

FIGURES OF THE *PRESENT*: URBAN SILHOUETTES

SOFIA, CRYSTAL GARDEN

DANDY AS A *PAINTER OF MODERN LIFE*: USHER, ACTOR, AND FLÂNEUR

(PART I)

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I.

The fragmentary chapter “The Marketplace” from the book *The Actors. Farce and Vaudeville and Even ... Tableau Viviant* (2004) appears, at first reading, as the usual eccentric episode of Lyubomir Milchev-Dandy’s city wanderings.¹ “The Marketplace”, however, sparks interest with its provocative focus on the figure of the painter as a flâneur, introduced by Charles Baudelaire’s essay “The Painter of Modern Life” (1863), transporting the scene of the flâneur’s stroll to the twentieth-first century – from Paris to Sofia.² Through an interplay of closeness and distance, Dandy inserts the image of the modern Sofia-based flâneur into the conceptual framework of Baudelaire’s text, on the one hand, and, on the other, the conceptual formulations of Walter Benjamin, who *canonised [Baudelaire] as the paradigm of the flâneur* (Игов 2010). Lyubomir Milchev, however, firmly rejects the blind following of the cultural code he acquired via the aesthetics of dandyism. He shows continuity as an object of debate and meaningful reassessment, portraying it in an atrophic version and mediating it through the lens of intrusive theatricality.

In “The Marketplace”, Lyubomir Milchev is, as usual, the hero of his own (fictional) story.³ He self-defines himself, first, as an usher, *endowed with a fine social intuition*, working at an improvised city theatre and showing people where their seats are and then – as an observer of

¹ A specific form of the flâneur’s observations in the early stage of a yet diffident and emerging eccentricity is observed in his book *Проглеждането на гледката: Из скромния опит на един съгледвач (The Awakening of the View: From the Modest Experience of a Flâneur, 1995)*.

² Boyan Manchev’s article „Безобразното тяло и фетишът на неорганичното. Записки на един съвременен софийски фланьор” (“The imageless body and the fetish for the inorganic. Diary of a contemporary flâneur in Sofia”) was published the following year in the magazine “Критика и хуманизъм” (*Criticism and Humanism*), and later in his book *Тялото метаморфоза (Body-Metamorphosis, 2007)*. Both Boyan Manchev and Lyubomir Milchev are two uncommon flâneurs compared to the model example of the Parisian cultural myth; however, they both put forward two versions of the contemporary Sofia-based flâneur that undoubtedly have their historical, cultural, and aesthetic grounds. It is interesting to note that Boyan Manchev’s flâneur chooses to look at the urban space in Sofia from the perspective of “fetishism” and the “inorganic”, pointing out his relation to Benjamin’s concepts: the self-reflexive indication in the title receives its logical culture-historical reference.

³ As autobiographical fiction, Lyubomir Milchev’s writings presuppose an identification between the author’s personality and his fictional character who narrates the story in the first person. This is why in this essay, the figure of the flâneur and that of the author are synonymous.

the city's people (flâneur) populating the marketplace (Милчев 2004: 105).⁴ The final identification modus, or actually the first, is his role as a participant and an actor in the *spectacle*. These embodiments begin when Dandy makes an appeal for voyeurism from the heights of the nearby balconies and roofs in the direction of his flânerie around the Marketplace, as he obtains firsthand exquisite impressions: *The balconies could be offered as boxes in a theatre to allow for a grandstand view of this remarkable spectacle* (my emphasis), while *the small but representative group of perky pessimists can avail of the roofs, whence they can peep like gothic gargoyles oozing the poisonous drops of their malice. It is the height from which to observe, according to their views, the human throng, and on a whim, fly down, headwards, or, if they can, ascend* (Милчев 2004: 105-107).

There is something uncommon in the idea that the flâneur secures an audience. *The observer is being observed*. This gesture of directed theatricality could be read as an ironic riposte to Baudelaire, whose actions and attitude, according to Sartre, are governed by the idea of being constantly under other people's gaze (Sartre 1994: 11-12; 55). What in Baudelaire is a genuine dramatic sense, in Lyubomir Milchev's aesthetic views is a caricature of Baudelaire's *self-punishment* and attempts to transform himself into an object in his own eyes (Sartre 1994: 55). In his article "A Vindication of the Flâneur" (2010), Angel Igov sheds light on the flâneur's typical distance (which will also be discussed in Benjamin), arguing that *he and only he owns a particularly privileged position to be at the same time outside and inside, part of the crowd and himself, to be simultaneously a subject and an object, but to be simultaneously a subject and an object you have to objectify yourself to a certain extent and to observe from 'above'* (Игов 2010). We can think of Lyubomir Milchev's flâneur as literally occupying this position: introducing the figure of the audience activates the situation of (theatrical) exhibitionism.⁵ In other words, from Baudelaire's failure, he has learned to realise that it is "impossible really to see ourselves through other people's eyes" (Sartre 1994: 55); Dandy creates a *theatrical situation*.

In "The Marketplace", however, the performance is not a "genuine" one – the theatre happens on the streets, in one's mind, staged with *the props of reality*. Dandy, first as an usher in this improvised theatre and then as an observer (flâneur), orchestrates the events following the maxim that he postulates at the beginning of his flânerie: *It is absolutely possible it stinks, but I keep away from such an olfactory obviousness since the obvious does not give but greedily takes away* (Милчев 2004: 101). In the spirit of the play with appearances, another excentric confession follows: *Feet measure in steps the length of reality. With which, thank God, I have never been in step. And will never be. And will never be ...* (Милчев 2004: 111). The street scene transforms into a space with a powerful aesthetic potential, where the state of play blurs the boundaries between real and fictional, between performance and theatricality.

