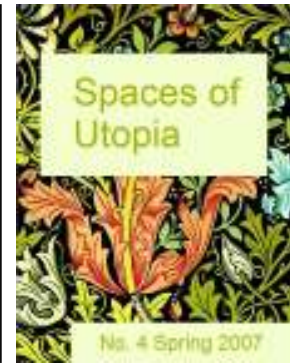


Defoe and the Utopian City:
GIVING A Particular ACCOUNT of Whatever is CURIOUS and
worth OBSERVATION in *A Journal of the Plague Year* and *A
Tour through the Whole Island of Great Britain*

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To scholars of Defoe, my title may evoke, by contrast, one of Maximillian E. Novak's early essays (published in *PMLA* in 1977), a study of *A Journal of the Plague Year*, aptly named "Defoe and the Disordered City". I seem, at first sight, to be challenging Novak's view of Defoe's portrayal of a London riddled by the plague as a dystopian space where chaos, disorder and disintegration reign supreme, and where traditional utopian notions of the city as a space of order, harmony and perfection are doomed to failure by the intervention both of divine punishment and natural catastrophe.

Nothing could be further from the truth. Despite its title, "Defoe and the Disordered City" argues, as I will throughout this essay, that Defoe's notion of the city's potential for regeneration and rebirth transforms what might have been a tale of woe and despair into a celebration of the power of human agency over death and destruction. I take the view, as Novak does, that, for Defoe, "the paradigm of history" underlying London's predicament in 1665 "is not [that of] a Jerusalem destroyed from within before falling to Titus", nor, I might add, is it the biblical parallel of a Sodom and Gomorrah suffering the effects of God's

righteous anger (Novak 1977: 249). Defoe is an optimist, and his belief in the triumph of the human and the social over apparently overwhelming natural or transcendental forces ultimately reasserts the notion of the city as the site of utopia on Earth.

I invoke Novak's title because its suggestion that "City = Disorder" seems to me symptomatic of our view of the (post)modern condition, where the "cities of destruction" or "confusion" prevail over the "cities of the sun" or "built upon a hill", a post-lapsarian world of industrial rise and decline, of failed experiments that turned garden cities into cokedowns, green belts into suburban wastelands, and circular, organic entities into decentred urban fields. And I do so also to make clear the perspective from which I will be looking at Defoe's utopia, a perspective inevitably coloured by the benefits – as well as the drawbacks – of hindsight and dramatic irony.

From a contemporary point of view, Defoe's optimism about the city's utopian potential may seem naïve at best, possibly misguided, certainly unfounded in the light of what has been happening to the country and the city over the last three centuries. History has taught us that we can no longer believe in the beneficent power of human achievement over brute nature and that we cannot – should not – take just pride in the usurpation of the divine right of creation. We have learned that the tale of Frankenstein may be true in more ways than one, and that the city has become the uncontrollable monster that rebels against its creator and runs amok in the world, spreading death and destruction. We have had to face the fact that the epitome of our civilising powers has turned against us and let barbarism return through the back door; nay, it has brought it into the very centre of our lives; the "heart of darkness", no

longer remote or easily isolated, has become an integral part of the everyday experience of millions of people living in inner city ghettos and urban slums. Language itself has had to be reinvented, its powers exhausted by the strain of having to represent and account for a dissolving reality, which quickly melts into air but leaves behind the solidity of poverty, alienation and destitution. We have recently had to rethink the vocabulary that we thought served us well to describe the centrifugal forces the city created, at a time when centripetal, decentred impulses put the very concept of the “city” at risk. The city can no longer be contained geographically, metaphorically or disciplinarily. It requires a coming together of the best of our discursive powers, from all areas of knowledge, to make sense of the interaction between the new phenomena of postmodern life and the age-old patterns that continue to exist alongside it.

Knowing all this, I will contend, nonetheless, that a study of Defoe’s vision of the city can work as an antidote to the debilitating nostalgia and paralysing pessimism that often prevail in many contemporary discourses on the city. It can act as a tonic to invigorate a withered sense of social and political agency over the historical process and help alleviate the symptoms of the existential *malaise* first felt by the Romantic generation and from which we have arguably never fully recovered. Looking at Defoe from a postmodern perspective can be an exhilarating as well as a chastening experience. His unquestioning faith in the truth-value of empirical data and sensorial perception, his unfailing trust in the mimetic powers of language, and his unwavering confidence in the legibility of the world around him have been lost to us. But what bubbling energy and unbounded excitement they produced! His euphoria is contagious. You cannot read Defoe without feeling that the eighteenth

century opened up the world for our perusal, appreciation and appropriation, large vistas unfolding before the curious, adventurous observer, vast regions waiting to be mapped by a faithful, trustful eye-witness, who comes back to tell the tale of what he saw for our instruction and delight.

