An English Songline

by JAG Maw

October 1986, a steamy college cellar somewhere under Cambridge. Lighting way low, amps buzzing gently, student chatter picked up by the stage mics, PA system on the edge of feedback. I was sitting on a monitor with a post-gig pint and talking rubbish to anyone prepared to listen. A bloke sidled up to join the chat. I was immediately impressed by his leather jacket. Not some chained-up bogus biker job: this one had *lapels*. Like David Sylvian's on the *Quiet Life* cover, only black. Very cool. But hang on a minute. Is that? I squinted. Out of each sleeve poked the tiny, whiskered and unmistakable face of a rat. Each would tip-toe occasionally down a thumb to sniff the air, have a rather pleased sip of beer and then disappear back into its sleeve. A Londoner taught to identify these creatures with the Plague, I raised an eyebrow. The rats were introduced to me as Sly and Robbie, and leather jacket bloke introduced himself as a guitarist. "I think you need a new one," he said. A new guitarist? It was hard to disagree. As the singer, I had decided that my job was to write inscrutable lyrics and then deliver them with unshakable conviction. Musically, however, I relied on the honourable excuses of punk rock. My guitar tended to run out of ideas after five chords (that's including the minors), and then turn into a stage prop. I went off to confer with the other band members, and told them about leather jacket guitarist and Sly and Robbie. We came back to find him. "You're hired," we said. "Gig next week?" Done. Gradually, over the coming months, we began to play real music. My lyrical concerns also changed, as they reflected my talks with him. While I was studying something wilfully obscure, he was reading into the physical sciences - geology and geography. Pretty soon I was writing songs in which heathens chanted under rock shelves, about how everything is cyclical, and like the phases of the moon, you gotta let it come to you. They had ley lines in them too.

Yeah. I know.

Last week I saw something which got me thinking about ley lines again for the first time since those undergraduate days. And on reflection, the wider context is much like that of thirty years ago. The world does seem to have cycled back to many of its strident, shoulder-padded Big Bang certainties. Hemmed in by one reductive *-ism* or another, we

are living in aggressively monist times. Dogmatic empiricism recognises no unknowables, only knowns and not-known-yets. Scientism rules, and physics is complete: heat is just mean molecular energy; pain is just the firing of c-fibres. The nominal has crushed the noumenal. It's getting to the point at which not even philosophers will speak up for metaphysics anymore. And while we haven't been told exactly what science is yet, we know for damn sure what it's not: homeopathy, astrology, reiki, creationism, intelligent design, psychology, ufology, ancient astronaut theory, palmistry, economics, graphology, fairies, dowsing, geomancy…Right?

Well, up to a point, Lord Copper.

✧

I'm getting ahead of myself. Let's start with the basic ley line exoterica: Picking up an English tradition of geographer-mystics – Tudor chronicler John Leland, Caroline folklorist and gossip John Aubrey, enlightenment antiquarian William Stukely, Georgian 'peasant poet' John Clare – in 1921 an amateur archeologist, photographer and travelling beer-salesman called Alfred Watkins experienced a sudden revelation whilst standing on a hill near Blackwardine in Herefordshire. He saw a network of paths and tracks which stretched across the land, lit up like 'glowing wires' and intersecting at node points of sacred sites – standing stones, wells, chapels, churches, trees. He was emphatic that this was neither some supernatural event nor his own mental projection, but a revealed truth, a folk memory recovered. He noticed that a number of particular names occurred frequently along these lines, words linked by descriptions of light and space. Among these were Cole (Welsh *coel*, light, splendour) and Ley (a glade, perhaps related to the Saxon *leye*, fire). He coined the term 'leys' to describe these paths erased by time. His thesis was that prehistoric man had negotiated his trade routes around the country not by natural phenomena like contour lines or rivers, but by sighting these sacred 'mark-points.' As the title of his book *The Old Straight Track* (1925) infers, Watkins' ur-path is an unforgiving one, and permits no swerving of geological obstacles or secular boundaries. Instead, his argument for straightness relies upon the robust physicality of early man and the absence of formal land ownership.

Watkins' leys are intuitively problematic. Kant's admonition 'Out of the crooked timber of humanity, no straight thing was ever made' seems particularly apt here given the *oh-let's-just-walk-around-it* pragmatism of these islands. And anyway, if the earth is curved

then surely every earthly line is too. Further, do straight lines even exist in *nature*? The book provoked exasperated tutting from the mainstream archaeological community, but it also inspired a generation of amateur archaeologists to go rambling, tooled up with OS maps and makeshift theodolites. Watkins himself was never wholly satisfied that his leys were simply secular trade routes, but his practical nature dissuaded him from speculation into any possible occult purpose. The discourse changed at the tail-end of the 1960s when a man called John Michell, a Cambridge-educated polymath and friend of the Rolling Stones wrote a book called *The View Over Atlantis* (1969). In it, Michell proposed a global account of ley lines resting on number, measure and astronomy. He recruited Plato (specifically *Laws* and *Timaeus*) and Pythagoras to support the theory of an ancient civilisation of great complexity and sophistication. Already hopped up on Blake, Jung, Ginsberg, Lovelock and the dawning of the Age of Aquarius, the 'earth mysteries' movement took off.

