

“GHOSTS AND TEXTS AND PHOTOGRAPHS”: Sinclair’s overwritings of the dead.

John Sears, MMU Cheshire, May - July 2004

“The price of achievement is death – but death is also the reward”,<sup>1</sup> argues Undark in *Radon Daughters*. Sinclair’s writings, overpopulated with and overwritten by the dead, construct death as both destiny and origin, marking the limits of the territories he maps in writing and walking - necropolitan spaces of burial and symbolic resurrection. At once enticing and ominous, absent and present, history and future, death is mass contemporary experience and the weight of tradition, the density of history inscribed into texts, images and cityscapes. Death is everywhere in Sinclair’s books, which offer what *London Orbital* calls “a necrophile carnival”<sup>2</sup>, a flamboyantly literary celebration of the immanence of mortified flesh. Death is source, drive, direction and end point of each narrative, insistently enacting Maurice Blanchot’s assertion that “Death exists not only ... at the moment of death; at all times we are its contemporaries”.<sup>3</sup> Death is recurrent, repetitive, like the cultural symbolism inherent in the practices and products of photography as a summoning-up into apparent presence of the dead, and the reiterations of intertextual literary reference, including self-citation and the allusion to or lifting of material from other texts, the possession of the writer and the text by the voices and words of the dead. Focussing mainly on Sinclair’s fiction, and using theoretical material deriving from key works on the theorisation of death and its relations to literary production, this essay will explore the symbolic resonances associated with the metaphorical and theoretical dimensions of death in Sinclair’s writings. It will argue that the representation of death is

---

<sup>1</sup> Sinclair, *Radon Daughters* p 243

<sup>2</sup> Sinclair, *London Orbital* p 4

<sup>3</sup> Blanchot, *The Space of Literature* p 133

intrinsically connected in these books to an ongoing analysis of writing and reading, photography and the image, and, ultimately, to the very forms and processes of narrative and poetic representation.

Death imbues Sinclair's texts with Gothic-Surrealist significance, allowing them to resonate as the literary transmitters of fictional voices from beyond the grave. In *Landor's Tower* this literary thanatology, this excessive concern with the morbidity inherent in and constitutive of literary traditions, finds its fullest theorisation in the image of the passing on of those traditions through the acts of reading and writing. Norton, Sinclair's familiar narrator and surrogate author (whose name itself is a literary 'passing-on', an act of homage to William Burroughs, deriving as it does from Burroughs's *Junky*) describes an idealised conception of "The pleasure ground of the book", "a communality in which hordes would meet and mingle and speak, discourse on an equal footing [...]".<sup>4</sup> This vision of the common reader in and of the text offers reading and writing as affording the requisite space for a democratic fantasy of communication between the (reading) living and the (written) dead. It is almost immediately overturned by the destructive intrusion of history, "genocide, dispossession, bitter intelligence".<sup>5</sup> History, in turn, consists, like books, and like the city which constitutes the backdrop of the bulk of Sinclair's writing, of "ghosts and texts and photographs",<sup>6</sup> textual / spectral representational remains signifying the triumph of death.

Maurice Blanchot, in *The Space of Literature*, connects death to the origins of writing, to writing's erasure of the thing and of the idea of the thing, and its replacement of them with itself, which is subsequently mistaken, in simplistic readings, for 'things'. This

---

<sup>4</sup> Sinclair, *Landor's Tower* p 258

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid* p 258

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid* p 258

“error”, the misreading of the word for the thing, of the literary for the ‘real’, and of the voice of the text for that of its author, allows space for the infinite plenitude of art, the possibility that the space of literature contains, in the repetition of symbolisation, everything and nothing. Blanchot describes literature’s “preserve outside of time and in all times [...]”, its “eternal lapping of return [...]”, its “pact contracted with death, with repetition and with failure”.<sup>7</sup> We are death’s “contemporaries”, sharing our time and our times with death, to the extent that history constitutes the possibility of our contemporaneity. Death, like history, coexists and coincides with us, with our temporal existences, marking them as both limited and continuous, “excluding us”, Blanchot continues, “from the limitless” and “depriving us of limits”.<sup>8</sup> Elisabeth Bronfen, summarising arguments of Blanchot and Walter Benjamin, defines the relation between death and language: “At the point where all language fails, [death] is also the source of all allegorical speaking”.<sup>9</sup> Because death cannot be named or contained by the act of naming, it constitutes the threshold of the possibility that signs become separate from naming, alluding in different (allegorical) ways to things. Death thus signifies the possibility of the literary (taken as fundamentally allegorical, “other speech, “a double intention”, as Marina Warner notes<sup>10</sup>) and its culmination, a closure that simultaneously inaugurates. Blanchot argues (against Heideggerian conceptions of death as the ‘property’ of the self) that death always belongs to an other; it shares troubling affinities with the other world constructed by the literary text, and, in this context, these affinities extend to connections with the uncanny time and space seemingly entrapped within the photograph.

