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Textual Refuse: Iain Sinclair's Politics and Poetics of Refusal

by

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**A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy**



**University of Sydney
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ABSTRACT

This thesis directs scholarly attention and recognition to contemporary British writer Iain Sinclair, whose textual refusals provide an alternative model of cultural production to those prescribed by late era capitalism. In doing so, it considers Sinclair's engagement with the notion of refuse. As Walter Benjamin's work eloquently testifies, reading "the rags, the refuse" reveals much about the constitution of culture. Refuse is an integral element of the everyday, and of modern consumer culture. As such, there are compelling reasons for it to be brought to the fore as a topic for study. To recognise the potential and possibilities of refuse is to refuse the ideological and structuring machinery of capitalism, which has devised systems to render refuse invisible and invalid.

In many ways, Sinclair creates and brings to light what dominant culture has attempted to bury: counter-cultural poetics, indeterminate narratives, alternative histories. Sinclair's "textual refuse" is the visible scriptural manifestation of those subterranean histories that hegemonic culture has sought to forget, omit and/or discount. In any economy that fetishises the commodity, Sinclair's association with the marginalised realm of refuse is politicised, and similarly his creation of textual refuse is politicised activity. Sinclair's textual refuse is a refusal of the commodification of literature. Within the theoretical framework of this thesis, refuse is neither failure nor negation. This thesis promotes Sinclair's refusals as dynamic acts; their ruptures and blockages are not impasses, but are, instead, productive. Given the inextricable link between refuse and contemporary production and consumption, Sinclair's engagements with refuse double as an argument for his timeliness and relevance as subject of academic enquiry.

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INTRODUCTION

“We are the rubbish, outmoded and unrequired. Dumped on wet pavings and left there for weeks, in the expectation of becoming art objects, a baleful warning. Nobody pays me to do this. It is my own choice, to identify with detritus [...].”

Iain Sinclair¹

The trope of difficulty is one frequently invoked in discussions on the politics and poetics of contemporary British writer, poet, filmmaker and critic Iain Sinclair. The experience of Sinclair’s readers, academic and mainstream alike, is often couched in terms of difficulty, and can translate into the difficulty of writing about Sinclair. Broadly speaking, Sinclair may be judged difficult for two reasons. Firstly, his writing tends towards the ‘unreadable’ by deploying various textual and linguistic tactics such as unreliable narrative, fragmented syntax and obscure intertextual references. Secondly, Sinclair’s texts are difficult to consume because frequently they are available only via narrow channels; that is, they can be difficult to obtain. It is not my purpose to suggest that difficulty is a pejorative notion; on the contrary, in Sinclair’s case it proves to be extremely productive. As I will argue throughout the course of this thesis, difficulty encourages the reader into alternative and heterogeneous relations with author, text, and cultural production in general.

At stake here is the ‘accessibility’ of Sinclair’s texts, or, more accurately, the texts’ refusal to be accessible in both content and material form. This locates a starting point for my study of Sinclair’s politics and poetics of refusal. Difficulty represents a refusal of hegemonic modes of contemporary literary production, and

¹ Iain Sinclair, *Hackney, That Rose-Red Empire: A Confidential Report* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2009) 7.

by extension consumer culture, which are designed to facilitate easy consumption of texts. Accessibility is compromised by consciously constructing texts that, according to hegemonic tastes, are commensurate with refuse. In other words, they are something that might be regarded as excremental, or in the vernacular, shit. Sinclair achieves this largely through refusing to conform to conventions that enable unimpeded consumption, a strategy that leads us to a fundamental premise of this thesis: his work—including its difficulty—is an imbrication of the double meaning of refuse, an imbrication of noun and verb.² His creation of a type of literary refuse is a means to refuse contemporary literary practice that is dictated by rules of the market. Refuse, too, is interconnected with difficulty because of its associations with the 'difficult' subjects of disorder and abjection, associations that Sinclair has exploited to uneasy effect in his writing. I will argue that refuse as it relates to Sinclair's work is not something exhausted and useless, but, as with difficulty, is something altogether productive.

Exegetic concerns are not all that is of interest in Sinclair. How his works circulate in different types of cultural economies, as well as the material conditions of the sphere of cultural production from which those works emerge, are key to an understanding of his writing and its reception. Sifting through the fiction, non-fiction, poetry, filmmaking, criticism and interviews, it soon becomes apparent that any comprehensive account of his singular position in contemporary British writing, and indeed his wider relevance to modern literature, must consider his texts beyond merely scriptural documents. Sinclair's engagement with the politics and ethics of production and consumption is an intriguing aspect of a labile career that

² Variations in pronunciation aside, noun and verb travel a similar etymological route, issuing forth from the French verb *refuser*, via the Middle English *refusen*. They are conceptually linked through the notion of rejection. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines the verb as "indicate unwillingness to do, accept, give, or allow." The noun means "[t]hat which is thrown away or rejected as worthless." "Refuse," def. *The Oxford English Dictionary*, 5th ed., 2002.

encompasses diverse cultural spheres such as counter-cultural poetics, avant-garde filmmaking, alternative press, mainstream media and multi-national publishing. His erratic negotiation of diverse cultural economies, and the frequently contrary circulation of his texts as material objects is a subject as worthy of attention as anything his texts might actually say.

Central to my thesis is the proposition that the things placed under the rubric of refuse can function as a refusal of the commodity form. The inverse formulation holds as well: that which constitutes a refusal of dominant forms of practice and/or thought is negated and rendered valueless by relegating it to the domain of refuse. In Sinclair's case, refusal takes the shape of texts that refuse instant readability, and which also refuse standard relationships with consumption, thereby creating what I call "textual refuse." There are two understandings of textual refuse at play here. The first encompasses texts that are produced from different cultural conditions to that of the typical commodity; texts that do not 'look' and/or 'act' like commodities. The second understanding of textual refuse is substantive. It describes texts that are unwieldy, obscurantist, obstreperous, and thus deny the instant pleasure of easy, uncritical consumption.

By creating textual refuse in both senses of the term, Sinclair has circumvented capitalism's conflation of literature and commerce by refusing to conform to a conventional interrelation with commodification. The key idea here is a refusal of "a conventional interrelation," because it would be misleading, given Sinclair's associations with publishing houses such as Random House and Penguin, to suggest that Sinclair has entirely bypassed the general economy. He has, however, refused to accede unquestioningly to its rhythms through an erratic textual movement between small press and multinational publishing. Moreover, the reality is that Sinclair may,

at times, be produced and distributed by the multinationals, but that situation does not necessarily translate into units sold. For Robert Bond and Jenny Bavidge, the never truly resolved tension between marginal and dominant publishing cultures allows Sinclair to credibly continue as one of contemporary British literature's "exemplarily disappeared" in spite of the forays into the mainstream.³

Following the Marxian formulation, what cannot be consumed in a capitalist economy cannot be commodified. Furthermore, what cannot be commodified cannot assume a value, and is value-less. It becomes the refuse. Thus cultural production can refuse commodification by becoming the refuse of the economy in which it circulates, or more correctly, in which it does *not* circulate. This is effectively what Sinclair aims for, and to an extent, achieves. He becomes textual refuse by refusing normative appeals to consumption. Within any economy of literature shaped by capitalist determinants, Sinclair is shit. Hard-to-find chapbooks and small magazines structurally inhibit easy consumption, whilst elliptical poetry and dense prose substantively produce the same effect in the mass-market publications. His writing, through a frenetic and arcane intertextuality, steadily builds an inter-connected assemblage of texts which constructs a secular textual cosmology as intricate as that of Sinclair's abiding influence: eighteenth-century poet, artist, visionary and radical spirit William Blake.

When the task is made difficult, many readers are unlikely to make the effort to seek out the more obscure texts. The academic and critical neglect of Sinclair's more abstruse novels like *Radon Daughters* (1994) and *Landor's Tower* (2000) underlines the effect of this strategy. Critique gravitates away from these books to the more accessible narratives in the oeuvre; for instance the non-fiction on London,

³ Robert Bond and Jenny Bavidge, "Introduction," 1-9, *City Visions: The Work of Iain Sinclair* (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2007) 2.

which contains references recognisable to a larger proportion of readers. These challenges could be one explanation for why Sinclair scholarship remains minoritarian in spite of an increased interest in recent years. Published monographs by Robert Bond, Robert Sheppard and Brian Baker attest to this growing, yet still under-examined, area of study.⁴ In addition, the collection *City Visions: The Work of Iain Sinclair*, edited by Bond and Bavidge (and which emerged from an international conference of the same name staged in London in 2004), constitutes a “dialogue” exhibiting the variety and breadth of approaches available in reading Sinclair.⁵ Regardless of affinity or disagreement, this thesis is intended as a companion piece to these other contributions to Sinclair studies, and promotes their agenda with its own arguments for the recognition of this writer’s difficult, yet endlessly generative textual refuse.

Most secondary sources, in one way or another, refer to Sinclair’s “passage from small press obscurity to a metropolitan visibility.”⁶ This has the unfortunate result of suggesting that Sinclair’s movement has been unilinear, yet as Bond and Bavidge point out, and as I hope to illustrate, Sinclair’s refusal has been more a question of a series of negotiations that refuse to conform to standard narratives regarding literary production and success, as opposed to a clear renunciation of one model (counter-cultural, subcultural, marginal) in favour of another (mainstream, mass-market). All agree that Sinclair has demonstrated a level of ambivalence in his trajectory from ‘outsider’ to ‘insider.’ Both Bond and Baker refer to “disinterest.”⁷ However, Bond’s understanding of Sinclair’s apparent disinterest in the market is

⁴ Robert Bond, *Iain Sinclair* (Cambridge: Salt Publishing, 2005); Robert Sheppard, *Iain Sinclair (Writers and their Work)* (Tavistock: Northcote House Publishers, 2007); Phil Baker, *Iain Sinclair (Contemporary British Novelists)* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 2007).

⁵ Bond and Bavidge 2.

⁶ Bond and Bavidge 2. Sheppard is less interested in this common narrative as a structure for understanding Sinclair’s work, and chooses instead to organise his readings in three sections, each looking at, respectively, the poetry, the fiction and the non-fiction/documentary film.

⁷ Bond 146-57; Baker 3.

that it is quite calculated and political in its applications, whilst Baker maintains that it is a “turn away from politics.”⁸ Baker surmises that the writing demonstrates “a strong distrust in revolutionary energies,” and he ultimately shies away from identifying any explicit political agenda in Sinclair’s work.⁹ It is my opinion, one that is expressed in this thesis, that that the writing *is* political in intent, and regardless of whether one shares Baker’s view or not, Sinclair’s writing is, at the very least, political in consequence.

Difficulty as refusal

To further illustrate how difficulty can constitute a refusal, I want to draw attention to an excerpt from an essay composed by Sinclair for the *London Review of Books*:

From the balcony, seven floors above the coast road, I watch the pepper-grey beach disdain its nuisance presences: night-fishermen, scavengers sweeping the shingle with metal detectors for small change lost in the spasms of last night’s courtship rituals. Dog valets. Tai chi soloists. Convivial drinking schools, cans raised to the world, enjoying the last cocktail party in England before being tidied away into that sinister under-promenade with its extruded viewing chapels (tidemarks of bright blue tin). In season – early June to mid-October – regulars perform stately laps across the bay, not far out, drifting with the tide. Frequently coupled for moral support, for the affirmation that the experience is survivable, they wallow and tussle, necks stiff, heads high above the tannin scum: leathery seaweed, wads of yellow paper. They tiptoe out, speeded-up

⁸ Baker 10.

⁹ Baker 3.

Benny Hill, over sharp stones, to neat piles of folded clothes. The watched, towelled down and returned to their balconies, rusting rails and anti-gull devices, become the watchers. A slow-motion cinema of such tender boredom that they will never move again.¹⁰

Here is one reader's response to the piece:

Living at the seaside doesn't seem to have made Iain Sinclair any more cheerful, and his piece [...] betrays his misanthropy [...]. Other observers of life on the beach would notice splashy games and laughter; he picks up on 'scavengers sweeping the shingle with metal detectors for small change lost in the spasms of last night's courtship rituals.' 'Spasms' – what a romantic he is. Sinclair's gloom takes in the place as well as the people. His Hastings is one of 'tannin scum'; balconies have 'rusting nails and anti-gull devices.' Only a tiny minority of eccentrics [...] are celebrated as swimmers against the scummy tide. The rest of us seem to deserve nothing but disdain.¹¹

What is noteworthy about this criticism is that it comes from a reader of the fortnightly *London Review of Books* where Sinclair has found an occasional home over the past two decades.¹² The *LRB* is 'highbrow,' the very audience that would be

¹⁰ Iain Sinclair, "Deadad," *London Review of Books* 17 Aug. 2006: 29.

¹¹ Christopher Stephens, letter, *London Review of Books* 7 Sept. 2006: 4.

¹² Sinclair has contributed his thoughts on subjects such as visiting the Millennium Dome, John Clare's Essex, and the monuments of London's Kings Cross in the wake of the July 2005 London bombings. See Iain Sinclair, "All Change: This Train is Cancelled," *London Review of Books* 13 May 1999: 14-18; Iain Sinclair, "Diary," *London Review of Books* 8 Jan. 2004: 30-31; Iain Sinclair, "Museums of Melancholy," *London Review of Books* 18 Aug. 2005: 14-17. He has also reviewed poetry collections and other marginal volumes. See Iain Sinclair, "The Poet Steamed," rev. of *Collected Poems*, by Tom Raworth and *Removed for Further Study: The Poetry of Tom Raworth*, ed. Nate Dorward, *London Review of Books* 19 Aug. 2004: 27-29; Iain Sinclair, "Hopi Mean Time," rev. of *Eye of the Cricket*, by James Sallis, *London Review of Books* 18 Mar. 1999: 9-11. Most recently, he has written on rebuilding of East London

deemed Sinclair's natural demographic, yet judging from the reaction above, it seems that Sinclair, ever the contrarian, is using difficulty to refuse even his most obliging readership.

Misanthropy, elitism and intellectual snobbery are concomitant accusations ritualised by critics of difficult writing, and are levelled, in particular, at writers of Sinclair's ilk who have modernist inclinations or affiliations. It is a discourse familiar to the mainstream media. To point out how ubiquitous this discursive territory is in certain spheres I want to look at the rehearsal of the debate on difficulty in the pages of two other mainstream, albeit highbrow, literary periodicals: the *New Yorker* and *Harper's*. In "Mr Difficult," an article for the *New Yorker*, contemporary American writer Jonathan Franzen—author of the commercially successful *The Corrections* (2001) and a National Book Award recipient—is not talking about Sinclair, or even about contemporary British literature.¹³ He is, however, talking about literary economies that match those in which Sinclair circulates, and his piece is exemplary in exhibiting the kind of arguments that surround difficulty. "Mr Difficult" is ostensibly Franzen's critique of fellow American author William Gaddis, a notoriously obtuse writer, and an obvious target for difficult writing's detractors. Unintentionally alluding to the work of sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, Franzen condemns what he calls the "Status" model of writing, the type of writing that rejects normative protocols for readability, writing which "is riddled with motifs, quotations, stories within stories, and countless allusions to [...] earlier works and other famous texts."¹⁴

for the 2012 Olympic Games: Iain Sinclair, "The Olympics Scam," *London Review of Books* 19 June 2008: 17-23.

¹³ Jonathan Franzen, "Mr Difficult," *New Yorker* 30 Sept. 2002: 100-11.

¹⁴ Franzen, "Mr Difficult". See Pierre Bourdieu, "The Field of Cultural Production, or: The Economic World Reversed," 29-73, *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays of Art and Literature*, ed. Randal Johnson (Cambridge: Polity, 1993).

In the scope of his attack, Franzen targets the type of writing Sinclair has spent his career promulgating and championing. The opinion piece prompted a direct response from Ben Marcus in the pages of *Harper's*, a literary periodical with a similar readership and reputation to the *New Yorker*. Marcus concludes that Franzen's attitude towards "experimental" writing is an anxiety

about literature's potential for mass entertainment. [...] In reviews, essays, and lately even a short story, [Franzen] has taken wild swings at some unlikely culprits in literature's decreasing dominance. In the process he has also managed to gaslight writing's alien artisans, those poorly named experimental writers with no sales, little review coverage, a small readership, and the collective cultural pull of an ant.¹⁵

The cultural economy described by Marcus above, and criticised by Franzen, is exactly the type of economy in which many of Sinclair's texts have circulated. In addition, Marcus draws attention to an on-line conversation between Franzen and the editor of the *New Yorker* in the aftermath of his "Mr Difficult" essay. Under the heading "Having Difficulty with Difficulty," Franzen condemns the canonical status of James Joyce's *Ulysses* because it

sends this message to the common reader: Literature is horribly hard to read. And this message to the aspiring writer: Extreme difficulty is the way to earn respect. This is fucked up. It's particularly fucked up when the printed word is fighting other media for its very life. If somebody is thinking of investing fifteen or twenty hours in reading a book of mine—

¹⁵ Ben Marcus, "Why Experimental Fiction Threatens to Destroy Publishing, Jonathan Franzen, and Life as We Know It: A Correction," *Harper's Magazine* Oct. 2005, 22 June 2008 <<http://www.harpers.org/WhyExperimentalFiction.html>>.

fifteen or twenty hours that could be spent at the movies, or online, or in an extreme-sports environment—the last thing I want to do is punish them with needless difficulty.¹⁶

Franzen's addendum is revealing for two reasons. Firstly, he believes that intentionally difficult writing, the sort espoused by modernism and experimental writing, forces readers into a masochistic relation with reading in which the reader is the supplicant. Secondly, and more importantly, Franzen conflates reading with consumption. The overlap is further reiterated through an analogy he makes between consuming food and consuming writing: "[B]eing a finicky eater, having a taste of this, a taste of that, not forcing yourself when you've lost all appetite – this makes sense to me."¹⁷ Within Franzen's schema of literary production and consumption, which clearly models itself on the general schema of capitalist production and consumption, there is something destructive about a difficult book that refuses the act of easy consumption. He urges writers to write books that are located within the reader's 'comfort zone' because they are more likely to be consumed. The pressures of consumer culture influence Franzen's apprehensions, and as a result, he lacks the insight to realise that it is precisely this interdependence between consumption and commodification that generates the space in which practitioners of counter-cultural, sub-cultural and marginal literature can communicate their minoritarian status. Through difficulty, writers can choose to restrict consumption of their work, as Sinclair has done, and therefore hinder commodification.

¹⁶ Jonathan Franzen, "Having Difficulty with Difficulty," *New Yorker Online Only*, posted 23 Sept. 2002, 31 Oct. 2005 <http://www.newyorker.com/online/content/articles/020930on_onlineonly01>.

¹⁷ Franzen, "Having Difficulty with Difficulty."

Moreover, Franzen's stance disallows the pleasure of the text. Although Sinclair often consciously and deliberately aims to refuse the reader through the use of unpleasant imagery, hectic syntax, and archaic language, his writing remains perversely appealing in its virtuosic tendencies. One cannot help but agree with James Woods' sentiments upon reading Sinclair's most commercially successful (and probably most readable, in terms of both structural and substantive attributes) collection of essays, *Lights Out for the Territory* (1997): "There are so many squeezed details, so many fat sentences in this large book – hardly a page is without brilliance – that one can only toss a few grains at the reader."¹⁸ The challenge facing the Sinclair scholar is not which quotations in a highly quotable oeuvre to include, but which ones to excise.

A note on methodology

The interpretive challenge mentioned above is linked to a textual situation where difficulty in gaining access to Sinclair is in no way the consequence of a paucity of material. The amount of writing is disproportionate to the measure of its availability. He is amazingly prolific, and the prodigious volume of poetry, short stories, novels, essays, films, opinion pieces, reviews, book-length non-fiction—none of it consolidated in a single cultural location—provides another obstacle to the Sinclair scholar. There is a glut of material, and whilst some of it can be located on the shelves of chain stores, a good deal of it is limited edition pieces, available only from micro-publishers and specialist libraries. It is true to say that the internet has facilitated the study of Sinclair to the extent that little magazines and small imprints have a presence on the net and Sinclair's books can be bought on the electronic secondhand book market. However, and despite the move to mainstream publishing

¹⁸ James Wood, "Magus of the City," *Guardian* 23 Jan. 1997: 10.

in the last two decades, a thorough survey of Sinclair's forty odd years of cultural production is still dependent on archival material that is not widely or readily available.

Adding to the aggregation of writing is Sinclair's criticism. While this provides a fascinating parallel body of work to the texts, it is yet more textual material for the Sinclair scholar to contemplate. There are two types of criticism in Sinclair. One is the criticism that scrutinises other writers, artists and filmmakers; for example, the excerpt from the *LRB* quoted earlier was from an essay on the artist Andrew Kötting.¹⁹ The other is Sinclair's commentary on his own work. This ongoing project of auto-critique, which always involves a level of self-reflexivity and critical analysis regarding his own writing practice, proposes an ethics of writing, and is an intriguing aspect of reading Sinclair. It also ensures that he retains some control over how his work is read. As Tim Adams—himself a literary critic—observes, “[i]t is characteristic of Sinclair to attempt to do the critic's work for him.”²⁰

Just as Sinclair's most well-known and widely-read book *Lights Out* is a series of discrete essays with the unifying thread of walking around London, this dissertation is, to some extent, a series of essays about Sinclair with an overarching theme of how his work engages with refuse and refusal. It is not a chronological, or a

¹⁹ Sinclair, “Deadad.” As for the role of the critic in producing meaning, Sinclair is typically ambivalent, dismissing them as hacks beholden to the party line of whichever media conglomerate employs them:

Reviews are always a weird reflection of what books actually are. Somebody generally sets a key note, and then everybody else grabs it and reflects it. Positive or negative, they don't very often connect up with how the books actually are. If you're going to get anything interesting written about them, they'll be in weird magazines that come out of Cambridge or somewhere, where some strange student has a take which will say something. The newspaper reviews are pretty much meaningless, they're just the reflex responses of burned-out journalists.

As usual, Sinclair is careful to include his own practice in his conclusions: “I know, because I write them myself, and I don't stand by those very much, either.” Iain Sinclair and Kevin Jackson, *The Verbals* (Tonbridge, Kent: Worple Press, 2003) 122.

²⁰ Tim Adams, “Singing his Prose,” rev. of *Landor's Tower* by Iain Sinclair, *Guardian Unlimited* 8 Apr. 2001, 21 June 2008 <<http://books.guardian.co.uk/reviews/generalfiction/0,,470051,00.html>>.

categorical survey of Sinclair's creative output, but neither is it a survey of refuse in Sinclair. There exists a rich tradition of literature produced in, and about London that employs the propinquity of effluent, dirt and garbage to textually recreate the urban experience. Certainly, Sinclair's eye has often wandered to the physical manifestations of refuse that are strewn across the London landscape, but for all their evocation of a particular aesthetic view of the city, that is not the subject of this thesis.

I have chosen to concentrate on certain Sinclair texts that engage with the notions of refuse and refusal, but I have not instituted any overriding pattern or structure. There seems to be something antithetical, unethical even, about imposing an order on a writer who has so steadfastly refused to conform to external governmentalities regulating how literature should be received and assessed. Given that Sinclair is about refusing conventional modes of cultural production and consumption, how does one contain his singular authorship, with its digressions and detours, in a relatively fixed format such as a dissertation? Is it a type of textual betrayal to attempt to corral Sinclair's contrary texts into a formalised document such as this?

As a response to this textual dilemma, I have not attempted a text-by-text review, though I have attempted to place the texts in some kind of relation with each other, and with Sinclair's corpus in general. Furthermore, while there is a hermetical tendency in Sinclair's work – a repetition and condensation of images, themes, tropes – I have encountered the problem that researchers all too frequently face: the limitations of space.²¹ This dissertation takes into account many aspects of his

²¹ Due to this exigency, I have drawn a line at the novel *Dining on Stones, or, The Middle Ground* (2004). The three major works that come after *Dining on Stones* do not represent radically new directions. *Edge of the Orison: Journey out of Essex* (2005), once again, is the chronicle of a monumental walk, and *City of Disappearances* (2006) is an edited anthology which extends the historiographical work of *Rodinsky's Room* (2000). *Hackney, That Rose-Red Empire* (2009), through its focus on the author's home for the last

writing, and develops an analytical framework that is applicable to many of his texts, yet it is not intended as an exhaustive overview of every text. For this reason, there is a preponderance of the poetry and the non-fiction in this thesis, perhaps, some might say, at the expense of the fiction. Sinclair came to fiction relatively late in the second half of the 1980s with *White Chappell*, *Scarlet Tracings*. In many ways, the novels are a re-writing of the antecedent texts in that they fictionalise the concerns of the non-fiction (psycho geography, spatial politics, urban culture, the project of writing and publishing) and transform the stylistics of the “ungraspable poetics” into difficult prose.²² The fiction is a synthesis of the poetry and the non-fiction, which are the original, and arguably the definitive, forms in Sinclair’s corpus.

Sinclair's Refuse/Refusal

I have gone some way to explain why difficulty is an entry point to the scholarly aim of my dissertation, which is an examination of Sinclair’s engagement with the notions of refuse and refusal. By way of a further introduction to the findings of my research, I want to present what strikes me as an archetypal Sinclair portrait. This sketch of the “pigeon man” distils a number of aesthetic, thematic and philosophical issues to do with the rejectamenta of modern life:

An elderly stooped figure dressed entirely in brown, [...] he is the colour of Daddies Own sauce scraped from a formica table. The pensioner progresses through the borough, each and every day, by his own eccentric circuits. He empties bulging plastic shopping bags of crumbs and crusts, ensuring that his feral pigeons will continue to splatter the same patches

30 years, the London borough of Hackney, promises to be the non-fictional counterpart to *Dining on Stones*’ fictionalised retrospective of Sinclair’s personal and publishing histories.

²² Bond and Bavidge 2.

of territory. Action painting on a grand scale, bowel art. Where does all this bread come from? The man looks as if he lives on stale crusts dipped in vinegar sauce – and yet, by the quantities he slings over privet hedges and arranges on chosen squares of pavement, he must have the clearance contract from a chain of bakeries.²³

At the level of imagery, Sinclair's *physiologie* of the "pigeon man" mentions a number of different types of refuse: residue ("sauce scraped from a formica table"); remnants ("bulging plastic shopping bags of crumbs and crusts); excrement ("his feral pigeons will continue to splatter the same patches of territory"). Beyond this, "bowel art" evokes the established aesthetic intersection of refuse and art, which is the subject of Chapter One. "Iain Sinclair, or, Literature and Refuse" is an overview of the notion of refuse as I understand it, and how this notion is deployed to develop a theoretical framework for interpreting Sinclair. This opening chapter presents a general theory of refuse, its position in the social and symbolic order, and its potential as the critique of capitalist consumer culture. It locates Sinclair's various artistic, theoretical and metaphorical applications of refuse within a body of cultural production that has wielded the politics and poetics of refuse to effect social comment. The link between texts, refuse and consumption is established through close reading of Sinclair's first novel *White Chappell, Scarlet Tracings* (1987), a gritty depiction of the second-hand book trade which utilises abject subject matter and imagery as strategies to refuse readability.

Sinclair's impression of the pigeon man, drawn from the streets of London, reminds us of the practice of the *flâneur*, who collects and collates material from the

²³ Iain Sinclair, *Lights Out for the Territory* (London: Granta, 1997) 9.

street to be rearticulated as art or literature.²⁴ The *flâneur*, although prolific and committed, refuses to contribute to any official economy of production and, as a consequence, is denigrated as idle and unproductive. He becomes social refuse. The “pensioner” in Sinclair’s sketch is also unproductive according to a capitalist understanding of work, and as a result, is categorised as the refuse of the social order.²⁵ Chapter Two, “Scribbling In The Margins: Sinclair’s Poetry and/as Play,” introduces the figure of the *flâneur* as a way of thinking about Sinclair and his mode of cultural production. It poses the question: how does the creative practitioner negotiate the modern culture of work when their practice and product do not conform? In order to provide an answer, it is necessary to consider Sinclair’s books as material objects, and the cultural conditions in which they are produced. Sinclair’s practice performs a sustained meta-commentary on the culture industry’s relationship with alternative literatures. An important theoretical strand of this chapter investigates how Sinclair’s cultural production constitutes a type of play. Using the figure of *homo ludens* (he who plays) as conceived by cultural historian Johan Huizinga, Chapter Two reorientates play as a productive refusal of the capitalist culture of work.

Sinclair’s ongoing relation with vision, the visual and the visible is the subject of Chapter Three, “Textual *Obscenery*: Sinclair and the Unreadable Written Word.” The narrative of the pigeon man belongs to the forgotten histories of the city that are rendered invisible by the official histories, in much the same manner as refuse is

²⁴ In this thesis, the figure of the *flâneur*, as the French noun denotes, is understood to be gendered male. Restrictions upon women’s movements in the public sphere made *flânerie* virtually impossible for them, which means that the spatial practice of the *flâneur* as described by Charles Baudelaire, Walter Benjamin and Sinclair is explicitly and exclusively male. For more on the (im)possibility of the *flâneuse* see Janet Wolff, “The Invisible *Flâneuse*: Women and the Literature of Modernity,” *Theory, Culture and Society* 2.3 (1985): 37-46.

²⁵ Refuse, according to the *OED* is also a “worthless or outcast section of a class of people; the scum, the dregs.” The pigeons are the refuse of a particular order as well. They are the avian outsiders of London, unable to find purchase on the spiked surfaces of the city. In the *LRB* essay criticised by Stephens, seagulls occupy an equivalent position, excluded by “rusting nails and anti-gull devices.” Sinclair, “Deadad” 29.

'disappeared' by regulatory bodies. In opposition to this process, Sinclair transforms these overlooked, inconvenient narratives into textual *obscenery* released by mainstream publishing houses, and visibly displayed in the high street next to bestsellers by other commercially successful London writers, such as Peter Ackroyd. In another instance of the blurring between official and alternative literatures, Sinclair's *obscenery* contaminates the mass produced *Dining on Stones* (2004) with textual refuse from the hard-to-obtain, difficult to read *White Goods* (2002).²⁶ Sinclair's philosophy is that "[h]owever meticulous the makeover, the back story always leaks, seeps through as ineradicable miasma."²⁷ Recording "the back story" thwarts the attempts by regulatory apparatuses to bury alternative narratives and practices. In line with its emphasis on the visual and the visible, Chapter Three also examines Sinclair's use of photography in the development of an ekphratic technique which renders the written word, paradoxically and perversely, less readable.

The "eccentric circuits" of the pigeon man, in their refusal of standardisation, mirror Sinclair's own eccentric creative and aesthetic trajectories. Chapter Four, "Losing the Plot: Sinclair's Excremental Narratives," explores how a refusal of determinate structure is created through substantive elements, and examines what the repercussions are for his readers. The legacy of the Aristotelian determinate structure and its enduring influence over reading practices may provide an explanation for the ostensible 'readability' and widespread acceptance of capitalism's essentially teleological grand narratives. By contrast, Sinclair's epic and interminable navigation of London's M25 motorway in *London Orbital* (2002) is an abjuration of determinate structure and the logic of causality. In doing so, it also enacts a critique

²⁶ Another short story, "A View from My Window", previously only available with a limited edition of *The Verbals: Conversations with Iain Sinclair* (London: Worpel Press, 2003), is also replicated, in full, in *Dining on Stones*.

²⁷ Sinclair, *London Orbital* (London: Penguin, 2003) 239

of the spatial politics of London as they have been organised and regulated by successive governmental bodies. Another alternative discourse advanced by Sinclair as a means of breaking the chains of capitalist spatial and textual logic is madness. Psychosis is a characteristic of the walk around the M25: the insanity of trying to negotiate on foot a space constructed for the automobile. Chapter Four presents *London Orbital's* incontinent accumulation of intertextual references, a feature distinctive to Sinclair's work in general, as a type of textual psychosis.

The following chapter, "Spectral London: Sinclair and the Refuse of History," examines the consequences of bringing to light narratives such as those of the pigeon man. It deals with Sinclair's treatment of the grand narrative of history, and in particular the history of London. Sinclair's insistence on noting the refuse of society and consumer culture evades the teleology of capitalist narratives. Refuse hangs around. It returns to haunt us; the ghost of commodities past creates anachrony. Thinking about refuse and history reminds us of Walter Benjamin's project to reconfigure the matter informing the history of modernity. Benjamin states that his *Arcades Project*, an assemblage of found scriptural objects and textual fragments, is composed of "the refuse, the rags" of history buried in the archive under layers of official history.²⁸ No-one is more intimately and symbolically connected to the matter of refuse than the ragpicker. In 'picking' through the forgotten junk of the textual economy, Benjamin emulates the activity of the ragpicker. In *Rodinsky's Room* (1999) Sinclair reveals a Benjaminian approach to historiography. This chapter explains how Sinclair's textual methodology, too, can be compared to that of the ragpicker.

²⁸ Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Bellknap Press, 2001) 460.

If we can say that the story of the pigeon man is lifted from the rag-pile of history, then Chapter Six, “Intertextual Ragpicking: Sinclair And The Ethics Of Appropriation,” explores to the fate of the raft of references that are gleaned from literature's dustbin. Sinclair the textual ragpicker resurrects texts (including his own) that official cultures have discounted, or omitted. Uncovering Sinclair's textual recycling initially seems to involve a postmodern game of spot-the-reference. However, in *Dining on Stones*, Sinclair's autoplagiarism takes its place within a wider typology of intertextuality that doubles as an interrogation of the ethics of appropriation. Chapter Six suggests that Sinclair's intertextual practice is distinct from the epistemic shift to the monologic culture of appropriation that Fredric Jameson claims has typified a large portion of postmodern literature.²⁹ In the end, Sinclair proves to be a deregulated ragpicker, removed from the capitalist literary market.

One of the conclusions of this thesis is that Sinclair's novels, criticism, poetry, and films constitute a hermeneutic circle. It is pertinent then to acknowledge that Sinclair's extensive publishing record is an entity made up of discrete parts that are mutually reliant, each on the other, in order to produce meaning. His texts insist that you have a working knowledge of the other texts in order to decipher the single text. Acquiring Sinclair's recondite code—which those who are cognisant with his style are well aware—is not a task for the uncommitted. The reader must assume the role of detective tracking down his poetry in second-hand bookshops, trawling the internet for his limited edition small-press publications. Obscure quotation that saturates the page must be researched, often in the cramped spaces of minoritarian literature. To read and understand Sinclair requires what Bourdieu has referred to as

²⁹ See Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London and New York: Verso, 1991).

“cultural competence.”³⁰ Bourdieu’s ideas on taste and consumption are useful for understanding Sinclair’s textual allegiances, his affinity for other types of textual refuse—unsanctioned graffiti, small magazine poetry, occultist pamphlets—which are also derided as shit, as ‘bad’ writing by those who have not acquired the cultural competence necessary to appreciate their coded information. It is the overall aim of this thesis to argue for the value of Sinclair’s textual refuse, and to position Sinclair’s difficult engagement with refuse and refusal as something both exciting and productive in terms of the possibilities and alternatives it presents for the reader. The difficulty of the writing represents a polemical challenge to the reader to go “read” London themselves. It is over to them to pick through the debris and find what appeals to them.

³⁰ Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (London: Routledge, 2003) 2.

CHAPTER ONE

Iain Sinclair, or, Literature and Refuse

Art has [...] magic power only as the power of negation. It can speak its own language only as long as the images are alive which refuse and refute the established order.

Herbert Marcuse¹

This chapter builds upon two fundamental, and interlinked, premises of this dissertation. The first is that refuse, both as category and as material product, provides a vehicle for enacting refusal of capitalist codes of production and consumption. The second is that a refusal of the order of capitalism can result in that refusal, whatever shape it may take, being relegated to category of refuse. Given the core inter-relation between refuse and refusal, a productive starting point, exegetically speaking, for understanding Sinclair's engagement with refuse is to look at his acts of refusal, or, more specifically, to examine how his location within the field of contemporary British literature is constructed and maintained through what he refuses.

One salient example of Sinclair's literary refusals is discerned from his immediate cultural habitat: Sinclair has anxiously and attentively cultivated a reputation of *not* being bestselling fellow London writer, Peter Ackroyd. An unflattering aside in the novel *Downriver* (1991) sets the tone of this refusal. The book's narrator visits one of the artists moving into and gentrifying the previously working class tenements of Spitalfields in London's East and finds

¹ Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002) 63.

a stack of books [...]: six mint copies of a celebrated 'bestseller' that attributed the most peculiar properties to the local churches. [...] 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. [...]

'When Mother and I moved here,' said Roland [...] 'and because our interests are well known, all our chums kept making us presents of that book. I haven't got around to reading it yet.'²

The veiled "bestseller" is Ackroyd's novel *Hawksmoor* (1985) which, critics (and Sinclair) have noted, owes a large debt to Sinclair's *Lud Heat: A Book of the Dead Hamlets* (1975) composed a decade earlier.³ Sinclair has achieved his goal in more explicit ways by vocally refusing Ackroyd's manoeuvres – textual and commercial – in essays and literary criticism. Perhaps the most renowned rejection, one that attained a certain notoriety in London literary circles, is his review of Ackroyd's

² Iain Sinclair, *Downriver* (London: Paladin, 1992) 98.

³ The general issue of Sinclair and appropriation is addressed at length in Chapter Six, but a profile of Sinclair in the *Guardian* newspaper distilled the issue of Ackroyd's appropriation of Sinclair:

A decade later, Peter Ackroyd published *Hawksmoor*, in later editions of which he pays tribute to Sinclair's poem for directing him to 'the stranger characteristics of the London churches.'

'Iain discovers it all and Peter makes a bestseller out of it,' says novelist Michael Moorcock. Sinclair is more circumspect: 'I don't think Peter's book could exist without the emerging crystal of *Lud Heat*. It's an energy crystal system that he adopts and puts into something different.' Ackroyd is happy to acknowledge the debt: 'I read it when I was quite young and was impressed by it and naturally it resurfaced in my work.'

The two met at poetry readings, Sinclair reciting his neo-modernist free-form works heavily influenced by the Cambridge school of J. H. Prynne. 'Peter's poetry was much more influenced by the New York school - civilised and gossipy,' says Sinclair. 'But he responded to something I wrote about *Hawksmoor* and it took off. There was a great critical demand for the Gothic things that Peter does, for Dr Dee and Dan Leno and all that. I came in the slipstream.'

Stuart Jeffries, "On the Road," *Guardian* 24 Apr. 2004, 22 June 2008

<<http://books.guardian.co.uk/review/story/0,12084,1201348,00.html>>.

Sinclair is sanguine about the appropriation in *The Verbals*, saying that Ackroyd "was able to take elements of *Lud Heat*, which was a completely obscure underground work, and parley it up into being a best-seller [*Hawksmoor*] [...]." Iain Sinclair and Kevin Jackson, *The Verbals: Kevin Jackson in Conversation with Iain Sinclair* (Tonbridge, Kent: Worple Press, 2003) 111.

biography of William Blake in the *London Review of Books*. Blake was always going to be contested ground, having already been claimed by Sinclair in *Lud Heat*. It was therefore unsurprising that a level of intellectual jockeying over disputed ownership should take place. However, Sinclair's critique travels further and outlines a philosophy of cultural production that marks a refusal of Ackroyd's project. In his piece, Sinclair labels his counterpart a "well-informed tour guide who has done the work, chewed up the culture gristle, the carcass of facts, to make it palatable for the rest of us."⁴ Ackroyd betrays Blake by making him too visible, and hence digestible. He creates "palatable" products that appeal to the literary market, which, in turn, facilitates their circulation as commodities. It is this assent that Sinclair judges ethically dubious.

A General Theory of Refuse

As laid out in the introduction, this dissertation understands refuse to be a refusal of the commodity form, yet it is not its aim to assert that commodity and refuse are exclusive to one another. The ideological construction of refuse in capitalist thought and practice is deceptive. Refuse is not *separate* from the commodity. It is neither a mere coda to the existence of the commodity, nor its abject other. Rather, refuse and commodity are two sides of the same coin, "[a]s closely linked," explains Julian Stallabrass, "as production and consumption."⁵ He adds, "[i]t may even be that we can think of commodities as deferred trash."⁶ Karl Marx outlines the existential connection between commodity and rubbish:

⁴ Iain Sinclair, "Customising Biography," rev. of *Blake*, by Peter Ackroyd, *London Review of Books* 22 Feb. 1996: 16.

⁵ Julian Stallabrass, *Gargantua: Manufactured Mass Culture* (London & New York: Verso, 1996) 172.

⁶ Stallabrass 172.

A product becomes a real product only by being consumed. For example, a garment becomes a real garment only in the act of being worn; a house where no one lives is in fact not a real house; thus the product unlike a mere natural object, proves itself to be, *becomes*, a product only through consumption. Only by decomposing the product does consumption give the product the finishing touch.⁷

Marx's understanding of 'consume' in the last sentence existed prior to the word's appropriation and reconstitution by capitalist discourse. Raymond Williams explains in *Keywords*:

In almost all its early English uses, consume had an unfavourable sense; it meant to destroy, to use up, to waste, to exhaust. [...] The unfavourable connotations of consume persisted, at least until the late 19th century, and it was only in the mid 20th century that the word passed from specialized use in political economy to general and popular use.⁸

Williams' history of the word's use concedes a conceptual overlap between consumption and degradation that Marx had already charted. Consumption depends upon degradation, the commodity is reified only when consumed, and thus Marx's syllogistic account of the commodity's trajectory teleologically binds it to refuse. Linguistically, conceptually, empirically, refuse has its origins in consumption. Thus, to borrow from Theodor Adorno, refuse becomes the "immanent critique" of the commodity form.⁹

⁷ Quoted in Stallabrass 91.

⁸ Raymond Williams, *Keywords* (London: Fontana Press, 1988) 78-79.

⁹ "Our critique of the ontological need brings us to an immanent critique of ontology itself. We have no power over the philosophy of Being if we reject it generally, from outside, instead of taking it on its

To consume is to die: this is a theme that has preoccupied Sinclair throughout his fictional and non-fictional peregrinations around London. The modern metropolis, which was for Walter Benjamin the geographical, social and economic centre of the capitalist system, is frequently portrayed in a state of degeneration. This decrepitude is signified by the prevalence of refuse. A walk around London in Sinclair's first novel *White Chappell, Scarlet Tracings* (1987) reveals multi-valent images of refuse:

We share a bottle of menstrual wine, vagrants; we spit into wild gardens.
We lick cigar stumps. We kick walls.

The dwellings on the south side of the Jewish Burial Ground have been evacuated by keyholders, occupied by derelicts and vermin; doomed, the whole zone is doomed; the stones will be razed, brick by brick, their histories flattened, buried in dust mounds.¹⁰

Aside from the obvious tropes of refuse ("vermin," "dust"), there is the evocation of bodily wastes (menstrual blood, expectoration), as well as the ruin with the "razed" histories of the abandoned monuments. Finally, "vagrants" and "derelicts" are capitalism's outcasts, the refuse of the social order.

The inversion of the equation consumption=refuse also holds true. Consumer culture is born of refuse, as contemporary novelist Don DeLillo discloses in

own structure – turning its own force against it, in line with Hegel's desideratum. [...] The thought movement that congealed in them must be reliquified, its validity traced, in repetition." Theodor Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton (Routledge and Kegan Paul: London, 1973) 97.

¹⁰ Sinclair, *White Chappell, Scarlet Tracings* (London: Vintage, 1995) 52.

Underworld (1998), his expansive, sprawling chronicle of the second half of the American twentieth century:

Detwiler said that cities rose on garbage, inch by inch, gaining elevation through the decades as buried debris increased. Garbage always got layered over or pushed to the edges, in a room or in a landscape. But it had its own momentum. It pushed back. It pushed into every space available dictating construction patterns and altering systems of ritual. And it produced rats and paranoia. People were compelled to develop an organized response. This meant they had to come up with a resourceful means of disposal and build a social structure to carry it out – workers, managers, haulers, scavengers. [...]

“See we have everything backwards,” he said.

Civilisation did not rise and flourish as men hammered out hunting scenes on bronze gates and whispered philosophy under the stars, with garbage as a noisome offshoot, swept away and forgotten. No, garbage came first, inciting people to build a civilization in response, in self-defence. We had to find ways to discard our waste, to use what we couldn't discard, to reprocess what we couldn't use. Garbage pushed back. It mounted and spread. And it forced us to develop the logic and rigor that would lead to systematic investigations of reality, to science, art, music, mathematics. [...]

Consume or die. That's the mandate of the culture. And it all ends up in the dump. We make stupendous amounts of garbage, then we react to it, not only technologically but in our hearts and minds. We let it shape us.

We let it control our thinking. Garbage comes first, then we build a system to deal with it.¹¹

DeLillo's philosophy of refuse may differ from Sinclair's in that consumption is presented as the antidote to death, but it is still revealing regarding modern custom. Complex systems, such as the ones detailed above, are designed to hide refuse from view in order to counter its increasing prevalence. The Western eye, and increasingly the global eye, has turned away from the detritus of consumer culture and its associations with rejection, putrefaction and ultimately, lack. Instead, it gravitates towards the commodity, which emphasizes enhancement and accumulation. This is a current that Sinclair patently rejects.

