

Hardy, Stephen Paul

## Downriver

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## Chapter Nine: Downriver

In his study of the development of London from an imperial to a global city, Anthony King offers a comparison between the 'Old Treaty Ports of China' and the new, world cities of which London is a prime example. He characterises the processes involved in the creation of such cities in ways which might serve as a useful prelude to a discussion of Sinclair's second novel, *Downriver*, and the London that it presents:

The processes are embodied in language and represented in space; 'concessions are granted to foreign powers, 'enclaves' are created for tax-free economic activities; and to protect themselves from the 'natives', the representatives of national and international capital retreat into 'compounds' bounded by high fences, locked gates and patrolled by state police or the security guards of private armies. In return for its percentage, the State maintains law and order, invests in the police, and provides the coolies and the social and physical infrastructure. These metaphors, stark as they may seem, have become real in London since the development of Docklands (King 1990:146)

King's depiction of late twentieth century Docklands as the repressive space of a colonial police-state itself verges on the gothic and *Downriver* can be regarded as a 'Docklands novel' in terms of its dramatizing of the space of an economic and political culture of which Docklands is the primary symbol. More directly than in earlier texts, Sinclair concerns himself in *Downriver* with a satirical critique of the values embodied in the life and buildings of nineteen-eighties London. As with King's description, he affords considerable attention to London as a post-imperial city.

*Downriver* can be regarded in many respects as a continuation of the project undertaken in *White Chappell: Scarlet Tracings*. The narrator and Joblard are still the central, co-ordinating characters, involved in another search for trapped deposits of London's secret history. The scope of the search, though, is wider, incorporating various parts of London, and presented in the form of a 'grimoire of rivers and railways' (408) that resembles an alternative travel guide and history. Another significant element, apart from the attention to aspects of both enterprise and imperial cultures, is the role played by the media. Debord's 'society of the spectacle' is present in various forms in most of the stories.

*Downriver* bears an interesting resemblance to *People of the Black Mountains* in its complex construction of a series of loosely inter-related tales. Williams, as we have seen, presents a cumulative history in a series of forty episodes. Sinclair, in *Downriver*, provides twelve tales, based on visits of different kinds to specific places and usually involving more than one sub-tale. The effect is not so much that of a cumulative history as of a partial, web-like, explorative mapping of some areas of a vast and complex space. In this respect, it might also be compared to Benjamin's convoluted approach to Paris in *The Arcades Project* or Deleuze and Guattari's mapping

of relations between molecular and molar orders of creation, in a series of plateaus, to be read in any order, rather than chronological chapters, in *A Thousand Plateaus*. The bohemian and sociable nature of the exploration conducted by the narrator and Joblard, the continued interest in pathological elements, and the emphasis on exploration as a form of escape from imprisoning aspects of the dominant social order also suggest an affinity with their approach, as does the characteristic of movement within the bounds of a certain area. As with both Deleuze and Guattari and de Certeau, Sinclair explores the potential of open and less visible pockets of space within the bounds of the dominant culture for projects of resistance, subversion and escape.

The twelve tales in the novel take the reader to a variety of locations and related institutions and characters along the river Thames. The opening tale, which provides an introduction to the novel as a whole, consists of twelve parts, the twelfth of which mainly consists of 'Joblard's HEART OF DARKNESS. *A Narrative in Twelve Postcards*: (25). Allusions to Conrad's symbolic tale of exploration are also made in other parts of the tale, as they are to Kerouac at the end of the first section: 'It was time to be out on the road.'<sup>(5)</sup>

The kinds of exploration the novel offers are ironically reduced versions of the earlier epics to which it alludes. Mock-epic and satire are integral elements in an exploration of specific parts of the city and their history. Apocalyptic aspects occur in various forms. The novel opens in Victoria Park and includes a short ecological meditation in connection with a reference to Mrs Thatcher, cast as a form of post-imperial dictator:

I looked out of the bay window at the lovely green lung of Victoria Park. (...) When the park was finally butchered and buried under tarmac by the threatened road schemes, it would all be over. There would be nothing left. 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. (4)

