

A Psychogeography of the Six Towns: city | walking | poetry

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[I]t is in Pottery buildings and...those municipal buildings funded by their proprietors – the latter ... martyrs to the vicissitudes of nineteenth century eclecticism – that the Stokiness of Stoke buildings manifests itself. And nowhere is this better illustrated than in the bottle kiln.

(Rice 65)

Every citizen has had long associations with some part of [their] city, and [their] image is soaked in memories and meaning.

(Lynch 1)

It is surprising, but true, that Argentinian magical realist, Jorge Luis Borges, set a story in the Stoke on Trent town of Fenton. 'The Garden of Forking Paths' (1941) is a tale which examines the nature of time through the symbol of the labyrinth; here in the form of the formal Chinese garden and the palimpsest text of a story written and re-written over a number of generations. We can extend Borges' symbol to urban space itself, where the city becomes a 'text' which is inscribed and re-inscribed by generations of planners and architects. Generations of urban subjects then overlay this physical geography with their own interpretations, histories and stories. Stoke's literary credentials, though limited, are relatively well-known. George Orwell travelled through the area, known as The Potteries, because of its dominant ceramics industry, while writing *The Road to Wigan Pier* (1937). He wasn't complimentary, describing how 'in among the rows of tiny blackened houses ... are the 'pot banks' – conical brick chimneys like giant burgundy bottles buried in the soil and belching their smoke almost in your face The best thing one can say for the pottery towns is that they are fairly small and stop abruptly' (97). Borges knew of Fenton from his Staffordshire born Methodist grandmother. The same Wesleyan Methodists are at the centre of Stoke on Trent's best known literary export, Arnold Bennett's *Anna of the Five Towns* (1902). Bennett creates a lightly fictionalised version of the six towns that constitute the city of Stoke on Trent, omitting Borges' Fenton. For Bennett, Burslem is not just a neutral background against which his drama plays out, instead it shapes and influences the relationships between the characters – through the Methodist Chapel, the pottery industry and the class relations inscribed on the very fabric of the town. The tale of Anna Tellwright's courtship with young pottery manufacturer Henry Mynors is played out against the backdrop of the district's industry; pottery, coal mining and the iron foundries. Bennett describes Bursley (the fictionalised Burslem, the oldest and once most prosperous pottery town), in this way:

Bursley lies towards the north end of an extensive valley ... defaced by the activities of a quarter of a million of people. Five contiguous towns—Turnhill, Bursley, Hanbridge, Knype, and Longshaw—united by a single winding thoroughfare some eight miles in length are mean and forbidding of aspect – sombre, hard-featured, uncouth; and the vaporous poison of their ovens and chimneys has soiled and shrivelled the surrounding country...

(Bennett np)

A few years earlier, in 1888, HG Wells had lived close to the ironworks that Bennett would go on to describe, where 'wreaths of yellow flame with canopies of tinted smoke' lit the night sky above his five towns (ibid.). In 'The Cone' (Wells 1895), Raut, an artist, gives voice to sublime effects of heat, fire and steam in the Etruria Valley where the ironworks, the colliery, the railway and the canal have an elemental presence. Wells allies the reader with the artistic consciousness through most of the story, impressing upon us a sense of both power and threat:

between the railway and the dark mass of the low hill beyond, dominating the whole view, colossal, inky-black, and crowned with smoke and fitful flames, stood the great cylinders of the Jeddah Company Blast Furnaces They stood heavy and threatening, full of an incessant turmoil of flames and seething molten iron, [A] truckful of fuel was shot into one of the giants, ... and a confusion of smoke and black dust came boiling upwards towards the sky.

(Wells np)

The idea of the urban-industrial labyrinth is clearly a powerful one in the Victorian consciousness and we can see from these examples how the cityscape is inscribed on both the characters' interiority and the imaginations of their creators, shaping and manipulating the characters' narratives. We can see from the work of Borges and Bennett how the narratives of his characters are influenced by their cityscapes and the social and industrial landmarks that make it.

Stoke on Trent now is the post-industrial result of the cityscape described by Orwell, Bennett and Wells. The last coal mine closed in 1999, the steelworks in 2000 and the ceramics industry employs a fraction of the workforce at its height (in the 1950s). **The six towns – Tunstall, Burslem, Hanley, Stoke, Fenton and Longton** – challenged each other for civic status throughout the nineteenth century, resulting in a polycentric conurbation with six administrative, cultural and civic centres. **Each has a town hall, a concert hall and a Victorian park** at its centre. Federation into the City of Stoke on Trent happened in 1910 and the character and relevance of each of the six towns began to shift. The decline of traditional industries, dis-investment and consequent social issues have altered them further.

