

EARLY MODERN LITERARY STUDIES



‘How to muzzle Anthony Burgess’: Re-Staging Marlowe’s Murder in Iain Sinclair and Dave McKean’s *Slow Chocolate Autopsy*

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Slow Chocolate Autopsy (1997) is a multi-media novel that is a collaboration between the poet and novelist Iain Sinclair and the graphic illustrator, Dave McKean. It concerns the character Norton, a time-traveller who is trapped in the layers of London’s historically violent past and is seeking to utilise the river Thames as his passage out of the city. Many of the chapters reveal his angst at his entrapment and he is either instigating violence or is, more frequently, its victim. In the first chapter of the novel, Norton is a witness to the last hours of Christopher Marlowe’s life. As he watches the action unfold in 1593, he realises that he ‘knew what was coming, the end of it’ (SCA 8).¹ His prophetic anticipation only applies to Marlowe’s death, though, since he does not foresee that he himself will be his murderer. However, as he predicts the conclusion to the day’s events, Norton reveals his more immediate concern with the representations of Marlowe in the aftermath of his death. In particular he is trying to determine ‘How to muzzle Anthony Burgess’ (SCA 8), who had written the novel *A Dead Man in Deptford* (1993) about Marlowe’s life and death. This essay will explore how and why Sinclair is attempting to ‘muzzle’ Burgess’s and biographical accounts of Marlowe’s life by suggesting an alternative representation of Marlowe’s death. These questions can be answered through four approaches: first, the unpremeditated stabbing of Marlowe by Sinclair’s own character indicates his brusque dismissal of the neatly choreographic description of the coroner’s report on which subsequent biographical interpretations of the staging of Marlowe’s death are based; second, by reducing the significance of Poley, Frizer and Skeres, Sinclair suggests that biographical narratives of Marlowe have given them too much emphasis; third, by

¹ Iain Sinclair and Dave McKean, *Slow Chocolate Autopsy* (London: Phoenix, 1997), p. 8. All subsequent page references will be cited parenthetically using the abbreviation SCA.

emphasising the first-person point of view of Norton, who is a disinterested third party to an incident that is not his priority, Sinclair dismisses the significance of causality; and fourth, by using a psychogeographical reading of motive and behaviour, in which the psychosis of location explains human action, Sinclair reads the violence of the protagonists in 1593 as explained by place rather than moral and cultural differences. Collectively, these approaches indicate how Sinclair offers an alternative postmodernist biographical reading of Marlowe's death.

1. Criticising versions of Marlowe

Sinclair and McKean's text was published prior to some significant biographies of Marlowe, most notable among them being the works of Constance Kuriyama (*Christopher Marlowe: A Renaissance Life*, 2002), David Riggs (*The World of Christopher Marlowe*, 2004), and Park Honan (*Christopher Marlowe: Poet and Spy*, 2005). However, these works do have much in common with biographies written prior to Sinclair's text, such as Charles Nicholl's *The Reckoning* (1992), since they supplement historical facts with conjectures about Marlowe's life based on social and cultural contexts, while claiming to veer away from engaging in too many questions about his personal life (we can think of Honan's statement that he will provide 'modest inferences about personal relationships').² They are also characterised by a tendency towards imaginative speculation. Nicholl's pronouncement, 'I have not invented anything', followed by his contradictory statement that he is filling in the spaces of the story 'with probabilities and speculations and sometimes with guesswork',³ or what Rosalind Barber refers to as Nicholl's 'novelistic flourishes', is indicative of the inherent characteristics of biographies, which Barber says cannot be 'assembled without conjecture, speculative gap-filling and other subjective intrusions'.⁴

Given the work that New Historicists such as Hayden White have done in revealing the subjectivity of the historical record and the historian themselves, and the tendency to construct the past according to literary genres, rhetorical strategies and narrative elements, it is not surprising that critics have viewed historical record as immediately subject to the

² Park Honan, *Christopher Marlowe: Poet and Spy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 2.

³ Charles Nicholl, *The Reckoning: The Murder of Christopher Marlowe* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1992; London: Vintage, 2002, revised edition), p. 3.

⁴ Rosalind Barber, 'Exploring Biographical Fictions: The Role of Imagination in Writing and Reading Narrative', *Rethinking History* 14. 2 (2010), 165-187 (p. 167).

creative process.⁵ Barber notes that ‘as soon as artifacts and documents are used to create narrative, a fictional element intrudes’.⁶ Biographical fiction operates from the same premise in arguing for the value of creative writing in establishing narratives that investigate the past. As Julia Novak has recently argued, there is a constant discrepancy between the supposed factual nature of a biography and the referentiality of the subject that the narrative seeks to represent.⁷ Furthermore, biographical fiction assumes a pre-existing narrative about the author, regardless of its veracity, upon which it builds its own version. This pre-existing narrative has been pointed out by Lukas Erne who sees the over-eager desire to identify Marlowe as the subject of the painting in Corpus Christi College, Cambridge, as symptomatic of Marlovian scholarship in general in which ‘a possibility, however small, solidifies into an assertion whose veracity is no longer questioned’.⁸ Erne argues that it is in the interests of academic scholarship to talk up Marlowe’s apparent atheism and homosexuality, regardless of whether they truly characterise Marlowe because they attract interest and controversy. What is produced about Marlowe is ‘a mythographic creation with which it is in our own interests to be complicit’.⁹ The resilient nature of this narrative fundamentally affects any future reading of an author’s life. As Barber points out, our adherence to a certain narrative changes ‘the way an idea is received or interpreted based on the reading we are either expecting or imposing’.¹⁰

Both Burgess and Sinclair adopt Barber’s claim that ‘modern biographies are no less prone to fictional constructions’¹¹ by offering their own hybrids of fact and imaginative reconstruction, using fictional narrators, an actor for Burgess and the time-traveller Norton for Sinclair. However, although there is this shared enterprise, what is striking is the seemingly harsh tone that Sinclair reserves for Burgess. He wishes to ‘muzzle’ Burgess, a verb that is usually used in the context of preventing a dog from biting someone. To Sinclair it might have more of a contemporary resonance, suggesting perhaps the menace of the pit-bull, the subject of his chapter ‘The Dog and the Dish’, in *Lights Out for the Territory* (1997), which was published in the same year as *Slow Chocolate Autopsy*. There, the pit-bull is the killing machine, the representation of atavistic fears, the extension of its

⁵ Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth Century Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973)

⁶ Barber, p. 167.

