

## Iain Sinclair

ROBERT BOND was born in London in 1972. He has taught at Cambridge, South Bank and Westminster universities. He is co-editor (with Jenny Bavidge) of *City Visions: The Work of Iain Sinclair*, and is now working towards a comparative study of Iain Sinclair and Wyndham Lewis. This book is the first full-length study of Iain Sinclair's writing to be published, and is Robert Bond's first book.



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ROBERT BOND

*University of Cambridge*



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My parents, Pilli and Reg, gave me an incomparable introduction to the city, and have borne the brunt of the resulting moods, depressions and exultations. I leave it to William Blake to describe the rôle played by Iain Sinclair himself in these struggles of mine.



## *Introduction*

This study focusses on Sinclair's prose. Prose works such as the essays in *Lud Heat* (1975) and *Suicide Bridge* (1979), or the novels *White Chappell: Scarlet Tracings* (1987) and *Downriver* (1991), represent Sinclair's fullest accounts of urban experience. Sinclair, however, is distinctive among contemporary novelists in that he is also a poet and film-maker. Questioned on his 'fragmented career' in a 1997 interview for *The Edge*, he stressed the interdependence of his various artistic activities:

I did a lot of small underground documentary films—about eight years of 8 mm films. But all these seemingly fragmented activities fed back into each other. There were always elements in my prose writing that would suggest something visual, or dreamlike, that was beyond the text. So I'd do a film version of something that was written, and doing the film would inspire me to be able to write about that scene in a later piece. So the whole thing, as far as I'm concerned, is part of one structure of energy.

Here the phrase 'one structure of energy' refers to Sinclair's artistic activity, though an earlier description of Brian Catling's sculptural work had pointed to an alternative conception of a structure, or 'field' of energy as a process or force of individuation drawing on a diverse array of singular interests and activities, some artistic and some nonartistic: 'The objects that emerged were only a single element in a field of energy that included writing, film-making, weapon fetishism, herpetology, conversation, food, friendship and practical magic.' Sinclair's equation of his own purely artistic activity with a unified 'structure of energy', draws our attention to the need to consider how his prose-writing was influenced by his involvement with other artistic activities. His prose

was influenced by his involvement with the work of other film-makers; in the next chapter I refer to his early interest in Stan Brakhage. Sinclair's prose was also influenced by his own film-making, as we have just seen. In conversation with Ian Hunt, Catling—who was taught film by Sinclair at Walthamstow—noted a specific quality of Sinclair's early film-making that reappears in his prose: 'Sinclair would use hand-held, dashing around grabbing images in a kaleidoscopic attack. And of course it's exactly the same in his writing.' He retained this immersive technique in later film-making. We can think of the sequence of images in *The Cardinal and the Corpse* (1992) wherein panoramic shots of the riverscape taken from a car crossing Waterloo Bridge, are alternated with glimpses of the St Luke's (Old Street) obelisk and a residential street: from the comfort of the editing suite Sinclair mounts a kaleidoscopic attack on the entire city.<sup>1</sup>

Yet it was Sinclair's involvement with one particular current of contemporary poetry which had the most significant effect on his prose. His writing emerged from what Hunt has called the 'small press, self-authorising sector' of contemporary British writing, and the publication of his work in journals such as *Grosseteste Review* and (more recently) *Angel Exhaust* and *Parataxis*, as well as in the poetry anthology *A Various Art* (1987), associated his writing with the neo-modernist production of the 'Cambridge school' of poetry in particular. Sinclair's very conception of his artistic activity as a unified 'structure of energy', which entails a questioning of the division of artistic labour, is consonant with the neo-modernist conception of poetry as, in Clive Bush's words, 'one intellectual activity among and related to other activities',<sup>2</sup> which entails a similar questioning of any division of the poet's intellectual labour between, say, 'poetry' and 'research'. Of course Sinclair is himself a researcher-poet; in the course of my account of his relation to neo-modernist poetry in the first part of this introductory chapter, I show that he displays a typically neo-modernist impulse to draw on a range of specialist knowledges.

Two likely reasons for the failure of critical surveys of contemporary writing to so much as recognize the existence of Sinclair's output can be suggested: the fact that his work has not been confined to literary production, and its inaccessibility. Yet it is precisely the inaccessibility of research-based neo-modernist writing such as Sinclair's which draws our attention to the inadequacy of the notion of linguistic accessibility, and the mystificatory falsity of the concept of a common readership, in a society in which linguistic competence is unequally acquired on the

basis of personal wealth. Simon Jarvis noted that ‘calls for all writing to be accessible to all competent readers given a modicum of effort have as their corollary a double exclusion’: of ‘thought and reference which does not fall within the terrain of such average competence’, and of ‘the incompetent reader, apparently self-disqualified before writing judged accessible by appeal to a consensual notion of competence’. He commented that reading J. H. Prynne’s poems is not ‘only a question of reading them off against a competence which has been accumulated in advance’, because Prynne’s ‘readers are asked to become researchers, to take purchase on the whole body of the language and the history and polity sedimented within it, rather than acquiescing in their dispossession in the name of the figment of a common readership’.<sup>3</sup>

In the first part of this chapter I describe the failure of critical overviews of contemporary writing to recognize Sinclair’s work, but I go on to suggest two reasons why we should be wary of overemphasizing the lack of attention paid to Sinclair’s writing by the critical anthologies, one of which is that now a growing number of readers are no longer prepared to acquiesce in their dispossession and are beginning to engage seriously with Sinclair’s writing. I also note that it was their desire to produce work with a social character which led neo-modernists to produce writing which solicits the reader’s participatory intellectual labour: the early neo-modernist poets conceived of the reader as a collaborative producer. I draw attention to the close relation of Sinclair’s early work to his local community in Hackney, and the easy evolution of his work from documentation of his immediate environment to documentation of the broader city. Sinclair’s poetry of the early 1970s is seen to register his estrangement from a capitalist city. I underline his presentation of irrationality in the city, and show how his concern with occultist irrationality enables him to cast light on the irrational rationality of capitalism. Examining Sinclair’s treatment of occultism alongside Theodor Adorno’s ‘Theses against Occultism’, I note how Adorno’s thought on occultism draws on the concept of the fetish-character of the commodity.

