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Recent British Literature: Concluding panel of the 2015 SEAC conference

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Abstracts

Français English

Les interventions ici réunies poursuivent le travail engagé dans le cadre des précédentes tables rondes ayant clôturé les colloques récents de la Société d'Études Anglaises Contemporaines. Cette année, la table ronde se tourne non seulement vers la fiction ou la prose récentes – en l'occurrence Iain Sinclair – mais aussi vers la poésie, ainsi que la littérature monde. Les trois interventions prouvent, une fois encore, la vitalité de la littérature contemporaine des Îles britanniques et aussi la complexité d'une littérature que l'on ne saurait plus longtemps définir comme *stricto sensu* « britannique ». Comme l'évolution récente du périmètre du Man Booker Prize l'indique aussi (il récompense désormais simplement une œuvre de fiction en langue anglaise ayant été publiée en Grande Bretagne), la mondialisation croissante de la fiction de langue anglaise ouvre de nouveaux horizons pour une littérature « britannique » qui ne se déploie plus uniquement selon les frontières séparant la littérature « britannique » et celle dite « post-coloniale ».

The texts here gathered continue the tradition of the panels which conclude the yearly conferences of the Société d'Études Anglaises Contemporaines. This year, the panel turns not only to recent fiction writing or prose coming from Britain—in this case Iain Sinclair—, but also poetry as well as writing coming from world literature. The three contributions testify once more to the vibrancy of recent literature emerging in the British isles and to the increasingly complex nature of what can no longer be defined as strictly 'British' writing. As the recent evolution of the Man Booker Prize also shows, which is now awarded to a piece of fiction originally written in English and published in Britain, the increasing globalization of very recent fiction in English opens up



new horizons for a 'British' literature which today can no longer be understood along the established frontiers distinguishing 'British' from 'post-colonial' writing.

Index terms

Mots-clés : R. F. Langley, Iain Sinclair, Taiye Selasi, psychogéographie, Londres, Afropolitain, littérature transnationale, Forward Poetry Prize

Keywords: R. F. Langley, Iain Sinclair, Taiye Selasi, psychogeography, London writing, Afropolitan, transnational literature, Forward Poetry Prize

Full text

Catherine Lanone: *London Overground* by Iain Sinclair

- 1 Published in 2015,¹ *London Overground: A Day's Walk Around the Ginger Line* comes as a respite after Iain Sinclair's bitter fight against the Olympics' Grand Project. While venting his nostalgia and pent-up anger in *Ghost Milk*, or adding a satiric coda with film-maker Andrew Kötting (shooting an anti-Olympic, mock-athletic trip along the Lea Valley in a swan-shaped pedalo), Sinclair had waged a lonely fight. *London Overground* returns to psychogeographic exploration with a lighter step, and has fared well with critics.
- 2 Shadowing the Overground, the new transport neural network composed of an amalgamation of old lines and new lines, Sinclair returns to a shape or 'geometry of experience' (Sinclair 2016), a circular ramble around London that loops the loop begun with *London Orbital*: 'To be attentive to voices, to walk beside our shadow selves. To reverse the polarity of incomprehensible public schemes' (Sinclair 2015, 127). There is a deliberate echo in the title, which is confirmed by Sinclair's wish to make the 'Ginger Line' the symptom of the moment: 'If the M25 was the significant geography for the Thatcher era, a landscape of decommissioned hospitals converted into upmarket compounds with no history, then the new railway, which was not new at all, but a device for boosting property values, looked like the right walk for our present doleful period' (23).
- 3 But whereas the epic *London Orbital* project entailed walking for a year, Sinclair decides that the Ginger Line walk must be done in a day, claiming that it feels right to do so. The change of scale ('an imploded version' [Sinclair 2016]) is a hint of the more humorous nature of the project, as if Sinclair wished to walk away from the radically changed area of East London and his own sadness: having taken nostalgia as far as it could go, he strikes out on a different route, a decision reminiscent of what Jonathan Coe also suggests concerning humour and melancholy.²
- 4 *London Overground* plays on slippage and parody. The book begins as Sinclair sets off down the Old Kent Road 'in the general direction of Canterbury' (4), an old joke; once again, the Chaucerian impulse is interrupted as Sinclair is waylaid by young people texting each other meeting points over the Ginger Line. Realizing he has 'blundered once again into a version of London' (14), Sinclair latches onto the Overground as the magic circle he must explore. Mapped by the Chapter headings that roughly follow the stops along the new line, leading from blood on the street (the mess of run-over pigeons) to road scars (Kötting is knocked down from his motorbike and wounded, his



leg bit by the monster of traffic, as if by a shark), the book is a mock *Odyssey* with ironic modernist echoes: like *Mrs Dalloway* or *Ulysses*, it must unfold in a single day, even though Kötting arrives late and instead of striking out at dawn, both men leave around eleven o'clock. Instead of a one-eyed Cyclops in their mock *Odyssey*, Kötting and Sinclair chance upon single running shoes caught in a net, bobbing in the rising tide—a collection of objects that is deemed striking enough for a photograph to be included in the text. A votive offering of the city, a spontaneous art installation, the shoes are a riddle prompting interpretation. They become a parodic spectral presence, the remains of 'a troop of one-legged marathon runners swallowed by the Thames' (127), and as such, contributing to the lingering ghost motif of the Olympics or here the Paralympics. Kötting immediately cooks up a sexual explanation, gay men looking for love leaving token Cinderella slippers. 'I'm not convinced,' Sinclair soberly says. He then conjures up hundreds of barefoot pilgrims paying their toll to cross the river: 'That made more sense: [...] Limp on, urban sadhu. [...] Every step a penance, every step a memento mori' (129). The pastiche of Sinclair's own constant reading of nostalgic signs is irresistible.

