

MODEL CITY

WITH A CRITICAL INTRODUCTION ON PROSE POETRY AND THE CITY

by

DONNA STONECIPHER

(Under the Direction of ANDREW ZAWACKI)

ABSTRACT

Charles Baudelaire famously wrote that he dreamed of the miracle of a poetic prose in order to find a mode in which to write about cities: “It was, above all, out of my explorations of huge cities, out of the medley of their innumerable interrelations, that this haunting ideal [of a poetic prose] was born.” These explorations led to *Paris Spleen*, widely accepted as the first volume of modern prose poems written. The critical portion of this dissertation examines the purported relationship between the prose poem and the city, constructing an apparatus of Baudelairean *correspondences* inquiring into how the built environment of the poem relates to the built environment we live in, using—in addition to poetry—literary criticism, urban theory, structural linguistics, sociology, and architectural theory to explore these sightlines. The prose poems in the manuscript that follows, “Model City,” exploit the connection between prose poetry and the urban and give it another twist—exploring the relationship between rigid form and the “drifting” poetic, the poems are “model cities” in themselves, built environments designed to a utopian template that thereby create space for the “innumerable relations” of utopic and dystopic living that goes on inside them.

INDEX WORDS: Poetry, poetics, creative writing, prose poetry, cities, model cities

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BA, Sarah Lawrence College, 1991
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A Dissertation Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of The University of Georgia in Partial
Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

ATHENS, GEORGIA

2011

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION: PROSE POETRY AND THE CITY

When Charles Baudelaire wrote the first theoretical text about the prose poem ever written, a letter to his editor, Arsène Houssaye, he directly linked the search for the “miracle of a poetic prose,” an ideal of which he has been dreaming, to cities: “It was, above all, out of my explorations of huge cities, out of the medley of their innumerable interrelations, that this haunting ideal was born.” This Ur-text for prose poetry is usually printed in collections of his prose poems in English, whether because it qualifies as poetic itself or because it is thought to help make prose poems more palatable for English-reading audience, is unclear—but in all of the citations and examinations of it I have come across, I have never yet seen a sustained inquiry into what exactly Baudelaire meant by this curious statement, which is all the more curious since a “huge city”—Paris—figures heavily in the formal poems of *Les Fleurs du Mal*, which is to say that, for a time at least, sonnets must have seemed an adequate formal vehicle in which to express the poetic content of huge cities. In fact, over the century and a half since Baudelaire’s letter, the notion that the prose poem has a special relationship to the urban has become something of a chestnut, such that, for example, in the 2004 *Boxing Inside the Box*, a study of the prose poem and women writers, Holly Iglesias could state as a matter of fact: “In the French context, a tradition of stringent syllabic versification, neoclassical formality and Romantic reverie could no longer match the social realities of an increasingly urban and industrial European landscape. Charles Baudelaire found a solution to this dilemma by pursuing what he

described in the preface to *Petits Poèmes en prose* as ‘a poetic prose.’”¹ And Cole Swensen, also in 2004, in “Poetry City,” wrote: “Prose poetry was the most radical new poetic form [in Modernism], and the one most tied to the urban.”² Accounting for a certain disingenuousness on Baudelaire’s part in the letter, I wish to take him at his word, and ask why, after having written *Les Fleurs du Mal*, his experience exploring “huge cities” caused him to believe that his customary elaborately rhymed and metered verse would not be adequate to the “innumerable interrelations” that cities represent. And more fundamentally, the question I would like to pose is, What do cities and prose poetry have to do with each other?

In this essay I will look not so much at particular prose poems themselves, but at the idea of prose poetry as ontologically urban, as put forth initially by Baudelaire, and examined through a number of contemporary critics who have written on the prose poem, several prose poets, as well as philosophers on the urban. In fact, I first started to think more seriously about the prose poem and the city while reading the philosopher Michel de Certeau’s essay “Walking in the City” in his book *The Practice of Everyday Life*. The central premise of De Certeau’s book, that supposedly passive consumers turn into active producers through “tactics” wielded as part of the survival strategies of everyday life, manifests itself in the city in the ways in which city-dwellers use the givens of the city idiosyncratically, and construct a unique paradigm of their own city, for their own use. While I was reading “Walking in the City,” it struck me that many of De Certeau’s observations about the relationship between the subject walking her way through the objective city seemed to apply uncannily to prose poetry, so I decided to investigate further.

¹ Iglesias 2004, p. 12.

² Swensen 2004.

This essay is a record of that investigation: it constructs an apparatus of Baudelairean *correspondences* inquiring into how the built environment of the poem relates to the built environment we make our way in, using literary criticism, urban theory, structural linguistics, sociology, and architectural theory, among other seemingly unrelated disciplines.

Constriction

As “Walking in the City” begins, De Certeau is standing atop the World Trade Center in New York City. The New York that he sees far below him turns into an object by virtue of his perspective; composed of buildings and streets, its circumference perceptible, it becomes the representation of a cartographer or a painter. The actual life being lived among those buildings and streets is erased by the bird’s-eye view, though De Certeau is still aware of its existence. This moment leads De Certeau to the perception that in fact, cognitively speaking, there are two cities: the city seen from a distance (in this case, from above), the city as idea (the “Concept-city”), static, fixed—as in a map or a painting; and, as the camera zooms from the panoptic vision made available at the top of the World Trade Center down into the streets themselves, the city as actuality—a plethora of millions of wildly divergent individual experiences moving through time—which in turn erase the map, the picture, which becomes a fiction. This second city is the lived city. According to De Certeau, the objective given of the first city, as an “administrative and legal entity” each city-dweller is positioned within, is, through various “tactics,” assimilated by the city-dweller—particularly the pedestrian—and rendered subjective, turned into the second city. The pedestrian does or does not stop at a red walklight, depending on how much of a hurry he is in or how he feels about authority; the pedestrian takes a shortcut through a back alley; the pedestrian stops to window-gaze at a bookshop but not at the jewelry

store next to it, though both inhabit the same phenomenological space. Both cities, the city as object and the lived city, coexist at all times, and a person is to varying degrees in a state of greater awareness of one or the other, which can be, in the case of De Certeau's World Trade Center epiphany, a function of optical perception. The walker in the city is practicing "everyday life"—he is the individual tactically maneuvering with forces greater than he is, transforming himself from a consumer into a producer, turning the first city into the second city, subordinating Goliath to David.

An obvious question is: why is this phenomenon specific to the city? Such a doubleness would certainly also be manufactured were the object a pastoral landscape seen from the top of a hill, or a country village seen from the pinnacle of a church steeple. De Certeau focuses on the city for two reasons: first, because the contrast between the concept and the lived experience is most extreme in the city, and second, because the city is much more marked by the kinds of legal and administrative constraints represented by "the city" (which, he writes, turns into a proper noun) than countryside or village. It is the sharpness of the contrast between the rationalized socioeconomic systems of the man-made city and the irrational behavior of the people that use it that calls forth the cognitive split into two separate if interdependent entities. Interestingly, De Certeau's notion was in some sense prefigured by Walter Benjamin, a great explorer of huge cities himself, in a notation in *The Arcades Project* in which he imagines this same cognitively double city (this time Paris), but with the components of its "administrative and legal entity" merely dreamed, and never executed: "To set up, within the actual city of Paris, Paris the dream city—as an aggregate of all the building plans, street layouts, park projects, and street-name systems that were never developed."³ Here too, in a complex operation, the conceptual is

³ Benjamin 1999, *Convolute L*, p. 410.

extracted from the actual, accorded its own fictive actuality, and then placed back within the actual, which is revealed to have its own conceptual component. Not coincidentally, Benjamin also devoted a great deal of attention to Baudelaire and his relationship to the city. As has been noted, however,⁴ he, curiously enough, wrote virtually nothing about the radical form of prose poetry that Baudelaire claimed to “invent” in order to construct a fitting analogue for the city.

Benjamin was influenced in his thinking about cities by the Prussian sociologist Georg Simmel, and particularly by his seminal 1903 essay “The Metropolis and the Mental State,” which laid out a picture in stark contrast to De Certeau’s theory of the individual and the city. In the essay, Simmel delineated the transformations he believed human beings were undergoing in their evolutionary process as urban creatures. Individual psychology was being radically reshaped, he argued, and in fact deformed by the urban-dweller’s need to individualize himself within a crowd of samenesses. To Simmel, De Certeau’s investment in the power of the individual to transform the monolithic structures that threaten to crush him would have seemed a species of unfounded optimism—rather, what is occurring through the development of the metropolis is nothing less than the “atrophy of individual culture through the hypertrophy of objective culture.”⁵ Baudelaire’s flâneur, with his power to appropriate the city according to his will, to, in effect, monogram it as he strolls along, stopping to browse at this bookshop and not that one, smoking a cigarette at this café and not that one, would have constituted not an agent of idiosyncratic meaning-production, but a member of the dubious club of city-dwellers who exhibit “the strangest eccentricities”—which, according to Simmel, they manifest in a desperate attempt to differentiate themselves from one another (and a notion that Baudelaire might not

⁴ “Even so profound and radical a critic as Benjamin managed to all but ignore the *petit poème en prose* in his important studies of Baudelaire’s work.” Monroe 1987, p. 101.

⁵ Simmel 1903.

have disagreed with). But in both visions, De Certeau's and Simmel's, it is the agreement on contending subjective and objective forces that interests us here.

So we are back to the question of why the city, with its oppressive objectivity threatening the very existence of the subject—or perhaps, acknowledging and then rejecting De Certeau, with its inherent inability to resist the tactics of the subject—called forth the prose poem. The appellation itself, as many have pointed out, is a contradiction in terms and foregrounds a transgression of form. Form is our preoccupation here: the use of prose “form” to contain poetry—if we temporarily subscribe to the notion of a separation of form and content that has been systematically destroyed for a century or more. De Certeau's idea about the first city, the cartographer's city, points up its existence as a representation. The form of a poem, whether free verse or sonnet or prose poem, is also a representation, one that a reader takes in in its circumference (from the top of a skyscraper, as it were, looking down at the page in the book), before diving into the lived city of the text. What do the formal, visual, immediately perceptible aspects of a poem convey? The prose poem generally speaking, and certainly this is true in Baudelaire, is composed of paragraphs, singular or multiple. The paragraph, rather than the free-verse poem or the sonnet, seems most directly to correspond to De Certeau's Concept-city. In fact, an analogy seems to invite itself into the discussion: the paragraph is to writing as the concept/map is to the city. The paragraph is a rectangular (occasionally square) representation of written thought, the basic conceptual unit of written thought in the Western world since the Greeks, as the concept/map is the representation of the city, the map being the foundational Western conceptualization of space. Given a series of paragraphs, writers (and then readers) are able to conceptualize the thinking that will go on inside the text. To use De Certeau's idea, the paragraph is the given, and the thinking that goes on inside it is the made. The prose of which the

paragraph is the basic unit I am referring to here is prose that predates “prose poetry,” and not fiction⁶, either, but non-imaginative writing: practical, factual writing, including the legal and the administrative, the scientific, the logical, the philosophical, etc.—the “objective.” The assumption of “objectivity” announced by the form of prose is what the writer bumps up against, as the walker in the city bumps up against buildings, walls, streetlamps: the map made three-dimensional.

When a poem bumps up against all this objectivity, the tension can be great. But with other poetic forms it is a different story. In the case of free verse, the tension between the given and the made is far less taut, in formal metered and rhymed verse, too prescriptive, to form a good analogue to the walker in the city. In a free verse poem, line lengths are visually announced from the first moment as the product of a producer who has made the decision of where to end each line with autonomy (and, it goes without saying, inhabits a universe that does not know the conceptual unit of the paragraph). A free verse poem proceeds like a pedestrian wandering rather in a natural landscape than a man-made one, not bound by the administrative system of streets, streetlamps, etc., that a walker in the city is, and such vertiginous freedom has no counterpart in the city. (Which, of course, does not change the fact that many great city-poems have been written in free verse—in fact, such poems may be so effective in part because they position the writer/reader as transcending the restrictions of the city.) Formal verse, such as the sonnet form Baudelaire wielded so brilliantly in *Les Fleurs du Mal*, is on the other hand too regularized—the city, even Haussmann’s Paris, or a star-shaped Renaissance city like Palmanova, can offer no analogue to pure idealized form as represented by the sonnet, which contends with nothing in its

⁶ A treatment of fiction is outside the scope of this essay, but it adheres to the qualities of prose that are important here: its law is the basic normative syntax of the sentence, its world the social fabric in which its characters act. There are of course exceptions, but this can be considered a general principle.

conception but silence. Even a planned city is faced with topographical contingencies and, most significantly, time—weather, human use, including creation and destruction—redesigning (Haussmann), razing (war, changing demographics). That Baudelaire’s discarding of formal verse to write about “huge cities” did not lead him to free verse is rooted partly in the historical specificities of the time and place in which he was writing⁷ and partly, I would put forth, in the more appropriate architectonic analogue of the prose paragraph. Paragraphs on a page resemble many-storied urban buildings.

De Certeau, going back to Barthes, which goes even farther back to Saussure, puts forth the analogy that the walker in the city is making a parallel operation to a speaker within language: “The act of walking is to the urban system what the speech act is to language or to the statements uttered.”⁸⁹ The city is the *langue*; the walker, exercising *parole*. But just as the individual is not free to speak ungrammatical gibberish and expect to communicate within the system of language, she or he is unable to roam about the city according to his or her will, to inhabit the city doing whatever he or she likes in it and not be apprehended by the law. The subject in the city is restricted on all sides by “the city” as a legal and administrative entity (of “panoptic administration” [96]) with its own subjectivity—“the city” comes into being as “the creation of a universal and autonomous subject which is the city itself.” (94) Individual users of the city either uphold or break laws, bow to authority or do not, participate idiosyncratically with administrative bodies, etc.—but no matter how they interact with it individually, they cannot escape the fact of the city. Similarly, the writer of prose cannot escape the fact of the

⁷ See the good discussion in Monte 2000.

