

Introduction

According to Priscilla Parkhurst Ferguson, the earliest recorded usage of “*flâneur*” in French dates from 1585 (39). The Norman verb *flanner* derives from old Scandinavian *flana*, meaning going about absently. In an 1808 dictionary of popular usage, the definition of “*un grand flâneur*” is “a lazybones, a loafer, a man of insufferable idleness [...]” (qtd. in Ferguson, 24). The first significant “bourgeois *flâneur*” in print appears in a 32-page pamphlet *Le Flâneur au salon ou M. Bon-Homme*, published in Paris in 1806. In this anonymous leaflet, a day of M. Bon-Homme is narrated in detail.¹ Later “*flâneur*” made its remarkable reappearance in Charles Baudelaire’s noted essay “The Painter of Modern Life” (1863), in which the 19th century painter and illustrator Constantin Guys is depicted as an artist who enjoys strolling around Paris. As a “modern hero,” Guys is said to be “by nature a great traveller and cosmopolitan” (6) and a passionate lover of crowds. The “painter of modern life” is very much a “man of the crowd,” fond of observing the city like a child who is “rapturously breathing in all the odours and essences of life” (7). As a spectator of urban scenes and contemporary manners, the *flâneur* is a walker who finds delight in wandering through the

¹ See Elizabeth Wilson, “The Invisible *Flâneur*.” M. Bon-Homme is described as a *rentier*, who mostly spends his time observing the urban spectacle. He often stays in cafés and restaurants, and pays a lot of attention to the lower rank of society. Nice wardrobe is also one of his main concerns.

Priscilla Parkhurst Ferguson notes the difference between M. Bon-Homme and the *flâneur* in Baudelaire’s sense. In her words, “[i]n contrast to the *flâneurs* of the 1830s, who celebrate the joys of the unexpected and resolutely refuse to make plans, M. Bon-Homme makes the same rounds day in and day out. Against the urban mysteries in which his literary descendants will revel, M. Bon-Homme reassures through the regularity of his routine”(26). Yet Ferguson still acknowledges that M. Bon-Homme bears the essential traits of his successors, that is, “the detachment from the ordinary social world” and being “suspended from social obligation, disengaged, disinterested, dispassionate” (26).

city contentedly and unhurriedly. To be at the heart of the crowd in the center of the metropolis is a cardinal aspect of the *flâneur*, as Baudelaire explains:

His passion and his profession are to become one flesh with the crowd. For the perfect *flâneur*, for the passionate spectator, it is an immense joy to set up house in the heart of the multitude, amid the ebb and flow of movement, in the midst of the fugitive and the infinite. To be away from home and yet to feel oneself everywhere at home; to see the world, to be at the centre of the world, and yet to remain hidden from the world.

(1993, 9)

Hence, the *flâneur* is a member of the crowd but also an outsider-observer at the same time.

The *flâneur* physically participates in the city he observes while remaining aloof of other city dwellers, studying the constantly changing urban spectacles before him with a cool but curious eye. According to Lee Ou-fan, the *flâneur*'s gaze is akin to the American poet Allen Ginsberg's idea of "spontaneous glance -- accident truth," a kind of casual but insightful vision easily distinguished from that of the tourist.²

In his 1930s essays dealing with Baudelaire, Walter Benjamin argues that this Baudelairian figure is concomitant with the high capitalism, and the *flâneur* is an apparently

² Stefan Morawski distinguishes between the curiosity of the *flâneur* and that of the tourist. In his words, "The tourist does not mind what he observes because it does not directly touch his skin and soul. Being anchored in a definite homeliness left only for temporary vacations, the tourist comes across foreign homeliness which he deems to be, even if strange and unpleasant, as much rooted as one's own. The *flâneur* is a kind of tourist at home, a native who feels partly homeless. The tourist can, of course, practice *flânerie*, but as an additional exercise. He pursues a spectacle that does not demand intimation. The *flânerie*'s self-imposed duty is intimating what is seen. (184)"

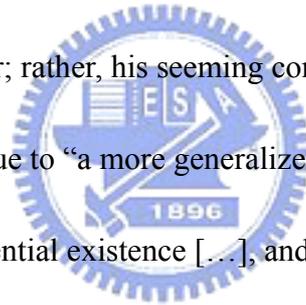
aimless person wandering through the streets in search of urban mystery. It is particularly in the arcade that the *flâneur* feels at home. In his reading of Benjamin's texts, Graeme Gilloch maintains that the *flâneur* "retains his individuality while all around are losing theirs" (1996, 153). The *flâneur* deems himself superior to the masses because while other urban inhabitants are indifferent to various inadequacies of life brought about by capitalism as if in a dream state, he remains sober. However, not every urban stroller deserves the name of the "*flâneur*." In Benjamin's conception, the *flâneur* may distinguish himself from the crowd "through his lack of activity" (Gilloch, 1996, 154). To stroll without a definite purpose is the highest ambition of the *flâneur*: he does not saunter in order to travel, trade or purchase. Yet his act is not at all pointless for his "leisurely appearance as a personality is his protest against the division of labour [and] against [the masses's] industriousness" (Benjamin, 1989, 54).



The *flâneur* is a figure with inherent paradoxes and ambiguities. "Is the *flâneur* bourgeois or vagrant, authoritative or marginal, within or detached from the city crowd [...]?" So Deborah Parsons asks us to think about (4). Simply put, the *flâneur* is never really an outsider since he cannot resist satisfying his voyeuristic desire, but neither is he a constant member of the crowd. Rather, the *flâneur* seems to belong to in-between spaces, the ambiguous interstices of the city. The *flâneur* struggles to map out a city of his own.

After Baudelaire's and Benjamin's classic discussions, this modern figure has aroused a good deal of disputes among critics adopting various perspectives. The first kind of critique has to do with gender bias. Socio-historically, the *flâneur* was almost inevitably male because

the social situation in much of the 19th century did not allow respectable Western women to wander around the streets. Janet Wolff claims that the *flâneuse* “was rendered impossible by the sexual divisions of the nineteenth century” (1989, 154). Griselda Pollock criticizes the *flâneur* in terms of the gendered imbalance of ocular practice.³ Deborah Epstein Nord indicates that even when Benjamin talked about the *flâneur* and when Georg Simmel formulated the idea of “locale of freedom” in the 20th century, women used to be marginalized and objectified, and always remain so.⁴ However, Elizabeth Wilson disproves of Wolff’s radical remark because Wolff overlooks the female walker’s subversive “resistance and reworking” in urban culture (84).⁵ Wilson argues that in fact Benjamin’s *flâneur* is not entirely omnipotent as a voyeur; rather, his seeming confidence betrays a male anxiety of being “marginal,” an anxiety due to “a more generalized insecurity and diseased consciousness [...], inconsequential existence [...], and economically insecure” (86-87).⁶ If the supposedly masterful *flâneur* does not exist but only stands for a masculine “attenuation,” “the Oedipal under threat,” then Wilson claims an extreme conclusion that “there could never be a female *flâneur*, it would be because the *flâneur* himself never existed, since he was but



³ See Pollock, “Modernity and the Spaces of Femininity.” To respond to these attacks, Chris Jenks argues that gendered gaze is probably a burden a *flâneur* can never avoid, a necessary evil, but it will not demise the fact that through *flânerie* one may acquire the ‘best’ view of observing a city. See Jenks, “Watch Your Step” pp. 150-52. Carol Yang has also defended the *flâneur* in her essay “T. S. Eliot the *Flâneur*: The London Painter of Modern Life.” She argues that the Marxist critiques have probably overlooked or misread the expectations that Baudelaire and Benjamin put in the *flâneur*. She clarifies the misunderstandings of such tricky terms as “idler” and “dandy.” For a brief history of the theoretical discussions of the *flâneur*, see Yang, pp. 32-42.

⁴ See Nord, *Walking the Victorian Streets: Women, Representation, and the City*.

⁵ To respond to these disagreements, Wolff revises her opinions later and admits that: [...] the sociology of separate spheres, and the historical observation that women were increasingly excluded from the public arena (including the street), has oversimplified what are in fact the more extensive options for women in the city. The formal accounts (what de Certeau calls the ‘conceptual city’) will not easily give us access to the ways in which women in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century were able to negotiate the streets. (2006,129, emphasis original)

⁶ The main supportive reference here is Susan Buck-Morss’ study of Benjamin’s transitional identification of *flâneur* from “the man of the crowd” in Poe’s story to “the man at the window.”

the embodiment of the special blend of excitement, boredom and horror evoked in the new metropolis, and the disintegrative effect of this on the masculine identity” (87).

Deborah L. Parsons has successfully established the *flâneuse*'s legitimacy and value. She argues that Wolff, Pollock and Wilson's critiques are problematic because their critical views are limited by regarding the *flâneur* merely as a socio-historical figure instead of a metaphor for a way of critical observation. For Parsons, *flânerie* is more like “a metaphor for a *style* of observation adapted to the modern city” (40, emphasis original). She argues that “characteristics of *flânerie* (adaptability, multiplicity, boundary-crossing, fluidity) place it prominently within a well-established critical debate on masculine/feminine art-forms” (41). Parsons thinks Benjamin's *flâneur* is highly ambiguous and leaves a lot of space for further discussion. In her own studies, she has analyzed the female characters who practice different kinds of *flânerie* in London or Paris from 1880 to 1940. Her ample literary examples include urban novels written by Henry James, Amy Levy, Jean Rhys, James Thomson, André Breton, Djuna Barnes, Theodore Dreiser, Rosamond Lehmann, Rose Macaulay, Doris Lessing, Dorothy Richardson, Janet Flanner, Marcel Proust, George Gissing, and Virginia Woolf. Parsons' book is a fruitful study of the *flâneuse* in modern literature. Nowadays the concept of *flâneur* is obviously more flexible than in earlier definitions.

The *flâneur* is not necessary a man, but could his/her steps be heard beyond the corners of Paris, or even beyond the Western cities? Although Benjamin once talked of the demise of the *flâneur* in Paris, in his “The Return of the *Flâneur*,” a review of his friend Franz Hessel's

“*Spazieren in Berlin* [On Foot in Berlin],” he extends the usage of *flânerie* to 1920s Berlin.

Moreover, in his discussion of Benjamin’s writings on Berlin and Moscow, Gilloch considers Benjamin himself to be a 20th century *flâneur*. Later, Rolf J. Goebel finds this modern figure in the 20th century Tokyo. Based on Harry D. Harootyan’s observation, Goebel contends that Japan’s capitalist modernization, characterized by “shock, speed, sensation and endangered cultural remembrance,” is similar to what Benjamin found in the earlier European situation (379). He thinks in Japan *flânerie* functions as a “dialectical movement of familiarity and strangeness” (379). So far as Hong Kong, another Asian city, is concerned, Huang Tsung-yi has discussed the film *Chungking Express* (1994) in terms of *flânerie*. Huang claims that the director Wong Kar-wei “exemplifies an archetypal director-*flâneur*, a cinematic detective of urban life, if you will, on the streets of Hong Kong in the age of globalization” (386). For Huang, *flânerie* can be a spatial practice in a mirage-like global city, which to some extent foregrounds the *flâneur*’s mixed infatuation with and resistance to globalization. Her study is similar to Chris Jenks, who sees *flânerie* as a critical attitude toward modern urban spaces instead of taking the *flâneur* as a social type or historical character. Jenks speaks in favor of the *flâneur* by re-conceiving the figure as a discursive strategy of a self-reflexive, “double metaphoric and methodological role” (146). He argues that the *flâneur*,

though grounded in everyday life, is an analytic form, a narrative device, an attitude towards knowledge and its social context. It is an image of movement through the social space of modernity [...] The *flâneur* is a multi-layered palimpsest that enables us to

“move” from real products of modernity, like commodification and leisured patriarchy, through the practical organization of space and its negotiation by inhabitants of a city, to a critical appreciation of the state of modernity and its erosion into the post-, and onwards to a reflexive understanding of the function, and purpose, of realist as opposed to hermeneutic epistemologies in the appreciation of those previous formations. (148)

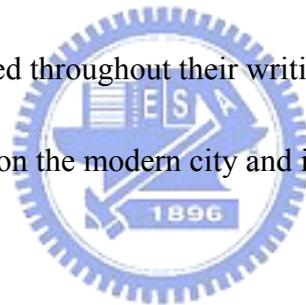
Instead of reading the *flâneur* as a socio-historical figure, it is more fruitful to study the *flâneur*'s observant, ambivalent, critical but sympathetic attitude toward the modern cityscape and the crowd, as well as the chemistry between the walker and the city. We should allow some flexibility in using this term. It is obvious that this famous figure did not exactly disappear by the late 19th century, for one readily finds his reincarnations in the 20th century and in non-Western cities.⁷



A literary work marked by *flânerie* is akin to Ross Chambers' notion of “loiterature,” that is, “a writing that takes the time to know the other and [...] the genre that transvalues the trivial” (35). Loiterature is loiterly not only in terms of the character's physical moving, but also in its critical stance as a literary genre. In my opinion, a work of loiterature is not so much a writing “to know the other” as a literary piece to explain the *flâneur*'s own self. Parsons argues that *flânerie* could be a form of search, and “in the abstract wandering in the city this search would seem to be not for place but for self or identity.” *Flânerie* in this sense is “an attempt to identify and place the self in the uncertain environment of modernity” (41).

⁷ Susan Buck-Morss argues that even though the marginal figure described by Benjamin may have gone, “the perceptive attitude which he embodied saturates modern existence” (104).

The interconnection between *flânerie* and memory is also noteworthy. Benjamin's writings about his Berlin childhood remind us of the importance of memory and perception in one's *flânerie*. Benjamin often commits himself to retrieving his cherished memories by walking, as exemplified by his memoirs of Berlin childhood like "The Berlin Chronicle" and "A Berlin Childhood around 1900." As a movement of search, *flânerie* is often a mnemonic exploration. To discuss *flânerie* as a journey of self-discovery and remembrance, we will benefit immensely by analyzing Virginia Woolf's and Chu Tie-hsin's works concerned. There are two main reasons why I have chosen their works for my study. First, it is generally acknowledged that both Woolf and Chu are fond of urban perambulations, and the idea of *flânerie* could be easily observed throughout their writings. Second, their "loiteratures" provide us with fresh outlooks on the modern city and introduce us to important facets of *flânerie* previously ignored.



Woolf celebrates London as a place for exploration not only in her personal journals but also in her literary creations. In her diaries, Woolf shows she was quite at ease when walking on London streets, she gleefully claims that "[t]o walk alone in London is the greatest rest" (*Diary* 1979, 298). Woolf is also an enthusiastic observer. Alex Zwerdling indicates that streetwalking is a routine activity in Woolf's life: "To venture into the world from the secure shelter of home, to gaze and gaze upon the city's life, was a daily necessity for her" (12). Anna Snaith and Michael H. Whitworth note that "[f]lânerie, as a literal and a metaphorical pursuit, was an essential fuel for her [Woolf's] writing" (2007, 1). Katherine Hill-Miller

points out that Woolf's urban walks inspired many of her masterpieces:

All Woolf's excursions into the streets of London fired her imagination and provided her with copy for her books. One day in 1925, as Woolf walked around Tavistock Square, she made up *To the Lighthouse* 'in a great, apparently involuntary, rush'. On one longer walk, when Woolf was writing *Mrs. Dalloway*, she was taken with the aesthetic beauty and haunting impact of people simply living. (75)

Deborah Nord calls Woolf a 20th century "female urbanist" who has created many "different textual possibilities for navigating the streets of London" (244). Indeed, Woolf writes a lot about urban life in London in *The London Scene*, and such novels as *The Voyage Out*, *Night and Day*, and *Mrs. Dalloway* contain characters mapping the city through pedestrian journeys. In the opening of *Mrs. Dalloway*, the eponymous heroine in her walk to purchase the flower explicitly claims that she "love[s] walking in London" (5). In *The Pargiters* and *The Years*, Woolf presents the street as a mixture of adventure and danger, freedom and threat, for a single woman who tries to wander around the city without company.

The connection between Woolf and *flânerie* in Baudelaire's or Benjamin's senses is not too hard to see. Rachel Bowlby makes a comparison between Baudelaire's poem "To a Passer-by" and Peter Walsh's erotic diversion with an unknown woman on the street. Bowlby further relates Woolf to the *passante* in Proust's and Baudelaire's writings about *flânerie*. Leslie Kathleen Hankins insightfully weaves Woolf and Benjamin together by discussing their

common interest in culture criticism and in the role of technology in modernity.⁸ While Benjamin's project on the Parisian arcades and the *flâneur* somehow "spatialized" cultural critique, Woolf's pioneering research on the inside/outside boundary that challenges the male-dominated society is arguably also "spatial strategies for change"(9). Moreover, both Woolf and Benjamin show keen interest in mobility within the city. The former claims that "[t]he charm of modern London is that it is not built to last; it is built to pass" in her essay "Oxford Street Tide" (1993, 115-16). The latter, in his essay "Moscow," states that one walker could only orient oneself and survey a place effectively through movement (Cohen, 101). One finds the two great writers at the turn of the 20th century sharing similar thought- provoking ideas about urban modernity and the common interest in urban strolling. Snaith contends that Woolf is a *flâneuse* by emphasizing the historical fact that from the 1850s, middle and upper-class women entered the public realm as protesters, charity workers, and shop girls.⁹ People might object that these women are not doing *flânerie* because they all have to engage in a certain campaign or business. But Snaith adds that in Woolf's opinion, whether a woman in public is a *flâneuse* or not depends on how she views herself, not how others see her:

[To allege that] the *flâneuse* is an impossibility is to look at women from a male

⁸ Hankins' essay tries to explore how Woolf and Benjamin similarly situate themselves as bourgeois intellectuals in commodity culture. Both of them tend to marginalize themselves. In Hankins' words: "Although both Woolf and Benjamin were clearly in some ways privileged insiders, they also identified themselves as outsiders. Outsider status offered one revolutionary strategy for Woolf and Benjamin, enabling them to launch cultural critiques from the perspective of revolutionary neo-*flâneurs*"(21).

