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Notes from Underground

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The reader, the thinker, the loiterer, the flâneur, are types of illuminati just as much as the opium eater, the dreamer, the ecstatic. And more profane. Not to mention that most terrible drug — ourselves — which we take in solitude.

—Walter Benjamin, “Surrealism”

I’ve begun to find the loneliness of cruising almost unbearable, my own loneliness as well as that of others. Strolling for sex, I now sense a terrifying solitude my potential partners share — or that I imagine they do. “Empathy,” according to Benjamin, “is the nature of the intoxication to which the flâneur abandons himself in the crowd” (“Flâneur” 55). The flâneur, he writes, is the man who fills the empty space created in him by isolation “with the borrowed — and fictitious — isolations of strangers” (58). I also find electronic cruising unbearable, chat rooms equally empty spaces I appreciate Aaron Betsky having called, if not unbearable, “unreal” (182). I’m that old.

So I’ve been considering an erotic space in which I’ve never felt lonely. I’ve been remembering episodes — real ones — involving New York City subways: the queerest, if not the cruiciest, space of my urban childhood, adolescence, and youth. Episode One (childhood): Broadway Local, evening rush hour, 1966. I crawl onto the lap of a black man and fall asleep. He pretends to be oblivious, according to my mother. Episode Two (adolescence): F train, evening rush hour, 1973. I’m molested on the way home from high school by a white man. I pretend to be oblivi-
ous. Episode Three (youth): Lexington Avenue Express, morning rush hour, 1986. I'm cruised by an Arab man on the way to work but don't speak to him until we both get off at Grand Central.

I've also been remembering literary episodes, real as well as unreal. I've been considering subway episodes in *The Motion of Light in Water*, Samuel Delany's 1988 autobiography, and in *The Swimming-Pool Library*, Alan Hollinghurst's 1988 novel. (Hollinghurst and I are Ronald Firbank fans. Delany and I went to the same high school.) Delany thinks subways themselves stroll. He pictures them in adolescence at his own pedestrian pace:

July dawns you could still wander the small streets [and see] fires here and there beside one or another still-standing tenement wall. Off beyond the Jacob Riis Houses . . . the East River's sluggish oils nudged the city's granite embankments or bumped the pilings beneath the Williamsburg Bridge: girder, cable, and concrete rose from among . . . the movie marquees on Delancey Street to span the night waters — where cars and subways and after-dark cruisers took their delicate amble above the blue-black current banked with lights — before striking deep into Brooklyn's glittering flank, above the Navy Yard. (19)

Delany also pictures subways as somewhere to ogle strangers and cultivate friends — the former no surprise to anyone who's ever ridden one, the latter no surprise to anyone who's attended a "special" public high school. (Kids at schools like ours — Stuyvesant, Brooklyn Tech, Music and Art — use public transportation for up to several hours a day.) He can recall having looked "at hands on bus drivers, . . . on a friend in school, on subway conductors, [and] on strangers across from me on the train — black, white, and Hispanic — for years" (72). (The man is a hand fetishist.) And he can recall — with irony — having fictionalized an underground communion with Joey, a sexy pal also portrayed as an idle, isolated flâneur:

Not much happened to Erik Torrent as he made his way through the pages of [the novel] *Lost Stars*. . . . Mostly he wandered around the city, thinking about his problems with his mother. . . . I'd made him fifteen, rather than fourteen — who could possibly be interested in the adventures of a fourteen-year-old (my age — and Joey's — when I began it)? Also there was no way to tell, from reading it, if Erik did or did not go to school. (Who could possibly be interested in reading about something as dull as school? Even a school like [Bronx] Science.) From time to time he sat in the subway station, having deep and intense conversations with his brilliant, witty, compassionate, but darkly troubled (and always nameless!) friend. (76)

Yet shortly after graduation — not to mention shortly after dropping out of college, not to mention after marrying Marilyn Hacker (another Science-ite) — young Delany begins to see subways as terrifying. He develops a "subway fixation" (374), a fear of either falling or throwing himself under one. The fixation, however, isn't merely phobic. It's a phobic attraction:
By the end of October '64, while Marilyn went to work... I was making one or two circuitous, ambling trips each day to the Second Avenue subway station at Houston Street... where, finally, past the turnstile, I would sit at the top of the stairs from the underground concourse to track level, clutching the banister rails, feeling myself drawn to the platform, while some unlocatable force impelled me down, pushed me to throw myself before the next incoming train. When, below, I saw the first cars rush in roaring beside the platform, I'd hug my chest and face to the bars and hold my breath till I broke into a sweat. (I didn't want to kill myself. Nothing in my life specifically dissatisfied me — making the compulsion even more unnerving!) I only realized how much I needed help one evening when a young policeman came up and pried me loose from the bars I was holding with his billy club to shoo me out of the station with the logical question that, in my obsession, I'd somehow never asked: "If you're afraid of the subways, why do I see you come sit here every day?" (306-7)

Delany did get help, from a therapist named Dr. G. And he and Hacker did separate.