⁷ Julia Novak, ‘Biographical Fiction to Historiographic Metafiction: Rewriting Clara Schumann’, *Brno Studies in English* 37. 2 (2011), 145-158 (p. 146).

⁸ Lukas Erne, ‘Biography, Mythography and Criticism: The Life and Works of Christopher Marlowe’, *Modern Philology* 103. 1 (2005) 28-50 (p. 30).

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Barber, p. 180.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 169.

owner's machismo, and a reminder of antisocial behaviour: 'a significant element in the two fingers for culture.'¹² If Burgess is the pit-bull, why does Sinclair feel it necessary to stop his bite, to censor his mouth? Why does he feel the need to stop Burgess in his tracks? After all, he cannot stop the publication of Burgess's novel since it has already appeared in print. What, then, might Burgess have done to necessitate this action?

I would suggest that Sinclair has an implicit understanding of how Burgess's work has prepared the way for Sinclair's own criticism of biographical fiction. He is acknowledging a fellow writer who playfully critiques those who claim the 'truth' about Marlowe's life and death. Hence Burgess's text is an imaginative rendering of 272 pages in which the few documentary facts – the letter addressed to the master of Marlowe's Cambridge college pertaining to Marlowe's services for the Queen overseas, the fracas with which Thomas Watson was involved, and the coroner's report – are re-cited but take up little narrative space because there is so much room for novelistic imagination. Marlowe's life and death require this hybridity between fact and fiction, or there would be little to say. In this sense, Sinclair's stance is an extension of Burgess's own position. However, while the act of muzzling Burgess recognises the efficacy with which Burgess has exposed the weakness of biography through his biographical fiction, Sinclair also wishes to muzzle him so that he can reveal his own abilities at deconstructing the premises of Marlovian biographies. Burgess has had his chance and has spoken effectively through his novel; now, Sinclair wants his. In other words, using the analogy from *Lights Out*, Sinclair also wants to raise two fingers at biography. Muzzling Burgess signifies the extent to which Sinclair sees him as his competitor, who is engaged in the same textual practices of drawing our attention to the weak foundations of truth that lay underneath the edifice of the Marlowe publishing industry.

More importantly, for my argument, Burgess's novel is viewed as an inevitable evolution of the liberties that biographers take with lives of writers. Erne cites other novels alongside Burgess's that 'constitute the logical continuation of a biographical, or mythographical, tradition that has worried preciously little about which parts of the story seem historically warranted'.¹³ Although Burgess and Sinclair are not defined as biographers in the way that Nicholl and others are, the mythography with which critics label Marlovian biography suggests that their work typifies the 'logical continuation' of which Erne speaks.

In this sense, Burgess and Sinclair both play with the tendency of biographers of Marlowe to be fascinated with Marlowe's life 'regardless of the exiguity of the documentary

¹² Iain Sinclair, *Lights Out for the Territory* (London: Granta, 1997), p. 61.

¹³ Erne, 34.

evidence on which they base their accounts.’¹⁴ This has recently been pointed out by J. A. Downie, who has shown how by the time Thomas Beard’s *The Theatre of God’s Judgments* (1597), which used Marlowe’s death as an example of God’s vengeance on atheists and sinners, had been abridged in 1618, ‘the stories both of Marlowe’s atheism and his Providential punishment had been further embellished’.¹⁵ Downie is good at showing how much scholars yearn to investigate Marlowe’s plays as if they did contain his personal opinions, a trend he sees continued into the mid-1990s. This occurs in contradiction of the fact that ‘We actually know very little about Marlowe apart from the bare facts to be found in the documentary record’.¹⁶ We then have to fall back on second or third rate evidence, such as Kyd’s confession after torture and Richard Baines’s note, all of which, Downie suggests, should be taken as ‘unsubstantiated allegations made by frightened men who were fearful for their lives’.¹⁷ This last comment is speculative, of course, like the biographies Downie criticises – we can only assume they were frightened – but Burgess and Sinclair may argue that biographical narratives constructed around such sparse facts are as fictional as their own renditions.

Sinclair’s character, Norton, comments that a motive for his own involvement in Marlowe’s last day is to see how he can ‘keep the yarn [of the narrative] out of the hands of the conspiracy freaks’ (SCA 8). This comment probably refers to the theories about Marlowe’s murder posited by various biographers. Surprisingly, one of those biographers, Charles Nicholl, seems to be in Sinclair’s corner. Nicholl seems to offer a cautionary comment about trusting other biographers: ‘Their default theory is that the apparent death of Marlowe was an elaborate hoax, enabling him to escape to the continent, thereby escaping charges of heresy then being levelled against him’.¹⁸ Nicholl sees these claims as offering an instructive case for all biographies in which hard evidence is minimal. He sees the debates about Marlowe as ‘an early paradigm of authorship controversialism, when invented evidence plays a determining role in what is presented as a genuine historical argument.’¹⁹

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 34.

¹⁵ J. A. Downie, ‘Reviewing what we think we know about Christopher Marlowe, again’ in *Christopher Marlowe the Craftsman: Lives, Stage and Page*, ed. by Sarah K. Scott and Michael L. Stapleton (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2010), pp. 33-47 (p. 43).

¹⁶ Ibid, p. 45.

¹⁷ Ibid, p. 46.

¹⁸ Charles Nicholl, ‘The Case for Marlowe’ in *Shakespeare Beyond Doubt*, ed. by Paul Edmondson and Stanley Wells (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp. 29-39 (p. 29).

¹⁹ Ibid, p. 32.

