In a famous essay, Walter Benjamin tells a story of storytelling (Erzählung) as an agent of Erfahrung, the “experience” the traveler brings home from distant parts. According to Benjamin, Erfahrung has been degraded in modern times as a result of being split into “information” (the already interpreted), and “fiction” (by implication the interpretable). But one can travel, of course, without leaving home; and Benjamin himself is clear that the value of Erfahrung is exclusively for a home audience and indeed that the category includes local experience. I want to look in what follows at a modern narrative genre—the genre of “loiterature”—that eludes definition as either “information” or “fiction” and has everything to do with forms of experience that are available without leaving home.

Narrative is intimately connected with the production of knowledge, and so with effects of power and desire. Modern narratology, however, in defining itself very largely as a grammar and a rhetoric, has tended to elide these larger questions in favor of aspects of narrative that are amenable to more formal technical study, notably the analysis of narrative structure and of narration as a matter of
relational positions, such as those of narrator and narratee or author and reader. Both as a grammar and as a rhetoric, narrative theory has had to deal with the vexed question of closure. As Ian Reid insists, the closed structure of story is open to analysis, as a linear series of discursive substitutions or “exchanges”; the closed narrator-narratee relation coexists with an interpretive relation of reading that introduces all the effects of difference and deferral associated with textuality. I propose that the questions of narrative structure and of the rhetorical production of relational subjectivity are themselves understandable as a function of narrative’s status as a discourse of knowledge in which issues of power and desire are simultaneously at stake. For if narrative structure and narratorial relations each raise the problem of the relation of closure to discursive openness, there is also an epistemological issue of the same kind. This issue has to do with the ways disciplinary modes of knowledge can be seen as functioning in an exclusionary fashion and with the possibility of counterdisciplinary modes as a less exclusionary, more open alternative. In the modern period (more specifically, since the latter part of the eighteenth century) narrative literature has been split, not only between Benjamin’s genres of “information” and “fiction,” but also between a disciplined exposition of knowledge and modes of narrative disclosure that enact “experience” as a counterdisciplinary event, with in each case correlative structural entailments and specific differences in the way narrative constructs subjectivity. The “loiterature” of travel will serve as my example of such counterdisciplinary narrative.

It is not my hypothesis that “disciplinary” and “counterdisciplinary” narrative constitute absolutely distinct genres: they are clearly locked in a relation of mutual entailment. Rather than showing that interrelationship, I will concentrate on exploring some features of loiterly narrative (on the assumption that narrative’s “disciplined” mode is familiar enough to be recognizable without lengthy analysis). I will try to present it, in a rather artificial point-by-point way, as the structural, intersubjective, and epistemological “other” of the disciplinary mode. To do this, I will
rely on Michel Foucault's analysis of discipline in *Surveiller et punir*, while pointing, by implication, to what is exclusionary in Foucault's own highly systematic and disciplined account of the emergence in the modern period of a society founded on discipline. That society was and is the site of counterdisciplinary impulses whose narrative manifestations are the subject of my own—also oversystematic—account.

Discipline, as Foucault describes it, emerges as a structuring in space and time of the activity of work: schoolchildren, hospital patients, factory workers, and soldiers, for instance, occupy a space that is rigorously delimited and divided, and their daily life is subject to no less rigorous scheduling, while their institutional career may be structured as a movement through a hierarchy—from student to teacher, say, or from worker to supervisor—that gives narrative shape to the disciplined development of the isolated individual subject. But discipline seeks also to mold "souls" in this way through training the body: the disciplined subject is one whose actions and reactions have been so trained to regularity and reliability that they do not need to be specifically commanded, thus realizing previously undreamt-of efficiencies, economies, and effectiveness (for example, in the movement of troops or the production of goods). This subject is, finally, a subject of knowledge, both in the sense of being subjected to a system of surveillance and examination that becomes progressively internalized, and in the sense that such a system presupposes an examining subject and a systematic body of knowledge about the examinees. Foucault shows how, in the form of pedagogy, criminology, psychiatry, psychoanalysis, and so forth, the sciences humaines emerged historically as an epistemological offshoot of the disciplinary society, with, at its heart, the practice of the examination—and at the heart of the examination the construction of sets of norms against which individuals may be measured and found to be either in conformity or wanting.

What this picture omits, however, is the degree to which, having become a norm in its own right, disciplinarity defines and produces, beyond the criminals and the criminality that are Foucault's
focus, various groups of marginalized and potentially oppositional misfits whose relation to delinquency is more ambiguous. What these groups have in common, I think, is an alienated relation to the world of work. Already in the famous opening pages of Balzac's *La Fille aux yeux d'or* [The Girl with the Golden Eyes], with its Dantesque representation of Paris as a many-circled inferno of endless labor and relentless pleasure-seeking under the spur of ambition and gold, a few sentences are reserved for those—such as priests and those newly arrived from the provinces, the beautiful people of both sexes (society ladies and dandies) and “le peuple heureux des flâneurs”—who escape the frenzy. Balzac's major successor in the portrayal of urban modernity, Baudelaire, similarly distinguishes between an anonymous crowd given over to daily labor and the nightly burden of pleasure, and those isolated figures—denizens of the street such as beggars and rag-pickers, prostitutes and strolling entertainers, widows and “petites vieilles”—in whom he recognizes his own kin, his “congéneres,” as an artist. The subordinated subgroups of the bourgeoisie, such as artists (who are perceived as not working) and women (who are not permitted to work, their social function being purely ornamental), have in common with the street people (who are perceived as parasitic) a dubious, alienated status that derives from the sense that they are at once economically unproductive and, because not subject to disciplinary control, potentially rebellious. To these suspect groups can be added the sexual minorities whose identities emerged a little later, in part through their being identified as anomalous objects of the new disciplines of knowledge, and in part as an effect of the crisis in the system of gender identities that arose toward the end of the century.

