No Beginning No End for the Uroboros: Iain Sinclair's *London Orbital*

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Abstract
The essay considers the peculiarities of Iain Sinclair's travel book *London Orbital*, which describes a walk along the 200-kilometre M25, the motorway which surrounds the London area. The first peculiarity is that the journey took place on foot and Sinclair reports a myriad of episodes that give us his taste for the minutiae of life. However, he never loses sight of the general view or the disquieting effect of the circularity of the route. Among the episodes included in the book, the article stresses a number of visits to mental hospitals, both in working order and defunct. Also mentioned is the transformation undergone by the former Puritan settlement of St. George's Hill, which has been turned into an expensive residence for upper-class commuters, a gated community. Attention is also paid to residences inhabited by national heroes, such as Princess Elizabeth at Enfield Chase in the Renaissance and Sir Winston Churchill at Chartwell House. The final page records the peculiarity of the sound of the motorway which accompanies our travellers along pedestrian pathways.

> A bridge – its two ends could not be embraced at a single glance and its piers were resting on planets – led from one world to another by a causeway of wonderfully smooth asphalt. The three-hundred-thirty-three-thousandth pier rested on Saturn. There our goblin noticed that the ring around this planet was nothing other than a circular balcony on which the inhabitants of Saturn strolled in the evening to get a breath of fresh air.
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> Walter Benjamin
> "The Ring of Saturn",
> in *The Arcades Project*, New York, 1935, 7

1. Introductory remarks

Where does the uroboros[1] begin? Where does the M25 ringroad begin? Where does *London Orbital* begin? And finally, once they have begun, where do they all end? The answer to all this is very simple, always the same and anxiety-inducing: they end where they began. As Sinclair notes, "the apparent endlessness of the orbital motorway induced rage and states of trance"[2], a phrase by which the author aims to define the disturbing issue of circularity. If this feature, openly declared from the start, is regarded as the key to the whole work, it is unsurprising that the ending of the book is as follows: "The next walk, with luck, will … close the circuit" (Sinclair 2002: 518). The issue of circularity will be ever present in this essay as a lens through which the peculiar piece of travel writing which is Iain Sinclair's *London Orbital* can be viewed.

Before considering the peculiarities of the text itself, we turn first to the idea of travel. Exploring the particular area surrounding London, the one defined and enclosed by its ring-road, thickly populated as it is with testimonials of the city's and the country's past and its cultural essence, is just as conducive to the advancement of learning, just as meaningful and rewarding as searching for the sources of the Nile – to mention just one very intriguing form of exploration in British history and one on the success of which Victorian Britain would invest heavily. It is as if, at the end of the twentieth century, the British had realised that, having once acquired the whole world, both in terms of territory and scientific knowledge, they now needed to take a better look at the place where it all began, London, by now the real, undiscovered country. What the book does is to narrate a walk that will "shadow the motorway (within audible range whenever possible) in an anticlockwise direction" (p. 125). He defines his expedition as

[1] The definition of this word in the O. E. D. runs thus: "A usually circular symbol depicting a snake swallowing its tail as an emblem of wholeness or infinity". We evoke this mythical figure here to underline the fact that the book we are considering, rather than moving forward and telling a story, keeps returning to itself, depicting a permanence, which is London.

[2] Sinclair, Iain, [2002] 2003, *London Orbital. A Walk around the M25*, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, p. 338. All quotations will be from this edition.

"a walk around the M25" (p. 553) – the M25 being a motorway which, enclosing London as it does, comes to be considered as enclosing the quintessence of what we call a city. "Our soul, as ever, is the M25", Iain Sinclair informs us on page 366, when he and his friends seem to have strayed from the thoroughfare. They travel erratically along lanes and minor roads in the vicinity of the rationally developed motorway; he defines his mode of proceeding on page 134 as "our shambling progress around the M25". The place at the centre of the orbital, that is to say London, has in the meantime become increasingly rich and significant: that is why travel in the twenty-first century need not aim to reach some remote place, but can very easily and profitably turn around and in on itself. The Victorians, with their dominating idea of progress, looked ahead; we on the contrary find our own values in reflecting upon ourselves.

