

## Street, Life, and Other Signs: Heine in the Rue Laffitte

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### Abstract

*In a dream sequence that Heine describes in Ludwig Börne: A Memorial (1840), the narrator finds himself at night on a street corner exposed to the pulsating street life of nocturnal Paris. Read with recourse to the notion of Derrida's voyou (rogue), the paper examines the significance of street life in the 19th century and the critical issues and concern Heine's text poses. A unique view of the experience of modern city life, the narrator's observations from the corner stone at the intersection of Rue Laffitte and the Boulevard des Italiens articulate a visionary critique of the complex of the socio-economic-political and esthetic issues that define modern urban experience. [Key-words: Paris, Heine, Derrida, street life, nightlife, boulevard]*

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As contemporary culture has taken to the streets as the site of postmodern, transcultural, and transnational negotiations, this turn to the street, or if you will the “turn on the go,” has become a signal challenge for current theory. Celebrated for its utopian qualities, the street has also become the marker of the very dystopian elements that define our current situation. The place of mobility and interchange where every social, political, and also cultural interaction and movement begins and ends is at one and the same time, the site of gridlock, congestion, traffic jam, paralysis, and dead end: a locus where petrification recognizes no exemption as its auratic spell commodifies the street and the hope it so stirringly expresses. That street is no neutral place or space but a socially, culturally, politically, legally, and geographically overdetermined meeting point that both connects and divides. As the 18th century German critic Gotthold Ephraim Lessing observed, what connects society is also what divides it. The very connecting elements are those that also divide and this tension is constitutive for the fabric of civil society. Division—Lessing recognized with the sharp-eyed vision that so strikingly anticipated Georg Simmel's deepest insights—provides the necessary structure to unify society in a way that preserves freedom and individuality in critically different fashion: a bulwark against a unity that cancels particularity, subjecting it to the mass produced experience of identity that betrays the universalism it so seductively promises.<sup>1</sup>

Ownership of this same street has been traditionally disputed: is it public, is it private, who claims the street, who owns it, and who actually runs it? And if it is the place of interchange between private and public

whose protocol does it follow? To claim in a Bakhtinian sense that it is the celebration of a carnival of collision would do little justice to the actual challenge the street presents. It would be an illusory pretense that anything goes while behind the screen the complex of the street's very hard and fast rules call for critical examination. And while the political powers that be claim traditionally the right to regulate street life—as for instance the Berlin police chief's proclamation of 1910 talks in his notice on "The Right of Public Demonstration" of the "right to the street"—the critic Viktor Klemperer noted that both the authorities and demonstrators share the call "Free the street! Free the streets!" to make room for the movement of the police or the demonstrators respectively.<sup>2</sup>

If the "grand boulevards" had opened the urban space in 19th century Paris long before Haussmann had made it more accessible for easy administrative control, troop movement and surveillance, the widening of the city's arteries would also provide the grounds for generating and expediting all kinds of other movements the city planners may have intended or not. While streets are conventionally theorized as a clearly defined space—with its dividers, collectors, squares, alleys, lanes, and dead ends—of a circulation that too often is misunderstood as "public," Jacques Derrida's *Voyous* (2003) or *Rogues* (2005) in the English translation, accentuates a different aspect. The streets that define a city and the movements of social intercourse also demarcate, on closer examination, precisely those borders or interstices that separate and unite the public and the private in the curious figure that runs the streets: the *voyou*. The *voyous* are the street youth, that dangerous, subversive element whose roguishly mercurious nature calls the street their home and thus functions as the continuous movement of displacement. The *voyous'* subversive challenge does not rest, as Derrida points out, in the fact that it poses the question whether they exist inside or outside society but that they mark the very boundaries and interstices that constitute the social and political space of the city and its social fabric. Streetwise, the *voyou* is not just the sign and agent of the instability of the life of the street, but a constant reminder of the very fact that any drawing of lines, borders, and demarcations remain thus—by the sheer logic of the boundary—ambiguously double faced. Carrying, as it were, the border between private and public—the street—along with them, or more precisely, within, the *voyous* trace the law of the sign, the signifier, of language. Just like *différance*, the *pharmakon*, the *khora*, and other travelers along the chain of signifiers, the *voyou* represents the impossibility of securing any meaning that does not walk the line.<sup>3</sup>