We all know our city; but how *legible* is it to us? how well can we *read* it? We know our paths and trajectories, our neighbourhoods, places where we work and shop and play, our routes to and from these significant sites. Our project is to explore the six town centres of Stoke on Trent – the city where we work and live – and the spaces in between that have a less readable identity and that connect them, using psychogeography to reveal the city that exists below urban routines and the rational patterns of commerce, culture and circulation. Psychogeography is a practice developed and codified by the Situationists, a 1960s group of radical artists and philosophers who saw themselves as the inheritors of the 'provocative style, demands for immediacy, and cravings for autonomy' of the surrealists and Dadaists (Plant 3). The Situationists sought to re-appropriate the streets of the city through a radical aesthetic practice of walking. In what follows, we sketch out the origins and tactics of psychogeography, submit our psychogeographic reports on the six towns, contemplate a geo-poetical urban cartography, and finally reflect on the methods we have employed. In doing so, we hope to have also introduced you to some of the landmarks and quotidian architecture of Stoke on Trent's six towns.

The relationship between walking in the city and poetry was established by Poe in the nineteenth century through the figure of the flâneur; a gentleman, wanderer-recorder negotiating the indecipherable 19th century urban text. Walter Benjamin describes how the flâneur would go 'botanizing on the asphalt' (36) and overlay the physical and rational metropolis with a 'phantasmagoria' of urban mythologies and stories (39). As we explored the six towns, it became increasingly clear to us that this phantasmagoria was constituted in a number of ways: language and the ways in which the city is named through formal and informal processes and over time; landmarks, which are built for historically specific purposes (such as memorialisation) but whose meaning alters over time; personal and communal histories, which can sometimes challenge and contest 'official' meanings and histories; and stories.

We can visualise the capacity of footsteps to rearticulate urban streets through the work of Michel de Certeau, who argues that walking reveals 'the disquieting familiarity of the city' and is an act of appropriation of urban space by the pedestrian (96). 'The long poem of walking', he argues, articulates 'a second, poetic geography on top of the geography of the literal, forbidden or permitted meaning' (101, 105). Walking, then, articulates and appropriates a place for personal and contingent meanings and contributes to the phantasmagoria identified with the flâneur. The urban phantasmagoria, then, is a poetic cartography which overlays the physical and rational geography.

The Situationists argue that we can use the practice of the *dérive* 'to notice the way in which certain areas, streets, or buildings resonate with states of mind, inclinations, and desires, and to seek out reasons for movement other than those for which an environment was designed' (Plant 59). By combining new, more personal interpretations of the cityscape with phantasmagorical elements we can begin to understand the multiple ways in which the built environment can influence the outcomes of narratives played out in urban settings. Equally, the region's industries leave their mark, particularly in the form of the potbanks that were so central to the pottery factories, and yet these landmarks have become redundant, their fires cooled by decades of neglect, the battle against pollution and technological developments. Each of the six towns, then, is a palimpsest of industrial and architectural histories, accompanied by less visible palimpsests of histories and communities.

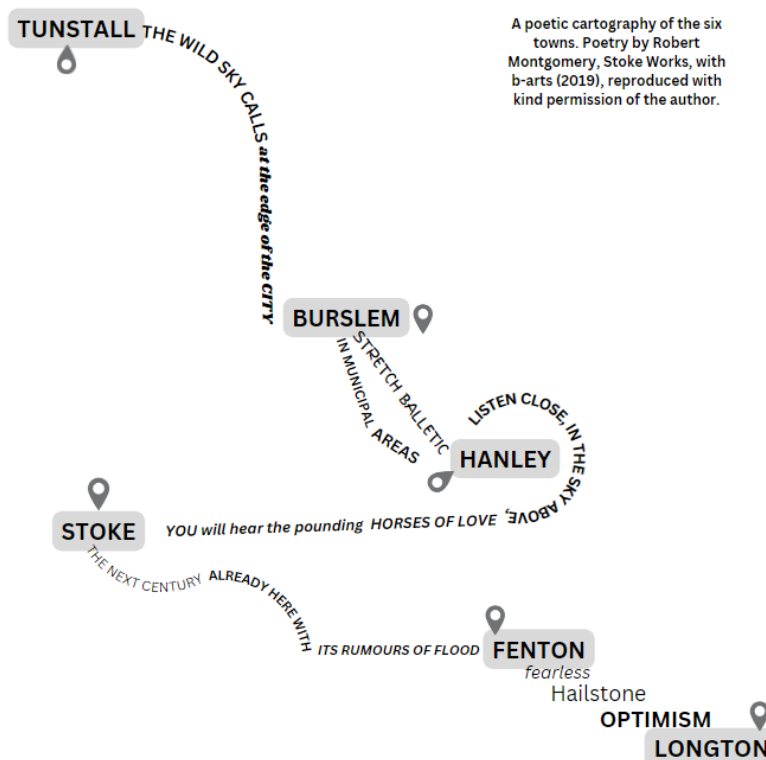
Psychogeography, Guy Debord tells us, is the 'study of the specific effects of the geographical environment ... on the emotions and behaviours of individuals', while the *dérive* is a 'mode of experimental behaviour linked to the conditions of urban society: a technique of transient passage through varied ambiances' (in Knabb 45). Simon Sadler describes how 'Psychogeography direct[s] us to obscure places, to elusive ambient effects and partial artistic and literary precedents' (76). Our method, therefore, will be to view the city as a sensual arena which becomes immediate and knowable as we allow the ambience of areas to guide our trajectories. Because of the dereliction and decay that has followed de-industrialisation, the six towns have many abandoned spaces and more recent circulation systems that obstruct and hamper the pedestrian, all of which have their own psychogeographic effects. *Dérive*, roughly translated, means drift. However, there is a crucial distinction between a drift or a stroll and a defined *dérive*. In 'Theory of the *Dérive*', Debord describes how:

one or more persons during a certain period drop their ... usual motives for movement and action, and let themselves be drawn by the attractions of the terrain and the encounters they find there. Chance is a less important factor in this activity

than one might think: from a *dérive* point of view cities have psychogeographical contours, with constant currents, fixed points and vortexes that strongly discourage entry into or exit from certain zones.

(Knabb 50)

We can view the *dérive* as a conceptual or performance aesthetic practice, where the provisional and **invisible inscriptions of walking** are overlaid on the urban palimpsest and can be **translated into** the **concrete** practice of poetic **composition**, language, formal and informal qualities of landmarks and urban markers, and official and personal histories.



One significant consequence of the Situationist's psycho-geographical project has been a reconsideration of urban cartography. Kevin Lynch's theory of cognitive mapping, described in *The Image of the City* (1960), identifies that urban subjects have a fragmented and partial mental image of the city because of their familiarity with certain neighbourhoods but not others. The Situationists portrayed the psychological experience of the city through fragmented, cut-up maps – most famously in *Naked City* (1957 Debord and Jorn) which reflects partial and fleeting experiences of spatial

ambiences and personal trajectories. As a consequence, a psychogeographical and geo-poetic cartography more accurately represents the urban imagination and how we locate ourselves in the unknowable totality of the city. Robert Montgomery's **poems are fragments** which represent the partial **images glimpsed** as a consequence of the transient rush of modern urban life. These images and poetic fragments accumulate into personal urban narratives. Montgomery's project, *Stoke Works*, reinforces the connection between language, narrative and the city by displaying these fragments on the fabric of Stoke on Trent's towns; **on railway arches, factory walls, on municipal and abandoned buildings**. Here, with the poet's permission, we borrow his geo-poetic fragments to connect together the six towns and to express something of the phantasmagorical quality of **our own long poem of walking**.

Because we explore the city on foot, we are able to make legible some of the histories and cultures of the streets that are not accessible when following the prescribed circulations of traffic and commerce. The team of psychogeographical researchers is comprised of an architectural historian and a cultural geographer, with the help of Robert Montgomery, poet. We allow the psychogeographical effects to shape our trajectories,

challenging the empirical discipline of street layouts and pedestrian circulation and exploring the abandoned and disquieting spaces. We also follow Bennett's thoroughfare that connects the towns together like a ribbon, contemplating the nature of the places that have an identity subordinated to the centres they connect. At the same time, we explore how the city's industrial legacy is inscribed on the architectural and cultural palimpsests of the towns, paying close attention to the civic centres, public art and the abandoned and marginalised buildings, pathways and spaces.

Our dérivés are structured by the North-South arrangement of the towns, and follow the view that Bennett would have had when describing the Potteries at the end of the nineteenth century. We make our way from Tunstall to Burslem along Scotia Road; then to Hanley through Cobridge via Waterloo Road; from Hanley to Stoke via Snow Hill and Shelton, passing Hanley Park; then to Fenton from Stoke along City Road; and finally to Longton following King Street.

We begin in **Tunstall** on a Saturday afternoon. The town hall sits on what would have been the main thoroughfare through the town and has recently been renovated. The façade is neo-classical and carries the inscription 'Peace, Happiness, Truth, Justice'. Next to the town hall is an impressive but abandoned bank building. This becomes a theme for each of the six towns and records the migration of commerce from the high street to the internet. The impressive gothic Victorian façade advertises **the long-defunct 'Manchester and Liverpool District Bank'** picked out **in terracotta tiles**. It also has shrubbery growing from the first floor **as nature begins to reclaim the abandoned structure. Glimpsed beyond are anonymous edge of town warehouse stores**. Opposite the town hall is Tower Square. The clock tower commemorates a local pottery owner and philanthropist, Sir Smith Child. Although influential in his time, Smith Child is not remembered today but the tower remains a local landmark where shoppers meet for lunch from the takeaways lining the square.