Burgess is alert to this invention and plays with it, offering a variant reading of the events at Widow Bull's tavern in Deptford that resulted in Marlowe's demise that are not far removed from other biographical accounts that Constance Kuriyama sifts through if only to answer 'what the likeliest (rather than the most ingenious or sensational, or titillating) explanation of Marlowe's death is'.²⁰ Burgess reproduces the coroner's report that states that Frizer and Marlowe exchanged malicious words because they could not agree about the bill. It states that in anger Marlowe grabbed Frizer's dagger when his back was facing him and wounded him in the head. Frizer, fearful of not being able to escape because of being positioned between Skeres and Poley, grabs the dagger in fear of his life and kills Marlowe in self-defence. However, this is preceded by Burgess's own account that deviates from the report. Rather than relaying Frizer's concern that he could not get up to defend himself, Frizer and Poley pinion Marlowe between them and all three face Skeres to simulate a Privy Council meeting. They slide a dagger towards Marlowe, goading him on to pick it up and attack them so that they can claim, 'we three here seek only to defend ourselves against a wild man'.²¹ The motivation for the attack is twofold. After Poley takes an afternoon nap, he comes down and asks Marlowe for his answer to three riddles: whether the Queen is a virgin, whether God is in Heaven, and whether he has slept with a woman. Marlowe answers no to all three. Skeres tells Marlowe that he is to be 'voided' partly because of his three 'no's and two other reasons: 'and you will never know whether it is a knight or an earl who wishes the voiding' (*DMD* 266). His death is to serve as a warning to others who are insolent to their superiors. Skeres takes Frizer's place in holding Marlowe down so that Frizer can have the privilege of stabbing him through his right eye. Marlowe dies as Frizer calls him a 'Filthy sodomite' and a 'Godless sneering fleering bastard' (*DMD* 267).

What is most significant, however, is the way in which Burgess subverts this meticulously detailed narrative at the end of the novel. Having provided an account of the reckoning that contains the same characteristics as the coroner's report – the dispute over the reckoning, the same manner of death, the identical aggressor and victim, and the tension caused by spatial proximity – Burgess's conclusions query how biographers assume historical 'fact'. The narrator of Burgess's novel says, 'So I suppose it happened, but I suppose only' (*DMD* 267), while in an author's note, Burgess says 'the true truth...can never be known' (*DMD* 271). This admission anticipates Constance Kuriyama's argument that, because of a lack of information surrounding Marlowe's death, we 'weave fictions around Marlowe that we know are fictions...a ritual that no biography of Marlowe can do without'.²² In this sense,

²⁰ Constance Kuriyama, *Christopher Marlowe. A Renaissance Life* (Cornell: Cornell University Press, 2002), p. 121.

²¹ Anthony Burgess, *A Dead Man in Deptford* (New York: Carroll & Graf, 1993), p. 266. All subsequent quotations will be cited parenthetically using the abbreviation *DMD*.

²² Kuriyama, p. 120.

the end of Burgess's narrative comes full circle since the purpose of his opening sentences is to question the reliability of first-person narrative. The narrator – 'a small actor and smaller play-botcher' (*DMD* 3) – asks the reader to entertain a supposition about his knowledge of Marlowe's life: 'You must and will suppose (fair or foul reader, but what's the difference?) that I suppose a heap of happenings that I had no eye to eye knowledge of or concerning' (*DMD* 3). Yet, although he admits 'I know little' (*DMD* 3), Burgess could artfully claim, as Erne has done, that the same lack of knowledge faces biographers of Marlowe. In fact, supposition is at the heart of the narrator's scepticism about how much he knows about Marlowe. He admits that he cannot know what Marlowe was thinking, 'Of Kit's heart I must be unsure, and can but suppose, or so I suppose' (*DMD* 4). And while he is present at pubs among the acting fraternity, there are scenes to which he is not privy, such as the nude swimming in a Cambridgeshire pond or Marlowe's initial meeting with Walsingham. On these occasions, he can only conjecture about what transpired: 'So, then, I suppose it to have been' (*DMD* 14). On other occasions, he has to rely on Marlowe's word. He says of Marlowe's involvement in the Babington plot, 'I do not know for sure that Kit became embroiled in these matters... But he said that he did' (*DMD* 81). In Part Two, he can be on surer ground because Marlowe has become a playwright and so he sees him more: 'I am not, so I suppose I must suppose, yet done with supposing, though from now...I have Kit much in my sights' (*DMD* 117). But his point, and Burgess's, is that even with these more frequent moments of contact, the subject cannot be completely known. Supposition will always be at the heart of any biographical enquiry.

Sinclair's account takes Burgess's mischievous deconstruction one step further since it has no relationships to the variations on the theme of the reckoning. Sinclair signals this departure early in his narrative with Norton's reluctance to be involved in 'a story that doesn't hold water' (*SCA* 6), a comment on biographers and their attempt to make sense of what happened on the day that Marlowe was murdered. Initially, as the tension builds during the day, largely accounted for by the amount of drinking that is taking place, Norton seems to recognise the choreographed structure that makes Marlowe's death inevitable. He gives priority to Marlowe as the director rather than the other actants but he sees the action as theatre and the location of the tavern and its garden as the stage. However, this ritualised enactment is deconstructed by Norton's awareness of theatre's imprecision. He 'despises theater, as it is enacted. As it fails, precisely, to reduplicate itself' (*SCA* 9). This is, perhaps, a knowing jab at Burgess's actor narrator whose livelihood is dependent on such a stage and the feigning that characterises his profession. But this bitterness can also be regarded as a commentary on the inability of biography to precisely capture the original moment. They provide variants rather than duplicates, each maddeningly inaccurate. Sinclair's answer to this imprecision is spontaneity, opportunism, and brevity. Rather than taking place in the claustrophobic space of the tavern, Marlowe's demise takes place in the garden and it ends

suddenly and anticlimactically without any choreographed scenes as Norton pays the reckoning and leaves Deptford, unchallenged.

