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Michael Sala

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University of Newcastle

Michael Sala

The dangerous ambiguity of being on foot: Reflections on the act of walking and negotiating the tension between pedestrian and car in the process of writing a novel

Abstract:

This article situates the writing of a novel and its relationship to place within a practice-led vantage point that draws on concepts of writing about the city, ranging from the figure of the *flâneur* to the field of psychogeography. I explore how the physical act of moving through a city on foot and my close reading of two short stories – which both leverage the contrast between pedestrian and vehicle – helped me to approach and define the city in which my novel is set and, through this, offered specific opportunities and imaginative possibilities for the narrative rendering of place. I also unpack the potentiality of the car, particularly the way it shapes an unequal power dynamic in which the pedestrian may be observed, interpreted and threatened by someone who can remain protected within the enclosure of a vehicle.

Biographical note:

Michael Sala is a Senior Lecturer in the School of Humanities, Creative Industries and Social Sciences at the University of Newcastle. His autobiographical novel *The Last Thread* (2012) won the Glenda Adams/UTS Award for New Writing (2013) and The Commonwealth Book Prize (Pacific Region, 2013). His second novel *The Restorer* (2017) was shortlisted for the Victorian Premier's Literary Award and the NSW Premier's Christina Stead Literary Award for Fiction, as well as longlisted for the Miles Franklin Literary Award. His research interests include the short story, memoir, science fiction and fantasy and the contemporary novel.

Keywords:

Fiction, domestic violence, pedestrian, psychogeography, *flâneur*

Between 2013 and 2016, I wrote *The Restorer* (2017), a novel about domestic and gender-based violence set in the city in which I live. This novel drew on my childhood experiences as a victim of and witness to domestic violence and on the creative material that I was reading and teaching at the time. It also drew on my journeys along the streets and parks and inner-city coastal areas that form the novel's setting over the course of 35 years. Beginning in childhood, when my family arrived from overseas, I largely experienced Newcastle from the vantage point of both an immigrant – someone who was not, in the terminology of the long-term inhabitants of the city, a 'local' – and a person on foot, a pedestrian. It is this pedestrian aspect that I particularly want to tease out.

This is not an essay about walking in the spirit of recent psychogeographic contributions by Vanessa Berry – as presented in both her blog *Mirror Sydney* and her book based on this work (2017) – or of Nick Gadd's meditation on psychogeography and grief, *Melbourne Circle* (2020). Rather than a discovery of physical or spiritual location from the vantage point of a walker, this essay is a more narrowly focused exploration of a specific tension that I have experienced as a person on foot in the city where I have lived for most of my life and an attempt to locate this tension productively within the process of writing my novel.

My foray begins with the word itself: pedestrian. "It is the pedestrians", Michael Pearson and Michael Shanks argue in their ground breaking work *Theatre/Archaeology*, "who transform the street into a space" (2001, p. 149). Yet the very word *pedestrian* evokes the other dominant moving part of the equation when it comes to the transformation of a street into a space: the vehicle, which, for the purposes of this essay, will be narrowed down to the car. Apart from defining the person on foot in relation to the car, *pedestrian* also means unexciting or dull, reinforcing the hierarchical nature of this relationship. My exploration will pivot on that area where the experience of pedestrian and car driver converge in my autobiographical context and how this influenced the development of *The Restorer*.

My experience of this intersection first comes into relief with a memory of watching my stepfather trying to teach my mother how to drive in 1985. We had recently arrived from Europe. I was 10 years old and my mother was 32. My mother was having trouble with the clutch and my stepfather was yelling at her which made her difficulties more pronounced. We had come to a stop in the middle of the road. The car was shuddering and the clutch was grinding against itself as my stepfather kept yelling abuse at my mother, telling her she was incompetent, a stupid idiot. Eventually my mother got out of the car. Transforming from driver into pedestrian, she walked up the road with her short, distinctive stride. I too wanted to get out of the car but I was too afraid of how my stepfather would react. A few months before this he had held me up against a wall with one hand around my neck and threatened to beat me to death. [1]

My mother eventually learned how to drive. She began studying nursing. Within six months of those two developments she had separated from my stepfather. Within another six months, my stepfather had kidnapped my youngest brother and disappeared into Queensland on a one-way

road trip. He left a note saying that he would kill himself and my younger brother if we came looking for either of them. After a few years my mother managed to establish contact with my stepfather, and my younger brother started to stay with us for brief periods of time during holidays. These trips were fraught, sad affairs which could not compensate for and in many ways accentuated the distance and sense of potential violence created by my stepfather.