Just beyond the square, the town gives way to partially Victorian derelict factory buildings and a park reclaimed from industrial land. The contours of **the park** have an unnatural quality that reveals them to be **an impersonation of nature**. This is emphasised by the incongruous presence of a residual fragment of a former factory, surrounded by rusty fencing and gates and the overgrown walls, which has become the site of illicit drinking and smoking for the local youngsters. The effect on the viewer is one of **a corrupted arcadian vision** of nature **inhabited by the ghost of the area's industrial past**.

The Victorians were keen on their arcadian versions of nature and a little further on is the town park, with impressive wrought iron gates dedicated to a successful local potter, Thomas Peake. Parks were provided by local benefactors as a place of leisure and the stroller, like the flâneur, could become spectacle as well as spectator. Bennett locates Anna and Mynors together in Bursley Park in a way that makes their courtship public. On this sunny Saturday, the park was busy with families walking, a wedding in the Floral Hall and teenagers on bikes, accompanied by a pungent aroma of weed. Parks can represent both redemptive spaces of nature and isolated places of urban threat, and many of the parks in the six towns have become run down. The relative affluence of the housing around the park has a strong influence of the ambience of these public spaces. Tunstall Park feels safe and open.

The Alexandra shopping centre on the edge of town is overshadowed by a large aluminium sculpture of **a pottery shard found** by archaeologists **with the fingerprint of its Roman maker impressed into the surface**. This public artwork prompts the viewer to think about **the unbroken history of pottery workers who have shaped both the clay** dug from the ground into ceramic objects to be used around the world **and**, as a consequence, **shaped the landscape** around Tunstall with its collieries, spoil heaps, factories, monuments and architecture. From here we follow Scotia Road, part of the major artery linking the towns. Scotia Road is an anonymous street of car lots, car washes and light industrial units.

We entered **Burslem** in the early afternoon as the central **town square** (sort of, you will see why in a minute) was **filling up with** Port Vale **football supporters**. Their '**long poem of walking**' has been **invisibly inscribed between terraced streets**, town centre pubs **and Vale Park** for many generations. This poem speaks of familial and **communal histories**, of collective **hopes and disappointments**, but most intensely it speaks of **a shared identity** based on this place as a locus of social and personal histories. As we approach the stadium, the crowd becomes denser, the chatter of groups and families louder, the smell of burger vans stronger, the excitement more palpable. Many in this crowd will share a footballing history like my own (though many miles away in West London) of accompanying their father and grandfather (mostly a masculine inheritance then) to their first game as a child, the memory of seeing the intensely green pitch contrasted against the colours of the stands – these are narratives passed between generations.

Burslem is known as **the Mother Town** and the one where Wedgwood developed a cottage industry into a factory system in the 18th century. As you come into Burslem from the North you encounter first the Victorian edifice of the Royal Stafford pottery. The works date, as recorded on the ornate archway, from 1819.

Immediately beyond is the formal centre of Burslem, with its old town hall and the disused Queen's Theatre forming a triangle rather than a square. What is striking here is the proximity of factories to the civic and ceremonial centre of the town. The traditional city model of centre, suburbs and industrial margins does not hold true for these towns. The old town hall has on its spire a gilded statue which is rumoured to be the inspiration for Robbie Williams' song 'Angels' - he grew up in Burslem and visitors to the town can take the Robbie Williams walking tour. The Leopard Hotel, an important 18th century building with a rich history, has recently closed down, become a cannabis factory and then been extensively damaged by fire.

An alleyway leads away from the centre into a side street **of mostly abandoned and decaying buildings**. In an expression of the neglect of this area, there is a hoarding with **fading artwork celebrating the 'MOTHE TOWN'** – the R panel has been repurposed and fills a gap on its side. While the area around the square feels pleasant and accessible, with cafes, an art gallery and pubs, just a few steps away is this site of dereliction that resists the pedestrian. Despite this, at the end of the alleyway are two of the most important buildings in the city: the Burslem School of Art (attended by Arnold Machin and Clarice Cliff) and the Wedgwood Institute. The Institute is richly decorated with a statue of Josiah Wedgwood and ornate terracotta panels depicting local industry, but it is empty and neglected.

Just beyond are the Three Sisters bottle kilns of the now demolished Acme Marls factory. The way these and other **sites of 'industrial ruination'** have been reclaimed by greenery perfectly illustrates Tim Edensor's description of how the 'temporalities of ruined factories ...testify to the natural temporalities imposed by decay and the ecological life cycles of non-human life-forms' (125). As they are taken over by nature again, the fragile order of the city is symbolised by the **foliage growing from walls and windows** – a theme of our dérives.

