

# Table of Contents

test . . . . .	1
Unmasking the Zapatistas . . . . .	1
Reader Flattery â Iain Sinclair and the Colonisation of East London . . . . .	4



# test

I am testing.

## Unmasking the Zapatistas

By Melancholic Troglodytes

No other group has had such a catalysing influence on the new political forms and tactics espoused by the anti-globalisation movement, yet there has been too little critical analysis of the Zapatistas' politics and the relationship of western activists to their guerilla icons. Melancholic Troglodytes review Mihalis Mentinis' book *Zapatistas: The Chiapas Revolt and What It Means for Radical Politics* and discovers some ugly nationalist features behind the mask

This [Marcos] is grown from man to dragon.  
He has wings, he's more than a creeping thing.  
– *Coriolanus*, V.4, William Shakespeare

Despite its hackneyed front cover, Mentinis' *Zapatistas* proves to be a gem of a book. In our view, it represents the most original analysis of the Chiapas revolt currently available in the English language. Furthermore, it may even have wider implications for radical politics beyond the confines of the Zapatistas.

It begins sedately enough. Chapter 1 is a non-descript summary of the Zapatista chronology. It goes through various splits and mergers, acronyms and myth-forging experiences that constitute the story of the Zapatistas thus far. Mentinis shows how 'the EZLN [Zapatista Army for National Liberation] inherited and maintained a militaristic logic, at least until the early months of 1994' (Mentinis, 2006, p.7). In this phase Zapatista declarations still had the authoritarian whiff of all previous Latin American guerilla groups, although already tinged with Marcos' malicious sense of humour ('We have taken Ocosingo. We apologise for any inconvenience but this is a revolution' – Marcos, 1 January 1994).

The Zapatistas have proved themselves smarter and more durable than the one-dimensional Che Guevara. They were realistic enough to acknowledge they were no match for the encircling Mexican army and flexible enough to alter strategy. They have tried hard to prevent the militarisation of the struggle, not so much as a matter of principle but as a matter of survival (ibid, p.12). By 1995, having found their magic lamp, they pleaded with the genie of 'civil society' to form a movement of national liberation. This was their first wish and the wish was partially granted in the national consultations they had with a million Mexicans. But the success was only partial and soon the Zapatistas found themselves isolated again. Their second wish was for a wider consultation with 'international civil society' about indigenous rights and other related issues. This took place on a number of occasions and succeeded in temporarily widening their portfolio abroad. Finally, the Zapatistas asked the genie to bring them closer to student and working class Mexicans whose struggles seemed pregnant with possibilities. All three wishes exhausted, the Zapatistas were left alone again to rue their marginalisation. Soon they entered a period of 'prolonged silence' which they have broken only recently.

Having set the scene Mentinis introduces the reader in chapter two to four leading perspectives on the Zapatista insurrection, namely, the Gramscian approach; the discourse of Laclau and Mouffe; academic Autonomist Marxism; and, most interesting to us, the non-academic 'Radical Left'.

Mentinis explains how concepts from Gramsci, such as his critique of 'civil society', 'passive revolution', 'the subaltern' and 'war of manoeuvres' can clarify certain aspects of Zapatista practice. He is even gracious enough to squander a few pages on the comedy double-act that is Laclau and Mouffe. Melancholic Troglodytes do not reject discourse analysis as such. We merely point out that Laclau and Mouffe's version represents the least radical and the most compromised wing of this tendency. Considering the sheer imbecility of these two jokers, with their kindergarten rejection of class struggle, their toe-curling desire to bring bourgeois 'liberty' and 'equality' to all, and their missionary zeal to reform democracy, it would have been advisable not to sully a perfectly decent book with their intellectual flotsam.

With academic Autonomist Marxists, Mentinis enters a more fruitful analytical terrain. Here he discusses John Holloway's ideas about 'dignity', 'alienation' and 'fetishisation' as related to the Zapatistas. He also uses Lorenzano to contextualise the Zapatistas globally. Accordingly, 'the Zapatista experience ... [is perceived as] ... an indivisible part of the global recomposition of labour' (ibid, p.45). Some of these concepts prove illuminating whilst others feel cumbersome and poorly articulated.

Having gleaned what is useful from Gramscian, post-Gramscian and academic Autonomist Marxism, he then discusses the contributions of groups such as Aufheben and Wildcat. Here things get really interesting. He takes on board their more telling critique of the Zapatistas but furnishes us with a few choice counter-punches of his own. Mentinis rightly points out that these critiques, having been forged at a distance, do not sufficiently investigate the inner workings of the indigenous communities. Furthermore, they pay scant attention to 'subjectivity', especially the 'revolutionary subjectivity' formed after 1994.

