

Notes towards a theology of urban walking
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The situationist theorist Raoul Vaneigem proposed what he famously called 'The Revolution of Everyday Life', which is the title of his influential book and a key factor in the shaping of the maverick practice - in which I've become very much involved - called psychogeography.

'There are more truths in twenty-four hours of a man's life than in all the philosophies,' wrote Vaneigem, but he perceived that most of the time society fails to perceive these truths. He wrote,

Everyday life itself is ... full of shortcomings - one has but to consider how little light is shed on it by those who wander about at the whim of its pleasures and pains.

Vaneigem called for an *awakening* - to 'the wish to live authentically and without restraint'. Vaneigem asserted that these awakenings must take place in everyday life and that the key elements in the revolution of everyday life must be 'creativity, love and play'. Vaneigem's work provides a theoretical underpinning for a psychogeography which creatively, lovingly and playfully explores the physical and social spaces of everyday living in the search for authenticity.

But what is psychogeography? The writer Will Self places himself in the company of contemporary psychogeographers. Until recently he had a column in The Independent called, simply, *Psychogeography*. These essays are now published in a book of the same name. Despite there being 'profound differences between us [psychogeographers],' Will Self says, 'we all want to unpick this conundrum, the manner in which the contemporary world warps the relationship between psyche and place'. For some reason most psychogeographers go about this task on foot. Walking everyday urban spaces is key to the psychogeographer's mission.

Jesus the teacher said, 'The Kingdom of Heaven is in your midst'; The Kingdom of Heaven is 'within your grasp'. The Kingdom of Heaven was the key concept of his

teachings and it was rooted in the everyday. Think of the raw materials he used for his parables: mustard seeds and yeast, fishing nets and a wedding banquet; stories relating to employers settling accounts with their workers, lost sheep and lost coins.

I have a sense that there may be valuable connections to be made between the Kingdom theology of Jesus and the social theory of Vaneigem and others concerned with the revolution of everyday life. I've been trying to explore some of these connections over recent years and I've found that a most helpful way to do this is on foot: thinking and talking with others whilst walking through the everyday urban environment. So for the next half hour I'd like to 'walk' the group through my journey in investigations in connecting urban theology with psychogeography, and in particular I will reference the walk which I made whilst on sabbatical in 2007, a two month walk from Hull to Liverpool following the M62 motorway.

People ask me 'why walk the M62?' and I have no answer in particular, but various suggestions to offer. First of all, the M62 is a beautiful road. I'm not the only one to think so. Listen to this quote by Bill Drummond, from his book **How to be an Artist**:

I ... got out of Hull and on to the most alluring, powerful, even magical motorway on our lump of an island. Even saying its name fills me with a longing. The M62. The greatest motorway ever made. Chuck Berry can keep his Route 66, Kerouac his two-lane black top, Paul Simon his New Jersey Turnpike, Billy Bragg his A13. Give me the M62. Driving it east to west is always best, especially at the close of the day into the setting sun....

Reflecting back on my M62 adventure now, I realise that one of the inspirations for my journey was Bill's quote. It struck a deep chord in me. Helped confirm for me the direction my route should take.

In my own book, **Walking the M62**, a diary of my journey, I described the sense of awe I had on 'the best days ... like when standing on the hillside above Booth Hall Farm watching the traffic steadily flowing across the high Pennines like a

metallic ribbon glittering in the sunshine, I was won over by the wonder...'

And any motorway has a fascination about it. I'm not the only person to think so. At a psychogeography festival in Manchester last year I met Tim Edensor who has written learnedly in defence of motorway driving against the conventional assumption that it is a numbing, soulless experience. Tim has published a paper entitled, **M6 Junction 19-16: Defamiliarizing the Mundane Roadscape**, in which he insists that

... the motorway journey is full of smells, sounds, and tactilities, producing a corporeal sociality that inheres in the intimate relationship between bodies and cars and the spaces through which they move, the distinctive roadscapes, particular models, road textures, and driving conventions and habits.

Tim celebrates what he calls the *ritualistic process* of motorway driving, something worthy of appreciation and consideration.