One of the most ruined but also most significant Burslem buildings is the remaining structure of the Burslem Sunday School. Eight classical columns supporting a large portico is all that remains after arson resulted in demolition of the rest. At this point in our journey we can stand on **the ridge from which Bennett surveyed the Potteries towns** stretching away to the south. In Bennett's day, smoke from the **potbanks** would have filled the air, while now they **remain as poignant reminders** of the area's industrial heritage. From here we can see the former Bethel Chapel, a symbol of Methodist power and influence: it seated 1000 worshippers and had its own Sunday school but is now boarded up. E. P. Thompson, in his study of the English working class, describes how 'Methodism, with its open chapel doors, did offer to the uprooted and abandoned people of the Industrial Revolution some kind of community to replace the older community-patterns which were being displaced' (416-7).

Here Burslem gives way to one of our liminal places. Cobridge runs along Waterloo Road to Hanley and is home to a large Muslim community. The businesses that line the road come alive at dusk, with young men getting haircuts, families visiting the restaurants and delivery drivers rushing from the takeaways. Just beyond is the Bennett family home, with its plaque commemorating his time there (1881-89). Bennett's view of the Potteries from here, north to Burslem and south to Hanley, influenced so much of his work, yet the influence would have been from memory rather than contemporaneous experience. He had moved to London at 21 and all his five towns literature was written in London and Paris.

Just off the main thoroughfare into Hanley is an area known as Portland Inn. The pub, now closed, gives the area its name and is itself named after the famous Wedgwood Portland vase. There are plans to turn the pub into a community and arts centre and a wall carries a graffiti inscription declaring 'People in Progress'. The power of language to connect temporalities is illustrated by this little neighbourhood. There is a connection here from ancient Rome; a classical Roman glass vessel gives its shape to Wedgwood's Jasperware vase, while its name derives from the aristocratic family which came to own the original – the physical palimpsest is overlaid with linguistic signs which carry distant resonances.

Between Portland Inn and **Hanley**, a vast former factory has been cleared to allow the completion of **the ring road that doesn't quite ring the town**. The site has been recolonised by nature, taking on the appearance of a small forest, displaying Edensor's temporalities of decay and nature. We will see how transport and traffic has come to influence the cityscape of Stoke on Trent and how it creates currents of resistance to the walker while directing the car driver towards the commercial centre.

Hanley is dominated by the Potteries Shopping Centre. The abandoned Debenhams store (closed 2021) is mounted with a major piece of modern art, a steel **sculpture** of a human figure, 'The Man of Fire' by David Wynne, which **celebrates the fires that fuelled**

the city's industries and are recorded by Wells in 'The Cone'. **Now**, of course, **those fires have been extinguished** and the city's narrative is reliant on different forces. The local name for the sculpture, Jack Frost, seems more relevant now than the intentions of the artist.

And so to the familiar town hall in the centre of the town. As Rice notes in the epigraph above, the Stoke style is eclectic. Built 'in the style of a Loire Chateau' (Rice 104), the building has been abandoned and the front is adorned with a large For Sale sign. The main doorway has become a sheltered spot for the town's many homeless people. Around the corner, there is a complex architectural juxtaposition of a partially demolished concrete brutalist bus-station, its glass and steel replacement and the 19th century Victoria Hall. The **concrete walkways and staircases** of the old bus station **provide shelter for the homeless**. While I photographed the sign for the abandoned Aarons News, a rat popped out from a hole to collect some stray takeaway food. Here, in doorways and in the concrete ruins, the formal narrative of commerce and economy is challenged by the presence of a sleeping bag and a box of dirty clothing in an alternative narrative of homelessness and dispossession. **The footsteps of the abandoned inhabitants** of the city **tell a very different story** to those of the shoppers and office workers who occupy the space with certainty and confidence.

One of the most impressive buildings in the town is the Bethesda Chapel. While partly restored, the chapel suffers from a lack of purpose – what is to be done with a Methodist Chapel for 3000 when there are so few Methodists around? Opposite, and somewhat incongruously, is The Backyard, an open-air bar and club pumping out loud dance music for a clientele arriving in the late afternoon sun in clubbing gear. A walk along the pedestrianised Piccadilly reveals that the night-time economy has extended into the afternoons as groups of young women and men drink cocktails and bottled beer at pavement tables. While these are public spaces, the currents and ambiances they produce provide a resistance to entry for these psychogeographers and the shoppers making their way to the car parks with their purchases – the streets are being taken over by the young on a night out.

This is **the Cultural Quarter**, with the Potteries **Museum and Art Gallery**, which houses an internationally significant ceramics collection. The front of this 1960s building is adorned with **a brickwork frieze depicting the city's industries (an emerging theme)** and an abstract sculpture celebrating the anniversary of the federation six towns into Stoke on Trent. Figurative **statues of Arnold Bennett** (seated, reading a book), **Reginald Mitchell and a steelworker (in shiny stainless steel)** celebrate in a more direct way the city's cultural, engineering and industrial past – all, it ought to be noted, through **a masculine history**. Like the 'The Man of Fire', these examples of public art reflect on the region's literary and industrial past, **but are less able to speak to its future**.