At first glance the text eludes easy definition, both for its uncertain genre – somewhere between essay and narration – and for the spare and allusive language in which it is written. This is shown in the surprising opening sentence of the book, which places the reader *in medias res*: "It started with the Dome". What started? we are led to ask. Having secured our attention, the author tells us more plainly what the book is all about: "Here it begins, the walk proper" (Sinclair 2002: 125). And with the Dome, again, the story ends: "We hadn't walked around the perimeter of London, we had circumnavigated the Dome" (Sinclair 2002: 551), Sinclair says on the very last page of his book[3].

The journey that Sinclair and his friends undertake may well be circular; the narration of it, however, steeped as it is in time, must have a beginning, a middle and an end. Thus not only does the tale sometimes become linear rather than circular, but it also fragments into myriad episodes; we cannot but follow the sights Sinclair chooses to describe, a choice which sometimes seems to have been made out of plain curiosity rather than planned. We are also bound to follow the choice of the spot at which he begins his story, the Dome, itself a circular structure and the latest symbol of the city the travellers are visiting – a city which proves timeless. Not only is

[3] We shall return to the issue of language when discussing Enfield Chase.

London, in its permanence, outside history, but, in the author's eyes, it is also outside a proper geographical dimension: no maps of any sort of the area are supplied to the perplexed readers, who wander in the ill-defined territory surrounding the city and wonder at the reason behind the surprising lack of a map.

This lack of definition is connected to psychogeography[4] and constitutes a further difference from the targeted model of Victorian travels and their reports, which are grounded in details and aim at the communication of facts. The peculiarity of this travelogue is that, although Sinclair and his friends, like their Victorian antecedents, get to know their chosen landscape materially by physically placing their feet on it, the London area as a whole remains a place of the mind. What interests them is simply their perception of the territory: no colonial enterprise is to follow on the heels of the explorers, exploiting their findings. In fact, as a psychogeographer, what counts for Sinclair is the way he perceives the elements that make up a landscape, not the landscape itself as it independently exists. Suffice it to say, then, that in *London Orbital* Sinclair reports a trip carried out on foot (this is the pivotal feature together with that of circularity) along the M25, starting in March 1998 and ending in December 1999, just before the advent of the millennium. The journey focuses on the

[4] On this new discipline, see Merlin Coverley, *Psychogeography,* Harpenden, Pocket Essentials, 2010. This book often refers to Iain Sinclair as the main representative of the discipline on the British cultural scene. In a previous book, Sinclair himself had defined psychogeography in the following words "Walking is the best way to explore and exploit the city" (Sinclair, 1998: 4, quoted in Baker, 2003: 4). Coverley's book also supplies a history of the attitudes that lead to modern psychogeography, such as those of the nineteenth-century Parisian *flâneurs* and of the twentieth-century London artists. One should also note that Coverley's book begins with Daniel Defoe, who conducted his *Tour through the Whole Island of Great Britain* (1727) in "circuits". A more detailed view of psychogeography can be obtained from Alastair Bonnett's book *Left in the Past: Radicalism and the Poetry of Nostalgia*, in which "Chapters 5 and 6 address the relationship between nostalgia and the situationists", and chapter 6 in particular "follows the development of the situationists' psychogeographic agenda in British avant-garde culture over the past 20 years […] travel narratives of Iain Sinclair […] a quixotic, love-hate relationship with the past […] historical re-reading of the everyday landscape […] an uneasy combination of deracinating modernism and folksy localism. Within Sinclair's travel books the modern landscape becomes a sight of creative purgatory, a necessary violence that simultaneously anchors the writer in modernity while establishing marginal spaces and histories discovered on foot as expressions of a profound cultural and social loss". (12).

200-kilometre, ten-lane motorway that encircles London[5] and was meant to allow vehicles to *orbit* the capital rather than travel through it. He does his circuit slowly, on foot, *en flânant* along country lanes that run close to the motorway. Like the psychogeographer he is – a peculiar sort of traveller, heir to the previous century's urban *flâneur* to be found in Paris and London[6] – he wants to make sure he does not miss anything of what surrounds and encloses the huge city he is circumnavigating, including things which the speeding motorists are unaware of. Thus, in a way, he is contradicting his own itinerary since the decision was to follow the motorway, which, by definition, does not allow travellers to linger and enjoy the surroundings. Sinclair shows a clear perception of this discrepancy when, retrieving his car to go back home to inner London after a day's travelling on foot, he remarks "[…] a day's walk undone in a few minutes of motorway transit" (Sinclair 2002: 212).

