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# Beautiful Losers: The *Flâneur* in St. John's Literature

PAUL CHAFE

THOUGH MANY OF THE WORKS produced by Newfoundland novelists focus on either the frontier-like Newfoundland of the past, or the simple outport existence (or both), most of these authors are modern urbanites: both Wayne Johnston and Michael Winter divide their time between St. John's and Toronto, Michael Crummey and Joan Clark live in St. John's, and Patrick Kavanagh lives in Ottawa. Recent award-winning novels such as Lisa Moore's *Alligator* or Edward Riche's *The Nine Planets* have more in common with the (sub)urban fictions of Don DeLillo or Richard Ford than with any traditional literary depiction of Newfoundland. Paul Bowdring's *The Night Season* (1997) and Michael Winter's *This All Happened* (2000) are two of the first truly contemporary St. John's novels. Bowdring's scholarly protagonist and Winter's would-be novelist narrator are filled with angst, loss, and nostalgia for their own mistakes and missed opportunities, neither of which are connected to a particular Newfoundland sense of longing. Unlike Johnston's Fielding, it is procrastination, not Confederation, that determines the fates and failings of these characters. The narratives of Bowdring's Will Wiseman and Winter's Gabriel English offer the reader a glimpse into a new and different breed of fictional Newfoundlander — not the struggling settler or oppressed outporter but the urban idler. If *The Great Gatsby* is a portrait of the lives of New York's idle rich in the 1920s, then *This All Happened* and *The Night Season* depict the existences of a far more rare and interesting collection of individuals — the St. John's idle poor, or at the very least, the idle lower middle class.

Both novels revolve around liberally educated, artistic urbanites living in downtown St. John's. These characters are content to subsist on government grants, odd jobs, and the good will of their fellows. Their lives seem to revolve around hours of contemplation (as close to work as these characters come), short excursions

sions outside the city, avoiding those they may have offended or slept with (or both), and meeting nightly at a pub or cultural event — be it a “folk night,” public lecture, poetry reading, or gallery opening. Though Winter claims his book to be “a literary tableau of Newfoundland life” (vii), both novels and their characters are rooted in St. John’s — any forays into rural Newfoundland reveal these characters to be recreational campers at best, unprepared and unable to exist in the celebrated Newfoundland environment that still defines them. The Newfoundland narrators of these novels are of the city: they live in it, they observe it, they read and write it, and — most notably — they spend a large portion of their time strolling through it. It is in this respect that these new Newfoundlanders have much in common with one of the more interesting creations of modernity — the *flâneur*.

The *flâneur* has its origins in the works of Walter Benjamin, and in particular in his *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism* and *The Arcades Project*. According to Benjamin, the street becomes a dwelling for the *flâneur*: “he is as much at home among the façades of houses as a citizen is in his four walls” (*Baudelaire* 37). The *flâneur* is a man of some means, most likely bourgeois, for he can afford to spend his days walking in the city, avoiding the life of labour. Though he walks the same streets as the homeless “rag-pickers” that inhabit Benjamin’s city, he is not one of them, for he can easily enter any café, shop, or arcade district. Yet like the rag-picker, he is a scavenger, a parasite of the city. Though his walk through the city may lack the focus of the homeless man hunting and begging for food, he is dependent on what he finds during his stroll to survive. During his ambling, the *flâneur* will make the observations or formulate the ideas that will maintain his leisurely existence: “Basic to *flânerie*, among other things, is the idea that the fruits of idleness are more precious than the fruits of labour. The *flâneur*, as is well known, makes ‘studies’” (*Arcades* 453). Just as the dropped coin or discarded piece of food will sustain the street urchin, a “word dropped by chance” in a crowded street brings illumination and profit, for such a word could

furnish the painter with the expression he was dreaming of; a noise, insignificant to every other ear, will strike that of the musician and give him the cue for a harmonic combination; even for the thinker, the philosopher lost in his reverie, this external agitation is profitable: it stirs up his ideas as the storm stirs the waves of the sea (453).

In the end, the *flâneur* is a writer, a narrator of the city: “The social base of *flânerie* is journalism. As *flâneur*, the literary man ventures into the market place to sell himself” (446).

The *flâneur* is most engaged in his work when he is idling, strolling the streets. Through his observations he records and re-creates the city and sells it back to its citizens in the form of a novel, poem, painting, or song. Benjamin believes the idleness of the *flâneur* is a “demonstration against the division of labour” (427) — the *flâneur* blurs the line between work and play. Whereas the labourer’s life is easily

divided into moments of work and rest, the *flâneur* is at work when he is not working. The writer not at his desk is still working for at any moment inspiration may strike. A writer not writing yet somehow still a writer, the *flâneur* evades classification — as Deborah H. Parsons puts it, “he literally walks away from Benjamin’s definitions into the labyrinth, myth, and fragments of the city” (Parsons 4). Both Will Wiseman and Gabriel English typify the elusiveness and contradiction at the shifting centre of the *flâneur*’s character. Will is an English professor who is not teaching, but neither is he resigned from the profession nor on sabbatical — rather, he has decided to “for a while at least, do absolutely nothing” (Bowdring 117). Gabe is a novelist who is constantly deferring the writing of his novel, yet he is still a writer in as much as his daily observation of his friends and surroundings constitutes writing. During these long moments of postponement, these St. John’s *flâneurs* take to the streets, the pubs, and art galleries to observe, experience, and record their versions of the city.

The *flâneur* preserves the city, literally pressing between the pages of a book particular moments within the changing life of a metropolis. In *The Arcades Project*, Benjamin writes of the “double ground” walked by the *flâneur*: “The street conducts the *flâneur* into a vanished time. For him, every street is precipitous. It leads downward ... into a past that can be all the more spellbinding because it is not his own, not private” (417). For the *flâneur*, who has lived his life in the city, each observation recalls “the time of a childhood... In the asphalt over which he passes, his steps awaken a surprising resonance” (417). In this fashion, the *flâneur* provides a much needed contrast to the getting and spending existence of his fellow urbanites, providing a pause for himself and others (through his writing) to experience and remember all the elements that contribute to the city’s identity. In this sense, Johnston’s Fielding is the archetypal *flâneur* with a purpose.

#### WHERE ANGELS FEAR TO TREAD: FIELDING AS *FLÂNEUR*

In Sheilagh Fielding, the caustic journalist who shares narrator duties with Joseph Smallwood in *The Colony of Unrequited Dreams*, Wayne Johnston has combined two Benjaminian concepts: the *flâneur* and the angel of history. Like the *flâneur*, Fielding walks over “double ground” as she strolls through St. John’s, simultaneously bearing witness to what is there and remembering how it used to be. Like the angel, her back is turned to the future even as she is pushed toward it. In a fashion, Fielding walks backwards through St. John’s, the rag-picker tendencies of the *flâneur* compelling her to collect the “pile of debris” that is the history of a St. John’s now merely a trace on the current landscape (*Illuminations* 258). Both angel and *flâneur* are collectors of refuse, a trait that serves Fielding well in the compilation of her *History*, for as it is noted in the epigraph from Prowse in Johnston’s novel: “The history of the Colony ... lies buried under great rubbish heaps” (Johnston vii).

In her journal that is both a love letter to Smallwood and a chastisement for his headlong rush into a future that altered so much of her home, Fielding describes her double-grounded walk through present and past: "I walk as far as I ever did, though it takes me longer. The past is a place I visit on Sunday afternoons. Things I cannot remember when I have been indoors a week come flooding back" (1). Fielding collects memories like rags and sews them together to create a St. John's in memory that is as real as the one through which she walks.

