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A CITY OF CONTRASTS: THE UNDERBELLY OF EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY LONDON

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Abstract: *The present article examines London not as the largest and most magnificent capital in Europe by the dawn of the eighteenth century, but as a sordid and dangerous city, in which poverty, starvation, crime and prostitution were in full swing. Although a considerable body of eighteenth-century English literature reveals the latter view of the city, I choose to focus on Edward Ward's* The London Spy *(1698-1700) and Tom Brown's* Amusements Serious and Comical, Calculated for the Meridian of London *(1700), two satirical representations of the dark side of London written by non-elite authors, and on John Gay's* Trivia: or, the Art of Walking the Streets of London *(1716), a guide to the modern capital of Britain.*
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1. Introduction

In a poem entitled "A Description of London" (1738), John Bancks portrays the hustle and bustle of the city seen as a kaleidoscopic space catering to all walks of life. However, his image of London is far from being majestic: streets that "are unpleasant in all weather" (Ford 2015: 280) are rife with rogues and crime, "gaudy things" (ibid.) are deceiving and lawyers, poets, priests, and physicians of all ranks hide their wickedness under the guise of worth and humility. Although a city of possibilities, Bancks's London unravels its dark side marked by poverty, corruption and vice: "Many a beau without a shilling, / Many a widow not unwilling; / Many a bargain, if you strike it: / This is London! How d'ye like it?" (ibid.). The direct question is highly suggestive of London as a city of contrasts, inviting the reader to muse on its magnificence and grubbiness alike.

Labelled by many historians as the largest and most elegant capital of Europe at the dawn of the eighteenth century, London has been tackled in tandem with the rise of modern institutions, as well as refined sociability, politeness, taste and genius. Recent studies, however, have focused on representations – be they historical, cultural or literary – of London as a filthy and dangerous city, highlighting a multifaceted capital that had been subject to major architectural and socio-economic changes since the Great Fire of 1666. Such is the case of Jerry White who, in his book entitled *A Great and Monstrous Thing: London in the Eighteenth Century* (2013), performs

a well-documented analysis of London divided by class, geography, politics and religion. According to White (2013: xix-xx),

> […] when we think of England in this century it is really London we have in mind, for London led the nation in genius, elegance and manners to an overwhelming degree. There is a great deal of truth in this characterisation, but a proper balance needs to be struck. For this was a city (and an Age) of starving poverty as well as shining polish, a city of civility and a city of truculence, a city of decorum and a city of lewdness, a city of joy and a city of despair, a city of sentiment and a city of cruelty. We might truthfully summarise it as a city of extremes. In Daniel Defoe's epigram of the early 1720s, London really was 'this great and monstrous Thing'."

Although Defoe's oxymoron best characterises the British capital in the early eighteenth century, my aim is to zoom in on three literary representations of "the monstrous", or the underbelly of eighteenth-century London, as perceived by three authors who act as walking spectators of the city. I will discuss two satires, Edward Ward's *The London Spy* (1698-1700) and Tom Brown's *Amusements Serious and Comical*, and John Gay's *Trivia: or, the Art of Walking the Streets of London* (1716), the first guide to London meant to instruct newcomers on how to avoid the pitfalls that lurk in the city in the wintertime. What holds the three texts together is the authors' immersion in the city as engaged – not blasé – walkers, who configure the topography of London through the act of writing and the representation of the dark side of London as an alternative, multifarious, and dynamic urban imaginary, predicated on first-hand experience. In the case of Gay's *Trivia*, one can add the pedagogical dimension, whereby the fictionalised world of the real intersects with the world of the reader, who either empathizes or becomes conversant with the places described. As Catharina Löffler (2017: 142) has cogently observed, "after the fire, London was virtually erased and other modes of perception were demanded". Concerned with applying the concept of "literary psychogeography" to eighteenth-century literary representations of London, Löffler argues that the walker paradigm implies a form of subjectivity that "was part of this new discourse of perception […] and that resulted in the creation of different urban imaginaries of London" (ibid.). In what follows, I will connect the walker trope – which is not to be understood as a synonym for the picaresque – with Edward Soja's (2000: 11) coinage of "Thirdspace", a term he defines as "fully *lived space,* a simultaneously real-and-imagined, actual-and-virtual, locus of structured individual and collective experience and agency" (original emphasis). Read in this light, the texts under scrutiny have a potential for unravelling "collective experience and agency" in the city through the lens of authorial observation, perambulation through the crowds and, most notably, construction or fictional configuration of the "lived space". In the words of Löffler (2017: 142), "Thirdspace" "creates spaces 'in-between,' spaces where reality and its subjective literary representation come together and form a new space". Last but not least, as a new epistemology of the urban, "Thirdspace" allows us to grasp "the infinite complexity of life through its intrinsic spatial, social, and historical dimensions, its interrelated spatiality, sociality, and historicality" (Soja 2000: 12).

