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Place and the early writing of Iain Sinclair

In: Hardy, Stephen Paul. *Relations of place : aspects of late 20th century : fiction and theory.* Vyd. 1. Brno: Masarykova univerzita, 2008, pp. 93-105

ISBN 9788021047181

Stable URL (handle): https://hdl.handle.net/11222.digilib/123872
Access Date: 23. 02. 2024
Version: 20220831

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PART THREE

Chapter Seven : Place and the Early Writing of Iain Sinclair

Iain Sinclair, like Raymond Williams, has devoted much of his writing to a sustained investigation and dramatisation of issues pertaining to place. The analysis of his work here includes consideration of its relation to aspects of French and American as well as British literary traditions. Sinclair, born in Wales, is of Scottish extraction and was educated in both Ireland and England. The majority of his adult life has been spent in London, to which the bulk of his writing has been devoted. Sinclair's publications include a series of volumes of prose and poetry, notably *Lud Heat* (1974) and *Suicide Bridge* (1979) as well as a series of novels, the two earliest of which, *White Chappell: Scarlet Tracings* (1988) and *Downriver* (1991), will be focused upon here.

Like the area on which Williams focuses, London has the potential to disrupt any simple notion of national identity, partly because it is a city, as opposed to a country, a city which has interests that extend well beyond the British Isles and which houses a population of exceptional ethnic diversity. At the same time, due to the degree of that diversity, but also because of the size and density of its population, London is a community more obviously unknowable than Williams' region. Furthermore, Sinclair, unlike Williams, is not a native of the area he chooses to focus on, even if he has spent most of his working life there. The brief depictions of London by Williams in his fiction prior to *People of the Black Mountains* tend to depict it as an alienating and anonymous place. This is far from being the case with Sinclair, but his novels regularly depict their characters discovering much about London of which they were hitherto unaware. It was observed earlier that Williams can be situated in the context of a predominantly English tradition in novel writing that includes George Eliot, Thomas Hardy and D. H. Lawrence. This does not completely account for the nature of Williams' novel writing and his approach to questions of place, particularly in relation to Wales, but Sinclair's relation to aspects of national traditions in writing would seem to be more immediately complex and the approach taken here will attempt to reflect this.

In an essay on approaches to Paris in nineteenth and twentieth century French writing, Michael Sheringham distinguishes between two traditions. One is represented by Balzac and signifies for Sheringham what he characterises as positivistic types of writing that inform the reader about developments in modern urban society in ways more collaborative than critical. In contrast to this:

> (...) the Baudelairean tradition construes Paris as a site of melancholy but ever-hopeful experience that questions and subverts the reductive characters of the planner, the politician and the orthodox literate. Paris becomes the name of

> a dimension of experience where totality is imminent but never actual, a zone of possibility for which the city-streets are the ever full, ever vacant setting.
> (Sheringham 1996:12)

This is a distinction partly reminiscent of Benjamin's between the modern novel and the story in *The Storyteller,* though in Sheringham's essay Benjamin is seen as part of the alternative to a tradition of writing collaboratively housed within, rather than reflectively critical of, processes of modern urban development. It is also reminiscent of Harvey's attack on the collaborative tendencies of post-modernist artists and theorists in relation to what he and Lefebvre view as processes of exploitative fragmentation, rather than tolerant and interactive differentiation. It might further be compared to Sinclair's approach to London, which like that of Baudelaire and later writers, projects personal dreams, fantasies and hopes (not only those of the narrator but of numerous other characters) onto particular places, investing them with an '*imaginaire* ' (Sheringham 1996:114).

Sheringham's analysis includes consideration of a slightly earlier study by Christopher Prendergast which refers to both Williams and Benjamin:

> Benjamin, like Williams, though in a very different style, insists on 'connection', the bringing to consciousness and knowledge of a system whose deep structures and modes of operation are often hidden, in the form both of an oppression and a suppression which suppresses the conditions of its own intelligibility (...) including, critically, the intelligibility of its oppressive character.
> (Prendergast 1992 : 214)

These comments also bring to mind perspectives such as those of Lefebvre, Harvey and Jameson. Their focus is on a more directly critical interpretation of modern, urban capitalism and the underlying, ultimately unsociable, processes it is seen as encouraging, but both kinds of approaches suggest the possibility of a more positive whole, glimpsed beyond the fragmentations of a negative social space and the same might be observed of Sinclair.