5 Sinclair also turns the partnership with Kötting into a double act, a Laurel and Hardy number. Blister-ridden and boisterous, Kötting is concerned with food and constantly hungry or taking a leak, he is the Bakhtinian body whereas Sinclair, musing on the past, seems all head. But Sinclair also makes fun of his own quixotic fights and wistful prophecies, casting himself as a latter-day Don Quijote to Kötting's Sancho Panza. He opts with relish for deflation and an ironic self-portrait as Kötting compares him to Brando's Kurtz in *Apocalypse Now*, 'With your polished skull and your TS Eliot and your overlandunderground rumbles' [sic] (167).

6 Playing on the comedic connection between the two partners in exploration, the text treads lightly, offering a string of sights and impressions, of signs read and misread, like the graffiti depicting a bureaucrat hung to dry by his suspenders, or the soldier with a drooping shotgun. As usual in Sinclair's texts, anonymous graffiti becomes the site of resistance to what Rancière calls the re-distribution of the sensible, in the Neoliberal city. Passing through Willesden, Clapham Junction, Dalston Junction, Hamsptead Heath, Sinclair chronicles the changing cityscape, conjuring up past lines and long-gone or revamped stations, mixing metaphors. Old garages and shops are replaced with fashionable cafés and trendy sites like Charterhouse Aquarium, providing fish tanks for the wealthy, dwelling in semi-transparent aqueous light beneath the arches, like a primitive underwater cave, a bemusing sight, a cross between Paul Klee and consumer fetishism.

7 Thus, as usual, psychogeographic progression implies a constant awareness of cross-sections, an archeological unravelling of the city's commercial and cultural palimpsest. For Brian Baker, '[w]hat Sinclair attempts to do is not to consume the spectacle of urban space, but to produce it through a reinscription of its histories' (Baker 21).

8 In this case, the literary palimpsest is often playful or ironic. For instance, the detour past the Freud Museum jumbles together an evocation of Freud's escape from Germany and railway journey to London (bombastically hailed as 'making a landing as significant as that of Duke William of Normandy' [216]), and an evocation of customized trophies, from Freud's own display of 'Egyptian gods and votive offerings' (signature 'excavated relics' confirming 'the metaphor of analysis as an extension of archaeology' [222]), to the paraphernalia for tourists, complete with mugs and the genuine 'Prof. Sigmund Freud's Fruit & Nut Bar,' relishing the commercial pun on 'nut'. Mistrusting psychoanalysis (a good walking partner offers a much better opportunity for reciprocal healing confession), Sinclair is interested in the man rather than the myth; cancer-ridden in London, Freud is taken down a peg or two. Sinclair suddenly rushes into a



flight of fancy, superimposing Conan Doyle's cases and Freud's cases, finding wondrous connections and secret correspondences (such as the photos of Irene Adler and of Yvette Guilbert, cocaine, piecing together narratives, reading clues and slips of the tongue) till Holmes blends with Freud, the arch 'Ghost hunter or ghost detective' (214), and Sinclair concludes with a flourish, picturing Freud ready to push his rival over into a ravine as if at the Reichenbach Falls, so that 'the Viennese Professor is a Moriarty figure' (216). The sweeping demonstration is in the 'demythologizing business' (the expression is taken from Angela Carter's *Notes from the Front Line* [71]), with great relish and zest.

9 As the text circles the stations of Sinclair's own overground/underground London, mapping the absent presence of writers and painters, the palimpsest pokes fun at the establishment, with a shot of Lady Di ostensibly going to the gym, for instance: 'But the most instinctive revenge on Diana's unfaithful husband was instinctive, not plotted: it was architectural' (138). Elsewhere, the 'circus' of Latter Day London with its emblematic Ferris Wheel, the Millenium Eye, calls for its 'clown,' Sinclair's nemesis, Boris Johnson, the then Mayor of London, who also makes a cameo appearance towards the end of the book.

