

**Space is the Place:
Space, Place and Transformation
in the work of James Attlee**

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Contents

	<i>page</i>
Acknowledgements	3
Abstract	4
Introduction	5
Creative and Commodified Space	9
Psychological and Psychogeographical Space	17
Place, Emotion and Resistance	31
Repetition and Pause	38
Digital and Cartographic Space	41
Conclusion	51
Endnotes	53
Bibliography	54

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ABSTRACT

While place and movement are central to much of my published work, this critical appraisal concentrates on two non-fiction travel books: *Isolarion: A Different Oxford Journey* (Attlee, 2007/2020) and *Station to Station* (Attlee, 2015), as well as one locative digital fiction, *The Cartographer's Confession* (Attlee, 2017). The appraisal is structured around key statements by the geographer Yi-Fu Tuan, particularly from his book *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* (1981) and his Farewell Lecture, delivered in 2014.

I will be examining how undifferentiated space can be transformed into meaningful location in life and on the page, as well as in the emerging form of locative digital fiction; how place itself can become a prison to which space offers an escape; and how the new dimension offered by digital technology can, when harnessed for literary ends, expand rather than detract from our engagement with the world around us. Investigation of my own work will be contextualised through reference to authors, philosophers and spatial theorists ranging from the 17th to the 21st centuries, including Robert Burton, Roland Barthes, Horatio Clare, Guy Debord, Richard Mabey, Herman Melville, Iain Sinclair and James Wood, among others.

INTRODUCTION

If we think of space as that which allows movement, then place is pause; each pause in movement makes it possible for location to be transformed into place.

Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience*, p.6

Yi-Fu Tuan wrote these words in the late 1970s, in a world in which the new multi-dimension known as cyberspace did not yet exist. A world untroubled by 24-hour online shopping, internet trolls and public shaming on social media, in which the vast majority of people stepped into a private sphere when they left work at the end of each day rather than remaining reachable at any time, their every movement tracked by satellites far overhead. The analyses of the terms 'space' and 'place' contained within Tuan's book remain acutely perceptive, but the reality they depict has shifted forever.

Why choose them then, as an epigraph for a thesis concerned with my own published work, written during the first two decades of the 21st century?

'If we think of space as that which allows movement' Tuan maintains, 'then place is pause'. In his Farewell Lecture at the University of Wisconsin-Madison in April 2014, aged 83, he was still revisiting these definitions, as always connecting them right back to embodied reality. 'Since the human individual is both body and mind, he can be said to be also both "space" and "place"', he told his audience. 'His body, tied by his senses to his environment, is place; his mind,

freed from such temporary ties, is space. Given his roaming mind, a human being can seldom be fully where he is' (Tuan, Yi-Fu, 2014).

In English we talk of 'room to move, room to breathe' as markers of psychological as well as physical space; yet open spaces always contain an implicit threat of the unknown. By contrast, place is humanized, enclosed, familiar, based around family and community— the safety of the cave, village or walled city contrasted with the open plain. Yet what in some contexts is security, in others is claustrophobia or oppression— an apparent contradiction explored both in my writing and this critical appraisal. When physical movement from a place of confinement is curtailed, a mental space must be created. For the Alabama-born, Chicago-based jazz musician Sun Ra, from whose 1973 album *Space is the Place* this critical appraisal takes its title, the racist constraints of American society could be countered by claiming citizenship on the planet Saturn and embarking on odysseys through space conjured through music, accompanied by his 30-piece Arkestra. 'Outer space is a pleasant place' the Space Ethnic Voices sing on *Space is the Place*, 'a place that's real... It's no disgrace to want to know how to live to really be free' (Sun Ra, 1973).

Finding that transformational escape route, whether from oppressive mental states or constraining circumstances, has been a recurring theme in my writing of the past two decades. Space, place and movement are central to three of my books that loosely adhere to the travel-writing genre: *Isolarion: A Different Oxford Journey* (Attlee 2007/new edition 2020); *Nocturne: A Journey in Search of Moonlight* (Attlee 2011); and *Station to Station: Searching for Stories on the Great*

Western Line (Attlee, 2015). Each generates material by movement through space: each examines the meaning of place and goes in search of the elusive, transformative 'pause' Tuan refers to in various ways.

My writing on the artist Gordon Matta-Clark, including the book *Gordon Matta-Clark: The Space Between* (Attlee and Le Feuvre 2003) is also concerned with ideas about different kinds of space: contested urban space; architectural space; inner, mental space; space as something both transformable and transformative. *Guernica: Painting the End of the World* (2017) has a strong geographical theme, tracing the journey of the iconic artwork around the globe, examining how its perceived meaning changes depending on its shifting position and movement through time. Finally, the geo-locative app *The Cartographer's Confession* (Attlee 2017) has a direct and visceral relationship with space, demanding that its readers travel to certain locations in London to access elements of its story world.

How is the pause Yi-Fu Tuan writes of to be found in a time of supermodernity, to use Marc Augé's term, in which constant change and crisis are the norm? Through what other means is undifferentiated space transformed into place, charged with meaning and emotion? When does place itself, rather than offering security, become a prison to be escaped? And how can digital space be mapped onto physical location, creating a new, immersive reading experience?

Given the constrictions imposed on another kind of space— the boundaries of which are dictated by the word-count of this critical appraisal— I will limit my

investigation and apply the research questions above to just three of the works I have mentioned: *Isolarion*, *Station to Station* and *The Cartographer's Confession*. While aspects of spatial engagement have informed much of my writing, it is these three titles that are most directly concerned with space as mutable experience. The selection will allow me to add to knowledge by comparing non-fiction travel narrative with the emerging form of locative digital fiction. I will explore techniques I have used in generating non-fiction travel narrative and explain how they informed my approach to plotting *The Cartographer's Confession*. I will examine the ways in which the narrative voices I have employed in each work are marked by an existential crisis that can only be resolved through various kinds of engagement with the space that surrounds the protagonist. Finally, I will contextualise these works in relation to theoreticians of space and place, from Merleau-Ponty to Frederic Jameson, and to the philosophical and imaginative works of writers such as Robert Burton, Herman Melville, Iain Sinclair, Richard Mabey and Nick Papadimitriou.

1. CREATIVE AND COMMODIFIED SPACE

Station to Station follows the route of Brunel's line from London to Bristol, exploring the 'non-space' of the train carriage, the effects of speed and repetition on human perception and the possibilities of locating a creative pause between the zones of responsibility at home and at work. The journeys of historic travellers are overlaid and intermingled with contemporary encounters while stations along the line become points of embarkation for expeditions into place and history.

In its opening pages the narrator is portrayed as a writer in crisis, surrounded by various unfinished projects with limited time and no workspace of his own (Attlee, 2015, pp. 6-7). My daily commute to work in London, like that of many of my fellow passengers, was taken up either with work for my employer, or, when exhaustion set in, with meaningless activities intended to distract. This is, of course, the flipside of the 'flexibilization' of labour in neoliberal economies; instead of offering freedom it often does the opposite, enmeshing its victims in a prison from which they rarely escape. As Jonathan Crary has written, 'there are now very few significant interludes of human existence... that have not been penetrated and taken over as work time, consumption time, or marketing time.' (Crary, 2013, p.32)

American poet Adrienne Rich summed up the way the demands of advanced capitalism impact on the creative mind in her notebooks, published in the early 1990s:

Most, if not all the names we know in American poetry are the names of people who had access to some freedom in time— that privilege of some which is actually a necessity for all. The struggle to limit the working day is a sacred struggle for the worker’s freedom in time. Yet every working generation has to reclaim that freedom in time, and many are brutally thwarted in the effort. Capitalism is based on abridgement of that freedom (Rich, 1994, p.44).

This is precisely the struggle I and my fellow travellers were engaged in over the time spent on our train journeys. I moved through the landscape surrounded by people who were already at work; as Anthony Elliot and John Urry have written, ‘in contrast to the immobile, fixed desk of previous work environments, today’s digitized, mobile workstations [...] mean that portable offices are increasingly commonplace throughout cars, planes and rail carriages and places of waiting en route’ (Elliot and Urry, 2010, p.32). Although I initially complied with this routine, after a while I began to question it. Who did my time on board belong to? Was I getting paid for it? If not, surely it was my own? I took to covertly observing my fellow passengers: one, a novelist whose last book I had read and with whom I had a passing acquaintance, was clearly not putting in extra hours for his day job; he spent his journey reading, making notes on what he had read and then writing in his notebook. The sight offered a different way of understanding the space that lay between home and work. I had been presented with what people call a ‘window of time’ in which to pursue these ideas to their conclusion. Wasn’t this what William Blake spoke of, in his epic poem *Milton*?