The sardonic humour in evidence here draws attention to processes of fragmentation and destruction focused on by writers like Lefebvre and Harvey as part of the exploitative organisation of social space by accumulative capital, represented, above all, by 'the Widow' and her cronies. 'A cast of grotesque characters helps to dramatise the nature of the social space explored. Milditch is an explorer of sorts, but also involved in the world of the media by virtue of his participation in film and television drama. The initial description of his activities could be applied to numerous characters in the novel, including the narrator: 'He made deals. He shuffled telephones. He haunted the dead zones of the city looking for connections that only he could activate.'<sup>(4)</sup> Before participating in 'a three-part Mini series push-on-the-Pole.'<sup>(4)</sup>, another form of media-deflated expedition, he sends the narrator in the direction of Tilbury Town. This, like many of the locations in the novel, is presented as a 'dead zone', which the narrator must activate by looking for appropriate connections. The initial description of the place provides a different image of London from that of glossy guide-book de-

scriptions based on more conventional points of reference such as Piccadilly Circus, Buckingham Palace, or Mayfair:

Tilbury Town is a single street and it is shut (...) The innocent sightseer abandons his guidebook to relish a haberdasher's grease-streaked window, which features underwear so outdated it has all the nostalgic allure of a fetishist's catalogue. There is a 'Financial Consultant' with a twenty-four hour sideline in radio-controlled mini cabs. And yet more mini cabs. The chief industry of the place is providing the means to escape from it. (6)

The energy of the prose seems to be partly motivated by the challenge of registering the degree of entropic inanity a culture can achieve. It has 'also been one of the dark places of the earth' (6), as the narrator, quoting Conrad, reminds us earlier in the section, and as presented here, it would seem to have returned to, or maintained, that condition. Reference is also made in an earlier part of the section to '(...) the river: black, costive, drawing me on; flaunting the posthumous brilliance of its history.' (6). Here, again, there is a characterisation of London, and its river, as post-imperial, but 'posthumous brilliance' might also serve as a description for the sardonic articulateness of the prose which is used to evoke its condition. Like the baroque drama explored by Benjamin, the 'baroque realism', (as the narrator characterises it) of the approach taken offers redemption only in the form of the death of the culture it depicts: a dead zone that can only be reactivated by 'making connections' and re-activating, its dark, suppressed history in opposition to surface notions of glamour and material success.

All of this is achieved in a style which appears to attempt to outstare the horror of what it records. This involves depiction of the activity of an army of minor characters sifting through the detritus of a cultural economy that operates on rapid development and turnover. One character, Iddo Okoli, would seem to be equally at home in the world of distant parts of continents once part of the British Empire and the current 'beached detritus of the Imperial Dream' (15), whether in the form of used books or discarded household appliances. Later in the novel, he presides as the leader of a voodoo ceremony at the heart of the British sector of 'voodoo economics' in Docklands. Conversations between the 'Connoisseurs of Crime', expeditions to the World's End (at Tilbury) and the obscure palimpsest of Joblard's postcard narrative all contribute to the sense of both a labyrinth and a dead end. The zone is comparable to that created by Pynchon in *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973), particularly as later tales break down the distinction between actual and perceived reality, but this is always related to the exploration of actual places in London. The result, as in Pynchon, is a mystery which the narrative will only partially clarify. As in Deleuze and Guattari, the chaotic and the absurd are treated in relatively positive terms, in contrast to the more socialist and humanist narratives of Williams or Lefebvre, where issues of justice and social progress are treated more seriously and solemnly.

Nevertheless, as with Williams, it is the significance of place, its specificity and history, which constitutes one of the principal positive elements in Sinclair's approach. The second tale begins with the detailed description of a tiny enclave of

hidden, historical space, not so far accessible to the creative destruction of modern urban planning, in the form of redevelopment for expensive residential properties:

The marmosets have gone. Why else should we meet in this place. A graveyard detached from its host: a church tower faking a period grandeur, while its body tumbles wantonly into decay behind corrugated-iron fencing. From the low steps of St John's, Scandrell Street, I mourn the loss of another secret locale. A *temenos* remaining secret because we do not need to visit it. It is there and that is enough. The balance of our psychic map of the city is unharmed. But now another disregarded inscape has been noticed and dragged from cyclical time to pragmatic time: has been asked to justify itself (34).

