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Noise, neoliberalism and Iain Sinclair

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Chapter 5: Roadworks: Orbiting the Orison

The symbolic function of the road in Sinclair's work is indicated in a memorably condensed fashion in the opening pages of *White Chappell Scarlet Tracings* when the narrator's fellow second-hand book dealer and travelling companion, Dryfeld, begins a discourse on toads and motorways:

“If the A1 had anticipated itself, Darwin would never have had to leave these shores. It's all here, Monsieur. Only the fittest and most insanely determined life forms can battle across the river of death to reach the central reservation - but then, ha! They are free from predators. They live and breathe under the level of the fumes. They stay on the grass spine, leave the city, or the sea-coast, escape, feral cats and their like, and travel the country, untroubled, north to south. The lesser brethren die at the verges. And are spun from our wheels, flung to the carrion. Grantham's daughter, this is your vision”. (12)

While it is unlikely that Margaret Thatcher would have recognized her “vision” in Dryfeld's riff, Friedrich Hayek, one of the principal sources of her economic theory, would almost certainly have agreed with this identification of the relationship between (social) Darwinism and the operation of the free-market mechanism which achieves efficiency through its disposal of the weak and superfluous. As noted in the discussion of De Quincey above, for Hayek, free market capitalism, insofar as it constituted a self-organising system, was at the most basic level a “natural” mode of economic organization whose operational logic was replicated throughout the natural world and could even embrace the relationship of toads and motorways (Hayek; Hunt). Alan Marshall commenting on the development of the “Economy-Ecology” analogy in postmodern science notes that this thesis has received even more extreme statements by Robert Ayres and Michael Rothschild who, taking this thesis to its inevitable conclusion, “regards capitalism as an inevitable, natural state of human economic affairs. Being for or against a natural phenomenon is a waste of time and mental energy” (qtd. Marshall, 142).

As such Sinclair presents us here with an image of the contradiction which runs throughout liberal thought as it is manifest in the concept of noise. Where liberalism conventionally looks to the road as a symbol of the free circulation of goods and information, Sinclair suggests through the mouth of Dryfeld that it is as a barrier, a “river of death”, that its true function within (neo)liberal thought is revealed. It is only through the discipline of the market, through a submission to its ruthless efficiencies, that we will reach the promised land. The promised land, however, Dryfeld’s analogy suggests, will resemble not so much a garden as the everywhere and nowhere, the no-place, of the central reservation.

The passage occupies a totemic position in Sinclair’s oeuvre. As the opening scene of *White Chappell Scarlet Tracings* it marks Sinclair’s shift from poetry to fiction and his narrator’s transition from assistant gardener to second-hand book dealer, a change in career which reflects Sinclair’s own move from his position as small-press owner and temporary labourer in “the industrial end-game” (Birkbeck 00:36:10) to book-dealer specializing in the works of the American “beat” writers. In this move from the production to distribution of literature, Sinclair’s career change mirrors the wider structural and ideological changes in the British economy. As he remarked in a lecture at Birkbeck in 2011, the world of the council gardeners he describes in *Lud Heat* had vanished when he returned the following year. The Park Department had been outsourced, the permanent staff disbanded, and all their knowledge and experience had been lost.⁵⁸ In swapping his subsidized lifestyle of communitarian production for that of a traveller and trader in used goods, Sinclair is in step with the tenor of the times: Norman Tebbit’s suggestion that in Thatcher’s Britain the unemployed should “get on their bikes” to search for work identifies mobility as a key element in the economic formula of neoliberalism, and with it, the road.

⁵⁸ “The sad thing was that we returned a year after we left and we went back to the hut but there was nobody there, there was one person who said well it’s all been rationalized and we’ve all been let go and there’s going to be gardeners coming in from the outside. And at that moment you recognize this sense of place and sense of, however grudging and bitter it was about what they were doing, the sense of responsibility for keeping a landscape beautiful and alive, was gone for good, and the people that came in just blasted away like industrial cleaners and then were off in the van and away” (Birkbeck 00:35:36).

The dynamics of the new economic reality is captured in the company of book-dealers described in *White Chappell* who join forces to raid provincial bookshops but keep their information and discoveries secret from each other. As dealers or brokers they are emblematic of the parasitic economy of the middleman who makes his living through establishing connections between the consumer and the consumed: they produce goods not through labour but out of the back of a car, and as such, are the central figures in an information economy where money is made literally on the road. The road as that which separates and connects becomes the locus of value production in a post-industrial economy, and, as Brian Baker notes, roads are central to most of Sinclair's work from this period, providing the narrative continuity in his novels in the absence of plot (162-3), and the immediate focus of the London Orbital project and his account of following the journey up the Great North Road out of Essex taken by peasant poet John Clare in 1841. Consequently it is the road as the locus of noise that will be explored in this chapter.

The politics of bus stops

The London Orbital project, which, in addition to the film and book of that name, can also be extended to include his denunciation of the Millennium Dome, published as *Sorry Meniscus* (1999) and the novel *Dining on Stones* (2004),⁵⁹ marks Sinclair's most complex engagement with the cultural and political landscape of a Britain transformed by the neoliberal economic revolution begun under Margaret Thatcher and continued under New Labour.⁶⁰ The inspiration for the walk around the M25 Sinclair explains "started with the Dome" more specifically, "[a]n urge to walk away from the Teflon meteorite on Bugsby's marshes" (*London Orbital* 4). The significance of the M25 then is to be located in Sinclair's critique of the Millennium Dome and as it is in his excursions to, and excoriations upon the Dome that Sinclair's

⁵⁹ Michael Caines' review in *The Times Literary Supplement* (23.4.2004) describes it as the "bastard son of *London Orbital*" (Caines 2004). For other reviews see <http://www.complete-review.com/reviews/sinclair/dinings.htm> accessed, 16.06.11.

⁶⁰ "New Labour was Old Tory with better haircuts, classier denials, the elasticated grin in place of the lead-filled handbag" (Petit and Sinclair 00:09:21).

critical project seems most at risk of collapsing into a simple rant about the arrogance and profligacy of government it is worth beginning an account of his motorway walk with an examination of his urge to flee the Dome. His denunciation of the “Teflon hedgehog” in an article originally commissioned by the *London Review of Books*, bundled in the pamphlet *Sorry Meniscus* (1999) and reprised in the opening section of *London Orbital* (2001) seems in many ways indistinguishable from the more general chorus of disapproval directed at “the most expensive tent in the universe” (*Sorry Meniscus* 23). However, despite its obviousness as a target for a generalized satire, Sinclair’s writing on the Dome encodes important elements of his broader critique of neoliberal urbanism. In this respect the Dome represents the essential continuity between Tory and New Labour. As a Tory project it could be derided as “a pointless but vaguely patriotic symbol sprayed over with cheer-leader slogans” another exercise in the “happy-clappy imperialism” familiar from earlier Tory injunctions to “rejoice” and celebrate Britishness. The fact that Tony Blair’s New Labour government took over the already derided project when it took power in 1997 effectively transformed the Dome into an emblem of the underlying continuity of the ideological assumptions of Tory and New Labour. As an expression of New Labour values the Dome is far more sinister than in its original incarnation as “a classic Tory scam” (*Sorry Meniscus* 16) for it comes to symbolize Labour’s endorsement of the neoliberal premise that the market represents the ultimate horizon of politics. It becomes, in effect, a symbol of the post-political condition: an emblem of a general loss of faith in politics and democracy.

In its staging of the city, the Dome represents a repartitioning of the sensible that erases the noise of politics. Under New Labour management, the Dome typifies a neoliberal concern with what David Harvey terms the “entrepreneurial city” (“From Managerialism to Entrepreneurialism”), in that it promotes the city as a place to do business within the global network of investment rather than concentrating on the immediate needs of its inhabitants. As such it is a “folly that would soak up funds that would otherwise be wasted on keeping electoral promises, restoring schools and hospitals” (*Sorry Meniscus* 37). Further, it marks the imposition of a virtual city upon the concerns of the actual: “What we could all use is another bridge, another tunnel, but that’s not on the New Labour agenda. Too expensive, too much hassle. Too heavy, too Soviet. Too . . . pedestrian” (*Sorry Meniscus* 21) [ellipsis in original].

Consequently Sinclair's immediate strategy in *Sorry Meniscus* is to juxtapose the vision of the Dome with the actuality of moving through the space of the physical city. "It was the vision in the brochures that counted, virtual reality. The world as it should be, if only we could believe" (*Sorry Meniscus* 34). Deciding to see whether it is possible to reach the Dome by public transport from within London, he leaves Hackney for Greenwich: "The Millennium urban Experience copywriters spoke with breath-taking self-confidence of a 'twelve-minute' ride from the centre of town" (53). However, the Docklands Light Railway (another public-private partnership) leaves him stranded at a bus stop in Cross Harbour on the Isle of Dogs where

A couple of old ladies, huddled against the cruel zephyrs and down draughts that swept through this Blade Runner architecture, remarked "You see plenty of those bleeders", as yet another empty link-bus met the train. Meanwhile they were left waiting, half an hour or more, for the standard Island-inhabitants' cattle-carrier. (58)

The snatch of conversation records in cameo form the spatial division engendered by neoliberal urbanism. As city administrations devote their energies to improving the city's competitiveness in the global market where Sassen's "global cities" compete for investment capital, large sections of the population are confronted not only with their political disenfranchisement but with the fragmentation of urban space. The redirection of funds away from service provision to entrepreneurial initiatives effectively leaves Londoners who are reliant on the public sphere stranded at bus stops.

The result is a city structured around two types of space. There is the city addressed to the space of international capital, where link buses shuttle between sites valorised by the language of public-private investment, while the local population inhabit a series of unprofitable spaces which are increasingly discrete and unconnected. It is a spatialisation of the city which, in Sinclair's hyperbolic account transforms the former Imperial metropolis into a version of its colonial Other: "The question becomes: is it possible to reach the Dome by public transport without help from Thomas Cook, a limitless budget and a posse of native guides" (67).

