

**ROMANCE STUDIES:
Readings in Excess and Betrayal, from Modernism to the Present**

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Faces in the Crowd: Valeria Luiselli's Haunted Times and Places

Valeria Luiselli's *Faces in the Crowd* (*Los ingrávidos*, literally "The Weightless," 2011) consists of fragments that do not quite make up a novel, as any effort to tell a coherent story is continually interrupted by other stories, other possible novels. So perhaps the book in fact excessively contains more than one novel—two, or even three or more of them. There is the story of a woman writing a book, in Mexico City. There are her recollections (maybe, inventions) of her time in New York City, what seems like a lifetime ago. And she writes about another writer, drawn from the Mexican literary tradition, who is likewise looking back at his time in New York, conjuring up a past when everything seemed new, but also perhaps coming up with the story of the woman who is writing about him. Time and causality start to warp or bend as what seems solid quietly comes to be seen as permeable if you look at it from the right direction, or from many directions at once. This is a "ghost story" (13), whose characters are both here and there, then and now, transient and ineffable, strangely "weightless" (as the original Spanish title suggests) but tied very concretely to material things, from flower pots to subway cars, office chairs to poetry books. Yet all these things are on the move, in a novel that is perpetually, but discontinuously, in transit and translation, a work in progress that is written or rewritten even as we read it.

1. Folding Time

A woman is writing a book. She has two children (a boy and a baby girl) and an architect husband. We do not know any of these characters' names, but perhaps the woman is Valeria Luiselli, as the book she is writing could be the book we are reading. Or perhaps only part of what we are reading is the book she is writing. This part could be the story of her as a younger woman, before husband and children: "It all began in another city and another life. [. . .] I was young, had strong, thin legs." The city is New York, where she works "as a reader and a translator in a small publishing house dedicated to rescuing 'foreign gems'" (1). She leads a somewhat Bohemian existence, with friends named "Moby," "Dakota," and "Pajarote" (or "Big Bird") who take courses in Philosophy, busk on subway station platforms, or forge rare books, and who come and go in her apartment, to take a bath, sleep overnight, perhaps have sex. The woman wanders the streets and the subway, wrapped in a "red coat with enormous pockets" (16), goes to bars and

parties, occasionally picks up discarded pieces of furniture, and indulges in minor kleptomania at her office or at other people's houses. All this contrasts with her life now, in Mexico City, where she seldom leaves her nicely-appointed house (new fridge and furniture, though "we like to think [. . .] there's a ghost living with us and watching us" [6]) but there is little space or time to write, as she is constantly interrupted by her family.

Those interruptions, alongside her musings about writing ("Novels need a sustained breath" [4]; "A dense, porous novel. Like a baby's heart" [28]), find their way into the book she is writing, which becomes therefore a series of fragments that switch between past and present, North and South, writing and the scene of writing. The husband reads the book, too—when the woman accidentally leaves her laptop open, for instance, or forgets a print-out on the kitchen table—and is disturbed by what he reads. He "asks who Moby is" (8). And: "Did you use to sleep with women?" (39). Then, as he becomes a character: "Why did you write that I like zombie films?" (35); "You wrote that I'd gone to Philadelphia. Why?" (85). The woman tries to be reassuring: "It's all fiction, I tell him, but he doesn't believe me" (57). As readers, we are not sure whether to believe her, either. This is a novel that dissolves boundaries, including that between fact and fiction.

There is at least one other novel in *Faces in the Crowd*. In fact, it may be "the novel, the other one" that, we are told, "is called *Philadelphia*" (58). This is a book about Gilberto Owen, a minor Mexican poet and diplomat of the first half of the twentieth century, who briefly lived in New York in the late 1920s. The woman became interested in Owen when she was working for the publisher, and ran across a copy of his collected works or *Obras*. She tries to persuade her boss to publish some of his poetry in translation, employing minor subterfuge (the translations are hers, but she passes them off as by someone else, a noted poet in his own right). She is increasingly obsessed with Owen, tracking down the places he used to live, and sometimes she imagines she sees him on a passing train in the subway. She also starts to research his life, taking notes from his correspondence that are included in the book we are reading.