The book comes into its own with chapters 3 and 4. In chapter 3 Mentinis offers a fusion of Antonio Negri and Cornelius Castoriadis. Concepts that should be familiar to fans of these two writers, ranging from project of autonomy, to constituent power and the social imaginary are invoked in order to open a space for 'an interrogation without limits' (ibid, p.68). The Zapatista rebellion is described as a 'constituent power', i.e., a materialisation of autonomy through democratic practice. This constituent power is supposed to promote strength (*potenza*) whilst destroying power (*potere*). Ironically Negri and Castoriadis themselves are not subjected to any critical interrogation. 'Democracy', for instance, is taken at face value and conceptual similarities between Negri and Castoriadis are treated as a cosmic conjunction. Towards the end of this chapter, the Zapatistas are contextualised within Negri's notion of Empire. Does this aid comprehension? We think not. For Melancholic Troglodytes who have previously denounced Negri's *Empire* as 'anti-working class toilet paper' and find a great deal in Castoriadis objectionable, Mentinis' approach smacks of irresponsible largesse. Nevertheless, we do not wish to be too dismissive of this section of the book since some (but only some) clarification of the Zapatistas is achieved through recourse to Negri and Castoriadis.

[IMAGE]

Chapter 4 provides us with a rather more successful synthesis, this time between Badiou's concept of the event and Debord's notion of constructed situations. Mentinis concedes that the Zapatistas do not constitute a fully-fledged event because 'from the beginning the rebellion seemed to lack the power to bring about a real rupture with capitalism' (ibid, p 100). However, through their discourse (a mixture of urban postmodernism and shamanistic pre-modernism) and the unfixing of the social imaginary,

the Zapatistas have encouraged the rest of the anti-capitalist movement to construct situations ‘which provide the terrain for new behaviours to emerge’ (ibid, p 107). So the Zapatistas possess attributes of both the event and the constructed situation. They are in Mentinis’ words an ‘evental situation preparing the terrain for a future event’ (ibid, p.115).

Since Mentinis is aware that all this may seem a tad airy-fairy he uses chapter 5 to nail his colours to the mast. Here he has to contend with questions regarding the evolving nature of the Zapatistas. Are they revolutionaries or reformists? Do they stand for nationalism or internationalism? What exactly is their relationship to the Mexican state? How do they relate to the working class? Most of the answers seem convincing to us. Mentinis demonstrates how the Zapatistas have at times silenced and isolated ‘the most radical voices associated with the most impoverished sectors’ of society (ibid, p.119). He also shows how NGO support and financial aid from bourgeois ‘sympathisers’ have affected autonomous decision-making (ibid, p.120). In practice only liberal and social democratic voices within the working class are foregrounded by the Zapatistas (ibid, p.121). Marcos’ resurrection of the concept of patria (inadequately translated as ‘homeland’) comes in for special scrutiny (ibid, pp.123-132). Mentinis also claims that over time the ‘anarcho-utopian elements have disappeared completely and have been replaced by reformist demands’ (ibid, p.134). Finally, he draws attention to how assemblies in Chiapas are ‘dominated by and often exclusively composed of men’ (ibid, p.143).

At first glance chapter 6 seem an oddity. It does not quite fit in with the structure of the book and yet in many ways it is the most intriguing section of the entire work. This is where Mentinis earns his keep as an amateur anthropologist by offering us a nuanced interpretation of the Zapatista mask. It discusses the indigenous metaphysics and the role of the shaman in both facilitating contact with the invisible world as well as spearheading previous revolts in Chiapas (ibid, p.164). It relates the interaction of this premodern shamanistic language of animal spirits with the postmodern discourse of Marcos and urban intellectuals. It even claims that some indigenous in Chiapas see Marcos as a god (ibid, p.166).

Mentinis forcefully argues that the primary function of the mask is not as a security measure. True, in some cases it affords protection from the authorities but most often the mask helps the Zapatistas ‘transcend the limits of the individual self and [become] a revolutionary unity’ (ibid, p.171). Only then do they feel strong enough to challenge both the state and the reactionary tendencies within their own ‘communities’. This is a fascinating point worthy of serious attention. It would also have been interesting to investigate if there are any functional or cultural connections between masks worn by Mexican wrestlers and masks worn by the Zapatistas.

For far too long interpretations of the Zapatistas have been monopolised by reactionary Engels-Leninist and Anarchist cheerleaders. Sad, pathetic, impotent, creatures too weak and dim to take on capitalism, preferring instead to idolise a far-off mystical Che in an exotic land. Mentinis has provided a valuable service in denting this monopoly and opening an alternative vista for radicals. His criticisms of the academic racket supporting the Zapatistas are timely. We are even prepared to concede that his censure of revolutionary groups such as Aufheben and Wildcat is (mostly) fair. Although he has greatly enhanced Melancholic Troglodytes’ understanding of the Zapatista, we are still not convinced that the Zapatistas ever deserved the designation revolutionary.

