SEVEN DIALS

Bob Biderman

Seven Dials It was the curious nature of the place – a roundabout with seven streets radiating out like spokes of a wheel. And then there was that wonderful pillar, like an ancient artefact – an obelisk or totem or the like – and just below its pointy top, six faces, six clocks (sundials, actually). There should have been seven – for Seven Dials – but the number of radiant streets was originally six, the seventh came later. Each street had the face of a sundial at its terminus – six streets, six dials. Then came the seventh. A street without a dial.

He recalled showing this curious monument to Daisy and then launching off into an exceptionally convoluted and tangential lecture about some obtuse etymology that had a peculiar meaning to him and, because Daisy actually loved him (sort of), also became of interest to her (at least, that's what he allowed himself to believe). For historical interest (simply that – nothing more intended), this is what he told her:

'"Dial" is one of those marvellous words that evolved, through many twists and turns, from the Latin, originally coming from "dies" which, itself, meant "day". Our use of the term most likely originated from the Middle English "rota dialis" or "daily wheel" which gave us a whole slew of words, including "sundial", rather cleverly combining the concept of circular motion with the idea of passage of time. Over its long and dusty journey, "dial" - a pleasant little word, don't you think? - came to mean "something round" (like a clock face), with a sense of rotation as well, so that when the telephone was eventually discovered (a term I prefer to 'invented' as it has more of the actual gestalt – implying that "telephone" was always there just waiting to be found – you see what I mean? No? Anyway…) the rotary wheel that came with the phone's early evolution, was itself called a "dial" followed by the verb, 'to dial', which meant "to turn the circular mechanical bit with one's finger in order to process a call". And then, when the circular bit morphed into push buttons, the language came with it, like a little obedient dog, so "to dial a number" continued meaning "to make a phone call" even though the sense of

the rotating wheel had been lost in the flurry of terrible techno-babble. Are you following me?'

"I'm following you but what's the point?" she said.

"Does everything have to have a point?" he asked, a bit disgruntled.

"Most things do, yes…"

Maybe that was the difference between her and him (or him and her). He didn't believe that things had to have a point at all.

'I wanted to give you some idea of why it's called Seven Dials,' he said, gesturing toward the monument. 'Most people don't know what a "dial" is anymore…'

'But there are only six,' she reminded him.

'What?'

'Dials. There are only six dials. See? One, two, three, four, five, six…' She counted them off on her fingertips. 'So why isn't it called "Six Dials"?'

He scratched his head. "Six Dials doesn't sound as good, does it?"

Then he launched off on another explanation: 'In the early part of the 17th century, the area now known as Seven Dials was marshy fields. But as London was growing by leaps and bounds, it was prime land for developers. And there was this guy named Neale…'

'Yeah,' she said, 'I know. Neale's Yard. Great place for face creams and shampoo that doesn't rust your scalp…'

'Well… history has a strange way of transforming names of people and things into something very far removed from what they were or what they ever hoped to be. That Mr. Neale is known for hair tonic rather than cleaning up a putrid swamp, is more than ironic…'

'Why ironic?'

'Because if he were like most 17th century gentlemen adventurers, he probably washed his hair six times in his life. Don't you find it ironic that nowadays we'd rather build mental statues to people we connect with herbal infusions and body lotions rather than with urban design?'

She shrugged. ‘Herbal infusions and body lotions are important too…’

He felt she was probably having him on, but he knew that partly it was just their curious dialectical banter. On the other hand, who in the world would have a conversation like this, at midday, in the middle of the street – madmen aside?

‘Look,’ he said, ‘Seven Dials is a metaphor. Standing here we’re only what? A ten minute walk from Leicester Square? But back then it was a smelly swamp at the city’s fringe. So what happened? And why? Neale was a visionary but he was also a man of his time. A decade before, Neale probably would have been selling shares in tulips…’

‘Tulips?’ She looked at him questioningly. ‘Tulipmania was in 1634. That was a few years before Neale’s time.’

‘… or something. Anyway, the Dutch are involved up to their necks. Think about it, here we are in the late 1600s. London is on the move. No longer a sleepy backwater, she’s starting her long and determined march into destiny. And it’s all because of the Dutch…'

‘Wait a second. How did the Dutch get into this soliloquy of yours? I thought we were talking about Neale and Seven Dials which was actually Six?’

‘The Dutch were involved in everything – you must have figured that out by now. At least they were by the late 1600s. Most people don’t know because they were very quiet about it. Not the in-your-face stuff of the French and the Germans. They just went about their business. How many people really know about the Glorious Revolution?’