There is a Moment in each Day that Satan cannot find
Nor can his Watch Fiends find it, but the Industrious find
This Moment and it multiply, & when once it is found
It renovates each Moment of the Day, if rightly placed

(Attlee, 2015, p. 6).

Blake, of course, was writing in the context of the industrial revolution, when pocket-watches and wall clocks were used by the governing classes— particularly factory owners and the foremen that worked for them— to steal and manipulate the time of those they exploited. ‘In reality there were no regular hours’, wrote the anonymous author of *Chapters in the Life of a Dundee Factory Boy* in 1887; instead ‘masters and managers did with us as they liked. The clocks at the factory were often put forward in the morning and back at night, and instead of being instruments for the measurement of time, they were used as cloaks for cheaterly and oppression’ (Deller, 2014, p.32). If Blake’s Satanic mills have largely disappeared from the post-industrial landscape, the tyranny of time has not. As George Woodcock wrote in ‘The Tyranny of the Clock’ in 1944, ‘the clock represents an element of mechanical tyranny in the lives of modern (people) more potent than any individual exploiter or than any other machine’ (Woodcock, 1992, p.11). In the 21st century, I propose in *Station to Station*, the Watch Fiends might be found blowing whistles on a station platform, rather than on a factory floor. Instead of slavedrivers, however, in the light of Blake’s words they might be better seen as ‘the unwitting gatekeepers to another kingdom’ (Attlee, 2015, p. 6); while the railway carriage, instead of functioning as a mobile prison or factory in which workers put in ever-longer hours for their employers, might function as the equivalent to the ‘room of one’s own’ Virginia Woolf identified as being essential to creative productivity, improved by being made fully mobile (Attlee, 2015, p. 7).

Writers no longer necessarily need a place to retreat from the world in order to write: instead they can be at the heart of the rush hour crowds, in plain view, indistinguishable from those running corporations, contacting loved ones or posting pictures of their latest meal in airports, coffee bars and railway stations. The world of work— and of creative endeavour— is now as portable as a laptop; lifting the lid of such a device, a writer opens a door through which they can step to escape. The rigid structure of the railway timetable, the miles travelled in the daily journey to and from work and the contained space of the carriage are all ‘renovated’ in the Blakeian sense by being redeployed in the service of writing. Does this process bear any relationship to the ‘pause’ mentioned by Tuan that transforms mere location into something as defined as place? While someone engaged in creative work in a commuter carriage may arguably be *less* aware of their surroundings than another traveller— unless, as I was, they are writing about the experience of train travel itself— their activity nevertheless charges both space and time between work and home with *significance* for them. The daily commuter is also part of a community of familiar faces, sharing space in a series of interactions ranging from courtesies to outright rudeness, familiar not just with fellow travellers but railway staff. Surely such relationships, combined with the creative possibilities offered by rail travel, might suggest that both station and railway carriage qualify in Tuan’s terms as place? Yet, he insists, movement is, by definition, space— it is only transformed into place through pause. Here we have the first indication of a fault-line within Tuan’s definitions that requires further exploration.

In the positive view of the railway carriage I adopt I am at odds with other writers on the subject, most notably perhaps Michel de Certeau in *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984). For de Certeau 'nothing is moving inside or outside the train... Inside there is the immobility of an order [...] There is nothing to do, one is in the *state* of reason'. He is equally unimpressed by the view from the window: 'Outside there is another immobility, that of things [...] The train generalises Durer's *Melancholia*, a speculative experience of the world: being outside of these things that stay there, detached and absolute, that leave us without having anything to do with this departure themselves' (de Certeau, 1984, pp. 111-112). Instead of a space for creativity, the carriage in de Certeau's view is one of incarceration and absence: a space that precludes action, where 'rest and dreams reign supreme'; history begins again at the railway station, where the train is left behind in its 'mute, idol-like inertia, a god undone' (de Certeau, 1984, p. 114). De Certeau's treatment of trains is shot through with hostility to the machine age and modernity itself, a tendency evident also in much psychogeographical writing. *Station to Station* is a journey through England engaged as much with the past as the present, yet it uses a quintessentially modern technology to achieve its aims. Rather than dismissing the mental states induced by highspeed travel through the landscape as 'laziness' or 'dream' as de Certeau does, it subjects them to close examination.

Railway stations are, in Marc Augé's terms, 'non-places', where the identity of the individual, based on the relationships forged in the 'place' of home and work is lost. The traveller through such a non-place is 'identified (name, occupation, place of birth, address) only on entering or leaving' (Augé 1995, 111). However

these non-places have other enemies, more daunting even than French academics: those for whom place, territory and identity have fundamental religious and political significance. It is their lack of definition and identity, Augé argues, that has made them the target of terrorism. 'Airports and aircraft, big stores and railway stations have always been a favoured target for attacks [...]; doubtless for reasons of efficiency, if that is the right word. But another reason might be that, in a more or less confused way, those pursuing new socializations and localizations can see non-places only as a negation of their ideal. The non-place is the opposite of utopia: it exists, and it does not contain any organic society' (Augé, 1995 p. 112).

Just such an event haunted both *Isolarion* and *Station to Station*: the bombings on the London underground in 2005 that I found myself uncomfortably close to, alighting at Paddington as the explosion happened one station away at Edgware Road and the sound of sirens filled the air. I described the shift in my own perception of my commute in *Isolarion*, when the technology of travel itself becomes a source of anxiety and threat (Attlee, 2020, p. 147). The young men who carried out the attack, it transpired, were committed to the utopian ideal of establishing a universal Caliphate. Newspapers at the time were suddenly filled with editorials blaming 'the multicultural model of society' for allowing such radical Islamist ideas to take root in Britain. Immigration once again became a national obsession. Young people, especially if they came from immigrant backgrounds, were encouraged in national newspapers to sign up to so-called 'British values', ones I was far from sure I shared. Surprisingly perhaps, I saw these convulsions in the national psyche play out most directly not at home or at

work, but in the so-called non-space that lay between the two. Changing direction unthinkingly one morning as I approached an entrance to the tube that was guarded by armed police officers, I found myself surrounded and searched. I was able to produce proof of who I was and where I was going swiftly; I couldn't help wondering what would have been my fate if I had been someone with less privilege. This palpable shift in atmosphere was one of the prompts that set me off on a journey in search of what *my* values were.

One of the four bombs that exploded in London on 7 July 2005 went off in a carriage on the Piccadilly line. Two weeks later, with forensic work complete, the identities of those who died that day were published in the newspapers. Those unbearably moving columns of names told a story. Twelve of those listed as having died on the Piccadilly line train that day were said to have been of British nationality; three were Polish, one was French, one a New Zealander, one Turkish, one Iranian, one Afghani, one Romanian, one Vietnamese and one Mauritanian. For me, that carriage and its occupants represent the country I am proud to belong to (Atlee, 2020, p. 148).

Context is everything. Originally written in 2005 or 2006, this passage read rather differently when the new edition of the book was published in March 2020, days before the beginning of the Covid19 lockdown, injected by the Brexit referendum and Britain's exit from the European Union with a new pathos.

Isolarion is not overtly or didactically political; the narrative persona I constructed is on a journey to find out what he thinks about things rather than deliver a treatise. Yet at certain points, lines are drawn. The United Kingdom, from a station concourse at Paddington to a shipyard in Sunderland, exists both as a physical territory and a concept in the minds of its inhabitants, turned from "space" into "place" by their understanding of what it signifies. The difficulty arises when those understandings differ so much from person to person, from place to place.

I present myself at the beginning of *Station to Station* as someone in search of a space in my life, both temporal and physical, in which to undertake creative work. Paradoxically, I find it in the so-called ‘non-space’ of the railway system, which far from being a place of incarceration and mental absence proves to be the workspace I have been seeking. For Tuan, space, while it allows movement, cannot invest a location with significance and meaning— this is only achieved through the pause; yet place itself, I argue, can be constraining, something that must be escaped from in order to reclaim ‘that freedom in time’ that Adrienne Rich speaks of. The tensions between these different understandings of space and place will inform the rest of this critical appraisal.