The problem with Mentinis’ unconditional but critical support for the Zapatistas is that:

... even when one has acquainted oneself thoroughly with life as lived by the people of Chiapas instead of the usual distant armchair critiques available for a nickel and dime;

... even when one has made allowances for cultural nuances and linguistic ambiguities that have hampered previous analyses;

... even when one has followed the political meanderings of the Zapatistas over a long enough timeframe instead of the snapshot, check-list approach favoured by lazy 'radicals';

... even when one has acknowledged the genuine differences between this and previous uprisings in Latin America;

... and even when one has bent over backwards to see the good and excuse the bad;

... there still remains vast areas of completely unforgivable reactionary codswallop that make any genuine revolutionary, anywhere in the world, uneasy at the prospect of joint actions or unconditional solidarity with the Zapatistas.

But then Mihalís Mentínis is a smart cookie who implicitly acknowledges all this, although he does so without making a clean break. Predictably the book ends with a half-hearted Parthian shot aimed at Marcos:

Unlike Marcos, however, who also confessed that 'among the human race, he has a special affection for the Mexican race' ... we have affection for no particular nation or race. Our struggle is for a nationless and raceless socialism, and we are armed with a desire for revolution.' (ibid, p.187)

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*Zapatistas: The Chiapas Revolt and What It Means for Radical Politics*, Mihalís Mentínis, Pluto Press (2006)

## **Reader Flattery â Iain Sinclair and the Colonisation of East London**

By John Barker

Iain Sinclair is familiar as a psychogeographic chronicler of London's East End in transition from Dickensian darkness to socially cleansed sterility. But is he an enemy of the urban enclosures or a literary estate agent, a seer or a voyeur? John Barker offers a stylistic analysis and some embedded psychogeographic reportage of his own

The colonisation of East London by the rich and their functionaries had begun well before the appearance of Iain Sinclair's fictions *White Chappell*, *Scarlet Tracings* and *Downriver* in which the area itself is the main character. But the colonisation and class cleansing has proceeded apace since then. My contention is that Sinclair has aided it in small measure by the bohemian ambience he has given East London in his work, one written in a relentless wiseguy prose full of false drama, from a rebel persona, that has grown increasingly unbelievable. It is a style that gives no space to, and yet flatters the reader.

In the process Sinclair has lost his raw material, and his more recent work has spread out geographically, but he has also done a slick job of pulling up the drawbridge after him. East London psychogeography is now passé: been there, done that. Though he would probably be outraged by the suggestion, given his scorn for the first wave of colonisers, Sinclair has not just lost his material but contributed to the loss. There is such a thing as the unintended consequence. There is the famous case of another Sinclair, Upton. His novel *The Jungle* had the intention of improving working conditions in the Chicago stockyards, but its effect was to horrify the bourgeoisie about the meat they bought and produced as a result the Federal Food and Drug Agency.

The unintended consequence may arise simply from a lack of self-awareness. In Iain Sinclair's case there is evidence of such a lack when it comes to the style and most of all, the tone of his writing. To get some sense of this, and the wiseguy nature of the prose without reference to East London itself, here is Sinclair reviewing Tom Raworth's *Collected Poems* in the *London Review of Books*.<sup>[1]</sup> He's a big fan and by way of contrast he attacks Martin Amis's use of simile to introduce:

a well-turned simile from a Martian verse-maker. Raworth, and those who have learned from him don't do similes.

Already there are the wiseguy giveaways, the 'Martian' from Martin and the 'don't do'. The problem with similes, as Sinclair goes on to say, is that they 'diminish narrative integrity' by suggesting that this work, this map, is not in itself convincing or true. The simile says: applaud my wit. Yes indeed, similes should be used sparingly, if at all, but a paragraph or two later, Sinclair himself indulges in one simile after another in remorseless fashion after his pompous pronouncement that 'we can't afford to ignore Raworth'. These similes have a heavy tread:

'but the politics have evaporated like a puddle on hot tarmac

'his father's letter like a shimmering 8mm home movie

'staying on the case like a disenfranchised private eye

This lack of self-awareness runs right through his East End fictions where he, perhaps unwittingly, uses a variety of modes that 'diminish narrative integrity'. But first, a sketch of how inner London, and East London especially, had changed before Sinclair took it as material.

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### **The First Wave**

Well into the 1970s, much of inner London was still poor London, full of council housing and private rented flats and bedsits. However, there was also a process of colonisation which began with the opening of the Victoria Line at the end of the 1960s. The first wave of gentrification happened at the very time when a bohemian lifestyle became more of a mass option and inner London was the place to be.

