Attention and the Ethics of Perception: Iain Sinclair's London Orbital

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Abstract
Drawing on criticism addressing Sinclair's works, this article is inspired by an approach based on the ethics of perception and vulnerability on the one hand, and the politics of (in-)visibility on the other. In the first part I address the issue of the ethics of perception, paying attention to the way in which they are performed in Sinclair's fiction with reference to the categories of attention and consideration. In the second part I address the modalities of social invisibility as inscribed in *London Orbital*. In the last part, I edge towards a discussion of suburban spaces as sites of vulnerability, addressing more specifically the figures of exposure and dispossession.

Keywords
Attention, consideration, ethics, invisibility, perception, vulnerability

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In his acclaimed *Psychogeography* (2010), Merlin Coverley evokes the secular tradition of London visionaries, starting from Defoe and reaching to Peter Ackroyd, through Blake and Machen. The latter he pointedly associates with suburban London, making him an ur-psychogeographer when describing his drifting through the city's peripheral zones:

> Machen is outlining the practice of psychogeography […], for as he frees himself from all geographical or historical markers, Machen remaps the city as he passes through it, and in establishing a trajectory away from the more well-trodden centre towards the overlooked suburban quarters of the city, Machen points the way for today's generation of psychogeographers as they explore London's anonymous outer limits. (Coverley 50)

Except for the absence of geographical and historical markers, these lines might well apply to Iain Sinclair's non fiction, recording his experimental and relentless perambulations through the metropolis, as is notably the case in *Lights out for the Territory* (2003) and *Ghost Milk* (2011), for instance. More specifically, I have selected this quotation as it ventures intro the borderlands or "edgelands" of the city, to take up Paul Farley and Michael Symmons

Roberts's key figure and concept (Farley and Simmons Roberts), thereby covering common ground with Sinclair's cult narrative and testimony *London Orbital. A Walk around the M25* (2002). Indeed, in the following lines, I shall be using indistinctly the term 'suburb' as a synonym for 'borderlands' or 'edgelands,' as will appear soon enough.

Much has been said about *London Orbital*'s drifting and veering through London's outer spaces. Its tendency to "mystify as to elucidate" was stressed by Andrew Ballantyne (Ballantyne 228), referring to the welter of cultural references and symbols that contribute to the narrative's opaqueness. David James, in a pithy paronomasia linking up Sinclair's reading of "encrypted runes" in search of the "actual causes of urban ruin," (James 85) has made a similar point, revealing the political edge of the poetical. Similarly, in his monograph devoted to Sinclair, Robert Bond comments on this poetic trait and on the text's "hallucinatory tonnage of fragments" (Bond 169) as modes of resistance to the neo-liberal insistence on centralization emblematised by the Millenium Dome, the landmark from which both the author's fugues and the narrative draw their initial impetus. Laura Colombino has also stressed Sinclair's ongoing fight against neo-liberalism and his crave to heal "by means of his salutary visionarism" (Colombino 150). Such a political orientation is confirmed in Martin Niall's monograph on Sinclair (2015) who teases out his evocation of "the matter of London" as a way to draw the reader's attention to the "detritus of globalization" (Niall, Introduction). In the criticism on *London Orbital*, how the poetical bears on a politics of literature is systematically put forward, making the novel echo and encapsulate Sinclair's relentless attempt at perturbing the distracting, manufactured image of the contemporary neoliberal city, *i.e.*: that of the Millenium Dome or, one decade later, that of the Olympic Games, as demonstrated in Catherine Lanone's inspired reading of *Ghost Milk* (Lanone).

In *London Orbital. A Walk around the M25*, Sinclair drifts and fugues through London's edgelands, repelled away from the magnetic pole of the Millenium Dome and

thereby resisting the capitalist regime of "fated consumption" (Bond 169) in its neo-liberal exacerbation; rejecting the injunctions of distraction formulated by, *inter alia*, the Lee Valley Regional Park; cultivating salutary anger and finding inspiration in the buried, submerged landmarks and dwellers of the eccentric suburban-scapes. Such a programme is implemented not so much by circumnavigating the city as by drifting through its suburbs and confines, through zones both unmapped and remapped by the indefatigable stalker and his stooges, through a series of drifts and veerings performed over a year. By promoting the time-honoured figure of the *flâneur* turned into a *fugueur* (Sinclair 2003a, 146), *London Orbital* harnesses the disruptive and corrective powers of psychogeography to make us "see the edgelands" (Farley and Simmons Roberts 5), in other terms, to train the reader's attention to the unseen and/or the neglected, thereby "making the [eponymous] road visible" (Niall, Introduction) in its obscenity and revealing glimpses or flashes of the hidden or subdued.

