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A Literary Walk in the City: Reading Valeria Luiselli's *Sidewalks*

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Abstract

The paper attempts a close reading of *Sidewalks* by Valeria Luiselli. Since Luiselli replicated walking/bicycling in Mexico City in terms of stylistics, structure and tone of the essays, I consider it significant to view *Sidewalks* as part of the literature of walking. A branch of travel literature, the literature of walking, was an emerging genre in which the narrator is depicted as walking on a place and the physical act of walking with thinking to generate and arrange creative ideas into a coherent whole. Walking and thinking were as old as the Greek Peripatetics or even older. The paper reads *Sidewalks* as the product of thinking while walking. Walking/bicycling provided Luiselli with a felt point of reference to interrogate abstraction in the modern world. Our failure to engage our senses with the real and the concrete place deprived us of an experiential way of living. The paper pays close attention to metaphors and images as they appeared to the consciousness of the walking/bicycling narrator, which are closely interwoven with Mexico's literal and literary background.

Keywords: Walking while thinking; cycleur; flâneur; modern city; travel literature.

Valeria Luiselli, in her collection of essays *Sidewalks* (2013), suggests that our failure to understand our surroundings from a subjective point of view is leading to a kind of epistemological crisis. She questions the modern world of abstraction and simulation and laments the passive acceptance of these reductive representations with no urge on our part to feel the concrete and the real. She finds the disciplines of cartography and anatomy so abstract that they seem to have lost the referent in the real life. With the dawn of modernity, rationality has overshadowed sensibility; as a result, I regard a display of feelings as sentimental. Moreover, modern rationality has given birth to "relational thinking," which, for the sake of simplicity, has substituted "the imagined abstract" for "the felt real." As a result, the substitution of the unfelt abstract for the felt real has displaced the real so that it is on the verge of being lost altogether.

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H. D. Thoreau has taught us that walking can stem the tide of this relentless expansion of the universe of abstraction. For Luiselli, who, unlike Thoreau, is a city dweller, even walking, the cherished pastime of the thinkers of the past, who walked to have a sense of the world, has lost its pristine appeal because the modern city decides the route, rhythm and pace of the urban walker. Any deviation from the set routes in the city might invite the risk of being knocked down by buzzing traffic or being looked upon by the city police with suspicion.

Luiselli regards the city as a book, which she can read from her subjective point of view. In order to narrate her essays from a subjective point of view, she employs a walking narrator who walks in the city to interweave the flavour of the place with the narration. To quote Rafferty, 'Luiselli uses each section to explore an idea; for example, the section titled "Speed Limit: 160 km/h" considers the speed of bicycle as "proportionate to man['s]," unlike the car or airplane, perfect for developing thought…' (35). Robbie Trocchia agrees that Luiselli's "nomadic past sheds light on the mode of her writing as a traveling trajectory. That is, she puts ideas in motion as she walks through them" (4). The city in question is Mexico, the geographical place; but as the novel progresses, the geographical Mexico city tends to be more like a metaphor, Mexico in Luiselli's mind. Thus, Mexico city begins from being a city "out there" and ends up being a city "in there." I can also interpret the metaphorical Mexico city as Luiselli's literary forest from which she gleans the literary "wood" to fashion her texts.

Necrophilia denotes a tendency to evince erotic interest in dead bodies. Musing about dead bodies of the poets, philosophers and writers of yore and searching for their graves, writes Luiselli, is a kind of intellectual necrophilia. Luiselli uses the term "necro-intellectual tourism" for the tendency of people to visit tombs, graves of the writers whom they adore. In the opening essay "Joseph Brodsky's Room and a Half," the reader finds the narrator in the cemetery where she is searching for the grave of Joseph Brodsky.[1] Luiselli walks to a cemetery to "meet" with Joseph Brodsky, the author. Wandering around the graves of writers such as Ezra Pound, the narrator was hoping to hear their ghosts, who might be attending to their graves, humming their writings. But after a long and careful walk around the cemetery, the narrator felt exhausted and sat under a tree to smoke a cigarette instead. The narrator wondered was there any shortcut to