“In travelling to England, a luxuriance of objects presents itself to our view”, says the narrator of *A Tour through the Whole Island of Great Britain* on the very first page of the book, and “new matter offers to new observation” in a country that is changing from a land of romance and ballad to an empirical place of documentary discourse and realistic fiction, from an agrarian to a capitalist economy (Defoe 1979: 43, 44). This sense of rapid change, both in the object of observation and in the nature and aims of the observer, undoubtedly adds to the excitement of the task; and the notion that any account of a country in a state of flux cannot be permanent and definitive, “as no clothes can be made to fit a growing child” and “no picture [can] carry the likeness of a living face; the size of one, and the countenance of the other always altering with time”, in no way gives cause for discouragement or defeatism (*idem*, 46). Rather, the necessarily provisional and partial nature of the project, the fact that “while the sheets are in the press, new beauties appear in several places, and almost to every part we are obliged to add appendixes, and supplemental accounts of fine houses, new undertakings, buildings, &c.” only augments the urgency of the matter – and provides a good excuse for the prolixity of the writer (*ibidem*).

Excess and hyperbole seem to abound in the world around Defoe and they inevitably permeate into his prose. Everywhere he looks he finds “the most flourishing and opulent country in the world”, an “increase in wealth”, “a

luxuriance of objects”, “improvements in the soil, the product of the earth, the labour of the poor, the improvement in manufactures, in merchandises, in navigations”, and so on and so forth, continuing for the next 679 pages of his travels around Britain (*idem*, 43, 45). An excess understood as salutary and beneficial, which should be welcomed and encouraged, and not rejected as the disorientating, alienating excess of that “perpetual whirl of trivial objects” that “wear [ies] out the eye” of the observer (Wordsworth, 1980: l.725-6, 731). No “press/ Of self-destroying, transitory things” for Defoe in his contemplation of the urban landscape (*idem*, l. 769-770); no desire to escape, “as from an enemy”, into some “sequestered nook” (*idem*, l.170). The “face after face, the string of dazzling wares”, the “shop after shop” is precisely what attracts him to this new England, the new commercial order of a rising capitalist economy (*idem*, l.156-7). He can never get enough of it, omnivorously devouring the never-ending parade of surface detail in the city with the gusto of a bon-vivant before a sumptuous banquet. He gorges himself to the full, but never seems to suffer any ill effects from indigestion or surfeit. The excess is never unruly, but controlled, ordered, kept within the bounds of reason, and the infinite multiplicity and endless diversity of the real invigorate the writer and energise the tale he has to tell.

The image of the city as a canker, where the fast-growing malignant cells cannot be stopped by human means, belongs in the future, as do the “monstrous ant-hills” and the “great devouring Wens” which the next century will have to contend with. For Defoe, urban growth means progress and improvement, and the appropriate response of the individual observer before the rise and rise of the city is that of wonder untainted by terror or awe. Defoe’s

protagonists – the autobiographical narrator of *A Tour*, the enigmatically named H. F. of *A Journal of the Plague Year* as well as a Moll Flanders and even a Robinson Crusoe – are eminently urban characters, the very first in the history of English literature. You cannot imagine them existing outside the thronged streets, noisy taverns, crowded parks, bustling markets and narrow alleys of eighteenth-century London; they would have to be shipwrecked before they went near a tree or a rabbit (and when they are, they proceed to build walled citadels, keep pets, acquire manservants, go out in their finery and, on departure, rent out the property for a profit).

Our post-romantic sensibilities shudder at the dismissal of the sublime beauty of a heath as a mere “Black Desert” from which the traveller escapes as quickly as he can to the “fertile country, enclosed and cultivated”, where small villages announce a return to civilisation, and the next town provides him with the delights of a corn market to be inspected, the houses of the nobility and gentry to be gaped at, and the flourishing trade of goods and manufactures to be remarked upon approvingly (Defoe 1979: 187). Defoe’s lack of aesthetic appreciation of landscape and natural beauty may shock us, and his view of the countryside as the last redoubt of the sub- or the pre-human is difficult to comprehend in an age that has recuperated the Romantic love of nature and transformed it into environmental concern. But to Defoe nature does not speak in any recognisable language; it has no words and no voice and therefore cannot compete with the strident din of the city, where the social and the human loudly proclaim their victory over barbarism. Raymond Williams would, I believe, agree that Defoe predates the “dissociation of sensibility” that separates the aesthetic from the social and political, a separation which results in the rarefied,