But this book that, many years later, she is writing (perhaps) is narrated from Owen's perspective, at the end of his life, overweight and almost blind, living in Philadelphia, as he reflects back on his New York days, when he was a much younger man and still full of ambition and prospects for the future. Owen's story is often about his friendships and encounters with other writers, some of whom go on to become much more famous than

him: fellow foreigners such as the Spanish dramatist and poet, Federico García Lorca, or stars of the Harlem Renaissance such as the novelist Nella Larsen. But he also tells us that he keeps seeing a woman on the subway, a woman with a dark face and a red coat who, at least once, is apparently reading a book called *Obras*. Looking back, decrepit in Philadelphia and accompanied only by “three cats that appeared out of the blue one day. And a ghost, or several ghosts” (66), he thinks to write a novel “set both in Mexico, in an old house in the capital, and in the New York of my youth” (135). Its narrator would be “a woman who remains eternally locked up in her house [. . .] talking with her ghosts and trying to piece together a series of broken thoughts” (137); “the novel will be related in the first person by [. . .] a woman with a brown face and dark shadows under her eyes, who has perhaps died” (111). But he is told that “there’s a young writer in Mexico doing something similar. The bastard went and stole my great idea” (135). Is this stolen book, then, the one that we are reading? A book anticipated by a fictionalized version of Gilberto Owen as imagined by a narrator he planned to invent?

Though there is quite a lot of metafictional reflection in the novel—moments at which the narrator (or narrators) discuss the process of writing and what they are trying to achieve with it—at other points it is left to the reader to make connections between incidents and objects that may otherwise go un-noticed. The woman narrator, for instance, mentions her red coat in passing a few times early on (2, 16, 18, 19), but by the time Owen says that the woman he has seen on the subway is “always wearing a red coat” (89), we may well have forgotten the fact, and the coincidence is never explicitly marked. I wonder what other connections or points of contact—material, like the coat, or thematic, or even linguistic (such as similar turns of phrase)—you notice between the various storylines. Or what other similarities did you notice between the main characters: the woman, Owen, and even the woman’s husband? Pause the video here, and note down some of these correlations or repetitions. While you do that, I’ll have a dry martini, but I’ll be right back.

Drinks Pairing: Dry Martini

One of the many echoes between the story of the woman narrator in the novel and that of Gilberto Owen comes when each of them has a martini in New York. The woman meets a “trustafarian” she calls “Baldy” at an art event. She goes back to his apartment, a loft in Brooklyn, and when he disappears she invites her friend Dakota to come hang out, eat,

have a bath, and watch DVDs. When Baldy returns, apparently unfazed at the new arrival, “He offered us a martini; we accepted on condition we could finish watching the whole DVD” (74). Owen, meanwhile, goes to a book launch in Manhattan hosted by his ex-wife: “the butler offers me a martini” (92). For both characters, the martini, a classic cocktail and symbol of sophistication, made of gin and (at its driest) the faintest, phantasmal suggestion of Vermouth, is ambivalent: it is taken as a gesture of generosity, but also as a sign that they are out of place. They do and do not belong at the same time; they are there, but only insubstantially. On the subway home, the woman sees Owen “for the last time. [. . .] Something had broken. The ghost, it was obvious, was me” (75).