⁸ De Certeau 1984, p. 97

⁹ Barthes, quoted in De Certeau: “We speak our city . . . merely by inhabiting it , walking through it, looking at it.” Note 12, p. 219.

paragraph—or, to be more precise: the right-hand margin (since, of course, some prose is not broken up into paragraphs, though if it does not extend across to the right-hand margin, it may well start to be categorized as poetry). The prose writer must accept the paragraph, though, once it has been accepted, the writer is able to commit within it a variety of speech acts, certainly including speech acts that defy or undermine the rationalized hypotactic logic that the paragraph announces by its form. “Tactics,” like De Certeau’s walker in the city. “Tactics” and “-taxis,” of course, share the same root: Greek *taktikos*, to arrange. I would argue, then, that one reason Baudelaire had to “invent” the prose poem as a mode for exploring Paris was precisely because of the aptness of this inescapability, and of the myriad ways that the writer, the city-dweller go about avenging their subjectivity, escaping the inescapability. The degree of tension afforded the writer of poetry by the implications of prose parallels the tension within which the city-dweller must act to appropriate his city.

De Certeau goes on to refine his analysis of the walk through the city as speech act by comparing the Concept-city to grammar, on the level of the sentence:

I would add that that geometrical space of urbanists and architects seems to have the status of the ‘proper meaning’ constructed by grammarians and linguists in order to have a normal and normative level to which they can compare the drifting of ‘figurative’ language. In reality, this faceless ‘proper’ meaning cannot be found in current use, whether verbal or pedestrian; it is merely the fiction produced by a use that is also particular, the metalinguistic use of science that distinguishes itself by that very distinction.

This refinement of the proposition also refines the schematic for considering the relationship between the prose poem and the city: the writer of prose poems sets up the (fictive) geometrical space of the paragraph, with its expectations of normative grammar (thus casting herself here in the role of De Certeau’s grammarian), “in order to have a normal and normative level to which [she] can compare the drifting of ‘figurative’ language”—in other words, to turn prose into

poetry. Or we could think of it this way: the prose paragraph is analogous to a birdhouse—a representation of a human house built for birds—and poetry to the nest a family of birds builds within the abstraction, making it their own.

Paul Valéry, in his essay “Poetry and Abstract Thought,” made this well-known analogy: walking is to prose as dancing is to poetry.

Walking, like prose, has a definite aim. It is an act directed at something we wish to reach. . . . The dance, is quite another matter. It is . . . a system of actions . . . whose end is in themselves. It goes nowhere.”¹⁰

Leaving aside the fact that literary history has too-simplistically accorded Baudelaire the status of founder of the prose poem, and closely associated him with a type of walking that, in terms of goal orientation, looks, in Valéry’s framework, a lot more like dancing than walking—that is to say, *flâneuring*—are we surprised that the artist who is credited with fixing the iconic image of the *flâneur* is also credited with inventing a type of prose that is not utilitarian, or, as Valéry writes, discarded when it has served its purpose, but whose “end is in itself,” which is to say, poetry? The *flâneur* is an urban creature through and through, the impulse to tarry to observe details occasioned by the city’s urban marketplace, which displays its wares in infinite variety in shop windows and display cases; the *flâneur* is De Certeau’s tactician morphologized. (As we will see later, Benjamin’s distinction between the *flâneur* and the man of the crowd fits into the dichotomy we have constructed of De Certeau and Simmel’s assessment of the power differential between the individual and the city.) Using De Certeau’s grammar of walking, what the prose poem engages in starts to look something akin to Parisian window-shopping: the conscious use of structures aimed at rationalized commerce (windows displaying wares)—or logic (the paragraph)—as an impetus for irrational dreaming.

¹⁰ Quoted in Silliman 2003, p. 100.

Freedom

Baudelaire wrote in one of his letters that *Paris Spleen* was “like *Les Fleurs du Mal*, but with more freedom, more detail, and more bantering.”¹¹ For a poet who was writing in a time that recognized no such thing as *vers libre* (Whitman had published the first volume of *Leaves of Grass* in 1855 in the United States, but it didn’t make its way across the Atlantic until after Baudelaire’s death), and whose habitual poetic activity involved elaborate formal apparatus, meter and rhyme schemes, the notion that his writing in prose would feel freer, like a lady’s ribcage breathing out after the corset has been unlaced, is only logical. The American poet Ron Silliman, writing more than a century later, describes this freedom in his essay “The New Sentence” (which I will discuss at greater length later): “The French found the prose poem to be an ideal device for the dematerialization of writing. Gone were the external devices of form that naggingly held the reader in the present, aware of the physical presence of the text itself.”¹² The literary critic Steven Monte, in *Invisible Fences*, attests to how this property of freedom granted by the prose poem has been reified over the decades: “If readers of prose poetry have been or become less aware of the genre’s constraints, it is perhaps because so much of the rhetoric surrounding the prose poem has to do with its formal freedom.”¹³ But as Monte elsewhere (p. 70) and Jonathan Monroe both show, Baudelaire was not engaged in a conscious effort to “dematerialize” writing by constructing his *poèmes en prose*, wasn’t deliberately attempting to dismantle a constricting formal expectation, wasn’t aiming for innovation, as such, at all—but rather was hoping, in using prose, to compete with the rise of the novel in the bourgeoisie’s estimation—and tap into its moneymaking capacities. Arsène Houssaye, after all, was the editor

¹¹ Quoted in Monte 2000, p. 63.

¹² Silliman 1987, p. 81.

¹³ Monte 2000, p. 8.

of a newspaper, *La Presse*, and Baudelaire revealed in letters that his approach to Houssaye had more to do with hopes of cashing in with the poems in prose through publishing them in the popular press than with “making it new” for its own sake.¹⁴ Here we come back briefly to Simmel, who, in his essay on the metropolis, wrote of its unique socioeconomic character: the metropolis “has always been the seat of money economy, because the many-sidedness and concentration of commercial activity have for the medium of exchange an importance which it could not have acquired in the commercial aspects of rural life.” In other words, the prose poem, placed cunningly as a new product on the literary market out of mercenary impulses, was theorized as coming into being out of explorations of “huge cities,” which is to say huge money economies: there is almost a tautology forming here. Building on his analysis of the impersonality in human interaction fostered by the rationalization of a money economy, Simmel foregrounds the “blasé attitude” that the city fosters in its denizens: emotional relationships formed by people all living in a village, who have known each other since birth, are replaced in the city by “intellectual” relationships—cool, rational, impersonal, as a result of an economy of its own: there is only so much emotion one person can expend on other people. “If the unceasing external contact of numbers of persons in the city should be met by the same number of inner reactions as in the small town, in which one knows almost every person he meets and to each of whom he has a positive relationship, one would be completely atomized internally and would fall into an unthinkable mental condition.” (15) The seeming “cruelty” of Baudelaire’s prose poems about the poor suddenly reveals itself in a new light: Baudelaire saw exactly what Simmel saw, that the big-city-dweller has demands made upon him, by, for example, beggars, that on a purely mathematical basis he cannot respond to as his moral universe dictates he ought, and the

¹⁴ See discussion in esp. Monroe 1998, pp. 94–97.

inevitable result of this inability to respond is a confusion of irrational remorse, pity, rage—and cruelty. And Simmel’s blasé attitude provides us with another reason, then, for Baudelaire’s selection of the more “objective,” less “emotional” mode of prose to write about huge cities, to write about such morally ambiguous encounters as those with the poor in a form that “frees” the poet from the subjective lyrical mode of verse, which would, within the ethical system posited by its singularity, demand a more human-scale, one-to-one, compassionate response.¹⁵ On a purely formal level, the caryatid of the lineated poem does not allow for the rich, productive tension and confusion between self and other, self and society, emotion and rationalization that, for all of the architectonic and historical reasons outlined above, the mode of “poems in prose” does.

The obvious formal tension between the “form” of prose and the “content” of poetry has been put forth as the primary reason why prose poetry has often been associated with subversion and social critique by a number of writers, though perhaps none so convincingly as Jonathan Monroe, who spends most of his excellent book on the prose poem, *A Poverty of Objects*, arguing that the prose poem functions as a site of productive generic tension between the individual and the society in which he or she lives—which is also an argument for the appropriateness of the prose poem as the apt mode for the urban, since the individual city-dweller is the most extreme example of the subject embedded within a social sphere. He writes that the prose poem “. . . displays a radical skepticism toward the notion of a lyrical/poetic discourse in and through which the self might present itself as unmediated, unaffected by social relations. In stark contrast to what Bakhtin has called the ‘monological’ tendency of lyric poetry, the prose poem dialogizes the word . . . [r]einscribing it in the heteroglossia of the surrounding

¹⁵ It has often been pointed out, for example, that people will weep with compassion over a homeless character in a movie, whereas they walk by homeless people in their own neighborhood unmoved. The characterization of the homeless person, taken in by the person in the movie theater, isolates him back into an individual, as the viewer is individualized in the act of spectating (though surrounded by a crowd) rendering them both, emotionally, “village people,” and erasing the “metropolis effect” that abstracts humanity.

aesthetic and social world.” (35) What is more heteroglossic than the modern metropolis, with its babble of voices, of selves, of realities, of “everyday lives”? According to Monroe, this “social reinscription of the lyric” is advanced by the prose poem as it emerges with Baudelaire. The Romantic lyric’s stock-in-trade of “musicality, the impulses of the soul, dreams, even meditative consciousness,” he argues, still have an important role in Baudelaire’s *poèmes en prose*, “yet more in a position of negation than affirmation, a negation beneath the weight of the ‘huge cities’ and the ‘medley of their innumerable interrelations.’” In this schematic, Monroe weighs in on the side of Simmel: the city offers not so much a corrective counterpoint to the overdominance of the subject, but a force that crushes it, or at least its dreamy impulses.¹⁶ In a reading of Baudelaire’s “A une heure du matin,” Monroe points out “[h]ow absorbed the speaker is by the social life of his big-city environment”—he begins the poem with the plural “on” rather than the singular “je.” In Monroe’s interpretations of Baudelaire’s poems, it is not so much that Baudelaire was “exploring” the city with agency, in a way that gave pleasure or autonomy to the flâneur himself, but that the pressure of the city, full of its inescapable crowds and social obligations, forces him to accommodate it within the perceptual space of the poem. In “A une heure du matin,” the speaker double-locks himself into his room within the city, thereby locking out “the tyranny of the human face,” as embodied by all the social encounters the speaker has had in the city during the day—but the “room” of the poem allows the tyranny of the human face back in in the very act of banishing it. Baudelaire could easily have double-locked himself in his room and written “L’Albatros,” a verse poem from *Les Fleurs du Mal* in which the city plays no role. Instead, though he has escaped the city in his room, because he knows his room is not a self-contained entity but merely one cell attached on all sides to other cells in the social honeycomb of the city,

¹⁶ This proposition is particularly interesting in light of the fact that later writers on the prose poem will argue that it is uniquely suited for dreaming (see Delville, esp. pp. 44–48; Silliman, p. 81).

he must allow it into—and contend with it inside—the prose poem. As such, the supposed “freedom” of the prose poem results in the poet “locking himself in”—too much freedom means the poet opens himself up to his own annihilation by the crowd, by an onslaught of contending subjectivities—and must find a substitute route to constriction, to constraint: to his own “egotistical sublime.” This danger faced by Baudelaire will be taken up in Benjamin’s essay “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire,” which I will look at more closely later.

Monroe goes on to write that the second great French practitioner of the prose poem, Arthur Rimbaud, also rejected formal verse as he sought a mode to express modern, urban life—and turned, following Baudelaire’s example, almost inevitably to the prose poem. In the case of *Une Saison en Enfer*, this meant Rimbaud’s attempt to find a form equal to a reality that included the Industrial Revolution, the increasing exploitation and urbanization of nature, and his anger at social injustice rendered more effective by the inhumane possibilities of the city. According to Monroe, Rimbaud offers a “critique of verse poetry for its tendency to replace the prosaic here and now—as in the alienation of factory labor—with accommodating visions of fantasy and poetic/religious harmony.” Monroe goes so far as to explicitly equate prose with the urban as he continues to discuss *Une Saison*: “The conflict between the pastoral and the urban, the poetic and the prosaic, continues to be manifest in the alteration of subsequent verse and prose passages.” In this reading, Rimbaud, who sailed off into deeper degrees of alienation when he left France to lead the life of a gun-runner in North Africa, took Baudelaire’s cue and went a step further with it, explicitly equating verse with outmoded forms including nature and the pastoral, and prose poetry with the modern and the urban, and rejecting the former—except in instances of holding it up to mockery—in favor of the latter.

Aphasia

Michel de Certeau calls the peregrination of a subject through the city “the long poem of walking.” Then he goes on to talk about an essay by Jean-François Augoyard in which the latter discerns two primary, and seemingly contradictory, stylistic figures in the discourse of the subject walking through the metropolis: synecdoche and asyndeton. Synecdoche is a kind of metonymy, in which one characteristic feature or object is substituted for a whole; asyndeton is, according to De Certeau, “the suppression of linking words such as conjunctions and adverbs, either within a sentence or between sentences.” In terms of walking in the city, the figure of synecdoche works as follows: “. . . a brick shelter or a hill is taken for the park in the narration of a trajectory . . . the bicycle or the piece of furniture in a store window stands for a whole street or a neighborhood”; the walker in the city is incapable of noticing or referring to everything that she encounters along her path; and yet the small collections of landmarks she notices still constitutes, synecdochally, the walk from point A to point B, although any other walker would notice a different collection of landmarks that would constitute the same thing. Asyndeton, on the other hand, works like this: “In walking, it selects and fragments the space traversed; it skips over links and whole parts that it omits. . . . It practices the ellipsis of conjunctive loci.” The walker doesn’t just let a few landmarks stand in for the entire topographical path, but actively ignores and suppresses the connectors that get her from point A to point B, such as stopping at a red traffic light.