10 Moving into familiar and unfamiliar territory, indulging, as he puts it, in cultural tourism without the inconvenience of taking a plane, musing on neglect, from derelict places to property developers, speculation, empty Qatar zones, or the closed library which Zadie Smith fought for, Sinclair suddenly branches off, striking a deeper note, conjuring up tutelary presences: Sebald, Ballard, but above all Angela Carter, the white-haired seer and friend, or Leon Kossoff, whose impasted oils picturing views from bridges provide textual areas of intensity: '[Freud, Auerbach, Kossoff] stay close to railways, using tracks as ladders into past and future, ladders of transience and extinction. Ladders like strips of film' (220). Ghosting the photographs and the descriptions, echoes of past voices and works of art linger in the postmodern makeover of the commercial city, as Sinclair continues his journey as a 'cryptographer,' in David James's words, 'going *in search of* London beneath the everyday rhythms that suffuse it" (James 149). Thus *London Overground* explores a new borderland, blending walking, reminiscing, echoing, and 'a circulation of images of circulation' (Sinclair 242).

Vanessa Guignery: Taiye Selasi: to be or not to be Afropolitan

11 The 2013 *Granta* list of 'Best of Young British Novelists' featured a majority of women and was indisputably cosmopolitan, including such writers as Kamila Shamsie (born in Pakistan), Xiaolu Guo (of Chinese and British nationalities), Nadifa Mohamed (born in Somalia), Helen Oyeyemi (born in Nigeria) and Taiye Selasi. Born in 1979 in London to parents from Nigeria and Ghana, Selasi was raised in Boston, Massachusetts, educated at Yale and Oxford, and has lived in Delhi, Rome and Berlin. Her contribution to *Granta* consisted of her second short story, 'Driver,' set in Ghana like her first, 'The Sex Lives of African Girls,' which had been published by *Granta* in a special issue on feminism (2011) and then featured in an anthology of *Best American Short Stories* (2012). Selasi's third short story, 'Aliens of Extraordinary Ability' (2014), is set in New York, and brings together an Indian cab driver, a Russian art gallery owner, a Senegalese cleaner and a young American prostitute with parents from India, while her first novel, *Ghana Must Go* (2013), charts the trajectories of characters in Ghana, Nigeria and the United States. Selasi also wrote the text which accompanies the



documentary *Exodus—Where I Come From is Disappearing* about the fate of refugees.

12 In a world dominated by global transnational literature, Taiye Selasi can be considered as a prime example of transcultural writers or ‘translated’ men and women (Rushdie 17): she herself claims to be ‘multi-local’ rather than ‘multinational’ (2014a). In her 2013 talk ‘African Literature Doesn’t Exist’—echoing Rushdie’s own seminal text from thirty years earlier, ‘Commonwealth Literature Doesn’t Exist’ (Rushdie 61–70)—Selasi protested against the ethnic and national categorization of writers: ‘to call me an African novelist is first to invent some monolithic Africa and second to restrict me—my characters, their color—from overstepping its bounds’ (2013d).

13 Reflecting on the question ‘where are you from?’, she explains how misleading her answers can be, such as ‘My father’s from Ghana but he lives in Saudi Arabia’ or ‘My mother’s Nigerian but she lives in Ghana’ (2013c). These statements omit a great part of her parents’ lives and histories: her father’s training as a surgeon in Edinburgh and swift departure for Saudi Arabia soon after his daughters’ births, or her mother’s Nigerian and Scottish ancestry, birth in London and ‘painful adolescence in London and Lagos’ (2013c). The sentences also distort Selasi’s own identity as ‘a British citizen with a suburban American accent’ who speaks no African language fluently and has always felt more at home in Oxford, Paris, New York, New Delhi and Rome than in Ghana. It is only in 2013 while travelling through fifty-four West African cities to photograph young Africans that she managed to ‘be [herself] on African soil’, a modern West Africa with ‘super-cool Togolese hipsters by the seaside’, a ‘sculpture park in the desert’ and Afro-Bavarian beer. She remarked: ‘This wasn’t my parents’ Africa, the past, that static site of hurt and home. It was mine: dynamic now. [...] *my* west Africa, *my* version of home, not just a place, but a way to be in [...] the world’ (2013c).

14 This version of a modern West Africa was first theorized by Selasi in ‘Bye-Bye, Babar (Or: What is an Afropolitan?)’ (2005),³ in which she defines a ‘stranded tribe of de-territorialized brown people’ (Bady 160):

They (read: we) are Afropolitans—the newest generation of African emigrants, coming soon or collected already at a law firm/chem lab/jazz lounge near you. You’ll know us by our funny blend of London fashion, New York jargon, African ethics, and academic successes. Some of us are ethnic mixes, e.g. Ghanaian and Canadian, Nigerian and Swiss; others merely cultural mutts: American accent, European affect, African ethos. Most of us are multilingual: in addition to English and a Romantic or two, we understand some indigenous tongue and speak a few urban vernaculars. There is at least one place on The African Continent to which we tie our sense of self: be it a nation-state (Ethiopia), a city (Ibadan), or an auntie’s kitchen. Then there’s the G8 city or two (or three) that we know like the backs of our hands, and the various institutions that know us for our famed focus. We are Afropolitans: not citizens, but Africans of the world. (2005)

15 Afropolitans are here defined as sophisticated, cosmopolitan, urbane young Africans who differ from other categories of immigrants from earlier or present generations whose relocation to a Western country was or is traumatic. For all their cosmopolitanism, Afropolitans have not turned their backs on their African origins to fully embrace a Western identity, but are intent on contesting the stereotypical images of the continent:

What distinguishes [Afropolitans] is a willingness to complicate Africa—namely, to engage with, critique, and celebrate the parts of Africa that mean most to them. Perhaps what most typifies the Afropolitan consciousness is the refusal to oversimplify; the effort to understand what is ailing in Africa alongside the desire to honor what is wonderful, unique. (2005)



16 This ‘refusal to oversimplify’ implies taking into account the specificities of the fifty-five African countries of the continent rather than essentialising ‘Africa’ as if all states were culturally, religiously, ethnically and linguistically homogeneous. It also entails forbidding the imposition of ‘a single story of Africa’ (Adichie 2009), which would be ‘a single story of catastrophe’ or what has been called the ‘Afro-pessimism narrative’ (Dabiri).

17 The buzzword ‘Afropolitan’, also theorised by Achile Mbembe in 2007, has spread in just a few years and has become commodified: it is now used by a South African magazine, by various brands and shops, as well as cultural and artistic groups worldwide. Blogs, forums and websites are dedicated to afropolitanism, now a cultural label. However, there has also been a backlash against the bourgeois aesthetic the Afropolitans have come to represent and which is ‘at odds with more explicitly politicized versions of African diasporic culture’ (Bady 149). Writers, artists and sociologists have published pieces to explain why they are not Afropolitans and to denounce afropolitanism as ‘the latest manifestation of planetary commerce in blackness’ (Dabiri), a phenomenon which is ‘product driven’, ‘design focused’ and ‘potentially funded by the West’ (Wainaina in Santana), a concept which uses Africa without Africans (Ogbechi). For Patrick Awondo, Afropolitanism holds the vocation of a utopia but needs to prove its capacity to embrace a *praxis* (118).

18 *Ghana Must Go*, the first novel by a self-proclaimed Afropolitan, focuses on a family from Ghana and Nigeria, whose father Kweku, a renowned surgeon, dies of a heart attack alone in his garden in Ghana at the beginning of the book. His estranged wife Fola has recently come back to Ghana while their children still live in the United States. This death sets off the stories of the various members of this family, told in a non-linear way, about the parents’ childhoods in Ghana and Nigeria just before the civil war, their immigration to the United States where they meet and have children, the father’s sudden disappearance from their lives, the twins’ traumatic experience as they are sent to live in Lagos with a deviant uncle, the mother’s return to Ghana, and the final family reunion for the father’s funeral. This novel about journeys back and forth across continents and across generations is aptly divided into three parts entitled ‘Gone’, ‘Going’, ‘Go’. The title of the novel refers to the phrase directed at Ghanaian immigrants in Nigeria in the 1980s, and at the end of the novel, the mother (who has mastered the art of leaving) says about her children: ‘Let them learn how to stay’ (317). In this story of willing or imposed migrations, the immigrant parents became middle-class professionals in the United States and their children later turn into successful Afropolitans. They all seem to be more concerned with who they are than with where they come from, more interested in the ‘traumas of their daily lives’ than in their African roots (Bady 161), and the book mostly stays away from African politics to concentrate on family dynamics.

19 In a recent controversial article, Ben Okri deplored what (implicitly Western) readers expect from black and African writers who ‘are read for their novels about slavery, colonialism, poverty, civil wars, imprisonment, female circumcision—in short, for subjects that reflect the troubles of Africa and black people as perceived by the rest of the world’ (2014). Like Okri, Selasi refuses to be treated as a sociologist who writes ‘about the condition of African-ness’ (2013d), and regrets that ‘literature about African people [should often be] conflated with literature about African politics’ (in Satoh 149). In *Ghana Must Go*, even if Fola’s father is killed by soldiers at the beginning of the civil war in Nigeria, the murder takes place off-stage and Fola is mainly struck by the absurdity of it all as her father was not even an Igbo, the targeted population at the time: ‘Never mind that the Hausas were targeting the Igbos, and her father was a Yoruba, and her grandmother Scottish, and the house staff Fulani, some Indian



even' (106). The complexities of the situation are overlooked by outsiders and, when she arrives in the United States, Fola simply becomes 'the native of a generic War-Torn Nation': 'Just some war-torn nation, hopeless and inhuman and as humid as a war-torn nation anywhere, all war-torn nations everywhere' (107). This systematic simplification and generalisation, highlighted by the repetitions, is the equivalent of Chimamanda Adichie's 'single story' and precisely what the characters are aiming to escape. Thus, Kweku left Ghana to flee his condition as a citizen of a poor African country and to become, simply, human:

To be 'free,' if one wants swelling strings, to be 'human'. Beyond being 'citizen,' beyond being 'poor'. It was all he was after in the end, a human story, a way to be Kweku beyond being poor. To have somehow unhooked his little story from the larger ones, the stories of Country and of Poverty and of War that had swallowed up the stories of the people around him (91)