The second part of this chapter introduces Adorno’s contention that the artwork’s fetish-character, or its illusory claim to be non-exchangeable, poses a threat to commodity fetishism. I begin this section by showing that whereas Adorno recommended the redemption of the artwork’s fetish-character, in Pierre Bourdieu’s theory the work’s fetish-character becomes an element to be diagnosed but not redeemed. This theoretical discussion enables me to approach Sinclair’s extraordinarily

intimate account of contemporary artistic production. Sinclair, who is seen to at once bolster and refute his writing's illusory claim to be non-exchangeable, has been almost unique among neo-modernist poets in that he has not remained detached from mainstream exchange relations. After suggesting that his work's commercial success is partly due to its thematization of the detachment of writers from mainstream exchange relations, I examine the consecratory function of Sinclair's writing. This leads me to introduce Sinclair's concern with artists' disinterest. After noting that he seeks to develop a model of disinterested production by associating enthusiasm with a compulsion to produce, I discuss his presentation of compulsive artistic production. Finally, I relate Sinclair's presentation of compulsion to some other contemporary London writers' accounts of compulsion. I consider the presentation of compulsive reading in contemporary London fiction and then, before embarking on my immersive readings of Sinclair's major London texts, I briefly compare Sinclair's account of textual immersion with Adorno's.

### Sinclair and Neo-Modernism

First we need to remember that the neo-modernist poetic grouping has become characterized by its members' refusal of collective status; the 'Cambridge school' has come to represent an alliance defined by the principle of nonalliance. Referring to the group centred on the major contributors to *The English Intelligencer*—the poets Andrew Crozier, Prynne and himself—Peter Riley dated the existence of a set "Cambridge" group of poets' to the period 'from about 1966 to 1970'. The subsequent, ongoing 'full scale retreat before the notion of a collective avant-garde' (in Drew Milne's words), found expression in Crozier's introduction to *A Various Art*: 'We have not attempted to provide a polemic apology or manifesto because no claim is advanced here for the existence of anything amounting to a school.' This disavowal of collectivity is frequently echoed; for example, introducing his selection of neo-modernist poets in *The New British Poetry* (1988), Eric Mottram stated that 'they belong to no enclosure of school or movement'.<sup>4</sup>

Milne traced the poets' suspicion of the idea that they belong to a school, and concomitant hesitancy about public pronouncement, to an 'hostility to collective statement'. He contrasted 'the embarrassment with manifestos in *A Various Art*' to the 'collective programme Andrew

Crozier sought with *The English Intelligencer*, in order to underscore 'the defeatism of an avant-garde which has privatised its earlier aspirations'. Yet when 'the reticence of *A Various Art*' is criticized for amounting to 'a tasteful tact and diplomacy about anything more collective than an opposition to existing establishment poetries and a preference for diversity', Milne's critique of the poets' failure to sustain the aspirations to collectivity of the late sixties, leads him to reduce Crozier's elevation of the notion of poetic 'diversity' in the introduction to *A Various Art*—that is, Crozier's valuing of the poets' singularity—to a characteristic of a barely-formed collectivity. Thus this characteristic, his valuing of the poets' individuality, is implicitly devalued. Yet Crozier's remarks about 'the degree of difference that existed between individual poets, and the extent to which each poet had accomplished a characteristic and integral body of work',<sup>5</sup> point to an important feature of Sinclair's writing. Sinclair's is a defiantly—which is to say programmatically—singular authorship, and one of its central programmes is the exhibition of personal idiosyncrasy. The singularity of his authorship aligns it with the singular 'Cambridge school' authorships assembled in *A Various Art*. But Sinclair's is also a singular authorship within the anthology, on account of his peripheral relation to Cambridge writing.

Andrew Duncan's 1992 report 'The Cambridge Leisure Centre: Traits' identified four separate groups of contemporary Cambridge poets, stretching chronologically from 'the 1950s group (*Grosseteste Review*)' to 'the age-group who were students circa 1974–77 (concentrated in *Equofinality*)'. (This division excludes younger poets like Milne and even younger poets such as Keston Sutherland). Duncan also identified a fifth category, consisting of 'completely independent poets, who have published in *Grosseteste Review*, *Ochre*, *Equofinality*, etc', within which he inserted Sinclair, Catling and others: Duncan states that these are '*prima facie* the most important poets to have appeared in those magazines'. Sinclair was an independent poet from the outset. He has gestured towards 'some parallel development with the *Intelligencer* poets: common interest in Olson & Black Mountain, in pre-history'. Yet he has also stated that 'I didn't have any direct contact with the English *Intelligencer* nexus in the '60s. I [...] didn't find out about its existence before it expired'. Riley's recognition that the Cambridge poets represented 'only one of the forces for renovation in English poetry in the late 60s', and that 'there were others just as enthusiastic or forward-looking in their ways, dragging people like Ginsberg over the Atlantic', reminds us of the London context of Sinclair's early work—*The Kodak Mantra*

