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White chappell : scarlet tracings

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Chapter Eight: White Chappell: Scarlet Tracings

Many of the interests displayed in the earlier prose pieces are developed in *White Chappell: Scarlet Tracings*, Sinclair's first novel. A preoccupation with place is evident but interwoven with an examination of various forms of related cultural production. The approach to human relations with the earth is characterised by a focus on their pathological nature, as in the essay on myth and place. The opening of the novel finds the narrator and three companions travelling in a car and compares them to the four riders of the apocalypse. One of them, Nicholas Lane, suffers from a bizarre medical complaint which allows the novel to begin with a dryly grotesque description of his vomiting up of the contents of his stomach. Another character, Dryfeld, presents his own apocalyptic vision of the present state of Britain:

If the A1 had anticipated itself, Darwin would never have needed to leave these shores. It's all here Monsieur. Only the fittest and most insanely determined life forms can battle across the river to reach the central reservation — then, ha! They are free from predators. They live and breathe under the level of the fumes. They stay on this grass spine, leave the city or the sea coast, escape feral cats and their like, and travel the country, untroubled north or south. The lesser brethren die at the verges. And are spun from our wheels, flung to the carrion. Grantham's daughter this is your vision! And when the cities are finished, abandoned, life will steal back down in this protective tongue. The new world will evolve *here*.

(Sinclair 1988:12)

The appearance of these male companions travelling by car suggests a comparison with novels such as Kerouac's *On the Road*, but, travelling in later times, they are presented as involved in a different kind of quest which involves a return to the city they have come from rather than an outward exploration of the country as a whole. Dryfeld's roadside meditation introduces an element not present in the pieces previously dealt with, that of direct comment on the state of the nation, albeit in ironic mode. His observations resemble those of Arran Gare in terms of Gare's comments on the values of a dominant class-fraction and his near apocalyptic reading of the effects of contemporary cultural values on the well-being of the planet. The impression provided is of an almost posthumous culture, a land of the living dead. The vomiting Nicholas Lane, the reference to the riders of the apocalypse, and Dryfeld's apocalyptic meditation all contribute to this impression which is furthered by the raid on Mossy Noonman. The raid, while suggestive of a bank robbery in an American western, is in fact that of four second-hand book dealers on a second-hand book store. The deathly figures scavenge and haggle over the comparably dead detritus of a literary culture. They are interested in the financial value of the books, not their possible literary merit. The scene depicted is reminiscent of the scavenging world of Dickens's corpse-robbers in *Our Mutual Friend*. Lane is the star, unearthing a trea-

sured first edition of Conan Doyle's *A Study in Scarlet*, the first published Sherlock Holmes story:

Some covers had been recklessly taped to quite alien interiors, others fixed with rubber solution into brown wrappings. But it had been the name of Beeton's Christmas Annual, and the search for the magic date, 1887, that had settled the price for Nicholas Lane. (25)

Lane estimates that his find, if genuine, will bring him: 'Ten to twenty. Grand. Plus.' (25). Full-stops between the figures suggest the anticipated surprise of someone insufficiently informed about the calculation of value in antiquarian books and thereby indicates a relation to the more documentary aspect of Sinclair's writing here and elsewhere. As with aspects of Surrealism and Situationism, as well as novels like *Moby Dick*, Sinclair's approach is to weave a speculative discourse into a descriptive narrative which is itself closely related to an actual journey or journeys. This is an aspect of his work that can also partly be compared to that of Williams in his use of Glyn in *People of the Black Mountains*. The narrator in the book is an observant, Ishmael-like figure to whom various characters and their obsessions play Ahab. He characterises himself, though, in terms of a London figure: 'The narrator, feeling posthumous, thought of himself as the Late Watson. The secret hero, who buries his own power in the description of other men's triumphs. Dangerous ground.' (15). The novel is also characterised by the narrator's self-conscious and self-doubting observations on the significance of his own and his associates' projects and dealings in a posthumous, entropic world, where human beings, as in Land's reading of Bataille, seem to be self-destructive fragments of a larger system. While also reminiscent of the work of Burroughs and Pynchon, Sinclair's approach here might again be related to Isabel Armstrong's reading of the significance of grotesque figures who are representative of an alienated human condition under capitalism.

