

# TRIVIA: AMBIGUITY AND THE CONVERGENCE OF AUTHORITY

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## I

“Duplicitous” and “ambiguous” have been the key words most often used in critical analyses of Book III of John Gay’s *Trivia: or, the Art of Walking the Streets of London*. The words reveal the difficulty we have in arriving at a single interpretation of the poem, something that is largely due to the diminished authority that Gay gives to the narrator, or guide. Rather than place him in an advantaged perspective, Gay makes his literary persona into a self-conscious walker who, despite his attempts to master the teeming London streets, is constantly doomed to collide with obstacles beyond his control. As a result, the notion of authorial control assumes a different and more ambiguous status in *Trivia*.

Pat Rogers asserts that *Trivia* “employs social observation to make a permanent moral comment” (162). This may be, but, because of the ambiguities of authorial control, the most memorable episodes in the poem resist the permanence that a fixed or authoritative moral interpretation might provide. In *Trivia*, any interpretation of the city and its problems must depend upon the perspective from which the city is approached. Gay’s London is in fact approached by three different perspectives (as the title of this poem “*Tri-via*,” where three roads meet, suggests): that of the walker (to be discussed in section II), that of the reader who the walker envisions as reading his poem (section III), and that of a careful reader, a perspective the walker never quite manages to repress (section IV). What Gay creates as a result is not only a complicated view of London, but a complicated sense of authorship as well,

in that any “permanent moral comment” on the city necessarily cannot be located within the perspective of a single authoritative speaker, but rather must be sifted out of these three different, and often colliding, perspectives.

## II

Unlike Swift’s *A Description of a City Shower* or *A Description of the Morning*, *Trivia* cannot, despite the sensational and visceral images of London’s city streets, be read as an exclusively descriptive poem. Rather, Gay first creates a literary persona, the walker, who in turn passively perceives and actively constructs the city of London, and (at least in the fictional universe of the poem) authors *Trivia* itself. If, as Rogers suggests, the poem is written to assess the morals of the city, or to take account of its sins, the choice of the walker as narrator complicates this reading. Unlike Swift, who seems to attempt authorial abstraction from his city by titling his poem as an objective “Description of . . .,” Gay locates his walker physically in both the city and the poem. As an individual, he is in persistent opposition to the city’s nightly obstacles, and, what’s more, faces constant danger of being overrun by what he is attempting to describe.

Yet the walker considers other less dangerous methods of moving around the city streets and rhetorically asks, “Who then through Night would hire the harnessed Steed, / And who would choose the rattling Wheel for Speed?” (351-52). So, the walker seems to have a moment to stand apart from his own decision to walk and consider it with a lofty sense of deliberateness (Haywood 73). Walking, at least in theory, becomes a method for him to comment as an outsider on the decadence of his society and, in a way, his colliding with coaches is ideologically superior to his being inside them. Consequently, the walker is not “participating” as a mere equal in the society he confronts and describes; rather his perspective as a walker provides him with a heightened, principled advantage.

Thus, it appears that the walker as a persona is employed to carry out a moral demonstration; he confronts the filth of the city as an untainted, ideologically pure man (Woodman 85-89). The walker certainly endorses such a reading, and this view would clearly support Pat Rogers’s theory that the poem engages in social commentary with a “permanent moral comment” in mind. When walking, the narrator warns his reader of the whores, death, thievery, filth, sewage, abuse, violence, and robbery one is likely to encounter

in a typical walk through the city streets at night. The walker gives advice to those who would become victims of the night's dangers if they were not aware of them, and does so by offering a careful (and sometimes neurotically precise) account of the perils of the city streets.