In reading this passage in De Certeau’s essay, I kept finding myself thinking of Roman Jakobson’s 1956 essay “Two Aspects of Language and Two Types of Aphasic Disturbances,” in which the linguist uses the empirical scientific results of studies on people with language disturbances to construct a theory about what he calls the two fundamental poles of language,

metonymy and metaphor, and, astonishingly—perhaps incredibly—makes the leap to link these two poles to the two imaginative poles of literature: prose and poetry. In the essay, Jakobson describes the effects of each type of aphasia, “similarity disorder” and “contiguity disorder.” In similarity disorder, patients retain the syntactical and grammatical structures of language, but are unable to make substitutions or process similarities. In contiguity disorder, patients can make substitutions—or see similarities—but cannot place them within a contiguous, grammatical structure. In the final section of the essay, “The Metaphoric and Metonymic Poles,” Jakobson takes these two kinds of aphasia and applies the principles behind them to poetry and prose. He concludes that poetry proceeds by metaphor, and prose via metonymy:

The principle of similarity underlies poetry; the metrical parallelism of lines, or the phonic equivalence of rhyming words prompts the question of semantic similarity and contrast; there exist, for instance, grammatical and anti-grammatical but never agrammatical rhymes. Prose, on the contrary, is forwarded essentially by contiguity. Thus, for poetry, metaphor, and for prose, metonymy is the line of least resistance and, consequently, the study of poetical tropes is directed chiefly toward metaphor.

Jakobson’s theory almost begs to be tested on prose poetry, which, if its appellation is to be believed, hovers around both poles (if such a thing is even physically possible). But perhaps most fascinatingly, Jakobson’s two types of disturbance echo exactly Augoyard’s two types of figures of speech in the rhetoric of walking, synecdoche (metonymy) and asyndeton (metaphor, or the falling away of the connecting structures of grammar such as conjunctions).

Thus, when De Certeau asserts, in his next paragraph, that “[i]n reality, these two pedestrian figures are related,” it is as if he himself were arguing for the emergence of the hybrid prose poem as an urban form without realizing it:

Synecdoche replaces totalities by fragments (a less in the place of a more); asyndeton disconnects them by eliminating the conjunctive or the consecutive (nothing in place of something). Synecdoche makes more dense; it amplifies the

detail and miniaturizes the whole. Asyndeton cuts out: it undoes continuity and undercuts its plausibility... Through these swellings, shrinkings, and fragmentations, that is, through these rhetorical operations a spatial phrasing of an analogical (composed of juxtaposed citations) and elliptical (made of gaps, lapses, and allusions) type is created.

Whereas in his essay, Jakobson did not allow for the possibility of a genre that would encompass both poles—either dissolving their polarity or keeping it intact, depending on which theories you subscribe to—De Certeau brings them together in the rhetorics of walking in the city, circling dazzlingly close to an allegory of the unification of poetry and prose without ever alighting upon it, since literature (though not linguistics) lay outside the explicit interests of the essay. In fact, going back to the De Certeau I quoted at the beginning of this section, he ought to have spoken of “the long *prose* poem of walking in the city.”

The New Sentence

When De Certeau writes that “[t]hrough these swellings, shrinkings, and fragmentations, that is, through these rhetorical operations a spatial phrasing of an analogical (composed of juxtaposed citations) and elliptical (made of gaps, lapses, and allusions) type is created,” he again seems uncannily to be writing the history of the prose poem, even beyond Baudelaire: for, “through these swellings, shrinkings, and fragmentations . . . an analogical and elliptical type is created,” we might add, the prose poem is also created, especially in one of its later incarnations, the New Sentence.

While it was American Deep Image poets such as Robert Bly and James Wright who, in the 1960s, first revived the moribund genre of the prose poem on American soil, it was the Language poets, based in the urban centers of San Francisco and New York in the 1970s who gave it the features that it is best recognized by in contemporary poetry: parataxis, disjunction,

ellipsis, fragmented narrative, etc. Silliman, who wrote the taxonomy of the New Sentence, describes it as such: it is “a sentence with an interior poetic structure in addition to interior ordinary grammatical structure”; in other words, “. . . the torquing which is normally triggered by line breaks [and rhyme, he adds elsewhere], the function of which is to enhance ambiguity and polysemy, has moved directly into the grammar of the sentence.” (90) What happens in the New Sentence is what happens on a walk through the city—“Through these swellings, shrinkings, and fragmentations . . . a spatial phrasing of an analogical (composed of juxtaposed citations) and elliptical (made of gaps, lapses, and allusions) type is created.” Because the Language poets specifically oriented themselves on Marxist principles and a critique of authority, prose acts in their poetry as a proxy of the “legal and administrative” authority they position themselves against. Believing with Adorno that art constitutes social critique, and that poetry that does not engage in such critique is irresponsible at best and navel-gazing at worst, the Language poets rejected the solipsistic Romantic arcadia of a bygone age (if it ever existed)—which, however, they do not exclusively associate, as Monroe claims Rimbaud did, with verse—since many of their books are indeed written in verse. Silliman traces his first glimpse of “the New Sentence” to a poem called “Chamber Music” in the book *Decay* by Language poet Barrett Watten, also a scholar of Modernism, who has done some very interesting thinking about space.

Brief Detour on Space

“The organization of space is the primary fantasy of the modern,” Watten writes in “Zone 3: the Modern as Spatial Fantasy” in his book *The Constructivist Moment*. The primary visual difference between lineated poetry and prose poetry, of course, is the latter’s lack of white space. Steven Monte, in fact, suggests that this may be the only irreducible difference between the two

kinds of poem: “. . . poetry of the last hundred years (if not more) amply shows that there is nothing preventing verse poems from including all but maybe one feature of the prose poem, the absence of line breaks.” (86) It is impossible to do any thinking about the prose poem without also thinking about space, which is impossible to ignore in the theoretical language of poetry itself; spatial concepts have always been intrinsic to the anatomy of a poem. As is well known, the word *stanza* means “room” in Italian; and there is also the Greek *strophe*, an act of turning; *feet* which are made for walking, and, of course, *metaphor* which in Greek means “transfer” (and which, as noted above, Roman Jakobson identifies as the primary characteristic of poetry vs. prose). Until Baudelaire, whom Benjamin claims as “the” modern poet, and after Baudelaire Mallarmé, whose “Un coup de dés jamais n’abolira le hasard” was the first poem to use the entire page as its field (as the artist Marcel Broodthaers said in 1970, “Mallarmé is the source of all contemporary art . . . [Un coup de dés] unconsciously invents modern space”), it has often been argued that poetry was less a spatial than a chronological form, reflecting its origins in oratory and song.

But what does the white space left on the page of a free-verse poem signify? Continuing with the allegory of urban space, it represents the most precious commodity the city has in its portfolio: square footage, open space, space to breathe,. The twelve immigrants sleeping on the floors of a tiny two-room apartment on the Lower East Side would give anything for some of the white space in, say, a Barbara Guest poem. The other precious commodity the unscribed space of a free-verse page represents is also nonexistent in the city: silence. A prose paragraph drones on with the logorrhea of the neighbor’s television coming through the walls of an apartment. Some poets, such as Rosmarie Waldrop, have figured this space as the space of what is not or cannot be said: “I love the way verse refuses to fill up all of the available space of the page so

that each line acknowledges what is *not*.”¹⁷ But perhaps it is not so much an acknowledgment of what is not but a willful blindness to what *is*—that space is a luxury. For the city-dweller, of course, especially. And, as we beneficiaries of late capitalism all too easily forget, the white space of a page, of a piece of paper, was until recently also, literally, a luxury: one need only think of Keats’s crossed letters or the Brontës’ tiny, cramped manuscripts, or of the rationing of paper in wartime, to remember what a luxury white space could literally, physically, be. White space, then, is anything but empty, uncoded, unscribed, a blank. It is more of a snowcloud before it releases its individualized messages, heavy with import.

If “the organization of space is the primary fantasy of the modern,” it is also the primary fantasy of the cartographer. Does the prose poem organize the space of the page or simply obliterate it, filling up the white space like the light and air in a landscape painting crowded out by high-rises, smokestacks, crowds?

Gaps

The language De Certeau uses to talk about the synecdoche and asyndeton of walking through the city, the “speech act” of pedestrianism, is uncannily mirrored in some of the language used in a brief essay written by Rosmarie Waldrop, the German-American poet I quoted above, who primarily writes poems in prose and who has called herself a “gap gardener” when it comes to the operations she makes in her poems. In fact, it would be impossible to speak of the prose poem and gaps without speaking about Waldrop. In the essay, “Why I Write Prose Poems (When My True Love Is Verse),” Waldrop writes:

I must cultivate the cuts, discontinuities, ruptures, cracks, fissures, holes, hitches, snags, leaps, shifts of reference, and emptiness *inside* the semantic dimension.

¹⁷ Waldrop 2005, p. 260.

Inside the sentence. . . . An energy that knots and unknots constellations before they can freeze into a map.

‘Gap gardening,’ I have called it. My main gardening tool is collage. And it is perhaps just another way of talking about poetry as concentrated language. . . . Making dense, cutting out steps. (262)

and:

The fragmentary, ‘torn’ nature of the elements. (263)

Gaps, discontinuities, fragments, density, collage. Waldrop’s description of the myriad varieties of rupture her prose poems cultivate in performing the line break internally echoes Silliman’s description of the New Sentence—in which the violent cutting action of the line break is incorporated into the body of the sentence. The process by which De Certeau’s pedestrian makes the city dense and cuts out steps in his walk—the “speech act of walking”—is also found in Waldrop’s process of enacting the “speech act” of poetry. One is reminded also, of course, of Baudelaire’s dream of a poetic prose in his letter to Houssaye: “the undulations of reverie, and the sudden leaps of consciousness . . .” The leaps and the gaps in the walking (through the interrupted linearity of sentences) rob it of its goal-oriented, rational character, and turn it into Valéry’s dancing, an end in itself. Waldrop also registers an awareness of the lurking danger of abstract representation, of fixity, as though one could walk through the city as a functionary of the map, as if one could walk literally *on the map*—or write as a functionary of language: “An energy that knots and unknots constellations before they can freeze into a map.” Before, perhaps, they can freeze into the cartographer’s New York City map as seen and conceptualized from the top of the World Trade Center.

If Waldrop and Silliman are to be taken at their word, then what makes poetry ontologically poetry, whether its lines extend across the page or not, is a violent breakage,

whether of line, of hypotaxis, of narrative logic—is the breaking open of utterance to create space within it, space for its own sake, “organizing space.” It is the rupture of logic that is most relevant to our purposes in what Waldrop has to say about her use of the prose poem, particularly her expressed interest in subverting logical syntax; many of the sentences in *The Reproduction of Profiles* begin, she says, with sentences from Wittgenstein:

Fascination of logical syntax. ‘If—then.’ ‘Because.’ But I try to undermine the certainty and authority of logic by sliding between frames of reference, especially pitting logic against the body.

In effect, this body of Waldrop’s, pitted against logical syntax, should be very familiar to us by now: for it is also the lyrical subject pitted against the logical, “objective” implications of prose, which is also the walker in the city, pitted against the “legal and administrative entity” that throws up obstructions in his or her path. The poet “cutting out steps” is the walker practicing asyndeton: “Asyndeton cuts out: it undoes continuity and undercuts its plausibility.” It “disconnects [totalities] by eliminating the conjunctive or the consecutive (nothing in place of something).” One of the techniques of Waldrop’s prose paragraphs that is especially striking throughout her trilogy *Curves to the Apple* is a seemingly “illogical” use of conjunctions; for example, in an excerpt from a poem in *The Reproduction of Profiles*:

The black hulks of the tanks began to sharpen in the cold dawn light, though when you leaned against the railing I could smell your hair, which ended in a clean round line on your neck, as was the fashion that year. I had always resented how nimble your neck became whenever you met a woman, regardless of rain falling outside or other calamities.

Here, the conjunction “though” and the conjunction-like adverb “regardless” are both used to introduce clauses that bear no logical relation to the sentence which precedes them. So while in the poem she does not strictly speaking eliminate the conjunctive, she certainly empties it of its

logical function in the hypotaxis of the prose paragraph. We could say that in doing so, Waldrop is practicing De Certeau's "tactics" on "hypotaxis"—she turns it not into parataxis, but into, to coin a word, "hypertaxis" (Merriam-Webster's: "hyper-" (4): bridging points within an entity nonsequentially). In fact, it's hypotaxis's rationality unmoored (gone "drifting"), rendered irrational, the *taktikos*, or sequencing, on which its authority depends disabled. But the impact of the irrationality can only be felt because the rational structures are still in place, like ghost structures—though they have been emptied out of their meaning.

Although Jonathan Monroe does not discuss Waldrop in his book, *Curves to the Apple* also supports his assertions about the dialogic nature of the prose poem, for throughout *Lawn of Excluded Middle* and *The Reproduction of Profiles*, the first two volumes of the trilogy, there is an "I" constantly interacting with or reacting to a "you," and in the third volume, *Reluctant Gravities*, the "you" enters into dialogue with the "I," and the entire book trades off voices in this dialogue. In "Why Do I Write Prose Poems," Waldrop talks about this use of dialogue:

Dialogue cultivates gaps by definition, by the constant shift of perspective. . . . the voices do not always engage with what the other has said, but veer off, pursue their own train of thought and thus enlarge the gap, the tension, mark the cut. (263)

Once again, it is the gaps, the cuts, that are emphasized within the aura of seamlessness that is the "normative level" of nonfiction prose. But here Waldrop goes further, and suggests that dialogue itself performs the substitute rupture of the line break, which gives us another frame for thinking about what the white space created by line breaks in a free verse poem signifies.

Perhaps we can think of it as tacitly inscribed with a social contract between poet and reader: as space allotted the reader within the poem's monologue. The repetition of line breaks, then, would

perform a necessary, if violent, ritualized and codified interruption of the monologism of the poem.

