

Walking with the psychogeographers

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John Davies

The M62 is a beautiful road. I'm not the only one to think so. Listen to this quote by Bill Drummond, from his book *How to be an Artist*:

I ... got out of Hull and on to the most alluring, powerful, even magical motorway on our lump of an island. Even saying its name fills me with a longing. The M62. The greatest motorway ever made. Chuck Berry can keep his Route 66, Kerouac his two-lane black top, Paul Simon his New Jersey Turnpike, Billy Bragg his A13. Give me the M62. Driving it east to west is always best, especially at the close of the day into the setting sun.... [1]

I did a walk last autumn, spent the whole of September and October following the M62 corridor all the way from Hull back home to Liverpool, and reflecting back on that adventure now, I realise that one of the inspirations for my journey was Bill's quote. It struck a deep chord in me. Helped confirm for me the direction my route should take.

In my own book, *Walking the M62* [2], a diary of my journey, I described the sense of awe I had on 'the best days ... like when standing on the hillside above Booth Hall Farm watching the traffic steadily flowing across the high Pennines like a metallic ribbon glittering in the sunshine, I was won over by the wonder...'

And any motorway has a fascination about it. I'm not the only person to think so. At a psychogeography festival in Manchester recently I met Tim Edensor who has written learnedly in defence of motorway driving against the conventional assumption that it is a numbing, soulless experience. Tim has published a paper entitled, *M6 Junction 19-16: Defamiliarizing the Mundane Roadscape* [3], in which he insists that

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

Tim celebrates what he calls the *ritualistic* process of motorway driving, in which we are 'constantly mutating and creating' as we interact with cones and temporary narrow lanes ... road surfaces which dip our vehicle toward the hard shoulder ... gusts of crosswinds which ... disrupt [our] composure, even more so when large trucks pass by with a jolt instigating a firmer grip on the wheel.'

On my motorway walk I spent hours standing on bridges above the M62, watching thousands of people pass beneath. I was a vulnerable pedestrian standing nervously on a thin metallic construction which shuddered with the eddy currents sent up by every container wagon, 4-by-4 and saloon car. I looked at the intensity in the drivers' eyes as the road reared up before them at 70 mph plus, and - aligning myself with the conventional view of what these drivers were doing - I interpreted their look as a dullness, a deadness, a switched-off state.

Tim's passionate discourse on the subject, though, has helped me to realise that actually there was a lot more going on for those drivers just then, that they were each performing all the minute physical and mental functions required to help them through that particular passage, and relating to their surroundings, wondering about the bloke they'd seen above them gripping tight hold of a camera he was pointing towards them as they passed.

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

Maybe breaking motorway journeys in architecturally designed film sets with their interiors of garish colours, harsh lighting, and hidden CCTV surveillance cameras allows people to be themselves. A modernity where we share space with strangers in a public place free of the constraints of our normal surroundings with their familiarity. [4]

In *The Art of Travel* Alain de Botton described the service station as 'like a lighthouse at the edge of the ocean, it seemed not to belong to the city, nor to the country either, but rather to some third, traveller's realm.' [5] Gripped by this sense of the exotic which service stations have, and inspired by Roger Green's enthusiasm for the richness and potential in such places, I made it a feature of my cross-country walk through the urban north of England that I would spend many nights sleeping in motorway travelodges, the leather chairs at Coffee Primo making a comfortable base where I could blog my journey on my laptop of an evening.

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

Why walk the M62?

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

I'm not the first, of course, to decide to devote weeks of my life exploring the places around a major roadway. An obvious inspiration was the pre-eminent psychogeographer Iain Sinclair whose book and film *London Orbital* describes his circuit of the hinterland of the capital city 40 miles out alongside the M25 [6]. The motivation for his journey was more critical than mine. The centre of London had been the arena for most of his other deep urban explorations vividly described in incredible books like *Lights Out for the Territory* - but as the millennium approached Sinclair became appalled by the horrors of New Labour's Dome project and he felt the urge to escape that corporate nightmare by walking the M25. He wrote,

It was obvious, therefore, that the best way to come to terms with this beast was to walk it. To set out, counterclockwise, from Waltham Abbey, and to complete the circuit before the (official) eve of the New Millennium.