At first she qualifies her dream-walk as a diversion, something that amuses her. She says, "I like to remember what used to be where something else now stands, or what used to be where there is nothing now. The pastime of the old, and I am not yet fifty" (4). By the end of the passage that begins *The Colony of Unrequited Dreams*, Fielding realizes the importance of her meanderings, for they recall a St. John's that is rapidly fading. Upon describing the vanished fish flakes, potholes, and wooden schooners that once defined her city, Fielding writes: "It was like that, Smallwood. Not three hundred years ago but twenty. One generation" (7). One senses in Fielding's reverie an urgent desire to sustain a moment despite the passage of time, a task she admits is unattainable: "It is impossible to fix exactly in time when something happened, and sometimes impossible to remember how life was before it did. This was our city when we were still in school. This is what it looked and smelled and sounded like" (8). Fielding also realizes that the position from which she viewed the city as a child, a position that still informs her adult understanding of St. John's, was a position of privilege. As a young girl, Fielding feared the people who actually lived in the city: "I was afraid of the crossing sweepers, boys wielding birch brooms who hung around intersections waiting for people to cross the streets" (4). The well-born daughter of a successful doctor, Fielding could enjoy the city from a distance even as she moved through it, marvelling at the "tedium of wonder" that is her St. John's without realizing that hundreds of others were desperately dependant on the continuing function of this port city: "The harbour. I loved the harbour as only a child to whom it was nothing more than a place to walk could love it" (7,6).

In accordance with Parson's belief in "infinite versions" of a city, Johnston immediately follows Fielding's *flânerie* with Smallwood's memories of his father, another wanderer whose drunken musings reveal a very different St. John's. As the young Fielding is walking past the harbour, Charlie Smallwood is walking through it: "He found a job that at least allowed him the illusion of self-sufficiency, that of lumber surveyor, his daily task being to walk about the decks of ships docked in the harbour and tote up the amount of wood on board" (9). Charlie does not abandon his "toting pole" when not working, "using it as an oversized walking stick [that] because of his mane of hair and bushy beard ... gave him the look of some staff-wielding prophet" (9). Charlie and his family wander from house to house in the St. John's area, settling finally on the Brow: "the least desirable, most scorned of all the city's neighbourhoods" (14). Each day, Charlie must walk from his home

amongst the “savages, the dregs, the scruff of society” and into the realm of successful merchants and his social betters. If the task of the *flâneur* is to collect inspiration for later publication, then Charlie collects enough information and cheap rum (“which he bought from the foreign sailors on the dock”) on these walks to fuel many nights of “flamboyantly eloquent” condemnations of St. John’s (9). From the deck that overlooks St. John’s, Charlie has a panoramic view of every street and neighbourhood — many of which he has been forced to leave as a consequence of a poverty that increases with the birth of each child. From his perch Charlie condemns the fortunes of his father and brother, who work as merchants in the city, the upper class who occupy the neighbourhoods inaccessible to him, and the itinerant English educators who judge both him and his son to be the riff-raff descendants of those “who couldn’t even make the grade in Ireland” (38). Clinging to a lower rung of the social ladder than Fielding, Charlie cannot afford these idle moments of reflection and angst, and they eventually lead to his ruin. They also result in the estrangement between him and his eldest son, Joe, who rejects his father’s *flânerie* for a more purposeful (though no less wandering) existence.

Maturity, her continued proximity to the proactive Smallwood, and her own bouts with alcoholism lead Fielding to become a greater *flâneur* — a *flâneur* with a purpose. The adult Fielding is a combination of her younger self, still a romantic capable of wonder, and the embittered Charlie Smallwood, at once a defender and an assailant of her homeland. Fielding becomes a *flâneur* who benefits from her fortunate birth but is not limited by its view. A true Benjaminian *flâneur*, Fielding takes as her profession the “social base of *flânerie*” and becomes a journalist. Literally venturing into the marketplace to sell herself, Fielding follows Smallwood through socialist circles in New York, into a St. John’s mob intent on removing Sir Richard Squires from office, and across Europe to record Smallwood’s activities and make them part of a greater, personalized history.

During the riot outside the Colonial Building, Smallwood first sees Fielding in all her *flâneur*-ish glory: “Fielding was leaning on the Bannerman Park side of the fence, watching the riot through the iron bars, notebook in hand, frantically scribbling. It was like some tableau of her life: Fielding the critic, aloofly watching a riot from the safe side of the fence” (315). Of course, Fielding is not content to stay outside the action for long and is soon hoisting herself over the fence and moving through the masses, certain there is a reportable story in this mayhem. Yet, Fielding does not become one with this mass — “the man of the crowd is no *flâneur*” and can “relegate [the crowd] to oblivion with a single glance of contempt” (*Baudelaire* 128). As Fielding straddles the fence between observation and interaction, “she paused to look over the crowd, shook her head” then “waded into the crowd,” moving through the “more tractable part of the mob” by prodding at them with her cane (Johnston 316). According to Benjamin, the *flâneur* demands “elbow room” while among the masses, in fact is “someone abandoned in the crowd” (*Baudelaire* 54, 55). The *flâneur* is amongst the crowd, but not part of it, for his is a double exist-

tence while in the street and among the crowd. The *flâneur* is both participant and recorder, a roving reporter who maintains critical distance even as he threatens to melt into the masses. Gilloch believes “the disappearance of the *flâneur* into the crowd, the instant in which they become ‘one flesh’, is the moment of extinction of the *flâneur*” (153). The *flâneur* avoids this merger by refusing to be caught in any moment, preferring to place each moment within a history. Fielding walks a Benjaminian “double ground” as she moves through St. John’s, experiencing each moment as it happens, but also contextualizing these moments in a greater narrative. Her *Condensed History* and her “Field Day” column enable Fielding to do this by appreciating the present moment as an instant in the future-past. In this fashion, Fielding performs what Ross Chambers considers the most important attribute of the *flâneur* — the act of “being belated.”

In *Loiterature*, Chambers qualifies the *flâneur* as a “belated figure”: that is, a character who lives within a “culture of impatience” yet carves a space for reflection (216). The *flâneur* becomes both subversive and subservient, taking a moment to critique the metropolitan life on which he is dependant for his own identity: “Betaking himself to the bourgeois marketplace with eyes firmly set on an aristocratic model of leisure, the *flâneur*, then, was a figure of divided attention and belatedness. As such, he was a likely site for a certain digressiveness to occur, by which he became dissociated from the culture of speed that his observations of modern life were nevertheless subserving.” Chambers believes that by filling this site of digressiveness, the *flâneur* becomes a suspect figure who is “loitering with intent, in this case critical intent,” and is marginalized along with other characters the bourgeoisie feared and despised like the beggar or the rag-picker (216).

St. John’s at the time of Johnston’s narrative is a time of flux, a “culture of impatience,” as Chambers puts it, and Fielding takes many moments within these years of rapid change “to digress a bit, that is, to become slightly dissociated from the onward rush of progress, in order to discover both the culture’s readability and one’s own readerly engagement with it as a text” (217). Fielding’s reading and writing of her city and island mark a “discrepancy between experience and memory” (218) in which she is the “belated observer” not just recording the world in which she lives but allegorizing it — placing the events and players within the context of the island’s history. This approach sometimes results in Fielding’s nostalgic, melancholic musings on the island that was and could have been. This allegorizing is also the source of Fielding’s most bitter sarcasm, reducing Smallwood and his big ideas to just another in the long line of Newfoundland politicians making the same mistakes. Both Fielding’s wistful and derogatory digressions are anathema to Smallwood and his spirit of progress. Her treatment of powerful politicians as mere bit players in a long history of failure and missed opportunities earns Fielding the life of the marginalized poor that Chambers believes is the eventual space (at least in the minds of the bourgeoisie) of the *flâneur*.