‘It was only “glorious” if you were Protestant,’ she reminded him.

‘It wasn’t about religion. That was just a convenient excuse. Godly loyalties changed depending on the prevailing wind. What’s important is that in 1687, England became a centre for international finance - after the Dutch marched in…’

‘At the invitation of the Anglican church,’ she reminded him. ‘Anyway they weren’t Dutch…’

‘Who?’

‘The invading troops. They were mercenaries. Half of them were Swedes and Scots..’

‘Yeah. There were even a few hundred blacks brought over to fight from the Amer-

icas. But don't forget, a good number of those mercenaries were Catholic. Did you know there were even suggestions a lump of money that went to finance this so-called Protestant invasion came directly from the Pope because he hated Louis of France more than William of Orange?'

'That's just my point. They weren't Dutch.'

'So who were the Dutch? The Portuguese Jews? The refugees from the Spanish Netherlands? The Swedes, the Swiss, the Poles, the Scots who manned their army and crewed their ships? Holland in 1680 was a hodgepodge. Being Dutch wasn't a thing, it was an idea…'

Her eyes were starting to glaze over. 'I know you don't believe in points, but does this have anything to do with Seven Dials or Six Dials or anything else I might have missed?'

'Like I said, it's the Dutch connection. In 1690 William of Orange granted Thomas Neale, a land developer, some marshland known as 'Cock and Pye Fields'. Ordinarily there would have been a street or two and several rows of houses constructed. But Neale, rather ingeniously (and as a way of maximizing his profit), devised a plan whereby six streets –a seventh came later – would branch out from a central hub on which was built a magnificent pillar – a sundial with six faces, so that each of the radiating streets would be overseen by its own timekeeping apparatus. But that kind of imaginative urban expansion took finance. And William of Orange brought with him capital, fiscal expertise and new methods of servicing debt. What could be more Dutch than that?'

'Is that it?' she asked, rather hopefully.

'There's a coffee connection, you know.'

Her eyes lit up. 'There is? What is it?'

Now that he had her attention, he thought he'd let her dangle.

'You know that engraving I have on my wall?'

'The Hogarth in your kitchen?'

It was Gin Lane, William Hogarth's iconic engraving of London low life in a drunken bacchanal. Central to the eye, in the foreground, a woman sits at the top of a steep flight of stairs. She's dressed in rags, her blouse torn open exposing her saggy nursemaid's bosom. Her body slumps like a beat-up Raggedy Anne. Her face wears a silly dissipated grin. The poor woman is so far gone that she's blissfully unaware

her baby has fallen from her arms over the side of the railing and is plunging to its almost certain death. Except it isn't. Instead it's trapped forever in the aspic of the artist's pen, a look of surprised terror embossed on its angelic countenance. The falling baby is frozen in time. As is its drunken mother. As is the grotesquely distorted man behind her gnawing on a monstrous bone while a mangy dog chews at the other end. And to the side another mother is eternally fixed in the act of feeding her child a glass of demon gin.

'How can you have that horrible scene hanging in your kitchen?' she asked him.

'If it was anyone else, it would be horrible and I certainly wouldn't have it in my rooms. But it's Hogarth. And because it's Hogarth, it's not horrible at all. In fact, it's almost charming.'

'Charming?' Hey, maybe there's something about this guy I don't know, she thought.

'Like Bruegel.'

'I don't think I've ever heard "Bruegel" and "charming" used in the same sentence, either,' she said.

'So you heard it from me first…'

'As with many things,' she admitted.

'Charming', of course, wasn't the word for Hogarth's Gin Lane. And both he and she knew that the term was bandied more for its value to shock (if not shock then certainly to astonish) because of its supposedly inappropriate nature. Still there was an aspect of truth to what he uttered (a small, tiny aspect to be sure – but an aspect none-the-less).

'There's grotesqueness to an R. Crumb cartoon, as well,' he said. 'But there's also a wittiness and humour that one could call "charm".'

'If one wanted to misuse the word. You're the linguist…'

'Well, there's a sense of the word that means "to give delight" or "to arouse admiration"…'

'Aren't you the same person who argues that language needs to be understood in the context of the situation? Or have I miss-quoted you?'

'One also has the right to have one's own vocabulary…'

‘Not if one wishes to be understood by others…’

‘If you simply view Hogarth as grotesque you’re missing the point…’

‘You don’t call babies being abused grotesque then?’