Sinclair represents Marlowe's death deflated of all tension and built-up suspense. Having been angered by Marlowe's attitude towards him earlier, Norton whittles a tree bough into a dagger. As he films the tension of the evening in the garden, Norton's camera captures the sudden lurch of Marlowe towards him as he realises he has been under surveillance in the garden. Marlowe rushes Norton who kills him quickly with the tree bough in self-defence. Sinclair's camera here occupies the space of surveillance that is taken up by the human eye in *A Dead Man in Deptford*. Burgess' novel begins with the actor narrator playfully exploring the concept of seeing as a means of acknowledging the inability to know everything about Marlowe's whereabouts. The 'eye to eye knowledge' of Marlowe has to be tempered by acknowledging that there are things that go on that he cannot know because he cannot see them: 'his doings behind the back of my viewings is of the nature of a stout link in the chain of his being, lost to my seeing, not palpable but of necessity existent' (*DMD* 3). The novel is also replete with examples of others, besides the narrator, watching Marlowe and watching each other. Kyd warns Marlowe about spies writing down Marlowe's blasphemous thoughts about religion; Thomas Walsingham informs Marlowe in France that 'We were waiting to spy on Poley, but Poley seemed to be there to start spying on us' (*DMD* 48). While Burgess's narrator sees all perspectives in Widow Bull's tavern, taking in the actions of all participants, Norton's camera is the contemporary equivalent only of the one who is seeing Marlowe rush at him. Norton is, perhaps, comparable to Frizer's face at which Marlowe lurches in the coroner's report. More precisely, what Norton is recording is an autopsy. In his essay 'Rites of Autopsy', Sinclair describes autopsy as 'the act of seeing with one's own eyes'.²³ Dave McKean confirms this definition of the word when he reminds himself to 'Treat London like an autopsy catalogue' (*SCA* 90). Both record what they see: Norton's camera sees Marlowe's face at the moment of impact with the tree bough; McKean's camera records what he sees while walking around London. Because of the lens through which Norton views the evening at Widow Bull's tavern in Deptford, Sinclair's representation of the final scene in Marlowe's life is a double autopsy: Norton's autopsy takes place behind the camera as he observes the participants while Marlowe is engaged in autopsy as he sees the camera and Norton's position behind it. Thus there is a symbiotic relationship between them. Both engage in autopsies but, at the moment of contact, Norton becomes the autopsy witness whereas Marlowe becomes the autopsy victim. Once he is dead, Marlowe's body will be denied this kind of autopsy. He will be transmuted into a blue plaque outside St. Nicholas' church, serving as 'something to pad out the History Trail brochure' (*SCA* 10), and far removed from the kinetic, close-

²³ Iain Sinclair, *Lud Heat* (Cheltenham: Skylight Press, 2012), p. 55.

quartered, and violent autopsies that have just taken place. Burgess recognises the same lack of seeing when he comments on the unmarked grave and the fact that the jurors at the inquest were spared the sight of Marlowe's mutilated eye socket (*DMD* 268). The only compensation for Marlowe resides in the fact that, because Norton's camera serves the function of recording what transpires in the present, unlike the inaccurate problems of biographical reduplication, Norton's film enables Sinclair's autopsy to be endlessly revisited with fidelity.

This is not to say that Sinclair can resist speculation about Marlowe's death. However, in a departure from biographies that emphasise the political pressures that were exerted upon Marlowe, Sinclair gives Marlowe agency. Norton conjectures that Marlowe's death was self-willed, fulfilling what he said in *Doctor Faustus* ('Cut is the branch that might have grown full straight'),²⁴ ensuring that he had bested Kyd, got out of the spy game without the help of Maliverney Catlin, Walsingham's agent, all without suffering torture and a burning at the stake (*SCA* 11). In other words, he left life on his own terms rather than have the terms of his life dictated by others, whether these were his contemporaries or current biographers.

2. Sinclair's revision of Poley *et alius*

One of the assumptions made by biographers is the central role played by Poley, Skeres and Frizer in Marlowe's death. Burgess plays upon certain known facts about these characters while strengthening the connections they had with each other. In contrast, Sinclair's position is to diminish their importance and go further than Burgess to suggest their obvious inferiority to Marlowe.

In Burgess's account, Robin Poley is depicted as an experienced agent of Walsingham who will be Marlowe's guide as he begins his service. Poley betrays Babington and is 'arrested' for his role in the plot so he can be in prison and incriminate those he found. When Marlowe goes on government business to Holland, he has contact with Richard Baines to whom he relates all the blasphemous sayings that will get him into trouble. Baines tells Marlowe about Poley being in prison in order to flush out Catholic conspirators. It is Poley who informs Marlowe of their meeting at Widow Bull's after Poley has returned from Flanders to spy on those who might plot against England. As well as characterising Poley as a skillful and manipulative government operative, Burgess also praises him for his

²⁴ Christopher Marlowe, *Doctor Faustus* (5.3.20) in *The Complete Plays*, ed. by J. B. Steane (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969).

learning. Of Poley, Skeres says that it is ‘all Plato with him’ (*DMD* 92), and acknowledges his intellectual debt to Poley: ‘I am no scholar. A picker up only. I cite bonny Robin’ (*DMD* 93). Nicholas Skeres himself is presented as a complex character, capable of equal measures of violence and kindness. He serves as Poley’s bodyguard, protecting him on his many missions abroad. Poley says of Skeres: ‘They fear Nick, but they do not fear me. They fancy that he is all malevolence. And so he is, so he is.’ (*DMD* 42). Yet Skeres is kind to Marlowe as he vomits after witnessing the executions of Babington. Burgess depicts Ingrim Frizer as Thomas Walsingham’s lackey, who beats Marlowe after finding he has sodomised his master. He makes Marlowe reluctant to visit Walsingham at his estate because ‘He feared Frizer’s mad devotion.’ (*DMD* 84). Nevertheless, Frizer also appreciates Marlowe’s poetry even though he misquotes lines from *Doctor Faustus* that Marlowe quickly corrects. Frizer and Skeres work together on usury schemes, charging high interest. Frizer also knows Poley. When Poley arrives in Deptford, he greets Thomas Walsingham and slaps Frizer affably on the back, recognising him as ‘a known confederate in lowly tasks in the past’ (*DMD* 234).