⁹ Judith R. Walkowitz also mentions women's remarkable public presence during that period of time: Middle-class men were not the sole explorers and interpreters of the city in the volatile decade of the 1880s. [...] Thanks to the material changes and cultural contests of the late-Victorian city, protesting workers and "gents" of marginal class position, female philanthropists and 'platform women,' Salvation Army lasses and match girls, as well as glamorized 'girls in business,' made their public panorama (18).

perspective, to erase women precisely because of the power of the male gaze. Many women, like Woolf, would have seen themselves as strolling, observing, exercising their right to gaze on men and women. The transitions taking place in the period, the boundaries and codes being transgressed by women's presence, mean that their purpose and position within the city was multifarious. (2003, 37)

Among her works about urban modernity, Woolf's "Street Haunting: A London Adventure" is recognized as one of the most significant that explores the urban landscape in an interestingly feminine perspective. It tells a story about a woman who walks on London streets in the excuse of buying a lead pencil, which is clearly a symbol of writing. Before going to the stationer to do the purchase, she idles on the streets, entering a boot shop and a bookstore respectively. During this urban journey, the walker is at one point said to be miraculously transmuted from I to an "Eye," from a human subject to an organ. This big eye could be associated with the *flâneur's* peripatetic gaze, yet it is an eye only capable of observing the surface, for in Woolf words, it should "be content [...] with surfaces only" (71). This raises the question about the gaze's penetrability. What is the significance of this Eye, and what is the value of this non-penetrative look? In this piece of writing, we also see a vivid delineation of the subject's interaction with pedestrians and her "role-playing" in the crowd, which invites a deeper discussion about the subject-object relation in this curious form of loitering. In my first chapter, I will analyze "Street Haunting" in detail to explore how Woolf's gaze, unlike a male *flâneur's*, represents a feminine vision of the city. In relation to

Woolf's key ideas of writing, I will argue how Woolf makes a city of her own with a unique way of perceiving the urban world in her *flânerie*.

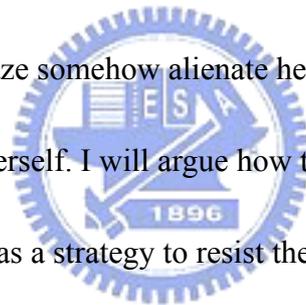
As mentioned above, the steps of the *flâneur* or *flâneuse* are not confined to Western culture and literature. When it comes to the literary *flâneur* in Taiwan, Chu Tien-hsin is certainly a writer that we cannot neglect. The critics Wang Der-wei and Peng Hsiao-yen, explicitly or not, have both tried to associate Benjamin's walking figure with Chu's characters. Chu herself is a writer who enthusiastically embraces the idea of wandering, and she contends that the best way to acquaint oneself with a city is to idle without a purpose. Chu actually bears an ambivalent attitude toward the link between the Western *flâneur* and her own works. In the opening of her essay "The *Flâneur*," she recalls that Wang Der-wei once fervently interrogated her about the significance of walking in "The Old Capital" in a scholarly conference. Chu replied that she "just" loves walking, with no intent to accept Wang's much-implied association of Benjamin's *flâneur* (2003, 151). Chu confesses that she refuses to theorize on her own work because she is afraid it will more or less limit her freedom as a creative writer, yet she also mentions that after browsing some second-hand materials about Benjamin's concepts, she has to reluctantly admit the rationale of her loitering dovetails with this archetypal Western walker "surprisingly well" (2003, 151). What is more intriguing is that in this essay she initially refuses to identify with Benjamin's *flâneur*, but still quotes Benjamin's words as follows: "The revealing presentation of the big city have come from [...] those who have traversed the city absently [...]." Right after this quote, almost with a sigh,

Chu wonders why she has “still borrow[ed] so many words from Benjamin” (2003, 153). In a multi-authored collection *Two Thousand Three Hundred Million Ways to Die: The Encounter of Lawrence Block and Taipei*, Chu contributes an article which directly borrows Benjamin’s title “A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism” and discusses the nature of Baudelaire’s *flâneur*. Almost out of an impulse, Chu refers to Baudelaire and Benjamin in her own writings quite a few times. Beyond cultural, historical and geographical boundaries, Chu’s and Benjamin’s loiterly subjects converge in a self-imposed marginalization¹⁰.

In Keith Tester’s collection of essays entitled *The Flâneur*, several useful essays that explore *flânerie* in different respects are included. Aside from the usual discussion of the *flâneur*’s visual observations, this collection covers other senses of perception as well, namely, touching, eating, and hearing. But smelling is regrettably omitted. In my second chapter, I will explore how *flânerie* could be realized in a very different way -- with the mediation of smell. In Chu’s short story “Hungary Water,” the possibility of “olfactory *flânerie*” is found. Two middle-aged men create a special bond by recalling scents from their past, and during this process they attempt to postpone and survive temporal and spatial changes. In my study, this mnemonic navigation through smell and walking is not entirely unlike Baudelaire’s and Benjamin’s similar undertakings. In the main characters’ search for lost moments, we are introduced an ambivalent relation between memory and forgetting.

¹⁰ See Chu, “A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism,” p. 41. She states that the walker’s “seemingly purposeless” is difficult to be approved by the society.

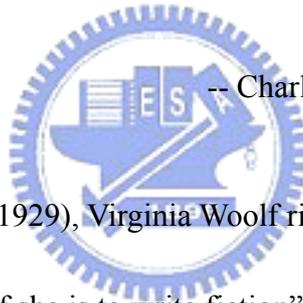
“The Old Capital,” another novella by Chu, is widely deemed a work of *flânerie*, but it is by no means a simple travelogue about the protagonist’s journeys in Kyoto and Taipei. What motivates the two *flâneries* in this story is the narrator’s long-held doubts and traumatic feelings about her knotted identity and memory, but how a *flânerie*, in which so many unstable elements are included, could possibly secure a sense of certainty for a person in her long journey of roots-seeking? In my third chapter, I will first discuss the significance of *flâneries* in Kyoto and Taipei in “The Old Capital,” especially the *flâneuse*’s phantasmagoric vision in her mnemonic journey that reveals her identity crisis. *Flânerie* in an urban setting might offer the protagonist some relief. However, the narrator’s second-person narrative point of view and pseudo-tourist’s gaze somehow alienate her not only from the (undesirable) others but also from (part of) herself. I will argue how the *flânerie* in “Hungary Water” and “The Old Capital” could serve as a strategy to resist the ruination and fragmentation of modern metropolitan experience.



Chapter One

A City of One's Own: The *Flâneuse*' Gaze in "Street Haunting: A London Adventure"

It is not given to every man to take a bath of multitude; enjoying a crowd is an art; and only he can relish a debauch of vitality at the expense of the human species, on whom, in his cradle, a fairy has bestowed the love of masks and masquerading, the hate of home, and the passion for roaming [...] The poet enjoys the incomparable privilege of being able to be himself of someone else, as he chooses. Like those wandering souls who go looking for a body, he enters as he likes into each man's personality.



-- Charles Baudelaire, "Crowds," *Paris Spleen*

In *A Room of One's Own* (1929), Virginia Woolf rightly avers that "a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction" (4). Her emphasis on a woman's inside, personal space hardly entails an entire withdrawal from the outside world. In her "A Letter to a Young Poet" and her speech to Newnham College students, Woolf urges young pursuers of writing to "look out of the window and write about other people" (*Collected Essays* 189-90), and to "loiter at the street corners" in order to "write all kinds of books" (*A Room* 142). For Woolf, the close connection between women's writing and walking can never be overemphasized. In a diary entry from May 1928, she describes London as an abundant resource nourishing her creativity: "London itself perpetually attracts, stimulates, gives me a play and a story and a poem without any trouble, save that of moving my legs through the

street” (*Diary* 1986, 126). Woolf’s “room of one’s own” does not only refer to a real domestic space but also serves as a metaphor for privacy, ample leisure, and financial independence. It is noticeable that these factors are also indispensable if one wants to be a *flâneur/se*, the writer as a walker. The line of thought from a room to a city, or vice versa, underlies many of Woolf’s creative works and critical essays.

Rachel Bowlby deems Woolf’s “Street Haunting: A London Adventure” one of the best demonstrations of how “walking the streets becomes [...] the background or ground for story-making” (1992, 37).¹¹ With playful theatricality, “Street Haunting” tells the story of a woman who ostensibly walks along London streets to buy a pencil. Before going to the stationer to make the purchase, she slowly rambles and visits a boot shop and a bookstore respectively. Banal as this urban journey may seem at first sight, the walker at one point is said to transmuted from “I” to an “Eye” — that is, from a subject to an organ. At first glance, this enormous roving eye reminds us of the *flâneur*’s peripatetic gaze, or Michel de Certeau’s “solar Eye,” a powerful, all-perceiving gaze (de Certeau, 92). But as Woolf suggests, this eye only observes the surface and one should “be content [...] with surfaces only” (“Street Haunting” 71).

What interests me most in “Street Haunting” is Woolf’s apparent self-restraint from

¹¹ “Street Haunting: A London Adventure,” written during the winter of 1926/7, first appeared in the *Yale Review* in October 1927. It was reprinted as a pamphlet by the Westgate Press in San Francisco in 1930. It is included in the posthumously published *The Death of the Moth* in 1942. The page references in my essay are based on *The Crowded Dance of Modern Life: Selected Essays 2*, published in 1993.

probing into the “deep truth” underneath the façade of urban scenes, which raises a vital question about the penetrability of the *flâneur*’s gaze. Should we interpret this apparently rather conservative attitude of looking as a kind of self-deprecating act, or is it instead a very fruitful way to observe the unfathomable surroundings? At a meta-level, how is the “superficial vision” connected with Woolf’s ideas of writing? On her urban journey, the narrator meets the people from different social classes. Her curiosity and enthusiasm for momentarily putting on other souls, as it were, invite us to look into the subtle relation between the walker and the crowds. This *flâneuse* also has a great talent of “home-making” in a public space, which, again, shows an unconventional way of making sense of the city.

I. The Enormous Eye

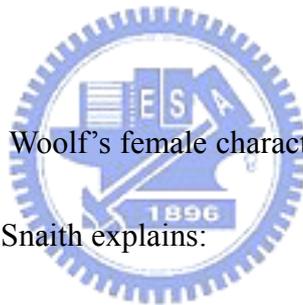
At the beginning of the story, the narrator lightheartedly expresses her need to buy a lead pencil as an excuse to take a walk by herself:

No one perhaps has ever felt passionately towards a lead pencil. But there are circumstances in which it can become supremely desirable to possess one; moments when we are set upon having an object, an excuse for walking half across London between tea and dinner [...] when the desire comes upon us to go street rambling the pencil does for a pretext, and getting up we say: “Really I must buy a pencil,” as if under cover of this excuse we could indulge safely in the greatest pleasure of town life in winter – rambling the streets of London. (70)

Then we are told it is a winter evening, a perfect time for walking, because it is not summer so one needs not bother about the heat, and the evening hours offer her “ the irresponsibility which darkness and lamplight bestow” (70). Entering the public space, the narrator is glad to join the flow of pedestrians. Leaving the habitual self behind, the narrator enjoys the companionship of the crowd:

We are no longer quite ourselves. As we step out of the house on a fine evening between four and six, we shed the self our friends know us by and become part of that vast republican army of anonymous trampers, whose society is so agreeable after the solitude of one’s own room. (70)

Urban spaces occasionally give Woolf’s female characters a more secured identity. Using Mrs. Dalloway as an example, Anna Snaith explains:



For Clarissa it is through the rush and movement of London that she survives, feeling part of something larger. Whereas her identity has been subsumed under the title Mrs. Richard Dalloway, on the streets of London her temporary anonymity gives her identity. (2003, 36)

The female walker enjoys temporary anonymity and a sense of belonging to a larger entity. However, Woolf’s passage does not only mention the identity of a woman on the street, but also suggests the narrator’s privileged social status. In contrast to that “vast republican army of anonymous trampers,” the narrator is “leisurely” — she has no need to go to work and can

enjoy the “solitude of one’s own room.” It infers that she has already secured financial and spiritual autonomies, the very ideal of *A Room of One’s Own*.

As soon as Woolf’s walker enters the public space, she experiences a dramatic transformation: “The shell-like covering which our souls have excreted to house themselves, to make for themselves a shape distinct from others, is broken, and there is left of all these wrinkles and roughness a central oyster of perceptiveness, an enormous eye” (71).¹² This “enormous eye” immediately seizes the beauty of urban crowds and spectacles:

How beautiful a street is in winter! It is at once revealed and obscured. Here vaguely one can trace symmetrical straight avenues of doors and windows; here under the lamps are floating islands of pale light through which pass quickly bright men and women, who, for all their poverty and shabbiness, wear a certain look of unreality, an air of triumph, as if they had give life the slip, so that life, deceived of her prey, blunders on without them.

(71)

The peculiar lights and the lovely atmosphere beautify and romanticize the hustling, bustling crowds and the cityscape in general.

¹² Rachel Bowlby contends that this transformation is understandable because if one wants to “move from self to anonymity,” it is a “corollary to transform from ‘I’ to eye, from pronoun to organ” (1992, 38). Leslie Kathleen Hankins also identifies Eye/I as a strategy to escape the social norm of gender, an “invisible cloak” to confuse or avoid sexual identification, and this enormous eye can “allow the narrator to evade gender issues by erasing telltale traces of gender in the streets. Such complex gender manipulations suggest that, for Woolf, gender makes *the* difference in the urban scene” (19, emphasis original).

Interestingly, Bowlby also discusses Woolf’s intriguing expression “oyster of perceptiveness.” The oyster may suggest “sensory responsiveness (of the animal itself) as well as voluptuousness (the pleasure of the consumer)” (1992, 47).

Using the plural pronoun “we” instead of the usual “I,” the walker reminds herself that this joyous observation must be “superficial”: “We are only gliding smoothly on the surface. The eye is not a miner, not a diver, not a seeker after buried treasure. It floats us smoothly down a stream; resting, pausing, the brain sleeps perhaps as it looks” (71). With this half-hearted gaze, the protagonist takes delight in admiring buildings, windows, lamps, and pedestrians in a London square, but again she warns herself not to dig any deeper:

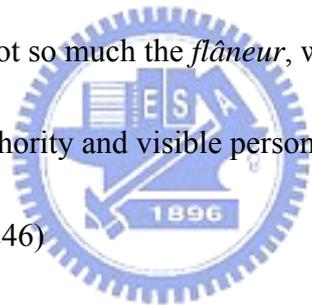
But here we must stop peremptorily. We are in danger of digging deeper than the eye approves; we are impeding our passage down the smooth stream by catching at some branch or root. At any moment, the sleeping army may stir itself and wake in us a thousand violins and trumpets in response; the army of human beings may rouse itself and assert all its oddities and sufferings and sordidities [sic]. Let us dally a little longer, be content still with surfaces only—the glossy brilliance of the motor omnibuses; the carnal splendour of the butchers’ shops with their yellow flanks and purple steaks; the blue and red bunches of flowers burning so bravely through the plate glass of the florists’ windows. (72)

Why is she so concerned about restricting her gaze to the surface and so cautious about digging too deep? This seems to be a warning of how to sustain the aesthetic pleasure by not probing deeper into the “deep truth” underneath the surface as it were. Also, the juxtaposition of “carnal splendor” of meat with bunches of flowers is very striking. Judith Walkowitz follows Susan Buck-Morss’ view and maintains that the *flâneur* has the “propensity for

fantasy,” and capable of presenting things “in fortuitous juxtapositions in ‘mysterious and mystical connection’” (16). But what exactly is the significance of this superficial vision?

A gaze signified by the enormous eye in “Street Haunting” differs markedly from the male gaze of the conventional *flânerie*. Although Nord associates the big eye with de Certeau’s “solar Eye” — an all-seeing eye, a voyeur god — she believes that Woolf’s protagonist is not likely to share the kind of privileged vision that a male observer enjoys:

Woolf’s eye seems to float above the scene, alighting to consume the treasures of Oxford Street or enter the mind of a washerwoman, but never allowing herself to dig deeper than the eye approves. She is not so much the *flâneur*, who enjoys anonymity but has a privileged sense of his authority and visible person, as an invisible presence whose being dissolves and disperses. (246)



Parsons notes that compared to Benjamin’s *flâneur* as a scopic authority, Siegfried Kracauer’s *flâneur* is not as “politically significant” as Benjamin’s. Kracauer’s walker’s observation is less omnipotent and controlling. In Parsons’ words, “[r]ather than categorizing and familiarizing the crowd, this [Kracauer’s] *flâneur* is more leisured, observing the surface pleasures of the city with a mind that registers rather than orders” (37-38). With a milder gaze, the protagonist in “Street Haunting” seems to be more akin to Kracauer’s *flâneur*. This raises a crucial question: does Woolf’s walker adopt the “superficial gaze” because she is incapable of a more penetrative gaze, or does she simply have no intention of going beyond the surface?

And if it is the latter, what can she gain with the “superficial sauntering” of the eye?

II. Woolf’s Ways of Seeing

To understand Woolf’s “superficial look” better, it is essential to review her writing project as a whole. In “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown” (1924), Woolf draws a sharp line of demarcation between “the Edwardians” (Arnold Bennett, H.G. Wells, John Galsworthy) and “the Georgians” (Joyce, Forster, Lawrence, Eliot, Strachey) (745). Woolf considers the older group to be “realists” and “materialists,” who obsessively observe “every detail with immense care” (2000, 751). Alex Zwerdling clarifies that the reason why Woolf dismisses Edwardians’ meticulous attention to material details and circumstantial facts is not because she asks for “‘insight’ — the ability to see into the inner nature of things” (16). Rather, what she rejects is Bennett’s unselective vision, whose eye “only lingers and never darts, it seems to count each brick in the path” (Zwerdling, 16), which, for Woolf, is unnecessarily exhausting, laborious, and emotionless. In order to better explicate her idea of writing as opposed to that of the “Edwardians,” Woolf makes up an imaginative figure, Mrs. Brown. As Woolf depicts:

[...] she is an old lady of unlimited capacity and infinite variety; capable of appearing in any place; wearing any dress; saying anything and doing heaven knows what. But the things she says and the things she does and her eyes and her nose and her speech and her silence have an overwhelming fascination, for she is, of course, the spirit we live by, life itself. (2000, 757)

Namely, Mrs. Brown could be argued as the Muse for character-creating who tends to whisper in a writer's ears: "Catch me if you can" (2000, 745). Woolf points out Edwardians' improper ignorance of Mrs. Brown and maintains that a writer should make every effort to grasp "unlimited capacity and infinite variety" of Mrs. Brown, who "changes only on the surface, it is the novelists who get in and out" (2000, 753). Woolf continues to discuss how to represent Mrs. Brown, and she reminds us not to anticipate "a complete and satisfactory presentment of her"; instead, we should "tolerate the spasmodic, the obscure, the fragmentary, the failure" (2000, 757). While depicting external reality, Woolf chooses to write with "the eyes of imagination" (*A Room* 116) and "moves swiftly from one sight to the next, constantly changing the focus from close-up to panorama, concentrating momentarily, unpredictably, on an old lady, a retired judge, then moving back or up to survey a street, the river, the city itself" (Zwerdling, 17-18). The enormous eye in "Street Haunting" could be read as a trope of Woolf's view of how to deal with modern urban reality in literary works.