The travelogue is organised in eight parts, corresponding to sections of the trip, entitled: "Prejudices Declared", "Soothing the Seething: Up the Lea Valley with Bill Drummond (and the Unabomber)", "Paradise Gardens: Waltham Abbey to Shenley", "Colne & Green Way: Abbots Langley to Staines", "Diggers and Despots: Cutting the Corner, Staines to Epsom", "Salt to Source: Epsom to Westerham. Through the Valley of Vision, to Dartford & the River", "Blood & Oil: Carfax to Waltham Abbey", "Millennium Eve". This makes for a remarkably long and rich book, which cannot be examined in all its details. Significant features will therefore be grouped under thematic headings.

2. The company he kept

As already mentioned, Iain Sinclair does not travel alone when walking around London: he is in fact accompanied by a number of friends. Yet the book consists of his own narration, told in the

[5] Conceived in the Thirties, the ringroad was opened with only two Junctions in October 1986 by Margaret Thatcher the remaining roadworks were only completed much later.

[6] Two Italian writers, Gianni Biondillo and Michele Monina, were inspired by Sinclair's example to conduct a similar tour around the city of Milan (Biondillo and Monina, 2010), openly declaring they had followed Sinclair's work by foot and by pen.

first person, in whom the *flâneur* and the writer coincide. Thus we never know who his friends are except through his words, written in his habitual language which, spare and allusive as it is, simply hints by means of a few meaningful strokes of his brush at their appearance, behaviour and words. In this way, the real people who walked with Sinclair become characters in a narration. It should also be added that they are not all with him all the time, thus leaving him the responsibility for devising and overseeing the overall plan of this peculiar exploration.

The main *character* who gets described in this gallery of friends, the one who is present for the longest time on the walk and who appears to be the closest in personal and family ties to the author is also the first of the two people to whom the book is dedicated: "For Renchi and for Kevin Jackson, shadows on the road". This character is Renchi (Laurence) Bicknell. Here and there in the book we are offered *glimpses* of him, always dressed in strange clothes, at least in the author's opinion. For example, we read: "He read the weather as: rain trousers, heavy blue sweater, furry cap with ear-flaps" (Sinclair 2002: 125). Elsewhere we find: "Renchi, muddy boots in hand is waiting […]. In his stocking cap and libertarian red scarf" (Sinclair 2002: 215), and later on: "I met Renchi at Epsom station on 5 August 1999. He was wearing a T-shirt of many colours, many signs and symbols: GIVE PEACE A CHANCE. Not the best disguise for infiltrating what remained of the hospital colony" (Sinclair 2002: 340).

Renchi is descended from a remarkable family of Victorian scientific travellers, mentioned on pp. 382-6. Mainly by way of his great-grand-uncle, Clarence Bicknell, Renchi could be said to represent the connection between the present, peculiar exploration and the never-forgotten Victorian tradition of travel and travel-writing. Clarence, after briefly joining the church, travelled all the way to Ceylon and ended up in the Mediterranean. He settled on the Italian Riviera in the town of Bordighera, to which he bequeathed his collection of rock-paintings gathered on the nearby mountains, giving rise to the (still-existing) Museo Bicknell. He was not only a scientist but also one of Turner's patrons. Sinclair informs us that his own great-grandfather, Arthur, had also been in Ceylon, "botanising and managing tea plantations" (Sinclair 2002: 387), around the same time as Clarence. This is one of the many traditional anecdotes that

survive in the book, alongside the more philosophical tenets of psychogeography.

Iain Sinclair is also accompanied from time to time by the writer and travelling erudite Kevin Jackson, who, during the expedition, develops ulcerated feet. This is apparently an unavoidable condition of the walking explorer, almost a professional ailment, as testified by one of the great scientific travellers of the nineteenth century, Alfred Russel Wallace, who in his *The Malay Archipelago* informs us that "for more than half the time I was laid up with ulcerated feet" (Wallace, 1862: II, 265). The same podal inconvenience also affects another of our M25 *flâneurs*, the silent photographer Mark Atkins. He is an off-and-on participant in the expedition, like the artist and musician Bill Drummond and the film-maker Chris Petit, who, though seldom present in the book, helped Sinclair in the production of the DVD accompanying the book. J. G. Ballard, on the other hand, is a constant presence in the background.