Rental properties became owner-occupied houses or flats, causing a steep rise in house prices and rents, so that already by 1974 *The Financial Times* could headline 'Housing's Arithmetic of Despair'. Margaret Thatcher's government policies on council housing accelerated the process.

These factors were common to the class cleansing across London but East London has its own special history, a place of interest to writers, social reformers, and voyeurs with always a hint of the dangerous. It has a history of immigrations; radical politics with at least two waves of property squatting; and militant trade unionism both in the docks and at Ford Dagenham. East End 'gentrification' began in Spitalfields with its Huguenot houses and Wapping with its warehouses. These Victorian (and earlier) buildings lost their original function with the closure of the London docks as containerisation allowed a shift to ports on the coast. This gave a jump-start to class-cleansing, smashing the base of labour militancy and releasing hundreds of acres of real estate onto the market. House prices were not improved, however. They have since been relentlessly pushed up (unless an area was deemed too naff, dangerous, or aesthetically displeasing) by a variety of factors:

â proximity to the City of London labour market and that of the socially engineered Canary Wharf

â the Europe-wide dynamic of artists looking for cheap rents, making an area attractive and then being pushed out by the consequent rent rises

â well-off parents putting up mortgage deposits or buying housing outright for their children

â their professionalisation of the bohemian lifestyle

These are âobjectiveâ conditions, but in his own way, in the form of reader flattery, Sinclair has helped the process along.

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## **Ripping Yarns**

Spitalfields has been a constant centre of interest for Sinclair. For a brief period in 1979 I swept its streets. At that time my round began with a dead rat or two in the gutters of Sheba Street, a tenement that ran parallel to Brick Lane, which itself had to be defended from the National Front. No regrets that either of those has gone, but the changed demography is visible in the shrinkage of the Laneâs Sunday morning âflea marketâ, and the explosion of property prices. The area also had a long-term morbid attraction as Jack the Ripper territory, the streets in which six prostitutes â the very word still a vicarious thrill in todayâs media world â were murdered. They were killings for which no one was charged or convicted. But such is the gaslight and myth attraction of this sordid affair that tourist guides walk parties of tourists around the sites of each of the six killings. In the autumn of 1988 a group of women began to picket such tours. By then Sinclairâs *White Chappell, Scarlet Tracings* was emerging from its small press publication (Goldmark) in 1987 to a wider audience. Of the various possible Jacks, one, the surgeon Sir William Gull, is a main thread in the book. Sinclair, with his usual cast of bohemians (no admission to book dealers who arenât crazed one way or another), is quick to let it be known that his rehash of these sexist murders is not going to be the usual vulgar stuff. Oh no.

The zone was gradually defined, the labyrinth penetrated. It was given limits by the victims of the Ripper.

Nothing vulgar, but a false sense of drama, one that âdiminishes the narrative integrityâ, is immediately created by the use of âlabyrinthâ and âzoneâ, a word lifted from the paranoid and angry views of reality of William Burroughs and Thomas Pynchon. âZoneâ rather than the streets where tossers emptied their ashtrays into the gutter of my Brick Lane patch. Just in case weâve missed the point, that this is not run of the mill Ripperism, he has his bohemian oppo, Jobling, say of another Ripper book:

Thereâs something inherently seedy and salacious in continually picking off the scabs of those crimes, peering at mutilated corpses, listing the undergarments, trekking over the tainted ground in quest of some long-delayed occult frisson.

None of that for Sinclair and Jobling, though they are not immune to a bit of âlong-delayed occult frissonâ themselves both here and in the recycling of the David Rodinsky story. And thereâs a falsity to the rhetoric, there can be no peering at corpses because there are none. But Sinclair is determined that their take on the myth is on a higher, offbeat, plane, one in which they will reverse the conventions of detective fiction:

Our narrative starts everywhere. We want to assemble all the incomplete movements, like cubists, until the point is reached where the crime can commit itself. That is why there are so many Ripper candidates, so many theories: and they can all be right.

Like cubists? Must be all right then. You can buy into East London myth and not feel mucky, neither a tourist nor a tabloid reader. Not naff at all.[2]

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## **Wankers**

In this same first novel, something more familiar is at work in making East London both exciting and safe for the modern bourgeois with a taste for the off-beat: it is the rhetoric of disgust. Its tone was set in T.S. Eliot's vastly overrated poem *The Wasteland*, and is all too easy to do, far more difficult to write joy and pleasure. Here is a taste of it from Sinclair on a stretch of unmarked passage to Limehouse Reach:

Maps of futility brought to ground â! There's nowhere to drink here: the pubs collapsed into their own pretensions, understudy villains ordering up cocktail froth, the mind-destroying jingle of electronic pickpockets.