*Diaries* (1971) and the film *Ah, Sunflower!* (1967) documented Allen Ginsberg's stay in London in the summer of 1967—and hence points to Sinclair's early status as a London writer. In 1976 *Poetry Information* described Sinclair's Albion Village Press as 'one pole of the centrifugal force currently whirling over London—the other being Allen Fisher's writings & publishing'.<sup>6</sup>

Sinclair's peripheral relation to Cambridge poetry did not save his work from the fate of all British neo-modernist poetry: to suffer from a paucity of serious critical response. The relative lack of commentary is partly a result of the activities of anthologists; as late as 1988, Mottram was still compelled to note that 'from Robert Conquest's *New Lines* and G. S. Frazer's *Poetry Now* [1956] [. . .] to Blake Morrison and Andrew Motion's *Penguin Book of Contemporary British Poetry* (1982), an assumed singular authority of a certain narrow range of British poetry has been maintained'. As James Keery has observed, apart from the revised (1985) edition of Edward Lucie-Smith's *British Poetry since 1945* (which accepted Roy Fisher's work), none of the mainstream anthologies of contemporary poetry produced in the eighties—Morrison and Motion's included—featured any of the poets published in *A Various Art*.<sup>7</sup>

The exclusion of neo-modernist writing from the anthologies assisted the critical presentation of this poetry as the production of a microscopic élite sufficiently small and invisible to be safely ignored; Keery quotes Morrison's statements about "the work and teaching of J. H. Prynne, who in Cambridge at least has a considerable reputation", though "there is no clear sign of what his following amounts to". Morrison's remarks appear in an article in *British Poetry since 1970* (1980), a critical collection that, by determinedly focussing on the standard narrow range of British poetry (Thom Gunn, Seamus Heaney, Geoffrey Hill), ensures that the reader remains uninformed about Prynne's, or indeed anybody's, influence on neo-modernist currents. The relative lack of commentary on neo-modernist writing is also evident in the 1991 collection *Contemporary Poetry Meets Modern Theory*, which includes only one study—Geoff Ward's article on Prynne and Paul Celan—of a poet from *A Various Art*. In 1996 only John Matthias's 'The Poetry of Roy Fisher' and Edward Larrissy's introductory survey 'Poets of *A Various Art*' found their way into the fourteen-essay volume *Contemporary British Poetry*.<sup>8</sup>

Critical overviews of contemporary writing have consistently failed to recognize the very existence of Sinclair's work. His name is absent from the index of *British Poetry since 1970*, and the index in *Contemporary British Poetry* once again omits Sinclair's name, though it appears in a footnote

in Matthias's essay. It is also worth noticing that there is no detailed consideration of Sinclair's poetry in what is to date the most useful critical anthology for the student of neo-modernist poetry, *New British Poetries* (1993), and that *An Introduction to Contemporary Fiction* (1999) lacks an article covering Sinclair's fiction.<sup>9</sup>

There are two reasons why we should be wary of overemphasizing the lack of attention paid to Sinclair's writing, and indeed to neo-modernist work in general by the critical anthologies. The first reason is that for some years now a body of critical response to this work has been emerging elsewhere. Though neglected within the critical anthologies of the 1980s and 1990s, neo-modernism clearly found attentive readers throughout that period. In 1993 Milne looked back on the Paladin publishing ventures of the late eighties (when Sinclair was operating as series editor for the Paladin poetry list), so as to identify the origin of a likely future critical turn to neo-modernist writing: 'recent books, notably *A Various Art* and *The New British Poetry* [...] suggest we may be at a historical point where new constituencies and audiences are formed'. The first Cambridge Conference of Contemporary Poetry in 1991, which Peter Barry and Robert Hampson described as 'a fitting culmination' to the 'writing and publishing activity' of the eighties, represented an important stage in the formation of a new audience for neo-modernist writing. Sinclair's reading from *Downriver* prompted Ward's remarks that 'if there is going to be powerful new writing from this quarter, then it would seem to be exemplified by Sinclair, John Wilkinson and Andrew Duncan'. Ward observed that these writers 'share a relish for the confident and politically caustic treatment of social material'; in the fifth issue of *Parataxis* (which has a CCCP logo on its cover) Rachel Potter focussed on this material in an article on *Downriver*.<sup>10</sup>

The publication of *Conductors of Chaos*, a poetry anthology edited by Sinclair, in 1996 represented another important stage in the formation of a new audience for neo-modernist writing. Sinclair's anthology can be viewed as a supplement to *A Various Art*: whilst retaining poets from the earlier volume (Crozier, John James, Douglas Oliver, Prynne, Peter Riley), it introduces significant neo-modernist poets absent from *A Various Art* (Catling, Allen Fisher, Barry MacSweeney, Wilkinson). 1996 also saw the appearance of the first extensive critical work from the new constituency for neo-modernism, Simon Perril's dissertation *Contemporary British Poetry and Modernist Innovation*, which included chapters on Veronica Forrest-Thomson, Oliver, Prynne, Tom Raworth and Sinclair. By 1996 Sinclair's work had indeed become sufficiently well-

recognized to be discussed, along with the work of Peter Ackroyd, Martin Amis and Angela Carter, in a chapter on mainstream London writing in Richard Todd's *Consuming Fictions: The Booker Prize and Fiction in Britain Today*. More interestingly, in *The Word Made Strange* (1997) theologian John Milbank placed Ackroyd and Sinclair within the lineage of antinomian Londoners, amongst 'all those obscure men of Whitechapel and thereabouts, the Muggletonians and members of other forgotten sects and their heir, William Blake'. Since 1996 critical work has also been done on the work of other neo-modernist London poets: Bush's chapters on Allen Fisher and Bill Griffiths in *Out of Dissent* (1997) were followed by Barry's 1999 article comparing the work of Fisher, Sinclair and Aidan Dun. Since 1999, critical accounts of Sinclair's work have multiplied significantly, and full-length studies are expected from both Brian Baker (for Manchester University Press) and Robert Sheppard (for the 'Writers and their Work' series). Jenny Bavidge and I are co-editing the essay anthology *City Visions: The Work of Iain Sinclair*, to be accompanied by a special Sinclair issue of the online *Literary London Journal*.<sup>11</sup>