I did not get a car of my own until my first daughter was born. Around that time, my younger brother embarked with my stepfather on another road trip which began in Queensland and ended up with my brother, then 22, being dropped at my house for a week. My stepfather remained in his car at the drop-off point. He drove off as soon as my brother got out, went up the road, then did a U-turn and drove past the house where I was still standing out the front. As he drove past he slowed to a crawl then accelerated and disappeared. I didn't see his face in the gloom of the car cabin but I felt the familiar anxiety, the threat of his presence – which for me had so often been associated with the cars he drove – at the sound of his approach, and the tension of being in a confined space with him.

“That's just him being funny”, my brother said as the roar of the vehicle faded away. In a lot of ways this has been the flavour of my experience with cars. It is an experience founded around my position as a passenger in cars I did not want to occupy and, more often, as a pedestrian. This is also the vantage point from which I approached the experience of walking in my novel, a vantage point that emerged out of a combination of personal history and my experience of the city in which I live.

The defining feature of a novel for me is not so much its use of language but rather its use of observation. As writers we not only make observations or flesh out our individual subjectivity, but to some extent we also learn how to reverse that subjectivity in order to perceive ourselves in our context with all its limitations and opportunities. The subjective eye is the novelist's greatest tool, one that the novelist works constantly to develop. Here I don't mean *eye* in the physical sense, rather in a broader sense as the way – and indeed the state of mind – in which we observe and interpret the world using the interplay between our senses or tools of perception and our reflexive capabilities. I like to think of style as the dramatisation of that interplay.

While the car offers freedom – as many critics note –especially in relation to walking (like it did for my mother when she finally learned how to drive), it can also embody a threat on several different levels. By *threat* I don't mean the unfolding environmental catastrophe that cars are helping to cause, or even the toxic waste-products produced by cars that we breathe in, but rather a threat or potential found in cars that is always present and sometimes actualised. When you walk beside roads and streets you assume that a vehicle will not leave the road and that you will not be hit if you follow the rules. There is also an acceptance that this is not always the case, that there is a chance that you *will* be run over, even if you follow the rules perfectly. We endure this possibility in order to live in the urban landscape.

However, as the incident with my stepfather suggests, the car also poses a more intimate threat. It can be used to intimidate those that are defined in opposition to it, those whose bodies are exposed not only to the potential violence of a collision but also to the scrutiny of those occupying the car. The scrutiny from a car cannot be easily or fully returned by those outside it. It is a gaze weighted in one direction that deprives its object of many of the cues that would enable a more equal exchange of visual information. In this more psychological way, the car is an expression of a power imbalance and of potential, the embodiment of a certain kind of gaze that has helped me to define the city in which I set my novel and where I still live.

Where the car contains a kind of threatening potential in an urban environment such as my own, the act of walking is for me in a sense shaped by its inherent posture of vulnerability, not just in relation to cars but in relation to other walkers. Like other theorists in this area, I am interested in the concept of performativity in relation to the act of walking; I am particularly interested in the performativity that occurs whether we like it or not and how this shapes our movement through urban spaces on foot, particularly when there are vehicles involved.

In *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Michel de Certeau observes: “The act of walking is to the urban system what the speech act is to language or to the statements uttered” (1984, p. 97). Walking is an act of communication. Furthermore, like all communication, it is always at least partly involuntary in the sense that, when we walk, we only have limited control over the information we present to others. Software and surveillance companies across the globe are currently working on the premise that our gait is as unique as our fingerprint in identifying us and in fact presents far more information. The problem for those who are developing this technological means of identifying individuals according to our gait is that the complexity of the information we present through walking requires a vast amount of processing power to interpret (Kelechava, 2018, n.p). So, the act of walking seems to me often to be an involuntary invitation to be perceived as much as it is an act that facilitates our own perception.