To the extent that middle-class members of such groups inclined to oppositionality (something first seen in the phenomenon of “Bohemia”), the narrative genre I call “loiterature” was available to them, initially in the practices of what Daniel Sangsue has called “eccentric narrative,” and of what is now generally called “flâneur realism,” as a counterdisciplinary vehicle. Against disciplinary closure, loiterature proposes the values of the “writerly”—of differ-
ence, deferral, and limitless supplementation—and it offers the occasion for a witty and entertainingly seductive performance of failure that comments on the disciplinary values of productivity and mastery. In coining the word loiterature I am translating a pun of Maurice Blanchot's. Blanchot uses the word *désœuvrement* to describe the inability of writing, traversed as it is by a consciousness of linguistic lack, to achieve the monumental, completed status of *oeuvre*. In appropriating the term, I want to keep the primary sense of *désœuvrement* (i.e. idleness), but at the same time to draw attention to the difference between a certain metaphysical pathos of failure, much exploited by Blanchot, and the political implications of a certain *failure to conform*, in the context of a social formation oriented toward disciplined efficiency and the power of norms, and in a literary system that values sublimity and promotes the concept of the *oeuvre* as masterpiece. In short, by opposing the monumental, the sublime, and the “ideal” in the aesthetic sphere, loiterature was simultaneously situating itself, in social terms, as a discourse of counterdisciplinarity. In doing so, it was led specifically to attempt a transvaluation of the trivial—something that foreshadows, I think, contemporary attempts such as those of Michel de Certeau to deploy the concept of the “everyday” as a phenomenon of culture that can subvert from within—whether in art or in the domain of knowledge—the claims of *techne*.

If the body is the vehicle of disciplinary training, it is also a site of potential resistance (consider the soldier who farts on parade); and the trivial asserts, above all, the claims of the body. But the word has an interesting etymology: it derives from Latin *trivialis*, designating a place where three roads meet and where, by implication, prostitutes, pimps, confidence-tricksters, and other unsavory types were wont to loiter in expectation of opportunity (opportunism, as de Certeau has pointed out, is the defining characteristic of oppositional tactics, and it is the art of biding one's time). The modern sense of “insignificant,” however, seems to have attached to the word trivial as a result of the medieval division of the seven liberal arts into the quadrivium (which comprised the four number arts) and the trivium (which grouped the three language arts: 
grammar, rhetoric, and logic). If suspicion of the trivial partakes of the Western tradition of privileging “mind” over “body,” it also has to do with a no less complex social history of suspicion of loiterers, as tricky customers who can be assumed to be up to no good, and of discourse as a medium of knowledge less reliable and trickier than “sound” disciplines like mathematics and science.

But the modern genre of loiterature began to emerge in the latter part of the eighteenth century. It has specific characteristics that can be opposed point by point to the features of disciplinarity I’ve mentioned. A narrative art of digression and episodicity, modeled after Sterne’s overwhelmingly influential *Tristram Shandy* and *A Sentimental Journey*, disrupts the sense of narrative as structural closure and mimes an experience of linear temporality. In lieu of the disciplined subject, the loiterly narrator has the persona of an engaging conversationalist, interesting by virtue of a seductive performance of personality, like the *parasitus* of classical times, or the *picaro* of early modern times. Such a narrator produces knowledge, finally, that has little to do with system or examination, dispensing random observations and striking insights seriatim, according to the haphazard logic of the “collection.” The loiterly subject is less interested in conceptual systems than in memory, as the site of re-collection where the random experience (the *Erfahrung*) of a life attuned to the dimension of time becomes unsystematically available. In addition to the founding texts of Sterne, let me randomly cite several others: *Jacques le fataliste* (for its identification of the discourse of fate with structural narrative closure, and for its counterpractice of interruption), early forms of flâneur realism such as Mercier’s *Tableau de Paris* or Restif’s *Les Nuits de Paris*, the *Rêveries d’un promeneur solitaire*, and finally X. de Maistre’s *Voyage autour de ma chambre*, which brings me back to my specific subject through its witty exploitation of the theme of travel without leaving home, of idleness as a mode of *Erfahrung*.

I would myself like to linger over some of these texts, but I will restrict myself instead to some observations about the destructuring of narrative through an art of deferral, the situation of the loiterly narrative subject as a seductive performer, and the practice
of collection/recollection as a counterdisciplinary epistemological
and narrative mode. I will do so by reading, respectively, a charac-
teristic work of flâneur realism written in the context of feuilleton
culture (Nerval's Les Nuits d'Octobre [October Nights]), a novel of
episodic construction, Colette's La Vagabonde [The Vagabond]), that is
one of the few examples of loiterature by a woman writer, and a
work in which the practice of gay history is figured as a form of
cruising, Neil Bartlett's Who Was That Man? As the figure of
cruising indicates, we will need to be sensitive to a subterranean
thematic of desire that links these three texts: the subject of
narrative knowledge is produced in Bartlett as a person of desire, as
is Colette's narratee through a seductive act of narration, while in
symptomatic fashion the dilatoriness of Nerval's belated narrator
enacts the destructuring of narrative through digression as an art
of deferral "founded" on lack. As an art of the trivial, loiterly
writing deploys the tricky resources of desire as that which is
capable of subverting simultaneously the claims of aesthetic monu-
mentality and the power of disciplinarity.