Having given our readers an idea – if this is possible in the case of such a peculiar book – of Sinclair's theory and practice of travel and travel writing and how it relates to some of the tenets of psychogeography, we now move on to discuss some of the issues and episodes of the book, that is to say what Iain Sinclair and his friends actually encountered on their circular trip and deemed to be worth recording.

3. No room for them in the city

Here is Sinclair then, orbiting on foot with his friends around London along the M25. In various locations around the outer rim of the motorway he comes across health establishments, especially mental hospitals. He is surprised, particulary by their numbers. Some of them are still operating, while others have been closed down and their grounds, now sought after building areas surrounded by attractive parkland, are being converted into housing estates for upper-class commuters, with the ensuing loss of the original buildings and, most of all, of the archives recording the unfortunate lives that had been expunged from the city and confined within their walls. In any case, though travelling very few miles in space, the author realises he is travelling quite a way back in time, to the Victorian era, when some of these establishments were founded and others were at the peak

of their activity. What we perceive from Sinclair's narration is the fact that mental illness was "rusticated", sent away from the context of civilised life in the city and removed to the countryside, there to be hidden from sight. The reader cannot help noticing the fact that the city had and has no room for such people: "Madhouses belonged on the periphery" (Sinclair 2002: 155). With all the records now burnt, the hiding mechanism is complete. In chapter 7 (the part of the book entitled *Paradise Gardens*), Sinclair reflects: "Asylums haunt the motorway like abandoned forts, the kind of defensive ring once found on the Thames below Tilbury" (Sinclair 2002: 163); as if it were the duty of the asylums, for simply being located in the vicinity of the outer ring-road, to act as a bulwark against the assault of mental illness from the outside, while at the same time keeping native and local madness at bay, away from the city. At the beginning of the book, the area is described as "a territory defined by the red Italianate water towers of Victorian and Edwardian madhouses" (Sinclair 2002: 4). In chapter 7 he continues with a list: "Shenley is a hilltop encampment, Cadbury or Maiden Castle; Napsbury is a winged creature […] The hospitals at Harperbury and Shenley…" (Sinclair 2002: 163). The Horton Hospital at Epsom (originally the estate of Sir Thomas Fowell Buxton) was acquired by the London County Council in 1896 to provide "for urban inadequates" (Sinclair 2002: 345).

Michel Foucault, though barely mentioned, is always in the background of the passages that deal with all these *closed systems* mentioned by Sinclair: "Renchi has been reading his *Madness and Civilization*" is all that gets said on page 163 (see Foucault, 1964), while the more appropriate *Discipline and Punish* (Foucault, 1977) is not mentioned at all, not even when mental illness is directly dealt with. Foucault's books also loom large behind the description of Leavesden, a facility which was built to implement "the rules laid down in the 1845 Act 'for the Regulation and Care and Treatment of Lunatics'" (Sinclair 2002: 176). Carefully planted grounds, which will turn out to enhance the commercial value of the possible future building sites, "disguise the nature and extent of the hospital colony […] the darker blocks, with their narrow 'airing courts' would be hidden" (Sinclair 2002: 176). Sinclair then goes on to supply all sorts of detailed information about this specific hospital, for instance the fact that: "the 'feeble-minded' (any

nuisance, drunk, women suffering post-natal depression) could be banished to Leavesden. […] Anti-social behaviour – inappropriate pregnancies, adultery, radicalism, riot – could see the offender put away" (Sinclair 2002: 178). The last inmate of a mental hospital to be mentioned is a famous one, the poet John Clare, who makes an appearance on page 533, almost at the very end of the book. This massive presence of mental illness around London is something new both to our explorers and to readers – both parties have learnt something. Here is one way, then, in which the exploration we are considering can contribute to the advancement of learning without having to visit exotic landscapes.

Although the author enlarges on Shenley Hospital, built as late as 1924, it turns out that the town of Shenley in fact hosts a more interesting building from Sinclair's point of view: the country manor of the eighteenth-century architect Nicholas Hawksmoor. Hawksmoor is a personality a psychogeographer should be particularly fond of, since he supposedly built his six London churches along what Merlin Coverley calls a *ley-line*[7], an almost mystical notion.