Woolf's preference for "surface look" instead of a tedious factual examination of reality could also be observed in "The Mark on the Wall" (1918). In this piece, Woolf sits by the fire and wonders what the black stain on the wall above the mantelpiece is. She could choose to find out the answer immediately, since all she needs to do is leave the chair and go up to the wall to inspect. But she refuses to do so on purpose. She explains: "I might get up, but if I got up and looked at it, ten to one I shouldn't be able to say for certain; because once a thing's done, no one ever knows how it happened" (*The Complete Shorter Fiction* 83-84). Therefore,

she remains seated, wondering whether that circular mark is “a nail, a rose-leaf, a crack in the wood” (*Shorter Fiction* 88) and allows her imagination to drift on. The process of guessing is dotted with the mundane remarks on trifles in daily life and nearly-philosophical thinking on world wars, visual images, knowledge, men and women, nature and life. Though in the end she tells us the mark on the wall is a snail, what the mark really is is not important in the story. It is Woolf’s purposeful ignorance that stimulates her creative inspiration. Woolf’s way of seeing proves that an evasive image can stir more creative imagination than a lucid vision. Moreover, for Woolf, these inspired thoughts, interesting though fragmentary, could sparkle like a diligent ant. In her words, “[h]ow readily our thoughts swarm upon a new object, lifting it a little way, as ants carry a blade of straw so feverishly, *and then leave it*” (*Shorter Fiction* 83, emphasis mine). Momentarily letting go and giving up reality as such can be extremely fruitful so far as creative imagination goes, and this creative process is related to Woolf’s allegory about “a good fisherman put[ting a fish] back into the water so that it may grow fatter and be one day worth cooking and eating” (*A Room* 6). According to Tracy Seeley, “going astray, wandering off the path, a kind of errantry or erring” may contribute to Woolf’s argumentation of women’s writing in *A Room of One’s Own* (32). Evasion and digression could be indispensable for a creative process. Woolf values psychological or subjective “truth” over mere scientific or social realities.

The walker in “Street Haunting” is also enthusiastic about the difference of people around her. Woolf once claims that “[t]he fascination of the London street is that no two

people are ever alike” (*A Room* 124). The narrator shows no hesitation to “put on” lives of other people in different professions, ranks, classes, and gender. This is similar to what Benjamin called Baudelaire’s “empathy,” which means “the nature of the intoxication to which the *flâneur* abandons himself in the crowd” (1989, 55). The noticeable difference is Baudelaire’s original empathy is with the people, but Benjamin with the commodity.

The underlying premise of temporarily “entering” others’ lives at will is having a more flexible identity. In her introduction to Woolf’s collected essays *The Crowded Dance of Modern Life*, Bowlby mentions the female walker’s variegated identities in “Street Haunting”:

It has to do with the shedding of the respectable self of one’s normal, everyday identity in favour of a temporary anonymity that leaves the (non-)self open and permeable to the passing sights and impressions of the city. The street scene becomes a theatre, offering constantly changing sights and imaginary identities to the spectator moving from moment to moment and detached from the ties of responsibility, either to the maintenance of a particular image of her own self, or to the people who happen to lie in her way. (1993, xxvi)

The narrator’s freedom of imagining oneself moving in and out of other characters is best observed in what happens after the question that she raises outside a boot shop: “What, then, is it like to be a dwarf?” (72). Woolf changes the pronoun from “we” to “she” in the next paragraph to describe the experience of a dwarf, who is “escorted by two normal-sized

women,” trying on shoes. The narrator’s imagination remains active as she moves on to her next stop — looking at the window display of an antique jewelry store. Once again, “we” are encouraged to abandon reality for a while in order to wear pearls and become a noble lady:

Let us choose those pearls, for example, and then imagine how, if we put them on, life would be changed. It becomes instantly between two and three in the morning; the lamps are burning very white in the deserted streets of Mayfair. [...] Wearing pearls, wearing silk, one steps out on to a balcony which overlooks the gardens of sleeping Mayfair.

There are a few lights in the bedrooms of great peers returned from Court, of silk-stockinged footmen, of dowagers who have pressed the hands of statesmen. [...] We seem to be riding on the top of the highest mast of the tallest ship; and yet at the same time we know that nothing of this sort matters; love is not proved thus, nor great achievements completed thus; so that we sport with the moment and preen our feathers in it lightly, as we stand on the balcony watching the moonlit cat creep along Princess Mary’s garden wall. (75-76)

The narrator is only a walker on the street, but her descriptions of the lady with pearls and of a Mayfair garden is very vivid. Still, she does not allow herself to idle in the noble lady’s world for long. She goes on to ask herself:

But what could be more absurd? It is, in fact, on the stroke of six; it is a winter's evening; we are walking to the Strand to buy a pencil. How, then, are we also on a balcony, wearing pearls in June? What could be more absurd? (76)

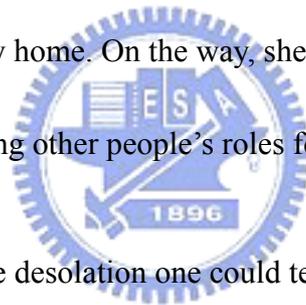
One might read this honest reflection as a self-warning, a reminder of the walker's previous assertion that she will not go too deep into anything or anyone she encounters in the visual domain. And she justifies her momentary imaginative identification with others by stressing the essential uncertainty and changeability of subjectivity:

Yet it is nature's folly, not ours. When she set about her chief masterpiece, the making of man, she should have thought of one thing only. Instead, turning her head, looking over her shoulder, into each one of us she let creep instincts and desires which are utterly at variance with his main being, so that we are streaked, variegated, all of a mixture; the colours have run. Is the true self this which stands on the pavement in January, or that which bends over the balcony in June? Am I here, or am I there? Or is the true self neither this nor that, neither here nor there, but something so varied and wandering that it is only when we give the rein to its wishes and let it take its way unimpeded that we are indeed ourselves? Circumstances compel unity; for convenience sake a man must be a whole. The good citizen when he opens his door in the evening must be banker, golfer, husband, father; not a nomad wandering the desert, a mystic staring at the sky, a debauchee in the slums of San Francisco, a soldier heading a revolution, a pariah

howling with scepticism and solitude. When he opens his door, he must run his fingers through his hair and put his umbrella in the stand like the rest. (76)

Following several illuminating episodes, this passage implies that Woolf finds the monotony and sameness of the public sphere disagreeable, and that she opts for a more flexible, chameleon-like identity. This porous mind also reflects Woolf's idea of writing with the eye of imagination.

In the stationer's shop she witnesses a quarrel between the owner and his wife, keenly observing the interaction while buying a pencil. It is the last of several moments for her to reflect on as she makes her way home. On the way, she confesses that her greatest pleasure came from imaginatively playing other people's roles for a short time:



Walking home through the desolation one could tell oneself the story of the dwarf, of the blind men, of the party in the Mayfair mansion, of the quarrel in the stationer's shop.

Into each of these lives one could penetrate a little way, far enough to give oneself the illusion that one is not tethered to a single mind, but can put on briefly for a few minutes the bodies and minds of others. One could become a washerwoman, a publican, a street singer. And what greater delight and wonder can there be than to leave the straight lines of personality and deviate into those footpaths that lead beneath brambles and thick tree trunks into the heart of the forest where live those wild beasts, our fellow men? (81)

In "Crowds," Baudelaire claims that enjoying the multitude is an art: "The solitary and

thoughtful stroller finds a singular intoxication in this universal communion. [...] He adopts as his own all the occupations, all the joys and all the sorrows that chance offers” (1970, 20). Benjamin also indicates that self-abandonment in a crowd allows the *flâneur*’s mind to be carried away: “The crowd is the veil through which the familiar city is transformed for the *flâneur* into a phantasmagoria” (1999, 21). The protagonist in “Street Haunting” has a lot of fun on the streets, making the city her personal playground, a symbolic theater in which she could be the playwright, the director, the actress, and the audience at the same time.

III. Just Looking: Class and Commodity¹³

The “superficial vision” in “Street Haunting,” unharmed as it may seem, still arouses disputes. The negative responses are usually associated with the class hierarchy. The intensity of class difference is most obvious in the window-shopping scene. As Bowlby notices in “Street Haunting”: “[t]he superficial sauntering of this eye finds its most perfect expression of egression in window-shopping” (1992, 39). After the dwarf episode, there come two bearded men and a small boy who are “the halt and the blind.” The narrator is now around the “narrow old houses between Holborn and Soho” (74). Woolf depicts this shabby area in central London as a place:

¹³ *Just Looking* is one of Rachel Bowlby’s books, in which she discusses consumer culture in Dreiser, Gissing and Zola’s novels. Her definition of “just looking” is “the conventional apology for hesitation before a purchase in the shop expresses also the suspended moment of contemplation before the object for sale—the pause for *reflection* in which it is looked at in terms of how it would look on the looker” (1985, 32, emphasis original).

where people have such queer names, and pursue so many curious trades, are gold beaters, accordion pleaters, cover buttons, or support life, with even greater fantasticality, upon a traffic in cups without saucers, china umbrella handles, and highly-coloured pictures of martyred saints. There they lodge, and it seems as if the lady in the sealskin jacket must find life tolerable, passing the time of day with the accordion pleater, or the man who covers buttons; life which is so fantastic cannot be altogether tragic. They do not grudge us, we are musing, our prosperity; when, suddenly, turning the corner, we come upon a bearded Jew, wild, hunger-bitten, glaring out of his misery; or pass the humped body of an old woman flung abandoned on the step of a public building with a cloak over her like the hasty covering thrown over a dead horse or donkey. (74)



It is by no means a comfortable expression to compare a homeless old woman to “a dead horse or donkey.” Here the readers might expect a sharp contrast between the upper-class *flâneuse* and the poor. Woolf does admit that this sight makes “the nerves of the spine seem to stand erect; a sudden flare is brandished in our eyes; a question is asked which is never answered” (74). What is this unanswered question in her mind? For Marxist readers especially, it might be “is my leisurely activity complicit with the dominant social power that sustains class inequities” or “should I be guilty if I remain indifferent to their miseries?” Woolf’s narrator does not directly cope with her sense of guilt here. As she claims earlier that “the eye has this strange property: it rests only on beauty,” she attempts to transform this uneasy tension by turning to aesthetic contemplation (72):

Often enough these derelicts choose to lie [...] close to those windows where commerce offers to a world of old women laid on doorsteps, of blind men, of hobbling dwarfs, sofas which are supported by the gilt necks of proud swans; tables inlaid with baskets of many coloured fruit; sideboards paved with green marble the better to support the weight of boars' heads; and carpets so softened with age that their carnations have almost vanished in a pale green sea (74-75).

Suddenly everything miraculously appears to be part of the beauty. The contrast between the bourgeois narrator and the poor could be vulnerable to the reprimand of her luxury-loving, but Bowlby reminds us that we should not forget these poor “choose” to position themselves to be offered the spectacle of commodity. They may not have the money to buy anything, but they could also be “connoisseurs of the pleasures of spectacle” (Bowlby, 1992, 41) since “commerce offers” its exhibition to all. Bowlby argues that in Woolf’s eyes, rich or poor, everyone can attain equal pleasure since the *flâneuse* chooses not to buy but just look.

Certainly this reading appears to be too naïve for Susan M. Squier, who sees Woolf’s urban strolling and viewpoint as those of a privileged, upper-class “insider”: “She reproduces in her language the voice of the dominant culture [...] She speaks in the language of the culture which has oppressed her” (1985, 49). To Squier’s regret, this winter walk in “Street Haunting” is “merely diverting, not enlightening” (1985, 48) and leaves the protagonist “neither morally, spiritually, nor politically changed, but merely entertained” (1985, 47). Squier’s critique of Woolf’s attitude toward lower-middle class is rather clear in another essay

“‘The London Scene’: Gender and Class in Virginia Woolf’s London,” in which she compares Woolf’s earlier draft with the published one of her “London Scene” essays. To avoid the friction between herself and the bourgeois women readers, Woolf chooses to delete the following section that depicts working-class’ suffering: “[...] this vast patient skillful & unremitting labour is full of sweat & agony & squalor & horror” (qtd. in Squier, 1983, 489). In the published version, there is no description of the working class’ labor at all and “[t]he workers have become invisible” (1983, 493). Squier is dissatisfied with Woolf’s eventual move to identify herself with the middle-class reader instead of keeping her initial sympathy with the lower-class. Squier’s critique reminds us of Woolf’s ambivalent, sometimes uncomfortable, sense about people in different classes. In his discussion of Woolf’s view of class and money and her sense of self as a “highbrow” writer, Zwerdling quotes Raymond Mortimer’s comment about Woolf’s inability to “put herself into the shoes of people very different from herself” (qtd. in Zwerdling, 112). Yet Zwerdling argues that Woolf is still trying to “break out of the set into which she had born and recorded her frustrated sense of how little she knew about people different from herself” (112).

With her socio-feminist concerns, Squier naturally expects Woolf’s essay to achieve something more practical or revolutionary in terms of class, gender and urban space. Pamela Caughie defends that the “value” of Woolf’s writings lies exactly in what Squier criticizes: Woolf’s “very avoidance of [...] an outsider position,” her purposive evasiveness (406). Caughie particularly disagrees with Squier’s view that the surface gaze in “Street Haunting”

suggests the walker's disability:

Squier asserts that this observing eye is “*unable* to move beyond such surface appreciation” [...]. On the contrary, it is *unwilling* to move beyond it. Or rather, the narrator recognizes the significance of the stylistic surface itself, refuses to see it as masking a deeper truth or as subordinate to some higher standard. (403, emphasis original)

Caughie criticizes Squier for improperly imposing a political purpose on Woolf's works.

Woolf's shifting position from outsider to insider, according to Caughie, might be just “a change in perspective, from observing aesthete (detached) to aesthetic participants (involved)” (393).



Bowlby's essay seems to deal with “Street Haunting” in a more complex way. On the one hand, she acknowledges the reading that the gaze on the surface “does not imply that there is no depth, but that its evasion is part of what defines the pleasures of all-eye looking” (1992, 39). On the other hand, she also includes another possible reading that “there is more going on than a simple, naïve delight” and discusses Woolf's implicit concern for gender and class oppression (1992, 40). In her description of the people in misery, Woolf does expose the binarism of male and female, inside and outside, sufferer and supporter, but Bowlby thinks Woolf's writing of different people, especially her turning everyone into the grotesque “had the effect of abolishing the difference it initially sets up” (1992, 41). According to Bowlby,

Woolf is neither making “a moral point about the harmony of all mankind,” nor is she “using a form of ironic assimilation to emphasize these differences all the more.” Rather, “these possibilities are present in the way what the scenes are narrated, but they are exposed as limited, much as the artificially distinguished sexual groupings pointed by exaggeration to the inadequacies of the habitual binary division” (1992, 43).

In terms of window-shopping, however, it is undeniable that the homeless has no choice but to mere look, because they simply could not afford it. For the narrator, the streets of London are agreeable “after the solitude of one’s own room” (70). But the poor might not even have their own room at all. There are still ineliminable differences in the street scene. Perhaps, Woolf’s anesthetization of the shabby area and the poor might disguise an uneasy feeling that is similar to what Baudelaire frankly expresses in his “The Eye of the Poor” (*Paris Spleen*, 1864). In this episode, the narrator is having a pleasant date with his lover in the terrace in front of a new café. In this romantic setting, however, the couple’s gaze unexpectedly meets the eyes of a poor father with two children, all in rags. The intensity of class difference makes the narrator feel uneasy, and he cannot help but feel a sense of guilty of his privileged social and financial status. There is no way in Woolf’s discussion to eliminate the class distinction and her urban journey cannot easily evade critiques like Squier’s, to be a selfish process of pleasure-seeking. Woolf’s aesthetics of space might be a way to “balance ourselves after the splendours and miseries of the streets,” to downplay the sense of guilt as a person with financial security and leisure time (76). However, the class

issue is not the most interesting theme in “Street Haunting.” While admitting the inevitable class difference, Woolf attends mainly to how to make the urban scenes aesthetically productive. Particularly, Woolf tries to break down the rigid boundary between the interior and the exterior, the private and the public space, which introduces to us an interesting phantasmagoric vision of the city.

IV. Domesticating the City

In previous discussions of urban modernity, the metropolis often belongs to the public, the masculine, and the cosmopolitan, while the home is associated with the private, the feminine, and the domestic. Baudelaire’s “the painter of modern life” is arguably hostile to domestic space and family life; he writes that: “in his cradle, a fairy has bestowed the love of masks and masquerading, the hate of home, and the passion for roaming” (1970, 20). In Tseng Ching-fang’s interpretation, Baudelaire’s modern artist’s aim to “be away from home and yet to feel at home everywhere” suggests his “intrinsic repudiation of domesticity and conventional bourgeois life” (234). According to Tseng, Mrs. Dalloway, as “the perfect avatar of bourgeois domesticity,” is a *flâneuse* who “challenges modernism’s traditional disengagement with the domestic” (222). Refusing to follow the male *flâneur*’s authoritative and totalizing gaze and peremptory epistemology, Mrs. Dalloway “inscribes women’s emancipation from domestic space and their incipient presence in the public city spaces” (223). Reading Clarissa’s *flânerie* to buy the flower and her party, Tseng argues that *Mrs. Dalloway* represents “a simultaneously *domesticating* and *un-domesticating* portrayal of the

modern city which contests and redraws the reified boundaries of the city and the home” (222-23, emphasis original). The interdependence of public and private spheres and the obscured boundary of city and home introduce us to a feminine urban perspective.