2. PSYCHOLOGICAL AND PSYCHOGEOGRAPHICAL SPACE

In observing the nature of life on board the commuter train in *Station to Station*, I was taking a retrospective position, having already commuted for over a decade, ‘a period during which, I calculated, I spent more than a year in motion’ (Attlee, 2015, p. 5). What I did not make clear is that during this time I had also written three books— *Gordon Matta-Clark: The Space Between* (2003, with Lisa Le Feuvre), *Isolarion* (2007) and *Nocturne: A Journey in Search of Moonlight* (2011)— along with numerous chapters, articles and reviews, using the space of the train journey to do so. A form of reification has been in process: the transformation of thought into things, as outlined by Hannah Arendt in *The Permanence of the World and the Work of Art*:

The reification that occurs in writing something down... is of course related to the thought that preceded it, but what actually makes the thought a reality and fabricates the things of thought is the same workmanship which, through the primordial instrument of the human hands, builds the other durable things of the human artifice (Arendt, 1998, p. 168).

The space in which this workmanship had been carried out— the railway carriage— had imprinted itself on the books’ structure and style, so that the process of writing became an integral part of their final form. In the case of *Gordon Matta-Clark*, I did not yet own a laptop and was taking notebooks and card-indexes on the train and writing up my hand-written drafts on a desk-top computer at home. *Isolarion* and *Nocturne* were both largely written on the train, drawing on notes and recordings made in the field. Written for a mobile, connected audience, they required a form that would suit their readership, one I

came to at least in part through composing the text during a daily commute of a certain length. *Isolarion* is largely a series of episodic interludes that form chapters of anything between three and 12 pages long— a perfect length for working up on the train into London.

My journey comprised of an initial cycle ride of around 15 minutes, usually spent listening to music; followed by an hour spent on the train, working on a laptop. Once I located a seat I put on headphones if necessary, either to block out distractions or to listen to and transcribe interviews made as part of my research. Material recorded in notebooks was worked up on the screen. For the first six years of my daily commute, arrival in London was followed by a tube journey of around half an hour, which I replaced after the tube bombings of 2005 with a cycle ride through London from Paddington to Millbank, also undertaken while listening to music or podcasts. The rhythms of the different stages of this journey each fed into the writing process; incidents observed on the journey, lines from a discarded newspaper or snatches of overheard conversation could find their way into the text. The job I had was demanding and often required long hours, but the commute created a mental space— cavernous, immense— in which I had a different life, independent from responsibilities at both end of the tracks.

This strategy has a long history. De Certeau refers to something similar occurring among industrial workers in France who indulge in what in colloquial French is known as *la perruque* (the wig): diverting time from the demands of the factory ‘for work that is free, creative and precisely not directed toward profit.

In the very place where the machine he must serve reigns supreme he cunningly takes pleasure in finding a way to create gratuitous products whose sole purpose is to signify his own capabilities through his *work* and to confirm his solidarity with other workers or his family through *spending* his time in this way' (de Certeau, 1984, pp. 25-26).

The *perruque* restores the dignity and self-determination of the exploited manual labourer by allowing them to undertake work of their own choosing. Commuting office workers are free to employ the same tactics. As I write in *Station to Station*, 'All commuters must come to terms with the fact they will spend a significant proportion of their waking life on the train. One way they deal with this reality is to rage against it; another is to slip its grip by turning it to their own ends'. (Attlee, 2015. P. 88).

In at least one sense, *Station to Station* and *Isolarion* are closely related in their approach to the world: each takes a supposedly mundane space and reveals it to be as worthy of exploration as any distant territory. In *Isolarion*, prevented from embarking on a long voyage by work and family commitments, I discover a starting point for a meaningful journey at my front door. The book takes the form of a pilgrimage down one multicultural street in Oxford that joins the ancient university city to the car factory on its eastern fringe, a very different city to the one the world knows through *Brideshead Revisited* and the exploits of various TV detectives. Exploration was undertaken on foot while remaining open to chance events and encounters. 'Why make a journey to the other side of the world', *Isolarion* asks, 'when the world has come to you'? (Attlee, 2020, p. 20).

The primal need to move may arise in the reader— or the author— at any moment; yet at the beginning of the book I reveal myself to be constrained from following my urge because of the work and family ties that hold me. The conflicting emotions these circumstances provoke — love, guilt, duty, the urge to find meaning— are, I believe, a feature of the lives of many creative people and in *Isolarion* I chose to make their resolution part of the journey of the book.

I take a talismanic text with me as I set out on my own journey— Robert Burton's *The Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621); not only in order to use it as a key to unlock meaning in what I found, but also because I felt I shared a certain affinity with the long-departed author, for whom writing was both an escape from and a cause of melancholy (Attlee, 2020, p.18). Burton provides an added dimension to *Isolarion*, his compendious masterpiece granting a 17th century perspective on the present.

In addition to the wisdom the book contains regarding the causes and treatment of melancholy, Burton's insights into love illuminate my discussions of wedding bands with an artisan jeweller; on lust and pornography, my visit to a sex shop; on the drinking of coffee and alcohol, much of the business of Cowley Road.

Applied to the urban landscape, his words help in the process of transforming it from space into place, while at the same time collapsing any sense of separation between his time and ours; for, as he puts it, "we are of the same humours and inclinations as our predecessors were; you shall find us all alike, much at one, we and our sons [...] And so shall our posterity continue to the last' (Burton, 2001, p. 53).

Melancholy was a kind of familiar spirit to the 17th century— a mark of genius typical of poets and playwrights, to suffer from which was, for a period, highly fashionable. Nevertheless, it was a state Burton was committed to escaping. Many literary wanderers, both fictional and non-fictional, have been open that they share his ambition, endeavouring by moving through physical space to leave the place of their travails behind. However, beginning such a journey is rarely simple and gives rise to conflicting emotions; as Tuan puts it succinctly in the opening remarks in his book, neatly summing up the circumstances of the protagonist at the beginning of *Isolarion*, 'place is security, space is freedom: we are attached to the one and long for the other' (Tuan, 1981, p.4). Here Tuan hints at the paradox that lies at the heart of both our understanding of space and my own writing practice: while our human instinct (and often our instinct as writers) is to transform formless space into place, the security we create through doing so can itself become restricting.

One of the greatest descriptions in literature of a narrator who is thoroughly oppressed by their surroundings comes in the opening paragraph of Herman Melville's novel *Moby Dick* (1851).

Whenever I find myself growing grim about the mouth; whenever it is a damp, drizzly November in my soul; whenever I find myself involuntarily pausing before coffin warehouses, and bringing up the rear of every funeral I meet; and especially whenever my hypos get such an upper hand of me, that it requires a strong moral principle to prevent me from deliberately stepping into the street, and

methodically knocking people's hats off— then, I account it high time to go to sea again as soon as I can (Melville, 2003 p.4).

The protagonist of Melville's novel is clearly facing a personal existential crisis, expressed in the 'hypos' — sustained periods of depressive mood— he is experiencing that can only be left behind by going to sea. The physical setting he finds himself in —a small coastal community built around a plethora of relationships and social interactions he finds odious — has resulted in a mental confinement he is desperate to escape. By signing up for a voyage, Ishmael exchanges the limited horizons of life ashore, among scenery that never changes, for movement across the trackless expanse of the ocean.

'We are of the same humours and inclinations as our predecessors were,' Burton has reminded us. Around a century and a half after Melville wrote the opening paragraphs of *Moby Dick*, writer Horatio Clare leaves no doubt as to his motivation in putting words on the page in his memoir *The Light in the Dark: A Winter Journal* (2018):

Last winter I thought I would go mad with depression. I was mad, but aware-mad, at least. It was nothing inexplicable: depression brings fear, entrapment, fault and failure wherever you look. The book I was writing seemed awful and I could see no hope... But this year will be different, it must be different. This book is to be a torch raised against it. I will take it down in notes and diaries. I will embrace this winter like a summer... I will pay attention. Depression kills your power of vision, turning you fatally towards yourself, but I will practice looking and looking outwards like an exercise, as though I am training for an expedition... The trick is to resist the psychological deafness, that bung of jeering voices clogging the inner ear (Clare, 2018, pp. 5-7).