In *Waste and Want*, a history of consumer culture and waste in the United States, Susan Strasser continually reminds us that many products of consumerism were designed to manage refuse and keep filth at bay. Industries such as the cosmetic and sanitation industries emphasise hygiene, cleanliness and health to combat infection, contagion and above all, dirt. Modernisation, argues Strasser, travels hand in hand with ideas about the proper place for refuse.¹²

Personal cleanliness had signified moral superiority among middle-class people at least since the Civil War, and dirt was a sign of degradation. Industrialization made both cleaning and keeping clean easier and cheaper. Cleanliness became big business, as manufacturers of washstands, basins and tubs, towel, plumbing parts, and the large-scale devices necessary for urban sanitation all flourished. Soap-making became

¹¹ Don DeLillo, *Underworld* (London: Picador, 1999) 287-88.

¹² Proper is an apposite word within this context: it comes from the French *propre*, which means 'clean'.

a major industry. [...] [P]aved streets and automobiles had alleviated the most offensive dirt in the cities. Electricity and gas had reduced the staggering amounts of grime from wood and coal heating and kerosene lighting. Household plumbing and commercial laundries had made it possible to keep bodies, clothes, and houses considerably cleaner.¹³

Strasser's socio-historical account of consumer culture and rubbish confirms sociologist Norbert Elias' theory that the "weeding out of the natural functions from public life, and the corresponding regulation or moulding of drives, was only possible because, together with growing sensitivity, a technical apparatus was developed which solved fairly satisfactorily the problem of eliminating these functions from social life and displacing them behind the scenes."¹⁴ For example, technology that enabled the readily disposable aspect of many consumer goods was, and is, exactly what creates the appeal to hygiene because "throwaway packaging was promoted for its convenience and cleanliness."¹⁵ Strasser elaborates:

Now articles could be declared obsolete because new technologies had made them so or for reasons of style and fashion, preoccupations not only of the wealthy. Like style, cleanliness and convenience were touted as reason enough for throwing things away. The selling points of modern products— styling, technological superiority, convenience, and cleanliness—all amounted to arguments for disposing of things rather

¹³ Susan Strasser, *Waste and Want: A Social History of Trash* (New York: Owl Books, 1999) 174.

¹⁴ Norbert Elias, *The Civilising Process: The History of Manners: Sociogenetic and Psychogenetic Investigations*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1978) 137-140.

¹⁵ Strasser 171.

than seeking ways to reuse them. Together they fostered a new kind of relationship to the material world, to production, and to disposal.¹⁶

Strasser's history illustrates how capitalism's demand for an accelerated rate of production and consumption necessarily accelerates the production of refuse. Yet affluent post-industrialised societies, who consume more and thus generate more refuse, are still uneasy with the inevitable material consequence of their disproportionate share of consumption. This evasion is enabled by an exaltation of cleanliness. In *Invisible Cities*, Italo Calvino captures the deluded reverence with which consumer society regards the pristine. The network of actors and procedures that remove the rubbish in Leonia is sacralised; the city's sanitation workers are "angels", whilst their task is "a ritual that inspires devotion."

It is not so much by the things that are manufactured, sold, bought that you can measure Leonia's opulence, but rather by the things that each day are thrown out to make room for the new. So you begin to wonder if Leonia's true passion is really, as they say, the enjoyment of new and different things, and not, instead, the joy of expelling, discarding, cleansing itself of a recurrent impurity. The fact is that the street cleaners are welcomed like angels, and their task of removing the residue of yesterday's existence is surrounded by a respectful silence, like a ritual that inspires devotion, perhaps only because things have been cast off that nobody wants to think about them further.¹⁷

¹⁶ Strasser 173.

¹⁷ Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities*, trans. William Weaver (London: Vintage, 1997) 114.

The city of Leonia derives its social and cultural character from its relation to rubbish and how it manages that rubbish. DeLillo and Calvino's literary responses to the codes and architecture designed and built to deal with refuse substantiate the influential work of anthropologist Mary Douglas. In *Purity and Danger*, Douglas observes "that ideas about separating, purifying, demarcating [...] have, as their main function, to impose system on an inherently untidy experience. It is only by exaggerating the difference between within and without, above and below, male and female, with and against, that a semblance of order is created."¹⁸

Cultural and technical filtering processes set out to define refuse from commodity, yet even the most meticulous management of the spent commodity does not portend a quiet retirement, or a gentle, logical obsolescence. We are never disturbed and repulsed by refuse more than when it has slipped past the processes designed to manage it; the raw sewage that washes up on the beach, the broken garbage bag lying uncollected in the street.¹⁹ This attitude emerges from expectations regarding order, and exhibits a mode of thinking that depends upon principles of classification and distribution which are linked to discourses of scientific and rational thought, and which initially appear removed from the messy reality of refuse. The body, a network of physiological, biological and neurological processes that constitute a system of order in its own right, cannot cope with such a breakdown, and reacts accordingly. William Ian Miller in *Anatomy of Disgust* explains how our affective response to an encounter with refuse is attributable to feelings about organisation. Miller positions disgust as "a strong sense of aversion to something perceived as dangerous because of its danger to contaminate, infect, or pollute by

¹⁸ Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966) 4.

¹⁹ This reaction is addressed in a previously published paper that examined media and community response to the build up of rubbish at a residence in one of Sydney's most affluent beachside suburbs. Kirsten Seale, "Location, Location: Situating Bondi's 'Rubbish House,'" *M/C Journal* 9.5 (2006), 22 June 2008 <<http://www.journal.media-culture.org.au/0610/07-seale.php>>.

proximity, contact or ingestion."²⁰ In other words, disgust is an aversion to something that has breached the lines of containment, something which signals a threat to established order. David Trotter elaborates:

[P]sychological activity [is] an attempt to impose order on experience: bodily paroxysm is a way of confronting and resolving urgent abstract dilemmas. According to this view, you vomit because you have lost confidence in your ability to make sense of the world: your ability to categorize, order, explain, or tell stories about what has happened to you. Disgust is the product of conceptual trauma.²¹

Refuse is obscene for the reason that its physical presence represents a degradation of order.

The Bard of Graffiti and Broken Bottles

In *White Chappell*, one of the characters chides the narrator for his forensic and exploitative interest in the abject: "I suppose you'd like the vomit and the venereal sores; he'd caught a bad dose. I'd always go for suggestion."²² Certainly, the narrator's interlocutor has got a point about this predilection for the disgusting as the following litany from the narrator demonstrates: "He would pick at the lining with a match-stick, roll out an interesting lump, either of skin or of snot, even food, then

²⁰ William Ian Miller, *The Anatomy of Disgust* (Cambridge, Mass; London: Harvard University Press, 1997) 2.

²¹ David Trotter, *Cooking with Mud: The Idea of Mess in Nineteenth-Century Art and Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000) 158-59.

²² Sinclair, *White Chappell* 66.

gasp for breath after his exertions”;²³ “He succeeded in spearing a spectacularly colourful glob of snot and prodded it across the counter. It was speckled like granite. He’d probably have it set into a signet ring”;²⁴ “Kernan squeezed out a pimple at the edge of his nose, speculatively licking his finger”;²⁵ “He’d been too busy to vomit for the last week: there was plenty to untank now. Brown and sour and smelling of death”²⁶ [H]is thoughts now so completely undressed that they spill, pus from an open sore.”²⁷

Sinclair knowingly, gleefully fixates on the unpleasant subject of refuse to create unease. He stubbornly, tenaciously draws our attention to the things consumer culture struggles to efface and would prefer to forget. This lever has not gone unnoticed by critics, and has earned him the epithet “bard of graffiti and broken bottles.”²⁸ Sinclair shows us that there are multiple ways and approaches available to literature to engage with the notion and the matter of refuse, yet to say that Sinclair’s engagement with refuse is more complex than imagery alone is not to underestimate his awareness of the aesthetic possibilities of refuse. For Sinclair’s artistic and literary predecessors, refuse is a metonymical trope of modernity, one that David Trotter writes was “reassuringly to hand for commentators on modern life, as a ready source of admonitory argument and gruesome example.”²⁹ Certainly, at the cusp of the twentieth century, modernist artists and writers used the politics and poetics of refuse to engage with modernity, the apotheosis being Marcel Duchamp’s iconic

²³ Sinclair, *White Chappell* 17.

²⁴ Sinclair, *White Chappell* 19.

²⁵ Sinclair, *White Chappell* 99.

²⁶ Sinclair, *White Chappell* 101.

²⁷ Sinclair, *White Chappell* 124.

²⁸ Murrough O’Brien, “Iain Sinclair: Bard Of Graffiti And Broken Bottles,” *Independent* 18 Sept. 2005, 22 June 2008 <<http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/features/iain-sinclair-bard-of-graffiti-and-broken-bottles-507124.html>>.

²⁹ Trotter 23.

Fountain (1917).³⁰ Refuse, Trotter adds, “continues to provide, at the [twentieth] century’s end, the terms in which it is possible to imagine certain crucial aspects of the modernity of modern life.”³¹ While the nexus of refuse and literature as social critique belongs to a radical tradition which has long since passed into the mainstream, it still retains a political dimension in that it provides a means for considering social order.³² Acts of literature, such as Sinclair’s, continue to exploit refuse’s abject status as a means of refusing the conventional appeals to taste that facilitate unimpeded consumption.

Locally, Sinclair is identified with a school of literature produced in and/or about London which deploys refuse as a critique of contemporary society. Sinclair’s descriptions of a refuse-strewn London echo those of other exemplars of the ‘London writing’ genre. The “water-rats” who comb the “slime and ooze” of the Thames and the city dwellers who are forced to live off the dust heaps in Charles Dickens’ *Our Mutual Friend* (1865) double as a potent indictment of nineteenth century capitalism. The ragpickers of the secondhand booktrade in *White Chappell*, an unfortunate, blighted lot barely existing on the leftovers of others, are reminiscent of Dickens’ scavengers. Dickensian allusion is satirically applied to accentuate the comic pathos and degradation of the booksellers’ lives:

³⁰Duchamp’s *Fountain* consists of a conduit of bodily waste, a concrete emblem of the abject, which is fetishised when placed within the space of the art gallery. It becomes an object of desire, however perverse. The urinal disorganises order: what constitutes art, what should be in the gallery, what is the appropriate site for refuse. It generates affect by exploiting socio-genetic expectations and anxieties regarding the correct place for rubbish.

³¹ Trotter 23.

³² Even Duchamp’s *Fountain* (literally and metaphorically representing waste) has achieved mainstream, albeit radical mainstream, recognition and has thus metamorphosed into art (gold). A commissioned survey in 2004 found that *Fountain* was “the world’s most influential piece of modern art,” as voted by a group of artists, curators and dealers. Charlotte Higgins, “Work of art that inspired a movement ... a urinal,” *Guardian* 2 Dec. 2004, 22 June 2008 <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/arts/news/story/0,11711,1364123,00.html>>.

Dryfeld growls through the vans, pokes into sacks, storms among the sheds of rag pickers, elbows over terminal waste-lots, where old bones have been spread out to dry, more for exhibition than with any serious expectation of a sale. He snarls back at the caged animals, bird yelp, rancid fish tanks, heavy jaw'd fighting beasts dealt, as they have been for over a hundred years, under the railway arches. The sentiment of the local inhabitants flattered by having some creature whose existence is even worse than their own.³³

These recreations of the secondhand book trade, a subcultural milieu that has provided material for more than one of Sinclair's narratives, are amongst his most unadulterated treatment of literature and/as refuse. Books are variously referred to as "leprous and flaky dogs,"³⁴ or "the direst dreck condemned tea-chest gloom ... covered in a layer of tea grains, brown, lumpy, inert."³⁵ Another "antiquarian" bookseller is "guarding a table of tattered remnants, street sweepings."³⁶ The literal meeting of literature and refuse in this arena is also foregrounded in Sinclair's film *The Cardinal and the Corpse* (1992), and the essay "Skating on Thin Eyes" (1997).³⁷ In the latter, Sinclair's prose is infinitely inventive in characterising another bookdealer's stock as refuse:

³³ Sinclair, *White Chappell* 38.

³⁴ Sinclair, *White Chappell* 16.

³⁵ Sinclair, *White Chappell* 72.

³⁶ Sinclair, *White Chappell* 72-73.

³⁷ This essay initially appeared in a truncated form in the journal *Inventory*, the manifesto of which reads: "Under a Walter Benjamin motto, 'the Inventory of the street is inexhaustible,' *Inventory* proclaim a sociological trawl through the city. In acts of re-appropriation found objects are modified, altered, written upon and carved into and the street becomes the site for defiant interventions. Acts of subjective and collective resistance to established order rally against alienated existence, consumer culture, the regimentation of urban space." Iain Sinclair, "Skating on Thin Eyes," *Inventory* 2.1 (1997): 8-12. It was later reprinted in an augmented version in *Lights Out for the Territory*.

George had, over the years, dispersed acres of country house libraries [...]: remorseless tides of salvage. Rare Victorian pamphlets, plump Edwardian bindings, railway fiction – he graded the lot, hemp sack or auction table. He kept the culture of print in flow. He served it like a pest controller, a water bailiff. Perched above the Fleet ditch, he shovelled the failed remnants, the picked-over dross, into the corporation's dustcarts. These Farringdon Road barrows were the court of final appeal. After the frantic ceremonies of the predators there was extinction.³⁸

Refuse and (Dis)order

Refuse is a recurring motif in Sinclair's portrait of another refugee from capitalism:

An elderly junkman/collector [...] filled his allotted chamber with all the debris he could drag, with his faltering strength, down from the exterior world. Once, in his pomp, he had trundled doorless fridges, trunks of condemned beef, unidentifiable elements of fantastic machines, spokes without a circumference, books raked from bonfires, things that had fallen from so many lorries they had passed beyond forensic recognition. [...] The junkman was a patron of the spurned, a collector of the uncollectible, a stalker of margins. [...] He soaked up envelopes, feathers, fluff, hairballs, broken plastic spoons. [...] The dealer who does not deal achieves the status of honorary artist. [He] established a museum of memory from which another London, disturbing and demented, could be reassembled.³⁹

³⁸ Iain Sinclair, *Lights Out for the Territory* (London: Granta, 1997) 19.

³⁹ Sinclair, *Lights Out* 253.

The story is textual refuse, originally appearing in the small press publication *Shamanism of Intent* (1991). The narrative is also a type of refuse because it is one of the forgotten narratives of the city that typify Sinclair's *oeuvre*, one that has been rejected from the official archive. Moreover, the aficionado of refuse, unnamed, unemployed, dabbling in other people's filth, becomes the refuse of the capitalist social order and its culture. However, it is the junkman's treatment of refuse that is most significant. The junkman's "museum" is "disturbing and demented." His chaos confounds bureaucratic and organisational apparatuses, like the museum, which manage ever-increasing flows of goods and information. There is no attempt to re-incorporate the material into a system. The order that the museum institutes is absent in this lawless territory of decaying goods. In another Dickensian moment, it reminds the reader of Krook's shop in *Bleak House*, where everything is collected, but nothing is moved along.

She had stopped at a shop over which was written KROOK, RAG AND BOTTLE WAREHOUSE. Also, in long thin letters, KROOK, DEALER IN MARINE STORES. In one part of the window was a picture of a red paper mill at which a cart was unloading a quantity of sacks of old rags. In another was the inscription BONES BOUGHT. In another, KITCHEN-STUFF BOUGHT. In another, OLD IRON BOUGHT. In another, WASTE-PAPER BOUGHT. In another, LADIES' AND GENTLEMEN'S WARDROBES BOUGHT. Everything seemed to be bought and nothing to be sold there. In all parts of the window were quantities of dirty

bottles--blacking bottles, medicine bottles, ginger-beer and soda- water bottles, pickle bottles, wine bottles, ink bottles [...].⁴⁰

Disorder provokes unease. It is a horror that the modern imagination, and all the procedures it invents and implements, struggles to allay. In *Underworld*, DeLillo's protagonist Nick Shay *organises* refuse. Shay says of his job: "We designed and managed landfills. We were waste brokers. We arranged shipments of hazardous waste across the oceans of the world."⁴¹ Excess is transformed from something abject and obscene into something quantifiable, and therefore comprehensible to capitalist logic. DeLillo's *Underworld* depicts an acculturated response to refuse that is distinct from Sinclair's iconoclastic treatment of refuse. In contrast, the junkman's "museum" is a Foucauldian heterotopia, a troubling place where "all the ordered surfaces and all the places with which we are accustomed to tame the wild profusion of existing things" are undermined, and even destroyed.⁴² This heterotopia cracks open existing ordered surfaces to reveal what Stallabrass calls "the broken utopian promise of the commodity."⁴³ The commodity's status as a unique object, replete with an attendant matrix of socio-cultural significations, becomes redundant when it is discarded and reduced to refuse. Its prior meaning cannot be sustained and is revealed to be arbitrary. The magic is unveiled as mere mechanics hidden behind skilful illusion. Refuse is the unwelcome allegory on the fetishism of commodities, because the commodity in its degraded state realises a type of authenticity that is

⁴⁰ Charles Dickens, *Bleak House* (London: Penguin, 1996) 67.

⁴¹ DeLillo 89.

⁴² Michel Foucault, "Preface," *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (London: Vintage, 1973) p.xviii. A photograph by contemporary German artist Andreas Gursky is the visual expression of this type of heterotopia. Gursky's photograph, *Untitled XIII (Mexico) 2002*, is an image of a massive rubbish dump in Mexico. It reveals the flipside of consumer culture, documenting in detail a veritable waste land, a seemingly monotonous landscape, which on closer inspection reveals a chaos of discrete discarded objects: plastics, metals, food matter stretching beyond the frame of the photograph. There is no order to this profusion, in spite of the attempt to contain it within the designated site of the dump.

⁴³ Stallabrass 179.

masked in its prior state. Writes Stallabrass: "Unmade, their polished unitary surfaces fall away, reinscribing in them for a time the labour that went into their making."⁴⁴ The object is mere matter. Rubbish, the ruined, wasted form of the commodity, reminds us of the ephemeral nature of the satisfaction promised by the commodity, or as Stallabrass puts it: "The lesson of the obsolete gives the lie to the promise of ultimate satisfaction."⁴⁵

The Paradox of Waste

DeLillo's protagonist in *Underworld* embodies the attempt to establish meaning from technologies of order. It has entered Shay's 'heart and mind,' bleeding into his domestic life:

I took a large paper bag and put all the smaller bags inside and then placed the large bag alongside all the other receptacles on the sidewalk. We ripped the wax paper from our boxes of shredded wheat. There is no language I might formulate that could overstate the diligence we brought to these tasks. We did the yard waste. We bundled the newspapers but did not tie them in twine.⁴⁶

In this way, he produces waste. The notion of waste is linked to acculturated expectations about order in late capitalist society. The processes designed to categorise and manage waste are analogous to other systems designed to produce and maintain order in late capitalist society. These instrumentalities are consistently

⁴⁴ Stallabrass 174.

⁴⁵ Stallabrass 180.

⁴⁶ DeLillo 102.

teleological and are predicated upon capitalism's alchemical project, which is to transform material and practice ceaselessly into the gold of the commodity.

This is the paradox of waste: contrary to sociogenetic perceptions regarding its abject nature, waste gleams with the efficiency of capitalist modes of production. Far from being something shameful or abject, waste is a necessary, and indeed desirable component of capitalist political economies founded upon principles of accumulation and expansion through increased consumption. For instance, the practice of 'planned obsolescence' (deliberately configuring products to deteriorate or become technologically obsolete) encourages consumers to discard a product and obtain another version. To be successful, 'planned obsolescence' must generate increased amounts of waste. Waste is produced in a similar way to the way that commodities are produced. It is legitimate. Trotter goes as far as to say that the "success of the enterprise can be measured by the waste-matter it produces, by the efficiency with which it separates out and excludes whatever it does not require for its own immediate purposes."⁴⁷ Waste is the manifestation of an affluent society who can afford leftovers for others to reuse. It is the preserve of the rich, while refuse is the condition of the poor. Sinclair discovers this when he travels from the housing estates of Tower Hamlets to the moneyed estates outside London in *Edge of the Orison*: "You see the empty quarter, hedges cropped, absence of rubbish, middens, burnt-out shells of cars, and you sense: money. The lush chlorophyll of liquidity."⁴⁸

Sinclair himself admits to a "cataloguing instinct. [...] I note graffiti, broken bottles, the remains of a TV set,"⁴⁹ but that instinct is different to the practices

⁴⁷ Trotter 22.

⁴⁸ Sinclair, *Edge of the Orison: In the Traces of John Clare's "Journey Out Of Essex"* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2005) 17.

⁴⁹ O'Brien, "Iain Sinclair: Bard of Graffiti and Broken Bottles."

described in DeLillo. *Underworld* serves as an example of literature talking about refuse as something to be 'dealt' with, transforming it into the far more legitimate waste. On the other hand, the junkman in Sinclair's *Shamanism of Intent* is not interested in (re)integrating the refuse he has collected into any system. His collecting practice and relationship with rubbish illustrates the distinction between 'waste,' with which DeLillo's novel is primarily concerned, and 'refuse,' which is Sinclair's concern. Waste is a convenient catch-all category under which to group various types of refuse, for example dirt, excrement, pollution and garbage. Refuse often functions metonymically as a material stand-in for waste, yet they are not synonymous. Waste is defined in the *OED* as an "unusable or unwanted substance or material, such as a waste product," but unlike refuse, this "unwanted" status is open to challenge. Trotter has some enlightening points to make regarding waste in capitalist economies:

[W]aste can often be recycled, or put to alternative uses; if the system which produced it cannot accommodate it, some other system will. Waste remains for ever potentially in circulation because circulation is its defining quality. Waste is the measure of an organism's ability to renew itself by excluding whatever it does not require. However foul it may have become, it still gleams with efficiency.⁵⁰

In "Skating on Thin Eyes" Sinclair's reportage of the secondhand book market supplies a diagrammatic model of the re-incorporation enacted by waste management. Sinclair notes that the books are constantly re-integrated into circuits of exchange, what he calls a "William Harvey discovery about the circulation of stock,

⁵⁰ Trotter 20-22.

like heavy oil between the gates of the heart.”⁵¹ Scrap merchants like Jeffrey have their “pilot fish, lesser figures creeping in from outlying districts of the city, to recirculate the scraps.”⁵² There are further markets down the chain, keeping commodities in flux, putting off their inevitable decay for as long as the market will allow. An instance of this postponement is another stall-holder whose livelihood is dependent on Jeffrey’s remainders:

Jock the Bookman was the direct precursor of the young contemporary with his stall on Kingsland High Street. [...] He raked over the floor of rejects, the grievously harmed veterans, the optimistically described “reading copies”; prepared to embark on a rescue operation. George’s dross represented the cream of Jock’s stock, the posh stuff that could be displayed in an orange crate at the back of his stall on the [Kingsland] Waste.⁵³

Consider another stallholder that Sinclair comes across while wandering the streets London:

At the next turning on the road north is a young man with a barrow of paperbacks, trying to make a go of an all-weather bibiothèque. The broken leg doesn’t help. He keeps his back to the wall, fending off the advances of deranged strollers who treat him as an unsalaried social worker or lay psychiatrist. [...] He is forced to share the responsibility for adult literacy in the area with the Oxfam superstore and other less

⁵¹ Sinclair, *Lights Out* 21. William Harvey’s findings in the seventeenth century showed that it was the heart that controlled circulation of the blood.

⁵² Sinclair, *Lights Out* 21.

⁵³ Sinclair, *Lights Out* 21.

reliable charity bunkers. (It would be a charity to take anything away from them.)

[...] You can't be too elitist about the stock. Take what you can find and be grateful for it. [...] The barrow is carefully, not to say obsessively, arranged in sections: science fiction/horror (no real distinction there), crime, posh Penguins, romance and her lightly-salted sister, pornography. [...] The stock is unashamedly populist, but not quite popular. [...] Hardbacks are barely tolerated on the stall, often kept in sealed plastic envelopes. They tend towards Book Club reprints of marketable crime and horror pros (I did once buck the trend by coming away with a fine first edition of *The Shining* by Stephen King); movie star memorabilia, militaria (especially Nazi), true crime photo shockers, and transatlantic fiction deemed too obscure to be worth remaindering. It's very unlikely that *Lights Out* will put itself around enough to claim a perch on the stall. Neither will any of the desktop pamphlets of modernist poetry that circulate entirely in *samizdat* form, unmolested by reviewers, unknown to bookshops (outside Camden Town). No place on the barrow for the disadvantaged, anything without a square spine is barred.⁵⁴

The barrow strives to re-integrate rejected texts and achieve capitalism's alchemical act by rendering them "marketable." The books are refuse rehabilitated, and in this way they can be considered waste. Recycling, which is how the second-hand market functions, is a facsimile of the economy of new goods. The barrow's taxonomies emulate the primary market by imposing an order, and hence delaying the disorder of refuse. To achieve this, it must institute a system of sorting that segregates, and

⁵⁴ Sinclair, *Lights Out* 18.

ultimately excludes, the wilful refugees of the dominant literary economy, the textual refuse such as “desktop pamphlets of modernist poetry.”

Waste management is a process that has its analogue in other, parallel orders within liberal democratic societies; for example, welfare systems, which are designed to sort and supervise the unemployed and disadvantaged.⁵⁵ Waste is tolerated because its teleology is exemplary in capitalism’s overarching alchemical teleology. Refuse, by virtue of being rejected, is no longer linked into any system and therefore represents the termination of a system. In its material form, refuse causes disquiet for the rich and the middle classes. It is excess, symbolising the failure of reason, of moderation. Refuse is the realm of the extreme, the dirty, the abject, the obscene, because it exceeds the threshold of commodification. In contrast, the concept of waste reassures. It speaks of some kind of order where the unwanted is separate and contained, and finally, still of use.

The perception of refuse as excess which can be indiscriminately discarded, Stallabrass explains, can only survive in prosperous societies “where the material from which broken commodities is made is not endlessly reused, bricolaged into

⁵⁵ Ideology disseminated by the liberal democratic state regarding the rehabilitation of the socially disenfranchised reveals itself to be a kind of alchemy: to transform human ‘waste’ into ‘useful’ members of society. Contemporary welfare states such as the British and Australian models have adopted the concept of ‘mutual obligation’, which supposedly eliminates wasteful expenditure by achieving a ‘balance’ in the responsibilities of the provider and the recipient. Welfare attempts to make the socially marginalised, who it deems ‘unproductive’, engage in ‘productive’ activity via schemes such as work-for-the-dole. Volunteer work for charities or community organisations - which invests in social capital and therefore cannot demonstrate any quantifiable benefit to the economy in financial terms, is often disallowed. Those subjects who cannot fulfil the contract (which, says Marcuse, is to work in order to sustain and absolve increased economic growth), because they cannot or because they do not want to, are considered social refuse. Their labour evades commodification, and consequently, has no use-value. Correspondingly, the media and politicians only notice this ‘waste’ when there is a malfunction in the welfare system, for example when the unemployed are not ‘usefully’ reintegrated back into the workforce, or if someone contravenes the regulations. This is a deliberate strategy on the part of liberal democratic governments to draw attention to the perceived limitations of the welfare system in order to justify their ‘rationalisation’ and dismantling of the welfare state. Marcuse 49.

intricate and ingenious devices, but is simply thrown away.”⁵⁶ Read literally, refuse is a physical manifestation and “powerful reminder of the West’s profligacy in consumption, of the extraordinary engines of waste that are our economies, sacrificing vast quantities of matter and human labour on rubbish dumps.”⁵⁷ Our notion of refuse varies from society to society, is dependent upon our material circumstances and differs according to our position within a social order. Attitudes towards refuse mark cultural differences or similitude. Richer societies consider the refuse of industrialization an abomination in their own backyard, but an acceptable burden to bear for those lower in the social hierarchy. It is not the task of this thesis to rehearse the gender, class and race politics of refuse at length—that is the subject of another study – but it is important to note, as Trotter does, that our proximity to, and tolerance for, refuse is relative to our social position. Those “who have power make more litter, directly or indirectly, than those who do not, and clear less of it up. The burden ... has always fallen disproportionately on women and on people of a ‘lower’ class or race, whose discovery of themselves with a broom or cloth in hand is a reinforcement of servitude.”⁵⁸ In *White Chappell*, “Lady Gull” (a transvestic Sir William Gull) uses the notion of filth to establish her social superiority: “This is intolerable. An assault! Unwashed from the most barbarous slums in Europe, rubbing against vermin infested walls, your arms scarlet with blood and filth– to be received in my husband’s house!”⁵⁹

The sight of increasing amounts of rubbish strewn on the street and its rapid accumulation in landfills and dumps is a tocsin calling attention to what Herbert Marcuse calls the culture of “desublimation,” a culture that is accustomed to the

⁵⁶ Stallabrass 172.

⁵⁷ Stallabrass 180.

⁵⁸ Trotter 30.

⁵⁹ Sinclair, *White Chappell* 171.

fleeting pleasures of immediate gratification, experienced over and over and over again through mass consumption.⁶⁰ Refuse needs to be invisible in order to ignore the warning signs of unsustainable production and environmental degradation. The unrelenting paratactic flow of Sinclair's inventories acts as an unalleviated, undisguised textual measure of consumption in affluent societies:

Under the bridge, weed-slippery skeletons of motorcycles, dredged from the filthy water, have been laid out. I've seen travellers, bare-chested, prudish in old trousers, diving for scrap. Ropes and hooks. Mounds of antique iron. Bicycles, prams. [...]

Along the avenue of peeling London planes, caravans have been parked. Cars. And bits of cars. An inhabited junkyard, a moveable suburb. Bureaucratic toleration pushed to its limits by the construction of waste towers, mounds of black tyres.⁶¹

Reverse Alchemy

Initially, Sinclair appears to conform to capitalist waste management systems; he seems to be driven by an alchemical urge to resurrect literary dross and transform it into his own peculiar alloy of narrative gold. In the auto-biographical *Liquid City* (1999), Sinclair brings to life two "sacred monsters" of the London secondhand book trade, Martin Stone and the unititular Drif. Stone spends his time "[c]ataloguing rarities, inspecting provincial libraries, facilitating deals."⁶² He teaches Sinclair how to transform the rejected into treasure: "I learnt about the alternate canon, the secret heroes: M. P. Shiel and William Hope Hodgson, Uranian poets, Sexton Blake pulps

⁶⁰ Marcuse 71.

⁶¹ Iain Sinclair, *London Orbital* (London: Penguin, 2003) 53.

⁶² Marc Atkins and Iain Sinclair, *Liquid City* (London: Reaktion Books, 1999) 135.

penned by Flann O'Brien, shilling shockers, David Goodis and William Irish, *Dope-Darling* by Led Burke (a.k.a. David Garnett)."⁶³ He admits that while "[d]riving these boys around the map, I picked up, without trying, enough material to let them dictate my first novel, *White Chappell*, *Scarlet Tracings*."⁶⁴ It is not only the scavenging of material goods in the form of books that Sinclair speaks of, but the scavenging of narratives. Of course, scavenging recollects Benjamin's project to reconstitute the matter informing historical consciousness by metaphorically emulating the ragpicker's activity. The *Arcades Project* is 'picked' from the textual refuse of the *Bibliothèque nationale*.⁶⁵ The labour of Benjamin's ragpicker acts as a metaphor for Sinclair's textual methodology. Texts like those traded in *White Chappell*, despite being described as "dreck," "dross," and so on, have provided ironically rich pickings for Sinclair's hallmark intertextuality.

Ostensibly, literature that recycles literary refuse hopes to transform itself into something that can be consumed, that is, something that can be read, and thus contribute to the alchemy of capitalism. Sinclair writes: "Jock was the only bookman in the whole strip between Shoreditch and Stamford Hill who *knowingly* retrieved vanished gems from the library of the lost. And who placed them where they would be best appreciated. For every book there was an ideal reader."⁶⁶ In this equivalency, the reader is equal to the consumer. In a sense, Sinclair is Jock's "ideal reader" because Jock's wares are exactly the type of texts he relishes. This appears to be ragpicking of the conventional sort, a conduit for refuse to become 'useful' once more. This is a notion that Sinclair touches upon in *White Chappell* when he discusses the mythopoeic London story of "The Elephant Man." Sinclair ties alchemy to the act

⁶³ Atkins and Sinclair 132.

⁶⁴ Atkins and Sinclair 132.

⁶⁵ Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Bellknap Press, 2001) 460.

⁶⁶ Sinclair, *Lights Out* 21.

of appropriation and characterises Frederick Treves' adoption and adaptation of Joseph Merrick's story as capture:

Treves wanted a reverse alchemy. He wanted to take gold and turn it to dross. He found a being composed of radical waters, a liquid thing swimming in its own inks, lost from the light. He took it up into the cape of myth. Its world was of his making. He made himself God.

But, equally, Merrick controlled him; appearing in the seductive guise of pure deformity. Making Treves vampire; returning compulsively. [...]

Treves had the Elephant Man fed on powdered gold. [...]

The chamber pot removed, the stool examined. To turn light into base matter. The flesh made word. The golden homunculus steams. The worm. But the excrement is pure. [...]

Merrick was destroyed by his deliverance, taken in out of his own distress and panic, rescued; he became a footnote in the myth of Treves. He was the animal part. His own energy withdrawn and stripped. He was the exhibition of Treves' sanctity [...].

He willingly abandoned himself, his unborn self, to the sensationalisation of his history. The victim drew the hand of the author over the paper [...]

Treves worked with surgical precision; cut away all extraneous dialogue, local colour, architecture, weather. Merrick was the nerve of all this: and it was at the cost of his own existence.⁶⁷

⁶⁷ Sinclair, *White Chappell* 108-09.

By contrast, Sinclair's narratives recycle literature in order to create a gold, which according to the tastes of mainstream consumers is actually shit: textual refuse that denies consumption. This engagement with refuse *refuses* the usefulness of 'ragpicking' as determined by the capitalist economy. It transgresses capitalism's alchemical project. Sinclair's gold is the unauthorised biography of London, the sardonic flipside of the airbrushed official accounts of London's history in tourist guidebooks that treat the city as a commodity to be consumed. He has devoted his career to documenting and describing the socio-cultural textualities that have been relegated to the status of refuse by official accounts of London's history. The systems that have been installed to render refuse invisible are the same systems that have rendered the unsanctioned activities of these practitioners invisible to the mainstream: "Secret cells of counter-terror scribblers, dole bandits sub-editing propositions too manic for even the *Sun* to contemplate. This is where the Invisibles go to ground."⁶⁸

Sinclair creates his degraded gold through intertextual ragpicking. In resurrecting narrative refuse he incorporates into his textual refuse. Shit does not become gold, but remains shit and thereby enacts an ethics of appropriation that transcends capitalism alchemical project. He digs up the forgotten histories of London, scavenging amongst texts that have been neglected or omitted, including his own small press publications, and moulds them into new texts. He is interested in the narratives that proliferate as the result of the demands of a production driven economy, then ultimately founder. In *Lights Out*, Sinclair ruminates upon a 1935 photograph of the Caledonian market where the glut of printed material ends up. The scene in the photograph shows "alps of books, mountain ranges thrown across the old cattle yards. Pipe smokers content merely to contemplate the spilled plunder,

⁶⁸ Sinclair, *Lights Out* 28.

treating the conical heaps like a visionary landscape. Scavengers icepicking a path towards some mouth-watering desideratum."⁶⁹

There is something of Sinclair in "Solid Objects," a short story by another renowned London writer, Virginia Woolf. At first glance, her protagonist mimics the activity of the capitalist ragpicker, motivated by the conviction "that one day some newly-discovered rubbish heap would reward him."⁷⁰ Her protagonist "[keeps] his eyes upon the ground, especially in the neighbourhood of waste land where the household refuse is thrown away. Such objects often occurred there – thrown away, of no use to anybody, shapeless, discarded."⁷¹ Undoubtedly, aesthetic echoes of T. S. Eliot's poetry are discernable; in *The Waste Land*, Eliot's vision of the Thames was of "empty bottles, sandwich papers, / Silk handkerchiefs, cardboard boxes, cigarette ends / Or other testimony of summer nights,"⁷² and in *Preludes*, the urban aspect was marked by "grimy scraps / of withered leaves about your feet / And newspapers from vacant lots."⁷³ Yet Woolf is distinct from Eliot in that she is intrigued, not alienated, by all aspects of modernity including its refuse. Far more importantly, there is a gratuitous dimension to the actions of Woolf's ragpicker; he has an affective attachment to his finds and does not seek to re-integrate them into capitalist circuits of exchange. His treatment of the things that others do not value distils the differentiation between waste and refuse, a differentiation that is perceptible in Sinclair's work as well.

⁶⁹ Sinclair, *Lights Out* 20.

⁷⁰ Virginia Woolf, "Solid Objects," *A Haunted House* (London: Hogarth Press, 1943) 74-75.

⁷¹ Woolf 72.

⁷² T. S. Eliot, "The Waste Land," *Collected Poems: 1909-1962* (London: Faber and Faber, 1963) 70.

⁷³ Eliot, "Preludes," *Collected Poems* 23.

CHAPTER TWO

Scribbling In The Margins: Sinclair's Poetry And/As Play

So all that great foul city of London there,—rattling, growling, smoking, stinking—a ghastly heap of fermenting brickwork, pouring out poison at every pore,—you fancy it is a city of work? Not a street of it! It is a great city of play; very nasty play and very hard play, but still play.

John Ruskin¹

The most intense and productive life of culture takes place on the boundaries.

Mikhail Bakhtin²

In the essay “Shamanism of Intent: A Retrospective Manifesto” (1991) Iain Sinclair writes: “Any proposition asserted with enough force could ghost as the truth.”³ Sinclair’s aphorism, and the “manifesto” in which it appears, can be read as a response to the specific historical and political context of Margaret Thatcher’s Britain, and the then British prime minister’s ubiquitous refrain, “There is no alternative.” This slogan, the discursive co-efficient of Thatcherite free-market economic and social policies, maintained that her program of deregulation was the sole course of political action.⁴ “Shamanism of Intent” is by no means Sinclair’s only disavowal of Thatcher. In 2004—fourteen years after her own party deposed her—he said: “You can't understand Thatcher except in terms of bad magic. This wicked witch who

¹ John Ruskin, *Crown of Wild Olive* (London: Macmillan, 1926) 17.

² Mikhail Bakhtin, *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, trans. Vern W. McGee, ed. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986) 2.

³ Iain Sinclair, “Shamanism of Intent: A Retrospective Manifesto,” *The Shamanism of Intent: Some Flights of Redemption* (Uppingham: Goldmark, 1991) 5.

⁴ Thatcher’s successors are not safe from Sinclair’s pen. His attack on New Labour in *Sorry Meniscus* (1999) proves this. However, the excesses of the Thatcher era, epitomised in the transformation of London’s Docklands, mark a nadir in London’s history for Sinclair.

focuses all the ill will in society. I can't understand her except as demonically possessed by the evil forces of world politics. Everything else follows from that: oil revenues blown in dubious arms deals, all real values trashed."⁵ Nor is it Sinclair's most trenchant denunciation of her politics: that distinction goes to the novel *Downriver* published the same year as the essay. Instead, "Shamanism of Intent" forms part of an ongoing critique in Sinclair's poetry, fiction, non-fiction and criticism which aims to demonstrate that contrary to the best efforts of Thatcher, and her political successors, a vibrant, potentialised, heterodox "alternative" is politically and culturally possible, and even necessary.

Sinclair's essay accompanied an exhibition of the same name, which he also curated. *Shamanism of Intent* the exhibition emphasises collaboration and community, and is a refusal of the increasing imperative of individuated social practice epitomised in the capitalist idealities of the sole author and privatised social space. Textual practice such as *Shamanism* constitutes a double refusal—in both content and material form—of the political and cultural economies advocated and enacted by the adherents of neo-liberalism. In combination and apart, in theory and in practice, the essay and the group show refute the totalising rhetoric and effects of Thatcher's ideology, which is encapsulated in comments like "there is no such thing as society."

To many it may seem like scribbling in the margins, but Sinclair's small-press activity is politicised precisely because it is of little or no use to consumer culture. It contradicts the dominant view, which equates public interest with the interests of consumers, whilst simultaneously exalting practices that enhance the *mythos* of the market. The catalogue is published by Goldmark Press, and exemplifies Sinclair's

⁵ Stuart Jeffries, "On the Road," *Guardian* 24 Apr. 2004, 22 June 2008
<<http://books.guardian.co.uk/review/story/0,12084,1201348,00.html>>.

small press and little magazine production. The press is based outside London in Uppingham, and hence operates in a space removed from a centralised, and London-centric literary market.⁶ This chapter looks at Sinclair's reinterpretation of the 'work' of literature (in the sense of practice *and* product) through his participation in this field. It considers selected poetry from the years 1970-1996, a period book-ended by *Back Garden Poems* (1970) and the anthologised collection in the *Penguin Modern Poets* series (1996).⁷

Periodisation in relation to Sinclair's work is often uncertain because many of the earlier writings are reprinted and reworked in later editions and anthologies,⁸ but the reason for sectioning off this period is that it occurs prior to Sinclair's first major crossover success with the compilation of essays *Lights Out for the Territory*, and thus, represents the most productive era for Sinclair within this sphere. Sinclair's inclusion in the *Penguin Modern Poets* series indicates a mainstream publishing house's recognition of his contribution to contemporary poetry, and indicates a shift to a major literary market. However, in that it was a collection of poetry, gleaned mostly from little magazine and small-press publications, the volume did not translate into the media attention or reader numbers enjoyed by *Lights Out*. After the recognition afforded by *Lights Out*, Sinclair's small-press output becomes more infrequent. Mirroring the marginalised position poetry occupies in literature in general, his poetry has moved into the background, while at the same time, his public profile as essayist and novelist has amplified.

⁶ Sinclair has a long association with Goldmark Press and its eponymous owner Mike Goldmark. Goldmark published the first edition of *White Chappell*, *Scarlet Tracings* (1987), before it was picked up by the majors, as well as *Rodinsky's A-Z* (1999) and *White Goods* (2002). In line with the idea of convergent artistic practice, Goldmark also incorporates a gallery where the *Shamanism* exhibition was held.

⁷ Douglas Oliver, Denise Riley, Iain Sinclair, *Penguin Modern Poets: Volume Ten* (London: Penguin, 1996).

⁸ For instance, a revised version of "Shamanism of Intent" appears in the collection *Lights Out* 243-278.

As tempting as it is to evaluate writers by touching upon substantive qualities, the discussion in this chapter is limited largely to the material dimensions and conditions of Sinclair's cultural production. It is concerned with structures for the reason that the structural features of Sinclair's texts are a statement that communicates refusal as eloquently as any words. His type of poetry is invested in a different model of production, one that is quite different from capitalist models. There is another important aspect to this chapter: the proposition that Sinclair's poetics, through reconfiguring the idea of (the) work, productively assume and promote the attributes of the ludic. Sinclair's poetry and poetic practice irreverently *play* with—and by extension, refuse—the sacrosanct in a capitalist political economy: the ethos of 'work' and the fetishism of commodities. The influential work of cultural historian Johan Huizinga on the play-element in culture proves particularly useful in exploring this idea.

Much has been made of one particular embodiment of the ludic as he appears in Sinclair's work: the *flâneur*. Yet Sinclair's characterisation of this figure is hardly typical. He echoes Walter Benjamin in declaring the existence of the *flâneur*, as previously stereotyped, to be impossible. Sinclair performs a Situationist *détournement* (derailment) of the *flâneur*-dandy or idler in an oft-quoted passage from *Lights Out*.⁹ His *flâneur* has evolved into something far more exacting and purposeful:

the concept of 'strolling', aimless urban wandering, the *flâneur*, had been superseded. We had moved into the age of the stalker; journeys made with intent—sharp-eyed and unsponsored. The stalker was our role model:

⁹ "Detournement (sic) is [...] first of all a negation of the value of the previous organisation of expression. It arises and grows increasingly stronger in the historical period of the decomposition [...]." Guy Debord, "Detournement as Negation and Prelude," *Situationist International Anthology*, trans. and ed. Ken Knabb. (Berkeley, Calif.: Bureau of Public Secrets, 1981) 55.

purposed hiking, not dawdling, nor browsing. No time for the savouring of reflections in shop windows, admiration for Art Nouveau ironwork, attractive matchboxes rescued from the gutter. This was walking with a thesis. With a prey. [...] The stalker is a stroller who sweats, a stroller who knows where he is going, but not why or how.¹⁰

Above, all the *flâneur*, as depicted in the writings of Sinclair, problematises the modern bifurcation of work and play, a problematic that leads us to Sinclair's philosophy and practice regarding contemporary cultures of work.

Sinclair and the British Poetry Revival

In his appraisal of Peter Ackroyd's biography *Blake*, Sinclair recounts Ackroyd's own biographical details, his metamorphosis from Cambridge poet to bestselling historian:

What might be floated is the notion that Ackroyd is the only Cambridge poet, the only person published by Ferry Press, to go public, to chance life in the front line. [...] The role or mask of the poet, as hermit of language, was never a comfortable fit. Its modesty was of the wrong kind (because Ackroyd's prose, despite his high profile, his famous devices and Hitchcockian walk-ons, is conventional, aerodynamic, eager to please). [...] [T]he brief flirtation with the obscurantism of the literary underclass,

¹⁰ Sinclair, *Lights Out* 75. Baudelaire wrote about the artist Constantin Guys; Sinclair implicates his friend and poet/artist Brian Catling.

privately educated Marxists, dysfunctional lyricists, language masochists, ended with *Country Life* in 1978.¹¹

As Sinclair tells it, poetry is the poor relation to other literary genres, such as biography and history. In this fable about poetry's position in the literature's order, the material asceticism of small-press and little magazine poetics is superseded by Ackroyd's portentous and profitable "golden brick[s] from the pyramid in the window of Waterstones,"¹² which are designed to invite a wide readership: "The 'I' of these anorexic pamphlets will be replaced by the avuncular 'we' of the biographies."¹³ It is a banal narrative of success by numbers, avant-garde beginnings eventually repudiated in favour of crossover appeal, an either/or formulation that Sinclair has avoided.

