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**The *Flâneur* and the Detective:
Patterns of Urban Identity in American Fiction**

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September 2004

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ABSTRACT

The thesis analyses problems of urban discourse in American fiction of late twentieth century. It focuses on four different novels, representative of interesting trends in contemporary American literature: Raymond Federman's *Smiles on Washington Square*, Maxine Hong Kingston's *Tripmaster Monkey*, Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49*, and Paul Auster's *City of Glass*. The variety of narrative techniques and approaches to urban themes in these works of fiction allows for drawing interesting parallels between them and broader literary and cultural traditions. The thesis focuses on two figures of urban walkers, which keep reappearing in urban discourse since the nineteenth century: the figure of the *flâneur* and that of the detective. By analysing how these figures find their places in contemporary fiction, the thesis aims to draw attention to new aspects of contemporary urban culture and its representation. The theoretical framework includes classic texts by authors such as Charles Baudelaire and Walter Benjamin, further developments of their concepts by contemporary critics, and draws on theories of urban culture, but also religion and psychoanalysis, to support, or challenge, claims proposed by literary criticism. The thesis incorporates theoretical stances into detailed close reading of the narratives, often contrasted with contradictory readings by other critics. It proposes a view on postmodern culture not as a radical negation of previous cultural patterns, but as a continuation of certain pre-modern trends. The conclusion draws a parallel between the experience of walking, as presented in the narratives discussed, and the experience of reading the narratives.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

If it was not for the help of all the wonderful people I have been lucky enough to meet along my academic way, this thesis would still be but a figment of my imagination. Many thanks to my friends, colleagues and students at the Institute of English Studies, University of Warsaw, for all the talking we did and the fascinations we shared. I am also grateful to two amazing ladies, who by their incessant enthusiasm and outstanding warmth have set a lasting example for me, both as academics and as human beings: Prof. Shelley Armitage (University of Texas at El Paso) and Prof. Alina Brodzka-Wald (Institute of Literary Research, Polish Academy of Sciences).

I remain a debtor to the John F. Kennedy Institute for North-American Studies at the Free University Berlin, for their financial support giving me access to their wonderful library, where I discovered books I had been dreaming about, and where this thesis started to take shape – with the help of the many insights I got from the ever-so-friendly Prof. Heinz Ickstadt.

Finally, may I mention the people and the place that made this thesis *really* happen, i.e. the wonderful staff and students at the University of Glasgow, where I spent a fabulous year in an amazing academic environment. Many thanks to everyone at the Slavonic Department, for the friendly work atmosphere there – especially to Dr. Elwira Grossman, who took care of the formalities of my stay in Glasgow and always encouraged all my academic efforts. And a million thanks to everyone at the English Literature Department, for all the inspiring lectures, tutorials and discussions I attended and enjoyed. Obviously, the people I owe the most to are my two fantastic supervisors: Dr. Rachel Connor, who was always willing to talk about whatever was on my mind, giving me thought-provoking feedback and making this thesis fun to write; and to Dr. Nick Selby, who took care of the final draft of this thesis and was always willing to help after I left Glasgow. Last but not least, may I pay tribute to my favourite stop on the way from the Slavonic to the English Literature Department and back – the Glasgow University Library, with its millions of fascinating books, and the friendly and professional subject librarian, Richard Bapty, who made books I wished to read miraculously appear on the library shelves.

And thanks to all other people that I have more or less accidentally met in Warsaw, Berlin, Glasgow, New York and other fascinating cities...

INTRODUCTION

Walking in the Narrative

Cities are difficult to portray. A photograph taken at any point in any city will not be able to embrace its scale, and a panoramic bird's-eye view will tend to defamiliarise the place rather than offer its image as experienced by a city dweller. Furthermore, no picture can really convey a city dweller's perception, which is shaped not only by the field of vision, but equally by the knowledge, or expectation, of what remains hidden – around the corner, inside a gate, behind a wall. Cities are spaces of concentrated human activity and it is most of all the variety of human interaction that makes city experience unique. Michel de Certeau, in *The Practice of Everyday Life*, makes an important distinction between "voyeurs" and "walkers," and maintains that the totalising perspective of looking at urban space from above is a source of voyeuristic pleasure that creates a "theoretical simulacrum," i.e. "a picture, whose condition of possibility is an oblivion and a misunderstanding of practices." De Certeau maintains that in contrast to panoramic pictures of cities, and the neat, orderly concepts of the city as represented by *geometrical* or *geographical* space, the real face of the city is *migrational*, and can only be known by the "ordinary practitioners of the city," who "live 'down below', below the threshold at which visibility begins." Cities cannot be seen, they can only be experienced. And, according to de Certeau, one of the best ways to experience a city is by walking. It is by people walking, meeting one another and witnessing a myriad of everyday events that the story of any city is created. "The networks of these moving, intersecting writings compose a manifold story that has neither author nor spectator, shaped out of fragments of trajectories and alterations of spaces" (1993: 153).

It should come as no surprise, then, that in many urban novels it is by descriptions of a character walking in the streets of a city that the city is represented. Urban literary discourse welcomes descriptions of walking especially well, as they create a unique opportunity to convey the perception of time and space as experienced by city dwellers. Consequently, quite often walking no longer has a marginal status in the narrative and becomes a central area of interest, as well as a narrative drive. In this thesis, I would like to take a close look at some examples of novels where walking takes on an important function in the narrative. Before I proceed to the analysis of literary texts, I would like to take a brief look at the range of critical

approaches to matters of urban discourse, and define my own position in relation to this subject.

Urban discourse

In a classic structuralist theory of narrative, Seymour Chatman distinguishes between two basic kinds of elements in the story, which he calls events ("the what") and existents ("the how"). Chatman further divides events into *actions* and *happenings*, and existents into *characters* and *setting*. A human figure in a narrative can belong to either *characters* or *setting*, depending on "whether or not it performs a plot-significant action" (32). The *setting*, presumably, cannot perform plot-significant actions. Chatman's analysis of the narrative clearly privileges *actions* and *characters* over *happenings* and the *setting*, using the *performativity* criterion as a key to the distinction. Chatman supports his approach by stating that "characters are difficult to presuppose," whereas "we can always 'fill in' [...] whatever is needful to authenticate a setting." He follows this claim by an example:

If we are told in a novel that the scene is a New York street, we can mentally provide it with stock details: cars, pedestrians, shops, policemen. But we cannot provide a hero: he is too special to 'fill in.' (141).

Chatman's view of the limited function of the *setting* becomes complicated if we consider the fact that any description of the *setting* purposefully introduced into a narrative will most likely *not* meet our expectations and capability to "fill it in". Descriptions of the setting in fiction will tend to be much more specific than our general vision of a city landscape, and may often work *against* our presumptions. In contemporary fiction, which, having abandoned realist conventions, brings issues of perception and interpretation to the foreground, it is often very difficult to decide where the *setting* ends and a *character* begins. The setting is not just a neutral background, while the characters, on the other hand, often resemble easily recognizable fictional types. The *setting* is often not only no less "difficult to presuppose" than the *characters*, but it also merges with the *character* in that it is always somebody's perspective that any landscape will take shape in, and in that the *setting* will often provide direct motivation for the *character's* actions. In this way the criterion of *performativity* is no longer clear, as the *setting* may on the one

hand be the realization of a *character's* performative act of perception, and on the other the *setting* itself may be seen to perform an action upon the *character*.

Chatman's book is divided into two major areas of analysis: story and discourse. Functions of *setting* are discussed under story, separately from discussions of narration and point of view, which come under discourse. In my analysis of the representations of the city in contemporary American fiction I would like to avoid such a division. I shall talk about "urban discourse" whenever an urban setting becomes a major factor in a narrative, and thus performs a decisively plot-significant function. The urban landscape, with its architecture, traffic, and myriads of minor characters, will not be understood as a predictable element of the setting, which the reader could easily "fill in" had it not been provided by the narrator, but a significant, and unpredictable, narrative element, which may often play no lesser role in the narrative than its major characters and the plot.

Theoretical framework

The dismissal of the importance of the setting, characteristic of structuralist approaches (of which Chatman is but one example), has been noted by many critics, who in their own studies aimed to – in the words of Hana Wirth-Nesher – "foreground the city setting as a problematic site that has been marginalized in discussions of the modern novel that tend to privilege character, plot and theme" (3). The last quarter of the twentieth century has witnessed a surge of interest in the area of urban discourse. Since Raymond Williams' outstanding study of the centuries-old opposition between the concepts of the country and the city, critics have been attempting to define urban literature, and find new ways of approaching it, which would throw new light onto problems of both literature and city life. Apart from individual authors' studies of city literature in general (e.g. Burton Pike, Hana Wirth-Nesher, Richard Lehan, Peter Brooker), which have tried to grasp general trends and metaphors used to represent the city in its various transformations across time and space, the 80s and the 90s also produced many anthologies on the subject of urban literature, which presented a wide variety of perspectives and

areas of study (e.g. the anthologies edited by Michael C. Jaye and Ann Chalmers Watts, William Sharpe and Leonard Wallock, Mary Ann Caws, Peter Preston and Paul Simpson-Housley). As a result of this generally increased interest in urban discourse, towards the end of the 80s specialized studies began to appear. One major area of investigation has been the city in American literature, with its many paradoxes and the aura of newness that to many critics made it a challenging and fascinating topic (e.g. Graham Clarke, Gerd Hurm, Ralph Willet, Peter Brooker). By the end of the 90s, the focus narrowed down even further, as more attention started to be paid to particular groups of city dwellers, especially those whose race, gender, social status or sexuality made them not quite fit the critical discourse that evolved around specific concepts of "the norm" (e.g. Deborah Parsons, Daniela Daniele, Elizabeth A. Wheeler, to name but a few).

The scope of this thesis does not allow even an attempt at summarising the various critical positions that have grown around the subject of the city and literature, and this is certainly not the aim of this introduction. My own approach to urban literature has no doubt been shaped by the variety of approaches I have come across in my reading, and to which I am certainly indebted, but there is no single book of criticism with which I would totally identify. Gerd Hurm has noted three general trends in criticism of urban literature, and has labelled them as the Psychological, the Aesthetic, and the Sociological Approach (86-104). It would, however, be difficult to classify the present study along these lines. I have tried to look at narrative techniques used in contemporary urban fiction to analyse literary representations of an individual psyche, which, however, exists only in relation to general social phenomena, and specific communities. As Hana Wirth-Nesher explains, "[c]ities intensify the human condition of missed opportunities, choices and inaccessibility," and the consequence of that is that "every urbanite is to some extent an outsider" (9). The novels I have chosen for my analysis reflect the complex relationship between the individual and the community that is bound to develop in urban conditions. In my study, I have tried to focus mostly on how narrative techniques challenge presumptions and conventions of literary and critical traditions. In comparing innovative literary solutions with well-established traditions and recognizable literary tropes, I have tried to grasp a new quality of urban fiction, which presumably also reflects new qualities in contemporary urban

culture. To quote Wirth-Nesher again, "[t]he metropolis is rendered legible [...] by multiple acts of the imagination; it is constantly invented and reinvented" (9). The narratives I have chosen for this analysis present multiple re-inventions of the cities they present, using the lens of their protagonists and other characters, as well as various narrative – and also metafictional – techniques. I consider my own perspective as yet another re-invention of the cities presented, and by drawing parallels, finding similarities and discrepancies between these works and other traditions of talking about the city, I hope to yet further extend the infinite field of visibility which contains numerous versions of the cities in question.

The choice of novels I have picked for this study, though it may appear haphazard at first sight, reflects this approach: the four novels seem to me characteristic of a certain trend in contemporary American urban literature. What they all share is the focus on an alienated individual in a metropolis throbbing with life, and they all pose challenges to narrative conventions that would traditionally be used for similar stories. There obviously are numerous other examples of this trend in contemporary American fiction, but by limiting the scope of my analysis I hope to be able to get closer to the texts, and perhaps arrive at conclusions that could also be relevant to other works of fiction. What I find particularly interesting, both in the novels and the critical debates that have grown around them, is the question of the spiritual condition of mankind in the postmodern urban world. Contrary to many critical approaches, which perceive the pluralism and relativisation of contemporary culture as either a sign of the ultimate decay of values, or else as a sign of the ultimate liberation from all systems of thought, I have tried to draw attention to the spiritual dimension of the new phenomena, and consider its relations to other spiritual traditions. I have devoted a lot of attention to questions of disorder, much lamented by both city planners and literary critics, such as Burton Pike, who claims that "urban shapelessness is a form of disorder expressing anxiety and loss of coherence, and symbolizing the anonymous randomness of contemporary life" (129). Following the famous claims of Jane Jacobs, I have tried to analyse possible functions of disorder in city life, and its importance for individual and communal existence.

In the first chapter I will attempt a comparison of Raymond Federman's *Smiles on Washington Square* and Maxine Hong Kingston's *Tripmaster Monkey*, both featuring characters of an outsider type aimlessly walking in the streets of New York and San Francisco. I draw parallels between their protagonists and the figure of the *flâneur*, as discussed by Charles Baudelaire, Walter Benjamin and other critics. I draw attention to those instances in the novels where twentieth-century American patterns of urban life can be related to nineteenth-century European traditions. In this way, I hope to show both the discrepancies between the two and trends that are continued in spite of social transformations. The second chapter is an analysis of Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49* and Paul Auster's *City of Glass*, featuring the same cities, where the activity of walking, however, acquires a slightly different dimension, as the *flâneur* gives way to a more popular urban figure of a detective. I focus in particular on the repeated failures of the detective in contemporary fiction, and try to relate this tendency to cultural and sociological phenomena. In conclusion, I present the qualities of literary *flâneurs* and detectives as symptomatic of contemporary urban consciousness in general, and suggest that reading itself can be treated as an act of *flânerie* or detective work, and that it is also through reading that urban communities define themselves.

CHAPTER ONE

Variations on the Figure of the *Flâneur*
in Raymond Federman and Maxine Hong Kingston

Smiles on Washington Square and Tripmaster Monkey**– walking for walking's sake?**

The narrative function of walking may be seen as just a necessary transition between one event and another. An action-oriented narrative might exclude descriptions of walking altogether, taking them to be uninteresting in themselves. Alternatively, passages on walking might serve the function of starting an unexpected course of actions, which could begin for example by a chance encounter in the street. This way of structuring the plot seems quite important in contemporary fiction, where chance and coincidence often play a much more crucial role than design and order. However, in Federman's and Kingston's novels walking as an activity in itself becomes a significant constituent of the plot, which not only allows for an account of street life, but at the same time offers an insight into the inner life of characters, their emotional state and views on the world.

Raymond Federman's novel, *Smiles on Washington Square*, focuses on a fictional character of Moinous, whose life and characteristics bear significant resemblances to the ones associated with the author himself. The curious name is explained toward the end of the novel, but may instantly suggest a symbiotic link between the narratee (*moi*) and the relationship he is trying to become part of (*nous*). On a different level, it can also represent the relationship between the writer and the novel's implied audience. The action is set in the fifties, and Moinous – like Federman himself – is a young French Jew, who, having lost his family in the Holocaust, migrated to the US during the war, joined the army, and later found himself in New York City, without a job, friends, family or indeed any specific purpose in life. Throughout the novel, Moinous is repeatedly depicted aimlessly walking in the streets of Manhattan:

Moinous likes to walk in the streets of New York when he has nothing else to do. Alone. For hours. Even five years after first seeing this city, he is still astonished by the beauty, by the grandiose magnificence of this amazing city (40-41).

Part of the awe experienced by Moinous comes from the fact that after five years spent in the country, he still feels very much an outsider. His admiration for New

York's impressive architecture and crowds of anonymous strangers in the streets is marked by this outsider position – for him the “here” that he finds himself in every day is a strange world, where a strange language is spoken, and the logic of the social and cultural system is sometimes incomprehensible:

The spectacular buildings. Those immense towers that reach into the sky. Those skyscrapers. [...] And especially the people. Ah the mass of people in the streets. [...] So many interesting people one can meet in New York, by chance [...] Yes, Moinous likes to walk in the city in search of the unexpected (41-42).

Moinous tries to adapt, but all too often finds himself unable to do so, and remains unemployed, alienated and disillusioned most of the time. Walking, then, is for him not only a pleasant pastime, but in fact the only chance of contact with the surrounding world.

Paradoxically, however, he usually does *not* come into contact with the people he passes in the streets, and suffers the well-known fate of a lonely individual in the midst of a crowd he does not really feel part of: “America, for Moinous, is a vast, perplexing conception. Loud and discordant. Crowded, frenetic, and elusive. Almost more than he can endure.” However, he feels there is nowhere else he could go: “No, not back to France. There is nothing left for him there” (9). So he has to learn to survive in the unfamiliar surroundings, and to deal with the new feeling of loneliness among masses of people:

Since coming to America, he's learned to live with hardship, and to endure loneliness without tumbling into self-pity at every misfortune. Ah, yes, loneliness, for which Moinous discovered there is no equivalent word in his native French (51).

Walking the streets is for Moinous the only chance of participation in the urban life, and he keeps hoping that an unexpected event might change his life. He interprets the lack of contact as a sign of his own inability to cope with the American reality:

If only Moinous knew how to take advantage of chance encounters, he could talk to some of these people as he wanders in the streets, and these fortuitous encounters could lead to unusual situations. Perhaps even result in love affairs (42).

The hope for a potential event only increases his overall frustration and the prevailing suspicion that happiness is just around the corner, but he, as a foreigner, fails to see the opportunity:

It seems that Moinous is never in the right place at the right time. Or else if he happens to be in the right place at the right time, he does not seem to recognize the opportunity offered to him, and therefore fails to grab it. Perhaps this is because he has not yet learned to take the kinds of chance most Americans take with their go-get-it attitude (56).

The novel, whose ironic subtitle defines it as "A Love Story of Sorts," is built upon Moinous's potential chance encounter with Sucette – a woman he instantly falls in love with, and then hopes to meet again. The narrator's mocking voice keeps offering alternative possibilities of the story's progress, but all versions and variants remain merely hypothetical, and both exercise and question the conventions of the love story.

In contrast to Moinous, who is constantly aware of his immigrant status and the limitations that it brings upon him, the protagonist of Kingston's *Tripmaster Monkey*, Wittman Ah Sing, feels no less American than the great poet he was named after. As a "[f]ifth-generation native Californian" (41) he could legitimately repeat after Walt Whitman "born here of parents born here from parents the same, and their parents the same" (2048). However, in spite of reminding himself that "[h]is province is America. America, his province" (41), he also feels an outsider in the American society that surrounds him. One reason for this is a double perspective, which comes from a compound identity, as with Moinous already encoded in his very name. "Wittman Ah Sing" not only refers to Whitman's famous line "I sing America" – it also reveals Wittman's Chinese roots. And indeed, despite being brought up in American culture, Wittman is visibly Chinese-American, and his race, as well as the society's reactions to it, is his everyday obsession. He is also to some extent bilingual, and in his thoughts Chinese words and concepts mingle with American ones. Another reason for his alienation is that as a graduate of Liberal Arts at Berkeley, living in San Francisco in the 1960s, he proudly uses the heritage of the Beat generation to criticize the society at large. Notwithstanding all the factors that make him very different from Moinous, he also spends most of his time aimlessly walking the streets of the city.

At the very beginning of the novel Wittman is depicted venturing on an experiment of his own – checking out how long it is possible to be "taking it all in", i.e. allowing all the multiple data that a city dweller is normally surrounded by to actually reach

the perception and be registered by the sensory system. He quickly notices all kinds of humans and animals behaving in strange, and often repulsive, ways: "There was no helping that. There is no helping what you see when you let it all come in; he hadn't been in on building any city." (4) What this short introductory passage suggests is that in order to survive without major disturbance city dwellers have to shut themselves out against perceiving what is happening around them. Walking with a purpose, an aim in one's mind is thus totally different from the activity Wittman finds both troubling and fascinating – participating in the life of the street, as a passive onlooker, a witness to "people who offended him in their postures and gestures, their walks, their nose-blowing, their clothes, their facial expressions," whom he labels as "[n]ormal humanity, mean and wrong" (8). In spite of his decision that "[i]t was time [...] to stop letting it all come in" (7), he seems unable to resist the curiosity about life that surrounds him, and throughout the novel we see him as a critical, but also constantly curious witness of city life, finding in it an inexhaustible source of inspiration for his own creativity: "The air of the City is so filled with poems, you have to fight becoming imbued with the general *romanza*" (20).

Using the city as the stimulation of creative energies involves fighting in order not to be overpowered by the landscape, and retain an individual view on the details observed. For Wittman it is not the realist account of the objective reality, but his own performance in interaction with the city that counts:

He was always walking alone in the opposite direction but ending up at Strawberry canyon [...] among the group looking down into the stadium for free. Only he was up here for the walk, awaiting a poem to land on him [...]. The reason he didn't like going to football games was the same reason he didn't like going to theater: he wanted to be playing (17-18).

Walking in the streets of San Francisco, and "taking in" everything that he accidentally comes to witness, Wittman is the Tripmaster Monkey, the trickster-performer constantly on a "trip", in both senses of exploring the world, and the possibilities of human perception:

Out on the street, Wittman fitted onto his Mongolian cheeks his spectacles that blurred everything, thus finding metaphors everywhere [...] Some things he couldn't tell what the fuck they were, so he'd go up to a bedevilment and have a look-see, not to miss out. Like Rimbaud, I practice having hallucinations (45).

