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Laurent Turcot, *Le Promeneur à Paris au XVIII^e siècle*, preface by Arlette Farge. (Paris: Collection Le Promeneur, Gallimard, 2007. 427 pp. Notes, figures. 26.50 € (pb). ISBN 2070783669.

Review by Thomas M. Lockett, Portland State University.

Paris, writes Edmund White, “is the great city of the *flâneur*—that aimless stroller who loses himself in the crowd, who has no destination and goes wherever caprice or curiosity directs his or her steps.”[1] Celebrated in the nineteenth century by Charles Baudelaire, the urban *promenade* remains a distinctively Parisian pass-time. Laurent Turcot’s *Le Promeneur à Paris au XVIII^e siècle* explores the origins of the *promenade* in Paris, as both an idea and an activity, from the reign of Louis XIV to the eve of the Revolution. Combining literary analysis with archival research, he has written a richly interdisciplinary study that draws together sociology, history of discourse, urban planning and criminology. Walking serves Turcot not simply as a fascinating topic in its own right, but as a lens through which to view larger trends in the cultural history of eighteenth-century France, including the rise of individualism.

Turcot summarizes the scope and purpose of his book in his conclusion when he writes:

La présente étude s’articule sur la définition et la transformation d’un rituel collectif de la promenade et l’affirmation progressive d’une forme de promenade individualisée qui se construit sur trois grands ensembles: l’aménagement de l’espace, les représentations sociales et culturelles et les pratiques de la promenade. (p. 412)

Somewhat confusingly, if the phrase after the colon is meant to describe the three large parts into which the book is divided, it lists them out of order. To the extent that he keeps them distinct, urban planning is actually the topic of part two, and cultural representations that of part three, while the evolution of the practice of strolling is more properly that of part one.

Indeed, part one (chapters one and two) argues a bold narrative thesis that to a great extent frames the rest of the book: having previously been understood almost entirely as a social activity, in the eighteenth century the *promenade* came to be medicalized as a healthful activity. A surprising number of advice-books were published in early modern Paris to explain to readers both how and why they ought to go walking. Examining this literature, Turcot finds that those of the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries present the walk as a polite and civil activity, an extension of the elaborate social etiquette that had developed in the salons and the royal court. Authors such as Jean Puget de La Serre, Charles Sorel, François de Grenaille and Antoine de Courtin wrote works explaining how to conduct oneself during a *promenade* so as to make a good impression. When you turn around at the end of a footpath, turn toward your companion, not away. At some point surprise your companion by saying goodbye and leaving, so as to affirm your independence. If strolling with a social superior, walk slightly behind him, not side-by-side. The *promenade de civilité* was peculiarly suited to strolling in a garden with well planned footpaths such as the Tuileries or the Cour-la-Reine rather than a busy street, and consequently influenced the development of the French garden.

Though they never entirely disappeared, publications on the *promenade de civilité* became rarer in the eighteenth century. Turcot attributes their decline in popularity to the influence of moralizing writers from Blaise Pascal to Jean-Jacques Rousseau who criticized *civilité* itself as something artificial and dishonest. Instead, the eighteenth century saw the rise of a new sort of advice-book that presented walking as healthful and enjoyable exercise. Medical writers like Andry de Boisregard, the chevalier de Londeau and Théodore Tronchin rejected the earlier emphasis on social distinction, arguing that persons of all social classes should benefit from regular walks. The anatomist Petrus Camper, inspired by a passage of Rousseau's *Discours sur l'origine et les fondements de l'inégalité parmi les hommes*, even criticized high-heeled shoes and proposed a new style of flat-soled footwear that would restore the natural function of the human foot. As the activity of strolling became democratized, it spilled beyond the confines of the landscaped garden into the streets and boulevards of the capital city.

Based mainly on sources in the French National Archives, part two (chapters three and four) examines the construction of Paris's first boulevards, designed both to ease traffic congestion and to provide Parisians with new places to walk. Beginning in the reign of Louis XIV, the demolition of Paris's ramparts freed up space to create a semi-circle of great thoroughfares along the city's northern perimeter from the Porte St-Antoine to the Porte St-Honoré. Bordered by footpaths and rows of trees to provide shade, boulevards integrated elements of the French garden into the urban landscape. They were socially transformative, with often unintended consequences. For wealthy burghers they became one of the most fashionable places in Paris to own a townhouse, but the proliferation of mansions with private carriage gates along the boulevards tended to defeat their intended purpose as an open and public space in which to enjoy a *promenade*. Eventually the construction of newer mansions even reduced the market value of the older ones.