The strategy of investment in prestigious projects that will increase the city's international competitiveness, creates a space which is fractured not only in terms of its interconnections with other areas within the city, but which also confronts the population with its disenfranchisement from the space of the neoliberal city which is traversed by systems to which they have no access:

The others on the platform live there. A gang of youths, confident in the non-appearance of anything resembling a train, take off down the tracks. And they are right. Masked carriages stacked with nuclear waste or whatever, rattle through at high speed, but passenger trains are a rumour. There is only speaking in tongues feedback from the public address system. The occasional word could be picked out of the acoustic froth . . . At the end of the last century it was possible to get into the City in about ten or twelve minutes by train or tram. Now there are only mobs waiting for phantom buses. There's a culture of waiting. Coming down from Lewisham to Greenwich, I discovered people whose lives were based around the time spent at bus stops. They reminisced, they kvetched. They discussed various ailments and fantasised on their chances of ever reaching a doctor's surgery or out-patient's clinic. And then they went home. (68-69)

This culture of waiting, of waiting for buses and waiting for the temporary disruption of public space to be restored is, Sinclair implies, permanent for it is precisely the space of discrepancy engendered by neoliberal visions of urban regeneration: the space which fails to live up to the reality presented in the "lap top fantasy" and the promotional brochure.

We are being asked to endure the noise, dust, pollution of a 24-hour building site, as vindication for the heavenly pleasure park that is, just, around the corner. It's a long just: long enough to give the advertisers and image-enhancers time to whet our appetites, convince us that this Disneyland trade show is something we can't do without. Meanwhile, we must tolerate railways that don't work, public roads with private security barriers, river paths that run up against plywood fences, naked dirt from horizon to horizon, and a quadraphonic Serbian soundtrack. (52-53)

As Guy Baeten (2007) has noted, the identification of civic failure with the moral failure of the underclass is central to neoliberal strategies of urban regeneration. Merijn Oudenampsen (2007) addressing what he terms the “city renovation yo-yo” notes that areas designated for regeneration are first identified in terms of urban blight as symptomatic of urban dysfunction, as empty of viable economic activity and or social coherence and then, “[o]nce the necessary mental space for radical intervention has been created, the new plans are presented in which special emphasis is placed on the area’s wonderful economic opportunities”. As a result “[a]n almost obligatory element in plans for urban renewal has become the SWOT analysis, in which the location is unquestioningly seen as strength and the population as weakness” (121).

A consequence of this dystopian/utopian yo-yo is that the reality of under-investment in infrastructure, the failure of the post-regeneration city can also be identified with the moral failure/weakness of the population. The city’s failure is imputed to the individual’s unwillingness to embrace risk, to live for the future, to realize their true potential as human beings. As Sinclair notes “[i]t was the vision in the brochures that counted, virtual reality. The world as it should be, if only we could believe” (*Sorry Meniscus* 34). If reality differed, this was because of a failure to believe, a failure of vision, a failure to see: “The blue river. The orchards. The gardens” (34):

Reality, out there, was always in need of a little cosmetic enhancement. Design buffs on the Millennium Experience payroll see the sorry isthmus with its muddy horizons, its earth-movers and excavators, its razor-wire fences and surveillance cameras, as an Arcadian grotto. They have no problem with deferred pleasure, they read the future like a transcendent comic strip. Old Thames is rejuvenated in a Mediterranean blue. There are avenues of potential trees, future forests. Docklands is a garden city, clean, broad-avenued, free of traffic, and peopled entirely by vibrant ink spots. (47-48)

However, in the Millennium Dome Sinclair recognises something more than just another exercise in the neoliberal strategy of urban regeneration. In Sinclair’s reading it exemplifies the tension between market and creativity that lies at the heart of the reconfiguration of civic government in the global context. It symbolises the hubris of a system which believes that it can eliminate the excluded; that fails to recognise the necessity of the hidden. The significance of the Dome is connected to its site. Where

the Millennium Experience brochurists impose their lap-top fantasies on Greenwich, he claims that earlier generations recognised the necessity of such waste land. Thus nineteenth-century colourists

balked at Bugsby's Marshes. The swamp defied their imagination. Its karma was too terrible. They knew the story and knew that any proper human settlement needed its back country, its unmapped deadlands. The Peninsula was where the nightstuff was handled: foul-smelling industries, the manufacture of ordnance, brewing, confectionery, black smoke palls and sickly sweet perfumes. (48-49)

As such, Bugsby's marshes give topographical expression to the wrong which Rancière places at the heart of the polis. It is the spatial equivalent of the necessary miscount.

The Peninsula thrives on secrecy. For as long as anyone can remember much of this land has been hidden behind tall fences. Walkers held their breath and made a wide circuit. Terrible ghosts were trapped in the ground. A site on the west of the Peninsula, now captured by the Teflon-coated fabric of the Dome, had once featured a gibbet where the corpse of some pirate, removed from Execution Dock in Wapping, would be left to decay. (48-49)

The choice of this site for a faux celebration of all that is best about Britain symbolizes the hubris of Blair's vision of Britain where image is all that matters and the reality of the site and its cultural memory can be discounted without a second thought. In this the Dome symbolizes the wider logic of capital: the transformation of places with their own specific associations and memories into what Marc Augé (1995) termed "non-places", the anonymous functional spaces of hypermodernity. The Dome performs this logic in that it is, in Sinclair's account literally all surface: the notorious struggles to find a content for the "Millennium Experience" exemplify the tendency to reconfigure place as a content-less space. Having created an artificial structure in the middle of a wilderness any content will itself be pure surface, inescapably simulacral.

The Dome's displacement of content to surface also mirrors the more general process of displacement attendant on the spatial logic of neoliberalism in which Londoners are pushed out of the increasingly spatially fragmented city and into the homogeneity and anonymity of the suburbs and dormitory towns that surround the metropolis, losing in the process access to the multiple narratives and associations of the city, and the possibility of the aleatory encounter which constitute the positive noise of the metropolitan life.

The London Orbital or M25 motorway epitomises this process. It is emblematic of Augé's no-place and is intended to facilitate the depopulation of the metropolis by making the city more accessible to the towns beyond its perimeter. In walking the M25, then, Sinclair is in his own terms carrying out a form of exorcism. By recovering a sense of place for this emblematic non-place he intends to counter the "vampiric" logic of neoliberalism which transforms place into space by erasing, denying and repressing cultural memory.

The Road as Parasite

If the M25 typifies the non-place of Augé's supermodernity, the place which is *in*, but not *of* its place, it also forms a perfect *habitus* for Michel Serres' parasite whose position is "to be between", which, having its being in relation, is most at home in those spaces which seek to efface their inter-mediality. For Serres, as we have noted, whether in information theory, biology or social relations, the parasite interferes with and upsets an existing set of relations and thereby provokes some form of reaction or response which ultimately stimulates the further transformation of the organism or system. In their study of new media development, Jay Bolter and Robert Grusin (2000) extend this insight into a principle of technological causality. It is entirely possible, they demonstrate, to write the history of new media in terms of successive attempts to overcome the noise of mediation - every new form of media attempts to deliver greater immediacy by eliminating the noise, or mediality, of that which it

replaces. The same logic applies even more directly to road-building, for insofar as new roads are built when old roads no longer serve their purpose, the driving force of the parasite as noise is seldom more evident than in road-building programmes.

Like all motorways then, the M25 is conceived as an empty channel of communication, its function as medium is to facilitate the movement of travellers and goods with optimum efficiency from point *a* to point *b*. As Sinclair notes in his attention to the road's "acoustic footprint", (*London Orbital* 00:16:30)⁶¹ it is also a perfect expression of pure mediality: a channel of communication designed, to erase all traces of its own presence. Sinclair's "project of restitution", in walking the M25 involves restoring a sense of place to this non-place by paying attention to its noise. By walking the "[d]ull fields that travellers never notice" (*London Orbital* 16) he aims to reinscribe this archetypal interstitial highway within a detailed cultural and topographical locale and thereby to discover within the M25 as non-place a place which is neither local nor global. Given that all roads are, to a greater or lesser degree, noisy, and that the characteristic of non-place is its aspiration to global uniformity, the difficulty of Sinclair's project lies in hearing the noise of this particular road.

That particularity, his walk reveals, is to be found in the road's symbolic resonance, its ideological content as a speech act. As Sinclair's detailed cultural history makes clear, the M25 was a project conceived as an affirmation of the modernist faith in the future but which carried an entirely different ideological message on its completion in 1986. For a government intent on restricting the role of government to the removal of obstacles to social and commercial mobility, the road, and road-building represented the embodiment of the neoliberal political project.⁶² It is no coincidence that whereas Harold Wilson's "white heat" of technology⁶³ delivered Concorde, Margaret

⁶¹ "[A]coustic footprints are what the road planners call the distance from which you can hear the motorway . . . and the motorway planners have the right to plant as far back as the acoustic footprints stretch" (*London Orbital* 00:16:30).

⁶² As Joe Moran notes, Thatcher's "consistent support for what she called "the great car economy" was based on a strong association between road-building and entrepreneurialism" (96).

⁶³ Harold Wilson delivered the "white heat of technology" speech at the Labour Party's 1963 annual conference: "the Britain that is going to be forged in the white heat of this [technological] revolution will be no place for restrictive practices or for outdated measures on either side of industry". http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Harold_Wilson accessed 21.06.11.