Now I want to consider a second reason why we should be wary of overemphasizing the lack of attention paid to Sinclair's writing, and to neo-modernist work in general, by the critical anthologies of the 1980s and 1990s. Overemphasizing the critical neglect of neo-modernism can give us a mistaken idea of the type of ghetto occupied by the poets. In her introduction to *Contemporary British Poetry*, Romana Huk invests in a discourse of ghettoization when she discusses the 'newly acknowledged pluralism' that the volume's essays draw attention to. Readers, Huk notes, are beginning to attend to 'literary history's occlusions', which include 'women poets', 'black artists' and 'the neomodernist [...] poets who, as they claim, were edited out of British literary history until the 1980s'.<sup>12</sup> It is precisely by drawing attention to the editing-out of neo-modernism that Huk constructs neo-modernist writing as simply another ghetto, equivalent to the ghettos of black or women's writing. Hence precisely Huk's emphasis on the critical neglect of neo-modernism, leads her to fail to register that the neo-modernist poets, almost all of whom are middle-class white males, have occupied a very different type of ghetto to those occupied by black or women poets.

Huk's positive valuation of the plurality represented by her discrete poetic groupings itself marks the advance in critical response to previously-neglected areas of contemporary writing that has occurred over the past two decades. In 1980, for Peter Jones and Michael Schmidt in their introduction to *British Poetry since 1970*, pluralism was still some-

thing of a dirty word, acceptable only if inserted in speech marks or qualified by the adjective ‘discriminating’: ‘Perhaps “seventies” will come to mean “pluralistic”, a positive diversity by contrast with the negative disorientation of the decade before. Judging from the *spirantia exta* of the 1980s, the omens are not good for the survival of this discriminating pluralism.’ Jones and Schmidt’s objection to the pluralism of 1960s poetry was specifically an objection to the proliferation of poetic possibilities that took place, or that was launched during that decade: ‘The 1960s were spoiled by excess of opportunities and choices and by the paucity of generously stringent critics.’ The concern to make use of a wide range of poetic possibilities is a central concern of neo-modernist writing. The poets included in *A Various Art*—most of whom, as Crozier noted in the introduction, began to publish in the 1960s—aimed to break free from the narrow range of possibilities approved by the stringently ungenerous poets and critics of the 1950s. Crozier pointed to one poetic possibility liberated by the neo-modernists, when he emphasized that ‘the poets who altered taste in the 1950s did so by means of a common rhetoric that foreclosed the possibilities of poetic language within its own devices’.<sup>13</sup> Neo-modernist poets maintained that the possibilities of poetic language were not to be restricted to those possibilities that draw on the devices of specifically *poetic* language. One possibility for poetic language—a possibility carried through in Prynne’s early poetry, for instance—is that it can draw on the discursive mode of prose.

I want to underline two ways in which Sinclair has displayed a neo-modernist’s concern to make use of a wide range of ‘possibilities’. The first notable possibility that Sinclair has taken up with, the possibility that literary prose can draw on qualities of sub-literary prose, derives from his engagement with neglected London writing. In *Lights Out for the Territory* (1997) he wrote of ‘the rich midden of London’s sub-cultural fiction, terse proletarian narratives of lives on the criminous margin’. He continues to list his own sizeable holding of such narratives in his bookdealing catalogues. A 1993 *LRB* article refers to some of the authors of this ‘underground literature’ or ‘ghetto fiction’: ‘Gerald Kersh, James Curtis, Mark Benney, Robert Westerby, Alexander Baron, John Lodwick, Jack Trevor Story’. Though some of this writing that has been ‘struck from the canon’, such as Curtis’s crime novel *They Drive by Night* (1938), falls neatly into the category of genre fiction, not all of these decanonised authorships can be dismissed as disposable ‘industrial fiction’: later in this chapter we will examine the work of two practitioners of what

Sinclair has termed 'the London proletarian novel', Baron and Emanuel Litvinoff.<sup>14</sup>

The neo-modernist belief that the possibilities of poetic language are not to be restricted to those possibilities that draw on the devices of poetic language, finds an analogue in Sinclair's belief that the possibilities of literary prose are not to be restricted to those possibilities that draw on the devices of literary prose. Sinclair's writing shows that one possibility for literary prose is that it can draw on qualities of sub-literary prose. Sinclair gestured towards the particular quality of sub-literary prose that has had the greatest influence on his own style, when he wrote of Tony Lambrianou's gangland memoir *Inside the Firm* (1992) that it 'persuades because it has all the qualities of good genre fiction. It is brisk, sharp-eyed, dramatic—and it guides outsiders through a previously prohibited landscape.' Here Sinclair's use of the hyphen emulates the dramatically brisk quality of genre fiction, and illustrates how his own 'contracted and improvisational prose' (as Patrick Wright has described it) draws on the speed of 'terse proletarian narratives'. Sinclair's interest in the prose quality of speed or terseness lies behind his advocacy of the more literary London writing of Louis-Ferdinand Céline. Sinclair has stated that 'there are no London novels I relish more than *Guignol's Band* (1954) [ . . . ] and *London Bridge* [1995]', and Sinclair's enthusiasm for Céline's use of ellipses, which contributes to the staccato, accelerated quality of his London writing, is communicated in *Asylum* (2000), a film co-written by Sinclair, when Chris Petit narrates how he had 'sleepwalked through the American night in pursuit of my lifelong quest for the visual equivalent of L.-F. Céline's three dots'.<sup>15</sup>

Neo-modernist poets originally took up with the second possibility that I want to draw attention to, the strategy of self-publication, in imitation of the self-publishing practice of certain American writers. Before we consider Sinclair's practice of self-publication, however, we need to note another important aspect of the neo-modernists' inheritance from American modernist poetry. I want to suggest that William Carlos Williams's conviction that 'the poem is a social instrument' was one of the key determining influences on the neo-modernists' attempt to produce work with a social character.