2. A guide to vicious London

Although published earlier than Joseph Addison and Richard Steele's fashionable *The Spectator* (1711-1714), Edward Ward's *The London Spy* (1698-1700), published in eighteen monthly instalments, represents the counterpart of the former, in that it provides a grisly description of the metropolis. Unlike *The Spectator*'s mission to cultivate taste, manners, politeness, sociability, gentlemanly or gentlewomanly decorum and the reformation of vices, *The London Spy* is a sample of eighteenth-century popular culture which reads like a foray into a squalid London, where poverty, crime and prostitution ruled supreme. It is worth mentioning that Ward's negative account of London belongs to the subculture produced in Grub Street, an emblematic street in London, which harboured hack writers and a variety of publishing houses as well. Located outside the city walls, "the close geographical proximity to Moorfields and Bedlam linked Grub Street to prostitution and madness, contributing to its dubious reputation" (Löffler 2017: 215).

Designed as a satirical guided tour of London, meant to exhibit its "vanities and vices" (Ward 1955: 2), *The London Spy* foregrounds a country philosopher eager to experience and understand life in the city. He is the "spy", the spectator who, taking random walks guided by a former schoolmate, is bewildered by the hustle and bustle of London. Ward establishes the rural-urban dichotomy through the two characters in order to show the spy's feeling of alienation in the city in which he remains a mere walking spectator who fails to appropriate the sense of urbanity. Befuddled by the city's lights and noise, and struck by its stink, "his ability to present the city accurately is compromised" (O'Byrne 2014: 58). Appearing as "a traveller to exotic, and perhaps dangerous, regions" (Mullan and Reid 2000: 31) and averse to coach or water travel, which he finds very dangerous, the country philosopher chooses to ramble about the city that reveals "the sight of sunder curiosities" (Ward 1955: 146). Concurrently, the philosopher's friend, a good connoisseur of the city, acts as an interpreter of social "rites of initiation", i.e. urban eccentricities and low life scenes they encounter on their way. According to John Mullan and Christopher Reid (2000: 33), the philosopher's guide to the metropolis "relies on the reader's implicit trust that the author (as opposed to the narrator) is in fact well versed in the city's habits and peculiarities, especially those which offend against property". In doing so, Ward depicts popular yet unpleasant London sites as "lived spaces" (Soja 2000: 11), since he was an author well aware of indigence who "understood that London was as much shaped by its inhabitants and their struggles as by its topography and architecture" (Löffler 2017: 230). For instance, notwithstanding London's magnificence, the spy is appalled when he comes across all sorts of vagabonds at Wapping, close to the Thames. Also, he is surprised to see how hard the life of the workers rebuilding St. Paul's Cathedral is or to hear that many beautiful stories about the city are in fact deceptive. Such is the case of the iconic Monument projected "as a memorandum of the Fire" (Ward 1955: 42), which the philosopher's guide considers an architectural work born out of judicial corruption: "It gave those corrupted magistrates that had the power in their hands, the opportunity of putting two thousand pounds into their own pockets whilst they paid one towards the building" (Ward 1955: 42).

Always in search of vivid settings and urban environments, the two protagonists offer the reader the chance to get familiar with unknown locations abounding in social injustice or with the cruel treatment of the unprivileged. Their visit to Rag Fair allows Ward to inveigh against the despicable conditions in which London's most impoverished inhabitants live. On the whole, their tour of the metropolis does not fail to disclose dangerous lanes and alleys, vulgar language, as well as neighbourhoods where "theft, whoredom, homicide, and blasphemy" (idem: 120) are the order of the day. Although they are eye-witnesses to unorthodox pleasures experienced by underclass dwellers, they remain spectators who, however, never adopt the reflexive or philosophical attitude of the *flâneur*. Thus, Ward's aim is to describe the underbelly of the city inhabited by various classes of people who unveil their character not only in accordance with their rank and profession, but also in physiognomic terms. As Löffler (2017: 234) contends, "the majority of his [the walker's] sketches remain focused on lower-class Londoners or shady figures". Bartholomew Fair is a case in point. Here, more than anywhere else, the philosopher and his guide are detached observers of a carnivalesque atmosphere, which, in their eyes, appears as "the epitome of hell" (Ward 1955: 201) upheld by the deafening music played by pick-pockets and the bawdy pastimes cultivated by the boisterous crowd.