Thatcher's vision of a car-owning democracy ensured that the M25 and the Channel Tunnel would be foremost in her governments' civil engineering legacy. As a means of releasing the creative potential of a society held in stasis by outmoded political and social identities, the M25 perfectly mirrors the neoliberal conception of government, existing for the sole purpose of facilitating free movement.⁶⁴

Indeed, insofar as it is intended to stimulate the circulation of goods and people necessary for the efficient operation of a free market, the road can even be said to replace the political machinery of democratic representation with the far more immediate mode of self-representation that, in neoliberal thought, is played by the free market. The M25 is, in effect, the public space of neoliberalism. As the host of one of the phone-ins featured so prominently in the film's sound track points out "every one of you, every last one of you, will at some time have been on the M25" (00:04:50) and, as an irate lorry-driver reiterates, "everything you touch in your house has been transported by truck at some stage of the game, if there was no lorry drivers out there this country would come to a [fade]" (00:08:15). The idea of the traveller as a postmodern everyman provides the perfect expression of the neoliberal assault on occupation- or location-based identities. It encapsulates a world where workers have become consumers, and rail-passengers are interpellated by station tannoys as "customers". The psephological consequences of this shift in representation are revealed in New Labour's identification of "Mondeo man" as the key to electoral success after "old" Labour's defeat in the 1992 general election.⁶⁵ In consciously shifting its notional demographic away from the inner cities of the urban poor to the newly affluent constituencies surrounding the M25, Labour recognised that electoral

⁶⁴ "Neoliberalism is in the first instance a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade. The role of the state is to create and preserve an institutional framework appropriate to such practices" (Harvey, *Brief History 2*).

⁶⁵ The phrase has its origins in a speech given by Tony Blair at the 1996 Labour Party conference: "I met a man polishing his Ford Sierra. He was a self-employed electrician. His dad always voted Labour, he said. He used to vote Labour, too. But he'd bought his own house now. He'd set up his own business. He was doing quite nicely. 'So I've become a Tory', he said . . . In that moment, he crystallised for me the basis of our failure, the reason why a whole generation has grown up under the Tories. People judge us on their instincts about what they believe our instincts to be. His instincts were to get on in life. And he thought our instincts were to stop him" (qtd. Moran 102-3).

success meant it could no longer be seen as the party of the poor. It abandoned a politics of location for one of aspiration based, as Joe Moran points out, on a car whose name is a “made-up word meant to sound like ‘world’ in several languages”, and which was, in fact, “one of the first cars to be conceived as a truly global product” (103).

However, as those radio phone-ins make clear, by 2001, the M25 has come to signify not greater mobility but the constant frustration of traffic jams and congestion: it has delivered not increased personal freedom but a new kind of boredom: “More than other motorways the M25 is designed to test thresholds of boredom. It eliminates any romantic notion of boredom, but for the addicted it has its attractions, it is mainline boredom, it is true boredom, a quest for transcendental boredom” (00:10:20). What should have been an empty channel for better communication has become pure noise. Indeed, the phone-ins (themselves, another legacy of the Thatcherite liberalisation of the airwaves, and hence the public sphere) point the same lesson: instead of liberating creative potential by increasing the opportunities for communication they have become a forum for reflecting on the failure of the road as a medium of better communication. Their constant message is “it’s not working” (00:05:01).

What the M25 teaches, consequently, is not simply that it is impossible to build an empty road, but that Serres’ maxim that “where there are channels, there must be noise” (*Parasite* 79) has profound ideological implications. Sinclair’s London Orbital project is in effect an attempt to fathom the political implications of that lesson, for insofar as the pure mediality of the M25 reflects the neoliberal emphasis on government’s own function as a form of pure mediality, its intent to simply remove the obstacles preventing individuals from fulfilling their economic and social potential, the failure of the M25 will tell us something about the failures, or parasitic dynamic - the cracks in the mirror - within the neoliberal project.

The parasitic dynamic of the M25 is starkly revealed in the apocalyptic backdrop to Sinclair’s project in the form of the 2001 foot and mouth crisis. Built to facilitate the unrestricted circulation of goods and people, the motorway network has enabled the centralisation of livestock slaughter. However, through the centralisation of livestock slaughter, the motorway network is also instrumental in transforming an outbreak of

foot and mouth disease in Northumberland into a national epidemic which results in the slaughter of seven million sheep and cattle and the effective closure of the countryside to tourism, thereby removing the countryside as a commodity from the circulation of goods. Liberalisation, in other words, requires unprecedented levels of state intervention and the effective closure of the national system. As such these apocalyptic images identify the motorway as the site of a fundamental ambiguity within the ideology of the free market: the knowledge that the free circulation of goods and people also facilitates the free circulation of disease - that the road is both the bringer of life and of death. Encoded within the mythology of the road is the idea that the principle of the free market disrupts the conceptual landscape of internal and external, inner and outer, us and them: the road as the place of the parasite opens the way to alien invasion, but it reveals that the alien is already within the system. As an emblem of all the ambivalences aroused by the idea of the free market itself, the M25 becomes in effect a site of the mediality repressed by the neoliberal abolition of the political: it marks the recognition that a free market does not decrease the power of the state, but paradoxically necessitates an even stronger state to police the freedoms it institutes.⁶⁶

Again Serres' account of the parasite is instructive in elucidating the chiasmic logic at work in the ambivalences generated by the road and how they relate to the apparent paradox through which the desire for the unmediated representation of the free market should result in increased, rather than diminished, levels of security and control. Any dialogue, Serres argues, is predicated on an agreement to exclude the noise of the media that makes the dialogue possible:

To hold a dialogue is to suppose a third man and to seek to exclude him; a successful communication is the exclusion of the third man. The most profound dialectical problem is not the problem of the Other, who is only a variety - or a variation - of the Same, it is the problem of the third man. We might call this third man the *demon*, the prosopopeia of noise. (*Hermes* 67)

⁶⁶ Alexander Thacker and Eugene Galloway recognise the same contradiction between the supposedly antithetical principals of sovereign power and networked power: "So networks and sovereignty are not incompatible. In fact, quite the opposite: networks create the conditions of existence for a new mode of sovereignty. America is merely the contemporary figurehead of sovereignty-in-networks" (20).

Rather than a supplement or obstacle to communication, the parasite as noise is the enabling condition of communication. But it is also clear that in the agreement to exclude, noise occupies the position of the repressed in psychoanalytic theory, it signals that which if it were acknowledged would dissolve or compromise the basis of identity that forms the fixed positions within the existing system. Clearly this model of communication arising from an agreement to exclude is the obverse of that invoked by Jürgen Habermas as the basis of communication within the public sphere which is predicated on the notion of universal inclusion (1989). Following Serres, we can say that in Habermas's model of the public sphere it is the idea of exclusion itself which is excluded. One is constituted as a member of the public by entering a space which is defined by the principle that no one can be excluded and as such it is the knowledge of exclusion which is repressed, which if acknowledged would dissolve the public sphere.⁶⁷ In this respect the M25 in problematising the notion that a free society should be open to all is very noisy. It becomes in effect a figure for the problematic relationship of inclusion and exclusion within the politics of neoliberalism. Within the film this is signalled through the mixture of roadside footage from Afghanistan with that of the M25, to indicate the road's inscription within a global economy of oil. Given that this is an exercise in psychogeography, however, the logic of the repressed should be sought not at the level of manifest content but in the project's formal meditation on the principles of exclusion and noise. The London Orbital project explores the M25's noise through its own noise, its own mediality.

To theorise the noise of the road, in other words, is not to represent it. If Sinclair's project as an exercise in cultural history provides a general map of the ideological contours of the M25, as a textual event it registers the road's noise through attention

⁶⁷ Serres suggests a logic, contained in the French verb *chasser* meaning "to chase" and "to hunt", in which the repressed - that which is chased away - is also that which is chased after, the desired objective: "To chase: push out, drive out, uproot, dismiss, purge, repress. We repress what bothers us. What is repressed, but remains anyway, still parasites communication. The hare [in Fontaine's fable, "*Le Jardinier et son seigneur*"] is the third position, and thus, he must be excluded. He must be chased, hunted down. I fear that this is the origin of hunting. The only things hunted are those that have to be chased away. In the end, there are two kinds of animals: those that are invited and those that are hunted. Guests and quarry. Tame and wild" (*Parasite* 77). The operation of this doubled logic also seems evident in the elevation of exclusion into the universalising principle that defines the identity of the public sphere as that which contains all identities.

to its own mediality - by foregrounding the noise of his own project in order to reveal how his own strategies of representation are implicated within those transforming the wider political culture. Typically the mediality of the London Orbital project, like most of Sinclair's other projects is foregrounded by its exploration of the nature of textual boundaries. It challenges any naive notion of representation through an insistence on its own mediality through its constant invocation to a missing object: the walk.

Sinclair highlights the *nachträglich* function of the walk as the absent origin within his poesis in his observation that “*Where* a road goes informs every inch of it” (46), for “*Where*” Sinclair's road goes is, of course, into his notebooks: the final destination of his walk is always the text. But, in accordance with the logic of the future anterior, and despite his admonitions against “wankers spouting Baudrillard, Derrida, flannel about flâneurs” (*Dining on Stones* 87), its end is also (always-already) its occasion, for the text is both the walk's destination and its point of departure - its motivation. In the case of the London Orbital walk, however, the road has, as we have noted, at least two destinations, two texts: the book published in 2002 and the film, made jointly with Chris Petit, also released in 2002, both titled, *London Orbital*. This doubled destination effectively doubles the road. What Petit terms the “split nature of the project” is reflected in the split screen format of the movie, a doubling which, apart from demonstrating a seemingly natural affinity between the pairings film/driving and writing/walking, doubly emphasises the irretrievable nature of the event that serves as a putative original: “the more polished the paragraph the less I trusted the memory” (00:06:38). *London Orbital*'s status as a film haunted by a book or a book haunted by a film of a road haunted by its destination establishes the buzz of mediality as a constant background noise within the texts.

To take one small example, the barking dog woven into the film's opening soundscape finds a referent in the book where we read, “I heard a sound, a howling, that was to be one of the defining characteristics of my motorway walk: the chorus of the boarding kennels. Domestic animals are dumped out on the fringes where their din will cause least offence” (15). The interplay between film and book enacts, in this case, the drama of the M25 as an acoustic event - it registers the place of the motorway in the social economy of noise. We need the book to hear the dog as

message rather than noise, but it is the film that actually allows us to hear the howling.