And any motorway *service station* has a sociability and a spirituality about it. I'm not the only person to think so. In his fantastic book *Destination Nowhere* Roger Green details the 18 months in which he spent some part of each day or night - often hours on end - in South Mimms Service Station on the M25, at first as a detached observer of life in that place but soon embroiled in it himself, as he got to know the people who worked there and the regular users, and they got to know him. In a revelatory, even revolutionary statement he says, 'I began to see my fellow service station users as individuals', and continues, speculating:

Maybe breaking motorway journeys in architecturally designed film sets with their interiors of garish colours, harsh lighting, and hidden CCTV surveillance cameras allows people to be themselves. A modernity where we share space with strangers in a public place free of the constraints of our normal surroundings with their familiarity.

In *The Art of Travel* Alain de Botton described the service station as 'like a lighthouse at the edge of the ocean, it seemed not to belong to the city, nor to the country either, but rather to some third, traveller's realm.' Gripped by this

sense of the exotic which service stations have, and inspired by Roger Green's enthusiasm for the richness and potential in such places, I made it a feature of my cross-country walk through the urban north of England that I would spend many nights sleeping in motorway travelodges, the leather chairs at Coffee Primo making a comfortable base where I could blog my journey on my laptop of an evening.

One day a friend called me en-route from Leeds back to her home on Merseyside and I invited her to come and eat with me. I'd been living in the Days Inn at Hartshead Moor Services for three days by then, and as I greeted her at the entrance to the Welcome Break restaurant, I was so integrated into the place that it truly felt like I was inviting her into my home...

Why walk the M62? Because it's beautiful. Because it's fascinating. Because it is an arena of deep sociability and latent spirituality well worth exploring, slowly, thoughtfully, creatively.

I'm not the first, of course, to decide to devote weeks of my life exploring the places around a major roadway. An obvious inspiration was the pre-eminent psychogeographer Iain Sinclair whose book and film *London Orbital* describes his circuit of the hinterland of the capital city 40 miles out alongside the M25. The motivation for his journey was more critical than mine. The centre of London had been the arena for most of his other deep urban explorations vividly described in incredible books like *Lights Out for the Territory* - but as the millennium approached Sinclair became appalled by the horrors of New Labour's Dome project and he felt the urge to escape that corporate nightmare by walking the M25. The long walk functioned as a sort of exorcism for him.

It had to be walking, for Sinclair; it *always* has to be walking for Sinclair, for as he writes in *Lights Out for the Territory*:

Walking is the best way to explore and exploit the city; the changes, shifts, breaks in the cloud helmet, movement of light on water.

Drifting purposefully is the recommended mode, tramping asphalted earth in alert reverie, allowing the fiction of an underlying pattern to reveal itself.

On my walk I left the motorway to spend a week in central Leeds and enjoyed a full and fascinating day with members and friends of the theatre companies *Imprint* and *Pointed Arrow*, whose productions often involve journeys, are concerned with 'explor[ing] what it means to connect with our land, its history, people and stories... [this is a] political theatre ... interested not only in events, but also in ... movement'. *Pointed Arrow* people talked about their *Pilgrimage* project in 2004 in which they had travelled along the Great North Road - the A1, from London to Edinburgh, performing a play about the stories connected with the road, and exploring British national identity - and inevitably their own identities - as they went.

And in central Manchester - where again I spent a rewarding week doing circular walks in city spaces - I was joined by another performer, Phil Smith. Earlier that year I had joined Phil as he walked the roads between Manchester and Northampton retracing the steps of a man called Charles Hurst who a century earlier had travelled that way laden with a big box of acorns which he planted as he went.

Hurst was a man with a mission. He felt that there weren't enough oak trees in England and he'd set about to put that right, recording his journey in a publication he called *The Book of the English Oak*. Phil wove the story of Hurst's journey together with the story of Phil's own journey, searching for the trees that Hurst had planted, and that became a play which toured the East Midlands last year.