Take myself. I would rather not be noticed at all and yet even I cannot respect my own wishes in this regard. I have been, for as long as I can remember, a self-conscious walker. The reasons for this are both physical and psychological. On the physical side, my feet are different in shape from one another, as if they belong to two different people. The result of this is an uneven gait. As a boy I had a bouncing stride as if I were ricocheting out of myself with each step I took, a signature that singled me out even from a distance. This impression would be reinforced by my difficulties with the English language and language in general. By the time I was 10 – from which time onwards I became a permanent inhabitant of Newcastle – I had lived in about a dozen houses in about 10 suburbs in three different countries. We had moved to Australia not once but twice in a kind of immigration double-step and I had experienced first days at six different schools where my poor grasp of language and awkward physicality immediately isolated me. As an immigrant to Australia I wanted not to assimilate but to blend in, yet the only person that could drive during those first ten years of my life was my stepfather and he rarely drove me to school. So I walked. I walked to school, I walked to the beach, I walked around my neighbourhood. And wherever I went I was locked in my stride, I was noticed.

People yelled from cars. Children at school compared me to different kinds of animals and imitated the way I walked. Older children singled me out for violence.

My adulthood has in part been the process of working out that stride, of making it less abrasive and more a part of the environment through which I carry it. In a way it doesn't matter if I've been successful at that or not: the damage has been done. I think about walking while I am walking. I wonder if other people are thinking about walking as they walk. I wonder if they are doing it naturally – that is, without self-consciousness – or whether they are putting the level of effort into it that I am. Sometimes, if I have been doing it for a while, I will congratulate myself for walking unselfconsciously. I suspect that I will always think about walking in this way. The part of me that has come out of childhood – the part we all carry, the part composed of instincts and habits, our patterns of thinking and behaviour that we can spend the rest of our lives trying to adapt to the present circumstances – still inhabits my perceptions when I walk. As this no doubt suggests, I have spent a lot of time thinking about where I fit in with the act of walking and, more recently, where to place myself in the field of critics who examine its implications.

If there is one thing I know that I am *not*, despite my long history of walking the city, it is a *flâneur* – a figure developed by Charles Baudelaire in his 19th century essay, “The Painter of Modern Life” (1863) then reimagined most famously by Walter Benjamin in the early 20th century (and periodically revived in ever-shifting forms in the service of various projects and outlooks). But there's something there that might serve as a starting point. In terms of its origins, Laura Elkin's book, *Flâneuse*, provides a useful summation of the *flâneur* that captures both my resentment of the ideas at the heart of this figure and also a shadow of what I am trying to express:

A figure of masculine privilege and leisure, with time and money and no immediate responsibilities to claim his attention, the *flâneur* understands the city as few of its inhabitants do, for he has memorised it with his feet. Every corner, alleyway and stairway has the ability to plunge him into reverie. What happened here? Who passed by here? What does this place mean? The *flâneur*, attuned to the chords that vibrate throughout his city, knows without knowing. (2016, p. 3)

In developing this figure, Baudelaire took a word that originally conveyed the sense of a man who was “a lazybones, a loafer, a man of insufferable idleness” (Parkhurst Ferguson, 2004, p.24) and shaped it into a cipher for the male poet, a sort of masculine urban pilgrim who used the privilege of his position and class to ‘know’ the city in the way that others won't or can't. Such a limited idea of what it means to be a walker in the city can only take us so far, not least because of its gendered, class-based and indeed implicitly racialised form. But it is worth unpacking these foundations of the *flâneur* if only to see what might lie beyond their grasp. The *flâneur* is a moment, or series of moments, in which writers have sought to formalise the act of walking through an urban environment and its social relations. Elkin uses the term of the masculine *flâneur* to delineate the notion of the feminine *flâneuse*, a figure she conceives as:

[...] not merely a female *flâneur*, but a figure to be reckoned with, and inspired by, all on her own. She voyages out and goes where she's not supposed to; she forces us to confront the ways in which words like home and belonging are used against women. She is a determined, resourceful individual keenly attuned to the creative potential of the city and the liberating possibilities of a good walk. (2016, p. 23)