Though Sir Richard Squires reads Fielding's "Field Day" column every morning, "searching, never in vain, for some mention of himself" and though Smallwood inquires earnestly (despite his attempt at smugness) whether Fielding's *History* will include any mention of him, Fielding's life as a woman of letters is a largely impoverished one, during which she is spurned by the more powerful inhabitants of her city (Johnston 280). In her usual ironic manner, Fielding admits to Smallwood that her decision to be a writer was a great disappointment to her father and her family: "I made up for catching TB when I told my relatives I was going to be a writer. They were overjoyed, for as you know, no family that can't count among its progeny at least one unpublished writer is taken seriously in St. John's ... you can imagine how thrilled my father was" (231). Divorcing her life of privilege, Fielding lives in estrangement from her father and occupies various derelict buildings, among them the shack of a railway sectionman and what she calls "a three-cent house, a marvellous establishment on Cochrane Street, which I share with an as yet un-unionized nest of prostitutes" (253). Even before she begins her life as a poison-pen columnist, Fielding feels the isolation that the observation of her fellow Newfoundlanders will foster, ironically quipping to Smallwood that she is "on the waiting-lists of various hermit professions: lighthouse-keeper, weather-observer, telegraph operator" (254). Like the *flâneur*, Fielding is among the crowd but not of it — her wry observation of citizens and politicians is the idleness Benjamin claims to be the *flâneur's* "demonstration against the division of labour" — and this can make her an object of scorn. More importantly, her treatment of self-important politicians as passing examples of a historical ineptness in Newfoundland politics forces her to a position outside the Newfoundland being created by Smallwood and others — an angel of history forced into a future that she does not want.

In his discussion of the character of the *flâneur*, Chambers uses a Freudian term used by theorist Homi K. Bhabha in his identification of the postcolonial subject. Rapid changes in the city's political or geographical landscape turn the *flâneur* into a very specialized reader, according to Chambers. Fielding's walk through St. John's remembering "what used to be where else now stands" is a revisiting and a revisionist experience: "one might say that the 'revisiting' experience makes a once familiar (*heimlich*) urban text into something that has become *unheimlich*, or uncanny" (Chambers 217). The city in memory haunts the current city, forever unattainable but never completely dismissible. Like Bhabha's unhomely subject who is continually rejecting, revisiting, and revising his (post)colonial identity, the *flâneur* occupies a position "split between two cities, each making claims on the attention but to neither of which one can fully 'belong'" (217). The *flâneur's* double-grounded experience of the city means he will never be entirely at home. Chambers claims that *flâneurs* like Fielding are "marooned in a kind of limbo and inevitably belated, therefore, as fast-forwarding history passes them by" (236). A bizarre breed of "inner exiles," Fielding and her type must live as "critical readers of the culture of impatience as it accelerates away from them, leaving them in its



dust" (236). Even as they walk through the streets where they feel the most comfortable, the *flâneurs* are being *unhomed*, forced at every intersection to note the divergence between their ideal city of memory and the city as it is being formed by others.

Chambers believes the *flâneur* to be one of "history's leftovers," a misfit in modern society in that his desire is not focused on the future "like the majority of his contemporaries in the culture of impatience" but on the past (242). This continuous reflection and look backward is what is most meaningful and maddening about the *flâneur*. His movement does not follow the "forward-turned, goal-oriented, progressive history" of his fellow city-dwellers, be they bourgeois or proletarian. The *flâneur's* life consists of "dilatatory, sideward movements" that may produce important moments of reflection, but that could also be perceived as, at best, moments of deferral, at worst, wasted moments of doing nothing (242). As Gilloch notes, the *flâneur* could be "heroic in his arrogant retention of an aloof independence and a disdainful individuality," yet this indolence may be a "thin veneer, a flimsy façade" (Gilloch 155). In truth, the *flâneur's* deferral and dawdling may not be in the service of reflection and preservation but simply an attempt to transform "laziness into an occupation" (156). It is quite possible that the *flâneur* delays because he has nothing to offer.

In Johnston's hands, the *flâneur* is the perfect twentieth-century Newfoundland hero. Fielding is a culture saviour, taking moments within the culture of industry and impatience to remember and preserve what is disappearing. She is Smallwood's foil and conscience, a counterweight to his industrialization. It is worth noting that Fielding's final words recall the July night in 1948 when Newfoundland voted to join Canada. Fielding sits atop her railway sectionman's shack in a rocking chair as a train hurtles past her, the grinning conductor's triumphant cheer of "We won" overwhelmed by the noise of the train. Though she has removed herself from the city, Fielding still demonstrates one of the failing characteristics of the *flâneur* discussed in *The Arcades Project*. As a streetwalker, the *flâneur* is continually "overtaken" by more advanced modes of transportation, be it a carriage or an automobile. The stationary Fielding contemplating what has been lost as the conductor of a modern machine rushes past her, celebrating what has been won, is a symbolic rendering of the fate of the *flâneur*, to be overtaken, left behind in her moment of nostalgic contemplation. The *flâneur's* only ammunition against the progress that overtakes and overwhelms him is his ability to mock it, to return to his "haughty bourgeois" nature and dismiss the industrious nature of his workaday fellows:

"Although the city forms the sacred ground of the *flânerie* ... the urban complex gave birth to precisely those forces that were soon to destroy the *flâneur*: the crowd and forms of mass production, standardization and commodification. The *flâneur* sought not so much to resist these tendencies as to deceive them, and he failed splendidly. He is only a mock-hero" (Gilloch 157).

Fielding fits this definition of a mock-hero in that she is failing splendidly, fighting a losing battle but delivering the sort of barbed insults that will forever scar those who defeated her. She is, quite simply, a hero who mocks, a hero whose sole weapon is well placed derisiveness.

She is somewhat elevated from the status of mock-hero by Johnston's romanticism. Fielding's *flânerie*, her "promenade without purpose," her seemingly aimless strolls through the city are redeemed by their connection and contrast to Smallwood's more industrious treks. Her angelic turn backward is heroic, for she sacrifices her life of privilege to save the history and identity of her people. Her life as mock-hero and mock-historian is not a lucrative one, and it transforms her into a figure of disdain and derision in powerful circles. Her life is all the more heroic for this tragedy: she is the disowned, downtrodden defender of the side that lost. The *flâneurs* of *The Night Season* and *This All Happened* cannot be so easily redeemed.

#### IDLE IDOL: THE *FLÂNEUR* AS MOCK-HERO

Bowdring's Will Wiseman is certainly a mock-heroic *flâneur*. His very surname is an allusion to a superhero, a hero whose special power is his wit and wisdom. His name also has the alliterative nature of other superhero alter-egos: Clark Kent, Peter Parker, Bruce Banner. As a mock-superhero, the wisdom implied in his name is double-edged. Will has garnered a considerable amount of wisdom, yet he usually earns it through unwise decisions. Being a *flâneur*, the will implied in the first name is also ironic. Though Wiseman has read his share of philosophy, his name is not indicative of a Nietzschean "will to power" or a will to anything in particular. Will is content to do absolutely nothing but wander about the city, roving from shop window to library, grocery store to shopping mall, all the while walking the double ground of the physical present and his personal past. Wiseman's superhero status is similar to that of floundering restaurateur Dave Purcell's self-appointed alter-ego in *Rare Birds*: "Fuck-Up Man" (Riche 3). Both men seem to have the unenviable power to make wrong decision after wrong decision and to have arrived at the time of the narrative at the very pinnacle of their "fuck up" powers, in Wiseman's case being divorced, alone, unemployed, listless, and spending his mid-life searching for purpose in the reflection of a downtown shop window.