As we have seen (39), Serres effectively describes the topology of this intertextual zone in detail in his example of somebody leaving a conversation at the dinner table to answer the telephone. Telephone and table constitute two distinct noise/message systems, he points out. It is Serres' stochastic region "on the edges of messages, at the birth of noises" (*Parasite* 67) in which we are located by the intertextuality and intermediality invoked by Sinclair. Adopting the language generated by the road itself, we might say that each text, book and film, takes place within the other's "acoustic footprint", each version constantly sounds the exclusion of its other. The film quotes the book as the book annotates the film, and together they invoke the road as itself the primary figure of selection - this path of all possible paths - whose silenced other is to be found in those "[d]ull fields that travellers never notice" (16).

As the interview with Sinclair and Petit included among the DVD "extras" makes clear, these versions of the walk as absent event inhabit very different niches within the cultural ecosystem. Whereas the book, "which comes out quite attractively from Penguin is able to sell quite large numbers of copies" (Petit and Sinclair, "Interview" 00:10:55) the film, "as far as television is concerned . . . may as well not exist" (00:11:33). It survives in the interstices of the TV schedules, airing only in the small hours of the morning with the result that "nobody knows whether they've watched it: it comes along at a point where you are either asleep or drunk, or you have maybe stayed up and seen a bit of it and then fallen asleep . . . it ceases to be discrete imagery and becomes part of this mindstream of nocturnal television" (00:10:40). Sinclair attributes the different fortunes of the film and the book to an effect of cultural *Nachtraglichkeit*: "I think this film was a very accurate reflection of what the M25 itself is, which is wholly posthumous, because when that road was opened in 1986 it was too late and people imagined it being opened in 1956 which is really where it belonged and the film is rather the same: it is something that exists in another era, doesn't belong now and people don't really know what it is, and it has no place" (00:11:49). The road can no longer be seen, he suggests, because it exists as spectacle within another era, it belongs to the modernist city, the city of boulevards. As a

medium, or emblem of pure mediality, the road is invisible: it exists as a site of the repressed, flowing seamlessly into the “mindstream of nocturnal television”.

Given that there is, then, a very real problem in representing the M25 - in making the viewer see the M25 rather than *just* a motorway, it is not surprising that it is the film rather than the book that offers the greatest scope for reflection on its own mediality, and Chris Petit’s self-reflexive discussion of his problems in determining the nature of his subject provides an extended meditation on the nature of the mediation represented by the motorway. In his narrative, Petit effectively articulates the problem confronting every reader of Sinclair: the sense of their own belatedness, the uncertainty regarding their own position in relation to the text, whether they are there as interpreter or witness: “Where Iain had already walked the motorway and amassed a huge archive of material, I was left with little to do except to find the split nature of our project by electing to drive in pursuit of nothing around the world’s biggest bypass” (*London Orbital* 00:03:00). In his quest to discover the nature of his quest in, and on, the road, to discover the rationale of his film, Petit must also contend with Sinclair’s proprietorial promptings. Sinclair “warned that by driving it, I risked becoming one of Bram Stoker’s undead” and recommends that, to help him define his quest, Petit read “the literature of the future written over a century past” (00:06:52). Sinclair’s helpful hints tie the meaning of the M25 to time travel. The H.G. Wells quote, delivered by postcard, describing the unpleasant sensations of travelling in time anticipates his own subsequent quotation from Wells’ “speculative fiction”, “The Time Machine”: “There is no difference between time and any of the three dimensions of space except that our consciousness moves it along” (00:07:05). Significantly, however, Sinclair misquotes Wells, transforming the original “moves along it” which assigns time an external objective reality, into the more subjectivist “moves it along” - which seems to make time an effect of consciousness. The parapraxis is important insofar as Petit’s eventual solution to the problem of filming the M25 involves a refinement of Sinclair’s misquotation: it is not consciousness that moves on time, but consciousness as embodied in technology.

Initially Petit ascribes his inability to film the M25 to the nature of the motorway. “After several weeks of attempted cutting, the M25 firmly resists editing, resists linear interpretation once anecdote is refused entry into the equation” (00:34:40). As a

circular motorway, the London orbital refuses narrative: it is neither a road to the future nor away from the past. Rather, as the world's biggest bypass, it is about avoidance: "it was always seen as the solution to a problem, a bureaucratic dream that took decades to realise" (00:49:00). As such the M25 is about boredom and repetition. Petit's moment of epiphany finally comes when he realises that the problem lies not in the subject, but in the medium, film:

The real problem with the M25 is that it resists filming as much as it resists editing. This seems partly to do with the new digital technology which lacks the emulsion shadows and chemical quality of film. Tape is ubiquitous. Too flexible and too accommodating. It can shoot anything. Tape is flat, tape is over-bright and electronic, tape is logging, a hand-held diary. Film comes in ten-minute rolls, tape in 60-minute cassettes. The M25 is anti-cinema and tape is anti-image. What other than a surveillance camera would want to record its ceaseless undramatic motion? The lesson was hard to learn. Several thousands of shots and miles of footage but there was no reason to cut. Editing made no sense in relation to the subject and in the end after many wasted hours it was those camera sentinels that guarded the road which pointed the way. That tape was after all the answer. The M25 only begins to make sense if you don't switch the camera off. (00:36.00)

In this perception that the M25 as a subject marks the shift from one technological grouping (film/analogue/chemical) to another (tape/digital/electronic), Petit effectively locates the road, and with it, Sinclair's project, at the juncture of two paradigms of representation. Film as the medium of cinema is associated with a moving camera whose perspective, particularly in the road movie, represents the protagonist's onward movement through time and space. The M25 is "anti-cinema" because it is predicated on repetition: the London orbital becomes a tape loop. In effect Petit maps a paradigm shift in subjectification onto the technological transition from film to tape, analogue to digital. Film is active, it organises time and space around the perspective of the camera which, in its dynamism, acts as a representative of the imperial *cogito*, moving forward, composing, and, in both senses, relating. Tape, Petit suggests, is about recording, about keeping track. Whereas the movement of the camera mimics that of the individual, the static surveillance "sentinels" are

emblems of the carceral gaze of the Foucauldian state. The individual is transformed into an object that moves across a static frame. That appears, disappears and reappears.

Along with its disruption of the narrative organisation of space and time invoked by film, the surveillance tape invokes a wholly new sense of space and temporality:

We move through a flat, brightly lit and brand new electronic world where everything is surveyed, where everything is shot to death. Cemeteries full of dead TV, beyond the reach of archive and collective recall, which no one can be bothered to remember. Like the road itself, film perhaps represents the end of something rather than the beginning. Film is past, tape is future. Digital technology is the start of a new kind of time: instant, disposable, re-recordable. The freedom of the handy-cam revolution to make a personal cinema but at the same time something more controlling security, surveillance, private porno movies, speed traps, the literalness of reality TV, loss of privacy and individuality as previously understood. Whatever is happening with this new technology, it marks a fundamental revolution in the level and type of voyeurism and a different way of looking at things, less nostalgic, new, unsuspected, kinds of boredom. (00:36.00)

In flooding the world with “dead TV”, tape institutes a new temporality of the sign, and it is within this temporality that Sinclair locates his text. In erasing the affective power that structures the economy of memory, tape’s ubiquity creates the cultural condition which Andreas Huyssen terms the “hypertrophy of memory” (*Present Pasts* 3) but which could equally be described as the hyper-inflation of memory insofar as it involves the devaluation of the image as the currency of memory. The effect of this hyper-inflation is spectral. Insofar as the command to remember etymologically present in “archive” is also the command to forget, there is, as Derrida observes in *Archive Fever*, always a spectrality inherent within the archive. However, in creating a realm “beyond the reach of archive and collective recall” tape institutes a wider spectrality in dividing the world between the recorded and the unrecorded. The injunction to record, to archive - “you forgot the camera!” - even as it cancels the memorability of the record erodes the value of the unrecorded. Only the recorded is

real but the recorded is also the forgettable. Memory takes on the flat literalness of reality TV.

Sinclair elaborates on the political and social implications of this division in his 2005 interview with Colette Meacher. The emergence of CCTV technology, he claims, has radically “transformed the gaze” with which both city and citizen are seen.⁶⁸ For example, the most iconic imagery of the July 2007 bombings, he suggests, did not come from the “inert and old-fashioned” TV cameras, but was “captured on phones in the tunnels”. As a result of the ubiquity of recording technology, the present has never seemed more present: “This new thing has evolved, an eye in the palm of your hand, a device for seeing and communicating in present time”. The fusion of the digital and the human seems to have eliminated the gap between representation and represented, to have made the present immediate. But as a result of this new immediacy, “what you see is totally different”. Acting as host for its content, the new technology/media has fundamentally altered the “psychic climate” of the city: “The technical possibilities create an expectation of disaster. The budget is so big, there has to be a bombing or an assassination to justify it. Surveillance technology incubates future shock”. Resisting this extreme statement of the parasitic relationship of media and content, Meacher counters with the common-sense view that most people find the presence of CCTV cameras “reassuring” and argues that “it’s not as if installing cameras will criminalize the criminals; the criminals are criminals anyway! The cameras simply catch them in the act”.