[1] Russian-born American poet who was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1987 for his poetry championing individual freedom in mystical yet lyrical language. He died in January 28, 1996. See. Britannica, The Editors of Encyclopaedia. ―Joseph Brodsky‖. Encyclopaedia Britannica, n.d., https://www.britannica.com/biography/Joseph-Brodsky. Accessed 11 June 2021.

know an author? How could the tourists know an author by paying a visit to his/her grave? It is remarkable that some writers do write about their encounters with ghosts, fairies and elves, or, at least personify the creative impulse as the Muse. Luiselli's narrator decides to gather a felt experience of whether ghosts really walk the graveyard or whether she can hear them gossip and chuckle. Her walk in the graveyard to meet with a ghost or some witches tells her that at least for her the only way to know a writer is to read his/her works. The writer's spirit, suggests Luiselli, lies not in the writer's body but the body of his/her writings. Valeria Luiselli, the good-looking flâneuse, also responds to the gaze of the modern readers who seem to be more inquisitive about her body than her works.

It is needless to mention why a young writer like Luiselli would evoke the memory of a masterful writer at the very beginning of her book. Like W. G. Sebald in *The Rings of Saturn*, she could not begin her journey as a writer without acknowledging the debt of gratitude to Joseph Brodsky, whose powerful influence hangs over her mind. Sometimes, the "ghost" of a predecessor is so strong that it "possesses" the young writer. The successor must first acknowledge and accommodate the legacy of the masterful predecessor before looking for a space for him/her. The trope of "grave" suggests a magnum opus, by some literary genius such as Brodsky, lying buried in the "graveyard," i.e. library. To say that "grave" is a metaphor in Luiselli for knowing a dead poet/writer does not stop the trope unravel further; instead, it amounts to making a beginning. In *Sidewalks*, Valeria Luiselli describes Walser's writing as "a chink in the wall, for looking through to the other side" (120). Lida Ford also accepts the proposition, "… I believe Luiselli is right when she views [metaphor] as not a dead-end but a significant, if not small, opening" (10). Writers have to find new "bottles" to contain the old "wine." Everyone aspiring to become a writer is under pressure to sound different from one's predecessor (who was more talented and had a wider range of themes to choose from), searching to find one's place in the densely populated literary world. A writer's urge to find a "permanent place of residence" finds its expression in the metaphor of "grave" in Valeria Luiselli's Sidewalks. Colin Rafferty observes, "[t]hese essays allow Luiselli to consider her predecessors – after all, the inhabitants of a cemetery are the only residents of a city who have a guarantee of permanent residency – but also herself within the canon…" (35).

Robbie Trocchia notes that Luiselli's works are primarily concerned with "space and people's relation to space" and that her concern with people and their spaces finds full articulation in her "mode of writing" (3). Nevertheless, Robbie glossed over the role of movement through the space

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as a catalyst because a static posture cannot help achieve a dynamic relationship with our spaces. In Luiselli's *Sidewalks*, Ireimagine walking in Mexico City with a view on the city's structural rigidity that modulates the movement of a walker. After practising walking with little success in Mexico, Luiselli switches to bicycling, which, she thinks, is a better option to provide body propelled rhythmical movement through the cityscape and, also, to provide much needed "invisibility" that a walker needs to cast his/her gaze at the public while himself/herself remain incognito. Moreover, bicycling provides the rider with an opportunity to think deeply while the bicycle effortlessly glides down the slopes. She coins the terms "cycleur" for a thinking bicyclist in a metropolitan city like Mexico. Robbie Trocchia notes that Luiselli "… is able to articulate her interest in space in a way that is not only illuminating both in the form and content of her fiction but also in the mode of her writing" (3). However, Luiselli does not dismiss walking as redundant activity in a city; instead, she chooses between walking and bicycling (even riding a bicycle requires some amount of walking) according to the place one visits. Patty Nash understands the composite quality of a bicycle ride when he notes Luiselli has rediscovered "the meditative detachment" of walking in "a long bike ride." Bicycling is remarkable to carry over two fundamental skills from bipedal locomotion, i.e. the balancing act and alternate movement of legs – both the skills have to achieve simultaneous synchronisation for bicycling to happen. In this sense, I can regard bicycling as an improved form of walking. Thus, it can be argued that detachment between the body and the mind was brought about not by bicycling but by motorised/air travel, replacing both walking and bicycling.