Wiseman is suffering a peculiar mid-life crisis. He no longer enjoys his work, he would rather avoid his friends than seek consolation in them, and he prefers to spend his time remembering the defining moments of the first half of his life. Though he does not want to be an active member of St. John's society, Wiseman cannot leave the city. In truth he is driven to walk through it night after night, strolling a double ground where many town houses and pubs remind him of past mistakes. He seems content to idle, but idle around those gnawing unfinished aspects of his life that he stubbornly refuses to complete.

According to Gilloch, the *flâneur*'s refusal to apply himself and become not only a functioning but leading member of society is the source of his heroic status: "The *flâneur* ambles, saunters and strolls, but must not hurry. He is fundamentally out of step with the rhythms of modern life. Herein lies his heroism.... Sloth is heroic" (155). Such an idling existence can be maddening for those outside it, as is the case for Wiseman's mother-in-law, who hears of his intent to do nothing during a Christmas gathering: "Dorcas drew herself up like a pouter pigeon, expelled several indignant puffing sounds, and then a really righteous bone-in-her-throat cough.... 'Nothing' was a concept she had trouble swallowing, being of a singularly unphilosophical temperament.... 'How can *one* do *nothing*?' Dorcas demanded, spitting words like irritating bits of grit from her mouth" (Bowdring 117, 118, 119). It seems the destiny of the *flâneur* to be misunderstood, even despised or suspected in his own time.

Wiseman has the education and the wit to become a fitting heir to Fielding, yet his inactivity and failure exceeds hers and is harder to redeem. At times, the narrative of *The Night Season* appears as a veiled excuse to connect epigraphs, each chapter beginning with at least one, sometimes three quotes from an array of artists, novelists, philosophers, and playwrights. The summary of the novel on its inside flap contends that the epigraphy is "a force in itself, suggestive of Will's obsessive reading, one of the burdens of his life." While this is largely true, Will seems to be amusing himself with these quotations, not trying to "reconcile literature and life." In a chapter entitled "True Grits," Will temporarily reoccupies the house he once shared with his ex-wife while she is out of town for Christmas. Will is forced to buy bacon, bread "*real* tea and *real* coffee" to take the place of the "oat bran, cracked wheat, hominy grits, buckwheat mix" and health foods that occupy Kate's "tire-somely wholesome storehouse" of a pantry (Bowdring 85). "True grit" is an ongoing pun in this three-page chapter, seemingly written for the express purpose of punning. Wiseman spends his morning observing a homeless cat he has called Sculpin, who is "as lean and tough as an old leather bag" and "probably downright unkillable" (88). "That kind of grits," Will muses, "you can't buy at the health food store" (88). Wiseman crowns this chapter not with a quote from "The Duke" but with two lines from a poem by John Wain.

Wiseman is the audience for his wit and wordplay. At first he begs the reader's indulgence as he recalls the time during his high-school years when he first experimented with calling his father by his first name, Des: "after a few attempts, the bald and unfamiliar diminutive had (if you'll forgive me) desiccated on my tongue" (1). He foregoes his audience's forgiveness a few pages later when he stretches his linguistic talents even further to make a less obvious pun. Sitting on his mother's couch on Christmas Day as Bing Crosby emanates from the record player, Will inquires if the singer is dead: "Bing himself replied unequivocally, or unequi-vocally, with a sprightly rendition of 'It's Beginning to Look a Lot Like Christmas'" (10). These turns of phrase are strung throughout the novel: Will refers

to his job at the local college as a “manure-track position,” and terms a fellow bibliophile “a stowaway ... on the Queen E II, the mother ship of the university line,” not the cruise ship but the library at Memorial University (117, 225). Wiseman’s compulsion to crack wise and turn phrases is related to the insecurities of the *flâneur*.

For Wiseman, the flaunting of his clever tongue and extensive literary knowledge is justification for his idle existence. Though an academic who is no longer teaching, Wiseman still identifies himself through the literature he has read. Any reflection on his life with ex-wife Kate leads to a literary allusion. His hope that the “too too sullied flesh” of him and his wife could “resolve itself anew” (itself a misquoting of Hamlet) is followed by Mercutio’s “O flesh, flesh, how thou art fishified” (Bowdring 28). Remembering his wife’s increasing coldness with each argument, Wiseman quotes Auden: “About suffering they were never wrong, the Old Masters” (136). It seems any encounter with a woman, be it actual or recalled, sends Wiseman to the inexhaustible annals in his head, emerging with the proper quote. Admiring the black hair of an estranged female friend, Wiseman turns to Rossetti: “Oh where are you going with your love-locks flowing” (192). Flirting with a woman in a George Street bar who is reading *The Garden of Eden*, Wiseman cannot resist an allusion to Hemingway when they realize they have seen each other before at the university: “That’s the place ... A clean well-lighted place” (224).

Though Wiseman has foregone his life of labour, it is obvious he still derives his identity from it. Moreover, his eagerness to display his acquired skill could allude to the shame he feels about “doing nothing,” a shame that forces him to validate himself through an endless stream of literary references. When Kerry, the young woman from the bar, follows him home, he spends the night listening to her read poetry from his massive personal library. Though this *flâneur* avoids work, he cannot seem to outpace the identity he has derived from it.

For Will Wiseman, the act of walking is a deferral of labour. Wiseman’s decision to do nothing “for a while at least” indicates that this is a (non-)space he intends to occupy temporarily. Unsatisfied by his job, divorced, detached from his daughter, Wiseman decides to put life on hold, to reflect on it before moving forward. Ironically, this pause can come only through movement, his aimless walking over the double ground of his city. He decides to not teach, to not be a teacher, yet he does not actively seek another activity or title by which others can identify him. He is not so much being a *flâneur* as deferring or delaying being anything else. His walk, and indeed the very narrative of *The Night Season*, is a delay, a deferral in Wiseman’s life. As the *flâneur* is outside the crowd at the very moment he is among it, Wiseman is not in the St. John’s of those around him who are attached to the city through their jobs and families. He walks through his own St. John’s, a dreamscape city of memory. Despite the grim observations and wry sarcasm, Wiseman’s is an earnest mid-life pilgrimage toward discovering a new self. This *flâneur* may seem to “prom-

nade without purpose,” but his many meanderings, diversions and deferrals do eventually lead to some conclusion.

Wiseman certainly fulfills the identifying characteristic of the *flâneur*: he is a walker. He wears sneakers year round, much to the chagrin of his mother when he visits her on Christmas Day. “Why are you still wearing this get-up in the middle of winter,” she asks (5). He remains downtown, for he is familiar with the area and can stroll through it, taking time to observe and preserve his surroundings. Though St. John’s is a port city, he is referring to the crowd of downtown shoppers and not the ocean when he frets about being sucked into “the all-consuming sea” (19). While he claims to desire a “burrow to crawl into” to avoid these shoppers until he can “emerge with the groundhogs on Candlemas,” he is among these people during this frenzied time (19). Though he grumbles about “Muzak machines in the overcrowded stores” and reminds the reader of “the rising Christmas suicide rate,” he cannot help but take to the streets, joining the ranks of “gawking shoppers” staring at “[l]ive turkeys named after city councillors ... on display in the downtown raffleshop window” (19). Wiseman has much in common with Benjamin’s favourite *flâneur*, Baudelaire, who “loved solitude, but he wanted it in a crowd” (*Baudelaire* 50). Alone in his townhouse, feeling through the walls the vibrations of the rock band rehearsing downstairs, Wiseman feels increasingly haunted by the “signature songs of my lost youth” which keep him awake (Bowdring 22). With nothing but his “hopeless nostalgia” to keep him company, he admits he cannot bear “the thought of spending Christmas in this house” and takes to the streets (22, 23). The next chapter begins with Will on Water Street, “clearing my head in front of the display window of Noseworthy’s, a confectionary cum deli cum secondhand furniture store” (25).