But perhaps the violence is only a scrim: perhaps in placing the violence done to the “body” of the poem on overt display, the free verse poem performs a masochism it can then hide behind as it dominates the reader’s own body vertically down the page, asphyxiating the reader’s figurative breath at each break. Charles Olson, in “Projective Verse,” emphasizes (and valorizes) the domination performed by the poet as he makes sovereign decisions as to where to cut the line—and with it his own and the reader’s breath:

And the line comes (I swear it) from the breath, from the breathing of the man who writes, at the moment that he writes . . . for only he, the man who writes, can declare, at every moment, the line its metric and its ending—where its breathing, shall come to, termination.¹⁸

This sovereignty, made available so recently by free verse, can be interpreted, going back to Monroe, as the revenge taken by the poet’s right to an “egotistical sublime” on the increasing constriction and crowding placed on the subject as a result of urbanization, so that where Whitman, city poet of high-capitalist New York City, establishes a position for his ego via the sovereign and willful line break (even while his poems constantly work to dissolve the ego, which tension is partly what makes him a great poet), Baudelaire, *citoyen* of post-revolutionary, high-capitalist Paris, plagued by class and labor unrest, eliminates that position by turning to prose, in which the poet, who has achieved a freedom from meter and rhyme, is locked back in by the constrictions of normative grammar and the inevitability of the right-hand margin.

Olson further figures the line as the result of the conduit of the “heart” via the breath:

the HEAD, by way of the EAR, to the SYLLABLE
the HEART, by way of the BREATH, to the LINE

¹⁸ Olson 1997.

The syllable, he acknowledges, pertains in both poetry and prose, which means that the cerebral function is equally present in both. But the heart is figured as bodying forth in the line, which is a function of the breath. Is the prose poem, then, “heartless” in a way that takes us back to the blasé attitude of Simmel’s city-dweller? And was Whitman able to embrace with love and kindness the whole of humanity because free verse had preserved his “egotistical sublime” intact through the ability to dominate via sovereign line breaks, while Baudelaire wrote poems that reacted with “cruelty” towards his fellow man because *his* egotistical sublime was fatally submitted to the crowd, to the city—to prose?

If Monroe is right and prose poems are by nature dialogic, do re-situate the subject into the social fabric, and Waldrop is right that dialogue cultivates gaps, shifts in perspective, then the spectator atop the World Trade Center, totalizing the city through “panoptic administration,” unable to carry on a dialogue because he is so far above everyone else, is in this perspective akin to the lyric poet writing in verse, privileging her or his personal subjectivity over the prosaic objective multiplicities of the city teeming below.

Dissensions

Steven Monte, in an exhaustive study of the origins of the *poème en prose* in France in his book about the prose poem, *Invisible Fences*, does not accept Monroe’s position that the prose poem is inherently more “dialogic” than the first-person free-verse lyric; nor that, as a formal category, the prose poem is necessarily “revolutionary” by virtue of its “subversive” mixing of genres alone. He writes: “I do not deny prose poetry revolutionary potential, but I am antiessentialist when it comes to questions of form or genre: the fact that a poem is written in prose does not necessarily mean it is subversive.” (8) He also does not support the construction of Baudelaire as

the first modern, and the first urban, poet: “While Baudelaire may introduce the urban note into his poetry with more success than his contemporaries, he was no more the first poet to write lyrics about the modern city than he was the first prose poet, his subsequent literary reputation notwithstanding.” (60) Monte can write these kinds of sentences because he has done an impressive amount of research on precursors, and unearthed far more than the usual suspect, named by Baudelaire—Aloysius Bertrand and his *Gaspard de la Nuit*; according to Monte, dozens of French writers had published some version of prose poems before Baudelaire did, going all the way back to 1699, and Fenélon’s *Télémaque* (15) and, more contemporaneous with Baudelaire, including Champfleury, Guérin, and—here’s a familiar name—Houssaye himself. (56). Nevertheless, he acknowledges that literary history has a compulsion to compact, simplify, and streamline. I found Monte’s chapter on the origins of the prose poem in France astonishing, for in all of the accounts of it I had ever previously read, Bertrand and Baudelaire were always the only two names mentioned. This brings me back to the question of why Baudelaire’s letter to Houssaye is always printed in English editions of *Le Spleen de Paris*: perhaps it is printed there because it provides a convenient founding narrative, a charter, as it were, that neatens, simplifies, and streamlines the messiness of the true story—and, not least, provides a comprehensible plea bargain for the crime of mixing genres.¹⁹ Monte does not specifically address whether or not he believes the prose poem is a more apropos analogue than verse for urban subject matter, though his repeated insistence on his own anti-essentialism and his emphasis on the long list of not-necessarily-urban precursors would suggest that he might read Baudelaire’s linkage of the two in the letter to Houssaye as merely a self-aggrandizing and territorial gesture. Most tellingly, his

¹⁹ As I write this, the certainty with which I have always believed that Walt Whitman was “acting alone” as the inventor of free verse in America receives a jolt; undoubtedly someone like Monte has written a book that shows its origin, as well, was anything but a simple tale with a single hero.

assertion that the only essential difference between a prose poem and a verse poem is the lack of line breaks in the former would seem to definitively put paid to the question. Nevertheless, Monte does acknowledge that literary history has been eager to position Baudelaire's urban prose poems as the foundational texts of a new form, and he himself highlights *Le Spleen de Paris*'s emphasis on the urban, as in a convincing passage in which he posits that Baudelaire's *flâneur* is structurally parallel to the Romantic poet's wanderer in nature:

Baudelaire is positioning the city walks of his prose poems against the nature walks of Hugo, Rousseau, and Lefèvre. The promenades of Baudelaire and Hugo are alike, however, in that they represent the poet alone among multitudes.

For Monte, then, the poet writing prose poems about city walks is no less alone than Wordsworth loitering at Tintern Abbey. The latter sentence hints at the possibility that the distance achieved physically, by a skyscraper, can also be manufactured imaginatively, if the poet walking through the city holds himself apart from—above—his fellow man. Monte may be anti-essentialist, but his historically grounded, contextually based interpretive framework for approaching texts means that he would probably give credence to the tradition that makes claims for the prose poem as a quintessentially urban form—regardless of whether, in and of itself, it actually is or not.

Monte's anti-essentialism about the prose poem is nowhere to be found in a highly essentialist short essay about poetry, prose, and the city called "Poetry City," written by poet Cole Swensen. In the essay, she argues exactly the opposite of what Jonathan Monroe, in his discussion of Rimbaud, posited, when he equated poetry with the pastoral and prose with the urban ("The conflict between the pastoral and the urban, the poetic and the prosaic, continues to be manifest in the alteration of subsequent verse and prose passages"). In her highly imaginative exercise, Swensen writes that, on the contrary, free verse (or, "modernist poetry" generally speaking) is the urban paradigm, and prose is pastoral:

I'm being somewhat tongue-in-cheek, but only somewhat, when I say that a poem is the city of language just as prose is its countryside. Prose extends laterally filling the page's horizon unimpeded, while poetry is marked by dense verticality, by layerings of meaning and sound . . . You look at a jagged skyline, and see the ragged right margin; you read through the quick shifts of much contemporary poetry, and think of a busy intersection in which your view is cut off by a bus one moment, then opened up the next, and then filled with a crowd crossing the street the next.

The clever observations in this passage are, of course, primarily metaphorical in nature (“You look at a jagged skyline, and see the ragged right margin”), which befits its subject matter (poetry), its argument (that poetry, not prose, is the ideal form for the urban), and its writer (a poet), but Swensen runs into trouble when she leaves the dichotomy of poetry/prose and bumps into the hybrid of the prose poem:

Prose poetry was the most radical new poetic form [of Modernism], and the one most tied to the urban, *though it happens to refute some of my points*. [my italics] But what it lacks in the ragged right margin and vertical orientation, it makes up in its block structure, which echoes the delimitation of space by city streets. Even cities without a grid structure, such as Paris, where the prose poem originated, still divide space relatively uniformly.

Many of Swensen's other observations about poetry—that it has systems, as does a city; that it has “a complex heterogeneity that functions both in its parts and in its whole,” etc., if examined more closely, could certainly also be applied to many kinds of prose, but as a breezily formulated study in metaphorical parallels, the essay convinces, despite the stumble, which she quickly—perhaps too quickly—recovers from.

Her assertion in the above passage that poetry is “vertical” is an assumption that Michel Delville, in *The American Prose Poem: Poetic Form and the Boundaries of Genre*, shares:

Because of its brevity and its extremely restricted linear or syntagmatic dimension, the prose poem logically invites the reader to focus on its “vertical” or paradigmatic dimension. Examples of the superior “verticality” of the prose poem can include a higher degree of metaphorical, lyric, or allegorical content . . . (107)

Delville is, of course, referring here to Saussure's theory of the axes of syntagmatic and paradigmatic relations, echoed in Jakobson's explication of the contiguous, metonymic character of prose and the repetitive, metaphoric character of poetry. But such notions of the essential properties of the horizontal and the vertical can lead to other, perhaps less palatable conclusions. For example, in Meir Wigoder's essay "The Solar Eye of Vision: Emergence of the Skyscraper-Viewer in the Discourse on Heights in New York City 1890–1920," on the photograph *The Octopus*, taken by Alvin Langdon Coburn from the top of the Metropolitan Tower in 1912, which was one of the first photographs made from a New York skyscraper looking straight down, he cites a telling theory of the architectonic horizontal and vertical put forth by Thomas Bender and William R. Taylor, who "locate the tension between 'civic horizontalism' and 'corporate verticality' in the aesthetic design and construction of New York's new buildings":

The term "civic horizontalism" captures the struggle of organizations and societies like the City Beautiful Movement, which demanded the creation of parks, playgrounds, wider pavements, tree planting, an increase in civic art, and laws to curb the heights of sky-scrapers, which prevented light from reaching large areas of the city. . . . Corporate concerns, however, were transparent and unashamed: the city grid enabled developers to divide New York into neat plots of real estate with the sole aim of housing the greatest number of people in the least amount of space; verticalism signified proud capitalism. Once skyscrapers began to be less vilified as social nuisances . . . they were endowed with individual qualities. They became modern icons testifying to the individualistic spirit of American capitalism.²⁰

The "individualistic spirit" of the skyscraper takes us back to Monroe's theory of the hypertrophied subject writing the "individualistic" lyric poem—so that individualistic, capitalistic, and free-market get equated with the metaphorical, the poetic, all via the spatial trope of the vertical. The Swiss architect Le Corbusier, in "The Skyscrapers of New York Are Too Small," a section in an essay titled "New York Is Not a Completed City," finds the New

²⁰ Wigoder 2002.

York skyscraper admirable but faulty in precisely its lack of horizontal space around its (compromised) verticality, and confirms its capitalistic character with a nod to the Cold War: “During these ten years New York raised itself into the sky; but the Soviets in Moscow denounced the skyscraper as ‘capitalist.’”²¹ For Le Corbusier, the solution is the model of the “Cartesian” skyscraper, which, while soaring up straight into the sky, factors in plentiful horizontal green space at its base. (And in which formulation, non-“Cartesian” New York skyscrapers are thereby indirectly branded as irrational.) He acknowledges the equivalent between the vertical and selfishness when he writes,

Here I wish to evoke the true splendor of the Cartesian skyscraper: the tonic spectacle, stimulating, cheering, radiant, which, from each office, appears through the transparent glass walls leading into space. Space! That response to the aspiration of the human being . . . that outpouring of self in looking far, from a height, over a vast, infinite, unlimited expanse.

We are back, of course, with De Certeau atop the World Trade Center and his vision of the Concept-city. Perhaps it is this removal that enables a person to conceptualize or to think metaphorically—when he gives into his inherent selfishness, when he places himself far above the rest of his fellow human beings, either literally or cognitively, and can “pour out” his self. The writer is notorious for needing to be alone to write. By removing himself from his fellow human beings and observing them from a distance, he achieves an epistemological higher ground and is able to subsequently convey the knowledge to them about themselves he has thereby won.

Keats accused Wordsworth of operating within his own “egotistical sublime.” The use of the word *sublime* is telling, since, in discourse on the sublime from Longinus to Kant to Burke, it is always associated with elevation. Longinus: “the Sublime leads the listeners not to persuasion, but to ecstasy . . . the Sublime, giving to speech an invincible power and strength, rises above

²¹ Le Corbusier in Kasinitz 1995.

every listener.”²² *On the Sublime* is also the source of the notion of an “elevated” style. For Kant and Burke, it was the Alps that represented the epitome of the sublime—the World Trade Center, then, would constitute a kind of American Sublime, a man-made Alp.

Going back to my comparison of Whitman and Baudelaire, the architectural landscape of New York City, of course, would, not long after *Leaves of Grass* (itself a vertical trope—each leaf of grass stands upright within the whole of the horizontality of the grass) be transformed into a vertical steel-reinforced lawn of capitalist skyscrapers blocking out natural light, whereas in Paris, Haussmann’s transformations during the Second Empire, during the last third of Baudelaire’s lifetime, put in place a long horizontal sandstone uniformity aimed at allowing in more “enlightenment,” literally and figuratively. In contrast to the individualistic skyscrapers of New York, in Haussmann’s Paris, “Street blocks are designed as homogeneous architectural wholes. Buildings are *not treated as independent structures* [my italics], but together must create—on a block, if not the same street or even quarter—a unified urban landscape.”²³ Has the answer to the long-unanswered question as to why formal poetry was ruptured in two contradictory ways—via free verse in the United States, and via prose poetry in France—been before us all this time, in the form of the skylines of New York City and of Paris? One need only compare the two countries’ current economic systems—unbridled capitalist and socialist, respectively—to see Monroe’s theories reinforced (and even if Second Empire France was a different story, the seeds were nevertheless there). Though Whitman’s poems are visually more horizontal than vertical, in their excess his lines recall the excesses of the skyscraper, simply laid

²² Longinus 1991.

²³ from Wikipedia.

on its side.²⁴ And in the structural linguistics framework of vertical and horizontal axes, they still inhabit the vertical, no matter how “horizontal” they look, since they do not commit to total horizontality, and are still poetry. In fact, Swensen’s “jagged” skyline, laid on its side to become “ragged right-hand margin,” befits, in some sense, Whitman’s excessive song of his “self pouring out.”