Sinclair's evocation of place is complexly mediated and usually redolent of decadence. The description of the place as *temenos* suggests an older, sacred relation to the earth, in contrast to the pragmatic functionalism of the modern cultural economy subsequently referred to. The 'balance of our psychic map' might be connected to the concerns of writers like Lynch and Jameson but also, further back in time to the concerns of poets such as Hopkins ('another disregarded inscape') and the Tennyson of poems like 'The Kraken' with its forebodings about the effects of modernisation on the delicate balance of an older ecology.

The marmosets referred to at the beginning of the passage are, like many of the human characters in the novel, victims who belong to and are consumed by their relation to place:

The marmosets were caged in huts and experimental basements. Mild theoreticians in white coats probed with blades for the sources of memory. (...) The skull, finally, was a hollow membrane lit by torches: 'memory' was active — and unlocated. The landscape is destroyed, but the dream of it is everywhere. (34)

The theme of controlled behaviour and damaged cerebral and neural activity is redolent of work by Pynchon and Burroughs but also the poetry of J.H. Prynne, and, again, Tennyson. Much of the search, in *Downriver* takes place through dreams, fantasies and other comparable states of consciousness. The sentence is suggestive of an attitude of nostalgia but also of more subversive possibilities. It would seem equally applicable to the projects of Olson or the Surrealists as to the cultures of colonised native cultures in America, Australia and elsewhere.

The two main characters in the story, Todd Sileen and Adam Tenbrucke are as damaged as the marmosets and both make their exits during its course. The one-legged, Conrad-obsessed, Ahab-like Sileen makes only a brief appearance, to return in a later novel. Tenbrucke plays a more central role, a figure reminiscent of characters in the work of both Pynchon and Poe. Trapped in his corrupted, entropic, antiquarian world and body, he dissolves in front of the reader's eyes:

He felt his brain drowning in occult semen, pearly slime dropping slowly on to sawdust, cold honey leaking from the sharp drip of a teaspoon. His residence

was a controlled environment. Each object smirked in self-justification. It knew its value. It 'appreciated' as fast as its curator. Tenbrucke was dying, decaying, sweating himself away. (40–41)

Tenbrucke manages to make the corruption he embodies even more spectacular and challenging in a final piece of performance art. His unwitting audience is represented by two 'dangerously healthy-looking' octogenarian, Californian tourists who are already aware of London's tendency to disintegration:

This frigging town was awash with terrorists brandishing poisoned umbrellas, crazy Irish bombers, Arabs spitting in your food, and fall-out from Russia stripping the trees. If you could find a train that was moving it was sure to explode. (42–3)

One person's or one country's disintegration can be another's development. Sinclair's text, like much late nineteenth century gothic fiction, makes ample allusion to London's degenerate nature but also, if usually in satirically negative terms, to its extraordinary ethnic, and thereby, social and political diversity. Sinclair's London is not a safe or clean place in any sense, in contrast to the self-enclosed world of the 'shrink-wrapped, sterile' tourists who are the epitome of the safe, clean, sterile, non-place. Tenbrucke, on the other hand, embraces the corruptions of body, place and the earth's elements, chaining himself to the river-bank, viewing the landscape in ultimate terms and opening himself, psychically and sexually in a final act of union: 'He opened his mouth and swallowed everything that was coming.' (48). Like Carter's William Light, and like many other characters in Sinclair's novel, he disappears, or dissolves, into the landscape. The provocative gothic extremities of the comic elements also display a considerable degree of affinity with the approach of Deleuze and Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus*. 'Zones of transition', the preferred social space of *Downriver*, have much in common with Deleuzoguattarian notions of 'becoming'. The latter are sometimes also presented in comic-gothic form, as in the case of the rapidly and unpredictably evolving Professor Challenger in the plateau entitled '10,000 B.C. The Geology of Morals' or the references to B-Movies, Lovecraft and Borges in 1730: *Becoming-Intense, Becoming-Animal...*' (Deleuze and Guattari 1988:39–74;239–252). A positive, almost celebratory, attitude towards disturbing, differential or chaotic elements might be claimed as characteristics of both gothic literature and post-structuralist philosophy and are integral to Sinclair's approach to place. London characterised in this fashion might thus be seen as helpful to devolutionary or dis-integrative processes of change in other parts of Britain.