Turcot documents in some detail the ongoing legal struggles between the crown and the property owners over control of the space bordering the boulevards, and devotes a separate chapter to the development of the Champs-Élysées, a vast new boulevard west of the Tuileries along which private constructions were not allowed to intrude. He also documents the growing problem of traffic accidents and petty criminality on the boulevards, and the response of the police. Within the city the Garde de Paris patrolled the boulevards, but on the Champs-Élysées that job fell to the Garde suisse. Here Turcot is able to draw a wealth of detail from the hundreds of weekly reports that Ferdinand de Federici, a sergeant in the Garde suisse, filed with his superior. They constitute a remarkable source that Turcot and Arlette Farge have edited as a separate volume.[2]

Part three (chapters five and six), based once again on printed sources, develops the last great theme of the book: by the second half of the eighteenth century the practice of the urban *promenade* became highly individualized. For Enlightenment writers, the purpose of strolling through Paris was less to make a good impression, or even to improve one's health, than to observe the city and its denizens, and each observer's experience was unique. In part this trend was an unintended consequence of the growing number of travel guides published for the use of tourists visiting Paris. To compete for readers, guide books had to be detailed and exhaustive. The *État ou Tableau de la ville de Paris* by Jèze and the *Almanach parisien en faveur des étrangers et des personnes curieuses* by Hébert and Alletz were eventually surpassed in 1779 when Hurtaut and Magny published in four volumes their *Dictionnaire historique de la ville de Paris et de ses environs*. Turcot argues that such encyclopedic travel guides invited readers to choose their own itinerary and discover the city for themselves. "L'évolution du genre même du guide de voyage favorise la promenade individualisée" (p. 277).

Turcot's final chapter focuses on three great texts by Enlightenment writers who spent much of their lives wandering, observing and describing the streets of prerevolutionary Paris: Siméon-Prosper Hardy, Nicolas-Edme Rétif de la Bretonne and Louis-Sébastien Mercier. All three texts are well known to historians of Paris. All three, moreover, though encyclopedic in their ambitions, present highly idiosyncratic accounts of the city based largely on the writer's personal experiences. *Mes Loisirs, ou*

Journal d'événements tels qu'ils parviennent à ma connaissance by the Parisian bookseller Hardy is a vast diary that fills eight folio volumes in the original manuscript, and that is only now being published in its unabridged form.[3] Covering the last quarter-century of the old regime, it details the daily social and political events of the capital, often from the point of view of the author who tells us what he saw in a given street at a given time. For Hardy, "La promenade est véritablement une méthode pour connaître l'espace et se l'approprier" (p. 353). Rétif de la Bretonne's *Nuits de Paris* is a much more fictionalized diary following the nightly adventures of its extraordinarily eccentric author as he roams Paris in search of material for his stories. Mercier's *Tableau de Paris* runs to twelve volumes containing over a thousand articles on a wide variety of Parisian sites and institutions, arranged without any obvious logic but apparently in the order he wrote them. Though not a diary, it too presents a highly individualized account of the city interwoven with the author's moral and political opinions. For both Mercier and Rétif, concludes Turcot, "le promeneur, plus qu'une figure littéraire, devient une figure sociale dont la fonction est de mettre au jour les mécanismes qui régissent la capitale" (p. 410).

Beginning as it does with the collectivized ritual of the *promenade de civilité* at the start of the eighteenth century, and closing with the eccentric *promeneur-observateur* of the 1780s, Turcot's *Le Promeneur à Paris* presents a grand narrative arc that leads from pre-modern communitarianism to modern individualism. As naturalists of the urban landscape, the great diarists of the late old regime had to separate themselves socially from the city in order to observe it. Turcot argues that they drew much of their inspiration from the later writings of Rousseau, including his *Rêveries du promeneur solitaire*, penned at a time when the author was increasingly paranoid and friendless. Rétif in particular, wandering the night in outlandish black costumes and frequently assaulted by Parisians who mistook him for a police spy, reminds us of the price that literary observers often paid. Recent scholarship demonstrates that even the bookseller Hardy had retired from selling books by at least 1770, thus distancing himself from the profession to which he was so proud to belong.[4] The isolation and sheer loneliness of the literary *promeneurs* of prerevolutionary Paris may help explain their dark, Baudelairian vision of a city filled with criminality, squalor and suicides.

NOTES

[1] Edmund White, *The Flâneur: A Stroll through the Paradoxes of Paris* (New York & London: Bloomsbury, 2001), p. 16.

[2] Ferdinand Federici, *Flagrants délits sur les Champs-Élysées: Les dossiers de police du gardien Federici, 1777-1791*, ed. Arlette Farge & Laurent Turcot ([Paris]: Mercure de France, 2008).

[3] Siméon-Prosper Hardy, *Mes Loisirs, ou Journal d'événements tels qu'ils parviennent à ma connaissance (1753-1789)*, vol. 1, ed. Daniel Roche & Pascal Bastien (Québec: Presses de l'Université Laval, 2008).

[4] *Ibid.*, pp. 10-14.

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