It becomes apparent that Will’s *flânerie* is an attempt to maintain and relive a connection with his ex-wife: “Walking was the only exercise she engaged in. Slow-walking, in a daydream. You could cover more ground out strolling with your three-year-old. Kate liked to look at things, indoors or out — the inflorescence of plants, frost on a windowpane. The texture of a stone could hold her attention for hours” (Bowdring 46-7). Post-marriage, Will can now be found “botanizing on the asphalt,” examining a window display, conjecturing as to its meaning, creating the life of the man who designed it. His reverie comes to an end with a confession: “But the bare truth was, I had never spoken to, or even seen, Mr. Noseworthy. I had never been inside his shop, and neither had anyone I knew. He was even more retiring than his merchandise. Perhaps there was no Noseworthy at all” (28). The city truly functions as a double ground for Wiseman. He dreams rather than experiences many places. Standing outside Noseworthy’s window, he wonders what would happen if “Kate and I could only come here for a Pepsi and a hot dog,” perhaps “our own burdensome history might be lifted from our shoulders” (28). A true *flâneur*, Wiseman impregnates his city with narratives, cramming meaning and experience

into places he has never entered. For Will, the city is a place of reflection rather than interaction.

Wiseman's movement through the city is a movement through his own memory, subconscious, and identity. Turning from the shop window, he is momentarily startled by a bus pulling up to the stop where he is inadvertently standing. Though he had not intended to take a bus ride, he steps on anyway, content to be lead through his city of memories. The bus takes him past his former home and into another memory: "I felt a hollow nostalgic ache as we passed the old house, gentrified now almost beyond recognition, where Kate and I had once lived, where we had first made love, in a bed sitting room with a view of the Waterford River" (29). The memory so overwhelms him that he moves to the rear exit while calling his ex-wife's name. The harshness of the "real" city strikes him as he exits: "I looked up and down the street, but there was no sign of anyone ... I began to walk back down the hill, but I didn't meet a soul until I reached Water Street" (30). Wiseman often permits himself to be led through the city, each moment of drift bringing him closer to an understanding of his relationship with Kate. Encountering Kate's brother Bill as he is exiting Lar's Fruit Market, he submits to his former brother-in-law's greater purpose: "he put his arm in mine and led me back into the shop" (53). Learning from Bill that Kate has left the city for Christmas, he is able to give momentary purpose to his strolling and eventually make his way to the house they used to share.

Chambers believes that memory gives rise to a feeling of "historical alienation" in the *flâneur* (219). Here is the source of the double-ground imagined and navigated by the *flâneur*. Here also is Wiseman's greatest affiliation with Fielding as a *flâneur*, an "historical alienation" that necessitates the allegorizing of the city. The city changes and many aspects of it are lost, taking with them the physical markers of the *flâneur's* memories and his very identity. To protect his identity, the *flâneur* remembers, either remembering "what used to be where else now stands" (like Fielding), or allegorizing what remains by imbuing it with memory. A house becomes a place where a couple once made love; a deli becomes a place where a couple could have saved their relationship. Will hates change, for it threatens to erase the city of his youth and the city in which he spent his happiest moments with Kate.

Standing in front of Noseworthy's window, Will admits, "I would not have been surprised ... to come down here some day and find the place closed, the windows caged" (Bowdring 27). In the window, he sees "the ghostly reflections of centuries of shoppers" while imagining "the bells of forgotten street cars echoing in his ears" (27). He both laments and admires the recent display which marks the survival of old St. John's, and yet stands as a meagre, less heartfelt version of past displays: "I warmed to the thought that Mr. Noseworthy was single-handedly and single-mindedly shepherding us all in the right direction.... Clear out, pare down, jettison, minimize. The past was a sad and wearisome weight" (27). Will admits there is "just too much history here to think about," but he despises any attempt to move

away from it (27). He detests the suburbanization of St. John's and the surrounding areas, referring to north-east St. John's as a suburban wasteland with strip-malls and "fortress-like fences" (3). He derides the lack of distinguishing features and landmarks to "etch themselves on my memory" in the "suburban sprawl" of "look-alike bungalows with lawns of frozen mud" and pathetic "maple-saplings guy-wired to the ground" (200).

But the newness he hates most is that which penetrates and alters his downtown. The streets and houses of his youth have been declared a "Heritage Conservation Area" and have become "a yuppie garrison" (57). The waterfront has been obscured by a wall of brick and glass, the centrepiece being "a brick shithouse and parking garage known as Atlantic Place, ... one of the ugliest things, both inside and out, ever conceived by the human mind" (57). The gentrification of George Street has chased people from their homes and converted it into a strip of bars "with names such as Swallies, Dickie's, Christian's, Gropers, and Bounders" (57, 58). Even Will's double-grounded dreamwalks cannot overlook the ghastliness of some of these edifices.

Not just the spaces but the traditions of Will's past are under attack as well. Joining Bill for breakfast on Boxing Day, he also joins him in his condemnation of beautification by-laws. "There's an unwritten law out here against hangin' out your clothes. Spoils the look of the neighbourhood, gives away your lower-class roots," he says (205). On New Year's Eve, Wiseman laments the loss of another tradition, one particularly dear to the heart of a *flâneur*:

The New Year's Eve waterfront soiree had once been a much smaller, more casual, affair: just a few people strolling the docks with mickeys of rum in their overcoats. On a few occasions Kate and I had been among them, singing "Auld Lang Syne" and kissing and embracing strangers at midnight. But, in less than a decade, it had festooned into a "tradition," a raucous media-whipped affair with radio station ghetto blasters on wheels and a City Council fireworks display (218).

On this New Year's Eve, he is away from the crowd. In fact, he is above them in sort of foggy panopticon: "I made my way up Military Road and sat for a spell on the Basilica steps high above the harbour. Through the luminous fog I could hear the radio music and the cheers of the waterfront crowd; the smell of the salt air was sobering and sad. There were probably ten thousand or more down there this year" (219). In an attempt to avoid the crowd, he walks the back streets of St. John's, and returns home, only to grow frustrated in his solitude, and sets out again amongst the revellers. Even as it changes, the city compels him to take part in it. In truth, it is the changes that repeatedly draw him outside his door. For it is the task of the *flâneur* to survive in a city that is becoming increasingly foreign to him: "The more uncanny a big city becomes, the more knowledge of human nature — so it was thought — it takes to operate in it" (*Baudelaire* 40). Refusing to relinquish his grip on the chang-



ing landscape of his city, he must take to the streets like a true *flâneur* and study the city and its occupants. Though his mastery of St. John's may be waning, his knowledge of it will secure his position as urbanite.

Through change, the city becomes an increasingly dangerous place for the *flâneur*. Benjamin notes that the aging *flâneur* was always actively avoiding creditors and moving from place to place. In his later years, Baudelaire "roved about in the city which had long since ceased to be home for the *flâneur*" (47). As the city becomes consumed by the machine of progress, the *flâneur* finds fewer places to practice his art. Moreover, walking the city so many times, he increases his chances of offending someone or outstaying his welcome — as Benjamin puts it, "Every bed in which he lay down became a *lit hasardeux* for him" (47-8). Though Wiseman more or less drifts through St. John's, there are sections he tries to avoid. As the crowd presses in on him, so too the area he can safely promenade becomes smaller.

