LITERARY GEOGRAPHIES

Urban Walking and The Spatial Hinge

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This piece considers the potential of reworking the concept of the spatial hinge (Thurgill and Lovell 2019; Thurgill 2021) in the context of Rebecca Solnit's (2014: 212) interpretation of the psychogeographical 'theory of the Dérive.' It describes how an urban walking tour (Evans and Jones 2011) enabled a reframing of the hinge as an embodied venture into the unknown. The essay explores the value of walking practice for literary geographers and, through an engagement with emerging theory in this interdisciplinary approach, show how a literary text representing one place can be used to guide the mobile exploration of a different location. In this case I write about a public event experienced by nearly 40 people which formed part of a literary festival held in 2019. I start by referring to James Thurgill (2021: 153) as he defines the concept which underpins my analysis:

> The 'spatial hinge' names a process which extends a reading (and with it the text itself) into places previously unassociated with the text, which start to feel as if they belong to the text and, as a result, come to be experienced by readers as fundamental parts of its literary landscape, even where the author has made no connection to such a site in their writing.

Understanding the hinge in terms of a 'swing' between written geography 'inside' the text and literal geography 'outside' (Hones 2022: 67), my example explores how the texture and atmosphere of late nineteenth-century London, conveyed by Arthur Machen, links with spaces created twenty years after his death. I am using a specific section of *The Hill of Dreams* (first published in 1907) rather than the whole novel for reasons which will become clear after I have introduced some ways in which walking has previously been used in literary geography.

David McLaughlin (2016) has written of the experience of exploring novels by authors such as James Joyce and Arthur Conan Doyle whilst walking. More recent examples are more intimate and personal: Naomi Walker (2020) takes solo strolls during the COVID-19 lockdown, while Angharad Saunders (2020) makes woodland walks with her young sons, inspired by the Gruffalo and goats. The latter two examples perhaps connect better with the tradition of lone walking than my mission to walk in a larger group – and in urban spaces. A paper by Jon Anderson (2015), however, investigates inner-city Cardiff as he traces the inspiration for one novel. Anderson promotes the potential for psychogeographical walking techniques to 'reimagine everyday space through new forms of interaction' (128).

My case study builds on elements of Arthur Machen's novel *The Hill of Dream*s (published in 1907), in which the protagonist, Lucian, is depicted at different stages of his life. The first four chapters describe his adolescence during the 1870s as he wanders through the rural landscape around (the fictional) Caermaen in Wales. The last three chapters portray Lucian as a young adult, by then an aspiring writer, as he ventures around the urban spaces of London during the 1880s. Though my work focuses on Lucian's London, it is important to explain that the fictional Caermaen has a relationship to the Welsh town of Caerleon, where I staged the walking event.

Machen states in the original preface that the fictional Caermaen is based on Caerleon, the small town where he was born. Of note, he does not specify where *the hill of dreams* may have been. He focuses on the town and makes it clear that Caerleon was, by the early twentieth century, 'a little desolate village' which had lost its previous glory as a Roman fortress city (2016: 72). Caerleon's Roman remains and its earlier links to the legend of King Arthur may have influenced much of Machen's thinking. Rouse (2013) explains how writers since the twelfth century, including Tennyson, were inspired to write about this place. Perhaps the fact that Machen spent his childhood in a quiet rural location made him particularly open to the intensity of urban city life. Indeed, Machen's novels are considered to convey the feeling and atmosphere of rapid urbanisation: his work has been described as a 'London Science' (Coverley 2015). To explain how walking may allow feeling to be located, I return to the psychogeographical practice introduced earlier.

As interpreted by Rebecca Solnit (2014: 212) the psychogeographical 'theory of the Dérive' can frame walking practices as ventures into the unknown. For example, a group walking tour can deploy the dérive by taking a map of one place when walking through another, throwing dice to decide which direction to turn, or, as I now suggest, using an unassociated literary text to experience place. Such a public walk could illustrate Sheila Hones' (2008) concept that the text event of fiction is relational: including, and affected by, both the context in which the literary work was written and the social situation in which it is accessed. With a group walk there is a significant degree of the *social*, particularly when the walk includes the performative elements of reading literary text and being accompanied by a performance artist.