Taking the topographic dis/placement of the *voyou* seriously, we can learn from Derrida that the urban experience, and the street smarts it provides teaches us a lesson in deconstruction that urban theory, architecture, and anthropology can hardly ignore: that while urban space is imagined as split by the line that divides the private from the public sphere, the arteries of urban life, the streets lower the blindfold of such either-or theoretical constructions, revealing the boundary itself to be a construction zone. With the street reconceived as refusing the exclusivity

of both the private and the public, with their attendant false opposition between social division and public unity, the figure of the voyou—"le voyou que je suis," i.e. "the voyous that I follow and that I am" as Derrida's play with the double meaning of "que je suis" highlights—calls for an understanding of the street as the precarious space where private and public meet and constitute each other reciprocally. Rather than a source of threat or anxiety, the voyous that I follow and that I am is to be recognized as a vital force, which like "Hermes," the god of thieves and hermeneutics makes the circulation between them possible in the first place.<sup>4</sup> The traffic of merchandise, words, and meaning, Greek mythology so aptly suggests, mediates as it transports its goods across borders and frontiers. Moving between and beyond different spheres of law and authority such traffic precariously travels the line of legality it appears to transgress as it negotiates it.

Derrida's archeology of the voyou as the agent who negotiates the street as a constantly moving boundary on the go and that we follow as who we are and that we are as we follow it, reminds us that a critical understanding of street life and dynamics makes it impossible to any longer imagine the street as a scene of a stable distinction between an us and them. The anxiety that informs such a scheme reveals the energies we are forced to invest to maintain the economy of such a distinction. But equally, the desire to be released onto the street to be all the same, to collapse the difference of the voyou that I follow and that I am into identity betrays another equally disturbing anxiety: the anxious desire to be one with the other, to cancel out all differences, which in the final analysis is the desire to integrate the one to the other.

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The street, in other words, is not just where the public and the private meet, collide, and clash. It is also the site where they constitute themselves as distinction in that curious double movement of the "voyou que je suis." So long, fare well to Carl Schmitt, good-bye to possessive individualism, and "auf Wiedersehen" to all those models of civil society that ignore the voyou that I follow and that I am as the double move constitutive for imagining the political. The distinction between friend and enemy that Carl Schmitt identified as the fundamental distinction that constitutes politics turns out to be upon closer examination, Derrida suggests, begging the question. But the assumption on which possessive individualism rests turns out to be no less problematic. If the once liberally progressive point was to define the individual as the subject that has the right to possess, the reality and its different concerns of the dispossessed highlights the limited compass and application this approach can claim outside the framework of the paradigm of property. Equally, any notion of civil society that seeks to claim integration as its ideal ignores the constitutively permeable nature of the borders on which it rests.

The voyous, as Derrida so suggestively argues, serves therefore as critical corrective for rethinking politics as well as political theory because it is the voyous' existence on the margin and in the cracks of society, in the space that separates and glues the social fabric that secures

the cohesion and consolidation of civil society in the first place. A political vision that ignores the very fundament, albeit a very dynamic, mobile, and unruly one is subject to fatal self-misconception.