One of Will's favourite diners is Bird's Family Restaurant and Bakery. He admits, "in the beginning I came here for one reason only: It was the sort of place Kate and her friends would never think of coming to" (Bowdring 64). He enjoys the "frozen in time" aspect of the place, "like someone's nostalgic hazy recollection rather than a real eating place" (65). In this restaurant Will debates returning to his former house while Kate is out of town. One gets the sense that he has come to Bird's often to think about Kate — a fitting irony since Kate is never there, enabling Will to freeze her in time as well. Here Will can revisit his Kate without ever having to confront his real ex-wife. His seemingly aimless existence is actually one of avoidance. He prefers "to meet the few friends I still wanted to see in some neutral territory like a bar or cafe" (92). He seeks the crowd but not company. He admits to Kerry, the girl he meets in a bar downtown, that he too avoids the Ship Inn because it is still the meeting place of many former friends. His description of that bar near the end of the novel captures the *flâneur*'s fear of being consumed by the crowd:

if half the town drank on the George Street Strip, the other half drank at the Ship Inn, and this half included everyone you knew, among whom, of course, was everyone you didn't want to see. Pity poor John Keats, out for a quiet pint of an evening, a man who professed to have no self, no nature, no identity — at least as a poet — and when in a roomful of people felt the identity of every one of them press upon him to the point of annihilation. He would not have stood the chance of the proverbial snowball in Hell in the agonistic crucible that was the Ship Inn (239).

What is the fate of the *flâneur* when there is nothing new to see in the city and all that is old is too painful to be enjoyed?

As Gilloch notes, it is the nature of the *flâneur* to be overtaken by progress: "The hustle and bustle of the crowd were both necessary to the *flâneur* and the source of his eventual demise" (156). The *flâneur* is an "idle dreamer destined for a rude awakening" (157). This awakening comes in several forms, the first being the realization that the city has changed beyond even his ability to enjoy it. Pretty soon

the “persistent aloofness” and “disdainful individuality” become less about a nostalgic connection to the past and more concerned with a cynicism for the present. Near the end of the novel, Will returns from his walk “tired but still restless, a bit edgy and raw-eyed” (Bowdring 220). His forays onto the streets only further frustrate him, the double ground of memory now barely perceptible beneath the drastically different city of the present.

As he sits before Kate’s television watching *The Notorious Landlady*, Will has a revelation while watching his teenage heartthrob, Kim Novak: “in that old black-and-white, soft-focus celluloid print, she glowed with a translucent sensuality that brought back all my adolescent love and longing, made even worse now by the knowledge that I would never have her, and that her painful beauty had now faded” (220). As Will’s frustration grows, it becomes obvious that what he realizes he will never have is not Kim Novak but Kate and, perhaps more importantly, the St. John’s in which he grew up and fell in love. Will claims to finally understand “what the film was really all about” (221) — the director, Richard Quine, the former lover of Ms. Novak, has created a film detailing everything he has lost: “our *auteur*’s painful longing filled every frame. Having lost *her*, how could he have been expected to keep his mind on something as trivial as plot” (222). Likewise, Will’s life has been without plot or meaningful progression since he lost Kate. His anger escalates as he realizes this is to be another uneventful evening: “In the end it always came down to this: the empty bottle, the empty bed, evenings like oceans, onlies and onliness; even after the walk abroad among your fellow men, the long walk back home to your bowl of gruel and your ghosts” (222). Before he takes to the streets with renewed purpose, Will projects his anger at his own passivity unto Fred Astaire’s performance in *The Notorious Landlady* as an observer to the romance in the film: “DANCE YOU SILLY FUCKER, DANCE. IT’S NEW YEAR’S EVE, I shouted at him. I switched off the TV, grabbed my jacket and walked out the door” (222). Will finally asks Dorcas’ question: “How can one do nothing?” Realising his aloofness has resulted in emotional atrophy, he sets out to join the crowd on the previously vile and vilified George Street Strip.

Will’s death as a *flâneur* is necessary — to remain a part of St. John’s he must become one of its citizens. The *flâneur* never walks against the crowd but alongside it, like the rag-picker who hopes to collect any item dropped by the crowd. Will sees in his future the destiny of the *flâneur* discussed by Gilloch: “The eventual fate of the *flâneur*, the truth of this character, is to be found in the pathetic figure who wanders around the city, seemingly without destination, but with a placard attached to him advertising commodities for sale” (156). Will encounters his possible future self near the end of the novel, when the ironically named Tasker Murphy visits him on New Year’s Eve. An alcoholic whose name serves only to highlight his do-nothing existence, Tasker sits at Will’s kitchen table, bemoaning his life, his separation from his wife and family, all the while drinking Will’s scotch and pulling “sad songs out of the air like trap lines out of deep blue water — hand over hand,

line after line, song after song after song after song” (Bowdring 211). Tasker is the *flâneur* lost in the past, ignorant of the present moment: “In the five or six years that we’d been neighbours, he’d been in our house no more than a half dozen times, usually around Christmas, and each time it seemed that he hardly knew us. He would re-introduce himself, thinking that we didn’t know him” (214). Rather than become permanently lost, the exhausted Will takes his place in the crowd, fighting for elbowroom in a St. John’s pub, using his identity as professor of literature to begin his conversation with Kerry. A fellow *flâneur*, she followed Will home because “[i]t seemed she had nowhere else to go” (223). Though both are certainly denizens of the city, they spend their first day together outside the city, on the very edge of the island.

Following a night of poetry reading, Kerry suggests a trip to Cape Spear, “North America’s most easterly point” (238-9). Walking along the cliff, Kerry mocks the “Ship Inn-centred world” of St. John’s, then boldly passes the “Parks Canada DO NOT GO BEYOND THIS POINT sign on the edge of the cliff” (239). Though they were notably uninspired in the city, both Kerry and Will are overwhelmed by passion in an alcove of rock as the ocean laps the shore. He watches as Kerry disappears into a “deep cleft” of rock “heaved up at a 45-degree angle, and its long wide mouth gaped at us and frothed and roared” (241). Kerry’s lips, stained from the berries she had picked appeared to Will as “red with the earth’s blood,” and he feels “the waters move in me” as he kisses her: “We kissed again, more passionately this time, then eased ourselves down upon the smooth warm stone. When all my senses returned again, the sea rushed back into my head with a roar” (241).

For all its cynicism and persistent aloofness, *The Night Season* is, in the end, as much a love letter to Newfoundland as is *The Colony of Unrequited Dreams*. Will has come to *flânerie* later in life, having been damaged by love and disillusioned by his profession. To step outside the crowd, to appreciate what is being lost as others move blindly beyond it, is a moment of power for the *flâneur*, but also a moment of self-deception, a belief that one can somehow exist as an inner exile, an angelic caretaker of all that is left in the dust of the forward-looking “culture of impatience.” Will’s encounter with Kerry and, subsequently, Newfoundland, leaves him reborn. He now experiences St. John’s through reborn eyes, finding newness everywhere. Waking in his apartment at the conclusion of the novel, he sees a flock of birds in his garden and notes he had “never seen anything like them before” (247). He learns to appreciate the transitory nature of this moment: “They seemed on display, freeze-framed beneath the streetlight, but then they rose suddenly, like a single silhouetted shape, and disappeared over the rooftops into the fading light” (247). Will realizes that he can enjoy his memories, but he cannot live in them. He cannot freeze-frame family and friends in a favourite time and place. As he reads from a storybook he used to read to his daughter, he finds comfort in the otherwise ominous approaching storm: “soon it would descend upon us with all its fury. The snow had held off long enough. It would block our doors and shroud our windows,

fill the streets and gardens to the roofs of the houses. As we slept it would sweep down upon us like the waters of the lake” (248). Having touched a more elemental version of Newfoundland through his experience with Kerry, he no longer fears or loathes the alterations of his city. He accepts these changes, for Newfoundland will always belong to him and he will always belong to it. It is this need for both elemental and personal connections that both consciously and subconsciously drive the *flâneurs* of *This All Happened*.