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

Walking is the best way to explore and exploit the city; the changes, shifts, breaks in the cloud helmet, movement of light on water. Drifting purposefully is the recommended mode, tramping asphalted earth in alert reverie, allowing the fiction of an underlying pattern to reveal itself. [7]

On my walk I left the motorway to spend a week in central Leeds and enjoyed a full and fascinating day with members and friends of the theatre companies *Imprint and Pointed Arrow*, whose productions often involve journeys, are concerned with 'explor[ing] what it means to connect with our land, its history, people and stories... [this is a] political theatre ... interested not only in events, but also in ... movement' [8]. Pointed Arrow people talked about their Pilgrimage project in 2004 in which they had travelled along the Great North Road - the A1, from London to Edinburgh, performing a play about the stories connected with the road, and exploring British national identity - and inevitably their own identities - as they went.

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

Hurst was a man with a mission. He felt that there weren't enough oak trees in England and he'd set about to put that right, recording his journey in a publication he called *The Book of the English Oak*. Phil wove the story of Hurst's journey together with the story of Phil's own journey, searching for the trees that Hurst had planted, and that became a play which toured the East Midlands earlier this year. [9]

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

Among the advantages which I have gathered from my tour, I count as not the least the proficiency I have acquired in the gentle art of strolling. I can now perform a feat which I believe few townbred men could accomplish with ease of grace: that is, to walk a good English mile in an hour. This is not quite so easy as it may appear. I therefore set down a few observations on what is fast becoming a lost art.

The first essential for success is that the stroller must free his mind from all thoughts of time, ambition, money, over-drafts, assignments, leases, bonds, agreements, formulae, loans, interests, and such tricks of commerce, and from all peevishness whatsoever. He must be prepared to pass the time of day with hawkers, beggars, parsons, squires, haughty dames, tramps, unfortunates, and bottom dogs generally, and when he receives a surly answer or a stony stare he must smile and pass on. I consider it good form to be an attentive listener to long, incoherent accounts of fearful ailments and afflictions told by garrulous old ladies: and I do heartily approve of carrying a small stock of nuts or wholesome sweets for distribution amongst juvenile friends that may be met on the way. The great secret is sympathy both with humanity and nature, and this sympathy will open the eye and the ear to sights and sounds that the indifferent would miss. A rambler in the proper frame of mind can see a complex world in each clear pool of a brook: or he can regard the tumbling ocean as a mere moisture covering a portion of a whirling atom of dust. [10]

Why walk the M62?

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

In Manchester Phil and I spent one day walking miles in search of Boggarts - which, for the uninitiated, are sprites, mischievous spirits mainly found in Lancashire and Yorkshire, often

thought to be responsible for poltergeist activity and pranks like turning the doorstep milk sour, making things disappear and causing dogs to go lame. Boggarts reside in mossy places - and north-east Manchester is surrounded by mossy places. The B&B we were staying in backed onto the evocatively-named Boggart Hole Clough, a public park which was spookily shrouded in mist on the morning of our walk, and suggested the theme to us. It made for a good day enjoying looking for the mystery in the urban, exploring the deep connections between geography and psyche, landscape and spirit. Messing about with the roadside moss.

On that walk we also encountered one of Manchester's most remarkable pieces of public art: Thomas Heatherwick's massive metallic explosion outside Sportcity whose title was inspired by Linford Christie's claim that he always left the starting block on the "B of the bang". So Heatherwick's impressive work aims to suggest the primal energy surge which fires every progressive motion. In my diary that day I wrote that

Thoughtful commentators have noted how this might connect with Manchester's recent story of rigorous regeneration, which might be said to have been sparked by the ignition of the IRA bomb at the Arndale Centre in 1996. ... The lady at the Sportcity Visitor Centre repeated a view that I've heard before, numerous times, from Mancunians: that terrible though it was, the bomb woke the city up. It fired an explosion of vital new beginnings. "And no-one was killed," she said.

This suggested another walk to us, which we did the following day - a walk from the outskirts of the city right into the epicentre of that IRA bomb, outside Marks and Spencers in the rebuilt Arndale Centre. It was a walk in which we were searching for the '*spark*' in the city, the places where the vital energy of Manchester seemed to be. Inevitably perhaps we didn't find much of that sort of energy in the Arndale, bustling though it was.