Elkin goes on to posit the instability of the figure of the woman in the street and asks, “Is she a carefree *flâneuse* or the object of the male gaze[?]” (p. 286). She also observes “a woman still can’t walk the city the way a man can” (p. 288). Yet despite this nod towards ambiguity and tension, it does not seem to me that her account of the *flâneuse* entirely evades the trappings of the male *flâneur* and is indeed in fundamental ways “a converted feminine mirror” (Livingston & Gyarkye, 2017). In both the male and female iterations of the *flâneur*, there is a confidence embodied in observation that does not account for the inward pull of anxiety and perception that I have often experienced in my own walks, particularly in relation to the car. This is not to say that there is not anxiety associated with the *flâneur*. Stefan Morawski for example notes “curiosity blended with fear and uneasiness (or anxiety)” as a feature of the *flâneur* but then also goes on to say that “his business is that of the spectator” (2020, p. 183). Meanwhile Priscilla Parkhurst Ferguson observes: “The *flâneur*’s ability to celebrate the unanticipated lies in his evident superiority to whatever challenges he may encounter” (2014, p. 31). The characters I am drawn to depicting in my work are never so confident in stepping out the door, but they share two elements with the figure of the *flâneur*. On the one hand, there is a searching quality in the act of walking – I will approach this later – and on the other there is the sense of potential, which in my rendering of the walker becomes more a sense of vulnerability and tension that arises out of the exposure to the world as a person on foot.

There is something in all of this that brings to mind the field of psychogeography, that is, as Merlin Coverly defines it, “the point at which psychology and geography collide, a means of exploring the behavioural impact of urban place” (2007, p. 10). Both psychogeographers and contemporary critics with an interest in the *flâneur* often touch on the relationship of pedestrians and cars in the urban landscape. Coverly notes that “cities are increasingly hostile to the pedestrian (p. 12). Psychogeography veers off in many directions beyond this that have no relevance to my own approach, yet that essential relationship between place and individual – the contrast between the car and the pedestrian – is common ground; though even here the emphasis is different. In terms of the scholarship on the *flâneur*, Zygmunt Bauman takes a typical approach when he emphasises the car in contrast to the pedestrian in terms of the safety and disengagement the car offers. He refers to the “wheeled security of cars”, and observes, “The street is the ‘out there’ from which one hides, at home or inside the car, behind security locks and burglar alarms” (2014, p. 48). I have not been able to find accounts that contrast the *flâneur* to the car by focusing on the potentially menacing aspect of the car in terms of the gaze it enables the occupants to deploy.

One of the most pressing concerns for me in writing *The Restorer* was in excavating the tension in the relationship between walker and observer; the pedestrian and driver, and also in my own experience as a child witnessing the domestic violence of a stepfather who I associated with

the authority and power of the car, against my mother who I understood to be as dependent on that vehicle as I was.

Six months after my mother left my stepfather, he drove to the house my mother was renting – a two-bedroom terrace that sat amongst other terraces in a narrow street in Newcastle East – and attacked the door with a crowbar demanding to be let in and threatening to murder us all. My mother's new partner jumped over the back fence in his underpants and ran away. My stepfather came into the house holding that crowbar and my mother somehow managed to talk him down. I think he came very close to killing us that night. I still have nightmares, as a grown man and a father myself, in which that moment of violence and powerlessness reasserts itself. Eventually my stepfather got back into his car and I can still remember the sound of it roaring off into the night. I had by then learned to dread the sound of his car, the roar of the engine, the slamming of the driver's door, the way that it presaged his sudden arrival, and it is this sound that I heard 19 years later when my stepfather drove off after dropping my younger brother at my house. In my childhood it was the sound of potential, of wondering if something was about to happen from which there would be no coming back.

The Restorer was in part an attempt to confront the dangerous ambiguity of this moment; the way that my mother, like so many women leaving abusive relationships, was negotiating not only a new life but the possibility of its ending completely at the hands of the person she had left – a possibility that is always heightened at the very moment of leaving (Campbell et al, 2003, n.p). There is no established way to navigate through that problem; partly because, for the person or people (her children were involved in this too) experiencing it, it is difficult to see an abusive situation clearly or accurately. It is also difficult to know the best way of handling a situation with another individual who at any moment may explode into violent reprisal. This ambiguity was the heart of the problem I was trying to express and one of the entry points I found to expressing it in a narrative way emerged through my relationship with a short story that I was teaching at the same time to undergraduate students.

Over the four years that I wrote my novel my encounters and re-encounters with E.L. Doctorow's short story "The Hunter" – from his hybrid novella/short story collection, *Lives of the Poets* (1984, pp. 39–53) – took my awkward self-awareness of the act of walking and its connection to cars and encouraged me to transform it into a reflexive approach to the act of writing fiction that utilised the psychogeographical potential of walking.

