Manchester has taken possession of me for good. I cannot leave, I do not want to leave, I must not.

W.G. Sebald

Listening for the Corncrake

Introduction to the Walk by Iain Sinclair

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The Walk

It is an inflexible conceit that there is only one city in my life. A city, mythologized to the point of dissolution, that stretches eastward from Charing Cross Road to the Lea Valley – while absorbing, when the wind is in the right quarter, downriver reaches of the Thames, Isle of Dogs to Southend. A zone labelled for easy access: London.

When my former prejudice was reduced to tatters by a single day walking in the rain through Manchester, everything crumbled with it: belief systems, concepts of urban geography, individual identity. A couple of hours into this gig and I was hiding behind the mask of a zombie who had rented my face, a person older, more troubled, estranged from the landscape markers by which he recognised himself. Manchester with its red-brick canyons was a dark mirror. I became city-centre tumbleweed, one of the unregistered; a solid ghost in an alien nightmare. Nobody stopped me to ask the way, as happens every afternoon in London, even when I direct lost souls by the most complicated bypaths; when I mumble more information than anybody needs or requires.

It starts with Thomas De Quincey, with Confessions of an English Opium-Eater. The quintessential London writer and recently elected godfather of psychogeography was born in Manchester in 1785. He attended Manchester Grammar School and was banished to a lightless crypt. He fled, unsure if he had 'eloped' or 'absconded', to Cheshire and the Welsh borders. On foot. Putting up at roadside inns. Discovering that walking was remembering, anticipating, debating with your demons.

Newly settled in London, back in the Sixties, I devoured the Confessions. Here was the film I would never make and the unstable model for everything I would write: English mountains and rivers, city as labyrinth, gossip about poets, predatory metaphors. De Quincey it was who floated the notion of the northwest passage as an escape from the soot-choked gravity of London. To be trapped, yes, and willingly; but to maintain the ideal of transcendence, travel from that which is least known to that which is unreadable: white-out, self-erasure. Polar absolutes. This creased and diminutive figure, man of the margins, unreliable witness, was the ultimate prisoner of language. Writing to write, seeking digression as a necessary device to stack up the pages, in support of his family. Hack journalism as vision. Every drop of sweat a coin earned.

Twenty years after De Quincey's escape, he's back. 'As I stood sheltering myself from rain in a shop within the most public street of Manchester, the master of the establishment drew my attention to a gentleman on the opposite side of the street – roaming along in a reckless style of movement, and apparently insensible to the notice he attracted. "That," said the master of the shop, "was once a leading merchant in our town; but he met with great commercial embarrassments... he lost all hope; and you see what sort of consolation it is that he seeks" – meaning to say that his style of walking argued intoxication. I did not think so. ▸

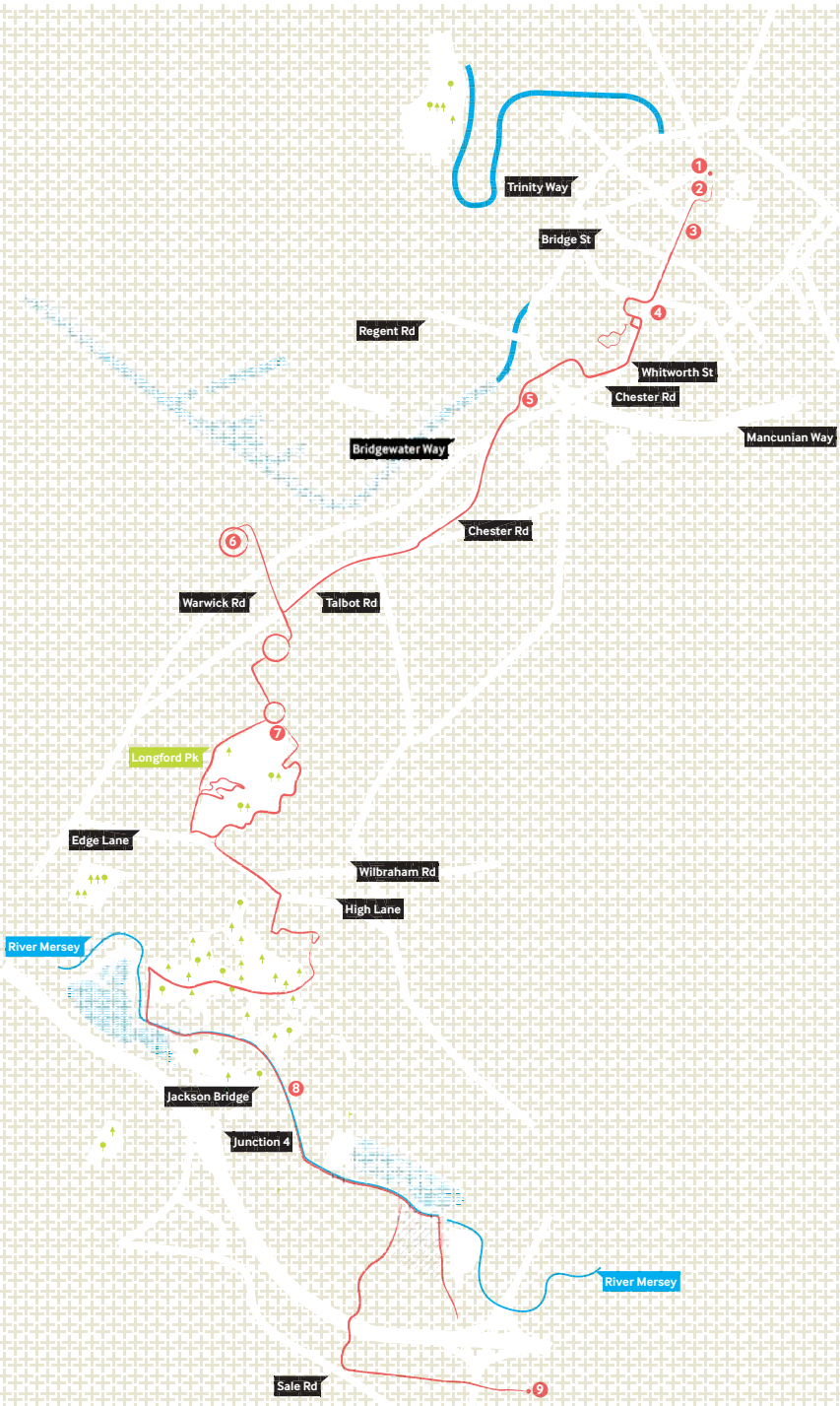
▸ There was a settled misery in his eye, but complicated with that an expression of nervous distraction, that, should it increase, would make life an intolerable burden. I never saw him again, and thought with horror of his being called in old age to face the fierce tragedies of life.'