Sinclair's investigation of obsessive relations to the earth is also reminiscent of another French writer connected with aspects of Surrealism, Georges Bataille. Nick Land, in his study of Bataille, provides a distinctively grotesque reading of Bataille's vision of the human condition under modern capitalism:

> The human animal is the one through which terrestrial excess is haemorraged to zero, the animal destined to obliterate itself in history, and sacrifice its nature utterly to the solar storm. Capital breaks us down and reconstructs us, with increasing frequency, as it pursues its energetic fluctuation towards annihilation, driven to the liberation of the sun, whilst the object hurtles into the vaporization of proto-schizophrenic commodification. (Land 1992: 119).

Bataille's philosophy is one of joy unto death in a world where the tendency to self-destructive excess is characterised as positive, particularly in his late, epic work *The Accursed Share* (Bataille 1998). It might be regarded as moving towards the grotesque

and the absurd in its view of Stalinism as preferable to liberal capitalism by virtue of its joyful acceptance of mass sacrifice. Sinclair's interest in portraying characters locked into patterns of obsession, related to the earth and place, which only end in and often lead to their death, is perhaps comparable to Land's reading of Bataille, and of a grotesque approach to figuring meaning in opposition to the functionally manipulative nihilism of capitalist social relations. Approaches such as those of Bataille and Land, as well as Deleuze and Guattari, are Nietschzean in their celebration of life as an expenditure of energy and their attack on what they see as the functional nihilism of modern social relations and priorities. Sinclair might also be seen as eligible for inclusion in such a categorization. The depiction of such approaches as 'grotesque' here is intended to indicate a connection with what Isobel Armstrong sees as a means of characterizing much Victorian poetry in its indirect attacks on the injustices of social relations in Britain during the later part of the nineteenth century (Armstrong 1996: 236–241). Her use of the term derives primarily from that employed by Ruskin in relation to Venetian architecture in *The Stones of Venice,* itself a classic study of the significance of place and of urban planning and architecture. Grotesque, for both Armstrong and Ruskin implies an expression of social alienation and many of the more fantastic elements of Sinclair's writing might be considered as expressions of this kind. Grotesque is a term closely connected in Ruskin to that of the gothic, his primary concern in *The Stones of Venice* (Armstrong 1996:514; Ruskin: Works Vol.XI. iii :154.) Attention has already been accorded to Pinkney's interest in gothic elements in the work of Williams and Lawrence and his connecting of these to other developments in aspects of cultural practice strongly connected with both socialism and sensitivity to locality, notably those associated with William Morris and the earlier years of the Bauhaus. Sinclair's use of gothic elements in his fiction is marked but also heavily ironical and characterised by allusion to earlier British and American literary texts.

One of the major influences on Baudelaire was an American, Edgar Allan Poe. Quotations from or allusions to the work of Poe and other American writers abound in Sinclair's writing. Much American literature includes a sense of discovering the culturally refreshing possibilities of life in a new place. This can mean founding a new way of life or renewing contact with older and healthier elements considered to have been lost during the development of European civilization. Elements of this approach can be observed in most of the American and Australian writers already considered or referred to here, most notably Olson, Carter and Gare, though elements of the same approach are perceptible in the work of Heidegger or Wordsworth in European contexts. All of these writers tend to evoke the notion of a predominantly rural and relatively benificent earth. Sinclair's writing evinces a degree of sympathy to this approach in parts but it is usually expressed through a more immediately apparent relation to the more gothic element in American literature, as evinced in the work of writers such as Poe and Melville, both of whom also produced novels based on sea journeys. Journeys of discovery are a particularly significant aspect of Sinclair's work.