Why is walking necessary while searching for a permanent place in the literary graveyard? No one walks to one's grave, but those to bear the dead to the graveyard do walk. In a way, Luiselli is going to the graveyard in search of a "soul" of a writer with which she would enliven her own "dead body." The "Dead" does not mean clinically dead, but aesthetically lifeless or anaesthetised by the dull times I live in and the desperate people one meets with. Poets of genius like Joseph Brodsky are more aesthetically alive after they are physically dead. Paradoxically, Luiselli walks in the graveyard hoping to begin a literary life, a life that defies death because a poet of genius comes alive when he dies – s/he kills death. Therefore, the narrator's walk through the graveyard is metaphorical as well as literal. It is also a sardonic comment on the fate of a human being that no matter how high one soars in one's prime, one has to *walk* to one's "room and a half" in the graveyard (emphasis added).

Valeria Luiselli resurrects flâneuse, the female counterpart of a flâneur, in the male-dominated tradition of flâneur. The flâneur, as imagined by Charles Baudelaire and Walter Benjamin, excluded women from the specialised practice of city walking except as objects of a masculine gaze. Luiselli, with her collection of essays *Sidewalks*, firmly establishes that flânerie is not a gender-specific practice, nor had it ever been. When Colin Rafferty acknowledges *Sidewalks* as a work set in the tradition of flânerie, he also lends his tacit acceptance because the tradition of flânerie stands readjusted after such works as *Sidewalks*. Note his words: "[l]ike its eponymous pathways, each fragmented essay of the book is laid, slab by slab, to create a route that leads us through the city and back to where we started, changed for the better by the ramble" (35).

As mentioned earlier, there is always a tension in Luiselli to shake off the burden of her predecessors, but not without a desire to draw nourishment from their literary legacy to earn a place in the literary canon. She accepts the fact that she wrote "*Sidewalks* in order to appropriate a language and a space that was not entirely my own (Reber 12). To achieve this end, she realigns the established canon to make a place for herself; for example, she asks: why shouldn't I run after a grave or some birds if Chesterton, so fat, so dignified, and so intelligent, had been capable of running after a hat?" (Luiselli). She quotes Joseph Brodsky more favourably than Chesterton: "If there is an infinite aspect to space," quotes the narrator, "it is not its expansion but its reduction. If only because the reduction of space, oddly enough, is always more coherent. It's better structured and has more names: a cell, a closet, a grave" (Brodsky qtd. in Luiselli). The narrator thus extends the metaphor of the grave to include the living writers as well. In a way, Luiselli is suggesting that we are all born into a "grave," i.e., our body is a living grave until we shed the ghost and end up in an earthly grave in the cemetery. This dimension of the trope of grave becomes more significant when we view it vis-à-vis the tension between the tradition and the individual talent in Luiselli, who as a writer probably wishes to begin her literary journey from where her predecessors, for whom she has ambivalent feelings, had ended. However, she is also destined to end there, not without leaving a body of works for the readers to peruse and a grave with a gravestone for the necro-intellectual tourists to visit. She also suggests that we are "living graves," and the way we earmark spaces in modern cities is nothing less than living in the grave while still being alive. She recalls how Brodsky and his parents were allocated forty square meters of space, i.e. a room and a half in Soviet's community living areas. Apart from the room and a half occupied by Brodsky in St. Petersburg and his tomb in Venice, the narrator imagines many spaces temporarily inhabited by Brodsky before cynically observing that "… a person only has two real residences: the childhood home and the grave. All the other spaces we inhabit are a

mere gray (sic) spectrum of that first dwelling, a blurred succession of walls that finally resolve themselves into the crypt or the urn – the tiniest of the infinite divisions of space into which a human body can fit" (Luiselli). Cees Nooteboom disagrees with her saying that there is a third space where the "homeless" can live, i.e. "writing." Nooteboom, however, does not notice that Luiselli, near the beginning of her book, drops a clue to understanding the trope of "grave." She writes that when looked from a flying aeroplane "the cemetery might resemble an enormous hardcover book: one of those stout, heavy dictionaries in which words – like decomposing skeletons – rest eternally" (Luiselli). Grave thus ends up being the entire book or oeuvre of an author in which the words and sentences like the human body decompose themselves.