The nearest we got to some sort of a Mancunian buzz was behind the modest shopping square in forgotten inner-city Collyhurst where on a hill called Red Bank, overlooking the tower blocks of the city centre, there was ample evidence - fag ends, crushed cans, crisp packets - that people often enjoy sitting around the funny sculpture on the hilltop, soaking in the fantastic view, and revelling in each other's company. And I sensed that these hilltop soirees must ignite a hundred small sparks - of light, love, ideas - in those who share them. The legendary toothless footballer Nobby Stiles and the marvellous gurning comedian Les Dawson both came from Collyhurst, I later discovered. Exactly the sort of modest place which occasionally sparks real genius.

Why walk the M62?

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

When I started planning this walk about three years ago I wasn't then aware that the sort of processes I was embracing could be given a name. But in that short period I've become well acquainted with the term psychogeography.

'Psychogeography' was defined in 1955 by Guy Debord, Marxist theorist and founding member of the Situationist International, a small group of political and artistic agitators with roots in Anarchism, Lettrism and the avant-garde who were influential in the Paris uprising of 1968, and whose influence continued into the designers of punk rock and the subversive street artists of today such as Banksy and gHOSTbOY. [11]

Guy Debord described psychogeography as "the study of the precise laws and specific effects of the geographical environment, consciously organised or not, on the emotions and behaviour of individuals."

It is not a precise science, psychogeography, more a strategy for engaging with ordinary life in ways which subvert the alienation most of us experience. Debord suggested that the alienation we see and feel is a consequence of the economic form of social organisation which has reached its climax in capitalism. Our world, our city, our street, are mediated to us through a lens shaped by the priorities of capital, which Debord named 'the spectacle'.

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

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

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

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

The Situationists introduced some strategies to help people shake off the influence of the spectacle, notably strategies which involved wandering about city streets.

'Psychogeography', wrote Joseph Hart, 'includes just about anything that takes pedestrians off their predictable paths and jolts them into a new awareness of the urban landscape.' [12]

The Situationists introduced a strategy called the *derive*, which is basically an aimless walk, probably through city streets, that follows the whim of the moment. The joy of the *derive* - usually translated into English as a *drift* - is that it is not provoked by concerns like getting to work (commuting), or getting to the shops (consuming). The *derive* opens the eyes and heart of the *deriviste* to a liberated journey. The streets look different when you're *drifting* them.

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

In an *Exeter Mis-Guide*, published in 2003, and their follow-up *A Mis-Guide to Anywhere*, 2006, a collective of tricksters, urban theorists, performers and artists calling themselves Wrights and Sights offer to readers 'travel documents for directionless journeys'.

Directionless, but not pointless, for rather than doing what conventional guidebooks do - direct people to the reception desks of hotels and the booking offices of theatres - the *Mis-Guides* give people the permission and the tools to explore the city on their own terms, in new and creative ways.

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

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

Revisit scenes from your past and see how they're getting along without you. Look into the back gardens of houses you used to inhabit. Commemorate in chalk special places on the pavement where you said 'Goodbye' or had a memorable conversation, or kissed. Lay a wreath on the site of a memory you want to put to rest. [13]

In *The Lonely Planet Guide to Experimental Travel* [14], writers Rachael Antony and Joel Henry suggest over forty experiments including Backpacking at Home which as well as being affordable is also nicely subversive and at the same time sounds great fun:

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

This summer the geographer Daniel Raven-Ellison will walk directly across three cities: Mexico City, London and Mumbai. Daniel is taking photographs every five metres of his walk, creating a collection of more than 30,000 images. The rules of the walk are to start and end in green countryside. The project is called URBAN EARTH, whose website says that 'The route is not decided by places of fickle and biased interest, but up hidden ridges of inequality and through the most densely populated and urban of city space(s).' [15]

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

Why walk the M62?

To try to begin applying some of this theory, however shakily, to see how it sits. Here's an extract from the diary of my walk, *Ferrybridge to Castleford, 25 September 2007*.

Above Asda, only sky

Back onto the motorway route today, on a stretch of country busy with industry.

