

Université de Montréal

**The Broken “I” : Fragmentation of Self and Otherness in Modern Urban
Narratives**

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Ce mémoire intitulé:

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Narratives**

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Résumé de synthèse

Ce mémoire mélange théorie et fiction pour explorer la technique narrative du “nous” performatif. Le premier chapitre démontre le rôle du discours dans le processus de formation d’identité, pour éventuellement démontrer que la nature performative du langage est responsable de la création des constructions sociales du soi et de l’autre. En étudiant les failles de ce système, cet essai tentera de créer une entité narrative libre de ces contraintes. Un second chapitre théorique, après des exemples de fiction, se penchera sur l’entité narrative du flâneur, qui à travers sa relation intime avec la cité, souligne une dichotomie présente dans la relation entre le soi et l’autre. Le flâneur émergera comme un site de traduction dans lequel le “nous” performatif peut prendre action. Toutefois, les limites du flâneur en tant qu’outil narratif l’empêchera d’être la représentation ultime de cette dichotomie. Après d’autres exemples de fiction, un troisième chapitre combinera ce qui aura été appris dans les chapitres précédents pour démontrer que le “nous” performatif et sa dissolution du “je” et du “tu” mène à une narration qui est responsable, consciente d’elle-même et représentative de la réalité urbaine moderne et ses effets sur la création de l’identité.

Mots clefs: performatif, identité, discours, soi, autre, narration, cité, flâneur

Abstract

This paper blends theoretical and creative writing in order to explore the narrative device of the performative “we”. The first chapter highlights the role of discourse in the process of identity formation and will move on to show how the performative role of language is used in the creation of social constructs such as the self and the other. Focusing on the limits of such a system, this paper attempts to create a narrative entity that is free of these boundaries. After some creative writing examples, a second theoretical chapter focuses on the in-depth study on the narrative entity of the flâneur, which, through its relationship with the city, highlights a complex dichotomy present in the relationship between the self and the other. The flâneur will emerge as a site of translation through which the performative “we” can begin to take action. However, the flâneur’s limits as a narrative device prevent it from being the definitive representation of this new relationship. After more creative writing examples, a third chapter combines what was learned from the previous chapters in order to demonstrate that the performative “we” and its dissolution of the “I” and the “you” leads to a narrative that is responsible, self-aware, and highly representative of modern urban reality and its effects on the creation of identity.

Keywords: performative, identity, discourse, self, other, narration, city, flâneur

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I. CREATIVE WRITING INTRODUCTION

Stardust Panic and Stories of Forgetting

1. the street

or

The Trials and Tribulations of Adam N., Poet Extraordinaire: a Soliloquy

Alright now come on Adam you can do it this is easy this is what you trained for - moments like these make up the fibre of a young man's life barely enough room for a pause let alone a car, hold the steering wheel foot on the pedal why is it you're always late bad idea leaving home in this condition should've lied on the couch and watched TV maybe sitcoms.

Grab the stick shift to reverse wait, first you need to make sure you're well aligned... great, shift, look in the rear view mirror coast is clear no sign of life nobody up at this hour anyway just cats roaming the streets making the law.

This is a tricky situation, Adam N., this would've been easier without the knife heating over the stove, hot kiss of black resin into the plastic bottle, forced friendships in a stale kitchen, fake connections between your eyes and the stiff glowing metal red and panicked in your hands.

Focus!

Put in reverse no room at all you shouldn't even have come, release the pedal now edging in slightly, snow kissing the windshield unique and crystallized then homogeneously spread by the determined worker ant wipers. What street is this anyway are you even allowed to park here wait there's a sign it says no animals allowed on the grass.

Get in line between the Civic and the Mustang asphalt spread all over the suburbs nobody sees earth anymore it's all parking lots covering underground rivers of human waste

don't be so dramatic, she's waiting for you get your shit together stop worrying about the terror of crossing for an instant your own gaze in the rear view mirror.

You momentarily recall the absent resolve with which you held the telephone in your right hand, shiny beige plastic voice saying come tonight everyone's gonna be there you should, oh yeah all things considered I know that's what you, ok see you later.

Everybody's always there it's always you trying to park your car, Adam N., it's always them waiting for you it's you with your foot on the pedal letting your mind wander over the scent of their conversations is this even the right house you never did like maps perhaps it's all those lines and fixed destinies perhaps it's your disbelief that north is up and south is down that never really sounded right anyway.

Bury it for the moment keep your mind on the mission hold your course steady in reverse, no need to rush it just hold the steering wheel and fight the good fight there you go.

This looks familiar bricked boxes all side by side like your nightmares trying to run from some nameless horror jumping fences into alien backyards over other fences into other backyards never any end to it till you wake up clutching the alarm clock like a knife.

Breathe.

Never should have driven in this condition.

The bus was no real alternative, sitting there locked to your iPod stealing pieces of foreign conversations in unfamiliar languages, reality show revelations in the seat next to yours when the fuck can I get out please ring the bell.

Breathe!

Hold the steering wheel. Turn. Go slow. Switch to drive. Align. Adjust. Switch to park.

Turn it off.

You've done it Adam N., the world is safe for now.

2. the living-room

or

The Counting Song

Moonlight slants in sideways through the windows, twisted beams of light caressing their faces like the final note of an autumn tune whistled carelessly among the skeletal remains of last year's trees.

Frankie picks up his guitar, lets his fingers taste for an instant the promise of string.

This night needs a soundtrack, he says, a song that will start out fast and angry and real and finish curled up in its own shadow in the corner of some room we'll forget about.

But for now this song needs to soar in the way that all things soar when they're born from the bottom of a shot glass, in the way Frankie once ran through St-Denis on an amphetamine-fuelled rush counting cars with the dread that he might never fall asleep again, one two three four five six running fucking angry fast seven eight jesus how many lights in this town nine ten eleven not hungry anymore twelve need to stop need to thirteen fourteen breath like steam sick funny what the fifteen sixteen I think I know that guy seventeen where is eighteen nineteen never gonna reach twenty.

Frankie's fingers hesitate. If this was his last song, would he still play it that way?

He feels around his jacket, finds only his keys, a pack of cards and his just-in-case condom.

"Have you guys seen my pick?"

"No," Maddy answers through her eyelashes, sipping her Sex on the Beach.

Louis next to her, lining up the shots. "Three each, see."

Danny looks up from rolling. "I told you, I'm not drinking fucking shots. Last time I..."

"Yeah no come on" "Last time you made me drink sambucca I woke up naked in my parents' bathtub." "Stop being a dick. You me Maddy Frankie three shots each now!"

"No, I," he licks the paper, "I... no!"

"Have you guys seen my pick?"

“You guys better drink with me. Stop being pussies, man. I don’t wanna drink alone.”

Louis the guilt trip drunk. Louis the sambucca communist, the shot glass socialite. Be my friend, don’t leave me, drink this, did you hear about Felix and Mel, yeah I know here drink this, my classes fucking suck this semester yeah you’re telling me, drink this, do you remember that night at karaoke when you sang that Grease duet all on your own, I love you man fucking drink it!

Maddy with the slow thoughtful drag of her cigarette, Danny sitting on the floor crafting a roach from a class reader’s cover page (“Sociology of Art”) going yeah haha yeah.

Frankie, distraught, looking for his pick.

3. the kitchen

or

Intermission

Heart beating too fast god dammit that’s how it starts.

Breathe. Have a smoke. Get your bearings.

I’m in a party. OK. Here’s me sitting on the couch. OK.

Felix is speaking of solitude. He’s in the middle of a story.

“The smell,” he says. “That’s what kept haunting me, long after she’d been gone. The ineffable distant fucking smell of her, seared into my bed sheets, my hair. Always a trace of her in the most inopportune moments possible. Food poisoning at three am, me bent over the toilet, vomiting. All around, can’t escape the smell of her in the deep darkness of the plumbing. Can’t stop retching. Bad timing, I guess.”

“What?”

Breathe. Have a drink. Focus.

“Screw it,” says someone. “Everyone leaves eventually right.”

“Nobody’s ever really gone,” he says. “That’s the true shitty horror of it.”

Get off this couch. Escape while you still can.

“I’m gonna get a beer.”

From here to the kitchen, passageways, sound.

Walking. Up the stairs. Through a hallway. Open fridge. Get beer.

“Hey Adam, question for you.” Jim leaning on the counter.

Max with a bottle opener in his hands. “We need an objective opinion.”

“Yeah ok.”

“Would you say a smurf opener or a bottle smurfer?”

“Smurf opener.”

“I told you!”

Jim shaking his head. “Depends if you’re talking about a northern Smurf or a southern Smurf. Different dialects.”

Can’t join this conversation. It’s too late for them now. Kitchen table, another crowd.

Need to get out. Need a smoke. Hallways. Lights.

“Adam.” Maddy.

“Hey.”

“Always in a hurry. Gonna run off without saying hello?”

“Hello.”

“Asshole. Glad you came.”

“I’m going out for a smoke. Can’t handle this right now.”

She laughs. “Hey don’t worry, we’re all stardust, right?”

What?

4. the basement

or

Against the Wall

The candle heeds their psilocybin dreams, unearthing their elemental conceptions of time with tears of wax on their flesh. Sharp clarity for an instant, feverish lucidity, then a lukewarm drop of hardening memory on their skin.

Shadows flicker, mad grins from the twisted trio sitting around the glass table, preaching to an absent choir. Matt with his antichrist haircut. Louis with his naive ideology. Danny with an incomplete pack of cards, shuffling compulsively. Then, always, someone saying “Let’s put on Pink Floyd!”

5. outside

or

Snow Falls Quietly Over the Street

Maddy takes a long drag of her menthol cigarette as Adam breathes warmth into his hands. He stuffs them in his coat pockets, oblivious to the guitar pick that scrapes against his numb and frozen fingers.

“I need smoking gloves,” he says.

“Yeah.”

Out of the black sky, snow falls quietly over the street.

“It’s cold.”

“You wanna go back in?”

“No,” he says. “If it’s all the same I...”

“It is. All of it. Stardust.”

“What?”

“Just something I picked up on Discovery. Don’t worry so much. So... shall we?”

II. THEORETICAL EXPOSITION

You and I: Performative Subjects in Literary Discourse

Although this study will eventually lean towards narrative devices through which identity dialectics are revealed, we will first have to establish a certain theoretical baggage upon which our theory can rely. This chapter will explore the identity-forming nature of discourse and its link to the creation of definitions of the self. This will begin with enquiries on the performative nature of language and its various implications, how that relates to the relationship between the “I” and the “you.”

Identity will emerge as a construct that evolves from the self’s meeting with the other and the resulting echo that ensues. From this meeting, however, will surface certain limits and flaws. From those flaws will arise a need for a narrative entity that will have, at its core, the representation of these problems. As this is a personal project that requires creative writing working in parallel, however, a bit of personal history is in order.

When I was a strapping young lad of three, during the early part of the eighties, my father’s job took my family and me around the world. Computers were part of a new burgeoning and already thriving industry, and my father, being in computers, was not lacking for work. We lived three years in Saudi Arabia, in a military compound situated in the center of the capital of Riyadh, in which exotic proceedings alien to my North-American mind (such as public beheadings) regularly took place. It should be noted that my birthplace of Quebec, Canada, is not known for such practices, although nowadays similar sights are easily accessible to today’s youth through a few quick clicks of a mouse. Whenever a Westerner, through morbid curiosity or

shameless voyeurism, would attend such an event, my father told me that the Arab organizers would shove them to the front in order to give them a better view. This was done out of pride for the proceedings, I guess, either to show foreigners the gaping void of the differences that stood between them or simply out of a misplaced sense of justice. Regardless, my father knew better and never attended any of these public executions, but he often told me how it seemed to change those who bore witness to them (rolling heads on dry Riyadh afternoons tend to have that effect on people). This sense of us/them prevailed in many aspects of our daily lives, personified by a large wall surrounding the compound, patrolled day and night by armed soldiers. Outside this island of safety waited the desert and its unknown cities.