---

<sup>7</sup> *The Space of Literature* p 243

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid* p 134

<sup>9</sup> Bronfen, ‘Preface’ to *The Limits of Death* pp xx-xxi

<sup>10</sup> Warner, *Monuments and Maidens* p xix

Sinclair's writings dramatically exploit the potentials of what Bronfen calls "a language of death"<sup>11</sup>, a semantic field within which literary language maps out its relations to this ambiguous threshold. Sinclair's writings explore death as trace, event, residue, detritus, phenomenon, experience, destiny, inheritance, logic, faith, moment and place; in relentless, reiterative detail they assert the absolute authority of death as persistent past and imminent future amid the banal transience of the present. Death is where Sinclair's books originate, and where they lead; each walk, each reading, each allusion, each recounted or excavated history leads inexorably towards the limit from which it originates, bound by the pact that Blanchot identifies – writing contracted with death, repetition, failure. Sinclair's insistent preoccupation with a symbolically restricted range of themes, activities and theoretical concerns (walking, writing, reading, searching for lost or evasive texts, cultural archaeologies, symbolic and mystical histories, psychogeographies, political and cultural critiques) betokens, in this reading, a concern with encoding the insistent return of a central set of preoccupations, to do with mortality and its connection with the written word. Death, the figure in the carpet of Sinclair's works, can be understood as "the shape that is unconsciously written into the text", "what is coded there, all that wonderful unexplained detail" in *White Chappell*, *Scarlet Tracings*.<sup>12</sup> It is not the solution to a literary detective's quest, but the very problem itself. Death is inextricably linked with textuality and with the act of writing, so that both ultimately figure death and the matrix of human desires and anxieties connected to it. Writing offers the possibility of symbolic survival, of living on in words beyond death, entering the space of literature beyond the physicality of the mortal. Textuality confirms this symbolic persistence as a resurrectionary remainder, a posthumous post-mortality in a literary tradition inhabited by dead writers and their

<sup>11</sup> 'Preface' to *The Limits of Death* p xxi

<sup>12</sup> Sinclair, *White Chappell*, *Scarlet Tracings* p 59

works. Writing is confirmation of death, the trace of the past in the present, whether it be literary or para-literary texts, mural graffiti, or the deeper levels of significance scribed in architecture, urban space, and the visual landscapes of signs. Each becomes a repository for the dead. In *Downriver* the whole of London, Sinclair's habitual territory and that which his writings inscribe most deeply, is "a necropolis of the unregarded".<sup>13</sup> "The Romans", we're reminded in *Lud Heat*, "regarded east London not as a place for the living but as a necropolis for the dead".<sup>14</sup> The city itself assumes symbolic import within the oeuvre's concern with death and its writerly encodings.

#### GHOSTS, TRADITION

Writing, in its post-mortem persistence as trace, offers the potential transcendence of death, the figuring of the beyond-death of posthumous existence, just as it offers the possibility of transcending the structures of contemporary capitalist individualism, the ideological object of much of Sinclair's political critique. The democratic vision of reading addressed above offers a condensed version of the ideology of literary practice explored in Sinclair's writings, and particularly in the social and political arguments of works like *Lights Out for the Territory* and *London Orbital*. "The job doesn't end with death", Joblard tells us in *White Chappell, Scarlet Tracings*: "And neither does it belong to any individual".<sup>15</sup> Writing is a public possession (the possession of the public by and in words) and reading assumes political significance to the extent that it demonstrates the responsibility implicit with this understanding of the literary text as a space inhabited by fundamentally democratic forces of representation. The symbolic persistence into the present of the written-in-the-past, echoing Blanchot's assertion that "the work of art, the literary work – is