In this article, I am as much interested in the politics of literature evinced by a reading of *London Orbital* as in the ethical subtract on which they rest. As indicated in my title, this depends to a great extent on an ethics of perception, and this is what I plan to unravel by first focussing on attention and consideration. My second part concentrates more specifically on invisibility and its limits. It is followed by a final discussion of suburban spaces as sites of vulnerability.

"Everything is visible and nothing is revealed." (Sinclair 2003a, 476) This is one of the many aphorisms that dot the narrative and it points at one of the main ethical failures signposted by Sinclair. Indeed, even if the sentence is apparently unaccompanied by one of the flourishes of anger that characterise many passages, and even if Sinclair sounds not so much cantankerous as disabused here, what is targeted is the contemporary observer's inability to see beyond glittering or fake surfaces. In fact, *London Orbital* is dominated by the

siderating image of the Millenium Dome, an emblem of popular failure and conspicuous capitalism looming over the city and its suburbs, whose effects are still felt from the green belt. Taking his lead from Adorno, Bond analyses the contemporary reader's blindness to realities beyond the veil of simulation in terms of distraction of the type called forth by stereotypical art. In his pages on *London Orbital*, he insists on "Sinclair's association of distraction with a dulling of the viewer's sense of social crisis." (Bond 171) Such a concern informs the narrative, since castigating the distracting purposes of the promoters of cultural consumption is one of the narrator's main activities. In full aphoristic swing, he inveighs against the ascendance of the fake: "The world its own Xerox. Originality as quotation." (Sinclair 2003a, 107) In the last section, he powerfully returns to this topic as he avers: "These days, only the fake is truly authentic." (Sinclair 2003a, 472) Such an obsession with the sham value of suburban-scapes is aptly envisaged in relation with another specialist of simulation, *i.e.*: J. G. Ballard, whose tutelary presence looms over many passages (see for instance page 195) and clearly extends to the eponymous road itself that it views as "a metaphor of itself" (Sinclair 2003a, 14), a self-engrossed, ever-unfolding simulacrum of itself. In the opening section, "Prejudices Declared," several pages return to the M25's founding moment, when Margaret Thatcher cut the silk ribbon during the inauguration ceremony, back in 1986. The snipping of the shimmering silk ribbon at the hands of the Iron Lady is the poetic launching pad for a series of associations in which, Moebius-like, the road stretches to infinity while coiling upon itself, in an endless mirage whose simulating powers Sinclair takes care to juxtapose with moments of incarnation. This is the case when simulation abruptly impacts with nature and more precisely wildlife, as in the swan episode to be found early on, not too far after the inauguration episode:

> As soon as the M25 was opened, swans lifting from the Thames at Staines mistook the bright silver surface for water; there were several nasty accidents. A report in the *Evening*

> *Standard* (February 2001) described the trauma suffered by a man […] when a large white bird crashed on to the bonnet of his car. (Sinclair 2003a, 10)

Here, the abstraction of the road is made to clash with the pulsating matter of the decoyed bird, eliciting the narrator's anger and his indictment of grand projects to be imposed on the dwellers, human and non-human alike, without paying attention to vibrant individualities of various sorts.