We moved around a lot after Saudi Arabia. We spent some time in Thailand, then in Australia. Everywhere we went, I was struck by the sheer amount of differences between peoples. In Saudi, the Bedouin preparing a mechoui out in the desert, reserving the lamb's eyes for the most venerable of them, was light-years away from my experiences of heating up pocket pizzas in the microwave. In Thailand, for entertainment not Saturday morning cartoons, but a parade of elephants, dancers with long metal fingernails, or a fight between a mongoose and a cobra (not to the death, obviously, at least not for the tourists). As a child, I would adapt easily to whatever the situation required of me. I would change my accent if need be, pick my conversations carefully, and in effect construct my identity depending on the circumstances. When we returned home years later, I had to adapt in order to become a real Québécois boy. I changed my accent again, and faked it until I finally did become a "Québécois" again.

Twenty years later, the eighties are long gone and the walls which protected our little island of safety are impregnated by hyper-consumerism, reality show revelations, and the diffusion of the self by a climaxing industry of informational technologies. Long gone are the

days when young men were born to a life of blacksmithing, following in the footsteps of their fathers, their grandfathers, their great-grandfathers and so on and so forth. Then, identity was fashioned out of economical circumstances and social standing, a kind of heritage one aspired to, a mantle passed on through the generations. Obviously, individual identity was more than the simple label of blacksmith, glass-blower or town beggar, yet the privilege of spending one's days wondering "Who am I?" was not exactly a luxury of feudal laborers. Nowadays there are more choices, more decisions, and ultimately more stagnancy as the city dissolves into the global, the self into the many. As a young, middle-class, white male of relatively privileged means, my position in debates of identity is precarious at best. Various experiences, however, have led me to question the modern processes through which identity is created, shifted, and inevitably altered.

How is modern identity fragmented and ultimately diffused? Popular culture certainly has a role in the process, with its near-infinite signals leading in so many different directions that one cannot spend more than a moment in a single thought before being thrown to the next idea, yet this outside source is an influence rather than a seat of formation. Where does it begin, then, this breaking of the self? Judith Butler, who has written on the performativity of gender formation, is an interesting starting point as it gives us a certain accountability for our own actions. We should begin, however, by defining what precisely is meant by performativity in order to see if we can apply Butler's definition of gender to all aspects of the self.

In thinking of the performative, we cannot look at Butler without first going to J.L. Austin, whose "Performative Utterances" is a standard reference on the subject. Since I will eventually argue that identity is formed primarily through discourse, Austin's writings are relevant through the ways in which they establish performativity as, at its core, a function of language. In his article, Austin isolates a certain structure within discourse which is about "*doing*

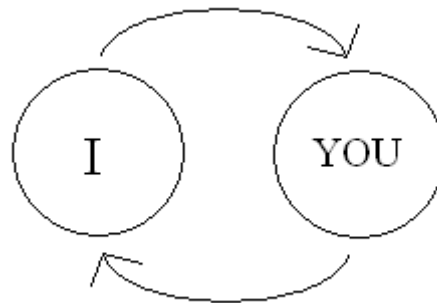
something rather than merely *saying* something” (1432). In essence, a performative utterance is one which does not function as the communication of one idea or another. Rather, a performative is a phrase that accomplishes a specific action. Austin gives us the example of weddings in which the participants, hopefully both of them, will say “I do” in order to confirm the proceedings. In saying those two words, the people involved are not communicating ideas but are, in effect, enacting a contract of sorts. Austin gives us other examples, such as saying “I name this ship...” before wasting a perfectly good bottle of champagne on the ship’s bow. The ship’s naming is not accomplished through the bottle-smashing, but, effectively, through the performative utterance itself. This is fairly straightforward, yet an important characteristic of such utterances is that they “[draw] attention in some way... to some important feature of the circumstances in which the utterance [is] made” (1431). This is where it gets interesting for the question of identity formation and eventual fragmentation. The performative phrase is not *just* about accomplishing a specific action such as getting married, naming a ship, apologizing to someone, et caetera. Rather, what is interesting is that it establishes a certain structure based on the circumstances in which the speaker addresses whomever is concerned. Most of these utterances, for example, begin with the “I,” identifying the speaker. More than a mere pronoun, this “I” establishes who is performing the action through discourse. More often than not, what follows is some outside entity with which the “I” interacts. When saying “I name this ship...” a speaker will establish the basic structure of self (“I”), other (the ship) and the relationship between these two entities (the act of naming). In other words, the performative utterance serves a double function. It accomplishes a certain action, but more importantly, it sets up a structure in which the “I” interacts with an “other”, where the subject is opposed to object. In other words, it sets up a crucial aspect of identity formation, the difference between the “I” and the “you”.

This is where we can finally turn to Butler. Austin's examples, which he refers to himself as "decidedly dull," (1432) are a simple starting point from which we can establish the relationship between self and other. For now, let us examine Butler's argument that sex and gender are "citational repetitions" (2486). Butler's work focuses on trying to demonstrate that gender and the behaviors associated to it are not inherent qualities found within men and women. Rather, gender is a construction imprinted on individuals by popular culture and social traditions from the moment of their birth. In other words, there is no instinctual drive which pushes little boys to dress in blue and play with trucks, and little girls to play with dolls and dress in pink. She links Austin's idea of the performative to a kind of social action, a pressure which, for example, could be reduced to sentences such as "boys play with trucks". The same structure is established: self (boy), other (girls) and the relationship between them (in this case, the exclusivity of trucks, much to the dismay of little girls everywhere). This is where the idea of repetition becomes crucial. The example, if spoken once, has little power. If it is repeated by an entire society over and over again, however, it begins to carry more weight. Butler does not restrict this theory to gender, but also to sexual orientation. Heterosexuality, she argues, is just another social construction, a set of behaviors imprinted by recurring pressures and influences.

Could we say, then, that *all* facets of one's personality are constructed socially through one's encounter with performatives? This is, in a way, the basis for existentialist philosophy, which argues that identity is entirely constructed through one's relationship with others. This is a rather vast subject to explore and, being a student of literature, I am more interested in arguing how this process takes place in the space of literary discourse. In other words, what is the performativity of narrative structures, its role in identity formation? This is yet another vast subject, so I would like to focus on a specific device: the literary "I". By this, I do not necessarily

mean the “I” as a first person narrator (although we will get to that later), but rather, the speaking subject who is created through writing, that nebulous construction found in-between the narrator and the author.

Outside literature, in the day-to-day operations of our lives, the “I” is the function of discourse through which we establish the self. Through its citational repetition, one ascertains the parameters of one’s personality. When someone says, for example, “I like cake,” information is added to the registers of their identity, in this case certain culinary predilections. This kind of declarative sentence is more often than not told to someone else who then integrates the information into the registers of their definition of the speaker. This basic relationship could be illustrated this way:

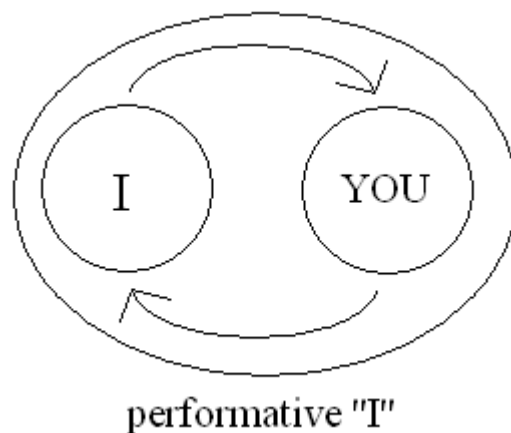


In this simple diagram, the self interacts with the other through an exchange in discourse. The relevance of this for our current search is the way in which the “I” and the “you” are rigid constructions with specific boundaries, represented here by circles. These circles, in this example, are filled only with pronouns. However, one could fit the registers of the self within those delimited zones. This is the simplest way of illustrating the relationship between the self and the other. How are these boundaries established, however? Through the citational repetition

of the performative “I”. What I mean to say is that the “I,” in its day-to-day use and repetition, builds the basic structure of self and other. The mere fact of saying “I” is a performative in itself, as it constructs the foundations for identity formation. In other words, it draws the circles which cage self and other and keep them apart.

We can transpose this model to literature and study the ways in which the performative “I” operates in the construction of identity. Any act of writing, after all, is an act of communication between a self and an other (or usually, many others). Even though a novel may focus on different characters, switch points of view, or explore different opinions, it is at its base the discourse of a single author. In *Narcissistic Narrative*, Linda Hutcheon claims that “narcissism can be argued to be, not an aberration, but the ‘original condition’ of the novel as a genre” (8). In other words, the real focus is on the self, whether the narrator is first person or not.

However, to be fair to the novel, it is often concerned with the various ways in which individuals engage each other. The entire process of self and other is often integrated within the novel itself. The idea of the performative “I” in literature, then, is not necessarily one that defines the registers of the self, but rather contextualizes that self in relation to the other. In other words:



The novel acts as this new circle which incorporates different selves, who in turn interact with each other within the universe of the narrative. For example, in Samuel Beckett's landmark play *Waiting for Godot*, the entire narrative focuses on the relationship between two characters, Vladimir and Estragon. The theme of the play is not who either of them are, but rather the emptiness which hovers between them, permeating their dialogue. Any act of story-telling, in fact, focuses on the relationship between different selves and the ways in which they interact with one another. However, as mentioned previously, behind the narrative is the story-teller. Behind the seemingly objective relationship of selves, there is a performative "I".

There is an obvious danger to such a structure, which is its subversive, inherent subjectivity. Behind the system of relations produced within the narrative lies a greater "I" not easily discernible within the story-telling: the discourse of the author. Behind Vladimir and Estragon's relationship lie Beckett's existential beliefs. We could return here to Butler who criticized certain forms of feminism that, she claimed, create "exclusionary gender forms" (2485). In other words, in exploring the relativity of gender construction and sexual norm, there is the danger of fashioning what was originally dismantled: rigid boundaries which trap individuals in a vicious cycle of repetitive behavior. In defining the sum of human relations, one creates a new absolute against which identity must either struggle or conform.

For Butler, the performative thus offers "a model of action within theories that often seem to allow subjects no room for resistance to power" (2486). In defining a certain struggle and isolating its participants within a bound structure, narratives become performatives that allow individuals little room to redefine such a struggle. Some feminist novels, for example, define women's battle for selfhood in a way that is so restrictive that it becomes a new system in

which women become prisoners. To put it in even simpler terms, such discourses argue against the claim that “women should be this way” by shouting “no, women should be *that way*”.

This is applicable not only to feminist theory but to all aspects of identity formation. As Butler believes, “identity is a trap, a hardening into rigid, binarized categories of much more fluid and heterogeneous possibilities” (2486). The limit of the literary “I” is the way in which it defines human relations in a subjective manner, which creates a binary to which the reader must inevitably acquiesce. The writer is like a journalist who, unable to escape the limits of self, struggles to communicate a certain truth which escapes his understanding. The danger for the reader is in believing that this truth is appropriately defined in the narrative. Minority writing, for example, is often stuck with the conundrum of representing the struggles of certain groups without resorting to the stiff categorization that oppressed them in the first place. For example, post-colonial writings strive to dismantle the power structure between self (the colonially oppressed) and other (the imperial oppressor). However, more often than not, they end up keeping the structure, only to change the definitions of each entity or to re-allocate power by defining the self as the victim clamoring for rights and the other as the victimizer deserving punishment. This ends up creating the very circles we were criticizing earlier for the ways in which they isolate the “I” from the “you”. Avoiding the rigid binaries of which Judith Butler speaks depends upon realizing that the self and the other are merely mirror reflections of one another. As Nietzsche puts it in *Thus Spake Zarathustra*:

The voice of the herd will still echo in thee. And when thou sayest, ‘I have no longer a conscience in common with you,’ then will it be a plaint and a pain. Lo, that pain itself

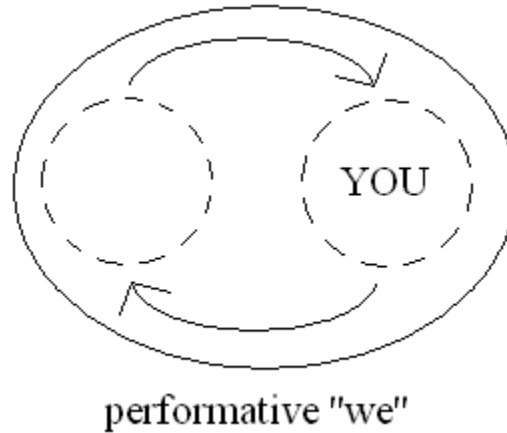
did the same conscience produce; and the last gleam of that conscience still gloweth on thine affliction. (77)

Although characteristically cryptic, what Nietzsche points at is the fact that the “I” and the “you” are not isolated from one another. Instead of two entities clashing against each other in a struggle for power, the self and the other are echoes for one another. He argues against the performative “I” which is found within narratives. The formation of identity, in other words, is not found within the registers of the self, but in the other. As Zarathustra expresses in Nietzsche’s narrative when he addresses the Sun: “Thou great star! What would be thy happiness if thou hadst not those for whom thou shinest?” (25).