Michell's starting point was Glastonbury. From the summit of the Tor and its St Michael's tower he looked west over the levels and made out in the distance the distinctive shape of Burrowbridge Mump, a prehistoric mound topped with a ruined church also dedicated to St Michael. Michell consulted his maps. He drew a line connecting the Mump, the Tor and to the east the great megalithic complex at Avebury, William Stukeley's 'serpent's temple.' Allowing for the curvature of the earth, he continued the line in both directions across southern Britain, from its westernmost point at Carn Lês Boel near Land's End in Cornwall to its easternmost point 350 miles away, at Hopton-On-Sea in Norfolk. Along the line he found a whole series of temples and churches similarly dedicated to St Michael, the dragon-slaying warrior and Archangel of Light who led the forces of God against Satan in the Book of Revelations. Of itself, this was perhaps surprising rather than astonishing; there are many tributes to St Michael in what is now the south of England. More surprising was his discovery that the line also intersects with a number churches dedicated to the other dragon-slaying saints, St George and St Margaret, and to St Mary, the Christianised earth goddess Bridget. These churches, some remote from any settlements and all but forgotten, were often built with the stone from nearby megalithic obelisks which had been broken up and sacrificed to the worship of the new Christian saviour. But what really intrigued Michell was that the line also marks the path of the sun on the 8th of May. This is of course the day when the Latin liturgy celebrates the Apparition of St Michael the Archangel. In pre-Christian times this day was celebrated as Beltane, the beginning of summer and the midpoint of the Sun-God Bel's progress from equinox to solstice. Michell envisioned a

350-mile long sequence of fires lighting up these sacred sites from sea to sea, as pagan worshippers welcomed Bel's return on the May Day sunrise.

All of this entailed much that remains controversial, not least a radical revision of our assumptions about the knowledge and abilities of the ancient Britons. The line however, is now known as the St Michael Alignment, and is probably England's best-known ley. There is another kink to its story. In 1989, dowser Hamish Miller and author Paul Broadhurst published *The Sun and The Serpent,* an investigation into a pair of phenomena related to it, the Michael and Mary currents. Telluric (Latin *tellus,* earth) currents are geomagnetically-induced flows of electricity which run in the surface layers of the earth. These low voltage currents have in the past been put to practical use – in the nineteenth century they were used to power remote telegraph systems. They also have diurnal characteristics, such that the general direction of flow is towards the sun. Miller and Broadhurst discovered two separate currents of electrical energy snaking up and down the St Michael Alignment in a double helix: a 'masculine' one and a 'feminine' one, intersecting at the node points of sacred sites along the way.

Dowsing, the use of a rod or a pendulum to locate hidden properties or elements, has enjoyed swings in respectability over its long history. It has been called a number of names over time - rhabdomancy, radiesthesia, water-witching, doodlebugging, biolocation – which reflect this ambivalence. In 1518 Luther included the use of a rod in a list of activities breaking the first commandment. Agricola discussed the practice in *De Re Metallica* (1556) and gave it a magical, pejorative association. In 1688 a Dauphiné peasant named Jacques Aymar was using a rod to track water when he came across the corpse of a murder victim. He used the rod to track the killer across southeast France, found him and secured a confession. In the Aymar case, dowsing was found to bring moral properties into the natural realm, by granting the dowser the ability to reify mental states.

Formal science tends to enlist or dismiss ideas from its fringes, as in the old sceptic's gag – Q: What do you call an alternative medicine that's been scientifically proven? A: Medicine. But dowsing has stayed stubbornly on the fringes. While we are all theoretically susceptible to small changes in magnetic fields, a dowsing rod is not the same as a magnet, which behaves predictably no matter who is holding it. Dowsing successfully is an intuitive practice, not open to everyone. In spite of this, dowsing has been used for non-paranormal enquiry for over five hundred years. It has been

practiced in the mining industries in Cornwall, Devon and Somerset from the sixteenth to the twentieth centuries. In the Vietnam War, US Marines used dowsing techniques to search for VC tunnels and weaponry. In the present day, dowsing is routinely used around the world in the hard-faced no-bullshit theatres of the exploratory and extractive industries – geothermal, mineral, hydrocarbon.