In placing himself so much at the centre of his account, it is possible that Clare takes inspiration from another British writer, something of a doyen for practitioners of the so-called New Nature Writing that has emerged in Britain over the past two decades and of which Clare is sometimes considered a representative.¹ In his book *Nature Cure* (2000), Richard Mabey presents himself as having come to a similarly disabling halt, 'lying on my bed with my face away from the window', not because of a change of season but because of a lack of forward momentum in his life: for a certain kind of writer, it seems, movement across the page is linked to movement through the world— stasis in one causes the other to grind to a halt. 'My past, or lack of it, had caught up with me', Mabey writes.

I'd been bogged down in the same place for too long, trapped by habits and memories. I was clotted with rootedness. And in the end I had fallen ill and run out of words. My Irish grandfather, a day-worker who rarely stayed in the same house long enough to pay the rent, knew what to do at times like this. In that word that captures all the shades of escape, from the young bird's flutter from the nest to the dodging of someone in trouble, he'd flit (Mabey, 2006, pp. 1-2).

Mabey is clear about what has brought on this malaise: he has been 'bogged down in the same place for too long'. A lack of the physical movement that turns place into space is combined with intellectual paralysis, as the space of the mind becomes ossified through habit and oppressive memories. 'Rootedness'— often seen as a positive attribute of character— has rendered him 'clotted', the unusual word speaking of a cessation of movement, whether of blood in the veins or thought in the mind.

For those unable to 'flit', the only remedy is to see the place in which they are 'bogged down' with new eyes. It is impossible to walk streets in Oxford as I did

while researching *Isolarion* and not be aware of the multi-layered nature of the present moment in a myriad of ways. As James Joyce puts it in *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, ‘the past is consumed in the present and the present is living only because it brings forth the future’ (Joyce, 1916, p. 296). For Simon Critchley also, urban spaces look both back and forward in time. ‘Might not the space of a town or a city’, he asks, ‘be seen as a memory theatre? One walks or moves in a city, most Bloom-like, and somehow the entirety of the past is whispering through locations— ghostly and sepulchral. Like a huge question mark. And implicitly that story becomes one about the future as well. The city is a spatial network of memory traces, but also a vast predictive machine’ (Critchley, 2014, p. 37).

Journeys into history in *Isolarion* can be triggered by something as insignificant as a street name. Circus Street, I discovered, a side street leading off Cowley Road, derives its name from Newsome’s Alhambra Circus that pitched there before the street was built, outside the city gate; the name of the long-vanished Victorian circus in turn leads to a disquisition on Moorish Spain (Attlee, 2020, p. 59).

History, in this context, is less a weight than a way out from beneath the greater burden of present troubles, the memory of the tolerance and religious diversity of Al-Andalus serving as a balm in times once again divided by faith-based conflict. As if in reminder that such divisions are scarcely new, a few yards away on the other side of Cowley Road is Tyndale Road, named, as I note in the book, after William Tyndale, who was rewarded for his efforts in translating the Bible

by being strangled and then burnt. Such collapsing of distance between nations and cultures, between past and present, is apparent everywhere to those who look. A woman working for a Palestinian charity in Oxford comes from a Muslim family that generations ago were appointed keyholders for the Shrine of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem, to avoid argument among the various Christian denominations that lay claim to it. Shortly after I learnt this I saw, by chance, the current holder of the position interviewed on television, the impressively large key in his lap. ‘I am left with the feeling that in the West we, too, seem to have held the key to something precious, without knowing what it was’ I wrote in *Isolarion*. ‘History teaches that once the key is lost, it is almost impossible to recover’ (Attlee, 2020, p. 149).

Opening oneself up to the invisible hauntings present in city streets was very much part of the practice of the Lettrists and the Situationists who wandered Paris in the 1950s and 60s. ‘All cities are geological’ wrote Ivan Chitchevlov under the pseudonym Gilles Ivain; ‘you cannot take three steps without encountering ghosts bearing all the prestige of their legends. We move within a *closed* landscape whose landmarks constantly draw us towards the past’ (Andreotti and Costa, 1996, p14). The idea that an area in a city might have a distinct atmosphere, or *ambiance*, along with the concept of the *dérive* – the directionless drift through urban terrain - were among the chief insights bequeathed by the Situationists to British writers like Iain Sinclair and Will Self, the latter of whom hijacked their term Psychogeography— ‘the study of the precise laws and specific effects of the geographical environment, consciously organized or not, on the emotions and behavior of individuals’ (Debord, 1996, p.22) — as the name

of a newspaper column. I had read Situationist theory about the city in the late 1990s and early 2000s; one of my chief discoveries during research into the work of artist Gordon Matta-Clark had been the influence Situationist writings had on his thinking, something I initially guessed from the echoes of their slogans I heard in his own writings; a discovery later confirmed through interviews I made with his former assistant Gerry Hovagimyan and his half-brother, Ramuntcho Matta. However, I was not enamoured with the way Situationist ideas had been recycled into journalism or repurposed as arcane occult theories, so I didn't reference them in *Isolarion*.

Is the influence of the Situationists nevertheless still discernible in my understanding of place? I would argue it is there, not least in their antipathy to the homogenisation of urban spaces. They were acute in realising how this trend is the logical outcome of big business and global capitalism. 'Just as the accumulation of commodities mass produced for the abstract space of the market inevitably shattered all regional and legal barriers [...] so too it was bound to dissipate the independence and quality of places' wrote Guy Debord in *The Society of the Spectacle*. 'The power to homogenise is the heavy artillery that has battered down all Chinese walls' (Debord, 1999, p.38). In *Isolarion* I mourn the fact that high streets in towns up and down the country are populated by the same chain stores, making them dead spaces, devoid of local identity. When asked to comment, in an essay published in 2018, on changes I had observed in the area surrounding Cowley Road subsequent to the publication of *Isolarion*, I noted that the agents of change were not just the ones I had foreseen. As well as the expected arrival of chain outlets, the area had seen an influx of independent,

artisan coffee houses, 'staffed mostly by a new, very different class from those that served in old-fashioned British cafes: the graduate *barrista*, skilled in creating a craft product for a clientele that mirrors themselves', creating a 'standardised environment, honed in hotspots of gentrification in our major cities and rolled out up and down the country' (Attlee, 2018, p.128).

The second way in which Situationist theory has influenced my thinking is in the notion of *ambiance* and of specific points around which the dynamics of a district circulate. One such in Oxford is The Plain, which lies just beyond Magdalen Bridge where the old tollgate to the city stood at the beginning of Cowley Road, Iffley Road and St. Clements. Although Oxford is built on a small scale it is one of the most demarcated cities I know, rich in 'psychogeographical contours, with constant currents, fixed points and vortexes that strongly discourage entry into or exit from certain zones', as Guy Debord wrote of Paris in *The Theory of the Dérive* (Debord, 1996, p. 22). For many years Oxford University students were warned not to cross Magdalen Bridge and enter Cowley, the province of factory workers, shopkeepers and college servants, so the Plain became a boundary between Town and Gown. It was also at or near the Plain that a miraculous well dedicated to St Edmund was situated in the 13th century, attracting many pilgrims, until it was filled in by the Bishop of Lincoln, who felt the dancing and merrymaking of its devotees was dangerously close to paganism. I originally believed the well's position to have been on what is now a traffic island in the middle of the roundabout, where a water fountain donated by a local brewing grandee in the 19th century bears the inscription *Lympha gqadit ruit hora sagax*

bibe carpe fugacem: The water drips, the hours go by; be warned, drink, catch them ere they fly (Attlee, 2020, p. 129).