Because, however, the prose poem engages both the vertical and the horizontal axes, perhaps its architectural analogue is not a Cartesian New York skyscraper (sixty stories high is “intuitively” right, says Le Corbusier), but something more like a tall *and* wide Le Corbusier *unité d’habitation*, the paradigmatic twentieth-century utopic architecture, designed to address both the increased crowding of cities and the needs of individuals to carve out their own space within the crowd. The *unité d’habitation* is a radically leveling and egalitarian conception of shelter: space allotted according to number of inhabitants; no *bel étage* differentiated from lesser floors, no penthouses. Lost is indeed “that outpouring of self in looking far, from a height, over a vast, infinite, unlimited expanse,” but gained is a closer connection to earth, that green space which it is surely better to run one’s bare feet through than to view abstractly from above. If Monroe is right and the prose poem deflates the individual to situate her squarely within her societal context, then the villas or New York skyscrapers of lyric poems had to make way for the prose poem’s *unité d’habitation*.

Swensen’s essay is both convincing and unconvincing—her mastery of prose syntax and her use of cunning verbal “tactics” to argue for poetry as a quintessentially urban form, convince

²⁴ Wigoder has an excellent discussion of how the heights of new Manhattan skyscrapers were “translated” into horizontal terms in order for people to comprehend them: “Even descriptions of the height of buildings had to use horizontal spatial terms to explain the magnitude of tower heights. One writer attempted to explain the height of the Singer Tower by reporting that the building contained ‘metal piping enough to extend from New York to Albany (136 miles); wires that would reach 3,425 miles or three hundred beyond Paris; and steel enough, if made into a three-quarter-inch cable, to connect Manhattan Island with the city of Buenos Aires (about 7,100 miles).’”

within the parameters she has laid out for herself; but when her argument is placed within a more comprehensive consideration of the subject, reveals itself as too circumscribed. Perhaps Swensen's ideas about poetry and the urban can be placed like Benjamin's unexecuted Paris within the actual Paris—an elaborate construction, complete within its own closed system, of “what might have been” had Paris developed in an alternate reality.

The Crowd

It's almost de rigueur to quote Baudelaire's letter to Houssaye in any discussion of *Le Spleen de Paris*. Perhaps this is partly due to the fact that the text has a magically flexible quality to it: it is itself both head and tail: assorted conclusions can be drawn from it, various positions supported using a phrase from it. For example, for all the lack of attention Walter Benjamin gives to the generic implications of Baudelaire's use of the prose poem among his many writings on Baudelaire, he quotes the letter in “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire,” and, ignoring what the dream of the prose poem might mean, focuses instead on the ramifications of Baudelaire's explorations of huge cities, and namely, one of Benjamin's lodestars, the crowd (“The crowd: no subject was more worthy of attention from nineteenth-century writers”²⁵):

This passage [beginning “Who among us has not dreamed” and ending “from the experience of huge cities, out of the medley of their innumerable interrelations”] suggests two insights. For one thing, it tells us about the close connection in Baudelaire between the figure of shock and contact with the urban masses. For another, it tells us what is really meant by these masses. They do not stand for classes or any sort of collective; rather, they are nothing but the amorphous crowd of passers-by, the people in the street. (180)

The question of why the prose poem was necessary to convey “the figure of shock and contact with the urban masses,” since poems in *Les Fleurs du Mal* also address the “quintessentially

²⁵ Benjamin 2006, p. 181.

modern experience” of walking through a city among crowds, is left unanswered. But Benjamin’s essay as a whole does engage the question of Baudelaire’s turn from poetry to prose (-poetry), without ever directly engaging the contradictory possibility of a lyric prose poem.

Early in the essay, Benjamin writes that *Les Fleurs du Mal* was the last success of lyric poetry on a mass scale, and continues, “If conditions for a positive reception of lyric poetry [since Baudelaire] have become less favorable, it is reasonable to assume that only in rare instances does lyric poetry accord with the experience of its readers.” Baudelaire, Benjamin writes, was the first poet to understand this, and he sacrificed aura, the flâneur’s leisurely sampling of the city, and, ultimately, poetry itself in the face of this knowledge. (“To Baudelaire, the lyric poet with his halo is antiquated” [208]) But sometimes Baudelaire is the flâneur, who “demanded elbow room and was unwilling to forgo the life of a gentleman of leisure,” sometimes the man of the crowd, manically attending to daily affairs. In an analysis of “A une Passante,” in which the speaker falls briefly in love with a woman passing in the crowd before him, Benjamin concludes: “What this sonnet conveys is simply this: far from experiencing the crowd as an opposing, antagonistic element, the city dweller discovers in the crowd what fascinates him.” This discovering is the privilege of the flâneur; the man of the crowd possesses neither the individuality nor the agency to segment off one element of the crowd for his own delectation. Note, however, that this is a remark on a *sonnet*. But when Benjamin discusses the only prose poem mentioned in this essay (but labeled merely “prose”), “Loss of a Halo,” he writes instead: “The man who wrote these pieces [the poem and similar diary entry] was no flâneur.” In Benjamin’s construction of his essay, its internal logic—discussing the prose poem only at the end, when he is also writing about the end of Baudelaire’s life—implies that toward the end of his life Baudelaire turned from a flâneur into a man of the crowd, at the same time that he turned

from poetry to prose: “The semblance [*Schein*] of a crowd with a soul and movement all its own, the luster that had dazzled the flâneur, had faded for him. . . . He named the price for which the sensation of modernity could be had: the disintegration of the aura in immediate shock experience [*Chockerlebnis*]. He paid dearly for consenting to this disintegration—but it is the law of his poetry.” The law of his poetry insisted on including modernity in the lyric (“How much can you get for your lyre, at the pawn shop?” “The Pagan School” sneers)—which also planted the seeds for its disintegration. Rhetorically, then, the essay implies this narrative: Charles Baudelaire the flâneur and poet’s great insight was that lyric poetry must allow modernity into itself if it is to survive, but the courageous implementation of this insight turned him into a man of the crowd and a prose writer (figured as a fall from the grace of poetry), even while it also spelled the end of lyric poetry as a popular genre, which could not compete with what modernity itself has to offer.

Benjamin’s analysis of the letter to Houssaye is telling: “They do not stand for classes or any sort of collective; rather, they are nothing but the amorphous crowd of passers-by, the people in the street.” In this case, whether the perceiver is the flâneur or the man of the crowd doesn’t matter: the crowd is stripped of any individuality; the passers-by do not compose an assemblage of easily readable individual subjectivities with socioeconomic markers, but form instead an objective physical mass that the only individuated form among them (in this case, Baudelaire, the poet) must navigate. With the advent of cities, a fundamental shift in the physics of the individual’s world took place: the volumes and masses of everyday life altered irrevocably, which called forth a formal response—as Benjamin noted, among other places, in his ingenious explication of how the advent of crowds trained the eye to see in “Farbflecken” (daubs of color),

which led to the invention (and acceptance) of Impressionist painting.²⁶ His “amorphous crowd” brings us back to De Certeau’s objectifying vision from the top of the World Trade Center and to Simmel’s cool, rational city-dweller: the crowds populating the city are necessarily erased of their individuality—from the distance of the top of a skyscraper, or from the distance of the “blasé attitude” developed in response to the sheer mathematical imbalance of the “huge money economy”—or from the distance with which Baudelaire observes “une passante”: falling in love, as Benjamin points out, “not at first sight, but at last sight.” From this distanced perspective, which was first provided by modern inventions (the skyscraper, the huge city, the crowd) people are turned into abstractions. Monte’s shrewd comparison of the modern poet alone in the city to the Romantic poet alone in nature is echoed here: the “amorphous crowd” possesses no more humanity than a rocky outcrop or a stand of trees; the “passante” is as unreal as a statue: “avec sa jambe de statue.” Finally, Benjamin uses the word *amorphous* (Merriam-Webster: “having no definite form”). What is a prose paragraph if not amorphous—particularly in contrast to a paragon of poetic form such as the sonnet? In response to the “amorphousness” of crowds that the individual began to constantly encounter in the city (and of which he was a part), the amorphous poem—the prose poem—was born.

Michel Delville, in *The American Prose Poem: Poetic Form and the Boundaries of Genre*, quotes the Baudelaire letter’s passage about cities in his discussion of the Serbian-American poet Charles Simic’s book inspired by New York artist Joseph Cornell’s work, *Dime-Store Alchemy*. Cornell was the borough of Queens’ version of the *flâneur*, haunting the dime stores and automats of New York City, though he more closely resembled the rag-picker in his art, most of which was three-dimensional collage created out of the flotsam and jetsam of

²⁶ Benjamin’s *Gesammelte Schriften*, 1.628

“treasures” found during his explorations of the “huge city.” “Like Baudelaire and Joyce,” Delville writes, “[Simic] regards the city as a new spatial model for a redefinition of poetic form, which becomes a means of celebrating objects or events we tend to perceive as trivial or prosaic.” In this view, the waste products of the “huge money economy”—both the kinds of scrap collage materials an artist like Cornell collected, and the inefficient, unproductive use of time indulged in by the *flâneur*—trivial and prosaic—are raised to the status of art via the “new spatial model” of the city, which has called into being the “new spatial model” of the prose poem. In this schematic, it is not so much that the prose poem is a necessary recognition of the subject embedded in his or social fabric, or that it is a subversive critique of the authorities of, respectively, subjective lyric poetry and objective prose; instead, the prose poem is the product of De Certeau’s highly adaptable human being using tactics to appropriate the givens of his environment, who finds a new spatial model that can “celebrate” “events we tend to perceive as trivial or prosaic.” Drifting around New York City’s dime stores, *flâneuring* through the boulevards of Paris—the prose poem “elevates” such prosaic events to the status of the poetic (the “egotistical sublime”) thereby asserting that they are more relevant to the modern human than are events we would historically characterize as “poetic.”

In other words, the poet still wanders lonely as a cloud, but instead of seeing “all at once a crowd of daffodils” (nevertheless assigned a specific [if hyperbolized], countable number, and therefore composed of individual daffodils in the Wordsworth poem: “ten thousand saw I at a glance”)—he sees at all times crowds of people, who are neither countable nor “tossing their heads in sprightly dance,” but who constitute a vaguely menacing “amorphousness” that must be escaped by a retreat to the double-locked domicile (see *Le Spleen de Paris*’s “A Une Heure du Matin”) rather than cozily recollected there, as the “heart with pleasure fills.”

Conclusion

“Ah, why was I born in a century of prose!” Baudelaire famously lamented.²⁷ If, as Theodor Adorno wrote, “the poem is a philosophical sundial telling the time of history,” then Baudelaire dreamed of a poetic prose in order to resolve the contradiction of his historical moment: that of being a lyric poet who knows that, in his time and place, the dominant culture has thrown in its lot with prose, not poetry—and that the changing experience of daily life threatens the very existence of lyric. The working title of Benjamin’s book on Baudelaire (uncompleted at the time of his death)—*Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism*—highlights this conflict. Little did Baudelaire know, of course, that the centuries would only get prosier; Kafka, in the twentieth century, traced the plight of the subject faced with ever more efficient and rational legal, administrative, and industrial systems that could only, perhaps, be represented in prose. Georg Lukacs, in his 1923 *History and Class Consciousness*, writes of how in the late nineteenth century capitalism finally extended its reach everywhere, thereby supplanting the relationship of man to nature with the relationship of man to man, and rendering social relations the only reality:

Capitalism destroyed both the spatio-temporal barriers between different lands and territories and also the legal partitions between the different “estates” (Stände). In its universe there is a formal equality for all men; the economic relations that directly determined the metabolic exchange between men and nature progressively disappear. Man becomes, in the true sense of the word, a social being. Society becomes *the* reality for man.²⁸

If this is true, then the city, a manmade environment in which nature has been entirely stamped out, is, indeed, the built corollary of capitalism—*pure society*—the “huge money economy” of

²⁷ Quoted in Monte 2000, p. 64.

²⁸ Lukacs 1971, p. 19.

which Simmel wrote. And therefore the prose poem, which came into being in its founding myth as a form adequate to provide an analogue for the human experience of the huge city, is, in all its contradictoriness, the compromised form that the agents of late capitalism deserve.

Conclusion II

My manuscript of poems “Model City” began as a response to a visit to Anniston, Alabama, an American model city. At a lunch stop in the very run-down town’s former saloon (and brothel), the waitress gave us a brief tour of the building, during which she mentioned that Anniston had once been considered a model city—certain innovative aspects of its city planning had been intended to serve as a model for other new cities; the town had been planned (in conjunction with the mines that provided its jobs) to provide decent Reconstruction-era living conditions for its workers. I didn’t think much about it then, but something about the hard-luck state of the dilapidated town—boarded windows, bail bonds stores (including its total lack of commemoration of civil rights events that had taken place there)—counterpointed poignantly for me with the notion of the model city, with its promise of prosperous and propitiously arranged life.

Since then I have visited several additional model cities, including Eisenhüttenstadt in eastern Germany, Letchworth Garden City in England, and Porto Lago on the Dodecanese island of Leros. Eisenhüttenstadt is a socialist model city; it rose from the plains in 1950, originally named Stalinstadt, and was intended to present a model of functional socialist modernity, next to a new steel mill. Letchworth, on the other hand, was the first “garden city,” modeled on Ebenezer Howard’s concept. Howard was one of the earliest city-planning theorists to recognize that urban planning should include the best aspects of both cities and towns, with green space

built right in. Porto Lago (now called Lakki) is an Italian Fascist “New Town” built in Rationalist architecture on Leros during the Italian colonization of the Dodecanese.

The questions that model cities pose—how does human life benefit from the planning of our environment, can the intentions behind the ordering of our physical spaces translate into a more orderly experience of the messiness that is life? and what happens when utopian intentions meet with the realities of bricks and mortar?—grow ever more critical the more urbanized life on earth becomes. Such questions are also inherently poetic: art, as Herbert Marcuse observed in *Eros and Civilization*, is inextricable from the desire to impose order upon chaos—though it can never be chaotic itself. Cities are embodiments of the art of living, for good or ill; rows of apartment blocks are stanzas in the “verbal patterning” of neighborhoods. Living in Berlin, where the average citizen is well-informed about architecture and its meaning, and where an obsession with built space is widespread, my sense of the endlessly symbolic aspects of the city has grown ever more acute.