Strolling

In October Nights (1852) an originary lack (i.e. un manque) is
figured as a missed train (un train manqué), and the outcome of this
critical delay, after three days and two nights of dallying in Paris
and the neighboring Valois countryside, will be a missed otter
hunt. Between this failed departure (départ manqué) and the missed
ending, the narrative is structured (if that is the word) by accumu-
lated delay and repeated lack in a way that is foreshadowed, en
abyme, from the start: having missed his first train because of a
lackadaisical approach to scheduling, the narrator also misses the
second, having become involved while waiting in the pleasures of
flânerie with a friend encountered on the boulevard. The two are
thus annuités, as they say, "adjourned for the night" with time on
their hands, and their response is to fill this potentially endless,
Shandyan time of deferral with further flânerie. On the first night
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this takes the typically Parisian form of strolling the streets in search of a likely place for a late-night supper, interminably putting off the decision until they end up in a low-class dive in the Halles ("chez Paul Niquet"). Thus is launched a narrative in which events, observations, conversations, and subjective impressions follow one another in an aimless, nonteleological and nonhierarchized way—nothing is more important than anything else, nothing advances the narrative toward what is in any case its anticlimactic conclusion.

Engaged in a story that borders on pointlessness, the narrator has a problem to deal with: how to attract and maintain his audience's attention for an account that has no point except its own insignificance. His solution will be an art of temporization, a technique characteristic of paid-by-the-column feuilleton writing which Nerval had already demonstrated, con brio, in "Les Faux-Saulniers" (1850). Temporizing is the check-is-in-the-mail tactic: in lieu of what the audience expects and wants (in this case an ending-oriented story leading to the closure of, as Nerval puts it, either a wedding or a death), a substitute satisfaction is provided, but of such a patently inadequate kind that it generates a whole series of such substitutes. The audience becomes prey to the "just one more" or the "bowl of cherries" syndrome: pointless and deficiently pleasurable as any given narrative moment may be, it offers just enough "satisfaction" to keep the reader reading. There is always hope (which always proves vain) that the next moment will bring a more substantial satisfaction. This is a narrative practice known to us these days through much radio and TV programming; and it has the characteristic feature of producing a strict equivalence between the experience of open, linear temporality and that of desire, structured by lack, as Lacan has it, into an endless metonymic chain of substitute "satisfactions."

It is worth noting that the narrator has rather deliberately chosen to put himself in this situation. If one is invited to an otter hunt in Creil, one can take the Northern railroad direct (even though it describes a long curve that Nerval ascribes on other occasions to real estate speculation: modernity is efficient, but not direct enough
Strolling, Touring, Cruising

to abolish time altogether). It is quite willful, therefore, to choose, as this traveler does, to take the Strasbourg road to Meaux, with the idea of strolling through the Valois, traveling by coach to Dammar-tin, through the forest of Ermenonville on foot for three hours, following the course of the Nonette to Senlis, and from there by coach again to Creil (chapter 22). This is a way of traveling without leaving home—the narrator insists from the start on the proximity of the Valois to Paris—while nevertheless generating something (an Erfahrung) to narrate. But as a narrator, too, this willful loiterer has deliberately opted for the difficulties of temporization over the easier, and expected, method of telling a suspenseful story. In this, he says, he is emulating a prolix orator described censoriously by Cicero who cannot say that his client left town without describing him waking, rising, setting forth, taking the right side of the via Flaminia and crossing the bath-house square—and never reaching the port. He has also been inspired by an account of London nightlife by Dickens: “How fortunate the English are to be able to write and to read chapters of observation completely unalloyed by fictional invention. . . . Our neighbors’ sense of realism is content with truth in the absolute” (1). But Londoners, the narrator grumbles, are much freer than Parisians: they have a house key (“La clef de la rue” is the title of the Dickens piece) and so can wander their city at night without fear of having to affront a censorious concierge. Our narrator is simply taking for himself la clef de la rue, and—since after the first night his story shifts to the country—la clef des champs as well.

Expressing disapproval of the hated “portier” as a figure of social authority is not the only risk the narrator knows he is taking. Like Nodier in Le roi de Bohème et ses sept châteaux, he imagines the unfriendly review his trivial narrative is likely to draw from an idealist critic (the kind whose doctrine is that “truth lies in falsity” [21]). More alarmingly, he is arrested at Crespy by a gendarme who discovers that the man who culpably misses trains also absent-mindedly leaves his travel passport at the hotel in Meaux, and who is unconvinced by the story that one might travel from Paris via Meaux to an otter hunt in Creil. Why travel east to reach the north?
Such a loiterly traveler is clearly suspect, and in the nightmare that attends his night in prison, he is hauled before what can only be described as a disciplinary tribunal that reminds him of sitting for the baccalaureate en Sorbonne ("the president looked uncannily like M. Nisard; the two assessors resembled M. Cousin and M. Guizot, my old teachers"). They hurl epithets at him: "Realist! Fantaisiste! Essayist!" until finally he cracks:

"Confiteor! plangor! juro! . . . — I swear to renounce these works accursed of the Sorbonne and the Institute: from now on I shall write only history, philosophy, philology and statistics. . . . You seem dubious. . . . Very well, I'll write virtuous bucolic romances, I'll try to win poetry prizes and prizes for good morals, I'll write children's books and abolitionist essays, didactic poems . . . tragedies!" (25)

His crime is that of being simultaneously realistic and unserious; in another register, Nerval's passionate apologia in _Aurélia_ for the rights of madness against the strictures of psychiatric medicine is foreshadowed here.