In London, De Quincey exists in a blur of perpetual motion; if he stops, he ceases, the words don't come, funds dry up. His addiction to language screams in every cell of his being. When he encounters eccentrics such as 'Walking Stewart', it is on equal terms: they tramp, they collide, rush on. Stewart is always ahead of him: madder, faster, more implicated in the derangement of the city.
In Manchester De Quincey is at rest, sheltering from the rain, local walkers are a cinema of otherness, perhaps drunk, perhaps crushed by circumstance. The only route open to him, as one small element in the narrative of place, is out. The road. Altrincham on market day. Within the amphitheatre of the hills, the spread of the Cheshire plain, market gardens and open countryside push at the townscape. Manchester is an island of the real. A human stain challenged to define itself. Daniel Defoe's great village, exploded by industry, manages its decline, experimenting with novel identities, beneath which the old gods shelter.

Of all British conurbations - rivers, railways, airports, development opportunities - Manchester was the grandest, the most challenging: and most avoided. It was too late, the story was too rich, I would not live long enough to fix my bearings. But there was attraction, too, in navigating a place that was completely unknown. Tapping along, fierce as Blind Pew (black spots on tongue), I was a sightless land-mariner negotiating territory more familiar to my audience.

Is the rain falling now? Misting my spectacles? Good. The promotional city-centre guide is pulp in my pocket. Out of the sea-fret drizzle, a phantom ship appears like one of the spectres WG Sebald mentions in his fictive memoir, The Emigrants. Ocean-going craft confirm Manchester's status as a port by sliding down the Ship Canal, towering over terraces with dreamlike intimations of other worlds. This landlocked building, Urbis, sleek and unexpected, has turned its back on the River Irwell, to face the town and its compact, self-contained centre. Shivering in its glass cladding like a customised iceberg, Urbis belongs to a fleet I am learning to recognise, boats that do not travel but which are themselves the inspiration for travel by others: visitor destinations, attractors, flexible in usage, weather-resistant, brought into existence with the death of industrial process. When shipyards close and dockers are stood down, pseudo-ships carry a heavy cultural freight. The final act of steel-rivet, large-scale shipbuilding technology is to throw up Antony Gormley's Angel of the North. An icon for a new theology of capital and regeneration. The first religion to create its idols in advance of its doctrine. Construct strange gods and in time we will invent the myths to explain them.

Iain Sinclair



The Plot

Simple notion: drive to Manchester, lodge somewhere generic, close to the airport (always a good indicator of edge-lands), take a bus (if available) to the centre, find Urbis (where my report is to be delivered), walk back out to hotel.

The Britannia Airport Hotel, in which I was booked, was on Palatine Road. Out here, travellers reeling from the M6 and the M56, discover in this concrete box a soothing redoubt, sound-baffled and cold-war casual. The Britannia Airport Hotel fulfils most of the criteria for Will Alsop's SuperCity staging posts: a set for Chaucerian exchanges, painless conviviality, displays of commissioned art. The building services its clients with minimal human intervention. Food is in trays, newspapers are stacked: help yourself. Automatic doors open directly onto a semi-circular public space, deep chairs in which to lounge, large-screen television, sunken bar. Mid-afternoon voyagers, already at ease with the barman, talk football. A large man wears a T-shirt printed with MAN U CHAMPIONS 18.

The Route

1 Urbis
2 Cathedral Gardens
3 Deansgate: South
4 St John Street
5 Railway, Canal, Road: Cornbrook, St George's
6 Old Trafford
7 Longford Park
8 River Mersey
9 Britannia Airport Hotel

For alternative means of travel the Metro Shuttle Bus Green Line journeys from Cathedral Gardens, Cathedral Street, to Mancunian way departing every 10 minutes. The bus route covers the beginning section of the walk.