“Model City” is written on a template, as planned cities are built on a template. But what happens once the parameters have been set out is as unpredictable as what happens in planned cities, despite their founders’ best efforts at rationalization and control—Eisenhuettentstadt is dramatically shrinking; Porto Lago was left to decay after the Italians lost the war; Letchworth Garden City has become a bedroom community to the metropolis of London. Each of the four stanzas in each of my poems begins with the words “It was like” because the poems are pure allegory, excruciatingly aware that ersatz is all they have to offer—deep structure as an aesthetic ersatz for any deep directed structure in daily life.

I trace my own use of the prose poem to a need for structure which yet understood that the age of metrical verse had definitively passed. I add structure back into the “freedom” of the

prose poem by, for example, constricting myself to a regular number of lines per stanza—as three per stanza of the manuscript before you. While at first glance such a restriction may seem nominal, it is in fact not at all easy to shoehorn the poem’s sentences into this pre-sized shoe—sometimes the thoughts want to go on longer, and the three-line limit pinches; sometimes they’ve expressed themselves sufficiently in two lines, and the extra space will only be filled by compromising the already adequately expressed thought. Although this constriction often goes unnoticed by readers, without it the poems would for me lose a crucial dimension of “the poetic”; my sense is that the constriction is taken in visually and subconsciously by readers and that it contributes to their reading of the poems as seekers of meaning within form despite themselves. The poems, as such, are “model cities” in themselves—built environments designed to a utopian template that only thereby create space for the “innumerable relations” of utopic and dystopic living that goes on inside them. The form is, indeed, a “birdhouse” within which the poetic comes to build its own idiosyncratic nest.

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CHAPTER 2
MODEL CITY

It was like trying to imagine the existence of a city in which no more building is possible, a city that is already perfectly, completely, sparkingly, imperviously built.

*

It was like imagining living in that city, in which the citizens are content with the already built, in which architects do not exist, and the very word 'architect' has an old-fashioned ring to it, like 'apparatchik' or 'castellan.'

*

It was like living in that city as an architect, and being unable to move to another city for sheer fascination, spending all day looking out the window at the perfectly built city, its perfect skyscrapers and airports and churches.

*

It was like being the architect and knowing that all cities everywhere are all already built, as he sits at his window all day, fascinated, looking out at all of it all already perfectly built.

It was like passing by a small shop under an overpass one afternoon in an unfamiliar part of a familiar city, and noticing that every single article for sale in it is blue.

*

It was like stopping in one's tracks outside the shop of blue articles and leaning in to gaze closer through the vitrine, over part of which is reflected the blue sky.

*

It was like gazing transfixed at the blue articles, at the powder-blue, royal-blue, cornflower-blue, sky-blue pens and stockings, dishes and notebooks and egg cups, detaching themselves from the reflection of blue sky.

*

It was like knowing that this shop would never have appeared in the familiar part of the city, and knowing that familiarity with the blue shop will only make this part of the city even more — perpetually — unfamiliar.

It was like slowly becoming aware one winter that there are new buildings going up all over your city, and then noticing that every last one of them is a hotel.

*

It was like thinking about all those empty rooms at night, all those empty rooms being built to hold an absence, as you lie in your bed at night, unable to sleep.

*

It was like the feeling of falling through the 'o' in 'hotel' as you almost fall asleep in your own bed, the bed that you own, caught at the last minute by ownership, the ownership of your wide-awake self.

*

It was like giving in to your ownership of yourself and going to the window, looking out at all the softly illuminated versions of the word 'hotel' announcing their shifting absences all over the city.

It was like reading *The Arcades Project* and thinking about how amazing it would be to go shopping in the past, when every store was an antiques store, and any antique could be had for a song.

*

It was like reading *The Arcades Project* and thinking about how time adds or subtracts value to objects and people, how some objects come to us like savants out of the past, embossed with knowledge.

*

It was like putting down *The Arcades Project*, switching off the light and lying in the dark badly wanting a first edition of *Les Fleurs du Mal*, badly wanting an original Atget.

*

It was like lying in the dark wondering if one would have known back then what one knows now, or if one can recognize value only after history recognizes it, if one merely apes the intelligence of time.

It was like bringing a picnic lunch on a Sunday to the converted industrial park, built over a closed mine, or an old quarry filled with lakewater, repurposed.

*

It was like setting out the grapes and the French cheese and the wine on the blue checked tablecloth, spread over the innocuous-seeming earth, seeded with secrets.

*

It was like suddenly, green grape in mouth, understanding the tenacity of landscape to seem, and your own tenacity to the seamliness of the landscape, to the rigor of the picnic.

*

It was like swimming in the man-made lake flooding the quarry, dynamite blasts as rumored as the stocked fish possibly nibbling speculatively at your ankles.

It was like driving out of your way to visit the model city, a model of order and urban planning, its well-spaced streetlamps casting small cones of light upon the darkneses of human life.

*

It was like arriving in the model city and being unable to discern the features that make it a model city, for all of its features have been incorporated into other cities, because they were so model.

*

It was like driving down the boarded-up main street of the model city with your windows down, and understanding that you have come to the wrong model city, that new model cities, the right model cities, lie far off.

*

It was like admiring the well-spaced streetlamps of the wrong model city, plundered of all its ideas, its boarded-up windows hiding away in the dark the long-forgotten aspirations for a model human life.

It was like the Socialist dream of the palace of culture, to place all culture together in one marble building in the very center of the city, like a big marble filing cabinet where culture can be filed away.

*

It was like requisitioning the idea of the palace and bequeathing it to the people, who would come and become kings and queens in the royaume of the filing cabinet of culture.

*

It was like entering the palace of culture and walking down the endless yellow marble hallways leading to rooms, lecture halls, stages for culture — and feeling filed away oneself, a curious tourist queen.

*

It was like the dream of writing poems lined with endless yellow marble hallways, interrupted from time to time by the crystal orgasms of chandeliers, it was like the desire to write in Socialist Baroque.

It was like riding the bus through the streets of a foreign city, and finding your eyes repeatedly drawn to the ‘Zu Vermieten’ signs in the windows of the Belle Epoque apartment buildings.

*

It was like imagining renting an apartment in one of the Belle Epoque buildings and becoming part of the foreign city, no longer foreign yourself, arranging your books on the built-in shelves, your clothes in a new armoire.

*

It was like imagining yourself moving into the apartment in the foreign city and looking out your new Belle Epoque windows at your foreign self riding by on a bus and looking into the windows.

*

It was like thinking about the organizing principle of the window, organizing light and air, inside and outside, belonging and not belonging, volume and surplus, foreignness and the familiar, opaque as glass.

It was like the amateur photographer on vacation taking a boat tour through the city having forgotten his camera, and getting angry each time the perfect photograph frames itself before his very eyes.

*

It was like the angry amateur photographer seeing each moment of lost aesthetic occasion as an instance of hidden significance suddenly revealing itself to him alone and just as suddenly vanishing, a door slid open and shut.

*

It was like, the next day, the amateur photographer setting out for the city with his camera in his pocket — and finding nothing at all to photograph, all day long — a long day — going back to the hotel with his film blank.

*

It was like the photographer sitting on his hotel bed and tossing the camera into his suitcase, resolving to go camera-less through the city from now on, preferring the nobility of his anger to the humiliation of blankness.

It was like seeing a fox one day right in the middle of the city — a real fox, not a taxidermied fox, nor a fox logo, nor a foxy person that one might want to sleep with.

*

It was like stopping and staring at the fox, along with all the other people walking down the street, all stopped in their tracks and staring in astonishment at the fox.

*

It was like watching the real, soft, cinnamon-colored fox, the only object moving in the landscape, moving silkily along the overgrown median, darting glances over at the people standing on the sidewalk, staring.

*

It was like the concentrated attention placed on the fox's perplexing appearance deflected by the fox, who keeps moving down the street, headed to a fox den known only to the fox — dark, liquid, insolvent.

It was like coming out of an unfamiliar subway station headed for a destination and noticing a sign that says ‘Sugar Museum, 500 m’ and suddenly changing your plans for the day, your destination.

*

It was like walking along the ‘500 m’ announced by the sign for the Sugar Museum and thinking, only 500 m to the unending sweetness I deserve, your original destination forgotten under a cascade of sugar crystals.

*

It was like riding dutifully on the subway to a destination and knowing nothing of the Sugar Museum, knowing only destination, knowing nothing of the Sugar Museum and how it can alter plans.

*

It was like walking 200 m and then suddenly understanding the nature of the Sugar Museum, and turning around to set out again for the original destination. For its nature is seduction, seduction and renunciation.

It was like walking past a building that a person is standing outside photographing and suddenly deciding to enter the building, thereby insisting on an interior to the photographer's insistence on façade.

*

It was like entering the building which was like breaking into the façade which was like leaping into a dark pool in which a white building is reflected with photographic precision, shattering the reflection.

*

It was like imagining the point of view of the photographer, standing outside the building: seeing the white building through the lens as pure form, exclusive of content — line, exclusive of space.

*

It was like allowing oneself a moment of triumph upon entering the building, having shattered its façade and insisted on its interiority, and becoming for a time a part of the building, like a column or a soffit.

It was like standing in the midst of the city park and staring too long at the carefully constructed artificial waterfall, so that the waterfall suddenly starts to rush back up again when your gaze falters.

*

It was like discovering this rushing back up and then standing there in the park making it happen over and over, staring too long at the waterfall rushing down, and then rushed back up by your will.

*

It was like willing the artificial waterfall to rush back up in the midst of the city park in the midst of the city, laid out with little hillocks and ponds, all constructed of will.

*

It was like dreaming that night of the waterfall in winter, surrounded by silver skyscrapers, halted by cold in its downward rush, a torrent of icicles, neither rushing up nor rushing down, impervious to will.

It was like walking down a street walked down many times before in your own neighborhood and coming to a stop before a wide-open door that is usually never open.

*

It was like hesitating a moment, and then walking through the open door into a courtyard, through which can be glimpsed another courtyard, through which can be glimpsed still another.

*

It was like walking through each glimpsed courtyard and glimpsing more courtyards, and walking through more and more glimpsed courtyards until you abruptly reach the last courtyard.

*

It was like staring at the last courtyard, its walls fluttering with red leaves, like red sequins, and then turning forcefully around to glimpse all the courtyards in reverse, forcing them to once again lie before you.

It was like going to an exhibition where all the artworks are about melancholy, and falling into fits of uncontrollable laughter, especially before a case of little ivory skeletons “intended for private reflection.”

*

It was like looking at the faces on those skeletons and asking yourself why skulls are always grinning like that, what they have to grin about, and then realizing we are all always grinning like that, under our faces.

*

It was like feeling that grin under your face at all times, even when you are sobbing, or expressionless, reading a thick book late at night next to a dark window: there you are grinning, despite yourself, down at the book.

*

It was like leaving the melancholy exhibition nearly sobbing with laughter, picturing the memento mori, the tiny skeletons in some noblewoman’s gloved hand, as she privately reflects, secretly grinning.

It was like watching the city slowly powdered over with snow from your bedroom window, the molecular makeup of the city slowly altered through the powdery intimations of ossification, the symbolic.

*

It was like watching the snow slowly powder over the construction site across the street, which will one day be a hotel, the snow filling in the space temporarily where one day there will be permanent temporariness.

*

It was like slowly coming to think of the snow as permanent, the construction site as permanent, the grand opening of the hotel permanently postponed, the spring postponed, the grand opening of the crocuses.

*

It was like feeling powdered over with snow oneself, as one is part of the city; apart from it, watching it from the window, to be sure; but a part of it, a powdered-over temporary part.

It was like looking out at the city's motley collection of random skyscrapers from various eras and wondering if they signified the energy and vigor of democracy, or its venal ennui.

*

It was like looking at the skyscrapers' staggered heights on the horizon and wondering if somebody somewhere had thought that this homage to a ridgeline would ameliorate the lack of the sublime in city life.

*

It was like looking out at the skyscrapers' staggering heights and motley randomness and then wondering if there could even be such a thing as a democratic sublime.

*

It was like the young architect sitting at her window looking out for hours at the city skyline and making lists of which buildings were beautiful and which were sublime.

It was like reading in *Towards a New Architecture* of Le Corbusier's veneration of the white paint, rows of windows, and spiral staircases of transatlantic ships: a "pure, clean, bright, correct, and healthy architecture."

*

It was like venerating Le Corbusier's veneration of the austere architecture of transatlantic ships while your mind drifts off to more of a Victorian interior: niches and turrets, rose-patterned wallpaper, girandoles, ormolu.

*

It was like admiring and resisting the machine for living, the aspiration toward the shipshape, faces neatly framed in portholes, bodies in tennis whites leaning on the ship railing of reason.

*

It was like wanting to divide your two-room apartment into the Le Corbusien and the Victorian, one room "correct and healthy," one room diseased and false, sailing to nowhere but its own red-velvet unreason.

It was like giving a tour of the city to a history professor and suddenly forgetting the history of every building, every monument, every landmark you pass, in quick succession.

*

It was like fumbling outwardly to explain to the kindly history professor that you knew these histories once, but knowing inwardly that you possess, at best, a nervous relationship to historical fact.

*

It was like walking along with the history professor trying to remember what era the professor researches, what war the film on the poster presages, what century the buildings before you were built in, what year it is.

*

It was like wishing you could explain to the history professor how the city resides in your head: like a well-worn atlas of beauties and shocks, not ahistorical, but not ordered by history; actual, but not necessarily factual.

It was like making plans to visit a model city, a model garden city, and thinking about one's own model city, one's life and its architectonics, its fragile blueprints.

*

It was like imagining life in the model garden city as a three-dimensional blueprint, the architectonics of life there as aspirational as an urban plan, life lived in the blueprint, ordered and ideal, one's ideal life.

*

It was like spending the rest of the afternoon unable to stop imagining lying next to a brown-eyed person and then, the following day, actually lying next to that person, faced with his brown eyes reading one's own.

*

It was like imagining the brown-eyed person installed in one's own model city, and the sadness of finding out that he lives in his own model city, where he is sole architect and inhabitant, consulting blueprints.

It was like wandering through the ersatz medieval town and wondering how many centuries it would take to turn into a real town, or even if it ever could, since its origins were ersatz.

*

It was like marveling at the precision of detail in the ersatz town, in its illuminations and crenellations, and marveling also at the mistakes, the well-meaning mistakes in execution, in executing the real ersatz.