A further, closely connected preoccupation which connects Sinclair to aspects of gothic and American writing, and perhaps also to Deleuze and Guattari, is with flight from an enclosed, threatening place. Writing of this kind moves towards the depiction of place as hell, or at the very least dangerously confining, rather than as a new found heaven. The haunted house and the threatening, enclosed space, are characterisations directly contrary to that of the sacred grove or *temenos,* but these also figure in the work of Sinclair and connect him to the concerns of Olson, Heidegger and Carter. Sinclair's texts, including those focused on here — his essay 'Nicholas Hawksmoor, His Churches' and his first two novels, *White Chappell: Scarlet Tracings* and *Downriver* — all present parts of London as complex and dangerous concentrations of energy rather than nurturing or idyllic forms of place but relations and distinctions between the two conceptualisations are far from straightforward.

Sinclair's adaptation of gothic elements applies as much to British as to American literature. De Quincey is appropriated and quoted in the essay on Hawksmoor. The first novel's concern with the Jack The Ripper murders involve consideration of writing by Stevenson and Conan Doyle. The notion of evil, or other dark mysterious forces, employed by these writers and others closely related to them, such as Oscar Wilde or Joseph Conrad -both of whom figure as influences acknowledged through allusion or direct quotation — is paramount in all the texts. Here one of Sinclair's main interests would seem to be in how culture breeds myth in relation to place, often through the medium of literary writers who are only partly in control of what is happening, as they create characters that take on a life of their own.

Sinclair's preoccupation with myth in relation to place connects his writing to aspects of twentieth century verse in both Britain and the United States. Olson is one of the most obvious examples but allusions to other modern poets with epic ambitions, regularly appear in Sinclair's writing, notably to W.B.Yeats, T.S. Eliot, David Jones, Allen Ginsberg, and Sinclair's near contemporary, J.H. Prynne. These would appear to be indicative of an interest in the mythical and the arcane but also of a complexly ironic attitude towards them. Like Prynne (elements of whose writing are related by Paul Carter to those of Australian aboriginal aesthetics(Carter 1996: 336–346) Sinclair adopts an oblique approach to the way in which writers like Olson treat questions of place. Prynne's poetry provides a more opaque, teasingly complex and relatively abstract textuality in contrast to Olson's direct treatment of the geography and history of Gloucester. Sinclair's notebook style of poetry is closer to Olson's in this respect, as is his focus on a specific place, but the divergent aspect of his relation to Olson comes in the form of an increasing use of ironical and satirical humour and the use of grotesque and fantastical tales and characters. In this latter respect, Sinclair also indicates an affinity not only with the radical elements expressed by his use of gothic but also, in his more ironic and satirical use of such elements, particularly in *Downriver,* a tendency to emphasise the absurd. This is perhaps as comparable to eighteenth century approaches to the 'progress' represented by developments in an increasingly urban and commercial culture as it is to the work of the French writers already referred to, including the Situationists. One of the problems for the reader

of Sinclair's work in this respect is perhaps to decide whether his writing should be interpreted as being primarily representative of an attempt to positively negotiate the elements of a perceptibly chaotic cosmos, or whether it should be taken, in novels like *Downriver,* as increasingly preoccupied, in potentially conservative fashion, with the superficiality of a dominant commercial culture, such as that particularly in evidence in the nineteen eighties. There is a shift to the more worldly terrain of the latter approach as Sinclair moves towards novel writing and wry observation of London's exceptional cultural diversity coupled with its equally exceptional degree of social and cultural pretentiousness.

