

Testing the *Flâneur* Image in Roberto Bolaño's Exile Writings: A Study of the Theory through the Example of B in "Vagabond in France and Belgium"

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Abstract. *Flâneur*, in Walter Benjamin's essays on the Second Empire of France, refers to the image of a wandering intellectual or petty bourgeoisie who indulges himself in the modern phantasmagoria on the streets of Paris. The complexity and fluidity contained in this concept make possible its denotative expansion in later literary texts. Chilean writer Roberto Bolaño's short story "Vagabond in France and Belgium" can serve to test and develop the theory, for the protagonist B inherits the basic characters of a *flâneur*, and meanwhile, the exile background endows him with some new faces in terms of the identity of places, the drive of behaviours, and attitude towards the void of (post-) modern life. By expanding the notion of *flâneur* into a Latin American post-modern context, this paper not only clarifies the relationship between *flânerie* and exile in Bolaño's works but also contributes to the expansion and enrichment of the denotation of *flâneur* on a critical basis.

1 Introduction

Being one of the representative writers in contemporary Chile, Roberto Bolaño (1953—2003) is arguably the most oft-quoted Latin American author after his literary predecessors of the *Boom Latinoamericano* (the Latin American Boom), with novels such as *Los Detectives Salvajes* (*The Savage Detectives*) (1998) and *2666* (2004) as his most well-known pieces. Born in 1953 in San Diego, he dropped out of school at the age of 15 to pursue his dream of being a writer and poet. It was during these years that young Bolaño was exposed to Latin American left-wing politics and started to devote himself to campaigns and movements. In 1974, one year after the right-wing dictator Augusto Pinochet's military coup, Bolaño left his home country and lived successively in Mexico and Europe for the rest of his life. He died in Spain of hepatic failure at the age of 50.

Nourished by the political turbulence in Chile and the writer's own expatriate experiences, exile life is a recurrent theme in Bolaño's writings. These Chilean exiles, often sad, young intellectuals, spend their days wandering around the streets and living as outsiders detached from European city life. Bolaño's alter-ego "B" in his short story collection *Last Evenings on Earth* (1997) is a member of them. In one of the pieces, "Vagabond in France and Belgium", Chilean man B goes to Paris and Brussels and meets and converses with M, a female exile of a younger generation. During B's sojourn, he walks around the cities and pictures European streetscapes through his eyes, but he achieves nothing in the end. B, the city loafer as such, to some degree dovetails what Walter Benjamin coins in *Paris, Capital*

of the Nineteenth Century (1939) as *flâneur*, the person who idles all day long along the arcades of the Second Empire of France and "seek refuge in the crowd" [1]. Though sharing some obvious similarities, Bolaño's Chilean *flâneur* is, in essence, different from Benjamin's Parisian *flâneur*. Therefore, an investigation into the *flâneur* image in the Chilean writer's short stories is of theoretical significance insofar as it helps to test the applicability of the concept in the context of the 20th-century Latin American diaspora in Europe.

The concept of *flâneur* or *flânerie* is an often-studied object and often-used theory in existing scholarship. Apart from some papers which focus on the analysis or critique of the concept itself, most studies in this field view *flânerie* as a theoretical perspective and, based on this, discuss the image or applicability of *flâneur* in certain literary texts or cultural phenomenon. In terms of Bolaño's works, though the characters' behaviour of *flânerie* is given attention by some scholars, it has not yet been analyzed in Benjamin's theoretical framework. The theme of exile remains the mainstream of Bolaño's study, but in most papers relevant, the Chilean expats' mobile experience in foreign cities is disregarded as an important part of their exile life. Only a few studies show pertinent concerns about this mobility, but they fail to clarify the notions of and the relationship between exile and *flânerie*.

Taking the short story "Vagabond in France and Belgium" as an example, this paper tries to test the adaptability of Walter Benjamin's concept of *flâneur* in Roberto Bolaño's exile writings. With the help of close reading and textual analysis, it aims to examine the

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influences of exile identity on the construction of the *flâneur* image in Bolaño's short stories. By doing so, this present article extends certain significance in its field. For one thing, in terms of the literary text, it contributes to the clarification of the relationship between the *flânerie* behaviour and the "exile" theme in Bolaño's works. For another, when it comes to the theory, by discussing the adaptability of the 19th-century European notion in the scope of 20th-century Latin American literature, it develops the denotation of *flâneur* on a critical basis.

