



Henry Darger, Surveyor of Realism Psychogeographic Sketch

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Like many of his fellow citizens at the time, Darger was a walker who wondered around Chicago. According to the autobiographical narrative, childhood and street games gave way to professional travel activity: St. Joseph's Hospital on the North Side, 740 Garfield Avenue; Grant Hospital; 551 Grant Place; Alexian Brothers Hospital, 1200 Belden Avenue, on the corner of Racine. However, these movements were constrained by the need to work, an external necessity linked to factors such as distance, inconvenient tram schedules, or the bad weather that surprised the author of the Weather Books, who had no raincoat or umbrella. Darger went on to replace them, in his voluntary movements, in particular after his retirement, on November 13, 1963 – intentional movement limited to a chosen perimeter.

“Henry used to take walks every day, at least twice a day. “He knew he was supposed to take walks for his health. One day, when we were driving on Belmont Avenue, approaching the Belmont ‘L’ station, we saw Henry searching for some treasures in a garbage can. The Belmont station is about one mile from where we lived. We realized how far he went on his daily walks.”¹

These urban wanderings, relating to his escape from the state farm in 1909 when he was a teenager, marked a passage from the disproportionately open space to the constrained space of the city. In this sense, the sedentary Darger is linked – at least as a symbolic figure – to the American myth of the travel writer.

1. LERNER Kiyoko: « Remembering Henry », p. 4.

Darger began his journey from 851 W. Webster Avenue, where he'd lived since 1932. There, you could also find May's Grocery & Delicatessen at 857, where he ran his rare errands. He then proceeded in variable directions, but according to a fixed list of destinations. His journey was so predictable that, during an interview on May 5, 2015, Kiyoko Lerner was able to retrace it in a freehand sketch, which illustrates this article.

His travel includes Dayton; Fremont; Sheffield, St. Paul's Church; De Paul; Lincoln; St. Vincent's Church; Sheffield; Halsted². He seemed to prefer the last three destinations, each for its own reason. St. Vincent's Church was on Darger's urban horizon since its inception. He attended various religious services there, which catered for his spiritual needs. Roma's grill, a restaurant on the corner of Sheffield and Webster ran by the three Acciari brothers, catered for his bodily needs. Sometimes, he ate breakfast there. Charles Acciari said that Darger went there almost every day for dinner, around five o'clock in the afternoon:

"I know he went to church nearby, three times a day, sometimes even more. He was a very discreet man. He never caused a single problem. He always paid his bill. He never asked for credit. He didn't eat much: a hot chopped steak with mashed potatoes, soup."³

According to Acciari, during the 50s and 60s, there were a number of customers who had affection for Darger. It was the group behind the Young Lords, a civil rights gang active in the 1960s until 1973. David Berglund, who lived on the same floor as Darger, remembers young Puerto Ricans coming to 851 Webster enquiring about him.

Finally, Halsted Street catered for his need for creation in two ways: In a very concrete way, as since the mid-1940s, he'd had his photographic copies and enlargements done at Foster Drugs, «Color Photo Service, Inc.», a Kodak dealer located at 2200 N; but also as a source of creative material.

The beginning of *Further Adventures in Chicago*⁴ gives a vivid description of Halsted Street with its many bars, brothels and music halls. When the Vivian Girls

2. Cf. également DARGER Henry: MISC. 8: carnet titré par Darger *N°Two*, p. 76: "Aberdeen Street"; "Jackson Boulevard".

3. KAZARIAN Choghakate: *Henry Darger, 1892-1973, op. cit.*, STOKES Mark: entrée « Roma's » dans le « Dictionnaire Dargerien » p. 234, traduction Anne-Sylvie Hommassel.

4. DARGER Henry: *Further Adventures in Chicago*, I, pp. 1-7.

lived in Chicago, they stayed at «201 Halsted Street, third floor»⁵. The Haymarket Theatre, that opened in December 1887, was the oldest of Chicago's theatres in operation in Darger's day. He used it as a model in the chapter in which Angeline Vivian is accused of degrading herself on stage, «on a cheap Vaudeville Stage»⁶. Halsted Street marks the boundary between the known and the unknown of the city, and hence between the authorized and the forbidden.