Our poem of walking continues from Hanley to Stoke, the fourth of our towns, taking in Snow Hill, another predominantly Asian and Kurdish neighbourhood, and Hanley Park. A park run on Saturday, innovative play areas and occasional public events (such as Pride) reinvigorate the space at weekends, but during the week it can be the preserve of drug dealers and street drinkers. There are contrasts and tensions between the different communities who inhabit the park – drinkers on a bench with their carrier bag of cans, young families and older couples using the café. Beyond the park is Shelton, a

neighbourhood where a significant Asian population creates a lively mix with the students at Staffordshire University.

The town of **Stoke upon Trent (note the distinction with the city of Stoke on Trent)** is divided by transport links. The **railway**, the **canal** and the **A500 separate the railway station** from the **town** itself, illustrating the Situationist's belief that '[t]raffic circulation is the organization of universal isolation' (Kotányi and Vaneigem in Knabb, 66). **Outside** the neo-Jacobean station is a statue of **Josiah Wedgwood holding an example of his Portland Vase**, reminding us of how **language** overlays the physical city to connect places, times and communities. Wedgwood was an Enlightenment thinker, whose scientific approach revolutionised **pottery** manufacture. His statue in an ethnically diverse community also reminds us of **his support for the abolitionist cause**.

To reach the town you **go under and over** the north-south, 19th and 20th century transport **links**. The railway links **London to Manchester and Glasgow**. The Trent and Mersey Canal was built to take pottery to international markets (replacing the horse caravans that left from places such as Packhorse Lane in Burslem) and the A500 links the city to the M6. It is known colloquially as the D road, partly because it forms a D with the motorway and partly (and less well known) because the Roman numeral for 500 is D. Local playwright, Deborah McAndrew, portrays the effects of cutting an urban highway through an established community in her 2019 play, *The D Road*. This site-specific production, staged in the former Spode factory, explores the over-lapping temporalities which create the physical and social fabric of a place and the personal and communal effects of **radical change** as the central character's house becomes **isolated on an island between the road and the railway**. The town itself is dominated by the former Spode works, the town hall and the King's Hall. The town hall is a monolithic, classical stone frontage. Today there is **a wedding at the town hall and the guests are forced to scamper across the one-way system, clutching the hands of small children, for photographs in the grounds of Stoke Minster. A church has occupied this site since the first millennium**. The current building is a fairly non-descript Victorian church but in the grounds are the graves of Josiahs Wedgwood and Spode.

The pre- and post-federation history of the six towns is illustrated by one street – it is named Commerce Street on a plaque high on the wall of a building and below it, Trade Street. Where names coincided **in the new city new names were given, but the ghostly residues of earlier forms remained**.

The history of the town is also illustrated on its southern edge where a large 21st century supermarket sits across the road from two Victorian buildings; a former library and art school. Strangely isolated outside the supermarket is a statue of Colin Minton Campbell, a former mayor. The family's factory stood, until the 1980s, on what is now a supermarket and its car park. A plaque records that the statue was restored and relocated to by Sainsbury's for the people of Stoke on Trent. The town centre is wedged between the sites of the vast Spode and Minton factories and would have catered for the workers' needs. Their footsteps would have trudged, six days a week, between the rows of terraced houses and the factories, and on Saturday, after the morning shift, to the football at the nearby Victoria Ground.

The echoes of fans' footsteps to see Stoke City still linger in the match day routines of today's fans, despite the club moving to a new edge of town stadium. Town centre pubs advertise a pint and a mini-bus ride to the ground to retain the custom of fans. The old Victoria Ground has now, many years later, been redeveloped as housing. The roads of the new estate are named after footballers and there is a blue plaque marking the centre circle; amusingly there are 4 houses with a plaque – maybe it moved around over the years.

The route from Stoke to Fenton takes us along City Road, one of those placeless places of industrial and commercial premises.

Fenton is the least remarkable of the six towns, perhaps explaining **why Bennett left it out**. This town disorientates the psychogeographer more than the others. Although it has a town hall and a formal square, in a way that the others don't, the formal centre is not the centre of gravity for the town and so instead **it feels like the edge**. It has the same components – a square, a town hall, a library, a park – but the commercial centre is **a strip of warehouse stores and fast food outlets** nearby. On the way into the central square there is an abandoned building with steel shutters on some windows and broken glass in others. A faded sign declares a Launderette and there is a central arch suggesting that this could, once, have been the front of a pottery factory. There has been some regeneration in the area immediately around the town hall and of the town hall itself.

The town hall is European gothic, **with high, arched windows**. It was **rescued** from potential re-development **by** Justin Meath Baker, **the grandson of the pottery philanthropist who had gifted it to the town** in the 19th century (Ault np). Each town has its own, now forgotten, philanthropic force who impressed their will on the townscape and then faded from collective memory. Justin Meath Baker **emerged from the shadows of history** to preserve the town's architectural legacy and, most importantly, give this building a viable future as a venue for small businesses and the arts. Recent events include a performance of Bennett's *The Card* by local theatre company, Claybody, and Staffordshire University student productions. Also rescued was the unusual ceramic memorial to the men of Fenton who fell in the Great War.