2 Theorizing *Flâneur*: A Product of Modernity

French poet Charles Pierre Baudelaire (1821—1867) comments on the modern society of the 19th century: "Modernity is the transient, the fleeting, the contingent; it is one half of art, the other being eternal and immovable." [2]. According to Chinese scholar Wang Minan, Baudelaire's ideas on modernity connotes three dimensions of meanings: the transience and contingency of modern life, of modern art, and the modern people's child-like strong interest in present life [3]. These "modern people" in the third dimension, thrilled by the newly emerged encounters in modern cities, correspond to what German theorist Walter Benjamin (1892—1940) defined as *flâneur*.

Benjamin's coinage of his *flâneur* is inspired by some kin terms to describe certain groups of idling modern people, such as Edgar Allan Poe's "the man of the crowd" [1], Georg Simmel's "stranger" or "badaud" [4], and the French "Bohemian" [1] or the English "dandy" [2]. The literary prototype of the *flâneur* image comes from Baudelaire's poetry collections *Les Fleurs Du Mal* (1857) and *Le Spleen de Paris* (1869), and the commentary of it starts from the poet's elaboration on the lifestyle and art of French painter Constantin Guys in his essay "The Painter of Modern Life". Though having been seen in previous writers' and scholars' discussions, the theorization of *flâneur* is marked in Benjamin's monograph *Paris, the Capital of the 19th Century*, where he flexibly inserts his discussion of this group of people in his analysis of Baudelaire and the streetscape in 19th century Paris [1]. Based on Benjamin's primary elaboration and successive scholars' interpretations, the image of *flâneur* can be summarized as the following four "faces".

Firstly, *flâneurs* are aimless wanderers. Instead of achieving any practical goals or making tangible profits out of their vagabondage, they wander around the streets merely for some modernist feasts for eyes, such as commodities in the World's Fair, to fill their spiritual emptiness [1]. Secondly, *flâneurs* are architects who construct urban space in a metaphorical sense. With the help of their sharp sight, *flâneurs* capture the visual images of modern cities and encode them into a literary text or a "semiotic universe" for interpretation [5]. Thirdly, *flâneurs* are intellectuals as "commodities". Based on Karl Marx's theory of Commodity Value, Benjamin puts that while enjoying the surrounding of

abundant commodities, *flâneurs* themselves become yet also commodities. Unaware of the commodity nature of their labour, these modern intellectuals are indulged in the "Idol of the Market Place", where pleasure rather than rights or powers is all, they can gain [1]. Finally, *flâneurs* are also the onlookers or marginal men of city life. Albeit "the men of the crowd", they still keep a certain distance from the urban crowd so that they are able to stay alert and critical of the illusions of modern capitalism [1].

The birth of *flâneur*, in a word, is a product of modernity. *Flânerie* reflects such modern characteristics as sensuality, fragmentation, and commodification and hence contains in itself theoretical complexity and fluidity, which leaves room for further interpretation and expansion. This group of city wanderers appear not only as Parisian citizens in the arcades of the Second Empire but also as Latin American exiles on the 20th-century European streets. The image of Chilean man B in Roberto Bolaño's short novels can be seen as having inherited the basic characters of Benjamin's *flâneur*, but meanwhile presents some new faces under the influence of his exile identity, especially in terms of the identity of places, the drive of behaviours, and attitude towards the void of (post-) modern life. Therefore, through a reading of Bolaño's work, the denotation of *flâneur* is tested and expanded against a new context.

3 B as *Flâneur*: Vagabondage in Cities

In Bolaño's short story "Vagabond in France and Belgium", the very first sentence reveals the theme of European vagabondage: "B has crossed the border into France. In five months of wandering, he will spend all the money he has" [6]. B, as a Chilean exile, exhibits in his vagabondage basic resemblances with the four "faces" of the *flâneur*, to some extent indicating the adaptability of the 19th-century European theory to this 20th-century Latin American text.