Delany never actually cruises the subway in this autobiography. Nor does Delany's alter ego in the novel The Mad Man (1994), even though he cruises every other part of the city. It's a failure — or success — that reminds me of Benjamin, who strolls into and out of, but never on, the Paris Métro. ("Is there anyone who has not been stunned, emerging from the Métro into the open air, to step into brilliant sunlight?" he writes in One-Way Street [484]. "And yet the sun shone just as brightly a few minutes earlier, when he went down.") And while Will Beckwith, the aristocratic flâneur who narrates The Swimming-Pool Library, does cruise the London Underground with considerable success, those subway episodes are framed by ones that emphasize his isolation — in particular his isolation from the heteronormativity that Delany finally transcends, ironically enough, by transfiguring the subway he'd found so frightening. (Beckwith would prefer to use a car, the vehicle Betsy calls "the ultimate icon of cruising" [148], but is driven underground by having had his license suspended. "So I made the best of the Tube," Beckwith writes, "and found it often sexy and strange, like a gigantic game of chance, in which one got jammed up against many queer kinds of person. Or it was a sort of Edward Burra scene, all hats and buttocks and seaside postcard lewdery. Whatever, one always had to try and see the potential in it" [47]. Dr. G. helps Delany by having him imagine the subway as transformative. "Think of what it does," he says. "You're walking through one part of the city. Now you suddenly go down steps, underground. You can't see anything of the world above. Then, after a loud, racketing ride, you suddenly come upstairs, like a swimmer breaking through the surface. You walk out and everything is completely different — changed. You're in a whole new place. Now you say you've been taking the subway here to the hospital every day. That's very brave — maybe unnecessarily so. But the next time you come, as soon as you go down the steps, don't let yourself get lost in where you are. Forget about being afraid or not being afraid. . . Concentrate on your destination [instead]" [333].) True, Beckwith does make the best
of it, ignoring an "older [white] admirer" who nearly molests him in between Bond Street and Notting Hill Gate on the Central Line ("one of the strap-hangers, a man whom I spotted eyeing the erection which even the shortest journey on tube or bus always gives me, inclined to swing or jolt towards me as the train lost or gained speed, and the pressure of his knee on mine, and of his eyes in my lap, irritated me" [93-4]), picking up a younger white admirer in between Notting Hill Gate and Holland Park (they don't converse until they both get off), and otherwise abandoning himself to the intoxicating, if fictitious, isolations of strangers. "I was certainly not alone in this carriage in sliding my thoughts between the legs of other passengers," he writes. "Desires, brutal or tender, silent but evolved, were in the shiftless air, and hung about each jaded traveller, whose life was not as good as it might have been" (269). But the novel begins with a primal scene that none of this activity eradicates, a scene in which an initial fantasy of the isolation of black men who actually work for a living is corrected by two others: a fantasy of their vocational communion, and a fantasy of their domestic communion with wives. (Beckwith prefers to remain idle; he also prefers black men.)

I came home on the last train. Opposite me sat a couple of London Transport maintenance men, one small, fifty, decrepit, the other a severely handsome black of about thirty-five. Heavy canvas bags were tilted against their boots, their overalls open above their vests in the stale heat of the Underground. They were about to start work! I looked at them with a kind of swimming, drunken wonder, amazed at the thought of their inverted lives, of how their occupation depended on our travel, but could only be pursued, I saw it now, when we were not travelling. As we went home and sank into unconsciousness gangs of these men, with lamps and blow-lamps, and long-handled ratchet spanners, freakishly functional, rolled slowly and clangorously forwards from sidings unknown to the commuter. Such lonely, invisible work must bring on strange thoughts; the men who walked through every tunnel of the labyrinth, tapping the rails, must feel such reassurance seeing the lights of others at last approaching, voices calling out their friendly, technical patter. The black was looking at his loosely cupped hands: he was very aloof, composed, with an air of massive, scarcely conscious competence — I felt more than respect, a kind of tenderness for him. I imagined his relief at getting home and taking his boots off and going to bed as the day brightened around the curtains and the noise of the streets built up outside. He turned his hands over and I saw the pale gold band of his wedding-ring. (1)

