



## *Victory Gin Lane. Starvation and Beverages in Orwell's Nineteen Eighty-Four*

by Paolo Caponi

Gin is a ubiquitous presence in the domestic and urban scenery of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949). For a population mercilessly hungered, it represents a handy and cheap commodity item providing a fluid opportunity for social aggregation. Victory Gin, served “in handless chine mugs” (Orwell 1949: 53), is part of the workers’ staple diet at the Ministry of Truth, and is sold “at ten cents the large nip” from the small bar (actually, “a mere hole in the wall”, 51) in the canteen; served with cloves, it is the “speciality” (79) of that disreputable place which is the Chestnut Tree Café, where Winston Smith once spotted three fallen-out-of-favor members of the Inner Party – Jones, Aaronson and Rutherford – drink it silently after their release from Oceania prison camps (79). As is typical of the fate of spirits in literature, gin also serves as self-medication and can fuel a kind of inner escapism. It is to make the world “look more cheerful” that Winston gulps it down “like a dose of medicine”, and only after the “shock” of swallowing it can he squeeze himself into his alcove and begin his diary (7); gin clears out Winston’s stomach (53), and is the *ultima ratio* against that prescient “dull ache” in his belly (105; 106) that originates after bumping into “the girl with dark hair” (later: Julia) one evening outside Mr. Charrington’s shop.



“Victory” gin, as well as a wide range of Oceania “Victory” mass-products like cigarettes or coffee, provides the link to an ampler national dilemma looking both forward, to the specter of a new thriftiness emphasized by collectivism, and, as investigated in the present study, backward, namely to the London social conurbation recurrently devastated by gin obsessions since the establishment of the very first gin distillery in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Because the brand “Victory”, the trademark of Oceania’s collectivism, always implies an institutional power behind that “bloody stuff” (147), a structured system of exploitation and measured poisoning here associated with the devastating effects of gin in the first place. As Orwell made clear to the United Automobile Workers club members (rather peculiar addressees who wished to recommend the book but required supplementary information from the author), “The scene of the book is laid in Britain in order to emphasize that the English-speaking races are not innately better than anyone else and that totalitarianism, *if not fought against*, could triumph anywhere” (Crick 1981: 398, italics in the original). Aptly enough, the “Victory” label was actually derived by Orwell from the low-quality “Victory” cigarettes (also known as Vs) made in India and smoked in Britain during World War II, officially produced by the Imperial Tobacco Company but essentially a by-product of an American manufacturers’ cartel. On the thin packet, the dominant V was meant to allude to Winston Churchill’s reiterated V-sign (his typical show of confidence expressed with his raised index and middle fingers); applied to a whole line of products in 1984 Oceania, the brand speaks of a patriotic joint venture between politics and economy, and instantly becomes a synonym for shoddiness and adulteration like “synthetic gin”, the only “cheap and plentiful” product Winston can think of in his list of items that connote Oceania’s “discomfort and dirt and scarcity” (Orwell 1949: 63).

Indeed, gin is not a neutral word in the history of London and England. An eye witness of the “young [...] Manufacture” of “the Distillers Company”, Daniel Defoe stands out as an early instance of public ‘responsibility’ in his *A Brief Case of the Distillers* (1726), one of the first in a genealogy of stolid supporters of the “publick Benefit to the Nation” deriving from “the distilling Trade, considered in its present Magnitude” (Defoe 1726: 1, 2). Unaffected by the devastating effects of liquor addiction (“the Distillers are not concern’d in it at all; [...]. If the People will destroy themselves by their own Excesses, [...] ‘tis the Magistrate’s Business to help that, not the distillers”, 11), Defoe saw in the new trade a propeller for the national economy, and, with it, for the spread of “without a *Pun* [...]”, a new generation of distillers as “*publick spirited People*” (2; italics in the original). His personal history of national drinking habits begins from the day when “Joy, Mirth, good Cheer, and good Liquor, were the solace of the common People in the Year 1661” (18). Initially, after the dire straits of the Puritan Commonwealth, “Beer and Ale [...] went a great way in the Work” (18), but they were soon to be supplanted by a profusion of “*Cordial Waters*” (19)



among which the last born, "Cholik Water, which in short was *Geneva*" (21), was destined to rule the roost.

And thus the strong-Water-Shops usually made a vast Show of Glasses, labell'd and written on, like the *Gallypot Latin of the Apothecarys*, with innumerable hard Names to set them off.