The giveaway here are those 'understudy villains'. What are they then? Pretend villains? Ones who just aren't up to it? Either way a wanker, vulgar too, drinking his cocktail froth. This before the very heavy tread of 'mind-destroying jingle of electronic pickpockets' as a description of fruit machines.

In his attack on Martin Amis cited above, Sinclair uses him as a prime example of the same strategy:

Critical consensus and broad readership made their choice long ago, stick with satire, smartly observed behaviourist rants (trashing the proles), small revenges.

Attacks on Amis strengthen one's own position as a rebel in the cultural world, and here Sinclair's attack is spot on. The trouble is that, as with the similes, Sinclair does so much of the same stuff himself. We can see it in his use of a different East London almost mythical heritage, its criminals, the Kray twins especially. He can't let them alone so we get an endless cycle of parading, then trashing these faces from the past. His account of Ronnie Kray's funeral in *Lights Out for the Territory* from 1997 begins with a characteristic self-dramatisation: 'It was quite a trick blagging my way through the crowd, one made up of the jobless, the unwaged, the never haves, the ones who parrot the party line, and the ones who don't have the faintest idea what's going on today or any other day.'

By the time of this book, Sinclair was a well established and acclaimed writer. Blagging? Really? I don't think so, though he has made much of how he has got himself into the funeral parlour with 'a mangled bookseller's card used for claiming discounts'. Wow. In all probability they didn't give a monkey's who he was. And what is this crowd he has blagged through? Wankers, all of them. Wankers of different stripes, but that's what they are, including those who 'parrot the party line'. Here it is the verb, parrot, which is so value-laden. And, what party line is that? The nostalgia party, the good old East End, that one? The ones given substance by the crowd of geezers who he is just waiting to wrap up in a put-down:

Villains that are so old they think they're being flash by giving two fingers to petrol rationing.

He likes this so much we get another of his triplet sentences where it is all summed up.

This has been a major killing for the car rental mob, the muscle agencies, the three-chair barbers.

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### âMob?â Hertz and Avis?

It is the funeral as spectacle he can't stand, that's the line, but he comes back to it, years later, in *Dining on Stones*, because it's such good material for the phrases that sum it all up for us, so that we too can patronise the whole thing:

Adios neighbourhood heavies â the old firms were good for nothing except heritage TV: suits and wreaths at Chingford Mount, gravel-voiced killers schmoozing the camera â Respects were offered, upper case carnations by the serial mourners of gangland: Freddie Foreman, Tony Lambrianou â

In other words, more wankers. Except I remember Freddie Foreman clearly. The first time he ever took a tab of acid and laughed at the screw who was banging up. That was 1974 in D Wing when it was the max security wing of Wormwood Scrubs. Then, some months later, Fred decking this giant of a culchie screw on the eve of his first ever home leave in 8 years; whacking him because the screw had been giving grief to Gerry Kelly, now MP for North Belfast, all evening long.

But it is not just East London's pensioner criminals, whatever you think of them, who get the Sinclair treatment. This is him in *Downriver* where at dawn in a lorry car park, he sees girls dropping down from lorry cabs.

The girls were inevitably overweight with make-up scattered like an autistic action painting; or scrawny, nerve-ticked, scratched, pimples and frantic to score, wriggling in satin, torn fish-net, split and smeared saddle-leather.

It's pretty obvious what kind of girls these are. These are proles, and ugly with it, ugly and pathetic. It starts with the make-up simile, and then goes into one judgemental adjective after another â boy does he pile it on â interspersed for variety with the value-laden verb, âwrigglingâ. And it is hard to see how it is different from Amis, here with some early description of Keith Talent in *London Fields*:

Keith's crowning glory, his hair, was thick and full bodied: but it always had the look of having been recently washed, imperfectly rinsed, and then, still slick with cheap shampoo, slow-dried in a huddled pub â

The distinctive value-laden adverb âimperfectlyâ followed by the adjective that you just know it is going to be âcheapâ. Notoriously, he goes on to give him more of a kicking:

You don't need much empathic talent to tell what Keith's thinking. He doesn't do that much thinking in the first place. The very difficulty, the disuse of the muscles, writes headlines on his forehead, and his tabloid face.

Which is him summed up, wrapped up, and placed across the counter. But how is this different to Sinclair on dog owners:

The pit-bull is twinned in desirability with the possession of a satellite dish â the Dog and Dish, they hang out together, chummy as a pub sign

Or in the same book, Sinclair on a bus giving us the dope on its passengers:

The willingly bemused, a troop of dope swollen moon faces, the sort usually glimpsed as they stare out of yellow, special needs minibuses with lifts at the back. Iâm sure weâve infiltrated a secure-hospital delivery, a round-up of sectioned carpet-chewers, white line stalkers, parrot imitators, biddable psychotics, folks who live with the daily horror of seeing things as they actually are.