On the one hand, Bolaño's B shares similar class identities, urban spaces, and visual aimlessness with Benjamin's *flâneur*, who is, in general, a wandering intellectual or petty bourgeoisie in European cities *tout court*. First, from his daily activities in France, such as reading and writing novels or frequenting bookshops, it can be inferred that B is a man of letter, which tallies with the identities of those Parisian *flâneurs*, such as the poet Baudelaire and the artist Guys. Second, happening in European cities, especially Paris, both their *flânerie* manage to explore and construct urban spaces. In Benjamin's description, the arcades are the place where *flâneurs* accumulate their modern experience. When it comes to B, city landmarks such as Saint Jacques Street and Luxembourg Gardens are visited during his sojourn, and his being "vaguely familiar" with the route from the Montmartre cemetery to the Pont Royal also intimates his inner construction of the city spaces.

Third and most importantly, B's look at the streetscape, just like a *flâneur*'s, lacks a possessive power over the city. Instead of using human beings' power-loaded "gaze" to incorporate the urban images

into their own possessions, the *flâneurs*' non-focused "look" at the modern streets symbolize their commodity-like passivity, for what they receive from their *flânerie* is mere pleasure without power. In "Vagabond in France and Belgium", B has largely a pair of *flâneur*'s eyes, vague and wandering. Staring at the mirror, he avoids looking directly into his own eyes: "What he sees is a thinnish, middle-aged man, sweating slightly from the walk, who seeks, finds, and flees his own gaze" [6]. B's habit of looking out of his hotel window into the streets is depicted several times throughout the story, with an ethereal narrative that underlies the futility of his looking. Significantly, even a Belgian dog outside the glass stares more possessively than the Chilean man: "A few yards in front of her, a dog has stopped, with his muzzle raised and his eyes, like slots in a cash drawer, fixed on one of the hotel's windows, perhaps the one from which B is looking out" [6].

On the other hand, as a "man of the crowd", B's *flânerie* ironically fails to find him a shelter in the crowd, which creates a long-lasting air of disquietude and fragmentation in the story. According to Benjamin, "the *flâneur* seeks refuge in the crowd" [7]. However, this attempt is oftentimes a futile one, for either consciously or unconsciously, they still keep certain distances from the phantasmagoria of modern life. In B's case, his observations of and interactions with other people give a feeling of the Sword of Damocles hanging over his head, like when he describes two women standing together: "seem to be the principal figures in a painting, which initially gives an impression of peace and balance, but then strikes him as deeply disturbing" [6].

The Chilean *flâneur*'s quasi-romantic intercourse with M, a younger African-Latin American exile who lives in Brussels, also verifies his uneasiness while being around others. Just like how a *flâneur* interacts with the modern crowd, B maintains a lukewarm relationship with M, seen from their disjointed conversations and unspoken messages. For example, at their first meeting in Belgium, instead of answering B's questions about her life, M ask about B's health, writing and life in Spain, indicating the exiled girl's natural reluctance to intimacy [6]. Another example is when M has known more about B by the end of the second day and escorts him back to his hotel; she (somewhat tentatively) asks her Chilean friend what he will do at night: "I don't know, says B, read maybe. For a moment, B thinks that M has something to say to him, but she says nothing." [6]. At that moment, the two are thinking about the same way to spend their night and probably know about each other's thoughts, but emotional aphasia hinders both from saying it. Taking root in the fragmentation of the Chilean exiles in Bolaño's stories, this emotional aphasia is evidence of B's *flâneur*-like loneliness despite his relative proximity with M.

To sum up, it is pertinent to classify B as a *flâneur* in a broad sense, for he shares not only basic backgrounds and resemblances with the group of modern people defined by Benjamin but also extends uneasy and fragmented feelings of loneliness when being in the city crowd with M's companion. Nonetheless, the image of this Bolaño hero is still a mere variation of the Parisian

flâneur, for it is conditional upon his identity as a Latin-American exile with an air of void.