In response, Sinclair notes how the technology has brought about a fundamental realignment between the image and the idea of the criminal. In the society of the spectacle the image has assumed a totemic function. The affluent believe they can protect their property by installing CCTV, he claims, “as if the image will somehow

⁶⁸ “I think the city has been completely altered by this form of gazing and that indeed consciousness is shifting into a battle between the virtual and the actual and the whole machinery of government and politics is involved in this virtual presentation, which is their trashed version of the sublime. In which they conjure up the Millennium Dome as an island of the sublime, an Arcadian wonder -- a shimmering thing of blue waters and orchards, which doesn’t exist. Underneath it is a disregarded reality, which is a kind of grim poetic, dystopian imagery, smell and filth and dirt. These two sides co-exist. The sublime has been corrupted, moved on by the persuaders and corrupters and the tricksters who are endlessly hosing it over you. I think the overwhelming experiences that you describe - a sense of your identity dissolving into this massive, shifting world - is not available to us any more” (Meacher).

magically protect them without affecting their own lives or behaviour”. What happens in effect is criminality ceases to be a matter of legal procedure - “[y]ou’re only a criminal if you’re caught. That’s the definition of a criminal. Until you’ve been accused and proven guilty you are of no interest to the system” - and becomes an aspect of visibility with the ubiquity of surveillance technology effectively making criminality a matter of retrieval and processing: “Most of Hackney is on a provisional caution. They’re waiting for the bureaucrats to find time to process them”. As such, the technology institutes a faultline within the idea of representation between the surveyors and surveyed which becomes evident in the act of looking back: “taking pictures of IKEA is actually a crime even though all their cameras are taking pictures of you. You’re not allowed to be self-conscious. You have to pretend that you’re in a movie and that you’ve agreed to it”. In the world of constant surveillance innocence and guilt become effects of mediality and of a relationship to mediality, such that even self-consciousness attracts suspicion. The mantra that the innocent have nothing to hide transforms the act of hiding into a proclamation of guilt and makes self-evidence the distinctive attribute of innocence. The open society has become addicted to the gaze that transforms citizens into the performers of their own innocence. In such a society only the naive can continue to believe that innocence and guilt are qualities which exist independently of their representation:

CM: Ultimately, the cameras won’t do anything other than portray events as they’re occurring.

IS: There are no events as they’re occurring. (Both laugh) (Meacher)

What Petit’s mini-essay reveals then, is that in *London Orbital*, tape is both the medium and the message. In the interview that accompanies the DVD, Petit explicitly identifies tape and the new digital cameras as the media that made it possible for him to make the film. In the film, as we have seen, tape enables the surveillance technology and security culture whose emergence the film maps onto the construction of the M25. The chiasmic logic which transforms a technology of liberation into a technology of control which is omnipresent in both the film and book, is written into the logic of the M25 itself as the emblem of a neoliberal promise of greater individual freedom which has delivered instead an ever-stronger, and more intrusive, state, and a culture ever more obsessed with security.

An unpeopled country: misrecognition and reforgetting on the Great North Road.

Sinclair's second road follows a route which is in marked contrast with his first. Where the London Orbital in endlessly circling the metropolis signals the termination of an idea of mobility in a condition of stasis, the Great North Road, or A1, explored in *Edge of the Orison* is first and foremost the road to and from the capital. As such it serves as a metonym for the road taken by the billions who have made the emblematic journey from the country to the city, and particularly, the dispossessed and landless workers whose surplus labour has historically fed the city's growth.⁶⁹ The Great North Road is, in this respect the road that connects the urban and the rural, but also the road that links the city with its topographical and conceptual outsiders: the country and by association, that most contested of categories, Nature. More immediately it is the road taken in 1841 by the "peasant poet" John Clare (1793 - 1864) in his flight from an Epping Forest mental asylum back to his native Northamptonshire. It is Clare's account of how, as a child, he set out to walk to the edge of the horizon, or "orison" in his dialect-influenced spelling, and found himself "out of his knowledge" (*Edge of the Orison* 30) that supplies Sinclair's title and establishes a further contrast with the horizonless circuits of the M25 where disorientation occurs not through an experience of the unfamiliar, but through the endless repetition of the same.

As the title suggests, the tone and tempo of this road trip are also markedly different from *London Orbital*. Rather than the promotion of a "thesis" (*Edge of the Orison* 6), this walk finds its pretext in a story of a family connection between Clare and the forebears of Sinclair's wife, Anna, who also came from Northamptonshire. This genealogical quest, the pronounced emphasis on family - Anna accompanies Sinclair for a significant part of the way - the predominantly rural character of the terrain, and its concern with one of England's foremost nature poets, all suggest that in *Edge of*

⁶⁹ As David Byrne shows, considering the city as a machine for turning peasants into proletarians can be a useful heuristic device (Byrne 4-6).

the Orison Sinclair has shifted his focus from the marginal cultures of the urban edgelands for interests more typically identified with Middle England. As Rebecca Solnit notes, the differences between urban and rural walking involve more than a simple change of scenery: while the shady business of urban walking is never more than a misstep away from “soliciting, cruising, promenading, shopping, rioting, protesting, skulking [or] loitering”, rural walking, she observes, tends to find its “moral imperative in the love of nature” (173-4).

Sinclair himself, however, emphasizes the continuity of the two projects, describing the Clare walk as “unfinished business” (5). London’s “gravity”, he writes, “had to be escaped by a final unwritten chapter, a shaky attempt to place my boots in John Clare’s hobbled footsteps” (5). If the London Orbital walk was an attempt at restitution, at restoring a sense of place to an emblematic non-place by uncovering the cultural memories erased in a landscape of amnesia, in the Clare walk the unfinished business is both a journey further into the landscape of amnesia and a return to the problem of re-presenting a past which isn’t simply a product of our own needs and desires.

In this respect Clare’s “orison” stands as a figure for a general epistemological limit: as the projection of the subject’s located perspective it symbolizes the interdependence of subject and object, the productive dynamic of perception and location. Clare himself is a figure who marks a variety of epistemological limits, who stands on a number of different horizons. Insofar as he is “the one chosen out of all past and future generations of Clares . . . to forge the memory system of poetry, a refinement or written version of the folksongs his father knew and played” (27) he marks the horizon that separates literary from oral culture: he marks the horizon of the written, with all that that entails. As the first Clare to become a writer he separates himself from the unrecorded generations as an individual who can be known. But individuated by his mastery of the written sign, knowable as an author, he encounters the double agency of the letter in a particularly forceful manner. His writing is strongly marked both by a sense of how his bookishness sets him apart from his family and the rest of his village and by how he is misread, as a peasant, rather than as a poet, by his urban public who desert him once the vogue for peasant poetry has passed, leaving him, literally, talking to himself.

The first Clare to become knowable he is also, as a reality effect of the sign, the first Clare to become unknowable: to discover that he has no authority over the interpretation of his words and that these words will be used to produce an endless series of Clares. This process of revision includes the epitaph inscribed on his grave: "Poets are Born not Made" which wind, rain and lichen erode to read "Poets are Born not Mad" - prompting Sinclair to write that "[t]here is no advantage in any man authoring his own life, predicting his future, it has already been told, warped, misappropriated by future biographers, special-interest pleaders, eco-romantics and fellow poets" (25). To become a writer, in other words, is to surrender any claim to an ordinary self and to become instead the subject of a series of re-readings. In thus surrendering his identity to the errancy of the sign he is the first Clare to set his identity loose on the road, to be what he will become.

In addition to marking the horizon that separates the (un)knowability of written culture from the oral, the memorialized from the immemorial, as a "peasant" who saw the landscape of his childhood "improved" by Acts of Enclosure which transformed common land into private property he occupies the horizon of modernity itself, having grown up in a world organized around relationships to property and land which, Karl Marx suggests, had been all but forgotten within two generations of his death (*Capital* 889). In this experience of an unalienated relation to labour and the material world, Clare thus stands as a figure too for that form of social immanence whose loss is signified by the modernity whose locus is the city.

"Who you walk with alters what you see" (6): in electing to travel up the Great North Road with Clare, Sinclair thus transforms this walk into an exploration of the themes of immanence and representation. In Clare, Sinclair aligns his concerns with reforgetting and a non-instrumentalised knowledge, with a figure - the peasant poet - who is of critical significance in wider debates about presentation and representation. The key terms of that debate have been largely determined by Gayatri Spivak's account of the subaltern ("Can the Subaltern Speak?") which explores the ways in which radical Western intellectuals, such as Foucault and Deleuze, despite aiming to critique Western narrativisations of imperial history, effectively consolidate the position of the West as Subject. Although concerned directly with Indian history and

addressing the specific problem of the contribution of peasants, tribals and women (283) to Indian nationalism, her work signals a wider problematic of representation. Namely that representatives who speak for those who are presumed to have no voice effectively silence those on whose behalf they speak. However identifying the unvoiced as an unknowable Other, merely confirms the sovereignty of the (Western) subject against which the Other is articulated.

For Clare the problem of the subaltern is the problem of the commodity form: he struggles to be recognized as the producer of poetry rather than simply as a poetic product. Thus, when, in 1818, the Stamford bookseller Edward Drury collaborated with the progressive London publisher John Taylor, to bring out Clare's first collection, *Poems Descriptive of Rural Life and Scenery* (1821) they resolved to bill Clare's work as "the trembling and diffident efforts of a second Burns or Bloomfield" (qtd. Sales 21). To maximize their commercial success the two men agreed Clare should be branded as a ploughman poet with equal emphasis being placed upon his lowly status as his poetic genius. So great was their faith in the commercial potential not only of Clare's poetry, but the peasant-poet brand, that they decided to publish this first volume at the publisher's risk, rather than by subscription. They took that risk because the potential of peasant poetry had already been demonstrated by the sale of 26,000 copies of Robert Bloomfield's *The Farmer's Boy* (1800) and the enduring popularity of Robert Burns, already enshrined as the national bard of Scotland. However, as Alan Vardy points out, Clare still required careful positioning if he was to appeal to a public raised on Wordsworth's precept that poetry be emotion recollected in tranquillity. This Taylor undertook in his introductory essay which echoes the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* (1798) and presents Clare in a Wordsworthian two-for-one offer, as both "the Poet as well as the Child of Nature" (qtd. Vardy 107). He recommends him to the reader not only for the quality of his natural description, but as himself a piece of the natural world. This doubling is necessary, Vardy points out, because Clare's verse, while rich in the spontaneous outpouring of feeling, tends to lack the vital element of reflection which completed Wordsworth's formula.