✧

Watkins, Michell, Miller and Broadhurst all state their case with reasonableness, cogency and detailed evidential support, yet there is a powerful counterargument to them. It goes something like this: We human beings are cognitive misers. We want to get our knowledge as cheaply as possible, so we use short-cuts in our thinking. We give those short-cuts, those rules of thumb, the grand and expensive-sounding name of *heuristics*. Inference tools like the representativeness heuristic (like follows like, things resemble their causes) are helpful with opportunity and threat identification and so form a big part of our success as a species. They speed up our decision-making by allowing us to process very large amounts of data very quickly, and then to generate inductively-based hypotheses – expectations about the future derived from past experience. (The sun rose today and so will rise tomorrow. Smelly things will taste bad and make us sick, etc). However, they can also lead us astray. Things do not always resemble their causes – an invisible microbe can cause a cholera epidemic. Neither does like always follow like – Saddam may look, walk and quack like he's got WMDs and the intention to use them, but in reality he has neither. In this sense, a heuristic is just a cognitive bias with better table manners. The biases at issue here are those of confirmation and of pattern recognition. Our perceptions, one of the main faculties we use to apprehend the world, are powerfully receptive of reality. But they also have a tendency to *construct* it, to manufacture patterns where no patterns exist. And our miserliness with our cognitive capital leads us to spend it only on evidence which confirms our beliefs. Offered disconfirmations, we tend to keep our hands in our pockets and look the other way.

I approached the ley line and dowsing literature with this sort of scepticism. It is easy to satirise its patterning, and many have – there's a corner of the internet devoted to a map of the Midlands overlayed with a perfectly symmetrical figure connecting the sites of defunct Woolworth's stores, for example. Of course, the confirmation bias objection has

a circularity and hypocrisy to it; by its own lights, if one is expecting to find hogwash then hogwash is all one sees. But the serious point is that evidence generated by questionable studies remains questionable. Individually unconvincing studies are collectively unconvincing, even if there are a million of them. I said earlier that we haven't yet been told exactly *what science is* yet. That is probably true, but we have learned to recognise *what is science* from the family resemblances amongst its methods. Perhaps chief among these is the elimination of bias, through single and double-blinding, randomisation and sampling, peer review and so on. Unlike our private intuitions, science is open to everyone and is therefore self-correcting.

However, it's a common misconception that science proceeds from observation to fact. But scientific hypotheses differ from our inductively-based heuristics. Instead, they are open-ended in their process of creation. In *Conjectures and Refutations* (1963), Karl Popper reminisces about making the same point to a group of science students in Vienna

"…by beginning a lecture with the following instructions: 'Take pencil and paper; carefully observe, and write down what you have observed!' They asked, of course, what I wanted them to observe. Clearly the instruction, 'Observe!' is absurd. (It is not even idiomatic, unless the object of the transitive verb can be taken as understood.) Observation is always selective. It needs a chosen object, a definite task, an interest, a point of view, a problem."

A scientific hypothesis works by postulating an entity *absent from the data.* The scientific process is not irrational; it is simply not mechanical. Science is as much a product of the imagination as it is of reason. It leaves room for happy accident and spontaneity. Linus Pauling said his job as a scientist was to generate lots of ideas and 'throw away the bad ones.'

Now here's the thing: Substitute the words 'science' and 'scientific' in the previous paragraph for the words 'art' and 'artistic.' You will find that no violence has been done either to art or to science. There is another important correspondence between the two: Like science, art has a provisional quality to it. As Leonardo da Vinci pointed out and many have since paraphrased, an artwork is never finished, only abandoned.

✧

I have an excuse for all this. Fortunately, it's a strong one. I got on this train of thought because the Somerset painter Luke Piper has just completed a three-year project: a large series of works, one hundred in all, depicting sites along the Michael and Mary lines. I went to see them in his studio in Chesterblade, which sits on a Mendip hill between Stoke St Michael and Bruton. On my way there I reflected that urban lives tend to be highly specialised, while rural lives can often foster a much broader range of activity. The Pipers are a celebrated example of this phenomenon. The achievements of Luke's grandfather John and his father Edward in painting, stained glass and graphic design are of course richly admired. His mother Prue is a potter and farmer and has a PhD in biochemistry. His brother Henry is a sax player and sculptor who designs and engineers firework displays. When he is not painting, Luke is as likely to be soldering a circuit board or building a dry stone wall as he is driving a truck across Africa.

I spoke to him about his painting process. There is self-deprecation in him, but it is not that of the *Four Weddings* bumbling charmer, nor that kind of high-minded humility to which the English are prone and which the Americans rightly regard as vanity in disguise. Instead, it is a manifestation of his restlessness about his work. Restless is good, I think. An artist who is afraid of overreaching is as useless as a scientist who is afraid to be wrong.