Such criticism echoes that on the centralisation of power and capital that is one of the main underpinnings of the narrative's demonstration. Indeed, the orbital road, despite its peripheral position, is regularly seen as a duplication of the highly-concentrated structure of the inner city. Bond insists on the presence of concentric circles and describes Sinclair's wanderings in this way: "attempts to locate an outside to a centralised capitalism, the orbital pilgrimages narrated in *London Orbital* can be seen to be motivated by Sinclair's critique of a capitalist logic of centralization." (Sinclair 2003a,173) Besides, on the opening page the orbital is compared to a tourniquet, with the power "to choke the living breath from the metropolis." (Sinclair 2003a, 3) The hellish concentric structure of the metropolis clearly spells a tale of closure and involution, the better to paradoxically point at the role of the metropolis as a beacon of neo-liberal influence. Within its radius, whose span is global and that seems to affect the edgelands even more crudely, spreads the mega-airport:

> Heathrow is its own city, a Vatican of the western suburbs. […] The airport complex with its international hotels, storage facilities, semi-private roads, is as detached from the shabby entropy of the metropolis as is the City, the original walled settlement. They have their own rules their own security forces, the arrogance of global capitalism. (Sinclair 2003a, 238)

Sinclair's evocation of the edgelands is one dominated by contamination: concentric circle rippling into concentric circle, enclosed space ricocheting into enclosed space, compound breeding compound. The suburban-scapes display the traces of separation and autonomy,

marks of pride and marks of woe. They bear witness to the ascendance of competition, hence individualism and separation cancelling any sense of solidarity and collaboration. Closed in upon themselves, the emblematic rings seem to open only to export their mantra of consumption, distraction, abstraction. Nowhere is this emblematised more sharply, perhaps, than in the pages devoted to the Lea Valley, a former rural area "aspir[ing] to the condition of the supermarket" (Sinclair 2003a, 42). During the second walk, recounted in the aptly entitled "Soothing the Seething" section, the area is systematically associated with the "Best Value" motto, at times searing the page in bold type (Sinclair 2003a, 43) in an array of unrelenting declensions, nominal sentences taking on the ring of shouts. Thoroughly contaminated by the spirit of neo-liberalism, the place becomes an abstraction, a mere message that cannot even find any materialisation in the present: "The Lea Valley was a future spectacle." (Sinclair 2003a, 43) Such a spectacle gives rise to the narrator's indignation as, escorted by his fellow witnesses, he stands up clearly and shifts to the collective, encompassing "we," the index of solidarity and interdependence as opposed to sovereign self-reliance, proffered here in full paratactic swing: "We wanted Worst Value. We refused cashback. We solicited bad deals, ripoffs, tat." (Sinclair 2003a, 44)

Throughout, the reader is confronted with alternations between dismay and pique, sharing Sinclair's emotions, never allowed to forget about the narrative's origin as a logbook, about its status as a vibrant testimony, as if the author's purpose were not so much to describe the aspect of the place he is crossing as to bear witness to and transmit the effects that it has on him and his fellow travellers. Sinclair's idiosyncratic voice is never heard to abate, as if he were speaking within the reader's earshot, performing his narrative even while the reader is going through it, incarnating it and courting concreteness by permanently soliciting the reader's affects. The "we" mentioned above thereby extends to and enfolds the reader, an invitation to witness and a shared refusal of the logic of centralisation, abstraction and

totalisation. The reader turned *fugueur* is invited to take part in the drifting and ranting, walking the same roads and tracks as Sinclair and his accomplices, training his/her indignation and attention to a myriad details. For in fact, what the narrative is about is just that, *i.e.*: paying attention to concrete, neglected details, as opposed to contemplating and accepting abstractions and totalisations from a distance. And of this Renchi, one of the central figures of the third walk—the ironically dubbed "Paradise Gardens"—, is designated as an emblem: "Spurning novelty, giving the mind time to settle; noticing the unnoticeable, tiny shifts in season and climate." (Sinclair 2003a, 125) By taking the time to walk, see and hear, by letting themselves engage with the singularity of the moment and of the place, the *fugueurs* as witnesses embrace the logic of attention as opposed to that of consumption. More than a logic, they opt for an ethical *practice*, dependent on the physical apprehension of natural, human, cultural and social realities that the hoardings and other insignia of the cultural industry keep inaccessible to detection. And by attending, they also care and attend *to* (Foley Sherman 12), as indicated by Jon Foley Sherman in his analysis of performance that may well be applied to Sinclair's testimony. What the *fugueurs* experience and share is precisely this, an experience, grounded phenomenologically and that does not mean to speak of human matters in abstract concepts since "corporeal involvement with the world forms the linchpin to understanding the world" (Foley Sherman 6). Drifting becomes a way to engage corporally with the world and to promote concreteness. It envisages ethics not so much as a series of abstract rules as a practice and as the immersion in relations, in the Aristotelian vein, in other terms an ethics of engagement through "attention to particularities" (Foley Sherman 5). This is what French philosopher Marielle Macé has analysed through a fruitful opposition between *sideration* (the impossibility to discriminate and the ability to apprehend totalisations) and *consideration* that she defines as an ethical category relying on attention: "To 'consider' would imply […] taking the living and their lives into account, […] taking their days and