The novel's subtitle: "His Fake Book" emphasizes that Wittman's story is to a large extent his own creation – his experience is not that of an individual faced with any sort of objective reality, but an individual who constantly reshapes and reinvents himself and the reality that, although certainly external to him, and constantly surprising, can only acquire significance in relation to his own perception and performance that really bring the city into existence.

Quite soon his extravagant passion leads him to a position very similar to that of Moinous – he is fired from his job in a department store, and finds himself unable, or rather unwilling, to get another one. He too becomes unemployed, but in his case being an outsider is his own choice, raising his awareness of the fictionality of the apparently ordered and logical city setting:

depressed and unemployed, the jobless Wittman Ah Sing felt a kind of bad freedom [...] Fired. Aware of Emptiness now. Ha ha. A storm will blow from the ocean or down from the mountains and knock the set of the City down. If you dart quick enough behind the stores, you'll see that they are stage flats propped up. On the other side of them is ocean forever (67).

The city does not exist as such – the reality that surrounds Wittman is but a stage, and all the objects are but decorations which have no use or meaning unless there is a performance going on that provides significance to the setting. Without the routine of a stable job, and the illusion of a clearly defined external reality that it provides, one has to redefine the meaning of existence, which all of a sudden loses its boundaries. In order to resist the ocean of emptiness, one has to set an alternative order, redefine reality, basing it on one's own actions, which are really ongoing performances that bring the city to life. But as Wittman continues to wonder about the relation between the urban landscape and the lives of city dwellers, he realizes that it is not only humans that define the city, but also the reverse – it is the city that provides significance to the lives of city dwellers:

And what for had they set up Market Street? To light up the dark jut of land into the dark sea. To bisect the City diagonally with a swath of lights. We are visible. See us? We're here. Here we are.

What else this street is for is to give suggestions as to what to do with oneself. What to do. What to buy. How to make a living. What to eat (67).

For Wittman, as for Moinous, the city is definitely not just a background to human actions, not only a stage on which human beings perform their ongoing drama.

The city actually *forms* human beings, makes them visible, and suggests at random possible activities and points of interest. In fact, it often appears so fascinating that any attempt at controlling one's life seems pointless, since succumbing spontaneously to the flow of life in the midst of metropolitan chaos may prove much more exciting and rewarding. The city and its dwellers remain in a symbiotic relationship – they need each other to define their own meaning or identity.

The positions taken by Moinous and Wittman may instantly bring to mind the figure of the *flâneur* – a detached, aimless walker, taking aesthetic pleasure in observing the life of the city, of which he does not seem to take part, although paradoxically, his very appearance contributes to the picture of city life. In spite of the prominent place that this figure takes in critical discourse, its definition remains a subject of critical debates, and is often claimed impossible. The problem with defining who the *flâneur* really is, or what the activity of *flânerie* involves, stems from many ambiguities and paradoxes present in the work of the two most famous and often quoted theoreticians of the figure: Charles Baudelaire and Walter Benjamin. Before proceeding to the analysis of what *flânerie* could mean for the twentieth-century urban American literary landscape, I would like to focus on these paradoxes, in order to establish the possibilities and limitations of the term.

The *flâneur* – definitions, confusions, ambiguities

For Baudelaire, the "perfect *flâneur*" is a "passionate spectator" (9), for whom the kaleidoscopic crowd is the natural element of life, and a source of continuous joy, but also the material from which he as an artist can distil the essence of modernity. Although this description is often quoted as a perfect definition of the *flâneur*, Baudelaire himself contradicts it, when he adds that the kind of artist he describes has "an aim loftier than that of a mere *flâneur*, an aim more general, something other than the fugitive pleasure of circumstance" (12). It appears, then, that in looking for the essence of modernity the artist ceases to be "a mere *flâneur*," who would be satisfied with a passive fascination with the street life. The artist is

motivated by his drive for analysis, synthesis, ordering. For a *flâneur* it is enough to perceive reality and remain fascinated by it, without the need to distil its essence, or decide on its value. The difficulty in following this distinction comes from the fact that in Baudelaire's essay the two figures often seem to merge.

To illustrate his essay, Baudelaire recalls the famous story by Edgar Allan Poe, "The Man of the Crowd." Interestingly, Baudelaire's and Benjamin's European perspectives on urban life take inspiration from a story set in London, but written by an American. This Trans-Atlantic dimension of urban discourse is continued by Federman, and given a new twist by Kingston, who adds an Asian dimension to the subject. Poe's story, however inspiring, does not allow for a clear definition of "the man of the crowd." The term itself appears only in the title, and in the narrator's final outcry, defining the unknown stranger as the man of the crowd, who "is the type and genius of deep crime" in that he "refuses to be alone" (109). The narrator himself, however, is highly unreliable. He has a passion for categorizing people in the crowd, and when he finds a character that cannot be easily categorized, starts following him, imagining horrors that the man must be involved in, but not finding out anything. The obsession with the crowd and the need to label every member of it may suggest that it is indeed the narrator himself, who "refuses to be alone" and is a true "man of the crowd." Poe's story shows that the variety of people one encounters in a metropolis exceeds human capacity for categorization, which for those who feel alienated from the crowd may be horrifying, and lead to further alienation and prejudice.

Walter Benjamin, however, describes the drive for categorization as a major trait of the *flâneur*, defining the figure as one that "goes botanizing on the asphalt" (1997: 36). In spite of the ambiguities of Poe's story, he takes its narrator to be the prototype of the *flâneur*. Benjamin moves from Baudelaire's fascination with the crowd to Engels' emphatic criticism of the isolation that the masses produce. For Benjamin, the crowd is a narcotic, intoxicating the *flâneur* with the feeling of freedom and power which are pure illusions. Furthermore, claiming that modern streets are no longer a proper milieu for old-fashioned *flâneurs*, Benjamin removes the *flâneur* from the streets into the arcades, or the department store, and on this ground builds his critique of commodity culture: he claims that economic

development transformed people's favourite pastimes from merging with the crowd into the comfort of observing it from a distance. Fascination with street life, in his account gave way to a prevailing interest in commodities, resulting in conformity, uniformity, passivity and alienation. In the end, Benjamin suggests that in post-Baudelairean modernity true *flâneurs* are an extinct species.

The greatest paradox of Benjamin's redefinition of the *flâneur* is that in his account the figure no longer bears its important original traits – no longer enjoys being in the midst of events, no longer has the freedom that seemed to be inherent in his idleness, and, most surprisingly, is no longer actually *walking in the city*, which to many users of French or English may appear to be the most crucial implication of the term. Benjamin turns the *flâneur* upside down, fits the figure with qualities that are contradictory to the term's meaning, and then boldly announces the death of the *flâneur* – and of city life that would be capable of filling the lives of its dwellers with any sort of meaning. His deconstruction of the term is meant to serve a specific purpose – that of criticizing capitalist culture – but the many contradictions inherent in Benjamin's notes on *flânerie* that are scattered among his writings, create a unique side effect – they suggest that the figure of the *flâneur* cannot be made to serve a specific political purpose, as it will insist on freedom of movement, unpredictability of action, and like the pursued stranger of "The Man of the Crowd," will always elude interpretation, and choose routes that will remain mysterious to anyone trying to understand their logic.

In spite of the paradoxes and ambiguities that have been growing around the term, the figure of the *flâneur* remains extremely interesting in the context of modern urban literary discourse. In the case of novels like *Smiles on Washington Square* or *Tripmaster Monkey*, the question that instantly comes to mind is whether it is possible to talk about their protagonists as twentieth-century American *flâneurs*, and if so, on what grounds the category could be applied, and what conclusions could be drawn from the comparison of urban cultures of the European past and the American present.

The *flâneur* in an American city?

One of the questions often posed by critics in relation to the *flâneur* is whether it is possible to place this figure in any context other than the nineteenth-century Paris, where it originated, and, as it is sometimes claimed, died. As Keith Tester notices:

On the one hand, there seems to be little doubt that the *flâneur* is specific to a Parisian time and place. On the other hand, the *flâneur* is used as a figure to illuminate issues of city life irrespective of time and place (16).

Tester points out that the confusion goes back to Baudelaire, who "was unprepared to make any significant distinction between *Paris* and *modernity*" and consequently his writing leaves an impression that "he was never really too sure whether he was writing about one or the other or indeed both at the same time" (16). The same, Tester notes, can be said of Benjamin, who uses examples of specific cities in order to criticize problems of modernity at large. Tester concludes that "the *flâneur* certainly occupies the specific times and places of nineteenth-century Paris, but that Paris is itself made important because it is an expression of modernity" (17). This paradoxical combination, in spite of adding to the confusion concerning the figure of the *flâneur*, accounts for the popularity that the term has gained in criticism not only of nineteenth-century Parisian culture, but of the modern city culture in general.

It may also be difficult to see how the figure could find its place in American cities of the late twentieth century. The difficulty comes mostly from the fact that American cities are often considered to be constructed in such a way as to make walking (without which, in spite of Benjamin's claims, it is hard to talk about *flânerie*) a difficult, if not hopeless activity, rather than an enjoyable pastime. A possible way to explain this major difference between European and American city structure is to note the degree to which they have been shaped by modern urban planning. While European cities have been evolving quite naturally from an original centre, where different areas of public and private life would come together, in America the advances of technology allowed for planning the city structure from scratch. As Jane Jacobs notices in her significant study of American urban planning and its disastrous consequences for city culture, the utopian ideas of order that have for many years ruled American urban planning have been

disregarding "the need of cities for a most intricate and close-grained diversity of uses that give each other constant mutual support, both economically and socially" (14). Jacobs argues that attempts at creating paradise cities have resulted in a "dishonest mask of pretended order, achieved by ignoring or suppressing the real order that is struggling to exist and to be served" (15). Spatial separation of people's different spheres of interest, she maintains, has killed the life of the street, and the spirit of social trust that was inherent to it. The American "[i]mpersonal city streets make anonymous people" (57), who prefer not to have anything in common with one another, and consequently grow more and more alienated from the society.

Another widely recognized phenomenon that may cause problems in discussing possibilities of *flânerie* in American cities is that the American pace of life does not leave time for walking, as the car has already for a considerable while been a symbol of the American fast lifestyle. However, Jacobs maintains that "the destructive effects of automobiles are much less a cause than a symptom of [the American] incompetence at city building" and the privileged position that the car has in American urban planning comes largely from the fact that "[t]he simple needs of automobiles are more easily understood and satisfied than the complex needs of cities," so that "a growing number of planners and designers have come to believe that if they can only solve the problems of traffic, they will thereby have solved the major problem of cities" (7).

Wittman Ah Sing certainly does notice this problem. Although San Francisco, like New York's Manhattan, may be one of the few places in urban America where the organization of space makes walking possible, this way of moving around the city is still not very easy, pleasurable or common. In his attempts at walking across San Francisco, Wittman notes:

Market Street is not an avenue or a boulevard [...]. Tangles of cables on the ground and in the air [...]. Buses and cars trying to get around one another [...], lanes taken up by double and triple parking. Pedestrians stranded on traffic islands. How am I to be a boulevardier on Market Street? I am not a boulevardier; I am a bum-how, I am a fleaman.

Now what? Where does a fleaman go for the rest of the evening, the rest of his adult life? [...]

No boulevards here. Who's here? Where are my familiars? Here I am among my familiars, yeah, like we're Kerouac's people, tripping along the street (68-69).

The anonymous street is clearly dominated by the traffic, and what Wittman clearly misses is not only the comfort of walking without the constant disturbance of vehicles, but also some sense of community with the people in the street. One way to deal with the lack of such feeling is to see the crowd as a community of individuals, as celebrated in the democratic tradition of American poetry, from Whitman to Kerouac, and continued by many contemporary poets. However, as Wittman recollects in his mind Kerouac's verses describing a crowd, he is suddenly struck by an expression that had previously escaped his attention – among soldiers, sailors, hitchhikers, hustlers and drunks, Kerouac lists “the twinkling little Chinese.” Wittman is outraged:

Shit. The “twinkling little Chinese” must be none other than himself. [...] If King Kerouac, king of the Beats, were walking here tonight, he'd see Wittman and think “Twinkling little Chinese.” [...] A man does not twinkle. A man with balls is not little. As a matter of fact, Kerouac didn't get “Chinese” right either. Big football player white all-American jock Kerouac. Jock Kerouack. I call into question your naming of me. I trust your sight no more. You tell people by their jobs. And by their race. And the wrong race at that [...] What do you know, Kerouac? What do you know? You don't know shit. I'm the American here. I'm the American walking here. Fuck Kerouac and his American road anyway. Et tu, Kerouac. Aiya, even you. (69-70)

Wittman feels betrayed by the last people he might be willing to identify with – the Beats, who turn out to represent only the white sector of young American rebels, pigeonholing others into racial categories. Wittman, however, refuses to be the kind of *flâneur* that goes “botanizing on the asphalt,” as Benjamin would have it. Rather, he places himself in the position of a rag-picker, “a bum-how, a fleaman” – if there are no proper sidewalks, the *flâneur* becomes a social outcast, living on the margins of society and therefore able to retain the necessary distance for unbiased observation.

At the beginning of the novel Wittman does show some tendency for classifying people and therefore looking down on them – he is particularly ruthless towards what he calls F.O.B.'s – Fresh Off the Boat Chinese, who by their unfamiliarity with American culture appear to him horrendously “uncool” (5) and fill him with shame at the thought that he might be taken for one. He is also critical about people

working in offices throughout the week and "living for the weekends," thus agreeing to lead "lives of quiet desperation" that Wittman, like Thoreau, is strongly opposed to. "How fucked up they must be" (55) is his diagnosis of the fact that people commute to work before daylight and back after dark. He does, however, occasionally attempt to perceive them in a different way. When still working in the department store, he observes customers, wondering:

Who are these people that no matter what odd time of day or night they have the wherewithal to go shopping? [...] Where are they going, and what do they do for a living? Are there many people like himself, then? They're all poets taking walks? "Just browsing." "Just looking." (46)

This uncertainty seems to lie at the heart of *flânerie*: a *flâneur*/artist, who himself is just an anonymous person in the crowd, is not able to tell how many people around share the same position, and are there not as mere consumers, but just for the love of human life and motion. Again, Wittman tries to resist Benjamin's assumption that the very existence of department stores determines that people focus their attention solely on the commodity. Behind the apparent idleness of window-shopping, Wittman knows, any sort of intellectual activity might be hidden.

As Wittman continues on his walks, and notices that – like his own – other people's appearances can also be misleading, he decides to give everyone "the benefit of the doubt." Happy clochards sharing wine, "bad boys" reading children's books together, "a tough-shit girl" helping her grandma cross the street – the situations he witnesses in the street convince him that there is only one good way "to behold strangers: longer." And he concludes that the reason he can now notice what previously escaped his attention is that he is now "free from work," and so "[t]he city becomes an easier place" for him (224). When waiting in a line at the unemployment office, he practices his new way of looking at people – when an angry former executive loses his temper at not being respected as he used to be, Wittman thinks:

Come on, give him the benefit of the doubt, he's no different from you and me. Tail him, and he'll lead you to a secret neighborhood of skylit lofts and underground poetry readings, and to the studio where he is making something beyond your imagination. Look at us: artists, squandering our creation time (225).

When a clerk is being formalistic and sticks strictly to the rules of bureaucracy, Wittman attempts to see humanity through the job-determined behaviour: "Don't deck her out. She's an artist too, artists and wayfarers all, earning their livelihood, meeting me in their path" (226).

His ultimate plan, towards the realization of which the novel progresses, is to stage a theatre performance that would include "everyone that is being left out, and everybody who has no place." As he explains, his "idea for the Civil Rights Movement is that we integrate jobs, schools, buses, housing, schooling, lunch counters, yes, and we also integrate theater and parties" (52). The plan goes together with his overall philosophy of life, which states: "Do the right thing by whoever crosses your path. Those coincidental people are your people" (223). Clearly, what he proposes goes directly against the ideals of urban planning that Jacobs describes. His walks in the streets of San Francisco allow him to notice people's alienation rooted in the fact that the street is no longer a safe space of diverse human activities – people only cross the city with a particular aim in their minds, and have nothing to do with one another during the short moments when they are sharing the same space. Wittman's unique observations and his reformative drive result from the fact that he seems to be one of the few people who actually take their time to walk and watch the streets.

In part, he admits, this is due to the fact that he refuses to strive toward achieving the high standard of private comfort that most Americans enjoy. He lives in a small rented room, and takes pride in following the Beat advice not to own as many as fifteen things: "No rug here. No sofa here. Never own a rug or a sofa. And thus be free" (28). The ascetic lifestyle has practical consequences: "The good thing about living by yourself in an uncomfortable room is that it forces you out in the marketplace and the forum, a notebook and a couple of books under the arm" (250). Having no proper home, no telephone number, no car, and finally no job, because as he keeps "getting dealt a choice between time and money" (168), he chooses time, Wittman is forced out into the street, to mingle with the crowd, take inspiration from it and, ultimately, unite all the varied people that he accidentally encounters in his theatre project.

In the case of Moinous, in *Smiles on Washington Square*, it is also the material reality of life that accounts for his lifestyle of spending his days walking aimlessly in the streets. Only in his case it is not his own political choice, but the harsh life circumstances that force him into the position of the outcast of the society. While Wittman represents the rebellious American spirit of the 1960s, Moinous is a foreigner quite unaware of the political reality of the 1950s, even if he himself suffers from the anxieties of the American society during the era of McCarthyism. Wittman consciously neglects the mainstream American lifestyle, and Moinous aspires to it, but is unable to keep the pace. Nevertheless, in the end their lifestyles greatly resemble each other, at least on the surface. If Wittman is the *flâneur*/artist, whose curiosity about life ends in creative achievement, as well as establishing friendships, marriage, and a community, the *flânerie* of Moinous is driven by a much more basic instinct – the need of human contact.

Moinous's motivation for being out in the streets is often stated quite plainly:

Unemployed, Moinous spends his days wandering aimlessly in the city [...] with nothing to do on a working day, he wanders around the city (7).

So again he's out of a job, and now evicted from his furnished room. And since there is a recession, it will not be easy for him to find another job (65).

Moinous's room was certainly not more comfortable than that of Wittman, but he had not even enough money to pay his rent. Literally homeless, his case is not Wittman's "voluntary poverty" (334), but simply poverty, from which there seems no escape, and of which he is very much ashamed. Forced to spend his night at the train station, he desperately tries not to think of himself as one of the bums that he sees there:

He feels embarrassed. On another bench, an old man wrapped in newspapers is snoring loudly. Probably a drunk snore. Far at one end of the waiting room, a woman in disheveled clothes is talking aloud to herself [...] He feels like walking out of this place, ashamed that he might be taken for one of these derelicts (77).

Wittman's curious gaze, critical instinct, and the willingness to be "taking it all in", in the case of Moinous give way to turning his gaze away, trying to hide himself from view, and daydreaming about love and happiness in order to forget about the

harsh reality around. He too spends his time in shopping districts, but he is neither an assistant, like Wittman, nor a customer:

Perhaps, the second time, they will meet in the subway. Or in one of the big department stores on Fifth Avenue where Moinous likes to wander when he has nothing else to do, even though he can never afford to buy anything [...] Or else they will meet in the streets, in some other part of the city. Uptown. By chance (19).

Without a job to keep him busy, or money that he could be spending, the only thing left for him to do is window-shopping, watching people in the streets, and hoping for another accidental meeting with the "charming blonde" that haunts his dreams. But even after he gets a job, which allows him to rent another room and resume a life of a regular citizen, what he sees in the street seems to depress him by its aura of unavailability:

he wanders in other parts of the city. Usually up Fifth Avenue. He likes to walk up and down that fancy avenue to look at the shop windows and at the people in the street, especially the women who go shopping in the expensive stores. He admires their legs. Their long, elegant legs that keep going up and up under their skirts to where it's warm, warm and cosy, but where only the imagination can venture. This makes him sad, because he feels that perhaps for the rest of his life he will seek what can never be attained (125).

His melancholy is most strongly expressed by his longing for Sucette, whom he is trying in vain to meet again. The impact that their accidental meeting made on him may bring to mind Baudelaire's sonnet "*A une passante*," where a *flâneur* catches a glimpse of an unknown woman in the street and is fascinated by her.

Fascination, however, is mixed with the realisation that this accidental encounter is not likely to be ever repeated, and so the poem concludes:

Somewhere, far off! too late! never, perchance!
Neither knows where the other goes or lives;
We might have loved, and you knew this might be! (45)

Benjamin comments that the sonnet reveals the irony of urban love: it is love "not at first sight, but at last sight" (1997: 125). The unfulfilled love for anonymous passers-by is to Benjamin the cursed lot of lonely city dwellers in the modern metropolis.

Federman's novel, however, evolves around the idea of the possibility of another accidental meeting, which would then acquire the quality of fate. Should the

passante reappear, the lonely fantasizing of the *flâneur* would give way to a miracle of human contact:

Moinous doesn't know what else to say, but he wants to keep the conversation going for fear that she might vanish unless words continue to hold them together. He cannot tell her that in his mind he knew all along they would meet again like this (126).

Perhaps we were destined to meet again, she says in a whisper, and then falls into silence, as if retreating into her own thoughts (130-131).