Piper sees each painting as an experiment: one will fail; another will succeed. Like his initialsake Linus Pauling, he throws away many more ideas than he keeps. We stopped in front of a painting of a church, and I asked him about it. "This is St Mary's Ashby, Somerleyton, in Norfolk. It's referred to vaguely in Miller and Broadhurst, but it was hard to see on the OS map where they meant. There are certainly no roads nearby. It was 2am in mid-January when I got there in the Old Blue [van], bumping along deeply rutted byways. If I'd lost momentum or traction I'd have been stuck up to the axles in mud. Then flat field after flat field for miles until I saw the hexagonal tower under a three-quarter moon. I woke up at dawn to find I had parked under a great oak. Nearby was a shrine to a local man who had died five years before; his family would come and leave offerings – a photo, notes, flowers. Not in the graveyard, but under this tree. I walked around the church to look at viewpoints. Sunrise was on its eastern elevation, so I went to investigate that. It was then I recognised the Mary current. It was six or seven paces wide, flowing into the church from the direction of a wooded pond. Stepping in and out of the current gives me a feeling like you get in a fast no-stops elevator in a high building. Michael has more of an electrical buzz, Mary is softer – woozy and slightly

euphoric. This is one of three I painted that day. As I was painting the last one I saw someone coming and I ran back to the Old Blue. The police had been called to investigate an abandoned vehicle. I made my excuses and left, trying to remember the name of that Johnny Cash song ['Starkville Jail'] about getting arrested for picking flowers."

Although he has lived among these lines and currents all his life, Piper's initial inspiration for the series came far from home, after a long road-trip to Beswick Falls in the Northern Territories of Australia in 2010. "On walkabout people follow paths or dreaming tracks for hundreds of miles, navigating their way by reciting songlines – tribal phrases describing the location of landmarks like waterholes and rock formations. If this oral tradition were to die out, the songlines would vanish and the relationship between the people and their land would change. This got me thinking about the parallels with leys and currents in England and I started to think about the direction of causation. Are we simply mapping these things, or are we channelling them? Do they somehow depend on us? That is how the idea of an English songline came to me." He paused, as if he had a secret he was slightly reluctant to share. "And when I got home from Australia I discovered that if you continue the St Michael Alignment on a map of the world, it cuts straight through Beswick Falls." He smiled and turned back to the paintings. "I'd like this to be a touring exhibition, and it feels important to me that its launch is happening on the line, rather than in a London gallery."

✧

Much contemporary art seems to be essentially in conversation with itself, obsessively preoccupied with its own ontology. Piper's is not. It is grounded outside of itself, in the physical world of car parks, mono-cropped fields and wire-strewn wastelands as well as sacred trees and ancient monuments. I drove away, thinking about how to think about all this. Perhaps each generation needs to find a way of engaging with its landscape. If so, it is unsurprising that each generation finds a different way to do that. Time has cycled around, and the kaftans and koans of the 'earth mysteries' crowd have long since floated away from the ley lines. No bad thing. Piper's investigations into the intangibles of the landscape are now finding their echoes in the work of others in different disciplines, writers like Philip Marsden, Rob Young and Robert MacFarlane, musicians

like PJ Harvey, Stornoway and Tom E Lewis. In their own ways, they are all positing entities absent from the raw data.

If science is the study of *what there is* then its highest value is truth. Art then adds the question *what matters*? Perhaps its highest value is insight. To me, these paintings generate a kind of psychic amplification. In describing them, it is hard not to collapse into this kind of language, reliant on metaphor. It is the same way that science must ultimately collapse into mystery. However, I am not convinced that this clash of *mythos* and *logos*, of the mystical and the rational is a problem as long as the imagination is free to do its work in that space. In any case, mystery has a respectable pedigree. The word comes from the Greek *musterion*, a hidden truth. In the Hellenistic tradition, it applied to secret ritual. The word was used honorifically: mystery was a thing to be adored, not a problem to be solved. In the early Christian tradition, the idea of concealment persisted in hidden presences (Jesus at the Eucharist) or in hidden interpretations and paradox. The Trinity violates the law of non-contradiction, for example: Jesus is identical to God, the Father is identical to God, yet Jesus and the Father are not identical. Those who accept this will treat it as a move of epistemic humility, an acknowledgment that the human mind is simply not equipped to engage with such transcendent realities. Present-day philosophical mysterians offer analogies with recent physics (how can light be both a particle and a wave?) or quantum mechanics (a rich source of paradox) and then point to the hard problem of consciousness and claim: 'We will never solve it. We are cognitively closed to its solution.' These mysterians prompt the thought: So what? Consciousness is not a problem, easy or hard. *Adore* it while you've got it. Piper's *Songline* is a good place to start.

I was halfway back to London before I remembered. I didn't ask him if he still has that leather jacket.

12th April 2015

✧✧✧

Luke Piper's 'An English Songline' runs from June 6th to June 14th at The Tithe Barn, Pilton, Somerset BA4 4EE