The spatial interplay of the interior and the exterior in “Street Haunting” is very striking. At the beginning, the narrator claims that joining the crowds is refreshing after staying alone in one’s room because remaining there “we sit surrounded by objects which perpetually express the oddity of our own temperaments and enforce the memories of our own experience” (70). She continues to explain that in one’s room one tends to recall memories by seeing the objects around. For example, seeing a bowl, she remembers vividly the scenery and the people she encountered in a trip to Italy: “All this — Italy, the windy morning, the vines laced about the pillars, the Englishman and the secrets of his soul — rise up in a cloud from the china bowl on the mantelpiece” (71). The narrator seems to escape this domestic space to the streets, since “to escape is the greatest of pleasures” (81). However, after an urban journey of fantasy and marvels, she returns to her home with a contented heart, declaring that “as we approach our own doorstep again, it is comforting to feel the old possessions, the old prejudices, fold us round; and the self, which has been blown about at so many street corners, which has battered like a moth at the flame of so many inaccessible lanterns, sheltered and enclosed” (81). It is as if she attains an emotional balance for the domestic and the public spaces. In a place with four walls, her imagination might bring her to a previous journey far away, but she is not satisfied with this “perpetual” enforcement of her memories, so she

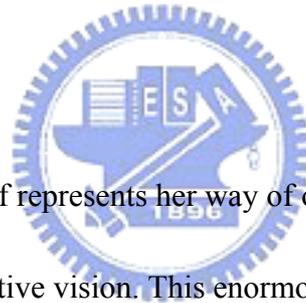
follows her desire to roam around the streets. Yet after the momentary involvement in the street life, she feels comfortable to return to her retreat, “sheltered and enclosed.” she knows exactly when to follow her desire to seek pleasure as an urban observer and when to let go and return home.¹⁴

While the *flâneuse* is crossing Oxford Street, her creative imagination is inspired by objects in shop windows, and she starts to domesticate the public space:

Passing, glimpsing, everything seems accidentally but miraculously sprinkled with beauty, as if the tide of trade which deposits its burden so punctually and prosaically upon the shores of Oxford Street had this night cast up nothing but treasure. With no thought of buying, the eye is sportive and generous; it creates; it adorns; it enhances. Standing out in the street, one may build up all the chambers of an imaginary house and furnish them at one’s will with sofa, table, carpet. That rug will do for the hall. That alabaster bowl shall stand on a carved table in the window. Our merrymaking shall be reflected in that thick round mirror. But, having built and furnished the house, one is happily under no obligation to possess it; one can dismantle it in the twinkling of an eye, and build and furnish another house with other chairs and other glasses. (75)

¹⁴ This return to domesticity also reflects Woolf’s ambivalent attitude toward solitude and society. For Woolf, a “protected shell” of privacy is necessary for her writing, but a walk in London will “shiver it all to bits” or “break the membrane, and the fluid escapes” (qtd. in Snaith, 2003, 40). Woolf desires for aloofness, but she also needs the society to provide her inspiration for writing. The home return might suggest Woolf’s belief of retaining one’s private realm after staying with a crowd. For a concise explanation of Woolf’s mixed love and hate toward the public and private spheres, society and solitude, see Anna Snaith, *Virginia Woolf: Public and Private Negotiations*, pp. 34-41.

It is noticeable that one's eyes could "create." For the narrator, perhaps, just looking will bring more delights than doing purchase. It is because she is "with no thought of buying," and her eyes are able to be "sportive and generous." She simply wants the flexibility to restructure a "chamber of an imaginary house" on the street, playing mix and match of the exterior and interior spaces. This interpenetration of public and private spaces articulates Woolf's spatial aesthetics. After having enough fun, she is always willing to "dismantle" the imaginary landscape and leave the reality as it is. Refusing to buy and possess a certain object, the female narrator feels free to enter and leave shops at will. This freedom enables the *flâneuse* to make the streets homely rather than blindly desiring for commodities and following fashions.



In "Street Haunting," Woolf represents her way of observing reality with an allegedly superficial but fruitful and creative vision. This enormous eye also reveals her distaste for Edwardian narratives and her preference to look at things in a desirable distance. Her feminine vision is capable of building a personal chamber on the street, and by so doing the potentially dangerous urban space dominated by men is aesthetically domesticated. She tries to play with the boundary between the public and private spheres and redefine the relation of the interior and the exterior in her own way. "Street Haunting" successfully shows us how a woman, after enjoying solitude of one's room, with her unique vision and spatial aesthetics, makes London a city of her own.

Chapter Two

“Olfactory *Flânerie*”: Mnemonic Exploration of Smell in “Hungary Water”

Smell—that is the sense of weight experienced by someone
who casts his nets into the sea of the *temps perdu*.

-- Walter Benjamin, “On the Image of Proust.”

For the *flâneur*, the city is not simply a semiological universe to be deciphered, but
also a mnemonic setting which is both imbued with, and evocative of, memories.

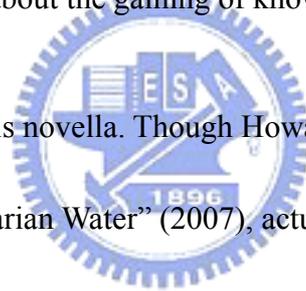
-- Graeme Gilloch, *Walter Benjamin: Critical Constellations*

The detailed description of one’s sensuality is often part and parcel of Chu Tien-hsin’s recent works (since the mid-1990s). The narrator in “The Old Capital” once laments that a certain body odor suddenly disappeared probably soon after her birth, and there remains only a filthy and unpleasant smell. She fears that this change of her body might bring about a gradual decrease of sensuality: “You couldn’t help but think of the five failings of a deity: ears turning deaf, eyes going blind, nose getting dull, facial complexion turning sallow, splendid clothes covered in dust” (133, 168).¹⁵ The protagonist suddenly gets into a panic when it occurs to her that she might grow numb to smells, colors, shapes, sounds and flavors. This would be, as one can imagine, a complete nightmare to many of Chu’s protagonists in other stories as well since they tend to be nostalgic about their good old days, and their past usually

¹⁵ The cited page number will appear first with Goldblatt’s English version, and then Chu’s original Chinese text.

can only be found in sensuous memories.

According to Tang Xiao-bing, Chu is anxious about modern people's potential blasé attitude due to excessive stimuli in the metropolis, and she sees her writing project as a discovery or recovery of "urban unconsciousness" (391) by recalling those long-forgotten sensuous impressions. Chou Ying-hsiung contends that reading Chu's recent works in terms of Michael Taussig's "tactile knowledge" (1999, 408) would make good sense of her sensuous writings. Wang Der-wei discusses Chu's works in the light of "synesthesia" (25), emphasizing the interplay of various perceptions. Most reviewers agree that Chu's "Hungary Water" is most pertinent to a discussion about the gaining of knowledge through the senses.



Let us begin the title of this novella. Though Howard Goldblatt translates the title literally into English as "Hungarian Water" (2007), actually Chu's intent is to borrow the name of the noted perfume "Hungary Water." Hungary Water, also known as "Queen of Hungary's Water," is the first alcohol-based perfume produced at the command of Queen Elizabeth of Hungary in the 14th century. In Nicholas Culpeper's legal recipe "Pharmacopeia Londoniensis," this perfume is boasted as an "admirable cure-all remedy of all kinds of cold and humidity-induced head ailments, apoplexies, epilepsies, dizziness, lethargy, crippling, nerves diseases, rheumatism, flaws, spasms, loss of memory, coma, drowsiness, deafness, ear buzzing, derangement of vision, blood coagulation [...] mood-induced headaches." What merits our attention here is this perfume allegedly possesses the healing effect on amnesia and sensuous numbness. Given this fact, Chu's probably has written "Hungary Water" in the hope

of attaining a similar magic power as that of the perfume “Hungary Water” — to recall one’s lost memory and to invigorate sensory perceptions and arouse desires.

In “Hungary Water,” two middle-aged men create a special bond by recalling scents from their past, and during this process of recollection they attempt to postpone and survive temporal and spatial changes. It articulates a primordial passion for perfumes and odors, through which the protagonist relives his cherished lost moments. This motif of remembrance through smell is not foreign to Baudelaire’s works at all. In his poems “*Parfum exotique*,” “*La Chevelure*,” “*Le Balcon*,” and “*Le Parfum*,” for instance, the sense of smell is often highlighted as a mnemonic device during the poet’s journey to the past. Also, Benjamin often commits himself to retrieving his cherished memories in his writings, especially in the memoirs of his Berlin childhood such as “The Berlin Chronicle” and “A Berlin Childhood around 1900.” In *Myth and Metropolis*, Gilloch regards Benjamin’s writings about his Berlin Childhood as “explorations of the interplay between memory and setting, time and place,” which “present images of a certain class at a particular moment as experienced by a child and as subsequently filtered through the memory of an adult” (1996, 58-59). Chu’s “Hungary Water” could be viewed as a literary synthesis of Baudelaire’s poetic connection of smells and memory and Benjamin’s ideas about the relation between walking and memory. “Hungary Water,” a story of two middle-aged men who search for the lost time in their childhood and young adulthood through smell, is also related to Benjamin’s distinction between *die Erfahrung* and *das Erlebnis* and the Proustian notion of *mémoire involontaire*. In this chapter,

I will discuss Chu's characters' attempt to recall their past through smell and walking, and how this process of remembrance, which may be termed "olfactory *flânerie*," functions as a resistance to the ruination and fragmentation of metropolitan experience.¹⁶

I. Memory, Smell and Desire

Memory, sensory impressions and sexual desire are three central themes in Baudelaire's love poetry. It is Baudelaire's belief that the intentional recall of smells and sounds can enable the poet "to re-create and recover the past" (Hyslop, 40).¹⁷ "*Parfum exotique*," "*La Chevelure*," "*Le Balcon*" and "*Le Parfum*" are all poems about memory and imagination inspired by Baudelaire's mulatto mistress Jeanne Duval. Written in 1857, "*Parfum exotique*" narrates how Baudelaire thinks of a beautiful exotic land by the perfume of Duval's breast:

Eyes closed, I breathe your breast's warm, heady scent.

I see a sun, fixed in the firmament,

Shining on dazzling shores: strand, rolling dunes;

[...]

Lured by your scent, led on to charming clime,

I come upon a port, all mast and sail, Battered and buffeted by tide and times;

And all the while green tamarinds exhale

¹⁶ In a conference paper concerned, Yang Nai-nu regards "Hungary Water" as a "*flânerie*" by smell, since the narrator and his partner, *A*, perform their *flânerie* mostly in the olfactory dimension of the city, instead of merely walking and seeing.

¹⁷ In his discussion of "the role of memory" in Baudelaire's writings, Lois Boe Hyslop compares Baudelaire's idea of memory with that of Marcel Proust. In Hyslop's words: "For Proust, memory must be involuntary it is to be creative. For Baudelaire, imagination alone is creative; memory is but its handmaiden" (40).

Perfumes that fill my nostrils and my soul,

Blending with sounds of sailor's barcarole. (1998, 47)

There are two noticeable features in this poem. The first is its suggestions of passion and lust.

As Gilloch affirms, "the possibilities of amorous flirtation and sexual intrigue are so central to Baudelaire that one might describe him as the prototypical 'erotic engineer'" (2002, 215).

This also indicates the close association between smells and sexual desire. Moreover, images and sounds are solicited by the sense of smell. In "*La Chevelure*," again, Baudelaire links the fragrance of Duval's hair with his memory of the blue-black sea. He writes: "O apathy that scents this head of hair! / O ecstasy! To populate tonight this darkened room / With all the memories asleep beneath your comb, / I'd shake them out like kerchiefs in the air!" He claims that the perfume of his lover's hair transports him to the "sea of ebony of sails, of mariners, of pennants and of masts," and his soul "floats on the perfume of your head," "filled / With swills of all the smells, the noises and the color;" and "endlessly rocking in a balm-perfumed repose!" (1991, 57) The poet is wholeheartedly "confounded by these scents" of the woman's hair, and drunk with passion and "the wine of memory" (1991, 59). In another poem full of tender love, "*Le Balcon*," Baudelaire describes his infatuation for his "*Mere des souvenirs*" through mnemonic sounds and smells:

I think that I inhale the perfume of your blood

[...]

I drank your breath: O muscadine! O veronal!

[...]

I can evoke the moments of our happiness,

To live my past again, spent snuggled in your thighs

Those pledges, those perfumes, those kisses without end,

Will they arise again from depths we cannot fathom, [...] (1991, 77)

“*Le Parfume*” in the sonnet sequence entitled “*Un Fantome*,” I believe, is most relevant to the project of memory reconstruction through smell in “Hungary Water.”

Dear reader, have you sometimes drawn a breath

With connoisseur’s intensity to search

It for the waft of incense from a church,

The sent of swirlings of a woman’s dress?



Intoxicating sense of smell! You move

The memory, restore the bygone hour:

A lover from the body of his love

Can pluck a smell as though he’d found a flower.

A live sachet, her heavy, curling hair

Gives off a wild, a savage woman-scent

That permeates her alcove and its air.

Her gowns, velour and muslin, redolent

Of female youthfulness unflawed and pure,

Disseminate the muskiness of fur. (1991, 81)

In this poem, Baudelaire explores the smell's mnemonic magic of "[mov]ing the memory, restor[ing] the bygone hour." Hyslop contends that "*Un Fantome*" is exactly Baudelaire's poetic attempt to find "in [a] Proustian fashion, '*dans le present le passé resaure*' ('the past restored to the present')" (65).

"Hungary Water" is also about this "past restored to the present" through smell. The occasion for the narrator and his companion to make their acquaintance is a party held by a mutual friend. The first line A says to the narrator is a blunt question: "How come you smell like that?" (68, 109) Because A is deeply attracted by the smell of citronella on the narrator's clothes, he tells the narrator that this smell lets him reminisce about an old street full of citronella smell in his childhood memory while living with his aunt. Though that is their very first conversation, A is self-absorbed in his own nostalgia and just keeps talking about his past. Later, both men meet again by chance in a café in Taipei. Without noticing the narrator's reluctance to learn about another middle-aged man's personal history, A continues his story of smells self-indulgently. A's aunt is an elementary school teacher, and A recalls once he insists on following her to the classroom, which in his memory is still vivid in scents:

That was in the summer, and the ground in front of the classroom was cluttered with

Burmese gardenias, I'm sure you've seen them, thick braches, far apart, the ones people call hen's-egg flower [i.e. plumeria], with white petals, a yellow core, and a subtle fragrance, but if you give me one, all I need is one whiff and I can recite the names of at least ten kids in that class, and if you supply me with the odor of a running sore on one of the student's legs or a whiff of gentian violet, I can conjure up a picture of every boy in the class. (72, 113-14)

Through a specific smell, A is quite confident that he is able to reconstruct a certain scene many years ago.

At that moment the narrator is already a middle-aged married man, who tends to be nonchalant about other people's life and thoughts. He confesses to himself that: "I'm over forty, I no longer have the will or the energy to listen to other people's problems" (71, 112). But when he tries to excuse himself, A asks him abruptly but earnestly to bring him some unwanted cloth with the smell of citronella oil, because it duplicated the smell of his aunt, who was dead several years ago. Somehow the narrator understands that smells play an extremely meaningful role in A's life and memory, so he promises to meet A again in the same café to continue their conversation. This time A reveals to the narrator more personal stories about scents, including his wife's obsession with perfume and the special smell in the tailor *Ume-san's* shop in his childhood (which is triggered by the unpleasant body odor from the café waitress' armpits) and so forth. This casual chat gradually becomes an inspiring lesson for the narrator, who is nicknamed by A as "Citronella."

For two middle-aged men, the erotic relation between perfume and sexual memories in “Hungary Water” is quite Baudelairian. A explains to Citronella why perfume, the main imported goods in Taiwan in the 1990s, turned out to be a disaster for him. A illustrates his sexual history of “once in a decade,” which is an old Japanese saying meaning the most unforgettable sexual experience which is so rare that it might probably only happen once in a decade (75, 116). A vividly narrates his experience of “once in a decade” with his wife, a woman who is crazy about buying and using new perfume:

That wife of mine is a wild woman. [...] You now, whenever a new perfume is imported into Taiwan she’s the first to buy it, and she really *wears* it, laying it on thick and encasing herself in such a spray I can barely see her. Then that night, my god, she throws herself into it with all the energy of final exam week, like a fox spirit or sex demon, doing everything in her power to suck me dry, body and soul, before the light of dawn...and so, I guess you could say that this perfume history is my once in a decade.

(76, 117, emphasis original)

This seemingly exhilarating episode becomes a “disaster” because sensuous impressions and sexual memory are so closely connected that it becomes impossible for A to have an affair with another woman having the same body fragrance. A further explains,

You see, that’s what really scares my wife: a fragrance she wears reminding me of other women. Which is why she’s tried every perfume on the market—that way, no matter

what fragrance I smell on other women, I'll immediately think of her, something beyond my control, and if I ever have thoughts of cheating, the only way my wife will not be on my mind is if the other woman wears no perfume or makeup (unlikely) or wears one my wife hasn't tried (even less likely). (78, 120)

A's wife's perfume fetish shows the very close connection between one's sensuous feelings and (sexual) memories. Classen et al. argue that the smell experience sometimes is more impressive than the visual impact:

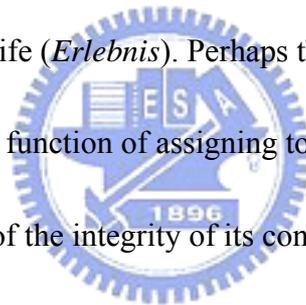
Odours also tend to make a forceful physical and emotional impact on one. Thus smelling an article of clothing belonging to a person will often give a much stronger impression of that person's presence than seeing the piece of clothing would. Furthermore, scent trails which we all leave behind us wherever we go evidence the particular paths an individual takes in the world. (116)

In "Hungary Water," Chu also mentions this scientific fact about odor to highlight smell as the medium of human interaction by quoting a passage from a science book: "— Odors, an undesired exchange of signals between people— [...] Olfactory receptors, which serve as links among all living creatures, are extraordinarily important in building symbiotic relationships [...]" (99, 140). Thus, the sense of smell is the most direct, instant, and undiluted. A smell-triggered memory is the strongest and the most irresistible. Perhaps this is why Citronella and A are more and more enthralled with this olfactory *flânerie*.

II. *Mémoire involontaire* and Olfactory *Flânerie*

For Baudelaire and Benjamin, the attenuation of *die Erfahrung*, the meaningful, coherent experience, and the predominance of *das Erlebnis*, immediate experience, or the disparate and discontinuous impressions in one's sensory world, are the corollary of modern people's lived experience in the modern metropolis. In his "Some Motifs in Baudelaire," Benjamin explains,

The greater the share of the shock factor in particular impressions, the more constantly consciousness has to be alert as a screen against stimuli; the more efficiently it is so, the less do these impressions enter experience (*Erfahrung*), tending to remain in the sphere of a certain hour in one's life (*Erlebnis*). Perhaps the special achievement of shock defense may be seen in its function of assigning to an incident a precise point in time in consciousness at the cost of the integrity of its content. (1989, 117)



The decline of *die Erfahrung* and the predominance of *das Erlebnis* are not only observable in one's modern experience but also in one's memory. In Gilloch's words,

[The city] is home to an amnesia born of sensory overstimulation and fatigue, a forgetfulness which leads to a misrecognition of the always-the-same as the ever-new, and thereby dooms the individual to fateful repetition [...] the abrasive encounters and surfeit of stimuli to which the modern urbanite is subjected produce deep, enduring scars upon the unconscious mind. These traces may be lasting, but they are inaccessible to the conscious work of remembering. In this way, *das Erlebnis* is the corollary not so much of

simple forgetfulness, but rather of a particular form of memory which resembles forgetting: Marcel Proust's notion of the *mémoire involontaire* (2002, 216-17).