I wanted to embrace Solnit's notion of the 'unknown' by exploring the potential connection between Machen's depiction of late-nineteenth century London (the last three chapters of the novel) and Caerleon as it become urbanised from the 1960s. I was open to

something less directed than previous Machen-inspired walks around Caerleon. For example, Literature Wales organised a 'literary tourism' event to visit places explicitly mentioned in Machen's texts, as well as his childhood home (Wild 2012). In another case, a group of artists went to Caerleon looking for the hill of dreams. Included in the resulting multi-format installation was a monologue written and performed by writer Stewart Lee. As Lee is a well-known Arthur Machen follower, it struck me that he was disappointed with modern-day Caerleon. In his own words he encountered the 'surreal threaded through the mundane' (Lee 2016). My walking event was intended to spark a reaction: the mission seemed satisfactorily flexible, but also sufficiently interesting, to underpin a dérive.

As I planned the walk, I consulted old Ordnance Survey maps. Editions from the 1960s to early 1980s showed Caerleon's centre, with its Roman remains and mediaeval buildings, becoming enveloped within an outer ring of brick, concrete and tarmac. Caerleon's population expanded by two fifths through the 1960s; a rate of increase similar to London in the period described in *The Hill of Dreams*. I plotted a line from the event base, coincidentally adjacent to Machen's birthplace, via the Roman remains, playing fields, and collections of post-war housing estates to a hillfort. The summit would be reached within an hour and there were options for the walk to be shortened. In the marketing materials we made it explicit that this would be an opportunity to explore the relationship between Machen's London text and urban spaces created during the 1960s and 1970s.

Most of the attendees came from the local area. Some knew *The Hill of Dreams* well and a few had been on the Literary Wales tourism walk in 2012. I explained that my role was to guide people along the route and to read out passages from *The Hill of Dreams*. Alongside me performance artist Marega Palser created some small playful acts which related to the text. We walked away from the visible Roman remains and stopped at the edge of a 1960s-era secondary modern school where I read a passage about the expanding London suburbs. Machen describes a man who descends from a London bus on a dark night (2006: 186-87). There is no street lighting between the bus and his new home. The man is assaulted, robbed, and seriously hurt. The story makes everybody in the neighbourhood fearful. This scenario was also the subject for an improvised dance by Marega, who ran between lamp posts near to the school, seeking protection under each imagined light. One person recalled how many of the new housing estates were isolated from the bus network in the late 1960s, and how she feared for her safety every time she returned home late at night. We then walked to an example of a privately built 1960s housing estate. I read out a different Machen description (168) of the late-Victorian London edgelands surveyed by Lucian:

> On every side monotonous grey streets, each house the replica of its neighbour, to the east an unexplored wilderness, north and west and south the brickfields and market gardens, everywhere the ruins of the country, the tracks where sweet lanes had been, gangrened stumps of trees, the relics of hedges…

This reading prompted walking participants to recall memories of our location from the 1960s. Woodlands and lapwing habitats in this place were displaced by houses and roads. The depletion of nature promoted one walker within the group to read out - and translate from

Welsh to English - lines from Waldo Williams's poem *Mewn Dau Gae* (In Two Fields): 'High up, above the sparkle-billed pipers, above the wise flight of the lapwings. It brought me the great peace' (Williams 2010). Though such a feeling of calm is no longer accessible, the words resonated with the wider group.

This was a public walking event inspired by a literary text. As an exploration of the spatial hinge in action it was complicated by the fact that the walk was held in a place closely connected to the author. Nevertheless, it turned out that *The Hill of Dreams* – and Machen's broader body of place-based writing – did enable some form of hinged experience for the participants. When we walked in Caerleon I found that people were able to 'locate extra-literary experiences in actual-world places not associated with the novel but which *feel* like they share the same affective environment' (Thurgill and Lovell 2019: 17). Machen's text may have resonated particularly well as he writes at the pace of a walker, slowly observing atmospheres arising from poorly lit spaces and the destruction of nature in favour of buildings. From this case I have learned that writers who make rich observations of moods and affect offer potential texts for literary geographers. Moreover, by taking inspiration from psychogeography and developing texts into loosely structured walking events, it seems possible to bring participants closer to the original work while also creating new imaginative openings.

Acknowledgements

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