The emphasis on the positive aspects of chaos connects Sinclair to writers such as Deleuze and Guattari, as well as the disruptive tactics of the Situationist International and Guy Debord, whose notion of 'psycho-geography' is particularly significant to Sinclair's whole project. Bracken provides a helpful introduction to both the term and Debord's general development (Bracken 1997). Chris Jenks identifies three 'central concepts' in relation to Debord's 'psycho-geography' : the *derive,* the *detournement* and the 'spectacle' (Jenks 1995: 153–156). The *derive,* or drifting, indicates the choice of an intuitive alternative route taken through the city and is comparable to the movements in haptic space of Deleuze and Guattari's nomad. The *detournement* is a re-positioning of elements into a new form of relationship, reminiscent of effects of collage and juxtaposition in avant-garde art from the earlier part of the century. The 'spectacle' takes us back to the conceptualisation of the dominant, distanced, visual culture emphasized by all of the writers considered in Chapter Three, as well as Foucault, in the wake of Debord's characterisation. Elements of Debord's approach are particularly evident in *Downriver,* but the emphasis on more satirical and ironic elements might also be seen as linking him to a native tradition stretching from Pope and Swift through to Thackeray and Dickens and beyond. Many of these writers were themselves based in London and before moving to a discussion of particular texts by Sinclair some preliminary consideration of relations between London and literature would seem to be of relevance to subsequent analysis. Sinclair's London is primarily that of the later part of the twentieth century, a time of both decline and success for London, typified by the Thatcher years, beginning with riots but progressing to the creation of Docklands and a renewed sense of Disraeli's two nations, the rich and the poor, living in exceptionally close proximity. It is these aspects of development in late twentieth century London which have provided a focal point for many of the fictional studies of London. There is arguably a tradition in British fiction of portraying London as a city of extraordinary size and complexity, but also one where the extremes of riches and poverty seem to co-exist in dramatic proximity. The most dramatic representations in this respect are perhaps those provided by Dickens but one can also turn to the poetry of Blake for a sense of the city as a hell which could become the site of a new heaven, or Defoe's depictions of London in the throes of plague. As noted earlier, Stevenson and Conan Doyle both use London as the scene for battles between good and evil, with various forms of social implication.

Another powerful wave of London writing was provided by the presence of new immigrants to Britain in the period after 1945 resulting in novels such as those by Sam Selvon (1956) and Buchi Emecheta (1974), as well as Colin MacInnes (1959). These can be seen to have provided the first stage in a process continued by writers such as Hanif Kureishi (1990), Timothy Mo (1981) and numerous others who focus on the experience of London's varied ethnic communities. While Sinclair's fiction is often based in areas, such as Hackney, which have a reputation for high levels of poverty and large numbers of residents belonging to ethnic minorities who are relatively recent immigrants to Britain, his main concerns as a writer are not directly with issues of poverty, ethnic tensions or direct instances of social injustice. The primary aim appears to be to provide a particular kind of mapping of a city which is an enormous, powerful and often virulently dangerous field of energies, social and otherwise. Sinclair's example has been followed or paralleled by other novelists, most notably Peter Ackroyd and Michael Moorcock, though a number of other novels, by writers who do not focus specifically on London, might be considered as falling into the same category.

Ken Worpole, in an article on London fiction makes an interesting distinction between novels that merely use London as a backdrop and those in which the city is '... an essential metaphor and dominating metaphor throughout.' (Worpole 1995:183). Worpole is more impressed by aspects of popular detective fiction and Moorcock's *Mother London* (1989) than what he sees as the dubious obsessions of writers like Ackroyd and Sinclair with macabre phenomena such as the Jack the Ripper murders, but this is to focus on only a very limited aspect of Sinclair's, (or for that matter Ackroyd's) approach to the city. Ackroyd is, of course, the author of numerous publications, including many fictional and biographical studies relating to London, though *Dan Leno and the Golem of Limehouse Street* specifically focuses on the period of the Ripper murders (Ackroyd 1995). At the same time, both Worpole's commendation of Moorcock's novel and his interest in the regional potential of the detective novel are worthy of further critical development. Novels like Moorcock's *Mother London* provide a particularly interesting combination of a sophisticated mode of narrative relating aspects of popular culture to a broader and more complex social and cultural context but with respect to a socio-geographical area which is more specific than that of the nation as a whole. The same might be said of Ackroyd and Sinclair and, in relation to a different area, Raymond Williams.

Sinclair's writing places its reader at the centre of developments in British culture, both past and present, though this does not mean that his work attempts to vindicate dominant aspects of the national culture. His attitude to place is markedly different from that of Williams and includes elements which can be compared to, and are often taken from, aspects of American and French as well as British writing. The approach adopted is more self-onsciously arcane, ironic and satirical than that of Williams but indicates a complex and respectful, though far from reverent relationship to the work of other poets who have a deep interest in issues pertaining to place and its relations. In these respects, his own work, like that of Williams, can

be regarded as a form of project directly comparable to the theory and poetry already considered.