Clare's authority as author is thus initially underwritten by a Wordsworthian aesthetic which emphasises his representative quality. As Vardy notes: "[r]eviewers sought after images of a pastoral world where peasant poets could represent a rural landscape

lost to them in their hectic urban milieus - ‘represent’ both in the sense of composing the images of nature that constituted that landscape and in the sense of standing for that lost pastoral world” (107). As a peasant, a simple child of nature, however, he is considered incapable of the reflective transmutation of experience into idea - of achieving the transcendental motion of the Romantic lyric. It is this understanding of what poetry should be that informs John Keats’ criticism of Clare relayed to the poet by Taylor, their mutual publisher: “I think he wishes to say that your images from Nature are too much introduced without being called for by a particular Sentiment . . . he feels as if the Description overlaid & stifled that which ought to be the prevailing Idea” (*Clare Letters* 99n). A sentiment expanded upon in the *Monthly Review*:

To attempt the sublimer provinces of song, a mind stored with the philosophic treasures of the past and with the wisdom and beauty of antiquity is requisite, as well as a heart that is alive to the sublimity of the highest feelings of our nature; but to achieve a description of the eternal beauty of the creation requires no knowledge that gazing will not give. (Qtd. Vardy 120)

Thus while the Romantic ideology of the author as the interpreter of Nature authorises Clare’s voice as a poet, it also declares in advance the inevitability of his failure to live up to the Wordsworthian model of poetic autonomy. From a Romantic perspective Clare will always be trapped within his representative function.

It is the same lack of a reflective quality that disqualifies Clare from the Romantic canon which, as Spivak points out, in Marxist historiography disqualifies the peasantry from the world historical stage. Lacking consciousness of itself as a class, the peasantry must always be represented by others who speak on its behalf. Clare in other words is doubly occluded: he is denied possession of the power of self-reflection necessary to constitute himself as a subject either aesthetically or politically, either as an artist or as a peasant.

As we have seen, Sinclair clearly signals his awareness that Clare has been endlessly refashioned to meet the needs of his present readers. In one sense, however, he is repeating that process. He sets out to follow “in the traces of the mad poet John Clare” (5). The mad poet, “mad to shrug off the poultice of identity, to be everyone.

Borderless as an inland sea” (5) is another, contemporary, version of “the peasant poet”. Both are read as reporters from realms from which no report can come, which are beyond representation. However, for Sinclair, writing in the wake of R.D. Laing and the anti-psychiatry movement, madness is to be located not in the individual so much as their social context, and, for Sinclair, as a psychogeographer, in their social topography. Moreover, Sinclair does not set out to provide a biography of Clare, to know the author, but “to follow in his traces”, to cover the same terrain and thus to encounter Clare in the difference and coincidence of their walks. Secondly, it is important that Sinclair is following Clare up the Great North Road, on his path back from the capital and, as he notes at the outset of this walk,

If you are fortunate enough to start from London, the goal of every aspiring economic or cultural migrant, then any outward expedition becomes a flight. Heading up the Great North Road, we were not advancing into a fresh narrative, a novel set of coordinates, we were running away . . . (8)

To walk away from the city, back up the Great North Road is effectively to reverse the narrative of progress: it is to enter the world of the defeated, of those who could not take the city and who have failed, or turned their back on the challenge of modernity. But, Sinclair insists, it is not to travel alone: “Quit London and you will be trampled in the stampede. Plague-dodgers. Hunted criminals . . . The exhausted, the timid. The burgled, raped, assaulted. Overtaxed. Under-rewarded. Choked on thin air. Allergic to everything” (9).

To walk up the Great North Road away from London is thus in itself a form of counter-history, an avoidance of presentism, and hence of positing a non-instrumentalised relationship to the past, and Sinclair’s technique for exploring that relationship is typically oblique. Neither biography nor autobiography, family history nor travel literature, *Edge of the Orison* proceeds through the resonance of the chance encounter exemplified by a “disconcerting incident” that occurs early in the walk:

On a long straight road coming out of Kent . . . [a] stranger, dressed in the clothes Anna [Sinclair’s wife, and walking companion on this stage of the journey] is wearing, a person of the same height, same length of stride, passes

her, walking North. I'm slightly ahead, marching uphill towards a road sign, wanting to check if we are in the right place. I lift the camera, catch the moment. Anna split, travelling both ways at once; south towards the coast and back, alone, to London. (7)

This minor irruption of the uncanny into the narrative is illustrative of the manner in which Sinclair sets about reading Clare. Anna's doubling registers the doubling of Clare's and Sinclair's text, for the scene captured by Sinclair's camera, also captures a scene repeated, in one guise or another, throughout Clare's oeuvre: a scene which can be described as the recognition of non-recognition, or the staging of the speaker's own failure to recognize and be recognized by the object of his or her desire.

The same scene is clearly marked, for example, in Clare's title "Lost as strangers as we pass" (*Selected Poems* 333) but it is given one of its fullest poetic expressions in the lines which conclude the ballad, "My love in dishabille":

She passed me by in silence; I passed her by the same;
I could not tell her person; I did not know her name;
But her person I love dearly, and I love her dearly still;
Though I did not know my own true love in rags & dishabille. (329)

Elsewhere the perception of strangeness as the property of the familiar provides the sentimental force in "I am", one of Clare's most powerful asylum poems:

And e'en the dearest - that I love the best -
Are strange - nay, rather stranger than the rest. (297)⁷⁰

Given Clare's biographical and historical circumstances this trope of misrecognition resonates at a number of levels. Professionally, it registers the Northamptonshire

⁷⁰ Its structural function can be seen in the poem "A Mouse's Nest" where the poem's narrator, having mistaken a ball of grass for a bird's nest, is shocked by the sudden appearance of an old mouse "An old mouse bolted in the wheats/ With all her young one's hanging at her teats" (234). Only after this disorientating encounter with the grotesque has been resolved by the mouse's return to its nest does the poem pan out to provide some form of conventionally picturesque perspective in the final couplet: "The water o'er the pebbles scarce could run/And broad old cesspools glittered in the sun" (234).

peasant's frustration at the public's refusal to recognize him as a poet: as the producer rather than the (picturesque) subject of his verse. Thematically it is manifest in the poetry's powerful sense of the disorientation consequent on the erasure of the landscape of his childhood after the enclosure of his home village of Helpstone which began in 1809. Seeing oneself not seeing marks the poet's sense that enclosure has not only rendered the landscape of his birth unrecognizable, but that in the loss of that world he has become unrecognizable to himself. It encodes, in other words, Clare's powerful sense of the interdependence of identity and place, of the ways in which identity is locational and as such vulnerable to those forces involved in the production and reproduction of space so powerfully evident in the processes of enclosure and agricultural improvement. As Sinclair writes:

He had to learn the difficult thing. In different places we are different people. We live in one envelope with a multitude of voices, lulling them by regular habits, of rising, labouring, eating, taking pleasure and exercise: other selves, in suspension, slumber but remain wakeful. Walking confirms identity. We are never more than an extension of the ground on which we live. (79)

Most importantly for *Edge of the Orison* however, seeing oneself not seeing is the primary narrative situation in "Journey out of Essex", Clare's account of his increasingly hallucinatory, 80-mile, 3-day trek from Epping Forest and the text whose traces Sinclair sets out to follow. The difficulty of establishing an authoritative text for Clare is notorious - apart from all the editions "'improved' or bowdlerized revisions by well-meaning meddlers and promoters" (27), and Clare's willingness to leave dealings with the "awkward squad" of punctuation to others, "Journey out of Essex" presents special problems. The text was written out by Clare in his Northborough cottage the day after his arrival and is based on notes he made during the walk but it is cast in the form of a journal which creates an immediate ambiguity of tense: is it narrated on a day to day basis with no idea of the eventual outcome of the journey, or from the perspective of having reached the safety of Northborough? When, for example, Clare writes "July 19 - Monday - Did nothing" ("Journey" 153), is this the "did nothing" of somebody commenting on the nature of institutionalized life, somebody who is simply obeying the behest of the journal form to report even the fact that there is nothing to report, or is it the "did nothing" of somebody

hesitating on the verge of a desperate enterprise, caught in indecision, reporting on his failure to make the jump that will instigate his flight? The resonance of that simple entry relies on the ambiguity of the text's suspension between report and narrative. Sinclair is attentive to this ambiguity, describing the text as "memories forged in a phantom letter . . . to his vanished muse" (10) and as Clare re-experiencing the journey from Epping: "He saw himself once again, on the treadmill of the road: incidents from a fading fiction . . ." (10). He also notes the contrast between the confidence of Clare's handwriting striding boldly forward and the shambling progress it describes: "Clare limps but his story pushes remorselessly towards its conclusion" (222).

What this narratological uncertainty conveys is an image of Clare as a stranger to his own words: discovering in his own hand a report from a place where he cannot remember having been: within the narrative forgetting is almost as prominent as walking.⁷¹ The narrative itself is characterized by vivid incidents swimming up out of a general condition of uncertainty as the narrator's memory struggles and fails to fill the lacunae of his notes: "I have but slight recollection of the journey between here and Stilton for I was knocked up and noticed little or nothing" (11). We learn of his encounter with the "Man and the boy curled up asleep" ("Journey" 154); of the man in a slop frock who mistakes him for a broken down hay-maker and throws him a penny; of the drovers who were "very saucy so [that] I begged no more of any body" (154); the civil cottagers at Potton where he called to light his pipe; the "kind talking countryman" (156) the "tall Gipsy . . . with an honest looking countenance and rather handsome" who mysteriously "cautioned me on the way to put something in my hat to keep the crown up and said in a lower tone 'you'll be noticed' but not knowing what she hinted - I took no notice and made no reply" (158). The hat in question - "an old wide awake hat" (153) - Clare had discovered at the site of a gipsy encampment in Epping forest two days before he left and put in his pocket "thinking it might be useful for another opportunity - as good luck would have it, it turned out to be so" (153). In its overall effect this narrative, as Sinclair points out, resembles John

⁷¹ This impression is reinforced by Clare's own notes to the manuscript recording his subsequent discovery of scraps of paper in his pocket providing further details of his route: "On searching my pockets after the above was written I found a part of a newspaper vide 'Morning Chronicle' on which the following fragments were pencilled . . ." ("Journey" 156).

Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, but a progress stripped of any allegorical system to enable the interpretation of encounters rendered increasingly mysterious by the pilgrim's progressive disorientation. Even physical progress is uncertain with Clare having to lie down with his head pointing North so that he will know which direction to travel when he awakes. At one point, he recalls,

I heedlessly turned back to read [a milestone] . . . I then suddenly forgot which was North and South and though I narrowly examined both ways I could see no tree or bush or stone heap that I could recollect I had passed so I went on mile after mile almost convinced I was going the same way I came and these thoughts were so strong upon me that doubt and hopelessness made me turn so feeble that I was scarcely able to walk. (157)

This is a narrative which performs its author's disorientation in the starkness of its imagery and the constant confusion of narration as recollection and report. Sinclair describes it as "one of the wonders of English prose" (10), it is also a masterpiece in the literature of alienation. It denotes not only the experience of a man who is a stranger to himself, but of a man who is alienated from the product of his labour, and in its journal format it mirrors the loss of the sense of the complete work which in Marx's account results in the alienation of the producing subject from the work in which alone human beings can find expression of their essential nature. Effectively it translates the notion of alienation into the loss of the "permission to narrate" (Edward Said qtd. Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" 283) - that Spivak identifies as the crux of the problem of representation: the knowledge that narrative implies a possession/consciousness of the whole which Clare cannot be seen to possess. Although he presents us with "that achieved thing, a letter, never sent, to a dead woman" (5), the reader cannot possess the whole being uncertain whether the text is reported or narrated as if reported, whether it is narration which seeks to pass as reporting, or reporting which achieves the form of a finished narrative by virtue of the completion of his walk; whether the text is written or walked. Clare's narrative, in other words, stages its author's madness, exhaustion and total disorientation and thus performs his subaltern condition so that Clare becomes the historian of his own absence and it does so by passing back and forth over a border of the irrecoverable that it itself produces.

Inevitably, given the power of the text over which he walks, Sinclair's encounters with Clare point to his own text's impoverished experience of their shared terrain: "He starved, tearing handfuls of grass from the side of the road. We breakfasted, full English . . . He slept in a 'dyke bottom', outside town where we booked ourselves into a decent pub" (10). Against Clare's wonder of English prose, his "mere scribbles, are prompts for some unresolved future project" (10). Again the relationship is parasitic: Sinclair draws the force of his writing from the trauma of Clare's. He sees himself being seen as a figure of fun through the eyes of his family: "He's reading the country,' they chorused: as I plunged into a thicket, across a stream, through head-high nettles. They stayed on tarmac. 'Can dad fetch the car *now*?' one of them would ask before we negotiated the first incline" (261). The tranquillity of his relationship with Anne - "the slightly dazed second courtship of that time, after the children have left home, when we sleepwalk between what is lost and what we are learning to recover" (7) - stands in pointed contrast to Clare's haunted dreams of his two "wives" and his failure to recognise Martha and refusal to admit that Mary is dead, and that they were married only in his imagination.

Clare's text literally overpowers Sinclair's and, paradoxically, insists on its reality over and against the banality of the same landscape in Blair's Britain. Sinclair reflects this inversion by rechristening the contemporary landscape Xanaxshire,⁷² "a sleeping country, unpeopled and overlit" (5) to reflect its general condition of narcoleptic torpor:

Lurid sunshine on a red-grey road. No cars, no delivery vans, no people.
Welcome to Middle England. Xanaxshire, in the wake of the Lloyds fiasco, the debt mountain, the Blairite establishment of urban fixers and spinners (no fox-hunting, acres of GM crops), is the home of dolour. State-sponsored clinical depression. Valium villages under the ever-present threat of imported

⁷² The drug is named after the drug Xanax a trademark of the Alprazolam "a drug of the benzodiazepan group, used in the treatment of anxiety" (*New Oxford Dictionary of English*) but echoes of Xanadu, Coleridge's orientalist version of the Mongolian city of Shang-tu are clearly audible.

sex-criminals and Balkan bandits; human landfill dumped in an off-highway nowhere . . . (19)

In this context of “state-sponsored clinical depression” all of Middle England resembles an asylum and Clare’s flight consequently becomes a flight to reality. The condition of unreality, in other words, shifts from the individual to the collective. Specifically, Xanaxshire exists as a fiction of locality: as a local whose ultimate referent is the global, and whose principal activity is the repression of the knowledge that its meaning is always elsewhere: “Faux rustics in monster vehicles are servicing the USAAF base at Alconbury . . . Those who are left are invisible, facing up to the consequences of the good life, the glutinous subsoil of somebody else’s labour; rituals of service and release, drink, madness, suicide” (19-20).

As such, the journey out of Essex becomes a journey into the global, a discovery of a landscape where a fantasy of Englishness masks the economic and political reality of England’s position as a base for US military and economic ambitions and as the beneficiary of the unequal geography of global capital. If the draining of the fens and reclamation of the agricultural land in the eastern counties originally provided the impetus for the industrial revolution and Britain’s rise to world power, it has now, as a natural airbase, found its economic function in assisting the space time compression that Harvey identifies as the prerequisite of global capital (*Condition of Postmodernity*).

However, if Xanaxshire as a fantasy of Englishness, represents the real as a non-place, a realm whose content is the repressed knowledge of its over-determination by the global, it is also the scene of a traumatic event - the enclosure of the commons - which, according to Marx, stands at the origin of capital’s reconfiguration of global space. In following in Clare’s traces, Sinclair is thus walking back to the birth of capitalism and the trauma that has produced Xanaxshire. For Marx, famously, the history of enclosure deserved to be written in “letters of blood and fire” (*Capital* 875). Not simply because of the human misery it caused those directly affected by dispossession, but because in creating a vast population of “free and rightless proletarians” (*Capital* 895) who owned nothing other than their labour power, it provided the necessary conditions for the development of the capitalist mode of

production whose subsequent export around the world was to play such a decisive role in the organization of space at every scale (Cosgrove 4). In its Marxist sense at least, not only does History begin in Helpstone, Helpstone constitutes the absent centre of a spatial order which defines both the global and the personal. Or as Sinclair puts it: “Enclosure, suddenly, is a personal matter: you have been shrink-wrapped in your own skin and you can’t get out. That’s when the blameless horizon, that wood, those hills, begin to hurt” (19).

As such in Marx’s account the crime committed in Sinclair’s “sleeping country” is ultimately ontological. It relates not simply to the amount of land expropriated from the peasantry (although Marx almost splutters with incredulity when he does the sums), but to the fact that in transforming the relations to the means of production, the enclosure of the commons erases all memory of any other possible relation: “By the nineteenth century, the very memory of the connection between the agricultural labourer and communal property had, of course, vanished” (*Capital* 889). It is the restitution of this forgotten relation to the means of production and its spatial form - the commons - that provides the *telos* of Marxist history: the commons will be perfected in communism, the destruction of the English peasantry is the necessary condition for the eventual triumph of the proletariat. The landscape of enclosure is for Marx thus suffused with a significance that is theological and mythical: “the English working class was precipitated without any transitional stages from its golden age to its iron age” (*Capital* 879).

It is the implications of this theological dynamic at work within the Marxist narrative that Sinclair registers in his description of Clare as another instance of the “reforgotten” (the book is divided into six sections of which “Reforgetting” is the penultimate). In this epithet he suggests that the forgetting of Clare is in some way necessary for narrative to proceed with the business of ordering experience as historical and for our understanding of Xanaxshire as a product of that history. As the reforgotten, Clare is both a member of Walter Benjamin’s tradition of the oppressed - those to whom history must appear as a sequence of disasters - and a figure whose occlusion is a precondition of history. The destruction of the peasantry is the rupture that organizes the logic of modernity in both its temporal and spatial modalities. The reforgotten of Clare is, in other words, necessary to maintain the structures of a world

where it is possible to speak of “progressive” and “backward” societies and the urban as the future of the rural. As an emblem of that which has to be forgotten in order for a story to be told, Clare effectively constitutes a figure of narrative trauma. The subaltern cannot speak because to hear his voice would be to dissolve the fabric of the symbolic order. In Lacanian terms Clare’s journey up the Great North Road might thus be termed a journey into the Real: that which cannot be assimilated within the symbolic order. In this case he disrupts the mechanisms through which narrative seeks to displace the present, the perception of the now, through anticipation (of the end which will determine the present’s meaning) and toward the past through the illusion that what comes after is caused by, codified by Roland Barthes under the tag *post hoc, ergo propter hoc* (94).