Accompanied by the accelerated tempo and mechanization of the metropolitan experience, memory may also undergo drastic changes. In his discussion on Benjamin's writings on Baudelaire's "To a Passer-by," a famous poem in which the poet expresses his passion toward a female stranger passing by, "a love at last sight," Gilloch claims that the poem is particularly important in Benjamin's oeuvre. For Gilloch, "To a Passer-by" "provides an image of the transformed condition of memory. The forms of remembrance in the metropolis are subject to the same processes of diminution and disintegration which afflict modern experience" (2002, 207). This celebrated poem may also be read as "an image of allegory of the *mémoire involontaire*, of modern metropolitan memory" (2002, 219). Marcel Proust's notion of the *mémoire involontaire*, or involuntary memory, means sudden and spontaneous recollection. As Gilloch's lucidly explains,

[The *mémoire involontaire*] are not the intentional consequence of some controlled, directed mental activity. Rather, they flow from the elusive moment of illumination in which a sensation in the present suddenly and fleetingly calls to mind an earlier, forgotten experience with its train of associations and impressions, only for these to be forgotten once more. The smell and taste of madeleines dipped in tea, the scent of various flowers—in Proust's work, these ephemeral stimuli awaken long-dormant memories of childhood encounters, love and sorrows. (1996, 59)

In “On the Image of Proust,” Benjamin also mentions the relation between preserved memories and smells:

No one knows with what great tenacity memories are preserved by the sense of smell—but by smells that are not at all in the memory—will be able to call Proust’s sensitivity to smells accidental. To be sure, most memories that we search for come to us as images of faces. Even the free-floating forms of *la mémoire involontaire* are still in large part isolated—though enigmatically present—images of faces [...] Smell—that is the sense of weight experienced by someone who casts his nets into the sea of the *temps perdu*. (1996, 246-47)



In fact, “Hungary Water” is precisely a story of *mémoire involontaire* in the sense involuntary remembrance such as the one triggered by the smell of madeleine in the famous episode of Proust’s *Remembrance of Things Past*. In Chu’s case, the narrator and A are triggered by smell they encounter in their mundane life, and such memories come back to them involuntarily. In fact, in addition to Proust’s involuntary memory, there are also conscious quests involved in “Hungary Water.”

As the two main characters’ recollection of the *temps perdu* develops to a certain stage, it becomes obvious that their project is closely related to the theory and practice of *flânerie*. Most accounts of the *flâneur* fall within the ambit of the walking archetype. But there are also a few noted exceptions. In his article “Radio Physiognomik” (1939), Benjamin’s friend

Theodor W. Adorno calls radio channel-switching “aural *flânerie*” (qtd., Buck-Morss, 105). In “The *Flâneur*, the City and Virtual Public Life,” Mike Featherstone’s contemporary *flâneur* is hardly “a man of the crowd” like the protagonist in Poe’s namesake story, but someone who sits in front of the computer screen, an electronic *flâneur*.¹⁸ Another innovative example is Robert Luke’s coinage “Phoneur” (a term derived from *flâneur*), which refers to cell phones users who may practice a “postmodern” way of *flânerie*.¹⁹ These examples are intriguing but somehow remote from the original meaning of *flâneur*.

Indeed the idea of *flânerie* is usually linked with memory and remembrance. Franz Hessel contends that the Baudelairean walker is “a figure of remembrance” (Gilloch, 2002, 199). Anna Stussi, in her reading of Benjamin’s Berlin childhood, regards Benjamin as a *flâneur* in the “labyrinth of memory” (qtd. in Gilloch, 1996, 66). The association of memory with the city is directly given in Benjamin’s own writings, in Gilloch’s interpretation,

Memory and the city both constitute labyrinthine figures, without beginning or end, in which one may make ‘endless interpolations’ [...] the journey into the past is a voyage into the distance, and movement in memory is like that in a labyrinth [...] To journey into the distance is to be a traveler; to journey within a labyrinth is to be a *flâneur*, one who wanders without destination [...]. Motion in the city and in memory is a persistent going nowhere in particular that constitute a perpetual rediscovery. (1996, 68)

¹⁸ Featherstone’s electronic *flâneur* has a central feature that “in contrast to the slow loitering of the *flâneur*, who has to wait to reach the street-corner to change direction, the electronic *flâneur* can, so to speak, jump out of the street into another street at any time” (921).

¹⁹ See Robert Luke, *Communities of Difference: Culture, Language, Technology*.

With reference to Benjamin's exploration of Berlin in the past, Gilloch thinks "the meanderings of the *mémoire involontaire* may themselves be understood as forms of flânerie in time which correspond to the perambulations of the urban stroller. Dreaming, remembering and flânerie share a concern with the intentionless, the imagistic and the intoxication" (2002, 221). Thus, the process and practice of remembrance are often close related to those of *flânerie*. A man in remembrance is like a man in *flânerie*. A *flâneur* is often a character in remembrance.

One may think the term *flânerie* in "Hungary Water" remains figural, as a *flânerie* to the past, but in order to have some control over their memories by smell, in the later stage the two men go out for a walk. They further their "ritual of fetishistic sniffing," to borrow Hsu Jen-yi's words (2007, 293), and go outdoors to find clues and traces. Little by little, the narrator is fascinated by this new friend's art of remembrance by smell, and he learns to use the same method to recall some vignettes of his good old days. When the narrator fails to recall the name of a girlfriend in his college days, he asks himself: "What sort of smell would it take for me to recall her? Something vivid and sensory, totally different from the words and images of a class yearbook" (82, 123).

Frustrated by the failure to recall this girl's name, the narrator attempts to search for a smell reminding him of their past love, but he still doesn't quite manage to get hold of that odor. In their next meeting, the narrator mentions his problem to his partner A, who immediately invites him to go for a walk. Their olfactory *flânerie* begins to take place in the

streets and they literally become *flâneurs*. They amble “[I]like a cinematic sage and his disciple, or Holmes and Watson” (83, 124). In a sense, *A* becomes the narrator’s Virgil, guiding him on his quest. The former initiates the latter into the exciting world of smells, teaching him how “to see a world in a grain of sand, and a heaven in a wild flower,” to borrow William Blake’s famous lines. The narrator later acknowledges how *A* has enlightened his way of perception: he says that before he met *A*, he “was never interested in recalling long-hidden memories or those that had already vanished” (91, 132). At this stage, the two men practice their concrete *flânerie* on Taipei streets. At one point they discover a flower called gardenia, and its smell reminds the narrator of his elementary school classmate, Zhu Meijun, because this beautiful girl always puts gardenia in her pencil box. Such an act was once a popular way to decorate and add fragrance to their stationery.



Later *A* asks the narrator to have some trust on the reliability of smell and urges him to purposely leave some “traces” in case he might want to reminisce something in the future. As *A* explains,

“So I’m not afraid of coming down with Alzheimer’s or winding up as a vegetable for one reason or another, because I believe that all I’ll need to relieve my past is exposure to my nurses’ perfume, and it will be a truthful revisitation, like watching a movie, unaffected by the crafty revisions we impose upon our past as we grow older. I suggest that if your wife isn’t in the habit of wearing perfume, you should make a point of using a fragrance yourself for a time. Some people call this a wet memory, and, of course you

needn't actually put it on your body, if that doesn't appeal to you, and you can find some other place for it in your life that feels natural. Storing your clothes in a closet or dresser with citronella isn't a bad idea...over time, a fragrance can help preserve a memory or preserve the woman in your memory, if holding on to memories of the past is something that interests you, that is, or is important.” (84, 125)

When the narrator and A reaches a small park during their walk, the narrator smells the crab mums and he returns to his third grade when he once “ruined a bed of crab mums in the back yard by burying a dog that had died of measles and then laying a bunch of the yellow flowers on the grave mound” (87, 128). Leaves from camphor tree, on the other hand, remind A of his grandfather (88, 129). From these and other examples we can say that their skill of remembrance is already entering a new stage—they may mix and mingle different aromatic formulae in order to recall a particular past event or a special person. In such a way they develop their skills and gain greater control over memory. When A expresses his desire to think of one of his girlfriends he had while he was in the army, the narrator helps him to find the right mnemonic “ingredients.” Like two seasoned perfumers, they come with the following secrete formula: “The smell of pig manure, pickled mangoes, an afternoon rain squall in May, soggy rented manga, a little knife...to which his [A's] sweat-soaked army uniform had to be added...we reminded each other of missing items and supplemented the lists, created a list of essential items, like devising a formula for a mysterious perfume” (91, 132). The examples above show how they can retrieve their past moments in random orders.

The *flânerie* into the past renders the boundaries of time and space flexible and mutable in one's perceived world. Those hidden memories two men used to forget in their daily lives can now traverse the ocean of time and space, reappearing to them in their "smellscape."²⁰

In his discussion of Baudelaire's "*Parfum exotique*" and "*La Chevelure*," Hyslop intriguingly distinguishes Baudelaire's remembrance from Proust's. In his words, memory in Baudelaire "becomes both the theme and the method, [and] unlike the involuntary memory of Proust, that of Baudelaire is a matter of deliberate recall" (63). It is noticeable in the latter part of "Hungary Water" that the two characters are partly engaging in "voluntary memories," and the key transition from involuntary memories to voluntary ones, I believe, is the actual *flânerie*, the active exploration of one's lost moments through the search for the right scented objects, which is later supplemented by the skill of mixing the right smells. In his autobiographical prose "A Berlin Chronicle," Benjamin writes that:

[Memory] is the medium of past experience, just as the earth is the medium in which dead cities lie buried. He who seeks to approach his own buried past must conduct himself like a man digging. This determines the tone and bearing of genuine reminiscence... the images, severed from all earlier associations, that stand—like precious fragments or torsos in a collector's gallery—in the sober rooms of our later

²⁰ The word "smellscape" is coined by Porteous (1985). "Smellscape" usually has poetic and literary associations; in Rodaway's words, Porteous "considers the rich detailed evocations of place and attachments to specific places found in novels, biographies, poems and diaries" (63). And the term "-scape" suggests the smell it refers to is relevant with people and environment (64). Rodaway prefers using the term "olfactory geography" to "smellscape" because he believes "smellscape" "fails to genuinely reflect the everyday nose-experience of a world around us"(64). For more information about "smellscape" and "olfactory geography," see Rodaway, *Sensuous Geographies: Body, Sense and Place*.

insights. (1996, 611)

The attempt at mnemonic exploration made by the two men in “Hungary Water” is not entirely unlike what Benjamin tries to do in his Berlin memoir. The main difference is that what Chu’s characters mainly work on is smells, not trying to recall past events by other means and turning them into more coherent stories. *Flânerie* is a heuristic practice for retrieving past moments, arguably a kind of resistance to the ruination and fragmentation of memories in the modern metropolis due to the predominance of *das Erlebnis*. It involves going to particular places in search of some specific scents, and can be supplemented by finding and mixing particular aromatic objects. The two men must walk in order to validate or “anchor” their olfactory perceptions which may otherwise elude their noses. The memory triggered by smell could be retrieved very soon, but conversely, it could disappear anytime by chance. As a result, one must engage with the physical environment and search for “proofs.”

According to Lawless and Engen, “[a]lthough memory of smells is often remarkable acute and has great longevity, we are more able to recognize smells than to recall them, to match smells to a list of suggested names than to actually think of a name” (qtd. in Rodaway, 65).

Classen et al remind us that “Odours cannot be readily contained, they escape and cross boundaries, blending different entities into olfactory wholes (4). This arbitrariness of smell is observable when the protagonist tries to remember the details of his early experience in a military village, he is confronted with an unexpected block:

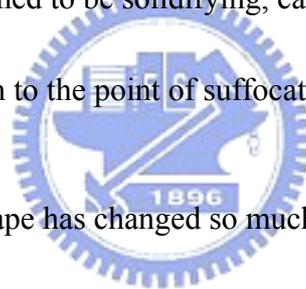
I quickly picked another green grape that wasn’t ever going to ripen, confident that it

would solve the great mystery of my universe. I stroked it, once again the fog spread all around...but it would only give me a single thread, which any breeze could snap in two
[...] Disc-shaped molecules with tails that have positive charges are unwilling to tell me anything more, except, except to return to a night wind in a weed-covered place like that
[...] (98-99, 138-39)

Because of this failure of remembering an episode, the narrator realizes that the olfactory memories could not independently exist. In the middle of the story, without leaving each other contact information, the two men just can not meet again. When they eventually reunite, A reports that he had “made a trip to Longquan in Pingdong” (104, 144). He explains that he made this trip because he desperately hopes to recall the face of that little girlfriend during his days in the army. He tries his best to replay the “plot” in his memory, so he lives in the same hotel, gathering comic books and mangoes. By doing so he puts together the “formula” related to the experiences he had in those old days in the hope that he may recall her look. Hearing A’s experiment, the narrator also wonders that, perhaps, if he intends to remember certain details in his childhood, he should make a real trip back to Fuzhouli, the place he lived in his early days, so that the break in his memory tracing may be mended. Both of them believe that the best way to get hints and even answers is a real *flânerie* to a certain place. The premise of olfactory *flânerie* is the subject’s former experience of “physical moving.” And this reveals the perceptual interplay between immobility and mobility, as well as the visuality and the olfaction in a *flânerie*.

When A shows up again after their separate *flânerie*, he told the narrator that he just made a trip back to Pingdong in order to memorize his military days:

[...] I boarded a bus by Pingdong Train Station and rode to Longquan through Neipu, the same trip I'd made twice weekly in the army. I didn't recognize most of the sights, because the place was congested with new houses so ugly they were beyond salvation. But as soon as I closed my eyes and opened the windows, the smells—all the plants mingled with insects on summer nights, you know, like the smell of the air on the day after a typhoon, with the fragrance from broken branches and the clean smell of water—so dense they seemed to be solidifying, cascading toward you, blocking your eyes, ears, nose and mouth to the point of suffocation. (104-05, 144)



So even though the real landscape has changed so much that it is no longer recognizable, the same smell in the hidden memory, at a movement's notice, may bring back the *flâneur's* world immediately. A memorable scent may bring one's memory back, regardless all the changes in the material world that changed much. The olfactory *flânerie* could be boundary-crossing and emotion-provoking. In *Aromas: The Cultural History of Smell*, Classen et al. remark on this "penetrability" of sense of smell: "Through smell, therefore, one interacted with *interiors*, rather than with surfaces, as one did through sight" (4, emphasis original). Likewise, Ivan Illich indicates that

As fleeting as each person's aura might be, the atmosphere of a given space has its own

kind of permanence, comparable to the building style characteristic of a neighborhood.

This aura, when sensed by the nose, reveals the non-dimensional properties of a given space; just as the eyes perceive height and depth and the feet measure distance, the nose perceives the quality of an interior. (357)

So perceiving a place through the sense of smell may broaden one's horizon, helping people know something more than what is in immediate surroundings.

III. Memory and Forgetting

In "On the Image of Proust," Benjamin sheds new light on *mémoire involontaire*. He introduces a debate between remembrance and forgetting. He asks:

Is not the involuntary recollection, Proust's *mémoire involontaire*, much closer to forgetting than what is usually called memory? And is not this work of spontaneous recollection, in which remembrance is the woof and forgetting the warp, a counterpart to Penelope's work rather than its likeness? For here the day unravels what the night has woven. (1996, 238)

This complex interplay between memory and forgetting is also observable in "Hungary Water," especially when the two men are in the grip of overtly emotional immersion of their personal histories. In fact, A's art of remembrance possesses something unpleasant, or even "dangerous," as Chu claims, because it unveils not only one's palatable memories, but also

deeply buried and long-forsaken ones. These memories could be traumatic and simply untouchable. The narrator tries to deal with this emotional crisis by appealing to science and reason. After their first experience of olfactory journey, the narrator could not help but contemplate on how much we humans have “unfairly” ignored the sense of smell. Therefore, in the main narrative, Chu adds the scientific data of human’s olfactory organs, the history of perfume, and the dialectics of memory and death. The narrator wonders why human can only “distinguish over a thousand smells” while other animals such as “sheepdogs have 220 million olfactory cells” that is 44 times more than humans?” (91, 132) He doubts if this heritage causes any significant loss for humans:



I can’t help wondering if we’ve lost something because of that. Or maybe we’ve lost it by design. Say, like before I met A. What I mean is, maybe, over the millennia, our ancestors have passed down to us only those organs and functions they found useful, the precisely appropriate degree of memory, and that all we need are those things that are essential to our existence. And so the number of olfactory cells we have today can be likened to me before I met A, in that I was never interested in recalling long-hidden memories or those that had already vanished. (91, 132)

The narrator tentatively suggests that human’s less emphasis on smell indicates our (unconscious) intention to exclude “un-needed” and “useless” memories. And humans are capable of, for safety’s sake, maintaining “precisely appropriate degree of memory.” But the narrator comes to realize this is a very terrible inclination:

I vaguely recall something a foreign writer once said: “The purpose of literature,” he said, “is not to educate.” I am not saying that literature is unrelated to morality, but that it represents one person’s morality, and that any one person’s morality is seldom shared by the larger body of people to which that person belongs.

By substituting the word “memory” for “morality,” we discover how frightened we are by the conscious or unconscious calling up of those authentic memories. My god! They are in conflict with collectively altered memories that can be made know to people, in such resolute conflict that one nearly feels oneself to be a traitor. (92, 132-33)

Olfactory memory is a relatively private matter for each individual. As Susan Stewart puts it, “We may apprehend the world by means of our senses, but the senses themselves are shaped and modified by experience and the body bears a somatic memory of its encounters with what it outside of it” (61). The scent and the individual are making secretive interaction and interplay everywhere anytime. And it is difficult for the human subject to consciously perceive.

Being aware of the fact that olfactory *flânerie* will not always bring pleasant experiences, the narrator can only conclude with the warning that “[t]he best strategy for staying clear of danger is to hold on to utilitarian memory alone” (92, 133). From that moment, the narrator’s attitude toward A’s art of aura remembrance changes from initial excitement to anxiety and uneasiness, and he realizes that the olfactory *flânerie* with A is no longer “enjoyable or

interesting” (92, 133). From then on the narrator is no longer willing to stay in the coffee shop where he used to meet A frequently. Nevertheless, olfactory *flânerie* is an ability and practice he just cannot leave aside once he has learned it. The issues of smells and memories still haunt him very often, so he enters a bookstore to search for scientific materials about the human smell. This research also signifies the protagonist’s hope to “find relative rationality that would allow [him] to dissolve the mysterious atmosphere that characterized [his] relationship with A” (92, 133). Though without indicating the book’s title (it is actually Diane Ackerman’s *A Natural History of the Senses*), Chu quotes several important chemical discoveries of the smell and the perfume. The more he understands the olfactory, the more the man is obsessed with it.