4 B as Exile: *Flânerie* in Void

Considering the initial of his last name and the two's shared national and exile background, the regular protagonist B is actually Bolaño's alter-ego, verifying the importance of the author's life experiences to the interpretation of the character. The author and character's 20th-century Chilean exile identity results in his differences from the 19th-century *flâneur* and thus tests and develops the concept's denotation in terms of the identity of places, the drive of behaviours, and attitude towards the void of (post-) modern life.

Firstly, in Bolaño's exile writings, the image of *flâneur* is developed into a rootless cosmopolitan without attachment to certain places. In Benjamin's descriptions, *flâneur* takes pride in being a Parisian when wandering about the "capital of the 19th century" and hence shows exclusive attitudes towards cities other than Paris, such as Baudelaire's criticism against Brussels as an unfavourable city for *flânerie* [2]. However, in the short story, B wanders around both Paris and Brussels, and they can be any other cities in either Europe or Latin America, for the hero shows no particularity about the place to vagabond and even no special attachment to where he comes from. According to Bolaño, "the writer's only motherland is his language" [8]. When deciphering the mysterious writer Lefebvre's graphic script, B compares his language and words to "blades of grass shifting in the wind", a field with "grass of uneven height" and "a cone unravelling" which reminds him of his "searching desultorily for a four-leaf clover" in his younger days in Latin America [6]. These images lost and roving, portray a picture of displacement in Lefebvre's writings, which respond to the cosmopolitan identity of Bolaño and the exile *flâneur* in his works.

Secondly, different from Benjamin's *flâneur*, whose wandering is fuelled by his great interest in the modern phantasmagoria of the outside world, Bolaño's character' vagabondage is driven by the obsessions inside his inner world. While the former indulges himself in the stimulus of arcades and commodities, the latter is more often motivated by the "'true' core of his inner self", which is reinforced in his exile experience [8]. In the short novel, B shows nearly no interest in places other than bookshops: "Sometimes he comes to the entrance of a museum, but he never goes in. Sometimes he comes to a movie theatre and stands there examining the posters at length, then walks on", which manifests his insensitivity to modernity, "as if he were not in Paris but out in the country" [6]. The only reason he enjoys visiting the second-hand bookshop is not for the store itself but for an author named Henri Lefebvre, which is yet another evidence of his inner drive, for he tries to track the already deceased author's home simply because he is the only author in the *Luna Park* magazine that he is unfamiliar with [6].

Thirdly, an attitude change from active confrontation to passive acceptance towards the spiritual emptiness of

the (post-)modernity also constitutes Bolaño's development of the Benjaminian concept. The exile *flâneur* in his works has a post-modern aura of void and gives up the modernist attempt to fill the void by means of *flânerie*. Living in the age of the "Chilean neo-avant-garde" movement, Bolaño is more or less influenced by the nihilist thought of "nothingness" [9]. He replied with the single word "nothing" to an interviewer's question about his feeling about returning to his motherland after years, and he also points out in his essays that what he learned from Chilean literature is to "ask for nothing because you will be given nothing" [10]. When it comes to the text of "Vagabond in France and Belgium", this air of emotionless "nothingness" is permeated the writer's language and narrative.

On the one hand, Bolaño's use of understatement in language soft-pedals the protagonist's feelings as a lonely, vagabond exile. When silence falls upon his conversation with M, B unconsciously drops into his own thoughts: "For a moment, he imagines the three of them, M's father, her mother, and M at the age of two or three, with her green eyes, surrounded by precarious suspension bridges. Her father was never really a close friend of mine, thinks B. There were never really any bridges, not even precarious ones" [6]. In this paragraph, the protagonist's feelings are conveyed without the help of any emotionally-loaded words. For one thing, the minute reference to M's "green eyes" indicates his care for the girl both in his imagination and in front of him. For another, the "precarious suspension bridges" is a metaphor of the relationship between B and M's father or M herself, and thus the fact that "there were never really any bridges" demonstrates the meaninglessness of B's interactions with M [6]. Meanwhile, the ostensibly inexplicable appearance of the bridges in B's thoughts also adds an air of absurdity to the void of the story.