In his dialogue "The Paradox of the Actor" (1770-1778), Diderot suggests two models of a theatrical situation, *two mutually exclusive life forms* (Тодоров 1997: 109): the stage and the

⁴ The Marketplace in question is The Women's Market in Sofia.

⁵ There is a hint of eroticism in the flâneur's practices. Angel Igov points out this aspect: *The flâneur is only one of the possible embodiments of the eye looking at the city and wandering around the city. A vital structurally defining organ from the human body fragmented in the city: an organ which penetrates and creates, resembling the phallus – the visual wanderings in the city are rarely divested of sexual overtones, as the very practice of flânerie is invariably linked to the eroticism of voyeurism and more concrete promises [...] (Игов 2010). Stressing the significance of the metonymic substitution of the all-seeing eye for the flâneur implies a relation to Baudelaire's comparison of the flâneur with the mirror, in which the crowd sees itself (Baudelaire 1978: 518).*

scene of life. The first represents the aesthetically modelled spectacle as an object of art, whereas the second can possess such a potential under certain circumstances. The perspective of the immediate development of theatrical aesthetics is sustained through a Second interlocutor (the primary listener): *But if a crowd of men were brought out into the street by some catastrophe and were suddenly to unleash, each in his own way, their natural sensibility, quite independently of each other, they will create a wonderful spectacle...* (Diderot 1981: 511). However, the one reflecting on the actor's paradox, that is, the First interlocutor, rejects such a possibility – according to him, the performance on the street – a space where coincidences reign, devoid of artistry – could not be compared to the performance on stage, *one which arose out of a deliberate agreement, and improved on nature* (Diderot 1981: 511).⁶ In “The Marketplace”, Lyubomir Milchev rethinks the aesthetic potential of the street situation: he applies theatre models on immediate and everyday episodes from real life to transform the sense of excitement and spontaneity, turning them into a well-thought and directed street performance, i.e. into art.⁷ In this way, Dandy combines, in his own way, the two *mutually exclusive life forms*.⁸ But if we are talking about *two different realities* as a stable principle according to which *events from one place could become events of another place only if they intersect the field of paradox, in which way they stop being the same events* (Тодоров 1997: 111), then how would we define the paradox which Dandy performs during his theatrical stroll as a flâneur?

Although it is difficult to fit the form of theatre in “The Marketplace” in one of the models of theatre theory, in practice, we are still talking about a theatrical situation: *If a person acts, and another is watching them, this is already a theatrical situation. The action is the main requirement for the presence of theatre along with the situation of spectatorship* (Васева 2020: 124). However peculiar the circumstances are and unconventional the theatrical situation, the notion that *theatre is real and is not*, which is generally applicable to many theoretical discourses and staging practices, is also valid here (Васева 2020: 20).

The episode with the androgynous yellow minikin fits this modus. A real (as long as the suggestion of making the unsuspecting ordinary people at the marketplace part of the spectacle works) tragedy of life is seen as a tragicomedy, as a sketch. *The yellow minikin, a lonesome dandelion somewhere in the field of intimacy* (Милчев 2004: 119), is once again rejected in a humiliating way and made fun of because of its contemptible social status and its unfitness for the community of the Marketplace. As a result, *it does not even make a bow at the end of the sketch and does not hear the applause of those, up in the boxes. Curtain* (Милчев 2004: 120). The curtain, as a typical feature of theatre, appears to mark the conventional end of the performance. In fact, we do not leave reality: it is just an interpretation of a life situation in the key of theatre through the immutable mocking gaze of

⁶ Curiously, the problem of improvement as moving away from nature is discussed by Baudelaire in “The Painter of Modern Life” („Художник на съвременния живот“, Baudelaire 1976: 538-541).

⁷ Analysing Diderot's dialogue in his book *A Little Paradox of Theatre*, Vladislav Todorov offers another option: “theatre as a form of presence in life” (Тодоров 1997: 109). In this case, *the premise is the reverse – theatre and life are not mutually exclusive life forms but a bifurcation of the same thing* (Тодоров 1997: 109). Through the playful mechanism of such a reversal, Vladislav Todorov poses the problem of a new paradox as he involves the sphere of life.

⁸ In this sense, we could ask the question which Ani Vaseva poses on the nature of what we actually call “theatrical” – in its comprehensiveness and intractability to be placed in frameworks and contexts: *What is the difference between “performing” as an actor and “performing” in life. Is there, in fact, such a difference?* (Васева 2020: 164).

the dandy-flâneur, who is simultaneously playing a role and directing under the watchful eye of his merciless audience.

[T]heater is real and is not. The negative connotation in the use of theatre's conceptual apparatus is highlighted only to be turned into an object of aesthetic treatment; Dandy uses a number of pejoratives – theatricality as a pose and deception, the audience seen as malevolent and cunning, the Marketplace (the stage) as “charming abomination”, a place of decay and a challenge to one's sense of smell – which are nevertheless valuable in the created fictional projection. The notion that some theatrical form is being imposed works together with the laws of theatricality.