detached gaze of the onlooker who enjoys unpolluted nature but is blind to the labour that has been transforming it (cf. Williams 1985: 120-126). Not so with Defoe, for whom the palace, the church, the market, the hospital or the cultivated field are all products of the social and the political, and therefore amenable to change. The city speaks to him above all of the human labour that went into its creation and development, and his writings are a record of present achievement and a tool for plotting the path of victories to come.

The idea of the city as a labyrinth, where the weary traveller despairs of finding a way out of the conceptual, emotional or sensorial maze, would be totally foreign to him. London is Long Acre, Cripplegate, Bell Alley and Guildhall, the Chamber of London, the Monument and the Hospital of Bedlam; something mappable – mapped – instantly recognisable, immediately familiar to the community of his readers. Names, dates, figures, lists are the materials out of which Defoe builds his image of the city, empirically verifiable pillars that support the edifice of his writing. Facts are not, for him, “dull, dead, uninformed thing[s]”, but the bricks and mortar he uses in the construction (Mayhew 1985: 448). His duty is not “to preach a sermon instead of writing a history”, his task is not “making [himself] a teacher instead of giving [his] observations of things” (Defoe 1983: 255). He is “very little in debt to other men’s labours, and gives but very few accounts of things, but what he has been an eye-witness of himself” (Defoe 1979: 45). Such trust in the individual power to arrive at a truth which is within the reach of our senses and reason, such confidence that the world is a *donné* waiting to be known and possessed by a reliable observer (who can then transpose it directly into words on a page) cannot be taken at face-value by an

age that identifies Defoe as the “Great Fabricator” of fictions passed off as truths we no longer believe in.

His is a visible city, which stands before us, as does the figure in the foreground of the picture, by virtue of its solid, material, unproblematic reality. The “unreal city” waits in the wings. Here, no fog in a winter dawn can obfuscate its glitter, and even when death has undone so many victims of the plague, “the prudence of my Lord Mayor and the Court of Aldermen within the city, and of the justices of peace in out-parts, was such (...) that the poor were kept quiet, and their wants everywhere relieved, as far as was possible to be done” (Defoe 1983: 113). And as soon as the disease was abated and its malignity spent, “a secret surprise and smile of joy sat on everybody’s face”, “all the manufacturing hands in the nation were set on work, and were little enough for several years to supply the market and answer the demands” (*idem*, 253, 233). Phoenix-like, the city rises again, its productive forces come back to life and the fragments are picked up from the ruins and re-glued together more securely than before. The centre holds again and the world did not end either with a bang or with a whimper. Industry pumps life back into the temporarily diseased body of the city, commerce is the blood that flows in its veins to restore it to health. Quacks and doctors may not have saved London from the plague, but the organic structure is resurrected by the collective action of an organised society that held together under the pressures of a disaster that passed understanding.

A “triumph of fact”, indeed, is this city which still believes that “National Prosperity” and “Natural Prosperity” are one and the same thing, where any potential Josiah Bounderby is kept in check by the regulating forces of the social contract, and the individual does not feel “the imaginative power languish

within” him among the oppressive forces of the city (Wordsworth 1980: l. 468-469). The “true-born Englishman” may have the right to ask of his country why it denies him the liberty to escape a quarantined city and can still proudly affirm his “right to live [anywhere] in it if [he] can” (Defoe 1983: 139); but society will invariably answer that “it was a public good that justified the private mischief”, and will remind him that a good “parley”, and talking “rationally and smoothly” will go a long way towards the re-establishment of order (*idem*, 67, 158). Contracts voluntarily undertaken by both parties to their mutual advantage guarantee the ideal balance between the individual and society as well as between Man and God. “*Why has God done this to me? What have I done to be thus us’d?*”, a solitary man on a desert island asks of nobody in particular (Defoe 1994: 68; italics in the original); and the answer lies within himself: “Had I done my part, *God had deliver’d me, but I had not glorifi’d him*” (*idem*, 70; italics in the original). Equally, fugitives from the plague will contribute to a collective kitty according to their means, and are “content that what money they had should all go into one public stock, on condition that whatever any one of them could gain more than another, it should without any grudging be all added to the public stock” (Defoe 1983: 141).