On the other hand, the leaping narrative of B's thoughts functions as a conscious avoidance of the overflow emotions. Like the author himself, B is a Chilean intellectual who fled to Europe in disappointment after Augusto Pinochet's military coup in the year of 1973. An emotional trauma from the ill fate of his nation and Latin America as a whole loom over his exile life, but none of it is directly depicted in the story. The most explicit reference to this traumatic experience is when B happens to know that Henri Lefebvre's birth year is the same as the coup and tries to recall his own memories back then: "B tries to remember the year 1973. It is no use. He has walked too far, and although he feels relaxed, in fact, he is tired, and what he needs is food or sleep" [6]. Here, "it is no use" signals a sudden leap in narration from the exile trauma to the *flâneur* trivia, blocking B's flood of emotions. Interestingly, this short sentence is also a pun: it not only connotes the obvious meaning of "B tries but cannot remember" but also intimate that this whole "remembering the traumatic past" is mere futility and meaninglessness, which again underlies the void and nothingness in the narration of the story.

In conclusion, the image of the exile *flâneur* in Bolaño's short story expands the original concept in three aspects. It not only develops the *flâneur*'s identity

of place from exclusive citizenship to a global one but also transforms his drive of behaviours from the outside world to his inner self. More importantly, instead of being what Baudelaire calls the "ultimate hero of modernity" who fight against the void of life [2], the post-modern *flâneur* embraces this void and paints his *flânerie* in a colour of nothingness.

5 Discussion

In short, the denotative development of the concept of *flâneur* is made possible by the Latin American exile background of the hero in Roberto Bolaño's short story. B's identity as exile is of particularity, for instead of being compelled to leave his motherland, his global displacement is more of a personal choice resulting from the author's positive attitude towards this kind of diaspora.

Bolaño's life experiences and literary thoughts largely account for his optimistic ideas about exile. For one thing, he was born and bred in an environment more of a romantic fantasy than the usual Latin American realistic criticism. Chile was the home to Latin American literary fantasy [11]. Bolaño grew up listening to his mother reading Pablo Neruda's love poems and launched the "Infra-realism" movement, also known as "Latin American Dadaism", as a young poet. His belief in individualism thereof enables him to consider exile from a perspective other than nationalism, which renders his attitude a respectively positive one. For another, Bolaño considers his exile as a form of literature itself. He repeatedly points out in his works that exile, in particular the writer's exile, should not be viewed as a trauma but rather as "an interruption that makes possible a new beginning" in his life and art or merely a form of more generalized displacement shared by other cosmopolitan writers such as James Joyce [12]. By saying so, he believes that exile is an aesthetic mode inherent in both his individual life and literary composition.

Though Bolaño views exile positively and writes it ethereally, the exiled characters in his works still bear an unavoidable sadness and loneliness as Latin American intellectuals in the 20th century. Here the void of *flânerie* is not only a reason for their self-loss but also a result or a representation of it. This representation of void in Bolaño's characterization, on the one hand, accounts for the *flâneur* notion's failure in the text. On the other hand, however, considering its relative adaptability to character B, it still manages to leave room for denotative development of the notion in a new context.

6 Conclusion

Flâneur, with his identities as an aimless wanderer, urban architect, intellectual "commodity", and crowd onlooker, is a product of modernity in Walter Benjamin's writings. The concept contains in itself complexity and fluidity and thus makes possible further interpretation and expansion in later literary works.

Chilean writer Roberto Bolaño's short story "Vagabond in France and Belgium" can serve as an

eligible text to test and develop the theory, for the protagonist and the authors alter-ego B inherits the basic characters of *flâneur*, but meanwhile presents some new faces. In the first part of the main body, the relative adaptability of the concept of *flâneur* to the text is verified through an analysis of B's resemblances with it. In the second part, B's differences from a Benjaminian *flâneur* are elaborated in terms of the identity of places, the drive of behaviours, and attitude towards the void of (post-) modern life, thus adding the post-modern "nothingness" into the original theory.

This denotative development takes root in the author and the protagonist's identity as Latin American exiles with an air of void. By expanding the notion of *flâneur* into a Latin American post-modern context, this paper not only clarifies the relationship between *flânerie* and exile in Bolaño's works but also contributes to enriching the denotation on a critical basis.

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