7.1 Early writing

One of Sinclair's earliest published prose pieces is entitled 'Hungry Ghost' (Sinclair 1989:13–14). In this, the narrator and his wife or girlfriend chance upon a situation which it soon becomes clear is that of an attempted suicide. Observation is made of the man's physical condition and the actions of other people involved, including the narrator, who uses his handkerchief to tie up one of the man's bleeding wrists. Eventually an ambulance arrives and the man is taken to hospital.

A number of observations can be made in relation to this short passage. Firstly, it begins with the words 'The end of a short walk'. Walking, it has been observed, is a significant aspect of Sinclair's approach to place, though more often than not the walk is not solitary but a collaborative, sociable enterprise. Here, the narrator has a companion. The 'end' of the walk clearly refers to its termination and yet, given what follows 'end' as *telos* seems almost as appropriate an interpretation as that of *terminus*. The apocalyptic element in Sinclair's fiction becomes more self-conscious as his writing progresses but even here the narrator is 'uneasy' with the nature of the place, in contrast to his companion. The precise name of the street is given and accompanied by a parenthetic characterisation which suggests a connection to earlier times: 'Holly Street (work ditch)'. This is a very different kind of introduction to the chosen area from that provided by Williams. Williams's tends to be presented as rugged and difficult but sociable beneath its harsh surface. The place presented here is more eerily impersonal. Despite probably returning home, the narrator and his companion give little impression of familiarity with their surroundings. What follows is even more disorientating and disconcerting:

> A man the far side of Middleton Road stumbled, held himself upright, then had the legs go from under him, drunk, tipped onto the pavement. We hestitated. He did not have the drunk's magical balance, the illusion of being on a wire, an animated earth puppet. When he fell I crossed to take a closer look. There was a dark trellis of blood running down one side of his face. (13)

The allusion to the figure of the drunk as an 'animated earth puppet' is one which appears with numerous variations in Sinclair's work, particularly *Downriver,* which presents a series of characters obsessively tied to a particular place. Also present here is something equally evident in much of Sinclair's later work — the thinnness of the line drawn between between comedy and horror. The man described is an attempted suicide and yet, a little further on, the narrator cannot resist using the potentially facetious, if accurate 'trellis' to denote the blood on the man's face. This combination of minimalistic documentary with occasional, more whimsical notes appears again at the very end of the passage where the narrator observes: 'There were spots of blood

on my feet, which were in sandals, the right one blue, the left one green.' (14). This is complemented by a slightly earlier observation: 'A younger woman, pretty, bent over to look at Denis's smashed face, yellow pants showing as her tight red dress lifted.' (13). Sinclair, while not known as a painter, studied at film school in London and is known as a film as well as poetry critic and reviewer, as well as working with poets who are also painters, sculptors or film-makers. There is something complexly and perversely whimsical and detached about the attention to elements of colour here. Red, yellow, green and blue all appear, as does the moment of sexuality in an otherwise distressingly negative and depressing scene. It is as if the writer were painting a picture of something he cannot claim to understand, almost as if he were in a state of shock and unable to map the elements of the event into a cognitively manageable whole. On one level, this is perfectly understandable. Nothing is more natural than a certain degree of shock in such circumstances. However, the attention to colour and the other elements noted might also be seen as suggestive of a determined bohemianism and of a desire to both look unflinchingly at the horror the situation offers and to search for elements of beauty within it. Such an approach to the city might be likened to that of Baudelaire and later poets in the French tradition as well as to elements of Oscar Wilde's writing. Wilde is one of the many *fin-de-siecle* figures quoted in Sinclair's work and one particularly associated not only with notions of gothic but of decadence and bohemianism, both significant elements in Sinclair's presentation of London. A better known piece and one which is very different in style and approach is 'Nicholas Hawksmoor, His Churches', originally published in 1975 (Sinclair 1995(a)). This takes the form of an essay rather than a piece of diary observation and is more self-consciously rhetorical in its approach. Beginning with prefatory quotations from de Quincey and Yeats, the essay focuses on mapping a field of energy charted by eight churches in the east of London constructed under Hawksmoor's architectural supervision. Mapping and building are seen as ordering forms of cultural protection against the chaos, darkness and mystery which lie beyond their bounds:

> Moving now on an eastern arc the churches of Nicholas Hawksmoor soon invade the consciousness, the charting instinct. Eight churches give us the enclosure, the shape of the fear; built for early century optimism, erected over a fen of undisclosed horrors, white stones laid upon the mud and dust. In this air certain hungers were set up that have yet to be pacified. (Sinclair 1995:13)

'The charting instinct', the need for orientation, is evoked here as basic. The 'enclosure' presented is one motivated by 'fear', but of what is not made immediately clear. Obvious candidates are disease and disorder, in social as well as physical forms, and in this respect, the figure of Hawksmoor resembles a later figure of modernisation in its urban context, Baron Haussmann. More obviously comparable might be Sir Christopher Wren, who in Peter Ackroyd's novel, *Hawksmoor,* is presented as the figure of optimism and modernity in contrast to the devil-worshipping character based on Hawksmoor (Ackroyd 1985). As was observed earlier, this fear of the beyond is translated by Jameson, with the help of the related gothic notion of the sublime, into a contemporary form

of disorientation, that of the flows of modern capital and its related hyperspace. The point here is not that Hawksmoor's and Jameson's fears are identical but that their mode of presentation, in terms of spatial anxiety, is comparable. Hawksmoor takes on the role of town planner as gothic hero, a Frankenstein whose monster is the city: 'He had that frenzy, the Coleridge notebook speed, to rewrite the city: man, recognising some distillation of his most private urges in the historical present, is suddenly, and more than anybody around him, *there…"* (14). The 'Coleridge notebook speed' suggests the modality of both Sinclair's and Olson's poetry and prose. Hawksmoor, as gothic hero, is a man possessed, but Sinclair's use of him is reminiscent of the way in which Olson uses Maximus as a figure of projection. The emphasis of the man being *"there'* perhaps evokes Heidegger's sense of the 'Da' in Dasein; 'Being' involves being somewhere, in a place, but that place can be anything but reassuring, as the significance of anxiety in both Heidegger and Olson's work indicates.

More than in Heidegger or even Olson, the battle is that of the town planner fighting the forces of chaos in the ordered form of the city, succeeding where others have failed to take the opportunity. Hawksmoor's own words are quoted and italicised. Referring to London and its planners, in a letter to Dr George Clarke, he writes that: '(…) *they ought for ye Publick good to have Guided it into a Regular & commodious form, & not have suffered it to run into an ugly inconvenient self destroying unweildly Monster.'* (14) Sinclair then projects onto, or reads into, the positioning of the eight churches, a 'geometry of opposition', a phrase redolent of Blake:

> A triangle is formed between Christ Church, St George-in-the -East, and St Anne, Limehouse. These are centres of power for those territories; sentinel, sphinx-form, slack dynamos as the culture they supported goes into retreat. The power remains latent, the frustration mounts on a current of animal magnestism and victims are still claimed (15).

As in Olson, elements of actual history are channelled into a poetic vision of redemption, but aspects of gothic sensationalism are also included; we are introduced to the psycho-geography of a culture and a place which is going '…into retreat', a possible way of expressing the decline of British as a world power. Processes of decline and the appearance of occult forces are themes dear to gothic fiction, but in Sinclair they are presented as a form of documentary in which the ghosts are those of actual, historical figures:

> So many spectres operate along these fringes: Yeats in the British Museum, at the time of the Ripper murders, researching into Blake (Blake and Newton, polar opposites). Milton: his early-morning walks over the ground where St George was to be built. (15)

The approach here might be characterised as a form of gothic, literary Situationism by means of which particular areas are invested with an occult history which makes them significant, awkward, unregenerate places rather than quietly domesticated and relatively empty spaces that are more prone to 'development' in every sense.

Milton, Blake, Yeats and others are enlisted in a line of history which later includes Defoe, Bunyan, alcoholic vagrants from the time of Hogarth's 'Gin Lane' to the present day, the narrator-author himself — 'My own jobs follow the churches across the city'(20) — and a series of what are characterised as forms of 'ritual slaying', from the Ratcliffe Highway murders through the Ripper killings to 'the battering to death of Mr Abraham Cohen, summer 1974, on Cannon Street Road.'(21).