A second meeting would verge on a miracle, but even the first exchange of smiles, although totally accidental, and seemingly inconsequential, was determined by an important factor that they had in common: they were both in the street in the middle of a working day, although for very different reasons. Sucette, unlike Moinous, is very rich, so she does not have to work and can do what she pleases with her time. Moinous and Sucette represent two different ends of the social scale, but they both possess the one thing that Wittman considers most crucial, and which most people lack: free time to ponder their thoughts and go walking. The difference between the two characters also lies in their level of political awareness. Whereas Moinous's thoughts circle around his own desires and frustrations, Sucette's views on reality take a much wider perspective. As "a twelfth-generation American" and a "perfect white Anglo-Saxon Protestant," she feels frustrated by "all the standard social and moral implications of such a background" (71), and appalled by the political drive to segregate people into decent Americans and "others," who are believed to threaten the ideals of the American dream. Moinous, himself an "other", has no political awareness, and in his walks refrains from judgment of the reality he does not understand. As a foreigner, Moinous cannot rely on categorization, as the whole reality around him is alien and incomprehensible. His outsider position results in a totally non-judgmental distance from his surroundings. The pleasure Moinous takes from his lonely walks is not based on categorizing, although his reasons are again the reverse of those of Wittman – whereas in the case of Wittman it is political awareness that makes him avoid passing easy judgment on strangers, in the case of Moinous it is being an outsider, a man to whom the life in a foreign country remains a mystery that he is trying to adapt to, that provides his non-judgmental distance from his surroundings. If Wittman seems to fit Baudelaire's description of the *flâneur*/artist, who distils the essence of modernity out of his excited curiosity

about the urban world, Moinous would rather represent what Baudelaire describes as "a mere *flâneur*," who has no artistic ambitions beyond "the fugitive pleasure of circumstance." Neither of them, although for different reasons, seems to fit Benjamin's description of the *flâneur* that "goes botanizing on the asphalt" with an air of superiority, replacing human contact by the pleasures of commodity culture.

Benjamin's scepticism concerning the possibilities and values of walking in the modern metropolis stands in bright contrast to Michel de Certeau's enthusiastic view of walking as a subversive activity, allowing for "things *extra* and *other*" that "insert themselves into the accepted framework, the imposed order" (160). Both critics, however, would probably agree that observing city life from above – be it a house window, or the top floor of a skyscraper – creates a totalising perspective that eventually alienates the viewer from the life in the streets. While Benjamin, however, seems to suggest that the progress of civilization pushes *flâneurs* off the streets, and transforms them into passive consumers, for de Certeau the distance created by being lifted above the level of life creates but a simulacrum of reality, and has nothing to do with everyday practices of city dwellers, who are less interested in a clear vision of space than in simply using it for their own purposes, taking the unexpected as a sign of their individual freedom. In the following section, I would like to take a closer look at the moments in the two novels where a horizontal perspective from the level of the street gives way to a vertical one, where the city and its inhabitants can be seen from above, and see how Benjamin's and de Certeau's theories can inform the reading of such passages.

Vertical and horizontal perspectives

Vertical perspective does not appear often in either of the novels. Their protagonists mainly exist in the flat, horizontal surfaces of the spaces they inhabit. They walk the streets, look for faces in the crowd, travel underground or take buses, trains or highways to get out of the city. However, the fact that vertical images appear only occasionally in both novels makes them all the more striking. Interestingly, their appearance in both novels is connected to one of the most

obvious possibility of having an overview of the city space from above – and that is flying, which within the city limits is quite likely to be associated with the most urban of birds, namely pigeons.

In *Smiles at Washington Square* the presence of the pigeons is very visible. Time and again in the narrative we see Moinous go to Washington Square to feed the pigeons and talk to the “bilingual” one-legged pigeon whom he calls Charlie (or Charlot), considers his best friend, and quite often identifies with. Moinous pities the handicapped bird as he pities himself, but watching the bird fly seems to offer him an image of freedom that is independent from life circumstances:

though Charlie has great difficulty walking on the ground on his one leg, he has no problem flying like other pigeons (116).

The image of freedom reactivates Moinous's hope for fulfilling his desires, but as his hopes remain unanswered, images of freedom and flying reappear in dreams and fantasies that let him forget about the world down below, and allow himself to be carried away into a better, imagined world.

The escape into fantasy can, however, have dangerous implications. In a dream sequence which begins as a fantasy and ends as a nightmare, another pigeon appears. In the dream, Moinous leaves a cinema with a prostitute, who takes him to her apartment:

A blue room full of exotic objects, among them a stuffed pigeon. A black cat is sitting on the dresser, but Moinous cannot tell at first if it is a real cat or a ceramic statue (81).

The movies and the prostitute offer the thrill of the urban life of fantasy. The city opens its secrets, and Moinous is finally invited to consume, and not only watch. However, entering the space of desire he has problems distinguishing between artifice and nature – the pigeon is stuffed, so rather not a symbol of freedom anymore. The cat may be real or artificial, and this ambiguity may reflect Moinous's identity problems: he too may be unsure whether he is just “a natural human being”, driven by human passion and instinct, or rather a creation of the social system, driven by desires stimulated by commodity culture. This feeling of uncertainty dramatically rises when Moinous approaches the prostitute, and is

horrified by the fire between her legs. The horror may come from the fact that clearly he is not the master of desire, he actually feels threatened by it. Consequently, he panics and starts running away, choosing the window as his route of escape. Jumping two floors down, he lands in a garden, where he climbs on top of a stone block and stands there like a statue. This sequence of vertical up-and-down movements then becomes transformed into an unstable image of an elevated position, which, however, offers no totalising view:

Just as he is about to jump off into the street, he realizes that, in fact, he is standing on the highest level of the Eiffel Tower [...]. For a moment he considers climbing down [...], but knowing his mortal fear of heights, he changes his mind [...]. Suddenly the platform becomes a crater of a dead volcano, then a ship deck, then the top flight of a lighthouse. It is raining hard and a thick fog prevents him from seeing where he is. He no longer knows when he will be able to come down (81).

Climbing the gate and turning into a statue may be seen as a way of neglecting his "human" side, repressing desire, choosing the safer status of an object, part of the city landscape. Repression, however, has further consequences – elevates one to the top of "the Eiffel Tower", and makes it quite difficult to come back to the reality down below. Contradicting de Certeau's descriptions of voyeuristic pleasures of seeing the world from above, Moinous does not seem to enjoy his elevated status – firstly, because of his "mortal fear of heights," and secondly, because no matter what high spot – volcano, ship, lighthouse – he finds himself in, none of them offers a good panoramic view of the space below, which remains hidden and unfamiliar behind the rain and the fog, while Moinous remains alienated from the world down below and unable to come back. This fascinating passage shows the ambivalence of Moinous's responses to urban reality. The thrill of the new, the desire for the unknown is mixed with the fear of being really out of place, and possibly tricked by a reality that appears tempting, but is dangerous and alien. The perspective from above is a way of escaping the threat of the unpredictable, but instead of offering comfort it brings more fear, alienation and confusion.

The dream with the prostitute and the Eiffel Tower is the second nightmare Moinous has that night. Interestingly, the first one shows his anxiety concerning his place in an anonymous crowd:

he is standing in the middle of a crowd of curious onlookers in front of which a series of executions is taking place, and this puzzles him. Everyone is wearing

a colonial helmet with a chin strap, except him. The victims are being tortured and then decapitated (80).

The feeling of alienation from those who represent power is here combined with the feeling of safety of the spectator hidden in the crowd. The dream reveals, however, that Moinous suspects this safety to be a mere illusion, which may collapse any moment:

Suddenly one of the executioners and two helpers come toward him, for it is his turn, he is told. This horrifies him terribly. He was not expecting this. But he does not resist. Instead, he smiles. In the dream he remembers that he has dreamed this dream before and he knows that the images will be erased when he awakens (80).

The horror of being persecuted gives way to the pleasure of inertia – letting things take their course, assuming that the paranoid vision of the crowd's hostility belongs to the inner world rather than to external reality. What the juxtaposition of the two dreams shows is that no matter what perspective Moinous might be taking – from within the crowd or from above, he nevertheless remains just as much confused and alienated, and simultaneously excited and frightened.

Wittman Ah Sing does not seem to share Moinous's anxieties. Neither the crowd nor heights fill him with fear. On the contrary, he seems to be enjoying both, and takes pride in occupying a room on the top floor of a high building: "Wait until you see the view from my top floor – all three bridges visible on this wind-swept morning" (161). Once he reaches the top, he goes on a stroll, admiring the views:

Yes, all three bridges in sight today. And the dragon's tail zigzagging up and over Lombard Street. Alcatraz – our troupe will take over the Rock for theater-in-the-round, the audience as yardbirds (161).

To Wittman, the world is first and foremost a stage, upon which he performs the drama of his life. A good view means nothing more than a possibility of being well seen. Performance-oriented, he reverses the voyeuristic pleasure – instead of enjoying a totalising perspective, he imagines himself mastering, or transgressing the limits of the space down below – or up above, depending on the organization of space and the position of the audience. In one of his poems, he envisions "a window-washing poet," who climbs "over the edge of a skyscraper, one leg at a time, onto his swing," and unclutches the ropes, "may the tilted City hold still." "Don't look down those paned streets," the poet-acrobat reminds himself, and

proceeds to perform amazing tricks (certainly no fear of heights involved), hoping for an applause from girls working in offices all around. The description of the performance ends by a vow: "I will make of my scaffold, a stage" (30).

In spite of Wittman's spectacular fantasies, his real performances take place at the level of the street, and in direct interaction with fellow city dwellers. The grandiose fascinations do not seem to work in reality. When driving outside the city, he admires pelicans flying above, and imagines them to be either airplanes or pterodactyls that look down on the car as "an exoskeletal scarab," but is then reminded that he should "[k]eep [his] eyes on the road" (160). The superfluity of the vertical perspective becomes apparent in the next scene, when he visits an abandoned lighthouse, as one of many possible locations for his theatre:

Yes, let's stop and visit the lighthouse [...] Explore storefronts, mansions, barns, terraces, vineyards, caves, and imagine a theater they would house. Prisons, forts, water-pumping stations, beer factories, lecture halls at teaching hospitals. The lighthouse could be it (160).

The lighthouse seems as good a place for staging a performance as any other (except traditional theatre, which does not seem appealing to Wittman's desire of integrating theatre with life). However, as Wittman starts exploring it, the space they find proves to be of little use for theatre purposes:

there was no air flow for creatures that needed to breathe. A dead pigeon lay on the floor. Taña climbed the steel stairs, and Wittman followed her [...]. The windows were opaque with salt and dirt. On a ledge was another dead bird. "Let's get out of here," said Wittman. [...] "We're not going to be able to turn this lighthouse into a theater, Taña. Unless our show had vertical action, and an audience of six lay face upward. Or we could seat the audience up here and on the stairs, and they look down at a play about the abysmal" (160).

Vertical perspective, Wittman seems to be saying, offers as much possibility of communication as much freedom as there is in a dead pigeon. In the lighthouse there is no air to breathe – and no life to enjoy. The tower does not even offer a possibility of observing the vast space of the sea outside – the windows are "opaque with salt and dirt." Dead pigeons are a negation of life and freedom, and to Wittman no performance has any sense without these two necessary qualities.

Vertical perspective, although it does serve the function of elevating the ego, proves superfluous and of no real use to a modern artist/*flâneur*. It may be worth noticing that Wittman's preference for keeping down to the ground has nothing to do with any fear of flying, as we learn earlier in the narrative that a unique dawn experienced together by people staying at a party till the morning, when the air was filled with seemingly supernatural pink light, had an unexpected result in that "nobody in this gathering of friends was ever again afraid when flying in an airplane" (149). The common experience, which is unexpectedly shared by a coincidental gathering of people who happen to witness it together, and are forever influenced by it may bring to mind Benjamin's observation on "the negative of solitude which is generally companion to the *flâneur*" – a friendship "strong enough to break through such solitude," which he bases on Jules Romains' idea of how friendship is formed:

You are present together at a moment in the life of the world, perhaps in the presence of a fleeting secret of the world – an apparition which nobody has ever seen before and perhaps nobody will ever see again. It may even be something very little [...] the thing up there vanishes. But they will know *in aeternum* that it once existed (1999: 444).

Benjamin, in spite of his generally pessimistic views on *flânerie*, offers an interesting option for the *flâneur's* experience – the solitude that is usually ascribed to the figure, may give way to friendship, based on the common experience of accidental events. It is this idea that seems closest to the style of *flânerie* that Wittman seems to be cultivating with the motto that "these accidental people are my people." With this attitude, the need for a shared experience that would form a community of strangers, the totalising option of seeing the world from above does not really have a lot to offer. It may be pleasing for the ego and offer an easy escape from reality, but as both Moinous's Eiffel Tower dream and Wittman's experience with the lighthouse show, instead of offering a clear and orderly vision of things, they may just have an effect of alienating the voyeur from the world down below, and the vision offered may not be clear at all, but a blur, distorted by the distance, bad conditions, and perhaps most of all – lack of comprehension of the defamiliarised landscape. Contrary to Benjamin's predictions, then, the modern *flâneur* has good reasons to stick to the street level, rather than enjoy the privileged position of a window above the crowd.

“Blind men walking the streets of unknown cities”

The contemporary *flâneur*, it seems, is still mostly interested in the variety of human interaction that goes on in the streets of a city, and will not give up the thrill of the unexpected for the safety of a totalising perspective. The amazement that the city offers to anyone willing to pay attention to the abundance of life by which its streets are filled is perhaps best expressed by Charlie – not a pigeon this time, but a minor character in *Tripmaster Monkey* relating to Wittman how the experience of seeing *The Saragossa Manuscript* has made him aware that all humans are “connected to one another in time and by blood” so that “we’re practically the same person living infinite versions of the great human adventure,” and changed forever his perception of the city:

I came out of the Cinema, and as I walked home, passing the doorways [...] and looking up at the windows of the apartments above the stores, I understood that inside each door and each window someone was leading an entire amazing life. [...] After that movie, Shattuck Avenue is a street of an unknown city. I’m going to spend the rest of my life discovering the streets of unknown cities. I can follow anybody into a strange other world. He or she will lead the way to another part of the story we’re all inside of (103).

The miraculous possibility of being able to enter different worlds every day seems to lie at the heart of *flânerie*, as presented both in *Smiles on Washington Square* and *Tripmaster Monkey*. In spite of Benjamin’s worries, the late twentieth-century *flâneurs* presented in these novels do not seem to be interested in commodities or the safety of secluded space. The *flâneurs* are certainly outsiders, be it by choice or necessity, but they retain a genuine interest in human interaction and a hope for encounters that would make a difference to their existence, forming unique human relationships, be they friendship, love or community. As a consequence of this hope, the experience of being immersed in the crowd will involve the continuous tension between the feeling of alienation and the thrill of realization that little human miracles may happen at any given moment. As the fan of *The Saragossa Manuscript* maintains:

The purpose of the population explosion is to make all the multitudinous ways of being human. We are like water of the I Ching, fluxing and flowing, seeking and filling each crack of each stream, each ocean [...]. Here we are, miraculously on Earth at the same moment, walking in and out of one another’s lifestories (103).

Wittman is certainly willing to agree with this, and he wants to see the film as well. He keeps asking after it, but the film is not shown anywhere, and he never meets anyone else who has seen it. Nevertheless, he remembers the film as told by Charlie, and even if after some years it seems more like a dream, the impact of the story told by Charlie leaves a mark on a number of people who listened to it. Some will remember it as a blur, some "will think they've seen it," but all "will remember a promise of something good among cannonballs and skulls" (104). The very fact of a shared, even if imaginary, experience proves the point that Charlie was making when relating the movie – that the opportunity to share life with other human beings one accidentally meets may be thought of as a wondrous miracle. It is also interesting to compare Charlie's account of the film in Kingston's novel with the film itself. The multiple stories of *The Saragossa Manuscript*, made by Wojciech Has in 1964, are reflected in the novel in a deformed shape, and hardly anything from Charlie's summary actually corresponds to the film's story line. One could even wonder if Maxine Hong Kingston had indeed seen the film herself, or just heard an account from someone who did not remember it very well. Or whether she had seen it, but forgot the stories themselves and all that remained was a vague impression and recollections of some details. In either case, the film's function in the novel does not change – it appears there as a link between characters who in sharing the distorted story nevertheless become aware of what the film shows – that one of the most amazing things in life is the ability to participate in the lives of others, and share parts of one's own experience with them, in spite of the blurs, blanks and distortions that are inevitable in the communication process.

It has to be noted that the fascinating complications of *The Saragossa Manuscript* have not made it a great commercial success, and in spite of being recognized as a masterpiece, it never entered mainstream culture. This, of course, may prove Benjamin's point that the progress of capitalism makes people automated consumers rather than active participants in the city life and imaginative recipients of culture. It is hard to disagree that contemporary culture in general may to a large extent resemble Benjamin's sad diagnosis. It seems, however, that Benjamin's observations leave no room for the figure that keeps demanding personal freedom to both admire the crowd and criticize it, and that is the figure of

the *flâneur*, who instead of becoming yet another member of the crowd of consumers, insists on active participation in urban life, and moreover believes that among the mass of people one encounters everyday in the streets of a city, an unknown number might also be of the *flâneur* type. Although Wittman does not manage to see the film, he remains deeply influenced by it, as it confirms his belief that only by going out into the street and becoming exposed to all sorts of unexpected events can one have a chance of creating any sort of community. *Flânerie*, as presented in *Smiles on Washington Square* and *Tripmaster Monkey*, is not so much about voyeurism, categorization and consumption, as about succumbing to the flow of life in the streets, where in spite of the *flâneur*'s original detachment, seeing things triggers the desire to participate and interact, driven by continuous curiosity of what unexpected event may happen the next moment. This combination of curiosity and fascination with the mystery that everyday life presents is perhaps best expressed in the line from *The Saragossa Manuscript*, which keeps reappearing in *Tripmaster Monkey*: "We are as blind men walking the streets of unknown cities" (101).

It appears, then, that the figure of the *flâneur* manages to persist in spite of difficulties, and it seems that in following this figure in American literature one may be able to grasp a certain undercurrent in American culture. It is not everyone that can become a *flâneur* – in this figure different marginalized groups within American society can be found: people persistently walking the streets will often be ones who because of matters of race or social status do not belong to the mainstream culture – be it different ethnic groups, immigrants, the unemployed, the homeless, bums and clochards, but also rebels and detectives, who become suspicious of the surface of things and take to the street in order to investigate the matter or disrupt the order of things in hope of finding some deeper reality underneath common appearances. A question that the examples of Moinous and Wittman as contemporary *flâneurs* will inevitably bring to mind is whether it is possible to conceive of a *female flâneur*, or a *flâneuse*. Baudelaire and Benjamin took the gender of the figures they described for granted. Is it possible, however, to limit contemporary *flânerie* to the male experience? And if not, why is it that both Federman and Kingston choose male protagonists to represent the fascinations and anxieties of the contemporary *flâneur*?

Flâneur/flâneuse?

Curiously enough, in both novels discussed here, the *flâneur* is a male figure. There might be a number of reasons why this should be the case, one of them being just the Baudelairean tradition rooted in the nineteenth century, where for a middle-class woman to be aimlessly walking the streets of Paris alone was not an acceptable pastime and certainly not a safe activity. As feminist critics such as Janet Wolf and Griselda Pollock emphasize, the problem with the concept of a *flâneuse* is that in the nineteenth century many of the public spaces of modernity were simply unavailable to female city dwellers (Parsons, 5). And even within the "respectable public areas," a woman would not be expected to wander aimlessly and unaccompanied by some respectable (preferably male) company. Consequently, the nineteenth-century *flâneur* is invariably defined as male, while women remain objects of his aesthetic fascination, but are never suspected of the drive for *flânerie* themselves.

Baudelaire's remarks on women may come as a shock to the contemporary reader. He defines the woman as "[t]he being who, for the majority of men is the source of the liveliest [...] delights" (30). Women are there to be seen and admired, but not only do they have no subjectivity of their own, it is even out of the question to expect any sort of communication with this "being as terrible and incommunicable as the Deity" (30). Baudelaire makes sure that the parallel between a woman and a deity does not go too far, when he adds an important distinction: a woman – as opposed to the Infinite – is incomprehensible simply because she "has nothing to communicate" (30). While the male *flâneur*/artist is equipped with the quality of genius, the woman is but a decorative part of reality, whose main function is to provide beauty to stimulate the artistic drive of the male *flâneur*, for "[s]he is a kind of idol, stupid perhaps, but dazzling and bewitching, who holds wills and destinies suspended on her glance" (30).

The powerful glance that the Baudelairean woman is equipped with introduces a major paradox into the position of women in the streets of Paris. In spite of the claim that their main function is to be pleasurable objects of the male gaze, it is in fact the *female gaze* that strikes the lovers of the beautiful. As in "*A une passante*," it is the gaze of the unknown woman that haunts the *flâneur* with the fleeting possibility of contact. By stressing the impact that the mysterious, unknowable female gaze has on the male stroller, Baudelaire seems to undermine his own argument, for it is not difficult to imagine a subjective, critical consciousness — consciousness of a *flâneuse* — behind it. As Deborah L. Parsons puts it,

Degraded, marginalized, or alienated as they may be, all the women common to Baudelaire's work are observers, and through them it is possible to question the assumption of the masculinity of public place and to formulate the beginnings of the conceptual idea of a *flâneuse* (24).

Interestingly, the "assumption of masculinity" can be undermined not only by investigating the significance of the female figure as described by Baudelaire — the possibility of questioning of gender roles becomes apparent in Baudelaire's chapter preceding the one on the woman — when he discusses a fascinating variant of the figure of the *flâneur*: that of the dandy.