Such charged sites recurred on my journey down Cowley Road: the leper hospital at Bartlemas, that had its own miraculous well; the first *Mikvah* (ritual cleansing bath for Orthodox Jewish women) to be built in Oxford since the expulsion of the Jews in the Middle Ages; and the site of the Workhouse, the miserable lives it contained recorded in its register of births and deaths that I consulted in a local history archive. Rumour and myth, gossip and legend undoubtedly swirl around certain focal points. However, I resist the analysis Iain Sinclair gives topography, particularly that derived from Alfred Watkins' theory of ley lines, as espoused in the book *The Old Straight Track* (1925) that was reissued in 1970, a key inspiration for Sinclair. Like Baudelaire, who in the poem *Paysage* had compared church steeples in Paris to the masts (*mâts*) of the city, Sinclair found himself fascinated by Hawksmoor's London churches and their spires: 'The most notable thing that struck me as I walked across this landscape for the first time,' he told one interviewer, 'were these run-down churches, and I suddenly realised, there's this one here and that one there, and maybe there is some connection'. (Sinclair and Jackson, 2003, p.26). In *Lud Heat* (1975) the author wills into being a network of lines laid across London, connecting churches and overlaying esoteric shapes on the city:

St. George's, Bloomsbury, and St Alfege's, Greenwich make up the major pentacle-star [...] These churches guard or mark, rest upon, two major sources of occult power: The British Museum & Greenwich Observatory— the locked cellar of words, the labyrinth of all recorded knowledge, the repository of stolen fires & symbols, excavated god-forms [...] (Sinclair, 2012, p. 17).

Whatever one may think of such arcane readings of geography, there is no doubt that powerful stories and historical events can appear to cluster in certain locations. One, a particular spur of the Chilterns overlooking the Thames valley, is explored in my book *Station to Station* in a chapter named 'Taplow and Maidenhead: Hauntology on the Hill'. It is the site of two great houses where history was made, Taplow Court and Cliveden; of the burial mound of an important Anglo-Saxon warrior; as well as a pool sacred to pagans and used for baptism by an early missionary to the Angles. I do playfully observe 'for those of a psychogeographical turn of mind' (Attlee, 2015, p. 111) that the baptism pool at Taplow, Diana Dors' swimming pool in nearby Maidenhead and the pool at Cliveden where Christine Keeler encountered John Profumo and Yevgeny Ivanov together may form a 'feng shui configuration' of shifting power in the Thames Valley, but this is a humorous literary allusion rather than a serious proposal. I prefer a different explanation to the one Sinclair might give for the reason Taplow has attracted the rich and powerful. Such people, I suggest (Attlee, 2015, p. 96) often choose scenic spots with commanding outlooks as the sites of their dwellings courts or temples, but always with good transport links— river, stage-coach or high-speed train, depending on the era— so that they can swiftly return to the centre of power when necessary. In this interpretation I find myself closer to author Joe Moran than Sinclair: 'Alfred Watkins would have given short shrift to this new-age, crystal-dangling guesswork', Moran has written. 'His ley lines were not energy fields; they were prototypes of those stubbornly human artefacts, roads (Moran, 2009, p. 78).

Or, it could be said, railways.

The GWR line from London to Bristol is a thought projection from the mind of Isambard Kingdom Brunel as much as a real space, a route connecting London to North America via transatlantic steamships that were yet to be built when he began work, just as the trains running along it are, in Marx's words, 'organs of the human brain, created by the human hand; the power of knowledge, objectified' (Mackay and Anvanessian, 2014, pp. 51-66). The line is also a space haunted by history; part of its funding came from Bristol merchants investing the compensation they received from the government for their loss of income on the abolition of slavery. Yet tyranny and exploitation did not cease, it merely shifted elsewhere. To realise his vision of connecting London with the Americas by train and steamship, Brunel had to blast a three-mile tunnel, then the longest in the world, at Box: 100 men died and many hundreds more were injured in its creation. Empire building, whether in the colonies or the English Shires, always exacts a cost.

The spaces that must be escaped in this chapter are largely mental rather than physical ones: the alienation of Melville's Ishmael, Burton's melancholy, Clare's winter depression, Attlee's work pressures and family responsibilities, Mabey's rootedness. As Tuan has shown us, our attachment to place and longing for freedom pull us in different directions. For those unable to simply leave, the answer might be to learn to see the quotidian landscape that surrounds us afresh, layered in history, as worthy of discovery as any distant and exotic realm.

3. PLACE, EMOTION AND RESISTANCE

The territory selected for exploration in *Isolarion* — humorously referred to locally as ‘the independent republic of East Oxford’— has a strong local character, while also being subject to the same forces and pressures that affect inner-cities worldwide. To grasp that character, as Tuan explains in *Space and Place*, a mental shift is necessary. While the street a person lives in is intimately experienced, ‘the larger unit acquires visibility through an effort of mind’:

The entire neighbourhood then becomes a place; it is, however, a conceptual place and does not involve the emotions. Emotion begins to tinge the whole neighbourhood... when it is perceived to have rivals or be threatened in some way, real or imagined (Tuan, 1981, pp. 170-171).

Part of the energy that fuelled *Isolarion* came from just such a threat: the desire of local politicians to monetise the neighbourhood’s perceived difference by placing ‘Gateways’ at each end of Cowley Road, rebranding it as an ethnic quarter. ‘Cities are criss-crossed with invisible lines of demarcation’ I wrote, ‘discernible to strollers, pilgrims and other explorers [...] with eyes to see them’; they should never be fixed in metal or stone (Attlee, 2020, p. 116). Similar feelings were triggered when a colleague from the publishing industry told me he intended to buy the local bakery, replacing a long-standing family business with a place that would sell croissants, tarts and sourdough bread. ‘Oh come on, he told me, ‘you can’t resist change... Your area will move upmarket whether you want it to or not’. I took some time to examine the emotions his words gave rise to.

Since I started writing about these streets, it is as though I have possessed them for the first time. I have walked them physically and brooded over them in my imagination, trying to read their meaning, as though their layout was the key to an encrypted manuscript. I have digested them as thoroughly as the baker's bread, and now they are at work from within, changing my attitudes, giving rise to new and sometimes irrational emotions. (Attlee, 2020, p. 58).

The emotion Tuan speaks of was clearly part of my reaction, yet it should be noted that this identification with a locality was achieved through a combination of physical and mental activity: I 'walked' and 'brooded'. This is closer to the understanding of space as something produced or practised found in the writing of Henri Lefebvre or Michel de Certeau than it is to Tuan's description. De Certeau writes that '*space is a practiced place*. Thus the street geometrically defined by urban planning is turned into a space by walkers. In the same way an act of reading is the space produced by the practice of a particular place: a written text, i.e, a place constituted by a system of signs' (de Certeau, 1984, p. 117). For Lefebvre, a city like Venice is not only a theatrical and artistic spectacle but also 'bears witness to the existence, from the 16th century on, of a unitary code or common language of the city' (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 173), making it both a work of art (*oeuvre*) and a product at the same time. For Merleau-Ponty, space is active, 'not the setting (real or logical) in which things are arranged, but the means whereby the position of things becomes possible. This means that instead of imagining it as a sort of ether in which all things float... we must think of it as the universal power enabling them to be connected' (Merleau-Ponty, 1986, pp. 243-44). These definitions of the urban landscape as akin to written texts and works of art, and of space as an active force linking things together, are obviously

relevant to books that take their trajectory from a road and a railway and are held together by evocations of place on the page. Yi-Fu Tuan cannot be relied on to cover every base: yet his clear, binary polarities still serve as a useful navigational tool.

How does a writer create a palpable sense of place in their work? An answer is provided by James Wood in his essay 'Serious Noticing'. For Wood, the well-deployed detail is key. 'I think of details as nothing less than bits of life sticking out of the frieze of form', he explains, 'imploring us to touch them. Details are not, of course, just *bits of life*: they represent that magical fusion, wherein the maximum amount of literary artifice [...] produces a simulacrum of the maximum amount of non-literary or actual life, a process whereby artifice is indeed *converted into (fictional, which is to say, new) life*'. (Wood, 2019, pp. 53-54).

This is a technique that occurs throughout my written work. An example occurs in *Isolarion* at a moment of inaction: a pause, in Tuan's terms. I am about to enter a 'private shop' (sex shop) on Cowley Road but find the front door locked. When nothing appears to be happening, I have learnt to observe.

In (the shop's) doorway, which I have never seen opened, the dust of the street—comprised of the pollen of trees, mud from car tyres, the shredded filters of cigarettes, fragments of atomized newsprint, chewing gum and scraps of discarded foodstuffs and packaging, all sifted and pounded by the wheels of traffic and dyed a uniform grey by its gasoline breath—is piled in an exhausted heap (Attlee, 2020, p.29).