In contrast, Norton has little interest in what and whom he sees. Initially, when he enters the garden and sees Marlowe and the others, he fears for his own life, as he is the outsider to these ‘four hoods’ (*SCA* 9). Soon, however, he identifies Marlowe as superior to his companions with whom Norton perceives he is bored. This is evidenced by the fact that while they are trying to stick a dagger in a tree, Marlowe is speaking poetry to Norton. Although Sinclair does follow biographical conventions concerning the role played by the others in Marlowe’s death – he argues that it is obvious how they will set Marlowe up, encouraging him to damn himself and get his opinions in print – he does not see it as enough to bring about his demise. This reasoning is based less on Sinclair’s engagement in conspiracy narratives that suggest that the Earl of Essex had a larger target in mind in Thomas Hariot and Walter Raleigh than the fact that the conspirators themselves are inconsequential: ‘Such clownish names as Skeres and Frizer will never skewer a principal. They’re a knockabout turn. Hit men with personal hygiene problems. “Sir, I will.” That’s the only line they’re ever going to get’ (*SCA* 9). Sinclair has Skeres and Frizer play Rozencrantz and Guildenstern to Marlowe’s Hamlet. This means that Sinclair dismissively deprives Skeres and Frizer of the individuation Burgess invests in them. He skewers Poley in a similar fashion. While Norton gives Poley specific attention, this is not due to any hierarchical importance he enjoyed within the group. On the contrary, Sinclair seems to relish demeaning him. Earlier in the chapter, he decides the whole group may not be interested in consorting with prostitutes. In fact, they may ‘go the other way.’ He singles out Poley with his ‘meat-hooked grin’ as looking like an ‘ambidexter’ (*SCA* 5). Later, when he is talking about all of them, he depicts Poley’s distinct unimportance: ‘Poley stood off, unsure of his role. A thatch of low branches crowning his head with horns. Was he required

in this scene? Or was he an understudy, an unreliable witness?’ (SCA 10). There are several observations to be made here. First, Sinclair undermines Burgess’s depiction of Poley as a skillful spy and a consummate actor, who insinuated himself into the confidences of Catholic prisoners, by indicating his lack of certainty about his performance in the drama that is unfolding in front of him. Second, the visual image created by positioning Poley under a tree recalls the scene in the 1616 edition of *Doctor Faustus* where Faustus places horns on Benvolio’s head after he had criticised Faustus’ competency in necromancy. Just as Faustus indicates to the Emperor that he performed this trick for his mirth, so Sinclair is now embarrassing Poley for laughs. Third, Sinclair considers him superfluous. He is not the main act, since he performs a secondary role in the dramatic theatre about to unfold. Fourth, given his peripheral role, he might not be trusted for their account of what transpired, undoubtedly a comment about the dubious narrative contained in the coroner’s report.

3. Anti-biography: The use of Norton

Rosalind Barber has argued that biographical interpretations are consistently weighed down by sifting through the same facts as their predecessors in order to construct new interpretations. This has led to what she says is a tendency to accept rather than interrogate ‘biographical commonplaces’.²⁵ In contrast, Sinclair’s intention is to arrest these assumptions and preempt biographers from managing the narrative by using the character of Norton who does not know Marlowe or his reputation. Norton is operating purely on first impressions, guessing from his appearance what he might be like, and assuming that he is homosexual and has a predilection for violence. In emancipating Norton from the weight of history, and a dependency on anything anyone else has said or written about Marlowe, Sinclair establishes a first-person witness who can be presented as possessing an equally plausible interpretation of what happened.

There are some caveats to this statement. Sinclair does include known observations about Marlowe’s beliefs. Norton overhears blasphemous conversations from Marlowe such as his comments that Gabriel was the Holy Ghost’s bawd, and that Mary committed incest with Jesus. Norton seems to be picking this up from the Baines note or any number of biographies. Its truth is given validity by the fact that Norton overhears it from the source. However, the tight syntax of Sinclair’s prose suggests notation, as if Sinclair is rehearsing conventions repetitively attributed to Marlowe: ‘The blasphemy: the Angel Gabriel as bawd

²⁵ Rosalind Barber, ‘Was Marlowe a Violent Man?’ in *Christopher Marlowe the Craftsman: Lives, Stage and Page*, ed. by Sarah K. Scott and Michael L. Stapleton (Farnham: Ashgate Press, 2010), 47-63 (p. 59).

to the Holy Ghost. Mary impregnated by her favourite son. The talk of Zion. Of plots and counter-terrors' (SCA 9).

In addition, Norton should not be regarded as a reliable or particularly pleasant first-person narrator and witness. He is biased against Marlowe's education – he sees him as a Cambridge pedant with a sneer – and is homophobic, immediately identifying him as a 'shirtlifter' (SCA 8). His Marlowe sings four lines from the fifth act of *Dido, Queen of Carthage* in a castrato voice. These lines belong to Dido and are moments of self-deception since she thinks that Aeneas will return to her even as her sister Anna chastises her for her idle fantasies. Soon thereafter, driven by grief, Dido throws herself into the flames. These lines foreshadow Marlowe's own death, but also suggest the homophobic distaste Norton has for someone he perceives as an effeminate, cross-dressing playwright. Their relationship is also tense. When they first meet, they rub each other up the wrong way. His immediate impression of Marlowe is that he does not like him, perhaps suggesting how Burgess depicts the reactions of Baines and others who call Marlowe's responses and actions 'unfriendly', and which Burgess suggests are the motives for betraying Marlowe to the authorities.

However, unlike the obvious deep interest biographers have to show in their subject, Norton simply does not care about what is transpiring on the day Marlowe dies. He does not want to be involved with what is happening even though he knows there exists an air of reckless violence in the garden because of the amount of drinking that has been going on. We learn several times about Norton's nonchalance: 'He'll sit this one out. ...Norton benched himself...He'd watch and he'd wait' (SCA 5). He also knows that he is of no interest to Marlowe and the others, even though he has inserted himself into this specific fatal historical moment: 'He's of no account, doesn't register' (SCA 5). So, rather than insert himself as a fictional character invested in the proceedings, Norton remains aloof, anonymous, and objectively observant until Marlowe surprises him, forcing him to react.