- 20 *Ghana Must Go* specifically attempts to avoid those stereotypes and offer counter-narratives of West Africa and Afropolitans, moving away from the concerns of earlier immigrant literature to throw light on a privileged community. While the parents struggled financially upon their arrival in the United States, their children are depicted as upwardly mobile and belonging to the middle- or upper-middle-class: they take private piano lessons, are educated in prestigious Western universities, and forge successful careers in medical or artistic circles. The youngest daughter is aware of this class privilege:

For all of the hoopla about race, authentic blackness [...], it is obvious to Sadie that all of them carry this patina of whiteness, or WASP-ness more so: be they Black, Latin, Asian, they're Ivy League strivers, they all start their sentences with overdrawn *ums*, and they'll all end up working in law firms or hospitals or consultancies or banks having majored in art. They are ethnically heterogeneous and culturally homogeneous (146)

- 21 Selasi's focus on privileged Afropolitans could clearly expose her to criticism by such writers as the Kenyan novelist Mũkoma wa Ngũgĩ who criticized Adichie for her 'African, middle-class aesthetic' in her novel *Americanah*, 'an aesthetic that is so concerned with not telling a single story of poor, fly-infested Africans that it goes overboard into the academic halls of Princeton, of mansions, housemaids, and casually worn and perhaps ill-gotten wealth' (in Selasi 2015). Writing about the middle-class diaspora is indeed a way for African writers to stay away from what has been called 'poverty porn' or an indulgence in such topics as genocide, prostitution, rape, violence and police brutality in African contexts. In his very controversial review of NoViolet Bulawayo's 2013 novel *We Need New Names*, the Nigerian writer Helon Habila harshly criticised this 'African aesthetic of suffering'.

- 22 Taiye Selasi herself protested against both criticisms which she viewed as edicts about the subjects one can write about and 'the appropriate way to write about them,' arguing instead for the freedom of writers to choose their own subjects and let whichever voices speak, be it 'the voice of the street child in Zimbabwe' or 'the Nigerian grad student at Princeton' (2015). In *Ghana Must Go* Selasi offers several story lines instead of a single story about West Africa and its emigrants. Although she mainly focuses on successful and gifted Afropolitans, she also gives us glimpses of less cosmopolitan characters, such as an eleven-year-old girl dying of treatable tuberculosis in a village in Ghana or an old Ghanaian carpenter sleeping by the ocean, who will not harm trees. Whether that is enough to fulfil the Afropolitan commitment to complicate West Africa, engage with it, critique it, and celebrate it, is still open to discussion.



Lacy Rumsey: On R.F. Langley's 'To a Nightingale'

- 23 R.F. Langley (1938-2011) was relatively little known during his lifetime—Ian Pople suggests that he may have been, as John Ashbery once said of Elizabeth Bishop, a 'poet's poet's poet'—but his *Complete Poems*, published in 2015, have attracted considerable and well-deserved attention. Born in Rugby, Langley studied under Donald Davie at Cambridge, and forged there a close friendship with J.H. Prynne. For Langley, as for Prynne, American poets such as William Carlos Williams and Charles Olson were crucial figures in the development of a style and a poetics that are inspired, in fundamental respects, by Modernism; his poems are also characterized by a close conceptual engagement with art history, aesthetics and philosophy. Yet Langley also acknowledged the great importance for his poetry of Shakespeare, Wordsworth and Hopkins, and many of his poems—meditative, attentive to the natural world—offer readers a surface that may seem more approachable than the poetry of his Modernist models and peers. His prose *Journals*, many extracts from which have been published, combine minute observations of the natural world with much material of other kinds.⁴ Langley's work may thus be seen both in the light of multiple strands of poetic tradition, and in that of the complex and innovative engagement with nature writing that has distinguished some British poetry and nonfiction in recent years.⁵
- 24 'To a Nightingale,' the last poem in *Complete Poems*, was first published in the *London Review of Books* in November 2010. After the poet's death, it was awarded the 2011 Forward Poetry Prize for the best single poem of the year:

To a Nightingale

Nothing along the road. But
 petals, maybe. Pink behind
 and white inside. Nothing but
 the coping of a bridge. Mutes
 on the bricks, hard as putty,
 then, in the sun, as metal.
 Burls of *Grimmia*, hairy,
 hoary, with their seed-capsules
 uncurling. Red mites bowling
 about on the baked lichen
 and what look like casual
 landings, striped flies, *Helina*,
Phaonia, could they be?
 This month the lemon, I'll say
 primrose-coloured, moths, which flinch
 along the hedge then turn in
 to hide, are Yellow Shells not
 Shaded Broad-bars. Lines waver.
Camptogramma. Heat off the
 road and the nick-nack of names.
Scotopteryx. Darkwing. The
 flutter. Doubles and blurs the
 margin. Fuscous and white. Stop
 at nothing. To stop here at
 nothing, as a chaffinch sings
 interminably, all day.
 A chiff-chaff. Purring of two
 turtle doves. Voices, and some
 vibrate with tenderness. I
 say none of this for love. It



is anyone's giff-gaff. It
 is anyone's quelque chose.
 No business of mine. Mites which
 ramble. Caterpillars which
 curl up as question marks. Then
 one note, five times, louder each
 time, followed, after a fraught
 pause, by a soft cuckle of
 wet pebbles, which I could call
 a glottal rattle. I am
 empty, stopped at nothing, as
 I wait for this song to shoot.
 The road is rising as it
 passes the apple tree and
 makes its approach to the bridge.⁶
 (Langley 2015, 153–154)