In Sinclair's version, Ackroyd is an unconvincing member of the Cambridge poets. The group, whose fulcrum is the poet/academic (and formative influence on Sinclair) J. H. Prynne, is a subset of the "British Poetry Revival," a loose banner retrospectively hung above a poetics of praxis that was active throughout the period 1960-75. Sinclair's poetry rises from the aftershocks of the Revival. The production of the Revival was characterised by a wealth of *samizdat*-like publications acting in concert with poetry readings, happenings and performance. The Revival was conceived, in part, as a foil for 'The Movement,' another group of poets emerging in the 1950s who enjoyed arts council funding, mass market publication, inclusion in university reading lists and reviews in the mainstream media. Another divergence was that the Revival was pan-British, shifting away from the established centres of

¹¹ Iain Sinclair, "Customising Biography," rev. of *Blake*, by Peter Ackroyd, *London Review of Books*, 22 Feb. 1996: 16.

¹² Sinclair, "Customising Biography" 18.

¹³ Sinclair, "Customising Biography" 16.

literary production and incorporating multiple vernaculars, whereas The Movement was almost exclusively English. By contrast, those involved in the Revival refused official support. As one poet explains in a history of little magazine publishing: “There is a point to the littleness of the little press. [...] It is not turned out for a market. [...] The point is to devolve control [...] to decentralize the creative capacity of society.”¹⁴ The Revival’s refusal of the apparatuses of popular publishing defined a politics that was against dominant modes of cultural production. This political stance further marked their difference from The Movement who were perceived to be apolitical.

Although frequently collaborative, it is important to note, as poet/academic Eric Mottram does, that the poetics of the Revival “acknowledged no enclosure in self-styled ‘schools,’ although it already showed a variety of small group differences.”¹⁵ For example, the label Revival (which connotes a certain evangelism—albeit of a secular kind—and therefore suggests a determination on the part of those involved to ‘spread the word’) was an afterthought and is somewhat misleading in that it diminishes the heterogeneity of the poetry produced. The Revival, its affiliates, parallel movements and offshoots embrace the multiplicity of poetic techniques, using open field, projective verse, sound text, concrete poetry, surrealist and dada developments, assemblage, and found textual objects gleaned from other cultural loci.¹⁶ Criticism and histories of small-press poetics, such as Mottram’s, emphasise dissonance, lack of cohesion, heteroglossia and polyphony. Alliances are revealed not in the words or poetic style, but in a shared refusal to adhere to conventional modes of cultural production, and by extension, consumption. What becomes clear is

¹⁴ Quoted in Roger Ellis, “Mapping the UK little magazine field,” *New British Poetries: The Scope of the Possible*, ed. Robert Hampson and Peter Barry, (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1993) 91.

¹⁵ Eric Mottram, “The British Poetry Revival, 1960-75,” Hampson and Barry 15.

¹⁶ This list is, in part, borrowed from Mottram 16-17.

that they embrace a politics that is devised not as explicit polemic, but emerges from inhabiting a separate cultural space.

Sinclair's involvement with presses that operate from outside the culturally legitimate concentration of London—Etruscan Books, Worple Press and the aforementioned Goldmark Press—therefore assumes a supplementary level of significance.¹⁷ These outfits enact a type of geographic decentralisation of cultural capital which Sinclair lauds: “London is deluding itself if it thinks that it can continue to dominate national consciousness: the centre is anywhere and everywhere, especially Uppingham.”¹⁸ In *Liquid City*, Sinclair is nostalgic about artistic and literary scenes now vanished from an increasingly mono-cultural Central and East London. In doing so, he reiterates the spatial politics of marginality and maintains that this trait is essential for credible resistant practice:

As we walk [...], I try to explain who and what Eric Mottram is. Oral history in its most debased form. Misinformation, hideously abridged narratives. [...] The names don't mean anything to Atkins. This is deleted history – Allen Fisher, Bill Griffiths, Barry Macsweeney, the heroes of the ‘British Poetry Revival’ – have been expunged from the record. Poetry is back where it belongs: in exile. In the provinces, the bunkers of academe. In madhouses, clinics and fragile sinecures.¹⁹

In this quotation, Sinclair aligns poetry with madness in a space set apart from the centre. In the same way that East London was once spatially and geographically

¹⁷ Etruscan Books, who published Sinclair's 2002 volume of poetry *Saddling the Rabbit*, are based in Buckfastleigh, Devon. Worple Press published Sinclair's extended interview with journalist Kevin Jackson, *The Verbals* (2003), as well as a recent collection of poetry *Buried at Sea* (2007). Worple operate out of Tonbridge, Kent.

¹⁸ Sinclair, *Lights Out* 138; 141.

¹⁹ Marc Atkins and Iain Sinclair, *Liquid City* (London: Reaktion Books, 1999) 38.

separate from the locus of political power, madness occupies a distinct social, cultural, and physical location to that of majoritarian practice. The potential of madness as a liberation from the controls of society has been investigated by the Frankfurt School, and in particular, by Herbert Marcuse in *One-Dimensional Man*. Marcuse opines that an “intellectual and emotional refusal to ‘go along’ appears neurotic and impotent,” not to mention irrational and psychotic.²⁰ Practices that are not sanctioned by the governmentalities of a capitalist political economy are pathologised, and even punished through social, economic and physical exclusion.

Of course, the promotion of autarky is complex in that it can assume more than one countenance. Sinclair could be hailed for the liberatory impulse of his poetry, or accused of advancing an exclusionary poetics. It is a bind that inevitably recalls the debates surrounding modernism and its cultural location. The shared tensions are by no means the extent of Sinclair’s engagement with modernism. Robert Hampson points out that poets like Sinclair were writing a poetry that “was not autochthonous: it grew out of a tradition of little magazine publication that is particularly associated with modernism, and out of patterns of publication and performance established during the 1960s. [...] It was also consciously internationalist, both in its networking and its awareness of American and other European traditions.”²¹ Hampson’s list encompasses modernist, as well as counter-cultural influences, including Dada, Surrealism, the Objectivists, and later, the Beats and the Black Mountain poets. Sinclair’s earliest full-length publication *Kodak Mantra Diaries* (1971) performs homage to these traditions through explicit reference, as well as stylistically through an anarchic flow of consciousness and free association:

²⁰ Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man* (London & New York: Routledge, 2002) 9.

²¹ Robert Hampson and Peter Barry, “Introduction: The Scope of the Possible,” Hampson and Barry 8.

it doesn't come down to much more than leaving home, getting the tail out of the family rat-trap and crawling to the city, avoiding the business pyramid, not working, living hand to mouth, moving around, sitting in people's rooms that you never sit in again, smoking, scoring, bumming, conning, talking, talking, talking about the programmes that have worked, India, America, Kesey, Grogan, the students in France, the Situationists, free food, free press, Ginsberg, Holland, that Dutchman who bored a hole in his head with a dentist's drill looking for a permanent high, what Laing said, what Bateson said, finding somewhere to sleep, Bob Dylan, someone to sleep with.²²

Other modernist and counter-cultural textual strategies adopted by Sinclair to refuse the mainstream are rudimentary. There is the renunciation of commercial aspirations through the wilful and proud promulgation of poetry that is "clinically uncommercial."²³ Sinclair's "Checklist of Publications" in *Shamanism of Intent* substantiates this claim as something beyond mere rhetorical device. For example, *Flesh Eggs and Scalp Metal* (1983) published by Sinclair's imprint Hoarse Commerce consists of "12 numbered copies, given to friends of the press."²⁴ In the acknowledgments of the 1989 anthology of his early poetry (also called *Flesh Eggs and Scalp Metal*, but a separate volume to the previous publication sharing its name) Sinclair writes that the early literary ventures "surfaced in clandestine editions of less than 20 copies."²⁵ *Bladud of Bath*, a release from Sinclair's other imprint, the Albion Village Press, is listed as being published "c.1978. Single folded sheet. [...] This

²² Iain Sinclair, *Kodak Mantra Diaries* (London: Albion Village Press, 1971) n.pag.

²³ Sinclair, *Lights Out* 139.

²⁴ Sinclair, *The Shamanism of Intent* 23.

²⁵ Iain Sinclair, *Flesh Eggs and Scalp Metal: Selected Poems 1970-1987* (London: Paladin, 1989) 3.

publication was distributed, gratis, from Compendium Bookshop. No copies survive in the Albion Village Press files. About 100 copies."²⁶

The name of one of Sinclair's imprints, Hoarse Commerce, is also rich in counter-cultural associations. Not only is it a riff on 1960s American counter-cultural small press Hors Commerce, but it also encapsulates a multivalent pun. It plays with the different uses of the French phrase *hors commerce* (which translates as "before business" and is used in the booktrade to denote copies of the book that cannot be obtained through regular commercial channels), as well as the homophonic 'whore's', which plays with the notion of the writer as prostitute. "Hoarse" could also suggest the minor status of those published under its imprimatur, those who must shout themselves 'hoarse' in order to be heard over the din of mainstream culture.

Apart from the minimal print run, there is another material dimension to the texts that emphasises their marginal position. Imprints like Sinclair's Albion Village Press—as the title of one of its publications, *Back Garden Poems* suggests—are 'do-it-yourself' affairs with ad hoc aesthetics. They make do with what is at hand: textual found objects, home-operated printing presses, the skills of family and friends. As in concrete poetry, the material presentation of the text, its typographic and textual subversions cannot be overlooked in reading Sinclair. Sinclair's homemade aesthetic, rough montages of word and image, refuses the streamlining and proliferation for

²⁶ Sinclair, *The Shamanism of Intent* 23. It is telling that *Bladud of Bath* ended up at a cultural node such as Compendium Bookshop. During its existence, the shop served as the lodestar for an alternative literary economy to that run by the major publishing houses and mass media. Sinclair says of the its demise in 2000: "It's such a loss that somewhere like Compendium in Camden has gone. Not just the shop, but the people there, who knew all about what was coming out. I used to rely on that shop to sell my own books when nobody else would, and also keep me up to date with what was going on." Indeed, Compendium was such a London landmark and literary icon that it warranted an obituary notice in the journal *Radical Philosophy*. Iain Sinclair, interview with Mark Pilkington and Phil Baker, *Fortean Times* Apr. 2002, 19 Jun. 2008
<http://www.forteanimes.com/features/interviews/37/ian_sinclair.html>. *Radical Philosophy* Jan. - Feb. 2001: 60.

which technical reproducibility was invented. American poet and academic Bob Perelman writes about this type of poetics in *The Marginalisation of Poetry*:

These sections are immune to standardizing
media: to quote them you need

a photocopier not a word processor.²⁷

Perelman is talking about a type of poetry that does not lend itself easily to reproduction and appropriation because of its idiosyncrasies in style and presentation.

The “undecidability and/ indecipherability” noted by Perelman is not created by non-representational language alone, but by cutting up the page with random shifts in font, or from switching from written text to visual image.²⁸ Nearly all of Sinclair’s small press output is a collaboration between the word and photograph and/or illustration. The title page of *Back Garden Poems* gives equal authorial weight to Sinclair and Lawrence Bicknell who does the drawings.²⁹ In *Lud Heat*, diagrams, photographs and reproductions of the artworks of Brian Catling are inserted into the pages. *Jack Elam’s Other Eye* (1991) interleaves images by Gavin Jones (who also took part in the *Shamanism* exhibition) with Sinclair’s poetry.³⁰ The effect of jumping from one medium to another is similar to that of the Cubist collage or Dadist cut-up. It fragments the text and undermines its comprehensibility as a seamless commodity, while collaboration is contra the capitalist ideality of individual author and work.

²⁷ Bob Perelman, *The Marginalisation of Poetry: Language Writing and Literary History* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1996) 7.

²⁸ Perelman 9.

²⁹ Iain Sinclair, *Back Garden Poems* (London: Albion Village Press, 1970) 1.

³⁰ Iain Sinclair, *Jack Elam’s Other Eye* (Hoarse Commerce: London, 1991).

For Robert Bond, the unfinished aesthetic of the “anorexic pamphlets,” specifically created to be given away to associates, encourages another textual agenda. The twin difficulties encountered in firstly obtaining, and then reading this type of poetry, come together “to produce work with a social character which actively solicits the reader’s participatory intellectual labour.”³¹ Bond points to poet and academic Drew Milne’s comments that “the sheets were ‘circulated’ amongst interested parties, seen as active participants, rather than ‘printed,’” and adds that “[t]his particular form of self-publication was adopted in order to encourage readers to think of the worksheet as work-in-progress with which they were themselves actively involved.”³² The reader is, as Roland Barthes would say “no longer a consumer, but a producer of the text.”³³ Again collaboration is key in this process, with Bond emphasizing that the reader is “conceived [...] as a collaborative producer,”³⁴

Another textual consequence derived from a culture of collaboration is that the critics and historians of the group are recruited from within the ranks. Sinclair himself has written about the avant-garde poetry milieu in *Liquid City, Lights Out* and *Conductors of Chaos* (1996).³⁵ These auto-critiques and homemade histories are not solipsistic, but are a feature that defines the cultural parameters of the scene. In combining roles, as these poet/publishers do, the writer has a level of control over their work from origins to the final material product, and beyond that to its

³¹ Robert Bond, *Iain Sinclair* (Cambridge: Salt, 2005) 12.

³² Drew Milne quoted in Bond 13.

³³ Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1974) 4.

³⁴ Bond 3.

³⁵ Others writing about minor poetics who are drawn from the ranks, most notably in *New British Poetries*, are Mottram and Robert Sheppard. Similarly, over the Atlantic, poet/academic Perelman is witness to what he calls “L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E writing.” This movement, which emerged from the Black Mountain and Beat poetry much like Sinclair’s circle, has followed a similar poetic and political trajectory to that of the British based Revival.

reception. This is increasingly unavailable in the atomised world of capitalist work. In a sense, it is a return to the artisanal, and thus a rejection of the contemporary alienated relation between producers and objects.

In “X Marks the Spot,” an overview of contemporary minor poetics, Sinclair celebrates off-piste poets and poetry. His account identifies a number of the key concerns for this scene:

Poetry: the hard stuff, the toffee of the universe. The antimatter that granted validity to the Thatcherite free-market nightmare by steadfastly manufacturing its contrary: a flame in the dark. There never was a better period in which to be unknown, off the record, ex-directory. [...] Presses were no longer “small,” they were microlite, singular – trade editions of one, mass markets of thirty, giveaways, offers you couldn’t refuse. [...] Desktop concerns, run for love or politics [...] gonzo outfits with marvellously pretentious titles [...] Furious compositions: it would take a ward of demented autodidacts to keep up with the pace and intensity of this output – lowercase, unpunctuated, long line, Adorno and Benjamin citing, dialectically lyrical, revenging song. Superb poets, who published modestly for years, were energized by the pressure of disinterest, to achieve new levels of excitement and control [...].³⁶

Sinclair’s account is framed by the material conditions of this type of cultural production. Poetry is resistant to “the Thatcherite free-market nightmare” because it is “antimatter”; it has a negative relation to the ‘matter’ of capitalism, which is the commodity form. In addition, the practice of this type of poetics is characterised as

³⁶ Sinclair, *Lights Out* 134.

frantic, almost deranged. This characterisation is crucial in considering how Sinclair's poetry engages with the notion of work.

Homo Ludens

Sinclair's poem "Reading in Bed" (1975) introduces a number of diegetic conceits that travel to the heart of his poetics of refusal:

the secret routines are uncovered at risk
& the point is
that *the objective* is nonsense
and *the scientific approach* a bitter farce
unless it is shot through with high occulting
fear & need & awe of mysteries &
does not demean or explain
in scholarly babytalk (15-22).³⁷ (original emphases)

Lines 17 and 18 outline a refusal of a positivist, rational mode of thought, the type of thought that underpins work practices in contemporary capitalist society, a refusal that continues in line 19 with a reference to the occult. The quality of ineffability that occult knowledge endorses—in contrast to systems of knowledge that rely on "the objective"—is a refusal of the type of deterministic knowledge constructed and disseminated by *homo faber*. In *Homo Ludens*, an inquiry into the social and cultural dimensions of the play-element, Johan Huizinga presents the figure of *homo ludens*—he or she who plays—as an alternative to *homo faber*. *Homo faber*, whose mission is to

³⁷ Iain Sinclair, "Reading in Bed," *Lud Heat: A Book of the Dead Hamlets* (London: Albion Village Press, 1975) 89.

master and re-make nature through favouring thought and practice which is rational and teleological, is an avatar of capitalism.

By contrast, the autotelic impulse of the ludic, or the play-function, refuses the teleology of capitalist work that turns material and practice into commodities. *Homo ludens* is not bound by the limits of capitalist work. Like *homo ludens*, Sinclair is unconcerned by the parameters of capitalist cultural production, as his long association with small-press publishing and his stated opinions on (not) writing for any particular market testify. Play is extraneous, incidental to the regime of work. As Huizinga points out, play “is an activity connected with no material interest, and no profit can be gained by it.”³⁸ It is considered the preserve of children, self-indulgent, unproductive.

Using Huizinga allows us to reassess those practices that are dismissed as ‘playing’ for the reason that capitalism considers them value-less, redundant, and/or supererogatory. Huizinga’s philosophy constructs a contrary reading of play, one that rescues *homo ludens* from his illegitimacy, by arguing that it is the very qualities denigrated by capitalist ideology and practice that make play meaningful. He argues that the

efforts to define or devise a use for play cast it as an “abreaction” – an outlet for harmful impulses, as the necessary restorer of energy wasted by one-sided activity, as “wish-fulfilment,” as a fiction designed to keep up the feeling of personal value, etc. All these hypotheses have one thing in

³⁸ Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955) 13. The tension between play and work is hardly a modern phenomenon. However, any contemporary consideration of play and work must take into account, and respond to, the current global dominance of capitalism as a political, economic and social order. It is this discursive and disciplinary framework that informs an understanding of play at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

common: they all start from the assumption that play must serve something else which is *not* play[...].³⁹

Play is hardly extraordinary. It is ubiquitous, quotidian, democratic. It is inclusive in that it is a productivity in which we can improvise, and thus make and learn the rules as we proceed. More importantly, play's universality as a concept and practice renders it immune to the charges of elitism that afflict other practices that have been marginalised by the dominant order. In fact, understanding Sinclair's writing as a form of linguistic and textual play counters the charges of elitism that dog his *poiesis* due to its inaccessibility. Let us be clear though: Huizinga is not proposing that play is a utopian space, a refuge from the reality of the everyday. Play might offer an alternative reality to the program of work and licensed leisure administered and devised by capitalist society, yet it is not an idealisation. Play can be messy, violent and cruel. To sum up in Huizinga's words: "play is a voluntary activity or occupation executed within certain fixed limits of time and place according to rules freely accepted but absolutely binding, having its aim in itself and accompanied by a feeling of tension, joy and the consciousness that is 'different' from 'ordinary life.'" ⁴⁰

In *Homo Ludens*, Huizinga devotes a chapter to charting the overlap between poetry and play. He proposes that "[p]oiesis, in fact, is a play-function. It proceeds within the playground of the mind, in a world of its own which the mind creates for it. These things have a very different physiognomy from the one they wear in 'ordinary life,' and are bound by ties other than those of logic and causality."⁴¹ For Huizinga, the congruence between play and poetry occurs in both cultural

³⁹ Huizinga 2.

⁴⁰ Huizinga 28.

⁴¹ Huizinga 119.

phenomena's capacity to span the extent of human experience and consciousness. "All poetry is born of play: the sacred play of worship, the festive play of courtship, the martial play of the contest, the disputatious play of braggadocio, mockery and invective, the nimble play of wit and readiness."⁴² Although Huizinga does not stake out any political terrain for this coalescence of play and poetry, his co-ordinates nonetheless suggest a model for cultural production that, through its identification with play, can usefully reject dominant patterns of production, distribution and consumption.

Play is gratuitous, as sociologist Zygmunt Bauman explains:

Being which is a [sic] play is a being that goes beyond reproducing itself; that has not got the perpetuation of itself as its only goal. Man does not play 'in order to'; play has no other aim but itself. ... It serves no 'sensible' purpose. ... Play is free. It vanishes together with freedom. There is no such thing as obligatory play, play on command. ... This is perhaps why play remains so stubbornly non-functional. Play is the ultimate *autotelic* phenomenon.⁴³

Play's autotelic impulse, its rejection of the teleological impulse of capitalist order, directs us to a primary condition of its alterity: it is autarkic. It may take place within the space of the everyday, yet it is nonetheless demarcated as separate. Play evades the regulation of disciplinary apparatuses because it needs no licence, nor does it need special conditions or tools for its enactment. In this way it can provide a forum for what cannot be expressed or performed otherwise. A further feature of its

⁴² Huizinga 129.

⁴³ Zygmunt Bauman, "Desert Spectacular," *The Flâneur*, ed. Keith Tester (London: Routledge, 1999) 142-43.

autarkic character is its ambivalence. It can encompass seriousness and levity, wisdom and folly.⁴⁴ In this manner, play refuses binary logic, the very system which marks the delineation between 'play' and 'work.' At this point, then, a problem presents itself, a theoretical knot to be untied if we are to cast Sinclair as *homo ludens*. For the very reason that play has no other goal outside the production of itself, how can it refuse the logos of capitalism? Adopting Huizinga's comprehensive model of the play-function as a model of refusal implies an intentionality, a conscious rejection, which play cannot seem to encompass if it is to retain its authenticity. Indeed, its ambivalence cannot constitute a refusal in itself. Ultimately, the critique of capitalism that play offers proves to be immanent to capitalism itself. It is the antipathy dominant discourse directs towards play that politicises it, producing the effect of refusal and thereby generating radical and resistant practice.

Play's refusal, like the refusals of small-press and little magazine publishing, lies in its potential to exist externally and function differently to capitalist formations. Huizinga maintains that a defining characteristic of play is awareness by those playing that their spatial practice exists in a space removed from the centre.⁴⁵ This too is the position of the minoritarian poet. *Lud Heat*, a self-produced and semi-autobiographical amalgam of poetry, prose and image, lists the numerous jobs Sinclair undertakes in order to fund survival in London: "My own jobs follow the churches across the city. Cigar-packing in Clerkenwell & I cycle past St Luke's [...] Ullage cellars of Truman's Brewery, Brick Lane & I front Christ Church. Garden assistant, & grass manicurist, in Limehouse & I mow continually between the shifting influence of St George's and St Anne's."⁴⁶ That others view writing as a

⁴⁴ Huizinga 6. The ambivalence of play can be detected, for instance, in the Shakespearean figure of the 'wise fool.'

⁴⁵ Huizinga 12.

⁴⁶ Sinclair, *Lud Heat* 11.

marginal practice, secondary to 'work,' is evident when he signs on as an assistant gardener. The

boss-man [...] gives me the Parks Department Manual to take home for a little light reading. It includes such nuggets as:

*"7. Writing of books. While occasional literary or artistic work is permissible, special consideration would have to given to the writing of books for payment on subjects relating to an Officer's or employee's work for the council."*⁴⁷ (original emphasis)

This location on the outer is not merely self-imposed, nor is it a poetic, imaginative fancy. It is enforced through the penury, stigmatisation and persecution that result from refusing dominant ideas of work. Playing can have serious consequences, with real penalties for those who refuse to conform, as the life narratives of some poets testify. A contemporary of Sinclair's, the Revival poet Bill Griffiths, recalls an experience with the authorities: "I was picked up by the police and remanded. [...] Eventually, a psychiatrist came and told me that if I didn't give up my ambitions to write, the court would send me to prison, so I compromised and got a job as a gardener and continued writing."⁴⁸ Another of Sinclair's oppositional histories of London details the arrest, trial and gaolling of the Angry Brigade, a collective who "had a genuine interest in the possibilities of kitchen-table publishing."⁴⁹ These biographical narratives seem to confirm Marcuse's pessimism in *One-Dimensional Man*: "Under the conditions of a rising standard of living, non-

⁴⁷ Sinclair, *Lud Heat* 27.

⁴⁸ Anecdote related to Clive Bush by Bill Griffiths in *Out of Dissent: A Study of Five Contemporary British Poets* (London: Talus, 1997) 213.

⁴⁹ Sinclair, *Lights Out for the Territory* 28.

conformity with the system itself appears to be socially useless, and more so when it entails tangible economic and political disadvantages.”⁵⁰

To say that ludic practice such as avant-garde poetics is gratuitous does not mean that it produces nothing in a material or social sense, rather that it has no value within the domain of capitalism, and is therefore equivalent to refuse. What is designated as play because it “has no material value” can still rehearse the tendencies and traits of ‘work’ while being produced from very different economic and social conditions. An example of play in this sense would be the *poiesis* of the *flâneur* who circumnavigates official economies of cultural production in his rearticulation of the city as art and/or literature. The *flâneur* that haunts Sinclair is inherited from Baudelaire.⁵¹ Baudelaire’s portrait of the *flâneur* in the guise of artist Constantin Guys is hardly commensurate with the nineteenth-century caricature created by satirist Louis Huart.⁵² Guys’ activity is described as unrelenting, fuelled by artistic inspiration. Indeed, Michel Foucault goes as far as to say that

Constantin Guys is not a *flâneur*; what makes him the modern painter par excellence in Baudelaire’s eyes is that, just when the whole world is falling asleep, he begins to work, and he transfigures that world. His transfiguration does not entail an annulling of reality, but a difficult interplay between the truth of what is real and the exercise of freedom [...].⁵³

⁵⁰ Marcuse 2.

⁵¹ Charles Baudelaire, “The Painter of Modern Life,” *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays*, trans. and ed. Jonathan Mayne (London: Phaidon, 1995).

⁵² Louis Huart, *Physiologie du flâneur* (Paris: Aubert, 1841).

⁵³ Michel Foucault, “What is Enlightenment,” *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984) 41.

Baudelaire's *flâneur* is not a dandy leisurely strolling the boulevards, parading the latest fashions. He is a fringe dweller, and at his most subversive, his activities are considered criminal.

Sinclair's poem "Street Detail" (1983) is a twentieth century London counterpart to Baudelaire's *Tableaux Parisiens* from *Les fleurs du mal* (1857). In "To A Passer-by," Baudelaire recalls another pedestrian, a woman, "holding her hem up, graceful, wondering."⁵⁴ Like Baudelaire, Sinclair offers a sketch hastily drawn from the ephemera of city life; "Street Detail," in execution and in content, connotes the movement that delineates both the *flâneur's* practice and his subject matter. The echoes of Baudelaire resonate in the small gesture by the driver of a car stalled at the traffic lights: "having to flick the box/ into the street not/ breaking off his talk" (4-6).⁵⁵ In taking the time to annotate this banal instant, the *flâneur*/poet refuses the rhythm of the city, dictated by the machines of commerce and industry, to play his own improvised tune. Sinclair borrows from Baudelaire in turning the everyday into the heroic matter of poetry, yet his imagery is far more prosaic. His inspiration is derived not from classical art and literature, but from the scrawls on the walls around him. In the manner of Dadist and Surrealist artists and poets, Sinclair includes a found scriptural object visually gleaned from the scene; a "FOR SALE notice,/ phone number on rear ledge" (7-8).

The mainstream disapproval and the lack of commercial reward that often greets the minoritarian poet may be undesirable according to the precepts of capitalism, yet Sinclair contests the perception of poetry as an unproductive 'pastime.' His poem "Where the Talent Is" (1996) is dedicated to Derek Raymond,

⁵⁴ Charles Baudelaire, "A une passante/To a Passer-by," *Selected Poems*, comp. and trans. Joanna Richardson (Penguin: London, 1975) 170.

⁵⁵ Iain Sinclair, "Street Detail," *Autistic Poses* (London: Hoarse Commerce, 1985) n. pag.

one of Sinclair's literary circle, and is punctuated with images of activity that defy the image of poet as idler.

sweating bread:

Columbian coffee fires the tongue as the date
on the cheap watch clicks a lunch-hour thirst
pushing the scribe towards a hard-earned
amnesiac seizure: keys,
hot as the thought of hell, fever beads (1-6)⁵⁶

"Sweating," "coffee," "fires," "hard-earned," "fever" are not the vocabulary of indolence and lassitude; rather they insinuate energy and dynamism, though not necessarily the sort that can be harnessed by capitalist production. Time is a central conceit in Sinclair's poem, for although the poet is ostensibly working against the clock, it is temporal regime that is imposed not by the exigencies of commerce or social custom, but by the pace of writing. Sinclair's portrayal of the writer and the process of artistic creation are aligned with Foucault's representation of *Guys* in that the writer is an ambivalent embodiment of the tempo of modernity, and that self-imposed rhythm veers close to madness, which, unlike its construction in capitalist discourse, is an engine for productivity.

Another poem "German Bite" conveys the furious drive that seizes those in Sinclair's circle by conjuring the "hands of Orlac," a pair of possessed hands from a cult film of the same name (1961) which cannot stop moving:

An excitement of 'too much'

⁵⁶ Iain Sinclair, "Where the Talent Is," Atkins and Sinclair 140.

the hands of the junkie not
as spectacular as the hands of Orlac
but as much of a functioning instrument
guiding the hit into what's left
of the thinking machine (1-6)⁵⁷

Tropes of addiction draw comparisons between writing and drug addiction, and the excess of the drug addict (they 'exceed' the bounds of normative society; their 'excessive' drive for the object of addiction) is perversely reconfigured as something productive. Sinclair introduces the idea of excess, of "too much," to counter the characterisation of marginal practices as somehow insufficient in terms of their material and social contribution. In opposition to the idea that the members of this milieu are averse to hard labour, the poem speaks of relentless production. Indeed, Wolfgang Görtschacher's extensive survey of little magazine production in Britain illustrated the extent to which this scene has been active.⁵⁸

In "Shamanism of Intent," the prodigious output of marginal poets and artists is characterised as "a sickness-vocation," which twins madness and work in the one description. Sinclair writes:

Certain artists – the ones I encountered, or the ones I remembered – began to look rather strange, otherworldly, out-of-it. Their behaviour – this remorseless pursuit of discomfort, this restlessness, this fruitful invitation – struck me as exemplary. The will to continue, to keep a hand on the

⁵⁷ Iain Sinclair, "German Bite," *Flesh Eggs and Scalp Metal: Selected Poems 1970-1987* 136.

⁵⁸ Wolfgang Görtschacher, *Little Magazine Profiles: The Little Magazines in Great Britain 1939-1993* (University of Salzburg: Salzburg, 1993).

drill, to improvise upon chaos, could, I felt, be defined as *intent* – a ‘sickness-vocation’, as Eliade has it, an elected nightmare. The health of the city, and perhaps of the culture itself, seemed to depend upon the flights of redemption these artists could summon and sustain. Icarus-bloody, they were twinned with all the other avatars of unwisdom: scavengers, antiquarians, bagpeople, outpatients, muggers, victims, millennial babblers.⁵⁹

It would be wrong to infer that Sinclair, by applauding the “will to continue,” is substantiating the status quo of capitalist modes of production. In fact, this type of output *parodies* capitalism, transforming production from something ‘rational,’ or ‘sane’ into a “sickness-vocation.” It is a critique of capitalism and its compulsive need to reproduce itself. Indeed, it is the “avatars of unwisdom” that prove to be far saner than a network of systems that mindlessly, and even narcissistically, remakes itself over and over again. As Sinclair observes in an interview, “[t]here’s no anxiety. Most of the stuff I have done didn’t have to win anybody’s approval. For me, there wasn’t that question of “How do I get published?” that seems to preoccupy writers now. *I used to publish myself*”;⁶⁰ presumably the “anybody” is the consumers and producers who adhere to, and as a consequence perpetuate, the logos of capitalism. For Sinclair, hegemonic culture is marching acquiescently to “[t]he military/industrial two-step. That old standard... YES was the word.”⁶¹ If ‘yes’ is the mantra of this type of (false) consciousness, then Sinclair and his coterie’s contrary creations are asserting a politics of ‘no’.

⁵⁹ Sinclair, “Shamanism of Intent” 7.

⁶⁰ Sinclair quoted in Jeffries.

⁶¹ Iain Sinclair, *London Orbital* (London: Granta, 2002) 4.

Sinclair's refusal to accede to hegemonic demands regarding what is readable writing points to a deliberate decision to preserve what Marcuse terms "artistic alienation."⁶² According to Marcuse, artistic alienation, as distinct from traditional Marxist notions of alienation, should be encouraged in order to preserve the power of the work of art to rupture reality. In late era capitalism, reality is the totality of commodity culture, thus art must remain antagonistic to the ubiquity of the commodity form. It must not be compelled to follow the conventional trajectory of commodification. Or, to return to Marcuse's words: "art has ...magic power only as the power of negation. It can speak its own language only as long as the images are alive which refuse and refute the established order."⁶³ The model of *poiesis* that Marcuse advocates belongs to an alternative economy, that of the gift, which revels in the exorbitance of the artistic act, its gratuitous impulse, its excess. In its refusal to conform to the rules of commodification, art exceeds the circulation of goods. Exceeding the bounds of reification results in exclusion, confining oneself to the refuse of society.

In his preface to *Conductors of Chaos* (1996), a volume of modern British poetry that he also edited, Sinclair makes known his disquiet about the act of anthologising for a wider audience. In his opinion, it is basically a means of enabling expanded consumption:

Established publishers abandon their claim to be taken seriously as purveyors of poetry at the very moment when they decide to concentrate, not on identifying and sustaining singular talent, but on releasing instead an ice-floe of meaningless anthologies. Resurrectionism: the slash-and-

⁶² Marcuse 63.

⁶³ Marcuse 65.

burn school of literature – inefficient, and destructive of resources. The subversive intention to turn books into objects, a prematurely gift-wrapped status; an invitation to graze. [...] [T]he anthology was understood to be the crucial marketing tool, the point of access to a dormant readership. [...] Instead of being a liberation, the anthology was a closing down, the suppression of a more radical and heterodox body of work. Those who were included were who should be taught. It's always easier to trace the compendium edition than the dozen of difficult-to-obtain little press publications, put out by maverick poets with no flair for distribution and publicity.⁶⁴

The textual enterprise that *Conductors* represents—an accessible condensation of small press and little magazine literary activity produced under the auspices of a major imprint—betrays the disposition of alternative publishing from which the compilation's content has been extracted. Sinclair continues:

The work I value is that which seems most remote, alienated, fractured. I don't claim to 'understand' it but I like having it around. The darker it grows outside the window, the worse the noises from the island, the more closely do I attend to the mass of instant-printed pamphlets that pile up around my desk. The very titles are pure adrenalin: *Satyrs and Mephitic Angels*, *Tense Fodder*, *Hellhound memos*, *Civic Crime*, *Alien Skies*, *Harpmesh Intermezzi*, *A Pocket History of the Soul*. You don't need to read them, just handle them: feel the sticky heat creep up through your fingers. If these things are 'difficult,' they have earned that right. Why should they be

⁶⁴ Iain Sinclair, "Infamous and Invisible: A Manifesto for Those Who Do Not Believe in Such Things," *Conductors of Chaos: A Poetry Anthology*, ed. Iain Sinclair (London: Picador 1996) xiii-xv.

easy? Why should they not reflect some measure of the complexity of the climate in which they exist? Why should we not be prepared to make an effort, to break sweat, in hope of high return? There's no key, no Masonic password; take the sequences gently, a line at a time. Treat the page as a block, sound it for submerged sonar effects. Suspend conditioned reflexes. [...] If it comes too sweetly, somebody is trying to sell you something.⁶⁵

The subtitle of this essay, "A Manifesto for Those Who Do Not Believe in Such Things," may be a rebuttal of the charge of proselytisation that the manifesto attracts, but Sinclair's thoughts certainly contain a political message. The questions he asks about minor poetics—"Why should they be easy? Why should they not reflect some measure of the complexity of the climate in which they exist?"—are an argument for a poetics of refusal, one that refuses easy, uncritical consumption through not only its (mis)use of language, but also the cultural conditions of production. For Sinclair, the mode of communication and the mode of production are interconnected, reflections and refractions of each other.

Sinclair tells us that an anthology like *Conductors of Chaos* is a risky proposition. After all, his criticism of Ackroyd centres on the charge that Ackroyd anthologises literary history. On the latter's biography of William Blake, he writes: "This is Ackroyd the facilitator, the magic lantern man. On our behalf he has absorbed, with clairvoyant virtuosity, around three hundred secondary Blake sources – years of mind-numbing work for ordinary mortals. But Ackroyd is an unparalleled library vampire, a gutter and filleter of texts, a master of synthesis."⁶⁶ More than anything, Sinclair refuses the type of literary production typified in the

⁶⁵ Sinclair, "Infamous and Invisible" xvii.

⁶⁶ Sinclair, "Customising Biography" 16.

'work' of London's commercially successful 'biographer,' and has defined his literary persona as oppositional. Sinclair condemns Ackroyd's collusion with the 'official' literary economy and has criticised his approach to historiography. In his review of *London: The Biography* by Ackroyd, Sinclair declares: "Beneath Ackroyd's mellifluous prose, the glitter of paste jewels and gorgeous robes, the sponsor's message is profoundly conservative. [...] The urban scribe locates his system of values in a franchised version of the past."⁶⁷ Writing of another doyen of popular publishing, Jeffrey Archer, Sinclair speaks of the material qualities of the book as a product, a commodity to be consumed:

Archer was a book man. His books happened. They understood, better than the rest of the fast-fiction conveyer belt, what the true function of a book was. An object, a brick of paper, good to handle, nice to have around. Inoffensive—except to whingeing aesthetes. [...] The much-edited story was so user friendly it spoke to you. It talked back. The plot was so familiar that simply bending back the covers was enough, the thick black lines of the text (virtually braille) did the rest.⁶⁸

In contrast, Sinclair's output flouts the rules. In doing so, he turns himself into the refuse of the literary economy and ultimately, the capitalist culture of work. Publications like *Shamanism of Intent* are sites where refuse overlaps with refusal. However, a conscious negation through wilful identification with refuse should not, in any way, be construed as a negative act. Sinclair refuses the perception of poetry as an unproductive 'pastime.' In opposition to the idea that the scene to which he belongs has a distaste for labour, his work speaks of constant activity. In fact, his

⁶⁷ Iain Sinclair, "The Necromancer's A-Z," rev. of *London: The Biography*, by Peter Ackroyd, *Guardian* 14 Oct. 2000, 19 Jun. 2008 <<http://books.guardian.co.uk/reviews/history/0,,382126,00.html>>.

⁶⁸ Sinclair, *Lights Out* 170.

yield parodies capitalism. In this way, Sinclair productively deploys the ludic to play with the *shibboleths* of capitalist society: work and the commodity. The ad-hoc, do-it-yourself aesthetics of the publications are a refusal of the technical perfection of the commodity, while the communal aspect of their cultural production is a move away from the alienated, atomised nature of employment today. This is writing that refuses to be a product of capitalist modes of work. Effectively, Sinclair and his collaborators represent a late twentieth, early twenty-first century artistic and literary *la bohème*, a league of *putschists* who conspire against and refuse the entrenched models of cultural production, distribution and consumption. They pursue an agenda that is steadfastly minoritarian in execution, content and expression. Yet as Sinclair's histories relate, this *bande à part* is hardly characterised by idle or dissolute behaviour. Throughout the last 35 years, Sinclair, like his collaborators, has been compulsively creating poetry, non-fiction, novels, criticism, film, and photography regardless of mainstream neglect—or indeed, acceptance.

CHAPTER THREE

Textual *Obscenery*: Sinclair and the Unreadable Written Word

Question any child as to his drawing and he will defend the 'reality' of what you claim to be 'scribbles.'

Stan Brakhage¹

The previous chapter addressed Sinclair's refusals of the structures of capitalist cultural production and a centralised literary market. Such an account necessitates a focus on the material conditions of cultural production, as well as the social location of that cultural production. The following two chapters turn to the substantive elements of Sinclair's writing in order to explore how endogenous components—narrative, syntax and language—refuse conventional appeals to readability. Together, they consider Sinclair's always provocative writing style, and examine the textual consequences of linguistic and formal devices such as non-linear narrative, a representational language and difficult syntax.

For the uninitiated reader, Sinclair's writing can sometimes resemble inscrutable hieroglyphics on the page. Eric Mottram's observation that the school of avant-garde poetics to which Sinclair belongs does "not cater to the middle-class rapid reader, untrained in contemporary poetics and looking for instant signification" could be applied equally to Sinclair's prose.² The movement away from widely disseminated signifiers is apparent from the earliest works, and is enhanced by a crucial element of Sinclair's textual methodology, the accumulation of arcane

¹ Stan Brakhage, "From Metaphors on Vision," 199-205, *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*, ed. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004) 203.

² Eric Mottram, "The British Poetry Revival, 1960-75," *New British Poetries: The Scope of the Possible*, ed. Robert Hampson and Peter Barry (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1993) 18. The audience to whom Mottram refers is satirised in *Dining on Stones* 12.

intertextual references. The tendency towards obscurantism retards the accelerated tempo of consumption favoured by consumer culture, because that tempo corresponds to the rate of recognition by the 'eye' of the reader. Sinclair's texts demand time and effort to decipher, thereby denying the instant pleasure of fast, uncritical consumption. These two concerns – the temporal and visual – are combined in the figure of the *flâneur*. The *flâneur*, that spectral figure always haunting Sinclair's work, is the archetypal, embodied refusal of the rhythm of consumer culture as he strolls the city streets. More importantly within the context of this chapter, the *flâneur* has an inalienable link to the visual. As Johanna Drucker articulates, he is an eye, but one that, to borrow a word from Sinclair, is "deregulated." He is an eye that does not contribute to official, regulated economies of information and surveillance, such as Panopticism.³

Sinclair has always been drawn to visual culture. His initial studies were in film, an experience he chronicled in the essay "Cinema Purgatorio."⁴ His earliest book of published prose, *The Kodak Mantra Diaries*, is a written account of Allen Ginsberg "observed filmed recorded remembered" during the making of a documentary, the rare and little seen *Ah! Sunflower* (1967).⁵ Since then, he has collaborated on four films with writer and filmmaker Chris Petit,⁶ and has curated exhibitions of visual art such as the aforementioned *Shamanism of Intent*. Sinclair has described his novel *Downriver* as a "sort of slap-happy, wild cinema."⁷ An essay in

³ See Johanna Drucker, *Theorising Modernism: Visual Art And The Critical Tradition* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994). "London is awash with deregulated shaman," says Sinclair in *Lights Out* 269.

⁴ Iain Sinclair, "Cinema Purgatorio," *Lights out for the Territory* (London: Granta, 1997) 279-329.

⁵ Iain Sinclair, *The Kodak Mantra Diaries* (London: Albion Village Press, 1971) n. pag.

⁶ *The Cardinal and the Corpse*, dir. Christopher Petit, Koninck, 1992; *The Falconer*, dirs. Christopher Petit and Iain Sinclair, Illumination Films, 1998; *Asylum; or, The Final Commission*, dirs. Christopher Petit and Iain Sinclair, Illumination Films, 2000; *London Orbital*, dirs. Christopher Petit and Iain Sinclair, Illumination Films, 2002.

⁷ Iain Sinclair and Kevin Jackson, *The Verbals: Kevin Jackson in Conversation with Iain Sinclair* (Tonbridge, Kent: Worple Press, 2003) 122.

Lud Heat is devoted to “The Act of Seeing with One’s Own Eyes,” made by Stan Brakhage, a pioneer of American experimental cinema, and he eulogises Brakhage in *Dining on Stones* some 30 years later.⁸ Yet Sinclair, for all his interest in the visual (and like his formative influence Brakhage), refuses the privileging of the eye in Western culture. He erodes the supremacy of ocularcentric culture, manifest particularly in urban landscapes like London, in favour of something altogether more enigmatic. One technique Sinclair has developed is the transcription of cinematic and, increasingly in the later stages of his work, photographic artefacts. This form of ekphrasis highlights Sinclair’s enduring interest in notions of visibility, vision and the visual.

Textual *obscenery*

A starting point for considering Sinclair’s interrelation with the visual begins at the summit of Beckton Alp, a pile of waste in London’s east that has been reconstituted as recreational space.⁹ For Sinclair, the Alp functions as a totem encapsulating the pervasive regulatory influence of Panopticism in contemporary urban culture. In *White Goods*, the prospect from Beckton Alp offers Sinclair the following image of London: “Leaning on a creosoted railing London makes sense. There is a pattern, a working design. There’s a word for it: *Obscenery*. Blight. Stuttering movement. The distant river. The time membrane dissolves, in such a way that the viewer becomes the thing he is looking at.”¹⁰

⁸ Iain Sinclair, “Rites of Autopsy,” *Lud Heat: A Book of the Dead Hamlets* (London: Albion Village Press, 1975) 40-44; Iain Sinclair, *Dining on Stones, or, The Middle Ground* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2004) 347-48.