Sinclair's technique, then, is to disavow any identification between the narrator and the subject. Norton has a bigger agenda and Marlowe's death is subservient to it. This is evidenced by the subtitle of Sinclair's work, 'Incidents from the notorious career of Norton, Prisoner of London'. Norton is less a conventional prisoner than someone burdened by the weight of London's history. He is seeking a way out via the Thames because it is a fluid exit point. Too often though, as nearly every chapter testifies, he cannot escape and finds himself at violent intersections of London history, such as Deptford in 1593. Therefore his presence on the fatal day represents a failed mission. Norton is irritated. He does not want to be there, and he is looking for a way out of a city in which he is trapped. He never finds his water-borne exit because he is let down by Burwell, the captain of the boat, who trades

in illegal wares such as recusants and Tyndale bibles. He is at Widow Bull's only to pass the time while he is waiting to get out. When the chapter ends, and the boat never comes, he becomes a pedestrian, walking away from Deptford, and heads west in order to re-emerge in another time period where his chances to escape may improve.

Part of the biographer's approach is to assume that the works speak the man. Patrick Cheney recollects critics from Robert Greene to Stephen Greenblatt who saw Marlowe's presence in his work. Cheney argues that what critics are doing is inverting the Keatsian 'negative capability' to find the positive capability. As a result, 'his authorial imagination is intriguingly *auto*-biographical'.²⁶ As a result, Marlowe is 'implicated' in his characters. Erne notes this critical practice, calling out A. L. Rowse for his claim that 'Marlowe is Faustus'.²⁷ Similarly, Barber cleverly shows how this works by deliberately reading Shakespeare's sonnets as if they had been authored by Marlowe, in order to show both the ease with which they can be shaped according to a pre-existent Marlovian biographical narrative and how characterisations of authors are provided by the works. Intriguingly, Burgess is doing something different. While he structures his narrative on Marlowe's poems and plays, they speak less Marlowe than Marlowe's contemporaries. Hence, when Marlowe sees Frizer, a line comes into his head that he will eventually give to Barabas in *The Jew of Malta*. He utters the line 'In Naples did I learn to poison flowers' after it is revealed that Frizer may have hastened the death of Thomas Walsingham's brother so that his master can become the head of the Walsingham estate (*DMD* 85). Marlowe reveals to Walsingham that Frizer prompted the line: 'as it came I seemed to see Frizer saying it and bowing deep' (*DMD* 85). This implies that Marlowe has drawn inspiration for his characters from people he encounters, and that they rather than Marlowe become absorbed into the work.

In contrast, Sinclair seeks to emphasise Norton's self-importance as a means of deconstructing the belief in this link between creativity and a subjectivity grounded in social relations. He does this by making Marlowe unconsciously influenced by Norton rather than by any individuals he encounters. Hence Norton is a creative God-like figure who serves as Marlowe's muse, providing him with the source for his writing: 'I am no reincarnation of Marlowe, Norton thought, it's the other way round. Without me, there is no Marlowe. I sketch what he was. He relives the lines I feed him' (*SCA* 185). In fact, Norton already has in his possession the words, the source texts that Marlowe will use in his plays.

²⁶ Patrick Cheney, 'Biographical Representations: Marlowe's Life of the Author', in *Shakespeare, Marlowe, Jonson: New Directions in Biography*, ed. by Takashi Kozuka and J.R. Mulryne, (Aldershot: Ashgate Press, 2006), 183-205 (p. 183).

²⁷ Erne, 41.

As he walks around the garden in Deptford he cites from *The Jew of Malta* the lines of Barabas: 'As for myself, I walk abroad a-nights, / And kill sick people groaning under walls' (SCA 7). These are not even Norton's lines as he admits that he 'pinch[ed] a couple of lines from a better man'. Although he does not identify this man, he leaves the lines for Marlowe to find. This positions Marlowe and Norton, and other prior writers ad infinitum, not as authors but as re-appropriators of words already laid down. In Burgess's novel, Marlowe seems to recognise this inability to claim origination when, after quoting the aforementioned line from *The Jew of Malta*, Marlowe says of it: 'A line that came to me. Such lines often come' (DMD 85). This is usually understood as inspiration, but Norton's solipsistic assuredness of his contribution to Marlowe's art acknowledges the fragility of the historicised subject, the extent to which the meaning of the literary figure is dependent on the transcendent other, such as the biographer or the muse, who brings his words and his self into being.

Such dependency negates the confidence of self-knowledge. Burgess plays on this lack of certitude since an actor who plays parts in plays written by Kyd, Marlowe and the up-and-coming 'Shagspeer' narrates Burgess's account. His ability to feign as an actor, in addition to his intimate knowledge of Marlowe, whom he knew 'in a very palpable sense (The Holy Bible speaks or speaketh of such unlawful knowing)' (DMD 3), makes him an unreliable narrator. However, the novel is structured as a bildungsroman for Marlowe's career and his conversations are therefore given a sense of authenticity by someone who knows and follows him. Burgess provides a sense of time passing for this character as his career is affected by his change in voice that means he can no longer play female roles. He changes as Marlowe changes. They age together. Consequently, there is certitude about establishing selves that are organised around temporal progression.