For this narrator is no examinee and even less an examiner, and his conversion to disciplined knowledge and structured plots takes place — revealingly enough — only in a dream. A simple observer, an impressionist, he has views, like his friend, _de omnis rebus scibilis_, but his attention span is short and his interest is easily diverted. Like Dante and Virgil, the two friends descend into the night world of Paris: we catch glimpses of various cafés, goguettes, and dives and snatches of slangy, trivial conversation. Brief streetscapes open up ("adultery, crime and weakness jostle without recognizing one another through the deceptive shadows" [10]; "on the right are the leech-sellers; the other side is taken up by Raspail pharmacies and cider-stands" [11]; "what a lot of cauliflower in this street" [14]). The initiatory motif of the descent into the underworld informs us that the nature of true knowledge is at issue, but Nerval's mystic concerns are under wraps here in favor of the practice of flâneur realism. This is not incompatible with the fact that, as the external action shifts to the Valois, the focus of the narrative comes to fall predominantly on the contents of the narrator's mind (for in loiterly
texts, the question of the flâneur's identity is always, covertly or overtly, at issue, in view of his self-definition as a man given over, like Baudelaire's "homme des foules," to the exploration of alterity. Thus the nightmare of the third night is preceded on the second by a bad dream in which Fichtean gnomes hammer at the narrator's brain in an attempt to rearrange the deranged structure of his consciousness. But there is also a wonderful page of pure visual impressionism, as the narrator wakes after his disturbed night to sit by the Marne and await his morning coffee, in that absent mood we all know so well:

People are beginning to come across the bridge; it has eight spans by my count. The Marne is marneuse, of course; but at the moment it has a leaden sheen ruffled occasionally by currents from the mills, or, further away, the playful swoop of swallows.

Will it rain this evening? (20)

The major encounter of this section, however, symmetrical to the fellowship of the narrator with his friend in the first part of the text, is with a group of saltimbanks or strolling entertainers, two Savoyards passing respectively for an Italian tenor and a Spanish dancer, and an alleged "monstre" or freak, a "merino woman" who hails from Venice and whose woolly hair, the narrator speculates, is a genetic throwback to some kind of African ancestry. These folk stand, obviously, for the strangeness of the real in its most everyday manifestations (the flâneur's stock-in-trade), and doubtless also for the tricks of art, since their art—like the narrator's—consists of unstructured, episodic entertainment (first an aria, then a cachuca, then the freak), and appeals to an audience as idle as its performers are shiftless. As the narrator of October Nights has a flâneur for his friend, partner, and philosophical alter ego, so the flâneur's own artistic counterpart is the wandering street entertainer, whether saltimbank or conjurer. For the friend was already described in these terms:

He will stop for an hour at the door of the bird-merchant's store, attempting to understand the language of birds. . . . No group gathers around some work-site or bootblack-seller, no fisticuffs occur, no
dog-fight happens, without his distracted contemplation taking it in. The conjurer always borrows his handkerchief, which he sometimes has, or the five-franc coin, which he doesn't always have. (2)

The hint of complicity here is unmistakable: if the conjurer engages in sleight-of-hand, the flâneur-narrator is a trickster too, in his way: his art of narrative temporizing "deceives" desire as the escamoteur deceives the eye, and the art of programming the reader's or spectator's idle attention, from turn to turn or from moment to moment, is common to both. Not surprisingly, we will find Colette's narrator-protagonist, Renée Néré, among music-hall artistes, an artiste herself, waiting her turn to take the stage after the performing dogs, the chanteuse, and the acrobats.

Touring

While Nerval's narrative starts with a missed train, The Vagabond (1910) begins with Renée arriving early at the theater and finding herself "prête trop tôt," ready too soon. She has time on her hands as well, but for reasons and with historical implications diametrically opposed to those of Nerval's flâneur. The latter, in his contempt for schedules, shows himself a belated figure, behind the times; Renée is a New Woman, too early because she is struggling for emancipation from domesticity in a society that, as yet, scarcely has a place for her. Consequently, existence in time is, for her, experienced as a matter of deep insecurity, not only financial but also ontological: "Why are you there, all alone? and why not somewhere else?" she asks herself (4), and later comments anxiously, "How quickly everything changes, especially women" (88). Her problem is not that she is suspect as a loiterer but that she needs steady and honorable work; and if going on tour figures for her what strolling through the city and its near countryside represents in Nerval, the act of travel without leaving home, that phrase now has a negative ring, signifying the inability her anxiety betrays to escape the law of domesticity that imprisons women. For her life
in the theater involves difficult compromises that are figured implicitly by her métier as an Apache dancer (the woman brutalized by the male, and performing fluttering steps of attempted escape), and explicitly by the tour through the provinces she undertakes, circling back in due course to Paris: "tourner," for her, is "tourner sur place," "revolving on the spot like my companions and brethren" (67).

There she is, then, ready too early. The consequence is a split identity, but one less metaphysically described than the Fichtean problematic Nerval evokes. Her alternative is between an absurd and lonely existence in pure time ("Why are you there, all alone? And why not somewhere else?") and the personage she sees in the mirror and calls her "conseilere maquillee" [painted mentor] (3), that is, her entertainer's personality garishly made up for performance, a seductive self devoted to entertaining the crowd whose work is the condition for the freedom the lonely self finds at once so precious and so burdensome. It is Renée's need for diversion from this intimate dialogue that accounts for the aspect of the book that most resembles the genre of flâneur realism and situates it as loiterature, despite its novelistic plot: Renée is a steady-eyed, unjudgmental observer of the backstage existence of music-hall performers, their poverty, courage, and pride, their makeshift conditions of life, their colorful language and sometimes easy morality, but also their hard work and devotion to their art—their life of instability that prompts her comment: "How quickly everything changes . . ." Déclassée as she is by her employment, Renée shares the flâneur's traditional sympathy for the life of the underclass, along with his ability, as an educated member of the middle class, to represent its color and pathos for a similarly middle-class audience. In this too she is a creature of compromise.