The reader has barely understood the "grave" as a metaphor when Luiselli's narrator presents another equally amorphous trope of the mirror. A mirror or looking glass is a reflective substance that reflects our image when we look into it; thus, before we learn to "see" ourselves through the faces of others, looking glass is the only object which can help us recognise ourselves. We are also aware of the joy that a little child feels when s/he first comes across the looking glass and sees his/her image. This first sighting of the child's image in the mirror can be regarded as the first step towards that self-image with which the child would identify him/herself the rest of the life – though it undergoes many changes in later life. However, Luiselli's narrator, by quoting Brodsky that the mirrors in hotel rooms return "anonymity" rather than self-image, inverts the metaphor of the mirror. The mirror, in the new signification, becomes destructive of rather than reflective of self-image. Through the inversion of the trope of a mirror, Luiselli wishes to suggest that human beings progress from anonymity to identity and then creep back into anonymity as they move towards the end. This interpretation of the metaphor of "mirror" fits well with the previous metaphor of "grave" insofar as both construct and dissolve the body and the body-oriented identity. The entire line of argument suggests that human life dissolves into lifelessness and then into death and, in some rare cases, rises to life after death. Note this, "... a dead person is always more agreeable than a living one" (Luiselli).

It is interesting to think about the perspective or the point of view from which the narrator is projecting the gaze on her world. Without establishing the point of view, which keeps on changing, one cannot perceive the object as the narrator perceives it. Note the shifting point of view in terms of height/distance from the object, speed of movement and the point at the timescale in the essay "Flying Home."

> The difference between flying in an airplane, walking, and riding a bicycle is the same as that between looking through a telescope, a microscope, and a movie camera. Each allows for a particular way of seeing. From an airplane, the world is a distant representation of itself. On two legs, we are condemned to a plethora of microscopic detail. But the person suspended over two wheels, a meter above the ground, can see things as if through the lens of a movie camera: he can linger on minutiae and choose to pass over what is unnecessary. (Luiselli)

The narrator flying in the aeroplane wonders what purpose the "airplane maps" serve when a peep through the window can afford a felt experience of the flight over the ground. The narrator feels that "airplane maps" are a cruel invention, as they tend to remove the felt experience of moving through a place. Not only are we unconscious of the concrete fact of flying and least interested in experiencing it, but we also feel rather satisfied in contemplating the replica of the real. Luiselli brings out this reluctance on our part through an episode in which she is on board a flight to Mexico. During the flight, notes the narrator, "… few people are conscious of the physical, absolutely concrete fact of flight….Everyone on board… attempts to ignore the fact, at once beautiful and terrifying, that their bodies are suspended in midair (sic)." Even raising the window curtain is looked upon as an act of revolt to the sensibilities of the majority that want to turn its eyes away from the sublime, yet terrifying, but the real experience of flight. Instead, the passengers prefer to fix their eyes on the aeroplane maps to know that they are travelling. The "real cartographic" representation of Mexico City, according to the narrator, can be seen from above without resorting to any reductive abstraction of the same on the table in a library. She notes with satisfaction that seen "… from above, that world is immense but attainable as if it were a map of itself, a lighter and more easily apprehended analogy." To put it in simple words, Luiselli arguably wants to suggest that the creation of the replica – if it has to be created – should be kept as near to the real as possible; the irredeemable separation between the two results in an epistemological crisis which can lead to the fall of the meaning through the chasm irrecoverably. Unsettled by this experience, the narrator visits the Map Library at the Mexico City centre to study the maps of Mexico. On visiting the Map Library, she finds out that the building housing the corpora of maps is a puzzle in terms of its architectural design. The narrator wonders why a place that holds the documents spelling out the order of space, i.e. the maps, is itself not a perfect example of "ordered distribution of space" (Luiselli). Her walk in the library building brings up a chain of felt reflections on the absurdity of reduction/representation of

space on paper. The experience of walking/travelling through a place, the narrator wishes the reader to understand, can never be replicated by running a pointer on the map.