---

<sup>13</sup> *Downriver* p 83

<sup>14</sup> Sinclair, *Lud Heat & Suicide Bridge* p 27

<sup>15</sup> *White Chappell, Scarlet Tracings* p 65

neither finished nor unfinished – it is”<sup>16</sup>, constitutes a key element of Sinclair’s ‘necromantic’ modernism, his insistence that his own writing enact Yeats’s ambiguous dictum of collaboration that “it is the duty of the living to assist the imagination of the dead”.<sup>17</sup> Writing becomes a collaborative activity shared between reader and writer, the living and the dead, the past and the present. In *Radon Daughters* this is figured as the writer’s uncanny apparent refusal to die, his ‘living on’ through the words of subsequent writers, “the morbid ventriloquism of dead authors who cannot lay aside their pens”.<sup>18</sup> In *White Chappell, Scarlet Tracings* this persistence becomes the insistence of the past in the present: “We have to settle ourselves into a text: nothing is written, everything rewritten. We are retrospective. Even the walls are soaked with earlier tales, aborted histories”.<sup>19</sup> Sinclair’s writing is dynamised by the implications of this insight, and haunted by its manifestations. He pseudo-plagiarises other authors, themselves writers much possessed by death -Kerouac’s *On The Road* as a “manuscript of the night” in which “death will overtake us before heaven”<sup>20</sup>, Hodgson’s “monstrous representation of Kali, the Hindu goddess of death” and of “the ancient Egyptian god Set, or Seth, the Destroyer of Souls”<sup>21</sup> encountered on the alien planet by the old man in *The House on the Borderland*, Landor with his tower “like a ghost in the finished book”<sup>22</sup> of *Landor’s Tower*. This is at once an act of continuity and extension and of homage, an assertion of the primacy of tradition, respect paid to the dead, and even to the writer’s previous incarnations. As the narrator of *Dining on Stones* puts it, “every statement sounds like an echo of something written or read [...]. We self-plagiarise to the point of erasure, quote our

<sup>16</sup> *The Space of Literature* p 22

<sup>17</sup> Sinclair, *Rodinsky’s Room* p 196; repeated as an epigraph to *Book One* of *Lud Heat* p 13

<sup>18</sup> *Radon Daughters* pp 419-20

<sup>19</sup> *White Chappell, Scarlet tracings* p 64

<sup>20</sup> Kerouac, *On The Road* pp 124, 158

<sup>21</sup> Hodgson, *The House on the Borderland* pp 28, 29

<sup>22</sup> [http://www.forteantimes.com/articles/147\\_ainsinclair.shtml](http://www.forteantimes.com/articles/147_ainsinclair.shtml)

own quotes, promote fresh new talent, buried for years in Kensal Green or Nunhead".<sup>23</sup> Sinclair's insistent repetition of themes is also, self-consciously, self-citation, the semi-self-parodic reiteration of his own already-written texts, a self-reflexive version of "the old Borges trick: reproduction as composition".<sup>24</sup>

'Write' thus collides with its homonyms 'rite' and 'right', combining meanings into an intricate set of symbolic resonances; ritual, possession and inscription combine in 'Rites of Autopsy', the section of *Lud Heat* addressing Stan Brakhage's *Dog Star Man*. Autopsy and the autoptic function, the act of "seeing with one's own eyes"<sup>25</sup>, connect the specular dimension of the text and the photograph with the "posthumous" themes of the oeuvre, its intense, analytic, deductive scrutiny of the corpus of inscribed history, the careful autoptic analysis, in *Dining on Stones*, of "territories where death holds sway".<sup>26</sup> Reading itself, like the psychogeographical exploration of space, is autoptic, the examination of dead words that live on, an entering into the posthumous world of representation which, in turn, becomes extensively figured in Sinclair's writings though the notion of the 'posthumous', the uncanny 'living-on' of the past. So in *Downriver* "London was posthumous", a "capital ... already posthumous, a memorial to its own lack of nerve";<sup>27</sup> the narrator of *White Chappell, Scarlet Tracings* feels "posthumous";<sup>28</sup> he becomes, in *Landor's Tower* and *Dining on Stones*, a "posthumous-modernist";<sup>29</sup> in the latter novel, the narrator tells us that his "riffs were posthumous but ripe with *déjà vu*"<sup>30</sup>, connecting the notion of the posthumous with that of the second-hand, the already-seen or

<sup>23</sup> Sinclair, *Dining on Stones* p 100

<sup>24</sup> *Dining on Stones* p 343

<sup>25</sup> *Lud Heat & Suicide Bridge* p 54

<sup>26</sup> *Dining on Stones* p 134

<sup>27</sup> *Downriver* pp 360, 276

<sup>28</sup> *White Chappell, Scarlet Tracings* p 15

<sup>29</sup> *Landor's Tower* p 106; *Dining on Stones* p 89

<sup>30</sup> *Dining on Stones* p 12

already-read. To become posthumous is also perhaps to be, even if only symbolically, reborn, to become a ghost, or a resurrected Lazarus like Todd Sileen with his “breath like Lazarus”<sup>31</sup> in *Radon Daughters*, Hinton as “Holmes returned from the Falls, revenant, born again” or Noonmann’s “afterlife of Lazarus, half-decayed” in *White Chappell, Scarlet Tracings*.<sup>32</sup> Blanchot writes of Lazarus tainted by the “anonymous corruption of the tomb ... [uttering] speech only because what ‘is’ has disappeared in what names it, struck with death so as to become the reality of the name”.<sup>33</sup> As Hélène Cixous wryly notes, “With Blanchot, everything is always posthumous”<sup>34</sup> – the same could be said of Sinclair’s works, populated by all these Lazarus-figures, come to tell us all. *Dining on Stones* refers us to *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, in which “the dead return”, and where, like Lazarus, “they are too discreet to gossip about their experience of the afterworld”.<sup>35</sup>