The compromise of her existence becomes a crisis of choice, however, on the occasion of the love affair that introduces narrative interest and plot: will Renée's affair with Dufferein-Chautel, affectionately known as "le Grand Serin" or the Big Noodle, end—as Nerval would phrase it—in marriage? One of the few employment choices available to a "dame seule" is work in the theater, as Renée
explains: “What would you have me do? Sewing, or typing, or streetwalking? The music hall is the job [le métier] of those who never learnt one” (134)—of those, that is, who have been excluded from the privileges of discipline. Renée, in short, is exploiting for employment purposes the seductive art she learned as a wife (knowing how to use her tears of pain, for instance, to make herself look beautiful). But for that very reason, her theatrical art jeopardizes the freedom of which it is also a condition, exposing her not only to the sexual advances of men (which she knows how to handle) but, more dangerously, to the temptation to return to the security—as well as the pain—of a conforming position in the patriarchal order as a married woman. This temptation is represented by the marriageable Dufferein-Chautel (“he looks married already” [102]), who is drawn to her by her stage performance, with his “ridiculous name, the sort of name for a member of Parliament or an industrialist, or a director of a discount bank” (100), but also with his ready assumption of male authority. Renée knows that she will not necessarily be reduced, as in her previous marriage, to being a kind of go-between in her husband’s extramarital affairs; but she is also aware that marriage “turns so many wives into a sort of nanny for grown-ups” (137). Her little dog Fossette (the reference is to a fetching dimple) stands for the strength of the impulse in her to revert to the life of a “submissive bitch, rather shame-faced, rather cowed, very much petted, and ready to accept the leash, the collar, the place at her master’s feet, and everything” (120). Renée, then, has only a choice of compromises: freedom with insecurity, or security with the leash—and the opportunity to write. Once a quite successful novelist, Renée’s new loiterly, “too soon” existence is one in which, paradoxically, she has no time for writing, since earning a living means being subject to constant distraction and interruption:

It takes up too much time to write. And the trouble is, I am no Balzac! The fragile story I am constructing crumbles away when the tradesman rings, or the shoemaker sends in his bill, when the solicitor, or one’s counsel, telephones, or when the theatrical agent summons me
Consequently her eventual return to writing, coinciding with her return to Paris, her rejection of the Big Noodle, and her implied acceptance of the loiterly life that is defined by interruption, is—as Nancy Miller has pointed out—the key to the book. Her return is also a renaissance (as her name foreshadows), since the writing to which she returns is not the writing she left behind her in her bourgeois existence. It is the writing, as Miller eloquently proposes, of a “feminist” (and I would add “loiterly”) subjectivity, one that has renounced the illusions of the bourgeois self and knows itself “subject to change.” Miller rightly emphasizes that the letter of rejection for Dufferein-Chautel that Renée brings back to Paris with her is described as “unfinished” (214). But because it is unfinished, and corresponding as it does to the anticlimactic ending of the missed otter hunt in Nerval, this letter cannot signify a resolution of Renée’s identity problematic. It means only that, for now, she has chosen between her two compromises and opted for the one that associates independence and freedom with, on the one hand, insecurity and, on the other, the deployment of “feminine” attractiveness, the conditions of her “too soon” existence.

My proposal is that the writing she returns to incorporates a similar compromise and is epitomized in the novel itself: it accommodates the problematic split in Renée’s identity in the (mixed) genre of the “loiterly novel,” exactly that impure “alloy” Nerval sought to avoid, a compromise between pure observation in the digressive, interrupted flow of a narrative of temporality, and fictional invention, sentimental interest, and the seductions of plot. Such writing indicates that Renée’s renaissance derives from her discovery and acceptance of the implications of being “no Balzac.” Writing need not ignore interruption but can accommodate to it and incorporate it; it need not have the monumental character of the Comédie humaine but can be, in exactly Blanchot’s sense, a matter of désœuvrement, of that “crumbling” of the edifice that loiterature as counterdiscursive narrative seeks not to resist or to deny, but to
assume and deploy as a tactic of oppositionality—a tactic whose
success depends, however, on obtaining the pleasurable assent of
its audience.

Part of the compromise Renée invents involves plot, then, but
another part involves finding a place in her writing for triviality. Early in the piece, she is tongue-tied when she seeks to represent
herself to Dufferein-Chautel, hesitating between her “own personal
language,” which she describes as that of “a one-time blue-stocking,”
and “the slovenly, lively idiom, coarse and picturesque, which one
learns in the music-hall, sprinkled with expressions like: ‘You bet!’
‘Shut up!’ ‘I’m clearing out!’ ‘Not my line!’” [“Tu parles!” “Ta
gueule!” “J’les mets!” “Très peu pour moi!”] (77–78). This is exactly
the linguistic alloy of writerly distinction and colloquial vulgarity
that we discover in the writing of The Vagabond, but it is Renée’s
dancing, as an art of the body (“Nothing is real except making
rhythm of one’s thought and translating it into beautiful gestures”
[41]), that has taught her that it is possible to make art out of the
trivial. And as Renée becomes aware when she dances for a society
gathering (i.e. in exactly the circumstances she evoked when
complaining of the interruptions that constitute the life of an
artiste), dancing embodies a compromise between the freedom of a
woman’s body and an art intended to be seductive to the powerful
(and specifically to Renée’s own former set):

Is not the mere swaying of my back [un coup de reins], free from any
constraint, an insult to those bodies cramped by their long corsets,
and enfeebled by a fashion which insists that they should be thin?