⁹ The Alp is a topographical curiosity, and its unconventional history has prompted serial visits in Sinclair’s fiction and non-fiction.

¹⁰ Iain Sinclair, *White Goods* (Uppingham: Goldmark, 2002) 22.

The impression of the city from this vantage point is that of the panorama, which, Michel de Certeau notes in *The Practice of Everyday Life*, should be a privileged view by virtue of its transcendence, its power to oversee the urban agglomeration: “It transforms the bewitching world by which one was ‘possessed’ into a text that lies before one’s eyes,” writes De Certeau of the panorama. “It allows one to read it, to be a solar Eye, looking down like a god.”¹¹ From Beckton Alp, as Sinclair’s experience implies, London can be read as a text, one that appears intelligible, one that “makes sense.” But what “sense” is the reader to make of Sinclair’s vision of London, a London characterised by this intriguing, and typically Sinclairean neologism, *obscenery*? *Obscenery*’s etymological origins in the word ‘obscene’ suggest that it is indecent, unruly, offensive. It would seem to encompass everything that hegemonic culture would prefer to keep off-stage and unseen; effectively, its refuse. Yet as Sinclair makes clear, it is hardly hidden—it can be seen from the Alp. By all accounts, *obscenery* proves to be the completely visible manifestation of what is normally segregated, managed and disposed of by the disciplinary apparatuses that organise and supervise urban space. In summary, *obscenery* resists the regulatory power of optic regimes like Panopticism by remaining visible, obscenely so.

Sinclair is careful to avoid a dialectic positing *obscenery* as the disordered antinomy to the pattern of hegemonic order. Instead, *obscenery* problematises the differentiations demarcating ‘good’ and ‘bad’ spheres of culture; or to use the categories deployed in this thesis, between refuse and commodity. Like *obscenery*, Sinclair’s *poiesis* blurs the boundaries between divergent spheres of culture as it oscillates between small press publishing and the mass market. His mimeographed chapbooks and limited edition hardcovers have, for the major part of his career, been conceived and disseminated outside the parameters of mainstream culture. His

¹¹ Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988) 92.

affiliation with the British Poetry Revival indicates Sinclair's dedication to alternative publishing, as does the existence of his own imprints, Albion Village Press and Hoarse Commerce. Although his publishing record with the multinationals complicates any clear-cut identity regarding cultural politics, Sinclair still rejects hegemonic expectations about what comprises literature. At the same time that he is published and circulated within the sights of hegemonic literary culture, and therefore subject to the gaze of the Panopticon, he exploits written language, a tool licensed by the Panopticon, for unlicensed praxis, namely, unreadable writing. Identifying Sinclair's cultural production as a type of textual *obscenery*, or textual refuse, provides a way of slipping through the bars of what Marshall Berman calls the Foucauldian cage of panoptic reification.¹² *Obscenery* proposes an alternative model of cultural production, one that enables the creative practitioner to loosen the panoptic bonds with which Michel Foucault pinions the individual, and thus productively negotiate the archetypal struggle faced in a capitalist political economy: the conflict between artistic integrity and commercial imperative.

To further investigate the conjuncture of *obscenery*, visibility and the panoptic schema of late era capitalism, we must return to the top of Beckton Alp. A view such as this is, according to de Certeau's account, panoptical. It shares the Panopticon's "see/being seen dyad," which is delineated by Foucault in *Discipline and Punish*; "in the peripheric ring [which in this case acts as an analogue for London] one is seen, without ever seeing; in the central tower [Beckton Alp], one sees everything without being seen."¹³ Foucault's formulation is substantiated by another visit to the Alp, this time in Sinclair's novel *Dining on Stones*. The narrator, Andrew Norton, comments that

¹² Marshall Berman, *All that is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (New York: Penguin 1988) 34.

¹³ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Penguin, 1977) 201.

the “*mound is an eye... Ascending, sightless, we would learn to see.*”¹⁴ The link between the peak’s prospect and the eye of the Panopticon is so compelling that it induces one of Sinclair’s signature riffs: a hallucinatory cultural history on depictions of the monocular.¹⁵

However, as de Certeau goes on to explain, a distanced perspective is ultimately an ontological fiction. The transcendent eye’s reliance on purely scopic knowledge renders it incapable of comprehending the diverse, fluctuating realities of the city. It flattens the fragmented, phantasmagorical urban landscape into an immobile, one-dimensional totality.¹⁶ Much as he is fascinated by the *obscenery* stretching out before him, Sinclair comes to realise that the panoramic view is unreliable. It lends false logic to the ineffable, that which can never be truly rationalised because of its infinite variation and ceaseless flux. In *White Goods*, ontological uncertainty is signalled by the observation “[t]he summit has it all. Now the pulse of the orange sun dissolves over an unreal city [...]”¹⁷ Sinclair’s comprehension of London as an “all,” an entity comprised of *obscenery*, is “unreal,” an eidolon. In *Dining on Stones*, Norton’s outlook from Beckton Alp, described as “the spread of ersatz London,” further erodes the authority of the transcendent eye.¹⁸ This type of view, with its dependence on surface knowledge, cannot penetrate what Foucault describes as “that whole lower region, that region of irregular bodies, with their details, their multiple movements, their heterogeneous forces, their spatial relations.”¹⁹ Panopticism, in order to fulfil its disciplinary project, must travel beyond visualisation. It must bridge the epistemological gap between distance and proximity.

¹⁴ Sinclair, *Dining on Stones* 185.

¹⁵ Sinclair, *Dining on Stones* 184. No doubt, Panopticism’s association with the “one-eyed stance” of photography and other forms of visual technology encourages Norton’s free association on the monocular.

¹⁶ de Certeau 92-93.

¹⁷ Sinclair, *White Goods* 20

¹⁸ Sinclair, *Dining on Stones* 184.

¹⁹ Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* 208.

Its applications must be diffuse, and penetrate various strata of culture. It must come down from Beckton Alp, so to speak. Like the viewer in *White Goods*, who “becomes the thing he is looking at,” the Panopticon must collapse the spatial and subjective separation between seeing and being seen.

The Panoptic Schema of Cultural Production

In capitalist political economies, the Panopticon’s process of infiltration is advanced by its utility as a labile system of discipline that can be appropriated by other instrumentalities functioning within that society. Foucault explains:

The disciplines function increasingly as techniques for making useful individuals. Hence their emergence from a marginal position on the confines of society, and detachment from the forms of exclusion or expiation, confinement or retreat. [...] Hence also their rooting in the most important, most central and most productive sectors of society. They become attached to some of the great essential functions: factory production, the transmission of knowledge, the diffusion of aptitudes and skills, the war-machine.²⁰

Foucault develops this argument, conceiving discipline in terms of industrial production:

The disciplinary pyramid constituted the small cell of power within which the separation, coordination and supervision of tasks was imposed and made efficient; and analytical partitioning of time, gestures and bodily

²⁰ Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* 211.

forces constituted an operational schema that could easily be transferred from the groups to be subjected to the mechanisms of production.²¹

Foucault's work draws an explicit correlation between the configuration of the Panopticon's "disciplinary pyramid" and the organisational hierarchy of capitalist production. Indeed, in *Discipline and Punish*, the Panopticon is frequently characterised as a machine producing discipline with maximum results for minimum expenditure, a model homologous with capitalist modes of production.

Panopticism efficiently and effectively implements discipline via real and imagined networks of surveillance that shift constantly between operations extrinsic and intrinsic to the subject, yet it does not necessarily prevent heterogeneous, transgressive or subversive practice from emerging. It will, however, by means of this surveillance, draw attention to these practices, classify and segregate them, apply pejorative labels such as 'bad,' 'useless,' 'harmful,' or 'refuse,' and relegate them to a social or spatial sphere outside the realm of the normative. In this process lies the Panopticon's vast potential to devise, standardise and regulate patterns of production and consumption; in other words, to 'flatten' culture. Practices and production that do not conform to hegemonic conventions are deemed aberrant, and rendered invisible. In this manner, the Panopticon reinforces its role as arbiter of public taste. According to the logic of scopophilic culture, to be 'unseen,' by choice or otherwise, necessarily restricts consumption of the product. In a capitalist political economy, where governing institutions and operations function as extensions of systems predicated upon the fetishism of commodities, regulating patterns of consumption—by deciding what is and is not seen—imposes control.

²¹ Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* 221.

Obscenery's visibility, however, rejects panoptic classification. It resists the panoptic systems that police cultural production, not by remaining hidden, or Other, but by declaring its presence. Unlike the commodity, which in its conformity is seamlessly assimilated into capitalist society, *obscenery*, like refuse or refusal, announces itself by being out of place. Like the split garbage bag lying uncollected in the street, Sinclair's *obscenery*, his unreadable writing, is matter out-of-place. In contrast, Beckton Alp, a sanitised pile of waste rendered useful, palatable, is an example of *obscenery* averted. In accordance with the panoptic technologies described by Foucault, it is assimilated into the landscape, and is virtually invisible. It is "a considerable event that nobody notices."²² Likewise, visual technology in the service of surveillance has been steadily integrated into the everyday, and, by virtue of its ubiquity, has become 'unseen'. Sinclair comments on this evolution in *Dining on Stones*: "The recording instruments shifted from awkward black boxes to silver toys (credit cards that ate light)."²³

Karl Marx explained that a commodity must be consumed in order to exist fully. Following Marx's model, a book becomes a commodity only when it is read. A book that is designed to refuse the act of reading, by being invisible and/or by being indecipherable, is perverse according to any schema of cultural logic, but particularly according to the logic of an economy driven by consumption. This refusal resonates with particular force within a capitalist schema of cultural production because it is fundamentally contrary to the process of commodification. A commodity can "become a reality only by use or consumption [...]."²⁴ When consumption cannot take place, or is denied, then the object evades commodification, and thus refuses to

²² Sinclair, *Dining on Stones* 179.

²³ Sinclair, *Dining on Stones* 24.

²⁴ Karl Marx, *Selected Writings*, ed. David McLellan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977) 422.

accede to reification. Sinclair's texts thwart easy reading and therefore consumption. They cause a blockage in the system of commodification.

A book that resists being easily read, but is still visible to mainstream culture, constitutes a type of textual *obscenery*, and thinking about Sinclair's *poiesis* as textual *obscenery* enables an understanding of why his texts have been judged by some critics and readers to be difficult, inaccessible, impenetrable, and above all, unreadable. Practitioners of counter-cultural and sub-cultural art and literature traditionally protect their minoritarian status and restrict access to their work by consciously constructing something that is deemed excremental according to hegemonic tastes and standards. They create something that inhibits smooth digestion, something that causes a malfunction in the order of consumption. In this manner, the double meaning of the word 'refuse' comes into play yet again: turning yourself into refuse is a means of refusing commodification.

Ekphrasis

One way in which Sinclair pushes language beyond the limits of normative literary production is through an ekphratic technique he has developed over the years. Sinclair transcribes visual media—at first film, and in recent years, photography—and converts it to the written word, a process which renders the image less readable. Brakhage has been a core influence. He and Sinclair share a similar creative intent: to undermine the hegemony of the forensic, positivist eye privileged in Western

culture, or what Brakhage calls the “‘absolute realism’ of the motion picture[, which] is a twentieth century, essentially Western, illusion.”²⁵

In *Lud Heat*, Sinclair twins avant-garde poetics with avant-garde film in his homage to the experimental cinema of Brakhage. Brakhage’s films are often characterised as “visual poetry.” In “Reading in Bed” Sinclair transcribes Brakhage’s film frames into lines of poetry, thereby creating a variation of “visual poetry”:

the sights and sounds are muted
the text also became un film noir
as dreamt
with all the multiple connections
ironies
& shifts of meaning
variable typeface
the horror is what he got right (1-8)²⁶

Sinclair reveals to Jackson in *The Verbals* that his immediately striking and much commented upon style originates in the visual, because it was derived initially from film:

KJ: [...] I’ve noticed that there are strong premonitions of your characteristic prose style at least as early as *Kodak Mantra Diaries*, as though you’re tapping into a rhythm, a range of vocabulary, a syntax which is quite spontaneous and natural to you, not something you’d contrived...

²⁵ Brakhage 204.

²⁶ Iain Sinclair, “Reading in Bed,” *Lud Heat* 89.

IS: Oh, no, no. No way. Just trying to get the most clear version of awkward thought processes. The rhythms that are natural to you. Sometimes very all-encompassing, sometimes very abrupt and stark. Changes of rhythm: bangbangbang bang... drip... drip... drip. The equivalents of single-frame filming, or massive superimposition of organic film.²⁷

A trademark of this style is an idiosyncratic, scattergun syntax. It is so distinctive that critic James Wood was moved to cast him as “a demented magus of the sentence.”²⁸ His language is clipped, elliptical, arrhythmic. The tempo speeds up and then slows down, pushing the language to its limits. Jackson describes his style as “a combination of abrupt groups of one, two or three words, with jagged syntactical fragments and a kind of sprightly running that doesn’t always call on verbs.”²⁹ The episodic impulse at work in Sinclair’s narratives is also enacted at the level of sentence and word, as the following example of extreme parataxis from *London Orbital* demonstrates:

[T]he service area has been revamped: as an air terminal. Clean, tactfully lit, unendurable. Everything is designed to get you out of there within minutes of finding a table. Crematorium muzak. Food that isn’t. Photoboosts that offer portraits in the style of Van Gogh, Renoir, Dega (sic). Concession on the point of collapse. A major hike to locate the Gents. No alcoves or areas in which to retreat. You sit on the edge of a hard chair, waiting for your flight to be called. It’s not day or night. You’re completely

²⁷ Sinclair and Jackson 123.

²⁸ James Wood, “Magus of the City,” *Guardian* 23 Jan. 1997: 10.

²⁹ Sinclair and Jackson 123.

disorientated. You can't remember if you're supposed to be travelling east or west.³⁰

Sinclair's syntax is so singular that it has run the danger of overpowering all other aspects of his writing. He recalls: "There was a period when the reviews started to focus entirely on the grammar, the syntax, and the linguistics of it [...]. You'd get people talking about the structure of the paragraphs [...]." ³¹ By pushing language to its limits, and even beyond, Sinclair's writing constructs a linguistic heterotopia. Heterotopias, as Foucault writes, "desiccate speech, stop words in their tracks, contest the very possibility of grammar."³²

In fact, Sinclair's prose often does not resemble prose at all; formally and syntactically, it is more aligned with his poetry. This is something the author has commented upon himself. Sinclair explains to one interviewer that this style emerged when he was writing his first novel *White Chappell*, *Scarlet Tracings*: "I'd been putting large chunks of prose into poetry books like *Lud Heat* and *Suicide Bridge* and I wanted to do a complete prose book. *White Chappell* [...] was related back to these earlier books but I'd removed the threads of poetry that went in between in the prose segments."³³ The stylistic result of this development is evident in this excerpt from the novel which is cryptic in its imagery, and unconventional, for prose, in its structure: "Slide a hand along the wall and penetrate the dome of Wren's machine, whale-melon vibrating in thought-star with other leviathans of the city, to swim back

³⁰ Iain Sinclair, *London Orbital* (London: Granta, 2002) 143-44.

³¹ Sinclair and Jackson 123.

³² Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, trans. Alan Sheridan (London and New York: Routledge, 2002) xix.

³³ Iain Sinclair, interview, "Renaissance Man of The Dying Days of the 20th Century," *The Edge* 6 (Dec. 1997 - Jan. 1998), 22 June 2008 <<http://www.theedge.abelgratis.co.uk/sinclairiview.htm>>.

up Thames, the great churches, in a moment of Apocalypse, drowning human frenzy."³⁴

In Bob Perelman's view, poetics of Sinclair's sort do not lend themselves willingly to reproducibility. Sinclair's notion of "variable typeface" in "Reading in Bed," and how the typographic quality of the poem plays with expectations about how we read, connects him to a tradition of non-linear modes of poetry like Dada and concrete poetry that merge visual and linguistic modes of reading, thereby blurring categories of art and literature. Perelman maintains that a productive way of writing and/or reading avant-garde poetics is by "using or alluding to [...] poststructuralist theory in order to open the present to critique and change."³⁵ The textual politics of asignifying language, and the linguistic and critical consequences of "the multiple connections/ironies/& shifts of meaning" in "Reading in Bed" link Sinclair to the poststructuralist project and its stated ambition to break the tyranny of textual tradition and filiation.³⁶

"Eye-Swiping" London

At one point in *London Orbital*, Sinclair uses *Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street*, the graphic novel by Neil Gaiman and Michael Zulli, as a guidebook.³⁷ The

³⁴ Iain Sinclair, *White Chappell, Scarlet Tracings* (London: Vintage, 1995) 104.

³⁵ Bob Perelman, *The Marginalisation of Poetry: Language Writing and Literary History* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1996) 13.

³⁶ This can be achieved by redrawing maps of textual connection that are arboreal, and instead creating cartographies of intertextuality that are rhizomatic. See Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, "Introduction: Rhizome," *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (London: Continuum, 2004) for a detailed explanation of these terms. A mode of interpretation such as that outlined by T. S. Eliot in his essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent" is arboreal. Eliot argues that "No poet, no artist of any art, has any complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists. You cannot value him alone; you must set him, for contrast and comparison, among the dead." Eliot wants to consolidate the narrative of filiation, a genealogy that relies on linear logic to be comprehensible. Moreover, his promotion of tradition amounts to a defence of, and a deference to, canonical texts, and could be interpreted as a rejection of the poetry that seeks to undo pre-established expectations about what kinds of poetry should be valued. T. S. Eliot, *Selected Prose of T. S. Eliot*, ed. Frank Kermode (London: Faber, 1975).

³⁷ Sinclair, *London Orbital* 106.

genesis of the graphic novel is similar to that of Sinclair's texts: "These days graphic novelists operate with expensive cameras [...]. Before laying out a narrative, they will rehearse what they later draw: the envisioned version (dream), the enacted version (logged and recorded), the public version (smoothed, idealised)."³⁸ This process (though not the final product which is a "smooth, idealised" synthesis of written text and visual image, as opposed to Sinclair's spiky, prickly writing) is analogous to the one Sinclair describes in *Dining on Stones*. The novel's narrator, Norton, speaks about transcribing the visual images that he logs on his walks:

I deactivated the flash and learnt to frame by instinct. The result was a pleasing, slapdash, unmediated aesthetic. The prose I contrived from these snapshots would be more provocative, so I hoped, than the awkward blocks of verbless sentences 'inspired' by the many thousands of diary-images I'd gathered during the years of my compulsive logging of London and the river.³⁹

Taking shape in the passage above, like the imprint of a developing photographic image, is a contemporary incarnation of the *flâneur*. Indeed, Susan Sontag detects an overlap between the spatial practice of the *flâneur* and the spatial practice of the photographer in her insightful critique, *On Photography*. She writes,

photography first comes into its own as an extension of the eye of the middle-class *flâneur*, whose sensibility was so accurately charted by Baudelaire. The photographer is an armed version of the solitary walker

³⁸ Sinclair, *London Orbital* 106-07.

³⁹ Sinclair, *Dining on Stones* 25.

reconnoitring, stalking, cruising the urban inferno, the voyeuristic stroller who discovers the city as a landscape of voluptuous extremes.⁴⁰

Sontag has in mind Eugène Atget, Brassai and Bill Brandt, photographers who gravitated towards the city's "dark seamy corners, its neglected populations - an unofficial reality behind the façade of bourgeois life,"⁴¹ photographers whose chthonian imaginations Sinclair shares.

In *London Orbital*, Sinclair introduces the term "eye-swiping"—scanning the urban landscape for creative material.⁴² Eye-swiping evokes the avidity of the *flâneur's* eye and the compulsive appetite of the stalker (the *flâneur's* modern-day guise) as they sweep up material for literary or artistic re-inscription. At the same time, swiping suggests the act of appropriation, which is an integral part of contemporary textual production. In his quest for alternative histories, Sinclair seeks out discarded inter-texts eye-swiping them and integrating them in his personal London mythopoeia. The drive to saturate the text with the plenitude of signifiers that London tenders is clear in this relentlessly detailed inventory of the landscape from *London Orbital*.

The distance to the roundabout was calculable by reading debris left at the side of the road. Single cans of Foster's ('Official Beer of Sydney Olympics'), Stella Artois, Carlsberg Special Brew and Tango. Two packets of Walkers Crisps (Cheese & Onion), one of Salt & Vinegar. Five McDonald's / Coca-Cola cans. One Lambert and Butler (King Size) cigarette packet. Two Marlboro. One Silk Cut. A Cocconut Bar. Smilers.

⁴⁰ Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (London: Penguin, 2002) 55.

⁴¹ Sontag 55-56.

⁴² Sinclair, *London Orbital* 91.

Four cans of Red Bull ('a carbonated taurine drink with caffeine'). Three burger cartons; one milk carton (2pc fat). Diet Cola. Dr Pepper. Orange peel. Knotted condoms. One stainless steel watch (LB417, Japan). One burnt-out car: POLICE AWARE. One motorcycle engine. These are the contour rings of civilisation as they spread out of from the Old Orleans ('A Taste of the Deep South') Roadhouse.⁴³

This precise recall of place is enabled by Sinclair's methodology, which he states is "walks, photographs – then at some later date, a book."⁴⁴ Photography presents itself as the consummate technology for eye-swiping. The insatiability of the camera's eye is commensurate with the insatiability of the *flâneur's* eye. There is a play between the homophones 'eye' and 'I' when Baudelaire speaks of the *flâneur* as if he were a type of camera eye: "He is the I with an insatiable appetite for the non-I, at every instant rendering and explaining it in pictures more living than life itself, which is always unstable and fugitive."⁴⁵ Baudelaire's oft-quoted proclamation on modernity, that it is "the ephemeral, the fugitive, the contingent,"⁴⁶ further positions photography as the logical medium in which to express the defining characteristics of the exemplary spaces of modernity, like the city. Easily reproduced and hence disposable, photographs are at once material and visual dramatisations of the transience of everyday life, of modernity. Sinclair openly admires photography's capacity to instantaneously capture, within a miniscule slice of time and a relatively finite space, the rapid flow of visual signifiers that characterise the urban experience. In *Lights Out*, he remarks jealously of photographer and long-time collaborator Marc Atkins, "he pulled it off: the glistening wet road, haloes of diminishing electric light on their

⁴³ Sinclair, *London Orbital* 417.

⁴⁴ Sinclair, *London Orbital* 208.

⁴⁵ Charles Baudelaire, "The Painter of Modern Life," *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays*, ed. and trans. Jonathan Mayne (London: Phaidon, 1995) 9-10.

⁴⁶ Baudelaire, "The Painter" 12.

poles, desolation. Printed on thick Japanese paper [...], the shot is timeless. It has everything I would like to invoke, and it grasps it in an instant."⁴⁷ This is the basis of his ongoing collaboration with Atkins, whose photography he describes thus: "scraps of language are tautologous: there is already a powerful narrative element in the image. Each frame provokes the next, implies movement. Nothing is replete. The form is hungry. It encourages, depends upon, a restless urgency."⁴⁸ Atkins' "hungry" eye matches Sinclair's eye-swiping. Walking with camera in hand, Sinclair need never slow to the pace required by writing.

The avidity of the photographic eye can also be detected in the infinite range of subjects at which the camera can be aimed. Sontag again: "From its start, photography implied the capture of the largest possible number of subjects. [...] The subsequent industrialization of camera technology only carried out a promise inherent in photography from its very beginning: to democratize all experiences by translating them into images."⁴⁹ Photography, its promiscuous eye roaming incontinently across the terrain of modernity, has successfully challenged and reconfigured cultural expectations regarding the legitimacy of the everyday as material for artistic representation. This vast span of interest parallels that of the *flâneur*, who avoids cultivating a fetishistic interest in certain aspects of urban culture. Observes Sinclair, "the born again *flâneur* is a stubborn creature, less interested in texture and fabric, eavesdropping on philosophical conversation pieces than noticing everything."⁵⁰ No scene from city life is included, or excluded, due to being more or less valuable. All is worthy, or unworthy, of his attention. His tastes are egalitarian in that he does not privilege certain practices or cultural products. There is no

⁴⁷ Sinclair, *Lights Out* 277.

⁴⁸ Sinclair, *Lights Out* 274.

⁴⁹ Sontag 7.

⁵⁰ Sinclair, *Lights Out* 4.

discrimination between the aesthetics of high art, or refuse. Above all, the *flâneur* is exempt from any official apparatus of visual surveillance. The undisciplined eye-swiping of the *flâneur* is, according to the bureaucratic logic of the panoptic schema, completely gratuitous.

Photographic Memory

There is, however, a misleading neatness to this photographer/*flâneur* equation because Sinclair does not classify himself as a photographer: he is a writer. In fact, his turn towards photography seems to break from past practice where he constructs his poetry and prose from the unstable imagery of what cannot be represented. In the poem “Immaculate Corruptions” (1996), the dedication reads “*i.m. AC,*” denoting memory and afterlife. The elegy form conjures a spectral absent presence, the ghost of the dedicatee:

I refuse the play of reflections
in the portrait glass, light from outside.
ceramic steam, all the dark truth
that shades your profile [...] ⁵¹

The poem, “Recovery and Death” (1988), whose title also suggests a recuperative relationship with the spectral remainder, plots another arc between Sinclair, Baudelaire and the *flâneur*. In the last two lines of the poem—“a bench that is not designed for rest/his back to the scene he is barely describing” (9-10)—a figure hovering between movement and stasis, reverts to his memory and affective relation

⁵¹ AC is writer Angela Carter. Iain Sinclair, “Immaculate Corruptions,” *Penguin Modern Poets: Volume 10*, Douglas Oliver, Denise Riley, and Iain Sinclair (London: Penguin, 1996) 124.

with the city, literally turning his back on, and thus refusing the authority of the technically reproduced image.⁵² It erodes the hegemony of the visual. Consider Baudelaire's evocation of the city in the poem "*Paysage / Landscape*":

It's pleasant, through the mists, to see them born:
The star in heaven, lamplight in the room,
And watch the streams of smoke rise to the skies,
The moon pour forth its silver sorceries.
I'll see spring, summer, autumn tremulous;
When the winter comes with snows monotonous,
With shutters, curtains, I'll keep out the light,
And build my magic castles in the night.

Then I shall dream of gardens [...].⁵³

Baudelaire's poem is about the uncertainty of images. It is built from memory and reverie, not document. The indistinct rules: dream, smoke, mist, sorceries, magic. Images flicker in the chiaroscuro of lamplight and moonlight, "tremulous" as they appear and disappear. With regard to film, Brakhage argues for a similar indeterminacy, a refusal of scientific positivism. His philosophy chimes with Sinclair's promotion of occult knowledge. Brakhage includes all types of organic perception in his idea of "nature" advocating that we should

allow so-called hallucination to enter the realm of perception, allowing that
mankind always finds derogatory terminology for that which doesn't

⁵² Iain Sinclair, "Recovery and Death," *Jack Elam's Other Eye* (London: Hoarse Commerce, 1991) n.pag.

⁵³ Charles Baudelaire, "*Paysage / Landscape*," *Selected Poems*, trans. and ed. Joanna Richardson (London: Penguin, 1975) 160.

appear to be readily usable, accept dream visions, day-dreams or night-dreams, as you would so-called real scenes, even allowing that the abstractions which move so dynamically when closed eyelids are pressed are actually perceived.

Imagine an eye unruléd by man-made laws of perspective, an eye unprejudiced by compositional logic, an eye which does not respond to the name of everything but which must know each object encountered in life through an adventure of perception.⁵⁴

Ultimately, Sinclair's process of transcription, from photograph to written word, retains a fidelity to Baudelaire's legacy. As Johanna Drucker explains, the *flâneur*

was a kind of camera eye, but Baudelaire's model of representation stressed mediation and subjectivity not mechanistic objectivity. [...] Thus, for Baudelaire the image which was accurate was not the mechanistic and replete document of usual information. Instead, he emphasized the reduced schematic indexical sign whose repleteness lay in the domain of shared knowledge; itself transient, ephemeral, changing.⁵⁵

The depiction of what the *flâneur* sees on the streets should not be a facsimile. It should be mediated by memory. Sinclair states in *London Orbital* that he chooses to write up his notes "after the event," aided by the performative memory of the photograph.⁵⁶ Yet Sinclair attempts to undo the logic of the photograph's mechanistic objectivity via a process of transcription which translates the ostensible, immediate

⁵⁴ Brakhage 199.

⁵⁵ Drucker 13.

⁵⁶ Sinclair, *London Orbital* 206.

readability of the photographic, cinematic or eidetic into the paradoxically, and perversely, less readable: written language. In comparison to photography, writing, as a tool of communication, labours to reproduce the sign. The evasive nature of written language, its inherent ellipses in signification, its struggle to bridge the lacunae in meaning have been remarked upon elsewhere by Fredric Jameson:

Objects are, however, [...] still very much a function of language, whose local failure to describe or even to designate them takes us in a different direction and foregrounds the unexpected breakdown of a function of language we normally take for granted—some privileged relationship between words and things which gives way to a yawning chasm between the generality of the words and the sensory particularity of the objects [...].

[L]anguage is being forced to do something we assumed to be virtually its primary function, but which it now—pressed to some absolute limit—proves to be incapable of doing.⁵⁷

Our efforts to simulate the sensory, spatial and temporal particularities of an object via the written word necessitate an accumulation of language, which in its recourse to Jacques Derrida's *supplement* has the consequence of increasing our distance from the original object.⁵⁸ The more written information we provide in order to approximate the precise quality of that which we wish to recreate through language, the further away we travel in linguistic space.

⁵⁷ Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London and New York: Verso, 1991) 137.

⁵⁸ Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976) 145.

Sinclair's melancholic *détournement* of the *flâneur* is not dissimilar to Benjamin's realisation of the lost potential of the *flâneur*. Far from being, in Rob Shields' words, "a dysfunctional social element,"⁵⁹ the fate of the *flâneur* is similar to that of the commodity: "The *flâneur* is someone abandoned in the crowd. In this he shares the situation of the commodity."⁶⁰ Benjamin's pessimism about the *flâneur* stems from his failure to achieve the "metaphysics of the provocateur," inconceivable in what Guy Debord would later term the "society of the spectacle."⁶¹ How can the *flâneur* not be implicated when his 'consumption' of the city is analogous to the shopper's consumption of the commodity, when the terrain of his practice is the degraded stage of the city?

On his peregrinations the man of the crowd lands at a late hour in a department store where there are still many customers. He moves about like someone who knows his way around the place [...]. If the arcade is the classical form of the *intérieur*, which is how the *flâneur* sees the street, the department store is the form of the *intérieur*'s decay. The bazaar is the last hangout of the *flâneur*. If in the beginning the street had become an *intérieur* for him, now this *intérieur* turned into a street, and he roamed through the labyrinth of merchandise as he had once roamed through the labyrinth of the city.⁶²

However, Sinclair's walks around London are a signal that the *flâneur* may have survived Benjamin's obituary notice, evolving to conditions in the contemporary city, and adapting to developments in visual technology. Sinclair's

⁵⁹ Rob Shields, "Fancy Footwork: Walter Benjamin's Footnotes on *Flânerie*," *The Flâneur*, ed. Keith Tester (London: Routledge, 1994) 71.

⁶⁰ Walter Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism*, trans. Harry Zohn (London and New York: Verso, 1997) 55.

⁶¹ See Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle* (New York: Zone Books, 1994).

⁶² Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire* 54.

relationship with visual culture confirms Buck-Morss' comment that the *flâneur* "becomes extinct only by exploding into a myriad of forms, the phenomenological characteristics of which, no matter how new they may appear, continue to bear his traces, as *ur*-form. This is the truth of the *flâneur*, more visible in his afterlife than in his flourishing."⁶³ Sinclair, the spectre of the *flâneur* shadowing him, has assimilated into his practice new methods of collecting and collating information from the everyday. His stalker repudiates the naïveté of criticism that uses the *flâneur* as a convenient catchall to theorise modern and postmodern modes of consumption.

The modern subject is acculturated to the presence and the use of photographic equipment. The camera is no longer exotic; it belongs to the sphere of the familiar. In Baudelaire's time the practice of photography was the antithesis of the *flâneur's* practice because, Sinclair writes, in "the nineteenth century ... it was a very different game. The camera was part of the spectacle: visibly wedged on its prongs, hydrocephalic, fixing time."⁶⁴ Our understanding of photography has shifted too. The facticity of the photograph no longer goes unchallenged. Photography is now understood to be something that emulates or rivals the real as distinct from an authentic reproduction.⁶⁵ Sinclair does not read the photograph as a machine-like reproducer of real images. Instead, it is the type of filter that Baudelaire stressed was essential to the *flâneur's* depiction of urban life. Sinclair incorporates photography into his craft, but counters its logic by undoing it, turning it into the 'unreadable' written word. Sinclair's praxis finally reveals itself to be an injunction against a telos of technologically enabled enlightenment which privileges ocularcentrism and scopophilia.

⁶³ Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1989) 346. Buck-Morss' references to "*ur*-form" and "after-life" connect her understanding of the *flâneur* to the palimpsest and ideas of the spectral, which are discussed in Chapter Five.

⁶⁴ Sinclair, *Dining on Stones* 208.

⁶⁵ See Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Ground of the Image* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005).

Adaptation implies teleology, but the contemporary embodiment of the *flâneur* rejects a telos of evolution or enlightenment, in particular one produced through developments in technology. The *flâneur's* movement creates anachrony: he travels through urban space, the space of modernity, but is forever looking to the past. He reverts to his memory of the city and rejects the self-enunciation of the technically reproduced image. The photographer's engagement with visual technology is similarly ambivalent. The photographer reiterates the trajectory of technological advance through his or her acculturation to new technologies, yet the authority of this trajectory is challenged by photography's product: the photograph, a material memory which is only understood by looking away from the future, by reading retrospectively. He reminds us of Benjamin's angel of history who finds himself driven by the storm of progress "irresistibly into the future, to which his back is turned."⁶⁶

Sinclair's writing continually forces our attentions back to the purlieus of urban culture, to everything that the centrifugal forces of Panopticism have driven to the periphery: social inequality, marginal spatial practice, and, of course, refuse. There is a self-reflexive joke contained in the title *Dining on Stones*. It is, after all, a novel that constantly urges the reader to swallow indigestible text. Similarly, the small press *White Goods*, in contrast to the emblems of consumer culture to which its appellation alludes, is a book that very few people want to possess—or read. According to the restrictive logic of late era capitalism, Sinclair's slippery, complex, unreadable writing is perverse. It can also be the source of perverse pleasure for those who refuse the inhibitions of conformity. At the same time, drawing out the

⁶⁶ Walter Benjamin, "On the Concept of History," *Selected Writings: Volume 4, 1938-1940*, trans. Harry Zohn (Cambridge, Mass. & London: Belknap Press, 2003) 392.

more occluded aspects of culture is not without its complexities, and in a culture where all too often surveillance leads to commodification, bringing even *obscenery* into the light can be problematic.

CHAPTER FOUR

Losing the Plot: Sinclair's Excremental Narratives

One cannot help but laugh when the codes are confounded.

Gilles Deleuze¹

This chapter addresses the broader theme of Sinclair's refusal of readability with specific reference to narrative. In terms of the economy of a teleological narrative, Sinclair's storytelling in his novels and non-fiction alike contains characters and events that are gratuitous. Sinclair further alienates the reader through a Blakean insistence on cyclical shapes that resists the linear structure associated with the shape of rational imagination. The apotheosis of the urge to refuse linear forms of narrative is chronicled in the book *London Orbital*, a navigation of the M25, which, as a circuitous journey, has neither defined point of origin, nor a locatable terminus. Repeatedly characterised by Sinclair as a "fugue," the trip around the ring road is the antithesis of linear logic, and is linked to Sinclair's deployment of madness as a means of disorganising hegemonic narratives. Through yet another *détournement* of the *flâneur*, Sinclair explains:

I found the term *fugueur* more attractive than the now overworked *flâneur*. *Fugueur* had the smack of a swear word [...]. *Fugueur* was the right job description for our walk, our once-a-month episodes of transient mental illness. Madness as a voyage. [...] The fugue is both drift *and* fracture."²

¹ Gilles Deleuze, "Nomad Thought," *The New Nietzsche: Contemporary Styles Of Interpretation*, ed. David Allison (New York: Delat, 1977) 147.

² Iain Sinclair, *London Orbital* (London: Penguin: 2003) 146-47.

Indeterminate structures

Sinclair's overarching refusal is of a narrative form derived from the Aristotelian ideal. In his *Poetics*, Aristotle outlines a model of storytelling where story, or narrative, is in the service of plot. In "Plot: Basic Concepts," the philosopher praises the beauty of "completeness" meaning a "whole [...] which has a beginning, a middle and an end."³ Aristotle's theory of the text leads to the promotion of a teleological model where all aspects of form and content work together to construct an ideal of readability as represented in a structure already predetermined by convention; namely one that comprises a beginning, a middle and an end. This is what Aristotle means by a "determinate structure." A determinate structure is one where "the various sections of the events must be such that the transposition or removal of any one section dislocates and changes the whole. If the presence or absence of something has no discernable effect, it is not part of the whole."⁴

The ascendancy of the determinate structure in the theory and practice of writing and reading has acculturated large numbers of readers to its parameters, with the result that the Aristotelian model is an easily digestible mode of storytelling. A narrative where the causal order, or plot, is subordinated, or dispensed with altogether, can be interpreted as a radical move away from readability for audiences accustomed to the Aristotelian template. The determinate structure has proved remarkably resilient in influencing expectations about how literature should be shaped, and how narrative should unfold through the act of reading. Centuries later,

³ Aristotle clarifies his definition of these terms: "A beginning is that which itself does not follow necessarily from anything else, but some second thing naturally exists or occurs after it. Conversely, an end is that which does not itself naturally follow from something else, either necessarily or in general, but there is nothing else after it. A middle is that which itself comes after something else, and some other thing comes after it. Well-constructed plots should therefore not begin or end at any arbitrary point, but should employ the stated forms." Aristotle, *Poetics*, trans. Malcolm Heath (Penguin: London, 1996) 13-14.

⁴Aristotle 15.

in 1927, E. M. Forster agrees with Aristotle that plot is crucial. In *Aspects of the Novel*, he opines that the true art of literature is causality:

If it is in a story we say: 'And then?' If it is in a plot we ask: 'Why?' That is the fundamental difference between these two aspects of the novel. A plot cannot be told to a gaping audience of cave-men or to a tyrannical sultan or to their modern descendant the movie-public. They can only be kept awake by 'And then--and then----' They can only supply curiosity. But a plot demands intelligence and memory also.⁵

Forster is emphatic that literature which respects an causal order is superior to literature which elides or discards causality. His concept of an ideal literary structure mirrors Aristotle's, who also argues for the primacy of order. Although literature may consist of multiple "formal elements, [...] the most important of them is the structure of events."⁶ There are two things about Aristotle's model relevant to discussion regarding Sinclair and what he is *not*. Firstly, as Malcolm Heath writes in the introduction to *Poetics*, it is not so much the elements of story, or how they are organised that is integral to Aristotle's determinate structure, but that its telos is an "ordered structure."⁷ Secondly, the literary structure is an economy where everything within it is essential, and nothing superfluous or gratuitous remains.

In terms of the narrative economy recommended by Aristotle and Forster, Sinclair's structure is highly inefficient. His fictions and non-fictions contain

⁵ E. M. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel and Related Writings* (London: Edward Arnold, 1974) 60.

⁶ Aristotle 11.

⁷ Malcolm Heath, introduction, Aristotle xxiii.

narrative diversions and digressions that are redundant to the progress of story.⁸ In effect, Sinclair rejects the model laid out by Forster: “we expect [the plot-maker] to leave no loose ends. Every action or word ought to count; it ought to be economical and spare; even when complicated it should be organic and free from dead-matter. It may be difficult or easy, it may and should contain mysteries, but it ought not to mislead.”⁹ Sinclair’s refusal of the hegemony of the determinate structure may explain the tenor of some responses to his texts, and why his texts have, at times, been judged difficult, inaccessible, impenetrable, unreadable and/or elitist.

Yet Sinclair is by no means the originator of alternative modes of storytelling. Indeed, his refusal of an Aristotelian structure often serves as conscious allusion and homage to his precursors. For example, Sinclair explicitly links the circles that guide the narrative shape of *London Orbital* to the prevalence of the circle in the cosmology of William Blake. Similarly, Sinclair is not without precursors in his other narrative method which, Tim Adams writes, “is to hang a discrete series of improvised intellectual riffs on to a Möbius strip of lowlife adventure.”¹⁰ A notable example where Sinclair uses the “discrete series” to interrupt and cut up the story is *Downriver*, which is subtitled “A Narrative in Twelve Tales.” The flashback to the textual fragmentation of Sinclair’s modernist forebears is not restricted to the fiction. *The Kodak Mantra Diaries* is a cut up of interviews, diary entries, transcriptions of visual media, and observation. Sinclair’s refusal of cohesion is, in fact, another refusal of the determinate structure because it endorses exactly the type of writing

⁸ It is necessary to point out that Sinclair’s writing circulates in a cultural and political economy unrecognisable from Aristotle’s, and in one that has witnessed significant technical and technological transformations since Forster’s time. However, Aristotle and Forster’s philosophies of literature are still published and read despite these transformations because they address the substantive qualities of writing, which are more resistant to transformation, as opposed to the far more susceptible material conditions that produce and disseminate them.

⁹ Forster 61.

¹⁰ Tim Adams, “Singing his Prose,” rev. of *Landor’s Tower*, by Iain Sinclair, *Guardian* 8 Apr. 2001, 21 June 2008 <<http://books.guardian.co.uk/reviews/generalfiction/0,,470051,00.html>>.

that Aristotle deplures: “Of simple plots and actions, the episodic ones are the worst. By an *episodic* plot I mean one in which the sequence of episodes is neither necessary nor probable. Second-rate poets compose plots of this kind of their own accord.”¹¹

The “Cosmic Ring”

Adams metaphorises Sinclair’s writing as a Möbius strip. The strip is a geometrical curiosity whose primary feature is that it is non-orientable, which means that it does not have two sides.¹² Its contours are unreliable, and so is the shape of Sinclair’s stories. *London Orbital* is a case in point. In this extended and monumental diatribe against the *realpolitik* of late twentieth-century neo-liberalism, Sinclair argues that successive national and local governments have engineered a politicised spatialisation and striation of London, resulting in a (re)organisation of urban space designed to enable and channel movement of capital, labour and commodities. The closed loop of the M25 motorway is ostensibly a regulated shape, and thus recommends itself to governmental bodies. It is designed to function as “a prophylactic, [...] a tourniquet” controlling the flow (with)in and (with)out of London.¹³ The ring of asylums dotting the landscape around the M25 is another instance of a regulated circuit:

Madhouses belonged on the periphery. Instability might infect healthy working people. Out here, in the clean air, the virus was contained. [...]

¹¹ Aristotle 17.

¹² Interestingly, writer David Rieff has used the image of the Möbius strip to describe another motorway. Rieff talks about the experience of the urban space of the Los Angeles freeway: “There is the nagging feeling that to enter the freeway is to move onto some enormous Möbius Strip, a series of contours that turn back on themselves.” David Rieff, *Los Angeles: Capital of the Third World* (New York: Touchstone, 1992) 49.

¹³ Sinclair, *London Orbital* 1.

Renchi has been reading Foucault, *Madness and Civilization*. A fitting complement to this stage of our walk. Asylums haunt the motorway like abandoned forts, the kind of defensive ring once found on the Thames below Tilbury. Hospital colonies are black mandalas of madness: circles set around a central axis, depictions of an unstable brain chemistry. [...] The fantastic sigils of the madhouse architects dominate the map.¹⁴

Within this ring, there are further circuits of constriction like “‘airing courts,’ grim circuits of an enclosed yard. [...] These circuits become the treadmills that drive the Blakean geometry of London; spiral visions that find their deranged resolution in Margaret Thatcher’s orbital motorway.”¹⁵ According to Sinclair, circuits that are strictly demarcated and maintained are malign (the circuits of incarceration such as the circular bond of the manacle, the panopticon, and the treadmill come to mind) and should be ruptured.¹⁶

As the reader learns, Sinclair views the circuit of the M25 as a tainted ring, a predetermined shape that is designed to encircle, and therefore fix the space of London: “This is the future England. London itself, by being completely enclosed in a motorway, has become a kind of concrete island.”¹⁷ The historical context here is clear. From the thirteenth century, the process of enclosure ran fences around—and effectively privatised—what had previously been common land. It is no coincidence

¹⁴ Sinclair, *London Orbital* 155; 163.

¹⁵ Sinclair, *London Orbital* 347.

¹⁶ Graphic novelist Neil Gaiman, who is referred to in *London Orbital* 106-10, shares Sinclair’s impressions of the M25. Gaiman declaimed the evil of the motorway in his novel, *Good Omens*: “Many phenomena — wars, plagues, sudden audits — have been advanced as evidence for the hidden hand of Satan in the affairs of Man, but whenever students of demonology get together, the M25 London orbital motorway is generally agreed to be among the top contenders for exhibit A.” Terry Pratchett and Neil Gaiman, *Good Omens: The Nice and Accurate Prophecies of Agnes Nutter, Witch* (London: Corgi, 1991) 19.

