Night-walking, by Matthew Beaumont

(Verso, 2015)

Review by Pohanna Pyne Feinberg

Matthew Beaumont's fascinating synthesis of historical perceptions of night in London from the Middle Ages to the late nineteenth century exemplifies the potential of a cultural lens to illuminate the character of an epoch. Beginning when urban streets were barely lit by candle lanterns and extending to when gas lighting systems were introduced in 1822, Beaumont traces the perceptions of night in the writings of British authors such as William Shakespeare, John Dunton, William Wordsworth, William Blake, Charles Dickens, and others. Nightwalking shows how the complex cultural associations of darkness, the night, and nightwalking were shaped by social, political, and economic contexts.

Even today, strolling the streets at night in a manner that indicates a lack of distinct purpose can provoke attention as well as concern. As Beaumont explains, the origins of these contemporary judgments are intricately tied to historical religious beliefs, such as the claim that darkness represented a state of spiritual loss. From feudalism through to the introduction of capitalism, as Beaumont's research shows, nightwalking was considered a sign of idleness and an explicit threat to diurnal productivity. Although ostracized for their activity at night, men, women, and children who suffered from economic marginalization had little choice but to walk at night to seek shelter and try to avoid arrest. The legal codification of nightwalking during the Middle Ages onward effectively vilified the poor, the homeless, and sex-trade workers. Those caught on the streets after curfew in Medieval London were immediately suspected of being "disturbers of the peace"[1] or people of "ill condition."[2] The "curfew implemented a political economy,"[3] and people who walked at night were accused of interrupting and undermining it. As Beaumont elaborates, the nightwalker "represents an intrinsic challenge to the diurnal regime on which, from the end of the Middle Ages, Protestant ideology, and the political economy of capitalism partly depended. [...] Nightwalking has functioned historically as a refusal, conscious or unconscious, active or passive, of the physical and spiritual discipline imposed by feudal and capitalist societies."[4]

Interspersing citations from historical law codes and religious texts, Beaumont also draws from works of fiction to enliven and deepen his analysis and reveal the transition away from the overriding fear of darkness that pervaded during the Middle Ages towards a more nuanced understanding. For example, although nightwalking remained a symbol of the sinister in literature until the late eighteenth century, it also became fetishized, as the wealthy and literate class objectified and fictionalized the nocturnal activities of the poor in their texts. Romantic writers such as William Wordsworth and Thomas De Quincy advocated for their right to walk during the day and night as a way of connecting to nature. They took up walking by choice, rather than riding by coach, as a militant form of pedestrianism. Walking at night, even without

light to guide the path, thus served as a poetic and spiritual objection to the scientific rationalism of the Enlightenment:

> The ethics and politics of pedestrianism in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and in particular the Romantic walker's identification with the figure of the vagrant, play the crucial part in the ongoing history of nightwalking as a dissident activity. [...] The act of nightwalking, moreover, carved out dark spaces in the landscape, cityscape and psyche that promised an escape from the penetrating glare of the Enlightenment.[5]

The introduction of gas lighting in wealthier neighborhoods of London brightened the streets significantly and served the middle classes as they developed exclusive forms of nightlife. Strolling along boulevards after dark to observe shop windows and socialize became possible without being considered a suspicious activity. While this newfound night brightness was welcomed by some, the illumination of night also meant, in a psychic sense, that the mystery offered by darkness was seemingly cast aside. That said, Beaumont makes it clear that although participation in this legitimized nightlife was a pleasure for some of London's residents, "almost a century and a half after the introduction of public lighting in London, the moral equivalent of a curfew prevailed."[6] Only those who walked by choice and for pleasure, for social reasons or as a poetic gesture, escaped judgment.