An early “avant-guard” to bid farewell to such a conception and usher in the arrival of the new political paradigm is Heinrich Heine’s cameo appearance in his own text. Stuck at a corner of Rue Laffitte in Paris, where Heine had come a decade earlier to live and write, he stands out as a particular oddity in a text that is already, even for Heine, an unusual and peculiar text. Heine’s *Ludwig Börne: A Memorial* takes a particular place in Heine’s body of writing. It serves Heine to develop and present his position on the relationship between politics and literature, the public and the personal by way of examination and critique of his one-time ally and later contender Ludwig Börne. The book as a whole presents thus the medium for the articulation of Heine’s different theory and practice of both politics and literature. For this reason, this text is Heine’s most personal and at the same time most political text, a conjunction that Heine himself recognizes to be constitutive for an adequate grasp of modernity’s emancipatory thrust. If Heine, Germany’s most outspoken 19<sup>th</sup> century poet, critic and exile in Paris, was never shy to exposing himself and provocatively so, his Börne book takes his argument on esthetics and politics to a new level of critique. The short-term result was the formation of a united front of rejection that made it difficult even for Heine’s most loyal supporters to accept his daredevil attitude of radical exposure of differences even if this required the risk of self-exposure. But Heine, the rogue that he was followed regardless the rogue that he dreamt to be following his own course wherever it would take him, even if that meant he would end up finding himself in a nightmare at the compromising site of a street’s intersection in nocturnal Paris.

Heine’s text appears in 1840 at a moment when development of urban architecture and city planning had reached a critical point and anxieties about modernizations and its consequences ran high. But Heine’s intervention—a pointedly literal form of intervention as the narrator’s voice literally intervenes at a crucial intersection of urban street life—is not just a symptomatic description of the enlightenment rationalism and the fallout of the anxiety that informs them but articulates also their sharp critique. While the ideological debates about urban modernization provide a conceptual and imaginary frame of reference that intellectuals and literati of the period seem eager to embrace, Heine’s nocturnal stance at the corner of Laffitte and the Boulevard des Italiens in 1840 deploys the inventory of the urbanist discourse to highlight its problematic underpinning. The nuance might seem to be minute but the difference is profound as Heine articulates a critique of ideology that will resonate with Marx and future Critical Theory as well as urban theorists.

Closer attention to the specificity of the particular corner of Rue Laffitte and the Boulevard des Italiens where Heine’s narrator finds himself in 1839 or 1840 allows us to better comprehend the rich and



Figure 1 Corner Rue Laffitte and Boulevard des Italiens. Photo by author.



Figure 2 Corner Rue Laffitte and Boulevard des Italiens. Photo by author.

suggestive network of associations and connotations the text invokes. [Figures 1 and 2.] If the project of the Haussmannization of the city is in the late 1830s and in 1840 still decades away, Paris has at that moment of time already emerged as a dynamically changing, stimulating site of modern urban experience. As a historic city guide notes:

In 1837 they [the boulevards] were paved in asphalt and given gas lamps. The most elegant restaurant in Paris, with the finest service and cellar, became the Café de Paris, which opened in 1822 on the Boulevard des Italiens. A dandy, Roger de Beauvoir, later wrote: “if you have not seen the Café de Paris towards 1837 or 1840, you have seen nothing (Hollis 2006:131).

And, indeed it is at this moment that the city undergoes a transformation that changes the urban experience in profound ways. As circulation, speed, and the emergence of an urban visual culture begin to shape the street life with intensifying force, the individual and his aspirations to freedom and independence comes under increasing pressure.<sup>5</sup> As Nicholas Papayanis observes in his study that emphasizes the significance of the role of both functionalist and utopian influences on city planning that preceded but also informed much of the vision of the Haussmann project, the 1840s “is the decade when the ideology of movement and circulation came to dominate urban planning theory and Paris came to be perceived as a site of constant movement.”<sup>6</sup> As “the circulatory system of Paris, its network of streets and boulevards, came to dominate planning texts in the late 1830s” this led to an intensification of the perception that urban life was defined by an increase of “urban circulation and the formation of a powerful city center”, notions that became “central tropes in the writings of many urban intellectuals trying to understand the modern city” (Papayanis 2004:104). What is dramatic about this development is that the social and political questions exploded onto the scene

with an unheard new urgency. 1840 was not only the year that saw the publication of a flurry of visionary writings, among them Louis Blanc's *Organisation du Travail* and Proudhon's famous *Qu'est-ce la propriété?* Communist literature began to hit the streets later that year as well. And 1840 brought not just an upheaval as far as theoretical life was concerned as the region experienced during the year also very real strikes (Papayanis 2004:104).