We have suggested some of the limitations of the performative subject within literary discourse. Obviously, some narratives require such subjects in order to adequately communicate the essence of their struggle. Certain positions, for example those that demand concrete political changes, need a structure in which the boundaries are clear. It would be presumptuous and somewhat naïve to completely invalidate this structure. It is important, however, to theorize what an alternative structure might be in order for certain narratives to communicate the very conundrum that the performative subject presents. In other words, we need to define what kind of narrative would be apt to express not the structure of human relations, but rather to expose Butler’s “fluid and heterogeneous possibilities” of the subject (2486). A later chapter of this paper will delve into the construct of the flâneur as a potential outlet for this discourse, but for now further exploration of the performative structure is required.

We should first return to Austin who, in theorizing the performative, warned that “one thing we must not suppose is that what is needed in addition to the saying of the words... is the

performance of some internal spiritual act, of which the words then are the report” (1432). Just as the performative sentence’s agency lies in the uttering of the words rather than in some internal function of the mind, so does the performative “I” only achieve meaning through its enunciation. It constructs identity right on the spot, through its direct contact with the other rather than some innate, pre-existing notion of the subject. To introduce a non-performative subject into a narrative is complex because, as explained by Richard Watts in *Packaging Post/Coloniality*, paraphrasing Foucault, “the beginning, one’s entry into discourse, is always governed by ‘the institution’” (2). What is meant here by institution is “the diffuse network that enforces the cultural traditions of those who have the desire and the means to enforce them” (2). This network is precisely the structure created by the performative subject within literary discourse, the very structure we have been criticizing for its role in propagating the boundaries that restrict the “I” and the “you”. The solution, then, is to have a subject who is ungoverned by the institution. The only feasible way to accomplish this is to have an “I” who is self-effacing, in a constant process of forgetting itself. When the performative “I” vanishes, all that remains is the other, the “you”, and all the processes surrounding it which are at the core of identity formation. What we have then, in effect, is a performative “we”. We could rely on one last illustration in order to define this concept:



In this instance, since the boundaries of the “I” are effaced, so are the ones surrounding the other. What remains is a pure system of relations which highlights the process rather than the product. This opens up the narrative and, hopefully, leaves room for Butler’s fluid possibilities. There can still be boundaries surrounding the subject, but these are not so rigid as to restrict it to a state of stagnation. This would also coincide with Butler’s proposal for a narrative that “[makes] evident identity’s construction” (2487). Through opening up the “I” and allowing it to include both self and other, the processes of identity are not only dissected, but re-deployed in the creation of a performative “we”.

We are, however, starting to fall into the realm of over-abstraction. Diagrams are all well and good, but when it comes down to it, can we apply this theory in any concrete manner? What is at stake in literature and narrativity if we attempt to apply this schematic to the organization of language and story-telling? How, in other words, can we locate the space of the performative “we”? How can one write from within a place Foucault defines as “the other side of discourse”(2)? I cannot presume to know all of the different ways in which this can be accomplished. However, I can try to theorize one of these ways by focusing on a very specific literary device: the narrator.

After all, one of the biggest problems we encountered with the performative “I” was the fact that it took place within an individual discourse. Even though we are striving for a literary “I” who is self-effacing and practically absent, we still need to root it within the author’s discourse. Ironically, first-person narrators are ideal for this situation, if only for the basic fact that in first-person narratives, “narrator and subject are identical” (Riggan, 23). In stories that use the third-person, the characters are objects which need to be defined. Their boundaries need to be established. With a first-person narrator, “the telling as well as the tale reveals to us the character of our narrator” (Riggan, 24). In other words, what emerges within the story will not necessarily be the events that surround the subject, but rather the ways in which that subject will communicate those events with others; process over product. The act of narration itself will take precedence over what is being narrated. In this way, the first-person narrator can remain relatively anonymous and come to embody a subject who leans more towards universality. I say “lean” here because universality, like objectivity, is out of discourse’s reach; yet I still claim, perhaps naively, that it should be reached for. Let us say, then, that the first-person narrator has ironically more chance of embodying the performative “we” and creating the kind of literature John Updike describes as displaying “the energies of people and the kinds of ways they encounter each other” (81). The creative writing sections of this paper attempt to create such narrative entities.

At this point, I feel that I need to comment on the privilege of the performative “we”. I was somewhat critical earlier of postcolonial writing, among others, for the ways in which it propagates a structure of difference. I conceded that this structure is sometimes necessary for certain struggles, but I have yet to define the struggle for which the performative “we” could be potentially useful. I have presented this ideal as if it should be the aim of all literature, but I

failed to point out that it is, in fact, a symptom of modern urban reality, which will become our focus in a later chapter, during our close study of the flâneur entity. Earlier, I wrote broadly about the evolution of identity formation and the ways in which the modern man now has the luxury of asking himself all sorts of questions regarding definitions of the self. Now that we no longer need to focus all of our attention on survival, we can spend our time writing abstractly about the ways in which we come to know ourselves. However, as Updike puts it, “with the lifting of this grinding pressure has fled a certain dignity of vocation” (101). The privilege of the performative “we” is symptomatic of a particular class during a particular time. John Dos Passos commented on this new generation of writers, starting from the 1970’s, and characterized their writing as “a tantrum of spoiled children who really have had too much done for them” (32). Updike characterizes it differently, commenting on the modern writer’s dilemma in the face of “dreadful freedom,” of having simply too many possibilities in front of oneself (101). It is a consequence, as he puts it, of having to live in the seemingly aimless “drift of modern life” (102). In other words, the struggle for the performative “we” is a luxury of the privileged who do not need to fight for survival or for the acknowledgement and respect of their existence by the hegemonies in place. The performative “we” is a struggle for those who do not need to fight for what is inside the registers of the self, but rather need to oppose the structures which binarize, solidify, and eventually diffuse the self into the vast, ever-consuming globalized city. It should thus be made clear that I am not theorizing an absolute, but merely an alternative to what is accomplished by most literatures.

That being said, we can finally focus on specific ways in which a writer can hope to construct the performative “we”. First of all, the thematic structure of the novel, or the story, should mirror the process itself. As mentioned previously, the narration should focus on the

process of effacement which the “I” is undergoing. This passage by Nietzsche gives us a good idea of how this can be accomplished structurally:

Man is a rope stretched between the animal and the Superman – a rope over an abyss. A dangerous crossing, a dangerous wayfaring, a dangerous looking-back, a dangerous trembling and halting. What is great in man is that he is a bridge and not a goal: what is lovable in man is that he is an over-going and a down-going. (29-30)

The narrator should thus be in a constant state of in-between, thus avoiding absolutes which might create unwanted boundaries. There is no “goal” to speak of, since the focus should be on the process of narration itself rather than the narrator. There is an inherent problem with this, however, since it can lead to a stance that is perhaps too passive, but we will explore this in depth in the next chapter.

Another technique is to play with time and space in order to dislocate the “I” completely. In *Narrative Perspective in Fiction*, Daniel Frank Chamberlain claims that “[n]arrative perspective, like perception, brings time and space together in a transitional dimension that is the imaginary world of the text” (137). Obviously, what interests us here is the word “transitional” and the ways in which time and space themselves are, like the narrator, in a state of flux. Spatial and temporal disjunctions are most welcome since, as Genette has said, “the distance between episodes and narrating locations ‘lies neither in time nor in space’ but in a difference of relations” (Chamberlain, 84). By avoiding absolutes within the contextualization of the subject, we are able to create an “I” that is nowhere and everywhere all at once.

As to the kinds of characters that are best suited to be subjects of the performative “we,” it is better if the narrator is not fully defined. Certain archetypes lend themselves well to these types of narration, however, such as the child, the wise fool, or as we will see in the second theoretical chapter, the flâneur. The child, in a very Nietzschean manner, is the state that follows self-effacement. It is a stage of rediscovery and redefinition. The childish narrator is one who comes with no preconceived notions of anything. What is consequently highlighted are the processes of his learning, usually through his encounters with the other. The fool functions on a similar level, since a confused narrator forces the reader “to share the narrator’s quandary or find his own path out of the narrator’s dilemma...” (Riggan, 30). As for the flâneur, he is an observer without intent, embodying the dialectics of identity without attempting to fashion the confining structures that are problematic to the performative “we”.

These are but several of the ways in which the performative “we” can be attempted in literary discourse. The important thing to remember is that the struggle for the dissolution of the boundaries of identity is one that can exist only in relation to the processes of identity formation. In other words, the performative “we” cannot exist without the performative “I” it is struggling against; perhaps that is its tragic flaw. Like the postcolonial writing that was critiqued for its propagation of duality, both attempt to demonstrate that “the novel is a bourgeois capitalistic narrative genre” (Hutcheon, 9). In disrupting the ways in which this genre pits the “I” against the “you,” the performative “we” hopes to establish a structure that will bring down the walls of literary discourse patrolled by the armed soldiers of social institutions. It could also be argued that this attempt is merely the product of a bored, privileged generation, but we will come to this soon.

The creative writing section that follows will attempt to stage a narrative in which the “I” and the “you” develop the kind of structure that we have been exploring in this paper so far. It is a continuation of the first story used as a preface to this work.

After getting our feet wet with some creative writing examples, we will be in a better position to focus in on a specific device through which the performative “we” can hopefully blossom. The literary construction known as the flâneur will be the focal point of this investigation, as his stance is one that sees but does not judge, a product of the modern age and, in its more recent iterations, an offspring of the globalized city.

It is through this study of the flâneur that we will eventually be able to see how the city affects the structure of identity dynamics that we have constructed in this first chapter, the final piece of the puzzle that will hopefully clarify how the performative “we” can work as a narrative device.

III. CREATIVE WRITING EXAMPLE

Through a Glass Darkly

1. a painting

He stepped through the mirror darkly, and none followed him.

It was after she'd asked him that ridiculously numb favour. Come to my house, she said, and then just...

This isn't a love story. This isn't even a story.

This is just this, Adam and Maddy sitting at a table, she with a cigarette in hand, he twirling an empty shot glass between his fingers.

He knows she does this thing sometimes where she sits across the table holding her cigarette like a black and white movie star with eyes that burn through his celluloid dreams. And when she takes a drag he can feel her sucking his strength away as if all that he is could be found at the tip of her fingers, burning away into colourless ash.

And when her careful finger taps lightly at the butt, he crumbles away into a pile of other men's dreams. He can see those men clawing out from the ashtray, desperately reaching for the gaze which turned them into ghosts.

Sometimes she flashes him a grin while she does that. He's never blamed her for it.

And silence cuts them both, deeply, the slight whisper of a ripple disturbing the shallow pools of their longing for one another.

But this isn't a love story.

This is it, she says. This is our moment. This is our painting.

This pause, this doubt, this reckoning of our solitudes.

Adam, she begs, please rape me, softly.

What the fuck, Maddy. What the fuck.

Please, Adam, I just can't... I can't anymore... I just... I don't know... I can't stand this fucking stillness anymore. This cigarette, this shot glass, this fucking table, you and me, me and you, it's always the same, it's always the same and I need... no words, not anymore, just... forget about it...

This isn't even a story.

They were going up a mountain on a ski lift once, him and her. She with a powder white suit and he with an old raggedy coat that had a larger reputation than himself. The pockets always mysteriously carried everybody else's lighters, they said.

He handed her a blue one which he had stolen from... was it Frankie?

She lit her cigarette and when she spoke he wasn't sure if it was smoke or merely her breath frosting the air before her.