Like the *flâneur*, the dandy also spends the time idling away in the streets, observing others with a detached, *blasé* attitude. However, as Deborah Parsons notices, the two can be distinguished if perceived as figures in the network of social gaze in the streets: "An important difference between the 'dandy' and the *flâneur* is that the latter observes whilst the former displays himself for observation" (20). This distinction is obviously not very precise, as both figures clearly participate in the complex game of observing while being observed. Nevertheless, it remains a valid point that for the *flâneur* the act of observation will have more importance than the fact of being exposed to others, while for the narcissistic dandy observation may or may not be involved in the act of making a public appearance. Baudelaire summarizes the spirit of dandyism as "the joy of astonishing others, and the proud satisfaction of never oneself being astonished" (28). What is striking here, is a parallel that can be drawn between Baudelaire's description of the dandy and that of a woman, who "has to astonish and charm us; as an idol, she is obliged to adorn herself in order to be adored" (33). It looks as if the image of the dandy and that of a woman is governed by the same principle —

of an artifice, masquerade, which is set up for public admiration, and under which a mysterious, unknowable being is hiding. However, whereas Baudelaire talks of dandyism in terms of heroism, praising the effort to hold a position superior to the pettiness of everyday life, he trivializes the same effort on the part of the woman. Although he perceives fashion and *maquillage* as "a symptom of the taste for the ideal" (32), and argues that their artifice reaches the realm of "something superior and divine" (33), he at the same time maintains that women's efforts at perfecting their appearance are only done "the better to conquer hearts and rivet attention" (33). In short, whereas the dandy rises above the common crowd and places himself in the realm of the unattainable through artifice and a *blasé* attitude, the woman creates herself in order to please others. Even if initially the position of the woman is similar to that of the dandy, in the end the dandy remains untouched, while the woman in one way or another is bound to become the object of consumption (Baudelaire follows the section on cosmetics by one on prostitutes).

In the sequence of headings of Baudelaire's essay, "The Dandy" has an interesting position in between "The Military Man" and "Woman", i.e. between the stereotypical essence of masculinity, and that of femininity – which reaffirms the androgynous quality that is associated with dandyism. It seems that the figure of the dandy may help to question the presumed masculinity of Baudelaire's *flâneur*. Deborah Parsons (drawing on Mary Ann Doane's discussion of the masquerade as a method of women's self-presentation) claims that the masquerade, a link between the positions taken by women and dandies, may provide a place for a female *flâneuse* in the streets that are governed by a powerful network of gazes:

Through the masquerade women can subvert the superior possession of the male gaze by themselves controlling the image that it objectifies [...]. She too is thus an artist, and through the masquerade of femininity does not so much objectify herself and see herself through the eye of the male, as constructs herself and presents herself as she wants to be seen (26).

Parsons concludes that the *flâneur* is an androgynous, rather than a masculine figure, and therefore it is only natural to conceive of a female variant, a *flâneuse*:

The urban figure, who is made a metaphor for the modern artist, is ambiguously gendered as the *flâneur*, masculine as a bourgeois male of privacy and leisure, but feminine as passively stimulated by the city, dandiacal in dress and on the margins of the public city world (38-39).

Parsons maintains that the common assertion of the maleness of the *flâneur* springs from a general nineteenth century "male anxiety" (28), which presupposed "the orientation of 'femininity' towards the unconscious, amorality, materiality, and sexuality, and of 'masculinity' towards rationality and consciousness" (29). The new, and therefore frightening, mass culture became associated with feminisation, and the anonymous crowd of consumers was perceived as consisting of female buyers. The *flâneur* was supposed to differ from the crowd by virtue of his detachment, and lack of interest in commodities – or social bounds – of which women were supposed not to be capable. In Ferguson's account, a woman-*flâneur* would be a contradiction in terms for the 19th-century society (as would be a woman-artist): "No woman is able to attain the aesthetic distance so crucial to the *flâneur's* superiority. She is unfit for *flânerie* because she desires the objects spread before her and acts upon that desire" (27). And there seems to be no way out of the vicious circle: a woman in the streets who is not on a shopping pursuit is herself perceived as a commodity, an object of desire for the male *flâneur*: "A woman idling on the street is to be 'consumed' and 'enjoyed' along with the rest of the sights that the city affords" (28).

This dichotomy in the definitions of male and female roles in the urban world contradicts, however, the original idea behind the figure of the *flâneur*, which was to subvert the masculinist order of the society. Originally, the *flâneur* was often described as a social outcast, "something of a deviant in emerging bourgeois society" (Ferguson, 25). Parsons argues that "the concept of the *flâneur* itself contains gender ambiguities that suggest the figure to be a site for the contestation of male authority rather than the epitome of it" (5-6). She lists "adaptability, multiplicity, boundary-crossing, fluidity" (41) as much more important characteristics of *flânerie* than Benjamin's masculinist ideas of superiority and the drives for categorization and consumption. Like the dandy, the *flâneur* is positioned in between normative dichotomies, choosing to remain on the border between detachment and involvement, contestation and consumption, masculinity and femininity.

Why is it, then, that novels such as *Smiles on Washington Square* and *Tripmaster Monkey* (written respectively by a male and a female writer) feature male *flâneurs*,

and not *flâneuses*? In the light of the arguments discussed above, it will not do to maintain that Western culture is simply still privileging the male perspective, confining women to the role of fetishised objects of the male gaze (as described by Laura Mulvey's critique of Hollywood cinema). If the figure of the *flâneur* is indeed characterized by boundary-crossing, it may be more interesting to observe in what way the gender of the protagonists of these novels is constructed, and in what way *flânerie* itself might serve to dissolve gender boundaries.

In both novels the traditional distinctions between genders are continuously challenged. Wittman Ah Sing of Kingston's *Tripmaster Monkey* is so much preoccupied with his looks that he could legitimately be called a Beatnik version of the dandy – he is very much aware of his looks and tries to attract as much attention as possible. Whenever he can, he contemplates his own reflection:

Sly-eyed, he checked himself out in the plate-glass windows. The ends of his moustache fell below his bearded jaw bone. He had tied his hair back, braided loose, almost a queue but not a slave queue, very hip, like a samurai whose hair has gotten slightly undone in battle. Like Kyuzu, terse swordsman in *Seven Samurai*. A head of his time, ha ha (12).

His masquerade involves playing with racial stereotypes – Wittman wants to look Chinese, but not evoke the stereotypical image of a Chinaman that would be reassuring to an average racially prejudiced American. The Chinese-pride exercised by Wittman involves wearing green, which his family had diplomatically tried to discourage him from, timidly admitting that the reason behind it is that it makes Chinese people look yellow. As soon as Wittman realized that not wearing green was supposed to protect him from racial prejudice, "he knew what color he had to wear – green, his color to wear to war" (44). In his private war against categorization, he takes care to challenge as many conventions as he can:

Wittman's suited body and hairy head didn't go together. Nor did the green shirt and the greener tie [...] match each other or the suit [...] His appearance was an affront to anybody who looked at him, he hoped. Bee-e-en! The monkey, using one of his seventy-two transformations, was now changed into a working stiff on his way to his paying job (44).

For Wittman, dressing up is one of his many performative acts, a conscious transformation, a masquerade designed to challenge the world he is going to confront. However, the narration prevents the reader from assuming that this attitude makes him a complete master of his appearance, and the effect it has on

his "audience." As Wittman is getting dressed in front of the mirror, the narrator comments: "He had assumed his mirror face, but thought he always looked like that" (44). Ultimately, Wittman's idea of manipulating the response to his appearance remains in the realm of wishful thinking – the masquerade only works to a certain extent, and its effects are often unpredictable. No matter how hard Wittman is trying, he will not win the favours of the beautiful Nanci Lee, whom he hopes in vain to impress. Wittman as a *flâneur*/dandy verges between a "feminine" interest in his own looks, and a "masculine" desire to possess.

Moinous of Federman's *Smiles on Washington Square* has no chance of being a dandy, as his low social position presses him as far as selling his only coat in exchange for a room he finds after a period of homelessness. He indeed admires and desires the beautiful and well-dressed women he encounters in the streets. In his first confrontation with Sucette, he is struck by the radical contrast between her appearance and his own:

there is something incongruous about this rather beautiful and elegant blonde [...] Yes, she seems out of place in this crowd [...] shouting slogans with the rest of them, many of them looking more like older versions of Moinous himself. Working-class types. Or more likely a group of unemployed workers (118).

It is Sucette that stands out in the crowd, while Moinous thinks of himself as one of the rather uninteresting mass of men. Obviously, he desires Sucette, but it is hard to equate this desire with a *flâneur*'s detached superiority – what keeps haunting him until the unresolved end of the book is "despair and loneliness," following "the miserable hope of wanting to be loved," which makes him wish "he had never seen this charming blonde on Washington Square" (145). In the end, it is the male protagonist who remains hoping for a relationship – with a woman, whom he perceives to be superior not because of a Baudelairean fantasy of divine beauty, but because of a combination of socially valid factors – financial security, political engagement, artistic creativity, which to Moinous remain as abstract and unattainable as the woman herself.

In Federman's narrative it is Sucette that makes creative use of the chance encounter in the street. Her social and financial status allows her to spend her days constructing fictional stories out of the random data that everyday life brings

about. In this way she perfectly resembles the *flâneur*/artist, often seen as "an author in search of characters and intrigue," for whom "[a]n entire novel can spring from a single encounter observed in the street" (Ferguson 28). Thus Moinous becomes a character in one of her stories and the passivity of the *flâneur* reaches its peak – as it turns out, even his name is an invention of Sucette, who decided to play on the French pronouns for "me" and "us" in order to retain a sense of togetherness between herself as a writer and her character/potential lover. What further complicates this operation, however, is the obvious fact that it is actually Raymond Federman who writes the story of Sucette and Moinous. On another level then, the name can suggest a combination of Federman's experience as an immigrant in the 1950s New York and as a writer incorporating a chance encounter into his novel. "Moinous" then encodes a double sense of identity – privileged and marginalized, passive and creative, desiring and desired, masculine and feminine. Employing metatextual techniques, Federman manages to transgress fixed boundaries and suggest that our sense of identity is a result of conflicting tensions rather than a predetermined given. The figure of the *flâneur* can as well exist on these two levels, or rather be a combination of both.

In *Tripmaster Monkey* a similar process of the dissolution of gender boundaries can be observed. It is not apparent, however, in the beginning, when Wittman is still trying to persist in a masculinist vision of the order of things. Walking down a street with Nanci (the object of his desire), he cannot help but think:

Strange the way a man has to walk with a woman. She follows his lead like they're dancing, she wasn't even a wife or girlfriend [...] No, Wittman didn't want to slow down for anybody either, become an inclining, compliant owned man. Husbands walk differently from single guys (28).

In this way he follows directly in the line of a traditionally conceived *flâneur*, who "is in society as he is in the city, suspended from social obligation, disengaged, disinterested, dispassionate" (Ferguson 26), and for whom "female companionship is entirely out of the question" (Ferguson 27). What he desires is to have access to Nanci's beauty and win her admiration, but at the same time not get involved in any way. This schematic division of gender roles, like his overall drive for categorization, does not survive until the end of the book. At a party, he joins a dancing crowd and goes through an uncanny experience – in the stroboscopic light the divisions between individual bodies cease to be obvious:

My parts dance whether I dance or not. Might as well dance. You move your crazy way; the light moves its crazy way. That hand or foot could be yours, it could be mine [...] Open and shut your eyes, change the periodicity. Can't tell your blink from its blink [...] Safe. Safe [...]. Free of partners. I'm dancing with her and her and nobody and everybody. Loose (108).

The mechanical light erases a sense of control over one's own body, and of unambiguous social roles and connections. The trance-like passivity that it encourages has a liberating effect on Wittman:

We are as face cards being shuffled [...]. And the world is in sync. In sync at last. God Almighty, in sync at last. Feet go with drums. Heart booms to bass. My pulse, its pulse. Its pulse, my pulse. Ears, eyes, feet, heart, myself and all these people, my partners all. In sync. All synchronized [...] O democratic light (110).

The "democratic light," followed by the shared experience of the story of *The Saragossa Manuscript*, transforms Wittman and his friends, as their individuality and narcissism give way to a need for a community, so that in the morning they make vows to protect their new "chosen family" that consists of random people who survived the party till the morning: "Let's invite everybody to marry everybody [...] We'll go anywhere and marry anybody! How do unrelated people get together? They get married!" (143). Wittman ends up as a brother to his friends and a husband to a girl he met at the party: Taña, who then takes him home. Their walk, however, bears a distinguishable difference from the previously described walk with Nanci. In the beginning Wittman follows his old routine: "He took a hold of her hand, and pulling her behind him, led her on a twining walk." As it turns out, however, Taña will not be led: "Taña caught up beside him; they walked together holding hands" (127). The party, which constitutes a turning point in the novel, makes Wittman realise that his air of superiority is his own creation, as much as the boundaries that seem to exist between him and other people.

What makes his situation even more complicated and confusing, is the confrontation with Taña's comfortable home – Wittman, for whom verging on homelessness was a part of his "voluntary poverty" life scheme, feels tempted by the possibility of living a nice and comfortable life with a beautiful and intelligent woman: "He could live here. He was itching to rummage, and to view life through her kaleidoscopes and prisms and magnifying glasses and scientific microscope" (153). Taña's apartment is as far from a stereotypical image of a "feminine space"

as she herself does not even vaguely resemble a stereotypical housewife. Wittman observes that "[s]he's another one who knows how to live on her own, where she belongs in time and space" (153). Moreover, the flat contains her own fantastic paintings, and Wittman cannot hide his envy at this possibility of showing off one's artistic capacities: "You're a painter [...] I wish I were a painter and always had something to show for it" (152). Wittman's simplistic vision of a male artist and a female admirer gives way to his admiration for the girl, who then proceeds to set out the rules of their new relationship: "You don't define my life [...] Making love is my idea as well as yours [...] We can each of us cut out whenever we feel like it" (153-4). Wittman is envious again, as these were the rules he had imagined himself outlining for a girl. Nevertheless, he agrees to the rules and admires the woman that is capable of "outplaying" him.

By the end of the day, after having spent 36 hours with a woman he didn't know the day before, Wittman begins to worry, and decides to leave the pleasant company in order to defend his independence: "If you don't get back to your own pok-mun alone when the weekend is over, you start becoming the husband part of a longterm living-together couple" (217). Wittman genuinely dislikes the idea of becoming a husband (even though he and Taña unofficially got married earlier the same day), but when confronted with the prospect of a bus home or another night over, lacks the strength to resist:

he had lost the energy to go out in the streets and catch the last bus in the drear night [...] walking to his poor room. And here were clean sheets, a made bed, and this girl (219).

The challenge becomes even worse the next day, when Taña informs him over the phone that their agreement is still unclear on a certain point: "I do want to be married to you, but I don't want to be the wife [...] I got carried away with you, Wittman, and forgot to ask which one of us would be the wife" (272). Wittman, who the day before was afraid of becoming a husband, is suddenly confronted with the prospect of becoming a wife. He proposes a compromise: "Wait, wait. We take turns. I want a wife too sometimes, you know" (273), but Taña is not easy to convince. What results from it looks like a disaster – in his final speech at the end of the novel Wittman describes the mess that has been escalating in the apartment since he moved in and Taña started consistently disregarding all

housewife duties. Wittman begins by announcing that he "may be getting a divorce" (335). But as he proceeds, he comes to the opposite conclusion – he addresses Taña in the audience saying:

you're free to leave if you want to leave me. But I'll always love you unromantically. I'll clean up the place. I get the hint. You don't have to be the housewife. I'll do one-half of the housewife stuff. But you can't call me your wife. You don't have to be the wife either (339).

Thus the novel concludes by a total erasure of distinctive categories such as life and art, masculinity and femininity: Wittman manages to stage the performance in which everybody has a place, so that all the random people he had accidentally met in the streets can come together and create a community, and he finally comes to terms with the disappearance of the two classic schemes of gender roles: that of romantic love and of patriarchal marriage.

The similarity in the way both novels deal with gender distinctions becomes obvious in two parallel scenes in which the two couples of lovers make arrangements for staying in touch. When Moinous is leaving Sucette's cosy apartment for the first time, he feels embarrassed about not being able to provide her with his phone number:

Moinous explains that he doesn't have a telephone because he doesn't plan to stay much longer in his furnished room in the Bronx, otherwise he would give Sucette his number too. But he promises to call her soon (124).

When Wittman calls Taña after he leaves her apartment, she asks him for his phone number, and finds out he does not have a home phone, "[n]or a home" (272). Wittman makes it another point contributing to his overall lifestyle, claiming that "[a]t a payphone I can dig the street" (272). In the next conversation, this time with Nanci, he confirms this stand: "At a street phone, you can't run out of what to talk about: it comes to you in the onswirling lifestream" (274). In spite of his fascination with the freedom that having no phone – or home – offers, he nevertheless makes sure that his freedom is not based on excluding others, when he assures Taña:

I didn't mean to put you at a disadvantage. I see what you're thinking. 'Don't call us; we'll call you.' I don't operate like that, Taña. I just don't have a telephone, that's all, honest (272).

In both novels, the seemingly carefree male characters become attracted to females who are distinctively better off, which shows not only by the fact that they have nice homes and phone lines, but also money. Taña drives a car and Sucette pays for the taxi ride to her apartment. Sucette also pays the bill in the coffee shop where she and Moinous go for their first coffee, thus saving Moinous from a financial difficulty. Wittman does pay for his part of the bill in a restaurant he goes to with Taña, although he does so "with virtually all the money he had left" (215). He then has to sign up for unemployment, while Taña continues with her boring but stable job. Sucette has enough money not to have a job at all and to go shopping for real while Moinous is just aimlessly window shopping. In short, although the first impression from the reading could be that the women's positions indeed do not give them the privilege of carefree *flânerie*, after a closer investigation it turns out that the reasons behind it are everything but classically feminine – what distinguishes the women from their *flâneur* partners is that they know where they are going, and can afford to spend their time in a way that is more productive than wandering aimlessly in the streets. This does not, however, confine them to the consumerist drive, as described by Benjamin. Both female protagonists are involved in creative activities and are admired for them by the male *flâneurs*. They also excel in the art of critical observation, which is clearly visible in Sucette's critique of the social system of the McCarthy era, and Taña's scrutiny of her exploitive workplace. Moreover, they are admired by their male counterparts for the amount of sexual energy and psychological integrity that they seem to possess. All in all, the female protagonists enjoy much higher social positions than the male ones. Although Wittman's low social status is the consequence of his own choice, whereas Moinous is stuck in it against his will, they both share a situation of homelessness and poverty that keeps them on the streets. In contrast, however, to the presupposed unwillingness of a *flâneur* to get involved in any social relations, they both strive to achieve goals traditionally defined as female: to be part of a local community and a family.

What can be concluded, then, is that in both novels we deal with an interesting reversal of feminine and masculine roles: while the male loses the air of superiority, authority and control, the female acquires money, power, critical sense and both sexual and creative energy. The very act of *flânerie* should consequently

be perceived in the light of this reversal – the *flâneur*, who already in Baudelaire showed traits of standing against the masculinist norm of the society, in the twentieth-century form shows even more the traits that used to be ascribed solely to women and served to prove their inferiority. What both novels do then, can be perceived as an effect of feminist shifts in the way modern society structures itself, but instead of introducing the character of a *flâneuse* that would complement her male predecessors, the narratives propose to deconstruct rigid notions of gender altogether. Such a move can work more radically than insistence on female *flânerie*: where a female *flâneuse* introduced into the narrative would still have to struggle with gender prejudice, and might have to be naively equipped with old-fashioned characteristics of masculinity in order to prove herself an equal of the *flâneur*, a male protagonist who in contrast with the females he admires shows more and more feminine traits makes transgressing gender prejudice (along with race and class issues) a more plausible task. A non-totalising perspective, if introduced in a female character, might be taken for a sign of her weaker position, a mark of the old presupposed female inability to form judgment, make choices, master space. The struggle against categorization seems to be more effective if grounded in a masculine perspective. After all, a woman in love wandering the streets of a metropolis in search of some form of happiness would almost inevitably be taken to be ridiculously sentimental. It seems significant that Maxine Hong Kingston (a Chinese-American woman writer from San Francisco) chose a male Chinese-American “poet” from San Francisco for a focalizer of her narrative, while Raymond Federman (a Jewish-American writer of French origin, living in New York) decided to focus on the perspective of a Jewish immigrant from France, whose story, however, turns out to be invented by the creative efforts of an American woman writer, who even equips him with a symbolic name (*Moi-nous*), suggesting a unity of the two: writer and protagonist, man and woman, two lovers. Perhaps it is through male protagonists, or, ideally, through a combination of male and female perspectives, and the reversal or intermingling of conventional gender roles, that a feminist perspective on contemporary urban life can work best?

The literary figures of Wittman and Moinous, although in many ways continuing the tradition of *flânerie*, oppose the drive for categorization and the tendency for consumption that Benjamin ascribed to the *flâneur*. Depicted as walking through

twentieth-century Manhattan or San Francisco, forming relationships with people that they accidentally come to meet, they make the reader transgress the limitations of class, race and gender, opening way to a more versatile concept of the urban experience than one determined by consumer culture. Nevertheless, their leisurely lifestyle – whether voluntary or resulting from a low social status – confines them to the margins of society, and their existence, no matter how much sense they manage to read into it, will appear to have no purpose from the perspective of an average citizen living according to capitalist standards. The unacceptable purposelessness of the *flâneur's* lifestyle is, according to Benjamin, the reason why *flâneurs* in the modern world tend to assume the role of the detective, and instead of aimless walking try to track something down, interpret the data they find around themselves and in this way give purpose to their passion for observation. And indeed, since Edgar Allan Poe, the detective has continued to be a prominent figure in American culture. Although placed more willingly in the realm of fiction than in that of real life, the figure may be seen to reveal some common fears and desires of the modern urban collective unconscious. In the next chapter, I would like to take a look at two famous incarnations of the detective in what have come to be known as classics of American postmodern fiction, and compare the way these figures function in the narratives with the previous observations on the *flâneur*.