Another element which emerges in this and other stories is that of the artist as shaman, a figure common in much American poetry, and one relatable to the bardic figures of older European cultures. The narrator himself undergoes a visit to the underworld, in the form of the Rotherhithe Tunnel, before emerging into another world, on the other side of the river and is then '(...) confronted with the legend of Prince Lee Boo' (52), a sacrificial victim of British imperialism who haunts the area, and whose tale he then relates.

Similar elements are present in the next tale, *Horse Spittle (The Eros of Maps)*, whose subtitle again indicates a significant relationship between desire and orientation. The central figure is another self-sacrificing character Edith Cadiz. She is approached through a palimpsest of media-oriented activity by the narrator and his colleagues:

If we did not impose the reflex inhibitions of disbelief, we would surely come, without strain, to the heart of the tale. We no longer believed in 'Spitalfields' as a concept; in 'zones of transition', New Georgians, the 'deal', or any of that exhausted journalistic stuff. We had something much better: a story we did not understand. It is always much more enjoyable to play at detectives than at 'researchers', who gather the evidence to justify the synopsis they have already sold. (60)

The orientation is always towards something less immediately tangible than the pretentious surface images which are sought and peddled by the media figures in whose machinations the narrator and his associates are partly enmeshed. Edith Cadiz emerges as a combination of earth-mother and *femme fatale*. With a name reminiscent of Edith Cavell's, she works as a nurse by day, stripper and prostitute by night, presenting an alternative, or supplementary, cultural economy to that promoted by capitalist social relations. Her most memorable act is a surrealist strip-tease in which her dog-companion strips layers of London street-map from her body, engaging the desire of her audience as the geography of London writhes in waves of erotically charged transformation:

(...) her wolf-dog leaps from the audience, rushes to her, takes the brass ring in his wet mouth, and pulls away a Spitalfields terrace with a twist of his powerful neck. The jagged gap reveals reveals new streets, fresh relations: Edenic glimpses. The tired city is transformed: a dustpit fades to expose an orchard, a church lifts through a sandbank, a hospital (with blazing windows) slides beneath the surface of a slow-moving river. The punters are maddened. The Thames attacks Hornsey. Leadenhall Market removes to Chingford. (63)

In her erotic and self-sacrificial mode of behaviour Edith provides an alternative cultural economy to that of capitalism comparable to the approach of Bataille or the appropriations of capital's more positive elements pursued by Deleuze and Guattari in their more flexibly abstract figure of the nomad and related concepts.

Edith is complemented by Meic Triscombe, M.P. who connects the occult elements in the tale to those of contemporary political satire. At the end, he meditates on the failure of an attempt to gain some personal credit from events arranged to support Aboriginal land rights and revive the memory of 'Old King Cole', an Aborigine cricketer, who, like Lee Boo, failed to survive his visit to the imperial metropolis:

Why had he bothered? There was no ethnic percentage in Abos. Now that he had thought about it, he convinced himself that there weren't any in Hackney, We had everything else: Blacks, Indians, Pakis, Turks, Kurds, Greeks, Yids, Fascists, Pinks, Greens, Gays — but hardly an Australian of any type. A few back-packing

antipodean dykes got into the schools; but they moved on fast. And good rid-  
dance. (86)

As with the tourists in the previous tale, the intolerance and cynicism of modern forms of cultural abjection are satirically contrasted with London's complex and haunted cultural diversity.

The geographical area focused on in the next two tales is primarily Spitalfields, with questions of image coming to the fore as the researchers venture into the arena of another medium, that of television and the B.B.C. The latter is linked to the culture of venture capital by being christened as 'The Corporation' (92). As with Triscombe and professional politicians, 'The Vatican', its other, more gothic-sounding title, receives satirical attention, in terms of its 'dogma', summarised in precepts such as 'There are two sides (and only two) to every argument.' (92). As in Sinclair's previous novel, the narrator and his colleagues find difficulty in sifting the authentic from the pretentious, and financial profit from either. Spitalfields is the right name for the area because of the appropriate associations: 'Spitalfields': the *consiglieri* liked the sound of it, the authentic whiff of heritage, drifting like cordite from the razed ghetto. But, please, do not call it 'Whitechapel' whisper the dreaded 'Tower Hamlets'. (93). Here, relatively recent ghosts emerge to trouble the clearing and paving-over of the locality evoked by Carter in *The Lie of the Land* and Sinclair insists on a comparably close attention to the complexities of its contours in relation both to geography and to the histories held within it, but in an altogether more parodic and satirical modality. His approach consists of diving into and through the multiple layers of rubbish thrown up by a near endless series of socio-economic, technological and cultural transformations to find what treasures might have been thrown up in their wake. In the sixth tale, the creation of the Docklands Light Railway provides such an opportunity. As with, Edith Cadiz's striptease, the cityscape becomes open to transformation, this time in the form of a rerun of the original bout of 'creative destruction' that saw the beginning of the railways:

The privatization of the railways carried us straight back into all the original excitements — and most of the chaos — that attended the birth of the system. Unchallenged social changes generated their own hubris: anything was possible. Demons slipped the leash. We were lords of creation. We could tear down and reshape cities; send iron ladders steeping out over the unregistered landscape. (158)

The new railway again damages ('casually amputated') a 'dream site', that of the Aboriginal cricketer, King Cole, who appeared in the third tale. Here Sinclair includes a variation of the refrain in the second story: 'The dream was maimed but not destroyed: disregarded' (164). A later section speculates on some of the effects of 'railway time', particularly in its newly privatized version:

The myriad routes and branches that followed on the unrestricted planning permission granted to the railway companies meant that time was also deregulated,



released from its bureaucratic prison: now anyone with voting shares could call the shots. We were recklessly plunged into a lake of temporal Esperanto ... (171)

In a manner comparable with that of Deleuze and Guattari's nomad, taking advantage of the open space provided by capital's destabilization of settled practices, but also that of Olson, moving with combinations on a specific territory, Sinclair produces his own form of speculative venture, investing that space with his own anarchic *imaginaire* rather than converting it in accordance with the latest requirements of processes of capital accumulation.

Connections between place and fascism, were made in Sinclair's essay on myth and place. The third quarter of the novel explores some of these connections in the context of nineteen eighties Britain, moving first to the suburbs. The *Prima Donna* of the seventh tale most obviously refers to the main protagonist of the tale within that tale which makes up its sixth section, but might also refer to its teller, John Millom, or, even more obliquely to the first lady of state and champion of suburbia in the nineteen eighties, Mrs Thatcher. The narrator, Sinclair, in the course of his investigations for his next book, chooses Millom out of a myriad of conspiracy-enthusiasts who contact him as a result of reading his first novel. He takes a train again, this time to '(...) the complacent ruralist calm of Leyton.' (195) Millom meets him at the station and then takes him home, in Calderon Road, in order to tell his tale itself influenced by Calderon, with whose play *The Surgeon of Honour*, he empathises: 'I could have written the thing myself, take way the language.' (197). Millom, who carries a swordstick, is presented as a darkly comic avatar of Jack the Ripper, keen to purify humanity of its sins. As in the baroque world of Calderon and Benjamin's book on *The Origins of German Tragic Drama*, where the only form of redemption in this respect lies in death, Leyton is presented as an appropriate spatial context:

The cheesy net curtains did nothing to filter out the inhuman entropy of High Road, Leyton; an embolic flutter of muddied Transits, partially resprayed Cortinas, and an angry boil of citizens scouting for the first rumours of the bus pack. The street had no evident purpose beyond proving the Third Law of Thermodynamics. Every substance has a limited availability of energy... (199)

The passage is reminiscent of the description of Tilbury Town in the first part of the book where : 'The chief industry of the place is providing the means to escape from it' (6). Millom's location in a dormitory, commuter suburb suggests its role as the entropic heartland of a reactionary tendency away from a culture sympathetic to notions of difference and towards a monolithic culture of death. The story begins and ends with the depiction of an even more zombie-like character, Cec Nettlewhite, who drives lorryloads of radio-active waste to secret depots in the small hours of the morning:

Cec had been turned down for the buses on the grounds of 'poor road sense': but the spooks found him perfectly suitable, a clean profile. He was deaf, impotent, suffering the onset of premature senility: a psychoneurotic, prone to para-

noid anxiety. He had a bad marriage and no friends. His moral judgements were untrustworthy. He was just about capable of keeping his hand on the steering column. The ideal man: he fitted the job description to the letter. (190)

Cec might also be seen as the ideal member of other, comparable organizations who can use the service of such disaffected and dysfunctional individuals. The primary textual linking of such characters to Mrs Thatcher and her regime, apart from suburbia and notions of purification, lies in Millom's claim, at the end of his interview with Sinclair, to have become 'one of us' (212). The satirical element in relation to the dominant political culture of the nineteen eighties may not be paramount but is usually present. It provides an interesting fictional complement to aspects of Deleuze and Guattari's approach to microelements or microfascisms in the composition of societies, which can fuse into the sudden build up of dangerously reactive, paranoid forces (Deleuze and Guattari 208–231).