She said this is it.

This is our moment.

This wind, this cigarette, these promises of snow.

The lights were enraged that night, desperate flickers of neon and darkness. He wanted to tell Maddy that she should never give up, that she should be strong, and other such platitudes that always failed to stir anyone.

He had no words for her though, only a ludicrous promise of pain, of undiluted feeling.

The entire City was moving around them, their quiet little table in the middle of the storm, Maddy with her cigarette, softly saying please rape me, please break me, please.

Adam, twirling a shot glass between his fingers, wondering about the children they both used to be.

They had never been lovers although once they had broken the library's silence with a kiss during a time when there were still many words in their hearts and they believed in all of them.

They were younger than they are today. Maddy's hair was shoulder-length. Adam's shoes were smaller.

They played hide and seek in-between the aisles and the frowning shushing people who were being very serious and quiet.

Their game had been going on for almost ten years, although now the entire City was their playground. Adam hiding from Maddy. Maddy hiding from Adam.

SHHHHHH!!!

Adam finds Maddy in the library. There's a book in her lap as she flips through the pages, looking for something. Adam sits down next to her. Maddy's hair smells like...

Look she says, look.

Her playful finger points to a picture on a page. A woman embracing a man. Darkness.

This is our painting, she teases.

Adam looks and feels an ineffable part of his thoughts flow into a future in which he is no longer a boy but a man facing an intangible darkness within himself, a man who no longer plays games with the rest of the world, a man without a name.

He is suddenly reminded of his father.

And Maddy, looking at the painting, shudders.

A clock ticks. Someone coughs.

Adam opens his mouth to speak but...

Kiss me, she says. Please kiss me, please.

They were going up a mountain on a ski lift once, him and her. When they finally got to the top, she wanted to go down an expert slope, even though it was her first time skiing.

What the fuck, Maddy. Why do you always do this shit?

She flashed him a grin and jumped head-first. He's never blamed her for it.

Later he found her broken on the side of the mountain, huddled next to a tree. There was no more rage in her, nothing in her eyes but a slow steady snowfall covering everything he'd ever known.

I did it, she whispered, because I wanted you to follow. I wanted you to fall.

But why?

Because you're so beautiful when you fall.

2. a story

Adam and Maddy are not lovers, but sometimes they like to pretend. They lie in the grass and point at the clouds and go look, this is you breaking down, this is me breaking down, this is us dissipating into the atmosphere.

As children, they would often play the divorce game. They would round up all of their toys and then argue bitterly over ownership of the things they loved. She still has his nameless teddy bear somewhere. He still has her broken music box.

Truth or dare?

Dare, always dare.

I dare you to...

They still play their games, although now the entire City is their playground. Maddy daring Adam, Adam daring Maddy. I dare you to come over and...

In the car on the way to her place, the radio is screaming

I know the pieces fit, I know the pieces fit,

I know the pieces fit, I know the pieces fit!

Later when he drops her off at her place, she breaks into tears.

It's not your fault, it's not... I'm just...

I know, Maddy, I know. This car, this song, this promise.

This is us dissipating into the City.

By the rivers dark I wandered on.

I lived my life in Babylon

And I did forget my holy song:

And I had no strength in Babylon.

3. a poem

Didn't I promise myself I wouldn't do this anymore? I don't remember.

Me hiding from you. You hiding from me.

I'm not a responsible person. I'm not a reliable narrator. But everything I say is absolutely true.

This whole goddamn City sounds like clichéd jazz, Maddy, moving like smoke in barely lit clubs. We're not people anymore. We're lights moving through the night like fireflies. We're not living anymore. We're dancing.

And we're eternal.

Everything begins and ends in a single poem. It has no words.

This is the poem.

A friend passes me the last drag of a dying cigarette.

Are we warriors? What rites we share are drowned out in the smoke. Is there light wherein we dwell?

I'd like to think I've seen the sacred and the divine out of the corner of my eye, shining brightest in the places I could barely see. Enough to make out the spectre, but not the heart of all songs.

So I became a poet, Maddy, because poets lie.

At first I thought I would be a writer. I would sit at a wooden desk which holds many important papers and I would be an important man writing important things.

This is a library in which are assembled all the works of my life. I have told many stories. Many of which begin with simple people and end up in greatness. There is much achievement in them. People rise up to conquer weakness and fear and they fall in love and accomplish many great things. The hero has a tragic flaw and is often doomed from the start, but his heart is usually strong and he overcomes the inevitable end of all things.

I thought I would be that writer. So I sat at a desk and chose which papers were suited for carrying great words upon them. I lined them up before me and tried to summon ink from my blood but there were no stories in me. There were no beginnings, no heroes, no ineffable greatness.

Only this.

I asked my father what am I to be? A great man, he said.

I don't know what that is.

So I became a poet.

My only poem is for you, and it goes like this:

4. a song

The boy stepped through the mirror darkly, and none followed him.

He came upon a river which flowed through a city, and as he sat on its bank, the river asked his name.

The boy, who wandered the land in search of himself, sang thus to the river:

I've tasted your truth and it was bittersweet, leaving traces of memory on the surface of my tongue. It was sorrow that led me there, and the desperate hope that left me clinging for more on the edge of your skin.

I've walked through countless songs and known none of them by name.

I have lost myself in the flame and risen up as smoke in twilight.

And in that moment I have seen the dusk and dawn of my life, the rise and fall of my childish ambitions. And in that moment I have seen the blood which fills my veins flow out into the world, coursing under the city streets like a midnight subway ride.

And in that moment I have seen the thrill of the great Decline, its sullied promises and its broken path. I have seen its winding trails leading deep within the void where all men fear to tread. In that void I have seen the birth and rebirth of mankind, its collapse and renewal.

In that void I have seen myself looking back at myself whispering to myself the secrets of the City. This is where we can hide, I said. This is where nothing can find us. This is where we will build great fortresses of glass which will absorb all light and reflect nothing. In this way, I said, we will flee the void.

I have seen these towers rise. I have seen them built upon a blood-soaked hill. I have seen us huddle in the morning light, weary of madmen and prophets. I have seen us forget their names.

I have seen us forget our languages and the trials of our fathers.

In that moment I have tasted sorrow, and it was bittersweet.

Yet for all those lost there are those who secretly thrive within the great shadows cast darkly upon the land by those blighted towers. In those shadows they have seen the false reflections. In those shadows they have rediscovered the Void.

There they wait for their hour to come, for the dusk which will lead to the dawn. And they sing songs which bear no names. And they write their promises on each other's skin, so as not to forget the languages of their fathers. And at night, they dance like flames upon the soil, rising up as great columns of smoke high into the northern sky, looking down at the City and the abyss it strives to cover, and they rise higher and higher, dreaming of the Moon's absent embrace.

And then they Fall.

5. a memory

He fell into a well as deep and wide as the world, his hands clutching at wet stone, eyes furtively clashing against the yawning black that stretched out to take him, again and again as he fell, broken.

No rushing wind against his skin, no feeling in his arms when he crashed against the numbing rocks,

only him and the wet angry black

and in the back of his mind, a song that was discarded long ago

He steps up to the microphone. The karaoke bar is mostly empty, his friends crowding around a single table close to the stage.

A few errant gamblers are latched on to the slot machines in the back, their arms moving in slow deliberate choreography. Tonight, none of them have any names.

A painting hangs low on the wall to his left, drawn maybe by one of the owner's relatives. A rural landscape in winter, blotted silhouettes in the doorway of an old house. The signature is buried in the snow.

His friends are lively, drunk, happy. On their table lie a full ashtray and a few empty pitchers.

The DJ announces his name in that quiz show tone that makes him doubt whether or not it's really his turn, but when the song starts he recognizes the scratchy old guitar, the mellow piano.

There was a boy who was me but I know that boy no more.

There was a house that was mine

on a street that was ours

but I know that street no more.

There was a day that was ours but it was lost to the calendar.

Somewhere in-between

January and May.

There was a song and a word and a screaming and a pain

For every little thing in the world

There was you and there was me and there was everybody else

And now there's this.

And now there's this.

And now there's this!

And now there's this!

Clap clap clap clap clap.

Smoking is no longer allowed in bars.

The DJ died of cancer.

A few months ago, horizon on a beach, thin infinite line swallowing up the world, and the sea crashing at his feet, wet and vibrant.

Today, gut clenched like a fist, vomiting in a random alleyway.

“Rick.”

Bleeeeeeeeeeeaaargh.

“Rick, you alright?”

He slumps against the wall, weakened legs doing their best not to drop him on the slimy pavement. He swallows, controls his breath and then lights himself a cigarette.

Two girls farther away closer to the street, smoking a joint. They look like university types, all scarves and square glasses. They look in his direction and seem amused. He takes a drag and waves hello.

“You alright, man?”

“Yeah.”

“T'es sur?”

“Ouais chu correct.”

A drunk stumbles up to the girls. He wears a soiled unbuttoned shirt and a ragged pair of jeans, no shoes. His hair is wild and aimless. He gestures frantically at the two girls. One of them has her arms crossed as she replies something to him. The other one smokes nervously.

“You see that?”

“Yeah.”

The drunk punches himself in the chest as if punctuating his own monologue. He appears to be crying. The girls are getting nervous.

“I guess we should do something?”

“Hey,” he directs at the drunk, “what’s up man?”

The man’s eyes focus in on them and he stumbles over without giving the girls another glance. The girls are gone with fast little steps before the drunk reaches them.

“Hey, hey, hey man, can I have a smoke? Please?” He puts his hands together as if praying. He has blood on his shirt.

“Sure.”

“Thanks man you’re a good guy, there’s no good guys in this world, thanks man, that’s all I wanted, all I wanted was a smoke, but nothing ever fucking works out you know.” It takes him a few seconds to light the cigarette properly. His voice is frighteningly desperate.

“Well you have one now, all’s well that ends well, right?”

“It’s her fucking fault. I thought it was alright but no, nothing to do, I said I’d fix it but she’s a FUCKING BITCH and that’s it. It’s not my fault, yeah?”

“Uhm,” says my buddy.

The blood on his shirt glares at us both. He starts weeping.

“You think I hurt her but I DIDN’T HURT HER.”

“We know you didn’t, man.”

“You guys are good guys. You guys are GOOD guys because you LISTEN. A guy like me, a STUPID fucking guy like me I can come up to you guys and you give me a smoke, you don’t care, and you don’t JUDGE.”

“We don’t, man. It’s all good. Really.”

“Do you guys have weed? I can’t buy any but maybe I could smoke with you? Just a few puffs?”

“Uh no, sorry.”

He buries his hand in his face and sobs.

“Hey, listen man...” my buddy starts. The guy looks up and wipes his wet hands on his blood-soaked shirt. “Listen, I dunno what happened, but look at you, you’re a mess.”

What? What is he saying? Shut up!

He goes on. “You fucked up, didn’t you?”

“I did”, the broken man wails.

My friend puts his hand right on the guy’s head. “You’re not broken, you’re pure. Now you get up and you make things right. You go back, and you make things right, alright?”

The guy stands up hesitantly.

“Uh, here’s a smoke for the road,” I add ludicrously. He nods appreciatively and stumbles away without a word.

That night, we took over the city.

His father is about to checkmate him.

Slim fingers grab the rook, sweeping it like a battering ram into his defenceless knight.

“Checkmate.”

His father grins as he struggles to understand.

I can’t move there...

Can’t move there...

Can’t move here...

Oh, I can move here!

No, wait....

Damn.

At the beach, thin line swallowing the world, and him lying on the sand, trying to write about home.

And him back where he started, months later, trying to burn life into an inert joint, his numb fingers struggling with the lighter, merciless February wind.

Then the shape of the flame, searing his retina temporarily. An imprint. A splash of brightness in his point of view. Bottom left.

Even blinking or shutting his eyes, the shape is still there like a blurred ghost, all whispers and secrets.

But with every blink it weakens until there is no more imprint but merely the memory of light that has been, a faint glow, a small nothing.

Him, standing there, dead lighter in his hands,
and the wind swallowing him whole.

6. photographs

In a Laval parking lot,
 he stands there with her leaning back against the hood of his car. His left hand is in his
 left pocket, fumbling with his change. He scans the street ahead but there's no sign of
 anybody else around. Lampposts hum.