### THE PORTRAIT OF THE *FLÂNEUR* AS A YOUNG MAN: GABRIEL ENGLISH

David Frisby refers to Benjamin’s *Arcades Project* as “scraps of information ... placed together in a constellation of meaning” (42). This is also a fitting description of Michael Winter’s novel, which Winter himself refers to as a “fictional memoir” in that *This All Happened* is really a collection of daily observations and musings presented in the guise of a novel. The narrative of Winter’s novel is connected only by a calendar year driven by 365 individual entries through which Gabriel English forms a pastiche of himself and his urban surroundings.

Winter’s novel is certainly the portrait of the *flâneur* as a young man, for Gabriel is very much Will Wiseman in an earlier stage of his life. Like Will, Gabe is a man of letters. In a true reflection of Will, Gabe appears to be at the beginning of a career as an educator, driving to Conception Bay to teach creative writing to high school students. Will spends a large part of his narrative remembering his failed relationship with Kate, while Gabe occupies most of his time trying to interpret and preserve his failing relationship with Lydia. Younger than Will, he seems more advanced in his *flânerie*, more practised. More proficient in the tactics of the *flâneur*, Gabe will also tire of them sooner, outgrowing the city (or believing he has) in his early thirties. This journal disguised as a novel documents the daily meanderings (both physical and mental) of a *flâneur* of St. John’s, recording his fascination and eventual disenchantment with his urban landscape. Like Will, Gabe eventually desires a more elemental and elementary version of Newfoundland.

The city has yet to become a Benjaminian *lit hasardeux* for Gabe, but he is certainly on his way to making St. John’s a dangerous place for himself. Having limited himself to a group of friends, friends who live in the “Ship Inn centred world” derided by Kerry in *The Night Season*, Gabe roves a sexually charged social circle crammed with ex-girlfriends, Lydia’s ex-boyfriends, and those who are both desirable and dangerous because they have been neither. His collection of friends has an incestuous nature in which no social gathering is possible without encountering at least one former lover or a person who threatens to encroach on Gabe and Lydia’s tenuous relationship. Several times throughout the narrative, Gabe ponders the possibility of “leaving this claustrophobic city” (91). The angst shared by these St.

John's hipsters is best described by Wilf Jardine, a 52 year old "promising actor" who describes the fear inherent in a seemingly simple solitary walk to a bar:

When you open the Ship Inn door all by yourself. You've walked downtown alone. You dont want to be alone. You feel like a dog and you want a bit of company. Well, you open that door and you steel yourself. It's got to be all one motion, no hesitation. Open the door and stride in, but a slow stride, maximum exposure. And you make your way to the bar. And all the way there you keep your eyes on the bottles and the mirrors and youre hoping, youre hoping there's someone in there who knows you. You hope you dont make it to the bar before someone waves you over, grasps your arm, says, Hey Wilf, how's it going? Yes, sir, that walk to the bar is the loneliest walk in the world. (142-3)

This is the circumstance of these St. John's streetwalkers, to dread the moment of being out yet alone, but to be forever on guard when in a crowd. Voices have a short distance to carry in St. John's, and the socialite must always be wary, even in the street: "Lydia's ex, Earl ... lives two streets away. Once, when we were walking home from the Ship, Lydia told me to shush. We were talking about Earl, under his window" (6). These people not only frequent the same bars, but they live on the same streets: the townhouse-lined streets of the recently gentrified downtown. It is no wonder Gabe feels claustrophobic in this city, for even as he walks, the row houses encroach on his conversations. He says, "We manage the stairs to Duckworth Street and speak quietly under the ear that hears all of downtown St. John's. Quiet with the stories you tell, or the wrong person will hear you" (95). Though it is one of the primary perils, being overheard is not the only hazard in the streets of St. John's.

Even one as familiar with the streets as Gabe can find himself in dangerous situations. One night Gabe is attacked by snowball-hurling teenagers, one of whom he manages to grab by the collar. As he decides what to do with the youth he has pinned to the sidewalk, older boys wielding hockey sticks surround him. Gabe runs several blocks uphill before he realizes the hockey players are actually Good Samaritans concerned about his welfare. Yet Gabe's fear upon first seeing the older boys reveals how quickly the familiar can become unfamiliar in St. John's. Following a night of drinking with Max Wareham, Gabe, who knows every alley and corner of his city, still manages to walk into a tree and seriously hurt himself. But the real danger in walking the streets of St. John's is encountering those dangerous and desirable characters outside the parameters of a bar or house party where watchful eyes ensure the interaction remains at the level of slightly risqué flirting. Gabe has gravitated toward Alex Fleming at several parties and has even met her for lunch a few times, but in the street one April night, both are able to momentarily slip away from the confining crowd: "everyone who is anyone is out crawling the mild, wet streets, a bit like Dublin folded into Paris. Europe of the twenties, when everyone is walking home with a person they shouldn't be walking with, people going home with the

wrong people for one night only. Alex leans into me and we kiss against the coarse clapboard of a house (I scrape my knuckles)” (88).

This moment with Alex is not an indication of dissatisfaction with Lydia but more an act of rebellion against the inward-looking collection of actors and artists who constitute and confine Gabe’s urban existence. This need for the new both drives and disturbs Gabe, for he knows Lydia wants it as well, in the form of the novel and charming Craig Regular: “Fact: I know everyone in this town even if I haven’t met them and they know everything about me, which is frustrating. So when someone new comes to town, or someone returns, like Craig Regular, everyone lurches towards him, especially the women, because it’s such a relief to meet someone you don’t already know” (152). Gabriel grows increasingly jealous and paranoid throughout the narrative, convincing himself Lydia has slept with Craig and Wilf. This combination of fear and envy fuels Gabe’s desire to vanish: “I am taken by the idea of leaving St. John’s by sea. I am taken by the idea of vanishing. A small vengeful part of me, or an intolerant part of me, wants to leave Lydia, and this means leaving St. John’s” (94). It also fosters Gabe’s already burgeoning contempt for St. John’s:

At Coleman’s grocery store. The distorted women, freak-show faces, warped eyebrows, blotchy complexions.... Thin legs on the women, big torsos, and their pushed-in, beaten faces, receding chins, thin hair crimped artificially. Then calling taxis, paying with Government of Newfoundland blue cheques that require MCP and SIN and they’re worth \$301.50 and they’re buying cases of Pepsi, Spaghettios, tins of vienna sausages, cold pre-fried barbecue wings, I can barely write this it is all so cliché (117).

This near inability to write marks Gabe’s exhaustion with St. John’s yet identifies him as a citizen. His *flâneur*-ish contempt for the masses is coupled with the comfort and identity that his observations afford him. Though he grows tired of the city and its people, he is linked to them as is the *flâneur*, walking amongst them like the ragpicker, collecting stories and conducting inspections through which he legitimizes his idle existence.

Gabe’s home is a panopticon from which he can view much of downtown St. John’s. When not walking the streets, Gabe likes to observe them through his binoculars. In truth, he more than likes to do this, as he admits in one of his entries: “I love my binoculars” (Winter 92). Most of *This All Happened* is observation, many sections beginning with a simple sentence describing Gabe’s location: “Snowbound in St. John’s,” “Ten p.m. at Max’s playing poker,” “At Coleman’s grocery store,” or “On our way to Gallow’s Cove” (8, 102, 116, 175). From his window, Gabe studies the city, sometimes “watching weather work in the distance,” at other times watching “a rollerblader tack down Signal Hill Road,” willing him to fall when he discovers it is Craig Regular (79, 92). This observation from a distance offers Gabe the security he lacks when walking the streets. He shares his townhouse with the couple

Iris and Helmut, their names a reflection of the omniscience and protection his room and the binoculars provide him.