In *The Production of Space,* Lefebvre has some interesting comments on the development of gothic as medieval architecture, noting its ability to achieve freedom from 'cryptic space' (Lefebvre 1991:256) and its adherence to the power of darker, older forces hidden from both light and sight. The gothic signals the dominance of a new regime of luminous, visible, space. This ultimately leads, Lefebvre claims, to the subordination of space to the written word and the society of the spectacle. Lefebvre makes reference to the work of both Bataille (257) and Debord (261), at this stage in his argument, even though his main debate is with Panofsky's reading of medieval Gothic architecture (260). A little later, he characterises this medieval, luminous space as leading to the future, secular, 'space of accumulation' (263). At the same time he observes that:

> With the dimming of the 'world' of shadows, the terror it exercised lessened accordingly. It did not, however, disappear. Rather it was transformed into 'heterotopical' places, places of sorcery and madness, places inhabited by demonic forces — places which were fascinating but tabooed. Later, much later, artists would rediscover this ferment of accursed and sacred. At the time when it held sway, however, no one could represent this 'world'; it was simply there. Space was ridden with hidden powers, more often malign than well-disposed. Each such place had a name, and each denomination also referred to the relevant occult power: *numen-nomen* (263)

Like much gothic literature from the eighteenth century onwards, Sinclair's writing works with such notions to challenge the dominance of a space of organised accumulation. The essay moves from consideration of the elements already covered, including serial killings as ritual slayings, to observations and reflections on earlier cultural tendencies, including those of the Romans and the Egyptians and their connections, actual and possible, to older cultures situated in the British Isles. This includes the Maya, whose culture figures as a major source of inspiration for an alternative culture in Olson's poetry. Various places are named and invested with ancient and subversive significance, in the manner of the ' *numen-nomeri* referred to by Lefebvre. The essay progresses from a discussion of de Quincey's treatment of the Ratcliffe Highway murders in *On Murder Considered As One of the Fine Arts,* where Sinclair suggests that while his treatment '...did not grow from direct observation of the ground.'(23) thereby missing the ritual element in the murder, de Quincey: '(…) couldn't help getting in among the authentic substrata. Unconsciously he offers hieroglyphs, disguised and smudged Egyptian ritual detail.' (23). This Sinclair offers in much greater detail in relation to various places in the area, providing evidence of sun and fire-worship in a manner reminiscent of both Bataille's thesis of total

expenditure and sacrifice in opposition to a contemporary culture of accumulation, but in a more playful and mannered fashion, reminiscent of the beginnings of British gothic literature and writers such as Walpole. The element of playfulness combined with consideration of alternatives to the 'space of accumulation' can be compared to the kinds of strategy offered by Debord and the Situationists and the subsequent writing of de Certeau and Deleuze and Guattari, all of whom indicate interest in the subversive potential of less visible forms of space and related practices.

Sinclair's essay on Hawksmoor is the first of many prose pieces included in *Lud Heat and Suicide Bridge*. The most significant of these in relation to questions of place is perhaps 'Intimate Associations: Myth and Place', which occupies the same, introductory position in *Suicide Bridge* as the essay on Hawksmoor does in *Lud Heat*. In contrast to the earlier essay, this one does not focus on a particular area but discusses human relations to place in terms of a general relationship with the earth, of which myth is a significant part. Paul Carter's portrayals of aboriginal Australian culture and aesthetics and Olson's primarily positive presentation of myth tend toward the notion of something older and in many ways more positive, to be started from again and taken in a more fruitful direction. The same might be claimed of Heidegger's philosophy. Sinclair's approach, in relative contrast, focuses on and begins with the claim that 'myths are lies', an approach which again connects him to notions of decadence, to figures such as Wilde, and — in his focus on the relationship of place and myth to man's tendencies to obsessive, pathological, self-destruction — the gothic. References to Poe, 'prophet seer of American guilt' (148), and allusions to Melville emphasise the American connection. Myth is also presented as a form of cultural subversion: ' Myth emerges as a weapon, a tool of resistance. It emerges in the hands of men wanting to maintain a contact with the previous, the era of power & high function.' (148) The relation of this aspect of aboriginal attitudes to colonising powers is touched upon, but the notions of subversion and resistance suggest an approach closer to that of de Certeau or Deleuze and Guattari. There is also a suggestion in the passage quoted above that such uses of myth can be as reactionary as they are subversive. This element is extended into the claim that myth can be a lethal form of nostalgia:

> It lies on the tongue like a grub. It climbs out of the book into a vertical energy called: FASCISM. The need for the old myths is a confession of our failure to handle the world, to be on terms with the life-spill of this moment. We want back to what was never there. Immediate parentage is denied. Deeper & deeper into the sand. (149)

In connection with relations between place and psyche, Freud is brought into Sinclair's discussion at the beginning of the piece by way of inclusion in a prefatory quotation from Robert Duncan emphasising the tendency of the unconscious towards processes of deception. Both Lefebvre and Deleuze and Guattari look for ways of challenging this predicament, it can be recalled. Lefebvre contrasts the 'truth of space' with verbal 'representations of space', Deleuze and Guattari offer the open-

ness of nomadic movement and thinking in opposition to the organised, sedentary repressions of the State. Olson, in his poetry, opts for a more Jungian notion of self which can only be achieved through renunication of more egotistical notions and of an alienated relationship with the land, an approach also essentially followed, though with different cultural references, by Carter and Gare. Sinclair seems to occupy a position somewhere between these Freudian or post-Freudian, and Jungian or ecological stances. He lays considerable stress on culture as pathology, a stance which can also be associated with Nietzsche and post-Nietzschean thinking, or with much other late nineteenth century thought, as indicated in the discussion of the gothic and decadent elements of Sinclair's writing. The emphasis on travel or quest as escape is presented firstly in a negative and then a partially more positive light, in terms which resemble those of Deleuze and Guattari's opposition between the static and the nomadic or closed and open, or Olson's two versions of America (its actual condition and the alternative history he proposes):

> Where there is unclaimed space, unwritten land, there is the quest & there is mining, a sickly clawing, not only for minerals, crops, dead artefacts, but also for mythologies....What we walk is myth flattened into space. Its hide. (150)

The alternative is characterised in opposition to both the 'celibate, fasting life' and 'the life of the materialist, forced to the service of his own goods, over stimulated into toxic inertia.' (151) This takes the form of a reconnection with 'the migrant, the traveller of paths, in balance with natural forces' (151). This type is seen as one for whom:

> Place does not go sour in his pocket or wither his sinew. He has escaped the fattening & over-informed vortex of centre where the city dweller, unravelled by centrifugal motions, has fallen victim to a weight, an ever-increasing density of myth (...) The city swivels on its axis, the sky is buried alive, buildings grow into the clouds, we carry the pains of architectural ambition on our shoulders. (151–2)

The relation of this characterisation to that of Williams's 'sweetness' of place is worth remarking on, though the terms of Sinclair's alternative to sourness stress, like Olson's, de Certeau's, Carter's and Deleuze and Guattari's, the significance of movement in relation to place. More interesting, though, is Sinclair's negative characterisation of the city as a form of lethal cultural implosion, given the fact that much of his subsequent work continues to focus on London. The human relation to place is presented as one of avoidance, by culture, of an ultimately unavoidable intensity or heat that is ultimately confronted as the end of life, again in both senses of the word 'end':

> Place, finally can be only one thing: where you die. Your own clenched spine secret. The motor word, **logos,** scorched into your chemistry: a sign on the ground that is yours & no-one else's. It is the elimination of absolutely everything, nothing remains, distance is wiped out, a total renunication of all you have claimed as knowledge up to this moment. Your whole journey has been to find that place

> which you have dreamt, long before birth (...) to find it & complete the story, which is the suicide bridge, which is the anticipation, sleep's rush on death, the forcing the entry that is something that is not yet, cannot yet be, known. (154)

Place here is represented as an existential condition which the narrative of myth can shape, and to some extent avoid, but not deny — the truth, which culture, as myth, or city, negotiates. Sinclair treads a similar path to Olson and Prynne in this respect but in his references to the urban reminds us that his interests are equally, if not primarily, with the everyday condition of life in the metropolis. It is on this area that his subsequent work increasingly focuses, in the approaches to London presented in his first two novels.