That night he masturbates.

In a Laval parking lot,
 he's trying to get home but the chain on his bike broke, and he's too drunk to figure out
 what to do next, so he lies down on the pavement and passes out, the broken chain
 clutched in his right hand.

The next day the bike is gone.

In a Laval parking lot,
 he's writing a poem that goes:
 You were a friend
 In the fast times before the slow days
 Rolled by unexpectedly

There was always room in your pockets
 Alongside the remnants
 Of all your broken twenties
 And your set of keys for which the locks
 Were no longer in use
 But you kept them for the hell of it
 And I admired you for that

It's years later now

And I don't smoke anymore
But sometimes I still catch myself
Turning to offer you a drag
From a phantom cigarette

In a Laval parking lot,
Still on the same pack, another one that goes:
Leave nothing for the ants
No crumbs from which empires can be built
From which traces of your history
Can be studied through scientific means

Leave no man behind who knows your name
Who knows just how treacherous your hair can be or how
Your skin is a dirty metaphor
For everybody else's problems

Leave nothing for the gods
Who only care about fucking
And boozing up naive well-wishers
With fat greasy questions

Leave nothing unbroken which can be
Shattered into a thousand nations
Leave no proverb unvandalized which was born
From alphabet soup vomit
And the tattoos of hungry heroes
Whose meaning can be pissed away
After an evening of half-smoked cigarettes

IV. THEORETICAL ILLUSTRATION

The Flâneur: a Concrete Attempt

After the abstract theories of the first chapter and some creative writing examples attempting to illustrate the theory, this chapter will now focus on a specific literary device that can hopefully breathe life into our concept of the performative “we”.

As a forethought, it should be noted that the subject of this section, the literary entity known as “le flâneur,” has no true equivalent in the English language, and even depending on which register of the French language one uses, the word itself has a variety of meanings. In our attempt to find a subject who can potentially embody the performative “we”, we will focus on the literary usage of the term, from Charles Beaudelaire’s dandy poet to Walter Benjamin’s hashish-impaired stroller to Gail Scott’s modern city dweller. Although initially a French construction, the flâneur has long since left the streets of Paris to haunt the rest of the literary world with his/her peculiar narratives. Although the subject is vast, we will focus our attention on Gail Scott’s My Paris and the collection of meandering observations by Walter Benjamin entitled Reflections. Skipping over what Benjamin calls the period of “impotence before the city,” we will go to the heart of the matter and examine how the entity of the flâneur interacts with the various processes of the city (and thus the processes of the other) and how he positions himself within the dichotomies present in urban space (Benjamin, 4). The flâneur will arise, if everything goes according to plan, as a literary device through which a narrator may resolve, as Peter Demetz puts it in his introduction to the anthology of Benjamin’s writings, the way in which “modern cities take their revenge upon the many claims human beings make upon one

another” (Demetz, xxi). After all, a valid solution to the dichotomy of self and other we have previously drawn up (quite literally) would be to personify the process itself and to give it agency.

We will first explore Andy Merrifield’s idea of the city as a space of struggle between process and individuation and the consequent need for a translation between the two. By looking at Scott’s text, we will establish that the flâneur as a narrator enables this space of translation through the ways she defines space, movement and the boundaries between facts and abstractions. By breaking down the barrier that stands between dreams and reality, the flâneur-narrator should reveal to us that cities and people are reflections of each other, and that cities are in actuality refractions of the human body. Consequently, the flâneur’s goal, through a narration of the senses, should be to return the city to its initial state as a human body. Through this study of the flâneur’s narrative responsibility, we will eventually root out his flaws and attempt to establish whether or not this type of narration opens viable spaces of discourse in which the performative “we” can take action.

In “Between Process and Individuation: Translating Metaphors and Narratives of Urban Space,” Andy Merrifield establishes that there is an urgent need “to *translate* between different metaphors and vocabularies of urban space, between metaphors conveying intellectual theoretical knowledge and those of sensual experience and individuation” (Merrifield, 418). In other words, in the literary expression of urban reality, there is a push and pull between factual, logical processes or systems and subjective, sensorial interpretations of the city. Merrifield advocates a discourse that “can be enriched if it speaks the language of daily life *and* that daily life can be more deeply understood if the way it is constructed processually is also known” (Merrifield, 419). Marc Eli Blanchard points towards similar dichotomies in In Search of the

City, where he claims “the city emerges... as an ambiguous compromise between the outside and the inside, between the crowd and the individual, between mind and character, and finally between idea and experience” (Blanchard, 36). Here, however, Blanchard affirms that the city itself is a compromise, a site of translation, a place in which balanced discourse can take place, in which our much sought-after “we” can root itself. The problem then, is to find a narrator who can represent this theater of opposites without being one of its players, without drawing those dreaded circles around self and other. In Myth & Metropolis, Graeme Gilloch comments on the way Walter Benjamin achieves this: “the reversal of interior/exterior space combine to fracture the superficial appearance of things, thereby permitting illumination of what is hidden” (Gilloch, 28). We can thus, for the purposes of this study, extrapolate that the flâneur as a narrator is a point of reversal who reveals the dichotomous processes that regulate urban spaces, one who can both explore and permeate these space/power dialectics.

Before we study what this reversal entails, we should first focus our attention on the flâneur’s narrative itself. In “One-Way Street,” Walter Benjamin writes that “[o]nly he who walks the road on foot learns of the power it commands, and of how, from the very scenery that for the flier is only the unfurled plain, it calls forth distances... prospects at each of its turns...” (Benjamin, 66). Thus the flâneur is one who is able to communicate the impressions that the physical world leaves on him, and more importantly, its prospects or its possibilities. This is achieved through an incredible focus on the details of both space and the sensual experiences that this space conveys. It is not without reason that Scott’s My Paris begins with descriptions of space, moving on to characters only later in the narrative. Even then, the characters are nothing more than set pieces, nameless and faceless players in the aforementioned theater of opposites. Scott’s narrator encounters “the smartly dressed woman” or “the mustached man,” pseudo-

archetypes who breathe life into the city, yet do not function as individuals (Scott, 11). This grants a focus on the process and structure of story-telling, identifying characters as near-empty constructions who are only there to reflect some aspect of human nature or another, and most importantly, are set pieces more than actual characters. As Demetz points out, “[m]emory ruled by the city does not show encounters and visits, but, rather, the scenes in which we encounter ourselves or others” (Demetz, xxi). What stands out of these encounters are not the characters, but the setting of the scenes themselves.

Blanchard explains that in the flâneur’s narrative, “a sophisticated combination of visual perspectives set up for the benefit of a third party allows the narrator to mirror himself in the images he has produced” (Blanchard, 79). In Scott’s novel, these visual perspectives are not restricted to the scenes in which one encounters the city, but extended to the ways in which the actual language is set up on the page. The names of certain places, the Hôtel Sphinx to name but one, are in bold characters (Scott, 13). This gives the reader the impression of certain landmarks standing out from the rest, creating something quite similar to a skyline within the text. Another textual device used throughout the novel is the pace and length of the sentences, which are never more than a few words long. In fact, every single image, sound, smell, character or place is restricted to its own short sentence. It is as if the reader, instead of being given a linear narrative with a beginning and an ending, is handed a series of snapshots taken with a camera during a long walk throughout the streets of Paris. The lack of transitive verbs points toward this absence of linearity. Another example is the way certain questions are phrased as affirmations, like when the narrator asks: “[w]hat is it about Paris” (Scott, 14). There is no question mark. The phrase requires no answer. Since it is merely a snapshot, there can be no relationship between interlocutor and audience. The question stands alone like a sentence, a statue, a rhetorical

construction which hints that the city is not linear (in the same way that the basic relationship between question and answer is linear) but rather an entity whose elements are neither questions nor answers, merely elements within a complex web of interconnectedness. In fact, Scott's narrator is conscious of this vast web as she is found complaining "about the ubiquity of visual image" (Scott, 32). She realizes that there can be no questions, nor any answers, and defines herself as "passively absorbing. Compared to. Say. Here looking round meaningfully. Compared to less anecdotal more analytical narratives. Requiring participatory i.e. truly democratic effort" (Scott, 32). Her passivity is opposed to a gaze which attributes meaning to things. In other words, Scott's flâneur does not define but merely absorbs. Her anecdotal style does not threaten, makes no claim for truth. There is no active participation. This could be considered a flaw, an argument which we will return to later. For now, we will focus on what this type of narration actually contributes.

One of the most crucial aspects of the flâneur narrative, whether Scott's or Benjamin's, is its relation to movement. As Demetz points out, Benjamin valued "threshold experiences" above all else, "moving towards threshold of speculative possibilities, tasting, confronting, exploring, without really caring to cross over into a total commitment to the 'other' once and for all" (Demetz, xxii). This is fairly in tune with Merrifield's desire for a discourse rooted in a site of translation between process and individuation. The flâneur, operating from a threshold, uncommitted to either side (much in the way that Scott's narrator is unwilling to commit), is able to understand the processual nature of urban spaces while still putting value on sensual experiences. We will later define the flâneur's threshold as a state between dreams/abstractions and reality/facts, but first we need to explore the movement that is at the root of this state.

As Gilloch points out, for Benjamin, “[t]ime and space are not compartmentalized and allotted for the performance of specific activities. They are frames for possibilities and potentialities” (Gilloch, 28). If we return to Scott’s novel, we could transpose this idea to her snapshots and arrive at the conclusion that each isolated sentence is so in order to highlight its own possibilities. Instead of anchoring each moment in a linear narrative, the images are given their own space through which they can actualize their own potential. The novel thus becomes a complex web, reflecting the nature of the city it strives to represent. We can even link this to Benjamin’s take on memory in “A Berlin Chronicle,” where he claims that “[h]e who has once begun to open the fan of memory never comes to the end of its segments; no image satisfies him, for he has seen that it can be unfolded, and only in its folds does the truth reside” (Benjamin, 6). The same can be said of representations of the city, as Scott’s novel proves, in the way every sentence serves as a segment in the process of perpetual unfolding

Of course, the flâneur’s movement is not entirely restricted by a devotion for thresholds and potential. The movement and flux of both the flâneur and the city are remedies against the static forces which hinder the possibilities of new spaces of discourse. In *My Paris*, traffic is constantly referred to as the narrator’s “nemesis” (Scott, 11). Thus, it is characterized as an entity with its own goals. It goes without saying that traffic represents a slowing-down, a readjustment, a hindrance for the flâneur who wishes to go about the city at his leisure. Traffic is vilified by Scott’s narrator not only for its harmful influence on the city’s movement, but for the way that it invades her sensual experiences. The loud engines of the cars, the black smoke rising from their mufflers, the smell of gasoline permeating the air; these are but a few of the ways in which traffic, the antithesis of the flâneur’s movement, is shown as his nemesis. It gets worse as Scott’s narrator is found “[g]uessing time by density of traffic. More than by light” (Scott, 32). In other

words, one of the dangers of stagnancy is not only the way in which it can influence sensual experiences, but the processes of the city themselves. Traffic is a metaphor through which Scott demonstrates the importance of movement in the flâneur's narrative.

Benjamin also addresses the idea of movement in his own way. In "Hashish in Marseilles" he describes a compulsion to "go forward; but in so doing we not only discover the twists and turns of the cave, but also enjoy the pleasure of discovery against the background of the other, rhythmical bliss of unwinding the thread" (Benjamin, 142). The background, the scene, is thus for the flâneur one of unwinding, of constant unfolding. "La flânerie," adds Antoine Papillon-Boisclair in his essay "Poétique du Flâneur", "entraîne une reverie désordonnée, évoque les contrastes, le mouvement" (P.-Boisclair, 5). Through movement, the flâneur-narrator can expose the contrasts and the dichotomies of urban space.