A version of the revenantial Undead, the ghost allegorises the persistence of history in the photograph and the literary text. “Ghosts among ghosts” populate *Radon Daughters*; the “empty lanes” of *Landor’s Tower* “were crowded with spectres”.<sup>36</sup> These novels, “phantom texts” in Nick Royle’s post-Derridean formulation, offer a colloquy with the dead that undermines the ideological rewriting or erasure of history, in which the dead are spoken for and from which they can only speak through representation; Sinclair’s understanding of the writer in relation to the literary tradition, his ‘ventriloquising’ of tradition, relies upon the understanding that tradition ‘speaks’ the present, creating the possibility of writing in the present. “We are ourselves spoken by skulls and spirits”, argues Royle, summarising Derrida’s arguments

<sup>31</sup> *Radon Daughters* p 304

<sup>32</sup> *White Chappell, Scarlet Tracings* pp 122, 184

<sup>33</sup> Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation* p 36

<sup>34</sup> Cixous, *Readings: The Poetics of Blanchot, Joyce, Kafka, Kleist, Lispector & Tsvetayeva* p19

<sup>35</sup> *Dining on Stones* p 371

<sup>36</sup> *Landor’s Tower* p 90



in *Spectres of Marx* – “this speech is caught up in a ghostly prosopopoeia”,<sup>37</sup> an endless re-personification of the voices of the dead in writing. In *Dining on Stones* Sinclair evokes the analogous image of “Two characters, on the verge of hysteria, testing each other out, arguing over authorship – when they are both ghosts, deletions, figments of nobler writers’ imaginations. Skull talking to skull.”<sup>38</sup> Sinclair’s writings invite possession and inhabitation by the spectral; discussing the origins of his writing with Mark Pilkington and Phil Baker, Sinclair comments: “With the very first sentence, you’ve entered into some kind of Faustian contract and a voice, or series of voices, are telling the story, and you go with that. It is a form of mild possession when it works and the care comes in revising it.”<sup>39</sup> “Mild possession” evokes, among other things, the Surrealist notion of automatic writing, Breton’s “inexhaustible murmur” in *The First Manifesto of Surrealism*,<sup>40</sup> an inspiration of which Blanchot writes, critically, “Yes, it is endless, it speaks, it does not cease speaking, a language with no silence, for in it silence is spoken”.<sup>41</sup> This speech, the speech of the dead, analogous to “the ancient idea according to which there is only one poet, a single superior power to speak which ‘now and again throughout time makes itself known in the souls that submit to it’”,<sup>42</sup> seems to speak the writer, to provide the voice, the inspirational breath of the utterance. Writers inhabit tradition to the extent that the murmur of the dead resonates through the works they produce. It links Sinclair (an ‘individual talent’) to the modernist tradition, exposing his roots in high modernist literature and Surrealism, as well as more familiarly in that avant-garde’s later eruption as Situationism. “Go with the old modernist strategy”, advises Norton in *Dining on Stones*: “quotation. Eliot, Pound. Yeatsian dictation.”<sup>43</sup>

<sup>37</sup> Royle, *The Uncanny* pp 277-88; p 281

<sup>38</sup> *Dining on Stones* p 403

<sup>39</sup> [http://www.forteantimes.com/articles/147\\_iainsinclair.shtml](http://www.forteantimes.com/articles/147_iainsinclair.shtml)

<sup>40</sup> Breton, *Manifestoes of Surrealism* p 30

<sup>41</sup> *The Space of Literature* p 181

<sup>42</sup> *The Space of Literature* p 156

<sup>43</sup> *Dining on Stones* p 370

## PHOTOGRAPHS, ABSENCES

In his philosophical meditation on death, *Very Little ... Almost Nothing*, Simon Critchley judiciously reminds us that “Death is radically resistant to the order of representation. Representations of death are misrepresentations, or rather representations of an absence.”<sup>44</sup> The silences spoken in Sinclair’s writings mark out absences: their key symbols are ‘misrepresentations’ of the absent dead and the spaces they have vacated, which remain, haunted. While Jeffrey Archer’s marked absence from his penthouse suite in ‘Lord Archer’s Prospects’ offers one comic-ironic configuration of this symbolic function, Rodinsky’s room is its most powerful recurrent embodiment. Sinclair’s insistent obsession with the various possible narratives (and specifically of Rachel Lichtenstein’s narrative) of David Rodinsky and the room he apparently vacated acts as a metaphor for the apotropaic function of all symbolic repetitions, the warding off of death, its totemisation and reduction to something repeatable, therefore momentarily conquerable. Rodinsky’s room is written on, discussed, analysed, invoked, and photographed in Sinclair’s books, apparently in a recurrent effort to capture and exorcise the ghosts it may contain; but the writing and the photographs paradoxically perpetuate, rather than destroy, the ghostly traces of the room and its occupant, which consequently haunt Sinclair’s books. The room and its contents suggest a distillation of the concerns that Sinclair’s fiction constantly returns to – the (once-) lived space, the ghost, the text, the photograph, the traces of the past persisting into the present, and the connections between them.