The style is more hyper than Amis, the piling on of phrases, but the effect is the same. And at the end of this passage he gives us his own version of T.S. Eliotâs cheek and pomposity in the famous line from *The Four Quartets*, âHuman kind cannot bear very much reality.â To which one can only say, speak for yourself.

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### **Crazies**

This passage occurs as part of one of Sinclairâs necessarily offbeat searches and following of trails. East London becomes a playground of weird connections. In the bus sequence he is in search of an obscure psychogeographer at work in an obscure room in the University of Greenwich with some absurd, self-imposed deadline. These searches are invariably given a drama of their own. Sometimes he uses an additional method of âdiminishing narrative integrityâ to achieve this. The first person present tense functions as an A to B method of generating excitement:

Easily into our stride, Iâm explaining the whole insane concept to Marc: on the hoof. No time for maps and bearings â Spoken out loud, put into words, our journey sounds insane. It *is* insane.

More often the excitement is generated by those triplets of verbs: back with poor David Rodinsky again; âWe dug, we competed, we whispered our discoveriesâ, just as his hyper- book dealers do throughout his work. As well as Rodinsky, the Ripper comes back to provide more weird connection material:

I had chased the rumours from Highgate to Stratford, from Spitalfields Market to the Minories â but they still eluded me, sliding feline round the next corner, spraying the cobblestones. I caught whispers in back-bars, sudden hunched-shoulder silences. Gnostic hints, clues masked in obscenity had been inscribed, a foot from the pavings, on the locked doors of the Fournier Street mosque: Spring-heeled Jack had returned.

The âgnostic hintsâ is unashamed reader flattery, you just need the patience, the tenacity and the ability to make weird connections, and what an attractive prospect East London becomes in spite of its inhabitants. But it is also a flattery whereby you are being let into the secret, into the offbeat elite. This is Sinclair back in that review of Tom Raworthâs poems:

Heâs not public company. Outside the circuit of small magazines and left-field academia, heâs not news.

Or worse, a recent piece in *Guardian Weekend*, 18 March, 2006, on the huge car boot sales at Hackney Wick. He writes of the photographer Stephen Gill who âhad stumbled on one of the great secrets of the city.â Great secret? When the parked cars reach back to Homerton High Street on a Sunday morning?

And there's a predictability to the photographer using a 50p camera and Sinclair talking of 'provisional zones'.

Sometimes, as in the case of the Edith Cadiz story in *Downriver*, there were moments when 'The trail was cold'. This story uses gothic Hackney Hospital for its location and of this he writes:

I would adopt my usual method, and circumnavigate the hospital walls; see what the stones had to say. The hospital 'had' in the meantime, been the designated dumping ground for all the swamp-field crazies, the ranters, the ultimate referrals.

The triplet of hyped-up phrases that concludes the passage is familiar, its summing-up tone, more important is the use to which Sinclair puts the hospital itself. *Downriver* came out in 1991, the year also of Dr David Widgery's *Some Lives: A GP's East End*. In this book he talks of how painful it is to be 'called to a person who has died unattended and alone.' And mentions how in 1990, a 91-year-old demented man lay dead in the grounds of Hackney Hospital for three weeks before discovery. I am not making any claims for social realism as against imaginative attempts to give a picture of a place. I do not myself believe Margaret Thatcher is a witch, but that she was a clever politician with a nasty agenda for which there was a historical opportunity. Despite this, I find Sinclair's writing is at its best when it is unashamedly mystical, when he goes for it without covering his arse in advance. What I find difficult, in addition to the reader flattery, and the knowing summings-up, is that there are no ordinary East Enders in his East End.

Widgery is neither sentimental nor nostalgic, it is already in 1990 a new East End:

Cockney individualism, far from vanishing as Ian Nairn feared, has become still more diverse if less obvious with the wild adaptations made by a multicultural proletariat and a sizeable bohemia.

Here the doctor, a free-thinking socialist, is inclusive in welcoming a new East London, bohemians and all. For Sinclair however, only bohemians count. The multicultural proletariat appears only in summing-up phrases, or as crazies. In *Lights Out*, for example, there are no black people except for a bag lady on Queensbridge Road, and an incompetent mini cab driver at the end. Instead, as in *Downriver*, Hackney Wick exists only as the house of a crazed drunken aristocrat, Elgin MacDiarmuid, and is seen only from this point of view, a house turned over by

Barrio-rats and spike-skulled squatters from distressed chip-vans.

Wow! More crazies in their parcels.