Interested in rendering a satirical – rather than morally instructive – image of "the City's Imprudence, Impatience, Intemperance, and Inhumanity" (idem: 226), *The London Spy* – at odds with Steele and Addison's reformist project advocated via *The Spectator* – is the successful artefact of a hack writer who played a significant role in the proliferation of popular culture in eighteenth-century England. Ward's London's underbelly stands for a mosaic of subcultures, a strategy employed by the author in order to make the country philosopher appear as a foreign traveller in the metropolis. Written by a tavern keeper with a sound knowledge of both the topography of London and its inhabitants, *The London Spy*'s "gritty realism" (Briggs 2011: 78) counterpoises the elite accounts of the rise of the metropolis in the early eighteenth century.

3. Defamiliarizing London

Patterned after Ward's *The London Spy*, Tom Brown's *Amusements Serious and Comical, Calculated for the Meridian of London* (1700) is another Grub Street piece of hack writing, although Brown's education at Christ Church, Oxford could have recommended him for the position of clergyman. Generally known as a satirical writer and translator, Brown was a tavern-goer who led a dissolute life. *Amusements* have only recently caught the attention of scholars, because the work bears a striking resemblance to Ward's *The London Spy* in terms of narrative technique, style, and structure. However, *Amusements*, like other writings about London penned by Brown, are "a storehouse of vivid sketches and witty comments upon London life in his day" (Boyce 1939: vii).

Written in imitation of Charles Rivière Dufresny's *Amusements sérieux et comiques* (1699), Brown's text employs the walker trope with a view to excoriating

the follies of the polite, on the one hand, and to capture London's busy life and crowded streets, on the other. Nevertheless, unlike Ward's rural-urban dichotomy embodied by the country bumpkin and his former school friend, Brown creates a perambulating couple of narrators, in which one, an Indian, is the figment of the other's imagination. Such a strategy enables Brown to present London as a defamiliarized space seen as new and culturally different from the perspective of the Other, i.e. the Indian. Moreover, it enables Brown to perform an imagological exercise by referring to the national character, i.e. the self-image of England, through the eyes of an inexperienced foreigner, for whom the urban – and urbane – English narrator reads or decodes the signs of the modern city:

> I am resolved to take upon me the Genius of an *Indian*, who has had the Curiosity to Travel hither among us, and who has never seen anything like what he sees in *London*. We shall see how he will be amazed at certain things, which the Prejudice of Custome makes to seem Reasonable and Natural to us.
> To diversify the Style of my Narration, I will sometimes make my Traveller speak, and sometimes I will take up the Discourse myself. I will represent to myself the abstracted Ideas of an *Indian*, and I will likewise represent ours to him. In short, taking it for granted that we two understand each other by half a Word, I will set both his and my Imagination on the Ramble. (Brown 1700: 19; original emphasis)

The native versus the Other narrative ambivalence also points to the colonial power of Britain in the eighteenth century, when the discourse of otherness mainly consisted of derogatory terms. Exposed to the bustling city, the Indian proves unable to adapt to the new, chaotic urban environment in which he "is carried down the Stream" and "Swims upon his Elbows to get to Shoar" (Brown 1700: 46).

Brown's London is diverse, dynamic, abuzz with activity and, ultimately, a cosmopolitan metropolis made up of "imagined communities" (Anderson 1983: 6): "London is a World, by it self. We daily discover in it more new Countries, and surprising Singularities, than in all the Universe besides. There are among the *Londoners* so many Nations differing in Manners, Customs, and Religions, that the Inhabitants themselves don't know a quarter of them" (Brown 1700: 18; original emphasis). It is "a Hodge-Podge" (idem: 29) perceived as an agreeable amusement induced by the act of walking and carefully observing the Court, Westminster Hall, St. Paul's Cathedral, parks, public walks, coffee houses, brothels or gaming houses. However, the walker's mood changes according to the scenes observed, as is the case of the impertinent rag-sellers in Long-Lane, who determine him to change direction. The urban setting abounds in new things worthy of being discovered, which not only explains Brown's goal "to continue his serialization" and "to react to the taste of the readership or to latest events" (Löffler 2017: 250), but also the massive urbanisation of London at the time, as well as its rapid population growth. As Darryl Domingo (2016: 19) suggests, "motion and mobility fascinated the eighteenth-century imagination, and, as a means of moving freely and without an intended destination, the London ramble served as a particularly useful means of chronicling, organizing, and narrating the life of the metropolis". In *Amusements*, however, the walking narrator makes no bones about stressing the poor quality of streets, the polite people's hypocrisy and, above all, the misleading signs which lead