Here, as at a Fountain, the good Wives furnish'd their little Fire-side Cupboards, with a needful Bottle for a cherishing Cup: And hence, as from wholesale Dealers, all the little Chandlers Shops, not in *London*, and its adjacent Parts only, but over great Part of *England*, were furnish'd for Sale; and to the personal Knowledge of the Writer hereof, and of Thousands still living, not the Chandlers Shops only, but just as is now complain'd of, the Barbers Shops (*Barber Chirurgeons* they were then called) were furnished with the same, and sold it by Retail, to the poor People who came under their Operations (19).

Defoe also generates an interesting pedigree for the term, apparently derived from the particular spirit produced by the Dutch to invigorate the soldiers, first named *Geneva* and hence "gin" in concomitance with its diffusion among the lower ranks of the army (29). Naturally enough, *Geneva* generated some ambiguity because of having the same name as Calvin's city, and it is noteworthy that as early as 1623 (well before Defoe's chronology) Philip Massinger could profit from this coincidence in *The Duke of Milan*, where Graccho goes on stage promising harsh punishment to the officer who would preach a sermon about sobriety "Unless he read it in *Geneva* print" (Massinger 1978: I.i.11). An indefatigable supporter of the free trade, and more than a century after Graccho's republic of drunkards, Defoe will rise up as the guardian spirit of the national distillers, a guild potentially capable of protecting themselves and "unjustly attack'd", he writes, "with Clamours and popular Pretences, as if their Trade [...] ought to be regulated by the Magistrates" (50) and not by their enlightened corporative judgment (40).

The role assigned by Defoe, rather capriciously, to the body of magistrates in his *Brief Case*, discriminating between what they should, or should not, do, according to the supreme necessity of *laissez-faire*, implies a national state remote and indifferent to the plight of the lower classes, once in a lifetime left alone to exercise their free will if only to destroy themselves. What became increasingly evident throughout the 18<sup>th</sup> century, *pace* Defoe, was the gradual addiction of the London urban *Lumpenproletariat* – who could not afford more expensive and, to an extent, less poisonous ales – to a very low quality of gin, notoriously adulterated with alum and sulphuric acid, and more often flavored with turpentine than with juniper berries (Dillon 2004: 167). And while Defoe and his fellow tradesmen were still waiting for the "elaborate Performance" of "the learned and worthy Physician [...] to show to the World the pernicious Consequence of drinking *Geneva* or Malt Spirits, and how many Thousands it has slain" (Defoe 1726: 51), the effects of the London Gin Craze were for all to see. At



the height of the craze, London, in any case not a salubrious city, was full of back-street dram shops and "Fellows" who, following in the steps of the old sellers of French Brandy still well remembered by Defoe, "cry'd it about the Streets", and carried "with them little double Dram-Cups, which being held up on one side was a Penny, and on the other side a Half-penny" (22). Illicit manufacturers competed with big distillers, and with William of Orange's ascension to the English throne (1688), practically anyone who could afford a vat and a still could set up shop and make spirits: "In 1690, English distillers paid duty on just over a half a million gallons of spirits. By the end of the decade that figure had more than doubled" (Dillon 2004: 10).

Gin addiction caused perpetual drunkenness and dementia, and easily led to idleness, prostitution, criminality. Twenty-five years after Defoe's paean, one of those cowardly magistrates conjured up in a *Brief Case* was to take the lead on the issue. The by then well-known author of *Tom Jones* and recently appointed magistrate for the city and liberty of Westminster, Henry Fielding, openly attacked in *An Enquiry Into the Causes of the Late Increase of Robbers* (1751) that "Poison called *Gin*" for that "new Kind of Drunkenness, unknown to our Ancestors, [...] lately sprung up amongst us" and particularly harmful "for a great Part of the inferior People" (88-89). In his pondered list of the factors socially responsible for this, besides "the vast Torrent of Luxury which of late Years hath poured itself into this Nation" (77), the "Probability of escaping Punishment" (130), and the absence of "Celerity, Privacy, and Solemnity" (171) in capital executions, gin is an overarching presence as "the Cause of the Transgression" (89), the "pernicious Liquor" (89), "the poisonous Distillation" (90), the "diabolical Liquor" (90) "the poisonous Draught" (91), the "Evil" (90-91). Gin "removes all Sense of Fear and Shame", Fielding notes, to the point that it "emboldens" its consumers "to commit every wicked and desperate Enterprize" (89). Interestingly enough for the future prospects of this argument, the unrestrained drinking of gin, and the increase in the crime rate that this entails, figures in Fielding's survey as inextricably connected with London topography, the very "Cities of *London* and *Westminster*" providing ample opportunity for escape and concealment thanks to "the late vast Addition of their Suburbs; the great Irregularity of their Buildings, the immense Number of Lanes, Alleys, Courts and Bye-places", facilitating that "*wandering* from one Part to another" which, as Medieval legislators knew well, is the *conditio sine qua non* for impunity (Fielding 1988: 131; italics in the original). Two hundred and thirty-three years later, O'Brien will remind Winston about the necessity for Airstrip One outlaws – and for a newcomer in the Brotherhood conspiracy as Winston now is – "to change one's hiding-place frequently" (184). Aptly, Fielding's pamphlet did not spare the government, since, in a London where it has been reckoned that over seven million gallons of spirits were legally distilled in 1751, it is "the great Revenue arising from the Tax on this Liquor" that "will prove the Quantity consumed better than any other Evidence" (89).