Sinclair is ahead of this game too. One of his other handy punchbags are TV guys in search of the offbeat, and he can be very funny, Situationist style, on this world. One of them tells him:

Go for those nutty characters you write about; off the wall eccentrics, headbangers with chutzpah 'Dig them out and we'll shoot them' Give me that surreal, subhuman cartoon feel you're so good at.

But this doesn't prevent him of giving us precisely such material over-and-over-again. In Widgery's account, madness is a very miserable business, as are all kinds of alcohol and chemical abuse. His is not a book full of saints. Along with the long-suffering folk who don't go for medical help early enough because they didn't want to make a fuss, there are manipulators and the violent, and mothers finding it harder than they'd thought. The chapter 'Visitations' is pretty hard going emotionally. But he can still write, a socialist without the notorious rose-coloured specs:

Still, what strikes me about all those condescending documentaries about the poor East Enders, ignorant, ill and probably racist into the bargain, is exactly the reverse: how well the modern Cockneys do in circumstances which their âbettersâ would find impossible â And yet how much more common decency, respect for humanity, honour and humour they possess than so many of the middle and upper classes who despite lip service to collective values in fact approach life in a spirit of naked self-interest.

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### **First Among Psychogeographers**

If Sinclair is not self-aware when it comes to the style of much of his writing, it is because those value-laden summing-ups are so ingrained in the tradition passed down from Eliot, who Sinclair quotes regularly. What he cleverly knits this together with is a style that on the surface seems so antithetical to the Eliot view of the world. It is the psychogeographical style with a situationist edge which suits the business of trails and searches. Once it had a subversive sting but it has become a stuck-in-time aesthetic. In *Lights Out*, Sinclair stands up for it:

Drifting purposefully is the recommended mode â To the no bullshit materialist this sounds suspiciously like *fin de siÃcle* decadence, a poetic of entropy â but the born again *flaneur* is a stubborn creature, less interested in texture and fabric, eavesdropping on philosophical conversation pieces, than in noticing everything. Alignments of telephone kiosks, maps made from the moss on the slopes of Victorian sepulchres, collections of prostituteâs cards, torn and defaced promotional bills for cancelled events at York Hall â

The possible criticism is, then, absorbed, dealt with in advance. But what a big deal he makes of it in contrast, say, to the great exiled Greek anarchist and historian Elias Petroupolis with his histories of Greek public toilets, bars, cemeteries, songs and more.

By the time of *Dining on Stones*, the criticism has not just been absorbed in advance, the veteran has seen it, done it, and comments:

Locally my wanderings were interrupted by cyclists eager to tell me about their projects: video surveillance of empty buildings, albums of re-photographed graffiti, underground streams tracked to source.

This doesnât prevent him from bringing the Ripper back in yet again before going on to trash it as old hat once more.

Brick Lane was a permanent exhibition of look-at-me-graphics, stencils, retro-Situationism â

You can only admire the chutzpah of this non-headbanger, this writer of look-at-me prose. Chutzpah was something on offer from non-retro-situationism. I was greatly influenced by the situationists in the late 1960s. There was a cockiness to their style that we needed at the time, but cockiness too can become a clichÃd rhetoric. Brian Holmes has wondered how the situationist âaestheticâ has maintained its prestige in such dramatically different times, and when they had themselves been recuperated in the 1980s with a situationist exhibition at the Pompidou Centre. In the case of Sinclair, it is because it allows him to have it both ways: it allows him to be snooty about both the big money and the offbeat bourgeois of the first wave of colonisation. This is him in full flow against the recuperators in *Downriver*:

Baroque realists and tame voyeurs fixated on entropy, tremble in paroxysms of excitement and distaste. There hasn't been such hot material lying around in the streets since they nobbled public hangings and bear baiting. Suddenly we're all Henry Mayhew and Jack London. It's shudder â unbelievable, terrible. We rush to our word processors, the hot line to Channel 4. We're going to get the lead story, with photograph, in the *London Review of Books*.

Chutzpah? You have to admire the way he does it. Not just that he is a regular in *London Review of Books*, it's that he's. He's part of it, but he's not part of it, because he was there first and is aware of what's happening. Aware, and not aware, because it's what he does so often in the writing: paroxysms of excitement and distaste. And when it comes to anger at docklands development â the seriously wealthy river-spivs â it comes as a riff (Part 8 of *Downriver*) in which a comic-strip Margaret Thatcher born out of Queen Victoria wants a memorial built in docklands, for which there must be a committee. This allows for a souped-up satire of the spectacle in which some of his favourite targets appear, like the architectural advisor âselling bijou residences in Cherry Gardens to half-solvent media leftiesâ and who found it âa real drag dealing with social climbing paupers,â and promises of âretrospective justificationsâ and âprime time televisionâ.