But there is something more worth while than humiliating them; I
want, for one moment only, to charm them [les séduire]. It needs only
a little more effort: already their heads, under the weight of their
jewels and their hair, sway vaguely as they obediently follow my
movements. At any moment now the vindictive light in all those eyes
will go out, and the charmed creatures will all give in and smile at the
same time. (41–42)

By the time she is ready to negotiate her tournée with the
theatrical agent who stands as another figure of the social (here
economic) conditions of Renée's independence (and who is, of course, the personage mentioned in the earlier passage about interruptions), she has lost her linguistic inhibitions—"I have found my voice again and the art of using it, and the right vocabulary [i.e. a suitably salty one] for the occasion" (92)—and it is not accidental that what is at issue here is a contract. Renée's loiterly art will be subject to a contractual obligation—the aesthetic obligation to be "charming" to the bourgeoisie—in a way that is modeled by the financial haggling that governs the limited freedom of her "escape" to the provinces, on tour.

There is a name that might be given to the set of compromises Renée finally opts for, including the compromise formation that is her writing; it is métier. In order for a woman to be free of the domestic leash, she must be employed, and métier names the only kind of employment for which, as a middle-class woman, she is suited: not the discipline of the factory floor or the professional disciplines of knowledge, but "le métier de ceux qui n'en ont appris aucun," a job one can learn by doing it, under a sort of (pre- or extra-disciplinary) apprenticeship system. For métier also names the artistic know-how one can acquire with hard work and under the guidance of a strict mentor, like Renée's partner Brague, from one's actual, "hands-on" contact with the world of the theater: in rehearsal, from observation of the audience, and from watching one's fellow performers. But métier finally, in the music hall and perhaps the theater generally, is the art of crowd-pleasing, the tricks of the trade that bring the audience back every Saturday night for more. It designates the theatrical seductiveness Renée must deploy as well as the means of livelihood that ensure her relative independence. In that sense it confirms what Renée's tour also teaches her, that although one can travel without leaving home, it is the impossibility of ever quite leaving "home"—and everything that word implies, for a woman—that governs the degree of travel one can achieve. "I am going away," she writes to Max at the end; but she thinks: "I am escaping, but I am still not free of you, I know it. A vagabond, and free, I shall sometimes long for the shade of your walls" (215).
Ross Chambers

Cruising

How, then, to “lose oneself in the city”? And what has that to do with knowledge? Who Was That Man? has an interesting epigraph drawn from Benjamin: “Not to find one’s way in a city may well be uninteresting and banal. It requires ignorance, nothing more. But to lose oneself in a city . . .” I would draw out the implications of this epigraph as follows: if Renée Néré experiences her freedom as solitude and is consequently forced into a compromise with the society that limits that freedom, her problem grows out of ignorance—ignorance, that is, of any community to which she is connected—the community, say, of other independent women attempting to survive on their own terms. Knowledge of a community is unlikely, however, to be a disciplinary knowledge, if only because discipline begins by separating its subjects in space, like soldiers on the parade ground, so as to turn them into autonomous individuals. Because it seeks on the one hand to promote “self-reliance,” and on the other to instil conformity, discipline is anti-communitarian. And community is therefore likely to be the experience, and the source of identity, of those who are excluded from disciplinary subjecthood.

The model for such people is therefore, in Bartlett’s book, the sexual cruiser, seen as one who seeks identity, as knowledge of “self,” in a community formed through identification with others, through “losing one’s self” in a “city.” Identity here is not a matter of individuality but of connectedness, in which both self and other, being mutually defining, exist only as members of a community. “I’ve come to understand,” Bartlett writes, “that I am connected with other men’s lives, men living in London with me.” But he adds: “Or with other, dead Londoners. That’s the story” (xx). The story, in other words, is not only that personal identity—in this case, for gay men—is indistinguishable from belonging to a community but also that the community extends into the past. Historically, gay identity emerged in London simultaneously with the constitution of a community of gay men; that is why a Londoner living in 1986 is connected with men who lived in 1895, the date of Oscar Wilde’s
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trial. And the reason it is important to establish this historical connection, as the book does, is that in producing Wilde individually as a homosexual the trial functioned—in typically disciplinary fashion (i.e. as a kind of examination)—precisely to obscure his membership in a community, and hence to deny the existence of a specifically gay identity as a communitarian phenomenon.

London's present cruising grounds, then, were already cruising grounds a century ago, and the streets have a memory. "What if I rounded the corner of Villiers St at midnight," Bartlett writes, "and suddenly found myself walking by gas-light, and the man looking over his shoulder at me as he passed had the same moustache, but different clothes . . . would we recognize each other?" (xx). In this question of recognition lies the kinship of the historian and the cruiser: the power of recognizing the self in the other makes both historian and cruising man—or, of course, woman—into constructors (for the historian, reconstructors) of community. And recognition is crucial because the social conditions of cruising are such that it cannot be a systematic activity: there is no way of identifying "gay men" unless they identify themselves; they are not available, as gay men, for the kind of disciplinary examination by which "homosexuals" are identified. Cruising can only discover, through recognition, a covert community in a random way. For similar reasons, the historical cruiser is forced to be an unmethodical searcher, looking for "evidence" (and hoping to recognize it) wherever and however it might turn up.