¹⁷ Tim Chapman, “When In Doubt, Quote Ballard: An Interview With Iain Sinclair,” *Ballardian* 29 Aug. 2006, 21 June 2008 <<http://www.ballardian.com/iain-sinclair-when-in-doubt-quote-ballard>>. Chapman’s title comes from Sinclair, *Dining on Stones* 178. Sinclair is referring to Ballard’s novel *Concrete Island* (1974), a Robinson Crusoe tale for the automobile age.

in *London Orbital* that Sinclair makes a visit to St George's Hill, a place "sacred" because of its association with the Diggers, the mid-seventeenth-century political group that actively protested the enclosures. He lays one history on top of the other, creating a palimpsestic history of enclosure. In a sense, Sinclair's pilgrimage around the M25 is conceived within a similar spirit of dissent, or refusal. His walk is a critique of the increasing privatisation of public space, exemplified in practices like the selling off of retired psychiatric hospitals to developers:

Shenley Hospital, active until a couple of months before our arrival, has vanished, replaced by a housing development, the bright new units of a Crest Homes estate. The back story of the asylum has been totally erased, apart from the baleful presence of the water tower. [...] Where were the former citizens of Shenley, the inmates? Turned loose into the countryside? Tipped into the hedgerows? Or abandoned to 'care in the community' when there were no communities left? ¹⁸

Travellers' movements are impeded while the landscape is given over to motorways and housing developments. Walking becomes a marginal activity and is, as Sinclair learns time and again, viewed with distrust by the authorities. The surveillance and controls to which he is subject as he attempts to walk urban space recall the concerns foreshadowed by Walter Benjamin regarding the urban wanderings of the *flâneur*. The threats were catalogued in a 1936 newspaper article, ominously entitled "*Le dernier flâneur*" ["The last *flâneur*"].

A man who goes for a walk ought not to have to concern himself with any hazards he may run into, or with the regulations of a city. [...] But

¹⁸ Sinclair, *London Orbital* 150-1.

he cannot do this today without taking a hundred precautions, without asking the advice of the police department, without mixing with a dazed and breathless herd, for whom the way is marked out in advance by bits of shining metal. If he tries to collect the whimsical thoughts that may have come to mind, very possibly occasioned by sights on the street, he is deafened by car horns, [and] stupefied by loud talkers [...].¹⁹

The *flâneur* is an endangered species in the city that Benjamin inhabits. He is marginalised by the social and technological conditions of modernity: the hegemony of non-ambulatory transport; the domination of social space by an overweening consumer culture; the bureaucratisation of the everyday; the standardisation of time. Susan Buck-Morss remarks that *flâneurs*, “like tigers, or pre-industrial tribes, are cordoned off on reservations, preserved within the artificially created environments of pedestrian streets, parks, and underground passages.”²⁰ To stray from these enclosures, or from delineated paths, is to invite suspicion as Sinclair frequently discovers. The following anecdote from *London Orbital* is unexceptional:

NO PUBLIC RITE OF WAY. Footpaths, breaking towards the forest, have been closed off. You are obliged to stick to the Lee Navigation, the contaminated ash conglomerate of the Grey Way. Enfield has been laid out in grids; long straight roads, railways, fortified blocks. [...] In a canalside pub, they deny all knowledge of the old trace. Who walks? ‘There used to be a road,’ they admit. It’s been swallowed up in this new development, Enfield Island Village. [...] The hard hat mercenaries of Fairview New Homes plc are suspicious of our cameras. Hands cover

¹⁹Edmond Jaloux quoted in Benjamin, *The Arcades Project* 435.

²⁰Buck-Morss 344.

faces. Earth-moves rumble straight at us. A call for instruction muttered into their lapels: 'Strangers. Travellers.'²¹

Diegetically, *London Orbital* is slightly disingenuous, for although it claims to use the ring road as a narrative guide, the story is never truly invested in the unadulterated purity of a closed circuit. Indeed, the tracing of the motorway does not begin until more than a fifth of the way into the book when Sinclair announces:

Here it begins. No detours. No digressions. We decided to take Waltham Abbey as our starting point [...] and to shadow the motorway (within audible range whenever possible) in an anti-clockwise direction. We wanted, quite simply, to get around: always carrying on from where we left off at the finish of the previous excursion. From now on the road would be our focus.²²

Moreover, in Sinclair's typically contrary fashion, *London Orbital's* opening salvo is not directed at the obvious target, its corrupted namesake, but at another degraded ring: the Millennium Dome: "It started with the Dome [...]. An urge to walk away from the Teflon meteorite on Bugsby's Marshes. A white thing had been dropped in the mud of the Greenwich peninsula. The ripples had to stop somewhere. [...] An escape. Keep moving, I told myself, until you hit tarmac, the outer circle."²³

Together, the Tories' motorway and New Labour's folly besmirch the Blakean circle. *London Orbital*, then, is an attempt to reinstate what Sinclair calls in *Sorry*

²¹ Sinclair, *London Orbital* 69-70.

²² Sinclair, *London Orbital* 125.

²³ Sinclair, *London Orbital* 3.

Meniscus (1999) the “cosmic ring.”²⁴ The book (and the walk) has a greater “ritual purpose: to exorcise the unthinking malignancy of the Dome.”²⁵ It is an exhortation to reclaim the circle’s resonance and potential from its restrictive, and at times punitive, political applications. Sinclair explains this project to Kevin Jackson in *The Verbals*:

[Thatcher] wanted to physically remake, she wanted to destroy the power of London, the mob, all of those things, which finally through the Poll Tax riots brought her down. I can’t look at it in any other way but as actual demonic possession. She opened herself up to the darkest demons of world politics, and therefore writers were obliged to counter this by equally extraordinary projects. The whole notion of *Downriver* was an anti-demonic project, and this one, *London Orbital*, is against the New Labour project as it stands, with the symbol of the road repeating the symbol of the Dome. Two Circles.²⁶

Sinclair further condemns the closed logic of the circuit by claiming that it lends itself to appropriation by capitalism’s unacknowledged twin, the criminal underworld. Sinclair shows that circuits have uses which are unlicensed by the polity, yet function in a symmetrical manner. The M25 motorway reveals itself to be a conduit of black money, drugs and people smuggling.

The road solicited crime. [...] The new motorway was a route into previously inaccessible territories; you could spin Surrey, explore Kent. [...] With the advent of this bright new motorway, a support belt beneath

²⁴ Iain Sinclair, *Sorry Meniscus* (London: Profile Books, 1999) 12.

²⁵ Sinclair, *London Orbital* 412.

²⁶ Iain Sinclair and Kevin Jackson, *The Verbals* (Tonbridge, Kent: Worple Press, 2003) 135.

South London's sagging suburbs, criminal imagination was booted into a higher register. Street crims became upwardly mobile. [...] Ratepayers see it as a barrier to be defended, villains see it as a job opportunity.²⁷

He interviews known Essex wide boy Bernard Mahoney, who confirms Sinclair's theory regarding the M25's primary role in enabling transaction and transmission of the goods and money of both legitimate and illegitimate economies. Capitalism's shadow self, the irregular economy, looks very like its official guise:

Thatcher's orbital motorway was welcomed by ambitious villains. Access to the wide world. Avoid the Thurrock ramp and it was peachy. 'Stolen lorryload of coffee beans to Liverpool for a relative of deceased train robber Buster Edwards ... Down to Bristol, doing debts. Bash people up in Birmingham. We were always on the move. The more people you reach, the more money you make. Know what I mean.'²⁸

Sinclair wryly comments that Mahoney's use of the publicly built and maintained roadway for his own activities is the "living embodiment of the public/private partnership."²⁹ Public/private partnership, a neo-liberal form of financial and economic collaboration between the state and private enterprise, is favoured and promoted by contemporary liberal democratic governments. The discrepancy between the ideological claims of Thatcher, Blair et al. and the reality of the M25 are illuminated by Sinclair:

²⁷ Sinclair, *London Orbital* 313-5.

²⁸ Sinclair, *London Orbital* 504.

²⁹ Sinclair, *London Orbital* 504.

[A]s a thing of spirit, it works. As a vision, it inspires. There is only one flaw, you can't use it. Shift from observer to client and the conceit falls apart. Follow the signs for LONDON ORBITAL in your car and consciousness takes a dive. The M25 has been conceived as an endurance test, a reason for staying at home. Aversion therapy. Attempt the full circuit and you will never drive again. [...] A motorway, built to solve the problems of flow and congestion, has now become the problem. Success has killed it. The M25 is too popular, people use it indiscriminately: thieves on away days, touring the bosky suburbs; sexual service industries taking advantage of the excellent parking facilities and discreet greenery of the Royal Horticultural Society's gardens at Wisley; walkers, random inner-city strollers trying to define the point where London abdicates.³⁰

Hermeneutic Circles

In *London Orbital*, Sinclair says, "I wrote the same book, the same life over and over again."³¹ Emulating the circular geometry of its ostensible subject matter, the book is a return. Sinclair's earlier essay *Sorry Meniscus*, is also a meditation upon the Dome, and as such, a textual precursor to *London Orbital*:

I had to admit that this shape, The Dome had its resonance. What if a dome could be stretched over the area circumscribed by the M25? A caul of translucent skin. A Blakean conceit, fierce, true, but held only in the mind. [...] Coleridge's opium dream invoked 'the shadow of the dome of pleasure' that floated midway on the waves'. The Dome as conceit, an

³⁰ Sinclair, *London Orbital* 77; 82.

³¹ Sinclair, *London Orbital* 44.

emblem lifted into the consciousness of all those who lived inside its limits. [...] Imagine the Dome as it ought to be, rather than it is: a poached egg designed by a committee of vegans.³²

The evocation of “over and over again” suggests a type of textual eternal return informed by Nietzschean ethics, a notion that Sinclair touched upon previously in *White Chappell*, *Scarlet Tracings*: “We give ourselves up, let go, stalk up on ourselves unawares. We walk into our own outlines, we are there before.”³³ Thematically, *London Orbital* travels much the same terrain as Sinclair’s previous publications. The book’s narrative contests the notion of inexorable uni-directional narrative progression culminating in a determinate endpoint. In effect, *London Orbital* moves retrospectively towards the textual antecedent *Sorry Meniscus*. The two books share themes and conceits, such as its withering attack on contemporary politics and politicians. In turn, *Sorry Meniscus* presages the later text because, as in *London Orbital*, Sinclair revels in his skill as pasquinader. Both texts provide savage commentary on the changes wrought on London by the social and economic policies of successive Tory and Labour governments. In *Sorry Meniscus*, Sinclair is endlessly, and remorselessly satirical in his jeremiad against the Dome; it is “a blob of congealed correction fluid, a flick of Tipp-Ex [...]. It still looks like a junky’s time-killing sculpture from a greasy caff, a heap of icing sugar with twelve match-ends stuck in it.”³⁴

The connection between the two books *London Orbital* and *Sorry Meniscus* points to another circle being constructed by Sinclair's corpus: a hermeneutic circle. A hermeneutic circle occurs when one's understanding of the text as a whole is

³² Sinclair, *Sorry Meniscus* 14.

³³ Iain Sinclair, *White Chappell, Scarlet Tracings* (London: Vintage, 1995) 112.

³⁴ Sinclair, *Sorry Meniscus* 11-12.

reliant upon an understanding of the individual parts, and vice versa. Neither whole nor part stands alone, and the reader moves from one to the other in a circular pattern. To decipher a single text requires a working knowledge of a complex of texts—novels, criticism, poetry, film, as well as familiarity with the wider cultural texts, such as Sinclair’s media persona, or his singular position in contemporary British literature.

This type of dynamic has repercussions for the marketability of texts and authors. Of course, Sinclair is not entirely naïve about the residual effects of demanding texts, and claims that *London Orbital* was conceived as a corrective, as well as a concession.

I felt quite strongly that with the kind of complicated dense fictions that I’d been writing, there was no place for them in the market. *Lights Out for the Territory*, which was centred on walks and explorations within London, had been much more successful. I needed to do another book which appeared to be a documentary but went off in other directions. One day when I was out walking up the River Lea to the point where it hit the M25 at Waltham Abbey, I thought this is it. [...] The obvious space to explore is this, with this pilgrim journey. It’s a book you can describe in a single sentence — a walk around the M25 — so everything clicked into place. Once I’d taken that decision, the book was there waiting to be written.³⁵

Sinclair is not being entirely candid here. To condense it to merely “a walk around the M25” is not telling the whole story. *London Orbital* is still an obdurate work of literary and cultural history, teeming with intertextual reference. Yet for all this,

³⁵ Chapman, "When In Doubt Quote Ballard."

London Orbital has been one of the more keenly studied and read of Sinclair's texts with far more criticism devoted to it than many of his works.

By contrast, the novel *Landor's Tower* (2000) is set in Wales and lacks the tropes and geographical markers usual to Sinclair's work. It disoriented readers used to certain 'grand narratives' in Sinclair's works. One reviewer even couched the experience of reading *Landor's Tower* in terms of madness and violence:

Reading one particularly incendiary section of this book I was reminded of watching a tooled-up video-game hero: Sinclair's prose cartwheeling and somersaulting and jujitsuing through anything the world could throw at it: lobbing smart bombs at soft targets; reducing vain conceits to matchwood, continually taking itself up another level. The effort of staying with this singular writer in this mood can be exhilarating, even if, at times, you feel as if you are not so much reading this novel, as being beaten up by it.³⁶

Symptomatically, very little has been written on this book, compared to the other novels, as though outside his London 'domain' Sinclair loses credibility. Sinclair explains in *The Verbals* that *Landor's Tower* was partially a reaction to readers' expectations of him, yet perversely it left the reader with expectations high and dry, alienated:

It was a lightweight comment on the situation I'd written myself into at that time, as being defined as a person who could only write about London. Certainly, when I wrote the one book about Wales [*Landor's Tower*], there was a real antipathy towards it, as being an illegitimate

³⁶ Adams, "Singing His Prose."

production. Nobody wanted to know – get back, you have to write about London, that's what you do.³⁷

Fictionalising his narratives removes the generic comfort derived from non-fiction, which, to an extent, can be read as a mirror of actual events, people and places, and thus, 'closer' to reality. Sinclair explains that *Radon Daughters* (1994), another novel that has been conspicuously absent from much of the criticism, was the product of this process.

In *Radon Daughters* there's a Renchi [Bicknell] character who accompanies the narrator on this walk to Oxford and Cambridge. And it's exactly a pre-*vision* of plodding around the M25. If you read that now, you'll see that it's already there in fictional form – and people found it unreadable. But if it's put in an apparently real landscape, they're quite happy to review it and discuss it.³⁸

Ben Watson describes his encounter with the 'difficult' *Radon Daughters*, and bravely soldiers on:

Against the inevitable charge of 'elitism' brought against difficult modern art, it needs to be pointed out that Sinclair's poetic prose is difficult for any reader: it does not rely on a stable set of high-cultural references, but includes slang and all the debris that hurtles towards us from radio, television, advertisement hoardings and cereal cartons. Faced with some bizarre verbal concoction or oblique reference, the reader needs to stop and

³⁷ Sinclair and Jackson 131.

³⁸ Sinclair and Jackson 124.

think - and sometimes, it's true, the point will evade you. Ask around, though, and you will often find it is simply some cultural flotsam - the name of a boxer, a brand of shampoo, some rhyming slang - that has escaped you. Indeed, some of Sinclair's best effects arrive when the reader investigates some mystery (his more arcane pulp and poetic 'discoveries' are listed in a bibliography): literature is conceived as dialogue, as a social process, not a solitary communion with an uplifting text.³⁹

Watson, the courageous reader, has in mind passages from *Radon Daughters* like the one below, which mixes the "cultural flotsam" of vernacular speech ("bombhead"; "screwman") with highbrow art (Italian filmmaker Pier-Paolo Pasolini) and mainstream branding (fashion designer Paul Smith):

A bombhead had insinuated a stool at the bar; one of Pasolini's rough trade hoods. Paul Smith and white T-shirt. A long range ventriloquist, the man cupped his chin on the heel of his hand – and stared, unblinking [...]. His mannerisms – scar tickling and the compulsive dusting of a Berkoffian No. 2 crop – were peculiarly offensive. The villain had all the dodgy trademarks of a resting actor. Some petty screwman, smalltime rudyard, called in as local colour. He'd bleed all over the leather of the getaway Jag, and be dumped after the first reel. The silent menace of his performance obliterated by gabbiness in the hotel bar. Vodka verbals. The geezer with the silver attaché case of bent Rolexes.⁴⁰

³⁹ Ben Watson, "Iain Sinclair: Revolutionary Novelist or Revolting Nihilist?" 20 June 2008 <<http://www.militantesthetix.co.uk/critlit/SINCLAIR.htm>>.

⁴⁰ Iain Sinclair, *Radon Daughters* (London: Vintage, 1995) 161.

Importantly, Watson counters the attack of 'elitism' that often greets Sinclair's incorporation of obscure material. He returns to the idea of "dialogue" between writer and reader, a process which encourages collaboration and inclusion, as opposed to the exclusion that many of Sinclair's critics choose to see, a response inspired by the textual tactics of narrative as much as the obscurantism of the subject matter. The purpose of this refusal, the tendency to confound and obfuscate, is not designed to alienate or exclude, and instead, is a gesture of inclusiveness. What becomes increasingly clear, even as Sinclair's narrative tactics render the text more obscure, is that Sinclair's writing emphasizes methodology. To state it plainly, Sinclair's writing is more about process than product. By drawing attention away from the endpoint, product, and shifting it to process, Sinclair undermines the dominance of Aristotelian narrative structures. In addition, by highlighting the *process* of writing, Sinclair invites the reader to participate in creating the meaning of the text through the *process* of reading. Sinclair's substantive refusals represent a movement towards difficulty which does not display an elitist tendency, but instead constructs a politics of inclusion. It reaffirms the commitment to a Barthesian relation to text, where the reader is as instrumental in generating meaning as any other component in the reading/writing machine.

Mad Travellers

Sinclair once observed of his own writing, "If you take the middle-brow novel as the norm, then seeing these things portrayed, they look pretty manic and nutty and coming from somewhere else, an alien world. And the language itself is fairly savage, so it's uncomfortable. So you would assume that the person producing them is,

equally, a kind of nutter."⁴¹ In *London Orbital*, Sinclair refers to his trip around the edges of London and London culture as a *fugue*. In psychiatry, a "fugue" is defined as a "flight from or loss of the awareness of one's identity, sometimes involving wandering away from home, and often occurring as a reaction to shock or emotional stress."⁴² Sinclair quotes a case recorded in Ian Hacking's book *Mad Travellers* where a shepherd suffered severe seizures, followed by a fugue state.

'Before or after an attack he would compulsively pace up and down, or in circles, always clockwise. He had an obsessive conviction that he should put the whole world, and the heavens and angels, in his head, or in his heart.' [...] Leashed, he walked the pain, lacking balance, a tight circuit around nothing. His epic peregrination, the few yards of a hospital ward, is a doomed attempt to recover memory. Movement provokes memory.⁴³

As Hacking describes it, madness manifests itself through the tracing of a circle. At first glance, the image of the shepherd appears pitiable, trapped by another benighted circle. Yet the interpellation of the subject can be so totalising in a capitalist economy that the fugue state can be seen to offer a credible alternative, a means of rupturing the restrictive logic of capitalism's signifying chain, a way of regaining the thoughts and memories forcibly expurgated by society. To refuse capitalism's *diktat* is to be designated irrational, and thus relegate oneself to the periphery.⁴⁴ For Sinclair madness is a means of purifying evil and accessing alternative energy forms.

⁴¹ Sinclair and Jackson 123.

⁴² "Fugue," def. 2, *The Oxford English Dictionary*, 5th ed., 2002.

⁴³ Sinclair, *London Orbital* 164.

⁴⁴ Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002) 9.

The trope of madness is one that has informed Sinclair's work from the earliest counter-cultural days. In *The Kodak Mantra Diaries*, a crazy drive lost in the streets of London is "open to sudden manic inspirations."⁴⁵ The frenetic lack of cohesion is matched by an interview technique which is "tortured in its syntax, schizophrenic in its content—something about interpersonal, religio-spiritual, linear structures of colonized, formalized, institutionalized, inhuman containment."⁴⁶ This is the antidote to the 'official' BBC interview which "forced them to talk about prearranged subjects, with the eternal middle-man, faceless, voice-of-reason, sitting in, keeping them under control."⁴⁷ The walk around the M25 has a tinge of lunacy to it; the perversity of navigating by foot a thoroughfare designed for the automobile. Yet against received opinion, it is not the walk that Sinclair believes is perverse, but to try and drive the motorway: "Any attempt to drive the circuit, or to come to terms with that journey, enforced metaphors of madness."⁴⁸

Sinclair's belief that his peregrinations will keep personal and collective evil at bay is a recurrent theme. He broached it in an earlier short fiction, "The Keeper of the Rothenstein Tomb" (2000):

Norton kept on walking. This was the form his mania took, hammering for hours at a time, out there beyond the traces of the Roman wall. [...] Norton was stone crazy, written out. If he stopped moving, so he believed, the treadmill would grind to a halt, buildings would topple, ancient streams would rise to the surface, the Walbrook, the Fleet, the Tyburn; the Wall

⁴⁵ Iain Sinclair, *The Kodak Mantra Diaries* (London: Albion Village Press, 1971) n. pag.

⁴⁶ Sinclair, *Kodak Mantra* n. pag.

⁴⁷ Sinclair, *Kodak Mantra* n. pag.

⁴⁸ Sinclair, *London Orbital* 13.

would crumble back into dust and demons of greed, paranoia, corruption would escape.⁴⁹

Later, in the novel *Dining on Stones*, Norton characterises his compulsion to log “everything” in the city as a psychosis.

I started to embark on monumental walks; do it that way, I thought, work the gap between *personal* psychosis and psychosis of the city: the crisis of consciousness lives in faulty synchronisation. Sometimes the city was crazier, sometimes my fugues leapt ahead: fire visions, sunsets over King's Cross gas holders. We are part of the madness. Monitor *everything*: weeds, green paint on a wooden fence in Maryon Park, swans hooked by Kosovans on the River Lea, the way an Irish barman in Kentish Town stubs out his Sweet Afton and scratches a cut that never heals on his right wrist.⁵⁰

The psychosis of the city, or of the M25, is twinned with textual psychosis in the form of incontinent ideas, extreme verbiage, compulsive digression, and/or excessive quotation. To try and give London and its infrastructure expression in literature is to invite such a state. As Sinclair says, “The person who undertakes research into the city’s history, minutiae and odd particulars, will become unbalanced. Identification with London’s biography is too intense.”⁵¹

In *London Orbital*, Sinclair literalises the theme of insanity by visiting erstwhile enclosures for those who were set apart as mad. These sites, such as Shenley hospital,

⁴⁹ Iain Sinclair, “The Keeper of the Rothenstein Tomb,” *The Time Out Book of London Short Stories: Volume 2*, ed. Nicholas Royle (London: Penguin, 2000) 159.

⁵⁰ Sinclair, *Dining on Stones* 267. This is a fictionalisation of the essay “Cinema Purgatorio” that appears in *Lights Out*.

⁵¹ Sinclair, *London Orbital* 208.

are the location of attempts to force idiosyncratic personal narratives into the larger schema of the general social narrative:

It's hard, seeing the photographs of the place in its Thirties pomp, not to think of other experiments in social engineering, eugenics. This is a camp, a colony, a plant to process non-conformity, to tidy away girls who got into trouble, drinkers, ranters; those who gave too vivid an expression to the overwhelming melancholy of urban life.⁵²

In other words, those who did not conform to the pre-determined structures of social behaviour, who broke that mould, were segregated from one regulated social environment, society in general, and removed to a separate one. Sinclair draws our attention to how the built environment conforms to, and helps maintain, dominant ideas regarding rationality and control: "A battle was being fought between opposed concepts of architecture: the grid and the skin hutch, the rational colony with its avenues and the yurt of the shaman."⁵³ An alternative spatial arrangement was instituted by 'anti-psychiatrists' R.D. Laing and David Cooper. Villa 21 moved patients from "huge wards (and a recreation hall that seated 1,000 people) to 'family' units of between twenty and forty-five members [...]. The grounded ocean liner of the Thirties, with its rigid hierarchies, became a flotilla of pirate craft, ships of fools with crazed or inspired captains."⁵⁴ The figures that Sinclair conjures – pirates, fools, crazed captains—are all, appropriately enough, carnivalesque. Carnival, in the work

⁵² Sinclair, *London Orbital* 154.

⁵³ Sinclair, *London Orbital* 156.

⁵⁴ Sinclair, *London Orbital* 155.

of Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, is a topsy-turvy space, where traditional orders are upended, and the potential for subversive activity emerges.⁵⁵

Aleatory Texts

In *London Orbital*, Sinclair half-heartedly attempts to conform to a determinate structure when he and his travelling companion, Renchi Bicknell, puzzle over “how to iron out the M25 circuit. How to convert the orbital motorway into a device made from straight lines, simple contraries.”⁵⁶ It eludes the conceptual neatness of the linear Myriorama, or Endless Landscape, “a set of twenty-four cards based on a ‘novelty’ published in Leipzig in the 1830s. Lay out the cards in any order - one long straight line or 12x2, 4x6, 3x8 – and you achieve ‘a perfectly harmonious landscape.’” No matter how they rearrange the cards according to the rules, it still makes sense, but Sinclair discovers that “the one thing you can’t do with the twenty-four cards is arrange them in a circle. The pattern fractures, the road breaks.”⁵⁷

The correlation Sinclair draws between the navigation of textual space and of urban space has been extensively theorised elsewhere by anthropologist Michel de Certeau. In his study, de Certeau speaks of “the unlimited diversity” of the walk, highlighting its improvised nature, and the infinite possibilities it proposes. Footsteps are equated with thoughts, multiplying unchecked. “They are myriad, but do not compose a series. ... Their swarming mass is an innumerable collection of singularities. Their intertwined paths give their shape

⁵⁵ See Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, *The Politics And Poetics Of Transgression* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1986).

⁵⁶ Sinclair, *London Orbital* 162.

⁵⁷ Sinclair, *London Orbital* 162.

to spaces. They weave places together."⁵⁸ On the other hand, de Certeau calls the subway "travelling incarceration" because of its predetermined route.⁵⁹

Sinclair welcomes the aleatory and wilfully creates the opportunity for diversion. The essay "Skating on Thin Eyes" is a journey through London with the ostensible purpose of diligently researching and reporting on the language he observes on his travels, but the map for the walk is only ever half-hearted, and Sinclair admits to "hoping for some accident to bring about a final revision."⁶⁰ When he finds the detour to disfigure his route, he is content: "Already the purity of the [walk] has been despoiled. Good."⁶¹ In another essay in *Lights Out*, the obligation to arrive at popular fiction writer Jeffrey Archer's penthouse at a fixed hour forces Sinclair to reconsider his (lack of) plans: "I daren't risk one of our walks. They tended, all too often, and like one of my less disciplined paragraphs to take over with an agenda of their own. 'Better to journey than to arrive' wouldn't work, not when set against Archer's known obsession with punctuality."⁶² Like Charles Baudelaire's artist, he is happily susceptible to distraction. Moreover, Sinclair, a devotee of psychogeography, is also a practitioner of the Situationist *dérive* as theorised by Guy Debord:

The *dérive* entails playful-constructive behaviour and awareness of psychogeographical effects, which completely distinguishes it from the classical notions of the journey or the stroll.

In a *dérive* one or more persons during a certain period drop their usual motives for movement and action, their relations, their work and

⁵⁸ de Certeau 97.

⁵⁹ Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley: California UP, 1988) 111.

⁶⁰ Sinclair, *Lights Out* 5.

⁶¹ Sinclair, *Lights Out* 8.

⁶² Sinclair, *Lights Out* 170.

leisure activities, and let themselves be drawn by the attractions of the terrain and the encounters they find there. The element of chance is less determinant than one might think: from the *dérive* point of view cities have a psychogeographical relief, with constant currents, fixed points and vortexes that strongly discourage entry into or exit from certain zones.⁶³

Excremental Narratives

According to the restrictive logic of late era capitalism, Sinclair's slippery, complex, inaccessible narratives are perverse. They are excremental. In another iteration of the double meaning of the word 'refuse,' the narratives turn themselves into refuse by refusing to conform to conventions that facilitate unimpeded consumption. Walter Benjamin tells us mimesis is the compulsion to become the Other.⁶⁴ Thus, the human psyche cognitively maps knowledge and information in linear form in order to make sense of spatial surrounds based on the line. The shapes wrought on the physical environment by modernity, and what we have come to think of as the defining spaces of that modernity—the factory, the railway station, the freeway—are ruled by the linear logic of determinate structures and teleology. Baron Hausmann's plan for nineteenth-century Paris, the capital of modernity and the natural terrain of the *flâneur*, was predicated upon a linear regulation of the urban landscape to replace the unruly disorganisation of slums. Time-management studies carried out by the Ford company in its aim to achieve greater efficiency in the output of commodities led to the development of the assembly line. The line guides the construction of mass transportation systems, which join destination A to destination B. Electricity, and

⁶³ Guy Debord, "Theory of the Dérive," *Situationist International Anthology*, trans. and ed. Ken Knabb (Berkeley, Calif.: Bureau of Public Secrets, 1981) 50.

⁶⁴ Walter Benjamin, "On the Mimetic Faculty," trans. Edmund Jephcott *Selected Writings: Volume Two 1927-1934*, ed. Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Belknap Press, 1999) 720-22.

telecommunications are transmitted along the line. That pre-eminence is replicated in the systemization of knowledge in the list, the inventory, the archive. The line has for the Western psyche become a synecdoche for order.

Determinate structures of storytelling and understanding are a way of mimetically making sense of the conditions and business of modernity, which is a compulsion to organise the world, and the people and objects within it. Linear narratives mimic the linear meta-narratives that engender them. *London Orbital* is conceived from its beginning as a 'unified' book, in as much as any Sinclair book could be deemed unified. It shuns the line, and instead deploys another established form, the circular shape of story telling. However, by identifying himself with the Blakean tradition of the circle, Sinclair signals an unconventional adoption of this model. In any case, capitalist ideology distrusts the futility of the circular, in that it revisits and retraces its own path. It is, however, interested in the potential for the circle to act as an enclosure to either contain or keep out certain elements.

In a way, Sinclair's narratives affirm Forster by frustrating our epistemophilic tendencies—our desire to know, our pleasure in knowing. This may explain his fascination with *Jack the Ripper*, a tale of mystery that eludes resolution and closure. It is a rejection of the "and then, ... and then" model also rejected by Forster. This is no doubt what leads his colleague Patrick Wright to ask about Sinclair: "There's a risk of mannerism. No question. The real problem is with the architecture of the books. Can he create the structures to sustain his sentences?"⁶⁵ Sinclair's narratives resist the teleology of determinate structure by failing to construct an already devised structure. Their aleatory excursions through history and language as well as

⁶⁵ Stuart Jeffries, "On the Road," *Guardian* 24 Apr. 2004, 21 June 2008
<<http://books.guardian.co.uk/departments/generalfiction/story/0,,1201856,00.html>>.

the narrow passageways of London are gratuitous according to such stipulations. He creates textual refuse by playing havoc with established grand narratives, which are predominately linear.

The plot of the commodity is presented ideologically and rhetorically as a beginning (production), followed by a middle (consumption) and an endpoint (obsolescence). Reorganising or subtracting one of these elements would render the structure incomplete and/or cause a malfunction. This is where Sinclair's insistence on noting the refuse of society and consumer culture derives its potential as critique of the story that offers the telos of closure. Refuse hangs around. It doesn't disappear but returns to haunt us and thus, the ghost of commodities past creates anachrony. Commodities travel in a cyclical pattern. They are created from matter and return to matter when they decompose. The end, 'refuse' overlaps with the beginning, 'production.' The narrative of the commodity is re-arranged because it appears as if consumption occurs post-production, but in fact production is dependent on consumption because commodification can only be achieved at the moment of consumption. In a sense, consumption becomes the origin because it is the instigator. But it is also the end point, thus it becomes a circuit rather than a linear progression.

The circle, too, cannot be a conservative structure. At the same time, it is inhered with mystical powers and possesses a radical history: "Impossible to transcribe how all the London visionaries insisted on the necessity of a system of concentric circles."⁶⁶ Sinclair talks about making "connections. Circuits, haloes, spirals, starbelts: Blake's Dante orbits or the overlapping spheres of 'Milton's track.' Zones that cluster around the 'Mundane Egg' (or 'Shell'). The world through which

⁶⁶ Sinclair, *London Orbital* 204.

the spiritual Milton journeys. Wheels. Rings.”⁶⁷ The circle is the basis of utopian visions of the city such as G. I. Pepler’s “‘Greater London,’ (published in [...] 1911) [which] proposed a parkway encircling London at a ten-mile radius from Charing Cross [...]. The parkway would act as a ring road and as the basis for a necklace of garden suburbs.”⁶⁸ The circles proliferate:

Arthur Crow, also writing in 1911, went further. He wanted to connect ten ‘Cities of Health’ [...]. They would be joined by a ‘Great Ring Avenue’, a fantastic Egyptian or Mayan conceit, radiant settlements as outstations. [...] Patrick Abercrombie’s *Greater London Plan 1944* published in 1945) still worked through concentric bands: the Inner Urban Ring [...], the Suburban Ring [...], the green belt [...] and the Outer Country Ring.⁶⁹

London Orbital’s journey may conclude where it set out, but Sinclair’s final lines offer, as even he admits, an odd sense of closure nevertheless.

We hadn’t walked around the perimeter of London, we had circumnavigated the Dome. At a safe distance. Away from its poisoned heritage. Its bad will, mendacity. The tent could consider itself exorcised. This was a rare quest for me, one that reached a fitting conclusion. Here at last was the grail. Up-ended on a swamp in East London. Glowing in the dark.⁷⁰

⁶⁷ Sinclair, *London Orbital* 123.

⁶⁸ Sinclair, *London Orbital* 85.

⁶⁹ Sinclair, *London Orbital* 85.

⁷⁰ Sinclair, *London Orbital* 551.

It is accomplished not through the performative tracing of a formulaic narrative form, but through the textual act of reclaiming the circle and rehabilitating it from the unethical appropriation and replication by neo-liberalist agendas. This is the resurrection of the Blakean legacy. In defiance of the Aristotelian ideal, beginning and end in *London Orbital* merge into one another, indistinguishable. Travelling the circle brings to light the unorthodox and heterodox (hi)stories of London: "I want to walk around the orbital motorway: in the belief that this nowhere, this edge will offer fresh narratives."⁷¹ The sprawl of the narrative is designed to emulate and "to celebrate the sprawl of London" which has been constricted by the band of the M25.⁷² It is not merely new material to furnish the narratives that Sinclair seeks, but a 'fresh' narrative form, one that could be considered excremental. Ultimately, Sinclair is uninterested in manufacturing a final product conceived according to any predetermined idea of what narrative is, whether it be the meta-narrative of cultural production or the narrative of the text itself. Sinclair's disorganisation and reorganisation of narrative, and his treatment of one particular grand narrative, history, is the subject of the next chapter. It examines the search for 'fresh' narrative form in the remembering, and the forgetting of London's history.

⁷¹ Sinclair, *London Orbital* 16.

⁷² Sinclair, *London Orbital* 412.

CHAPTER FIVE

Spectral London: Sinclair and the Refuse of History

The writer's function is not without arduous duties. By definition, he cannot serve today those who make history; he must serve those who are subject to it.

Albert Camus¹

History is for pissing on.

Malcolm McLaren²

Chapter Five is a consideration of Sinclair's refusal of a particular narrative, a grand narrative: History. It also revisits some previously introduced ideas regarding the problems of 'making visible' texts and exposing them to regulatory machinery such as the Panopticon. The obvious place to turn in order to understand Sinclair's relation to history and historical texts is to his sustained, complex engagement with the material, cultural and social history of London. Sinclair is never interested in merely recreating and reinstituting past textual incarnations of the city. His imagination is drawn to the spectral city, as Ian Penman discerns: "Sinclair writes ghost stories, of a sort: whatever his subject, there is always a low, persistent note of something mourned, spectral, lost."³ Spectrality, that presence which is an absence, suits Sinclair's always ambivalent relationship with the field of London writing.

The work on London exhibits meticulously, some might say obsessively, researched histories of the city. This is not to say, however, that Sinclair's philosophy

¹ Albert Camus, "1957 Nobel Prize for Literature Address," City Hall, Stockholm, 10 Dec. 1957.

² Malcolm McLaren quoted in *London: From Punk to Blair*, ed. Joe Kerr and Andrew Gibson (London: Reaktion Books, 2003) 303.

³ Ian Penman, "A Magus Marooned," rev. of *Landor's Tower*, by Iain Sinclair, *Guardian* 5 May 2001, 21 June 2008 <<http://books.guardian.co.uk/reviews/generalfiction/0,6121,485838,00.html>>.

of history actualises official history, history that is created from the 'top down,' so to speak. In the same manner that he refuses determinate structure in his own narratives, Sinclair refuses the determinate structure of history, that is, history organised as a "continuous, systematic narrative of past events."⁴ Critic Robert Macfarlane detects this agenda in Sinclair's excursions around London in *Lights Out for the Territory*:

The book's intent—as far as it is possible to extract anything so forthright from its magnificently pell-mell prose—was to reclaim London's history from its sanctioned, official custodians (the Government, the heritage industry, the developers) and return it to those Sinclair saw as its true curators: a gaggle of mystics, visionaries, writers, collectors, filmmakers and poets, all the lost and the "reforgotten" keepers of a city's pasts.⁵

Sinclair's approach has much more in common, albeit instinctively as opposed to explicitly expressed, with Walter Benjamin's philosophy of history. In his influential essay "On the Concept of History" (1940) Benjamin is seeking, writes Susan Buck-Morss, "the particular kind of historical knowledge that is needed to free the present from myth [and which] is not easily uncovered. Discarded and forgotten, it lies buried within surviving culture, remaining invisible precisely because it was of so little use to those in power."⁶ The notions of visibility and invisibility, always dominant in Sinclair, once more come to the fore. A Benjaminian refrain is detectable when Sinclair writes that his own philosophy of history is "the revenge of the

⁴ Iain Sinclair, *Dining on Stones* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2004) 361.

⁵ Robert Macfarlane, "A Road Of One's Own," rev. of *Edge of the Orison: Journey Out of Essex*, by Iain Sinclair, *Times Literary Supplement* 7 Oct. 2005, 21 June 2008
<<http://tls.timesonline.co.uk/article/0,,25341-1885866,00.html>>.

⁶ Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project* (Cambridge, Mass. & London: MIT Press, 1991) x.

disenfranchised. Improvisations of history that are capable of making adjustments in present time. [...] The past is fluid, a black swamp; dip for whatever you need. Stepping off the main road at this point lands you right in it.”⁷ Sinclair, like Benjamin, prefers to sift through, and ruminate upon the (textual) refuse of dominant culture. Benjamin’s “angel of history” turns away from the “storm of progress” propelling him into the future, and looks instead to the “wreckage.”⁸ In Sinclair’s case, the storm of progress is undoubtedly the on-going gentrification of London that has taken place in the wake of the dismantled welfare state, and the accompanying commodification of the city’s history, what we might call the ‘heritage industry.’ The “wreckage” is the residue and ruin of what has been overlooked and/or omitted by official histories. This chapter proposes that Sinclair’s philosophy of history overlaps with Benjamin’s, and, in doing so, proposes an ethics of history.

Rodinsky’s Room

A logical starting point for exploring Sinclair’s ethics of history is his treatment of a particular East End mythopoeic history: that of David Rodinsky, a member of Whitechapel’s erstwhile Jewish community. Rodinsky vanished in 1967, and his room above the synagogue in Princelet Street was discovered more than a decade later. Sinclair himself has been instrumental in this mythopoeia, a role he interrogated in the short story “The Keeper of the Rothenstein Tomb.” As motif, Rodinsky’s room travels throughout Sinclair’s work, and “The Keeper” is only one episode in a series of literary encounters. His most lengthy engagement is in *Rodinsky’s Room* (1999). This collaboration with the artist Rachel Lichtenstein marks

⁷ Sinclair, *Lights Out for the Territory* (Granta: London, 1997) 26.

⁸ Walter Benjamin, “On the Concept of History,” trans. Harry Zohn, *Selected Writings: Volume 4, 1938-1940*, eds. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, Mass. & London: Belknap Press, 2003) 392.

the apotheosis of an enduring fascination that began, in written form at least, with an article in the *Guardian*.⁹ The article was later re-written as fiction to comprise a chapter in *Downriver*.¹⁰ Sinclair then turned the Rodinsky story back into non-fiction with references in *Liquid City*,¹¹ and in two dedicated volumes: the joint work with Lichtenstein, and a shorter non-fiction *Dark Lanthorns: Rodinsky's A-Z* (1999) which re-imagines Rodinsky as a psychogeographer. Finally, pieces of these numerous textual Rodinskys re-appear in the non-fiction *London Orbital* and the novel *Dining on Stones*.¹² The possibilities of the truth *and* the fiction of Rodinsky's tale hold Sinclair in thrall, but, more importantly, it has provided both site and narrative to which Sinclair can repeatedly return to elucidate his theory of history. Rodinsky gives Sinclair an East End based in material fact (the room, Jewish immigration, gentrification), yet enhanced by the myths surrounding it, much in the same manner as the Jack the Ripper story and the streets of Spitalfields function in the novel *White Chappell, Scarlet Tracings*. This combination of space and narrative is crucial to Sinclair's writing of place, or more specifically, his writing of London, and to his own brand of psychogeography.

Rodinsky's Room, Sinclair's most comprehensive account of the legend, is at its heart a detective story that is intimately connected with the social and cultural history of the Jewish East End. Structurally, it is a montage with alternating first person narratives. Sinclair supplies one of the accounts. Rachel Lichtenstein, whose biography at the start of the book states that she is "an artist who lives and works in

⁹ Rachel Lichtenstein and Iain Sinclair, *Rodinsky's Room* (London: Granta, 2000) 32-35. Sinclair's substantial edited volume *City of Disappearances* shares the Rodinsky book's approach to historiography, and as such, can be seen as connected to the body of work on Rodinsky, even although its remit is far wider.

¹⁰ Iain Sinclair, "The Solemn Mystery of the Disappearing Room," *Downriver* (London: Paladin, 1992) 119-50.

¹¹ Marc Atkins and Iain Sinclair, *Liquid City* (London: Reaktion Books, 1999) 148, 188.

¹² Iain Sinclair, *London Orbital* (London: Penguin, 2003) 133, 167, 206, 338-40, 348, 350, 531-32. Sinclair, *Dining on Stones* 78, 223, 224.

the East End, provides the other narrative. She is also a tour guide and gives lectures on the Jewish East End."¹³ Sometimes, the two perspectives mirror each other. At other times, they diverge. In this way, the structure of the book undoes any sense of a unifying, omniscient point of view. Sinclair parallels his quest for an enigmatic subcultural writer named David Litvinoff, which takes him through oral, folkloric, mythic and apocryphal texts, with Lichtenstein's search for the truth about Rodinsky: "Where I was concerned, the quest for David Litvinoff, a detective story unravelling the mysteries of a life without evidence, a life recalled in contradictory monologues, was twinned with Rachel Lichtenstein's furious pursuit of the other David, Rodinsky."¹⁴ But there are two types of historiography at work here. Sinclair's narrative is derived from textual and observational readings; Lichtenstein's, from lived experience – genealogical and personal. Their fragmented, multi-perspectival approach incorporates many voices from the East End's inhabitants, past and present, and paints a far richer, more evocative picture of Rodinsky's lost East End than any single impression. An abandoned room, filled with the refuse of a man's life becomes the pathway to an array of histories, collective and personal, local and from further abroad.

The proliferation of narratives goes some way to addressing Peter Brooker's criticism that Sinclair presents a particular portrait of the East End to the exclusion of others; most specifically, the South Asian diasporic populations who moved to the area in the 1960s and 1970s. By inference, Brooker believes Sinclair guilty of the historiographical crimes of predecessors who overlooked the East End because it "represented the 'other' to the nation's preferred self-image of middle-class

¹³ Lichtenstein and Sinclair, iii.

¹⁴ Lichtenstein and Sinclair, 137.

respectability.¹⁵ Brooker writes: "Here Sinclair's strategy and vision are limited. In *Downriver* he notes the variety of multi-ethnic life in the East End. [...] However, whereas these earlier immigrants and colonized others are an acknowledged, sometime considered presence, the newer ethnic community of Bangladeshis [...] are as if invisible."¹⁶ In effect, Brooker accuses Sinclair of substantiating dominant historical narratives through his lack of inclusion. His "project is limited, therefore, not because it fails some pure and external standard, but because it colludes in the very norms of Thatcher's Britain [...] in attitudes to women and ethnicity."¹⁷ While Brooker's argument for the visibility of these histories is valid, it is not Sinclair's literary responsibility to speak others' histories for them. Neither is it his intention to weave an exhaustive, all-encompassing tapestry of the East End's history. He is merely teasing out threads of history – allegorical, buried, occult. To cover the histories of the East End in entirety is not only impossible, but also antithetical to Sinclair's (and indeed, Brooker's) philosophy of history, which strives to dismantle totalising narratives.