A brief diversion towards the park and Victoria Road takes us past what should be a local landmark; a piece of public art with a curved brick wall bearing the motto 'onward and upward' (which comes from the town coat of arms) and a steel spire-ette with the word 'Fenton' down it. I had passed this many times in the car and not noticed it. The practice of 'botanising' at this intuitive and intimate level of urban exploration has revealed aspects of the city that had previously remained below a threshold of visibility, to paraphrase de Certeau (93).

King Street runs from Fenton to Longton, the last of our six towns, and is the most varied and interesting with few modern buildings and many with a rich architectural and industrial history. Between the houses, the car dealerships and the car washes, derelict pubs and factories stand as testaments to the area's once thriving industrial communities. This road **feels like** the past; there is a gritty reality to it that reminds me of **a black and white photograph of the past – the 1970s or, from some angles, the 1870s**. This road feels like it has been abandoned by the people who should be caring for it, but it is also a place of fascination that makes you want to explore the side-streets and the alleyways.

Longton is the town which carries the signs of its industrial heritage most visibly. There are more **bottle ovens crowded** around this town centre than the others; because there are more working pottery factories, because there is a working pottery museum, and because of neglect. More recently, Longton has been shaped by transport and traffic. The eight lane A50, linking Stoke to the East Midlands, is in a cutting dividing the town in two. The urban motorway brings traffic to the retail parks that crowd around the junction from it. The result is a lack of investment on 'the other side', leading to further isolation, dereliction and ruination.

If approached along King Street, you arrive in Longton under an iron railway bridge with the town hall behind it. The building is closed, deemed redundant in a city with five other town halls, with a classical stone frontage of columns and a large portico entrance. Behind is the Victorian, iron framed market hall, bustling with Saturday shoppers. Other than Hanley, this is the liveliest shopping town we have visited. Opposite, the walls have been used as a canvas for community murals depicting war and the home front – images of soldiers, letters home, a military dog and a nurse. While the 1960s shopping arcade, the Longton Exchange, is busy and most shop units are occupied, there is a vacant Woolworths store with its sign still over the main entrance, despite going out of business in 2008. Older shoppers with bags and trolleys meet in the central square and exchange greetings and news. The streets around, in contrast, show signs of abandonment and dereliction. **Vacant and half demolished Victorian buildings** are being **re-colonised by nature**, while a brutalist concrete office block has large To Let signs in the windows.

Beyond the top of the town is the evidence of the ceramics industry in this town; its history and its present and **the fragile preservation of craft skills**. The heritage is guarded by the Gladstone Pottery Museum, which will be familiar to viewers of the Great Pottery Throwdown TV programme. This wonderful museum maintains the bottle ovens and the skills of ceramic flower making and pot throwing, and allows visitors to try for themselves. Rita is a demonstrator who worked in the factories, making many dozens of ceramic flowers every day. She now works with a local ceramic artist and academic, Neil Brownsword, to record how **the work of the maker** is **anonymously embodied in the ceramic object** while it is **the name of the factory** which is **carried by the 'bottom stamp'**. You can tell **someone from the Potteries** because they **will always look at the stamp on their crockery before drinking the tea** you have just handed them.

The A50 bisects the town, marooning the town's library at the end of a footbridge. This magnificent building was gifted to the people of Longton by the Duke of Sutherland, whose ancestral estate was nearby at Trentham (now a public gardens). As a consequence, it is named the Sutherland Institute and, like so many of the public buildings we have encountered, it has a yellow terracotta frieze depicting local industry (in a classical style). It provides a cognitive marker for the traveller returning to the city, letting them know that they are nearly home, even if they are unaware of its origins. Like **the various clock towers** and commemorative **institutes and park gates** encountered on our dérives, these **landmarks** have lost their original relevance over time but become part of personal stories as they become landmarks **of the personal imagination**.

Conclusions

So, what conclusions can we draw from our own long poem of walking about both the practices of psychogeography and the City of Stoke on Trent. By taking unconventional trajectories and experiencing urban ambiances as they unfolded both geographically and temporally, we have encountered a palimpsest of urban narratives.

The *dérive* freed us to imaginatively reconstructed our personal cities from the fragments and partial impressions collected as we negotiated, traversed and explored urban *spaces*, transforming them in the process into *places* with their own historic and communal identities. These individual cartographies are shaped on the one hand by the fabric of the city and on the other by our personal trajectories, those of others, the traffic, the weather, our moods.