The horizontal and the vertical, the secular and the sacred are in perfect equilibrium. I know no better consubstantiation of Defoe’s utopian vision than his design for a town to be built for a group of refugees (see Appendix), a plan which he put forward to the Lord Treasurer, “and others who were principally concerned at that time in bringing over, the poor inhabitants of the Palatinate; a thing in itself commendable, but as it was managed, made scandalous to England, and miserable to those people” (Defoe 1979: 201). The circle at its

centre, as is appropriate, places the sacred at the heart of things. But the squares and the straight lines bring in the human and the secular; they belong to an age of reason which imposed a linearity on the world that nature cannot boast of. The circle may be entered from all sides; inside it live the elect; you can walk around it and enjoy the protectiveness it affords. But sooner or later, in a gesture of defiance, you will want out, out into the large avenues leading to a wider world. The choice is yours: if you decide to stay within, nothing will be lacking; self-sufficiency is guaranteed by the little garden at the back of the house, a miniature nature put to human use; and whatever else you may require is within walking distance and available for purchase. The offices of a benevolent society are just around the corner from the abode of a benevolent deity. The four points of the cross tell of sacrifices both animal and divine, the two extremes of the middle where we exist, between the desires of the body and the needs of the soul. The square and the circle, the straight and the round, closure and openness, all work in unison; they complement and balance each other in a perfect synthesis of opposites. Only a cynic would say that this harmonious fusion of Religion and Commerce means Commerce has been turned into a Religion...

Defoe would not recoil from the duplicity. An age of wigs deals in artifice, enjoys masks and revels in disguises; loves to be in a play where the daughter of a convicted felon ends up as a gentlewoman, where rebellious sons become empire-builders, and trusted, reliable eye-witnesses turn out to be government spies and double-agents. Defoe knows as much about expediency as he does about metamorphosis. How else do you take the bull of Change by its pointed horns and live to tell the tale? Pragmatism never stands in his way; he even

manages to perform the difficult acrobatics of having both feet firmly planted on the boggy ground of a shifty society. Or, like an experienced sailor, he moves in sync with the rolling of the ship on stormy waters, allowing for the ups and downs, tilting left or right according to the rocking of the vessel, but somehow always landing butter-side up. Mobility is all.

His protagonists are people going places, *flâneurs* with a purpose, undeterred “men of the crowd”, rogues elbowing and pushing their way forward through the throng in their rush to arrive at their appointed destination. They only stop to watch, voyeuristically, when curiosity gets the better of them and the inquiring mind wins over the instinct of survival. But it is no remote, alien jungle full of cannibals and wild animals that they have to trudge through and conquer. They belong to the city and the city belongs to them. They would not have it otherwise. This is no world of perilous encounters, no “darkest London” inhabited by primitive, dangerous tribes, but a community of respectable citizens going about their ordinary business, counting the pennies in their pockets. Besides, there is safety in numbers. The idea of the individual as a solitary consciousness wandering the streets, enclosed in a “semi-transparent envelope”, an evanescent membrane separating it from the real, would gather no followers (Woolf, 1972: 106). Nothing stands between the I/eye and its object, no shadow falls between conception and creation, motion and act. You are what you do, and the city both bears witness and provides the evidence by which your actions will be judged.

Defoe always writes with posterity in mind. He is a chronicler of the Here and Now who surveys present locations with an estate agent’s eye to future profits. And the nation he is promoting is immense: from London to Land’s End,

from the “frightful” landscape of the Scottish Islands to the “rising peaks of nameless hills” in Wales, from remote Penzance to mountainous Northumberland. A whole country under improvement, a developer’s dream. The timing is also propitious: “the wars between the nations are at an end, the wastings and plunderings, the ravages and blood are all over” and the “lasting tranquillity” of the Union ensures the stability of the market (Defoe 1979: 637). And all being well, the business will expand, and “posterity will be continually adding” to the property and “every age will find an increase in glory” to augment the legacy (*idem*, 46). He can proudly assert: “(...) I am not writing panegyrics or satires here, my business is with the country” and genuinely believe he has done the product justice (*idem*, 664).

Defoe (quite literally) brings us News from Everywhere, from an emerging New Atlantis where in the unseen future Wigan Piers will die a slow, consumptive death, from sunny Oceanas where bleak houses will later be erected. His English journeys do not look backwards to green pastures and do not foresee the dark satanic mills that loom on the horizon. He could only envisage Brave New Worlds, their hour come at last, marching towards Bethlehem to be born. His tales are Elysian, not full of sound and fury, and he meant them to signify.