Once movement is established, the flâneur soon encounters boundaries and façades, presumably since they operate from the same middle ground as the flâneur himself. The narrator in Scott's novel describes façades as being "[a] world unto themselves. Cities in miniature. Sets" (Scott, 24). What is interesting here is the idea that within the theatre of opposites that are cities can be found boundaries between these opposites that are theatres of opposites themselves. That is quite a mouthful, but to put it more simply, boundaries are scenes within scenes. If we return to the way in which Scott's narrator identifies herself, the flâneur is an open door between opposing forces since she is passive. A boundary is the result of someone who seeks meaning and attributes different values to the opposed entities. If we take up Mark Kingwell's claim that most political problems are due to "a troubled relationship of inside and outside, and of the boundary between," we can surmise that Scott's flâneur is one who could come up with a decent political discourse since the limitations of inside and outside are blurred if not reversed

(Kingwell, 183). In any case, they are not imbued with the restrictive meaning that opposes them, yet Scott's flâneur is not interested in political discourse from a narrative perspective so that is a moot point.

Benjamin's take on the notion of façades is slightly different. Whereas Scott's flâneur resolves the issue through a complete disassociation with meaning, Benjamin's flâneur disrupts boundaries through the act of discovering and knowing. As he points out in "One-Way Street," "[a]s soon as we begin to find our bearings, the landscape vanishes at a stroke like the façade of a house as we enter it" (Benjamin, 83). In other words, whereas Scott's narrator revels in her lack of attachment, Benjamin's narrator seeks to regain his way. In "Hashish in Marseilles," when he is wandering around and feels swallowed by the anonymity of the crowd, he decides to play "the game... of recognizing someone [he] knew in every face" (Benjamin, 140). Through the act of knowing, Benjamin's flâneur feels closer to the city. This contrasts with Scott's flâneur, and one has to wonder if the gaze she opposes herself to is not Benjamin's own.

Another boundary that is broken by Benjamin's narrative is the restriction of time and space. After absorbing some hashish, his narrator claims that "Versailles... is not too large, or eternity too long" (Benjamin, 138). The city is extended and expanded to cover everything and everyone. It becomes a universal construction of "absolute duration and immeasurable space," through which Benjamin's flâneur can operate free of restrictions (Benjamin, 138).

Recreational drugs are often used in flâneur narratives. One can think of Hunter Thompson's Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas for example, where various mind-altering products are consumed by the narrator throughout his jaunt through Las Vegas. In My Paris, Scott defines the "contemporaneous flâneur. I.e. stoned" (Scott, 40). Why this predilection? Scott and Benjamin both describe the effects of drugs on individual perception and the ways in which this

goes hand in hand with their respective flâneurs. Scott's narrator loves "this state of absolute unfeeling. Putting 'one' in total posture of receptivity" (Scott, 42). As mentioned previously, passivity and receptivity are at the core of Scott's flâneur, who does not commit to anything and prefers to absorb whatever she is experiencing. Benjamin refers to Joël and Fränkel's descriptions of the effects of hashish as he describes "images and chains of images" appearing in the mind, "whole scenes and situations" being experienced, and "utterances happen[ing]... like outward events" (Benjamin, 137). More importantly, though, "[s]pace can expand," which as we know is crucial to Benjamin's conception of the city (Benjamin, 137). Finally, and this is where we can link it back to Scott's text, there is "a continual alternation of dreaming and waking states, a constant and finally exhausting oscillation between totally different worlds of consciousness" (Benjamin, 137).

This oscillation is defined practically word for word in Scott's novel when the narrator listens to "B saying threshold between dreaming and waking: ideal site for projecting past (dream). Into present (real). And reverse. Producing. Through shock of encounter. Spark of illumination" (Scott, 59). This is packed with everything we've been discussing so far. First of all, it is a threshold, a site of translation between process and individuation, but more importantly between the abstract/theoretical and the real. On top of that, Scott's flâneur claims this space is one of reversal, encounter and production. In short, it is the perfect recipe for a flâneur's narrative. Consequently, dreaming is one of the most prominent tropes for the flâneur.

After all, the city itself is meant to be a dream of the people who inhabit it, or rather a theoretical, communal understanding of some kind. As Blanchard writes, "[t]he city is never real. It is more like a series of pictures, of vignettes, made to be read by everyone in his own way"

(Blanchard, 74). This is certainly on par with Scott's perception of the city and the way that it is communicated through her novel. However, Blanchard goes beyond the simple dichotomies:

What is at stake here is not simply the question of the primacy of subjective experience over the analysis of objective data. It is the claim to validity of a consciousness whose strength lies in... the refusal to embrace and graduate to the authority of a positive, objective, albeit superficial knowledge. (Blanchard, 74).

This refusal seems to reflect Scott's desire for the flâneur to remain uncommitted, to operate from the threshold between abstraction and reality. As Blanchard adds, "[t]here begins the myth and the dream of the city" (Blanchard, 74).

We can push this idea further by looking at Howard F. Stein's Developmental Time, Cultural Space and his claim that "[e]nvironment is heir to psyche" (Stein, 15). In his own words, "human beings construct the world they inhabit *from* the body and the family *outward* to society and nature" (Stein, xi). The human body is the first process one comes to master. All societal organizations are constructed first and foremost with the goal of satisfying the body's needs. Sleep, nourishment, protection, companionship, these needs are filled by various systems put into place by the societies we inhabit. The city is a product of this. However, with time, "human beings tend to cast the identity of their 'who-ness' with their emotion-laden 'where-ness,' thus merging 'who I am' with 'where I am,' binding self and place" (Stein, xii). In other words, the city becomes not only a product of the body, but a reflection of the body itself. To be able to represent this complex mirroring requires what Stein calls a "psychogeographic style of thinking and feeling" (Stein, 13). One must be able to meld place and identity, to link the city to sensual human experience. This is, as we already know, what the flâneur specializes in.

Scott and Benjamin both accomplish this with their respective writings, but interestingly enough they approach it from opposite ends. Whereas Benjamin is more interested in how places are determined by people, Scott demonstrates how the human body is influenced by the city. For an example from Benjamin, one only has to look at “Hashish in Marseilles” where, for instance, he describes a square within the city that “had a tendency to change with everyone who stepped onto it, as if it formed a figure about him that clearly, had nothing to do with the square as he saw it” (Benjamin, 141). As we can see, this has nothing to do with how the people are perceiving the square. Rather, the physical appearance of the square changes depending on which people are strolling about it. Their mere physical presence, their bodies, are changing the place’s identity, and not the mental abstractions that could serve to define it.

Scott’s flâneur who absorbs experiences is the complete opposite, as her body is almost literally penetrated by the city. She describes the “constant buzz and roar of the city passing into blood” (Scott, 33). Later on she describes her “metabolism changing due to new environment” (Scott, 37). In these two cases, the physical processes of her body seem to be affected by the city. More interesting is the way in which the city seems to produce the pseudo-archetypes mentioned previously. She accuses the city of “[m]anufacturing alcoholics” (Scott, 14). Body and identity are products of urban space. At one point, the narrator encounters “windows along Saint-Germain. Screaming SOLDES, SALES” and then soon after, she observes “[w]omen’s boots... screaming ESCOMPTES” (Scott, 21). There is a complete attunement between the city and its inhabitants. Both operate from the same space and share the same voice. This is explored even further when she describes a fence whose “symmetry of spears” and “[g]eometric patterns” evoke a structured process (Scott, 16). She then goes on to say that this process is “[s]leeping into

brain,” as if the city’s symmetry could be transposed to the systematic processes of the human mind (Scott, 16).

At this point, we could make the claim that one of the flâneur’s roles is to promote this intricate relationship between city and body. As we have seen with Scott and Benjamin, this can be accomplished in different ways, either by attributing human, sensual characteristics to the city or abstract, systematic characteristics to the human body. This would seem to draw us closer to Merrifield’s desired site of translation between process and individuation, which in turn brings us closer to our beloved performative “we”.

Even then, it seems there are many ways to do this. If we look at Scott’s novel, as described earlier, most of the images are isolated but work together as a web. However, there are some instances in which sensual experiences are arranged under certain processual patterns. For example, there are several instances in which a circularity of senses occurs. At the start of the novel, for instance, the narrator sees “[s]hiny shoes” which is a visual clue, then she notices “the earthy naughty odours of a hundred different cheeses,” which is olfactory. Then she describes the cheese “oozing through its wax paper in her bag,” which deals with the sense of touch, and then she returns to the visual by concluding with “[a] surface more shiny” (Scott, 14).

Let us leave behind for a moment the whole business of process and individuation to focus on a device to which we can eventually link the previous notion of the body’s distinct relationship with the city. In his essay, Papillon-Boisclair tells us how “la présence fugace d’un souvenir... plonge le flâneur dans une temporalité complexe où s’entremêlent passé et présent” (P.-Boisclair, 28). The flâneur’s gaze “s’arrête sur des lieux qui lui rappellent son enfance, sur les ruines d’une ville en perpétuelle reconstruction” (P.-Boisclair, 28). In the first quote, the complex temporality mentioned is obviously part of the site of translation we have been striving

for, yet the crucial word here is “souvenir,” or rather memory. In the second, we are told the flâneur is stirred by his memories to notice a perpetual reconstruction. We could link this to the idea of movement and potentiality discussed previously, but let us push it further by focusing on the idea that memory and reconstruction entail a desire to return to something. The return is, after all, one of the flâneur’s tropes. Thompson’s drug-addled reporter returns to Las Vegas three times during the course of his novel. Coupled with the idea of return is the idea of repetition. Scott’s flâneur has a friend, B, who dreams of writing a Paris arcades book, which was already done by Benjamin. She criticizes the Protestant “notion of proceeding forward. Rite or repetition considered waste of time. Or boring” (Scott, 75). Thus she establishes her flâneur as one who does not proceed forward, who is in a constant process of waiting and returning. Her “rite,” as she puts it, is the representation of sensual experiences, which as we concluded earlier, returns the city to its original state as a production of the body.

Scott does not restrict her novel to this ritual, however. She critically engages with Benjamin’s writing directly. She defines Benjamin’s flâneur as “[l]ost in 19th-century crowd. Yet capable of haunting. Being man (sic) in full possession of individuality. Contrary to onlooker. Who under the influence of crowd. No longer One” (Scott, 31). She then describes herself as being “in middle. Neither One. Nor entirely bleeding into context either” (Scott, 31). Since Scott’s flâneur is one who absorbs and does not judge, she does not have the commanding presence of Benjamin’s “One”. As we have already established, although she respects Benjamin’s flâneur, she is aware that his judging gaze is one which molds and shapes, categorizes and creates boundaries. However, she recognizes the existence of a “[w]hole underground that was other city. Of 19th-century unconscious” (Scott, 25). Thus, just as the

modern city is a product of its past incarnations, so is Scott's flâneur ultimately a product of Benjamin's.

Let us now turn our attention to the flâneur's responsibilities. Obviously, by this we mean his duty as a creator of literary works. After all, Benjamin himself is the one who claimed that literary work must be born "in a strict alternation between action and writing" (Benjamin, 61). So what is the flâneur's action? In Images, Passages: Marcel Proust et Walter Benjamin, Robert Kahn comments on Benjamin's "Enfance berlinoise" and the way in which "le langage est le médium de la ressemblance, celle-ci est le seul moyen d'aller vers l'unité originelle" (Kahn, 127). Language is thus the best tool through which one can return to an origin of sorts. Origin here does not necessarily denote a specific state, but merely the centering of one's identity through which one can accomplish reconstruction. As Papillon-Boisclair confirms in his essay, "le labyrinthe offre un avantage au flâneur: étant perdu, évoluant dans un dédale qui aurait des proportions infinies... le poète peut espérer trouver un 'centre' à chaque coin de rue" (P.-Boisclair, 95). What, however, is this center?

In his essay "A City Is Not a Tree," Christopher Alexander points out that the "growing reluctance to accept the modern city evidently expresses a longing for some real thing, something which for the moment escapes our grasp" (Alexander, 401). There is an absence of something essential which is felt by all. If the flâneur is best equipped to operate from within a site of process and individuation, should it not also be his responsibility to find what is missing?

As Kingwell puts it, "we build in order to dwell, indeed can build only when dwelling is the goal" (Kingwell, 181). Thus, if the flâneur discovers a center throughout his observations of the city, should his discourse not come to embody this center? To point out the distinct relationship between body and city is crucial because it returns one to the origin of cities and

forces us to rethink the processes that regulate our lives, but as Kingwell claims, those in charge of creating cultural space, whether architect or flâneur (because the flâneur does indeed contribute to the creation of cultural space through his literary representations), should “act to make *thought*, not just the *already thought*, a part of our political discourse” (Kingwell, 181).