Rodinsky’s room provides a contemporary version of a central modern myth, that of the unrecognised and now only posthumously acknowledged creative genius. French photographer Eugène Atget

---

<sup>44</sup> Critchley, *Very Little ... Almost Nothing* p 26

embodies this myth powerfully, and Sinclair rightly cites Atget in his initial chapter in *Rodinsky's Room* as, in the quoted words of Mark Holborn, part of “the canon of surrealism”<sup>45</sup> (reminding us again of Sinclair’s concern with Surrealism and/as canonical modernism). Susan Sontag links Atget, the inveterate walker of the city and early-morning plunderer of its sights, to the rag-picker, the Baudelairean figure of the modern poet, thus symbolically establishing the link between photograph and literary text; Gerry Badger has recently commented on the “maddeningly incomplete” versions of his life’s work that Atget left us, our uncertain sense of “his grand design”.<sup>46</sup>

Atget’s photographs, paradigmatic of a particular modernist conception of photography, famously construct a modern Paris out of its past, *vieux Paris*, in images frequently devoid of people and of the conventional signs of modernity (he managed almost completely to exclude the Eiffel Tower from his cataloguing of early twentieth century Paris). In some long exposures, the ghostly trails of figures accidentally crossing the scene are visible (one thinks of Sinclair’s description, in *Dining on Stones*, of “reality with its faint ghosts [where subjects moved]”<sup>47</sup>). Atget’s city is haunted by that which his photographs leave out, the present, the living. It evokes, instead, a past constructed out of its residue, traces of histories. Like Rodinsky, who needed a Rachel Lichtenstein and an Iain Sinclair to make manifest his ‘work’ and its potential significance, Atget needed another photographer, Berenice Abbott, to promote in books and exhibitions the 10,000-plus images of Paris he left on his death in 1927, and a critic and theorist, Molly Nesbit, to apply new historicist and other contemporary theories in order to analyse and attribute extended political motives to the albums of photographs he constructed, thereby elaborating and establishing possible

<sup>45</sup> Sinclair, *Rodinsky's Room* p7

<sup>46</sup> Sontag, *On Photography* p 78; Badger, *Atget* pp 11-12

<sup>47</sup> *Dining on Stones* p 189

meanings and motivations for his work.<sup>48</sup> Rodinsky, Sinclair fictionalises in *Downriver*, “achieved the Great Work, and became invisible [...] resurrected only as ‘a feature’ [...] in the occult fabulation”<sup>49</sup> of Whitechapel. Atget, secret treasure of the Surrealists, is one prototype of Rodinsky; both are absences allowing endless mythologisation, modern ghosts whose lives haunt the present. Both Atget and Rodinsky afford space for political musings; Atget’s albums, Nesbit argues, offer subtle critiques of some of the social and political orthodoxies of his time; Rodinsky, Sinclair and Lichtenstein suggest, provides a template for a form of strategic resistance, a kind of disappearing critique expressed in absence and the lack of productivity – he is, Sinclair asserts, “a writer who didn’t write”,<sup>50</sup> reminiscent of the French ‘author’ Joseph Joubert whose gift, Blanchot argues, was that “he never wrote a book. He only prepared himself to write one” and “was thus one of the first entirely modern writers”.<sup>51</sup> Rodinsky fulfils some aspects of this function for Sinclair’s writings; he symbolises a dimension of modernity in which the trace of the self is left as an elusive, incomplete, post-mortem reminder, in a writing that demands the extreme attention of the reader – a cryptic, incomprehensible system of apparent signs (routes of walks marked on maps, saved bus tickets, cipher-alphabets, word games and apparent doodles, seemingly randomly juxtaposed words, evidence of poly-lingual interests and desires - a range of creations captured in Lichtenstein’s photographs reproduced in the hardback edition of *Rodinsky’s Room*) that insists upon and resists decoding in equal measure, and implies, as Paul Auster has written of Joubert, “a writer who spent his whole life preparing himself for a work that never came to be written”.<sup>52</sup>