The focalising character in this story is an outsider to a dying town in rural America where she works as the only teacher in what was once a thriving school. The character is never given a name, only a role. She is both observer and – more profoundly and problematically – observed. For most of the story, she is simply walking; through the interior of the largely abandoned school; along the streets; from location to location within the town. For me, the whole point of her walking is that she is working something out through those steps, and this is the searching component that my iteration of the walker has in common with the *flâneur*. Searching for what? A perception in the motion? Or in the landscape itself? Or in some combination of the two that might allow for the sort of useful clarity that precedes a decision? It's what my mother always

used to do It's what I do. If there is opportunity and danger involved in walking through an urban landscape at different times of day then there is also danger and opportunity in making certain decisions. The nature in which this teacher is observed is purposefully diffuse. The ever-present question in the story is embodied in its title, "The Hunter". Is she hunting for something or is something hunting her? This is a question that a walker – who is both more vulnerable to and more engaged with the environment – has time to evaluate and reevaluate with each step taken.

The signal moment in the story in its relation to the title occurs when the teacher walks up to an old, abandoned mansion overlooking the town and goes inside:

She stands at the window and sees at the edge of the field a man in an orange jacket and red hat. She wonders if he can see her from this distance. He raises a rifle to his shoulder and a moment later she hears an odd smack as if someone has hit the siding of the house with an open palm. She does not move. The hunter lowers his rifle and steps back into the woods at the edge of the field. (1984, p. 44)

At first glance the reader might assume that the hunter – who will make no further appearance in the story – has fired at her as she stands there in the abandoned mansion. On the surface of it, the writer's focus on her reaction, "she does not move", is a detail that does not need saying. There are potentially endless actions that a character does not perform that do not warrant observation. By adding this detail, an implicit counter-impulse is suggested without being stated: the character is resisting the urge to move or is unable to do so. This comes back to something essential in the act of walking. It is the original and most fundamental way in which humans move through the world – hearkening back to a time when humans were as likely to be prey as predator and when freezing was an instinctive response to threat. But here there is no clear indication that the shot has actually hit the building – what we hear might be an echo or the crack of ice – or that the hunter aimed at her (we might assume it but it is not specified) or that he even saw her there, as she herself reflects before he raises the rifle. The passage is a study in ambiguity that plays on, and subsequently becomes part of, a succession of images in which a potentially violent gaze is combined with uncertainty to undermine the focalising character's perception and expose her in a vulnerable way.

At an earlier point in the story the regular bus driver, who picks up the children from the school where the woman is the sole teacher, has been replaced by a younger man who the teacher does not know:

The bus windows slide past, breaking her image and re-forming it, and giving her the illusion of the stone building behind her sliding along its foundations in the opposite direction.

The bus has turned into the road. It goes slowly past the school. The children's heads lurch in unison as the driver shifts gears. The bus plunges out of sight in the dip of the hill. At this moment the teacher realizes that she did not recognise the driver. He was not the small, burly man with eyeglasses without rims. He was a young man with

long light hair and white eyebrows, and he looked at her in the instant he hunched over the steering wheel, with his arms about to make the effort of putting the bus into a turn. (1984, p. 42)

The images developed in the passage are underpinned by an accumulation of tonally negative descriptive verbs – “lurch”, “plunge”, “hunched” – while what is not said also forms a kind of negative presence. The gap in the description of the new man’s expression is filled with a lexical shadow built on accumulation. Again, the source of the dread – is it perceived or imagined? – remains unclear. In the first sentence of the passage, it is the woman’s own gaze reflected back at her and her own body being broken and reformed, that disrupts her sense of orientation in this world. It is not only the bus driver but the bus itself that is imbued with threat by the description, as if the bus has become an extension of the new driver’s gaze and ultimately her own. In this story there are only two significant portrayals of vehicles: both will be driven by this young man whose gaze is potentially, if never with certainty, predatory.