Yet, because the social commentary that is typical of *Trivia* is so ambiguous, it is unclear whether these 'dangers' are finally to be construed as vices. The case of the pickpocket (55-75) provides a good example. After grabbing some fop's "Flaxen Wig," the young boy tears down the street in the hope of escaping his pursuers, described by the walker as "Hounds." It is an interesting episode, as it is not the thief who is criticized, but rather the fashionable fop and the maddened crowd who pursues the pickpocket. The boy's theft is made deeply pathetic as the walker describes his act as akin to a fox "Who lately filched the Turkey's callow care," reminding the reader that the boy must steal in order to eat and survive (68). Yet, despite the walker's apparent sympathy, he comments only once on the situation, asking "Why did not honest Work thy Youth employ?" (72). Even if we read this question as poignantly rhetorical (instead of poignantly naïve), pointing to the failure of the city to support its inhabitants, this comment hardly seems to have the bite of a firm moral denunciation. Indeed, when it comes to the actual (and painfully brutal) beating of the boy, the walker stays mute and moves on to other things. In a moment when a "moral comment" would have been apt, the walker's editorializing voice disappears. If the walker does attempt a "moral comment" in this episode, it is very obliquely made, through a cautious rhetorical question, and a meaningful silence.

It is this kind of ambiguity in *Trivia* that makes any straightforward interpretation of it as a moralizing poem, offering a negative view of London, too reductive or even incorrect. Recently, critics have been inclined to read *Trivia* as a poem invested as much in celebrating the supposed "vices" of the city as it is in damning them. What these critics take as their point of departure is the way that the city's filth, mud, and sewage are dealt with in the poem. While the walker apparently presents the rushing kennels, the muddy streets, and the general filth of the city as yet more obstacles to be avoided, it is equally clear that these images provide much of the poem's energy (Haywood 66). Interestingly, the walker never acknowledges his work's indebtedness to the city's filth, and we begin to see a certain ironic distancing between the walker-poet's intended work and the actual achievements of the poem.

## III

Perhaps the walker's inability to produce a biting moral commentary on the episode described above has something to do with the position of the walker's intended reader. Indeed, from the great risks neurotically delineated in this poem, we get a sense of whom the poem is being written for. The reader is at risk of becoming dirty, of having to confront the filthy poor, and of having his illustrious "trinkets" stolen: "thy flaxen wig," "thy late snuff-box," and his handkerchief from India (55, 62, 259). The audience our walker envisions for this poem seems to be a hopeless, hapless fop. Thus, unlike similar mock-georgics of the day (such as those by Swift and Pope), *Trivia* cannot relate the city's base vices to any higher social issues without casting some of the blame upon his audience. In the mock-georgics of Pope and Swift, there is no apparent awareness that those who would be able to read their poems are in fact the same people they condemn, and that the act of publishing their poems is as commercial as any other trade. *Trivia* seems to be questioning the inherent limitations of the mock-georgic as a genre, so that we may even venture to call *Trivia* a mock-mock-georgic. Thus, the walker strives to satisfy the perceptions of his foppish readership, and in fact struggles to repress any "permanent moral comment" which may reflect negatively upon his audience.

However, the befuddled and faulty walker occasionally fails to achieve his complex aim. The episode of the prostitute exposes the extent to which the walker can be confused by his own artistic and moralizing ambitions. Rather than interpreting prostitution as metonymical of the city's immoral commercialism, or even as symptomatic of his society's ambivalence towards the poor, the walker can provide no loftier interpretation of the prostitute's moral status than his appealing to a personal anecdote about a "Yeoman" he once knew (285). The walker reverts to nostalgic and pastoral language to describe the poor downfall of a shepherd in the big city. Typically, the "mock-georgic" is employed to contrast the pastoral tradition with the decadent and unnatural urban universe. This seems to be the walker's intent too, as he sees his "walking" as having an organic purity. Yet here the walker instead mixes the pastoral tradition with urban sin, describing the prostitute as a perverse sort of nymph herself, as though he can perceive no contradiction in the relation of one to the other. The tragic tale of the yeoman and the "fraudful Nymph" (289) tries more to appeal to the reader's fashionable kind

of sentiment rather than to expose the wrong of prostitution in terms of rational principles. Such rational principles must be avoided, lest he alienate his reader by finding in prostitution a similarity with the city's consumption, decadence, and sickness as a whole.