These apparently insignificant details — 'bits of life' in Wood's phrase— turn a shadowy figure in a briefly sketched doorway into a real person in a real place.

Such 'serious noticing' during a cessation of forward momentum is the antidote to the state of inattention we are lulled into by overfamiliarity and distraction in the modern world.

Another contemporary British writer deeply invested in such techniques in order to create a sense of place is Nick Papadimitriou; his book *Scarp: In Search of London's Outer Limits* is the result of years of walking in his home territory, the fringes of North London, in particular an escarpment he spots from the window in his block of council flats and determines to explore, hoarding the physical remnants he finds on his walks at home.

The collections of letters and photos I picked up over the years from skips or houses deserted by death spill over from shoeboxes and slide across the floor until they bleed into one another. My own collection of forlorn love-letters from a failed relationship in the 1990s joins them so that, were I to die suddenly and be found months or years later, the officials bearing the responsibility of informing my next of kin would be hard put to identify me. And this is as it should be: I'm not Nick Papadimitriou; I am Middlesex... (Papadimitriou, 2009, p. 76).

Papadimitriou's intense engagement is not the result of interaction with people— very much part of the writing process in *Isolarion* and *Station to Station*. Instead he walks miles through urban and semi-urban landscapes with hardly an encounter, at least of the conventional kind: a tramp he meets in a graveyard turns out to be a kind of folk spirit or shaman, purportedly hundreds of years old; but the dead are around him constantly, along with memories of his own long-vanished childhood.

I pull my region closer, dragging its leaf-fall, scrap-iron, blotting-paper substance home with me after every walk. I spread my finds out on the trestle table and spend long evenings in examination. I hear voices hovering around these tiny fragments of other times, other people's lives, though what is said and who's had who I can't often tell (Papadimitiou, 2009, pp. 76-77).

In my resistance in *Isolarion* to proposed and actual changes to the place I am writing about I am also hardly alone. As Susan Sontag has written, 'one of the recurrent themes of modern travel narratives is the degradations of the modern, the loss of the past. The 19th century travellers are noting the inroads in the idyllic life in, say, the South Seas made by the modern money-economy; for travellers who would never dream of living like the natives generally still want the natives to stay wholesome, rustic, sexy and uncomfortable' (Sontag, 1984, unpaginated). I was sensitive to such charges when writing *Isolarion*. But my resistance to proposed regeneration measures on Cowley Road was not a matter of nostalgia— for me and I suspect many others, Oxford would become uninhabitable without an area that remained outside the sphere of the tourist industry, un-dominated by its universities and to some extent self-governing. As Abdelhafid Khatib wrote in response to the threatened demolition of Les Halles in 1958, 'any solution aimed at creating a new society requires that this space [...] be preserved for the manifestation of a liberated, collective life' (Andreotti and Costa, 1996, p76).

I confessed in *Isolarion* to not being keen on local politics: 'however, sooner or later, anyone who hangs around the edge of a battlefield is going to get drafted' (Attlee, 2020, p.66). I was invited to take part as a delegate in a two-day planning consultation with members of the public and the architects charged with the

redesign of the Cowley Road and its environs. My involvement in the consultation led to many semi-comical outbursts and confrontations, both in person and via correspondence. For instance, when delegates criticised local Asian food stores for piling their produce on the street outside their shops, I responded by arguing, in the full knowledge I sounded eccentric and contrary, that it is more interesting and stimulating when proceeding through a city as a pedestrian to have to move from side to side, rather than straight ahead on a pavement that is 'like a motorway'. (Attlee, 2020, p.70). The extended and highly critical letter I submitted as part of the planning process became part of the book— clearly a risky strategy for a writer documenting the area where he and his family lives.

The journey made in *Isolarion* outlined in this chapter is a different one to either the *dérive*— or aimless drift— of the Situationists, or the wanderings of British psychogeographers, who tend to interact on the page only with their chosen travelling companions or fellow scribes. As Lauren Elkin has written, "The great writers of the city [...] are all men and at any given moment you'll also find them writing about each other's work, creating a reified canon of masculine writer-walkers' (Elkin, 2016, p.19). The sense that readers of Sinclair or Self are part of an in-crowd who will understand key cultural references and be able to penetrate the authors' somewhat opaque prose style is perhaps another difference between key works of British psychogeographical writing and my own. While not afraid to experiment with form or language, my books seek to make connections rather than create an exclusive, parallel reality. *Isolarion*, for instance, is full of the voices of those I encountered on my wanderings: friends,

family, neighbours, local politicians and activists, shopkeepers and chance encounters alike, their idioms rendered as close as possible to the tapes and notes I made during my research in an effort to capture the *sound* of the area and its many variations of spoken English on the page.

The book's progress is shaped as a pilgrimage, with the clear subtext that undertaking the journey has changed its protagonist. Its everyday day location becomes a 'practiced place', in de Certeau's words, its streets walked and brooded over, its detail captured through a process of serious noticing. In terms of its protagonist, its movement is from outsider status to committed local; in response to a perceived threat, emotion has begun 'to tinge the whole neighbourhood' in Tuan's words, allowing it to shift from concept to place.

4. REPETITION AND PAUSE

'Place is pause; each pause in movement makes it possible for location to be transformed into place', Yi-Fu Tuan tells us. As we have already stated, 'pause'— whether as a cessation of movement or a space for contemplation— has largely been squeezed out of contemporary life by the constant demands on our attention. One way it is achieved in my writing is through looking again and again at the same thing— the antithesis to the emphasis on the constantly new that is characteristic of supermodern life.

Repetition is a key feature of the experience of the commuter making the same journey every day. In *Station to Station* I examine the effect on human perception of such journeys; the state known as habituation, in which the over-familiar no longer registers with our attention, allowing focus on the arrival of the new and significant. 'While this adaptation was a benefit when we lived on the savannah', I wrote, 'hunting antelope on foot, in danger of attack by lions, in the highly mechanised society we now inhabit it can mean that much of our time is spent in a state best described as perceptually half-asleep. There is also a reverse process that can happen after a period of time spent making the same journey' (Attlee, 2015, p. 149).

This 'reverse process' occurs when certain details in the landscape— for me it was the cooling towers of Didcot Power Station— although seen countless times, suddenly acquire a kind of hyper-reality so that they can never be ignored again.

Once this has happened they function in the landscape like the 'punctum' in a photograph that Roland Barthes speaks of in *Camera Lucida* – the detail that somehow connects with and 'wounds' the viewer, giving emotional resonance to the whole composition. The cooling towers would surface from the dreamlike state in which much of my journey was subsumed, like breaching whales; soon I was photographing them, standing in the corridor with my head out of the window, or shooting through the glass from my seat... Still lives, snatched at speed; looking at them one after another on my laptop, each a record of a few seconds culled from hundreds of days, produces in me a vertiginous feeling, as if I was replaying a single moment of my life over and over again (Attlee, 2015, p. 150).

Barthes' division of photographic imagery between *studium* — to which he gives 'a kind of general, enthusiastic commitment [...] without special acuity' (Barthes, 1982, p. 27)— and *punctum*, that which 'rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow, and pierces me', (Barthes, p. 26), is a matter of interaction between the observer and the observed that mirrors the activity of the writer looking at the landscape framed by the window of a train. 'Whether or not the *punctum* is triggered, it is an addition: it is what I add to the photograph and *what is nonetheless already there*' (Barthes, 1982, p. 55). For the prick of the *punctum* to be felt; for the reification of Arendt or the renovation of Blake to happen; for Tuan's pause to be achieved, a particular kind of space— in this case the commuter carriage— is required, one that contains, or acts as a portal to, a different mental state. Like many ritual spaces, entry to it is guarded. It is communal yet allows solitary reflection; and it is accessed through repetition.

In *Station to Station* I admit having thought that stopping commuting to go freelance would allow me more time to write. Instead, I found the opposite was true. I missed the ritualised space of the carriage. I regained access to it when I became writer in residence— or Writer on the Train— for the GWR and was

given a photo ID staff card that in the box for 'job', instead of engine driver or guard, merely said 'writer'. Re-entering the carriage enabled me to regain what I had lost; I compared the experience to divers who 'remember things while deep underwater that they cannot recall on land' (Attlee, 2015, pp. 7-8).