Both Lichtenstein and Sinclair stress that Rodinsky's tale is only extraordinary in its re-telling, not in its lived incarnation. Sinclair writes, "Rodinsky's was the invisibility of the unnoticed, not of the Nietzschean assassin, the self-willed superman. The scribbled marks on his map recalled humble domestic quests and not the sites of sacrifice, past or future."¹⁸ Lichtenstein discovers when she goes to interview the now dispersed Jewish community that the solitary, reclusive life of Rodinsky is hardly unique. It is being re-lived in council housing by numerous elderly ex-residents of Whitechapel and Spitalfields. Another researcher and

¹⁵Peter Brooker, "Re-imagining London," *Modernity and Metropolis: Writing, Film and Urban Formations* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002) 97.

¹⁶Brooker 103

¹⁷Brooker 105.

¹⁸Lichtenstein and Sinclair 200.

documentary-maker with whom she speaks confirms this: "After finishing the [radio] programme and gaining access to the homes of elderly Jews living alone in [council] blocks, [...] Alan told me, 'There are many Rodinskys still in Whitechapel.'"¹⁹ By defusing the sensationalism, the co-authors delineate a discursive territory that is distinguished from the histories Sinclair derides in *Dining on Stones*:

I refused to have any truck with novelists who lost their nerve and tiptoed into non-fiction, dinky little things about Regency stuff-dribblers, science as anecdote, First War diary, madhouse meditation, incest recovery affirmation, swimming to Scotland. Or, worse than those counter-grabbing booklets (which won't spoil the lien of your suit), baggy horrors about stinky, seething Elizabethan/Victorian London, poverty porn illustrated from the archive. Wormy history cooked up to make us feel good about the thin air of the present. Books about pain: crimes reinterpreted, battles refought.²⁰

In her afterword to the paperback edition, Lichtenstein recounts how, at a book reading, an old man "left [...] in disgust, muttering under his breath, 'total rubbish, I knew David Rodinsky well, used to work with him in a shoe factory in Princelet Street, there was nothing remarkable about him whatsoever.'"²¹ Yet, this would seem to be the point of her narrative, to somehow re-forget someone who had been re-constructed by the heritage industry through tools like "blue plaques," which according to Sinclair, "[force] us to remember those who might prefer to be forgotten."²² The heritage industry has not allowed Rodinsky to remain "unwritten,

¹⁹ Lichtenstein and Sinclair 293.

²⁰ Sinclair, *Dining on Stones* 91.

²¹ Lichtenstein and Sinclair 327.

²² Lichtenstein and Sinclair 6.

unexplained and therefore free," and Lichtenstein and Sinclair hope to redress that capture.²³ Yet even personal investment in the story – Lichtenstein's grandparents were married at the Princelet Street synagogue and had a watchmaking shop in the same street – does not protect Lichtenstein from criticism such as that of popular historian Lisa Jardine who felt "deeply uneasy" about the book and surmised that "many of the moves [she] makes, including the marking of the grave and the request for prayers to be said for him, suggest her personal atonement for the appropriations she has made in the name of art."²⁴ Lichtenstein's defence is that "before I came across the story David Rodinsky was already public property. When the room had first been opened up a number of false legends had built up around the man and his disappearance. I felt that Rodinsky chose me, in some way, to publicly displace the myths with the truth about his life and sad death."²⁵ As she presents it, her task is redemptive in that she is trying to retrieve Rodinsky's story from the profiteers.

Tellingly, Sinclair omits the role of traditional historian from the inventory of Lichtenstein's duties, and instead emphasises the spectral dimension of her task:

The more documentation Rachel could file, the more artefacts she could photograph and label, the more elusive this fiction, David Rodinsky, became. She improvised with all the required roles: private detective, archaeologist, curator, ghost-writer, ventriloquial deliverer of Rodinsky's voice and art. She realised with a proper sense of dread, that the business of her life, this stretch of it, was to complete whatever it was that Rodinsky had begun: to pass beyond ego, and all the dusty

²³ Lichtenstein and Sinclair 6.

²⁴ Jardine quoted in Lichtenstein and Sinclair 323-24.

²⁵ Lichtenstein and Sinclair 324.

particulars of place and time, into a parallel state. Disincarnate.
Unbodied. Eternally present.²⁶

Jacques Derrida, taking his cue from Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, tells us the spectral creates anachrony; it is time out of joint.²⁷ Lichtenstein, too, is approaching history as something that does not achieve temporal logic, something that is to be 'undone,' dis-organised, rather than systematically built up. It is not history of the sort that Peter Ackroyd constructs, where "[t]ime behaves itself, the chronology is linear."²⁸

History as Golem

In his introductory chapter in *Rodinsky's Room*, Sinclair begins "Rachel Lichtenstein is the story." Lichtenstein's involvement in the project is crucial. It is affectively connected.

Rodinsky's room was the module through which an important narrative of immigrant life, hardship and scholarship, would be recovered. I wasn't qualified to hunt down the human story, that would be the task of someone even crazier than I was, someone capable of handling bureaucratic obfuscation, working the files, spending days chasing dead ends on a hot telephone; travelling like a spy, winning the sympathy of fragile family connections. Someone who belonged here

²⁶ Lichtenstein and Sinclair 4.

²⁷ See Jacques Derrida, *Spectres of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of the Mourning and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (London: Routledge, 1994).

²⁸ Iain Sinclair, "Customising Biography," rev. of *Blake*, by Peter Ackroyd, *London Review of Books* 22 Feb. 1996: 18.

by birthright. Someone who could read history of the room as an analogue of their own undisclosed heritage.²⁹

Sinclair relinquishes his 'ownership' of the story on ethical grounds, but as he continues to recount Lichtenstein's "mad quest to discover all that is to be known about a synagogue caretaker, a Talmudic scholar, a holy fool; a man who invented himself through his disappearance," it is apparent that there is plenty of material for him as well.³⁰

The profile of Rodinsky is not dissimilar to the other outsiders populating Sinclair's texts.

A simpleton who achieved competence in half a dozen languages, alive and dead. A sink-school dropout who made translations from cuneiform texts of the Fertile Delta. A penniless haunter of cafes. A city wanderer who assembled a library that filled more than fifty cases. Rodinsky was a shape whose only definition was its shapelessness, the lack of a firm outline.³¹

Rodinsky's numerous turns in Sinclair's corpus come about because the tale captures many of the themes that preoccupy the author. Of particular resonance is the idea of erasure, as exemplified by the "man who invented himself through his disappearance." Rodinsky "perched under the eaves, a crow, unremarked and unremarkable – until that day in the Sixties when he achieved the great work and

²⁹Lichtenstein and Sinclair 256.

³⁰Lichtenstein and Sinclair 3.

³¹Lichtenstein and Sinclair 3.

became invisible."³² Rebuffing the type of history that claims to be definitive, Sinclair welcomes the lacunae. They are central to his ethics of history. Rodinsky's room is captivating precisely because it is "a missing text. A text that had been worn away by indifference, the exigencies of the everyday. A text that could be reassembled by sympathetic magic, some peculiar marriage of scholarship and obsession."³³ Sinclair wants to share the story and admits to certain exploitative interest:

My attitude towards the room at the top of this forgotten building was unforgivably predatory. Cheesy romanticism was only the latest outrage in a long chain of exploitation. I wanted to bring outsiders here, writers and painters whose work I admired, or simply those with an interest in the hidden attics and subterranea of the city.³⁴

Ultimately, he recognises that he does not possess the requisite sympathetic, or empathetic force when he attempts to coordinate an anthology—always a problematic format for Sinclair—organised around the theme of Rodinsky. He bequeaths the task to Lichtenstein, whose authority to tell the story is far more convincing than his own. Her link to the story is an "[o]wnership: without title deeds or rent book. Ownership, in the high Blakean style, by assertion; by incorporating the everyday particular into a mythological structure. Title by possession. By love. By painstakingly recovered memory."³⁵

Sinclair borrows a particular entity from Jewish mythological tradition to frame Lichtenstein's re-reading of Rodinsky's biography: the golem. The golem

³² Lichtenstein and Sinclair 34.

³³ Lichtenstein and Sinclair 5.

³⁴ Lichtenstein and Sinclair 256-57.

³⁵ Lichtenstein and Sinclair 79.

comes into being in order to protect: “When the ghetto is under threat, Rabbi Judah Loew ben Bezalel comes forward to reveal his homunculus, or to shape a giant servant out of river mud, a guardian for the poor and the oppressed.”³⁶ Thus, when Sinclair likens Lichtenstein’s textual methodology to the fashioning of a golem—“Now the book existed. Rachel existed, and she had reassembled the lineament of Rodinsky. A second Rodinsky. Another life on the pattern of the first”³⁷—he is commenting upon the ethical dimensions of her practice, her desire to protect Rodinsky and his story from unscrupulous opportunists. Moreover, the suggestion throughout the book, from both interlocutors, is that Lichtenstein’s credentials go beyond her personal identification with the East End, her commitment and her diligence. She has been designated by some occult energy to ventriloquise the tale, thus fulfilling the supernatural aspects of the golem tale.

The golem has further significance. Sinclair’s concept of history is based on erasure, reading what has been left over in the light of what is not there. This can be elucidated via the legend of the golem: “In movement the golem is unseen, only when he comes to rest is he vulnerable. [...] Sudden invisibility is a consequence of recognition. Speak of him and he isn’t there. But any new telling of the tale can only begin from the disappearance.”³⁸ The golem is a paradox, an otherworldly embodiment of the presence that is an absence. The counterpoint to this type of erasure is the history tourism of the Denis Severs’ house, a contemporary recreation and re-enactment of Georgian Whitechapel. It is a site/sight that renders history visible, turning it into spectacle.

³⁶ Lichtenstein and Sinclair 180.

³⁷ Lichtenstein and Sinclair 268.

³⁸ Lichtenstein and Sinclair 183.

In Gustave Meyrink's novel, *The Golem* (1915), the creature is moulded from refuse, matter that has been cast aside. Within a literary context, Meyrink's narrative is also a golem created not just from Jewish folklore, but from the textual refuse of disreputable fiction, penny dreadfuls and yellowback novels:

From mud, the story emerges. [...] Nocturnal expeditions, wading through shit, a yellow poultice clinging to his boots, in search of an instrument of transformation. The point where his quest for the Golem would fuse with his attempt to understand the metaphor of alchemy. But this gossip was itself a metaphor for the way that Meyrink's dubious novels appeared to the literary journeymen: a dabbling in filth, a useless stirring up of waste.³⁹

The Severs house attempts to fabricate a golem from the residue of history, from the junk and trinkets left over. But visibility is the house's failure. It indicates "a loss of undertext. Everything is suddenly explained, overemphasized, brochured."⁴⁰ Sinclair describes the experience of the visitor to the scene of re-creation: "They realise, of course they do, that the arrangement on the table, the punch-bowl, the clay pipes, the tumbled chair, mirrors the painting on the wall, the Hogarthian scene of riot. This is a polite riot, a riot that has frozen, spilled over, neutralised its venom."⁴¹ It is its neatness that offends Sinclair, just as the tidiness of Ackroyd's histories irritates him.

"The Keeper Of The Rothenstein Tomb"

³⁹ Lichtenstein and Sinclair 182.

⁴⁰ Lichtenstein and Sinclair 7.

⁴¹ Lichtenstein and Sinclair 9.

Sinclair's short story "The Keeper of the Rothenstein Tomb" is an offshoot of the Rodinsky phenomenon and acts as a commentary on the use and abuse of history. It re-introduces the character of Norton, and to the extent that Sinclair has admitted that Norton is his textual double we can assume that there is symmetry between Norton's opinions and those of Sinclair. (This textual mirroring is unpacked in detail in the following chapter.) The tale is inspired by a photo of a "man who used to live in an underground burrow in the Brady Street cemetery" that Lichtenstein met in her investigations. She narrates:

Mike showed me a photograph of him and told me about his life. He appeared at first to be the caretaker of the whole cemetery but in fact his only job, according to Mike, was to look after the one tomb that belonged to the Rothschild family. [...] The man made the cemetery his home, living underneath one of the tombs with his dog. Mike Pattinson showed me the photograph which was haunting; a man living in a bare stone crypt, making Rodinsky's lodgings look like a palace.⁴²

Sinclair borrows this "character," fictionalises him, and contrives another link to Rodinsky through the narrative device of a hunt for a mirror purported to be Rodinsky's. Norton, like Sinclair, is an obscurantist, preferring to milk occult sources that exist outside any official or visible economy of knowledge: "He loved these messages, covert dispatches produced for his eyes only. They were like transcripts taken down, hot, from a psychic wire service. In the towers of Hawksmoor churches and derelict end-of-terrace houses, waiting for demolition, were spies and watchers

⁴²Lichtenstein and Sinclair 319.

who tapped in their reports.”⁴³ This predilection for the chthonic—“It was the bits you couldn’t see, black holes on the map, unlisted bunkers and disregarded lives that made most noise”⁴⁴—becomes a compulsive resistance to the London whose once occulted histories have been brought to light, and consequently exploited by the heritage industry. As Sinclair’s friend, the writer Michael Moorcock, wrote in the “Introduction” to a reprint of *Lud Heat*: “Sinclair drags from London’s amniotic silt the trove of centuries and presents it to us, still dripping, still stinking, still caked and frequently still defiantly kicking.”⁴⁵ This is literalised with the story of this man who lives underground in the cemetery. In fact, the tomb is a perfect Sinclairean setting in its ‘otherness,’ recalling various other spaces to flee surveillance such as Gavin Jones’ bunker in *Shamanism of Intent*.⁴⁶

Excavating ‘unknown’ Londons, thereby revealing the city’s subcultures and secret histories, has acquired an elevated cultural currency in the past two decades, occurring hand-in-hand with the large-scale redevelopment of the East End and Docklands. Sinclair’s role in this industry is typically ambivalent. On the one hand, books like *White Chappell* and *Lights Out for the Territory* have attributed cultural value to previously neglected swathes of London by the very virtue of writing about them. On the other hand, that value hinges on neglect by the dominant culture, which, of course, is no longer possible when Sinclair’s writing moves into the mainstream. Illumination and surveillance equal commodification in this equation and areas that are rich in alternative energies dry up once captured by the heritage industry. Sinclair’s mouthpiece Norton voices his disillusionment: “If he’d had a camera, he would have left it in the bag. London was a book with no surprises. It

⁴³ Iain Sinclair, “The Keeper of the Rothenstein Tomb,” *The Time Out Book of London Short Stories: Volume 2*, ed. Nicholas Royle (London: Penguin, 2000) 159.

⁴⁴ Sinclair, “The Keeper of the Rothenstein Tomb” 167.

⁴⁵ Michael Moorcock, introduction, *Lud Heat and Suicide Bridge*, by Iain Sinclair (London: Granta, 1998) 3.

⁴⁶ Sinclair, *Lights Out* 243.

knew itself too well. When self-consciousness turns into art, art into fashion, fashion into property, it's time to pull the plug."⁴⁷ He complains that he "could no longer enter the city, the density of surveillance undid him, leeched his energies."⁴⁸ Yet, at the same time, Norton continues to hustle work from "the only woman in London who could commission a story. The only one generous enough to humour his affliction, the compulsion to repeat himself [...]."⁴⁹ She advises him to "'Keep it under 2,000 words. We're not the *LRB*. No digressions, nothing heavy. Bit of mystery, blah-de-blah. [...] The story has to be picture led."⁵⁰

In "The Keeper" Sinclair parodies his tendency to repeat themes and images. Norton speaks of "his affliction, his curse, the compulsion to repeat himself [...] to tell it and keep telling it, beyond the point where he required listeners, a single listener, anyone."⁵¹ While it is true that Rodinsky has shown up time and again, "The Keeper" is more significant in that it is a self-reflexive critique of Sinclair's own involvement with the heritage industry. The story dramatises the complexity of any stance Sinclair takes on the ethics of history, because he could be judged to be an instigator of the very industry he is criticising. Norton's lament could be Sinclair's:

'Standard riffs,' I snorted. I'd used them myself, more than once. The problem, at my age, is that every statement sounds like an echo of something written or read. The worst of it, for journalists who stick around too long, is that we self-plagiarise to the point of erasure, quote our own quotes, promote new talent, buried for years in Kensal Green or

⁴⁷ Sinclair, "The Keeper of the Rothenstein Tomb" 167.

⁴⁸ Sinclair, "The Keeper of the Rothenstein Tomb" 159.

⁴⁹ Sinclair, "The Keeper of the Rothenstein Tomb" 160.

⁵⁰ Sinclair, "The Keeper of the Rothenstein Tomb" 166.

⁵¹ Sinclair, "The Keeper of the Rothenstein Tomb" 160.

Nunhead. The madness of seeing London as text. Words. Dates.
Addresses. No brick that has not been touched, mentioned in a book.⁵²

Similarly, the attacks he launches against Ackroyd—"The urban scribe locates his system of values in a franchised version of the past. *London: The Biography* is an antiquarian project, a city of words, a public monument to set alongside the sculptures of Henry Moore or the monstrous steel folios of Anselm Kiefer"⁵³—could be referring equally to his own textual bind.

Colonising London

In Sinclair's view, artists and writers enact a 'double' colonisation of London; textual and spatial colonisations are, to his mind, more or less synchronous.⁵⁴ This confluence of colonisations, textual and spatial, abets the heritage industry. In writing about Ackroyd's novel *The House of Doctor Dee*, which is set in the inner London area of Clerkenwell, Sinclair asserts that the literary use of history can be co-opted by developers to add lustre to their projects: "As with *Hawksmoor* and Spitalfields, his gesture proved to have a prophetic influence on estate agents. Property values rocketed in the wake of his novel. Sharp developers should snap up proof copies of future Ackroyd fictions."⁵⁵ In "The Keeper" he notes: "The whole business had been heritagised, art-streamed, given a provisional blessing by lottery sponsors with a sharp eye for the way a good yarn can underwrite development

⁵² Sinclair, *Dining on Stones* 100.

⁵³ Iain Sinclair, "The Necromancer's A to Z," rev. of *London: The Biography*, by Peter Ackroyd, *Guardian* Oct. 14 2000, 21 June 2008 <<http://books.guardian.co.uk/reviews/history/0,,382126,00.html>>.

⁵⁴ On a biographical note, Sinclair's move to Hackney over thirty years ago did not precede, nor did it precipitate any such social and economic influx. Hackney has had trouble shaking its popular epithet "Murder Mile," and as such, has proved remarkably resistant, up until recently, to the massive programs of gentrification witnessed in other sections of London. None of the walks in either volume of the *Time Out London Walks*' series encompass Hackney or its neighbouring locales, Clapton and Dalston. Of course, this 'invisibility' has been compromised by the appearance of Sinclair's own book *Hackney, That Rose-Red Empire* (2009).

⁵⁵ Atkins and Sinclair 85.

[...].”⁵⁶ Rodinsky, too, generates interest only as far as he can be harnessed as a marketing aid:

It is uncertain how many weeks or years passed before anyone noticed his absence. He had evaporated, and would remain as dust, his name unspoken, to be resurrected only as a feature, a necessary selling point, to put alongside Nicholas Hawksmoor in the occult fabulation of the zone that the Eighties demanded to justify a vertiginous inflation in property values.⁵⁷

Moreover, the various uses to which Rodinsky’s room has been subjected are, for Patrick Wright, a way of mapping the shift from the spatial organisation of the welfare state to that of neo-liberal capitalism:

With its layers of engrained filth and its walls papered over with newsprint, this foul little hole stands in unmistakable tribute to the documentary tradition. It presents exactly the kind of image that was still being used, right up into the Seventies, to press the case for slum clearance and redevelopment. But this is only one aspect of the story. By the Eighties, and especially when the property market started to move, this blitzed-out imagery of the slum interior was being augmented and put to very different purposes: it was beginning to turn up in the brochures of the more style-conscious estate agents in nearby areas like Islington.⁵⁸

⁵⁶ Sinclair, “The Keeper of the Rothenstein Tomb” 162.

⁵⁷ Lichtenstein and Sinclair 34.

⁵⁸ Patrick Wright, *Journey Through Ruins (The Last Days of London)*, (Radius: London, 1992) 203.

When Sinclair is satirising the gentrification of London in his fictions, even ruins in their wasted state are open to exploitation. In *Downriver*, an abandoned municipal swimming pool is transformed into

East London's first privately funded lazaret. [...] The red-brick Stalinist folly with the sea-green tiled entrance had functioned for many years as a swimming pool. [...] It was a symbol of a vanished *Health and Efficiency* era; a huge chlorine-weeping, corn-plaster infested trench [...] which should, without doubt, be restored and streamlined as an 'investment opportunity.' The public purse no longer ran to filling it with water [...] for the unbathed peons to splash about, urinating, exposing their unsightly flab, and floating their beer-cans and fag packets.⁵⁹

The lazaret is set up in the ruin of the public facility to treat AIDS sufferers, 'ruined' people who are treated like the refuse of society, but with the hope that they can be turned into profit; material and social refuse are brought together to 'turn a buck.'

AIDS was a fifth-floor disease, in a four-floor culture. There had to be somewhere – preferably outside the inhabitable zone – where a buck could be turned coping with one of the few genuine growth areas that was still [...] scandalously under-exploited. [...] The agents of Venture Capital had identified a brand of 'quarantine' that had much in common with other hermetic encampments, kept for aliens in time of war.⁶⁰

⁵⁹ Sinclair, *Downriver* 104-05.

⁶⁰ Sinclair, *Downriver* 104.

Given Sinclair's declared identification with his protagonist, Norton's regret in "The Keeper" at the unintended consequences of his success could be read as Sinclair's comment on the matter. In the non-fiction *Edge of the Orison*, Sinclair echoes (in his own voice) his textual double's disgust at the colonisations of London, declaring:

London, better known, less understood, was more London than it had ever been; a monster greedy for expansion, eager to swallow underexploited ground and to bury it in satellite development.

Writers begin with discovery, discovering their subject matter, marking out their turf. And finish with dissolution. Learning how to suppress conditioned reflexes. Learning to forget.⁶¹

Dining on Stones is also preoccupied with this theme. In the book, Norton compares his own journey beyond the limits of London to that of his great-grandfather's epic capitalist journey to Peru, which in turn provides an analogue for Joseph Conrad's narrative in *Nostromo*. This is hardly accidental as Conrad's renown is derived partly from his writings on the character of European colonialism. The narrative of inner London is also framed by colonialism; the city is 'tamed' by gentrification and appropriated by writers such as Ackroyd. Sinclair's desire to rewrite Conrad's epic narratives represents the inexorable move away from the parochial walks of *Lights Out*. *Dining on Stones* charts Sinclair's move further away from London in the search for fresh material: from the East End, to the M25; from the "necklace of hammered metal around the throat of London, its ugly sprawl"⁶² to the south coast, "sixty miles out". The *flâneur* cannot sustain his practice in the regulated space of central London,

⁶¹ Iain Sinclair, *Edge of the Orison* (Penguin: London, 2005) 8.

⁶² Sinclair, *Dining on Stones* 253.

must travel to fringes, badlands, purlieus, unexplored, overlooked margins of cities: the middle ground (ex-urbia). Sinclair's next publication, *Edge of the Orison*, goes further afield, walking Essex in the footsteps of poet John Clare, yet is still devised as a reaction to London and the desire to flee the city's degraded terrain. He explains: "Heading up the Great North Road, we were not advancing into a fresh narrative, a novel set of coordinates, we were running away – like all those who lost their nerve."⁶³

It would trivialise and diminish the horrific impact of colonialism on indigenous and local populations to compare it with the type of colonisation enacted by the heritage industry in London in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, yet both are motivated by a similar capitalistic urge to accumulate and proliferate. "Jack the Rip-off," Sinclair's review of Hollywood's filmic adaptation of *From Hell* (Alan Moore and Eddie Campbell's 1999 canonical graphic novel set in London's East) is couched in terms of colonialism.

'This is a ghetto story,' threatens Albert Hughes, co-director (with brother Allen) of the film version of Alan Moore's celebrated graphic novel, *From Hell* (a Jack the Ripper 'melodrama in 16 parts'). You shouldn't hold Tinseltown responsible for customised quotes fed into the publicity machine. It's much easier to buy a property that comes ready packaged, dressed like a storyboard. Moore's complex original, serially published like a novel by Dickens, had to be reduced to single workable strand. [...]

From Hell [...] is a ghetto story. But that ghetto is Hollywood, not Victorian Spitalfields. History is there to be captured and colonised by a

⁶³ Sinclair, *Edge of the Orison* 8.

commando unit of highly trained and skilled professionals, using the most advanced technology known to the western world. The corporate military/industrial state sees film as an efficient way of burning (laundering, re-investing, alchemising) money.⁶⁴

From Hell is “[a]n industrial product crafted to stand alongside the wave of predatory development that maligns history and treats the past as the final colony in the American world empire.”⁶⁵ In *Dining on Stones*, Sinclair re-imagines this film review, “in which the journalist argued that US global capitalism had nowhere left to invade—except the past,”⁶⁶ decorating a hoarding in much the same way he observed, in the original piece, that history is packaged and disseminated in a spatially transformed East End:

Georgian façades are retained, like cosmetic masks, to dress the latest land-grab piracy. The arch from Aldgate priory, close to where the body of Kate Eddowes was found in Mitre Square, is preserved - as a conversation piece, inside the offices of the Swiss Reinsurance Co. The arch belonged to one of the 10 side-chapels where masses were sung for the dead. Memories of the Augustinian priory, of a gateway built from the ruins of property demolished when the Jews were expelled from England, are prompted by summaries on boards. Royal genealogies alongside yellow press graphic strips, precursors of Eddie Campbell, with Ripper cartoons and caricatures of Jewish slaughtermen.⁶⁷

⁶⁴Iain Sinclair, “Jack the Rip-off,” rev. of *From Hell*, dirs. The Hughes Brothers, *Guardian* 27 Jan. 2002, 21 June 2008 < <http://film.guardian.co.uk/features/featurepages/0,,640024,00.html> >.

⁶⁵Sinclair, “Jack the Rip-off.”

⁶⁶Sinclair, *Dining On Stones* 99.

⁶⁷Sinclair, “Jack the Rip-off.”

The setting for “The Keeper” is Smithfield, a location that has symbolic status. The Smithfield meat market is a metonym for a previous East End. It appears in Sinclair’s writing as a relic of the working class character and social marginality of the East End. In *White Chappell*, for example, the market is metaphorised as the carcass of a butchered animal:

Gull took Hinton by the elbow and drove him, the shortest course, down the central aisle of the great meat cathedral of Smithfield, [...] under the hooks and lanterns, through the beach of blooded sawdust.

[The] thick scent of fat clings to the clothes, buckets of dark ornaments, black and purple, glistening pebbles of skin. The animal inside-out. They walk into the stomach of an upended cow; they are lost in its iron ribs, milk turned by terror into acid. [...] They join the bloody-coated slaughtermen... long mirrors enshrining the market, forcing the doctors, the butchers, the priests into a single moulded frame.”⁶⁸

The recurring metaphor of meat, cut up and then ingested, is polyvalent. The populace of Victorian London, the working classes, the destitute, the prostitutes slain by the Ripper are all meat to be consumed in one way or the other, sacrificed to the excessive appetites of the city that demand constant satiation. They become meat yet again when consumed by the culture industry. The city itself is treated like meat, commodified and sold off: “Break the skin, Quality Chop House, 94 Farringdon Road, *Progressive Working Class Caterer*; break the skin down the length of the sausage, split the pink sizzling meat, gristle and fear. Gathering the strength for an

⁶⁸ Iain Sinclair, *White Chappell, Scarlet Tracings* (London: Vintage, 1995) 124.

assault on the book stalls.”⁶⁹ These images of meat are linked to the theme of surgery prevalent in *White Chappell*, but also introduced in “Rites of Autopsy” as early as 1975 as a way of thinking about the capitalist atomisation and decimation of the social fabric and urban space of London.⁷⁰ The excision of body parts is equivalent to the city’s fate, cut up and parcelled off by developers, politicians and the creative classes.

Of course, Sinclair’s critique of *From Hell* is coloured by personal experience. He has also tackled the Jack the Ripper tale in *White Chappell*, and it is worthwhile considering his alternative use of the tale. In the novel, Sinclair is equivocal about the libidinous interest in the Ripper and the associated industry that has sprung up to service it. One character remarks, “There’s something inherently seedy and salacious in continually picking the scabs off these crimes, peering at mutilated bodies, listing the undergarments, trekking over the tainted ground in quest of some long-delayed occult frisson. I abhor these hacks with their carrier bags of old cuttings.”⁷¹ Sinclair could hardly be excluded from this group, but, as usual, this comment reveals a level of self-awareness about his project. It also seems that his intent is not the same as the film’s intent, which is to contract the story into a “single workable strand,”⁷² a process that could be considered akin to capitalism’s efforts to condense culture into a “single workable strand” of production, distribution and consumption. In keeping with his tendency, preference even, for fragmented narrative, Sinclair argues for complexity and lack of resolution in the story, as well as a subversion of genre to further muddy the waters. In *White Chappell*, Sinclair speaks of a kind of automatic

⁶⁹ Sinclair, *White Chappell* 103.

⁷⁰ Iain Sinclair, *Lud Heat: A Book of the Dead Hamlets* (London: Albion Village Press, 1975) 40-44. The motif of autopsy is also present in the title *Slow Chocolate Autopsy* (London: Phoenix House, 1998).

⁷¹ Sinclair, *White Chappell* 57.

⁷² Sinclair, “Jack the Rip-Off.”

writing channelled from the city's energies that in its ineffability refuses the precision and determinism of the modern forensic science crime thriller:

Dictation at this speed takes the scribe, often under pressure of work or disease, so fast and so deep that he writes it before it happens, and by writing it he causes it to happen, a fate game that allows the unconscious no release. He cannot escape his devils by describing them. The medium does not choose who he will serve.

This is to reverse the conventions of detective fiction, where a given crime is unravelled, piece by piece, until a murderer is denounced whose act is the starting point of the narration. Our narrative starts everywhere. We want to assemble all the incomplete movements like cubists, until the point is reached where the crime can commit itself.

That is why there are so many Ripper candidates, so many theories: and they can *all* be right.⁷³

Ultimately, the power of "The Keeper's" critique of the heritage industry is not activated by the narrative content alone. As is often the case with Sinclair, it is generated by the context of the story's publication as well. The story is his contribution to *The Time Out Book of London Short Stories, Volume 2*. As the title of the collection states, the book is an anthology of stories about London marketed under the aegis of the successful *Time Out* franchise, whose flagship is a highly visible, weekly 'What's On' guide to London. *Time Out* consolidates its position by way of its ubiquity (facilitated by mass distribution and corporate sponsorship of 'London'

⁷³ Sinclair, *White Chappell* 61. In spite of his rejection of the crime genre, Sinclair wrote the introduction to the Penguin Classic edition of Arthur Conan Doyle's *Study in Scarlet* (London: Penguin, 2001). Conan Doyle's interest in the occult tradition of 'spiritualism' has a certain congruence with Sinclair's interest in the occult.

events) and through its self-declared cultural 'expertise' on the city. Sinclair's inclusion is hardly unexpected, as London is the centripetal force in much of his writing. In recognition of his literary services to London, he has been named "London's Magus" by the city's *Independent* newspaper, and has been described in *Time Out London Walks* (a sister publication to *London Short Stories*) as "the latest in a distinguished line of pacing London visionaries."⁷⁴

The *Time Out* compilation belongs to, capitalises upon, and enables the burgeoning readership for the genre of 'London' writing. The tradition of writing about London is well-established, and has some celebrated practitioners; William Blake, Charles Dickens and Virginia Woolf are only the most obvious examples and all are quoted in Sinclair's work. Under this rubric one could also assemble best-selling contemporary writers such as Ackroyd, Martin Amis and Monica Ali. *Time Out's* reputation is not dissimilar to Sinclair's, in that it is based on a claim to inside knowledge. Sinclair's expertise is maintained through written contributions to daily newspapers, the *London Review of Books*, and his appearances on public and commercial television and radio. Like Sinclair, the magazine also trades upon its familiarity with, and connection to London's official *and* unofficial discourses.

Thus, a fairly rudimentary exchange of cultural capital takes place. *Time Out's* patronage of Sinclair confers upon him the status of 'London' writer ("*Time Out* remains committed to promoting and encouraging new and established talent in London").⁷⁵ In turn, *Time Out's* cultural capital is derived from pin-pointing and subsequently exhibiting writers like Sinclair for whom London is "manifestly [the]

⁷⁴ Kevin Jackson, "London's Magus: A Conversation with Iain Sinclair," *Independent on Sunday Magazine* 22 June 2003. Andrew White, ed., *Time Out London Walks: Volume 2* (London: Time Out Group, 2001) 216.

⁷⁵ Nicholas Royle, introduction, Royle xi.

subject."⁷⁶ Consequently, inclusion in such a high profile literary venture is hardly a refusal of mainstream recognition. It is, however, interesting to note that Sinclair did not make the first volume of the *Time Out Book of London Short Stories*, which included writers who have, and are perceived to have, wider commercial appeal, for instance, Neil Gaiman, Will Self and Nick Hornby. In the second anthology, Sinclair keeps company with friends and collaborators Christopher Petit and Michael Moorcock, as well as Stewart Home, whose self-published texts circulate in the same literary economy as many of Sinclair's. Sinclair is second tier, but proudly so.

Towards A Psychogeography Of London

In *Liquid City*, perhaps Sinclair's most nostalgic text, he describes a get-together by his cohort. The liminal, spectral quality of an East End no longer in existence is evoked in this vignette:

I've always believed that bringing the best writers, the sharpest intelligences, to any location alters it forever. But risking 30 or so poets in a wine-bar in Spitalfields Market was pushing it. (The eviction orders were already in the post.) [...] What happened, happened at the margins. Off camera. Out of earshot. Stuff that should never be recorded. Secret monologues of the unacknowledged legislators. Prophetic fragments of poems left for an instant on blackboards, before being wiped out.⁷⁷

⁷⁶ Royle xi.

⁷⁷ Atkins and Sinclair 214.

To an extent, Sinclair's recourse to the spectral, the occult and hidden reserves of alternative energy are a means of evading the culture of surveillance that is characteristic of contemporary London. He attempts to preserve the "secret monologues" and residue "off camera." The counterpart fictions *White Chappell* and *Downriver* are the spatial totalitarianism regulating London: "The Widow and her gang had decided that Hackney was bad news and 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."⁷⁸ "Spatialisation," writes Robert Bond, "supports the exercise of power."⁷⁹ Roger Luckhurst believes that Sinclair's interest in the occult can be read as reaction against "stalled representative government," in the face of the massive privatisation of space wrought upon London as a direct result of the decline of the welfare state.⁸⁰ Sinclair's inclusion of the occult is, according to Luckhurst, also indicative of the "historical avant-garde's interest in the occult as a mode of resisting instrumental reason and the tyranny of planned space."⁸¹ Sinclair undoes the axioms of contemporary London, which are energised by capitalist governmentalities, by discovering alternative forces that do not conform to capitalism's temporal or spatial logic. These sources of energy are not absolutely present (in both spatial and temporal senses of the word):

We have 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.

⁷⁸ Sinclair, *Downriver* 4.

⁷⁹ Robert Bond, *Iain Sinclair* (Cambridge: Salt, 2005) 40.

⁸⁰ Roger Luckhurst, "Occult London," Kerr and Gibson 340.

⁸¹ Luckhurst 338.

So it's all there in the breath of the stones. There *is* a geology of time! We can take the bricks into our hands: as we grasp them, we enter it. The dead moment only exists as we live it now. No shadows across the landscape of the past – we have the past, we have what is coming; we arrive at what was, and we make it now.⁸²

At one point in *Rodinsky's Room*, Sinclair describes the room as a "vortex." A vortex connotes frenetic movement, and Sinclair believes history's aim should not be to "freeze time, to wrap precious fragments from another time in clingfilm."⁸³ This idea of history, mummified, fossilised, ossified, *dead* is not one to which Sinclair subscribes. History is vibrating, energised by the echoes of past voices and visions, hence Sinclair's interest in the Situationist concept of psychogeography and the *dérive*. However, in a movement similar to the Situationist *détournement*, Sinclair derails Situationism's aleatory *dérive* by turning it into something less susceptible to chance. He explains in *The Verbals*:

KJ: For the benefit of future compilers of the *Oxford English Dictionary*, maybe we'd better have the Sinclair definition of what that slippery word "psychogeography" means.

IS: I think the word first crossed my path in the 1960s, but it didn't really take. The Situationist Era drifted through me, and I didn't think I was practising anything which resembled it [...] I mean they weren't seriously interested in where things fell on the map, they were just using those forms, but I *was* interested in where things fell on the map. I thought

⁸² Sinclair, *White Chappell* 112.

⁸³ Lichtenstein and Sinclair 273.

psycho geography would be adapted quite conveniently to forge a franchise – which is what happened, more than I could have imagined! [Laughs] It took off!

I think of it, I suppose, as a *psychotic* geography – stalking the city. That's it really. You need a bit more bite in the term than the whole ley-line thing which is...

KJ: A bit soggy?

IS: A bit soggy... a church tower here, a landmark there – I wanted it to include *everything*. Patterns and lines and ways of moving...

KJ: It's more than a metaphor for you?

IS: It's more than a metaphor.

KJ: But at the heart of it is the belief that something which happens in a place permanently affects that place?

IS: Very much so. There are these acoustic chambers in the city, voices and echoes...⁸⁴

The psycho geographical internalisation of the external landscape as voice or vision becomes an important aspect of Sinclair's work:

⁸⁴ Iain Sinclair and Kevin Jackson, *The Verbals: Kevin Jackson in Conversation with Iain Sinclair* (Tonbridge, Kent: The Worple Press, 2003) 75-76. *Dining on Stones* opens with a fictionalisation of this interview, as well as a self-reflexive reference to the psycho geographical traces that permeate Sinclair's accounts of London's history. Sinclair, *Dining on Stones* 7.

The material that's sometimes called 'psychogeography' is loosely based on that era of primitively sounding out place through possession or séance, rather than [...] trying to summon entities, to communicate with them or control them. It wasn't that at all. It was as if certain places released voices [...] more than anything visual, there were no visual hallucinations [...].⁸⁵

Psychogeography is an established trope of London literature. The tale of Dick Wittington tells of the eponymous hero receiving messages from the Bow bells. Later, Blake emerges as the archetypal London psychogeographer, transcribing and drawing the voices and visions emanating from the city's streets. Psychogeography provides a means of reading the refuse of history, the traces remaining after the rest have been collected. Sinclair's project is to channel the voices of the past, the traces that saturate the architecture and paving stones of London.

The psychogeographer reads the landscape according to her own personal matrix of desire, experience, knowledge that is susceptible to other forces, of which chance may be one. An example of this is a walk in *Liquid City*, which Sinclair undertakes with Alan Moore, author of *From Hell*:

It was curious how this walk [...] seemed to flow from the obsessions that Alan and I had separately exploited: gothic mystification in Whitechapel, surveillance and sculptural coding in the City, Lord Archer's penthouse and the paranoid poetic of Lambeth and Vauxhall. [...]

⁸⁵ Sinclair and Jackson 75.

We were a thrift-shop Dee and Kelley cupping our ears for whispers from tired stone.⁸⁶

The purpose of the *dérive*, if it can be said to have any such thing, is to (mis)use urban space in ways that are not designed by regulatory powers. Psychogeographical cartography is one that is constantly morphing, and thus cannot be fixed on any conventional map. Sinclair's rearticulation and negotiation of urban space is led by ghosts and driven by deregulated forces like psychosis.

With the disorganisation of the spatial occurs an attendant reconfiguration of the temporal. Time as a linear positivist construct becomes obsolete, just as it does when Lichtenstein excavates Rodinsky's history:

Southwark holds its time, with the City, with Whitechapel, with Clerkenwell, holds the memory of what it was: it is possible to walk back into the previous as an event, still true to the moment. The Marshalsea trace, the narrative mazetrap that Dickens set, takes over, the figures of fiction outliving the ghostly impulses that started them. The past is a fiction that absorbs us. It needs no passport, turn the corner and it is with you.⁸⁷

More importantly, psychogeography is a means of destroying hierarchies of power established through inclusion in historical record, and through the immurement of ideas such as standardised time and regulated space. This is a Benjaminian idea:

⁸⁶ Atkins and Sinclair 84. Sinclair and Moore are compared to John Dee and Edward Kelley, the sixteenth-century alchemists and occultists.

⁸⁷ Sinclair, *White Chappell* 63.

A chronicler who recites events without distinguishing between major and minor ones acts in accordance with the following truth: nothing that has ever happened should be regarded as lost for history. To be sure, only a redeemed mankind receives the fullness of its past—which is to say, only for a redeemed mankind has its past become citable in all its moments.⁸⁸

An interest in “major and minor” without creating a structure of value is a radical undoing of the type of history that seeks to identify what is of import and value according to traditional networks of power. It is as concerned with the refuse of history as with its legacies:

The zone was gradually defined, the labyrinth penetrated. It was given limits by the victims of the Ripper: the Roebuck and Brady Street to the East, Mitre Square to the West, the Minorities to the South, the North largely unvisited. Circling and doubling back, seeing the same sites from different angles, ferns breaking the stones, horses tethered on wastelots, convolvulus swallowing the walls, shadowed by tall tenements, chickens’ feet in damp cardboard boxes, entrails of radios, slogans on the railway bridge, decayed synagogues, the flush and flutter, cardamom seeding, of the coming bazaar culture, the first whispers of a new Messiah.⁸⁹

Palimpsests

⁸⁸ Benjamin, “On The Concept Of History” 246.

⁸⁹ Sinclair, *White Chappell* 35.

Psycho geography's recognition of the residue of history, the traces of previous lives and occurrences, social and spatial practices, is made material in the form of the palimpsest. The palimpsest is a textual manifestation of the spectral trace, the eidolon. Julian Wolfreys imagines Sinclair's writing as palimpsest, a dialogic layering of texts that mimics the heteroglot text of the city.⁹⁰ Its ghostly textual residue brings to mind Derrida's *supplement*, which "intervenes or insinuates itself *in-the-place-of*; if it fills, it is as if one fills a void. If it represents and makes an image, it is by the anterior default of a presence."⁹¹ Wolfreys conjures the image of the palimpsest when reading Sinclair because it permits a type of textual reciprocity through maintaining the traces of previous textual layers.⁹² A palimpsest is created when new layers of text are reinscribed that partially erase or obscure the already existing layers. The traces and lacunae remaining are dialogic, they 'speak' in their original voice, communicating with new and previous traces and absences, yet always retaining their otherness. Here lies the palimpsest's radical potential to contest received ideas about the temporal and spatial construction of history. The palimpsest permits Sinclair to maintain the traces of previous textual layers, thereby distinguishing himself from the intertextual vampire who, in an unethical relation with the intertext, ruthlessly possesses the source and obliterates any acknowledgement.

Significantly, the palimpsest is not conceived as solely an accumulation of residue, but also the result of its complementary process: erasure. As Sinclair states in *White Chappell* it is not a case of ridding oneself of ghosts, but of realising their presence, which is, in fact, an absence: "Always erasure, not exorcism. Exorcism merely confers status on the exorcist: who claims, falsely, that he has the power to

⁹⁰ Julian Wolfreys, *Deconstruction: Derrida* (London: Macmillan, 1998) 141.

⁹¹ Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1976) 145.

⁹² Wolfreys 141.

unmake. Has tricks to stake the demonic, nail the black heart. Erasure acts over, is a discretion."⁹³ Sinclair is far more invested in what has been rubbed out than what has been added. In *White Chappell*, Sinclair's artist friend Joblard talks about wanting to create art that evokes the palimpsest:

Joblard is pursuing the invisible.

'I want to make tracings of unseen acts. To flood locked rooms with chemicals that trap the slightest movements of light. To cover all the marks of my own complicity. I want erasures. Weak illumination of ink. Shaded bulbs hung over parchment. The word "whisper" in some unknown language. I want the acts to repeat. I want to measure the force of decay in bread, the glow in the bones of mackerel. To erase time and to bend its direction of flow. [...]

I know there is nothing to be written: all writing is rewriting. That old dream: complete books that will never be transcribed, made redundant by their own conception."⁹⁴

Sinclair's preference for the remainder can be read as an analogue of his enthusiasm for refuse. He eschews the commodity, which signifies enhancement, and instead, examines the refuse, which is the negative incarnation of the commodity. It is what has been discarded, erased from the narrative of the commodity.

The palimpsest assumes elevated importance in light of Sinclair's habit of re-writing earlier small press material for release in mainstream anthologies. This is evident in the preface of *Flesh Eggs and Scalp Metal*, the first major retrospective of

⁹³ Sinclair, *White Chappell* 199.

⁹⁴ Sinclair, *White Chappell* 148.

Sinclair's poetry: "Many of the poems have been reworked but not, substantially, rewritten."⁹⁵ *Dining on Stones*, which contains significant amounts of previously published writing, does not include any such disclaimer, but the integrated text is reworked to some extent. Sinclair's writing may be conceptualised as a palimpsest, but he is also fond of it as a motif. In *Dining on Stones* it is the photographic print that is a palimpsest. An example is a glass plate by well-known postcard photographer Fred Judge in which the touristic panorama is altered and spoiled as it deteriorates.