And the novel's final subway reference involves a similar scene in which the black man's erotic attention has turned from wife to child:

I told [James] of a thing that had happened on the train. It was while I was coming to see him and had taken place just in front of me, an ordinary thing and yet calmly beyond the turmoil of my own mood, in fact wonderfully self-sufficient and entire. Among the crowd that got on at Tottenham Court Road were a black couple with a baby: they took the two places
against the glass partition, so that the man and I sat...knee to knee. Once he had looked at me politely as I shifted to make room for him he had no interest in me at all — and I hardly took notice of him. His wife held the impassive and very young child in her arms: despite the heat it was dressed in a quilted one-piece suit, but with the hood back. My thoughts were all elsewhere, though I saw the man, about thirty, I suppose, lean over the baby's open flawless face, and smile down on it, out of pure pleasure and love. His fingertips moved from his own softly bearded lips and gently stroked and almost held within their span his child's lolling wispy head. His other hand lay loosely in his lap, and it took me a while to see that he was hiding and coaxing — yes — a hard-on in his respectable grey slacks. I was not aroused by this; but did I dwindle, if only for a moment, in the fact of their glowing, fertile closeness? I felt perhaps I did. (279-80)

All these episodes — my own, Delany's, Hollinghurst's — suggest that although the subway isn't the kind of space Betsky calls queer, and although it isn't somewhere flâneurs stroll, it is, to be a bit obvious, unique, uniquely urban, and uniquely erotic. And to be less obvious, if rather optimistic (or nostalgic), the subway is a space, perhaps the only space, in which gay (or proto-gay) men can both discover their sexualities and discover that these sexualities involve (fictitious) forms of communion — of intimacy — that don't, or needn't, necessitate — or necessarily precipitate — the kind of sexual communion that can seem equally fictitious, if only afterward. (What about women? What about flâneuses? That's not for me to say, and both Betsky and Benjamin imply that there's nothing to say.) For Betsky, queer public space is a deformation of otherwise useless space, an appropriation for the perverse purpose of gay sex. It's also, like queer private space, the domain of middle-class white men. This doesn't describe the subway, an otherwise useful space that whites no longer dominate and in which one can't have sex. For Benjamin, the flâneur, unlike the pedestrian who "wedges" himself into the crowd, "demand[s] elbow room and [is] unwilling to forego the life of a gentleman of leisure" ("Flâneur" 54). The flâneur, moreover, controls his locomotion. This does not describe the usual subway rider, a worker — or student — who either sits or stands, in no position (during rush hour) to demand elbow room, and at the mercy of a machine that does the strolling for him, only much too quickly and according to a predetermined course.

Who, then, can help us understand the subway, annotate the Underground, commemorate the Métro itself? Michel de Certeau, perhaps, who writes about the "travelling incarceration" of the railroad (111). (Benjamin, in a passage similarly informed by Baudelaire’s sense of "spleen," calls the train station a "prison-world" ["The Work of Art" 236].) For de Certeau, railroad cars, like subway cars, enable erotic speculation, "the strange fablés of our private stories" (112). But because they contain private toilets, railroad cars, unlike subway cars, also enable passengers to have sex: "Only the restrooms offer an escape from the closed system. They are a lovers' [sic] phantasm" (111). For de Certeau, railroad cars, like subway cars, enable fantasies of individual autonomy: "the Robinson Crusoe adventure of the travelling noble soul that [can] believe itself intact because it [is] surrounded by glass and iron" (114). (Beck-
with's impression of the "self-sufficient" integrity of the black family, as opposed to his "dwindling" sense of self, is both anomalous, given that subway riders usually travel alone, and indicative of the author's subliminal homophobia.) But because one sees cities, towns, and landscapes through that glass, railroad cars, unlike subway cars, are saddening: they proffer the (melancholy) pleasure of seeing what one is separated from." Subway tunnels, of course, are dark ("You can't see anything of the world above"); there are no "phantasmagorias of [protean] space" in which to abandon oneself, no crowded scenes in which "the city is now a landscape, now a room" [Benjamin, "Paris" 159, 156], subway windows are reflective, and other passengers one's only prospect. In other words, subway riders see themselves alone, yet imagine themselves together. And they're glad to do so.

A note on seeing. Benjamin wasn't saddened by seeing what he was separated from while taking a "solitary ride" on a Moscow street car.