It is interesting to note how the walker deals with the city's lower classes in *Trivia*. I have suggested before that the walker unwittingly exposes his sympathy with certain characters on the London streets, especially the pickpocket. To appeal to his audience, however, this sympathy must be repressed. The way the walker silences his compassion for these figures is remarkable—he literally takes away their voices. The wretch who is caught in the turnstiles is beaten “half breathless to the ground” (110) and the pickpocket, also “breathless” (71) is drowned until “Mud chokes his Mouth” (76). Without voices, these characters are unable to contribute to the poem's message. Yet what unfortunately emerges from these violent attempts at stifling the city's poor is, ironically, more sympathy for them.

#### IV

*Trivia* is in this way a very modern poem: the walker-poet is deliberately created as a failure in relation to his own lofty aims. However, as the walker provides the only voiced perspective in the poem, there is little opportunity to evaluate his failings within the content of the text. And yet there seem to be instances within the poem which, unbeknownst to our walker, directly mock the would-be poet. These moments tend to stem from the walker's own inadequacies as a writer, particularly his failure to master his own language; often his symbols and his words betray him. These instances unwittingly reveal the walker's inadequacies as a wielder of artistic control and a source of moral guidance. The concluding lines of the poem declare the walker's ultimate intention for his work, namely that as a poem it will “shine” for all walkers through London (416). The symbol of light and, more precisely, artificial light plays a huge role in the final book of *Trivia*. In a way this is consistent with the walker's intentions, as he professes to illuminate potential dangers for a walker through the dark city streets. However, the manner in which light is repeatedly used as a symbol consistently undermines the walker's authority in a way that generates a sense of there being a meta-poetical, authorial position (perhaps the position of the poem's ultimate author, John Gay) which criticizes the walker's objective for his poem.

The image of an impure, falsifying light is repeatedly used throughout Book III of *Trivia* and right up to the point of its complicated closing lines. At the collapse of one of the carriages the walker erupts into a recollection of the destruction of the Eddystone lighthouse. Once a beacon of guidance, the collapse of the lighthouse brought about the wreckage of many ships that had previously been dependent on its cautionary ray. We must give serious consideration to the point of such a digression from the poem's narration, as it can be no accident that it is offered so incongruously in the context of a collapsed carriage. The analogy of the lighthouse is perhaps accurate in its relation to the purpose of the walker's own poem: the walker also intends to illuminate the city's perils so that the reader may avoid them. Yet the passage deals with the destruction of the lighthouse, not its success, and thus we are once again left with a sense that light in this poem and, indeed, the light *of* this poem, somehow fails to achieve its noble purpose.

However, the walker is betrayed by something yet more obvious in his delivery of these concluding lines. Given the walker's moral pretensions, it is impossible to ignore the glaring irony that his poem will ultimately "shine" on a "*Fleetstreet Post*" (415-16). In his conclusion to the poem the walker is completely subsumed by the world he attempted to describe and judge morally. His attempts at a "permanent moral comment" are mediated by his awareness that his poem must in the end be marketable to a consumer. Unbeknownst to the walker, the satire in this poem is as much directed towards those who write in an attempt to reject the city morally as it is towards the city itself. To confirm this point we can look to how artists are related in *Trivia*. While the walker does not often directly address his role as a poet, the poem does present other kinds of "subtle-artists" (54) and "ballad-singers" (77) in the forms of thieves and their deceitful confederates respectively. The prostitute also "with flatt'ring Sounds ... soothes the cred'lous ear" (273). This characterization lends itself to multiple interpretations. Primarily it serves to lodge our particular poet, the walker, firmly within the sin of London streets, despite his heightened sense of self-importance. It also, however, points to our walker-poet's inability to control and master the literary symbols he deploys. Thus he is prone to accidentally trapping himself in his own language. Moreover, it hints that our walker-poet may be (unwittingly) engaged in a similar kind of trickery. If the foppish reader believes that this poem is simply a faithful description of London's streets at night and does

not register that *Trivia* is equally engaged in “flattery” (like the prostitute) then he has fallen prey to its ultimate satire.