---

<sup>48</sup> See Abbot, *The World of Atget*; Nesbit, *Atget’s Seven Albums*

<sup>49</sup> *Downriver* pp 134-5

<sup>50</sup> *Rodinsky’s Room* p 134

<sup>51</sup> Blanchot, ‘Joubert and Space’ in *The Book to Come* p 50

<sup>52</sup> Auster, *The Notebooks of Joseph Joubert* p ix

In Sinclair's books photographs are, among other things, memorious records of the passing of the past, signs of mortality connecting the present with the dead, ritualised products of pictorial-memorial significance; they confirm photography's role as what Pierre Bourdieu calls "a technology of solemnization".<sup>53</sup> In *Radon Daughters* "the unphotographed are the forgotten"<sup>54</sup>, in *Downriver* "the photograph ... is itself a kind of death", an inscription "fixed and made available for close examination long after the anonymous photographer was dead and forgotten".<sup>55</sup> In *Dining on Stones* (in a passage that again mentions "Eugene Atgét [sic]" along with Bill Brandt), photography is described in second-hand words, "as the man said", as "'a form of bereavement'", and cameras as "hand-held obituary lanterns" that allow the "breeching" of "the middle ground" of the novel's subtitle,<sup>56</sup> a territory described elsewhere in the novel as "a zone of ghosts and phantoms" to be entered via photography, "an exercise in wish-fulfilment".<sup>57</sup> In *Landor's Tower* "a simple definition of photography" is given in the old man "fixing images of folk who were no longer there"; "The flaw in using this device," Norton notes, "was that, as with fiction, you opened yourself to a form of possession. Got more than you expected: prophecies of death ...".<sup>58</sup> Fiction and photography undermine the conventional authority of the artist; tradition asserts itself through the voices of the dead possessing the creator in the present, their "speaking the silence", in Blanchot's terms.

The connection between the photograph and the written text, their shared opening up of the space of the dead, is thus explicit. In each of Sinclair's travelogues the writer and the photographer,

---

<sup>53</sup> Bourdieu, *Photography – A Middle-Brow Art* p 27

<sup>54</sup> *Radon Daughters* p 51

<sup>55</sup> *Downriver* pp 80, 82

<sup>56</sup> *Dining on Stones* p 24

<sup>57</sup> *Dining on Stones* p 56

<sup>58</sup> *Landor's Tower* p 115

Sinclair and Mark Atkins, represent in different media the documentation of experience, its recording for posterity, its rendering as future traces of the past. Like writing, photography, in a series of tropes familiar from its theorisation, allows communication with the lost past described by Roland Barthes as “flat death”, of which there is “nothing to say”: “I am looking at eyes that looked at the Emperor”, Barthes famously writes of a photograph of Jerome Bonaparte; of one of Lewis Payne, “He is dead and he is going to die”.<sup>59</sup> This doubly chronologised space of photographic representation, in which the past, present and future commingle (as in Sinclair’s utopian vision of the literary text), is one of the spaces signified by Sinclair’s “middle ground”. It is a space in which the dead persist in words and images, leaning towards the abstract “space of literature” described by Maurice Blanchot (with its connection to the death of things in their rendering in words), or to the more satirical, political critique offered by Sinclair’s figure of the contemporary, displaced suburban population, the “Undead” who ‘inhabit’ the fragmented realms beyond the A13, the territories of both *Dracula* and postmodern horror. This is paratactically rendered in *Dining on Stones*: “The final frontier: Thames Gateway. New London: stilt cities, excavated chalk quarries, airstrips, amnesia. The beginning of the ultimate exodus. When the centre implodes and the fringes are populated with the Undead, dreaming of lottery tickets and bright-blue seas.”<sup>60</sup> *Dining on Stones* extends Sinclair’s recognition of the symbolic potential of the Undead or the vampire (already exploited in metaphors of *Dracula* and the arterial road in *London Orbital*, where Stoker’s novel is analysed, in terms of Sinclair’s characteristic understanding of the tradition, as “an original rewrite, the recapitulation of a recurring fable”<sup>61</sup>) into a fully developed critique of the relations between the literary, the

<sup>59</sup> Barthes, *Camera Lucida* pp 92-3, 3, 95

<sup>60</sup> *The Space of Literature; Dining on Stones* p 116

<sup>61</sup> *London Orbital* pp 395-445; p 403

photographic and death, an exercise in his own brand of “urban Gothic”. In its thematic concern with Joseph Conrad, an undeveloped (not, as the novel erroneously states, “unexposed”) camera film, and the symbolic figure of Kurtz, “one of the Undead, taking possession”, a foundational figure of literary modernism who is “the thing that cannot be seen. Kurtz is posthumous. Kurtz is place”, the novel combines a characteristic network of issues and images into what it calls “a sugary Day of the Dead”, a carnivalesque meander through familiar Sinclair territory evoking both the deadly alcoholic carnival of Malcolm Lowry’s *Under the Volcano* and, presumably, the final (terminal) instalment of George A. Romero’s *Living Dead* trilogy.<sup>62</sup> For Steve Beard, the Undead in Romero’s films function, as they surely do in Sinclair’s novels, as “a projection of postmodern capitalism’s worst anxieties about itself”, representing (in Beard’s early 1990s reading) the “structural unemployment” endemic to “post-Fordist political economy”. Beard’s polemical theorisation approximates the territories of Sinclair’s novels and sometimes offers close parallels to their rhetorical tone: like Sinclair he is concerned with the social resonances of symbolic expression, with what he calls “mining communities turned into theme parks, industrial warehouses turned into electronic offices, Victorian hospitals turned into luxury apartment blocks [and] surplus human capacity processed through the system as grotesque ‘social waste’”.<sup>63</sup>