Most of Phil's plays are about journeys of one sort or another. Inspired by roads and what Phil finds on them. And his methodology, which might perhaps be cited as a form of psychogeography, is quite like Charles Hurst's approach to walking, which he describes in this quite lengthy but delightful passage from *The Book of the English Oak*:

Among the advantages which I have gathered from my tour, I count as not the least the proficiency I have acquired in the gentle art of strolling. I can now perform a feat which I believe few townbred men could accomplish with ease of grace: that is, to walk a good English

mile in an hour. This is not quite so easy as it may appear. I therefore set down a few observations on what is fast becoming a lost art. The first essential for success is that the stroller must free his mind from all thoughts of time, ambition, money, over-drafts, assignments, leases, bonds, agreements, formulae, loans, interests, and such tricks of commerce, and from all peevishness whatsoever. He must be prepared to pass the time of day with hawkers, beggars, parsons, squires, haughty dames, tramps, unfortunates, and bottom dogs generally, and when he receives a surly answer or a stony stare he must smile and pass on. I consider it good form to be an attentive listener to long, incoherent accounts of fearful ailments and afflictions told by garrulous old ladies: and I do heartily approve of carrying a small stock of nuts or wholesome sweets for distribution amongst juvenile friends that may be met on the way. The great secret is sympathy both with humanity and nature, and this sympathy will open the eye and the ear to sights and sounds that the indifferent would miss. A rambler in the proper frame of mind can see a complex world in each clear pool of a brook: or he can regard the tumbling ocean as a mere moisture covering a portion of a whirling atom of dust.

Why walk the M62? Because it gives you plenty of time and imaginative permission to explore the joys, riches, and complexities to be discovered in each good English mile.

In Manchester Phil and I spent one day walking miles in search of Boggarts - which, for the uninitiated, are sprites, mischievous spirits mainly found in Lancashire and Yorkshire, often thought to be responsible for poltergeist activity and pranks like turning the doorstep milk sour, making things disappear and causing dogs to go lame. Boggarts reside in mossy places - and north-east Manchester has many mossy places. The B&B we were staying in backed onto the evocatively-named Boggart Hole Clough, a public park which was spookily shrouded in mist on the morning of our walk, and suggested the theme to us. It made for a good day enjoying looking for the mystery in the urban, exploring the deep connections between geography and psyche, landscape and spirit. Messing about with the roadside moss.

Digging deeper into the story of Boggart Hole Clough we were later delighted to discover that back in 1896 Boggart Hole Clough had been adopted by the Independent Labour Party for its meetings, which were soon banned by the Corporation. Emmeline Pankhurst spoke there, to an audience of between 25,000 and 40,000, and was subsequently summonsed and charged with breaching public order'.

Pankhurst caught a bad cold from standing around speaking in that damp mossy place, but it helped to launch her political career.

So Phil and I were delighted to discover that our feet had trod the very ground where the tactics had been honed which would be used to great effect in the suffragette struggle: gaining maximum publicity by refusing to accept legal judgements; Boggart Hole Clough was the place where Emmeline Pankhurst's star first rose as she pushed herself on to the stage of national politics on her own terms rather than in support of her husband. By this connection Boggart Hole Clough asserted itself to us as indeed, a place of history-making mischief.

Why walk the M62? Because it can radicalise your view of life as you take a fresh look at the details of the mundane.

When I started planning this walk some years earlier I wasn't then aware that the sort of processes I was embracing could be given a name. But in that short period I became well acquainted with the term *psychogeography*.

'Psychogeography' was defined in 1955 by Guy Debord, Marxist theorist and founding member of the Situationist International, a small group of political and artistic agitators with roots in Anarchism, Lettrism and the avant-garde who were influential in the Paris uprising of 1968, and whose influence continued into the designers of punk rock and the subversive street artists of today such as Banksy and gHOSTbOY.

Debord described psychogeography as 'the study of the precise laws and specific effects of the geographical environment ... on the emotions and behaviour of individuals.'

Actually it is *not* a precise science, psychogeography, more a strategy for

engaging with ordinary life in ways which subvert the alienation most of us experience. Debord suggested that the alienation we see and feel is a consequence of the economic form of social organisation which has reached its climax in capitalism. Our world, our city, our street, are mediated to us through a lens shaped by the priorities of capital, which Debord named 'the spectacle'.

The spectacle: the way we only see the world how the forces of capital want us to see it. This debilitates us spiritually, and in reaction against this the Situationist International devoted themselves to finding ways of 'reclaiming individual autonomy from the spectacle'.

As an organisation the Situationists were short-lived and somewhat - probably deliberately - ramshackle. But they did champion a cause which many continue to embrace, a cause which might be affirmed by anyone remotely sympathetic to the theology of the kingdom of heaven, as explained in the gospels.