The neo-modernist poets' relation to certain currents of American writing has frequently been identified, and on at least one occasion to the detriment of the poets themselves. Introducing the selection of neo-modernists in *The New British Poetry*, all but two of whom, as he notes, appeared in *Poetry Review* between 1971 and 1977, Mottram reminds us

that ‘in the late 1970s the Arts Council directly dissolved the editorial board of Poetry Review, incensed by our inclusion of “foreign poets”, particularly Americans. This was seen as a treacherous assault on British poetry.’ Peter Brooker noted the two currents of American poetry that most influenced British neo-modernism when he wrote, in connection with Raworth’s work, that ‘Black Mountain poetics, centrally Charles Olson’s essay “Projective Verse” (1950) and with it a counter-hegemonic reading of Ezra Pound and a preference for W. C. Williams over Eliot’, could provide ‘a strong alternative tradition to Eliotic modernism and to Movement poetry for a younger English poet’.<sup>16</sup>

Sinclair discussed his own early involvement with Black Mountain writing in the interview published in *The Edge*, when asked about ‘the early influences on your approach to the subject of London and its myths’:

My early influences were American Beat writers—and I thought the prose writing of poets associated with Black Mountain College in America was very fine: I’m talking about people like Ed Dorn and Robert Creeley. I didn’t see any writing in England that was remotely like that—it didn’t have the same consciousness, use of detail, flow or intelligence that I saw in American writing.

In the next chapter I address Sinclair’s relation to Olson’s interest in unifying poetic form, and later we will also note the presence of Dorn—who is shown in conversation with Sinclair in *Asylum*—in Sinclair’s writing. The neo-modernists’ concern to perpetuate the poetic trajectory stemming from the work of Pound and Williams, or what Crozier called their ‘interest in a particular aspect of post-war American poetry, and the tradition that lay behind it—not that of Pound and Eliot but that of Pound and Williams’, is most clearly identifiable in Sinclair’s case from his early interest in Ginsberg. As Lucie-Smith noted, in an interview with Sinclair cited in *The Kodak Mantra Diaries*, ‘Ginsberg’s relationship to Carlos Williams puts him in the direct line of modernist descent.’ In a brief discussion of Williams’s *Paterson* (1946–58) which is recorded in Sinclair’s book, Ginsberg suggested that Williams and the Black Mountain poets, or Olson at any rate, shared a conception of the extended poem as an apprehension of a social formation—specifically, of a city. Ginsberg’s underlining of the urban nature of Williams’s and Olson’s projects may well have contributed to the gestation of Sinclair’s own ‘London Project’.

[Williams] took *Paterson* as the subject matter of a man/city microcosm/macrocosm free-association poem collage because that was the nearest large social unit.

Olson is doing the same thing for Gloucester with the *Maximus Poems* & Louis Zukofsky in his long poem *A* for the city of his own consciousness.<sup>17</sup>

Williams's derivation of his subject matter from 'the nearest large social unit' was in keeping with his conviction that poetry has an essentially social character. He expressed this view in an April 1950 letter to Henry Wells:

The poem to me (until I go broke) is an attempt, an experiment, a failing experiment, toward assertion with broken means but an assertion always, of a new and total culture, the lifting of an environment to expression. Thus it is social, the poem is a social instrument—accepted or not accepted seems to be of no material importance. It embraces everything we are.

I want to suggest that Williams's conviction that 'the poem is a social instrument' was one of the key determinants of the neo-modernists' attempt to produce work with a social character. Williams's letter to Wells was strikingly echoed by Prynne's letter to *The English Intelligencer* of 14 March 1968. Just as for Williams the poem was social, for Prynne here 'rhyme is the public truth of language'. Prynne conceives of language, just as Williams had conceived of the poem, as an all-embracing civic atmosphere:

Rhyme is the public truth of language, sound paced out in the shared places, the echoes are no-one's private property or achievement; thus any grace (truly achieved) of sound is political, part of the world of motion and place in which language is like weather, the air we breathe.<sup>18</sup>

Prynne's remarks illustrate the neo-modernists' conviction that poetry has an essentially social character. It was their ambition to produce work with a social character which led the most interesting neo-modernists to produce writing which actively solicits the reader's participatory intellectual labour. Perril pointed to the fact that reading the most important neo-modernist writing involves familiarizing oneself with a broad array of intellectual specialisms, when he noted 'the irony' that 'this microcosmic element of poetic activity [*The English Intelligencer*] undertook a massive extension of the scope for poetry', by 'bringing it into contact with a whole range of specialist discourses (pre-history,

human geography, geochronology, economics) the ramifications of which are only now starting to be recognised and assessed'.<sup>19</sup> Perril's 'irony' pairs the ghettoization of neo-modernists such as Prynne with their impulse to flit freely between the cognitive ghettos delimited by the social division of intellectual labour.