The task of the urban poet (or short story writer, or novelist, or painter) is to bring in to combination the tangible and rational landmarks of the city, such as civic buildings and memorials and public artworks, with the 'disquieting familiarity' of the intangible language, histories and stories of the personal features and ambiances of urban experience. These will become the cartographies of narrated figures or poetic personas who may be able to read the city as a legible text or, potentially, figures which are overwhelmed by such a complex environment.

Of Stoke, we discovered that it is architecturally, industrially, culturally and demographically rich. The region's industrial past is inscribed on its fabric. Modern buildings sit alongside Victorian buildings of genuine national and international significance. We discovered the beauty of the industrial ruin, and that many parts of the city have been choked by the isolating flows of traffic.

Earlier we briefly encountered the *flâneur* and the writing of Walter Benjamin. He was deeply concerned with the work of the mid-nineteenth century Parisian poet, Charles Baudelaire. Baudelaire 'found' the raw material of his poetry amongst the rag pickers and pedlars of Paris. Similarly, our discussion has concluded that the urban poet must be open to the impression on their consciousness of physical landmarks and urban stories. We have borrowed this aleatorical process of poetic composition to fashion a poem from our own psychogeographic reports, picking out and highlighting phrases which capture, we think, the experience of walking through the six towns. The stanzas created represent our own 'long poem of walking', a way in which a poetic impulse 'walks' through our essay.

Our long poem of walking (the six towns)

The six towns – Tunstall, Burslem, Hanley, Stoke, Fenton and Longton. Each a town hall, a concert hall and a park
invisible inscriptions of walking translated into concrete composition
poems are fragments images glimpsed on railway arches, factory walls, on municipal and abandoned buildings our own long poem of walking

Tunstall the long-defunct 'Manchester and Liverpool District Bank' in terracotta tiles as nature begins to reclaim the abandoned structure. Glimpsed beyond are warehouse stores. the park an impersonation of nature a corrupted arcadian vision inhabited by the ghost of the industrial past.
a pottery shard found with the fingerprint of its Roman maker impressed into the surface

the unbroken history of pottery workers who have shaped the clay and shaped the landscape

Burslem town square filling up with football supporters. Their 'long poem of walking' invisibly inscribed between terraced streets and Vale Park
communal histories, hopes and disappointments, a shared identity
Burslem is the Mother Town
An alleyway of mostly abandoned and decaying buildings
fading artwork celebrating the 'MOTHE TOWN'
sites of 'industrial ruination' foliage growing from walls and windows
the ridge from which Bennett surveyed the Potteries towns
potbanks remain as poignant reminders

Hanley the ring road that doesn't quite ring the town
a sculpture celebrates the fires that fuelled the city's industries. Now those fires have been extinguished
concrete walkways and staircases provide shelter for the homeless
The footsteps of the abandoned inhabitants tell a different story
the Cultural Quarter, Museum and Art Gallery, a brickwork frieze depicting the city's industries (an emerging theme)
statues of Arnold Bennett, Reginald Mitchell and a steelworker (in shiny stainless steel) celebrate a masculine history less able to speak to its future.

Stoke upon Trent
railway, canal and A500 separate railway station from town
Outside Josiah Wedgwood holding an example of his language pottery his support for the abolitionist cause.
go under and over
links London to Manchester and Glasgow.
radical change isolated on an island between the road and the railway.
a wedding at the town hall and the guests are forced to scamper across the one-way system, clutching the hands of small children, for photographs in the grounds of Stoke Minster. A church has occupied this site since the first millennium.
in the new city new names were given, but the ghostly residues of earlier forms remained.

Fenton is the least remarkable why Bennett left it out
it feels like the edge
a strip of warehouse stores and fast food outlets
The town hall with high, arched windows rescued by the grandson of the pottery philanthropist who gifted it to the town emerged from the shadows of history
King Street feels like a black and white photograph of the 1970s or the 1870s.

Longton bottle ovens crowded
Vacant and half demolished buildings re-colonised by nature

the fragile preservation of craft skills the work of the maker anonymously embodied in the object the name of the factory carried by the 'bottom stamp'.
someone from the Potteries will always look at the stamp on their crockery before drinking the tea handed them.

the clock towers institutes and park gates
landmarks of the personal imagination.
our own long poem of walking

Exercise

Choose a neighbourhood that you know but isn't one you are very familiar with – your place of work or education, or somewhere you pass through regularly. Choose one or two confederates to share your journey. Choose a starting point and a time limit – 2 to 3 hours is ideal. Then just drift around the area. Record thoughts and impressions in some way (a pen and pad, photographs, the voice recorder on your phone). Plot landmarks that have a formal quality, and then look closely at them to see what relevance they had when they were put there. Be sure to look above street level, to go down side streets, to embrace being a bit lost. Draw out a rough map of your *dérive* and allocate words or phrases to places and spaces. Identify places that are more or less 'legible' to the pedestrian. The words, phrases and impressions you have collected can then be incorporated into a story, a poem or new visual cartography which captures the psychogeographic identity of the area.

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