I appreciate Beaumont's commitment to addressing the touristic and even voyeuristic distancing that economic privilege allowed for some of the authors he references, many of whom were educated and had easy access to means of survival. For example, the authors of the nocturnal picaresque, a genre derived from "noctuaries" during the late 1600s, exemplifies the ways in which authors catered to a bourgeois readership's fascination with the taboos of the night. These writers walked during the dark hours in order to document what they saw, sometimes using exaggerations that fictionalized nightlife as either tragic or comic, as celebratory or satanic.[7] Writers such as John Dunton and Ned Ward took advantage of this opportunity to profit from the fascination with the "dark intrigues of the town" that were then in vogue.[8]

Nightwalkers appear in some of Shakespeare's representations as "restless materializations of a dark absence,"[10] whereas during the late 1700s and 1800s, Romantic nightwalkers such as Wordsworth aspired to reinvent the self through a solitary ambulatory state of nocturnal freedom from the "corrosive demands of the diurnal city."[11] Although there were interpretive adaptions over time, walking at night was clearly never treated as benign. Conversely, the ability to write about the experience of walking at night was consistently an activity restricted to literate men. As Beaumont acknowledges repeatedly, the studied portrayals of nightwalkers offered by these authors often exposed their tendency to objectify the lives of the poor and express misogynistic opinions.

Furthermore, first-person accounts from homeless youth, women, and illiterate men are absent from the literature, and to a large extent even from the archives. While reading Nightwalking, the reader is left with a sense of longing to hear at least some of these voices—those who struggled to survive on the streets, those who were imprisoned, and those who were fetishized by this literature. Who were these many generations of homeless and marginalized? I want to hear from the women who worked on the streets and also the women who, despite the dangers, surely snuck out amidst the darkness to meet lovers or simply to find peace from a sleepless night. While each author cited in Nightwalking is compelling to read, the sensation left by the absent voices lingers. They become the silenced participants in a literary history that seems to explicitly embrace the drama of their lives, while concurrently contributing to their exclusion.

Throughout the book, the reader becomes absorbed by the impressively fluid dialogical interweaving of archival references

and citations from multiple sources, including more contemporary authors and philosophers such as Rebecca Solnit and Michel Foucault. Beaumont reveals the historically embedded nuances of nightwalking in a way that endows this extensive monograph with enriched momentum. The breadth of Beaumont's commitment to thoroughness and his passion for the topic is evident from the introduction to the last chapter, which seems to promise a continuation rather than a conclusion.

Since reading Nightwalking, its resonance has been affirmed by the many times I have been compelled to mention aspects of the book during informal conversations. It has also been on my mind while walking at night around the city, as my thoughts were repeatedly infused with allusions to the text. For example, as I strolled home a few weeks ago, I felt a sudden quiet come over me as I turned the corner and noticed the streetlights were out. The sense of calm and even relief was a reaction to the release from brightness. Dark spaces like these are rare in a city like Montreal, which invests a great deal of hydro power to maintain lit pedestrian pathways and streets. My initial reaction was then met with an accentuated spatial awareness. My ears seemed to extend and I looked around to observe the darker corners. We have become so accustomed to the availability of light at night that, as one friend recently commented, "it is now the bare minimum feminist right."[12]

As comforting as urban lighting can seem to abate potential dangers, there are also moments when the stars feel too obscured and we crave real darkness. As I walked and thought about safety, light pollution, and the significance of shadows at night, I noticed how the architectural forms on my block shapeshift when allowed to dwell in darkness. I became struck by the complex historical unfoldings that led to the introduction of urban lighting: legislation influenced by ethical and classist fervour, feudalist and capitalist labour imperatives, and the determination of industrial growth. All of these factors have contributed to and informed my current relationship to being a woman walking at night in an urban centre. It also occurred to me: If an energy crisis led to the loss of night light altogether, what would a city like Montreal become—or rather, revert to?

NOTES

1 Matthew Beaumont, Nightwalking (London: Verso, 2015), 33.
2 Ibid., 24.
3 Ibid., 25.
4 Ibid., 42.
5 Ibid., 228–229.
6 Ibid., 338.
7 Ibid., 142.
8 Ibid., 147.
9 Ibid., 138.
10 Ibid., 86.
11 Ibid., 329.
12 From a personal conversation with a friend on January 2015.