Junction 33, Ferrybridge Services: a tatty-because-well-used service area, in which business is done out of the back of vehicles, men sit alone consuming overpriced refrigerator-packaged food, women serve at tills or as Travelodge bedders, young people from nearby run-down Ferrybridge Hill hang about and police and private security patrol the area attempting to alleviate the fear of car theft held by employees and regular users of this place. Little endearing about Junction 33, Ferrybridge Services on a wet Tuesday morning. It will cheer up, though, with the arrival of elderly folks' coach parties later today and hen parties at the weekend.

Junction 32, Outlet Village: not a place I stop at today, having already done that at the peak of the retail week, on my inward journey to central Leeds two Saturdays ago. Noticing the scale, though, of the neighbouring Xscape, where people I know come from as far away as Liverpool to practice on the ski slopes. People I don't know come, I guess, from nearby Castleford for the cinema, skate park and bowls. It's quite a thing to have on your doorstep, though it does make the facilities of the town of Castleford seem feeble by comparison.

Castleford town centre: Nice seats, though, in the pedestrian area between the Co-op and Marks and Spencer. Lots of them, including single circular ones set in threes which pivot so you can either face inwards for a chat with friends, or spin away to turn your back on a stranger; all being well used by folks of all ages and types (self included) on a suddenly hot, sunny Tuesday lunchtime.

A young woman clips through the seated Castleford citizens asking them questions about what might be a local redevelopment issue, making copious notes on an A4 lined pad, and in one case taking their pictures. I imagine she is a keen young local journalist. I spin my seat in her direction hoping for an interview which would be more for my benefit than hers but she heads into the Co-op instead. Through the lobby of the Burberry factory on Albion Street rows of machinists are visible, working hard on the autumn/winter range. Despite (or maybe because of) the presence of a Factory Shop, and despite (or maybe because of) reports to the contrary (in 'chav hate' websites and sneering tabloid feature articles) it seems that no-one in Castleford is wearing Burberry. However on Bridge Street Penningtons Sporting Arms and Ammunition are trading in guns, crossbows and knives, which is enough to alert a stranger to possible dangerous traits in the local culture.

Junction 31, Wakefield Europort: today's destination and one of the most-anticipated visits of my entire walk. In my mind I'd pictured Wakefield Europort as a vast area chaotic with articulated truck activity, a motorway hell-zone. I'd imagined I'd be risking my skin walking into an area designed for massive speeding freight carriers. Perhaps it was the onset of the sunshine after Ferrybridge rain, or some other sort of reverie, but I found that at the major junction at the convergence of the motorway, Europort approach road and the A655, the traffic flowed smoothly through multiple lights and across numerous lanes; crossing it on foot was easy.

And the Europort, though busy and vast, had a calmness about it which disarmed me, then pleased me. Servicing giants like Argos, TK Maxx, DHL, Royal Mail and Asda, many lorries sped past me along California Drive, Expressway and Tuscany Way. But as they drew into their termini they seemed to be swallowed into a silence; inside those massive sheds (which cover acres and acres of low common land) it seemed that the hand over systems flow smoothly. In the long walk alongside Asda all that I could find to photograph were the shining white sides of the distribution centres resting like gentle rocks beneath a generous white cloudy sky.

If I were to compose a prayer for Junction 31, I thought, on the walk back, it would be a reflection on the realities of requesting *Give Us This Day Our Daily Bread*, because it all comes from here, this vast inland petrol-propelled port: bread (Warburtons), drinks (Scottish and Newcastle), groceries (Asda), clothes (TK Maxx), toiletries (M&S) and any other household goods you can think of (Argos); but then a long tailback of parked lorries obstructing California Drive demonstrated what happens when systems go wrong.

Waiting for delayed access to the rail freight terminal the drivers' hunger and thirst were serviced by a burger man in a white caravan signed PETE'S EATS. Pete's presence indicates

that this delay happens regularly. However the rail freight centre seems to be getting a makeover, there are signs of expansion and notices clipped to lampposts about further works, so perhaps the queues will stop and Pete will have to find another pitch. Even this queue, though, seemed calm enough, beside one driver blasting his horn. And the atmosphere was easy inside the Whitwood Transport Cafe, a light, clean and generously-proportioned place which did a good bacon butty and mug of tea for me, and offers the drivers who use it some very good facilities - showers, a TV room, pool table, decent toilets and a bar. As haulier Colin told me, drivers generally get a very raw deal, in working, resting and eating conditions, so Whitwood - not out of place at Junction 31 - is to be applauded.