This is the paradox: although the railway carriage is moving through the landscape and therefore by Tuan's definition can only be defined as space, it allows pause in a way a seat at a stationary desk very often cannot. The mystery of course lies not in the object of the carriage, but the human being with her 'roaming mind' that inhabits it. As we have seen in previous chapters, the space of the non-space of the carriage can be rendered meaningful as location through the creative work it allows: at the same time it can function as a platform from which to observe a world transformed by speed and repetition and experience new forms of perception. Travel writing similarly cannot be limited to one function; while traditionally it seeks to transform formless, unbounded space into place by rendering it familiar to the reader, it can also celebrate movement itself.

5. DIGITAL AND CARTOGRAPHIC SPACE

In June 2016, along with two other writers, the novelist Kate Pullinger and the digital creative Duncan Speakman, I was commissioned by the Ambient Literature Project— an AHRC-funded, ‘two-year collaboration between the University of the West of England, Bristol, Bath Spa University and the University of Birmingham, established to investigate the locational and technological future of the book’— to create a piece of locative writing in the form of an app.² Each writer was allocated a budget, paired with a producer and a digital production company and given a year to deliver a project. *The Cartographer’s Confession* was made available to download free on iTunes³ and Google Play⁴ in early summer 2017 and went on to win The New Media Writing Prize that year.

Central to the research around Ambient Literature was the investigation of how a reader’s— or, in the terminology of digital literature, a *participant’s*— relationship to a text changes when they are actually *in* the space conjured in the story: a situation made possible by the fact that a smartphone always knows where its user is. At its most successfully immersive, the boundary between fictional narrative and the surrounding landscape in such writing becomes blurred— the text becomes the world, the world the text. Several of my books had been generated by moving through space and evoking the landscapes and

places I found on the page; now I had an opportunity to author space itself: to choose where a reader would be and what ambiance they were surrounded by when they encountered a particular element of the piece.

I was aware that most people today see themselves as a blue dot moving across a screen which reveals the names of the streets only in their immediate vicinity; and that as a result, as a character in *The Cartographer's Confession* points out, 'they were never lost, but they never knew where they were'. Yet even though digital mapping technology relies on geographic information systems (GIS) and global positioning systems (GPS), it is not as distinct from traditional cartography as might be imagined. As Clancy Willmott has written, 'the maps ... we use are not tabula rasa, but haunted by the past (Willmott, 2020, p. 16).

Although the tools have changed from sextants to software, stars to satellites, and magnetism to media interfaces, the cartographic lines drawn on paper were made by early explorers and colonialists – who made these maps for the purpose of navigation and conquest and through the discursive power of the geographical imagination (Willmott, 2020, p. 14).

Such theories encouraged me to believe that the past might still bleed through the surface of the landscape even when that landscape was rendered as a digital image; and that it might be possible to create a narrative delivered by the latest technology that would offer a reading experience as immersive and demanding as a novel. Any such story would have to both guide readers through physical space, using GIS and GPS, and through the trajectory of its narrative from beginning to end, the two movements dependent on each other.

My piece, I decided, would be situated in London; the first challenge I faced was how to select story locations in such a vast and varied territory. After the death of a relative I had acquired a box of black and white photographs of London street scenes he had taken in the late 1940s and early 1950s. The subjects of the photographs were mainly anonymous passers-by captured in the street or the denizens of street markets, including traders, customers and the occasional street performer. They included a young, blonde woman, hand in hand with a harassed looking man in a suit; a boy lifting a tortoise from a box in a market; and a man in a greasy pinstripe suit with a monkey on his arm. These would become my principal characters. I noticed for the first time that several of the photographs had their locations inscribed on their reverse in pencil; in this way the key locations of the story were chosen for me. I discovered that inspiration for elements of the plot could be derived from the employment of what James Wood calls ‘serious noticing’ in and around the locations dictated by the photographs. When I discovered a set of steps leading down into the Thames in Bermondsey, I knew that I had found the ideal setting for the violent dénouement of my story: as I stood at the top of the steps I could see clearly in my mind’s eye how events would unfold. In the same way, the protagonist encounters a quotation from *Twelfth Night* — ‘There is no darkness but ignorance’ — on a statue of Shakespeare in Leicester Square, just as I discovered it while pacing out the story and incorporated it into the narrative. Close observation is of course a prerequisite of good travel writing. Liberated by the move into fiction from the necessity to adhere to some version of the ‘truth’ — a contested commodity in much travel writing — I was free to use what I discovered as I chose.

If I was writing for the page, this would be enough. In writing for an app, each location evoked in the text had to be tested for its suitability in the real world. Would it be a safe and conducive place for a participant to stand and listen to audio material or read texts and look at images on a phone? Would a GPS signal trigger, or were there tall buildings or other structures that would prevent it doing so? And was it close enough to other locations for it to be travelled to on foot or by public transport? The story had to be paced out in real time: a high level of physical engagement was required to create a functional digital story-world. As I wrote, I sent my text to the producer of the app, Emma Whittaker. She responded, explaining what was and wasn't possible and I had to be ready to adapt the story as necessary; for instance, at her suggestion I re-sited a particular photo-location from one side of the Thames to the other, to avoid readers becoming too physically exhausted to follow the story to its conclusion.

The germ of the narrative came from a story within my own family. A Norwegian relative had married a German man in Oslo a few years before the outbreak of the Second World War and travelled to Germany with him. There her relationship with her husband broke down, but not before she had given birth to a daughter. When she said she wished to return to Norway she was told the child would have to remain in Germany, as she was the property of the Third Reich. She was forced to smuggle her baby out of the country in a suitcase.

In 1945, a prison camp was opened on the island of Hovedøya in the Oslo Fjord and Norwegian women who had fraternised with German soldiers were

incarcerated there. My characters, a woman and the young son she has smuggled out of Germany shortly before the War, escape from the island on a fishing boat and make their way to London where, after wandering through the city, they find shelter with the street-trader community. In an effort to understand his new home the boy takes to drawing maps of the city. When his mother disappears, the boy's compulsive cartography is framed as an unconscious desire to find her: the landscape around him is tinged with loss, turning it, in Tuan's terms, from location into place. As a young adult he gets a job working on the London A-Z.

A third strand to the story is derived from a set of newspaper cuttings I had discovered in the back of an old book called *Why Birds Sing* by Jacques Delamain. The cuttings tell the story of the harsh weather in autumn 1931, when swallows in northern Europe became too cold to fly back over the Alps to Italy and on to Africa. In an outpouring of compassion, members of the public in Germany, Austria and several other countries gathered them up and put them in crates on trains to Venice, where they were released. This story, I point out in the app, is in sharp contrast to historical events a decade later, when the same trains travelled north from Italy carrying Jewish prisoners on their way to Birkenau. Swallows are a motif throughout the app, punctuating the narrative with their appearances, marking time and providing a distant, aerial viewpoint on the action.

The Cartographer's Confession has a three-part structure, with each chapter located in a different part of London. The movement of readers between story-points is through 'space' as defined by Tuan: as the reader approaches the

geographical area covered in a chapter, a map zooms in to pinpoint the position of the individual stories, which are released by GIS as they are reached. Once readers arrive at a story-point, pausing their movement through the city, that space is transformed into 'place' in Yu-Fu's terms through a rich mix of media including the voices of actors, written texts, photographs, illustrations, music and binaurally recorded 3-D sound. Further elements are released on a timer as the reader moves between locations. As each audio piece, text or photograph is accessed it is placed on an illustrated timeline, so that it can be easily re-accessed, in the way a passage from a book can be turned back to and re-read. Music for the app is composed and performed by my occasional group, The Night Sky. Each chapter has a theme tune associated with it which plays while the participant is in that region of the city; an extended mix, featuring ambient river sounds, accompanies travel between chapter locations. As each chapter is navigated it is added to an illustrated map that is completed on finishing the journey and placed on a chronological timeline. Clearly, this is a collaborative process, involving many people — from actors to coders, from experience designers to cameramen and musicians— closer to making a movie than writing a book. A full list of credits is given on the app.