Returning alone to the lane he walked with A days ago, the narrator smells the gardenia and wonders what he will be inspired this time. Again, it is still his classmate Zhu Meijun’s pencil box in Zhongshan Primary School. But his *flânerie* to the past goes further this time, he thinks of his graceful school teacher, Wu Zhengying (93, 134). Because of the gardenia’s smell that strongly associates to his elementary school life, the narrator suddenly falls back to the old scene with Ms. Wu and her boyfriend in the teacher’s dormitory, while he was a little boy who has a crush on Ms. Wu. This little episode of “love triangle” brings the narrator near the border of an emotional breakdown: “Our young teacher, Wu Zhengying, with her shoulder-length hair, swept up in a sweet, happy atmosphere, did this boyfriend, or should I say future husband, treat her well? Suddenly my eyes filled with warm tears, and I was in the

grip of sentimentality” (94, 135). Then the narrator recites the previous conclusion with more affirmation and pessimism again: “The best strategy for staying clear of danger is to hold on to utilitarian memory alone” (94, 135). Right after this, Chu quotes a scientific report of J. E. Amoore about odors, as if some fragmentary results of instrumental reason will balance the over-sentimental ambience.

Then the narrator picks up a green unripe grape, and its smell reminds him a great deal of memories about his experience of stealing grapes in the military village, the Women’s Association Village I (95, 136). It is around the period when the whole village is forced to move away after a flood. At first, the smell of grapes brings him some carefree memories of having fun with other children in the same community. Because at that time adults have no time to watch on them, their games are getting wild and bloody: one playmate named XX Liu even killed a dog for fun. The narrator is not willing to cooperate with these murders, but he witnessed Liu to dispatched rats, snakes, cats, and fear in that situation“ [...] XX Liu would kill a man sooner or later” (97, 138). As the memory becomes more and more terrifying, he murmurs again: “The best strategy for staying clear of danger is to hold on to utilitarian memory alone” (97, 138). In the end, the narrator even gets confused “... Did we kill a man or didn’t we?” (97, 138) Simply out of a smell of grapes, he recalls such an appalling event. In the first “danger” for the narrator, it is an affection that is too bare to face directly, while in the second episode, a context involving a possible murder is certainly frightening in one’s consciousness. Whether it is a matter of love or death, smells may solicit the traumatic past,

which involves long repressed memories in one's unconsciousness. The primary danger is the risk that an overdose of invested emotions in smells may threaten to turn the *flâneur* into a man of melancholia, who may constantly ask himself unsettling questions like this one raised by the narrator: "What in the world did I want *A* to help me recall or to conceal?" (102, 142)

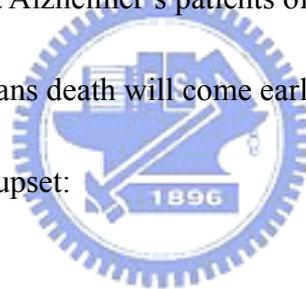
Benjamin believes modern experience is all about "ruination and mortification, intoxication and interruption, boredom and melancholy" (Gilloch, 2002, 208). The reason why Chu's characters choose to recollect their memories through smell is probably because, as mentioned before, the sense of smell is the most direct, instant and essential of the world of things. It approaches us before we have time and consciousness to use our intelligence, cognition, or knowledge to edit it. It is more "inescapable" than other senses (for example, one can easily choose not to look, hear, taste without harm, but one cannot choose to stop smelling too long without losing one's breath).²¹ Chu seems to appeal to the direct representation of sensuality to attain the profoundness and authenticity in a floating world.

"Hungary Water" is a story of search. By way of the olfactory *flânerie*, two men interrogate the significance of life, death and memory, and they always seem to look for something lost. It could be a trivial episode with an ex-girlfriend, a crush for one's elementary school teacher, a missing piece of one's terrible memory that matters (like the possible murder

²¹ It is intriguing that the sense of smell does not concern humans so much as other senses. In human history and culture, the sense of smell tends to be unfairly neglected. Susan Stewart notices that disability insurance policy will pay for one's loss of an eye or hearing, but a lost sense of smell is never mentioned. See her *Empire of the Senses: The Sensual Culture Reader*, p. 62. Lawrence Durrell also writes, "losing one's sense of smell [...] why is there no word for it in English? We have deaf and blind, but nothing to describe the lost sense of smell [...]" (qtd. in Rodaway, 61). Given that, "Hungary Water" could be argued as a literary project for smell's renaissance, to restore the sense of smell to an equally important role for sense impressions and memories.

of XX Liu), or simply a lamentable youthful day. With their heightened sensitivity to smells, they get a glimpse into or even seize the lost for a moment. In order to secure a visual image in one's memory, one may take a picture by cameras. To remember a certain voice, one may record it. Yet smells cannot be contained, after all, not all smells could effectively be preserved as perfume. Throughout "Hungary Water," there is always an understated anxiety about this elusiveness and volatility of the smell.

This desperate quest for the lost past becomes more obvious at the end of the story. At the final stage of the story, A told him a depressing piece of information: "I read a terrifying report a while ago that said that Alzheimer's patients often lose their sense of smell along with their memory. [...] Yes, that means death will come earlier than you expect" (106, 146). This report makes the narrator very upset:



And not just our own deaths. Anything that's hidden, asleep, or undiscovered will fly away like swarms of buzzing bees, for when they're no longer remembered, they'll truly fall into a slumber and disappear forever.

I was disconcerted by their second, unavoidable, true deaths, which, sooner or later, would occur. I really didn't know if they were leaving without us or if we'd abandoned them. (106-07, 146)

So they decide they cannot afford to waste their sense of smell while they still own the ability of olfactory *flânerie*. A still hopes to remember his little girlfriend, so he poses the ad to

search for her *j'aiose* perfume even though it is probably no longer available. Also, the narrator prepares an ad that is addressed to his former classmates in Zhongshan Primary School in Women's Association Village and invites them for a reunion. But he just prepares it, and does not intend to post it immediately. It is intriguing that he does not want to do so until "something happened to me" (110, 150). According to Liao Chao-yang, it is because the ad is about his "useless" and "danger" memories, long-hidden in the narrator's personal history, so he is not willing to show the message to the public so easily, yet he still hopes to maintain a connection with the past, so he leaves an opportunity and hope for these moments (191). A journey by smell still promises something irreplaceable. We learn that during their wait for answers to their request of the perfume, they keep carrying on their olfactory *flâneries*, and this time they no longer fear the advent of death or the loss of memory, but with more poise, confidence and faith.



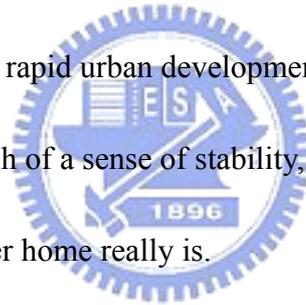
Chapter Three

Flânerie, Abjection, and Identity in “The Old Capital”

Due to the dominance of capitalism, in a modern city things and human relations tend to be defined primarily in economic terms. In this sense, the act of loitering can be viewed as an “illegitimate” idleness suggesting nothing more than a waste of time and energy. But for the Taiwanese novelist Chu Tien-hsin, who never hesitates to reflect upon the capital’s accelerated urbanization all through her long writing career, *flânerie* is a potential resistance to mainstream values and the culture of speed. In her wide-acclaimed masterpiece “The Old Capital,” Chu deals with the ambivalence of capitalist modernity through an unnamed narrator who is fond of walking around Taipei. While tracing the individual and collective memories of the city, the narrative often directly addresses the reader. To deliberately confuse time and space, Chu skillfully sews into the main narrative passages from canonical works, including Yatsunari Kawabata’s masterpiece *The Old Capital (Koto, 1962)*, Tao Yuan-ming’s classic *Peach Blossom Spring (Taohuayuan)*, and Lien Heng’s authoritative *Preface to the General History of Taiwan (Taiwan Tongshixu)*. In so doing, Chu turns Taipei into a palimpsestic city.

Although “The Old Capital” is written in a complex style, its plot is relatively straightforward. The narrator takes some days off for a trip to Kyoto for a personal appointment with a close friend A, who shared her much-treasured adolescent years. While waiting for the old friend, the protagonist wanders aimlessly through Kyoto streets. During

this solitary journey, she feels quite content because she is deeply attracted by the city's ancient beauty, but her delight is not untainted by a sense of melancholy because she finds it an ironic contrast to her own city, Taipei. She later realizes that A will not show up because actually they have not set a specific time or place to meet, and she determines to return to Taipei earlier than scheduled. Carrying her ambivalent mood back to Taipei, she is mistaken by a Taiwanese bus driver for a Japanese tourist. With no intention to correct this misunderstanding, she continues the journey to “re-visit” her hometown through the eyes of an outsider. Through her estranged gaze, modern Taipei ruthlessly floods her with a great sense of loss, for she can merely grieve over the “aura” of the good old days that have already faded away because of Taipei's rapid urban development in the early 1990s. Walking in Kyoto and Taipei respectively in search of a sense of stability, the narrator fails to find an answer to the urgent question of where her home really is.



Wang Der-wei and Peng Hsiao-yen have both discussed the identity problem of the *flâneur* in Chu's “The Old Capital.”²² Shimizu Kenichiro, who translates Chu's “The Old Capital” into Japanese, holds that Chu's multi-layered text somehow reflects Benjamin's *flânerie*.²³ The unnamed narrator in “The Old Capital” is a middle-aged bourgeois woman, who can easily afford a pleasant trip to Kyoto; she sees many films and often goes to coffee shops for leisurely afternoon tea. The narrator also had the habit of roaming in her youth.

²² See Wang, “The Old Soul's Many Lives,” the foreword to *The Old Capital*, p. 27 and Peng, “Chu Tien-hsin's Taipei: Geographical Space and Historical Consciousness” in *Space, Place and Culture: The Writing and Interpretation of Chinese Cultural Space*, p. 440.

²³ See Shimizu Kenichiro, “The Book of Memory: The Introduction to Chu Tien-hsin's *The Old Capital*,” translated by Chang Chi-lin, p.176.

Apparently, the protagonist shows the features (or at least potentials) of Benjamin's *flâneur*, but she also possesses atypical features. For instance, she is not as "deliberately aimless" as the earlier *flâneur* in the Parisian arcades used to be. Her special journey in Taipei unfortunately mixes serendipity with very little delight. Her easily-confused personal identity as a second-generation Chinese mainlander in Taiwan, coupled with the sharp contrast between a rapidly changing Taipei and a supposedly forever tranquil Kyoto, places her *flâneuse* in a very delicate position.²⁴ Arguably the narrator hopes to make use of her *flânerie* as a means of negotiating her questionable cultural roots, and in this sense she cannot be considered aimless and leisurely at all.

In this chapter, I will discuss the significance of the *flâneries* in Kyoto and Taipei in "The Old Capital," especially the *flâneur*'s phantasmagoric vision which reveals her identity crisis. Finding a sense of certitude in an urban setting may offer some relief regarding her personal predicaments. However, the second-person narrative point of view and the pseudo-tourist gaze in effect alienate her not only from the undesirable others, but also from part of herself. I will explore how the wandering project in "The Old Capital" is a process of

²⁴ The identity issue in Taiwan is quite complicated. Taiwan has been colonized by Japan for 50 years (1895-1945). Mainlanders (Waishengren) refer to migrants from mainland China after 1945, especially those who followed Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalist government's retreat from China to Taiwan after 1949. Mainlanders' political inclination is often in opposition to Taiwanese, Fukienese migrants who arrived to Taiwan earlier than mainlanders.

As second-generation mainlanders, people like Chu who lack the lived experience in China but still long for the mother-land China are often questioned about their loyalty and love for Taiwan, the place they actually stay and live. Chu's identification with China is deeply influenced by her father Chu Shi-ning and her mentor Hu Lan-cheng, both were personally connected to Chinese culture, literature, history and heritage. Under multiple cultural and historical impacts from Japan, China, and Taiwan, the second-generation mainlanders take pains to negotiate their identity in Taiwan. Letty Chen contends that Chu's (and her sister Chu Tien-wen's) writings are mainly concerned with "how to conceive an authentic cultural identity in such [complicated] circumstances" (2003, 585). For a brief overview of Chu's literary background, see Letty Chen, "Writing Taiwan's Fin-de-siecle Splendor: Zhu Tianwen and Zhu Tianxin."

self-alienation or abjection, and how the negative emotions and agonizing experiences of the protagonist self-exile nonetheless contribute to Chu's great literary achievement.

I. *Flâneries* in Taipei and Kyoto

“The Old Capital” details three *flâneries*: the first in the 1970s Taipei, the second in the 1990s Kyoto, and the last in the 1990s Taipei. The narrator starts with a reminiscence of the typical Taipei trips that she and A would take back in the 1970s. She rationalizes that since there was not much to do, as teenagers they had no choice but to “venture out.” They walked, sometimes took a bus if necessary, to “North Gate,” “*Izumi-machi, I-chome*,” “Dadu Road,” “Guandu Temple Pass,” and “Zhuwei” (113-14, 153).²⁵ Chu vividly depicts a representative landscape in her description of Taipei in the past. The city is never just a geographic background, but more like a city-text for the narrator to interpret. This echoes Featherstone's comment that *flânerie* “is a method for reading texts, for reading the traces of the city,” and “a method of writing, of producing and constructing texts” (910). These casual trips were always pleasant, full of poetic imagination. In her romantic vision, the river near Guandu can be like the Yangtze, the longest river in mainland China, and the scenery in Zhuwei can be associated with the famous poem written by Tsui Hao which depicts a high balcony near the Yangtze River. She claims that Taipei at that time was full of serendipity and surprises. Streets are generally “pretty” so that one “found it hard to choose one over the others.” When the narrator and A “walked along Chongjian Avenue, the oldest street,” she even feels “[e]very little alley

²⁵ The former page number is from English version, and the latter refers to the original Chinese text.

[she] crossed made [her] feel as if [she]’d missed an opportunity and would live to regret it (177, 203).

Along with innocent tears and laughter, the Taipei in her adolescence and young adulthood is represented vividly and affectionately. To borrow Baudelaire’s words, the narrator and her companions were then granted “the extraordinary delight of celebrating the advent of the new” by appreciating the exotic aura of their hometown (“Paris Salon of 1845,” qtd. in Berman, 143). However, in a reminiscent tone, Chu infers that the happy memories of the past took place in an innocent setting very different from the place now, and that what happened belongs to the good old days that are forever gone:



Back then, bodily fluids and tears were as fresh and clear as the dew on flowers; people were more willing to let them fall if that was what felt natural.

Back then, people were so simple, so naïve, they were often willing to sacrifice themselves over a belief or a loved one, whatever their party affiliation.

Back then, before commercial real estate had led to an unrestrained opening of new roads, a building boom, and land speculation, trees could survive and grow tall and green, like those in tropical rain forests.

Back then, there were few public places, virtually no cafes, fast-food restaurants, iced tea shops, or KTV, and pubs were virtually unheard of, so young people had only the

streets to roam, yet they did not surge through town like white mice.

Back then, on summer nights you could see the Milky Way and shooting stars, and watching them for a long long time spawned an awareness of the vicissitudes of life and death, of dynasties rising and falling. Especially foolish spectators vowed to do something spectacular so as not to end up wasting their lives. (111-12, 151-52)

Everything “back then” seems to be full of hopes and possibilities, but regrettably all these only happened “back then.” It invites readers to ask why things have deteriorated to her deep regret.



After a quote from Yatsunari Kawabata’s *The Old Capital*, the narrator is found appearing on the Kyoto streets of the 1990s. We are told that the narrator, now married and having a daughter, spends her vacation alone in Kyoto and makes an appointment with A, whom she has not met for a long time because A has been in the United States for years. At the time, A happens to be doing some academic research in Japan and hopes to have a reunion with the narrator. However, their appointment is so tentative that no accurate meeting time or location is confirmed in advance, therefore the narrator takes her time to wander in Kyoto, an old city that she visited with her daughter six or seven years ago. The narrator recalls the last trip and discovers those Japanese shops, markets, and parks still bearing the traces of their past. The narrator believes that Kyoto does not change and remains “loyal” to her memory since her last visit. All those trees, gardens, shrines, temples, ceremonies and festivals are so

well preserved. As a city that allegedly outlasts all temporal changes, Kyoto is “old” enough to make her feel calm and give her a sense of security and certitude. Kyoto proffers a precious sense of everlasting serenity and is almost a symbol of changelessness for her: “The scene ought to have been exactly the same as the one the poet *Basho* saw several centuries earlier” (164, 193).²⁶ She feels so at home there that she can forget her actual status as a tourist: “Taking a sip of the hot coffee, you say to yourself for some strange reason, ‘*Tadaima*, I’m back’” (151, 183).²⁷

Letty Chen thinks Kawabata’s Kyoto is “captured as an ideal city where the history of a place and the memory of an individual are tied together” and Kawabata’s *The Old Capital* is “the silhouette of history, a shadowy outline of the meaning and representation of a coherent cultural identity” (2006, 306). Chen also notices an interesting parallel between the twin sisters (Chieko and Naeko, the protagonists in Kawabata’s novel) / friends (the narrator and A) / cities (Kyoto and Taipei) (2006, 313).²⁸ By making her “The Old Capital” a pastiche of Kawabata’s *The Old Capital*, Chu endeavors to deal with the cultural hybridity and authenticity of contemporary urban experience. In parallel to this gratifying journey, the narrator occasionally comments on her more recent, unpleasant experience in Taipei. She laments the ruptures between the past and the present, expressing her resentment:

It becomes virtually impossible to recount to your daughter the traces of your life in

²⁶ Matsuo Basho, a famous Japanese *haiku* poet (1644-1694).

²⁷ *Tadaima* means “I am back” in Japanese.

²⁸ Letty Chen made a detailed discussion about the intertextuality of Kawabata’s *The Old Capital* and Chu’s “The Old Capital,” see her “Mapping Identity in a Postcolonial City: Intertextuality and Cultural Hybridity in Zhu Tianxin’s *Ancient Capital*.”

this city: the village you'd lived in; the spot where you'd buried the dog; the studio where you'd learned to dance; the memory-filled suburban movie theaters, with their double features; the site where you and her father had had your first date; you and your best friend's favorite coffee shop; the bookstores you'd frequented as a student; the house you'd rented when you and her father were first married.... Even the two kindergartens (same location, different ownership) where she'd been enrolled not so long ago had disappeared (it was now a small restaurant called "Home of the Geese").