In the scene that directly follows the first encounter with the bus driver, the woman is at home in her bath. She “bathes and urinates in the water” and “the cold air comes along the water line and draws its finger across her neck” (1984, p. 42). This scene that extends for only a single paragraph somehow seems a transgression of the established boundary between reader/observer and focalising character. It seems gratuitous for the reader to be offered this moment for no discernible narrative purpose. The protagonist appears particularly naked and the perspective’s vantage point particularly intrusive. The blurring of boundaries between reader/observer and focalising character feeds into the ambiguity surrounding the teacher’s sense of vulnerability in general and makes a disconcertingly effective bridge to the next moment involving the bus driver:

She walks to work, opens up the school, turns up the radiator, cleans the blackboard, and goes to the front door to await the children on the yellow bus.

They do not come.

She goes to her teaching room, rearranges the day’s lesson on the desk, distributes a sheet of stiff paper to each child’s desk. She goes back to the front door and awaits the children.

They are nowhere in sight. (p. 42)

Structurally, the two single line paragraphs extend her sense of vulnerability so that it encompasses the children. Once again, the use of space, the tension between what is said and not said, builds a sense of dread. The children will arrive, however, and the focalising character’s largely perambulatory and apparently self-imposed ordeal will continue. We are told as she approaches the mansion, in which she may or may not be shot at, that the house is abandoned because it was the site of an act of homicidal domestic violence. Like the school and the bus, the mansion is not a neutral site, towering as it does over the town, but one inscribed with a gendered and violent history to which the walker is intimately exposed and drawn. This is important. The teacher identifies with this environment which is in a sense inscribed against her.

The perambulatory ordeal is both physical and psychological. After leaving the mansion, she “climbs through snow drifts in which she sinks up to the thighs” (1984, p. 43) and struggles to cross a bridge through the wind “as if she is pushing through something, as if it is only giving way to her by tearing” (p. 45). She is on her way to a bar significantly called The Rapids. Here she will begin her final encounter in the story with the bus driver, one in which cause-and-effect will hurl her into a cathartic act of rejection, a rejection of the vehicle as well as the man. In the culmination of their encounter the bus driver, after driving her home from the bar and in the process of reaching across her position in the passenger seat for a sack of wine, may or may have intentionally touched her. The teacher flees from his vehicle on foot into her house. In this moment I see my own mother and I think of all the occasions in which women have leaped out of cars, transforming from passengers into pedestrians and exchanging one set of risks for another. It is a variation of a moment that is imbedded in another form and, incidentally, at the heart of a recent story that has found considerable traction in the literary world, “Cat Person” by Kristen Roupenian. In that story, when the protagonist is picked up by a man for a date, she becomes acutely self-conscious as they are driving and experiences a moment of intense anxiety in which she confronts her vulnerability to potential threats:

On the drive, he was quieter than she’d expected, and he didn’t look at her very much. Before five minutes had gone by, she became wildly uncomfortable, and, as they got on the highway, it occurred to her that he could take her someplace and rape and murder her; she hardly knew anything about him, after all.

Just as she thought this, he said, ‘Don’t worry, I’m not going to murder you,’ and she wondered if the discomfort in the car was her fault, because she was acting jumpy and nervous, like the kind of girl who thought she was going to get murdered every time she went on a date.

‘It’s O.K. – you can murder me if you want,’ she said, and he laughed and patted her knee. (2019, p. 81)

In that case, the protagonist has reacted to her sense of vulnerability with a pre-emptive strike of self-effacement. It is a deferment rather than confrontation. In “The Hunter”, with the interaction driven by high stakes physical action and response, there is more of an air of immediate psychological crisis and possible danger. The teacher is responding decisively to a perceived threat. In that moment of decision, it can rarely be clear what will happen next or whether the action was a pragmatic – if dramatic – response to the situation at hand or an overreaction, the response to a threat that was entirely or partly imagined. As things turn out, the bus driver does not approach the house but rather starts his vehicle:

All at once the back door is flooded with light, the white curtain on the door glass becomes a white screen, and then the light fades, and she hears the pick-up backing out to the street. She is panting and now her rage breaks, and she is crying. (1984, p. 48)

The light evokes the paralysing illumination, the aggressive intent, of hunting at night, combining it with that primal animal instinct to freeze when confronted. The white screen is

also a motif that has already reared its head in this story, evoking an earlier scene in which she visited a movie theatre by herself, took what is probably Valium and likely suffered a hallucination:

The screen is white. Then what she sees forming on the white screen is the town in its blanket of snow, the clapboard houses on the hill, the frozen river, the wind blowing snow along the streets. She sees the children coming out of their houses with their schoolbooks and walking down their steps to the street. She sees her life exactly as it is outside the movie theatre. (1984, p. 44)

Notable in this earlier incident is that, while this is likely a hallucination, it may also be taken as her strong emotional identification with a location, her recognition that her physical location has become an expression of her sense of self. Her vulnerability, her sense of threat, is completely embodied in her relationship to a place inscribed against her even as she does not register herself as a physical presence within it.