Through an ingenious comparison between a guild of doctors dissecting a cadaver (as depicted in Rembrandt's The Anatomy Lesson of Dr Nicolaes Tulp) and a group of cartographers bending over a map in the Map Library, the narrator brings out the striking similarities between the two "operations." She notes that essentially "... an anatomist and a cartographer do the same thing: trace vaguely arbitrary frontiers on a body whose nature it (sic) is to resist determined borders, definitions, and precise limits." The juxtaposition also suggests that a cartographic map is akin to a cadaver under the surgical knife; both can be subjected to the cruelty of cartographical/anatomical probity but not without mutilating them beyond redemption.

Luiselli does not try to see her world through abstract philosophical concepts; rather, she lets them refract through the prism of her walking/wakeful "self." The narrator uses "Mexico City" as a trope as well as a physical location through which she contests the notion of graphical representation of places in cartography. The narrator notes that she cannot imitate Benjamin's flânerie and Baudelaire's strolls in Mexico because Mexico lacks any city centre like Paris. The narrator wonders where to locate Mexico in Mexico City. She fails in her search to experience the city of Mexico without the aid of any graphical representation, such as paper maps and aeroplane maps. Even walking through the city does not yield the perception she craves. The narrator questions the fundamental notion of flânerie that only walking can decode the puzzle of a modern city. In this way, she compels the reader to rethink whether she is talking about the geographical city of Mexico or Mexico that lurks in her memory, i.e. the Mexico of her creative mind. It also betrays anxiety to seek novelty and escape the baggage of her predecessors, like Benjamin, Baudelaire and Sebald, amongst others. The narrator attempts to achieve newness by making the city of Mexico unique and unrepresentable through any of the abstract systems existing before her, yet in denial lies her desire to represent herself through representing Mexico. It can thus be argued that Mexico is, in fact, Luiselli's "room and a half," which she wishes to reclaim from the wilderness of oblivion. She admits that when she wrote Sidewalks because she "... wanted to become a writer, a Mexican writer, an inhabitant of a city in which I had been born but had never lived, a speaker of a language that had always been only a small portion of myself. Writing is a way of writing yourself into the world, I guess. I was of course unsuccessful. I ended

up writing a book not about Mexico City but other cities as well as the impossibility of writing about Mexico City" (Reber 12).

In "Manifesto À Velo," which means "statement of purpose for a bicycle," the narrator weighs and considers walking and bicycling in terms of their suitability in the context of the modern metropolitan city. However, the narrator considers walking indispensable in certain circumstances, such as in a graveyard or a library. Nevertheless, she prefers bicycling to walking in the city for several advantages that it has over walking. The narrator notes that from "… the Peripatetic philosophers to the modern flâneurs, the leisurely stroll has been conceived as a poetics of thought, a preamble to writing, a space for consultation with the muses." Yet walking in a metropolitan city, in general, Mexico, in particular, argues the narrator, has certain practical limitations. Because of restrictions on free movement in a city, a pedestrian's "extravagant spirit" stands primarily curtailed. How can the modern city walker feel free on a busy road when Rousseau in pre-modern had the bad luck of being hit by an onrushing Great Dane? Asks the narrator. First, a walker's pace poses a threat to the rhythm of the fast-moving city; second, thinking accompanies leisurely walking so much so that the walker becomes self-absorbed to the point of being lost in conversation with the self and might become less alert to the traffic on the road, thus putting his life at risk. Workaholic city dwellers might consider a walker an idler, therefore, a figure of suspicion to the point of being an outlaw. A bicyclist provides indemnity from such a miscalculation besides offering matching benefits of walking. A bicyclist can cruise unnoticeably yet enjoy the wholesomeness offered by body-propelled locomotion. "The bicycle," notes the narrator, "is halfway between the shoe and the car, and its hybrid nature sets its rider on the margins of all possible surveillance." The bicycle, for example, allows the rider idle time without losing the rhythm of movement to reflect on a thought bit – all the rider has to do is let the bicycle run its course on a steep slope. Therefore, it can be argued that the narrator prefers a plurality of points of view in terms of distance/height, angle and speed of the movement for capturing the nuances of the object of the gaze. The quest for a wholesome perception of an object from diverse points of view is how Luiselli arguably suggests remedying the epistemological crisis arising from the successive overshadowing of the real by the abstract. She notes how the shift in point of view results in an altered perception of the object in front of the gaze:

> The difference between flying in an airplane, walking, and riding a bicycle is the same as that between looking through a telescope, a microscope, and a movie camera. Each allows for a particular way of seeing. From an airplane, the world is a distant

> representation of itself. On two legs, we are condemned to a plethora of microscopic detail. But the person suspended over two wheels, a meter above the ground, can see things as if through the lens of a movie camera: he can linger on minutiae and choose to pass over what is unnecessary. (Luiselli)

In the essay, "Alternative Routes," we see that whenever the narrator feels cramped in her room and restless in her mind – though both happen simultaneously; she picks up her bicycle and rides away into the city. She is particularly smitten by the urge to break free from the four walls of her apartment – which suggests some unsettling impulse lurking at the back of her mind – at the evening hour. At this time, her roommate Sara – we are not sure how Sara is related to her – returns to the apartment from work. The narrator has left the link between the presence of Sara in her room and her sudden fit of restlessness, making her rushing out onto the road on her bicycle unexplained. Along with this, the narrator also becomes over conscious of herself, so much so that she wants to become invisible to the gaze of others. As the name of the essay "Alternative Routes" suggests, she is unable to come to terms with some urge in her mind that cannot be channelised through the socially acceptable paths – thus, she searches for alternative paths. Remarkably, walking/bicycling helps her approach her critical yet unexplored portion of her mind, and she bicycles and reads to come to terms with the rumblings of inner wilderness. The indescribability of her condition is metaphorized in her frantic search in the dictionary for "the exact word" that could express the state of her mind so that she is at least able to say it to her questioning self that she is not alone; there have been people like her before. She is not only suffering from a unique state of mind but more so because she, despite being an inventive writer, cannot find a proper order of events to externalise and evoke the emotion inflicting her mind. In her frantic search for answers to the question posed by "the other" in her "self," she is quite a modern descendent of Rousseau (Singh, "Walking"). It is after a long furtive search in various dictionaries of diverse languages that the narrator could muster the courage to approach, though allegorically, the relationship she probably had with Sara:

> Sara is doing an oil painting from a snapshot she took in Madrid some years ago, when we lived there together. It's of a long, narrow street called the Paseo de los Melancólicos, through which we often had to ride home. Along the bank of the river Manzanares – that "liquid irony," as Ortega y Gasset described it, because of its almost total lack of water – the melancholy Paseo de los Melancólicos stretches out like a pleonasm. (Luiselli)

After a long search, the narrator is able to zero in on a word approximating to her condition: "Saudade," which becomes more of a metaphor for the unsayable in the relationship between the two young intellectual women than a literal word denoting melancholy. Thus, painting for Sara and walking/bicycling, thinking and writing for the narrator become crucial for locating, naming and narrating the deepest layers of each woman's self. The essay, thus, ends with an affirmation to "use alternative routes," i.e. to sublimate rather than frustrate the wayward energies of the self.

In the essay "Stuttering Cities," we find that using the "alternative routes" is easier said than done. One requires a "mason" with "a chisel with a mallet" to cut, shape and smoothen new routes; and bidding adieu to the dear old ways is not so easy either. The chiselling, dismantling the old and digging through the new ways in the existing structure, like effecting alternations in an apartment building, has meta-literal[2] meanings. The narrator observes that learning is like digging new pathways in the mind, which might necessitate relinquishing old ways of thinking and looking at things. Interestingly, the narrator's idea echoes Robert Macfarlane's notion of learning to find new footpaths on the land (31). While Macfarlane was exploring our direct relationship with the land, Luiselli looks at the world mediated through the prism of language, i.e. her primary concern is our relationship with our world as constructed by language. It is a tripartite grid: our mind, language, and the outside world. Thus, by the end of the essay, the construction and alteration, which is being done in her apartment building, is made to include dismantling, altering and reconstruction in the brain, the structure created by the language and for the language. To put it directly, the physical, fleshy, and bony structure of the brain is her apartment building, and the voice of the narrator is the language that is "living" in that structure. Learning, the narrator suggests, would necessitate an overhaul in the way language "lives" and "moves" in the brain.