But the identity of Norton, through whom the representation of Marlowe and what transpires in the fateful meeting with Poley and the others acquires meaning, is consistently nebulous and undefined. As the opening chapter to the collection of historical episodes in which Norton finds himself, he is both witness to the fateful events of the night Marlowe is killed and the one who kills him. But who Norton is (a possible doppelganger of Sinclair) remains elusive throughout the other chapters of the text whose settings are historically diverse. He is often not the narrator, serving, for example, as the destitute renter of a boarding house, providing scraps to the narrator-tenant who comments, 'He had no face'. Norton is simply a 'skull', a 'dead man', who 'lived in the shithouse, book on his lap' (SCA 35). As a traveller across time, we suspect he is Death's agent – 'That's what it was all about earning Charon's wages' (SCA 4). On other occasions, he is a peripheral presence, serving as victim on at least two occasions. In one chapter, he serves temporarily as a member of a team which paints football pitch lines at night, and whose leader kills workers,

keeping their heads in a bag. In another chapter, Norton is supposed to be killed by Jack the Hat who, in turn, is killed for upsetting one of the Kray twins in gangland London in the 1960s. Norton is supposed to be killed by Jack but his presence remains elusive. Jack asks, 'who said Norton exists? There's no record of him' (SCA 72). Later, he argues that 'Norton was another name for nothing. An alias. A *nom de guerre*' (SCA 74). Only at the end is it implied that Norton is himself a fictional construct, possibly a junkie who has supplied William Burroughs with heroin. The last page after the acknowledgements reproduces Burroughs's prologue to his work, *Junkie: Confessions of an Unredeemed drug addict* (1953), written under the pseudonym William Lee. The opening page informs us that the narrator became acquainted with a thief called Norton, an Italian formerly called Morelli, who requisitioned, that is, stole materials on a daily basis during the war. This establishes that Norton is ethically untrustworthy and changes his name to avoid detection by the authorities. Our knowledge of his presence in Burroughs's text confirms our earlier impressions of a narrator whose identity can never be precisely defined. By shifting between active first-person narrator and passive third-person, the collection of stories never provides the reader with a narrative focus. This lack of stasis differs markedly from the progressive story told by Burgess' narrator who charts his knowledge of Marlowe from their first encounter to Marlowe's demise.

4. Psychogeography and Marlowe's Temperament: The Product of One's Environment

Sinclair's creation of an elusive narrator who disturbs our certitudes about a direct relationship between subjectivity and the creative act is, I would argue, one of two strategies he utilises to question the extent to which writers of Marlowe's life and work have assumed, confidently, that they could construct a narrative about his personality and motives. The second strategy is to suggest that an individual's psychosis is determined by the psychosis of place. Marlowe is violent not because of any innate or genetic disposition, but because he finds himself in Deptford on the fateful day

Burgess's Deptford is purely a sensory experience. It is Elizabethan background noise, 'soothed by the noise of the waterside taverns, where there was much hard drinking by joiners and caulkers and hemp-dressers, for here were the naval yards where ships, merchantmen and men of war, were built of English oak and Russian spruce' (DMD 162). The olfactory appeal is impressionistic: 'The smell of fresh-cut wood mingled with that of fish not so fresh, tarry sailors, ale vomit' (DMD 162-3). Even as death is imminent, Burgess's description of Widow Bull's garden – 'among the pinks and primroses and violets, under a beech and the mild sun' in which the participants 'took seats on a gnarled

bench' (*DMD* 259) – reads like a Thomas Kincaide backdrop. Sinclair is certainly capable of replicating this descriptive passage. His text also provides sensory perceptions of an Elizabethan summer night. The smells are of pigs drunk on apples, dye factories, the smell of splintered wood down by the docks while the food is a culinary list of unappetising Elizabethan grub – stockpot, bacon, cabbage leaves, prawns, and cold gravy, with sack to drink.

But what distinguishes Sinclair's sense of place from Burgess's is his psychogeographical perspective. Sinclair is regarded as one of its most recognised practitioners which he acknowledges even though it makes him uncomfortable: 'There's this frightening sense that I must have some weird brand image as the London psychogeographer'.²⁸ Sinclair is a follower of Guy Debord and the Situationists of the 1960s who view psychogeography as concerned with how landscapes affect individuals and their actions. The novelist Will Self cites Peter Ackroyd as an example of the landscape phrenologist for whom individuality is subsumed by 'the city's own enduring personification'.²⁹ Writers like Self, Sinclair, and the documentary writer Nick Rogers recently debated this in a roundtable discussion following the premiere of Rogers's *London Perambulator*. In the discussion, Sinclair talked about how Papadimitriou 'sees himself becoming Middlesex. The landscape becomes a portrait of him...he wants to disintegrate, cease to be an entity, to become part of the thing he's been looking at'.³⁰ Sinclair has utilised this position of self-abnegation as a way of understanding his city: 'For me, it's a way of psychoanalyzing the psychosis of the place in which I happen to live. I'm just exploiting it because I think it's a canny way to write about London.'³¹

What really interests Sinclair is London's synchronisms. His city is a palimpsest space that simultaneously situates the new alongside the old. In one of his earliest texts, *Lud Heat*, he depicts Hawksmoor's churches as 'sketches cancelling sketches...the churches themselves are incredible culture grafts, risky quotations'.³² Similarly, Sinclair's *London: City of Disappearances* (2006) is a catalogue of remnants of a suppressed history: the faded plaque that preoccupied citizens have missed; boarded-over warehouses with art nouveau

²⁸ Quoted in Stuart Jeffries, 'On the Road', *The Guardian* 24 April 2004, online edition, <<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2004/apr/24/featuresreviews.guardianreview14>> [accessed 15 December 2014].

²⁹ Will Self, *Psychogeography* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2007), p. 1.

³⁰ 'Panel discussion with Iain Sinclair, Will Self and John Rodgers' in *The London Perambulator* <<http://londonperambulator.wordpress.com/2014/03/14/panel-discussion-with-iain-sinclair-will-self-and-john-rogers>> [accessed 25 September 2014], 5.33-5.46.

³¹ Jeffries, 'On the Road'.

³² Sinclair, *Lud Heat*, p. 16.

calligraphy; a stretch of Roman road given over to weeds and farm dogs, while traffic clogs on the contiguous motorway; tarmac airstrips for Second World War bomber squadrons are returned to agricultural disuse.