#### OVERWRITING, REPETITION

As should be apparent from the discussion above, Sinclair’s writing is haunted by other texts, saturated by intertextual allusions and citations, and, in some cases, structured around or dependent upon precursor texts for its form and motive force. At one extreme, as we have seen, this intertextuality becomes self-referentiality, the reworking of the writer’s own previous works,

<sup>62</sup> *Dining on Stones* pp 68, 35, 188, 426, 103

<sup>63</sup> Beard, *Aftershocks – The End of Style Culture* pp 76, 80

unworking them into new literary formations. On its opening page *Lights Out For the Territory* acknowledges *Radon Daughters*; *Downriver* references *White Chappell*, *Scarlet Tracings*.<sup>64</sup> The work cements itself together through such iterations, drawing attention to the insistent return of other voices, and in doing so exploring the connections between writing and the dead. Repetition is an intrinsic form of this exploration, as *Downriver* overtly acknowledges: “*Stolen from other men’s books*. Revisions breed in the white spaces, feverishly overwriting the original version, to clarify some imagined authorial intention [...]”.<sup>65</sup> Revisions and palimpsestic overwritings characterise Sinclair’s prose, its reliance on “the alchemy of repetition”<sup>66</sup> to generate significance out of accumulation through reiteration, to familiarise through repetition as insistence. Overwriting, in this context, signifies both over-inscription, the adding of accreted layers of signs to narratives already cluttered with significances, and the tendency of Sinclair’s style to exaggeration and over-determination, partly as a consequence of this. In each case, the return to the text in order to elaborate and develop it is apparent. Sinclair’s writings continually seek legitimation through constant recourse to other, earlier writings, grounding themselves in the written which, in turn, becomes ungrounded in its written-ness; texts lose their discreteness and become part of the tradition, which speaks (murmurs) through them. The primary figure for this process, to which this essay has of course repeatedly returned, is that of repetition.

To repeat is to return, to return to, to allow to return, and repetition has been extensively theorised by psychoanalytic and post-structuralist thinkers in relation to the potential beyond-death of resurrection. Freud understands repetition as a form of

---

<sup>64</sup> *Lights Out for the Territory* p 1; *Downriver* p 213

<sup>65</sup> *Downriver* p 213

<sup>66</sup> *Radon Daughters* p 155



compulsion, leading “only to unpleasure” which “over-rides the pleasure principle”.<sup>67</sup> Ultimately he theorises this “unpleasure” as the prioritising of the death instinct, the reality principle. Lacan insists upon an understanding of repetition as “fundamentally the insistence of speech” which “returns in the subject until it has said its final word”, until, that is, the subject ceases to exist.<sup>68</sup> Derrida argues that ghosts signify a problematic, contradictory return – the ‘spectre’ haunting Europe, at the beginning of *The Communist Manifesto*, being a future ghost, or the ghost of a future memory, the return of that which has not yet been, the future death of the ‘other’ of the present returning to haunt itself.<sup>69</sup>

Repetition, then, is repeatedly theorised in relation to the fundamental difference of death, and is critically constituted as the symbolic assertion of existence in the face of impending non-existence, a non-existence paradoxically doubling the non-existence from which subjectivity emerges. In one literary-critical application of this theoretical trope, Hillis Miller’s classification of the forms of repetition in fiction includes, as the seventh form, “Repetition as Raising of the Dead”. His example text is Woolf’s *Mrs Dalloway*, a novel about, among other things, walking around London on a day when characters “rise from the dead to come to Clarissa’s party”, as Hillis Miller puts it.<sup>70</sup> Narration itself, in Hillis Miller’s careful reading of Woolf’s novel, enacts the process of resurrecting the past in representational form, and allows a broad model for the functions of narration and literary language in Sinclair’s writings, which, in their recurrent representations of fluid pasts intermingling with presents, work to evoke the absence at the core of literature, its implicit recognition, as it is expressed in *Dining on Stones*, that “only the dead see the dead”.<sup>71</sup>

<sup>67</sup> Freud, *On Metapsychology* pp 292-3

<sup>68</sup> Lacan, *The Psychoses* p 242

<sup>69</sup> See Derrida, *Spectres of Marx* pp 1-48

<sup>70</sup> Hillis Miller, *Fiction and Repetition* pp 176-202: p 190

<sup>71</sup> *Dining on Stones* p 431

Sinclair's books lead us repetitiously through the absences of death, necropolitan worlds where we repeatedly encounter textual origins as liminal words and images "glowing in the dark", like the "exorcised" Millenium Dome, in the final words of *London Orbital*.<sup>72</sup> "The dark" of this closing night, like the "dark" implicit in the title of *Lights Out for the Territory*, corresponds to what Nicholas Royle calls the "spectral night of dreams, of phantoms, of ghosts"<sup>73</sup> of Blanchot's theorisations of death and writing, which is also the dark night of death in Sinclair's writings. We are led through these writings in the company of Sinclair's narrators, who, like Kaporal in *Landor's Tower*, "watch glossy, avariciously-beaked crows bouncing on coarse thick grass ... One word in his mouth: death".<sup>74</sup>