practices into account, and therefore unclose what sideration encloses." (Massé 24, translation mine)[i] A similar idea provides the argument for French philosopher Corine Pelluchon's work on the ethics of consideration, when she demonstrates that attention as the "capacity to be present to what one is doing" (Pelluchon 16, translation mine)[ii] is the condition of consideration. Now, one of the mainsprings of consideration is the capacity to take the other and the environment into account not from above but by privileging proximity. To do this, one has to relinquish any bird's eye view or distant contemplation of an object (admittedly, *London Orbital* is devoid of what is traditionally called a landscape, complete with distant, plunging, all-encompassing command of the scenery) and to adopt a humble position, seeing not from above but at ground level, a position that allows for attention and engagement with the other as a peer. Such a humility, as indicated by Pelluchon, "strips the individual and links him/her to all humans, making him/her equal to others and linking him/her, though his/her flesh, to all beings that were born and are mortal."[iii] (Pelluchon 33, translation mine) It is my contention that Sinclair's narrative does just that, that is deploy the psychogeographical potential of the *fugueur* to make his drifting and veering the very condition of a humble encounter with the (submerged) other. Such a meeting is of necessity a practice, since it is incarnated in the vibrant body of the walker who engages with places and people alike to walk through a common world where the distribution of the perceptible is also a sharing of affects.

Attention to singularities, as suggested above in the allusion to Renchi, implies "noticing the unnoticeable"—and not just "tiny shifts in season and climate," but also and more particularly, noticing the unnoticed and the submerged, and retrieving visibilities. Herein lies the ethics of attention that goes hand in hand with caring for the unseen and the repressed and attending to what is generally left to lie fallow or forgotten. This is certainly the reason why *London Orbital* offers few glimpses of the eponymous visible road and gives the

reader access to the many buried, humble traces of former presences that have helped fashion the suburban milieu. The graffiti spreading on disused private or public buildings and the residues and detritus gathered in improvised open-sky museums telling the tales of former uses and departed users exemplify this point:

> Under the bridge weed-slippery skeletons of motorcycles, dredged from the filthy water, have been laid out. I've seen travellers, barechested, prudish in old trousers, diving for scrap. Ropes and hooks. Mounds of antique iron. Bicycles, prams. Immune to Weil's disease, rat bites, they submerge, time after time, in the mucilage, the electric-green scum. (Sinclair 2003a, 53)

The mundane poetry of the description echoes other passages when, in their pilgrimages, Sinclair and his guests come across witnesses of the daily in its humility. Even more frequently they are confronted with absences, or rather places (great houses, asylums and hospitals, among others) that metonymically point to a buried presence effaced from contemporary radar and GPS screens. This has been underlined by various commentators, among whom Ballantyne, who finds it characteristic that Sinclair very often interviews "seldom heard people," paying them special attention so as to retrieve them, their stories and part of the history of the place from invisibility (Ballantyne 288); or else Tatiana Pogossian for whom "Sinclair aims at unveiling London's neglected past and to some extent […] provokes this encounter between the object and the interpreter." (Pogossian 1) More generally, and without referring to the English terrain, Patrick Keiller has commented on his own practice of the suburban train journey as a wish to "depict the place as some sort of historical palimpsest, the corollary of this, the exposition of a state of mind." (Keiller 11) Stripping the layers of the palimpsest as he walks through the edgelands, Sinclair drifts from one submerged presence to another, shifts from one state of mind to the next, veering between contemplation of the past and rage against the neoliberal present. In Alastair Bonnett's words, much of his work consists in "retriev[ing] radical histories" (Bonnett 46), very much after the

fashion of what he does in *Lights out for the Territory*. This is possibly the reason why *London Orbital*, with its circular structure, from Dome to Dome, is also a story of "winding the clock back" (Sinclair 2003a, 69). In the face of those who have found fault with Sinclair's obsession with the past, its smack of conservatism and its taste for the elegiac glance, Bonnett flourishes the idea of "nostalgic radicalism" that he sees as characteristic of contemporary British psychogeographers, among whom Sinclair. To him, "[t]his body of work explores and re-imagines the forgotten nooks and crannies of ordinary landscapes. It seeks to re-enchant and re-mythologyze prosaic geographies. The resultant effect is disorienting—funny yet melancholic; utterly out of our time but ill at ease with modern Britain." (Bonnett 46)