It was the bromoils that slipped, leaked. Go to Judge's archive [...] and they'll tell you that prints can no longer be taken from those glass negatives. London has reverted to its original fog, memory devoured by fungi. The night city is an involuntary collaboration between what Judge saw and shapes like fingerprints. A superimposition of gas clouds, smears, phantoms of future terror. Soon the glass will be clear as water.⁹⁶

History in ruins

In *Liquid City*, London itself is a "textual palimpsest";⁹⁷ layers of partially destroyed cultural and material information laid on top of each other. In *White Chappell*, buildings also have the potential to be palimpsests:

The bar has its own sense of what it should be: damp wood bowed like whalebone, cabin-close, engravings of the old city, its secret corners, obscure messages. This interior has a narrative quality, like the inside of a

⁹⁵ Iain Sinclair, *Flesh Eggs & Scalp Metal: Selected Poems 1970-1987* (London: Paladin, 1989) 3.

⁹⁶ Sinclair, *Dining on Stones* 299.

⁹⁷ Atkins and Sinclair 85.

pulpit. WE have to settle ourselves into a text; nothing is written, everything re-written. We are retrospective. Even the walls are soaked with earlier tales, aborted histories.⁹⁸

The traces of erstwhile buildings are historical quotations existing in the present. This explains Benjamin's interest in the ruin. He reads the ruin's decay as a simultaneity of multiple historical coordinates, and as such, a signifier for the impossibility of history as it has been culturally constructed by dominant culture. The image of the totems of previous regimes wasting away is a potent denial of the immortality of empire and signals the impermanence of the grand narratives of history which have overlooked the true repositories of historical knowledge: refuse, the quotidian, the people who inhabit the streets. Ruins, in their decrepit state, are the antidote to the type of history described by Benjamin where

[w]hoever has emerged victorious participates to this day in the triumphal procession in which the present rulers step over those who are lying prostrate. According to traditional practice, the spoils are carried along in the procession. They are called cultural treasures, and a historical materialist views them with cautious detachment. For without exception the cultural treasures he surveys have an origin which he cannot contemplate without horror. They owe their existence not only to the efforts of the great minds and talents who have created them, but also to the anonymous toil of their contemporaries. There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism.⁹⁹

⁹⁸ Sinclair, *White Chappell* 64.

⁹⁹ Benjamin, "On the Concept of History" 248.

In opposition to the acquisition of “cultural treasures” and the spoils of victory, the ruin does not occur through agglomeration, but through the breaking down, by turning into debris. Its contours are erased and thus represent the inverse of progress conceived as aggrandisement. Again, the notion of absence or lack, as opposed to the enhancement emphasized by the fetishism of commodities, is crucial.

Sinclair refers to Rodinsky’s room as a ruin:

The irrelevant details pile up and the man begins to fade. He does not go away, that was unnecessary. There is still so much of him here that he no longer needs to be present in any other form. The room, as he left it, has gone and will never return: Rodinsky is what remains, a museum of ephemera and dust-breath. A trap. He converted himself into these shards, tempting to carry them off, so that his work is continued. The ruin is immortal.¹⁰⁰

The image tempts us to think of Rodinsky’s room as sealed space, immured against time. This is ultimately a mistake, because although it remained unopened for over a decade, time did act upon the remnants of Rodinsky’s life. As Lichtenstein relates: “I have been told that when his room was finally opened in 1980, a solidified cup of tea sat next to his unmade bed. On the grease-caked stove stood a near-fossilised pot of porridge. His clothes hung in the wardrobe heavy with dust.”¹⁰¹ Another witness recalls that “there was a bed, roughly made, unkempt, filled with dust.”¹⁰² The windows were broken, rain had damaged the room. Others who visited the room

¹⁰⁰ Lichtenstein and Sinclair 35. Unconsciously, Sinclair invokes Benjamin’s angel of history in the “cheap calendar reproduction of Millet’s *Angelus* fixed forever at January 1963.” Time refusing to travel forward, combined with the mass-cultural print of the famous original, connotes in one image both the angel and Benjamin’s ideas about technical reproducibility.

¹⁰¹ Lichtenstein and Sinclair 95.

¹⁰² Lichtenstein and Sinclair 94.

had trouble entering because the lock had deteriorated: "He had tried again and again to open the door but it wasn't budging. The lock was so old and rusted[...]"¹⁰³ When they manage to get the door open the hinges are stiff with disuse. The deterioration of the debris of Rodinsky's life speaks of a type of movement, but one that is oppositional to historical consciousness as affirmative progression. Rather the accretion of dust, damp, dirt is, paradoxically, a type of entropy. A general understanding of entropy is the measure of the loss of information. These changes to the scene are marked by erasure, wasting away. The decay is random, unsystematic, and thus could be interpreted as chaos. Indeed, Sinclair writes that chaos is "a condition of Rodinsky's room. But it is a casual chaos. A chaos to which no one is expected to return. [...] Rodinsky thrives on what can never be known."¹⁰⁴ Again, Sinclair's version of the story is constituted in terms of what is not there, as opposed to what is tangible, visible, knowable.

The Ghost Of The *Flâneur*

The Arcades Project has another function outside its project to read the refuse of history. It is Benjamin's threnody, an extended textual bereavement for the *flâneur*. For Benjamin, the *flâneur's* disappearance functions as elegiac emblem, a spectral metonym signifying the ravages of capitalism upon metropolitan life. Certainly, as avatar, the *flâneur* could not survive the transformations wrought upon the urban environment, changes which were increasingly antagonistic to his spatial practice. Ostensibly, *The Arcades Project* is a blueprint, a chart of the *flâneur's* demise, but the task of negotiating the map is hardly a simple exercise in orienteering because, as Buck-Morss is careful to note, *The Arcades Project* "does not exist- not even a first

¹⁰³ Lichtenstein and Sinclair 320.

¹⁰⁴ Lichtenstein and Sinclair 11.

page, let alone a draft of the whole.”¹⁰⁵ Its unreliable structure is a kaleidoscope of pieces gleaned from literature and mass media which textually evokes the urban phantasmagoria of Paris.

Wandering the fragmented, nebulous textual passages of *The Arcades Project* becomes a task analogous to the *flâneur's* aleatory negotiation of the city's ceaselessly shifting shape. At the same time, Benjamin's activity contradicts the obsolescence of the *flâneur* in that it is itself indicative of the practice of *flânerie*, which is, as Baudelaire articulates, the collection and contemplation of ephemera from the everyday to be rearticulated as art or literature. Benjamin himself embodies what he describes as the “dialectic of *flânerie*: On one side, the man who feels himself viewed by all and sundry as a true suspect and, on the other side, the man who is utterly undiscoverable, the hidden man.”¹⁰⁶ We can detect the “dialectic of *flânerie*” in Sinclair's work as well, because, with Benjamin, he mourns the loss of the *flâneur* from the urban spectacle, thereby denying a contemporary presence, yet his textual stalking (as with Benjamin's ragpicking) is a contradiction. As well as sketching or jotting down reflections in his notebook—or taking photographs—Sinclair's stalker is getting dirt under his fingernails, excavating alternative narratives of London's history, burrowing deep beneath the layers of textual information built up by hegemonic culture.

Norton's situation in “The Keeper” seems to affirm what Benjamin uncovers in his fragmented history of the *flâneur*; that “the true situation of a man of letters [is that] he goes to the marketplace as a *flâneur*, supposedly to take a look at it, but in

¹⁰⁵ Buck-Morss 6.

¹⁰⁶ Benjamin, *The Arcades Project* 420.

reality to find a buyer."¹⁰⁷ The *flâneur* evades official economies of production, but his knowledge of the city can still be appropriated. Norton plaintively acknowledges his role in this process:

Norton blamed himself. He couldn't keep shtum, didn't know when to leave well alone. He had to worry at, tease out, secrets that were better left untold: vanishing caretakers, patterns of malign energy that linked eighteenth-century churches, labyrinths, temples, plague pits. Now they were too loudly on the map, or trashed by attention. All he ever wanted was to write himself out, to fade into the masonry, become one of the revenants someone else would track.¹⁰⁸

The spectre of the *flâneur* in *Lights Out* and *London Orbital*, Sinclair's non-fictional accounts of London, signifies a spatio-temporal disruption. Tracing Derrida's thought, the *flâneur* is a paradox, a presence that is comprehensible only by acknowledging an absence.¹⁰⁹ This spatio-temporal illogic admits the possibility of metamorphosis for the *flâneur* from his historical and cultural origins in 19th century Paris. He metamorphoses, palimpsest-like, into contemporary incarnations—ragpicker, stalker, photographer—by adding and/or erasing layers, while retaining the ghostly residue of the original archetype.¹¹⁰

In *Dining on Stones*, the demise of the East End is refracted through the semi-fictionalised vehicle of Sinclair's filmic collaboration with Christopher Petit: "*The*

¹⁰⁷ Walter Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism*, trans. Harry Zohn (Verso: London, 1997) 34.

¹⁰⁸ Sinclair, "The Keeper of the Rothenstein Tomb" 162.

¹⁰⁹ Derrida, *Spectres of Marx* 6.

¹¹⁰ Chris Jenks characterises the contemporary *flâneur* as a "multilayered palimpsest" in "Watching Your Step: The History and Practice of the *Flâneur*," *Visual Culture*, ed. Chris Jenks (London: Routledge, 1995) 148.

Cardinal and the Corpse—‘Too many corpses, not enough cardinals’ (*Time Out*)—was a wake for Whitechapel, a party for the near-dead, a hooley for vampires who’d just heard that the blood bank was foreclosing.”¹¹¹ The corpses are the denizens of a disappeared East End —wide boys, poets, kabbalists—but Sinclair is also alluding to the corpse of the East End itself, feasted upon by the vampires—predominately property developers and politicians, and now arriving in the guise of Hollywood filmmakers. It is the cadaver of Whitechapel and Spitalfields that is eulogised in *Liquid City*, a series of recollections of the ghostly London that has nourished Sinclair’s imagination.¹¹² Sinclair reminiscences about *The Cardinal and the Corpse* are shrouded in twilight:

The film was finished, and the survivors gathered outside this pub, with its murky history, for the group shot. [...] None of the other hacks turned up. The event was off-piste. A ghost circus. [...] The line-up looks like a who’s-next-for-the-grim-reaper? competition. [...] The night is inky. The Carpenters Arms (no nonsense about apostrophes) has detached itself from London and is floating across the glacial rim of deep space. A chorus of lightly fleshed skeletons take their bow.¹¹³

For Sinclair, Hollywood’s shining its lights and turning its cameras on the mythologised history of the East End is the last wave in the process of changes capitalism forced upon that terrain in the 1980s and 1990s. Ultimately, the inclusion of “The Keeper of the Rothenstein Tomb” in *Time Out London Stories: Volume Two* is an apt statement on Sinclair’s ambivalent position in relation to diverse cultural economies. While contributing his creative labour to an enterprise being sold with

¹¹¹ Sinclair, *Dining on Stones* 91.

¹¹² Atkins and Sinclair 212.

¹¹³ Atkins and Sinclair 212.

the idea of 'London', Sinclair, via his textual *doppelgänger* Norton, is typically self-reflexive. Sinclair agrees to participate in the anthology, but implicitly criticises the project via his narrative. One of the aims of Benjamin's thesis on history is to dismantle the totalising narratives of Fascism, employed by its adherents and foes alike, so as to argue against its 'historical' inexorability. Sinclair also disavows this type of historical consciousness by mocking the the Swiss Re building, an icon of the resurrected East End, of civic triumphalism, and the type of monument glorified by a writer of Ackroyd's ilk: "It pulsed provocatively, a sex toy someone had forgotten to shut off. A fishnet condom skinned over an Oldenberg vibrator. Foster's gherkin dominated London approaches, reconfiguring the energy spirals of the labyrinth; it glowed like a sick bone in a soup of dollar bills."¹¹⁴ This chapter has addressed Sinclair's relation to history and its texts. In outlining Sinclair's ethics of history, Chapter Five has, implicitly, gone some way in laying the foundation for Sinclair's ethics of appropriation, because an engagement with history necessitates engaging with historical texts. The following chapter, Chapter Six, builds upon this specific textual case, and extrapolates a general theory of Sinclair's intertextuality and his ethics of appropriation.

¹¹⁴ Sinclair, *Dining on Stones* 98.

CHAPTER SIX

Intertextual Ragpicking: Sinclair and the Ethics of Appropriation

Ragpicker or poet – the refuse concerns both.

Walter Benjamin¹

This chapter travels beyond Sinclair's ethics of history and historiography, and encompasses his wider intertextual practice. It hardly tests the boundaries of literary criticism to state that Sinclair's works are overtly intertextual creations. Yet to attempt an extended exegesis of his writing and not broach the matter of intertextuality would surely be an oversight. The critical aim here is to suggest that intertextuality in Sinclair is a far more interesting proposition than a synthesis of references to other writers. The novel *Dining on Stones* has some things to say about history and historiography, but above all, it is concerned with diverse types of intertextuality. To investigate the ethics of appropriation, and Sinclair's own intertextual methodology is to compare differing theories and modes of intertextual practice including dialogism, poststructuralism and postmodern pastiche. In thinking about Sinclair's intertextuality, a number of different metaphorical embodiments of intertextual methodology also present themselves, foremost among them the ragpicker, the *doppelgänger* and the vampire.

Dining on Stones is a fable about the attempt, one hundred years on, to (not) re-write Joseph Conrad's *Nostromo*. References to the novel multiply incontinently; for example, *Dining on Stones* is predominately set on England's South Coast where *Nostromo* was composed. Sinclair's twentieth-first century variation is not without his

¹ Walter Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire: Lyric Poet of High Capitalism*, trans. Harry Zohn (London: Verso, 1996) 80.

typical wry wit: for the (self)anointed “magus of London” an adventure “sixty miles out” from the capital is equivalent to the South American adventure undertaken in *Nostromo*.² *Dining on Stones*’ dominant narrating voice is the “frequent presence” Norton.³ Norton compares his experience of writer’s block to Conrad’s legendary bouts:

Joseph Conrad managed three hundred words on a good day. There weren't many of those. 'The atrocious misery of writing,' he moaned. A few miles to the east of here in a rented farmhouse. Labouring over *Nostromo*. The manuscript had elephantiasis. He was sick sweating, characters mumbled in his ear, stalked him on his afternoon walks.⁴

Norton exorcises his blockage through intertextual scavenging:

I sat in the house, alone, in the tragic heap of things, not writing. Taking exercise by climbing the stairs to the attic, picking out an old paperback, stealing a sentence. Scribbling quotations in a ruled notebook, composition by default: elective affinities. Surrogates.

[...]

I thought about doubles, duplicates, fetches. I dipped and filched

[...].⁵

Norton’s method announces two intertwined textual ambitions of Sinclair’s novel. The first is to reveal the mechanics of how texts are constructed and the integral role

² Iain Sinclair, *Dining on Stones, or, The Middle Ground* (London: Hamish Hamilton 2004) 16.

³ Michael Moorcock, “No stone unturned,” rev. of *Dining on Stones*, by Iain Sinclair, *Guardian* May 1 2004, June 21 2008 <<http://books.guardian.co.uk/reviews/generalfiction/0,6121,1207083,00.html>>.

⁴ Sinclair, *Dining on Stones* 8.

⁵ Sinclair, *Dining on Stones* 70.

of the inter-text in this enterprise. The second is to offer a critique of cultures of intertextuality, and by doing so, arrive at an ethics for intertextual practice. Sinclair's writing seems to be suggesting that intertextuality is unavoidable, to be encouraged even, yet at the same time it is necessary to formulate an ethical relation with the intertext.

Before addressing Sinclair's ethics of intertextuality, it is pertinent to deal briefly with the first aim, because while it is by no means innovatory, it is connected to the concerns of the second. The references to Conrad are unadorned, and are not new for Sinclair. The earlier novel, *Downriver*, contains a character who is obsessively "gathering about him the works of Joseph Conrad. All of them; every envelope, every (certified) drop of ink."⁶ Conrad's canonical status in English literature makes him an obvious subject for quotation or re-inscription, as narrator Norton admits: "I went everywhere in the canon, odd volumes, sets, battered first editions, before I tried *Youth: And Two Other Tales*. *Heart of Darkness* had been milked to death, they'd all been at it, Orson Welles, Nicolas Roeg, W. G. Sebald. It wasn't *Heart of Darkness*, although that played best with the situation I found myself in."⁷ In spite of its overuse, even Sinclair quotes *Heart of Darkness*. It is cited more than once in *Downriver*: "'And this also has been one of the dark places of the earth,' I quoted, straining the portentous ripeness of another Pole over the drowned fanns of Essex."; "Joblard's HEART OF DARKNESS. A Narrative in Twelve postcards."⁸ Moreover, *Downriver's* focus on the Thames joins Sinclair and Conrad's narratives through the motif of the river, whose ceaseless, timeless movement in both novels is indifferent and impervious to the real and metaphorised colonisation(s) it enables.

⁶ Iain Sinclair, *Downriver* (London: Paladin, 1992) 35.

⁷ Sinclair, *Dining on Stones* 175.

⁸ Sinclair, *Downriver* 6; 25-29.

Sinclair ultimately settles on another Conrad novel, *Nostramo*, which is presented as a far less conspicuous option. Within the narrative space of *Dining on Stones*, Norton's re-imagining of *Nostramo* becomes enmeshed with another narrative that is pulled from the journals of his great-grandfather who disappeared on an expedition in South America:

Driving east down the A13, past Creekmouth, [...] the mess of the sewage outflow, filter beds, new retail parks, coned lanes, uncompleted ramps, I took the Peruvian journals as a literal guide: like for like. A shifting landscape of equivalents. The River Roding, disgorging in a septic scum into the Thames, became the Rio Perene. The man-made, conical alp of the Beckton ski slope stood in for the foothills of the Andes.

[...] The Peruvian interior in the late nineteenth century, filtered through the prejudices of a weary Highlander of discounted Jacobite stock, a self-educated plantsman and jobbing author, was a more convincing mindscape than riverine, off-highway Essex.

[...] [T]wo journeys overlap: Peru and Essex.⁹

The interleaving of the diary, *Nostramo*, and Norton's narrative self-consciously draws attention to Sinclair's intertextual practice, and would seem to conform to the meta-fictional impulses of postmodern literature. Certainly, when we learn from secondary sources that the diary interpolated is in fact that of Sinclair's own great-grandfather, the book's postmodern credentials seem even more substantial.¹⁰ In true postmodern style, the elision between Sinclair and Norton is taken to such a degree

⁹ Sinclair, *Dining on Stones* 29-33.

¹⁰ In *The Verbals*, Sinclair explains that his great-grandfather Arthur Sinclair "took off and became a seriously strange traveller, to places like the source of the Amazon – wandering about in Peru, and [...] then he began to write, a book about his travels in the Amazon – which I've got – with maps and other details, which I've drawn on from time to time." Iain Sinclair and Kevin Jackson, *The Verbals* (Tonbridge, Kent: Worple Press, 2003) 15.

that, at times, it is almost impossible to tease out the author's voice from that of his creation. As risky as it may be to conflate Norton and Sinclair, Sinclair retrospectively grants the reader permission to do so in *Edge of the Orison*, the book immediately published after *Dining on Stones*. In this non-fiction, Sinclair is blunt about Norton's function, plainly stating that he is an "unreliable twin, alternate world fetch: a stand-in through many books."¹¹ If *Landor's Tower* was an attempt to lead Norton away from well-worn paths, then *Dining on Stones*, in spite of its dislocation from London, is Norton's apogee as Sinclair's double.

The metafictional impulse in *Dining on Stones* is scarcely unique amongst Sinclair's novels. As critic Jonathon Heawood notes: "For more than a decade now, Sinclair's novels have been inhabited by thwarted novelists who offer a running commentary on their own failings. He is the purveyor of a uniquely English form of metafiction: self-conscious, doubtful and obsessed by the weather."¹² Many of the book's details and events are culled from Sinclair's life, and the use of autobiography is a feature of *Dining on Stones* that is linked to a particularly intriguing aspect of the novel: Sinclair's proclivity for assimilating material, virtually word for word, from his own backlist. It is this propensity that led Heawood to judge the novel "a tortured retrospective, a stepping stone towards the autobiography which may, one day, follow."¹³ Sinclair's autoplagiarism is gleaned not only from the text of his own autobiography, but from his formidable body of written words. A survey of *Dining on Stones* reveals the following instances (amongst others) of autoplagiarism: an entire short story, "View from My Window" (2003);¹⁴ excerpts from the collection of

¹¹ Iain Sinclair, *Edge of the Orison* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2005) 159.

¹² Jonathon Heawood, "Scared of his own shadows," rev. of *Dining on Stones*, by Iain Sinclair, *Guardian* Apr. 18 2004, 22 June 2008
<<http://books.guardian.co.uk/reviews/generalfiction/0,6121,1194119,00.html>>.

¹³ Heawood, "Scared of his own shadows."

¹⁴ Sinclair, *Dining on Stones* 313-41; Iain Sinclair, *View from my Window* (Tonbridge: Worple Press, 2003).

poetry and prose, *White Goods*;¹⁵ a newspaper review of the film *From Hell*;¹⁶ a paragraph lifted from *Dark Lanthorns: Rodinsky's A to Z*;¹⁷ material from the novel *Downriver*;¹⁸ and scenes from *The Kodak Mantra Diaries*.¹⁹ Moreover, *Dining on Stone's* narrator Norton, as already noted, is recycled from earlier Sinclair works, *Slow Chocolate Autopsy* (1997), the short story "The Keeper of the Rothenstein Tomb" and *Landor's Tower*.

What is noteworthy about this sample is that of Sinclair's inter-texts integrated in *Dining on Stones*, only two, *Downriver* (its first run published by Paladin, an imprint of HarperCollins) and the film review (which appeared in a major daily newspaper), could lay claim to a wide distribution, and hence a diverse readership to the usual acolytes. From this textual circumstance arise two consequences, both of which are integral to Sinclair's methodology and pivotal in understanding Sinclair's refusal of the dominant culture of appropriation. The first consequence is that the transmission of minoritarian acts of literature—the textual refuse of the majoritarian literary economy—to the mass market collapses the lines of containment between divergent spheres of cultural production. Concomitantly, it refuses capitalism's insistence on an ideological differentiation between refuse and commodity. Sinclair's

¹⁵ Sinclair, *Dining on Stones* 141-65, 190; Iain Sinclair, *White Goods* (Uppingham: Goldmark Press, 2002) 57-75.

¹⁶ Sinclair, *Dining on Stones*, 99-100; Iain Sinclair, "Jack the Rip-off," *Guardian* 27 Jan. 2002, 22 June 2008 <<http://film.guardian.co.uk/features/featurepages/0,,640024,00.html>>.

¹⁷ Sinclair, *Dining on Stones* 223; Iain Sinclair, *Dark Lanthorns: Rodinsky's A-Z* (Uppingham: Goldmark, 1999) 32-33.

¹⁸ Sinclair, *Dining on Stones* 88; Iain Sinclair, *Downriver* (London: Paladin, 1992), 136. This material was also replicated, with attribution, in Rachel Lichtenstein and Iain Sinclair, *Rodinsky's Room* (London: Granta, 1999) 67. The narrator also writes "I'd known an Edith once, another graveyard, obliterated inscription, a lost woman reborn in one of my fictions. Title forgotten. Her name remains with me: Edith Cadiz." Cadiz was a character in *Downriver*. Sinclair, *Dining on Stones* 288.

¹⁹ Sinclair, *Dining on Stones* 361; Iain Sinclair, *The Kodak Mantra Diaries* (London: Albion Village Press, 1971) n.pag.

autoplaiarism pollutes literary commodities, distributed by global publishing houses such as Penguin, with the refuse of the dominant literary economy.²⁰

The second consequence of the inter-texts' inaccessibility is that only the enthusiast, well-schooled in Sinclair's oeuvre, detects the instances of recycling. A conventional retrospective serves a pedagogical purpose by educating the reader about textual genealogies. Autoplaiarism, however, is the type of retrospective that can only be detected by those *already* possessing a knowledge, and therefore assumes almost hieratic, or occult attributes. Another way of thinking about this is through the prism of Pierre Bourdieu's notion of "cultural competence:" "Consumption is, in this case, a stage in a process of communication, that is, an act of deciphering, decoding, which presupposes practical or explicit mastery of a cipher or a code [...]. A work of art has meaning and interest only for someone who possesses the cultural competence, that is, the code, into which it is encoded."²¹

To some degree, however, this education is not one that is formally or conventionally attained. Sinclair definitely encourages the auto-didact. In *Dining On Stones*, he criticises, via his narrator, the unenquiring reader: "The culture classes, professionally lazy and ill-informed, are only comfortable when the job has been done for them. Having absorbed, without noticing it, earlier versions of the A13 walk—as art criticism, psychogeography, anthologised fiction—they greeted my book with tempered enthusiasm."²² As Robert Bond repeatedly emphasizes in his monograph, Sinclair invites the participatory intellectual labour of the reader, but not

²⁰ Hamish Hamilton, which published *Dining on Stones*, is an imprint of The Penguin Group and has publishing houses in all major English speaking countries and is owned by the multi-national media conglomerate Pearson.

²¹ Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (London: Routledge, 2003) 2.

²² Sinclair, *Dining on Stones* 12.

in any way that has been predetermined through conventional modes of reading, education or consumption.²³

Autoplagiarism, Sinclair's own brand of intertextuality, like his writing, refuses simplistic categorisation. It occupies a unique position in the constellation of intertextual modes, but this is not to say that it is neutral. According to the *OED* plagiarism can mean "the action or practice of plagiarising; the wrongful appropriation or purloining, and publication as one's own, of the ideas, or the expression of the ideas (literary, artistic, musical, mechanical, etc.) of another," or "a purloined idea, design, passage, or work."²⁴ Autoplagiarism confuses this understanding because Sinclair pilfers from his *own* texts, passing them off as a new text. In doing so, Sinclair emphasizes the authority of the author over his own work, but this is in no way linked to any capitalist ideality of the author as a 'name' or 'brand.' He refuses poststructuralism's occlusion of the author, whilst still inviting the reader to participate in the production of meaning via her own intellectual labour. It would seem, then, that Sinclair's incorporation of his own textual refuse has political and aesthetic implications that preclude his writing from the epistemic shift to the monologic appropriation which, Fredric Jameson claims, typifies a large portion of postmodern literature.²⁵ As a result, his textual methodology locates a point of departure for an interrogation of appropriation within the context of late era capitalism and its return to Hegelian dialectics.

Modernist Magpies and Postmodern Pranksters

²³ Robert Bond, *Iain Sinclair* (Cambridge: Salt, 2005) 3.

²⁴ "Plagiarism," def. *The Oxford English Dictionary*, 5th ed., 2002.

²⁵ See Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic Of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1991).

At first assessment, *Dining on Stones* approximates a postmodern literature, which treats a text's confluence and/or dissonance of innumerable signifiers and systems of signification as axiomatic. The novel frequently draws attention to this situation via intra-textual devices. Exchanges like this one, a reference to Sinclair's 2002's non-fiction *London Orbital*, suggest a postmodern form of intertextual play:

'Actually,' Livia muttered [...] 'Marina used *your* road book [...].'

'What road book?' I hadn't written about roads. What did I know about roads? The A13, it's true, was a possible future project - but I'd kept pretty quiet about that.

'The one about Lakeside, Chafford Hundred, Essex gangsters, Dracula's abbey, bullion robberies. The walk.'²⁶

Another instance of this is a direct reference to the opening line of *Downriver*: "The only line I could quote from my own work, the first in a rambling fiction about the Thames, time travel and secret railways: 'And what,' Sabella insisted, 'is the opposite of a dog?'"²⁷ The slippage between Sinclair the author and Norton the narrating voice further accommodates a postmodern sensibility.

In spite of the playfulness, Simon Perril discounts the possibility that Sinclair is a "postmodernist prankster."²⁸ Postmodern appropriative practices frequently rely on a collective cultural knowledge of widely recognised signifiers in order to create meaning. Much of Sinclair's loquacious quotation and allusion, including that which is self-referential, is not readily available and requires the

²⁶ Sinclair, *Dining on Stones* 42-43.

²⁷ Sinclair, *Dining on Stones* 295. This duplication of an opening line doubles the duplication of another opening line from a classic tale of *doppelgängers*, Edgar Allen Poe's "William Wilson" (1845). Sinclair, *Dining on Stones* 70.

²⁸ Simon Perril, "A Cartography Of Absence: The Work Of Iain Sinclair," *Comparative Criticism* 19 (1997): 312.

reader to expend time and intellectual labour in apprehending it. Norton points out that the “Conradian era is over, leisurely paragraphs, tracking shots punctuated by elegantly positioned semi-colons. English as a third language, after Polish and French. Time to read Flaubert, Turgenev.”²⁹ Nonetheless, he has difficulty consuming popular fiction and rejects its products: “I tried reading, American crime capers, Florida, New Mexico, New Orleans; it didn’t take.”³⁰ *Dining on Stones* refuses postmodernism’s obsession with popular culture by rarely referring to mass cultural products except when they have been discarded and have become refuse: “Crunched by wheels [...] of an articulated lorry, she swooped on something black and shiny. An old record, a seven-incher with rat bites taken out of it. 'My Oh My' by Slade.”³¹ Vinyl is virtually obsolete, the band is out-of-fashion, the commodity has been attacked by vermin and is no longer marketable.

In *Dining on Stones*, Sinclair advocates an intertextuality that is both sourced from Modernist texts, and is modernist in its tenor: “When a natural climax arrives, a crisis in the narrative, subvert it: pick up a book. Go with the old modernist strategy, quotation. Eliot, Pound. Yeatsian dictation. I didn’t have a lot of choice, one paperback in each sidepocket of my poacher’s waistcoat.”³² In actuating this methodology, Sinclair manifests a type of textual Tourette’s Syndrome, unable to restrain himself from scattering references across the page. His visions of London are always filtered through an overflow of textual information drawn from literature, visual art, cinema and architecture. In *Lights Out for the Territory*, London is described as a “patchwork” and as a “black and white jigsaw,” which are equally apposite summations of Sinclair’s own texts, a myriad of scriptural fragments put together.³³

²⁹ Sinclair, *Dining on Stones* 272.

³⁰ Sinclair, *Dining on Stones* 108.

³¹ Sinclair, *Dining on Stones* 178.

³² Sinclair, *Dining on Stones* 370.

³³ Iain Sinclair *Lights Out for the Territory* (London: Granta, 1997) 211.

The text replicates the city in that the pieces are not necessarily a smooth fit, and can trigger disorientation and even psychosis. This is where Sinclair and his textual rival Peter Ackroyd deviate. Although Sinclair admits that Ackroyd is as maniacal as he is in the pursuit of the city, Ackroyd's seamless exhibition of London and its history is, for Sinclair, orthodox in its aesthetic presentation.³⁴

But the parade has passed us by. Beneath Ackroyd's mellifluous prose, the glitter of paste jewels and gorgeous robes, the sponsor's message is profoundly conservative. Poll-tax riots and uprisings at Broadwater Farm Estate are coeval with the burning of Newgate Prison: they are virtual-reality panoramas from the Museum of London. London is a vast library, a chamber of echoes and quotations. Subversion may excite for a moment, but it will be crushed. "The fabric of the city, despite a variety of assaults, has always been preserved. Its mobs have never yet defeated it."³⁵

Sinclair relishes the unravelling of "the fabric of the city" as an antidote to Ackroyd's cohesion. Cohesion exemplifies the system in which the commodity circulates. Theodor Adorno's aphorism "[t]he whole is the false," a repudiation of Hegelian dialectics, could convincingly be deemed Sinclair's maxim.³⁶

³⁴ In *London Orbital*, Sinclair claims that writing *London: The Biography* induced cardiac arrest: "Peter Ackroyd, completing his magnum opus [...] suffers a heart attack. Typescript on desk. Quadruple bypass. Biography of a city: autobiography of city writer. *Resurgam*." Iain Sinclair, *London Orbital* (London: Penguin, 2003) 208.

³⁵ Iain Sinclair, "The Necromancer's A to Z," rev. of *London: A Biography*, by Peter Ackroyd, *Guardian* 14 Oct. 2000, 22 June 2008 <<http://books.guardian.co.uk/reviews/history/0,,382126,00.html>>.

³⁶ Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, trans. E. F. N. Jephcott (London: Verso, 2000) 50. Adorno adds that his aphorism is the "inversion of Hegel's famous dictum: *Das Wahre ist das Ganze* - the whole is the true."

The following intertextual exercise from *Lights Out* displays the enduring desire for disjuncture. Sinclair casts long-time collaborator, the photographer Marc Atkins, in a double role, alternating between Mary Shelley's unhinged Frankenstein, and his terrible creation. It is a parable about creative monster-making, on how texts are plundered and sewn together to engender and animate "hideous progeny."³⁷

Fourteen hours a day in the darkroom had gifted [Marc] with a ridge of tension at the base of the skull that felt, so he reported, like a bolt through the neck. [...] Stiffness was an elective condition: eye/brain/hand in a state of perpetual arousal. Stalking London, early and late, in a feeding frenzy. A convinced vegetarian whose lifelong obsession was the analysis and celebration of meat, dusty metropolitan light nibbling at the unclothed female form. Generously vampiric, he'd butchered himself in pursuit of his project: the cataloguing of the city, its buildings, shrines, rivers, railways, writers, clouds and women.³⁸

Indeed, Sinclair indulges in further textual suturing, drawing together the myths of Frankenstein and Dracula. Vampirism as a metaphor for textual appropriation is a theme that has preoccupied Sinclair for some time. The apologue of Frankenstein's failure to create an entity from disarticulated parts also appeals to Sinclair, and illuminates those constant Sinclairean conceits of disjuncture and psychosis.

Perril labels Sinclair a "modernist magpie,"³⁹ a sobriquet which describes both Sinclair's textual practice, as well as the texts he cites. The image of the magpie is

³⁷ Mary Shelley, author's introduction, *Frankenstein Or The Modern Prometheus* (London: Penguin, 2003) 10.

³⁸ Sinclair, *Lights Out* 76.

³⁹ Perril 312.

pertinent because whilst some of the magpie's activity may be indistinguishable from stealing (or, as Sinclair prefers, "poaching"), there is no attempt to try and pass off the material as its own. The magpie is a collector, and Sinclair shares its traits – acquisitiveness, curiosity and eclecticism. Unlike the magpie, Sinclair shuns shiny objects, the commodities of consumer culture. Sinclair is more inclined to turn to cinematic genres like Soviet realism: "I saw this stretch of Commercial Road as a tracking shot from one of the Soviet realists, a camera train, Dziga Vertov: sailor's dormitories, reading rooms, padlocked swimming pools (with an Eisenstein montage of culture hero statues, cranes, demolition balls, high-contrast clouds)."⁴⁰ A seaside town is likened to a German Expressionist painting: "Think Beckmann's *Scheveningen* (1928) and know Hastings (2003). Deserted promenade, pedestrian crossing, beach swept of pebbles by spring storms, merciless sea."⁴¹ The sticky issue of canon and cultural capital arises once again with these types of references, but Sinclair's taste for canonical writers or artists does not necessarily translate into support for official histories, or what Bob Perelman describes as "large networks of legitimation—publishing, awards, review, extensive university connections."⁴²

Benjamin's Ragpicker

In *Dining on Stones*, Norton is a scavenger. Whilst his writing has had some mainstream success, he remains a resolute ragpicker, sorting through the marginalia of culture. Norton describes his methodology thus:

⁴⁰ Sinclair, *Dining on Stones* 118. In a typical Sinclairean description, the antithetical — "Commercial" and Marxist aesthetics—is brought together.

⁴¹ Sinclair, *Dining on Stones* 278.

⁴² Bob Perelman, *The Marginalisation of Poetry: Language Writing and Literary History* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1996) 12.

I assembled monster files of cuttings and photographs, everything that could be known about the worst of London, the A13. Company histories, geologists' reports, traffic-flow statistics, gangland memoirs. Luke Howard's classification of clouds over Plaistow. I walked the Northern Sewage Outflow. I haunted burial grounds. I cycled along scummy canals and lost rivers. If I found a good pub, a promising ruin, I came back [...] I shared the best of my research, the bits you'd highlight in an off-beat guidebook. And I suppressed the evil stuff. Hoarded it for use at some future date.⁴³

Like Norton, Sinclair is a textual archaeologist, burrowing deep under the layers of textual information built up by hegemonic culture. When he reads the city, it is not the new landmarks, self-professed testaments to the power of capital, that provoke narrative, but the refuse revealed in their construction:

New buildings meant old bones. Without development, Quatermass pits in London clay, there would be no hard evidence of plague deaths, helmets, brooches, Elizabethan theatres, coins, rings, oyster shells and broken clay pipes. The yellow dead, in their gaudy, would sleep forever in the choke of claggy earth. Bulldozers fetched them out. More to display. More skulls to house. A louder story to narrate.⁴⁴

It is hard to avoid the long shadow of Benjamin's ragpicker cast over Sinclair's writing. Benjamin's *The Arcades Project*, a collection of found textual refuse unearthed

⁴³ Sinclair, *Dining on Stones* 82.

⁴⁴ Sinclair, *Dining on Stones* 99. "Quatermass pits" refers to the cult science fiction television show (1957), and a later film version, *Quatermass and the Pit* (1967), which both have an archaeological theme.

from the archives of the *Bibliothèque nationale*, takes its place within a complex of modernist concepts and practices: Dadaist assemblage, Surrealism's "objective hazard," the Situationist *dérive*. Sinclair's recuperative project displays congruencies with these practices, though for the most part he rummages through a different genus of textual refuse: one that is produced in and about London. The inventory includes the novels of Alexander Baron, Emanuel Litvinoff and "the rich midden of London's sub-cultural fiction, terse proletarian narratives of lives on the criminous margin,"⁴⁵ the small magazine poetry of the British Poetry Revival, and the forgotten writings of suburban poet David Gascoyne who is "a natural psycho-geographer, tracking the heat spores of Rimbaud, from the British Museum to Wapping and Limehouse."⁴⁶

Benjamin positions the ragpicker as a central trope of modernity, but it is clear from his writing that the ragpicker is not solely a socio-economic phenomenon. It is a metaphor for the production of the literature of modernity. With reference to Charles Baudelaire, Benjamin draws an analogy between the practice of the ragpicker, and that of the poet:

The poets find the refuse of society on their street and derive their heroic subject from this very refuse. This means that a common type is, as it were, superimposed upon their illustrious type. This new type is permeated with the features of the ragpicker with whom Baudelaire repeatedly concerned himself.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Sinclair, *Lights Out* 312.

⁴⁶ Marc Atkins and Iain Sinclair, *Liquid City* (London: Reaktion Books, 1999) 146.

⁴⁷ Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire* 79.

He quotes Baudelaire, whose depiction of the ragpicker is, Benjamin writes, an “extended metaphor for the procedure of the poet.”⁴⁸

Here we have a man who has to gather the day’s refuse in the capital city. Everything that the big city threw away, everything it lost, everything it despised, everything it crushed underfoot, he catalogues and collects. He collates the annals of intemperance, the stockpile of waste. He sorts things out and makes a wise choice; he collects, like a miser guarding a treasure, the refuse which will assume the shape of useful or gratifying objects between the jaws of the goddess of Industry.⁴⁹

Like Baudelaire and Benjamin, Sinclair’s subject matter is derived from the cultural margins. A large part of his writing has been informed by, and constructed with, texts and histories that have been discounted or omitted by dominant culture; in other words, textual refuse.

Benjamin observes that “the particular difficulty of doing historical research on the period following [...] the rise of the mass-circulation press” is “the sources become innumerable.”⁵⁰ It is inevitable that some of these sources will end up as waste—in charity stores, bargain bins and book barrows. Though he is not completely uninterested in ‘known’ writers, Sinclair is a *habitué* of the unconventional ‘archives’ where Benjamin’s glut of printed material ends up, and has made a career out of ‘re-discovering’ writers and books. In *Lights Out*, he

⁴⁸ Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire* 80.

⁴⁹ Baudelaire quoted in Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire* 79.

⁵⁰ Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Belknap Press, 2001) 466.

searches for forgotten histories by sifting through the second-hand book markets, places where books are commodities which have exhausted utility within the primary market of new goods, and are treated like “opencast slag, insultingly priced, happy to rot away amongst the spoons and rags and horse-manure.”⁵¹ Sinclair welcomes getting dirt under his fingernails as he digs up the forgotten histories of London. In a poem “Hoxton Market” (2002) Sinclair talks about the experience of seeking out textual refuse:

In a bin opposite
‘Office for the Relief of the Poor’
2 magic books on a crust of filth⁵²

Distilled in these three simple lines is a theory of (inter)textual methodology. Sinclair identifies with scavengers, like the mudlarks he observes sifting sewage in *London Orbital*:

I spent a Saturday afternoon, in the rain, observing a pair of middle-aged mudlarks, up to the elbows in liquid sewage. One of them dragged an old tin bath out of the river, at low tide. The other worked with a sieve like a grizzled prospector, Walter Huston in *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre*. They spent hours labouriously sifting shit, hoping for the odd ring or coin. And I stuck with them, watching.⁵³

⁵¹ Sinclair, *Lights Out* 21.

⁵² Iain Sinclair, “Hoxton Market,” *Saddling the Rabbit* (Buckfastleigh: Etruscan Books, 2002) 32.

⁵³ Sinclair, *London Orbital* 51.

He is driven by an alchemical urge to resurrect literary dross from its relegation to the dustbin and transform it into his own peculiar alloy of narrative gold. The ragpicker aims to resurrect refuse by reinstating it with an exchange value, and in doing so, return it to the circulation of commodities. This is an alchemical act. Ragpicking of the literary kind should, following this pattern, provide a conduit for literary refuse to become 'useful' once more. The mainstream literary economy operates in an identical manner to other capitalist economies: what cannot, or will not be consumed is shit.

However, Sinclair's engagement with textual refuse refuses the usefulness of intertextual ragpicking as it is enacted within a capitalist economy. *Dining on Stones* interrogates capitalism's relationship with minor cultures because Sinclair's literary ragpicking is politically distinct from capitalism's capture of minor literature in order to commodify it. Effectively, he transgresses capitalism's alchemical project. He rehabilitates literary refuse in order to create his own gold, which according to the tastes of hegemonic culture is actually shit that cannot be digested by consumers. Sometimes it is collection of writings that have been forgotten, or indeed never noticed, by mainstream literary culture. The proliferation of references, including those from his own small press and magazine publications, are retrieved from London's unofficial histories, from diverse and often obscure locations at the fringes of the city's culture. He gravitates towards the half-lit haunts of the criminal underworld, political extremists and artistic subcultures. These are groups that have been relegated to the status of social refuse by official accounts of London's history, which either ignore them, or pathologise them.

Through their consideration of the refuse of cultural production, Benjamin and Sinclair's work constitutes a critique of a particular formation of social and/or textual order: the archive. The bourgeois inclination for conservation (of its power, its

status, its assets and its property) gives birth to the archive, which Jacques Derrida points out, is a fundamentally institutive and conservative enterprise.⁵⁴ Conservation guards against the extremes of profligate consumption. Simultaneously, it establishes a material bulwark against indigence because it is based upon the anterior possession of some *thing* to archive. It is also conservative in that it reaffirms the dominant paradigm of capitalist logic: the archive has the power, through conservation, to confer value upon what might usually be discarded or destroyed, and thus become value-less. In her insightful book *The Dialectics of Seeing*, Susan Buck-Morss explains that Benjamin's aim is to "destroy the mythic immediacy of the present, not by inserting it into a cultural continuum that affirms the present as its culmination, but by discovering that constellation of historical origins which has the power to explode history's 'continuum.'"⁵⁵ The archive could be said to be one of the tools of history's continuum with its preoccupation with linear modes of organisation. A way of disturbing the continuum is to create anachrony. *The Arcades Project* achieves this. Benjamin is the curator of an archive, a textual museum that is not designed to commemorate the past, but is affectively invested in a melancholy that is atemporal. It is an acknowledgment that there is no definitive, linear history of Paris, that its histories are rhizomatic, sprouting out at any angle, digressing in any direction, existing contemporaneously. In the previous chapter this was also shown to be Sinclair's philosophy of history, expressed above all through his iteration of the spectral. Sinclair advocates a dialogism of modernist sensibility that encourages instability, anachrony and rupture in texts through formal techniques such as montage, the cut-up, and collage. As Benjamin's work stresses, this type of textual methodology has the potential, through the disruption of spatial and temporal logic

⁵⁴ Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, trans. Eric Prenowitz (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996) 7.

⁵⁵ Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: MIT Press, 1989) x.

and the creation of anachrony, to rupture the linear representations and formations of order favoured by capitalist political economies.