Why walk the M62?

To take time in the spaces and places where hardworking people - and workless people - spend most of their days, to appreciate and celebrate them.

To explore the great secret which Charles Hurst so well expressed, 'The great secret is sympathy both with humanity and nature, and this sympathy will open the eye and the ear to sights and sounds that the indifferent would miss.'

Why walk the M62?

For the journey itself and the enjoyment of writing about it - in the tradition of many literary travellers and published psychogeographers.

To explore and provoke and mess about to see what would happen - in the tradition of many artists and playwrights of the road.

Why walk the M62?

To attempt a bit of theology without using exclusively theological language.

To explore a sort of spirituality without defaulting to the standard methods and sites and texts usually available in that arena.

Why walk the M62?

To have a bit of fun.

I think I succeeded in doing that, not sure about all the rest. But the journey of exploring and celebrating what last Greenbelt we called '*heaven in ordinary*' - that's a very valid journey to take; I'm pretty confident that I'm not the only person who thinks so.

It was really good to share parts of my M62 journey with many Greenbelters who'd first contacted me through the festival - or at the festival - offering accommodation or company, or conversation or critique or other sorts of help on the road and in the time since.

Thanks, again, to those here who did that. I hope we'll continue in sharing that journey together.

Notes

[1] Bill Drummond, *How to be an Artist*
(ISBN: 9780954165604)

[2] John Davies, *Walking the M62* -
<http://www.lulu.com/content/1454947>

[3] Tim Edensor, *M6 Junction 19-16: Defamiliarizing the Mundane Roadscape*

- [4] Roger Green, *Destination Nowhere*
- [5] Alain de Botton, *The Art of Travel*
- [6] Iain Sinclair, *London Orbital, (book, DVD)* (ISBN:9780141014746)
- [7] Iain Sinclair, *Lights Out for the Territory* (ISBN: 9780141014838)
- [8] Pointed Arrow, *Tales From the Great North Road*
<http://www.pointedarrow.co.uk/pilgrimage/>
- [9] Details of Phil Smith's play *In Search of Pontiflunk*,
http://www.northantstouringarts.co.uk/whats_on/show/in_search_of_pontiflunk
- [10] Charles Hurst, *The Book of the English Oak*, out of print but available in libraries.
- [11] For starter references, see Wikipedia entries for Psychogeography
<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Psychogeography>
and Situationist International
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Situationist_International
- [12] Joseph Hart, *A New Way of Walking*, Utne Reader, July / August 2004
<http://www.utne.com/2004-07-01/a-new-way-of-walking.aspx>
- [13] Wrights & Sites, Exeter Mis-Guide, Mis-Guide to Anywhere
<http://www.mis-guide.com/index.html>
- [14] Rachael Antony and Joel Henry, *The Lonely Planet Guide to Experimental Travel*
- [15] Daniel Raven-Ellison, *Urban Earth* - <http://urbanadventure.wordpress.com/>

The text of my talk was given at the Greenbelt Festival in August 2008
<http://www.greenbelt.org.uk/>

CDs or MP3 downloads of this talk are available from the online Greenbelt Shop
<http://www.greenbelt.org.uk/shop/talks/details/GB08-35>.

Walking the M62

During the months of September and October 2007 John Davies took a walk across the north of England following the route of the M62 motorway east to west from Hull to his home back in Liverpool. This is an edited version of the daily entries John posted on his walk website, with additional passages and a new 7-page introduction. Also including 12 b&w pictures from the walk, John's 'Twitter' archive and a useful reference list, this is an entertaining and thought-provoking record of a remarkable journey.
<http://www.lulu.com/content/1454947>

"A world animated." - **Phil Smith**, Mis-Guides

"Not so much an alternative manifesto but more a policy study on behalf of a neglected electorateThis is England, this was England...." - **Stewart Henderson**, broadcaster / poet

"Crammed full of stuff that has got me thinking." - **Joe Moran**, author, *Queuing for Beginners*

"Walking the M62 will become another component of the cultural wampum bag I carry with me." - **Roy Bayfield**, *Walking Home to 50*

John Davies
<http://www.johndavies.org>

We are grateful to John Davies for kind permission to host this work on aughty.org