This points at Sinclair's elegiac temptation, of which he is obviously aware: "The structure of our walk is elegiac: discontinued rituals, closed shrines." (Sinclair 2003a, 133) The contemporary suburbs are thereby felt as a braille plate, full of the traces and imprints of past events and characters still bearing on the present. In other terms, what characterises *London Orbital* is an obvious sense of the presence of the past, as if the edgelands—in the same way as the city, in other narratives by Sinclair or Peter Ackroyd, for instance—provided for the emergence of the buried and the submerged to he/she who pays the right type of attention and does not let him-/herself be distracted by the blandishments of neoliberalism. The ethics of attention doubles up with an ethics of perception here as, to be able to retrieve invisibilities, the witness has to train his/her perception and take it less as a natural quality than as "a social activity" to be built up that "make[s] elements appear in the perceiving subject's environment as relevant and worthy to be perceived, while others appear as irrelevant." (Le Blanc 2009, 13; translation mine)[iv] I would argue that Sinclair keeps doing just this throughout and keeps entreating the reader to do the same. Training perception as a social activity means being "attentive to the clamour of forgotten voices" (Niall, Introduction) and obviously has to be considered in relation with memory and, more especially, forgetting.

For in fact it is a map of forgotten sites, lives and presences that *London Orbital* relentlessly and stridently brings to the reader's apprehension. This is confirmed by Bond, when he evokes a special function of the walks inspired by the M25: "the orbital landscape is also where Sinclair retrieves the residues of the social process of forgetting—the operation of marginalisation." (Bond 180) This is certainly the reason why the text teems with allusions to retrievals and rescues, as during the third walk, when Sinclair meta-narratively comments on his self-set errand: "It is no easy task to rescue the Harefield narrative from the present assembly of buildings." (Sinclair 2003a, 192) Elsewhere, another hospital has vanished, replaced by a housing development, Shenley Hospital, residing place of the mentally ill kept to the fringes of the suburbs for camouflaging purposes and now altogether erased from orbital maps: "We are stunned by the disappearing act. We've seen the old photographs, Shenley was like a benign concentration camp. Thirties architecture, industrial/pastoral units: a processing plant for mental hygiene. The scale was epic. Vast dormitories. Kitchens. Bath-houses." (Sinclair 2003a, 150) In *London Orbital*, disappearance breeds disappearance and the *fugueur* mutates into a stalker, tracking the buried history of alienation through the worn architectural residue of caring institutions.

What the narrator is left with is the relentless task to name absence, and to paradoxically summon up presence through its faded footprints:

> The country, or this remnant of it, was a kind of amnesia, and the asylum a place of forgetting. Urban loci—churches, pubs, markets—were always provokers of pain. […] Out here on the motorway rim there were no memories. Nothing had happened. All accounts of incarceration, all voyages towards recovery, begin with that journey: the cart, the ambulance, the distance between home and the walled nowhere. (Sinclair 2003a, 172)

In such passages, what is generally kept hidden or repressed surfaces centre stage in a poetics of the obscene that literalises the notion by making central what used to be peripheral, and throwing into the reader's face what was meant to be kept undetected. Such a poetics is a