Textual Doubles

Thematically, the heteroglot narrative of *Dining on Stones* frequently returns to the duplication of textual material. The book's primary narrator is haunted by doubles, not least because one of Norton's responsibilities is to act as textual *doppelgänger* for Sinclair. In *Dining on Stones*, Norton complains that he suffers "from ontological insecurity," ultimately because his biography does not belong to him alone.⁵⁶ He is indexical to appropriation because his biography constitutes a cut-up of episodes copied from Sinclair's personal history and experience as presented in the non-fiction and quasi-autobiographical poetry and prose. When Kevin Jackson queries him in *The Verbals* about the "experiment with a new alter ego figure, Norton" in *Slow Chocolate Autopsy* (1997), Sinclair explains that he has reprised the character as a response to the position he is perceived to occupy in contemporary British literature:

There was a notion of being trapped by the hackdom of writing, being trapped into having to write about the city, so it was a lightweight comment on the situation I'd written myself into at the time, as being defined as a person who could only write about London. [...] And Norton had a sense of frustration - he keeps trying to escape the temporal and

⁵⁶ Sinclair, *Dining on Stones* 84.

spatial limitations of the city and is thrown back every time. He's a sort of eternal hack, through various periods of time and history.⁵⁷

Says Norton, no doubt ventriloquising Sinclair, "When everything else fails, fall back on doctored autobiography: audition friends and acquaintances as fictional monsters, twist facts, push them as far as they'll go, distort evidence, leaven the mess with half-truths."⁵⁸ At various intervals throughout *Dining On Stones*, Norton reports "scratching dog-shit from the base of the pyramid in Limehouse Church," dropping out of the Courtauld Institute, and being a book-dealer — all details from Sinclair's life as documented in *The Verbals*.⁵⁹ He speaks of the "wilderness of Tower Hamlets Cemetery where I used to take my sandwiches when I worked for the Parks Department," which recalls a diarised line in *Lud Heat* from Sinclair's time as a labourer: "May 15/Wednesday [...] I take my lunch to Tower Hamlets Cemetery."⁶⁰ *The Cardinal and the Corpse*, the film Norton works on in *Dining on Stones* with a character named Jamie Lalage, shares its name with the film Sinclair made with filmmaker Christopher Petit.⁶¹ Atkins and his co-authorship of *Liquid City* are conjured in Norton's aside "[w]e didn't have the photographer with us, the lanky skinhead who had collaborated on my Thames book."⁶² Norton's "first photographic portrait: perched on a stuffed lion on the promenade at Paignton" unerringly matches the snapshot of a young Sinclair reproduced on the cover of the collection of poetry *Saddling the Rabbit* (2002).

⁵⁷ Sinclair and Jackson 131.

⁵⁸ Sinclair, *Dining on Stones* 276.

⁵⁹ These details in *Dining on Stones*, respectively 14, 39, and 77 are described in *The Verbals* on pages 105-111, 97, 79-82.

⁶⁰ Sinclair, *Dining on Stones* 222; Iain Sinclair, *Lud Heat: A Book Of The Dead Hamlets May 1974 to April 1975* (London: Albion Village Press, 1975) 27.

⁶¹ Sinclair, *Dining on Stones* 91. *The Cardinal and The Corpse*, dir. Christopher Petit, Koninck, 1992.

⁶² Sinclair, *Dining on Stones* 166. Atkins is co-author of *Liquid City*, which is the "Thames book" in the quote. Sinclair describes Atkins in an essay for *London Review of Books* as "the skinhead photographer." Iain Sinclair, "All Change. This Train is Cancelled," *London Review of Books* May 13, 1999: 18.

In addition to his writer's block, Norton is troubled ontologically by a fetch, or maybe two. He claims that someone is "stealing my material. He impersonated me with a flair I couldn't hope to equal, this thief. Trickster."⁶³ A piece in a magazine that he believes is the product of his own pen appears under another moniker, not dissimilar to his own.

I began to read, with mounting horror, a garbled version of my own words, the profile of the Bethnal Green painter I'd abandoned three years earlier. [...] But some hack, name of Norton, had found and pirated my research. And without the courtesy of shifting a comma - or making any form of acknowledgement (share of the cheque).⁶⁴

Significantly, "acknowledgement" of a source is conflated here with financial remuneration. The text of the actual purloined article centres on artist Jimmy Seed and his

lust for ownership. He owns the building in which he paints. And several others: Edinburgh, Normandy, Folkestone. The bricks and mortar of his studio, I soon realised, meant more to him than the paintings themselves. Seed gestured derisively towards packed storage racks. Unsold canvases are so many oversized cheques, collateral for a future property portfolio.⁶⁵

A piece about the foundation of bourgeois economic identity, private property, thus becomes a meta-commentary on the 'ownership' of intellectual property, as well as

⁶³ Sinclair, *Dining on Stones* 218

⁶⁴ Sinclair, *Dining on Stones* 57. In another instance of autobiography bleeding into fiction, Jimmy Seed, the artist in question, is a poorly disguised caricature of artist Jock McFadyean, for whose 2001 exhibition Sinclair provided the catalogue essay. Iain Sinclair "Walking Up Walls," *Jock McFadyean, Beyond Turner's Road, New Paintings*, exh. cat. (Agnew's: London, 2001).

⁶⁵ Sinclair, *Dining on Stones* 60.

the convergence of art and capital. Norton not only loses his identity, he loses his livelihood when his text is possessed. The circuit between appropriation and capitalism is complete:

Norton had raided the album. Not content with pilfering ancient hackwork (good riddance), he was using *my* photograph. For all I knew he was out there now, taking the radio gigs, picking up cheques from the *London Review of Books*, banging on about congestion charges (thirty seconds) on Channel 4 News. I certainly wasn't getting the calls.⁶⁶

Norton's experience dramatises the difference between fully blown expropriation and an acknowledgement of influences that pays homage. The following inventory is an example of the latter in that there is no attempt to paper over the cracks between the references; the 'otherness' of the inter-texts is respected:

I had a powerful urge to get on a train. Marina Fountain on the platform at Fenchurch Street, a copy of *Conrad's Polish Background*, edited by Zdzislaw Najder, in her shoulder bag, setting off for the great unknown, for riverside Grays, is a very seductive image. The opening of a film. Red eyes, dark glasses. White raincoat. Isabelle Adjani. Anna Karina. Herzog's *Nosferatu: Phantom der Nacht*. André Delvaux's *Rendez-Vous à Bray*. Chantal Akerman's *Les Rendez-vous d'Anna* ('A series of train rides, a series of tales ... A moving eroticism stemming from the everyday').

⁶⁶ Sinclair, *Dining on Stones* 64-65.

The woman had hooked me. I would follow her, vamped, vampirised, into the badlands. Into yellowback fiction.⁶⁷

The Marina Fountain mentioned above is another “writer” whose story (about vampires no less) is vampirised from Norton’s. It is constructive to quote at length Norton’s response to her appropriation because it goes some way to elucidating the typology of intertextuality outlined in *Dining on Stones*:

She hadn’t written it without help, obviously. The tone was masculine, sure of itself, its pretensions; grammatically suspect, lexicologically challenged, topographically slapdash. A slash-and-burn stylist. But haunted: by missing fathers – Bram Stoker, S. Freud and Joseph Conrad. Clunky hints... about writing and stalking, literary bloodsucking, gender, disguise. It was a tale that never worked through the confusions, never lifted from dirty realism to science fiction. Did Fountain understand, for example, the William Burroughs fixation with ‘grays’, as *X-File* beings? Soft-skinned and seamless, the aliens among us. Returned dead. Doubtful, very doubtful. Her title, like much of the story, was accident.

Fountain wrote like a man envious of the vim and attack, the linguistic inventiveness, of the new lesbian novelists from the Celtic fringe. The praise heaped upon them, the advances. The film adaptations.

But it was the Conrad aspect that pricked me. Fountain had somehow got wind of my researched (incomplete, unpublished) essay on Conrad in Hackney. Her exaggerated prose, its shotgun sarcasm,

⁶⁷ Sinclair, *Dining on Stones* 167-68.

jump-cuts, psychotic syntax, was an offensive parody of a manner of composition I'd left behind.⁶⁸

Fountain's version is mechanical "echopraxis," a neologism coined by Sinclair in *Dining on Stones* to delineate the "mindless repetition of another person's moves and gestures."⁶⁹ Thus, the story's style, "dirty realism," becomes as much a reflection on the grubby reality of appropriative practices, as a descriptor of genre. Its mercenary dimension, enacted without regard for the integrity of the inter-text, is underscored with the epithet "slash-and-burn stylist." Textually speaking, it is tantamount to colonisation. As it is diegetically presented, the Fountain piece is pastiche. This is because Fountain's double is of a monologic disposition. The monologic double possesses the text, drains it of its vitality. It entails necrosis, mortification. For Jameson, pastiche is the exemplary postmodern literary 'style'. Fountain's appropriation of Norton's story is commensurate with Jameson's characterisation of pastiche, which, he says, shuts down communication between texts.⁷⁰ It is a textual aporia. Jameson's verdict is harsh: pastiche is cannibalism, text devouring text with an appetite that corresponds to the cupidity of consumer culture. Textual cannibalism vanquishes dialogism. It is the negation of the textual Other because cannibalism is only possible when the Other no longer exists.

Fountain's work conforms to the definition of appropriation as it appears in the *OED*. The primary entry lists the word as the "making over (of a thing) into one's own or [...] another's possession; the taking of a thing for one's use. especially *without permission*."⁷¹ A subsequent entry, dating from the late twentieth century,

⁶⁸ Sinclair, *Dining on Stones* 167.

⁶⁹ Sinclair, *Dining on Stones* 192.

⁷⁰ Jameson 17.

⁷¹ My emphasis. "Appropriation," def. 1, *OED*.

defines appropriation in the context of artistic practice as the “reworking of images or styles contained in works of art, photographs, etc., esp. well-known ones, in order to encourage critical reinterpretation.”⁷² Postmodern doxa equates appropriation with intertextuality, but when one meditates upon the constitution of exemplary postmodern intertextual styles such as pastiche, one returns to the definition in the *OED*. The final words of this entry, “to encourage critical reinterpretation,” seem unduly generous in their determination that appropriation necessarily travels beyond an exercise in style, and approaches critique. However, it is this understanding of the term which has been *appropriated* by postmodernist literary theory, and is often conflated with intertextuality. Postmodernism’s appropriation of intertextuality at the level of cultural production is analogous in its processes to capitalism’s wider appropriation of discourse and practice.

From Dialogism To Monologic

Dining on Stones presents a typology of intertextual practice, and the issue of what distinguishes intertextuality from appropriation is a recurring subtext. In order to illuminate Sinclair’s treatment of the two textual approaches, it is worthwhile recapitulating some germane points from theories of the intertextual. A general appreciation of intertextuality recognises that texts constitute an intersection of innumerable other textualities operating at the level of the social (*langage*), text (*langue*) and specific utterance (*parole*). In postmodern literature, this realisation is performative, enacted as a meta-discourse acknowledging the text’s foundations in the inter-text. Modernism’s literary assemblages share postmodernism’s tendency,

⁷² "Appropriation," def. 5, *OED*.

and, to borrow Victor Shklovsky's words, lay bare the device.⁷³ Through techniques such as collage, bricolage and montage they expose the seams, and draw attention to the work as a 'made' object constructed by the writers. These linguistic (and at times visual) conjunctures of disparate elements do not attempt to elide material and thematic disjuncture. Instead, modernist intertextual practice attempts to communicate, at the level of the text, an experience of modernity and its accompanying fragmentation of self and society. Sinclair's London writing communicates this, borrowing from modernist depictions of the city. The modernist approach also resonates in *Dining on Stones*, in which, one critic says "Sinclair floods us with cut-ups of data in which his own creative position is itself a cut-up."⁷⁴

Modernist illumination of textual fissure has led key theorist of the intertextual Julia Kristeva to posit canonical modernist works—such as those of James Joyce—as exemplary dialogic texts.⁷⁵ Dialogism's foremost thinker Mikhail Bakhtin recognises that signification is produced both at the origin and destination point of communication. While he liberates the readers from their traditionally prescribed role as mere end point by acknowledging their seminal role in producing signification, he also emphasizes that language's haecceity, its specificity of meaning, is dependent on the structural conditions of its production:

Orientation of the word towards the addressee has an extremely high significance. In point of fact, *word* is a *two-sided act*. It is determined equally by *whose* word it is and for whom it is meant. As word, it is precisely the *product of the reciprocal relationship between speaker and*

⁷³ Victor Shklovsky, *Theory of Prose*, trans. Benjamin Sher (Elmwood Park: Dalkey Archive Press, 1991) 147.

⁷⁴ Jay Merrick, "A Metropolitan Kaleidoscope," rev. of *Dining on Stones*, by Iain Sinclair, *Independent* 23 Apr. 2004, 22 June 2008 <<http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/reviews/dining-on-stones-by-iain-sinclair-560860.html>>.

⁷⁵ Kristeva 71.

*listener, addresser and addressee. ... A word is a bridge between myself and another. If one end of the bridge depends on me, then the other depends upon my addressee. A word is a territory shared by both addresser and addressee, by the speaker and its interlocutor.*⁷⁶

The Bakhtinian “utterance” gives equal weight to the origin and the destination of the sign within a given exchange. By recognising the utterance, intertextuality of a dialogic disposition maintains the otherness of the inter-text. The dialogic text is a dynamic act of literature, which reorganises or dissolves the striations between reader, author and producer. These formal categories are obsolete in both the production and reception of Sinclair’s work, and this signals the bridge between Sinclair’s work and the poststructuralist project.

The potential for polysemy, and its allowance for multiple contemporaneous interrelations between readers and producers, is structurally and philosophically resistant to bourgeois individualism and the capitalist ideality of an author. Sinclair, who has constructed a career out of collaboration and collective practice, is sympathetic to such a renunciation. In fact, his criticisms of Ackroyd are based on the latter’s efforts to re-inscribe his singular, fixed role when equating his own history of writing London with the epic history of the city itself. “*London: The Biography* very rapidly announces itself as *Peter Ackroyd: The Autobiography*. The celebrated author transforms himself, with a showman’s pass, into a city of memory. Proceeding by a series of recognitions, he dowses for the qualities that have defined and sustained a career of heroic endeavour.”⁷⁷ The effect is to bring the figure of the author into relief

⁷⁶ V. N. Volosinov (M. M. Bakhtin), *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*, trans. Ladislav Matejka and I. R. Titunik (New York, Seminar Press, 1973). Regarding the contested authorship of certain Bakhtin texts, I have adopted Michael Holquist’s attributions.

⁷⁷ Sinclair, “The Necromancer’s A-Z.”

and position him as a sole creator of London's history. In the face of Ackroyd's *chutzpah*, Sinclair's claims to the history of the city are modest.

Building on Bakhtin's recognition of reciprocity in transmission, poststructuralist theory seeks to release texts from the limitations of filiation and to separate the pleasure of the text from conventional pleasures of consumption. The challenge to the hegemony of authorial intentionality and the refusal of the authority over meaning to which it lays claim destroys the filial link between author and text, and ultimately empowers the reader by identifying them as the site where meaning is produced. For Barthes, this means that the discovery and recognition of a Bakhtinian dialogic relation between text and inter-text is, with its heteroglot impulses and overflowing of meaning, a *textasy*, *jouissance*. This brings us to one danger of ceding the power to the reader in the postmodern episteme: the reader is often reconstituted as a consumer. In *Dining on Stones*, a missive from another writer to Norton alerts us to this:

One of the letters on my tray was from a woman who had laboured for more than seven years, making an artist's book out of *Nostramo*. Squeezing ghosts of words, with infinite pain and care, until they became abstractions, wave patterns printed on tissue. 'I am badly distressed,' she wrote, 'by my failure to get this work out to even the modest public.'

But the public is never modest. Nor the writers, the initiates: the possessed. Why should they be?⁷⁸

Poststructuralism then, in spite of its desire to liberate texts from the bounds of codification and commodification, has unwittingly laid the foundations for the

⁷⁸ Sinclair, *Dining on Stones* 416.

theory that substantiates postmodernism's intertextual aporia. Barthes' much quoted declaration on the death of the author engenders repercussions that he may not have foreseen, creating an aperture that unintentionally allows an exploitative co-option of the inter-text to take purchase. Postmodernism's attendant theory is an over-determined repetition of poststructuralist tenets such as the instability of texts, the polysemous signifier and the impossibility of self as empirical subject. Images and meaning are no longer anchored, and free to be reproduced. Paradoxically, this proliferation of signification has the effect of constricting the originary text, compressing it under the burden of competing meanings, so that it is almost undetectable. Writes Brian Massumi (doubling Jean Baudrillard), "postmodernism stutters. In the absence of any gravitational pull to ground them, images accelerate and tend to run together. They become interchangeable. Any term can be substituted for any other: utter indetermination."⁷⁹

In this manner, postmodernism is inconsistent because the death of the author eliminates restrictions on appropriation based on bourgeois ideas of property rights, but then hopes to reconcile those abstracted pieces, ripped from their context, under a single author in order to market them. It would seem that postmodernism's occultation of the source is the point where appropriation supersedes intertextuality, where quotation becomes vampirism. Contrary to poststructuralism's revolutionary challenge to bourgeois hegemony over ideas of self and the resulting *textasy* it stimulates, Jameson believes that postmodernism defuses the emotional potency of artistic acts because the effacement of the centred subject and the self is accompanied by a "waning of affect." He writes,

⁷⁹ Brian Massumi, "Realer than Real: The Simulacrum According to Deleuze and Guattari," 22 June 2008 <http://www.anu.edu.au/hrc/first_and_last/works/realer.htm>.

As for expression and feelings and emotions, the liberation, in contemporary society, from the older *anomie* of the centred subject may also mean, not merely a liberation from anxiety, but a self present to do the feeling. This is not to say that the cultural products of the postmodern era are utterly devoid of feeling, but rather that such feelings—which it may be better and more accurate to call ‘intensities’—are now free-floating and impersonal, and tend to be dominated by a peculiar kind of euphoria [...].⁸⁰

The euphoria to which Jameson refers is not that of the poststructuralist *textasy*. Instead, it is postmodernism’s return to the idealism of Hegelian dialectics, a euphoria achieved from the fusion of contradictions. Postmodernism is a utopian attempt to synthesize antinomy and unity in a simultaneity that assimilates the fragmentation of modernity and the modern subject, with the cohesion of the commodity and its closed system of cultural logic. The euphoria to which Jameson refers can also be detected in postmodernism’s return to the idealism of Hegelian dialectics, the fusion of contradictions. Postmodernism’s discursive appropriation of heterogeneity is a utopian attempt to synthesize antinomy and unity, to congeal diverse textual content in a single material form: the commodity. As such, it is a rejection of the cleavage and energy produced by Sinclair’s disjunctive texts.

As such, the postmodern double is a rejection of modernist engagements with technical reproducibility. Repudiating Benjamin’s anxieties in “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technical Reproducibility,”⁸¹ postmodern theory argues that

⁸⁰ Jameson 15-16.

⁸¹ Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technical Reproducibility,” trans. Harry Zohn and Edmund Jephcott, *Selected Writings: Volume 4: 1938-1940*, eds. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings. (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Belknap Press, 2003) 251-283.

technologies enabling reproducibility have led to a democratisation of text and textual production, and by extension, have liberated the multitude from a hierarchy of value that privileges the singular. Mass reproduction and the associated pressure for texts to be accessible results in altered attitudes regarding the preservation of intellectual property rights and ‘fair use.’ In an economy of signs where use-value has become synonymous with exchange-value, then the text which has no exchange value due to it being ‘freely’ available—‘free’ in its double sense, as something exempt from restriction, or cost—can be copied without economic or ethical restraint, without permission. The quotation marks can be scrapped.⁸²

The original no longer carries the same cultural currency because, according to postmodern logic, the replicas are transpositions with a legitimacy equalling, if not rivalling the original. Clearly, Jameson’s regret that postmodernism represents “the end of the distinctive individual brushstroke (as symbolised by the emergent primacy of mechanical reproduction)” cannot escape an association with elitism because technical reproducibility indubitably enables greater access.⁸³ However, the utility of technologies of reproduction to the capitalist empire of structures and signs cannot be underestimated. It enables the ceaseless reproduction of ideologemes inscribed with the logic of capitalism;⁸⁴ in other words, it enables capitalism to reproduce itself relentlessly.

⁸² Another case in point in the realm of cultural production is the music industry’s struggle against ‘illegal’ reproduction of its products. The industry has maintained virulent rhetoric, along with recourse to legal protection designed to serve corporate interests, but is against public opinion regarding the ethics of appropriating its products. An exponential growth in the practice of sourcing music from conduits other than those licensed by multinational companies reveals that there are many people whose attitudes regarding copying music from media like internet are not in accord with those of the corporations.

⁸³ Jameson 15.

⁸⁴ Ideologeme, as used by Julia Kristeva, demarcates “that intertextual function read as ‘materialised’ at the different structural levels of each text, and which stretches along the entire length of its trajectory, giving it its historical and social coordinates. [...] The *ideologeme* of the text is the focus where knowing rationality grasps the transformation of *utterances* (to which the text is irreducible) into a totality (the text) as well as the insertions of this totality into the historical and social text.” Julia

Postmodernism, which doubles (following Jameson's formulation) as the cultural logic of late capitalism, reiterates that texts can be undone, and then reassembled, rearticulated anew, rendered useful to a commodity culture over and over again. Consequently, postmodernism's copies are analogous, at the level of cultural production, to capitalism's ceaseless appropriation of discourse, practice, and production. It strives to alchemically transform everything that it has doubled into the gold of the commodity. For Jameson, the inherent dangers of unrestrained reproduction are exemplified in the treatment of Van Gogh's *Pair of Shoes* (1885):

If this copiously reproduced image is not to sink to the level of sheer decoration, it requires us to reconstruct some initial situation out of which the finished work emerges. Unless that situation—which has vanished into the past—is somehow mentally restored, the painting will remain an inert object, a reified end-product, and be unable to be grasped as a symbolic act in its own right, as praxis and as production.⁸⁵

Jameson's reading of Van Gogh's shoes reminds us of the fate of Alberto Korda's 1960 photograph of revolutionary Che Guevara. Appropriated by the media, inscribed on T-shirts, mugs, even doormats, Che's portrait is an emblem of the degradation Jameson describes. Like Van Gogh's painting, Korda's photograph was once a "symbolic act in its own right, as praxis and as production," saturated with the potential and spirit of revolution. Over time, the iconic image has leaked meaning. The signifying chain that anchored it to its original significance is broken

Kristeva, *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, trans. Thomas Gora, Alice Jardine and Leon S. Roudiez, ed. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980) 36-7.
⁸⁵ Jameson 7.

each time it is reproduced and decontextualised through the process of commodification, until Che's image is unrecognisable, a mere ornament.

Sinclair is explicitly critical about the textual free-for-all and its associated removal of texts from their context as the following passage demonstrates.

The glitzy mirrors, the underoccupied (mid afternoon) restaurant, indulged Kaporal, let him think of Brassai, of Robert Doisneau. It was worrying this inability to take anything on its own terms, treating the south coast like a Monday morning conference at Radio 4, broadsheets on the table. Nothing was, everything is *like*. Referenced, analogous. Parodic. [...] Kaporal [...] was quoting piecemeal from the second book he'd picked up on London Road. As you will have recognised. The previous para. A straight steal, twitched from first to third person, Henry Miller's *Quiet Days in Clichy*. Nobody reads Miller.⁸⁶

Meanings are no longer anchored, but free-floating, liberated from the constraints of any external architecture. Each transposition adds another dimension of textual meaning, so that the text becomes what Sinclair has called "a cacophony of quotations."⁸⁷ The abhorrent flipside of this liberation is a flattening of the original text, compressed under the burdensome weight of competing meanings, so that its voice is almost undetectable, or inaudible above the 'cacophonous' shriek of so many references. Like Jameson, Sinclair offers a cautionary tale; this time about Conrad. He talks about Francis Ford Coppola's Conradian moment in the film *Apocalypse Now*, a "different kind of colonialism" and his appropriation of that other exemplar of

⁸⁶ Sinclair, *Dining on Stones* 200-01.

⁸⁷ Sinclair, *Lights Out* 232.

modernism, T.S. Eliot: “A nude Michelin Brando lisping his Eliotic pieties and splashing himself with water. [...] *The horror*. [...] Coppola’s in trouble. Madness takes discipline. Eliot puts himself together on Margate Sands. The poem comes later. Coppola feeds Eliot’s lines. Like birdseed, to his costive genius actor: to pastiche madness.”⁸⁸ Again, that word pastiche. Jameson characterises it as an aporia; Sinclair, as constipation, a blockage, but not one that causes a productive break in the system of signification.

In The Shadow Of The Vampire

The question that arises at this point is: how is Sinclair’s autoplagiarism distinct from Fountain’s monologic doubling? Revealingly, Fountain’s story is not only attributable to Norton, but is attributable to Sinclair from a previous publication. When “Grays” is printed in full in the novel, it is a renamed and slightly reworked double of a Sinclair piece previously published in the small press title *White Goods*.⁸⁹ (The other Fountain story “View from My Window” is also attributable to Sinclair from a previous small press publication.⁹⁰) Norton’s review of Fountain’s writing as “a manner of composition I’d left behind” doubles as Sinclair’s self-conscious recognition of the text as an artefact produced from diverse inter-texts – including his own. Neither the style, nor the content of Sinclair’s previous works have been discarded: they have been reproduced and incorporated in *Dining on Stones*’ occluded retrospective of Sinclair’s earlier work. Known in its original version as “In Train for the Estuary,” “Grays” takes its cue from Karl Marx’s famous analogy between capitalism and vampirism: “capital is dead labour, which, vampire-like,

⁸⁸ Sinclair, *Dining on Stones* 187-89.

⁸⁹ Sinclair, *Dining on Stones* 141-65; *White Goods* 57-75.

⁹⁰ Sinclair, *Dining on Stones* 313-41.

lives only by sucking living labour, and lives the more, the more labour it sucks.”⁹¹ Sinclair's interpretation of the archetypal vampire tale has particular relevance for his ethics of appropriation because his reading of the Dracula mythology is also an allegory on cultures of intertextuality.

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, the vampire is a leitmotiv and metaphor that runs the course of Sinclair's work. In *Dining on Stones*, the character of Mocatta is called “The Dracula of Winchelsea” on account of his involvement in a network of exploitation. “The rarely seen dandy [...] had a marine property empire, 'slums for bums', that ran from Seaford to Hastings. [...] He'd recognised, very early, that asylum-seekers and urban unfortunates (banished from the Smoke) were a major asset, the coming commodity. Better than oil. Better than —or twinned with— drugs.”⁹² This is an example where refuse, in this case the refuse of society, is exploited and henceforth re-integrated into the circuits of capitalism. In Sinclair's reimagining of *Dracula*, the xenophobic tendencies of Stoker's time resonate in early 21st century Britain. In Bram Stoker's version (1897), Count Dracula is reviled for his foreign birth, yet his affluence and spending power buys him a place in British society. This time the outsiders, namely refugees, do not enjoy the protection afforded by social position or financial security. The social refuse of the global system of capitalism, the unemployed, the working poor, asylum seekers and economic immigrants, are at the mercy of a bloodsucking network of global capital that commodifies everything, including human life. They are refugees, not only in the accepted sense of the term, that is, those who have been ejected from their home: they are ‘economic refugees’, refugees from the hegemony of capitalism. They represent what sociologist Zygmunt Bauman has called the “outcasts” of modernity

⁹¹ Karl Marx, *Capital: Volume One*, trans. Ben Fowkes (New York: Random House, 1976) 342.

⁹² Sinclair, *Dining on Stones* 50.

and globalisation.⁹³ To be indigent is to be excluded from the bounds of capitalist society, which at its core is based on the precept of private property. Sinclair states in *The Verbals* that his reading of *Dracula* hinges upon the notion of private property: “It’s fantastic on real estate, it’s all about real estate from the start, the moment [Count Dracula] starts poring over these brochures of London.”⁹⁴

In the stolen story, Sinclair’s vampire doubles as an academic; or it may be the other way round. She is an embodiment of the contemporary *flâneur*, a stalker/*flâneuse* who obsessively pursues Joseph Conrad, her quarry and/or object of study:

First, she had learnt Polish. Then she tracked down the letters and initiated the slow, painstaking, much-revised process of translation. She travelled. Validated herself. Being alone in an unknown city, visiting libraries, enduring and enjoying bureaucratic obfuscation, sitting in bars, going to the cinema, allowed her to try on a new identity. She initiated correspondence with people she never met. She lied. She stole from Conrad.⁹⁵

The woman’s identity is leached from the work of Conrad. Sinclair describes unethical activity in appropriating text: lying, stealing, sucking the blood from the corp(se)us of Conrad. It is a rejection of Derrida’s hauntological model, a necrophiliac engagement with the trace, the residue of Conrad. The textual refuse left from the once living person is appropriated: “An over-intense identification with the books she read, authors and their characters. She became an emanation of place.

⁹³ Zygmunt Bauman, *Wasted Lives: Modernity and its Outcasts* (Cambridge: Polity, 2004).

⁹⁴ Sinclair and Jackson 105.

⁹⁵ Sinclair, *White Goods* 58.

That's why she wanted to be close to Conrad, but not too close. *It is still more painful and hard to think of you than to realize my loss; if it was not so, I would pass in silence and darkness these first moments of suffering.*"⁹⁶

A compulsive need to maintain the "validation" of this poached identity emerges, manifesting itself as addiction. Addiction, in another act of appropriation, subsumes identity and all other drives, overtaking all other considerations. Characters are readily marked as addicts by their behaviour, conflicted between desire and loathing for their drug. The paranoid tendencies of the addict, as they stalk text, leads to the conclusion that everything is textually connected. Appropriation equals paranoia in this belief — which apes the ideology of capitalism—that everything is one vast network. The man with whom the woman shares the train carriage is a book-dealer on the hunt for books. His story also employs the associated tropes of addiction, where text is the drug and the second-hand book trade is a black market economy dealing in addictive substances:

Nothing. Mid-morning and I hadn't pulled a single carrier bag. Books? I couldn't even find a shop. West Ham. Barking. Dagenham Dock. Shop? I couldn't find the town, the centre. Burying grounds, different light. Who needed books? ...I drank black coffee, standing up in fast-food dumps with revoked franchises. I ran back to the railway. I was getting jumpy for my hit of print. I read bills of fare with random apostrophes. I cross-referenced dull graffiti. I scraped the shit off my trainers to find a label to interpret. I tried to make up words from broken matchsticks. This was a territory without language. I snatched crumpled betting slips and

⁹⁶ Author's italics. Sinclair, *White Goods* 69.

crammed them into my pockets to have something to read on the train. I paced the platform like a caged cougar. I was uncomfortable in my skin.⁹⁷

Sinclair's narrative of addiction doubles as a critique on the compulsion to reproduce text and image that characterises both postmodern textualities and the apparatuses that produce them. The addict is an extreme embodiment of the (ir)rationality of consumption: consumed by the need to consume. Sinclair's characters function within an economy where libidinal urges are satisfied through the appropriation and consumption of texts, whether by reading, writing or purchasing.⁹⁸ The woman's lust for text is commensurate with the twin desires—blood and real estate—of her literary progenitor, Stoker's Count Dracula.

The textual doubling in *Dining on Stones*, which is published by the multinational Penguin, seems to enact a reterritorialisation of a deterritorialised minor literature. However, Sinclair's allegorical rewriting of the vampire legend and its subsequent inclusion in the mainstream novel's narrative, reveal that capitalism's doubles are simulacra in the Aristotelian sense because they are copies for which there is no original. The ostensible 'original,' *White Goods*, is the product of different material conditions. Thus the machinery of capitalism cannot duplicate it. The capitalist reproduction of text initially produced within an alternative cultural economy is an uncanny double (with an infinite capacity to be doubled over and over again) whose existence, like that of Sinclair's academic in "In Train for the Estuary/Grays," is parasitical. The capitalist simulacrum necessitates that the original

⁹⁷ Sinclair, *White Goods* 65.

⁹⁸ Sinclair, *White Goods* 65. Sinclair also addresses the intertwined themes of necrophilia, death-drive and addiction in *Downriver* 39: "And all the time, the body of Joseph Conrad - as it could be excavated from documents, letters, and sketches - was re-forming around him. He was nailing himself inside another man's shroud. He was willing Conrad's *physical* immortality; turning this Wapping hutch into an immaculate death-barque. When the very last item in the bibliography was secured, Sileen would cease to exist."

be destroyed, or at the very least, theorised out of existence so that restrictions based on its own premise of individual property rights can be circumvented. This is achieved through the shift to monologic culture. Postmodern appropriation is the total refutation of Bakhtin's *utterance*, and ultimately the effacement of the Other.

Postmodern Appropriation As Ideologeme

Vampirism, as Francis Ford Coppola's film *Bram Stoker's Dracula* (1992) made transparent, has its analogy with contamination and contagion. It is a metaphor for viral transmission. Capitalism, too, has been likened to a virus, spreading by infiltrating, then colonising host cultures, and eventually forcing them to mutate to its own form. According to Sinclair, viral attack and addiction characterise the process of writing contemporary fiction, and the onslaught of information and references. Appropriation spreads like disease, is dirty and infectious.

When you get into the zone, as sportsmen describe it, your book writes itself. Every phone call keys up the next chapter. Imaginary creatures, borrowed from Stevenson or Machen, beckon you from doorways. Succubi wink and flirt. London and the Estuary become extensions of your immune system. But you are not immune, you are wide open to all the viruses, syndromes, germ cultures: you twitch and fret, rant, sweat, ravish.⁹⁹

Sinclair represents Conrad's composition of *Nostramo* in this manner as well:

⁹⁹ Sinclair, *Dining on Stones* 94.

A short story that got its claws into him, cells breeding like a cancer. It swells unnoticed into a novella: 60,000 or 70,000 words. [...]

Six months in: 'Nostromo grows; grows against the grain by dine of distasteful toil [...].'

Black and bitter depression, fevers, troubled stomach.

[...] Half delirious, like a skeleton on a raft, tongue swollen till it fills his mouth, Joseph Conrad finishes the draft by working through the heat of August for eighteen hours a day.¹⁰⁰

Fredric Jameson offers "that every position on postmodernism in culture—whether apologia or stigmatisation—is also at one and the same time, and *necessarily*, an implicitly or explicitly political stance on the nature of multinational capitalism today."¹⁰¹ Postmodern literature is self-aware; it acknowledges its role as commodity and reproduces the ideology of the commodity form in its material form. In this manner, it functions as an ideologeme, simultaneously enclosing and enclosed by capitalist ideology. The metaphor of capitalism as virus comes into its own. The host culture is rearticulated as an ideologeme that subsequently spreads capitalist ideology in its dual capacity as receptor and transmitter. Or to put it another way, following Herbert Marcuse, capitalism is "self-validating enunciation,"¹⁰² as are postmodernism's textual practices. Appropriation is overcoded and underpinned with the monologic of capitalism. Capitalism's alchemical project is to capture ceaselessly forms and expressions of culture, transforming them into the gold of the commodity. The transformation occurs by forcing cultural products to conform to the capitalist laws of production, distribution and consumption. As textual practice,

¹⁰⁰ Sinclair, *Dining on Stones* 372-33.

¹⁰¹ Jameson 3.

¹⁰² Marcuse 101.

appropriation could even be said to be philosophically sympathetic with capitalism's espousal of liberalism and individualism.

Dining on Stones is a novel obsessed by doubles, as re-iterated in the line "[I]et me call myself for the present, Andrew Norton," which is an unreliable double for the opening line of Edgar Allen Poe's famous short story about doubles, "William Wilson."¹⁰³ Poe's following line, "The fair page now lying before me need not be sullied with my real appellation," could be read as a meta-comment on Sinclair's adoption of an alter ego, his double Norton in *Dining on Stones*. The novel within the novel *Estuarial Lives* functions as *Dining on Stones*' textual double, eerily similar in subject matter: "I made notes for *Estuarial Lives*, the A13 book: Aldgate, Limehouse, Dagenham, Rainham. Blank chapters."¹⁰⁴ However, Sinclair's doubles cannot be understood according to the schema of postmodernism because he refuses postmodernism's political and aesthetic symbiosis with capitalism. Moreover, the double in Sinclair travels beyond rehearsing a self-conscious hyphology.¹⁰⁵ He defies postmodernism's occultation of the author through his reiteration of the author's authority over his or her own work. In contrast to the reductive manner postmodern texts duplicate other texts, Sinclair's texts propose a typology of intertextuality, which advocates a dialogic duplication. This doubling refuses postmodernism's return to the idealism of Hegelian dialectics, and its synthesis of contradictions in the service of its unified material and aesthetic program: the commodification of literature. Consequently, *Dining on Stones*' textual recycling and incorporation of textual refuse enacts a critique of the epistemic shift to the postmodern monologic

¹⁰³ Sinclair, *Dining on Stones* 70.

¹⁰⁴ Sinclair, *Dining on Stones* 71.

¹⁰⁵ Roland Barthes, "Theory of the Text," *Untying the Text: A Post-Structuralist Reader*, ed. Robert Young, (Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981) 39.

that seeks to elide any social and material disjuncture through unified networks of production, distribution and consumption.

The language of capitalism has successfully established itself as the dominant language of the everyday, its ideology saturating every level of public and private discourse: politics, culture, identity. Capitalism's professed tolerance for, and inclusion of diverse subject positions, its 'inclusiveness,' can be read as a form of appropriation at the overarching levels of political economy and cultural production. Presenting itself as a polyglot, polysemous series of discourses and practices, capitalism is, in fact—as Marcuse ably demonstrated—one-dimensional.¹⁰⁶ “One vast machine” echo Toni Negri and Félix Guattari, “with a single program to turn society and culture into a ‘workhouse.’”¹⁰⁷ One-dimensional society is a compression of governmental, social, cultural and linguistic apparatuses into a singular political and social program; the “one workable strand” that Sinclair observed in the Hollywood appropriation of *From Hell*.¹⁰⁸ A totality which professes itself to be concerned with singularities, the forces of production instead homogenise alternative cultures through the process of commodification. Postmodernism, in the end, is a form of textual waste management that time after time reintegrates texts, even those that have been thrown away, in order to produce literature that can be (re)sold. *Dining on Stones* is all too aware of this circumstance as Sinclair/Norton's thoughts on *Nostromo* attest:

In *Nostromo*, that masterpiece of movement, shifting perspectives, romance, rebellion (intelligent, frustrated women and good black

¹⁰⁶ Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man* (London: Routledge, 2002).

¹⁰⁷ Felix Guattari and Toni Negri, *Communists Like Us: New Spaces of Liberty, New Lines of Alliance* (New York: Semiotext(e), 1990) 7.

¹⁰⁸ Iain Sinclair, “Jack the rip-off,” rev. of *From Hell*, dirs. The Hughes Brothers, *Guardian* 27 Jan. 2002, 21 June 2008 < <http://film.guardian.co.uk/features/featurepages/0,,640024,00.html> >.

cigars), nothing affects me so much as the agony of its composition, the research, the libraries devoured. Maps, charts, engravings. Financial pressure. [...] Author (creased brow) knowing he has a vast undertaking on his hands, long, complex, laboured; it must divert a dull-witted readership. The pain of those paragraphs! Sentences. Syllables. Mots justes. Money, money, money.¹⁰⁹

It is a description of the archetypal conflict facing the writer, the struggle between commercial imperative and creative freedom. The picture it paints of literature, and more specifically intertextuality, in the service of the market is framed by "agony" and "pain." The references to *Nostromo* in *Dining on Stones* are therefore not an appeal to the reader, but a comment on the difficulty of writing literature *not* destined for the marketplace.

¹⁰⁹ Sinclair, *Dining on Stones* 372.

CONCLUSION

As Walter Benjamin's work eloquently testifies, reading "the rags, the refuse" reveals much about the constitution of culture. What a culture does not value discloses as much about that culture as what it does value. Moreover, because refuse is an integral element of the everyday, and of modern consumer culture, there are compelling arguments for it to be brought to the fore as a topic for study. To recognise the potential and possibilities of refuse is to refuse the ideological and structuring machinery of capitalism, which has devised systems to render refuse invisible and invalid. In many ways, Iain Sinclair has spent his writing life creating and bringing to light what dominant culture has attempted to bury. Sinclair's textual refuse, his *obscenery* is the visible scriptural manifestation of those subterranean histories that hegemonic culture has sought to forget, ignore, and/or discount. His methodology emulates the practice of one of the central tropes of this thesis, the ragpicker. In any economy that fetishises the commodity, the ragpicker's inextricable association with the marginalised realm of refuse is politicised, and similarly Sinclair's association with, and creation of textual refuse is politicised activity.

Given refuse's inalienable link to production and consumption, Sinclair's engagement with refuse doubles an argument for his timeliness and relevance. The analysis undertaken in these pages suggests a number of different intersections of refuse and refusal occurring in his work. Initially, by outlining a general theory of refuse as the refusal of the commodity, this thesis mapped how creative practitioners, including Sinclair, can refuse capitalist modes of production by consciously creating textual refuse, the shit of the cultural economy. Sinclair's textual refuse is the refusal of the commodification of literature. Refuse in this sense is neither a failure nor a

negation. Consequently, Sinclair's engagement with refuse goes beyond aesthetic representation. This line of enquiry develops further when one considers cultural production as practice. Situating Sinclair's work as a form of play is one way of exhibiting his resistance to the capitalist culture of work. For the reason that it is autotelic as opposed to teleological, play is considered useless, valueless and as such, refuse. Yet Sinclair refuses simplistic binarism in that his prolific output is the antithesis of unproductive, whilst being gratuitous according to the precepts of capitalism.

It is important to note that Sinclair's refusals are never absolute, as his involvement with multinational publishing and mainstream media illustrates. They are about negotiation and movement, as opposed to aporia. The trajectory of this thesis has been to consistently promote refusal as a dynamic act; that its ruptures and blockages are not, in fact, impasses, but are, instead, productive. Sinclair's predilection for textual fragmentation is another example of the movement away from totalising structures. Similarly, the claim, disseminated by the grand narratives of capitalism, that refuse and commodity are separate entities is the type of totalising binary that Sinclair, and the arguments presented in this work seek to undo. Here, the stance has been that refuse is immanent to the commodity and, following Theodor Adorno, it is precisely this interrelation that generates the force of its critique.

In spite of burgeoning interest in his writing in the past decade, there are still a limited number of secondary sources, and works solely devoted to Sinclair are rare. Moreover, much of the criticism has adhered to familiar themes: the treatment of London, the *flâneur*, Sinclair's relation to minoritarian literature. This thesis has traced and critically examined some of the well-worn paths of its predecessors, but,

in the spirit of Sinclair's own work, has ventured further. The (inter)textual wealth of the material Sinclair has produced, and continues to produce, ensures that there is still new critical terrain to be discovered and surveyed. This allows present-day and future Sinclair scholars a generous amount of space in which to move. For these reasons, embarking upon an extended study of Sinclair is a liberating prospect. For exactly the same reasons, it is daunting, requiring critics to restrict their attention to certain aspects of Sinclair's work in order to give that work the intensive attention it requires and deserves. Most exegesis considers his work within a wider context, for instance, his role within the genre of London writing, or his relation to other London writers such as Peter Ackroyd. Even in the wake of an international conference, *City Visions: The Work of Iain Sinclair* in 2004, attempts to produce a sustained critical account of Sinclair and his writing remain scarce. Setting out for uncharted territory without a conclusive map can be unpredictable and confusing, but the enterprise also allows (or perhaps forces) emerging scholars to develop their skills as literary and cultural cartographers.

In a fashion, this is what Sinclair himself has done: he has wandered off the map when it comes to capitalist modes of cultural production and consumption. The theoretical framework deployed here to read Sinclair emerges from thinking about his singular relationship with diverse cultural economies. How can one speak about his oscillation between minoritarian literature and multinational publishing and not resort to established and overused terminology, vocabulary such as 'selling out' or 'compromise'? To do so would be to reinscribe the very narratives of cultural production that Sinclair has sought to refuse throughout his career. The foremost purpose of this thesis then has been to devote serious critical and academic investigation to a writer who has negotiated the marginal and the mainstream, not by conforming to a standard narrative of labouring on the fringes in the hope of

being (logically) appropriated by capital, but by refusing that pattern. His erratic movement between cultural economies is mimicked in the digressions and diversions of his fiction and non-fiction. Sinclair's difficult narratives mark a substantive refusal that is contiguous with his refusal of the structures of capitalist literary production.

Although devised with Sinclair in mind, the theory based on the interplay between refuse and refusal can be implemented to read other forms of cultural production. The parameters of such an interpretive tool are elastic and could expand to include other creative practitioners who deploy refuse and/or refusal in their practice and production. Naturally, this thesis is not intended as the final word on Sinclair; to offer a definitive account would be at odds with the types of histories that Sinclair himself has sought to create. A prevalent theme here has been the position that textual lacunae, what is missing, communicate as much information as what is present. Likewise, the absences in this thesis announce that there is a great deal more to be said on Sinclair. A dedicated reading of the underrepresented, 'difficult' fiction *Radon Daughters* and *Landor's Tower* needs to be executed. Sinclair's (mis)use of English, a dominant language, to create the "minor literature" (to borrow Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's terminology) of avant-garde poetry and modernist narrative offers another rewarding direction in which Sinclair studies can travel.¹

Of course, increased appraisal of Sinclair has occurred hand-in-hand with an increased interest in London itself, an interest that is frequently exploitative. This is the textual dilemma facing Sinclair: how to read one's subject without succumbing to an exploitative appropriation of the intertext. Given the intertextual dimension of

¹ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, trans. Dana Polan (Minneapolis and London: Minnesota U. P., 1986).

academic research, the issue of an ethical intertextuality is one for the Sinclair scholar to consider as well. Indeed, she could do far worse than to subscribe to the ethics of intertextuality proposed by Sinclair's work, one that is dialogic and modernist in sensibility, as opposed to postmodern and vampiric. As this thesis has argued, Sinclair's engagement with refuse, in practice and in his texts, offers an alternative model of literary production and as such, is one replete with possibilities for writers in many different fields.

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