Yet to the very end, perhaps connected to her absence in her own hallucination, there is no clear sense of a locus for the teacher's sense of vulnerability and no clear locus to the threat. The bus driver departs. The deployment of the white screen as a motif suggests either that she has seen things in the bus driver's actions that weren't there or perceived something beyond what is immediately apparent. Yet perhaps both possibilities exist at the same time, further reinforcing the dangerous ambiguity that permeates her experience of the world.

The next day, in the final scene of the story, when the teacher – alongside the children in her care who become alarmed by her sense of vulnerability – poses for a photograph, she says, "Take it as we are. We are looking at you. Take it" (p. 49). And that use of "you" returns the focus on the reader. It is no longer the photographer observing the picture but the reader. The landscape itself has become an embodiment not just of the teacher's vulnerability but also the reader's voyeuristic desire and complicity in the act of observation. We are as readers, to all intents and purposes, illuminated within the narrative perspective as if we are contained in a vehicle carrying us through the story. We watch the character move on foot through her life from the safety and obscurity of our vantage point with a gaze that is always, until this last moment at least, weighted to our advantage.

At every turn, then, the perambulatory context becomes the means by which the focalising character's vulnerability – and the reader's structural complicity in it – is illuminated and dramatised. Yet is also the context in which she confronts the world, in which she reaches a sort of crisis that has the potential to take her out of her state of ambiguity, her depressed drifting between vague threats shifting into something more definitive. In that action-driven shift, imagined threats come into sharper relief. They either materialise or disperse and there is no telling for the person on the ground, in the heart of the situation, which outcome may occur. That is for me the heart of the abusive relationship, which often plays out in compressed domestic settings but can find its resentful echo in the everyday act of an individual, usually a

woman, walking down a street and being scrutinised by the occupants of passing cars who are largely protected from view.

One night I am jogging along a one-way road in Newcastle called Shortland Esplanade. This road follows the edge between coast and beach so finely that, at high tide, waves will often break across the sidewalk. If you stand on the sidewalk at high tide, you can lean against the white wooden fence, wet from the spray of waves, and look straight down into water to see fish swimming almost close enough to touch. This is not something that most of the people in the cars driving past would know. What they see is the nearness, the vulnerability, of people, not the water swirling over rocks and lapping against stone. Though it is night, there is enough illumination from streetlamps for me to see fish. There are other pedestrians about, people who are either running or walking. There are also cars. The traffic here is restricted to 40 km an hour. The cars have for me a predatory aspect as they drive past, although I am sure plenty of the drivers are just enjoying the view of the ocean.

From one car, as it passes me, a man shouts, “Faggot!” The car cruises on, towards a woman, who is about 30 metres ahead of me. The man yells out again, this time towards the woman. “Slut!” This one-sided dialogue hurled from cars is not unusual in Newcastle and it has shaped how I move through the city. I rarely run in places that I will need to share with cars for too long and I avoid places that are not well-lit. I have the privilege of easily being able to do this in the coastal area where I live. Even then, I keep an eye out. I always expect the possibility of trouble even though it is, in fact, unlikely, beyond those objects and voices hurled from cars. Nonetheless, I promise myself every time I step out the door that I will go down fighting if it should come to that.

My experience, I might add, as the above incidents suggest, is – among other factors – shaped and to some degree cushioned by my gender. I am aware of this when I run and particularly whenever I approach or pass a woman pedestrian.