As critic Cecily Raynor observes, throughout *Faces in the Crowd*, “temporalities overlap as [its] chronologically disparate narratives unfold and collide” (“Place-Making” 139). Both the woman narrator’s and Owen’s narratives are in part exercises in memory, as they look back to moments in their lives when they were younger and less constrained (by either domestic obligations or physical ailment) than they are at present. But they are also interested in anticipation or premonition, in what is to happen in the near or far future: for the woman, the children are an index of futurity, as when she notes that “The baby doesn’t say anything, but one day she’s going to say Pa-pa” (5; and indeed, sixty pages later, “Pa-pa says the baby” [66]); meanwhile Owen is told, after he reports seeing the woman on the subway, that “what’s happening [. . .] is that you can remember the future” (88). Owen also writes that he is “an unconjugatable tense, the future pluperfect” (96), a tense unavailable in standard English (or Spanish)—it would be something like “will have had been” or “will have had seen”—that would combine the future with the definitively past, the past of the past. It is in this paradoxical, apparently ungrammatical, temporality that this novel is written. Or perhaps all novels: Owen is also told, by the same friend (Homer Collyer, a famous recluse and compulsive hoarder), that “If you dedicate your life to writing novels, you’re dedicating yourself to folding time” (115). Hence for instance, Owen could turn out to be the “future ghost” of the narrator’s husband, living “his future life” (117). In the novel, time folds back on itself but also forward, enabling points of contact and contiguity between past, present, and future.

2. *Burrowing through Space*

Faces in the Crowd is concerned not just with temporal folding, but also with spatial orientation and reorientation. Indeed, time is as much as anything a matter of configuring space, of facing in the right direction. “I once read in a book by Saul Bellow,” the woman narrator tells us, “that the difference between being alive and being dead is just a matter of viewpoint: the living look from the center outward, the dead from the periphery to some sort of center” (23). This begs the question of where exactly center and periphery are to be located. Is New York—perhaps particularly in the 1920s, in the heyday of a modernism that encompasses not just the Harlem Renaissance with Larsen or the jazz maestro Duke Ellington, but also figures such as Lorca or the poet Ezra Pound—not the center of something? Is Mexico City then the periphery, although at around the same time it was home to Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo, as well as others such as Chilean poet Gabriela Mistral, and attracted enthusiastic visitors such as the Russian film director Sergei Eisenstein and (a little later) French Surrealist André Breton? And what of Owen, a provincial Mexican (from the state of Sinaloa in the country’s Northwest) who comes to New York, but his presence there is barely noted or recorded? The novel suggests that “he hated New York and was, in fact, on the margins of all that” (44). At the center but on the periphery at the same time, he occupies the viewpoints of the dead and the living alike, looking both inward and outward. Something similar is true of the woman narrator, both in her doubled temporality (as a young woman “there,” and a mother “here”) and in her job as reader and translator seeking to legitimate Latin American authors in the light of North American cultural priorities—tasked with finding another Roberto Bolaño, who might find “success in the American market” (15). Where you are from counts, as does where you are now, and which way you are looking.

It is not just a matter of looking inward or outward. It is also a question of viewing things from below or above! Early on, Owen is quoted as saying that “New York has to be seen from the viewpoint of the subway. The flat horizontal perspective vanishes in there. A bulky landscape begins, with the double depth, or what they call the fourth dimension, of time” (37). Time opens up only from below, though the subway in this book is also, as critic Emma Eldelin indicates, a “haunted underworld” (“Subway Space” 229) in which the dead linger on, perhaps in perpetuity. Just as an archaeologist digs down to see the past, to view modernity from the *longue durée* of the material infrastructure, the pipes and

tubes on which the city depends, as well as everything they have displaced, so Luiselli (or her narrator) is less interested in skyscrapers than in buried tunnels and underground platforms, in what subtends the glitz up above.