As many now contend, Fielding's social criticism was part of a joint venture with the painter and engraver William Hogarth, aimed at the moral recovery of life values in the face of the State's hypocrisy and its systematic policy of exploitation of the ignorant and the disenfranchised. Conceived as a face-to-face diptych for the pro-Tory *London Evening Post* in February 1751, and as a visual *pendant* to Fielding's *Enquiry* which had come out in January, the prints *Beer Street* and *Gin Lane* [above] "design'd and etch'd by Mr. Hogarth" were published "in the cheapest Manner possible" so as "to render them of more extensive use", being, as they were, conceived for the reformation of "the lower Class of People" (quoted in Paulson 1993: 17).<sup>1</sup> Hogarth's planned layout is part of the graphic tradition of contrasting views (Paulson 1993: 24). In his intentions, *Beer Street* should be viewed first in order to magnify the disastrous effects of gin addiction, creating a sort of anamorphic effect deriving from the visual juxtaposition of two most salient London areas where, "to the poor, this *produces* that" (Paulson 1993: 24). The peculiar setting chosen by Hogarth for *Gin Lane*, the parish of St Giles – a recurrent one in his drawings – can be inferred by the faded outline of Bloomsbury's St. George's church in the background, and provides, with its dilapidated house-fronts and its swarming multitude of *proles*, the proleptic link to Orwell's novel and its vitriolic reflection on gin, its revenues and its producers. The visual proximity of the prints as originally envisaged by Hogarth seems to find a deliberate correlative, in

<sup>1</sup> The original engravings, now in the British Museum of London, measure 143/16 x 12 in. (See Paulson 1993: fig. 3).



*Nineteen Eighty-Four*, in Winston's episodic *ownlife* wanderings through London as described in chapter VIII, where, after much walking "over pavements" (Orwell 1949: 85), he finds himself first in a *prole* pub offering pints of beer to try and unearth – uselessly – the memory of old times and then, in rather low spirits, in the open air, right "outside the junk-shop where he had bought the diary" (97). The location of both the pub and the shop can be roughly deduced by a number of clues disseminated in the narrative, first and foremost by Winston's realizing that, before entering the pub, he has ended up "somewhere [...] north and east of what had once been Saint Pancras Station" (85-6), compatible with a trajectory "first south, then east, then north again" (85) after his workday at the Ministry of Truth – famously modeled on the "Miniform" (i.e. the Ministry of Information) in the London Senate House, in Malet Street, where Orwell occasionally worked during World War II (Bowker 2003: 269, 301).

Malet Street, within a stone's throw of St Giles, establishes the relation with Hogarth's prints, a relation based on more than a topographical coincidence as testified by the "three discoloured metal balls which looked as if they had once been gilded" which Winston notes "immediately above his head" (Orwell 1949: 97) after his visit to the pub and which make the ensign of Mr Charrington's shop. For a largely analphabet population, three spheres suspended from a bar, prominent in both Hogarth prints, had been the visual marker of the pawnbroker's shop since the Medieval times, a symbol originally of the Lombard merchants in England and possibly passed on to the trade in secured loans (and, incidentally, to the Medici family) thanks to the Lombards' proverbial proficiency in financial, banking, and the moneylending industries (Creet 2013: 2). Though its trade has changed over time, Charrington's shop still imposes a barter – life against a quantum of solace – on its unaware customers. The flight of steps on which Winston's lingers (Orwell 1949: 90), anticipated by "a din of shouting voices" (89), are very much like those in *Gin Lane*, and add a vertical dimension – a descent, to be precise – to Winston's *flânerie* about London (to the "dingy little pub" [90] for him, to one more gin-cellar for Hogarth).