an inexperienced visitor into error. For example, the narrator, unlike his Indian alter-ego, knows how to discriminate between a coffee house and a brothel: "Where the Sign is painted with a *Woman's Hand in't*, 'tis a Bawdy-House […] but where it has a *Star* in the Sign, 'tis Calculated for every Leud purpose (Brown 1700: 115-116; original emphasis).

Amusements configures an urban imaginary in which an Indian fictitious interlocutor may pass for any naïve newcomer to London. Similar to the walkers in *The London Spy*, the ones in Brown's work are reflective spectators who satirize the vices and follies of the city, offering the reader an insight into a motley gallery of human types, ranging from paupers to affluent Britons. The pluriperspectivism provided by London "as a World by it self" (Brown 1700: 18) has a great impact on the walkers' frame of mind, which determines them to perceive the city in emotionally different ways, thus giving birth to "a highly subjective representation of London that nonetheless does not fail to convey a sense of verisimilitude" (Löffler 2017: 262). Brown's London, more than Ward's, focuses on a defamiliarized version of London, not only because of the invented Indian observer, but also because of the new sights, or signs, that need to be learnt or properly decrypted. But, despite their anti-elitist, comic and vulgar style, both Brown's and Ward's texts exerted a huge influence on Joseph Addison, Richard Steele, and Samuel Johnson, who promoted the discourse of taste and civility.

4. Walking as an artful practice

Walking the streets in eighteenth-century England was inextricably linked to the expansion of the city and its busy life, providing accessibility to all age groups and social ranks. As an act undertaken for leisure or pragmatic purposes, walking, unlike other means of transportation, enabled pedestrians to perceive the ongoing heterogeneity of the city, as Ward's and Brown's texts suggest and, above all, to grasp the sense of place, i.e. the micro-level, via first-hand experience. For newcomers to the city, London was rather a "mental map" or a "symbolic representation" (Soja 2000: 11) which required social and topographical guidance and instruction. Be they residents or strangers, walkers "made sense of a city that needed to be explained, presented, revealed, discussed, and questioned" (Löffler 2017: 95).

John Gay's poem, *Trivia: The Art of Walking the Streets of London* (1716), attests to eighteenth-century England's preoccupation with street life. As the title suggests, Gay chooses Trivia, the Roman goddess of crossroads, to be the poet's muse and also the guardian of inexperienced citizens who might fall prey to the maelstrom of city life. Although written in a burlesque tone, *Trivia* is a didactic text whose structure echoes Vergil's *Georgics*. It represents "a crucial moment in the history of urban literature" (Rogers 1978: 220) due to the rise of the metropolis in which pedestrians, especially middle-class and upper-middle class individuals, display an artful, that is, well-mannered and decorous, way of walking. According to Flavio Gregori (2005: 72), *Trivia* is also an "'art' of living in the great, new, exciting and dangerous, also morally and politically, world of the metropolis, i.e. the world of modernity".

Gay's purpose – stated from the outset – is to provide useful advice on how to walk the London streets by day and by night in the winter:

> Through Winter Streets to steer your course aright,
> How to walk clean by Day, and safe by Night,
> How jostling Crouds, with Prudence, to decline,
> When to assert the Wall, and when resign,
> I sing: Thou, Trivia, Goddess, aid my Song,
> Thro' spacious Streets conduct thy Bard along;
> By thee transported, I securely stray
> Where winding Alleys lead the doubtful Way,
> The silent Court and op'ning Square explore,
> And long perplexing Lanes untrod before.
> (Gay 1716: 1-2)

Subtly enough, Gay refers to the middle-class polite practice of walking "clean by Day" in slippery or slushy conditions. Also, he is a proto-*flâneur* (cf. Gregori 2005) who never becomes one with the crowd, although his goal is to cultivate politeness and, furthermore, in Book I, to teach readers what coats, canes, and shoes to wear, what walking routes to take, how to interpret the weather, how to avoid dangerous places or situations. Labelled as "a town georgic" (Nokes 1995: 206), the poem concentrates on urban life, which, according to the georgic tradition, is at loggerheads with "the harmonic relationship between man and nature visible in the fields" (Gregori 2005: 75). This explains *Trivia*'s ironic mode endorsed by an urban imaginary, according to which London appears as a mythical place or as the copy of the Rome of Juvenal, whose satires are a source of inspiration for Gay's parodic scenes.