*

It was like wondering about the viability of the ersatz medieval town, peopled only by tourists and stocked with expensive ersatz Heimat cafés — just like real medieval towns, the continent over.

*

It was like wandering through the ersatz town and wondering about the origin of ersatz, about the authenticity of authenticity, about the sorrows of patina, the magnificent duplicities of age.

It was like walking home from a movie theater unable to stop humming “Wie einst, Lili Marleen” ... “Wie einst, Lili Marleen” ... “Wie einst, Lili Marleen” ... when you pass a poster for an exhibition on the *città ideale*.

*

It was like going back home to your small apartment and remembering having read somewhere that Leonardo da Vinci wrote somewhere that small rooms strengthen minds, while large rooms weaken them.

*

It was like turning on the television and idly sketching a new *città ideale*, one in which all the rooms are so tiny that minds swell in them like da Vinci heads in drawings — large, correct, teeming with inventions.

*

It was like making sure to draw at least one window into each room, so that nowhere in the model city could a person be put into a windowless room to be tortured by perpetual iterations of “Lili Marleen.”

It was like the architect suddenly understanding that the model city inside will never correspond to the model city outside, and then remembering that she has already understood this, standing inside the model city.

*

It was like the architect standing inside the model city, visualizing the model city inside, its hipped roofs and spiral staircases, and realizing she has already understood everything, that this revelation is a repetition.

*

It was like the architect having taken the train to the outside model city in order to walk its circular streets in circles in search of the model city inside, circling in like a bird on a berry, on a model berry.

*

It was like the architect at last getting lost in the model city's carefully circular streets; here all had been foreseen but the willfulness to be lost, to lose oneself in the repetitive search for a model of how to live, found.

It was like walking one evening through the vanquished streets of a city that had tried and failed to impede the march of time, and finding yourself invaded by a strange feeling.

*

It was like the moment of recognition that the strange feeling is nostalgia, for a past not your own, a nostalgia all the more potent for its double displacement, as your eyes take in the markers of the vanquishing.

*

It was like slowing your pace and then coming to a stop, stopping to mark this moment in time, in recognition of the desire to stop it, it was like halting the march of your own borrowed nostalgia, trying to vanquish it.

*

It was like accidentally glancing down at your watch, and then accidentally up at the clocktower, and feeling the double vanquishing of time, the stoppage and the ticking — the ticking, the ticking.

It was like the architect sitting at the edge of the ocean and thinking about buildings, studying the structure of the waves and the ornament of the seafoam, construction and destruction, construction and deconstruction.

*

It was like the architect thinking about the wave insisting on its own ridged architectonics, on the dialectics of building solutions and dissolutions, on liquid *Baukunst*, as he espies spiral seashells in the sand.

*

It was like the architect thinking he'd like to build rooms in which the sleeper falls asleep to the sound of the waves, a sound like overlapping stadia filling and emptying, a bedroom like a spiraled seashell.

*

It was like the architect wanting to construct the rooms out of the sound of the waves, to construct a space made of that sound, so that he and others could fall asleep to it — in it — of it — a structural part of it.

It was like passing the public flowerbed on your way to work and noticing that the tulips have been torn out to make way for violets, which will be torn out to make way for roses, which will be torn out to make way for pansies.

*

It was like thinking about all those torn-out flowers lying in heaps in wheelbarrows to be carted away for the sake of the beautiful illusion of perpetual bloom, about sacrifice and waste, meaningless labor and graft.

*

It was like sitting at home after work thinking of one's own meaningless labor, of all the money spent on public gardens, of this social contract upon the meaning of beauty, one of the few on which the many agree.

*

It was like thinking about all those torn-out tulips and violets, roses and pansies, lying in meaningless heaps on wheelbarrows, the irrationality of an economy of beauty, the flower-like ecstasy of the irrational.

It was like the city planner falling asleep in a Lucite chair and dreaming of a city built entirely of Lucite, dreaming of living in that city that can't be lived in, a Lucite life.

*

It was like the city planner dreaming of a great translucent happiness all hers as she goes about her life in the city built of Lucite, as she feels herself slowly turning into clear Lucite as she dreams.

*

It was like the city planner admiring the well-planned plazas and promenades of the Lucite city, marveling at the Persian-style gardens and fountains made of Lucite, that in fact she herself has planned.

*

It was like the city planner planning an unlivable Lucite city in her dream and being unable to recognize her own capacity to plan perfection, her own intolerance for the non-Lucite, her own Lucite will.

It was like walking through the model city to get to field after field of blue forget-me-nots planted by the city and thinking about how memory is turned into history by the sign.

*

It was like wanting to forget everything, but remembering to stoop down to pick forget-me-nots to press into your notebook, where the ahistorical becomes the historical, where a blue forget-me-not desiccates into a sign.

*

It was like remembering that history is codified memory as you take off your dress to lie intoxicated among the forget-me-nots, their tiny blue faces both curious and blank, as you forget your own curiosity.

*

It was like slowly putting your dress back on and leaving the field of civic forget-me-nots, your head slowly refilling with all you'd hoped not to remember, forgetting your notebook in the field.

It was like traveling to Granada to see the Alhambra and ending up spending most of the day there in the Alhambra documentation center, watching films about the Alhambra.

*

It was like feeling that in the films one was able to best experience the Alhambra, the black-and-white gardens, the grainy hand of Fatima carved in the portal, the sepia Palace of the Nasrid.

*

It was like getting lost in the labyrinth of the intricate history of the Alhambra, the ceilings of the steam baths poked through with die-cut daylight stars flickering in a film.

*

It was like wanting never to leave the documentation center of the Alhambra, buying sepia postcards of Lorca in the gardens sketching the view, and deleting your own photographs of the fortress.

It was like taking a taxi out of the city to go to the beach one Sunday, to lie on the sand all day almost comatose with pleasure, away from the bar charts of uncertainty and doubt.

*

It was like arriving at the beach, paying the taxi driver, and then noticing the profusion of shells washed up in ridged rows on the beach, the sea's depository.

*

It was like lying on the beach for an hour or so and then finding oneself drawn to the little commodities of the shells, their articulated forms, their coin-like precision.

*

It was like spending the rest of the day collecting shells, some as presents but the lion's share for oneself, a cache of free shells to take back to the city to remind you of the sea's Nazarene freedom.

It was like feeling very uncertain one afternoon outside the model city, like that feeling of uncertainty you get when you are riding in an elevator that opens on both sides.

*

It was like riding in the elevator feeling very uncertain, wanting the elevator to open on one side only, and to know what side, the side leading back out to the model city.

*

It was like thinking about the windows in all the buildings of the non-model city, with their ogive shapes and faulty latches, as two-way openings rendering interior life utterly porous, interior-less.

*

It was like standing in the elevator outside the model city one afternoon, disturbed by the excess of apertures and openings, points of access and multiple entries — by the triumph of flow.

It was like sitting on the sofa reading a book about a model city in which the building code decrees that all windows must be vertical; in this model city, no horizontal windows are allowed.

*

It was like reading the explanation in the book that vertical windows “reflect a standing person” and wondering why windows that would “reflect a sitting person” would not be allowed.

*

It was like thinking about the significance of standing versus the significance of sitting, the ethics of the vertical versus a horizontal ethics, the bad morality of the picture window, dissolute in horizontality.

*

It was like putting down the book and looking out one’s own horizontal picture window, in which one may voyeurize one’s neighbors, making a picture out of one’s neighborhood, but not consenting to be in it.

It was like walking past a block of new condominiums called ‘The Ridgemont’ and remembering that in the time of your childhood, there had been a movie theater called The Ridgemont on that site.

*

It was like noticing that the sign had been designed to look like a movie-theater marquee but much smaller, and imagining the developers’ meeting at which this handout to local history had been hit upon as a heroic idea.

*

It was like remembering walking up as a girl to The Ridgemont to see movies, and how for years it had sat closed, its patio rattling with dry leaves, its large marquee announcing only RIDGEMONT in blue discolored letters.

*

It was like seeing the condominium’s little faux-marquee and exploding into an irrational rage — that a part of your girlhood is a developer’s quotation, that strangers are now eating and sleeping where once you were dreaming.

It was like driving around the model city in which each house is required to have a porch and forbidden to have a lawn, and thinking about the loveliness of lawns, the sound of lawn-mowers out of childhood.

*

It was like driving around the lawn-less model city, so lovely with its porches, and thinking about how its loveliness is held in place by control, like a drawing held in place by fixative, so the charcoal doesn't smudge.

*

It was like driving around the model city held precariously in position only by laws and decrees, by writs and punishments and threats of expulsion, and thinking about the lovely irresponsibility of lawns.

*

It was like looking upon the loveliness of the model city and wishing one could live there *but also* have a lawn, a porch and a lawn — lush with dew at dawn, dark velvet at nightfall, as the lawn-mowers are going home.

It was like the architect sitting by the sea in her Barcelona chair and looking out at the relentlessness of the horizon line, allowing its grim absolutism to enter her body.

*

It was like the architect's body tensing up as she stares at the horizon line, the edge where the sea meets the sky and there is no compromise, an edge facing off an edge.

*

It was like the architect in her Barcelona chair feeling this edge of the horizon line where there is no compromise in her body as a kind of vertigo, and being forced to lower her head.

*

It was like the architect experiencing the absolutism of the horizon line as vertigo, and thinking about the sea as a surface on which nothing can be built, and being forced to lower her head.

It was like going to see an exhibition called “The Unbuilt City,” a display of architectural plans and models for transforming the city — grids, high-rises, and monumental ministries — that ultimately came to nothing.

*

It was like wandering through the exhibit staring at futuristic drawings that figure the erasure of the city’s beautiful, low-slung residential blocks, which you love, and feeling supremely glad they came to nothing.

*

It was like taking note of a resistance in yourself to the futuristic, the futuresque, the future — while not denying a certain incongruous nostalgia for antiquated visions of the world of tomorrow.

*

It was like smiling as a ‘person of the now’ at visions of tomorrow turned into yesterday’s novelties, and realizing there are two kinds of people: those who can’t wait for the future, and those who can’t wait for the past.

It was like the little group of tourists on a walking tour trembling with excitement when the tour guide points out the bullet holes from a long-ago war still visible in the parliament building.

*

It was like the group of tourists nodding politely at the brand-new buildings, dutifully observing the carefully renovated historical buildings they walk by, but only trembling to life before the buildings pocked with bullet holes.

*

It was like the little group of tourists stopping and trembling with excitement at the holes, trembling with excitement at this apparition of evidence — that history is real.

*

It was like the little group of tourists feeling the bullet holes rip through their own peacetime lives, trembling at the realness of wartime, so close they can touch it, put their fingers in the bullet holes.

It was like being in the middle of a beautiful experience demarcated by space and time and trying to snatch something of it to keep for yourself that will disobey the laws of space and time.

*

It was like being in the exact middle of a beautiful experience and seeing yourself as if in a glass case as you look at yourself having this experience, encased in glass and unable to snatch anything of it.

*

It was like being in the exact middle of a beautiful experience in a glass case being watched by yourself, knowing you will be unable to snatch anything, and feeling it is not enough, even watching yourself have it.

*

It was like trying to *not* try to snatch something of the experience and finding that worse, and starting to hate the beautiful experience, for showing itself but not giving itself, for obeying the laws of space and time.

It was like staying on an island where you have been given a desk facing the harbor and watching a large white ferry dock, unload, load, and depart, and then another large white ferry dock, unload, load, and depart.

*

It was like starting to watch for the next large white ferry painted with green trim to glide into the harbor to dock, unload, load, and depart, and then glide back out of the harbor.

*

It was like developing an inordinate fondness for the large white gliding ferries, your only way off the island besides gliding into the green water yourself, and never gliding back out again.

*

It was like wanting to stay on the island forever, watching the ferries perform their mimesis of arrival and departure, gliding over the surface of waters layered with fish, starfish, whales, sharks, and ammonites.

It was like taking the train across a border between two countries with totally different languages, one built like a fortress and one slinky as a river, and thinking about how orderly languages are, keeping within their borders.

*

It was like anticipating how the station-names will change abruptly from words stout as fortresses to words slinky as rivers right after the border, as if each language lived in a world untroubled by the existence of the other.

*

It was like crossing the border and trying to feel it underneath the train, to feel this instance of division, of order, of force, of fate. But the border was an abstraction ordering other abstractions, like stout and slinky languages.

*

It was like glancing out the window of the train at the border and watching a woman with the wrong passport led away by police — and remembering the luxury of forgetting the brute ordering force of abstractions.

It was like standing on the street and watching a delivery truck drive down into an underground parking garage, watching it get smaller and smaller until it looks like a toy truck before it disappears.

*

It was like watching the truck drive deep down into the garage and then disappear into the darkness as the automatic gate at street level slowly lowers itself to the ground.

*

It was like thinking that night about the underground garage and all the other underground garages in the city building a city as deep under the ground as the high-rises build a city high over the city.

*

It was like sitting in one's high-rise looking out over the city grateful for the automatic gate of the underground garage, preventing the passerby from hurtling down into the alluring darkness of the underground city.

It was like taking digital photograph after digital photograph of lilac bushes in the city park, moving with your digital camera right into the lilac bushes, because you are in love and out of your mind.

*

It was like filling up your digital camera's memory with bad photographs of lilacs and only lilacs, lilacs blowzily expanding to fill the four corners of all the frames.

*

It was like walking right into the lilac bushes with your digital camera like a person hypnotized, pressing the button again and again to memorize the lilacs, to digitize the out-of-your-mindness of being in love.

*

It was like being in love and out of your mind and walking straight into the lilac bushes to take bad digital photographs of the lilacs — even though you know it won't be long before you sit, amazed, erasing each one.

It was like being given the keys to the model city and instantly feeling the burden of ownership, the keys weighing down your skirt pocket so severely that you begin to consider giving them back.

*

It was like being given the keys to the model city, and then getting into your car and driving out to the outskirts of town to leave the keys on an unoccupied bench overlooking the sound.

*

It was like being given the keys to the model city and getting rid of them and driving back home lighter, enlightened, entering your house with its key and sitting down with a sigh on your sofa, in the quiet and dark.