The neo-modernist impulse to draw on a range of specialist discourses or knowledges was articulated by Riley at the beginning of the second series of *The English Intelligencer*, when he laid down the formula 'the poem: Physiological Presence + Cosmological Range'. Sinclair's writing displays both elements of Riley's equation; perhaps most notably on account of the writing's visceral quality, the reader of Sinclair's work has a strong sense of physiological presence, and Sinclair's involvement with diverse areas of pre-history, anthropology and myth attests to his impulse to draw on a 'cosmological range' of specialist knowledges. Perril saw that the neo-modernists' impulse to draw on a range of specialist knowledges was related to their ambition to produce work with a social character; he described the 'vast project' initiated within *The English Intelligencer* as 'a conscious determination to push poetry into a scope so extensive that it could only be maintained as a communal venture, no individual poet or poem being able to produce a definitive finality'. The social character of such neo-modernist writing which actively solicits the reader's participatory labour was also referred to by Allen Fisher's definition of civic address in his 1988 review of *A Various Art*, 'Towards Civic Production': 'an address that operates through the co-operation of the poet's aesthetic labour and the reader's production'.<sup>20</sup>

Milne remarked on how, as a 'bold and adventurous attempt to organise and develop a new collective poetics, based on the model of the San Francisco worksheet *Open Space*', *The English Intelligencer* involved a 'transformation of the mode of publishing and notion of audience': 'the sheets were "circulated" among interested parties, seen as active participants, rather than "printed".' This particular form of self-publication was adopted in order to encourage readers to think of the worksheet as work-in-progress with which they were themselves actively involved. Its grounding conception of the reader as a collaborative producer ensures that *The English Intelligencer* remains, as Milne put it, 'a marker for what might be seen as contemporary in the context of contemporary poetry': readers of the worksheet were able to shuffle together appropriate extracts and so produce a new text, in much the same way that a present-day user of the Electronic Poetry Center at SUNY-Buffalo can print

out selected web-pages. Crozier pointed to the fact that self-publication always was the crucial element in the formation of an audience for neo-modernist work, when he noted that in the 1960s 'American examples provided lessons in the organisation and conduct of a poet's public life, indicating how poets might take matters of publication and the definition of a readership into their own hands by establishing their own publishing houses and journals'.<sup>21</sup>

Sinclair has noted that the audience for the screenings of the communal video diaries that he was involved with in Haggerston from 1969 to 1976 fulfilled the neo-modernist ambition for an audience of collaborators: 'this is a form of chamber cinema, watched by those who compose it'. His remark, made in a 1997 interview for *Vertigo*, that 'we were just doing like we're doing now' emphasized that such screenings represented a form of cinematic self-publication that Sinclair has remained keen to pursue; *The Slaughterhouse Tapes*, which consisted of out-takes from *The Falconer* (1998), were shown in Smithfield in January 1997 during the launch party for *Lights Out for the Territory*. As Sinclair remarked in that text, his early experiments in chamber cinema were conducted in parallel with literary self-publication: 'Books could be produced when we were ready to produce them, on a small scale, allowed to find their natural audience (about four hundred readers at peak)'.<sup>22</sup>

Both the name of Sinclair's first press—Albion Village Press—and the title of the first collection of his that it published, *Back Garden Poems* (1970), signalled the close relation of his early work to the commune or community living in and around Albion Drive and Albion Square in Haggerston from the late 1960s through into the 1970s. Prynne's title *Kitchen Poems* had presented his 1968 volume as the product of indoor contemplation or as a record of interior life; the name *Back Garden Poems* announces Sinclair's ambition to record life outdoors and so document his immediate community. He recognized that it was an emphatically local community that he was documenting, and not the city: 'we are all out of it here, out of all of it, in the penumbra of the city, not part of its life and business'. *Back Garden Poems* records how one filming session focussed in on the 'stygian ant civilizations' discovered beneath some concrete paving, and so reveals just how desperately local the group's documentary activity could be. Yet in this documentation of local insect life we can see the origin of Sinclair's documentation of the submerged intellectual life and stygian irrationality of the city. He has noted in interview that there were 'elements' of 'themes' relating to the history

of East London 'in all the [...] little poetry books I'd published here in London' prior to *Lud Heat*; for example, Catling's drawings in Sinclair's *Muscat's Würm* (1972) are attributed to 'William Gull',<sup>23</sup> after Sir William Withey Gull, a figure caught up in the Jack the Ripper case. The easy evolution of Sinclair's work from documentation of his immediate environment to documentation of the wider city is also indicated by the presence of such themes in his writing of the early 1970s.

Sinclair's developing documentation of the wider city involved the notation of his estrangement from that city. 'Geared Scroll', a poem in *Muscat's Würm*, presents us with Muscat.

Muscat, an alien consciousness  
 an unoccupied room in a forgotten street  
 a watcher a reporter  
 with a dud radio, out of contact  
 with the home planet  
 that has dissolved from his memory

These lines anticipate Sinclair's later description of himself as being 'in permanent exile. I'm a spy, a kind of virus that's been working away quietly for years.' Sinclair claimed exilic status on account of his 'Welsh/Scottish' identity. In 'Geared Scroll' the exilic condition of Londoners derives from their detachment from 'tribal blood memory'. This detachment is linked with an entry into the 'machine habits' of capitalism, which habits are seen to foster irrationality:

the rest left to city dwellers  
 pulled out of the skin of tribal blood memory  
 into machine habits  
 minds exhausted into madness

It becomes clear that it was an estrangement from a specifically capitalist city that Sinclair was registering in his poetry of the early 1970s. Alien consciousness Muscat resembles 'The Invader', a 'hillsman short of patience', in *The Birth Rug* (1973). This hillsman, like the city-dwellers of *Muscat's Würm*, is rapidly losing his 'tribal blood memory'; he carries 'a soft pack/ of leaking consciousness'. But like Muscat he is estranged from his fellow citizens, 'these strangers,/ the traders with their pouches & quick tongues.'<sup>24</sup>