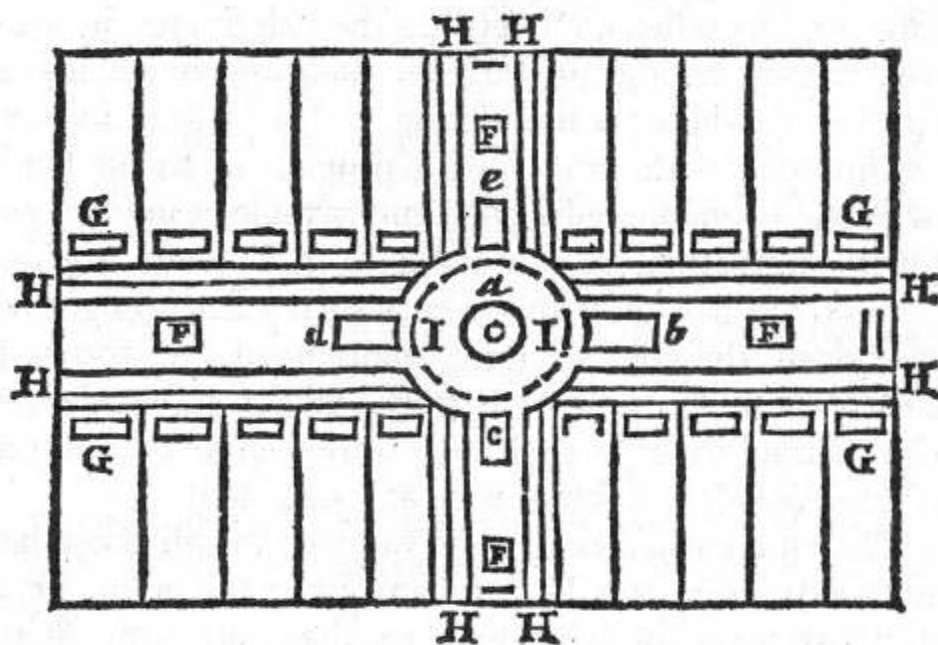
How can we match this today? Innocence lost cannot be regained, and anyway, our expulsion from Eden took place a long time ago. We cannot but agree with Orwell that “the ‘democratic vistas’ have ended in barbed wire” (Orwell 1998: 91). God-fearing, independent-minded tradesmen turned into exploitative capitalists; adventurous, self-confident explorers into acquisitive, arrogant colonialists; the city went from cosmopolis to metropolis to

megalopolis; picturesque towns have become theme parks, closed-up factories are now popular heritage sites and Green tourism is a fast-expanding industry. We live in a hyperreality which is “neither idyllic nor dystopic” (Barnes 1998: 256), where “spectacular commodities” (Debord 1994: 111-112) are dispersed over a diffused area which is no longer either urban or rural. We take the illegibility of the city for granted, and assume from the start that its nature is now unknowable. A “non-space” that cannot be read, against which metaphor collapses and before which narrative is powerless (Jones 1990: 142). A sense of dislocation and disorientation prevent the postmodern body from organising “its immediate surroundings perceptually”, and from the ability “cognitively to map its position in a mappable external world” (Jameson 1984: 83). We are undergoing a “general process of dissolution which brings the city to the point where it *consumes itself*”, in a cannibalistic ritual of self-destruction (Debord 1994: 124; italics in the original).

Possessed of this knowledge, Defoe’s world may appear to us as irrecoverable and irreproducible, available only for naïve eulogising, nostalgic yearning or impatient dismissal. I have tried to steer away from all of these, preferring to regard my study of Defoe’s utopian vision as a four-thousand word exercise in willing suspension of disbelief. With utopias (and dystopias) gone, Coleridge’s “poetic faiths” remain, and “unreality”, as Salman Rushdie has aptly put it, is still “the only weapon with which reality can be smashed, so that it may subsequently be reconstructed” (Rushdie 1991: 122). The “what ifs” of fiction can still work both as a safeguard against mythologizing impulses and as a stubborn gesture of refusal to accept the inevitability of the real.

APPENDIX

from *A Tour through the Whole Island of Great Britain*



- a - the church
- b - the shambles
- c - the market house
- d - a town hall
- e - a conduit with stocks, &c
- F - the conduits, or wells
- G - houses
- H - the lands enclosed behind
- I - streets of houses for tradesmen

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