The confusion which arises from these clashing perspectives is suggested by the title: *Trivia* is indeed a poem about collisions and intersections, not only between physical objects, but also between literary genres. Our walker frequently appeals to other textual authority in an attempt to comment on his encounters on the London streets. His interpretation of the city of London seems largely informed by his reading of Homer, Virgil, Sophocles, and Juvenal, and he reaches out to these classical writers repeatedly throughout *Trivia*. In eighteenth-century georgics this was a way of flaunting one’s education, of asserting one’s right to literary and moral authority. It would also have appealed to his fashionable reader. Perhaps not surprisingly, the overwhelming majority of classical allusions in *Trivia* are comically incongruous with what the walker is in fact encountering. Likening the crossing of a street to Odysseus’s choice between Scylla and Charybdis (183-84), and comparing losing a friend in this crossing to Nisus’s loss of Euryalus, are evidently absurd and inappropriate comparisons—for as he says himself, “*Euryalus*, alas! is now no more” (91-100). The walker is thus unsuccessful in collating his text under the authority of the ancients. Rather than meaningfully relating to the city, these moments of epic simile expose only the walker’s own aim at self-aggrandizement.

The tragic references are similarly construed. Given that the title of this poem is *Trivia*, or a place where three roads cross, the Oedipal myth is forced upon the poem from its beginning. The moment when this tragic figure is invoked occurs when the walker addresses the perils of losing the wall and being swept into a brawl in the streets (205-24). In many ways this connection is much more justifiable than his other attempts at invoking classical literature. The tragedy of Oedipus does begin at a crossroads, and the king’s ultimate fate of walking the streets of Thebes blind is precisely what the walker fears for his reader. However, there is an overwhelming amount of the Oedipus tragedy which cannot be filtered into this minimal connection, and thus the reference succeeds only in further elucidating the psychology of the walker-poet. The walker attempts to elevate the act of walking the streets to a heroic pursuit in order to prove that his poem serves as protection against dire tragedy. Yet he is betrayed by the alternate meaning of his poem’s title: it is just all too trivial.

However, before we may dismiss the walker's use of intertextual references entirely, it is important to state that there is one moment when the epic simile is undeniably successful. Gay's poem ends with a fire and, for one flickering moment, the walker lands on a correlation between classical myth and his depiction of the city that is perfectly apt. It occurs when the walker observes a fireman who bears an infant out of a flaming building (362-63). At this point the walker extols the fireman's heroism, who "With no less Virtue, than through hostile Fire / The Dardan Hero bore his aged sire" (367-68). This use of the epic simile clearly corresponds to what it is describing, namely, Aeneas carrying his father out of the flaming battlements of Troy. Furthermore, the simile enriches the walker's observation, as it expands upon the nature of the fireman's virtue without losing sight of its subject. It seems, finally, that the walker is acting as a successful commentator as well as a successful poet. This moment of abstraction from the walker's observation appears to gain a kind of authorial legitimacy by virtue of its uniformity with the other text he invokes. If there is a "permanent moral comment" to be found in this poem, it is unlikely we will find it in the majority of the walker's confused perceptions and forced correlations. However, there is undeniably a sense of positive virtue in the city which comes from this one successful exit from the skewed universe of the poem. The episode of the fireman escapes the individual perspective of the walker in that it is supported by an accurate intertextual relationship. Thus, we finally have a moment in the poem when all three perspectives—the walker-poet, the fop-reader, and the critical reader—finally agree upon, or "converge," over an interpretation of events. "Tri-via" has been achieved.

## V

I would like to suggest that, as critical readers, we are not meant to dislike our walker as a guide or as a poet. He is a profoundly sympathetic character who is unable to conceal his sympathy for the figures that flood London's streets at night, and who is also trying to produce a marketable poem. Gay's walker is the only voice in the poem, but, ironically, his is also just another voice in the teeming streets of London. This is a poet who is in every sense actively engaged in what he is writing, both with the subject of his poem, and with the writing process. Gay does not think that it is appropriate that the city be approached with a disembodied, moralizing voice, but rather



through the medium of a literary persona, himself implicated in what he attempts to describe as a non-participant. By uniting a description of London with an obviously flawed poet, Gay forces the reader to see the faultiness in authors, and in readers, who claim to have an ideological abstraction from their subject. Not only is the walker connected to his city through the book trade, or through the language he must use to describe the city, but the two are also remarkably similar in character. Both walker and city are morally ambiguous and apparently contradictory. But neither, ultimately, is negatively construed in the greater universe of the poem.

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