The gospels, for instance, record the statement, 'Give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's'. [Matthew 22:21], through which we find Jesus liberating his audience from the influence of the spectacle, breaking the domain of the occupying power by subverting the very mechanism of their oppression: the tax system.

Notice, by the way, where Jesus was and what Jesus was doing when he had this radical conversation - he was wandering about the streets of the city.

Psychogeography includes just about anything that takes pedestrians off their predictable paths and jolts them into a new awareness of the urban landscape.

- so wrote Joseph Hart in an article on psychogeography in the Utne Reader in 2004.

The Situationists introduced some strategies to help people shake off the influence of the spectacle, notably strategies which involved wandering about city streets. In particular a strategy called the *dérive*, which is basically an aimless walk, probably through city streets, that follows the whim of the

moment. The joy of the *dérive* - usually translated into English as a *drift* - is that it is not provoked by concerns like getting to work (commuting), or getting to the shops (consuming). The *dérive* opens the eyes and heart of the *dériviste* to a liberated journey. The streets look different when you're *drifting* them.

Others, directly or indirectly, or maybe not at all influenced by The Situationists have embraced the drift and created other similarly liberating strategies for walking.

In an *Exeter Mis-Guide*, published in 2003, and their follow-up a *Mis-Guide to Anywhere*, 2006, a collective of tricksters, urban theorists, performers and artists calling themselves Wrights and Sights offer to readers 'travel documents for directionless journeys'. Directionless, but not pointless, for rather than doing what conventional guidebooks do - direct people to the reception desks of hotels and the booking offices of theatres - the *Mis-Guides* give people the tools to explore the city on their own terms, in new and creative ways.

As well as visiting Veitch's gardens at Killerton, look in Exeter for plants in unexpected places ... wild flowers growing in industrial estates, building sites, road verges.

Rather than looking in the civic centre at statues of the great and good, instead trace a shape of a person onto a map of the city - maybe your shape. Walk the route you have marked. You have now mapped your body onto the city.

Revisit scenes from your past and see how they're getting along without you. Look into the back gardens of houses you used to inhabit. Commemorate in chalk special places on the pavement where you said 'Goodbye' or had a memorable conversation, or kissed. Lay a wreath on the site of a memory you want to put to rest.

In *The Lonely Planet Guide to Experimental Travel*, writers Rachael Antony and Joel Henry suggest over forty experiments including *Backpacking at Home* which as well as being affordable is also nicely subversive and at the same time sounds great fun:

Ask a friend to drop you at the airport. From there, catch the cheapest form of transport back into town, then make your way to a backpacking hostel of your choice and check in. Spend your time eating backpacker meals (pizza, falafel, takeaway curry) and doing backpacker activities with other backpackers - sightseeing, beer drinking, surfing the Net in Internet cafés, having meaningful discussions and even romantic liaisons with fun and attractive people you've just met. Watch your budget, and be sure to take photographs of yourself with your new friends. When you've had enough, make your way back to the airport and ask someone to collect you to take you back home.

Last summer the geographer Daniel Raven-Ellison walked directly across three cities: Mexico City, London and Mumbai. Daniel took photographs every five metres of his walk, creating a collection of more than 30,000 images. The rules of the walk were to start and end in green countryside. The project is called URBAN EARTH, whose website says that 'The route is not decided by places of fickle and biased interest, but up hidden ridges of inequality and through the most densely populated and urban of city space(s).'

There is a politics to all these ways of walking and seeing, sensing and walking and I'm just beginning to wonder how closely these politics might be linked to theologies of liberation, green theologies, theologies rooted in the minutiae of particular places which critique the way we're normally encouraged to see them and challenge us to liberate our hearts and minds about our everyday environment.

Why walk the M62? To try to begin applying some of this theory, however shakily, to see how it sits.

I'd be keen to hear your thoughts on aspects of theology which may possibly connect with these ideas and instincts.

I've been particularly helped by those few writers who have attempted to describe a *theology of place*. John Inge has written a very useful survey *A Christian Theology of Place*; Tim Gorrings's *A Theology of the Built Environment*,

which usefully focusses on the urban places. And particularly helpful to me has been Walter Brueggemann's *The Land: Place as Gift, Promise and Challenge in Biblical Faith*, first published in 1977, recently updated, which seems a most fruitful starting-point for this area of investigation.