‘Sure, when you analyse what you see, you might call it grotesque, but when you look at the whole picture what stands out is the wittiness. You might call a Tom and Jerry cartoon grotesque when the mouse hits the cat over the head with a giant sledgehammer but the idea is so absurd that you forget the violence and focus instead on the humour. Hogarth is like that…’

‘Except Hogarth did his drawings to push a political point. People were killing themselves and abusing their children because of Demon Gin. Tom and Jerry were designed to make children laugh - though, personally, I don’t see anything funny about animal violence ….(this last bit was said as more of a mutter since she really didn’t want to get onto the subject of cartoon cruelty with him just now as it would take up the rest of the day debating issues that they had been round and round and round before ad nauseum).

‘Hogarth was first and foremost a satirist – similar to Jonathan Swift. You can call Swift’s Gulliver’s Travels grotesque too if you want…’

‘You’re right, I wouldn’t hang his book in my kitchen…’
He could tell from her face, from the wrinkling of her brow, the drawing of her lips in a serpentine motion, the narrowing of her eyes into slits that appeared to him like armour worn by errant knights getting ready to launch themselves, however unwillingly, into deep and deadly battle, that, perhaps he should ease up on her a bit.

‘I promised you a coffee connection, didn’t I?’

‘That you did.’

‘Coffee and gin. They both had a strong connection with Holland. One directly, the other indirectly. But both those commodities came to represent the duality of the new economic order – coffee was the stuff that would lubricate the wheels of commerce; gin was the stuff that would mask the pain and suffering the new economic order revealed. Think about it. A generation before, nobody had heard of gin and few people in England had ever tasted coffee. Within a few decades of the Dutch invasion, coffee houses were everyplace and gin dens had become so ubiquitous that Hogarth was driven to use them as his metaphor of consummate evil…’

'And you're blaming all this on William of Orange, are you?'

'In a manner of speaking. But I wouldn't say "blame" was the operative word here. What do you know about gin, by the way?'

'I know I don't like it. I do know it came from Holland, originally…'

'Like a lot of things we now think are bad for us, gin was invented by a doctor as a tonic for treating kidney disease and gout…'

'I thought alcohol was bad for the kidneys,' she said.

'It wasn't alcohol that was seen as the therapeutic agent; it was the juniper berry that was brewed into the drink. Dutch gin, known as jenever, became exceedingly popular almost overnight. It was easy to distil and cheap to make. And when William of Orange came to the British throne, barrels of the stuff came with him. Gin became popular in England after the government allowed unlicensed gin production and at the same time imposed a prohibitive duty on all imported spirits…'

'I don't understand,' she said. 'What possibly could have been the incentive for unleashing that terrible plague? You know what gin was called back then? "Mother's Ruin!" And that's exactly what it was!'

He arched his eyebrow – the left one, not the right. The left one was reserved for when he questioned her judgment. The right one was arched when he questioned his own.

'"Mother's Ruin" was poverty,' he said. 'Nobody spoke of "Mother's Ruin" when gin became popular amongst the middle classes.' And without waiting for her to respond, he continued, 'But as to why the government unleashed this plague, they did it for the same reason that any government unleashes plagues – it made for good business. Gin could be distilled from poor-quality grain that was unfit for brewing beer. So the government encouraged the gin trade to help prop up grain prices, which, at the time, were very low indeed. So low, in fact, that it was causing a depression in the farming industry.'

'But there was another reason…' she said. 'Pacification of the lumpen mobs…'

'That was one side of the equation. But on the other side was the wheels of commerce – and you don't keep them turning with a sozzled workforce.'

'So that's where coffee comes in, does it? But how were the Dutch involved? Coffee was already in England by then…'

'It might have been here but it was hardly known. Coffee was popularised through the network of cafes and coffeehouses relating back to the development of the financial markets that were being perfected by the Dutch…'

She looked slightly disappointed. 'That's pretty vague stuff,' she said. 'I thought you promised me a coffee connection with Seven Dials. You've gone an awful long way just to leave me with a vague supposition….'

'Who said I was finished?' he told her brightly.

'Oh, God!' she muttered aloud and closed her pretty eyes.

'Hogarth, St. Giles …' He waved his hand in the direction of Bloomsbury and the steeple of St George. 'We're in the heart of Gin Lane right here, right now. Just a few decades after Neale's great urban development, the area quickly went down hill and soon became one of the worst slums in Europe. Here where we're standing was one pole in the continuum from drunkenness and despair to vigor and hopefulness. And Hogarth had a foot in both camps…'

'How so?'

'Through his father – a failed academic writer who ended up in debtor's prison and whose dream was to start…' His voice faded out as he tried to gaze into the distance through the London slime.

'… to start?' she prodded.

' To start a coffeehouse. For speakers of Latin…'

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