Heine's intervention situates itself in the context of the coordinates of a map of social and economic relations that define the very conditions of urban existence. In this context, Heine's pointedly pseudo-classic appearance signals with its distinct non-contemporaneity or *Ungleichzeitigkeit* a challenging critique of the century's new visions of modern urban existence.

Donning red-rosed tights, his flesh-colored costume announces Heine as a modern day representative of Greek mythic custom.<sup>7</sup> As such he stands at a corner of an intersection in Paris taking literally the shit that the coaches of the passing upper class spatter on his costume and even the "beautiful flower wreath" he wears on his head. Poetry under siege. The Greek paradigm of humanity under siege. And sensuality under attack by Puritan drivenness. Protection gear against the anal character is the necessary equipment for this modern street where the contemplative bystander encounters what we could call a *pedestrian* experience: the clash with the speed-driven rush of drivers and passengers that, shuttled to and fro, assume the features of the commodity they pride themselves on moving and controlling. Whereas these passengers dash like so many consignments in their coaches through the streets for the sake of speed, their perception is paradoxically diminished if not entirely obliterated. A self-consciously modern *pedestrian* in that same city, Heine recognizes the consignment "of one of those impudent gold carriages" to be the powerful financier and art collector Alexandre Aguado, Marquis de las Marismas del Guadalquivir: but neither the "stamping horses" nor the Marquis himself appear to notice what or who shares the street with them. If early modern road rage seems to blind these addicts of velocity, the unsavory experience still succeeds in opening the poet's eye to the more profound aspects of what for some seems only the (a)venue to defeat temporality. For Heine, the street is not just a space—empty or filled with dirt—but the (a)venue also for the recovery of time:

Usually in my dreams I am sitting on a cornerstone of the Rue Lafitte on a damp fall evening when the moon shines down onto the dirty boulevard pavement with long, glancing beams, so that the filth looks gilded if not studded with gleaming diamonds. The passers-by are also nothing but shining filth: stock jobbers, gamblers, cheap scribblers, counterfeiterers of ideas, still cheaper trollops, who to be sure, have only to prevaricate with their bodies, sated fatbellies who have been fed in the Café de Paris and now stumble toward the Académie de Musique [i.e. the Paris Opera], the cathedral where Fanny Elssler dances and laughs. Among

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them the carriages rattle and the lackeys jump, colorful as tulips and nasty as their gracious masters. And if I am not mistaken, sitting in one of those impudent gold carriages is the quondam cigar dealer Aguado, and his stamping horses spatter my rose-red tights. Yes, to my own amazement I am completely dressed in rose-red tights, in a so-called flesh-colored costume, since the advanced season as well as the climate do not permit complete nakedness as in Greece among the Thermopyleans, when King Leonidas with his three hundred Spartans quite nakedly danced on the eve of the battle, quite nakedly, his head wreathed in flowers (Heine 2006:108).

Greek attire and accessories are here the critical cues of the poet's mission. As we remember, King Leonidas and his three hundred Spartan fighters who, in Heine's account, danced—or rather exercised—naked—albeit without the tights—to prepare their defense of the pass at Thermopylae against the Persians was defeated in battle but went on to live forever in memory as the unforgiving champion of freedom. Unable to sustain their blockade of the pass, they all chose death. But their heroism was to be remembered in the famous poetry that would impart more life to their vision of freedom than the surviving victors could claim for themselves. Beyond the idea that the street that leads to freedom never rested in the firm possession of either party to the battle, Heine's reminiscence suggests that while opponents may seek to push each other aside making way for their own claims, the trace that poetic memory leaves behind writes the irreducible and irrepressible voice of the remnant that remains: the *voyou* that I follow and that I am.