Because Sinclair reads London as a historical palimpsest, Deptford, where Marlowe meets his end, is not simply an Elizabethan Deptford; it is all the manifestations of the neighbourhood throughout its history, all acting on each other simultaneously. As a result, any mood that a neighbourhood acquires is pervasive and permanent. The psychosis of Sinclair's London is violent. In an interview with *The Independent's* Andy Bennett, he admits that he is attracted to chronicling low-life London since he sees it as a cruel and seething city. He describes the borough of Hackney and its council blocks where he lives as full of jumpers, crack, and other drugs, all of which indicate 'social entropy'. Similarly, Deptford is characterised by its violence. Norton has visions of 'surplus weaponry', kids with machetes, and 'Belgian ordinance' in a bedsit in Lewisham, the borough into which Deptford was absorbed in the 1960s (SCA 7). Each historical layer is characterised, then, by its potential for creating terror. Therefore, from a psychogeographical perspective, if people behave according to the psychosis of place, then what transpires in Widow Bull's garden in 1593 is an inevitable extension of location. Men will act violently if the place where they live exudes an atmosphere of violence.

Recent critiques of biographical representations of Marlowe have questioned the extent of Marlowe's violent behaviour. Rosalind Barber notes that new evidence found in the National Archives in Kew by David Mateer attests to the opinion that 'elements of Marlowe's biography are interpreted to support his "bad boy" reputation'.³³ Barber argues that Greene and Harvey and the Baines note make no mention of his violence. Barber notes how many scholars, including Honan and Riggs, have mentioned the implausibility of the inquest document, arguing for a conspiracy and a cover up for Marlowe's assassination rather than a case of self-defence.³⁴ She argues that testimony of his aggressiveness rests with three professional liars: Poley, Frizer and Skeres. But given Sinclair's psychogeographic reading, the violent mood of the novel as a whole is indicative of the menacing psychosis of the city that in turn explains Marlowe's violence. And there is little doubt that Sinclair's Marlowe is violent. When he first encounters Marlowe, Norton appraises his character. He sizes him up as 'a psycho in black velvet, optioning mischief whose black eyes indicated 'choreographed violence' (SCA 8). It is only his companions who prevent Marlowe from picking a fight with Norton. By suggesting that Marlowe is present in an environment that is a palimpsest site of continuous historical violence,

³³ Barber, 'Was Marlowe a Violent Man?', p. 53.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 57.

Sinclair identifies him as more a type than a historicised subject, whose actions are replicated by others identical to him at different points in the temporal continuum. Early in the narrative, Norton notices Marlowe's white hands 'hanging loose above an imaginary gunbelt' (SCA 5). This prompts Norton to think of 'Audie Murphy, back from Hell after killing 240 Germans... A forty-year-old Billy the Kid doing hard time in an Arizona ghost town' (SCA 5). Instead of granting Marlowe a subjectivity located in a precise Elizabethan space, Sinclair identifies Marlowe as a trans-historical interchangeable character with a shared belligerent attitude.

At the end of his narrative, Burgess identifies the pervasive presence of Marlowe in contemporary culture by noting that Marlowe possesses an 'inimitable voice [that] sings on' (DMD 272). By 'song', Burgess probably meant the lyrical qualities of Marlowe's distinct cadence. His identification of Marlowe's 'inimitable' voice, though, suggests a unique quality about which, I would argue, Sinclair takes issue. In creating Norton, Sinclair provides a character who recognises that Marlowe stands out from his companions. However, he also regards him as insignificant in terms of his own self-involved project, which is to escape from an historically stultifying London burdened by its past. Norton's claim that he provided Marlowe with lines for his plays further questions the dramatist's uniqueness. However, Burgess and Sinclair are both complicit in their critiques of biographers of Marlowe who engage in exegetic commentary on historical documents, such as the coroner's report of Marlowe's death, in order to establish causal significance. Such biographies tend to offer similar narrative reconstructions of his death in which those present have been afforded weighty historical significance and provided with motive and cause. Burgess's narrator sees all the circumstances surrounding Marlowe's death as lies, signifiers of the impenetrable mystery of what occurred that is both a metaphorical and a literal cover up: the language of the report, and the covering of Marlowe's body and its internment into an unmarked grave (DMD 268). In turn, Sinclair has Norton dismiss the significance of Poley, Skeres and Frizer, who are given so much attention by Nicholl in *The Reckoning*, before killing Marlowe himself. In doing so, Sinclair downplays the causality embedded within such narratives in favour of exigency.³⁵ The inevitability of his death gives way to death by chance. In this respect, Sinclair is attempting what Paul Menzer refers to as 'a post-modern erasure of biography', designed to avoid a critical practice in biographies of Marlowe that have engaged in 'a preposterous poetics that start with the

³⁵ Paul Hammer takes issue with the significance that Nicholl gives Skeres, as well as the general idea that this was a well-coordinated conspiracy against Marlowe. He sees his death as a blunder compared to Nicholl's view of it as a 'decision' and the cause as money rather than politics. Instead of a political murder, Hammer views Marlowe's death as a 'clumsy but almost mundane event.' See 'A Reckoning Reframed: the "Murder" of Christopher Marlowe Revisited', *ELR* 26. 2 (1996), 225-242 (p. 241).

author's end.³⁶ If this end is a random and contingent one, and is dependent on a fictional character who does not exist in historical archives and who is not invested in the significance of Marlowe's demise, then Sinclair is anticipating what Thomas Healy has recently argued is the problem with biographies of Marlowe. In focusing so much on contextualising his life, Healy says that his biographers 'allow Marlowe's life to attain a significance that few of his contemporaries likely felt it possessed'.³⁷ While acknowledging the richness of Marlowe's art, Sinclair, like Healy, cautions us about seeing his life as anything more than an 'ordinary figure'.³⁸ Certainly this is what Sinclair's alter-ego Norton feels as he slips nonchalantly out of Deptford, leaving the British tourist industry the task of erecting the blue plaque for 'the History Trail brochure' (SCA 10) that will give Marlowe his belated significance.

³⁶ Paul Menzer, 'Marlowe Now' in *Christopher Marlowe in Context*, ed. by Emma Bartels and Emma Smith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp. 357-365 (p. 358).

³⁷ Thomas Healy, "Marlowe's Biography" in *Christopher Marlowe in Context*, ed. by Emma Bartels and Emma Smith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp. 334-345 (p. 334).

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 337.