powerful pointer at and symptom of an ethics of attention and perception, as it gets the reader to consider the unconsidered. This is what Bond—in Esther Leslie's wake—has analysed in terms of the transformation of scenery into "obscenery" (Bond 181), a term that takes into account the writing of place and its power to throw into relief and to shock. By using such shock tactics and by soliciting the reader's affects, once again a *practice* of consideration of the neglected, in its/their singularity/-ies, is at work in this testimonial narrative, reminding us that "perception doesn't *happen* to anyone. It is something people do." (Foley Sherman 6, emphasis in the original) By unearthing the submerged and throwing the buried into light, Sinclair trades in visibilities and throws into the limelight what is hidden by the political powers. He thereby reminds us that "invisibility is not subtracted from politics but that it reformulates politics," which is tantamount to saying that "the conception of politics cannot be reduced to activities declared as political but must integrate infra-political activities"[v] (Le Blanc 2010, 176; translation mine)—and infra-visible realities, it is tempting to add. This signals towards an "uncanny openness" (Farley and Simmons Roberts 136) where the familiar surges behind the unfamiliar and breaks open preconceptions, whetting attention and allowing for the perception of uncharted tracts and objects. In Sinclair's narrative, the suburbs and edgelands are haunted sites carrying more than directly meets the eye, and whose active consideration activates as places resisting the imposed political order. They are open, vulnerable places, leaving room for sensitiveness to the other.

London Orbital contributes to renewing the original faith in drifting as *openness* to the tonal influence of a milieu, hence sensitiveness to space and its tones. Such an exposure to space is expressed in Guy Debord's initial description of the *dérive*, as he evokes the technique of drifting as "hasty passage through varied ambiances" (Debord, translation mine).[vi] One may remember too that drifting implies renouncing the ordinary reasons that

preside over the desire or need to walk through a city so as to "let oneself be solicited by the terrain, with its corresponding meetings"[vii] (Debord, translation mine). In other terms, Debord is describing a mode of presence to the world that interprets the practice of drifting as some form of exposure to the urban environment, some sort of hysterical tuning to the solicitations and colourings of the milieu. In the drifting experience, the first impulse is towards the outside, which implies an initial surrender of the self and a sensitiveness to the environment, hence the other. This may lead us to envisage drifting as a specific practice and experience of vulnerability, as in drifting the subject is of necessity relational, dependent on the milieu and on the others, a far cry from any Jupiterian sovereignty. With drifting, no towering distance may be envisaged and the exposed, dispossessed subject plunges into humble relations with the other. This may explain why drifting is highly compatible with the practice of attention in the even finer and more spontaneous shape of tuning, a condition for the emergence of consideration as ethical practice and experience, as indicated above.

This echoes Pelluchon's vision of attention as "being present to" the other (Pelluchon 216), the place and the moment, and has been underlined by various critics. Among them ranks Colombino who insists on "the psychogeographer's [Sinclair's] keen receptivity to his own surroundings" (Columbino 152), or David James who, commenting on the work of Rose Tremain, uses words that may fittingly apply to Sinclair's works in general and *London Orbital* in particular, as he evokes her ability "to engage phenomenologically with places rather than to topographical labelling" (James 8). Perhaps this technique is nowhere more aptly investigated as in Bond's analysis of immersion, when he considers one of the chief modalities of drifting: that of renouncing any superior knowledge and position so as to humbly merge with the flow of sensations, an immersion practiced by Sinclair, mediated through his monumental testimony and passed on to the reader who, in turn, becomes immersed into the text. To Bond, "textual immersion [is] a strategy of resistance to the

capitalist regime of 'fated' consumption," as we may remember, and it is also the condition of concentration as opposed to distraction, Bond alluding to Adorno's opposition between both terms here (Bond 169–70). This is why I tend to see immersion as another condition of consideration, which means in turn that I take the shared immersion (the author's and the reader's) at work in the *London Orbital* project to be an ethical category.