St Martin-in-the-Fields, featuring in Winston's *idée fixe* which is the nursery rhyme about the London churches, and first mentioned by Mr. Charrington in the room above his shop (103), provides the backdrop to *Beer Street*, where Winston's *bête noire* – the mousetrap – is on the windowsill of a now dilapidated pawn shop. A section of its own is deserved by the hag at the top of the stairs in *Gin Lane*, who is both a champion of femininity *hic et nunc*, a prototype of those "swollen waddling women that showed you what the girls will be like in ten years' time" (86), and a recurring presence in the novel, in the guise alternatively of the prostitute mercilessly recorded by Winston in his diary (66-72), of the ubiquitous *prole* beauty, and also of the puking recluse, like the one Winston encounters, late in the novel, in the cell of the Ministry of Love, and whom he disquietingly associates with the memory of his mother (240). The varicose ulcer, a sort of family trait then, is also there to link the prostitute's physical decline in *Gin Lane* to Winston's. Hogarth's visual imagery, however, stretches



beyond the precinct of St Giles "Rookery" to permeate the whole narrative of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* with its diffuse, centrifugal symbolism. The prints relate to a series of diegetic elements in the novel which, besides gin and its disruptive potential, give Airstrip One its peculiar, derivative taste. The burial of the dead at the back of *Gin Lane*, as well as the multitude of drunken zombies around the undertaker's shop and its eloquent ensign, anticipate the "corpses waiting to be sent back to the grave" (79) to which Winston links the figures of Jones, Aaronson and Rutherford (incidentally, a caricaturist) drinking in the café; the barber hanged in its attic, presumably because hopelessly out of work, associates with the recurring motive of the public hangings of traitors in the novel, besides providing an elliptical reference to the chronic shortage of razor blades in Oceania's London (remarkably, the excuse Winston invents for his wanderings in the *prole* slums is the search for razor blades, 97). Julia's "tool-bag" replete with utensils and "neat paper bags" (147) of *real* milk, bread, coffee, and tea, which she once brings with her to her love-nest above the pawn shop, has an *air de famille* with the load of cooking utensils a woman brings to the pawnbroker's in *Gin Lane*; and the badge worn by the virginal wards of St Giles parish, barely noticeable in *Gin Lane*, returns transmogrified as the red sash of the women in the Junior Anti-Sex League, of which Julia is a member. The snuffbox held by the prostitute, technically the immediate cause of the lethal fall of the infant at her side, is reputed to be an amicable reference to Fielding the tobacco-sniffer, the latter also being obliquely evoked in the novel through O'Brien's mild gesture of resetting his spectacles which, in Winston's words, "might have recalled an eighteenth-century nobleman offering his snuff-box" (12). Not to mention all those mansions "shored up with baulks of timber [...]" (5) and "falling to pieces" (22) which dominate Winston's scenery as well as Hogarth's – including *Beer Street*, where the dilapidated house, with its window "patched with cardboard" (4), is now the pawnbroker's. Larger in size, the "booklets in sealed packets" (137) produced by Julia at the Fiction Department are also there, in the pile of books left unattended by its drinking bearer in the right corner of the print, "ghastly rubbish" (137) for Julia as well as items ready for a "trunk-maker" in Hogarth, as is barely readable on the tag dangling from the wicker basket.

The synoptic layout of the two prints almost makes one the negative of the other, and each one the ideal counterpart of a situation that needs its antimatter to exist and prosper. Beer, then, is not only the lesser evil in a social community stubbornly founded on work and capital, but, more subtly, the blood-stained artifact whereby a savage exploitation of the declassed takes place beyond the looking-glass. The sign-painter on the extreme left is, in this sense, highly significant if only for the fact that, in rags as he is, he is actually painting a sign advertising beer with a gin bottle as a model, and this while facing the prosperous and salubrious *Beer Street*. This implies a systematic exploitation of the weak (both the gin addicts and the artist) as the preliminary condition for the circulation of money, as well as, incidentally, the



cynical inclusion of the artist in a global system that mercilessly recycles themes, images and situations.