In this unpredictability sexual and historical cruisers have much in common with the activity of "collecting"; but like collectors, cruisers of knowledge are also driven, obsessive figures, creatures of desire, always in search of one more "item." Because it is driven by desire, there is no end to their work and they are therefore never in a position to systematize finally or definitively what can appropriately be called their "findings," which remain just that: collections of "trouvailles." Between gay cruising literature like John Rechy's *Numbers* or Renaud Camus's *Tricks*, and loiterly history like Walter Benjamin's *Passagenwerk* (a collection of quotations) or Georges Perec's *Je me souviens* (a collection of memories that have the specific quality of being both trivial and nonpersonal, or
collective), there are consequently “recognizable” structural and epistemological similarities that imply a generic relationship. Bartlett’s book—the record of intense cruising not in Villiers St. but in the British Library—lies somewhere between the two groups. And what is a genre if not itself an assemblage or collection of texts, each “recognizable” in spite of dissimilarities as members of a community—an assemblage carried out, as Anne Freadman insists, as a function of some specific motivation and in a clearly contextualized, situated way?

There is a deliberate rejection in this genre of a certain narrative structure that is itself a structuring of history, and of its implications. Two narrative models are available to gay people, as Bartlett points out (23–24). One is the coming-out story, with its firm narrative structure of “before” and “after:” a beginning and an end mediated by a crucial event that has the status of an emergence of truth. A coming-out story can be either individual or collective, and Wilde’s coming out—more accurately his involuntary “outing”—functions as both. But the closed structure of such a narrative makes it exclusionary, and Bartlett’s study of the 1895 trial demonstrates that the outing of Wilde had as its unacknowledged purpose to silence gay voices that were beginning to be heard, to force back into invisibility and oblivion the community of gay men that had begun to emerge—of “gay men,” not just of men with homosexual desires, a distinction that hangs significantly on their communitarian invention of signs of recognition, such as Wilde’s green carnation or the moustache in Villiers St. But the cruising story, the obsessive collection of scraps of forgotten history, makes use of just such signs of recognition in order to undo the effect of exclusionary and scapegoating stories constructed by the powers that be. Thus Bartlett notices that men like Arthur Symonds and Edward Carpenter were already, long before him, engaging in the “inspired queenly assemblage of fragments” of gay history (227), and I, in turn, have just pointed out that such cruiser-historians form part of a larger counterdisciplinary epistemological community of (re-)collectors of the past that includes Pèrec and Benjamin.

The point, then, as Bartlett points out, is that “it never is in all the
papers” (125): the official story always needs supplementation by
the collector, looking for the forgotten but telling scraps. “What I
want are details, details are the only things of interest” (159). “I read
texts with the dogged energy that I usually reserve for cruising; I
became excited by the smallest hints; I scrutinized every gesture
for significance; sometimes I simply stood close and waited for a
response” (28). The outcome of working principles such as these is
a book whose pages often seem to reproduce the bulletin board in
the author’s room: “On my wall a handsome face is pasted up next
to a fragment from a novel, next to the latest report of an arrest or a
persecution” (96); quotations from a range of nineteenth-century
sources, personal observations about gay life in modern London,
and analytic commentary coexist on the page; a chapter on flowers
as recognition-signals includes the story of one Private Flower who
was arrested for “cottaging” in the 1830s. Bartlett puts together a
portrait gallery of men’s faces and a glossary of historical gay slang
omitted from the OED; he rejoices that at the Wilde trial “the
prosecution assembled one of the most extensive and glamorous
collections of details about our life” (99), but he also assembles
counterevidence of the energy and vividness of gay life in the years
between the trial of Boulton and Parks (alias Stella and Fanny) in
1870 and the Wilde trial, in the form of a year-by-year “calendar” of
quotations and cuttings that extends over twenty-five pages.

A scrapbook such as this, says Bartlett, is “the true form of our
history” (99). Because “our past is continually lost” (59), it is
necessary to make good the omissions; “because the clues change”
(63) and recognition is therefore always aleatory, no truth claim can
be made or conclusions safely drawn. The scrapbook “embodies in
its own omissions how we remember and forget our lives. We are
always between ignorance and exposure” (99); but in doing so it
nevertheless demonstrates that “the past is still with us” (82). Like
the cruiser hunting familiar streets that harbor memories of dead
Londoners, the scrapbook’s demonstration of the proximity of past
and present represents another sense in which the loiterer’s experi­
ence consists of traveling without leaving home. Such Erfahrung is
exhilarating—but its dependence on recognition also makes its
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epistemological status dubious, as Bartlett emphasizes. After all, as Oscar Wilde's "composing" of a new identity after 1895 demonstrates, gay men are given to "making it all up as we go along" (170-71); moreover, in a way foreshadowed by Wilde's story "The Portrait of Mr. W. H.," the whole enterprise of the "recollection" of gay culture and community raises the question whether it is perhaps all a fantasy, fueled only by desire. "My father always said, if you're not sure if it's the real thing, then it isn't" (189). And collecting, as an activity of knowledge, has exclusionary implications of its own: it takes place "within a specific economy" (186) of class and privilege and is dependent on one's having "discretionary income" and (something Bartlett does not specifically mention although it is everywhere implied) time and leisure. Who can otherwise afford to spend an idle bank holiday weekend ("I wasn't working, and it was the first good weather of the year") and then return to the library, as Bartlett describes himself doing (125-26)?