CHAPTER TWO

Postmodern Incarnations of the Detective

in Thomas Pynchon and Paul Auster

***The Crying of Lot 49* and *City of Glass* – walking as a quest?**

As the examples from the two novels previously analysed may suggest, one way to depict contemporary cities is through literary figures of outsiders, who either out of a rebellious, personal choice, or because of difficult life circumstances, spend their time walking through cities and observing life in the streets, continuing the tradition of *flânerie*. What distinguishes the *flâneurs* from ordinary citizens around them is the aimlessness that characterises their everyday activity of walking. That, according to Benjamin, is the reason for both the emergence and the crisis of *flânerie* in the modern world – he claims that capitalism, as a system based on rationality and effectiveness, imposes industriousness on all members of the society. "The flâneur," Benjamin maintains, "required a social legitimation of his habitus" (1999: 442), and found that a good way to justify idle walks is to treat all the observations made on the way as part of a meticulous work of a self-appointed detective. The activity of the detective is similar to that of a *flâneur*, but his objectives are different, as there is always a purpose to a detective's lone walking. Although most characteristic of popular fiction, the figure of the detective keeps reappearing in various forms of American literature, and has undergone interesting transformations, which at the same time link it to and distinguish it from its origin in Poe's fiction. Unlike the skilled detectives of popular genres, however, literary detectives often share an interesting feature: they are by no means professionals. Like the narrator of "The Man of the Crowd," they are more or less ordinary figures who become obsessed by some coincidence or unusual appearance in the street, and decide to try and trace down the mystery, hoping for an answer to some haunting question. It is this voluntary quality of their search that perhaps links them the most to the figure of the *flâneur*.

The self-appointed detective – the hope and challenge offered by the quest

Neither Oedipa Maas of Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49*, nor Daniel Quinn of Paul Auster's *City of Glass* are outsiders *par excellence*, although they

both, each in a different way, find themselves emotionally distanced from common patterns of life. Oedipa Maas, a young suburban housewife, feels tired of her routine life. Her days seem "more or less identical, or all pointing the same way" (6), and she seems to have given up her ambition of breaking out of the ordinary. She envisions the world as a tower, whose "height and architecture" are "like her ego only incidental" (13). Seeing no escape, she conforms to the suburban consumer lifestyle, which is dominated by mass commodities and mass media, poignantly encoded in her very last name. The only unordinary event in her life is when an eccentric ex-lover, Pierce Inverarity, calls one night at three in the morning, "from where she would never know," and confuses her by changing roles and voices, to then hang up and leave her wondering over the "quiet ambiguity" of the phone line which "could have pointed in any direction, been any length" (6). She recalls that event a year later, when she finds out that the old lover has died and made her the executor of his will. It is in the process of trying to sort out his vast estate that her routine activities give way to an obsession with clues to mysteries that her originally innocent investigation suddenly starts abounding with. Gradually, as Gerd Hurm puts it, the suburban consumer "turns into a would-be reformer who searches for an authentic counterculture in the urban underworld" and becomes a detective who "intends to put her deranged world in order" (310). The task she embarks on, however, proves to be much more difficult than she could have possibly imagined.

Quinn's life, although significantly different from Oedipa's, is characterised by a similar sense of pointlessness. In the beginning of *City of Glass* we learn that Quinn, now 35, "had once been married, had once been a father, and that both his wife and son were now dead" (3). In reaction to this tragic situation, however, his life becomes perhaps even more organised by routine than that of Oedipa's: he lives alone, earns a living as a writer of mystery novels, and has a lot of free time. The privileged lifestyle has little value to Quinn, who only tries to find ways of killing time, for which he does not see much use. His only passion is walking in the streets of Manhattan, which he perceives as "an inexhaustible space, a labyrinth of endless steps" (4). Rather than making him involved in the life of the city, however, his walks give him a "feeling of being lost [...] not only in the city, but within himself as well" (4). This seems to be the only point of his walks – he excels in the

detachment so typical of the classic *flâneur* to the extent of losing the sense of curiosity that Baudelaire saw as a distinctive feature of the figure. His *flânerie* reaches the extreme of decadence: the only thing that matters to him is motion, and he keeps his emotional reactions to the minimum. In this, he becomes more of a drifter than a real *flâneur*, as the following extract illustrates:

Motion was of the essence, [...] allowing himself to follow the drift of his own body. By wandering aimlessly, all places became equal, and it no longer mattered where he was. On his best walks, he was able to feel that he was nowhere. And this, finally, was all he ever asked of things: to be nowhere (4).

As in the case of Oedipa, his life is marked by a massive loss of illusions – his past life cannot be revived, and he gives in to the pointless routine of everyday existence. Interestingly, as in Pynchon's novel, what breaks the routine of his life is also a phone call, which also takes place at night. Like Oedipa, he is also confused by it: the speaker at the other end of the line demands to speak with a Paul Auster of the Auster Detective Agency, and Quinn hangs up after a futile attempt to explain that he knows of no such agency or person. However, when the next night the telephone rings and he answers it too late, he starts waiting for the mysterious stranger to call again. When it finally happens, Quinn is ready to take on any challenge – he assumes the false personality of Paul Auster and embarks on a case which is going to merge his own existence with that of a character he created for his mystery novels: the detective Max Work.

Raymond Williams, when referring to the Sherlock Holmes stories, defined the detective as "the man who can find his way through the fog, who can penetrate the intricacies of the street" (227). Even though Conan Doyle's London was already characterised by "labyrinthine obscurity and lurid fascination," Williams notices that the reassuring figure of the detective provides the image of the city with "a romantic atmosphere which some look back to with nostalgia" (227). The detective, equipped with the power of rationality and logic, could be counted on to bring order back to the space overtaken by chaos. In his book on contemporary urban crime fiction in the USA, Ralph Willet recalls this observation, and contrasts it with later modes of detective fiction, which "can be used deconstructively to display the fragmentation and complexity of modern life and to undermine the tendency of narrative to achieve control and closure" (8). The image of the city as a labyrinth refers to Benjamin, who in his explorations of urban themes "preferred

fragments to wholes" (9). Willet finds the ideas of fragmentation particularly relevant to contemporary urban fiction, and observes that

Since Benjamin, and specifically in the menacing cityscapes of contemporary American novelists such as Auster and [...] Pynchon, the overwhelming presence of the labyrinth has been the source of paranoia and fatigue (9).

Paranoia and fatigue are both functions of the dissatisfaction experienced by the detective when his investigation, based on scattered fragments of the city landscape, fails to offer a conclusive outcome. Willet observes that the city in crime fiction is often characterised by images of decline:

The fragmented city, where experience can become dreamlike and insubstantial, yields greater or lesser pieces of fictions to the seeker after truth, bewildered by both the labyrinths and open spaces of the city (133).

His interpretation of such an urban image is not overtly fatalistic; decline, he maintains, "is simply part of the urban rhythm of growth and decay" (135). This assertion brings him to the conclusion that "[c]rime fiction cannot avoid the reproduction of negative images but they may co-exist textually with utopian longings" (139). The urban labyrinth, then, which poses a challenge for the detective, and resists his or her efforts to comprehend and master it, would hold an ambivalent position: it would on the one hand present a threatening image of chaos, irrationality, crime and death, and on the other hand continue to be a source of motivation, inspiration and hope – for answers, explanations, truth, community, life. Both Pynchon's and Auster's detectives, as contemporary variations on the figure of the *flâneur*, have to deal with these two polarised sets of images of the contemporary metropolis. By tracing their ways around the cities they explore, some interesting observations on contemporary urban existence can be made. The postmodern literary detective's perception of the world may be troubled and ambiguous, but I believe it represents a new kind of spirituality, which goes beyond fixed value systems and is characteristic of contemporary urban consciousness. In what follows, I would like to approach problems of postmodern spirituality, taking Pynchon's and Auster's variations on the figure of the detective as symptomatic of new ways of thinking about language, experience and meaning in the contemporary world.

For Quinn, one of the pleasures of being Paul Auster is the heightened sense of fictionality of his own existence, which he has for some time already considered a crucial quality of his life. When Quinn is getting ready for his appointment with the mysterious stranger, he finds solace in the thought that "[i]t wasn't his appointment, it was Paul Auster's" (14). And "[t]o be Auster meant being a man with no interior, a man with no thoughts" (75), which is exactly what Quinn had been trying to achieve on his drifting walks. For Quinn, who "long ago stopped thinking of himself as being real" (10), taking on the identity of Auster is just a continuation of his former sense of fictitious identity: he had been writing under a pseudonym of William Wilson, and identifying more with the fictional detective he had created than with his own self. The detective, as a character familiar to many more people than Quinn himself (i.e. the readers of the novels), "necessarily had to be real," and consequently, "the more Quinn seemed to vanish, the more persistent Work's presence in the world became" (10). Moreover, Quinn finds it reassuring to identify with Work, whose life is unquestionably filled with a sense of purpose, which to Quinn is the whole point and pleasure of detective stories:

What he liked about these books was their sense of plenitude and economy. In the good mystery there is nothing wasted, no sentence, no word that is not significant. [...] Since everything seen or said, even the slightest, most trivial thing, can bear a connection to the outcome of the story, nothing must be overlooked. Everything becomes essence (9).

What Quinn expects of his own role as a detective is possibly the same sense of purpose that his character Work enjoys. However, as it turns out, the reality that he finds himself in proves to be much less reassuring than his own work of fiction.

Oedipa, for whom the identity of an executor, not to mention a detective, is rather abstract, is at first not even attracted by the possibilities offered by her new role. When she meets her lawyer in order to find out what it is that she is supposed to do, she asks if she could not get somebody to do it for her. The lawyer replies that he could do some of it, but expresses surprise that she is not even interested in what she might find out (12). This seems to plant a seed of curiosity in her otherwise *blasé* attitude, and when she drives to San Narciso, where she is supposed to start her investigation, she experiences a sudden thrill of the possibility of finding some sort of essence behind seemingly unimportant signs.

Interestingly, the promise that for Quinn is contained by fiction appears to her in facing the city landscape:

She looked down a slope [...] on to a vast sprawl of houses which had grown up all together [...] and she thought of the time she'd [...] seen her first printed circuit. The ordered swirl of houses and streets, from this high angle, sprang at her now with the same unexpected, astonishing clarity as the circuit card had [...] there were to both outward patterns a hieroglyphic sense of concealed meaning, of an intent to communicate. There'd seemed no limit to what the printed circuit could have told her (if she had tried to find out); so in her first minute of San Narciso, a revelation also trembled just past the threshold of her understanding (14-15).

The totalising perspective from above, in agreement with de Certeau's claims, not only defamiliarises the landscape, but also creates an illusion of human ability to master space. From this moment, Oedipa starts expecting a revelation, and hopes that by sheer carefulness she will be able to comprehend and control her task. This attitude, however, is ironically ridiculed towards the end of the novel, when Oedipa reaches her final state of confusion:

Where was Oedipa who'd driven so bravely up here from San Narciso? That optimistic baby had come on so like the private eye in any long-ago radio drama, believing all you need was grit, resourcefulness, exemption from hidebound cops' rules, to solve any great mystery.

But the private eye sooner or later has to get beat up on (85).

The clear view of San Narciso as a printed circuit, which Oedipa initially found so promising, does not prevent her from finding out more and more mysteries and intricacies in the estate she is supposed to comprehend. Oedipa gradually gets more and more confused, and when her investigation takes her to San Francisco, she again looks down at the city, but this time her vision is far less clear:

looking down at San Francisco [...] from the high point of the bridge's arc, she saw smog. Haze, she corrected herself, is what it is, haze. How can they have smog in San Francisco? Smog, according to the folklore, did not begin until farther south. It had to be the angle of the sun (74).

This time the high viewpoint not only defamiliarises space, but offers only a blurred vision, through a filter of haze. The further Oedipa proceeds with her investigation, the less sure she is of a possibility of ever finding herself in an authoritative position that could provide clear answers to the questions that keep proliferating. As the clues only come from little incidences that she accidentally stumbles upon, she decides to get down to street level in order to look at the matter more closely. But the closer she looks, the less sure of the final answer she becomes.

The detective work – testing the limits of rationality

Quinn is better prepared for his new role, although he knows detective work solely from fiction. His task is to tail Peter Stillman, who just got out of prison for having imprisoned his little son in a dark room, in order to find out if a child cut off from the world would learn to speak "God's language." The son was discovered and gradually brought back to the civilised world, but now that the father is being released from prison, the son and his wife fear for their safety. Quinn agrees to help, and he starts from getting a new notebook, hoping that by being meticulously recorded "things might not get out of control" (46). Although he feels slightly embarrassed by the "irresistible urge" for a red notebook that seems to "call out to him" (46) in a stationery shop, he does not yet question the overall rationality of his actions. He starts his work, however, from an action more ritual than rational:

He cleared the debris from the surface [...] and put the red notebook in the center. Then he drew the shades in the room, took off all his clothes, and sat down at the desk. He had never done this before, but it somehow seemed appropriate to be naked at this moment (46-47).

The scene represents a belief that a new investigation should be started from a total *tabula rasa* state of mind, which will prevent any past experiences from influencing its course. Quinn tries to use pure logic for his detective work, but soon gives up even that, deciding that he has "not been hired to understand – merely to act" (48). Action, as a quality of life, seems to offer a relief from the intellectual effort that dominated his writing work. However, it soon turns out that pure action is not always as simple as pure intellect would imagine. Waiting at the train station with Stillman's picture in hand, Quinn is first relieved to recognise the man, but then devastated, when he notices another one, who looks almost the same:

There was nothing he could do now that would not be a mistake. Whatever choice he made – and he had to make a choice – would be arbitrary, a submission to chance. Uncertainty would haunt him to the end (68).

The first detective task proves much more difficult than Quinn had expected, and logic seems to be of no use. Since the very beginning of Quinn's career as a detective, his actions are determined by chance rather than rationality. He can only rely on a vague "inner voice," or intuition, to tell him which choice to make:

For no reason, he went to his left, in pursuit of the second Stillman. After nine or ten paces, he stopped. Something told him he would live to regret what he was doing [...]. There was no way to know: not this, not anything (68).

Quinn decides to follow "the first Stillman," so right from the beginning his quest is marked by an arbitrary choice. But further doubts as to the purposefulness of the detective's action appear. Stillman takes long walks around Manhattan, the meaning of which continues to puzzle Quinn. Quite like the narrator of "The Man of the Crowd," he becomes more and more annoyed by the impenetrability of the man he follows. The thought that haunts him, however, is that the man might *not* be planning a horrible crime at all, that there really is *no* purpose to his walks, that he is just an old man who walks aimlessly – quite in the manner of a *flâneur* – in which case Quinn would find himself "embarked on a meaningless project" (73).

The difference between the activities of a supposed *flâneur* and those of a detective is emphasised in a fragment where Quinn's problems in adapting to Stillman's pace is described:

The old man would wander through the streets of the neighborhood, advancing slowly, sometimes by the merest of increments, pausing, moving on again, pausing once more [...]. Moving in this manner was difficult for Quinn. He was used to walking briskly [...]. He was the hare in pursuit of the tortoise, and again and again he had to remind himself to hold back (71).

This fragment can be linked to Benjamin's observations on *flânerie*: "In 1839 it was considered elegant to take tortoise out walking. This gives us an idea of the tempo of *flânerie*" (1999: 442). Quinn's difficulties reveal that neither in his previous habit of walking in order to "forget himself" nor in the present detective pursuit can he be treated as a *flâneur*. In the first instance because of a lack of the leisurely attitude that would be characterised by a slow pace, and in the second because of the necessity to focus on a single task, which is characteristic of the detective figure. Quinn evolves from a drifter into a detective, and when faced with different walking habits, hopes that there is some logic to Stillman's actions – in other words, that he is not merely a *flâneur*, but indeed a criminal planning a mischievous action:

Either Stillman knew what he was doing or he didn't. And if he didn't, then Quinn was going nowhere, was wasting his time. How much better it was to believe that all his steps were actually to some purpose (74).

Quinn notices that Stillman also carries a red notebook, in which he notes some things down. He starts to suspect that the notebook contains "answers to the questions that had been accumulating in his mind" (73), but has no access to the book's contents. Instead, he notes down everything he can in his own red notebook, but when after two weeks he tries to make sense of his notes, no pattern seems to emerge from them. Quinn becomes more and more frustrated:

He had always imagined that the key to good detective work was a close observation of details. The more accurate the scrutiny, the more successful the results. The implication was that human behavior could be understood, that beneath the infinite façade of gestures, tics, and silences, there was finally a coherence, an order, a source of motivation. But after struggling to take in all these surface effects [...] the only thing he felt now was the man's impenetrability (80).

Once again, it is pure chance that gets him out of the impasse. He gives up trying to solve the puzzle intellectually, and "[f]or no particular reason that he was aware of" (80) starts to sketch Stillman's daily routes on a map of the area he had been walking in. Although at first Quinn questions the rationality of this procedure, the random method reveals a pattern in Stillman's actions, as his daily routes form a sequence of letters, reading "OWEROFBAB". Taking into account the fact that there were four days missing from his notes in the beginning, and possibly still a few letters to be added in the days to follow, Quinn decides that the letters might be forming a meaningful phrase: THE TOWER OF BABEL. This, of course, can be linked directly to Stillman's old *idée fixe* about finding God's original language. Quinn does make the connection, but feels uneasy about having found the pattern in such a coincidental manner:

the letters continued to horrify Quinn. The whole thing was so oblique, so fiendish in its circumlocutions, that he did not want to accept it. Then doubts came [...] He had imagined the whole thing. The letters were not letters at all. He had seen them only because he had wanted to see them. And even if the diagrams did form letters, it was only a fluke [...] It was all an accident, a hoax he had perpetrated on himself (86).

His paranoia is heightened by the impossibility of finding out what the purpose of the pattern could be – the letters can only be connected to the surface of Manhattan's streets, and to other texts, but do not point directly to what is going on in Stillman's mind. The meaning behind the man's actions still remains opaque:

He wondered if Stillman had [...] plotted his course [...] or whether he had improvised [...]. It was impossible to know. He also wondered what purpose this writing served in Stillman's mind (86).

Quinn finds the intellectual tools of the detective not enough to provide answers to his questions – he only has access to the surface of things, and can only speculate about the meaning hidden behind it. Quinn finds himself “in a neverland of fragments” (87) where there are no clear connections between signs and the meaning behind them.

Paradoxically, this is what ultimately links him to the position of Stillman himself. When Quinn finally decides to confront the old man and find out from him directly what the purpose of his actions is, he hears the following:

“Anything for the truth. No sacrifice is too great [...]. You see, the world is in fragments, sir. And it's my job to put it back together again [...] I'm merely looking for the principle.” (91)

As it turns out, Stillman is also on a detective pursuit, but his is a meta-task of looking for the ultimate answer, trying to make logical connections between all the elements of the world and the meaning that he believes should be hidden behind them. Quinn's and Stillman's tasks are in fact quite similar – they are both looking for a pattern, although Stillman's totalising ambitions bring him closer to the realm of madness, whereas Quinn, as long as he keeps to the patterns of detective work, manages to convince himself that he holds the side of rationality, sanity and logic. This becomes more difficult when one day he loses track of Stillman, who all of the sudden disappears for good, to “become part of the city [...] a speck, a punctuation mark, a brick in an endless wall of bricks” and Quinn finds himself in a situation where he “could walk through the streets every day for the rest of his life, and still he would not find him” (109). The rationality of the detective pursuit reaches its limit when the pursued object disappears. All that remains at Quinn's disposal is “chance, a nightmare of numbers and probabilities” (109). In the absence of the human being whose movements might be hiding unknown motives, there are “no clues, no leads, no moves to be made” (109). It is then that Quinn's assumed identity of a detective exhausts its possibilities, and gives way to what Benjamin might describe as “manic behaviour,” which brings him even closer to the former position of Stillman – like the old man, obsessed by the desperate need to control meaning that keeps sliding away from his grasp, Quinn makes a step into the realm of madness.

Analysing the similarities between the work of the classic detective and that of a psychoanalyst, Slavoj Žižek recalls a fragment of Freud's "Interpretation of Dreams," where he claims that "[t]he dream-content [...] is expressed as it were in a pictographic script, the characters of which have to be transposed individually into the language of the dream-thoughts" (109). In his argument, Freud deals with a common mistake of looking for immediate *sense* of the pictures appearing in dreams rather than linking its individual elements to different elements of *language* that they could be associated with. Thus the dream resembles more a picture-puzzle than a symbolic scene. As Žižek explains, "we must [...] translate the objects back into words, replace things by words designating them" (109), and only then can we possibly arrive at a possible meaning underlying the dream. The real content of the dream, carefully protected by the unconscious, will be replaced by random objects in one way or another associated with it, which together create a coherent, though nonsensical picture that will remain a puzzle if approached directly. This, Žižek believes, is what links the work of the psychoanalyst to that of the classic detective. Like the analyst, the detective deals with a "false image put together by the murderer in order to efface the traces of his act." The task of the detective, quite like that of the analyst, is "to denature it by first discovering the inconspicuous details that stick out, that do not fit the frame of the surface image" (111), and then "unmask the imaginary unity of the scene of the crime as it was staged by the assassin" (112). The detective must look for a "double inscription", and put random clues together to find the spot where they do not match. In short, the surface signs, or signifiers, can reveal more about the whole case than the supposed "meaning", or signifieds that seem to be standing behind the signifiers. Symbolic interpretation can be misleading, and it is only by analysing the surface of signs that the criminal's plot can be penetrated.