Perhaps at this point I am asking too much of the flâneur. However, Scott seems to criticize the passivity of her own narrator, of a text “[w]herein author saying nothing. Only endless oneirically conjuncting. Facts and anecdotes. For purpose of shocking unconscious knowing. Into realm of conscious recognition. But can unconscious. Be trusted” (Scott, 27). Since the author is saying nothing, according to the narrator, the shock to the unconscious mind seems to occur merely for the sake of shocking. This, however, has its limits. As Benjamin put it, “[t]o convince is to conquer without conception” (Benjamin, 63). Without a proper stance, the flâneur’s observations run the risk of becoming baseless abstractions. Besides, passivity itself is a stance, and the flâneur, whether he realizes or not, makes choices and judgments of his own. As Papillon-Boisclair points out, “le flâneur... est confronté aux caprices de la ville, doit faire des choix, emprunter telle rue plutôt qu’une autre et demeure sollicité par une multitude de signes” (P.-Boisclair, 5). The flâneur chooses his own path, thus shaping his representations of the city. He chooses which signs he will respond to, and which are not worth the time to put into writing. In effect, the flâneur is not in the least bit passive. His gaze shapes and molds cultural space, and to deny that is to deny the consequences of one’s actions. Obviously, I am not accusing Scott or Benjamin of shirking their responsibilities, as their writings have influenced and shaped the way we view ourselves and the world. However, one cannot help but hope that one day a flâneur will stand up and tell us what actually lies at the center, then lead us home.

V. CREATIVE WRITING EXAMPLES

1. poem for a girl

from the back her hair bends

the light like a discarded mirror

soft shiny promises in an elevator

Light (perhaps your own) reflects back into my abysmal irises which in their state drink fragments of selected memories. You, somewhere else entirely, looking away as you always do, weep (perhaps) for the little boy you thought I could be. She, nothing like you, walks away at the next floor.

“This is us,” Friedrich says, pushing aside an elderly Chinese man with a bucket full of coins who mutters an ancient curse and grabs furtively at our own treasures.

Making our way to the roulette tables, I glimpse for a second your face in an ashtray and wonder if I can reach down in that graveyard and pull out a strand of your hair.

“Let go,” he tells me.

I didn’t even notice my hand clutching the railing.

A hundred nights like these.

Drunk on the subway going home, bending my neck to read the next stop. Which line am I on?

Blurred underground colors, senseless directions, a woman’s callous voice announcing this and that, Friedrich in a moment of lunacy, pole-dancing.

At first there was Friedrich and me at the bar, scavenging stories from a group of eclectic youths who somehow thought we were anthropology students on a rampage. He allowed me no such comfort.

“We’re lawyers,” he tells one of the girls. “Working the big case.”

“Yeah?”

“Wall Street, yeah. Big money. Clients.”

“Anybody I’d know?”

“Yeah big names. Big names. Going multinational. Going corporate.”

“What?”

Damn you Friedrich, why couldn’t we be anthropology students?

“We’ve got suitcases,” I venture.

“And calculators,” he adds.

No alright I just made all of that up.

I actually only have one bar story with Friedrich. It was after the whole tree thing, after I saw Friedrich for what he really was. We were on some bar rue St-Denis, trying to forget the past year or so (the Habs were having a shitty season anyway). We went to the bathroom for a piss, or maybe Friedrich wanted to write something on the stall doors as he often does. I’m not quite sure anymore. Anyway.

We walked in and there was Friedrich’s ex casually blowing some smirking asshole with a mullet. I don’t know why I remember the mullet.

Just as Friedrich muttered her name, I recognized the bastard as Matt from second grade who had once infamously killed a squirrel in the school yard.

So Friedrich went “Fuck me” and I went “Matt?” and Matt went “Holy shit” as Friedrich’s ex came up for a breather and said nothing.

There was a good four seconds of complete silence as we (though I can only speak for myself) marvelled at this strange coincidental occurrence.

Friedrich, always one to break pauses, said “Wow, your daddy must be really proud of you.”

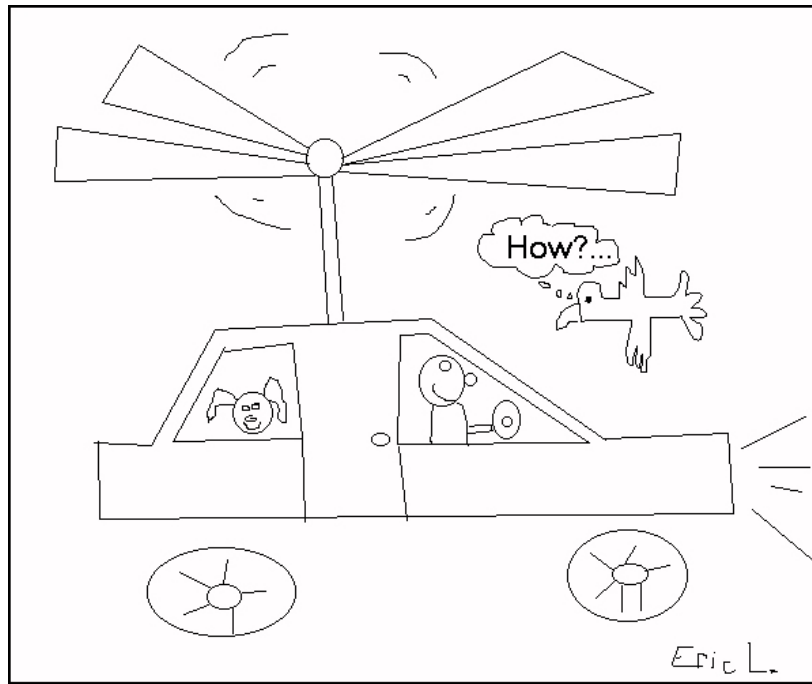
When I told you that story the first time, all you could think to say was “Lovely.” as you shrugged me off your naked body.

More coffee.

Wish I had a typewriter.

Trying to remember the first time I ever told you about Friedrich.

I couldn’t put it into words so I drew you a picture:



You didn't approve of him.

I forget the point of it all. Was it your hair?

I often write about women's hair, but that's one thing you've always forgiven me.

Yours is too real to put into words. The scent alone is enough to draw blood. It beckons me to plunge my hand into its black depths and pull out all of your secrets. I hope my name is buried in there somewhere. Is that selfish? Narcissistic?

Is it wrong that I fear my fumbling fingers in that lovely black tangle won't even find my initials?

Do you keep secrets even from yourself?

I told you once (while you were sleeping) that I love you because you elude the alphabet.

Do you hide in the spaces between each letter?

I can't recite the alphabet without singing it. Is it silly to think that this is your doing?

Anyway.

Friedrich and me, we were in an abandoned construction site, pretending we were philosophers. I don't know what we were on.

I barely knew him back then, but I think we were both drawn to the remote possibility of what we might be together. A force to be reckoned with. A great wave that would descend upon the streets and clean the desperation which was clinging ungracefully to the sidewalks.

But really we were Vladimir and Estragon sitting in the mud exchanging words words words nonsense blah gibberish.

I said this did you
say this I think you
said that yes I think

I said that and there we were
yes there we are and this
is how yes this is how
we'll change the world one word at a time
starting with our names

Friedrich's great folly.

"An empire of mud," he screamed in a moment of pure lunacy and I didn't know whether I should laugh or weep or join him in his delusion.

I wrote a poem while he danced in a dried up pond with dead fishes and a wilted tree.

I don't remember how it goes.

As we were walking

Fuck it I can't write that story... but I'll try anyway.

As we were walking home we felt like gods, drunk with potential. To be honest, Friedrich was a frightening figure at that point, a living statue, unbroken. I could look behind him

and see a clear trail that led to the beginning of everything we were now trying to accomplish.

He knew where he was heading. Straight for the cross.

I followed, as always, which you've never forgiven me.

We stumbled upon an ancient decrepit house which bears no relevance in the story apart from the fact that there was a tree growing inside of it. Nothing grand, just a tree. A small one.

"This is it," Friedrich said imperiously.

But then his eyes lost that glint of whatever it was that had driven him to this point, and feeling suddenly cold, he suggested we cut the tree down to build a fire.

I felt uneasy at the idea, but I stood by as he grabbed it by the base and pulled until the whole thing came crashing out of the earth. He broke it in half with several blows from his boot and set it on fire.

I don't know why but that's when I lost you.

You should've stood up to him, you told me later.

At the roulette table, Friedrich and me, a hundred nights like these.

I want to lose everything so that I can finally find you again in our bedroom. But time and time again, all I see is the dull green haze of the alarm clock as I pretend to sleep while you quietly masturbate next to me.

Anyway.

2. The Cruel Months

I wanted him in that last drag to take the city
 into his breath
 and spread it over the river
 like a curtain before our eyes
 hazed and

Friedrich and me... Friedrich and I? Which is it again?

Friedrich, right. Right.

Friedrich and me in the city, some parking lot past our boundaries back home. Some idea of his. Some word gone awry.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean,” he says, “that we’re entirely too distracted right now.”

“The lights?”

“Are they?” A mad question. A curious one.

“No matter,” I conclude.

“I’ll continue my story.”

“Here, the Wheel of Fortune,” the fortune-teller says. “And here the High Priestess, and here the Moon.”

And here is the Emperor, Friedrich. Emperor of mud. The King of Nothing.

And here I am, the Fool, with a tattered knapsack full of unfinished poems.

And here we are again on an anonymous night, edging perhaps towards the ignominious fate he has in store for the both of us. Friedrich, ever one to lose sight of our drinks, begs the fortune-teller for another go.

“Here are the Lovers. Yes. Yes?”

“Yes!” Friedrich exclaims, turning towards me. “No?”

“No.”

“There was a girl once, wasn’t there?”

Would he understand even if I told him the story? I once tried to draw him a picture in the sand but he brushed it away with one lucid sweep of his thoughts, a casual argument hidden behind a sneer. Women had no place within his grand design, no room for difference. If he could he would build a city from the broken bones of his followers. And women, watching in horror from a distant shore, would merely shake their heads and blame it on genital folly.

You never understood why he led me down those alleys of the mind where dwelt my past transgressions. I admit that I was hungry for his sermons. Friedrich naked in the St-Lawrence, babbling out a prayer for the concrete graves and the birdless skies.

“There never was a girl,” I reply.

“Sure there was,” he adds cruelly. “Her name was H...”

“Shut up! Shut the fuck up! No name-calling!”

The deck is shuffled thrice and Friedrich, looking for his card, drags me downward still.

We played a game of chess, you and I, while everyone else was out skiing. This was years ago, before we started talking behind closed doors. Black and white squares, pieces carved out of wood. I moving towards you, you moving towards me. King and Queen of January mornings.

We made love on everyone else’s beds. Your suggestion.

By the time they came back the game was over. I was certain then that our secrets could be kept hidden in the snow, somewhere outside our bedroom window. Maybe a little mound at the base of some tree, doomed to melt at the season’s turn. And when we all went out for a smoke I wanted us to run over the fragile ice covering the lake, that crystal layer of doubt which kept us from the muffled promises we’d made to each other during the frail hours of winter nights.

When I think of you now I can no longer reconcile you with the continuous thread of my life, that clockwork treadmill carrying me from one moment to the next. When I think of

you now I see a casual suggestion, an offhand remark which through its ease caused that thread to splinter into a thousand stars.

In the alley of bones Friedrich first saw his blood-spattered vision, his own ruined symphony. It was the drugs, I thought, or perhaps his insomnia playing tricks with him again.

The snake came to him, he told me, from the depths of the river and delivered to him its song of the drowned.

He wouldn't reveal its secrets to me, never to me. Never to anyone.

He would, however, take me to the river and show me what only water and fire could teach.

On the muddy shores of the St-Lawrence we knelt and undressed ceremoniously.

It was surely the drugs, I kept telling myself, surely some thought that had taken a terrible turn, some game where the rules had been misunderstood, some instruction that hadn't been properly followed.

"Can you smell the dead?" He was fully erect now. Menacing. "This is where the dreams of the dead converge, under the icy waters of the St-Lawrence."