25 The poem elicits reminiscences of two monuments of English Romanticism. One is Keats's 'Ode to a Nightingale'; Jeremy Noel-Tod suggests that Langley's 'song' that will 'shoot' recalls the living death which the nightingale's ecstatic music induces in Keats's speaker (2012, 115). The other, which is arguably of more profound importance to Langley's poem, is Coleridge's conversation poem 'The Nightingale,' from *Lyrical Ballads*. Langley stated in a letter of 2010 that 'my deepest feelings have always been for Coleridge's Conversation Poems', and their influence on 'To a Nightingale' seems, indeed, to have been fundamental.⁷

26 This influence operates structurally, thematically, and in the manner in which theme and structure interact. The overall design of 'To a Nightingale' is of the kind that sometimes called, in a loose musical analogy, 'sonata form' or 'rondo form'—that is to say, it returns, as it closes, to its starting point. Coleridge drew attention to the presence of such a structure in another of his conversation poems, 'Frost at Midnight,' calling it 'the rondo, and return upon itself of the Poem,' and adding that 'Poems of this kind & length ought to lie coiled with its' tail round its' head [*sic*]' (I, 456).⁸ Langley's poem, at 45 lines, is shorter than 'The Nightingale' or 'Frost at Midnight,' but it makes very noticeable use of this device. The elements that recur are the road, the bridge, and the cluster of /p/ sounds between them:

Nothing along the road. But
 petals, maybe. Pink behind
 and white inside. Nothing but
 the coping of a bridge. (1–4)
 The road is rising as it
 passes the apple tree and
 makes its approach to the bridge. (43–45)

27 Like 'The Nightingale,' Langley's poem describes a radical openness to the phenomena of the natural world, with its almost systematic enjambment coming to stand as an analogy for, or emblem of, that openness. Crucial lines from Coleridge's poem describe, and in their running-on exemplify, the proper stance of the poet:

[...] to the influxes
 Of shapes and sounds and shifting elements
 Surrendering his whole spirit, of his song
 And of his fame forgetful! (27–30)

'To a Nightingale' offers a comparable statement, and similar technique:

[...] I am



Empty, stopped at nothing, as
I wait for this song to shoot (40–42)

28 Coleridge and Langley thus employ a shared troping of enjambment: as syntax moves unrestrictedly over line-breaks, so the world can, or should, enter unrestrictedly into human consciousness.⁹

29 Despite its strong relationship to these precursors, Langley's poem is by no means a Romantic pastiche: it has other distinctive qualities whose antecedents, insofar as they are poetic, are Modernist. One is the manner in which it attends to the minutiae of the natural environment, particularly to the very small living things that are present even when it might be thought that there is 'nothing along the road,' as the first line has it. In describing these phenomena, the poem incorporates and modifies aspects of scientific discourse, including the use of scientific nomenclature, the dramatization of hypothesis ('*Phaonia*, could they be?') and the presentation of precise details in (on occasions) apparently dispassionate language. Thus, the poet notes and names the different species of moth and fly, and gives careful accounts of their appearance; where Coleridge is content to evoke a 'mossy Bridge' ('The Nightingale', l. 4), Langley gives us the genus of the moss observed, as well as a detailed description of it:

Burls of *Grimmia*, hairy,
hoary, with their seed-capsules
uncurling (7–9)

30 As some readers will know, and others will be induced to discover, the seed capsules of *Grimmia pulvinata*, the most common British moss of the genus *Grimmia*, are indeed held on stalks that at first are arched, then dry and straighten with age.¹⁰ Such details abound in the poem. If readers of Ezra Pound frequently feel inspired to read up on Provençal poets or Italian condottiere princes, so those of 'To a Nightingale,' and of other work by Langley which engages in detail with the natural world and the means by which it is perceived, may consider increasing their knowledge and awareness of their environment. In such modes, poetry serves, among other things, to foster a direction and intensification of attention.