Sinclair's developing thinking about the capitalist city can be compared with Prynne's treatment of the capitalist city in 'A Note on

Metal' (1968). There are explicit references to Prynne's work in Sinclair's early poetry: Muscat 'liked reading/ Mr Prynne, of a morning', and *The Birth Rug* opens with a quotation from *The White Stones* (1969). In 'A Note on Metal', Prynne saw the effects of the 'innovations of metallurgy' to have been urbanization and the development of a 'politics' of capital or 'wealth': 'The Sumerian settlement was founded on the innovations of metallurgy, and these abstractions of substance were in turn the basis for a politics of *wealth*'. Later, at the end of his essay, Prynne suggested that the formation of capitalist self-interest is to be ascribed to 'a critical overbalance of intent', which was reached only at the culmination-point of 'the increasing speed of displacement' or the course of abstraction. Prynne's eighth footnote identifies the 'critical overbalance of intent' with 'urban totalitarianism', and refers us to Marxist historian V. Gordon Childe's 1957 article 'The Bronze Age', in which we find this statement:

The beginning of the Bronze Age in Egypt and Mesopotamia [sic] coincided with a social revolution—the 'Urban Revolution', I call it—the establishment of totalitarian regimes under which a surplus was systematically extracted from the peasant masses and gathered into centralized royal or temple granaries.

In adopting the idea of urban totalitarianism, Prynne in fact inverted Childe's argument. Childe stated that the evolution of metallurgy had rested on the existence of the urban regimes—'it may be granted that such totalitarian economies were essential to get a metallurgical industry started'<sup>25</sup>—yet in 'A Note on Metal', urban totalitarianism or the 'critical overbalance of intent', rests on displacement, or on the course of an abstraction of value that Prynne had identified with the innovations of metallurgy.

Prynne's identification of the condition of critical overbalance of capitalist intent with the phenomenon of an urban totalitarianism, or with an accumulative mode of urban life grounded (for Childe) in surplus production, foreshadows Sinclair's account of the capitalist city as a 'fattening & over-informed vortex of centre', in 'Intimate Associations: Myth & Place'. This is the opening essay in *Suicide Bridge*, which Sinclair composed between Autumn 1973 and Spring 1978.

He ['the traveller'] has escaped the fattening & over-informed vortex of centre where the city dweller, unravelled by centrifugal motions, has fallen victim to a weight, an ever-increasing density of myth, a black hole

shrinking as it enlarges, cancerous, in terms of mere landscape. The city swivels on its axis, the sky is buried alive, buildings grow into the clouds, we carry the pains of architectural ambition on our shoulders.

Sinclair sees the city shrinking as it enlarges: he matches its territorial expansion with a 'vortex' of compaction or 'weight' of accumulation—the buildings, rather like Childe's granaries, grow into the clouds and weigh in on the earth and sky alike. In *The Kodak Mantra Diaries* Sinclair had already aligned such a centripetal force of compaction with the city's economic life; here the 'negative dynamic' preventing 'a move to the country' is the 'money spiral', 'the whole weight of money/fear'. The view that London is being compacted or enclosed by a capitalist logic, or that it is 'shrinking as it enlarges', is of course not an unusual one; in 'Towards Civic Production' Fisher too remarked, in connection with the 'call directed against the metropolis (in, for instance, both Tim Longville and Ralph Hawkins' [sic] works) to keep away', that 'it has been clear for some time that the ecumenopolic wen of London that has been engulfing all else in its environment is itself being engulfed by the IMF and its global entourage'.<sup>26</sup>

The originality of Sinclair's account of London derives from his emphasis on the irrational quality of the city's capitalist activity. His preoccupation in 'Intimate Associations: Myth & Place' with 'a weight, an ever-increasing density of myth' that bears down on the contemporary city-dweller, attests to his recognition of the compaction of capitalist irrationality, or 'myth', within the city. Sinclair's presentation of irrationality in the capitalist city can be illuminated by an important conceptualization of urban irrationality offered by Adorno, in the fragment of *Minima Moralia* (1974) titled 'Mammoth'. Adorno is arguing that nature is not 'conserved', but instead dominated and denatured, in the city zoos that he regards as cultural products of administrative rationality:

Only in the irrationality of civilization itself, in the nooks and crannies of the cities, to which the walls, towers and bastions of the zoos wedged among them are merely an addition, can nature be conserved. The rationalization of culture, in opening its doors to nature, thereby completely absorbs it, and eliminates with difference the principle of culture, the possibility of reconciliation.

Sinclair's work is distinguished by its focus on the 'nooks and crannies' of urban life, or the hidden aspects of urban experience. Sinclair's inter-

est in occultism, for instance, indicates his concern with the irrationality that is buried away in the nooks and crannies. In the 'Theses against Occultism', Adorno held the liminal irrationality of occultism, or these 'asocial twilight phenomena in the margins of the system', to 'illuminate all the more clearly' the irrationality of the capitalist system itself, or 'the forces of decay within'. In *Lights Out for the Territory*, Sinclair similarly saw Dark and Light (a Dalston 'voodoo boutique') as a 'focusing device' for social irrationality:

I can never make my mind up—is this tellingly sited shop promoting the craziness, the babble, that has spilled over on to the walls? Or is it simply a focusing device, a shelter for all the unhoused definitions of the weird that stalk the streets of the borough?