Brueggemann's work is rooted in a concern to address what he regards as a pervasive aspect of contemporary culture: the sense of being lost, displaced, and homeless. 'The yearning to belong somewhere, to have a home, to be in a safe place, is a deep and moving pursuit,' he writes. It is experienced by people from all sectors of society and even those who appear to be well rooted and belonging can experience profound dislocation.

'This, of course, is not a new struggle,' he continues, but it is more widespread and visible than it has ever been. Nor is this sense alien to the biblical promise of faith. The Bible itself is primarily concerned with the issue of being displaced and yearning for a place. Indeed, the Bible promises precisely what the modern world denies.'

He suggests that land is a central, if not the central theme of biblical faith. 'Biblical faith is a pursuit of historical belonging that includes a sense of destiny derived from such belonging.' He suggests that the urban promise of freedom and self-actualisation has failed, that it has not fed the human hunger for a sense of place, which is a primary category of faith.

By *place* Brueggemann is talking about specifics, as, he argues, scripture does.

Place is space that has historical meanings, where some things have happened that are now remembered and that provide continuity and identity across generations. Place is space in which important words have been spoken that have established identity, defined vocation, and envisioned destiny. Place is space in which vows have been exchanged, promises have been made, and demands have been issued. Place is indeed a protest against the unpromising pursuit of space. It is a declaration that our humanness cannot be found in escape, detachment, absence of commitment, and undefined freedom.

So biblical faith is not to do with a history of a people in random space; it is to do with a particular history of a particular people *in a particular place*. 'If God has to do with Israel in a special way, as he surely does, he has to do with land as a historical place in a special way,' writes Brueggemann.

I relate this with the work of the pre-eminent psychogeographer Iain Sinclair, whose work over thirty-plus years has especially to do with a particular place - Hackney, East London. Territory in which he lives, and which he visits and revisits on foot. In an interview with Geoff Nicholson for the book *The Lost Art of Walking* Sinclair describes his method.

You can train yourself to log and sense [all the minutiae and fine detail]. Over the years you can come to recognize aspects and details, down to the smallest particulars, and incorporate them into a larger sense of the whole. That's really what walks are about. As well as hoovering up information, it's a way of actually shifting a state of consciousness, and you get into things you didn't know about, or you begin to find out about, and that's the interesting part. Otherwise, it's just reportage.

Whereas the Situationists took as their model for urban walking the *flâneur*, a 'stroller', or 'aimless urban wanderer' and took as their method the *dérive*, or 'drift', Sinclair opts to describe himself and his collaborators as *stalkers*:

The concept of "strolling", aimless urban wandering, the *flâneur*, had been superseded. We had moved into the age of the stalker; journeys made with intent - sharp-eyed and unsponsored. The stalker was our role model: purposed hiking, not dawdling, nor browsing. No time for the savouring of reflections in shop windows, admiration for Art Nouveau ironwork, attractive matchboxes rescued from the gutter. This was walking with a thesis. With a prey.

Clearly for Sinclair, mere 'reportage' is insufficient reason for urban walking, and aimless wandering is out of the question. Sinclair sets out on his psychogeographical journeys with purpose in mind: 'with a thesis. With a prey'. The urban theologian of place might empathise with this approach.

Of Sinclair's work the critic Robert Sheppard writes,

This could never be 'On the Road': the drunken swerve of the Beats or the cool Baudrillardian blur of traversing postmodern space. It maintains a focus upon the urban *pavement* and its subterranean layers: upon place, upon history, and their conjunction in the present.

I repeat and expand the quote I gave earlier from *Lights Out for the Territory* in which Sinclair describes his method and reveals its purpose, then justifies it against potential critics:

Walking is the best way to explore and exploit the city; the changes, shifts, breaks in the cloud helmet, movement of light on water. Drifting purposefully is the recommended mode, tramping asphalted earth in alert reverie, allowing the fiction of an underlying pattern to reveal itself. To the no-bullshit materialist this sounds suspiciously like *fin-de-siècle* decadence, a poetry of entropy - but the born-again *flâneur* is a stubborn creature, less interested in texture and fabric, eavesdropping on philosophical conversation pieces, than in noticing *everything*.