Here, the corner of a Parisian boulevard becomes the battleground where opposite interests and claims clash. If the fight for freedom has taken to the street, so has, in the figure of Heine, the modern poet in tights with Greek allure. And as the poet's place is in the street and on the ground, his patriotic ambition of taking back the street might be considered a failure in the eyes of those who pass by. Yet quite to the contrary, "the poor fool" emerges as the stubborn reminder of a poetic vision and a vision of poetry that signals the freedom that those hastily complying with the demands of the day have long lost sight of. If the "public" hustle and bustle would rather wish to see this "poor fool" swept off the streets and boulevards and have it rather committed to the privacy of an esthetics behind closed doors, the poet's resistance affirms another vision:

I am costumed just like Leonidas in David's painting when I sit on that cornerstone by the Rue Lafitte where Aguado's damned driver spatters my tights. The lout, he even spatters my flower wreath, the beautiful flower wreath I wear on my head, which is, however, just among ourselves, already rather dry and without fragrance. Oh! they were fresh, happy flowers when I adorned myself with them, believing that the next morning it would be

time to go into battle, to the sacred death in victory for the fatherland. That was a long time ago; I am sitting glumly and idly by the Rue Laffitte, awaiting the battle, and meanwhile the flowers are fading on my head, and my hair, too, is turning white, and my heart grows ill in my breast. Holy God! How slowly time passes in such inert waiting, and in the end my courage will fail. I see how the people pass by, look at me in pity, and whisper to one another: the poor fool! (Heine 2006:pp.108)<sup>8</sup>

In rose-red tights—the modern version of the fighter for freedom against despotism and subjection to slavery—Heine marks the corner of the Rue Laffitte as the spot where the voice of protest, lament, and counter claim will not subside. [Figures 3 and 4.] The poet in the street has become, if only for a moment, the street poet. Playing on the Spartan freedom fighter wear—or rather non-wear as their nudity suggests—Heine’s dream-costume hardly seems to respond to the contemporary expectations and dictate of Paris fashion. Or maybe more so than any other outfit, the passage highlights, as Spartan camouflage seems the only street wear appropriate for what the street poet suggests is indeed a battleground where freedom and slavery, liberation and repression meet and contest. The textual reminder for such a reading resides in the continuation:

Just as my nighttime dreams mock my daydreams, so it happens sometimes that my daytime thoughts make fun of my nonsensical nighttime dreams, and rightly so, for I often act in my dreams like a real dolt (2006:109).



Figure 3 Maison Dorée, Rue Laffitte and Boulevard des Italiens, 1839. (Loyer 1988, 147).  
Courtesy of Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris.





Figure 4 Boulevard des Italiens, 1839. (Loyer 1988, 147). Courtesy of Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris.

Rather than an anxiety-dream—as this passage is often read—Heine’s text locates anxiety itself in the hectic velocity of the motion on the street. The dream is thus about an anxiety it exposes and cannot therefore be itself reduced to an anxiety dream. Bespattering the poet, anxiety will not go away but clings to him as the eloquent reminder of the conflict that is the street. The filth is the refuse of an economy that enforces the divide between public and private but turns a blind eye on the grounds, i.e. the dirt and literally the shit on which this distinction turns. The pedestrian who walks in the dirt acknowledges it. As street-poet, he even recognizes its poetic quality as allegory of what, despite all attempts at negation, remains irrepressible. Aguado’s driver thus not only spatters the poet’s tights, but even “my flower wreath, the beautiful flower wreath I wear on my head.” Poetry itself is affected, and not just the poet. This poetry, in all its combativeness, presents a different form of esthetics, refusing to doff the floral wreath—the ancient symbol of poetry—which has become “however, just among ourselves, already dry and without fragrance.” If it is the wheels of the golden carriages that rut the earth, kicking up dirt into the face of those that consider the street as more than just a thoroughfare, the sullied poet at the corner of Rue Laffitte reclaims the dignity that these mud-slingers claim as their own but had long ago lost to those they sully. If the glamour that exclusion and arrogation of power desire depends on diverting such shit onto those for whom poetic desire has become a battle for survival and a fight for freedom, the poet’s power consists in taking it in. For some passers-by he might seem to be a fool. But only the poet who gives voice to the word can sound the voice of liberation, by commemorating how such dirt and shit was produced in the first place. In countering such diversion, the poet makes “social progress” and real movement possible. While dashing golden carriages and their owners may appear to lord over the streets, the reader is made to understand, that the golden sheen of their carriages