31 This attention is also directed to language. Langley was passionate about the forms and history of English, noting in an interview conducted in 2005 that 'generally I need an etymological dictionary to say what anything is' (Serra Bradford 16). Of course, a passion for language is by no means a Modernist preserve, even if it is common to lay emphasis on Modernism's foregrounding of the materiality of its medium. Where Langley's approach to language echoes that of Prynne (or, with encyclopaedic knowledge replacing lexis, Pound) is in the pedagogical breadth and precision of its reference: the experience of Langley's poems, as of Prynne's, is considerably enhanced by consultation of the *OED*. Thus, 'To a Nightingale' includes technical words such as 'mutes,' a term for bird-droppings used primarily in falconry, and employs other words, such as 'burl,' in highly specific ways.¹¹ The poem also pays particular attention to what it calls the 'nick-nack of names,' for example by giving loose translations of the moths' scientific names: *Scotopteryx*, the genus of the Shaded Broad-bar, is rendered as 'darkwing,' while *Camptogramma*, that of the Yellow-Shell, underlies the short sentence 'Lines waver,' which seems to refer both to the 'curved marks' of the scientific name and the haze of the heat of the day. The word 'nick-nack' itself most often refers to a trinket, a bibelot—it is more usually spelt 'knick-knack'—but it can also mean, according to the *OED*, a petty trick or subterfuge, and a feast to which all guests contribute. These are creative ways of thinking about naming, and suggest, on the whole, an optimistic vision of language. Langley also takes great care with sound patterns and rhythm; the lines that describe the moss, for example, are given force and



unity by the echoes between *burls* and *uncurling*, *hairy* and *hoary*, and by one of the short bursts of enjambed metricality in which the poet specialises: ‘Burls of *Grimmia*, hairy, / hoary’ offers a sequence of four-beat rhythm, which then fades away into something more unambiguously non-metrical (‘with their seed-capsules / uncurling’).¹²

32 The central movement of ‘To a Nightingale’ is, as already noted, towards greater openness to the natural world. The openness is partly achieved through the poet’s acts of close attention, which foster a slowing, and a thickening, of the experience of time:

[...] Darkwing. The
flutter. Doubles and blurs the
margin. Fuscous and white. Stop
at nothing. (ll. 21–24)

33 The shortness of these sentences emphasizes the lines’ intense focus on the detail of perception; in their brevity, as in the minuteness they describe, they tend towards the ‘nothing’ which, if we accept the implications of the infinitive clause that immediately follows (‘To stop here at / nothing’, ll. 24–25), is their aim or destination. Acts of attention prepare the ground for radical openness, but it takes the nightingale’s song to bring it about: it is the bird’s evocatively-described ‘soft cuckle’ and ‘glottal rattle’ that bring to completion both the opening of consciousness and the apparent quietening or evacuation of self, leaving the poet suspended and ‘empty.’

34 The nightingale’s capacity to bring about such openness and self-suspension reveals, as well as echoes of Keats and Coleridge, a strong trace of Langley’s reading of Iris Murdoch. In an interview first published in 1996, Langley accepted his interlocutor’s suggestion that ‘wonder’ was important to his poetry, and glossed this with reference to Wordsworth’s idea of joy (Walker 246). He then gave as an example of wonder a moment from Murdoch’s essay ‘The Sovereignty of Good over Other Concepts’ (1967):

She’s got a passage about a kestrel, which would take you back to Hopkins again, wouldn’t it? You’re wrapped up in your own affairs, you’re screwed up by your own subjective feelings, and you know that you’re colouring the world with your own thoughts and resentments, and you see a kestrel outside a window hovering and it —what does it say? ‘The world becomes all kestrel’ or something. And so you forget yourself. (Walker 246)¹³

35 The perception of a kestrel functions, in ‘The Sovereignty of Good,’ as an example of the ways in which the beauty of the natural world, and the ‘self-forgetful pleasure’ we take in the ‘sheer alien pointless independent existence’ of natural objects, can ‘alter consciousness in the direction of unselfishness, objectivity, and realism’ (82–83). ‘To a Nightingale’ has, very clearly, much in common with this.

36 Beyond the drama of the encounter between poet and natural world, it is the effects of that encounter on the use of language that make ‘To a Nightingale’ remarkable. Three examples, among many, may be dwelt on here. One is the use of the words ‘Stop / at nothing. To stop here at / nothing,’ which are to be taken, at least initially, in a literal sense: leaving off what one is doing, standing still, attending to the detail of the apparently empty, achieving emptiness oneself. The enjambments, and the insertion of the adverb ‘here,’ help to defamiliarize the sequence of words, and to block their much more common use within the set expression ‘to stop at nothing’ (‘to admit no obstacle’, *OED*). That expression will be partly reactivated later in the poem by the words ‘I am stopped at nothing’, but its more negative connotations (‘to be prepared to do anything; be unscrupulous or ruthless’, Collins) are kept lastingly at bay. Evoking these connotations of selfishness in order to resist them is part of the drama of ‘self-forgetful pleasure’ which the poem creates.

37 A second example of the poem’s distinctive use of language occurs just after its



description of the songs of three other birds—chaffinch, chiff-chaff and turtle-dove:

[...] Voices, and some
vibrate with tenderness. I
say none of this for love. It
is anyone's giff-gaff. It
is anyone's quelque chose. (28–32)

38 The lines seem an attempt to neutralize any emotive claims that the poet might appear to be making on the world or on language, instead offering both up for the use, pleasure and instruction of others: 'It / is anyone's giff-gaff. It / is anyone's quelque chose.' 'Giff-gaff' is readily grasped as a pattern of sound in the context of this poem, since it echoes 'nick-nack' and 'chiff-chaff'. It is less familiar as a lexical item.¹⁴ According to the *OED*, the word is used in Scotland and the North of England, with the meaning of a mutual giving, a give-and take. This is, of course, appropriate to the stance of openness to one's environment that the poem advocates, even in its form. The lines' principal seduction, however, is probably sonic: the words 'It is anyone's giff-gaff. It / is anyone's quelque chose' resound in memory via their echoic sound patterns, their comically straight-faced appropriation of French, and their rough two- and three-beat rhythms.