Thus, Luiselli's city is the city of linguistic construction and the world that she experiences through it, which began with learning the first sounds of language from her mother. This construct of a city is awaiting earthquake and consequent destruction, which has to happen before real, which lies beyond the language, manifests itself. If an encounter with the real is the

[2] Meta-literal is a metaphor, which has its root/literal meaning in firm possession as against a metaphor, which has lost its roots. In this study, meta-literal expressions are favoured more because they fit with the basic premise of the thesis, i.e. to walking and float at the same time. Thus meta-literal is an expression which is literal yet its meaning spills beyond the literal sense.

final destination of a walker, then we can argue that Luiselli, like Annie Dillard (*Pilgrim*), considers language an impediment to "seeing" rather than an enabler. Lying at the heart of Luiselli's frustration with language is her condition she has had since childhood, which is indescribable through the existing corpora of terminology. She is left with two choices – either accept the definitions offered by the existing discourse about women of her kind or find "the exact word" for describing her unique "self." She discovers a few terms to describe the women of her kind – hysteria, depression because of sexual repression but finds none suitable enough to describe her condition entirely. In search of the exact word, the narrator bicycles from one library to another, even try to learn some foreign languages to zero in on some word that could fully describe her state of mind.

Luiselli contests the Freudian theory of psychoanalysis for terming psychological disorders, hysteria, and depression in women because of repressed childhood sexuality. However, they regard similar mental ailments in men as the signs of genius. She quotes Aristotle and his theory of humours in which they regarded an excess of black bile as the factor responsible for the melancholic temper of some men of genius, such as Aristotle, Søren Kierkegaard, and so on. The Freudian psychoanalytic theory, adds the narrator, not only diagnoses such women as traumatised subjects but also requires them to allow "a male psychiatrist" to analyse their sexuality and lead them to confession. While doing so, argues the narrator, the analyst, would project his version of a woman's sexuality onto the patient who probably would not have her "ego" to defend herself. The narrator further argues that the "Freudian woman" is a construct, a document written by the male psychologist and that that document needs to be deconstructed for revealing her real self. The narrator also disagrees with Freud's overemphasis on individual sexuality at the cost of sexuality being a product of social, economic and familial conditions obtaining at the formative years of the subject's life. Though C. G. Jung corrected Freud's assumptions, which resulted in the foregrounding of "the collective unconscious," rather than individual sexuality, even Jung failed to do justice to the woman as an individual. Luiselli's narrator seems to be oppressed by the prevailing narratives stereotyping a woman and the chain of events[3] – the narrator's restlessness in her room, frantically riding her bicycle to escape into the city, approaching some library to search for the exact word to define her condition – is an

[3] See. The term Objective Correlative was used by T. S. Eliot in the essay "Hamlet and his Problems" to denote an extended metaphor consisting of ordered events employed by Shakespeare to evoke the state of mind from which Lady Macbeth was suffering.

extended metaphor to externalise her state of mind, which perhaps she has not yet explored and accepted. The narrator, however, stops short of explaining how the dismantling process would unfold without the help of an analyst. Nevertheless, a discerning reader can deduce from the narrator's relapse into a more or less identical succession of events every time she has a fit of schizophrenia, a pattern that she employs to come to terms – at least for the time being – with her uncontrollable run of psycho-sexual impulses. For example, the narrator bicycles away into the thick of the city as if she is peddling away from her troubled self; stopping over at some library perhaps to be at a place where she could avoid the gaze of others – the library is the only place where visitors are too preoccupied with what they are looking for to cast a glance at others; to hide in an open dictionary under the pretext of looking up "the exact word;" and after a tiring session of reading her "self" in others' accounts, the narrator's coming back home at night when Sara, the trigger for her schizophrenic rush, would be fast asleep. The narrator applies this formula again and again until she can wrest control of her "self" from the unconscious. Intriguingly, the narrator confesses that while she is on board an aeroplane, she feels particularly free from the crushing weight of social imperatives, and she invariably cries when the aeroplane touches down because now the bird is returning to the cage, i.e. the social, linguistic and heavily controlled environment of the metaphorical Mexico city would again have its sway on her "self." It thus can be argued that walking/bicycling provides the narrator with the background lull of movement to think herself out of her psychological dilemmas.