Must all this have an either-or relation with progress? (149, 181-82)

The narrator is left with a native land that bears no resemblance to the landscape in her memory. Compared with Kyoto's presumed unchangeless or authenticity, Taipei has become utterly strange and unfamiliar to her. She feels apprehensive about this disjunction and accuses Taipei of having mercilessly erased all traces of the precious past:

You just wanted to ask humbly and deferentially: wouldn't a city, no matter what it's called (usually something related to prosperity, progress, or, occasionally, hopes and happiness), be in essence a city of strangers if it had no intention of retaining the traces of people who had lived there? Why would anyone want to cherish, treasure, maintain, and identify with an unfamiliar city? (157, 187)

The narrator is simply unable to associate the present Taipei with the one in her memory. She is disoriented by the modern look of her hometown. The unpleasant feelings increase to a

degree that the city finally brings her unbearable pathos. Once she tries to find a snow-white building that she took her fiancée to see, a place she used to privately call her “secret garden,” but is soon shocked to discover that it has turned into a totally different place:

Like an eyewitness who, after going to the police to report a dead body, returns to the scene only to see there was no body, no blood stains, everything normal, you told your future husband in a sobbing voice that the place was never like this or like this, that it would be like that and like that. In a panicky mood, you pointed here and there aimlessly; in a word, you were lost. (174, 200-01)

The narrator still maintains her habitual *flânerie* as an adult, yet she can no longer feel at home, happy and content like the *flâneur* in Baudelaire or Benjamin. Instead, her heavy steps suggest deep melancholy. She can feel at home in Kyoto but cannot fully embrace her real homeland, which logically should be the most familiar and homely place. Wang Der-wei argues that the narrator almost completely identifies with Kyoto as her ideal home. The narrator is clearly aware of her love for Kyoto and disillusionment with Taipei. She once mutters to herself: “You really did not want to go back there [to Taipei]” (143, 177). And she tries to make sense of her paradoxical identification in the following way:

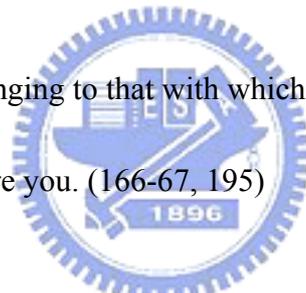
This is how it was: if a little time and a little memory remaining before you died and you could choose where to go, like so many people who are anxious to leave a hospital and return to a familiar place, usually their home, you’d likely choose this

place, and that was because, because it was only in places where you had left traces of yourself, where everything connected to you existed, that maybe those things would continue to exist and the significance of your imminent disappearance would be diluted—isn't that so?

But why not choose the city where you were born, grew up, gave birth to and raised children, and began to show signs of aging?

Why wasn't it the city you came from? ... You sat on the bench, freezing cold, as if sitting in water [...].

Maybe everything belonging to that with which you were familiar, everything you remembered, died before you. (166-67, 195)



This paragraph is a negative example of Benjamin's idea that "to live is to leave traces" (1978, 155). If one's hometown fails to preserve one's life traces, eventually there will be no signs to identify it as one's hometown.

On the other hand, why has she adopted Kyoto as her idealized hometown? One idea that merits our attention is that the narrator does not wholeheartedly look forward to her initial meeting with A; she probably fears meeting her old friend face to face would remind her that they are no longer young. Nor can she be entirely sure that their friendship has remained unchanged. In the same manner, Taipei's urbanization conspires to erase her beloved past in

the city, and she is obliged to search for something that might give her a sense of immutability and safety when faced with temporal and spatial transformations. Considering the unpleasant experiences prior to her Kyoto trip, we know that she is increasingly aware that she no longer seems to belong to the changing Taiwanese community, a sentiment that casts a shadow over her *flâneries* in the 1990s Taipei. Aging, the destruction of the old cityscape, and her political predicaments as a so-called *waishengren*, or “external province person,” together compel her to seek something more everlasting and comforting. It is at this point that she re-visits Kyoto, a city that is not entirely new to her. As an Asian city that at one time emulated the Chinese in architecture, Kyoto’s perpetual beauty caters to the narrator’s inner quest for Chineseness.

Besides, Taiwan has once been colonized by Japanese for 50 years, many old streets and architectures in Taiwan still preserve the Japanese style.²⁹ The cityscapes of Kyoto and Taipei are thus connected historically, and Kyoto may also remind her of Taipei in her younger days.

It is questionable whether those born after 1949 really see Japan as a colonizer; Chu’s descriptions of Kyoto are naturally devoid of any postcolonial critique. In Letty Chen’s words, those colonized traces in Taipei belong to the part of the unwritten past and Chu might make use of these imprints “as clues to retrace history,” as well as “a source of nostalgia and inspiration for imagining the past” (2006, 317). Moreover, because she has visited Kyoto before, her memory and emotional investment in Kyoto is more personal than political. Kyoto

²⁹ Letty Chen also thinks Chu’s appropriation of *Preface to the General History of Taiwan* in her main narrative “protests the total erasure of Taiwan’s history in order to underscore the absurdity of the pan-Chinese identity that the Guomintang (formerly Kuomintang, KMT) government has strategically imposed on the people at the expense of the local history prior to 1987” (2006, 308).

is indeed very significant in her personal history.³⁰

The narrator's nostalgia finds a home in a Japanese city, but at the same time the journey serves as an ironic contrast to her subsequent Taipei *flânerie*, which gives her a deeper sense of loss after her return. She makes no effort to correct a bus driver's mistake of identifying her as a Japanese tourist, and she just "play[s] the role of a foreigner" (187, 211). Using a colonial-era map purchased in Japan, she has a completely different experience from her Kyoto *flânerie*. Her return resembles the awakening of Rip Van Winkle: she finds that everything she was once familiar with and cherished in her heart is gone.

II. *Flânerie*, the Politics of Redemption, and Identity

If after the Kyoto trip the narrator's Taipei *flânerie* is unlikely to be a delightful experience and that her sense of belonging will not be found by coming back, then why does she bother to do so? As a child, the narrator used to take *flânerie* as a habitual practice that satisfied her desire for curiosity, serendipity, and self-discovery. In her 1990s disturbed state, she allows herself to take a peculiar gaze by re-visiting her hometown as a tourist -- an innovative idea that pushes her to seize the opportunity and an excuse she gives herself. According to Chou Ying-hsiung, "[t]he excuse she gives herself is that, since her former college classmate has failed to make it to the appointment, she still has a week off, and she

³⁰ Yet whether Kyoto is really that changeless as the narrator believes and claims remains questionable. For Kawabata, for instance, Japan's tradition slowly faded away at the end of World War II (Chen, 2006, 315). Letty Chen points out the narrator's desire to connect Taipei to Kyoto, to see the similarity between the two cities is "a symptom of [...] discontinuity in Taiwan's historical record and the disruption of the collective memory of its people" (2006, 317).

might as well avail herself of the opportunity. Subconsciously, of course, we know that as the other of herself, the fake Japanese (who does not speak a word of Japanese) is now intent on juxtaposing the beautiful and the ugly” (2000, 64).

The narrator’s walks might be considered an attempt at some kind of political redemption. In Hsu Jen-yi’s words, “[t]his particular gesture of melancholy manifest in her obsession with memory and past demonstrates [...] an index of a dialectical thinking about the inadequacies of the present and of her aching desire for the past’s unrealized potential. Walking, becomes a politics of redemption capable of teasing out hidden geographies” (2004, 552). Unfortunately, deep down she knows she is fundamentally out of step with the city rhythms of Taipei’s modern life. Her inner doubts about the legitimacy of her hometown repeatedly manifest themselves between the lines. The identity of Taiwan’s inhabitants was originally a Gordian knot, one inextricably implicated in the triangulation of nationalist China, imperialist Japan, and native Taiwan.³¹ As a second-generation mainlander herself, Chu does not conceal her political predicament due to the rise of pro-nativist political climate. In an interview Chu admits that her intention of writing “The Old Capital” is to “write about a girl with an extremely confused identity; perhaps she is a second-generation mainlander” (Chiu, 1997, 146).

³¹ See Chiu Kuei-fen, “Think of My (Self-)Exiling Brothers/Sisters: Reading Chu Tienxin as a Second-generation Mainlander.” Chiu holds the view that Chu is positioned as a paradoxical epitome of Taiwan’s orphan stance in the world. It is neither local nor foreign, neither unified nor independent (1997, 106).

Chiu also thinks the term “second-generation mainlander” is misleading for “it is a label too clear-cut to convey the sense of ambiguity with which ‘second-generation mainlanders’ try to negotiate their identity” (2002, 75). After Taiwan people realize that “‘recovering the Chinese mainland’ propagated by the Nationalist party for forty years” is only a myth, second-generation mainlanders in Taiwan painfully found they are “doubly exiled” (2002, 75).

The narrator once recalls an unpleasant episode, a political rally attended by 100,000 people against the then-ruling party that she and her husband had attended:

Your original intention had been to donate some money, a meager contribution to help unseat the ruling party, like giving blood for a single stroke on a written character years before, and then leave. In the end, of course, you couldn't make your way out through the crowd. More importantly, your husband of nearly 20 years wasn't about to leave.

When you looked at him, his blurred face displayed the same expression as the tens of thousands of faces around him, he could have been a total stranger who was shouting and clapping in response to the spotlighted speakers. Finally, when a campaign aide said something about how people with a provincial background like yours ought to get out and go back to China, your husband cast you a frenzied glance, as if afraid you'd be identified and driven off by the people around you. (132, 167-68)

The uncomfortable existence of “people with a provincial background” in Taiwan aroused hostility in the early 1990s, one that resulted in the construction of a high “political Tower of Babel” (Chou, 2000, 57). The ambiguous identity of second-generation mainlanders creates a deadlock. On the one hand, they were not accepted by the so-called local Taiwanese because “officially” their “native land” was mainland China and not Taiwan. On the other, they had already lived on the island for two generations and their home is no longer elsewhere.³² The narrator strongly questions the orthodoxy of both stands. According to Huang Jing-jung, her

³² See Mei Chia-ling, “The Imagination of Homeland and Writing Politics of the Military Village’s Novelists in the 80s and the 90s,” p.164.

main anxiety is not one of identification, but of “not being identified” by fellow Taiwanese (1997, 269). Very consciously or not, she suffers from this split or disjunction, and her disguise as a tourist may be the result of feeling a prejudice against second-generation mainlanders. Her rationale is: since politically and culturally I am now viewed as an un-welcomed outsider, why bother to take pains to eagerly claim that I love Taiwan as much as you do? Why not just play an outcast role and see what will happen?

In her essay “The *Flâneur*,” Chu claims that the lead character’s loitering without a specific aim lets her discover “sameness” in relation to what Benedict Anderson calls the “imagined community” (2003, 152). As part of this desire to discover “sameness,” in “The Old Capital” we may also observe a desire to escape from disorder. Chou Ying-hsiung argues that at first glance, the protagonist’s trips to Kyoto and Taipei seem to be “a remedy against some of the ills of the contemporary world.” But after a closer study, “one will also find in the text the overwhelming presence of the author’s will for order, temporal or spatial” (2000, 60). Unfortunately, her objective to identify with an identifiable outer world is not fulfilled in “The Old Capital.” After all, how can one discover “sameness” or order in a place in which the self is labeled an outsider?

Once the narrator went to Jiantan on a winter afternoon, just as she had done when she was 17. Mixed with her feelings of disgust concerning the changing cityscape (“You quickly contained your shock and disbelief at the sight of the MRT station, ugly and gigantic beyond belief, for it destroyed the skyline’s beauty”), the narrator shows her repressed anger and

indignation in the following confession:

You had no idea when the incessant longing for faraway places, the desire to go on a long trip, to fly far and high, first came to you.... For many years you had actually found life bearable only by regularly imagining some part of the city, some section of a certain road, or some street scene as some other city, one you either had or had not visited. It was like so many men who, regardless of how they feel about their wives—good or bad—have to imagine them as other women before they can perform in bed.

You never tried to deal with this feeling, nor did you dare mention it to anyone, especially since there were always people who wanted to know whether or not you loved this place, even wanted you to hurry up and leave if you didn't.

“If you want to leave, leave. Go back to where you came from”—as if you all had a place just waiting for you to return to, a ready-made place to live, but you kept hanging around, to your shame.

Was there such a place? (133-34, 169-70)

In this passage, the narrator is not reluctant to admit her thoughts of leaving. Such a desire to escape, wander, or even go into exile betrays an ironic dimension of her national identification.

Maybe exile is not the worst treatment. Exile means being sent away from one's native

country or home. To “qualify” for exile, one’s homeland must be identified as a pre-existing entity, but for people like the narrator, they are unable to fully ascertain where their home is located. Thus, where would they be exiled from? The narrator inquires painfully, if such people later felt like going home, “was there such a place?” (134, 170)

After her Kyoto trip, the narrator’s “re-visit” does not offer her new hopes, rather, it again proves that the home in her memory is lost to history under the twin forces of rapid urbanization and political changes. The changes come so quickly that she has no time to adapt to her new surroundings. The failure of her memories inevitably deepens the narrator’s melancholia and anxiety, and perhaps even leads to a schizophrenic identification with Taiwan. Her political homelessness converges with her with the government’s inability if not reluctance to preserve the precious past. She gets helplessly stuck between present and past, here and there. Perhaps the main problem does not lie in the narrator’s intention to leave or stay, but in the idea that if she does leave, there will be no place for her to return to. As the narrator’s favorite way of getting along with urban space, she expects her walks to be a strategy for reflecting on, reviewing, or retrieving her past. However, the more she tries to uncover Taipei’s hidden geographies, the more disappointing and frustrating her *flânerie* becomes. She painfully faces monuments now disguised as urbanized buildings and finds no traces of her past life. Thus, the *flâneur* becomes a homeless vagrant.

III. *Flânerie* and Abjection

Chu once admitted that she attempted to call upon something beyond a recognized identity: a freedom to be “not identified” by writing “The Old Capital.”³³ To explore this negative freedom, she uses a second-person narrative and a pseudo-tourist gaze as writing strategies. However, the *flâneur*’s self-displacement complicates the identity issue to the extent that she is not only alienated from the crowd but also from herself, transforming the project into a process of self-estrangement. Throughout the text, readers may not always be capable of distinguishing between the “you-narratee” and the narrator. In Chou’s words:

The narrator and her narratee counterpart may be separated but by no means distinct. On the surface, the arrangement brings the narrative to a level of self-consciousness otherwise impossible. Moreover, the very tone of the narrative gives away the narrator’s or even the implied author’s sympathy for the narratee, to a point of identifying one with the other. One may even argue that the phatic device serves a very persuasive purpose of identifying the narratee with the reader. In other words, any reader with good sense is canvassed by the author to see things the way the narratee does—and, by extension, the way the narrator, or the implied author, does. (2000, 68)

Aside from increasing the phatic influence of such a device, Chou believes that the second-person point of view “enhances greatly the story’s coherence by means of rhetorical

³³ See “A Conversation between Chu Tien-hsin and Wu Heh,” p. 27.

intensity” (68). Tang Xiao-bing also notices this special point of view when saying that in Chu’s text, the distinction of *you* and *I* is blurred so that *you* could arbitrarily refer to the narrator, the reader, or anybody else (395). Peng Hsiao-yen sees the narrator in “The Old Capital” as a “participant observer” (423), which sounds even more like a *flâneur*.

The role-playing of a tourist in one’s hometown in the final *flânerie* is another self-displacement mechanism. According to Rob Shields, the estrangement a *flâneur* experiences recodes self as other: “*The stranger is thus a foreigner who becomes like a native, whereas the flâneur is [...] a native who becomes like a foreigner*” (2000, 68, emphasis original). We have discussed the possibility that certain political meanings and expectations are invested in this final loitering in “The Old Capital.” From the narrative to the stance as a pseudo-tourist, Chu’s *flâneur* adopts a different “alterity mechanism.” As Chou sees it:



The will to power imposes order upon an otherwise amorphous world, to the extent of creating a wishful version of history. One often resorts to all sorts of alterity mechanisms of being in other’s positions to gain insight into things we have no direct knowledge of. Man projects himself or herself unto a world of the other via various narrative techniques, e.g. manipulations of narrate and narrative voices, reification of the world, even the discursive treatment of events within a narrative framework, as in the case of Zhu Tian-xin. (2000, 56)

In a separate essay, Chou (1999) observes that the “alterity mechanism” that is prevalent in

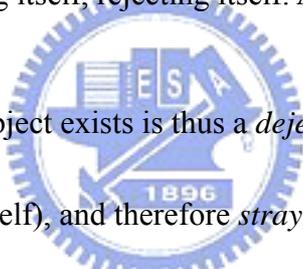
Chu's recent writings may make one foreign, so that one may seize the realistic details in a self-alienated way.

However, the question still remains: what triggers this alterity mechanism, and what is its ultimate aim? In Wang Der-wei's interpretation, this alterity mechanism signifies one's desire for self-abnegation, or to use Julia Kristeva's term, "abjection" (22). Based on Wang's argument, Sang Tze-lan elaborates that the orientation of the multi-faceted narrative in "The Old Capital" is that Chu's always-fragile national identity undergoes a forceful expulsion from the major community (453). In this sense, we may identify Chu, a second-generation mainlander, as an abject of the dominant social groups, being socially expelled by other Taiwanese. This viewpoint is, actually, a starting point to read the story in terms of abjection. I think the idea of abjection may help us to analyze this convoluted text better, for abjection, like *flânerie*, is a motion related to one's identification, should shed light on what the narrator mentally experiences during her *flânerie*.

We may benefit from a quick review of how Kristeva defines the abject in *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. She describes the abject as neither subject nor object: "The abject is not an ob-ject facing me, which I name or imagine. Nor is it an ob-jest, an otherness ceaselessly fleeing in a systematic quest of desire [...] The abject has only one quality of the object—that of being opposed to I" (1). The neither-nor status of the abject is reinforced by its power to destabilize the subject/object (or self/not-self) binarism. The abject involves a process of self-cleansing: "I" want none of that element, sign of their desire; "I" do not want

to listen, “I” do not assimilate it, “I” expel it [...] I expel *myself*, I spit *myself* out, I abject *myself* within the same motion through which “I” claim to establish *myself*” (3, emphasis original). The abject is the part of subject which the subject endeavors to expel, and cannot be fully obliterated but only “hovers at the border of the subject’s identity” because it is the precondition of material existence, and “it is impossible to exclude the threatening or anti-social elements with any finality” (Grosz, 1990, 87).

Abjection is also a process or a movement dependent on “a dialectic of negativity” (Kristeva, 7) because lives of abjection are based on radical exclusions. In Kristeva’s words, it is “repelling, rejecting; repelling itself, rejecting itself. Ab-jecting” (13). She adds:



The one by whom the abject exists is thus a *deject* who places (himself), *separates* (himself), *situates* (himself), and therefore *strays* instead of getting his bearings, desiring, belonging, or refusing [...]. Instead of sounding himself as to his “being,” he does so concerning his place: “*Where* am I?” instead of “*Who* am I ?” For the space that engrosses the *deject*, the excluded, is never *one*, nor *homogeneous*, nor *totalizable*, but essentially divisible, foldable, and catastrophic. A deviser of territories, languages, works, the *deject* never stops demarcating his universe whose fluid confines—for they are constituted of a non-object, the abject—constantly question his solidity and impel him to start afresh. A tireless builder, the *deject* is in short a *stray*. He is on a journey,

during the night, the end of which keeps receding. (8, emphasis original)³⁴

Kristeva argues that the cause of abjection is that which “disturbs [the clear demarcation of] identity, system, order [...]. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite” (4). Because it is unaccepted by the symbolic order and threatens the subject, the undesirable part must be exteriorized in order to establish the order of proper and clean.