What matters here is not the incompleteness of the scrapbook method, or the dubious objectivity of an epistemological "hunt" motivated by desire, or the dependency of this activity on specific social conditions. What does matter is the dubiousness of claims to completeness and objectivity, and of narratives that mask their socially positioned status with implied or explicit truth claims. It is not making such claims, and in making its specific position of enunciation readable in historical, economic, and cultural terms by its careful exploration of the conditions of gay male life as Bartlett knows them in modern London, that this loiterly narrative makes its own epistemological point. In so doing, it makes the point for loiterature in general, whose doubtful reliability in matters of information and whose class ties to the bourgeoisie and its history scarcely need to be indicated. It is not that such features are invalidating, but that their visibility questions the assumptions by virtue of which they might be invalidated. Such assumptions are those of disciplinarity, whose epistemological reliance on examination presupposes the separability of (examining) subject and (examined) object. Claims to dispassionate objectivity rest on such assumptions of separability, assumptions which themselves derive
from a concept of individual identity as autonomous, unconnected, not dependent on the alterity of a community in which it is possible to “lose oneself/one’s self.”

But when Bartlett writes simply: “It’s quite true, I am other people” (205), he is echoing flâneur-knowledge that goes back at least to Nerval’s “I am the other” (a phrase he scribbled on a portrait of himself), or to Baudelaire’s definition of the flâneur (itself derived from Poe) as “l’homme des foules,” the man of the crowd. As visible as are the class differences in Nerval’s account of Parisian lowlife and Colette’s reportage on the backstage life of the music hall, there is also a sense of community in these texts—of the community of society’s misfits, underlings, and rejects—that draws a line from Nerval’s preoccupation with alter egos (the Parisian friend, the saltimbanks), through the comradeship celebrated in Colette’s novel, to Bartlett’s “I am connected with other men’s lives.” That statement is embroiled in gendered blindness, just as those of Nerval and Colette are embroiled in the limitations of class, but all of them can be rephrased as: I am connected with other lives.

Although I cannot demonstrate the point at length here (part of the argument is in Werner Hamacher’s distinction between ratio and lectio and elements of another part are in Room for Maneuver), I want to enter the claim in conclusion that “reading” is the name that can most appropriately be given to the mode of loiterly knowledge that enacts identity as connectedness and questions the assumptions underlying disciplinary “examination.” Where an examiner is focused on an examinee as an other to be dispassionately assessed in terms of a set of disciplinary “norms,” the reader is the site of a more intimate and less certain experience—that of a recognition, mediated by much less assured “signs” or “tokens,” in which it is through the other that the reading subject becomes known. In reading, the “object” must be recognized as a(nother) subject at the same time as subjectivity is itself experienced, not as in-dividual, but as split, because necessarily produced through that other’s mediation.

In Bartlett’s text, the narratee is consistently produced as a reader in this sense, because the narrative deploys the pronouns of
address, "we" and "you," as pronouns of community, inviting the addressee to confirm the narrator’s own recognitions by recognizing in turn, as tokens of gay identity, his various “findings.” Earlier loiterly narrators, such as those in Nerval and Colette, are readers of the discourse of the world much like the more familiar Baudelairean flâneur; they are always confronted with a fragmentary text, or a haphazard series of partial texts, that they cannot or do not seek to master, because, in ways both obscure and evident, they have a sense of their own inescapable investment and involvement in the “object,” the connectedness of “I” and “not-I.” “Always ready too soon,” Renée Néré responds by reading: “I’d better open the book lying on the make-up shelf . . . or the copy of Paris-Sport the dresser was marking just now with my eyebrow-pencil; otherwise I’ll find myself all alone” (3).

If the proximity of city and countryside in Nerval and Colette and that of present and past in Bartlett are the conditions for traveling without leaving home, then reading, as the experience of the proximity of I and not-I, is the paradigmatic form of that loiterly Erfahrung. Our theories of reading do not much stress that it is, in essence (but “essence” is not the word), an experience of the inevitably temporal constitution of a mediated, and so split, subjectivity—one that knows itself only in and through the other. But temporality is also what the loiterer knows best, and it is inescapably the dimension of experience implied by the contraction of space that conditions travel without leaving home. “With time,” reads the first sentence of October Nights, “the passion for long trips fades.” One might equally say that it is with the fading of the passion for long trips that knowledge, as the Erfahrung of time, begins.

Notes


2. This essay is partly programmatic and partly exploratory: it is not meant to be exhaustive or even thorough but to introduce a few ideas for discussion. I plan to expand in later work on a number of points that are
made briefly here.

3. See Narrative Exchanges.

4. See Ross Chambers, Story and Situation and Room for Maneuver.

5. I intend the term “counterdisciplinary” to locate the narrative genre that is my subject as counterdiscourse in Richard Terdiman’s sense of the word. See his Discourse/Counterdiscourse.

6. See Le récit excentrique.


8. Michel de Certeau, Arts de faire.

9. See in particular de Certeau’s discussion of tactics as opposed to strategy, 21 (trans. p. xix).

10. All translations are mine, and for the convenience of users of other editions I refer in parentheses to chapter numbers, not pages. On Les Nuits d’Octobre, see Ross Chambers, chapter 9 of Gérard de Nerval et la poétique du voyage, and Daniel Sangsue, 360–64.


12. Page numbers in parentheses refer to the Ballantine edition. I have sometimes silently emended the translation.

13. As my discussion of Bartlett’s book will confirm, I do not conceive community either as a matter of conformity (the totalitarian model) or as a contractual phenomenon (between “individuals” and “society”), but as a function of the recognition of self in alterity and so of a mediated play of differences. For theoretical work along these lines, see Miami Theory Collective, ed., Community at Loose Ends, work that is itself broadly inspired by Jean-Luc Nancy, La Communauté désœuvrée.


15. Werner Hamacher, “Lectio: de Man’s Imperative.” More broadly relevant is Michel de Certeau’s characterization of reading, in The Practice of Everyday Life, as a loiterly practice, like “walking through the city”: “to read is to wander through an imposed system” (169).

Bibliography

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