Luiselli even questions language as a medium of expression, insofar as every writer has to re-fashion his/her language to write something new. If the writer cannot or does not re-structure the exiting corpora of language according to his/her creative impulses, the writer is bound to only re-write what has already been written by his/her predecessors. We know this individually of language as style, but for Luiselli, this signifies much more than mere style. Luiselli's quest for "the exact word" may be interpreted as a young writer's search for a clue to fashion her language to express her deep mind.

> I know that the times I feel most excited about what I'm writing are when I should be most suspicious because, more often than not, I'm repeating something I either said or read elsewhere, something that has been lingering in my mind for a while. I'm almost always saying something trivial, just when I believe I'm on the verge of a novel idea.
>
> (Luiselli)

The task of the flâneur/flâneuse is much more formidable than that of a spiritual walker, as imagined by Henry David Thoreau in *Walden* and “Walking” (Singh, “Philosopher”) and Annie Dillard in *Pilgrim on the Tinker Creek*. A flâneur/flâneuse in Baudelaire-Benjamin-Laura Elkin-Valeria Luiselli lineage faces the phantasmagoria of the modern city, which not only overwhelms but also overpowers the soul of the city walker who has to explain and interpret the shape-shifting facade of the city. In contrast, the spiritual walker in the Rousseau-Wordsworth-Emerson-Thoreau-Dillard-Loren Eiseley and MacFarlane line of descent can be more focussed because he is in the company of a benign nature, not in the grip of a callous modern city. Nevertheless, nature in Dillard is not as benign as it is in Rousseau and Thoreau; rather, it defies and disturbs human complacency that oversimplifies it. After watching nature from a walker’s point of view, Dillard finds it violent and beautiful so that she accepts the impossibility of compressing/expressing the brutal and beautiful aspect of nature in a composite sublime utterance (Pilgrim).

The narrator's bicycle rides to the city lead her to certain places, which she terms “relingos;” relingos are those indefinable spaces where the mind can soar without having to board a plane, such as a graveyard and a library. To quote her, “a relingo—an emptiness, an absence—is a sort of depository for possibilities, a place that can be seized by the imagination and inhabited by our phantom-follies. Cities need those vacant lots, those silent gaps where the mind can wander freely.” It reminded the reader of the narrator's reflections on being “suspended in midair” in “Flying Home;” and of the woman visitor who puts flowers in exchange for chocolates on the grave of Ezra Pound. The narrator wonders it would hardly make any difference to the soul of the buried unless some visitor offers "the body” to call them back to life again. In other words, Luiselli visits the graveyard to “conjure up,” i.e., re-embody the dead by reimagining their words and sentences into life again in her writings. This essay thus recollects some ideas broached up in the previous essays to conclude them as a kind of prologue to the work. The narrator combines the two separate tropes into one composite metaphor. Mexico City seems to be composed of all the canonical writers such as Brodsky, Benjamin, and Baudelaire, to name a few, and certain spaces in the city correspond to their oeuvre. In a city where “Walter Benjamin: a one-way street walked down against the flow,” the narrator can find the unexplored spaces and fill them up with her writings. For the narrator, “everything we haven't read”...is “relingos,” i.e., “absences in the heart of the city.” As mentioned earlier, Mexico City metaphorizes the literary landscape in which she has to look for empty spaces with which she could unleash her creative potential. The

narrator concludes that rather than filling up the spatial emptiness, she would "clone" it in the form of her art and present it to the reader.

In the essay "Permanent Residence," Luiselli puts her bio-sketch in the company of the canonical dead writers; by doing so, the young writer metaphorically secures a place for herself in the annals of world literature. To quote her, "writing means writing yourself into the world." "The world" means the world of letters, and writing the "self" means expressing her felt experience creatively in her literary works.

Conclusion

It can be concluded that walking and bicycling not only act as the moving cradle in which Luiselli could solve her psychological predicaments and, thus, unleash her full creative potential but also provide her with a motif to bind her scattered philosophical musings into an organically connected narrative. Luiselli variously externalises her unexplored self through the trope of Mexico City and views it from multiple points of view for forming a wholesome perception. Moreover, walking, thinking and writing creatively about the literary Mexico becomes a transformative practice for the budding writer to express herself and her world to the readers.

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