It is noteworthy that theories of abjection contain ambivalence. While Elizabeth Grosz seems to favor a “deconstructionist” move and stress ruptures and self-alienation, Kristeva’s abjection mostly refers to defilement rituals, preserving selfhood and social stability.³⁵

Though abjection threatens one’s life, we have to tolerate and live with it. As Barbara Creed recognizes, abject “helps to define life” (9). After the process of abjection, it promises re-established boundaries of the self. McAfee also notes that “The abject is the vandal *and* the policeman of the self, threatening to dissolve it while simultaneously reinforcing it. Just as the nothing lays the ground for being, the abject lays the ground for being a subject” (121, emphasis original).

Then in what way does the narrator in “The Old Capital” practice her *flânerie* as a process of abjection? In her essay “The *Flâneur*,” Chu contends that in one sense, a *flânerie* is often motivated by a spiritual self-exile (2003, 153). The experience of abjection and *flânerie*

³⁴ In his “*Flâneur*, Symbolic Order, and the Abjections,” an essay about a Taiwanese writer Li Yong-ping’s works, Huang Jing-jung associates Li’s works with Kristeva’s abjection. Huang also mentions Chu’s literary works that deal with the similar scenario (2004, 420).

³⁵ See Elizabeth Grosz, “The Body of Signification” in *Abjection, Melancholia and Love: The Work of Julia Kristeva*.

are in many respects parallel—both can be dynamic movements of identification. Note also that the *flânerie* essentially shares a similar feature with abjection: their necessary position on the border. Noëlle McAfee describes abjection as “the state in which one’s foothold in the world of self and other disintegrates,” and the symptom of the abject is “being on the border, pushing toward psychosis where the I blurs” (120).

As a “politics of redemption” to ensure one’s steady identity, *flânerie* belies a problematic dimension. Considering the necessary floating status of a *flâneur*, walking and moving (both physically and mentally) can become abjection at any time. This is similar to Deborah Parsons’ comment that “the act of walking denies the observer a totalizing, constant perception and a self-absorbed subjectivity” (72). A *flâneur*’s identity, especially Chu’s narrator’s, is usually suspended in a site full of uncertainties, stimulants, and variations. In this sense, the abjection-*flânerie* at the same time re-established and re-destabilizes the walker’s identity. It is an example of the synchronous mental work of construction and deconstruction.³⁶ Yet I have to make clear that my argument is not to deconstruct the positive politics of *flânerie* as a whole, the interconnection between *flânerie* and abjection I discussed depends much on the walker’s personal and social backgrounds. Thus, *flânerie* as a positive politics of redemption might still work in another case, in different contexts.

The feeling of being a stranger lies perhaps more in Chu’s narrator than in the outside

³⁶ Letty Chen contends that the narrator uses colonial map as a guide “to establish an independent cultural identity” (2006, 319). It “stands as an allegory of the author’s project to rewrite the present with an imagined past” (2006, 318). But this gesture is also self-contradictory, because “as the map can only further widen the gap between the narrator’s image of Taipei (in both history and her memory) and the city in the present, the process of identification becomes the process of disidentification” (2006, 319).

world, and this very sense of self-alienation is embodied in her abjection. Kristeva has discussed major expressions of the abject in social life, as well as in cultural and psychical taboos established to deal with “food, death and sexual difference” (Grosz, 1992, 198). In the final part of the story, what the *flâneur*-speaker sees, hears, and thinks of tends to be associated with corpses and death. To discuss how the *flâneur* invests too much in the past in terms of abjection, I will analyze the ending of “The Old Capital,” in which Tao’s narrative is inserted rather indiscriminately into the narrator’s discourse.

Toward the end of “The Old Capital,” the mental scheme of the *flâneur* keeps losing its equilibrium. After the narrator imaginative utopia fails to match the visual world in reality, those inadequacies emerged from the uncanny city fall apart. Chou indicates that the narrator, by the “narrative overkill” (2000, 56), who is likely to be too obsessed with the past “may be investing too much in the past—a past that is closely tied to its loss” (2000, 64). In “Memory and Forgetting,” Paul Ricoeur mentions the wounds and scars of memory and expresses his view that in some places in Europe “there is too much memory” (6). He also suggests that “the diseases of memory are basically diseases of identity” (7). Perhaps Chu’s Taipei is invested with too much memory, therefore she can only “reconcile” with it by alienating herself from the place and from herself. In his summary of Freud’s essay “Mourning and Melancholia,” Ricoeur concludes that

mourning is a reconciliation. With what? With the loss of some objects of love; objects of love may be [...] abstractions like fatherland, freedom [...] What is preserved in

mourning and lost in melancholia is self-esteem, or the sense of one's self. This is because in melancholia there is a despair and a longing to be reconciled with the loved object which is lost without the hope of reconciliation. (7)

The idealized double of "The Old Capital" is the fisherman in Tao Yuan-ming's Utopian story *Peach Blossom Spring*. In Tao's original version, the time is set "during the Taiyuan Reign of the Jin Dynasty." A fisherman mindlessly rows upstream and discovers a utopia located in a mountain valley with peach trees in bloom. This Chinese Arcadia is full of "*rich fields and pretty ponds, mulberry, bamboo [...] criss-crossing paths skirting the fields*" (214, 231).

People living there are happy and content, and they treat the fisherman with generosity and hospitality. However, after the fisherman returns to his home and tries to re-visit this earthly paradise, he cannot find it anymore. As a result, he cannot prove its existence or the authenticity of his experience.

After her painful and melancholy *flâneries*, the narrator in "The Old Capital" finally reaches Dadaocheng Pier. It is her tourist gaze that renders her a position similar to that of Tao's fisherman. Both enter an unfamiliar village, but the Taipei version is not as Arcadian as the village that the fisherman enters, nor are the villagers as friendly. What she confronts is a dystopia, a monstrous version of *Peach Blossom Spring*.³⁷ The uneasiness that accompanies her intrusion into a place is associated with an earlier experience. She recalls when years ago,

³⁷ See Leonora Yang, "Multiple Intertextuality and Space: The Cultural Identification and Textual Localization."

she took her daughter to Dda'an Park, "with the intention of telling her you'd grown up in this neighborhood. You'd barely entered the village when pairs of eyes the same age as your father's came at you, showing surprise and fear, and they asked you where you came from."

The narrator cares much about how the villagers might identify her as a guest or an intruder:

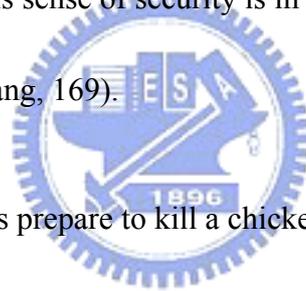
You didn't think you looked all that different from other young village women, children in hand, and had no idea how a single glance could have marked you as an outsider. You told them the truth. It turned out that there had been a massive protest against the demolition and relocation, and that the villagers had thought you were a reporter or a rubbernecker. (215-16, 232)

No matter why the people in Da'an Park showed their hostility to the protagonist, the fear of being labeled as a foreigner is nowhere to be found in Tao's narration. "The Old Capital" narrator continues to describe the present surroundings:

But you and the men and women under the trees spoke different languages, so, afraid they'd be able to tell who you were, you shambled off [...] As expected, you heard the men and women behind say something, but you ignored them, preferring to head toward the sunny basketball court where a few youngsters were having a pick-up game, not caring if she was invited to go to their house, where she would be served wine while they killed someone for a feast. You weren't surprised. The blindingly bright sun's rays were saturated in moisture. Wasn't there a movie scene where a group of people who are

neither vicious nor benign join forces and kill an intruder, or a stray dog, one afternoon out of sheer boredom? Then they yawned and continued waving fans, making tea, picking teeth, digging between toes, and listening to plays whose characters you didn't know, while caterpillars slithered down along tiny threads overhead. (216, 232-33)

In this paragraph, the narrator admits that her uncomfortable feelings might partly come from a language barrier, since she does not speak the Taiwanese dialect of Chinese. But a foreign language did not cause any problems during her Kyoto journey. As Chang Wan-yi observes, Chu cannot speak Japanese, but it never gives her any reason to feel anything less than “perfectly safe” (151, 183). This sense of security is in sharp contrast to the unpleasant situation in her hometown (Chang, 169).



In Tao's story, the villagers prepare to kill a chicken to treat the fisherman, but in “The Old Capital” the narrator fears that the villagers might kill a human for a feast or “out of sheer boredom.” The ambience in this demonized *Peach Blossom Spring* makes the *flâneur*—now an intruder in danger—feel fearful. However, by reading the passage more objectively we find that the villagers are just common people “weaving fans, making tea, picking teeth, digging between toes, and listening to plays whose characters you did not know.” They actually do not directly interact with the *flâneur*. The text tells us they probably “say something,” but we do not know whether these words are said in response to her intrusion, or just as idle chat among themselves. It is arguable that the villagers' hostility is mostly in the narrator's imagination, an exaggeration of her previous unpleasant experiences or a pathological self-(non)-

identification. Because she does not identify herself as who she is, and the previous *flâneries* show her that every place she goes is someplace she does not belong, she abjects herself before others can abject her.

This journey seems to end in an impasse for the protagonist, who refuses to let go of revenants. Unaware of her chaotic mental status she continues to walk, but her visions are even more horrible and are shadowed by death:

A helicopter hovered in the air, probably searching for a corpse floating in the river, an old man on a motor scooter that belched dark smoke came toward you, an old woman seated behind him, then passed by, probably on their way to identify the body after being notified of the drowning; a pack of wild dogs was now under the Chinese hibiscuses, all looking up at you, neither barking nor wagging their tails, and that included a puppy that, normally not on its guard, was looking at you coldly; the high-pitched sounds of a funeral song came to you softly from the far side of the river; someone was burning leaves and grass, giving off a smell that had hung in the air ever since humans had learned to use fire; the young basketball players had vanished, leaving an orange ball bouncing on the cement all by itself; near the overpass the gray wall that kept getting taller, like a prison wall, was clean and unmarked, no graffiti, nothing!

What is this place? ... you began to wail.

...

A shimmering ocean, a beautiful island, the essential seat of our sage kings and wise elders' destiny. (217, 232-33)

At the very moment the ideal pastoral land fails to be found, when the abjection-*flânerie* meets its end, the narrator gets lost and breaks down. Even an ordinary scene in a village will let her (only) think of crab droppings, caterpillars, a floating corpse, a dog's body, death, murder, funeral songs, all those dirty and uncomfortable images, odors, and sounds. Her mental chaos can be articulated by Kristeva's description of a subject who endures difficulty becoming situated:

Also strange is the experience of the abyss separating me from the other who shocks me—I do not even perceive him, perhaps he crushes me because I negate him. Confronting foreigners whom I reject and with whom at the same time I identify, I lose my boundaries, I no longer have a container, the memory of experiences when I had been abandoned overwhelm me, I lose my composure. I feel “lost,” “indistinct,” “hazy.” (1991, 187)

The imagined heaven falls into a diabolical state. The narrator's crying at the end of the story is an outburst of her long-repressed emotions about her disorientation and non-identification, one that exposes the symptom of infertility in contemporary urban civilization.³⁸ The text manifests Chu's protest and dissatisfaction with the capitalized Taipei that embraces progress

³⁸ See Tang Xiao-bing, “*The Ancient Capital*, Outside the Remains and Peach Blossom Stream,” p. 398.

and modernity wholeheartedly without reservation and reflection. Such surroundings are the least favorable for a *flâneur* seeking an answer to the question, “Where am I?” In this case to perform *flânerie* as redemption is unlikely to be successful, not only due to the walker’s self-(mis-)emplacement within an uncanny city, but also out of a compulsive self-hatred that constantly threatens the vulnerable *flâneur*, who imposes a self on an ambiguous place. Eventually, the narrator painfully stays in a city where the old pillars of memory ineluctably crumble and melt into the air.

However, “The Old Capital” does not only ask for the readers’ sympathy, there are more interesting points deserving our discussion. Chu’s political inclination and concern revealed in this writing, in fact, arouse disputes. For instance, Chu speaks for the group of waishengren and criticizes Taiwan government (and people)’s indifference to destroy the urban landscape, but when the first-generation mainlanders migrated to Taiwan fifty years ago, they might as well do the similar deconstruction to the original landscapes. Also, Kyoto in other tourists’ or local resident’s eyes might not be as “changeless” as the narrator senses. One should understand that Chu’s account of her *flânerie* may only reflect part of Kyoto and Taipei. While she discusses Chu’s *Remembering My Brothers in Old Military Village Days*, a work Chu also deals with ethnic diversity and questions of provincial identity even more explicitly, Chiu Kuei-fen comments it is “a performative act of ‘remembering otherwise,’” by which the author may intervene in the construction of history (2002, 80). Namely, in writing one’s memory, what is not written, as well as what is written, conveys important messages as to

how the narrator reviews and evaluates the past, thus “[t]he way memory is historicized and reconstructed depends greatly on the position of the person who is doing the remembering” (2002, 80). Letty Chen thinks that perhaps Chu’s essential predicament, rather than “where and how to find her own history,” is “what facts she is willing to accept as her history” (2006, 316). In this sense, Chu’s *flânerie* could also be understood as a journey to find out what she may accept and recognize as her own history.

Hsu Jen-yi (2007) notices Chu’s persistent concern for the issue of ethnicity when Chu’s latest novella “A Glance toward the Southern City” (2006) publishes. It seems the journey in “The Old Capital,” in spite of its somewhat pessimistic ending, never ends. After 10 years of writing “The Old Capital,” with an even more ironic and critical tone, Chu is still concerned about the difficult situation and identity crisis of second-generation mainlanders. It seems her predicament of national identity nourishes her creative mind and energy. But in her latest interview, Chu talks about the risk of overtly investing personal emotions and concerns into her own literary works. Although she is aware of the criticism of her sometimes too sharp critical mind, she affirms that she will never let any ideology, political concern, personal worries or prejudices to overpower literature.³⁹

From this point of view, there are two levels regarding success or failure of the project of “The Old Capital.” At the character level, that is, inside the story as it is, the narrator’s attempt to retrieve a stable identity does not go smoothly as she anticipated. However, at a meta-level,

³⁹ See her interview with Tang Nuo, published in *INK Literary Monthly* (Sept. 2006): 22-42.

these unpleasant if not traumatic experiences are aesthetically productive, and it turns out to be an artistic accomplishment that may prompt Taiwanese readers to ponder seriously on the question of cultural identity and reliability of memory. Judith Butler has mentioned the productive potential while the subject deals with the loss, sometimes “pathos is not negated, but it turns out to be oddly fecund, paradoxically productive” (468). Perhaps we should wait and see how Chu, as a writer and a walker, will continue to gain out of her loss. Her *flânerie* should be carried on.



Concluding Remarks

The enormous eye in Woolf's "Street Haunting" is capable of building a personal chamber on the street, and by doing so the urban walker can feel "at home" in public, which is dominated by the patriarchal social order and is not entirely friendly to women. The walker's fluid identity allows her to "put on briefly for a few minutes the bodies and minds of others" (81), and this permeable mind or porous self is related to Woolf's ideas about modernist writing. The street "haunter" is in many respects truly a master of *flânerie*, who skillfully "keeps her position flexible, in motion, open to chance" (Caughie, 404). Although the walker in "Street Haunting" modestly claims that there is no "great achievements completed" (1993, 76), this short piece of writing does successfully show us how a *flâneuse* can, with an interesting feminine poetics of space, make London a city of her own.

In "Hungary Water," the narrator and his companion's *mémoires involontaires* are triggered by olfactory *flânerie*. The mnemonic exploration through smell and walking is not entirely unlike Baudelaire's and Benjamin's undertakings. Their search for specific smells and odors also introduces us to an ambivalent relation between memory and forgetting. In addition, this olfactory *flânerie* could be seen as a strategy to resist the ruination and fragmentation of modern metropolitan experience, a method to deal with the attenuation of *die Erfahrung* (experience) and the predominance of *das Erlebnis* (immediate experience).

Compared to Woolf's street "haunter," the *flâneuse* in Chu's "The Old Capital" is much

more sentimental and melancholic. The narrator tries to play a tourist in her hometown when she cannot validate her identity. Confused with the changing landscape and plagued by an identity crisis, the narrator is trapped in an “uncanny” Arcadia in the modern Taipei. Her inability to accept the contemporary urban landscape as it is and her deepened sense of loss exacerbate her melancholia while she is performing a *flânerie* in search of a sense of belonging and security. The practice of *flânerie*, in this way, is related to the process of abjection closely. Yet we cannot ignore that Chu’s sense of loss and her love of walking are in fact immensely productive, enabling her to create this masterpiece of sorrows and melancholy.



Woolf and Chu love walking and observing the cities, which provide them fruitful ideas and creative inspiration. Their works reveal their passion for an active engagement with the metropolis. For them, to search for a creative vision, one’s lost identity, or cherished memories, the best solution is *flânerie*. Walking is exercised as a strategy to respond to and resist dominant ideologies. The protagonists in these three stories, in one way or another, try to see the world anew. Gillian Rose argues that male writers by and large still tend to demand “an omniscient view, a transparent city, total knowledge” while females can know the city “in terms of a challenge to that omniscient vision and its exclusions” (qtd. in Parsons, 7). In “Street Haunting,” Woolf shows how a woman can see a different world by looking at the surface only. In “Hungary Water,” two men try to retrieve their memories and better understand the outside world mainly through smell instead of the eyes. The walker in “The

Old Capital” tries to ascertain her identity and memory by paralleling her *flânerie* in Kyoto and Taipei, past and present, and visiting her hometown as a tourist. These strategies are unconventional and readers can see how a *flânerie* can be represented and appropriated in various contexts to produces significant effects. Walking is not only a daily practice, but can also be invested with various emotions, expectations, and political agenda to deal with one’s class, gender, nationality, memory and selfhood.



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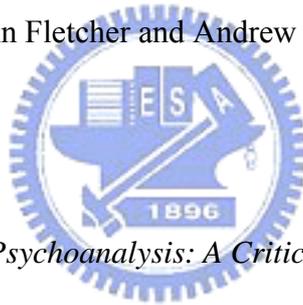
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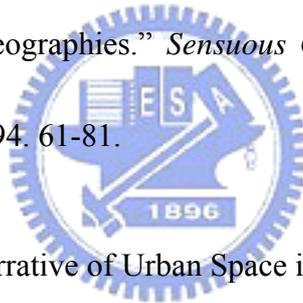
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