*

It was like breathing deeply, easily, in an air free of keys to the model city, free of model cities, an air lightly scented with accident, perfumed with the deep ease of the haphazard; the habitual; the half-assed.

It was like watching the implosion of a building captured on film, watching the brown façade implode, slide down, its windows elongate, distort, slide, and sink down into raw materials in a film.

*

It was like watching the built slide ecstatically into raw materials in a film, and feeling it, as you watch, as voluptuous but violent, a violent voluptuousness sliding past the tension of the built.

*

It was like watching the tension of maintaining walls and floors, ceilings and stairwells give in to the ecstasy of windows sliding weightlessly down into the brown billowing dust-clouds of raw materials.

*

It was like watching the building implode in the film and feeling ecstatic and voluptuous oneself, wanting to press 'rewind' to watch the implosion over and over, its slide into voluptuousness, its fuck-you to the built.

It was like traveling to visit a model city and finding yourself in a museum looking at architectural models of the model city, moving from model to model lost in thought.

*

It was like realizing after a time that you are lingering among the models of the model city in the museum set pristinely atop pedestals, that you are delaying going back out into the real model city outside.

*

It was like examining your desire to be incorporated into one of the models, a tiny figurine forever in the act of crossing the plaza, to formally reject the triumphs, and disappointments, of the real model city.

*

It was like imagining yourself a figurine forever caught in the act of crossing the model city's plaza, safe by several degrees from the real model city, several degrees safer still from the non-model city where you live.

It was like walking past a building that had been built by one regime and then used by three regimes in succession, and thinking about the idea of ownership, of a building as an exoskeleton of a regime.

*

It was like thinking about the building that you call home as an exoskeleton you do not in any sense own, unlike a snail's exoskeleton; about the ownership of attachment, the attachment to ownership.

*

It was like remembering pulling empty snail-shells from wildflower leaves one summer, and remembering that even snails don't own their own homes, that one doesn't even own one's own skeleton.

*

It was like straightening up your borrowed skeleton while entering the exoskeleton of the building, knowing that you are only a regime moving into the abandoned homes of previous regimes.

It was like watching swallows crisscross over the plazas of the Alhambra and thinking of the expression “bird’s-eye view,” and wondering aloud if birds take any enjoyment in the view.

*

It was like watching the swallows crisscross over the springtime Alhambra while posing an absurd question aloud to the person with whom one has just shared a first kiss in a hotel.

*

It was like imagining all the bird’s-eye views enjoyed by all the birds crisscrossing the Alhambra, threading in and out of the rectangular towers and the fortress, whose entrance is carefully hidden.

*

It was like walking in the Alhambra feeling absurd and desirous, posing nonsensical questions and kissing the person no longer in the hotel — which welcomes anyone — but next to the fortress, which welcomes no one.

It was like walking through the perfume department of a department store in one's adopted city and smelling exactly the same perfume-clouds as those that hover in department stores in one's native city.

*

It was like walking through the perfume-clouds and feeling overcome by both sentiment and repulsion, as the sickeningly sweet perfume-clouds cushion, and then suffocate, one with thoughts of home.

*

It was like walking past the row of smiling women in white coats proffering perfume samples amid the discreet hush of commerce, which is exactly the same discreet hush in one's native and adopted cities.

*

It was like breathing in the perfume-clouds of commerce in the store like smelling-salts, disagreeable and yet tonic; artificial rose and real clove, real jasmine and artificial mimosa, narcissus, gardenia, and ylang-ylang.

It was like riding home on the subway with your friend and her new boyfriend, when your friend leans in to tell you about a girl she went to high school with named Crystal Chandelier.

*

It was like laughing and telling your friend and her new boyfriend that you went to college with a girl named Silver Bullitt, and then looking out the subway window into the framed darkneses rushing by.

*

It was like waiting for the new boyfriend's contribution, which does not come, and then imagining every room in Crystal Chandelier's house hung with crystal chandeliers, Crystal standing under one in a portrait, beaming.

*

It was like riding home wondering whatever happened to Silver Bullitt; what the parents of Crystal Chandelier could possibly have been thinking; whether the boyfriend has nothing to contribute, or is choosing not to.

It was like going to another part of the city to visit an apartment complex built over the autobahn, and imagining what it would be like to live in that building suspended over speed.

*

It was like thinking about this confluence of motion and stillness, speed and rest, restlessness and home, and wondering what it would be like to sleep over such a display of awakesness.

*

It was like imagining making love to one's beloved in a bed bolted to the floor built over the foundations suspended above the steady roar of cars held to no speed limit.

*

It was like a quiet night spent at home in the apartment in the building built over the autobahn, a quiet night laced with the foreboding of roar, a clouded notion of utopia, stasis leveraged by speed.

It was like noticing the hotels going up all over the city and imagining a city consisting only of hotels, and then reading on the subway TV that the city building minister has announced a moratorium on the building of hotels.

*

It was like renting the apartment that you live in exactly because it feels like a hotel room, radiating a kindly emptiness, because it feels like the right measure of the relationship between you and your life.

*

It was like remembering days you sat at your window worrying about the glut of hotel rooms already diluting the city, and imagining how hard it must be to convert hotels to other uses.

*

It was like riding the subway home flooded with relief, holding the news of the hotel moratorium in your head like an un-looked-for letter announcing undreamed-of good news.

It was like moving into an apartment for the summer furnished only with a bed, a desk, a chair, and an old “world” radio, its luminous dial turning to Moscow Paris Berlin Belgrade Budapest Skopje and points in between.

*

It was like lying in bed at night next to the world-radio which can now only get a few local stations and imagining the feeling of lying in bed in Belgrade early in the last century listening to music from Paris.

*

It was like lying there under the open window feeling that the apartment is not big enough, the summer is not big enough, the world is not big enough for the world-radio and its luminous ideals.

*

It was like moving out of the apartment at summer’s end and fighting the temptation to help yourself to the defunct world-radio, and its song: “Ever let the fancy roam / pleasure never is at home.”

It was like going to a dinner party where you know no one and listening to the hostess talk about a cherry festival in Michigan for which, the previous year, the organizers had had to import the cherries.

*

It was like envying the glossiness of the import, the smoothness with which goods are loaded onto airplanes, ships, and trucks and inserted seamlessly into new worlds, as you try not to think about the fact that you know no one.

*

It was like imagining the city faced with a cherry festival and no cherries, counting on the import's glossiness, its ability to slide guilelessly into open mouths, while you cast furtive glances at the other dinner guests.

*

It was like fantasizing about exposing the festival celebrating a harvest that never happened — why should the glory of the indigenous be propped up by the smooth adaptability of the foreign? you think, surrounded by strangers.

It was like walking through a model city that began life named after a dictator, and that ten years later was unceremoniously renamed after its industry, and that fifty years later is shrinking.

*

It was like wandering through the carefully planned Stalinist-style buildings of the now no-longer-named Stalinstadt, admiring the architecture's tense concessions to ornament and its rigid grandeur.

*

It was like taking pictures of the architectural fabric of the shrinking model city that began life as Stalinstadt, its buildings still called "Stalinist," its streets wide and honeyed with sunlight and utterly empty.

*

It was like walking under archways of the former Stalinstadt into and out of courtyards to streets named after German socialists, thinking about how to build always means to inscribe with ideology — later amended or no.

It was like walking around your empty neighborhood one winter evening with a new friend who'd lived there fifteen years ago, watching him point to imaginary stores, restaurants and bars that used to make up the streetscape.

*

It was like feeling both dazzled and dismayed by this inscription of your new friend's perfected past, perfected and erased, except in the theater of his mind, all over the actual streetscape, all over the present.

*

It was like walking silently through the neighborhood with the new friend, feeling dismayed by the theater of the past drawing its velvet curtains over the present and the future, as the evening darkens into night above you.

*

It was like bidding goodnight to the new friend and suddenly seeing that every hour is a theater of victory or failure of inscription, and that you have just lived through an hour of failure, written all over by the past.

It was like going to visit a summer palace built for a queen and later requisitioned by socialists, restored and opened to the public as a museum — with socialist-royalist gift shop.

*

It was like marveling at the former drawing room turned into the socialists' council chamber, the massive drab-green upholstered furniture arranged under the queen's gilded mirrors, which the socialists left on the walls.

*

It was like noticing that the socialists had left the bourgeois gilded filigree mirrors hanging on the walls, and reading on the wall panel that the socialists' drab green furniture had actually cost “a small fortune.”

*

It was like lingering in a bedroom that had hosted the dreams of princes, and then the dreams of Castro, Qaddafi, Gorbachev, and Ceausescu, and feeling a frisson of excitement about what you'll find in the gift shop.

It was like arriving too early to visit the Freud Museum and being forced to walk around the neighborhood on a cold November morning, trying to blow heat into your hands.

*

It was like arriving too early, walking around the block, and wondering what psychopathology such earliness must reveal, especially for a person who is in her daily life chronically late.

*

It was like trying not to over-interpret this instance of earliness within a pattern of lateness while blowing meaninglessly into one's hands, knowing the gesture must in fact be full of meaning.

*

It was like feeling like a complex of see-through-able psychopathologies once finally in the house, trying to read the spines of the books on the bookshelves, wanting to sink down with all one's repressions on The Couch.

It was like walking past the brown façade of a squat that has been evacuated by force and gutted, on which is still painted in large white letters WIR BLEIBEN ALLE.

*

It was like stopping to gaze at the façade and its gaping black window slots, behind which in fact no one at all remains, and trying to decide if it is a good thing or a bad thing that you don't have your camera.

*

It was like trying to decide if taking a photograph of the gutted squat would be ethical or unethical, if taking a photograph would turn you into a kind of Weegee with a corpse, or an Audubon with a very beautiful dead bird.

*

It was like moving on past the gutted squat and its gutted ideal: to live without money in a 21st-century European late capitalist capital city, knowing thousands of other cameras will take the photograph you do not.

It was like walking through the city park after finishing work for the day and noticing that the trees have white tags tied around their trunks, and, on closer inspection, that the tags contain numbers.

*

It was like thinking about the numbered trees living arboreal life outside numbers, though the rings accumulating inside the trunks are also engaged in a form of counting.

*

It was like walking back home past a new hotel where all the room numbers are painted in white on the façade, so that each traveler turns into a subject in the laboratory experiment that is traveling.

*

It was like sitting back down at your desk to write an invoice for the day, gleefully multiplying work by an hourly rate, as another ring deepens its stain inside your body.

It was like going to the Secret Service museum and peering into the vitrines holding secret cameras — concealed in watches, purses, fountain pens, buttonholes, thermoses, neckties, and fake tree trunks.

*

It was like thinking about the daily life of the city as a kind of rampantly blooming garden of activities that merit recording, and of all the worker bees gathering pollen to deliver to the queen bee that is the state.

*

It was like thinking about the hive buzzing with worker bees eager to serve the queen bee of the state, and then discarding the metaphor from the natural world, because spies are spies, and bees are bees, and a state is a state.

*

It was like thinking about the camera hidden in the fake tree trunk, and then about the night you watched a deer peer into the living-room window of a suburban house, about the naturalness and unnaturalness of surveillance.

It was like walking through the city one evening and suddenly noticing all of the advertisements advertising advertisement: Rent this space for X amount per day.

*

It was like never having noticed before how much of the city's advertising space was advertising itself, and stopping to wind one's scarf more tightly around one's neck.

*

It was like feeling unable to fend off the chilly mise-en-abyme of the advertisements advertising themselves, as if one had accidentally placed a fingertip on the city's tender spot.

*

It was like turning direction for home to get away from the unsightly sight of the city advertising itself, offering up all its blank surfaces for purchase — worse, for rental.

It was like reading a copy of *S/Z* that has lain dormant on your bookshelves for several years and realizing as you read that you've spent your entire reading life as narrative's fool.

*

It was like wondering which of the other books lying dormant on your shelves will X-ray through the thick skin of your opaque assumptions, revealing the extent of your folly.

*

It was like casting suspicious glances at your bookshelves and all the books there you've been meaning to read for years, beginning to give them a wide berth as you move around your apartment.

*

It was like finally sighing and taking out a pen to write "Narrative" on a list that already includes "Beauty," "Truth," "Fairness," "Perfection," "Anti-depressants," "Westward Expansion," and "Hope."

It was like being driven through the residential part of a city that has no sidewalks, and being informed that sidewalks were intentionally not built so that “undesirable elements” could not walk too close to the houses.

*

It was like looking out the window at the red-brick houses with their white columns in various configurations gliding by, presumably inhabited by “desirable elements.”

*

It was like thinking about how the distinction between “desirable” and “undesirable” elements is itself riven with false desire, and how the lack of sidewalks exposes this falseness.

*

It was like thinking about all the desires striking paths through the neighborhood with no sidewalks, about how intention inscribes itself into the landscape in the most visibly invisible undesirable ways.

It was like walking down a street in a storied city lined with horse-and-carriages, and noticing a pair of yoked horses nuzzling each other affectionately while the drivers wait for trade.

*

It was like wondering if gestures of human affection can be so easily transferred to the gestures of horses, so that if one sees affection in the nuzzling of the yoked horses, affection is there.

*

It was like thinking about horse affection and human affection while walking down the carriage-lined street holding hands with one's loved one, glad not to be yoked.

*

It was like secretly wanting to go for a ride in the carriage with one's loved one but openly holding the very idea up to scorn — the shabbiness of anachronism, of the driver's threadbare velveteen cape.

It was like hearing about a neighborhood on the outskirts of your adopted city called the “Cosmos Quarter,” supposedly crisscrossed by streets with names like Venus and Sirius.

*

It was like forming the plan to take the subway out to the Cosmos Quarter one Saturday, and then hearing that in recent years the neighborhood has become depressed, a piece of news you listen to with delight.

*

It was like taking delight in the cleft between the universe of optimism that could name the streets of the Cosmos Quarter, and the depressed state into which the quarter has fallen like a burnt-out comet.

*

It was like, later, wincing at this easy ability to abstract suffering into the picturesque, then wondering what cosmic effect you had expected anyway in visiting the Cosmos Quarter, in reading its outworn semiotics of zeal.