39 These are relatively conspicuous instances of Langley's use of form. A third, more discreet moment comes at the poem's end:

The road is rising as it
passes the apple tree and
makes its approach to the bridge. (43–45)

40 The effect of these lines is dependent to a fairly high degree on their use of sound effects, and also on some ambiguities of grammar. In terms of sound patterns, it can be noted that there are two prominent syllables in the antepenultimate line ('road', 'ris-'), two in the penultimate ('pass-', 'app-'), but three in the final line ('makes', '-proach', 'bridge'). These prominent syllables are alliterated in the antepenultimate line ('road is rising'), and again in the penultimate line ('passes the apple'); the equivalent syllables in the final line, however, offer only more distant echoes ('-pr-', 'br-'; '-ch', '-dge'). Of the poem's final three lines, therefore, the first two are bound quite tightly together by both rhythm and alliteration, while the third is not so bound. The difference creates a lightly-handled but powerful pattern of tension and release, with the release being concentrated in the poem's final line.

41 This sense of release is also created by the ambiguities of the three verbs that are found in this passage. 'Rise', 'pass' and 'make [its] approach' can all be used as verbs of state—describing, for example, the unchanging contours of a road—but they can also be verbs of action, applied to a person or animal. By combining three such verbs, and by using the -ING form for the first of them, potentially suggesting the kind of agency one would expect of an animate subject, the poem creates the illusion that the road is becoming animate—has been, in some sense, energized into action by the nightingale's song. A second reading will, perhaps, locate this feeling in the perceptions of the poet, understanding that it is he who has been momentarily transformed, and who therefore sees the rising road and bridge somewhat differently, perhaps unlocking their metaphorical connotations of progress and hope. By offering the possibility that the change might be taking place outside the poet's consciousness, however, the poem is able to keep that consciousness momentarily out of the way, and to sketch, in lines that could not have been written without Modernism, a discreetly Romantic commitment to the power and movement of the world.



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Notes

1 *London Overground* was initially meant for a small publisher, but the publisher went out of business, so that Sinclair reverted to Hamish Hamilton, but still considers the book as marginal rather than mainstream. See the interview online, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wV4T2_gQphg, last accessed May 20, 2016.

2 See the interview with Jonathan Coe reproduced in the present issue.

3 'Bye-Bye Babar' is an allusion to 1988 film *Coming to America* with Eddy Murphy playing a prince from an African country who arrives in New York. When an elephant extends his trunk to the prince, the latter says 'Hello, Babar.' Twenty years later, Selasi bids goodbye to the stereotype and 'cultural condescension' of the film and is interested in the way 'the general image of young Africans in the West transmorphed from goofy to gorgeous' (Selasi 2005).

4 Langley 2006, and the additional entries that appear regularly in *PN Review*. The entries that are relevant to the composition of 'To a Nightingale'—identified by Jeremy Noel-Tod as those of 6 May and 26 June 2010 (Langley 2015, 174)—have not, at time of writing, been published.

5 See, for example, the poetry and prose of Kathleen Jamie and Helen Macdonald.

6 The text of 'To a Nightingale' is © the Estate of R.F. Langley 2015. Grateful acknowledgement is made to the Estate, and to Carcanet Press, for their permission to reproduce the poem in full.

7 Letter to Ian Brinton, quoted Noel-Tod 2015, xii. Of course, many other literary representations of the nightingale's song exist. There is useful discussion both of the nature and structure of that song, and of ancient Greek literary representations of it, in Nagy (e.g. 39–41).

8 'Frost at Midnight' both begins and ends with reference to the 'secret ministry' of the frost. In 'The Nightingale,' the poem's 'return upon itself' may be seen in the speaker's renewed addressing



of his companions.

9 Since an enjambed line is one that is not end-stopped, Langley's image of being 'stopped at nothing' can be read as, among other things, an acknowledgement of this troping of form.

10 Source: http://www.bbsfieldguide.org.uk/sites/default/files/pdfs/mosses/Grimmia_pulvinata.pdf, last accessed on May 27, 2016.

11 The *OED* notes that, as well as meaning 'a small knot or lump in wool or cloth,' 'burl' has the 'poetical' meaning of 'roundness, fullness'; this definition is, however, marked with a query. The two illustrative quotations are both by Hopkins, which suggests that Langley's use of the term is a deliberate borrowing.

12 As Noel-Tod points out (2011, 74), much of Langley's later poetry lineates by syllable count: here, seven per line.

13 Murdoch's exact words are 'There is nothing now but kestrel' (82).

14 Or was; in Britain, a mobile telephone operator was created under that name in 2009.

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