At work in the narrative is what Sinclair himself describes as chorography as opposed to topography. He takes pains to quote his sources when using the notion, soliciting the figure of Paul Devereux, the British specialist of archaeoacoustics and ecopsychology. This is how Sinclair describes the practice, in Devereux's wake: "The chorographer is hungry for place: 'place as *expressively* potent, place as *experience*, place as a trigger to memory, imagination and mythic *presence*." (Sinclair 2003a, 122; emphasis added) In his testimony, Sinclair practices chorography as the writing of place as experience, which is a way of asserting the writer's strong relational orientation and openness or vulnerability to place. In this quotation, such terms as "expressively," "experience" and "presence" do emphasise the strong sensational nature of drifting and the experiential nature of the testimony shared with the reader. In Sinclair's own confession, "Text is performance. The only memorial of the synapse-burn in which it is composed. […] Don't burden yourself with the manufacture of copy-cat reality." (Sinclair 2003a, 67) Sinclair's chorography, in other terms, is a permanent attempt at capturing the affective and tonal gist of a singular situation and milieu and to share it as directly as possible with the reader. This is the reason why his testimony is paradoxically characterised by an in-built opaqueness, as the welter of references and figures of speech make it a densely poetical prose whose rhythms and rhymes are but ways to solicit the reader's ear. One might even suggest that Sinclair's and *London Orbital*'s singularities are based on an attempt to stretch the testimonial form to its limits and to transform it into a field of affects that directly solicits the reader's sensory apparatus. The most recurrent devices used

to achieve this effect are certainly the massive use of parataxis, nominal sentences, figures of repetition and amplification, and the mixture of description and free direct discourse, among other resources. At times, too, the narrative hesitates between past and present, for no special reason, disturbing the rules of temporal agreement, as during the following evocation of the fifth walk: "An excursionist mood grips us, time out; after the dark residues of the asylum colony, we turned our faces to the south, to Epsom Downs." (Sinclair 2003a, 355) In such passages, the emergence of the present tense fosters a sense of immediacy and allows for the synchronous sharing of the moment, the excursionist mood gripping Sinclair, his companions and the reader alike in a shared impulse of exposure to the spirit of place building up in turn a sense of community.

Such a sense of the common is efficiently summoned through the body's centrality not only in the perception of place, quite obviously, but also in the writing of place or chorography. In other terms, it is precisely because there is a *fugueur*, who solicits his body as recording apparatus through the drifting experience and who *considers* the environment humbly, from ground level, that an experiential attitude to writing can extend to the reader. The experiential value of the testimony is therefore predicated on a writing of place that makes the body and perception central, in its soliciting of attention and invitation to consideration. Pelluchon deems incarnation to be crucial to the ethics of consideration, as she reminds us that the search for the good life "must start from the body and from our dependence on the material conditions of existence."[viii] (Pelluchon 61–62, translation mine) For her—and I would say that this is a conviction she seems to share with Sinclair as indefatigable walker—, the incarnated subject is essentially relational and is "not so much defined in his/her freedom as in his/her responsibility."[ix] (Pelluchon 62, translation mine) This offers a privileged prism through which to picture Sinclair's contribution to chorography as he exposes himself to aleatory meetings, fine-tuning to novelty and otherness alike, and

accepting his relational nature, hence his responsibility. His drifting about the M25 and his preference for milling over circulating go along with a strong sense of dependence on the other and of interdependence between and among subjects, places, moments and references. This is regularly referred to, as when the narrator avers "I make connections" (Sinclair 2003a, 123) or when, in the vision of natural vulnerability starting from a reflection on food chains, he comes up with the following revelation: "the chain of interconnections is alarming: Moby-Dick threatened with extinction by the Art Nouveau filigree of Junction 5, its run-off into the River Darent." (Sinclair 2003a, 380) Beyond—or rather *under*—the narrator's indignation what appears is an exposure to the invisible, to the neglected, to the disused and the misused, and a sense of responsibility shared with the reader. Pique thereby becomes an invitation not only to attend, but also to attend to and care for, and possibly to take care of the misused milieu and its submerged inhabitants. Sinclair's tetchy testimony is an impatient call for consideration, in Macé's and Pelluchon's acceptation of the term, and this all the more so as in consideration begins collective responsibility: "It is the expression of our common destiny with the other living beings, human and non-human, and it is inseparable from the desire to take care of them."[x] (Pelluchon 102, translation mine) In the ethics of attention and consideration practiced and recommended by Sinclair emerges a clear sense of the common, hence of the political, and in many ways his testimony is an expression of what the politics of literature can do.