He then moves immediately on to describe what he has noticed on a walk through Hackney:

Alignments of telephone kiosks, maps made from moss on the slopes of Victorian sepulchres, collections of prostitutes' cards, torn and defaced promotional bills for cancelled events at York Hall, visits to the homes of dead writers, bronze casts on war memorials, plaster dogs, beer mats, concentrations of used condoms, the crystalline patterns of glass shards surrounding an imploded BMW quarter-light window, meditations on the relationship between the brain damage suffered by the super-middleweight boxer Gerald McClellan (lights out in the Royal London Hospital, Whitechapel) and the simultaneous collapse of Barings, bankers to the Queen. Walking, moving across a retreating townscape, stitches it all together: the illicit cocktail of

bodily exhaustion and a raging carbon-monoxide high.

This exhilarating writing suggests that the sum of all these disparate parts must be (at the very least) a heightened appreciation of the place being walked through, its people and culture. Where Sinclair asserts that the purpose of 'tramping asphalted earth in alert reverie' is to 'allow... the fiction of an underlying pattern to reveal itself', the alert theologian might recognise that process as a means towards a contextual understanding of that place, that revealed 'fiction' as a key to fully comprehending and deeply relating to a local community. This returns us to Brueggemann's validation of such detailed investigations of place when he writes,

Place is indeed a protest against the unpromising pursuit of space. It is a declaration that our humanness cannot be found in escape, detachment, absence of commitment, and undefined freedom.

The antitheses of the four negative categories Brueggemann lists here are engagement, attachment, full commitment, and freedom set within a moral and visionary framework. Each of *these* categories apply to Sinclair's committed psychogeography: an observation which reaffirms the value of his methods for those on similar journeys of discovery.

If Sinclair believed in the communion of saints then his writing suggests that his inner sanctum would be Blake, Bunyan and Defoe, each of them memorialised in the City of London Nonconformist graveyard known as Bunhill Fields, from where he begins many of his walks. In conversation with Geoff Nicholson Sinclair calls this site 'the epicentre', and says,

My theory is that all lines of energy or intelligence move out from that particular cluster. Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress is actually the ultimate English walking book, where the physical journey that he does then becomes fabulated into this Christian mythology, but all the places are actually mappable. And then Daniel Defoe, because he traveled around the whole of England as an intelligencer and spy and double man. And then Blake with his cosmic and imaginary journeys with specific wonderful transits of London that are in the Jerusalem poem where he

starts on Highgate Hill, through the narrows of the riverside, and he actually lists all these places. So I think any sense of a journey must begin on that spot, in this wonderful cross between the three of them.

In *Lights Out for the Territory* Sinclair writes,

Blake, Bunyan, Defoe, the dissenting monuments in Bunhill Fields. Everything I believe in, everything London can do to you, starts there. The theatre of obelisks and pyramids, signs, symbols, prompts, whispers. The lovely lies that take you out into the light. That bless each and every pilgrimage.

There is much in that short passage to affirm a recurring theme and subtext of this talk: the theological value of ongoing engagement with Sinclair's form of psychogeography. Beginning with a common appreciation of the cultural giants of the English mystical-Christian tradition and what they have to say about a spirituality and theology of place; engaging with the ideological construct which the critic Robert Bond refers to as the 'sacralization of place'; sharing a desire to be 'taken out into the light' - all of this leads towards the liberating notion that the urban environment (in all its pain and complexity) can be a place of blessing, and that all our journeys through it may be pilgrimages.

In his book *Psychogeography* Will Self mentions with frank self-depreciation that his friend and collaborator Nick Papadimitriou

... points out that most of the psychogeographic fraternity ... are really only local historians with an attitude problem. Indeed, real, professional local historians view us as insufferably bogus and travelling - if anywhere at all - right up ourselves.

Maybe we are, but despite these misgivings it may be that psychogeographers have hit on a method of interpreting everyday life which engages real people in real places in terms which are readily understood, which correspondingly opens up the possibilities for creating 'the revolution of everyday life' which the situationists worked tirelessly to promote, and which may offer valuable connections with theology, and new avenues for theologians to travel.

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- Also keep an eye on www.johndavies.org for plenty more writing and references related to the subjects covered in this paper.