For me, history, in the sense that I explore it in *The Restorer*, is autobiographical. It is less directed at uncovering the hidden mysteries of a place as is it situating an individual in a particular place and time. It is, in my rendering, the kind of history rooted in the experience of a dislocated individual rather than a community. I think that this is because – as an immigrant and due to the regular disruptions of my childhood and my eventual separation from extended family and people with a shared history – I do not really feel part of a community but an observer within one. In this sense the interest for me is weighted towards how personal history and in-the-moment experience gained in a specific location affects the way a person feels and behaves. But teaching Doctorow’s “The Hunter” has emphasised to me another aspect of this dynamic. Place can become a manifestation of the state of mind of an individual. In the storytelling sense it becomes a figurative as well as literal means to explicate character. Place in this sense intersects with an objective reality but also has its own flavour, its own truth specific to the person experiencing it. This is a limited vantage point and the source of much of the ambiguity in my account of the person on foot.

Against this, walking is both an action and provides the illusion of action. We can walk away from a dangerous or difficult situation but return to it in the same outing. The two main focalising characters in *The Restorer* are always walking by necessity between locations, over the dramatic lifts and falls of landscape that mark the Newcastle coastline. In experiencing this landscape on foot, they get to know its contours and textures – as I did through my endless traversing over the same terrain – but they are also moving through themselves, their own states of mind, and I set out to leverage the tensions within the act of walking in an urban space such as my own into a novelistic explication of character and conflict. By following the same paths, by observing intimately both place and the dynamic between cars and pedestrians and reflecting on these observations in my reading and writing process, I sought to access the state of mind, the vantage point, of the vulnerable walker.

And perhaps this is the term, the figure, that I am working with and offering as the product of my own process, a distant relative of the *flâneur* or the classic psychogeographer: the vulnerable walker – a kind of walker in which opportunity and vulnerability form an uneasy balance.

This figure also appears for me in the more emphatic moments of walking. Leaving a car or leaving a house can become metonymic of leaving a relationship, at which point the potential for violence is made tangible. Such a weighted decision forms the climax of “The Hunter” and also becomes a climactic moment in *The Restorer* when the fifteen-year-old protagonist begins screaming to force a young man who may be on the brink of sexually assaulting her to let her out of a car (1984, p. 324). This dynamic also evokes the idea of *walking out* which is dramatised in the outcome for my other focalising character, the girl’s mother, as that fraught moment when a woman leaves an abusive relationship knowing that this may precipitate an escalation in violence and possibly fatal consequences. What I found and used then in the act of walking, and share with the figure of the *flâneur*, is ambiguity. But my version of ambiguity takes the privileged, unencumbered drift between urban possibilities often associated with all kinds of *flâneur* and transforms it into the shifting boundary between freedom and danger, between intimacy of experience and vulnerability of posture, between constraint and exposure.

The rendering of Newcastle in my novel is based in my own subjectivity. As Elkin notes, “space is not neutral” (2016, p. 287). For me it is partly rooted in the sense of menace that comes from both the environment, shaped as it is in the tension between pedestrian and car, and the inner self, where memories, past traumas – the fear of death and sudden violence – assert themselves and inscribe themselves on the sensory information somewhere between the skin or the eyes or the nose or the ears and the mind.

That small gap is everything.

To be clear, the novel demanded and emerged from a certain state of mind. I do not always experience all of this in such an intense way while walking. I was also suffering from depression during the writing of this novel, in part because I was reliving my childhood and my own experiences of domestic violence while engaged in the process, which foregrounded

elements in my thinking and perception that are generally less salient. The figure of the awkward walker is usually more a part of my vantage point that coexists with many others but was here foregrounded both because of my state of mind and my efforts to find the right dramatic perspective for my novel.

In the end, walking is a complex activity on many levels, in terms of what it transmits and what it signifies and what it offers, and this is further complicated by its relationship to the car. The act of walking in an urban setting such as my own, which is dominated by cars but also shaped by people on foot, exposes the individual to new experiences and insights in the *flâneur* or psychogeographic sense, in contrast to the way that the insulative shell of the vehicle constrains many of the city's inhabitants, even as it affords them more far-ranging mobility. In a car I often feel trapped even when I am the one driving. Walking alone through the urban landscape, on the other hand, can be liberating, a state of being in which different vantage points can be discovered and problems can be worked out. It can also, through the presence of cars and the threats they pose, the intimidating potential of the hidden gaze, provide a vantage point in which the dangerous ambiguities associated with domestic and gender-based violence emerge as the inescapable, often distorting background noise that both resonates with and facilitates the violence that occurs out of sight.

Notes

[1] I write about my relationship with my stepfather and the events of my childhood in my memoir *The Last Thread* (2013/2017).

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