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

Works by Iain Sinclair:

*Lud Heat and Suicide Bridge* (1975 / 1979), London: Granta 1998

*White Chappell, Scarlet Tracings*, Goldmark 1987

*Downriver* (1991), London: Vintage 1995

*Radon Daughters* (1994), London: Granta 1998

*Lights Out for the Territory*, London: Granta 1997

*Slow Chocolate Autopsy* (with Dave McKean), London: Phoenix House 1997

*Rodinsky's Room* (with Rachel Lichtenstein), London: Granta 1999

*Landor's Tower*, London: Granta 2001

*London Orbital*, London: Granta 2002

*Dining On Stones*, Harmondsworth: Hamish Hamilton 2004

<sup>72</sup> *London Orbital* p 457

<sup>73</sup> *Very Little ... Almost Nothing* p 32

<sup>74</sup> *Landor's Tower* p 45

*City Brain* interview with Mark Pilkington and Phil Baker,  
[http://www.forteantimes.com/articles/147\\_iainsinclair.shtml](http://www.forteantimes.com/articles/147_iainsinclair.shtml)

Other works:

Berenice Abbott, *The World of Atget*, Horizon 1964

Paul Auster (editor and translator), *The Notebooks of Joseph Joubert – A Selection*,

San Francisco: North Point Press 1983

Gerry Badger, *Eugene Atget*, Phaidon 55 2001

Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida* (translated by Richard Howard),  
 Flamingo 1984

Steve Beard, *Aftershocks – The End of Style Culture*, London:  
 Wallflower Press 2002

Maurice Blanchot, *The Space of Literature* (translated by Ann  
 Smock), Lincoln &

London: University of Nebraska 1982

Maurice Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation* (translated by Susan  
 Hanson),

Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press 1993

Maurice Blanchot, *The Book to Come* (translated by Charlotte  
 Mandell), Stanford:

Stanford University Press 2003

Pierre Bourdieu, *Photography – A Middle-Brow Art* (translated by  
 Shaun Whiteside),

Polity Press 1996

André Breton, *Manifestoes of Surrealism* (translated by Richard  
 Seaver and Helen R

Lane), Ann Arbor / University of Michigan 1972

Elisabeth Bronfen, 'Death: A Preface' in Joanne Morra et al (eds),  
*The Limits of*

*Death*, Manchester: Manchester University Press 2000

William Burroughs, *Junky*, London: David Bruce & Watson, 1973

- Hélène Cixous, *Readings: The Poetics of Blanchot, Joyce, Kafka, Kleist, Lispector and Tsvetayeva* (translated by Verena Andermatt Conley), Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 1991
- Simon Critchley, *Very Little ... Almost Nothing: Death, Philosophy, Literature*, London: Routledge 1997
- Jacques Derrida, *Spectres of Marx: The State of the Debt, The Work of Mourning and the New International*, translated by Peggy Kamuf, London: Routledge 1994
- Sigmund Freud, *The Penguin Freud Library Volume 11 – On Metapsychology: The Theory of Psychoanalysis* (translated by James Strachey), Harmondsworth: Penguin 1984
- J. Hillis Miller: *Fiction and Repetition – Seven English Novels*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard 1982
- William Hope Hodgson, *The House on the Borderland*, London: Panther 1969
- Jack Kerouac, *On The Road*, Harmondsworth: Penguin 1991
- Jacques Lacan: *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book III 1955-1956 – The Psychoses* (edited by Jacques-Alain Miller, translated by Russell Grigg), London: Routledge 1993
- Malcolm Lowry, *Under the Volcano*, Harmondsworth: Penguin
- Molly Nesbit, *Atget's Seven Albums*, Yale UP 1992
- George A. Romero, *Night of the Living Dead*, Moonstone Pictures DVD 2001 [1968]

- Dawn of the Dead*, BmG Music Programming DVD 2001  
[1980]
- Day of the Dead*, Arrow Film Distributors DVD 2003 [1986]
- Nicholas Royle, *The Uncanny*, Manchester: Manchester University  
Press 1993
- Susan Sontag, *On Photography*, Harmondsworth: Penguin 1979
- Bram Stoker, *Dracula*, Harmondsworth: Penguin 1993
- Marina Warner, *Monuments and Maidens: The Allegory of the  
Female Form*,  
London: Picador 1986