The element of political satire in relation to developments in contemporary urban space is rather more explicit in the next two tales. The first, 'Art of the State (*Silvertown Memorial*)', focuses on the relationship between monumental architecture and political absolutism, a theme focused on by numerous analysts of urban space. Mumford tends towards suspicion of the baroque and the classical as supportive of absolutist tendencies in seventeenth and eighteenth century Europe. Harvey registers a strong degree of disquiet at the 'organization of spectacle and theatricality' of post-modern urban centres, combined with 'voodoo economies', as representative of: 'The triumph of aesthetics over ethics...'. (Harvey 1990: 93;239). Lefebvre also includes a relatively neutral consideration of 'monumentality' as a significantly transcendent aspect of architecture, taking the Taj Mahal as an example, and moves on to a characterisation of 'monumental space as that which signifies the sacred and excludes the profane or obscene. 'The obscene', he claims, 'is a general category of social practice, and not of signifying processes as such: exclusion from the scene is pronounced silently by space itself.' (Lefebvre 1991:226).

The narrator and his associates, in this and the next tale, are increasingly excluded from the scene of the dominant culture, as they watch it from a distance or concealed in secrecy. Similarly, many of the characters whose tales are told are obscene, in this more specific sense of off-scene, and in the general challenge they present to a pristine culture of authoritarian spectacle. The seventh tale opens with an extravagantly grotesque parody of Mrs Thatcher, 'The Widow', as the central figure in a technically enhanced neo-baroque, politically authoritarian paradise:

One morning...the newspapers loud with her praise, the *Sun* in its heaven, banked television monitors floating a cerulean image-wash, soothing and silent, streamlets of broken Wedgwood crockery, satellite bin lids flinging back some small reflection of the blue virtue she had copyrighted, (...) the widow rose from her stiff pillows — bald as Mussolini — and felt the twitch start in her left eyelid. She ordered the *immediate* extermination of this muscular anarchy. (...) She was a couple of years into her fifth term in what was now effectively a one-party state and a one-woman party — what *could be* wrong? (219/220)

The various elements of the Widow's regime, personal and political, are included at one stage or another in the tale, from the *Sun* to the Saatchi brothers ('The Sh'aaki Twins'). A working lunch of the Steering Committee to discuss the planning of a memorial to her dead 'Consort' forms a major part of the tale. What Harvey characterises as the dubious eclecticism of postmodernist architecture and its tendencies towards even more dubious forms of neoclassicism are similarly connected here to the world of neo-Victorianism and free-market economics:

'I see it, I see it!' the Architect cried out, with all the agony of a convert. 'You're reviving Speer. I've thought for some time, though one has been reluctant to admit it — he's a quite respectable figure once you move him from the sleazy *milieu* in which he operated. (233–234)

In subversive opposition to this project, Imar O'Hagan, an associate of the narrator builds his own, alternative monument, a bunker modelled on the Silbury Hill complex. As in many parts of Sinclair's writing, reference to a much older culture, closer to the earth forms part of the cryptic space offered as part of a fugitive resistance to the unifying domination of modern cultural imperialism. The tale following, set mainly in the Isle of Dogs, begins with a vision of Sinclair's native area of South Wales being 'leased' to '(...) Onoka-Mishima Investments (Occidental)...'(263) and Britain as a banana republic similarly 'leased' to various manifestations of international venture capital. This includes London, where 'The occult logic of 'market forces' dictated a new geography.' (265). Voodoo economics almost become literal, centred in the new Venice and Vatican of the Isle of Dog(e)s, in a parody of the British gothic novel's demonization of Roman Catholicism. At the centre of this combination of all things terrible is 'the Widow', the destructive monster created by the failings of the national psyche:

'I'm convinced', said Davy, 'we are confronted by a demonic entity, a blue-rinse succubus draining the good will of the people. That woman can't be stopped without a stake through the heart burial where four roads meet, a fist of garlic up the rectum. She's a force of nature, but she's not self-created (...) The Widow is the focus of our own lack of imagination: the robot of our greed and ignorance... (267)

The alternative community sheltering in O'Hagan's bunker then attempt to penetrate 'Vat City', the chosen name for Docklands, and a social space graphically dramatised but close to that of the sketch drawn by Anthony King at the beginning of this chapter. Their chosen mode of transport is a curragh, again redolent of much older cultures that are more attentive to the earth. They penetrate to the centre and find various of the novel's characters involved in voodoo ceremonies of the blackest kind. The only escape from this nightmare space, the narrator decides is '(...) to believe more strongly in some other reality, a place beyond this place.'(295) An attention to place which can be interpreted as both Utopian and nostalgic, or as a form of 'dreaming' which can be connected to Surrealists or Aborigines, recues the heroes

from their predicament. They dream of 'the gentle slopes of Mudchute Hill' and subsequently find themselves there (296).

The final tales continue this movement of escape away from the nightmare centre of Docklands. The eleventh tale primarily takes the form of a pilgrimage to the home of a relatively unknown poet, Nicholas Moore, in St Mary Cray, near Orpington. Here we are presented with something approaching pure documentary, with no overt fictional modifications, in stark contrast to the previous tale. This is presented mainly through the medium of an edited interview with another poet, Peter Riley, who tells the story of Moore's life and career and his connections to better known poets. Moore is presented as a figure in internal exile, wasting away from diabetes and in a culture which has less and less time for poetry. Riley emphasizes that 'He didn't relate to this locality in any sense.' (315) but Sinclair insists on exploring it, by way of the river, and through the eyes of Moore, providing the reader with an alternative approach to this part of London's outer suburbia. Sinclair presents his reader here with a view of the poet as representative of an alternative, almost lost culture, dying of neglect. Moore is linked, by implication, to the ghosts we have encountered in previous tales and there is a strong kinship with the kinds of figure documented by Paul Carter in his approach to relations to the land in the Australian context. Riley notes Moore's attitude to poetry: 'There was a large sense that poetry is very important and was everywhere abused. He felt that what he was writing was important that the world was losing it. There was no access to the world.' (312) He also observes his relation to the land, if only in the form of his suburban garden:

The garden looked like a wilderness, but the pattern was still there underneath. All it needed was weeding. This was a great creative work of his. He cultivated his own hybrids of irises and Michaelmas daisies and *sempervivums*. (313).

As with many of Sinclair's fictional characters, there is a powerful element of eccentricity and at least of physical corruption, as Moore struggles to garden in his wheel chair, dying of diabetes but still consuming good food and wine. Like the historical characters such as Lee Boo or King Cole, he suffers a death which is obscene in both the conventional and Lefebvrian senses, wasting away in internal exile. Like Carter's von Strehlow and the Aranda culture that fascinated him, or William Light, he is seen as representative of something lost and disappearing, but not totally. Sinclair makes a point of ending the chapter, after his 'pilgrimage' (317) along this part of the river, with '*Sempervivum!*'. The relative lack of comic, ironic or fantastic elements in these parts of the story suggest a degree of affinity with Carter's approach to his Australian figures.

A journey on the river, to the estuary, is the focus of the penultimate tale, which mixes allusions to *Moby Dick* with more numerous references to *Three Men in a Boat*. The notion of pilgrimage is maintained with the ultimate destination of the Isle of Sheppey occupying the role of an ironised Utopia, a space which is off-scene with regard to what is presented as the oppressively dominant culture: '(...) to carry us downriver, beyond the known station of Tilbury towards the potential mysteries of

Sheerness. From the Isle of Dogs to the Isle of Sheep: a pilgrimage towards Hope, and for Joblard a quest for his origins. (325) The inclusion of a 'quest for origins', while ironically developed, again indicates a kinship with Olson's, Carter's and Williams's notions of pasts that could have been developed into better futures. At the same time, the ironic presentation of such quests is indicative of an equal degree of affinity with a politics and poetics of difference that uses the past as a resource to challenge the conformities of universalizing dogmas with claims to a monopoly on the truth.