As Spivak notes, the peasant has the position of noise within the Marxist narrative. If the apparent noise of Indian peasant insurgencies is to be understood as signal - as a different story - rather than as irrelevancies within the narrative of Indian history, then it is necessary to posit a different receiver:

When we come to the concomitant question of the consciousness of the subaltern the notion of what the work *cannot* say becomes important. In the semioses of the social text, elaborations of insurgency stand in the place of “the utterance”. The sender - “the peasant” - is marked only as a pointer to an irretrievable consciousness. As for the receiver, we must ask who is the “real receiver” of an “insurgency”? (82)

Jonathan Bate suggests the ways in which this logic works with respect to Clare when he notes that Clare’s continued marginalization within the Romantic canon is all the more “astonishing” given his “centrality to two works which were seminal to the growth of late-twentieth century ideological, socially-oriented criticism of Romantic period texts” (164), namely John Barrell’s *The Idea of Landscape and the Sense of Place* (1972) and Raymond Williams’ *The Country and the City* (1973). Both Barrell and Williams draw on Clare’s accounts of enclosure and imaginative dispossession to demonstrate the ways in which nature was produced as a site for the symbolic resolution of the social and economic conflicts unleashed by the industrial revolution. However, despite his central role in demonstrating that, in Williams’ words, “the idea

of nature contains an extraordinary amount of human history” (70) Clare, by virtue of his own attention to the detail of the natural world must himself be regarded as the victim of ideological misrecognition. As Bate notes, Clare may be the hero of Williams’ and Barrell’s stories, but his veneration of nature sits uncomfortably with their central thesis, “that the bond with nature is forged in a retreat from social commitment, that it is a symptom of middle-class escapism, disillusioned apostasy or false consciousness” (164).

In this sense Clare’s centrality to and absence from the canon seems symptomatic of the problematic relationship between classic ideology critique and any concept of “nature” which insofar as it naturalizes dominant power relations ultimately becomes that-which-must-be-historicised. It points, in other words, to the wider problem of speaking Nature within the language of critique. However, where the injunction “always historicise” (Jameson, *Political Unconscious* 9), would seem to consign the proletarian nature poet to the pathos of an Althusserian *meconnaissance*, Sinclair’s double-take in showing us Clare seeing himself as a man not seeing himself,⁷³ suggests a poet whose subject is the conditions of the recognisable, a poet marked by his awareness that the conditions of his own recognisability are also the conditions of his objectification. Rather than a figure who is a) the tragic victim of a history in which he can have no agency and b) also the victim of false consciousness who in celebrating Nature, celebrates his own ideological mystification, we glimpse a more complex figure. In the “Journey out of Essex” Clare is neither the man who fails to recognize his own wife nor the man who recognizes that failure, but a writing subject that constitutes itself as it moves backwards and forwards across the division between report and narrative. Clare on the Great North Road is a figure who does not have the permission to narrate, who could not figure in his own narrative as narrative but who aligns narrative as a form of memory system (according to the logic of *post hoc ergo propter hoc*) with the telos of a walk to transform sequence into a signifying whole,

⁷³ A further example of Clare staging his own non-recognition occurs in his anecdote of how as a child he would present his parents with his poetry as if it had been written by somebody else, in order to get a better impression of its worth: “My method . . . was to say I had written it out of a borrowed book and that it was not my own . . . and by this way I got their remarks unadulterated and without prejudice” (“Sketches” 12).

“that achieved thing, a letter to a dead wife” even though the home he eventually arrives at is no home.

Clare’s progress up the Great North Road, in other words, is marked by its surreptitious passage between subject and object: its production of itself as the story of a man who cannot tell a story. In this it echoes his account of his birth as a poet which Sinclair narrates thus:

An acquaintance, a Helpston weaver, owns a copy of James Thomson’s poem, *The Seasons*. Young Clare’s immediate and intense desire is to *possess* this wonder. Stamford on Sunday morning, bookseller’s premises closed. He bribes a lad to mind the horses he has been paid to watch over. Dereliction of duty. Early return, before first light, to the market town, waiting for the shutters to be thrown open: book secured for a shilling. Clare not wanting to be observed in the act of reading, unconcerned about trespass, climbs over the wall into Burghley Park. (80)

Where, in Clare’s own words, he,

nestled in a lawn at the wall side the Scenery around me was uncommonly beautiful at that time of the year and what with reading the book and beholding the beautys of artful nature in the park I got into a strain of descriptive rhyming on my journey home this was ‘the morning walk’ the first thing I committed to paper. (Robinson 10)

As an enactment of literature as a form of trespass by a worker who refuses to know his place it is a story which could have come straight from the pages of Rancière’s study of nineteenth-century French workers, *The Nights of Labour* (1981). Like Clare the workers Rancière describes refuse to accept their designation as simply workers and, in acts of cultural production, consumption or simply aesthetic contemplation practically contest the division between manual and intellectual labour, thereby demonstrating the arbitrary nature of social division and consequently, that things could be otherwise. In becoming a consumer and a producer of poetry in virtually the same moment, Clare contests the standard Marxist constructions of “the worker” as

the subject of class history and reveals the peasant poet to be, from the moment of his birth, a subject who instigates a redistribution of the sensible: conflating production and consumption, writing and reading. The history of “the worker”, Rancière argues, is to be found not just in overtly political actions and events but in precisely the fence hopping performed by Clare.

This redistribution of the sensible is marked by the sense of the interdependence of subject and object, speaker and spoken which expresses itself in the proliferation of speaking subjects within Clare’s poetry. Aware of the conditional nature of his own claim upon the status of speaking subject, it is as if there is nothing in Clare’s world which cannot speak: not only birds and brooks and bushes, but even, a patch of ground: “I’m Swordy Well a patch of land/ That’s fell upon the town” (Bate, *Selected Poems* 211). The subtlety of this interdependence is suggested by the poem “A Nightingale” (1844) which concludes with the ostentatiously un-Keatsian lines:

The ploughman feels

The thrilling music as he goes along,

And imitates and listens; while the fields

Lose all their paths in dusk to lead him wrong,

Still sings the nightingale her soft melodious song. (*Selected Poems* 289)

The complex distribution of the voice in this verse which manages to be, like the nightingale itself “clod brown” and enchantingly melodious, is epitomized in the adjective “thrilling”. Lumpen and unpoetic it seems to mark a capitulation in the face of the sublime, a prosaic marker of the inexpressible, but with perfect economy it also captures the interpenetration of poem and song as forms of affective expression. It is the extent to which Clare’s world is peopled, that is populated with speaking subjects, that gives the force to Sinclair’s description of Xanaxshire in his opening sentence: “It is a sleeping country, unpeopled and overlit” (5). The Middle England encountered by Sinclair has not only been depopulated by the historical processes of enclosure and urbanization, it is unpeopled ontologically in terms of who and what can be thought to speak.

Jonathan Bate's attempts to rescue Clare from the silence of ideology critique in the name of ecocriticism by asking "can we conceive the possibility that a brook might actually speak, a piece of land might really feel pain? As inheritors of the Enlightenment's instrumental view of nature we cannot" (165).⁷⁴ We cannot understand Clare's nature as anything other than a form of pathetic fallacy because our thought is conditioned by the tragic gulf between subject and object, suggests Bate, before invoking the Australian Aboriginal as the prototype of a mode of perception that has escaped the conditioning of reification. However, reading Clare as a sign of narrative's struggle to contain the exclusions through which it orders experience, the lamentation of Clare's landscape need no longer be seen as gestures towards some idea of nature as unity lost to a postlapsarian consciousnesses. Instead the staging of misrecognition suggests a concern with the contingencies of subjecthood - with who and what can speak, and who and what is spoken about.

In following Clare's walk up the Great North Road then, Sinclair alerts us to the presence of a Clare who is the spokesman for a world which is absent from our language. However Sinclair cannot follow him into that world, and ultimately *Edge of the Orision* can only testify to the absence of Clare while Sinclair's progress is via the connections which keep his prose moving - the fact that Lucia Joyce spent most of her life in the Northampton General Lunatic Asylum where Clare died, that although he can find no evidence of a connection between Anna and Clare, he discovers one between himself and Beckett who once played cricket against Northampton where there is a "Beckett's Park" (231) etc. etc. This far from London however, Sinclair too is "out of his knowledge" and the connections and coincidences through which he weaves his narrative strands together begin to seem increasingly forced. The digression on Mary Stuart, Queen of Scots' execution at Fotheringay castle - the most melancholy place in England - for example wouldn't seem out of place in one of the

⁷⁴ Jonathan Bate: "Is the voice of Round Oak Waters to be understood only as a metaphor, a traditional poetic figuration of the genius loci, or 'an extreme use of the pathetic fallacy'? Or can we conceive the possibility that a brook might really speak, a piece of land might really feel pain . . . How would the poem be read by, say, an Australian Aboriginal who has walked some of the invisible pathways which criss-cross the land, which are known to Europeans as Dreaming-tracks or Songlines and the Aboriginals themselves as Footprints of the Ancestors or the Way of the Law? Are we to understand the sorrows of the brook as an echo of Clare's own?" asks Barrell. No, the Aboriginal reader will reply, instinct with the knowledge that the land itself is always singing. It may just be the other way round: the sorrows of Clare are an echo of the brook's own" (*Song of the Earth* 165-66).

texts on which Sinclair practices his parasitism, the guides to “Clare Country” and literary England, while the fact that Anna’s great-great-great-grandfather was married in 1788 “Five years before the birth of John Clare. One year before the French Revolution” (357) suggests that Xanaxshire may have tested Sinclair’s imagination to exhaustion, and once the hunt for ancestors has reached its horizon, and with the knowledge that there are now “celebrity genealogical truffle hunts on TV” (350) it is time to head back down the Great North Road with what sounds like an admission of defeat:

The Clare I found will not be your John Clare, nor the poet Geoffrey Hadman claimed as a relative. The track we travelled, coming from London, is no longer Clare’s Great North Road. Through error, perhaps, we arrive at a richer truth: in the telling of the tale. The trance of writing is the author’s only defence against the world. He sleepwalks between assignments, between welcoming ghosts, looking out for the next prompt, the next milestone hidden in the grass. (362)

The abiding note of contemporary pastoral it seems is melancholic, and in *Edge of the Orison* Sinclair seems to discover the dependence of his text on the noise of the city. Together the two roads produce different but complementary messages about Blair’s Britain. The M25 represents the transformation of the liberal ideal of mobility and personal freedom into a surveillance society - the society of total visibility implied by digital tape - the trek up the Great North Road encourages us to re-examine the relationship of country and city by problematising the position of nature in relationship to art.