reflects the dirt on which they travel. In claiming the streets, their wheels seek to roll across the public's space, as if marking it as their private property. It is against this new despotism, thriving on the petty theft that expropriates the public sphere, that Heine's poet—like the Spartan freedom fighters of old—takes up his position on the Paris street. The route from the city's emblematic restaurant *Café de Paris* to the theater of the Royal Academy of Music, which the Parisians simply called opera,<sup>9</sup> that temple of the muse that Aguado and his companions hope to reach with death-defying speed, inevitably passes the corner stone at Rue Laffitte: just as the Persians were forced to cross the pass of the Thermopylae. In parallel fashion to the moment of historical danger, when freedom was under attack, sheer power appears to succeed in the streets of modern Paris, but only as it submits to the rules of the street it pretends to control. Unimpressed by the dirty onslaught, the poet in his dreamy, rose-red tights—with his flower wreath now “dry and without fragrance,” and this means sharp and to the point—creates his poetry out of the refuse of power. Poetic justice here serves not as wishful, compensatory thinking but as the motive and mobilizing force of poetry's intrinsically political thrust. Heine's poetics of the dream, while sitting on a corner-stone, encapsulates his new esthetics in the image of a street scene that re-defines the meaning of street-life as the new urban battleground.

But the text points to an additional critical dimension. The corner at the Rue Laffitte and the Boulevard des Italiens provides not just the perspective for the narrator's observation but turns out to be the intersection of the axes of two streets that suggests a system of coordinates that highlights the layout of the street map as a socio-economically constructed space that calls for critical attention. If the trajectory of the movement on the Boulevard des Italiens, the narrator witnesses, is one that runs from the *Café de Paris* to the opera, i.e. from consumption of the material needs to the consumption of art as entertainment and ideology, thus uniting the physical and intellectual, or in Heine's terms the sensual with the spiritual needs, this movement turns on the axis of the Rue Laffitte. Yet the intersection of the Rue Laffitte makes this trajectory not just observable but inserts the third element in the equation of urban life, i.e. money as capital. If the Boulevard des Italiens figures in Heine's text as the axis on which space and time, i.e. the modern urban experience of speed as consumption and enjoyment is staged, it is anchored on the axis that its intersection with the Rue Laffitte represents, the street on which bankers such as the Rothschilds and Joseph Périer had just opened their offices in 1835, resp. 1836 (Hillairet 1963 vol. 2:13). David Harvey's three defining moments—time, space, and capital—are thus suggestively inscribed in Heine's passage and critically figured.<sup>10</sup>

Heine's point of observation rests on the corner stone that links the narrator's point of view critically with the phenomenon of the Rothschilds, a reference whose recurrent iteration in Heine's writings serves in provocative fashion to account for finance capital's powerfully progressive and emancipatory if unintended revolutionary push to modernity.<sup>11</sup>

With Rothschild as oblique but coy allusion, Heine's view from the Rue Laffitte considers not just the economic but attends also to the seminal role of the Rothschilds as financial engineers of social and political progress towards a modern Europe that at the same time tends to exclude so mercilessly the very Jewish identity that has made them possible in the first place.