In the first two chapters reader/participants are free to approach a chapter location from any direction and therefore to encounter the stories clustered there in any order. This, of course, has implications for the way they are written: the overall story arc must be maintained independently of the sequence of events within it. In the final chapter, as we move towards the *dénouement*, the plotting hardens into a more linear form; certain locations remain 'hidden' until

previous story elements have been accessed, to preserve the integrity of the dénouement. For the mechanics of all these details— the fine-tuning of what is known as the interaction mechanism of the app— I was entirely dependent on the expertise of producer and experience designer Emma Whittaker.

Perhaps the best way to explain the dynamics at work is to describe what happens with an edited extract from a particular scene. It takes place on the wooden balcony at the back of a pub in Bermondsey called the Angel Inn, which overhangs the river. (Those who prefer not to enter the pub can access the scene from the riverbank outside). Users of the app have been delivered a black and white photograph of the view from the balcony towards Tower Bridge, taken in 1948. The scene in the photograph is Whistleresque, with a string of barges in the foreground and the mist rising from the water making the distant view ethereal. Both banks of the river are empty of tall buildings but studded with cranes, the tallest structures in sight. Thomas, the narrator, has lured his German father to the pub for their first meeting since he was a young child. To begin with we are privy to Thomas's internal dialogue, above background sounds of waves breaking on the Thames foreshore below and distant voices from the pub. 'It's really something, this view', his voice tells us, and users of the app are immediately caught up in making comparisons between the present skyline, the river hemmed in by tower-blocks and office buildings; the one in the old photograph, which they can pinch and enlarge on their phones; and the one being described by the narrator on the soundtrack in a scene set in London in the early 1960s, on the cusp of huge change, in which a black-and-white image of

post-war London is already a relic of the past. Effectively they are in three different time zones at once.

Part of the research process in the Ambient Literature project was to elicit responses from users of the commissioned apps. One such described engaging with *The Cartographer's Confession*:

Another amazing moment that I had was walking around the corner into Borough Market, looking at the photograph of the market place in the, I guess the early '50s or late 1940s, whenever the picture was taken. There is a church spire in the back of the photograph [...], and I saw something that looked like exactly the same view, but instead of the church spire the Shard was there instead, in exactly the same space in the frame. [...] That made you think a lot about passing time and the way the city changes [...] The way those textures and details of the city from history are still present in our lives. (M. Marcinowski, in Abba, Dovey and Pullinger, 2021, p.214).

Description of place transmitted through the actor's performance and *representation* of place provided by the photograph do not distract from *actual* place, but instead intensify engagement with it— perhaps, in Tuan's words, they 'tinge it with emotion', as the digital space of the app's story-world is overlaid onto the very real landscape that surrounds the participant, intruding into and making unique their experience through the sounds and human activity it generates. If this medium can transform even a familiar site into something new and strange by liberating a participant from the prison of the present moment, enabling them to experience it simultaneously at different times in history, perhaps it offers one resolution to the tensions in Tuan's definitions between space and place, security and freedom. As Jonathan Dovey and Matt Hayler have written, *The Cartographer's Confession* evokes a dream of another London that

seems to be secreted in its present day streets; its locations are forever changed for us' (Abba, Dovey and Pullinger, 2021, p. 158).

For those unable to travel to London or commit the time to walking the story's trajectory, an 'armchair version' of the app is available at the press of a button in which story elements— whether sequences narrated by an actor, passages of written text, both fiction and non-fiction, or photographs— are released together and placed in chronological order on a dateline, removing some of the dramatic tension inherent in the narrative while providing an interesting, randomised version of it. This version of the narrative still works, but there is no doubt it suffers when separated from the landscape in which it is embedded. Whether there is a commercial future for such works remains an open question: probably not in the form of apps, which incur huge costs in terms of coding as soon as they depart from pre-existing templates; more possibly in a future when we all have access to seamless, ultra-fast and all-pervasive internet connection.

Locative digital fiction is a form, I would argue, in which physical space plays a role as crucial as— although different from— the one it does in travel writing. In *Isolarion* and *Station to Station*, material is generated as I move through space within a territory I have demarcated as one worthy of exploration. In *The Cartographer's Confession*, a storyline is partly arrived at through physical exploration of locations, several of them selected through the use of found photographs. At the same time, the reader/participant is asked to make a journey themselves: they become explorers, using a map on their phone to locate elements in the story. The app both draws attention to their surroundings and

overlays them with an imagined space evoked by auditory, visual and written material. As Tuan has taught us, any individual is both body and mind, space and place: 'Given his roaming mind, a human being can seldom be fully where he is' (Tuan, Yi-Fu, 2014). But perhaps the opposite is also true: through engaging with the medium of locative fiction, might not participants find themselves more fully where they are?

CONCLUSION

What is it that impels the travel writer— or indeed the hero of a fictional journey— to leave home? The narratorial voices of all three works I have examined are marked by some sort of personal crisis, the resolution of which comes through engaging with the physical space that forms their environment: in *Isolarion*, that space is a street in my neighbourhood that seemed to present a microcosm of society at large; in *Station to Station*, it lies both within the railway carriage and along the course of a railway line rich in historical resonances; and in *The Cartographer's Confession* it is a city that Thomas Andersen has arrived in as a refugee, that has swallowed his mother and that can only be mastered by mapping its every street and alleyway. Each is the story of an existential as well as a physical journey: a movement not only through space but away from oppressive mental states, whether of melancholy, loss or alienation. The self, these works suggest, can be understood by understanding the physical space that surrounds it. This comes close to what Frederic Jameson has called 'an aesthetic of *cognitive mapping*'.

In a classic work, *The Image of the City*, Kevin Lynch taught us that the alienated city is above all a space in which people are unable to map (in their minds) either their own positions or the urban totality in which they find themselves (...) Disalienation in this traditional city, then, involved the practical reconquest of a sense of place and the construction or reconstruction of an articulated ensemble which can be retained in memory (Jameson, 1991, pp. 51-2).

I would argue that what is happening in the works I have reviewed is something approaching this process of disalienation through the 'reconquest of a sense of

place'. Lynch's observations were limited to the traditional city: Jameson expands them outward to encompass the postmodern world-space of multinational capital, calling for 'the invention and projection of a global cognitive mapping, on a social as well as a spatial scale' (Jameson, 1991, p. 54). For the alienated, whether situated in the vast grid-city devoid of landmarks or the non-places of Augé's supermodernity, the world can appear, in Tuan's terminology, overwhelmingly 'space' rather than 'place'. In my practice the reconquest of this alienated territory can be undertaken equally well by walking through it while remaining open to the chance encounters that may result; rushing through it on a train; or observing it through the prism of an emerging medium. At the same time my writing recognizes that when place itself becomes constraining, accessing the freedom offered by space becomes imperative.

I am conscious that I have broadened Yi-Fu Tuan's concept of the pause, just as Jameson expanded the application of Kevin Lynch's thoughts about alienation. Like Tuan, I believe a pause must be found; like him I also believe that place can become a prison to which only movement provides the key. Sometimes in the works I have examined pause is achieved by a literal cessation of movement, accompanied by 'serious noticing', in James Wood's phrase, of detail in a particular locale, investing space with meaning and the artifice of writing with life. At others, it is discovered in the midst of movement, by locating the moment in the day that William Blake instructs us neither Satan nor his watch-fiends can find. Finally, a pause may occur in Leicester Square or on the banks of the Thames as a participant listens through their headphones to a story unfolding which colours and enriches the space they find themselves in, on the one hand

transforming it into place, while on the other demonstrating that place itself remains mutable, subject to expansion and reimagination as it blends with the digital realm.

ENDNOTES

¹ 'The new nature writing focuses on finding meaning not in the rare and exotic but in our common, unremarkable encounters with the natural world, and in combining both scientific, scholarly observation of nature with carefully crafted, discursive writing. In this sense it speaks to a contemporary eco-political moment while critically engaging with the rich history of nature writing and thinking about the environment in Britain from the Romantic era onwards, and particularly since the late 1960s'. Joe Moran, 'A Cultural History of the New Nature Writing', *Literature & History*, 23:1 (Spring 2014), 49-63.

² <https://research.ambientlit.com/index.php/about-the-project/>, accessed 09/04/2020

³ <https://apps.apple.com/gb/app/the-cartographers-confession/id1263461799>, accessed 3 July 2020

⁴ <https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=com.calvium.apptrails.ambientliteraturejames&gl=GB>, accessed 3 July 2020

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