This mistrust of the healthy effect of beer, or at least of the innocent implications for its drinking public, re-surfaces, as anticipated above, in Winston's debacle in the pub, in his inability to extract from the *prole* (beer-)drinker a single, feasible memory *ante-quem*, and, most extendedly, in Orwell's *disjecta A Clergyman's Daughter* (1935) where a long section of the narrative is devoted to the backstage life of beer consumption. Here, the dark side of market economy, the dubious provenance of ultimately "good" beverages like beer is explored with documentary intent, to the point of following the agricultural supply-chain back to its origin and well "down into the hop country" (Orwell 1935: 95), where the "bloody 'opping" (100) takes place on the brink of starvation and in a renewed regime of bound servitude. In the eight days of Dorothy's defensive amnesia, totally unaccounted for even though easily explicable in terms of a guilty *coup de foudre*, she is catapulted from her flat life of menial work at her father's vicarage, through an intermediate station in London, to the *inferno* of the Kent summer hop-picking, where she experiences little more than lost sleep in hopper huts and the abyss of the beggar's hunger. Through this absence, this rather providential lapse in her consciousness, Dorothy casts off her identity to find herself among the swarming multitude of rugged *unpersons* that migrate through the English countryside barely tolerated by "the inhabitants, who looked on the hopping season as decent provincials in Roman Gaul might have looked on the yearly incursion of the Goths" (116). Averting their eyes from this "Cockney dirt" (120), beer producers and consumers alike end up nudging free enterprise toward an unlegislated free-for-all, and ally themselves in reaffirming an institutional power that prospers merely on its blank consciousness and memory. This hiding-in-plain-sight philosophy, the same underlying Hogarth's prints, acquires a political dimension, a salient level of social criticism in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* precisely through Orwell's derivative visual reference, his carefully pictorial description which also strives to account for those who are no longer here, for those "vaporized" bodies that are not, Orwell implies, only a trademark of the new-born USSR with its startling, straightforward "rectification" of images.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> The most shocking instance of which being, perhaps, a 1930 Russian photo revealing the ultimate "vaporization" of Nikolai Yezhov after his physical execution (King 1997: 123).







The connection between those kinds of “rectifications” coming from the other side, and Winston’s tampering with “memory holes” (Orwell 1949: 40) at the Ministry of Truth is self-evident, though rather misleading in the end, insofar as it is developed at the expense of a repository of iconic references which is distinctively English in its essence and, most importantly, its targets. Assuming Orwell’s functional relocation of Hogarth’s prints – whether the outcome of a cryptomnestic process or of an entirely deliberate one, it is difficult to conclude –, the reiterated labelling of his work as a “parody”, or a “satire” by the author himself (Crick 1981: 395, 398) becomes intelligible in the light of an autochthonous, satiric tradition.

Unexpectedly enough, the blacksmith’s opulent leg of ham in *Beer Street*, together with the man distracting the housemaid at his side, were meant by Hogarth to replace, on afterthoughts, the murky, serpentine figure of a Frenchman, traditionally the enemy of the thriving English people and therefore so inconspicuous in Hogarth’s proof version as a stain on a white sheet [below].<sup>3</sup>



<sup>3</sup> The proof state of *Beer Street* (141/8 x 1115/16 in.) is now at the Cambridge Fitzwilliam Museum. (Paulson, 1993: fig.1).



This vaporization *avant la lettre* of a spurious detail of Hogarth's *Beer Street* generated the final version, normally credited as the only one representative of the author's "intentions". The motives behind this change remain unclear, although it is not difficult to imagine a last-minute compliance to higher reasons of state and, in the synoptic comparisons of the two prints, to avoid mixing the issue "of the underfed artist and an underfed Frenchman" (Paulson 1993: 33). After all, it was primarily to damage French interests that William of Orange had once hastened to promote parochial gin production. Hogarth's is a rectification capable of producing its political fruits of *entente cordiale*, since France ends up included – like Italy and another old nemesis of England, Spain – in Oceania's bloated macro-area. It is from within, then, that London now has to protect herself.

Although inextricably connected to the postwar, totalitarian scenarios, the urban landscape of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* resists a spatial, if not properly a temporal, relocation outside its original precincts, and finds in the English autochthonous, historical tradition of consumerism and exploitation the greatest outrage to reputation. A reputation that not even the name of Winston for "the last man in Europe" can fully rehabilitate.

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