In terms of dangers, presented in Book II, or night life in dimly-lit streets full of thieves and drunken people, detailed in Book III, Gay's walker-narrator expresses his concern with traffic, namely horses and coaches, and people of inferior rank, such as peasants, apprentices, beggars, street-sellers, and harlots. Thus, the walker detaches himself from the vermin or the labouring class, for his goal is to teach walking as an artful practice. At the same time, his fashionable clothes are highly indicative of his snobbish attitude towards the poor, and also of the big gap between "them" (plebeians) and "us" (the polite), reinforcing the walker's belief that walking the streets should be an art in itself. The spectator's haughtiness, as well as many of the exaggerated descriptions of various places, such as Drury Lane, the Strand, Covent Garden or Pall Mall, and stimuli – triggered by the sense of touch, smell, and hearing – make *Trivia* both a real and a fictional account of London. Throughout the text he remains unempathetic with the low classes, yet actively immersed in the life of city, recommending that pedestrians should choose "close Abodes" and "the long uncrouded Way" (Gay 1716: 24) so as to avoid crime, prostitutes, and noisy streets. In the vein of Edward Ward and Tom Brown, the walker's itinerary is always chaotic, passing from ill-reputed places to posh areas as rapidly as the reader who seeks to configure the city as "a mental map" (Soja 2000: 11). As Löffler (2017: 141) rightfully remarks, "the reader conducts a journey in the mind, figuratively in the walker's footsteps, which is not only

geographical, but also psychological". Importantly enough, the walker's journey is shaped by his individual experience with the city streets which, in turn, shapes his subjective vision of the city.

John Gay's *Trivia* remains a canonical literary cartography of the streets of London in the early eighteenth century. It is a subjective account of the metropolis described in the winter, a season which Gay sees as windy and full of mud. Besides, it is, as Clare Brant (2008) argues, a description of London "perceived through movement, energy, collisions and clashes of values" filtered through the walker's panoramic view of the modern city. By providing advice, explanations and comments, the walker in *Trivia* explores a multifarious London that invites – and entices – the reader to create a mental map of the city at a time when urbanization was in full swing. In a nutshell, Gay's poem is an exercise in "writing" the tumultuous city (Certeau 1984: 93) via walking as an artful way of decoding it.

5. Conclusion

As I hope to have shown, the three texts discussed here foreground the image of London as "a great and monstrous Thing" (White 2013: xx), an oxymoron which should be understood in tandem with the historical context in which London developed as a modern metropolis after the Great Fire of 1666. Although the biggest and most spectacular city in Europe at that time, London witnessed a massive urbanization process, with profound social and cultural effects on its almost half a million citizens at the beginning of the eighteenth century. Informed by Jerry White's argument, I have chosen to consider the underbelly, or the dark side, of the British capital in order to understand the variety of its people, places, and social conditions explored by Edward Ward, Tom Brown and John Gay through the act of walking. By using Edward Soja's (2000: 11) concept of "Thirdspace", my purpose was to show that *The London Spy*, *Amusements Serious and Comical* and *Trivia* represent, each in its own way, an urban imaginary of "the monstrous" experienced first-hand by walking spectators, who are seduced by, or react to, the stimuli of the city. In doing so, they offer the reader a perspective on London that is at once real and imagined, always subject to change, discontinuous or fragmented. Anticipating the *flâneur* that Charles Baudelaire portrays in his 1839 essay "The Painter of Modern Life", the walkers in these writings acquire an ambiguous status, in that they refuse to blend with the crowd, but are always curious to see what happens in the city. Hence, their vivid description of the seamy side of London life is a major contribution to the static – and majestic – accounts of an affluent London. Built on the interplay between place/space and the walkers' subjectivity, social rank, and frame of mind triggered by the urban environment, Ward's, Brown's, and Gay's literary representations of London are three instantiations of "literary psychogeography" (cf. Löffler 2017), according to which the underbelly of London is observed, revealed, read, interpreted, explained and contested as a "lived" (Soja 2000: 11), rather than static, space. Ultimately, such writings about London deconstruct the grand narrative of the modern and grandiose eighteenth-century city.

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