4. What became of the Puritans

When Iain Sinclair and his friends reach the South-West bend of the London Orbital – they have gone more than halfway around London and it is by now the 16th of July 1999 – they come across St. George's Hill, another reminder of the past (though further away in time) with which our travellers have to come to terms. This Hill is one of the landmarks in English history, though at present it appears to have (temporarily?) been downgraded from its quasi-heroic status to a costly bourgeois residential compound, a proper gated community. From the way Sinclair speaks about them, we perceive that it is clear that the Hill's present residents are

[7] Merlin Coverley, in his *Psychogeography*, refers to a book by Alfred Watkins, *The Old Straight Track* (1925) that gives a definition of "ley-lines", which Coverley summarises in these terms: "those alignments linking sites and objects of prehistoric antiquity" (Coverley, 2010: 125), not immediately recognisable in our days, and thus pertaining to the irrational domain, that quantum of irrationality which characterises the whole area of psychogeography.

completely in the dark about its past, which is well-known to the author: "[…] the private estate of St. George's Hill. Today we are going to attempt the walk over St. George's Hill, and on towards Cobhams Heath, following in the steps of Gerrard Winstanley and the community of Diggers, in the period after the English Civil War" (Sinclair 2002: 300). A rather ludicrous narration then follows, in which the *nouveaux riches* residents of St George's Hill are described in terms of their absurd absession with security, which is in stark contrast to the more noble ideology of their civil war predecessors. Our travellers reach the spot at mid-morning, when no one is at home and it is not clear what the guards presiding at the gates and those slowly patrolling the streets in white cars are protecting, unless it be the habitation of nothingness. As is to be expected from someone who is knowledgeable about the English Civil Wars, Sinclair refers his readers to Christopher Hill's authoritative book *The World Turned Upside Down* (Hill 1972), in which the Oxford historian evokes how the Diggers settled on the hill:

> One Sunday in March or April 1649 the congregation of the parish church of Walton-on-Thames was startled to see the church invaded by a group of six soldiers after master Faucet had preached his sermon. The soldiers in a series of symbolical gestures and amid scenes of some excitement, announced that the Sabbath tithes were abolished. On Sunday 1 April - quite possibly the same Sunday - a group of poor men (described as labourers in a legal action three months later) collected on St. George's Hill in the same parish and began to dig the wasteland there. (Hill 1972: 110)

The historian makes it clear that the Diggers are revolutionaries who turn the world upside down in as much as they refuse to comply with the rules of the Medieval organic society, according to which high and low, lords and commons, the king and his people were believed to thrive as long as they acted communally. When small groups, or even single individuals, refused to respect the land at the centre of the community intended for common pasture, on the grounds that they needed to produce crops for their individual families, and started digging it, it was a revolutionary gesture marking the birth of modern bourgeois individualism, or at least an example of it, a step in that direction.

No surprise then that the modern inhabitants of St. George's Hill should shape their daily lives according to the same individualism that had its roots in the thinking of seventeenth-century revolutionaries. This is our conclusion, though, not Sinclair's, who goes to great lengths to mention Winstanley's merits (and his pamphlet *The True Leveller Standard Advanced,* 1649), as well as the rebellious groups which have spontaneously sprung up in that same area in recent times. Sinclair also goes on – and this is where he is most successful – to ridicule the suburban middle class, with its minor, pretentious rituals, such as playing golf: "BEWARE OF GOLFERS PLAYING FROM THE LEFT" a notice warns; and a bit later another one adds: "BEWARE OF GOLFERS PLAYING FROM THE RIGHT" (Sinclair 2002: 303, 306).