London Orbital provides an experience of vulnerability to the other and to the milieu and reminds us on every page of the narrator's emblematic status as precarious subject and of his function as a transmitter of vulnerability. Indeed, as indicated by Le Blanc, among others, the individual is by nature precarious and the function of the artist as precarious witness is precisely to become dispossessed in favour of the other.[xi] This is what Judith Butler has described when focussing on singularity as "the irreducibility of exposure of being *this* body"

(Butler 34). By embracing exposure through the twin practices of drifting and witnessing, Sinclair courts vulnerability of a type that, "accepted and assumed, is a breach that allows for an enlarging of the self by making it take part in the healing of the world."[xii] (Pelluchon 119, translation mine) Drifting, attending, considering become the pillars buttressing an ethical practice whose ultimate aim is the political.

In *London Orbital*, as in many of his writings, Sinclair inveighs against the worst excesses of neo-liberalism as they leave their impact on the metropolis and its edgelands. As indicated above, this is done by relying on the practice of psychogeography and witnessing, i.e.: producing a testimonial narrative of the drifting experience. The main effects of the *dérive* are of a clearly ethical nature, as this technique promotes attention and consideration of the environment and the other, organises the retrieval of cultural and social actors from invisibility, and fosters both the *fugueur* and the reader's openness and vulnerability to the milieu. In all those instances, the ethical dimension becomes a powerful condition and mainspring in Sinclair's political quest. Admittedly the frontier between the ethical and the political is fairly tenuous, and the political edge of ethics is fairly naturally whetted in such a context as the evocation of the suburbs. This is why I would contend, ultimately, that *London Orbital* emblematises two grounds on which literature's powers of intervention are to be treasured. It first allows for the practice and transmitted experience of attention, an activity that conditions a great deal of the ethical and political momentum as, in Foley Sherman's terms, it has "additive" and "enlarging" powers (Foley Sherman 147) that expand the subject's consciousness of his/her belonging to a common world. Attention as passage towards the common thereby provides a political lever that textual dynamics may act on as a way towards what Pelluchon calls "*convivance*" (Pelluchon 148) or the desire to live together and the capacity to take part in the life of the city. Secondly and finally, the narrative as

testimony allows to make a strong point about the politics of literature and, more specifically, about the disrupting powers of imagination. This is what Colombino concludes: "Imagination and aesthetics are configured, therefore, as the plane on which late capitalism can be confronted, for Sinclair, and where a salutary visionariness may counterfact false, marketable dreams." (Colombino 161) By teaching us the inadequacy of our own attention, and above all by introducing dissensus into our routine apprehension of the suburbs, *London Orbital* invites the reader to develop his/her capacity for consideration and thereby contributes to a politics of literature by fostering a sense of the common. To do this, it wagers that narrative democracy is an objective to be met, as all residents and places, as submerged and supressed as they may be meant to be, are eligible for emplotment and textualisation.

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[i] « ‘Considérer’, ce serait […] tenir compte des vivants, de leurs vies effectives […], tenir compte de leurs pratiques, de leurs jours, et par conséquent déclore ce que la sidération enclôt. »
[ii] « la capacité à être présent à ce que l’on fait. »
[iii] « Elle met à nu l’individu et le rattache à tous les autres humains, le rendant égal aux autres et le liant, par sa chair, à tous les êtres qui sont nés et qui sont mortels. »
[iv] La perception « est davantage une “activité sociale” qui fait apparaître dans l’environnement du sujet percevant des éléments comme étant pertinents, dignes d’être perçus, et d’autres éléments comme non pertinents. »
[v] « l’invisibilité n’est pas soustraite à la politique: elle la reformule […] la conception de la politique ne peut pas se réduire à des activités déclarées politiques mais doit intégrer les activités infra-politiques. »
[vi] « une technique du passage hâtif à travers des ambiances variées. »
[vii] « se laisser aller aux sollicitations du terrain et des rencontres qui y correspondent. »
[viii] Il est « nécessaire de partir du corps et de notre dépendance à l’égard des conditions matérielles de l’existence. »
[ix] Le sujet « n’est plus défini dans sa liberté mais dans sa responsabilité. »
[x] « Elle est l’expression de notre communauté de destin avec les autres vivants, humains et non humains, et est inséparable du désir d’en prendre soin […]. »
[xi] I am referring here to the second acceptation of the notion as defined by Butler and Athanasiou (Butler and Athanasiou ix).
[xii] La vulnérabilité « acceptée et assumée est une brèche qui permet d’élargir le moi en le faisant participer à la reparation du monde. »