The grotesque, satirical and comic elements of the first strand of narrative are juxtaposed with a second, historical strand, concerned with figures related to the Jack the Ripper murders. The main character here is the surgeon, William Withey Gull, whose name is taken as appropriate in that he is presented as a victim of his own distorted beliefs. Evangelical Christianity and butchery are shown as intimately involved in his earliest days. Sinclair provides a picture of Gull's father sitting down to dinner which is reminiscent of the opening of the second part of *Ulysses*, when the reader is introduced to Bloom and his more healthily sensual appreciation of both liver and women. Sinclair's description presents a humourless follower of the Protestant work ethic whose offspring will be a talented surgeon, capable of more dramatic forms of butchery:

His fist, like a pale crab, went among the warmed meats, slither of kidney, liver, blood-sausage, layered on thick muscular segments of potato. He chewed vigorously, exercising an already powerful jaw; animal fires became his fires. There was no pleasure of the sense in this. Work was life. Life was work. 'Blessed is he who has found his work.' (27)

In contrast to Joyce's rather more celebratory depiction of both the city and humanity in relation to Bloom and Dublin, Sinclair focuses on the negative, pathological aspects of modern capitalist culture and its most representative form of place, the city – London in this instance. Comparisons can be made here with elements of the work of both Benjamin and Deleuze and Guattari, who take an interest in pathological displacements of healthier or more conventional forms of desire. Benjamin indicates, like Sinclair, a fascination with the evidence and origins of the increasingly commodified world of the modern city, as represented by the arcades of Paris. Deleuze and Guattari are interested in ways of escaping the apparatus of capture, represented by the state, capital and the negative, joyless forms of subjectification in which human beings can become entrapped. The older Gull provides an origin in his primitive but machine-like absorption of the flesh of other animals and his respect for work. His son is presented as a kind of Freudian case study but also as a study in evil, like many late nineteenth century characters from Dr Jekyll to Dorian Gray and Dracula. The presentation of Gull's inverted Christianity is perhaps also comparable to that of Hogg in his *Confessions of a Justified Sinner*. Joyce's work, this time *The Portrait of the Artist As A Young Man*, is ironically echoed in Gull's first attempts to write : 'Aloga taimma a gaow lifbb a boagy ho livin in a haos.' (28) The language here is not that of parodied baby talk but something, literally carved in stone (on a slate), that is perhaps evocative of an older, ur-language belonging to a time before Christianity or even the Old Testament. As in the essay on Hawksmoor, the relation of modern, urban cultures to much older ones, in terms of basic drives towards self-protection and self-destruction, is explored in a form of gothic which is thick with parody and literary allusions.

This approach is further developed in the narrative strand which follows the exploits of the narrator and his companion, Joblard. Commenting on the development of his interest in London as a place with a history as a form of spiritual pilgrimage (a characterization that allows him to be compared with the more violently pathological figure of Gull), the narrator observes that: 'You allow yourself to become saturated with this solution of the past, involuntary, unwilling, until the place where you are has become another place, and then you can live it, and then it is.' (31). The characterisation of relations with place as saturated with a solution is suggestive of a Jungian, alchemical element. Jung's interest in occult mysticism and ways of reconciling a sense of individuality with that of being at ease with one's life and place in the cosmos are a significant element in Olson's poetry. Olson's version of projection comes as much from Jung as it does from the influence of geography on his work. Charles Stein's study of Olson's use of Jung, *The Secret of the Black Chrysanthemum* provides a particularly thorough examination of this aspect of Olson's approach (Stein 1979). Here, Sinclair appears to focus on the element of transformation, as in the making of myth or fiction, involved in alchemical operations – an appropriately gothic variation on the notion of projection. Place has to be (re)created, albeit instinctively or unconsciously, but also 'lived', before it 'is'. In one sense, this might be regarded as a mystical or 'cryptic' version of Lefebvre's notion of the 'appropria-