I was feeling quite contented with this forced, nearly pointless trip through a part of the city with which I was completely unfamiliar. For the first time I noticed the absolute similarity between certain parts of the outskirts and the harbor streets of Naples. I also saw the enormous Moscow radio transmitter, whose shape is different from any other I have seen. On the right side of the avenue that the streetcar was following there were occasional mansions, on the left side were scattered sheds or cottages, open field for the most. The village character of Moscow suddenly leaped out at you undisguisedly, evidently, unambiguously in the streets of its suburbs. There is probably no other city whose gigantic open spaces have such an amorphous, rural quality, as if their expanse were always being dissolved by bad weather, thawing snow, or rain. (Moscow Diary 112)

Nor was he gladdened by the subway-like experience of not seeing through a Moscow street car window. "Through the ice-covered windows you can never make out where the vehicle has just stopped. If you do find out, it is of little avail. The way to the exit is blocked by a human wedge" ("Moscow" 112). Two appropriate responses to these passages are that Benjamin and de Certeau needn't agree with one another, and that riders always know where subways stop, because they see station signs along the platforms. (If Imagist, they see — and imagine — other signs as well. To quote "In a Station of the Metro," by Ezra Pound: "The apparition of these faces in the crowd; / Petals on a wet, black bough.") But it's also important to recognize that Benjamin prefers to see cities, or at least to eroticize city-dwellers, in fleeting glimpses — a preference we may not share, or a visual pleasure we may wish to prolong. "The delight of the city-dweller," he writes, "is not so much love at first sight as love at last sight" ("Flâneur" 45). And public transportation, as Benjamin himself acknowledged, tends to prolong the fleeting glimpse:

"Interpersonal relationships in big cities are distinguished by a marked preponderance of the activity of the eye over the activity of the ear. The main reason for this is the public means of transportation. Before the development of buses, railroads, and trams in the nineteenth century, people had
never been in a position of having to look at one another for long minutes or even hours without speaking to one another.” This situation was . . . not a pleasant one. (“Flâneur” 38, quoting Georg Simmel)

A note on imagining. Although neither Benjamin nor de Certeau helps theorize Delany’s subway fixation, common sense — if not personal experience — does. Common sense (which Barthes denigrates as doxa) tells us that the subway — New York’s in particular — is an especially terrifying and potentially dangerous space, “haunted by the specter of disaster” (Williams 187). Both criminal and technological catastrophe lurk at the back of the mind. Is he going to mug me? Is he going to murder me? Are we going to crash? Why are we stalled? What if there’s a track fire? What if there’s a bomb? It’s a long, almost unconscious litany. And so if the railroad, as de Certeau suggests, “combines dreams with technology” (113), the subway combines both dreams and nightmares with technology — a unique combination that must result in a wider range of fixations and fantasies, or phobic attractions, than Delany’s alone can represent. I, for one, along with other Science-ites, have always been fascinated by the infamous “third rail.” Touch it — just touch it — and you die.

Dreams and nightmares. I’m speaking metaphorically, of course. Even though, despite the litany, it’s easy to snooze there — a function of the narcotic quality of uncontrollable locomotion as well as of the fact that sleep enables us fully to ignore irritating invasions of personal space — and even though the tunnels are dark, subway cars are too bright — too fluorescent — to seem nocturnal. No flickering gaslight. No nineteenth-century noctambulisme (“Flâneur” 50). No rider appears other than he is. No one appears as you may envision him. And no one now emerging from the Métro is stunned to be stepping into brilliant sunlight. Seeing and imagining, in other words, remain distinct, nonphantasmagorical, because the use of a subway isn’t like the use of a back room. It’s not like the “descent” to la chambre noire where, according to Barthes, “I invariably expose my loneliness” (105).

I also keep remembering another episode — a recurrent one. A recurrent and rather prolonged dream. Episode Four (adolescence): F train, evening rush hour, 1973 through 1976. Two severely handsome young men, both in blue jeans and flannel shirts, both softly bearded (one’s a redhead, one’s a brunet), both white, I’m afraid — two young men always sit opposite me between Roosevelt Avenue and 179th Street. Are they co-workers? Are they college students? Invariably, their knees touch. Do my thoughts slide between their legs? Not yet. I think they’re friends. I think they’re more than friends. I think — and it doesn’t occur to me that I’m being heteronormative, homophobic, or racist — I think they’re my future. No, not “think.” Hope.

Works Cited