It would seem that Quinn intuitively follows these classic methods of detective work. When his rational attempts to penetrate Stillman's actions fail, he turns to the surface of things, focusing on the man's very steps, and the tracks that they create, rather than on his possible motives. Thus he arrives at the TOWER OF BABEL puzzle. Here, however, the psychoanalytic model gets stuck. There are no elements "sticking out", everything is too perfect and absolutely meaningless, and this is what horrifies Quinn. A good detective, once he finds the proper clues,

should be able to figure out what their logic leads to or what real meaning they are trying to hide. In the case of Quinn, however, not only do the clues lead nowhere, but his only suspect soon disappears, and so do possibilities of finding meaning behind his actions. This forms a turning point in the novel, as Quinn, when faced with such impossibility, has to radically change his tactics. Faced with a complete lack of clues, he decides to take absolute surveillance of the possible victims' house, not to let any possible clue slip out. In this process his identity undergoes a major metamorphosis, but no matter how hard he tries, he seems doomed to failure. The world cannot be controlled, and the answers remain unknown.

Interestingly, Oedipa's first clues are also based on the very surface of things, rather than meaningful interpretations of facts. The first thing that attracts her attention is an inscription on a letter she receives from her husband. She does not expect the letter to be saying much, and she actually pays more attention to what its very envelope is saying: "It may have been an intuition that the letter would be newsless inside that made Oedipa look more closely at its outside" (30). After a while of such aimless looking, she notices a strange misspelling: "REPORT ALL OBSCENE MAIL TO YOUR POTSMATER." She draws her co-executor's attention to it, but he refuses to see any meaning behind the misprint. Oedipa, too, is not prepared to draw any conclusions from this apparently meaningless incident, and it is only after she is faced with more such coincidences that her suspicions become an obsession, and she starts looking for clues everywhere.

Like Quinn, Oedipa also keeps a notebook, and although she is not as meticulous in noting down the things she experiences, she nevertheless soon has a small collection of random notes in her memo book. They include the symbol of what she later learns to be a muted post horn, which she first sees on a latrine wall. Her first reaction to the mysterious sign reveals her interpretative helplessness, but also her hope that the meaning must be there, but has to be deciphered: "God, hieroglyphics" (34). Her next note reflects the difficulties that she is faced with in the new role of trying to make sense of mysterious signs: "Shall I project a world?" (56). The other notes include a post box number and a diagram she finds drawn in chalk on a sidewalk. Apart from the post horn, which connects the different signs, there is no apparent logic to what she notes down, but she hopes that by holding

all data in one place some meaning might eventually be revealed. Her hope is to "at least flash some arrow on the dome to skitter among constellations," and like Quinn she believes that "anything might help" (56).

Oedipa's difficulty, which makes her case initially even more frustrating than that of Quinn's, is that there are no suspects she could follow. The only people whom she believes might know the answers to her questions are the dead man and Driblette – the director of a play which seems to be full of hints connected to the case. When she goes to see him after the play, she is fascinated by his eyes, which "seemed to know what she wanted, even if she didn't" (52). The only thing that promises a possibility of communication is the play which Oedipa has just seen. Driblette presumes that she came to talk about the play, and discourages her possible questions even before she asks them, claiming that the play "doesn't mean anything" (52), it is pure entertainment. And even if there is any meaning in the play at all, it is, according to Driblette, not to be found in the text, but his, the director's, head: "The words, who cares? [...] the reality is in *this* head. Mine. I'm the projector of the planetarium." He further discourages her detective attempts: "You can put together clues, develop a thesis, or several [...]. You could waste your life that way and never touch the truth." Moreover, he maintains that Oedipa's very existence, and the questions that she poses, are also just functions of his own existence: "If I were to dissolve in here [...] what you saw tonight would vanish too. You [...] would also vanish" (54). Then he falls silent, and only suggests that perhaps a better attempt at communication between the two of them might be having sexual intercourse rather than struggling with words. Oedipa leaves, promising to call. When she eventually calls him, desperate for what answers he might be keeping hidden, his phone does not answer. She then learns that he had committed suicide. Thus, as in the case of Quinn, her only possible link to the truth disappears for good. Exasperated, she goes as far as trying to communicate with the dead man's spirit and wonders if "some version of herself hadn't vanished with him" (111). And again, the only response she gets is the same that she got from the man when he was still alive: silence (112).

Beyond rationality – chaos, silence, and the real of desire

The impossibility of determining answers or solutions, and the abundance of instances of silence, muteness, incommunicability is striking in both novels and does not seem a particularly conventional pattern for a detective story. In classic detective stories, the detective may encounter a wall of silence at the initial stage of the investigation, but once a major clue becomes revealed, more and more details start to fit together, and eventually a pattern emerges, and reveals the reality hidden behind the surface. That, at least, is the convention developed by Arthur Conan Doyle in his Sherlock Holmes stories, and continued by popular writers such as Agatha Christie. This classic mode of the "whodunit" is sometimes called the "formal detective novel" (Grella) or "mystery fiction" (Malmgren). Another form of the detective story that has developed from it, set in urban "mean streets" rather than old country estates, is called the "hardboiled detective novel" (Grella) or "detective fiction" (Malmgren). The detective in the hardboiled genre is likely to get lost and confused by the case he is trying to solve. Malmgren sees the difference between the two genres in their treatment of *centeredness* and *motivation*. The classic, "formal" type "presupposes a centered world," which is "orderly, stable, resistant to change" (183). This means that "everything signifies. As signs are decoded and motives are discovered, that world is shown to be fully motivated" (185). The situation changes in the hardboiled type, which features "a decentered world" (183), where "motivation and truth are [...] highly problematic" (187), because based on a problematic signification system. The signs that the hardboiled detective encounters can be misleading, confusing or meaningless. Malmgren maintains that this genre represents "a world undergoing the fall of language, from motivation to non-motivation, from identity to difference, from presence to absence" (189). In contrast to some other critics, however, he does not believe that the classical mode represents "reality" either. Malmgren stresses the fact that both modes are "conventional practices," which "create reality for us, a vision of reality that may privilege either order or chaos" (198). By enlisting metafictional practices employed by Auster in *City of Glass*, Malmgren shows that the novel "subverts the reality claims of detective fiction" (195), and by bringing conventionality of writing itself into the foreground, saves "the Real," which without

language and its conventions would "degenerate into the Actual – chaos or silence" (198).

Although Malmgren's reading is very careful and well argued, his conclusion remains puzzling and unclear. It disregards the fact that novels such as those of Auster or Pynchon do in fact privilege "the Actual", i.e. chaos *and* silence, and suggest that imposing some order on it is but a futile attempt to save "the Real" of language and culture. Thus, Auster's and Pynchon's narratives differ not only from the classic, "formal detective novel," but from the "hardboiled detective novel" as well. The hardboiled genre, although it does focus on chaos and uncertainty, is still characterised by some kind of closure. It may not be as reassuring as the classic triumph of reason, but nevertheless it offers some solace to the disturbed reader. This solace of a closure is missing from the experience of reading *City of Glass* and *The Crying of Lot 49*. This difference changes the mode of fiction, which consequently is no longer labelled "classic" or "hardboiled", but is rather called "postmodern", and sometimes "anti-detective". In order to understand the significance of the lack of closure, it may be worthwhile to see what functions conventional closures in detective fiction usually serve. An interesting approach to the pleasure derived from reading the two different types of detective fiction is offered by Slavoj Žižek, who claims that the solace that both conventions offer to their readers lies in the fact that they both, each in its own way, allow both the detective and the reader to "avoid the real of desire."

Žižek claims that the murder, which lies at the basis of most detective stories, functions as a "traumatic shock," which "cannot be incorporated into symbolic reality because it appears to interrupt the 'normal' causal chain" (117). It is "an encounter with the 'impossible' real," and the detective's task is to rationalise and explain it. The explanation he provides also frees everyone around from the floating guilt, as in classic detective stories no one can sleep peacefully until the guilt is localised in a single subject. Up to this point, Žižek maintains, the detective's work is quite similar to that of the psychoanalyst – looking for clues that would reveal the real hidden under the surface of things. When it comes to the final solution, however, the detective's work differs from that of the analyst. Whereas a psychoanalyst is interested in 'inner' truths, i.e. hidden desires of

people involved in the case, the detective is only interested in "pure facts." Consequently, the work of the detective is the reverse of that of the psychoanalyst: whereas "psychoanalysis confronts us precisely with the price we have to pay for the access to our desire," detective stories give us a reassuring guarantee "that we will be discharged of any guilt, that the guilt for the realization of our desire will be 'externalized' in the scapegoat and that, consequently, we will be able to desire without paying the price for it" (118).

The classical and the hard-boiled detective stories, according to Žižek, both perform the same function, but do it by different means. In the classic genre, the way to "avoid the real of desire" is quite simple and organised by rigid conventions, of which perhaps the most crucial one is the detective's external position, which is guarded by two major techniques – firstly, he is never the narrator of the story, and secondly, he keeps his distance from the case by receiving payment for the task he performs. The position of the hard-boiled detective is much more complicated, and therefore more confusing. First of all, he "becomes an active hero confronted with a chaotic, corrupt world," where "the more he intervenes [...], the more involved in its wicked ways he becomes" (118). Secondly, he often becomes the narrator of the story, or else his thoughts and doubts are known to the narrator. Moreover, it reveals that his detective task is not just a job he performs with detachment, but "concerns him ethically and often painfully" (121). The hard-boiled detective's involvement in the case is often emphasised by the fact that he does not expect any money for his work, as he treats his task as "an ethical mission" (119). The mission is about revealing the nature of the world, and the threat that it poses is that the world cannot be understood, controlled or mastered. In this way, Žižek maintains, in the hard-boiled detective stories the detective himself "undergoes a kind of 'loss of reality' – finding himself "in a dreamlike world where it is never quite clear who is playing what game". And the dreamlike, uncontrollable nature of the world is, according to Žižek, most often embodied in the figure of the *femme fatale*, who at the same time triggers the detective's desire, and poses a major threat to his task. The major paradox of this figure is that it manages to both fascinate and horrify, and provokes all kinds of reactions on the part of the detective, who never actually accepts her very existence. It is through the figure of the *femme fatale* that the hard-boiled detective is confronted

with the real, and it is by rejecting her that he manages to avoid paying the price for "the real of desire."

The menace that the *femme fatale* presents to the detective can be ambiguous. Žižek is aware of the common interpretation that she, as a woman, through her sexual enjoyment and power, poses a threat to male integrity, so that by rejecting her, the detective finally recovers his initial position of strength and identity as a man. Žižek, however, claims that the *femme fatale*'s threatening identity as a subject is in fact formed at the moment when she "assumes her non-existence" through a hysterical breakdown. It is through her "inconsistent hysterical masks," her ultimate incommunicability and irrational behaviour, that she poses a real threat to the detective's integrity. From this unbearable confrontation with the real, there are only two ways out for the hard-boiled detective: either rejecting the *femme fatale* (ideally by killing her), or his own (often suicidal) death.

In the light of Žižek's essay, classifying the two narratives discussed here becomes problematic. The stories of Auster and Pynchon certainly have a lot in common with the genre of the hardboiled detective story: their protagonists are deeply disturbed by their quest, their involvement in it more resembles a "mission" than a job (they do not really receive payment for it either), and as they progress, more and more doubts and confusions appear. However, when it comes to closure, the well established pattern is not as obvious anymore. If, as Žižek convincingly argues, the threat posed by the universe in the hardboiled detective stories is often embodied by the *femme fatale*, then this embodiment undergoes interesting twists in the two novels.

In *City of Glass*, there indeed appears a character of a sexually appealing woman filled with fear and desire – it is Quinn's employer, the wife of Stillman's son, Virginia. Her appearance constitutes a significant part of Quinn's motivation for pursuing the case: "deep inside he had been nurturing the chivalric hope of solving the case so brilliantly [...] that he would win Mrs. Stillman's desire for so long as he wanted it" (77). The desire to master the *femme fatale* cannot be clearly distinguished from the desire to master the case itself. Intellectual brilliance is

supposed to be matched by sexual performance. However, the story develops quite differently from the typical hardboiled scenario. After their initial kiss, Quinn only contacts Virginia by phone. Once the phone, however, starts only replying with a busy signal, Quinn loses grasp of the femme fatale – and of the case as well. Not only has he no chance to confront (and possibly reject) the femme fatale, he also loses touch with the victim, the suspect, and the logic of the case itself. The only thing left to him is his own desperation, and he finally concludes that “nothing really matters”. His gradual rejection of clothing and all physical activity brings him back to the primordial state of being, where he “no longer had any interest in himself” (156). He dismisses the case as unimportant and devotes his efforts to write “about the stars, the earth, his hopes for mankind.” Significantly, he remembers the moment of his birth, and “the infinite kindness of the world and all the people he had ever loved” (156). Eventually, he disappears. In this way Quinn gains the qualities that Žižek ascribes to the *femme fatale*: trying to “lose himself” by playing different fictional roles, he eventually becomes constituted as a subject at the moment when he in a way “assumes his non-existence”. He goes back to the primordial state of being, where the line between life and death is no longer very clear. In the end, it is not even made clear whether he dies or not, as indeed, for him, it “does not really matter.” The impossibility of mastering either the case or the *femme fatale* forces Quinn to face “the real of desire,” i.e. the death drive, an inevitable element of the forces of the universe. Having abandoned his detective pursuit, Quinn is ready to face chaos, irrationality and death.

Detecting a variant of the femme fatale in *The Crying of Lot 49* can be more problematic because of the gender of the protagonist, herself a woman, who shows no signs of sexual obsession. Nevertheless, if the figure of the *femme fatale* is understood as an embodiment of the uncontrollable forces of the universe, and an object of the detective's fear and fascination, then it can clearly be seen that all these features are in fact present in the figure of Oedipa's late lover, the owner of the mysterious estate, Pierce Inverarity. He shares a number of features with Virginia Stillman. His very identity is to Oedipa, like Virginia's to Quinn, ambiguous and confusing. The parallel is clear in the initial phone conversations in both novels – in *City of Glass* it is not made clear whether it is Virginia or her husband who is making the initial phone calls; in *The Crying of Lot*

49 Pierce is changing roles and voices to then hang up. He is also, in spite of his death, Oedipa's employer, who sets her on the detective pursuit. And because of his death, he is also ultimately, like Virginia, unattainable and impossible to master. Starting from this initial impossibility to conquest this male variant of the *femme fatale*, the whole story develops towards consequent dissolution of identities of almost everyone involved, culminating in Oedipa's final realisation that she herself no longer can hope to ever hold a firm grasp on the laws of the universe. The real, she seems to realise, cannot be penetrated, and has to be faced in all its ambiguity. Towards the end of the novel Oedipa reaches a state of mind quite similar to that of Quinn – deciding that nothing really matters, she is able to face the primordial state of being, and no longer insists on finding unequivocal answers to ontological questions.

It seems, then, that Auster's and Pynchon's variations on the detective story hold a position beyond both the classic, "formal" genre and the hardboiled variants. The difference may be grasped in the attitude towards "the real" that these narratives ultimately propose. As Žižek reminds us, there is a high price to be paid for facing "the real of desire." Both Quinn and Oedipa, after a long struggle, having exhausted all their tools of logic and rationality, towards the ends of their quests seem ready to pay the price. They seem to realise that the confrontation with "the real" can be rewarding in itself. The price to be paid is the loss of illusions of a firm grasp on reality. The reward, however, promised by facing chaos, is breaking out of the conventional simulacra of what appears to be everyday reality. In the end, the only result that the detective quest can offer is the realisation that the chaos underlying the surface of signs can be repressed, remain unnoticed, denied, but cannot be made to dissolve and turn into a stable order and coherence.

The urban underworld – chaos underlying surface order

The process by which Oedipa proceeds in her investigation is quite similar to Quinn's. She starts from trying to solve the puzzle logically, later hopes for answers from other people, and only when faced with the impenetrability of signs

decides to take direct action and try to take a close look at random elements of the world around her. When she already has enough hints to believe in the existence of a mysterious organisation called the Trystero, she concludes that it must be a trick of her imagination and decides to go to San Francisco and face its urban reality in order to reassure herself that her suspicions are just a fantasy:

Either Trystero did exist, in its own right, or it was being presumed, perhaps fantasized by Oedipa [...] Here in San Francisco [...] there might still be a chance of getting the whole thing to go away and disintegrate quietly. She had only to drift tonight, at random, and watch nothing happen, to be convinced it was purely nervous, a little something for her shrink to fix. She got off the freeway [...] drove around, parked finally [...]. Then walked along Broadway, into the first crowds of evening (75).

This is the first moment in the novel when Oedipa is actually walking, rather than driving. Up to this point she had only seen the world from behind the windows of her Chevy, and on the TV screen. Her desperation, however, made her believe that by getting down to street level she may get closer to the truth. In fact, however, she hopes that no truth is hiding there, and that her ideas are just a projection of her brain, caused by her detachment from reality. She decides to drift, and play "the voyeur and listener" (85), i.e. exercise the unfamiliar art of *flânerie*, in order to convince herself that reality is just what it is and hides no special messages or secrets. However, what she finds out on her 24-hour walk through San Francisco is exactly the opposite of her hopes: secret signs seem to proliferate whichever way she turns, and she discovers whole communities whose existence she had never suspected, and who seem to live in a sort of an underground, going against the grain in a society in which they are an underprivileged class. She sees a community of alienated individuals, each in some way relying on the secret system of the Trystero.

The "infected city" (80) turns out to be full of signs, whose meaning, however, remains hardly less ambiguous than in the beginning. Oedipa discovers a whole new world and feels for the first time that she in some way becomes part of the city, able to actually see it as it is, and not as it is presented in advertisements:

The city was hers, as, made up and sleeked so with the customary words and images [...] it had not been before [...]. *She was meant to remember*. She faced that possibility [...]. Each clue that comes is *supposed* to have its own clarity, its fine chances for permanence. But then she wondered if the gemlike 'clues' were

only some kind of compensation. To make up for her having lost the direct, epileptic Word, the cry that might abolish the night (81).

The proliferation of signs promises a revelation, and Oedipa is thrilled by this possibility, but at the same time realises that the feeling of being exceptional, chosen to see and understand hidden signs could also be just an illusion, which hides the unpleasant fact that there really are no answers. Nevertheless, she has to face "that other chance" that "there really was a Tristero [...] and she *had* come on it by accident" (124). What she sees on her first random walk convinces her that "she might have found the Tristero anywhere in her Republic [...] if only she'd looked," and becomes "conscious of the hard, strung presence that she stood on" (124). What she suspects, then, is that the innocent, clear view of reality that most people enjoy is just an effect of not looking, not observing the reality around them closely enough to perceive the inconsistencies and darker areas. The messages are not really hidden deep inside; they are there on the surface of sidewalks, latrine walls and garbage bins, but – quite like in the psychoanalytic work – one has to look at them closely and make metonymic, rather than metaphorical, connections between things that do not seem to have a lot in common.

Oedipa's discovery of the underworld of the dispossessed culminates in her meeting with a dying old sailor. Oedipa is "overcome all at once by a sudden need to touch him" (87), and holds him in her arms, while the man is crying. Even though the man does not actually communicate anything of importance to her verbally, their physical contact leaves a strong impact on Oedipa:

She knew, because she had held him, that he suffered DTs. Behind the initials was a metaphor, a delirium tremens, a trembling unfurrowing of the mind's ploughshare. [...] The act of metaphor then was a thrust at truth and a lie, depending where you were: inside, safe, or outside, lost. Oedipa did not know where she was. [...] 'dt' [...] meant also a time differential, a vanishingly small instant in which chance had to be confronted at last for what it was (88-9).

Oedipa realises that names and labels are just handy metaphors that in fact protect us from "the real." Dealing with words, labelling things, creates an illusion of keeping things under control – thus one can remain "inside" language, and treat words as direct links to "the real." If, however, through whatever circumstances, one steps over the conventions of language, and faces the chaos that lies

undemeath, it turns out that names and labels do not actually refer to "the real" but propose an alternative, artificial order instead of it. Oedipa is horrified:

It was as if she had just discovered the irreversible process. It astonished her to think that so much could be lost, even the quantity of hallucination belonging just to the sailor that the world would bear no further trace of (88).

She knew that the sailor had seen worlds no other men had seen [...]. But nothing she knew of would preserve them, or him (89).

The logical consequence of this observation is the question concerning Oedipa herself: the thought that "she was meant to remember," which had up to this point given some sense to her discoveries, was based on the assumption that experience could be translated into language and thus preserved. Now, however, Oedipa questions her own status within society and language, and wonders whether she can still think of herself as remaining "inside, safe," or whether her experience has taken her beyond the limits of the social order, and sanity, so that she will now forever have to deal with the situation of being "outside, lost."