In the autobiographical narrative, certain places resonate analogically with past events, activities, or inhabitants of the past. His memory is stimulated by nostalgia and flashbacks, involuntary or intentional recollections and, like a walker, returns, stops or resumes according to recollection.

In return, Chicago is a great source of treasure and discoveries to feed his creations. By pilfering waste, Darger thus unveils the creative act of collecting the materials in advance for his pictorial work. This is linked to the randomness of his discoveries during his urban wandering.

In conclusion, through his travels around the city, Darger met his various requirements. He evolved in a fairly wide area, with 851 Webster Avenue, his address, as his starting point. Darger strolled «over against one's self»⁷, and, in urban mode, seemed to meet the criteria set out by Henry David Thoreau:

"If you are ready to leave father and mother, and brother and sister, and wife and child and friends, and never see them again, – if you have paid your debts, and made your will, and settled all your affairs, and are a free man –then you are ready for a walk."⁸

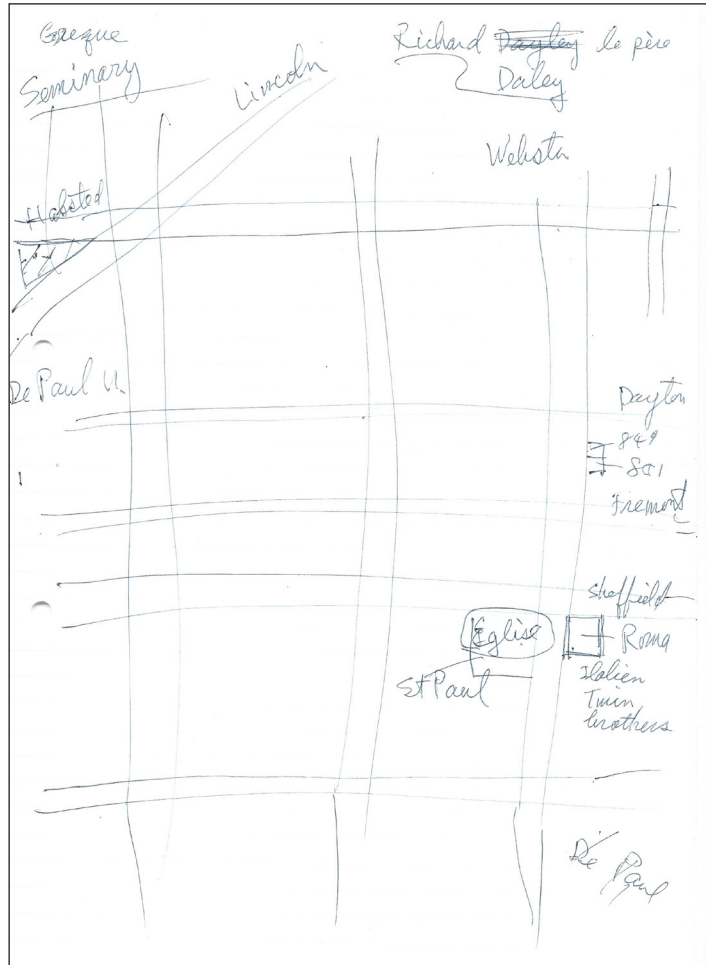
Darger's travels thus evoke Thoreau's «sauntering», from natural space to urban areas, not the least of the paradoxes.

5. *Ibid.*, I, pp. 28,29.

6. DARGER Henry: *Further Adventures in Chicago*, I, pp. 691-692.

7. THOREAU Henry David : *Walking, Seven elements in Nature Writing*, publication initiale dans la revue *Atlantic Monthly*, 1862, CreateSpace Independent Publishing, 2014, p.6.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 4.



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/Colloque
Autour d'Henry Darger

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