5. Two residences

Almost at the two extremes of his journey, its beginning and its end, Sinclair encounters two residences that seem to act like bookends to all the stories contained in the book, or like symbols that buttress the city and protect it from the outside. The two houses have gone down in history as having been the former homes of two *national heroes* (and are reminiscent – the second in particular – of the *folksy localism* mentioned in note 4 above): Princess Elizabeth (later to become Queen Elizabeth I) stayed for some time at Enfield Chase; and Winston Churchill had his country retreat at Chartwell, near Westerham, in Kent, a town which also happens to be the birthplace of General James Wolfe, the man who beat the French out of Canada in 1759. "Churchill and Wolfe dominate Westerham […] Mementoes and memorabilia designed to tempt us into Quebec House [where Wolfe lived for his first twelve years] or Chartwell, to remind us of a glorious past that is now largely in the keeping of Americans and Canadians" (Sinclair 2002: 392). Yet Sinclair, as we shall see, does not in fact enlarge on Wolfe: Sir Winston attracts more of his attention.

With no real introduction and in his typically abrupt and allusive way, the author begins to expand on Enfield Chase. The episode below is an excellent example of Sinclair's narrative style. Sentences are simply set next to one another and acquire their meaning when the whole passage is read in its entirety. The information supplied is in the end quite detailed but is not offered judgementally; instead,

it is up to the readers to make up their own minds about the place itself as well as about the author's opinion of it:

> Princess Elizabeth, the future Virgin Queen, was brought from Hatfield House to Enfield Chase by her 'keeper', Sir Thomas Pope. She travelled, according to Nicholas Norden's *Progresses of Queen Elizabeth* [1593], with 'a retinue of twelve ladies in white satin, on ambling palfreys, and twenty yeomen in green on horseback that her grace might hunt the hart'. (Sinclair 2002: 92)

The following passage describes the forest as a site of enchantment for a green belt monarchy; a theatre for role reversals, sexual travesty, debating schools:

> "The Queen came from Theobalds to Enfield House to dinner, and she had toils set up in the park to shoot at the buck". The court stood for wild nature, ecology, the preservation of animals so that they could be killed for sport. The forest, when it is enclosed and exploited, is royalist. Republican sentiment cuts down trees. The major deforestation took place under Cromwell and the Commonwealth. The diarist John Evelyn described the Chase as 'a solitary desert with 3000 deer". (Sinclair 2002: 92-3)

This passage is another particularly effective example of Sinclair's use of language, which, as readers can see, tends to be evocative rather than realistically descriptive.

As for the house at Westerham, not only do Winston Churchill and Chartwell receive more attention than James Wolfe, as we already hinted above, but Churchill the man takes up much more space than the house itself. When he bought it, Churchill had it appointed to his taste, yet he had to leave it when the war began because it was too dangerous – the ponds were too visible to bombers. Sinclair comes to a very bitter conclusion, which is mostly dedicated to Churchill's painting activities, a practice which he

> took up […] as a relief from deep depression. […] If brought to it, if forced, Churchill could be "paintatious" (his word) about Chartwell. […] Churchill's *Painting as a Pastime* remains in print, along with postcard reproductions, videos, mugs, coasters, key rings. This much-visited, much-admired National Trust property is the ultimate point for the tourist who wants to leave London without leaving London; the paradox of an open

asylum in which the demons of history can be drugged with scents, bright colours and a prostituted landscape". (Sinclair 2002: 401)

6. The siren song

Our author and his friends are forever walking around in the vicinity of the M25, but hardly ever can they walk on the motorway itself; thus the presence of the ring-road is often perceived by them in terms of sound, it is heard rather than seen. As our closing image, then, we would like to offer the sound of the motorway which constitutes the background to the whole book. Sinclair begins very early by telling us that "you could hear the faint siren song of the road, the M25" (Sinclair 2002: 14); that song is luring him and his friends to continue travelling along the motorway. Towards the end of the book readers also find the following words: "The tour, within the acoustic footprints of the M25, is finished" (Sinclair 2002: 455), which can be said to announce the conclusion of the story of the circular journey, though it will take another eighty pages for this to be achieved. The sound of the motorway is mentioned three more times: on page 125 Sinclairs expresses his intention "to shadow the motorway (within audible range whenever possible)"; on page 380, at the end of a rather gruesome presentation of a recipe for cooking pheasants killed by being run over on the motorway, we read that "Song birds, sensitive to the M25's acoustic footprints, back off"; finally, very near the end of the book, on page 510 we are confronted with "[…] migrants who are never comfortable out of reach of the motorway's acoustic footsteps", an image which seems to evoke the long way these people have come – indeed often walked – from their own remote elsewhere.

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