The underworld that Oedipa discovers has its parallel in the experience of Quinn. Like Oedipa, when faced with the impossibility of getting through to any other human being connected to the Stillman case, he decides to take random action on his own. He goes on a haphazard walk through the streets of Manhattan, and for the first time notes down in his notebook just "the things he had seen while walking" (128), not in any clear way connected to his investigation. Only then does he notice that the city is full of "the tramps, the down-and-outs, the shopping-bag ladies, the drifters and drunks," who "range from the merely destitute to the wretchedly broken" (129). Their presence is as constant as the busy phone signal, which gradually becomes "a counterpoint to his steps, a metronome beating steadily inside the random noises of the city" (126-7). The busy signal, although associated with noise, in fact signifies absolute silence, impossibility to communicate; it is "negating speech and the possibility of speech" (127). Quinn finds its steadiness comforting and reassuring – it is in fact the only steady thing to hold on to in a world that keeps changing and mystifying. It also denies the possibility of taking any action, and that as well Quinn finds appealing.

When he listens to a clarinettist playing music in the street, Quinn feels drawn "into the circle of its repetitions," which seems to be "the place where one could finally disappear" (130). Disappearance, however, is just an illusion – the people in the streets are merely looking for a place where their existence might be more bearable; they are "forever on the move" (131). Quinn recalls Baudelaire's prose poem "Anywhere out of the world," with the famous line "It seems to me that I will always be happy in the place where I am not" (132), thus reaffirming de Certeau's assertion that "[t]o walk is to lack a site" (1985: 139). The homeless people in the streets not only lack a physical place of their own, they also lack a place in the society, living beyond its norms, having stepped over the limits of rationality and sanity. Quinn himself is soon drawn into the circle of madness. In his desperate attempt to make sense of signs, he decides that the busy signal cannot be just an arbitrary phenomenon – it must be a sign, "telling him that he could not yet break his connection with the case" (132). The new logic that his haphazard walk in the streets has equipped him with, tells him to forget about the limits of rationality and devote his entire life to the observation of his employers' house. Quinn settles in a garbage bin next to the house and devotes all his time and effort to the activity of observation, at the price of sleep, food and all human routines. When after an indefinite period of time he is forced to venture into the streets again, he does not recognise his own reflection in a mirror, as he had in the meantime "turned into a bum" (143). Quinn's identity undergoes a major transformation, and in fact he seems to have given it up, as he has "melted into the walls of the city" (139), quite in the manner that he imagined Stillman to have done before. When the news of Stillman's suicide proves the futility of his actions, and after he finds out that his flat has already been rented to somebody else, and all his possessions have been disposed of, he feels that "he had come to the end of himself" (149). By then, however, it no longer matters to him. The final section of the book shows the process of Quinn's gradual dissolution, until his final disappearance – what remains is only the red book, the narrator's unreliable account, and snow falling all over New York and covering all traces.

Both Oedipa and Quinn represent people who had long lost the ability to simply walk and thus participate in the life of the spaces they inhabit. The world around them is a simulacrum, a simulated, fictional world produced by imagination

triggered by mass culture. The quest for meaning brings both protagonists to a state where they realise that they had never actually seen the world around them. And once they do manage to see it, it proves to be quite the reverse of what mass culture sells as everyday reality – beneath the appearances of order, comfort and rationality lie underground worlds dominated by chaos, poverty and madness. Moreover, once they are noticed, it becomes more and more difficult to keep stable boundaries between the world of the surface order and the world of the underlying chaos, as the two constantly merge, and the stability of the surface can really be believed in only at the cost of repressing “the real” that lies underneath. Thus, both novels seem to suggest, the surface is just a comforting illusion, aiming to preserve the reassuring belief in a stable order of things.

The busy signal in *City of Glass* has its counterparts in Oedipa's numerous futile attempts at communication. After somebody tells her that “there's no way to trace it, unless you want to follow an accidental correlation” (64), she follows random traces. They lead her to a “mad scientist” figure of John Nefastis, and his machine that activates the famous Maxwell's Demon – a device able to violate the Second Law of Thermodynamics, “getting something out of nothing, causing perpetual motion” (59). Even though Oedipa is sceptical when faced with such a negation of the laws of science and common sense, she decides to find out whether she herself might not be a “sensitive,” able to make the Demon work. As the scientist explains to her the relation between two kinds of entropy (one related to the laws of thermodynamics, and the other to communication theory), he maintains that the only link between them is Maxwell's Demon, who uses the information flow to sort out hot and cold molecules. “Communication is the key” (72), and so Oedipa sits down “waiting for the Demon to communicate” (73). However, nothing seems to happen, and she wonders whether Nefastis is putting her on, or whether she simply is not a sensitive. “Unless a piston moved, she would never know” (73). Annoyed by this ambiguity, she decides that “Nefastis is a nut,” and that a “true sensitive is the one that can share in the man's hallucinations” (74). Her craving for the possibility of absolute communication, however, makes her reflect nostalgically: “How wonderful they might be to share” (74). In spite of her common sense, she finds the mad possibility highly attractive. Finally, as with Driblette previously, attempts at communication fail, and the man proposes sexual

intercourse instead, as perhaps the only relief from the alienation caused by the failure. Once again, Oedipa flees, and continues the investigation on her own.

Since the beginning of her quest, Oedipa keeps on "questioning her own sanity" (92), and – like Quinn – sometimes supposes that "this is all a hoax" (116). Her exasperation brings her to a state of mind where she "hoped she was mentally ill; that that's all it was" (118). She visits her psychoanalyst, only to find out that he has himself been overtaken by a fantasy. He urges her to keep her fantasy alive:

Cherish it! [...] What else do any of you have? [...] Whatever it is, hold it dear, for when you lose it you go over by that much to the others. You begin to cease to be (95-96).

And indeed, people around Oedipa are in a way "ceasing to be." Her own husband is "losing his identity" (97) and becoming "like a whole roomful of people" (99). Both the outside reality and people she used to rely on slip out of her grip, and she is faced with an abyss. Having lost all stable points of reference, Oedipa no longer knows on which side of the borderline between sanity and madness she is. In the end, after hours and days of following random traces, she finally manages to find people who are willing to answer some of her questions concerning the word *Trystero*. On the condition, however, that she sticks to words only: "Pick some words [...]. Them, we can talk about" (104). Even though they have high respect for *Driblette*, they do not pretend to understand the man's ideas: "You think a man's mind is a pool table?" (106). So they discuss texts, and Oedipa manages "to collect a few fragments" (109) of the story. And her initial doubts are confirmed:

Oedipa wondered whether, at the end of this (if it were supposed to end), she too might not be left with only compiled memories of clues, announcements, intimations, but never the central truth itself (66) .

After a few more futile attempts at finding out the truth, Oedipa finally realises that "[e]ither way, they'll call it paranoia" (117). Oedipa has to learn "to breathe in a vacuum" (118). She realises that nobody will ever answer her questions after she begs a stranger on the phone to tell her whether the whole thing was not just a practical joke. The only answer she gets from him is that it is "too late" (122). And indeed, it is – certainly for Oedipa to go back to the state of certainty and self-assurance that she had at the beginning of her investigation. After this final

disappointment, she gives up attempts at arriving at a logical and coherent story. Being now "outside, lost," she sees the various "acts of metaphor," i.e. language, civilisation, history, as nothing more than systems of signification, not directly connected to the reality she experiences, or to her own identity. As the imagined links between reality and signs disappear, and she reaches a state of complete isolation, Oedipa suddenly feels "[a]s if there could be no barriers between herself and the rest of the land" (122). Looking at San Narciso again, she no longer experiences the thrill of revelation promised by the signs which she previously perceived as a "printed circuit." It no longer matters if Pierce Inverarity indeed owned almost everything in view, and was involved in an intricate conspiracy:

did it matter now if he'd owned all of San Narciso? San Narciso was a name; an incident among our climactic records of dreams [...]. San Narciso had no boundaries. No one knew yet how to draw them (123).

Giving up her detective ambitions, Oedipa concludes that she does not have to know which of the possible solutions is true. What remains unquestionable, however, is the fact of her fascination with the possibility of breaking out of the norm, discovering some absolute factor underlying everyday existence. And she recalls people who might share the same longing:

She remembered drifters she had listened to [...]; and walkers along the road at night [...] too far from any town to have a real destination. And the voices [...] that had phoned at random during the darkest, slowest hours, searching ceaseless among the dial's ten million possibilities for that magical Other (124-125).

She realises that no matter which of the multiple interpretations might actually be true, there exist only two general options:

it was now like walking among matrices of a great digital computer, the zeroes and ones twinned above, [...] ahead, thick, maybe endless. Behind the hieroglyphic streets there would either be a transcendent meaning, or only the earth (125).

Oedipa knows that she really has no choice as to whether to believe in the possibility of a transcendent meaning or not, because no matter what she may find out, she will keep imagining it. Like Quinn, who (in spite of all that common sense told him) could not accept the possibility that Stillman's actions might be totally pointless, because that would deny all the options of making sense of experience, she also realises that disregarding the possibility of there indeed existing some secret world beneath the ordinary surface would soon drive her crazy:

Ones and zeroes. [...] Another mode of meaning behind the obvious, or none. [...] For there either was some Tristero beyond the appearance of the legacy America, or there was just America and if there was just America then it seemed the only way she could continue, and manage to be at all relevant to it, was an alien, unfurrowed, assumed full circle into some paranoia (126).

Oedipa realises that if the world is only what it appears to be, and hides no mysteries, then the only way to retain one's own relevance to it is to project some hidden meaning onto the surface of things. Paranoia, then, can be a way to deal with the meaninglessness of existence. In Oedipa's case, there is no way to tell if what she experiences is indeed her own paranoia or a real discovery of what lies underneath the surface of everyday life. And the novel suggests that the possibility of living safely without haunting questions is conditioned by people's agreement to live in a state of passive oblivion, in a world that is a simulacrum, only pretending to be well organised, coherent and transparent. Once the surface, however, starts cracking, there is no coming back to the original state of ontological innocence – the suspicions will remain, no matter how much we repress them. At the end of the novel Oedipa already knows that, and therefore she can relax and sit down awaiting "the crying of lot 49" (127), because she knows that no matter what she does, having to deal with these questions seems her own inevitable "lot."

A similar realisation can be observed in the case of Quinn, whose "lot," however, is perhaps even more radical, as instead of an unresolved state of waiting we are offered an unresolved state of his disappearance. It needs to be remembered, however, that the characters' waiting or disappearance is frustrating first and foremost for the readers, and not the protagonists themselves. In both novels the final images of the protagonists depict them as peaceful, finally having come to terms with the problem that had been haunting them throughout the narrative span of the novels. In a way, then, their quests do reach a closure, despite remaining unresolved. It is the reader that may feel frustrated, or possibly even offended by the lack of a conventional closure that would do away with questions, uncertainties and doubts. And in fact, many readers do express their dissatisfaction, which often results with interpretations of the unresolved endings as signs of the failure not only of the detective, but of the author, literature, or contemporary culture in general. If we bear in mind that by their narrative strategies Auster and Pynchon challenge well established, and often loved, literary patterns, it should not be

surprising that many readers find them – like the *femme fatale* – fascinating and troubling, a source of joy and menace.

The failure of the detective – loss, gain or eternal return?

Both Quinn and Oedipa, gradually drawn into their detective projects up to the point of crossing the limits of sanity, end up deciding that it does not really matter what the answers to their questions might be. The emphasised failure of the detective with which both novels end has been the subject of many critical debates. Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49* and Auster's *City of Glass* are often seen as manifestoes of the postmodern way of thinking about language, experience and meaning. The characters of urban drifters on a failed detective quest are said to represent postmodern consciousness in general, and the labyrinthine cities with their proliferation of signs are taken to be symbolic representations of postmodern urban space. Critics tend to belong to two general groups: enthusiastic advocates of postmodernism, who see it as liberating from totalising systems of thought; and critical sceptics, who lament the loss of meaning and human values rooted in stable cognitive and ontological positions enjoyed by the subject in previous systems of thought. For the first group, the failure to finalise the quest is a sign of liberation, for the second, it is a worrying symptom of a major crisis. Some conclude that postmodern literature describes the symptoms of a disease, which, if approached wisely, may even help to cure it. In this way, postmodern literature would be giving its readers a warning, and reassuring them that we can still try and resist the decay of values. Most critics share the assumption that we are dealing with a completely new phenomenon, something that humanity has never been faced with before. In what follows, I take a brief look at various critical stances on the two novels, and I discuss questions of value and innovation posed by the novels and the critical debates.

In his book *The City in Literature*, Richard Lehan juxtaposes two philosophical concepts behind the literary depiction of the modern urban reality. The first is the modernist view of the city, which still managed to maintain "a cyclical sense of time

by juxtaposing the present against a more heroic past" (287). The chaotic and alienating modernist city was prevented from becoming but "a system of signs" by the possibility of finding some "transcendental signifier (be it God, nature, history, or the rational mind) to hold the other signs in place" (265). Postmodernism, according to Lehan, destroyed the possibility of finding transcendent meaning, as reflected in the philosophy of Jacques Derrida, in whose view all "transcendental signifiers" are "falsely privileging meaning from the outset" (265). In the postmodern city, therefore, there are no "transcendental signifiers," and consequently "urban signs begin to float and meaning gives way to mystery" (265). Summarizing the literary progress of the concept of the city, Lehan claims that whereas literature before postmodernism presented binary views on the city (as organized by Enlightenment values, or hostile and decaying), in postmodern literature the binary view is gone, because there is no meaning on which any value system could be based. Lehan's favourite example is Thomas Pynchon, who "set his characters in a perpetual present in which they were cut off from everything except the constant play of urban signifiers and cultural stimuli" (5). Interpreting Pynchon's fiction as a symptom of a general postmodern tendency, Lehan arrives at a conclusion that the modern city "exact[s] a high price" for humanity:

As the postmodernists drain consciousness from both the subject and the urban world, the self is commodified along with other objects; what is human becomes virtually refined away, leaving us only a world of things and objects and the relations between them" (274).

Clearly, for Lehan, "what is human" can only be defined through a "transcendental signifier" linking the chaos of the present to some mythical order of the past. Its absence in postmodern literature is treated as a sign that "the sense of individual freedom [...] gives way to totalism and repression" (274). Noticing that "Oedipa can find no totalizing perspective to explain the landscape of which she is a part," Lehan concludes that "[u]nable to discover a transcendent meaning," she is "left with the earth – or rather the mystery of the unreadable city" (271). His reading disregards the fact that by the end of the novel Oedipa does not face a *lack* of a transcendental signifier, but an *uncertainty* as to whether she can rely on its existence. And consequently, she does not give up her quest, but decides that she will continue her investigation even if she has no guarantee of ever arriving at *the* truth. Lehan's account, however, sounds much more catastrophic:

Once we lose transcendent meaning, our hold on the city is *gone*. All human values become tenuous. [...] By the end of the novel, the world is *breaking down* into solipsism. [...] The modern city, which brought the individual into being, then *destroyed* individualism (273-4, emphasis mine).

Lehan laments the loss of the "sense of individual freedom," which he perceives as based on a stable system of reference, i.e. anything (religion, history, art, science), as long as it is not questionable. Once all such systems become the subject of postmodern scrutiny, and are no longer taken for granted, the issue at stake, according to Lehan, is "the very idea of humanity" (283).

Lehan compares Oedipa's quest to that of Quinn from Auster's *City of Glass*, and finds parallels between their urban journeys: "Like Oedipa, Quinn does not know if he has discovered truth or only made it up" (281). Lehan concludes that the fictional stories present an actual situation of humanity in the contemporary world:

we are left with the city, which, like the fallen language system, is all that we have. [...] the random connections we make in the city reveal the nature of the only reality we can know (282).

A similar reading is proposed by Peter Brooker, who opposes the uncertainty presented in Auster's fiction to stable values of love and family:

Personal loving relationships [...] are the much threatened source of stability in Auster's fictions, a mainstay in their very ordinariness against the unpredictable and random (1996: 158).

Brooker sees "Quinn's spiralling decline and disappearance" (1996: 158) as a warning, presenting the dangers of modern urban existence. He quotes Auster's comment, defining *The New York Trilogy* as stories "about what happens to people in a big city like this", and on this basis claims that for Auster himself, Quinn's lot is "an image of what he might himself have become if not for the marriage to Suri Hustvedt" (2002: 129). Brooker sees the stories as moralistic allegories with encoded warnings from the author, who pays tribute to his own happy family life by depicting characters who were not as lucky. He concludes that the purpose of Quinn's final disappearance is "so that his double, the unnamed narrator who represents Auster's new family life can appear" (2002: 129). This reading is based on disregarding an important differentiation in the novel between the fictional character of Paul Auster, the writer, and the unnamed narrator who finds Quinn's red notebook and reconstructs the events described. Auster's family

life in the novel exists independently from whatever happens to Quinn. The narrator's existence, on the other hand, depends on Quinn's red notebook, which is the only link between the narrator and the reader. The narrator's final words express deepest sympathy for Quinn: "Wherever he may have disappeared to, I wish him luck," and contempt for the character of Paul Auster: "I am convinced that he behaved badly throughout. If our friendship has ended, he has only himself to blame" (158). The character of Paul Auster is in fact the most isolated character in the novel. His existence is not really necessary for the plot to take shape. This paradoxical metafictional move stresses the split between a person's family life and creative activities. The image of a happy nuclear family may be highly attractive, and is indeed the subject of Quinn's envy, but it does not reflect the forces which make people actually write fiction. After all, it is not the nostalgic image of a happy family, but Quinn's disturbed quest that drives the novel and has the ability to fascinate thousands of readers.

Lehan's distress about the postmodern image of the city seems to express a general anxiety concerning the condition of mankind in the postindustrial world. Describing urban reality in terms of decadence, chaos and ultimately dehumanization is nothing new – Lehan admits that it has been done at least since Zola. It is, however, also worth bearing in mind that, as Raymond Williams' classic study shows, the concepts of both the country and the city have acquired quite ambivalent qualities over the centuries of their literary representations:

On the country has gathered the idea of a natural way of life: of peace, innocence, and simple virtue. On the city has gathered the idea of an achieved centre: of learning, communication, light. Powerful hostile associations have also developed: on the city as a place of noise, worldliness and ambition; on the country as a place of backwardness, ignorance, limitation (1).

It seems that what critics like Lehan find disturbing is the fact that postmodern representations of the city no longer hold any promise of an "achieved centre" – as the centre obviously "cannot hold" any longer. What results from this observation is a feeling of nostalgia for the "good old times" when to be *urban* also meant to be *urbane*. What such readings disregard, however, is that the very idea of "an achieved centre" has always had a utopian quality – as Williams also reminds us, the nostalgia for some sort of a golden age can be traced back infinitely, only

stopping at the image of the ultimate ideal of Eden. "Nostalgia," Williams concludes, "is universal and persistent; only other men's nostalgias offend" (12).

Williams' observations show that Lehan's nostalgic laments falsely privilege the supposed order of the past with the chaos of the present. An example of a reading that treats the transition with much more enthusiasm is Daniela Daniele's *The Woman of the Crowd*. Daniele believes that postmodern urban literature proposes

a city of heterogeneous beliefs and codes, where ontological instability characterizes a new, inclusive utopia far preferable to the secluded, aesthetic ones embodied by monologic inner worlds (24).

Daniele contrasts the modernist city, the Baudelairean "space of *malaise* and *ennui*" (12), with surrealist and postmodern approaches to urban reality. She claims that postmodern "hybrid and decentered cities" and the recurrent "inconclusive quests for meaning" (21), do not result with an "apocalyptic 'loss of meaning'," but simply question "the modes in which meaning gets produced" (22). She traces the postmodern failed pursuit back to Breton's *Nadja*, and sees its elusive heroine as the unattainable "transcendental signifier": "the woman who keeps changing shape like an unstable signifier, always escaping the artist's desire to understand/possess her" (12). Breton's *Nadja* is certainly a successor of Baudelaire's *passante*, and survives in postmodern fiction either directly (as in Pynchon's *V.*, featuring a similarly elusive female figure), or as an abstract idea of a cognitive impasse, as in *The Crying of Lot 49* and *City of Glass*.

Daniele contrasts the detective quest, as described by Benjamin, with the quest for meaning in Baudelaire: whereas, according to Benjamin, the aim of the detective story is to identify a criminal among a mass of anonymous people by means of reason and logic, Baudelaire prefers to rely on imagination:

Confronted with metropolitan street life, the poet reads latent contents – hidden meanings – into the fragmented reality surrounding him, and is always ready to detect traces of a lost symbolic world in chance encounters (30).

This description might be related to all the four novels discussed in this thesis: Moinous and Wittman, as contemporary *flâneurs*, let themselves become amazed by coincidences, whereas Quinn and Oedipa, as contemporary detectives, try to find patterns among them. However, Daniele notices, there is a significant

difference between a Baudelairean *flâneur* and a postmodern drifter. For the Baudelairean *flâneur*, the *passante* was at the same time a promise of a way "out of the infernal chaos" (33) of the metropolis, and a source of frustration, as she could not be controlled or understood. The assumption behind this frustration was that experience should essentially have symbolic value. This attitude changed with the rise of the Avant-garde. Daniele explains the transition as follows:

while Baudelaire saw the city as an illuminating *forêt de symboles* [...], Breton [...] stresses the opaque nature of urban objects and envisions a *forêt d'indices*, a landscape of enigmatic traces in the city (38).