tion' of space by those who are not part of the cultural formation that dominates it (Lefebvre 1991: 164–168). Lefebvre's notions of the appropriation, reappropriation and diversion of dominated spaces are partly related to events in the late sixties (a period towards which much of Sinclair's fiction displays a strong degree of ironically modified nostalgia). They can also be seen as a development of approaches to place and space offered by the French, 'Baudelairean' tradition referred to earlier. It was also noted earlier that Sinclair's approach to place more closely resembles the darker, worldlier side of the earth that Lefebvre sees as being displaced by medieval gothic. One way in which this occurs is through the emergence of repressed or earthly desires. These might be seen as being re-identified in the work of Freud with its emphasis on the workings of unconscious desires and already prefigured in works like Stevenson's *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, whose territory is, in more than one sense, the concern of Sinclair's novel.

As the novel progresses, the nature of Sinclair and Joblard's work — the creation of an area for psychogeographical research — is further elaborated upon. Jobs are taken in order to speak to other workers who inhabit the area and to get the feel of the place:

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. (35)

As in Olson's poetry, the real names of actual, specific places are provided, giving the sense of a report on a project as much a piece of fiction. The main characters are close to being identified as actual individuals — not only Gull and the narrator, but figures like Dryfeld and Joblard, who seem to be thinly disguised versions of Driffield and Brian Catling.

The narrator, reporting on the exploration of place and the related activity of second-hand book dealing undertaken with Lane, Dryfeld and Jamie, continues to dwell on the secondary nature of his own being. Gull perhaps seems a more vividly real character than the contemporary, living characters because his life is completed and can be presented and examined in more detail with the benefit of the passage of time. There are also good (or evil) reasons to remember him because of what he has done. The earlier essay on place and myth suggests that the significance of our life only really begins when we are dead. We then have the possibility of becoming part of something that closely resembles Jung's notion of the collective unconscious, of which both Olson and Sinclair attempt to present a version in relation to place. Sinclair's narrator worries at his unction with respect to what does and does not constitute a sense of being, contrasting it with the visual:

The narrator, seeking failure and obscurity, as the only condition spiritually adequate to his self-esteem, is glass; he watches them, not watching, being. And can only live in them and feeding from them. Which is a state of being as full and as empty as they themselves are. (69)

He becomes, in his own version of himself, a voyeur and a parasite, perhaps a vampire of sorts, in his feeding from the lives of those he watches, but concludes that he is not ultimately different and seems to justify his own project, though in uncertain terms. Part of the horror or worldliness of his vision of relations between place and people is the lack of substantive foundation for it. In this respect, he mirrors and embodies the text's self-consciousness about its own questionable status, in contrast to the greater sureness of more confident figures like Gull who 'sees', or thinks he does, the vision and the work with which God has entrusted him. Reference is made to another confident figure with a vision of this kind at the beginning of the novel, in Dryfeld's reference to 'Grantham's daughter' and her 'vision'.

The later part of the book broadens the element of historical reference and characterisation in the novel in relation to the central historical character of Gull. James Hinton's correspondences with his sister Sarah and his experience of the city as hell is followed by consideration of the work of his son, Howard, by Joblard. As in much gothic fiction, we are presented with a highly mediated approach to what can be considered actual events, thus again emphasising the cultural significance of the creation of meaning in anything. Howard Hinton manages to achieve, in his book *What Is The Fourth Dimension?*, published in 1887, what Joblard considers to be a vision of some significance:

We have got to imagine some stupendous whole *wherein all that has ever come into being or will come co-exists*, which, slowly passing 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. 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. (112)

Hinton's vision of a 'fourth dimension', which can take us beyond the prison or trap of our present perceptions, is presented with a strong dose of irony through the palpable of Joblard's enthusiasm for 'a geology of time' (Joblard is a sculptor). However, support for this notion is also provided by the narrator, in character as Sinclair, in his discussion of presences in fiction that become something much more than their authors could envisage :