Portrait of Gilberto Owen

Yet the narrator is dissatisfied with any single perspective. She tries out different formulations: "A horizontal novel, told vertically. A novel that has to be told from the

outside in order to be read from within" (61); "Not a fragmented novel. A horizontal novel, narrated vertically" (69); "A vertical novel told horizontally. A story that has to be seen from below, like Manhattan from the subway" (122); "Or a horizontal novel, told vertically. A horizontal vertigo" (126). Such variety also suggests that this is still an unfinished novel, a work in progress—as do other asides (comments apparently to one side of the main text, and so similarly marginal or peripheral) that reflect on what could or should be done with this book that we see its writer (or writers) writing. For they are not only writing, but also rewriting. We find phrases reworked, built up or pared down, as in the case of the Ezra Pound poem that gives the novel its (English) title. Pound, like the woman narrator and Owen, has an uncanny encounter on the subway and quite literally sits down to write about it: "he slid down until he felt the concrete caress of the ground on his ass. He took out a notebook and began to write." He comes up with "a poem of over three hundred lines." But then, over the following month, returning always to the same subway station, he works to "remov[e] everything extraneous, [until] only two poignant lines survived, comparing faces in the crowd to petals on a dark bough" (14). Even the comment about seeing the city from below turns out originally to be an observation made by a woman called Iselin, a prostitute who accompanies Owen for a while: "Manhattan has to be seen from the subway [. . .]. the people who see it from above, from the Woolworth Building, don't see anything, they live in a mock-up of the city" (121). In later reworking this statement, Owen is both stealing it (perhaps in the same way that the woman narrator is also a habitual pilferer) and translating it, refining it, making it literary. Seeing from below allows us to trace the roots of such phrases, among the sex workers and (elsewhere) elderly retirees or eccentric hoarders who also inhabit the city. Or perhaps these are not such much roots as subterranean pathways, linguistic and cognitive traffic that seldom sees the light of day.

This is a novel that is both in transit and in translation. Again, the subway is a key instance of the constant and everyday (and so taken for granted) movement that can lead to revelatory encounters. The woman narrator meets her friend Moby on the subway, breaking what Eldelin cites William Chapman Clarke calling the "'cardinal rule of subway etiquette' that 'thou shalt not make eye contact'" (225). They start talking as they compare the books they are reading. And indeed, the woman associates the subway (and other public spaces) with literature, reciting snippets of verse as she passes through

particular places, “assign[ing] them some value and imprint[ing] an experience on them. [. . .] The entrance to the subway at 116th Street was Emily Dickinson’s” (17). No wonder she thinks that “The subway, its multiple stops, its breakdowns, its sudden accelerations, its dark zones, could function as the space-time scheme for this other novel” (60), by which she means the novel about Owen, but the same is true for *Faces in the Crowd* itself. Note that what is envisaged is not untrammelled flow, but stops and starts, breakdowns and recoveries, that are essential to the process.

As critic Maria Pape suggests: “If you read the novel like you see Manhattan from the subway, each fragment becomes a station and each white space a part of the network of tubes that connects them” (“El pasaje como *modus operandi*” 174). In this light, the novel never stops still, but is in perpetual if discontinuous motion. Hence also the infidelity of the translation: the English version has some significant differences from the Spanish original, not least the fact that in the Spanish the husband is a writer rather than an architect. Luiselli happily acknowledges such deviations in an interview for *World Literature Today*: “There is a section in *Faces in the Crowd* [. . .] that my Italian translator, Elisa Tramontin, came up with. She produced such a good translation of it in Italian that I changed the original after her input, and so all the other translations followed her version instead of my ‘original’” (Reber, “Writing Yourself into the World” 14). We see similar performances of creative translation in the novel itself, as in a recitation by Owen and Lorca in which (for example) “In this kitchen insane” in Spanish becomes “This, itching is saying” in English (113). Here, just as transit is more than simply a way to get from A to B, so translation is also creative movement, a chance to look at things from above or below, from inside or outside, without ever pretending to encompass or exhaust the whole. After all, what could be more “horribly boring” than a “novel in which each line is there for an ultimate reason: everything links up, there are no loose ends” (124). Instead, we have “a structure full of holes” (10), like the ground on which Manhattan sits, perforated and pockmarked by craters and tunnels, passageways and fissures that funnel crowds through past, present, and future, bringing the instant in contact with eternity.

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Song: LCD Soundsystem, "New York, I Love You but You're Bringing Me Down"