Friedrich's divine babble, his burnt thread seeking refuge in the numbing darkness of the river, his prophetic masturbation, all the parcels of his shattered being were being broken down and rebuilt, broken down and rebuilt from the waves crashing upon the shores, crashing and crashing and crashing

When I came to we were floating above the dead, weeping.

Perhaps it was simply the way our threads were being cut or the way in which the clouds devoured the moon or the way we could no longer feel our frozen genitals, but in the river Friedrich came to know women and I came to know you.

I thought that I could trap you in a poem, cage you in a metaphor, but every time I said your name it only dripped from my lips like a card from the fortune-teller's deck.

Here is the Moon and here is the Sun, and here is the Wheel and here is the Star, and maybe I can shuffle the deck until the cards lose meaning, until they thrive only at the bottom of my pockets.

And here is you and here is me, maybe in a poem or a song or a story.

Or a sentence. Or a thought.

And maybe with enough words I can make it all mean something.

And maybe with enough days I can escape these cruel April nights.

In the river I came to know you

I saw you

standing on the other shore

watching me build us a city of flesh

wondering

why I never even bothered

to look back and notice

that you hadn't followed me in

3. ceremony of innocence

in his final moments
he cradled the world
under his wing
and let loose the mountain's prayer
and spread wide the river's song

The last time I ever saw Friedrich, he was walking away from me after our climb up Mount Royal on a clammy summer's eve. He never looked back, his bare feet casting aside earth and rock, leaving nothing in his wake but whatever words I could conjure up for another useless poem.

It wasn't a farewell of any kind, just another split in the road.

We had often dreamt up our own immortality, speaking of how we could spend eternity leaving each other, only to encounter one other again on a different road, perhaps centuries later. Our clothes would be different, travel-worn and faded. Our eyes would flash recognition for an instant as we crossed each other's path, and then we would be on our way again. And we would never look back.

This was the last time I saw him, rough and beastly, slouching off towards some holy city or another, waiting to be born.

I had often imagined some tragic ending for Friedrich, a fragrant suicide in a ritual of stillness. Dull razorblades, unlit candles, an unsigned letter to his friends, and the soulless drip drip drip of the water forcing its terrible rhythm unto the scene.

And perhaps that was the ending I had envisioned for myself, the silent witness who holds his breath before the credits roll, mouth agape, unable to mutter the names of his passing friends.

He hated me for this.

That was the one thing you both had in common.

You wanted me to write our story somehow, to piece together the faltering silences and the savage innuendos of our short time spent together. How was I to know you were searching for your own geometry in this cubist mess of a world?

I could only ever glimpse you from the side as you looked away, while Friedrich and I sold our prophecies on the streets for a couple of free drinks and a spot on the curb.

You both wanted me to draw your histories with confident brush strokes and definite answers, but you know I was never too good at coloring inside the lines.

What I give you instead is this.

This blotch of colors on a stolen canvas.

“I’m sorry about the tree,” Friedrich told me finally, after one of his infamous pauses.

“What?”

“It was already dying. I thought perhaps I could give that meaning somehow.”

“We both share the blame, I think. It was so long ago anyway. Why are we even talking about it?”

“I’m going away.”

“Why?”

“There’s nothing for me here.”

Sitting on an upright stone overlooking the City, in the shadow of the starlit cross above our heads (which stands for a history or another), we shared one last smoke and sparing no time for formal platitudes, he shook my hand and walked away.

I can no longer recall how I first met Friedrich, how I came to be his friend. I look at that first drawing I showed you and it means nothing to me now, a punch line without a joke, too eager for a laugh to worry about the set-up.

You and me. Friedrich and I.

We were all endings.

Our first meeting, in the dandelion fields.

I don't know what I was doing there in the first place. I think I'd decided that I was going to be a poet, and I walked throughout the familiar suburban greyness in search of some meaningful spot wherein I could sit and indulge in an epiphany or two.

Blank notepad in hand, pen brimming with ink, all I wanted was a tree I could lean up against so I could write up my generation, as poets are wont to do. I was even unshaven, as a writer should be.

There was a suitable tree near my house, but a ghastly chunk of it had been ripped off to make room for electrical wires. It produced no fruit.

Though it was spring, I found a house with its Christmas lights still up. I made a poem of it, but that was hardly the epiphany I craved. Besides, they weren't even plugged in, lifeless glass hinting at the December nightlife of suburbia, something as foreign to me in the spring as the relatives I see once a year, great-uncles whose life stories are buried in cigar smoke and cheap whiskey.

No epiphany, that.

Thus, yearning for lucidity in the dull gray waste, I marched on.

By the time I reached the dandelion fields, I'd written enough poems to fill up the notebook, but I'd traded it away to a young boy in exchange for his walking stick.

Needing a break, I sat amongst the white clocks of the maturing dandelions and watched as the wind blew them away, spreading the seeds outwards towards the streets and the boxed houses and the pools and the ministered gardens and the jaded playgrounds of a million lonely children.

When the epiphany came, there was no time to look for a new notebook, so I wrote the poem on my walking stick. A few scattered images on a broken piece of wood.

You came to me then, cradling a book of poetry under your arm. You were heading home perhaps, cutting through the field and its fledgling dirt path.

We traded poems throughout the afternoon, and being naive we knew that such moments had a price, so in exchange we both left something in the dandelion fields.

I, my walking stick. You, a torn page from your book.

I finished my pack of cigarettes on top Mount Royal, sitting on that rock till dawn broke over the City, light pouring into the streets like water down a crease of earth.

If you were my dandelion girl and I, your melodramatic poet, then what was Friedrich to me and I to him?

Our keepsakes must have rotted away by now, wood and paper feeding the soil where other flowers will grow, where other prices will be paid by different people.

What did Friedrich leave behind?

I climbed higher as the sun came up, perhaps hoping to find a place Friedrich had never seen. Or maybe I felt as if I could somehow glimpse the road ahead of him if I climbed high enough, if I scaled the cliff side that scorned me with its stony arrogance, if I carved myself a new path out of the ancient earth.

Into the City and beyond, that's where I imagined his path would take him. Out of the gut-wrenching nausea of senseless urban nights. Out of this wretched island's siren song of solitude and into the very heart of the river.

I could see him step into the St-Lawrence, washing away into the ocean and rising up on a distant shore far from the numbing isolation of his modern existence.

And I can see us there, on the other side, teaching each other how to be children again, how to speak without words, how to run with no destination, how to love with no past.

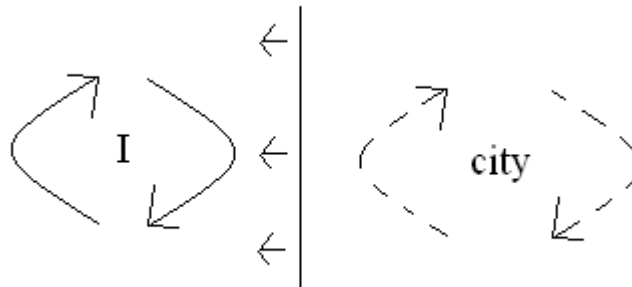
And then with no more cigarettes, I head back down and leave the thought behind.

VI. THEORETICAL CONCLUSION

The Broken “I”

When I first started writing on the flâneur, I thought that he would come to embody what is needed for the performative “we” to operate in literary discourse. I thought that the flâneur’s focus on process, that his inherent dualities and dichotomies, would lend itself well to my desire to break down the barriers between self and other. Although studying the flâneur did bring us to some interesting conclusions on the relationship between individuals and the city, nothing has been resolved as to what should be done once we understand this relationship. The flâneur, as I was told, is neither oracle nor prophet. He moves but never is. He points but never names. His observations are necessary but they are made obsolete by his own inaction.

What we shall take with us then is not what the flâneur says, but rather what he is. In being pure movement, in detaching himself from a center (yet seeking that center outside of himself) the flâneur embodies the “I” in a state of flux. In showing us the city as process and then defining it as a mirror of one’s self, the flâneur disproves the notion of otherness. Allow me another diagram or two in order to explain this more properly:



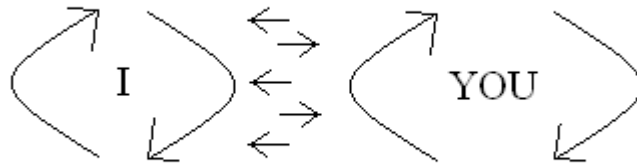
Here the “I” is pure process, while the city is a theoretical process (mirroring that of the self) which appears when the self glimpses a reflection of itself. I use the word “city” liberally here, as this could embody any form of communal framework. However, since everything is based on the “I”, the same dangers apply as when we were theorizing the performative “we”. Criminal gangs are the perfect example of how this process can go awry. Individuals will gather in a group that they feel represents their own balance of process and individuation, yet this group will oppose other groups (the city itself, rival gangs, etc) and ultimately reproduce the same dated conflict of “us” versus “them”. What is the solution then?

My last illustration was meant to display the conclusions that were reached regarding the flâneur, yet it is from there that we can depart to solve the problems that arose when we tried to put the mantle of the performative “we” on his unwilling shoulders.

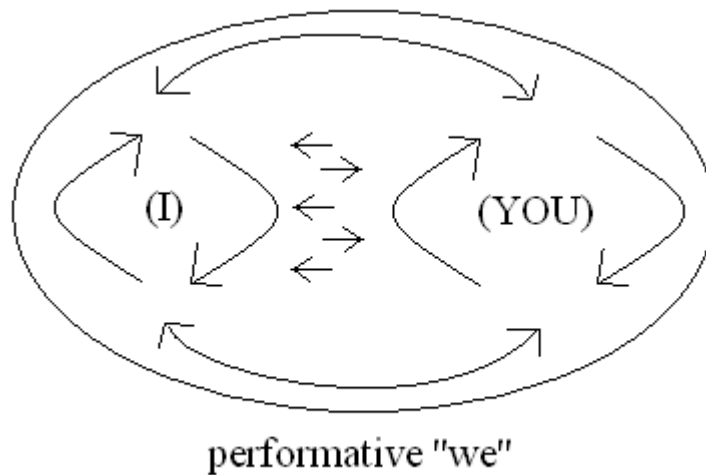
The problem with the previous diagram is that it leads to the idea that everything is merely a reflection of the self. It leads to the statement: I am everything and everything is me. There is indeed a uniting potential behind this train of thought, but it is too vast and can lead to relativism and inaction. If the “I” is completely diffused, then there is no more room for any agency.

So, does the theory fail? One of its failings is that the mirror has not been properly defined. There is something that stands between the self and the city, that which reflects the self and creates the dream of the city. In my illustration, the mirror was a line, a theoretical abstraction, a sophist’s magic trick.

What is responsible for the self’s reflection is what ultimately causes it to create the city, to devise what is needed for the self to cohabitate with that which causes it to glimpse through the mirror and see the fleeting nature of its existence: the other.



Here, the city has been taken out of the equation since it is merely a theoretical construction resulting from the encounter between the self and the other. The “I” and the “you” are processual entities which thus reflect each other upon contact. Our exploration of the flâneur and the city is finally bringing us back to our initial narrative theory of the interplay between the “I” and the “you”. We only need to apply these new conclusions to our illustration of the performative “we” in order to remedy the flaws that originally arose when we tried to theorize this new narrative entity.



All of these different arrows might warrant a summing up of everything we’ve established so far. The performative “we” is, at its core, a herald for the death of the “I” and all of the boundaries that it creates through its performative power. The “we” that we have theorized

also has performative power, yet one that seeks to destroy the traditional understanding of self and other. It is a new narrative entity born from modern times, from the city which has shown it the processual nature of identity. It is the understanding that there is no “I”, no “you” and that these are comforting but dangerous illusions (thus the parenthesis’ in the diagram). The “I” and the “you” are reactionary constructions responding to the threat that is born from the encounter of the self and the other. What results from this encounter is the breaking of the self and essentially, the realization of one’s own mortality.

The performative “we” is the union between the modernist voice that claims “I will show you fear in a handful of dust” (Eliot, 39) and the postmodern voice that screams:

“May I never be complete.

May I never be content.

May I never be perfect.” (Palahniuk, 46)

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