Accepting the notion of 'presence' -1 mean that certain fictions, chiefly Conan Doyle, Stevenson, but many others also laid out a template that was more powerful than any local documentary account – the presences that they created, or 'figures', if you prefer it, became too much and too fast to be contained within the conventional limits of that fiction. They got out into the stream of time, the ether, they escaped into the labyrinth. They achieved an independent existence.' (129)

This discussion of the independent reality of fictional characters by two fictional characters who are barely distinguishable from actual individuals can be connected here to questions of metafiction, as raised by Pinkney in relation to Williams. Like Williams, Sinclair has something to say about the nature of place as created, by human experience and narratives, but does so in relation to fiction as instinctive my-

thologising. Place as the repository of people's experience guides or influences the writers he refers to, as it does many of the characters in the novel, whether they are fictional or non-fictional. Fictional characters become real as they connect to the collective memory of a particular place which, as in Williams, lasts much longer than the lifetime of a generation of living human beings. As with the people of Williams's Black Mountain area who are 'deep and gone' into the earth, so parts of the memories of generations of Londoners can be brought to life through a closer contact with the place where they lived.

What is transmitted, however, is far from reassuring, in terms both of the content and the complexly meditative, if often urbanely humorous, modality of its presentation. Sinclair both interprets and extends, in relation to his own poetics and politics of place, a fascination with the multiplicity and chaos of the city and the human psyche which has influenced its creation — the 'template' laid out by the writers he refers to. An anonymous 'Jack', not the Ripper, but sartorially and existentially, not far removed from him, appears just after their discussion:

Jack presents himself, initially as an alien life form. The light from the streetdoor shines through his gray raincape, beads of sweat trickle down his scalp. His thick glasses are misted over; he is eyeless. His arms are lost within the wings of the cape. (129–30)

Eyeless and armless in appearance, Jack is more shamanistic witness than reincarnation. He proceeds to retrace verbally the steps of Rimbaud and Verlaine in London, another male couple to complement those of Holmes and Watson, or Joblard and the narrator. References to Joblard's forthcoming wedding intensify the sense of a mystical communion with an arcane, psychic history. The phrase 'inner city' is allowed to take on other, possible meanings, and is provided with a daemonically spiritual dimension that makes it rather more of a 'problem' than simply clearing up the more embarrassing aspects of the mess created.

The final section of the novel introduces a further dimension to the complex 'template' that Sinclair has framed in relation to London and elements of its literary and psychic history. This complements the Hinton correspondence by means of a contemporary letter from one 'disenfranchised Scotsman' (165) to another. In his letter to Sinclair, a fellow poet, Douglas Oliver, discusses the problem of 'dabbling with 'demons''. He wonders, as Sinclair, as narrator, does, whether Sinclair is merely dabbling and concludes by giving him the benefit of the doubt, but no more than that. Again, the novel insists on exposing the precarious nature of its undertaking and that of the more general project of which it is a part.

The narrative progresses to a climax of sorts. A copy of Joblard's book 'Necro-pathia' is found in the possession of a man who has murdered his wife. The murder takes place in the Leeds area at about the time of the 'Yorkshire Ripper' murders. Gull proceeds with his mission to 'redeem my time' (193) by means of experiments performed on a series of women and is eventually committed to a hospital. He dies a rich man, true to his obsessions. The narrator, at the end of the novel, goes to an

upturned boat which would seem to represent Gull's first home, claiming that'(...) the connection will be made, the circuit completed.' (210).

The completion is promised rather than achieved, again suggesting the Utopian element in the Baudelairean tradition as characterised by Sheringham. The novel offers an urbanely self-conscious and ironic account of the arcane activities of a number of distinctly eccentric characters who are themselves interested in very disturbing aspects of the significance of London as place. A cryptic history of London, grounded in an investigation of that 'fen of undisclosed horrors' over which part of Hawksmoor's architecture is constructed, is presented as an alternative to versions of London as capitalist and imperialist success story. This approach is extended and expanded in Sinclair's second, more ambitious novel, *Downriver*.