Once upon a time, such a style could carry a punch as in Ishmael Reed's work, and especially *Mumbo-Jumbo*, where it is able to carry Reed's anger. For the last 25 years or so in the Western world, however, you have to wonder if âsavage satireâ isn't an oxymoron, the savagery impossible especially in such wiseguy prose. Sinclair seems clear about this in the case of Martin Amis but for himself, his outlook seems to be of the better-dead-than-naff variety. Compare the docklands memorial satire of *Downriver* to Chapter 10 of David Widgery's book, âConsequencesâ. Here, some very unsentimental stories of heroes, non-heroes, and sickness, intercut with what the London Docklands Development Corporation is doing on the day Canary Wharf is âtopped outâ. Tenants are âdecantedâ from St Vincent House and Risby House to make way for its infrastructure, and the architect of that Fat Canary says:

A skyscraper recognises that by virtue of its height it has acquired civic responsibilities. We expect it to have formal characteristics appropriate for this unique and socially charged role.

Reality outdoing any satire, as Tom Lehrer said, giving it up when Henry Kissinger was awarded a Nobel Peace Prize.

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### **Reassuringly Authentic**

The colonising of East London did not stop with Wapping, Limehouse basin or Canary Wharf. It has extended not just geographically but in the manner that enclosures tend to do, culturally. In Hackney, it is most visible, and hurtful, in the disappearance in the last few years of at least four big pubs where the crack was fierce and wild. Public houses, public spaces. And they are going, the ones where there was some freedom to the public space. First down was The Albion to the north of the borough. A big old Victorian affair that served a sub-culture of goths and mohicans, many of whom were stalwarts of that anti-capitalist movement on the streets. It is now large-scale apartments. As is the Pembury Tavern at the Amhurst Road end of the Pembury Estate. A pub where they didn't bother too much with furniture. The music changed but it was always loud.

Further along at the top end of Mare Street was the Samuel Pepys where a really fine band might turn up out of the blue and where you'd hear where that night's squatted rave was happening, and then get asked by the 20-year-old on the door âhumiliating this â if you was the law. Now reclaimed by the landlords, The Hackney Empire, and sterilised into an empty chrome and glass bar.

Sinclair does not come across as much of a pub man, the odd manic pint with manic book dealers or manic artists perhaps, and then be put off by all that cocktail froth, or an old dockers pub which gets the full disgust treatment with the leadweight irony of 'authentic', in *Dining on Stones*:

The ham rolls were reassuringly authentic: crusted in over-tanned plaster of Paris, concealing a pink slick of reconstituted animal fat – the wallpaper had not been pasted to the wall: it had grown like a fungus. And was growing still.

Where there is a long pub scene, The Spear of Destiny in *Downriver*, it is full of Irish and Scots geezers beating shit out of each other in the public bar, and parcelled up in Sinclair phrases. It also has a literary ring to it, the landlord and his wife seeming to come out of *The Angel and the Cuckoo*, a novel by Gerald Kersh (a writer we both admire). The pub also has a snug bar where landlord Count Jerzy's wife keeps it cosy with the inscribed portraits of East End heroes and assorted bracelet-wearing gangsters, the sort he just can't leave alone, who must be shown to be wankers over and over again.

Worst of all in the Hackney pub clear-out was the closing of the Crown and Castle, on the corner of Dalston Lane and Kingsland Road, to become an eat in/eat out place, part of a chain. On weekend nights the place was mental. A DJ playing to a room of punters aged between 20 and 60, black and white, and the Hassidic guy who loved dancing with the big black women. We danced packed tight, rush-hour style, and for a few hours it was sexy as hell.

Seen from the outside, in summing-up phrases, how easy to make those wonderful nights sound naff. How tempting for someone writing in the Sinclair mode. In *Lights Out* he does it himself:

Dalston coming into its pomp after a railway carve-up, as an alternative for those who couldn't afford the trip – up west, has all the buzz of a J.G. Ballard traffic island squatted by cowboys.

What a bloody cheek!

Yes, Sinclair does bear some responsibility for the incessant colonial process. Reading him, the colonisers can feel good about themselves and also enjoy this history-packed area of the city because now they know the score. The reader is flattered, he/she for sure is not one of the wankers, uglies, or phoneys who have been so exhaustively parcelled up for their enjoyment.

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[1] *London Review of Books*, 19 August, 2004.

[2] On 27 October, 2001, *The Independent* reported that egg throwing and air rifle fire had taken place against tourists following Jack the Ripper's footsteps. They talked of 'cowboy' operators. It has become a real broadsheet standby, the 'cowboy' operator, gangmaster, dodgy builders and the rest. It is also one of those value-laden words much favoured by Sinclair. How about cowboy journalists, or cowboy consultants?

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