Gabe makes these observations from the desk at which he is supposed to be composing his novel. The writing of this novel is something by which he identifies himself rather than something he actually does. In truth, Gabe is rapidly approaching Will's situation of doing absolutely nothing. Even when he sits to write his novel, he cannot stop observing the city outside his window: "Back working on the novel. Outside my window I can see Boyd Coady on an aluminum [sic] ladder. He's scrutinizing the work of the roofer" (162). Actually watching someone watch someone else, Gabe grows further removed from doing anything himself. Near the end of the novel, he admits to Alex that "I've given up on the novel" in favour of watching the city fulltime (280).

Yet Gabe is well studied in the tactics of the *flâneur* and he knows that the *flâneur* distinguishes himself "through his activity, or rather, through his lack of activity, for the business of the *flâneur* was 'doing nothing'" (Gilloch 154). One of Gabe's New Year's resolutions is to finish a novel, and this is the activity by which he identifies himself throughout the narrative. The fact that he never gets closer to completing the book does not seem to bother him, perhaps because he knows that the length of time it takes to produce something also adds to its worth. Gabe can mock the hefty patrons of Coleman's grocery store and their clichéd purchasing of junk food with government cheques, though he is technically unemployed and beleaguered with student debt. He can look on them with disdain, for they are on welfare and doing nothing while he is a "writer." The longer it takes for him to produce this novel only distances him further from these people, for he is not a hack writer mindlessly producing disposable literature. He is a true novelist whose masterpieces require prolonged periods of time.

Gabe remains much like Will or Benjamin's *flâneur* who "catches things in flight." Those who work can justify their existence through what they have garnered. The *flâneur*, whose work is not work, justifies himself through the tools of his trade: keen observation and clever wordplay. In this respect, Gabriel is certainly a younger version of Will Wiseman. *This All Happened* abounds in idle wordplay, as if Gabe and his artistic (though largely inactive) friends must continually reify themselves through displays of writerly observation. Gabe begins the entry for 4 March with "It's after badminton, on the only day of the year that is a command, march forth" (Winter 59). He responds to a child's comment that "A question mark is like half a heart" with "Sometimes questions are asked half-heartedly" (50). In a more bizarre moment, Gabe proclaims that "Corn ... the lobster of the vegetable family," then, pressed to defend this statement by Lydia, he actually takes time to list the similarities: "They're both large, I say. A solid colour. You boil them alive and they're seasonal. You eat only a select part of the whole body. And pepper's important" (100). These moments of artful insight are a way for Gabe and others to



avoid dealing with their own idleness, to confer purpose and meaning upon moments and themselves.

In finding his place in his city, Gabriel the writer converts St. John's and its occupants into texts he can read. His voyeurism reaches such a point that he refers to autumn in St. John's as "the striptease of the city" (Winter 249). Gabe begins to spend more time observing the city than living in it — Lydia complains near the end of the text (and the relationship) that Gabe does not "instigate evenings out" (223). His constant observing grows increasingly unsettling to those he is watching. Early in the novel, he watches his friend Maisie through his binoculars as she walks home with her groceries, then decides to make a prank phone call:

I wait until Maisie is in her porch. I can see her run for the phone.  
You should close your front door, missus.  
Who is this.  
I've frightened her. It's Gabe, I say.  
Jeez, boy (35).

His constant surveillance upsets Lydia, who begins to distance herself from him because of the way she is treated in his journal:

I felt like I couldn't say anything to you because you'd take it the wrong way and write it down in that journal.  
You read it.  
Yes.  
Lydia.  
Everything you write about me is rotten (190).

Even as his relationship crumbles, Gabe cannot remove himself from the position of the observer. He commands himself, "I have to stop watching Lydia" (248), yet he continues to do so to the point that he begins stalking her. One night, Gabe follows Lydia and Craig Regular from a restaurant, to a laundromat, to Craig's home in the Battery, at one point actually tracking them in his car. Earlier in the text, Gabe proclaimed his love of walking: "Walking is the correct speed for rumination" (132). But now a walk in the city has become painful as the city and its people have changed and slipped from underneath the narrative he has constructed for them.

Throughout the text, Gabe expresses a fascination and fear of change. He makes an effort to be present when houses are being torn down and makes note of the places where buildings once stood before they were lost in a fire. The arrival of Craig Regular and his beguiling newness upsets him, for it marks a change in his relationship with Lydia and the dynamics of his social circle: "Why the interest in Craig Regular? Lydia: He's new. In this town, everybody knows everyone else even if you haven't met them. That explains Craig Regular" (151). Gabe admits, "Often I am afraid of new life. Of pushing into the new" and that "I always sense a

panic at the thought of change” (146, 207). Yet this fear of change runs parallel with a desire to escape the city.

In *The Arcades Project*, Benjamin identifies the two sides of the “dialectic of flânerie.” One side is “the man who is utterly undiscoverable, the hidden man” (420). This is Gabe gazing out his panoptic bedroom window or writing in his diary, the man enjoying the “omnipresence of God” that flânerie affords him as he narrates the city (805). The other half of this dialectic, however, is “the man who feels himself viewed by all and sundry as a true suspect” (420). Gabriel and the city seem to have grown mutually tired of each other. The city and its citizens refuse to correspond with Gabe’s imagining of them: new buildings replace beloved landmarks, new people infiltrate and alter the closest social circles, and a presumed friend like Boyd Coady is revealed to be a master of breaking and entering, using the houses of friends and neighbours to conduct his everyday business:

I hear from Daphne that the police have found lots of evidence. Boyd Coady used seven houses in the neighbourhood. He’d break in, find a spare key, make a copy, and then study the patterns of the people who lived there. When he knew they were gone, he’d go in.

He left the television at Lydia’s because she didn’t have one, and he liked to watch TV while his laundry was on (Winter 241).

The change he does notice is compounded by the unseen changes he later discovers, and Gabe is soon disenchanted with the city, exhausted by it. He becomes overwhelmed by the city, yet remains insatiable, as if the city, though inexhaustible, offers only subtle variations on the same fare. The novel concludes with Gabe’s statement of purpose: “I gotta leave this place. I gotta start over. I’ve used up everything here. I have got to let the city go fallow” (Winter 285). There is also his romantic New Year’s resolution: “I’ve decided to leave St. John’s. I will head west and look for a desolate, foreign place. All that can happen to me here has happened” (286). These final lines serve as a (perhaps misguided) culmination of a desire expressed by Gabe and others throughout the novel to “get out of town and explore Newfoundland.”

Gabe plays the role of the settled urbanite, the master of the metropolis. He frequents the clubs and taverns deemed the domain of the city’s artists and thinkers; he remains trendy and *nouveau*, like Benjamin’s *flâneur* who took a tortoise out walking in the streets of Paris. He skis downtown over snow-covered streets, attends erotic poetry readings, and even permits his artist friend to make a mould of his buttocks. Yet the text also abounds with a desire to leave the city. Like Fielding and Wiseman, Gabe is a *flâneur* who has grown uncomfortable in the city on which he has founded his identity. These incidents of unhomeliness force these characters to look outside the city for a sense of place and in doing so question their own conflation of St. John’s and Newfoundland identities. As historians, journalists, academ-

ics, and artists focused on a particular Newfoundland “frozen in time,” these characters move outside the city and realize what they have been deferring through their leisurely meditations is the knowledge that the Newfoundland they have called home may never have existed anywhere but in their own imaginations.

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