His concern with occultist irrationality enables him to cast light on the irrational rationality of capitalism, when in *White Chappell: Scarlet Tracings* the entire City is viewed as a cranny distilling occult signifiers: 'the most darkly encoded enclosure in the western world'.<sup>27</sup>

Adorno saw the contemporary investment in occultist irrationality to be an aspect of our forced adaptation to the irrationality of capitalist rationality. 'By its regression to magic under late capitalism, thought is assimilated to late capitalist forms.' Occultist irrationality teaches us about *late* capitalist irrationality, because in the emergence of occultism as a re-birth or extension of earlier irrational thought—Adorno calls occultism 'a second mythology' or 'reborn animism'—we can see reflected the emergence of new forms of capitalist irrationality as a development of prior forms of capitalist irrationality. Indeed for Adorno, occultism itself provides the arena within which we can witness the extension of one instrument of capitalist mystification, the fetish-character, to labour:

The occultist draws the ultimate conclusion from the fetish-character of commodities: menacingly objectified labour assails him on all sides from demonically grimacing objects. What has been forgotten in a world congealed into products, the fact that it has been produced by men, is split off and misremembered as a being-in-itself added to that of the objects and equivalent to them.

Adorno considered the occultist's icon to be varnished with two fetish-layers; the fetish-character of the commodity, and the fetish-character of the labour—the 'forgotten' production—that made the object.

Occultism comes to mark the supplementation of commodity fetishism with a labour fetishism that, manifest in a new fetish-layer, is itself visible in the commodity. It is the fetishization of labour visible in the object that lends the occultist's toy its sinister aspect. The objects on display at Dark and Light are seen to be less menacing; Sinclair compares them to gnomes rather than demons. He discerns in them only the fetish-character of the commodity. The sacred aura of Vatican icons clings to these toys: 'the window facing Dalston Junction suggests something between a clearance of surplus Vatican stock and the gnome reservation of a downmarket garden centre'.<sup>28</sup>

Of course Marx's theory of commodity fetishism is not only present at the core of Adorno's thinking about occultism. It has, as Gillian Rose noted, 'become central to the neo-Marxist theory of domination, aesthetics, and ideology'.<sup>29</sup> It is to Adorno's aesthetic theory that we will turn now, at the opening of the second part of this chapter.

### Adorno and Bourdieu

Adorno devoted a great deal of attention to advanced contemporary art. This response to contemporary art contributed centrally to his project of philosophical aesthetics. For example, in *Aesthetic Theory* (1997) his preoccupation with the inaccessibility or hermeneutic difficulty of modernist artworks, enabled him to expose the ideological nature of claims for the accessibility of art: 'The much derided incomprehensibility of hermetic artworks amounts to the admission of the enigmaticalness of all art. Part of the rage against hermetic works is that they also shatter the comprehensibility of traditional works.' Adorno is keen to assert the incomprehensibility of all art, because he sees the artwork's incomprehensibility as strengthening the work's illusory claim to be valuable not merely as a for-another but also as something in itself. It is in defence of its illusory claim to be valuable as something in itself, or of its fetish-character, that a work refuses immediate access to its readers. Precisely as an illusory in-itself, an inaccessible contemporary text such as *Lud Heat* can be seen to stand as criticism of our ongoing conversion of everything to a for-another, or of our progress towards a society in which the only form of value—of objects and humans alike—is exchange-value:

By crystallizing in itself as something unique to itself, rather than complying with existing social norms and qualifying as 'socially useful,' it [art] criticizes society by merely existing, for which puritans of all

stripes condemn it. There is nothing pure, nothing structured strictly according to its own immanent law, that does not implicitly criticize the debasement of a situation evolving in the direction of a total exchange society in which everything is heteronomously defined.<sup>30</sup>

Having identified the artwork's fetish-character to rebuke our evolution of a 'total exchange society', Adorno argued in *Aesthetic Theory* that the work's fetish-character poses a threat to commodity fetishism: 'a fetishistic element remains admixed in artworks, an element that goes beyond commodity fetishism'. Adorno recognized that it was the commodification of culture that originally granted the artwork its freedom from serving an immediate (ritual or political) function, and so its fetish-character; 'the emancipation of art was possible only through the appropriation of the commodity character, through which art gained the semblance of its being-in-itself'. He also recognized that 'even the absolute commodity remains salable'. The artwork, which represents an 'absolute commodity' on account of its being even more fetishized than the fetishized commodity, or an image of that which would be fetishized to the point of non-exchangeability, is seen to be in exchange. But for Adorno the artwork's fetish-character is to be valued nonetheless. The work's fetishistic element still 'goes beyond' commodity fetishism. As an ultra-fetishized absolute commodity, or 'a social product that has rejected every semblance of existing for society', the artwork is at least 'free of the ideology inherent in the commodity form, which pretends to exist for-another, whereas ironically it is something merely for-itself'. The artwork's fetish-character, or the artwork's illusory claim to be non-exchangeable, bears out Adorno's argument that the work's ideological content is inseparable from its truth content. 'In art, ideology and truth cannot be neatly distinguished from each other.' Art's fetish-character is ideology, 'the semblance of its being-in-itself', yet for Adorno 'even in artworks that are to their very core ideological, truth content can assert itself. Ideology, socially necessary semblance, is by this same necessity also the distorted image of the true.' This is why he asserted that 'the truth content of artworks [...] is predicated on their fetish character'.<sup>31</sup>

Adorno's contention that 'in the context of total semblance, art's semblance of being-in-itself is the mask of truth', led him to advocate the redemption or 'rescue' of art's fetish-character.

The separation of what is true in itself from the merely adequate expression of false consciousness is not to be maintained, for correct consciousness has not existed to this day, and no consciousness has the lofty