Daniele compares the Surrealist version of the *flâneur* with another figure described by Baudelaire – the *chiffonnier*, a rag-picker, collecting "old, unrelated objects in the street" (38). Daniele also describes the characteristics of the *chiffonnier's trouvaille*, an object accidentally found in the street, which may "assume a multitude of unstable meanings, coincidences and unexpected matches" (38). Surrealist and postmodern urban heroes more resemble this *chiffonnier*, relying only on chance in his quests, than the original Baudelairean *flâneur*-artist, with his ability to extract essence from minor details. The figure, however, undergoes yet another transformation in the course of transition from Surrealism to postmodernism. For the narrator of Breton's *Nadja*, Daniele maintains, the realisation that the object of his pursuit cannot be controlled still results with "a certain discomfort" (49). In spite of the surrealist suggestion that it is the very waiting "for the epiphanic 'monster' " that "is itself magnificent" (40), it is not until the rise of postmodernism, that the very act of "waiting" really takes over the hope for arriving at some sort of a *denouement*. As Daniele points out, the suspension of symbolism in Breton is but an anticipation of "Postmodern urban drifting among the multiple, heterogeneous codes of the information society" (50).

In postmodern fiction, as Daniele sees it, Breton's *chiffonnier*, having evolved from the Baudelairean *flâneur*, gives way to an urban drifter, who "is constantly on the move," and whose mobility only leads to "the awareness of the relativity of all knowledge" (102). It is not difficult to see how these shifts are reflected in Pynchon's and Auster's narratives, whose protagonists become preoccupied with collecting waste and random data, to finally surrender the hope of finding any final

clues among them. The cognitive impasse presented by postmodern narratives, which some critics find so disturbing, to Daniele appears advantageous:

the Postmodern drifter is exposed to a code overload that gradually distances him from the ironical (self-centred) perspective of the Modern hero. He assumes, instead, the humoristic, composite nature of an urbanite, finally questioning the ethnocentric values of his own culture (105).

By presenting "multiple subjectivities constantly recycling different traditions and cultures" (105), postmodern writing, in Daniele's view, presents "the possibility of tolerant coexistence of incongruous cultures," which is worth paying the price of "the integrity of individual identity" (23). Daniele maintains that an artificially preserved order can be more dangerous than uncontrollable chaos, as it leaves no room for free information flow and results with "close, self-centred worlds" (23) with no potential for communication of ideas and experiences. The postmodern city poses a challenge to the idea of order, as it "dissolves fixed categories and identities" and becomes "a city of heterogeneous beliefs and codes" (24).

It is quite a common practice to perceive the pluralism offered by postmodern culture as either a sign of liberation from totalitarian systems of thought predominant in Western culture since the times of the Enlightenment (Lyotard), or else a symptom of degeneration, or abandonment of the Enlightenment project (Habermas). When applied to postmodern detective stories, these two approaches can result with either enthusiastic (Daniele), or sceptical and anxious (Lehan) attitudes towards the failure of the detective. In spite of their discrepancies, both readings are based on opposing postmodern trends to the Enlightenment conventions of knowledge. However, if we move beyond the time frame of Modernity, it may turn out that the postmodern failed detective quests can be related to a lot of pre-modern worldviews, where the subject's central position and the assumed explicability of the laws of the universe are not generally taken for granted.

An approach of this kind is proposed by Edward Mendelson in his famous essay on *The Crying of Lot 49*. Mendelson's reading is based on the category of the sacred. Whereas for Lehan the "lack of totalizing perspective" means that the signs "fail to point toward a redeeming God" and "become wholly self-referential"

(271), and for Daniele postmodern pluralistic worlds simply provide freedom and tolerance, Mendelson notes: "As in all religious choices, no proof is possible" (119). Mendelson claims that in Pynchon's novel "*religious meaning is itself the central issue of the plot*" (120). The lack of any stable "transcendental signifiers" is to Mendelson a sign of a deeply religious perspective on reality:

The religious content of the book is fixed in Oedipa's dilemma: the choice between the *zero* of secular triviality, and the *one* which is the *ganz andere* of the sacred (130-131).

The concept of the "*ganz andere*," or the "wholly other," dates back to Rudolf Otto's discussion of the idea of the holy and human responses to it, characterised by both dread and fascination. Otto compares religious feelings to people's ambivalent attitudes to ghosts; in both cases we deal with

something which has no place in our scheme of reality but belongs to an absolutely different one, and which at the same time arouses an irrepressible interest in the mind (29).

This quotation may be referred directly to Auster's and Pynchon's fiction. Even though their stories leave room for rational explanations, they nevertheless produce a feeling of dealing with the uncanny, and show the limitations of the human mind's capacity for understanding. The comparison with a religious worldview may explain the effects that Auster's and Pynchon's unconventional developments of the detective story achieve. As Mendelson explains:

Pynchon's novel uses mechanisms borrowed from the detective story to produce results precisely the opposite of those in the model. Where the object of a detective story is to reduce a complex and disordered situation to simplicity and clarity, and in doing so to isolate in a named locus the disruptive element in the story's world, *The Crying of Lot 49* starts with a relatively simple situation, and then lets it get out of the heroine's control: the simple becomes complex, responsibility becomes not isolated but universal, the guilty locus turns out to be everywhere, and individual clues are unimportant because neither clues nor deduction can lead to the solution (123).

If readers are disturbed by a lack of solace, which results from this reversal of the usual detective story patterns, it needs to be remembered that the expected solace, based on a rationalistic approach to reality, is what Žižek would call "avoiding the real of desire." Both the psychoanalytical and the religious approach go beyond reassuring conventions proposed by rationalism and realism, and call for a reading that would affirm the irrational factors inherent in human experience.

Mendelson's reading is based on Mircea Eliade's concept of the sacred. Eliade's discourse on the sacred is based on the following definition of *hierophany*:

the manifestation of something of a wholly different order, a reality that does not belong to our world, in objects that are an integral part of our natural, 'profane' world (11).

If we normally perceive our world in terms of scientific or psychological logic, the "different order" must stand above the limits of rationality. Eliade reminds us that the irrational factor was at the core of archaic religious systems. Religious actions may not be justified by ethics or rationality, but are rooted in an inexplicable experience of the sacred, which can never be totally understood. If we give up rationality, then instead of a clear and comprehensible system of meaning we have to face a seemingly chaotic, irrational combination of profane elements, which may look like "floating signifiers", but can also be believed to manifest a completely different, hidden order – a higher order of the sacrum. The postmodern city, then, may be seen both as a *negation* of previous, stable systems of thought, and as a *return* to pre-modern ideas, focused more on the inexplicable nature of the universe than on the human power of the mind. As Eliade points out, commenting on modern Western civilisation, "the *completely* profane world, the wholly desacralized cosmos, is a recent discovery in the history of the human spirit" (13). He also notices, however, that

such a profane existence is never found in the pure state. [...] the man who has made his choice in favor of a profane life never succeeds in completely doing away with religious behavior (23).

Eliade's work not only takes its readers back to the visions of the world as experienced by the archaic *homo religiosus*, but also points out in what ways these old cognitive patterns are preserved in the contemporary world.

In this way, the ambiguous concept of individual freedom, which Lehan claims to be lost, and Daniele claims to be finally achieved, becomes redefined once again. Both Lehan's and Daniele's approaches relate the idea of individual freedom to stable, clearly defined belief systems, which, however, are only characteristic of the *modern* consciousness. In such approaches, the idea of individual freedom is a crucial category, and the ultimate goal for mankind. The problematic ontological and cognitive position of the protagonists of postmodern fiction can then be seen

as either an entrapment in a mystery that cannot be solved (and therefore denies the possibility of individual freedom, as no conscious choice can then be made), or as the ultimate liberation from any choices, which leaves room for all sorts of concepts and behaviours, in a world where "anything goes." If, however, we change the perspective, and erase the assumptions imposed by Modernity, the concept of individual freedom will no longer remain an unquestionable goal for humanity. In pre-modern (or non-Western) visions of the world, the category of individual freedom may be quite abstract, and totally irrelevant for man's dealings with the universe. If "the real" is accepted as inexplicable, but at the same time determining human life (which is proposed not only by psychoanalysis, but also most archaic religious concepts), then there is no point expecting human life to be characterised by any kind of "individual freedom." And indeed, Auster's and Pynchon's narratives do stress the fact that their protagonist's lives are organised more by coincidence, which, depending on the point of view, can also be called fate, than by their own, rational choices. Even though they seem to live in a totally "profane," or desacralized world, their quests lead them to question the basic principles of rationality, and take them back to a primordial state of being, where the nature of the universe is never taken for granted, but (like the *femme fatale*) continues to fascinate and horrify. The religious reading of these narratives does not presuppose any stable religious system, but as Eliade and Mendelson remind us, stable and reliable systems are not what a truly religious experience of the world is all about. The open ending is for Mendelson the ultimate sign of the religious approach: "a manifestation of the sacred can only be believed in; it can never be proved beyond doubt. There will always be a mocking voice, internal or external" (135). Auster's and Pynchon's novels are indeed filled with all sorts of "mocking voices," which may be seen to question all possibilities of finding any meaning behind the surface of signs. Nevertheless, it would be simplistic to treat these voices as negation of meaning, spirituality, transcendence. The pluralistic, uncertain postmodern state of mind, often taken to be a symptom of the ultimate fall of human spirituality, can be related back to an archaic consciousness of a *homo religiosus*, for whom the universe appears as a *mysterium tremendum*, any human explanation of which can always only be tentative.

The *mysterium tremendum* of religious experience is also a fascinating subject for Jacques Derrida, whose insistence on deconstruction makes many critics simplistically interpret his writings as proposing ultimate destruction, absolute nihilism and a total lack of transcendence. Contrary to these views, a multitude of Derrida's texts focus solely on the possibility of transcendence. In *The Gift of Death*, which is a good example of Derrida's reading of religion, Derrida maintains that the factor responsible for the *mysterium tremendum* is a *secret*, and it is the idea of *secrecy* that stands at the core of any religious experience:

we tremble from not knowing [...]. I tremble at what exceeds my seeing and my knowing [...]. Inasmuch as it tends to undo both seeing and knowing, trembling is indeed an experience of secrecy or of mystery (54).

Derrida presents God as wholly other [*tout autre*], a being that by definition cannot be understood, and is always incompatible with the capabilities of human perception:

If the other were to share his reasons with us by explaining them to us, if he were to speak to us all the time without any secrets, he wouldn't be the other, we would share a type of homogeneity (57).

If such an approach may sound utterly fatalistic, and suggest that there is no hope for any communication between what is human, and what is *wholly other*, Derrida goes further and maintains that the situation that we are faced with when dealing with the *wholly other* is reflected in our day-to-day dealings with every *other* human being, because "every other (one) is every (bit) other" [*tous autre est tous autre*]. In other words, all other human beings are in a way *secrets* to us, and our decisions to get in any way involved with them are always marked by our willingness to deal with the unexpected. A truly religious perception of the world means remaining open to anything that reality may bring at any given moment, suspending rationalistic assumptions and being aware of our cognitive limitations. In the end, we never have a guarantee that our attempts at communication are going to succeed, because all communication is based on *absence*, and the consequent *longing*, rather than *presence*, and the *given*. The lack of guarantee, however, does not negate all possibilities of communication, though it does question the possibility of ever achieving a state of certainty:

Our faith is not assured, because faith can never be, it must never be a certainty. [...] To share a secret is not to know or to reveal a secret, it is to share we know not what: nothing that can be determined (80).

Despite the common accusations of nihilism, such an approach is not a negation of the possibility of communication: a secret can be shared, even if it cannot be known or explained. But it is also imperative, Derrida insists, for each generation to "always start over" in order to participate in a tradition which has to be "reinvented each step of the way" (80). God, as the *wholly other*, can be experienced, but cannot be explained. The experience can and must be shared, even if it cannot be appropriately transcribed into language. In a final passage, Derrida proposes a tentative definition of God:

God is the name of the possibility I have of keeping a secret that is visible from the interior but not from the exterior. [...] And he is made manifest, he manifests his nonmanifestation when [...] there appears [...] the possibility of secrecy, however differentiated, complex, plural, and overdetermined it be; that is, when there appears the desire and power to render absolutely invisible and to constitute within oneself a witness of that invisibility (108-109).

In this light, the haunting quality that *The Crying of Lot 49* and *City of Glass* have for many readers may be seen as an effect of the experience of sharing a secret, which – though undefined and never explained – is nevertheless there, powerfully rendered in the narrative that keeps suggesting alternative orders behind the surface of urban signs, but never manages to explain them. The characters of Oedipa and Quinn can be seen to "witness an invisibility" and the very experience of "witnessing", of trying to find out and realising the limitations of human cognition is shared by the readers, who participate in the quest and share the protagonists' frustrations. In this way, Pynchon's and Auster's texts can indeed be seen to offer not so much a *perspective on* religion, but an *experience of* its very basic form. Lehan's claim that the modern city "destroyed individualism" is in a way right; however, the postmodern "destruction of individualism" (as based on the idea of individual freedom) and breaking away from the American tradition of self-reliance gives way not to "solipsism", as Lehan would have it, but to the awareness that the only way out of the cognitive impasse is embracing the unexpected and the inexplicable – both within the human self, and in the world outside.

A similar reading is proposed by John A. McClure, who treats the work of canonical postmodern writers such as Pynchon and DeLillo, but also many ethnic writers, as "a post-secular project of resacralization." Grouping together different

narratives that in one way or another involve an "untidy resurgence of magical, sacred, pre-modern and non-western constructions of reality," he claims that

their assaults on realism, their ontological playfulness, and their experiments in the sublime represent a complex and variously inflected reaffirmation of premodern ontologies – constructions of reality that portray the quotidian world as but one dimension of a multidimensional cosmos (143).

The quality of Pynchon's work that illustrates McClure's thesis may be just as well applied to the work of Auster. McClure defines it as the insistence on

the necessarily and even redemptively unfinished nature of any ontological mapping, the everpresent danger of confusing a particular representation of reality for being itself, which must always exceed formulation" (153).

Any attempt at formulation will always only be rhetorical, "a matter of probabilities and partialities" (153). Trying to define what he calls "postmodern spiritualities," McClure uses a quotation from Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*: "She didn't know, [...] all she was trying to do was reach" (152), and concludes his essay by stating that both the postmodern readers and writers are constantly "caught up in a reaching," and at the same time "wary of grasping" (161). Which seems to stand in perfect agreement with Derrida's conclusion: "As often happens, the call of or for the question, and the request that echoes through it, takes us further than the response" (115).

The failure of the detective, then, may be perceived as his or her ultimate success – by the emphasis on failure, and the protagonists' coming to terms with it, Pynchon's and Auster's narratives manage to find a way out of the rationalistic assumptions that have shaped the contemporary consciousness to the extent of often no longer being noticed. Postmodern literature, rather than proposing a decay of values and stable systems of reference, can be perceived as a possibility of taking a refreshing step away from our culture-specific value systems, and by questioning them, come to terms with the limitations of human knowledge.

CONCLUSION

Walking the Narrative

The affirmation of the "unfinished nature of ontological mapping" that McClure finds so appealing in postmodern fiction, can be related back to de Certeau's concepts concerning the practice of walking in the city:

Physical moving about has the itinerant function of yesterday's or today's 'superstitions'. Travel (like walking) is a substitute of the legends that used to open up space to something different (1993: 160).

It is perhaps through this quotation that the figures of the postmodern walkers – playing the roles of *flâneurs* or detectives – come together, and can be directly related to Otto's and Eliade's accounts of the human fascination with the irrational and the unexpected as manifestation of a "higher order." In this light, the failures of these figures, emphasised by the narratives (failures to achieve a stable social position or a stable worldview), may be treated as signs of their ultimate success, a mark of extraordinary courage in dealings with the Real. They bring to the foreground the realisation that the order imposed on reality is merely rhetoric and tentative, and that the real life of a city and its inhabitants lies beneath, or beyond, this artificial order. To quote de Certeau again, "the signifying practices" of displacement and condensation, by which urban dwellers constantly re-invent the space around them, can be revelatory, no matter how unimportant they may seem:

Stories about places are makeshift things. They are composed of the world's debris. [...] These heterogeneous and even contrary elements fill the homogeneous form of the story. Things *extra* and *other* [...] insert themselves into the accepted framework, the imposed order. [...] The surface of this order is everywhere punched and torn open by ellipses, drifts, and leaks of meaning: it is a sieve-order (1993: 160).

To see urban reality as defined by fragmentation, disorder and instability may sound fatalistic, but what de Certeau points out is that this way of looking opens up possibilities for life, rather than limiting them to a stable value system that might not be equally comfortable to everyone. A similar way of thinking about the city is proposed by Richard Sennett, who thus comments on the modern emphasis on the value of individualism and completeness:

It is a modern habit to think of social instability and personal insufficiency as pure negatives. The formation of modern individualism has in general aimed at making individuals self-sufficient, that is to say, complete rather than incomplete. [...]

However, without significant experiences of self-displacement, social differences gradually harden because interest in the Other withers (371-372).

The modern need for self-sufficiency, according to Sennett, makes people look for comfort rather than stimulation, and eventually leads them to cut themselves off from others. The disorderly urban experience, however, contradicts the need for self-sufficiency, as it

confronts us, in all our frailty, with contradictory experiences which cannot be pushed away, and which make us feel therefore incomplete. Yet precisely in that state of "cognitive dissonance" [...] human beings begin to focus upon, to attend to, to explore, and to become engaged in the realm where the pleasure of wholeness is impossible (372).

The contemporary metropolis, as presented in the narratives of Federman, Kingston, Auster and Pynchon, is indeed dominated by chaos, uncertainty, coincidence and lack of coherence. It is often confusing, and at times completely incomprehensible. The protagonists are repeatedly denied "the pleasure of wholeness," and cannot claim to be absolutely self-reliant, as they depend too much not only on others, but also on chance, which determines their lives and choices. If this, however, looks like the denial of the ideal of personal freedom, it needs to be remembered that the romantic concept of freedom cannot claim universal value. In the narratives discussed here, the protagonists manage to break out of the routine followed by other city dwellers (who in all likelihood take the idea of individual freedom for granted) precisely because they are in some way forced to step away from the crowd. In some cases it is because of their social position, in others it is a matter of personal choice or life circumstances. All of them, however, at some point realise that the space of their cities is not equally accessible to all – and access to certain areas, or the possibility of understanding what they represent, is conditioned by forming relationships with other people, to whom this particular area "belongs" – not necessarily in legal, but certainly in symbolic terms. Paradoxically, however, as Hana Wirth-Nesher points out

gaps in the cityscape produced by inaccessibility and partial exclusion motivate the city dweller to construct spaces and narratives that constitute a provisional home (21).

It is only in the process of exploring the non-domesticated spaces of the city, and becoming exposed to random events taking place in the street and in public places, that the protagonists gain their truly urban identity. They all become confronted with the chaos of urban life, which on the surface may resemble a

perfect order. The surface creates an illusion that makes lives of masses of people free of existential questions. The spectacular popularity of such urban myths as the one presented cinematographically in "The Matrix" (or its predecessor – the cyberpunk classic, William Gibson's *Neuromancer*) shows that many people share the anxiety that there should be more to existence than order and safety of a routine. The novels discussed here, rather than focus on fantastic visions, take minor everyday events as their material, and explore ways in which the spirit of urban life and community, based on the acceptance of disorder as a principle of life, might be preserved.

In this light, the ultimate "failures" of the protagonists – and of the narratives that "fail" to provide a closure to their plots – can be read as the only possible signs of success in the urban world. Wittman is perhaps most conscious of his achievements, whereas Moinous may not be quite aware of it, and Oedipa and Quinn no longer think of their lives in terms of success. Nevertheless, they all manage to go their own way, and redefine their relationships not only with other human beings, but with the universe as such. Again, Hana Wirth-Nesher's words on urban fiction in general, may be helpful here; in her account, "[t]he private self in conflict with a public world" that was characteristic of traditional urban fiction, has now been replaced by "a self that both constructs and is constructed by the cityscape" (21). The protagonists agree to the fact that their lives are not completely private and independent from others, or from the space that surrounds them, and this realisation makes them come to terms with the dilemmas that used to be the source of their frustration. Moreover, they seem to realise that succumbing to the unexpected and allowing chance to rule their lives, has the potential of filling their lives not only with chaos, but also the possibility of a revelation, which, although never guaranteeing any answers to the ultimate questions, still holds the promise that there is more to reality than just a surface of signs.

Whether we think of the characters' lots in terms of success or failure, the effect these narratives have on the readers remains a different story. The reading experience produces a genuine interest in the city as a discursive practice. These narratives take their readers on fascinating "walks" through labyrinthine turns of

action. In the process of trying to get through, the readers have to learn that the only thing to be expected is the unexpected, and that literary conventions are like social stereotypes – constantly undermined by real experience. The readers also have to learn that relationships between the characters, but also between the characters and the reader, the reader and the author, the author and the characters, can be complex and take multiple forms, because the level of discourse cannot always be neatly separated from the level of experience. As *The Saragossa Manuscript* wonderfully shows, an important quality of human life is the ability to participate in other people's stories. City life, where such stories are constantly confronted with one another, demands a special skill: one of telling stories and being able to listen. No wonder, then, that thousands of readers continue to be fascinated by intricate stories of aimless walks and failed quests. Perhaps in some way the collective experience of reading such urban fiction creates a virtual community of "postmodern urban drifters," fascinated by urban space with all the coincidental, unexpected, possibly revelatory experience that it has to offer. Perhaps it is in this way that our postmodern, confused and uncertain religiousness really manifests itself.

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