The implications of the transformation from dockland to Docklands are explored in relation to Woolwich. The liberating obscenity of the old place is contrasted with the sanitised confinement of its regeneration. First, there is a description of the relatively fortunate fate of those later housed in the hulks: 'Dissenters and criminals (marginal to the needs and legitimate needs of the state) were once spilled into the wilderness of an unmapped world..' (336) These are characters like those in the novel, but they are later imprisoned in the prison hulks '...a floating Gatwick without the duty-frees. The only destination was death.'(336) These are then linked to the cultural complement of 'enterprise', that of heritage:

Now the hulks were occupied once more, under the co-sponsorship of English Heritage, who had lovingly restored them to the last detail of authenticated squalor. This daringly simple solution had been unveiled by the Widow in her keynote Marshalsea speech...(336)

The Marshalsea speech is attended by Sir Alec Guinness, player of Dorrit senior in the film production of Dicken's novel. The Widow reminds her audience that: 'A prison is a state of mind' and then goes on to outline her own, carceral vision of fragmented, domesticated, neo-nationalist 'freedom': (...) let every man become his own warder, protecting the things he loves best: his *family*, his *home*, his *country*. Then, and only then, will We discover what *true* freedom means.' (337). The regal, capitalised 'We' is maintained throughout the speech. Here, to use Lefebvre's terms, the representation of a space, that of 'truth', in the speech, is nicely contrasted with the (carceral) truth of that space — if the reader chooses to accept the narrative's rather than the speech's perspective.

Further downriver, pondering on the fate of the riverboat, the *Alice*, the narrator's mind begins to drift, forming associative patterns from and with the landscape, in a manner reminiscent of the technique of *macchiare* to which Paul Carter is attentive in relation to painters like Giorgione (Carter 1996: 175–176).

Something happens with the draw of time. With names. The *Alice*. Fleeing from the extreme interest of Lewis Carroll (...) Dodgson Dodge-son. Out on the river with another man's daughters. Lorina, Alice, Edith (...) *Edith Street*, E2. Only the names survive; riding the tide of history like indestructible plastic. (342)

One is reminded here of de Certeau's comments on street-names in Paris: 'A strange toponymy that is detached from actual places and flies highover the city like a foggy geography of 'meanings' held in suspension...(de Certeau 1984:104). The Situation-

ist technique of drifting, close to De Certeau's concerns here, and the equally suggestive, associative notion of *macchiare* can be seen as applicable to Sinclair's approach in much of the book and, again, it is the process of combination which is of particular interest, combining the urban with older notions of place.

Sinclair himself is the focus of the final tale. He disappears out of his novel, leaving Joblard, in the role of Ishmael to his Ahab, to take over the narrative, while he becomes part of the company of eccentric spirits of place in a posthumous culture that his own grimoire has conjured up. A grim trudge around the Isle of Sheppey concludes the novel as both Joblard and Sinclair, who has now become totally speechless, look for an ending, a way out. Joblard begins to believe in the virtues of place, of fiction, and particularly a combination of the two, transforming Sheppey into another *temenos*:

This is an island that is *not* the world. It is removed, discrete; one of those transitory border zones, caught in uncertain weather, nudged, dislocated by a lurch in the intensity of the light. A special place, where, I'd like to believe, 'good persists in time'. These are not my thoughts. This is not what I want to say. 'Good', if it still survives, is sustained by its concubine, 'evil; its sullen dependant. There is only the *will towards good* asserted by these unnoticed landscapes. And the quality we discover in ourselves as we are drawn towards them. 'Good' is a retrospective title. To be used when it's all over. (401)

The element of projection and the ethical battle are insisted upon at the end, which finally ends with an imaginary cricket match and the delivery of the manuscript of the novel, left in '(...) the hands of the cashier at the Indian supermarket in Heneage Street.' (407).

In *Downriver*, Sinclair produces a focused perspective on Britain's capital, which includes significant elements derived from aspects of American and French, as much as British, writing. The effect is one comparable with the satirical fantasies of British writers such as Swift, Dickens or Butler, as well as being comparable to those of American authors such as Burroughs or Pynchon. At the same time, the novel provides evidence of a sympathetic attitude to the concerns of epic strains in twentieth century British and American modernist and neo-modernist poetry, as well as to those of writers in a disruptive, ironical tradition of reflective subversion and appropriation, stretching from Baudelaire to the Situationists and beyond.