Heine's street map however reaches further. In this period Heine lived at 23, rue des Martyrs (Kruse and Werner 1981:173), the continuation of the Rue Laffitte towards Montmartre with only the church of Notre Dame de Lorette barring a direct view from his house to the intersection with the Boulevard des Italiens where the narrator finds himself in the dream sequence. The site of the church sets off the connecting block of the Rue Fléchier that links the Rue Laffitte with the Rue des Martyrs which results in a slight detour. This suggests one additional dimension in Heine's text. The street's system of coordinates includes then in addition to time, space, and money as the constitutive elements of the city's urban experience also the narrator's own living the space. Heine's apartment down the street however is not part of the scene but what remains off the scene. An unspoken part of the city, the narrator's home maybe shaped by the sheer urban force to functionalize space, time, and capital in its own image. But it represents at the same time also the place that resists such assimilation. Just as the unconscious serves as the precarious home of the conscious, the apartment down the street positions the narrator in that peculiar urban space between street and house, the site that is at the same both always already public and private. At the intersection of the conscious and unconscious—where the distinction *heimlich* vs. *unheimlich* has itself assumed *unheimlich* features—the unconscious returns as the empowering agent that is not only informed and shaped by the force which space, time, and capital exert but that—thanks to the powers that elude the grasp of the conscious—is able to critically resist, disengage from, and reflect on the forces that condition it.

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Against the temptation of unreservedly embracing the ideology of speed and capital that would seduce so many utopian city planners, social engineers, critics, and literati alike, Heine's nocturnal dream reclaims a ground for critical contemplation that in its stubborn entrenchment at the corner position marks the voyou's positionality that questions the grounds for the set boundaries on which speed, greed, and power seek to thrive. Reflecting on the conditions of the infrastructure that makes the city and its street life possible in the first place, this voyou observer names the costs and human loss modern urbanity incurs. Exposing the unintended instrumentalization to which those who race the streets in pursuit of their happiness submit, the lords of the streets turn out to be the self-deluded subjects of the servitude they so desperately desire to leave behind. Viewed from the corner of the Rue Laffitte, these actors of desired independence turn out to be what their crazed chase for self-fulfillment so mercilessly reinforces: hopelessly repressed subjects of the dreams they chase as they remain the slaves of their desires.

Though the flaneur tempted by the lure of the streets might fixate his gaze on the fetishes of commodity, Heine's dream alter ego brings this floating through the city to a standstill, arresting the movement for an instant to bring out street-life's deeply haunted underside. Interrupting his walk for a meditative break and resting on a stone that marks the coordinate grid of what perception could otherwise—and without grounding—falsely ascribe to the esthetic effect of perpetual movement, the poet's dreaming eyes open onto another dimension of street-life altogether. In its attempt to understand the street's movements, poetic imagination in this way needs to re-ground itself as part of the action, in order to reflect, meditate, perceive, but ultimately and simply, as the passage suggests, to *see*. Against the excited high-strung fantasies of utopian visions Heine's dream sequence thus reclaims another, more critical and radical vision of urban freedom and respect for social equality and independence.

The sign of life—the dirt spattered on the narrator—is then also a reminder of the life of the sign, of the dynamics of signification. The *voyou* that I follow and that I am is the signifier and the signified running the street and sometimes resting, hiding in doorways, side streets, or simply sitting on a corner stone: the continual renegotiation of boundaries he or she carries, dislocates and displaces as they move or stand still. They force us to re-imagine the scene of the street as the site of motion and commotion of signification and with it of the concept of agency, action, and change. The *voyou* that I follow and that I am teaches us that the one who seems to hold power is not always the one who holds power. The one who desires to hold power or who claims so shows rather the lack of it. The person on the run, on the other hand, is the one who takes power to its limits, the moving boundary between public and private. On the run, the *voyou* represents the ever-moving boundary he or she is, the constant reminder of difference in identity. If the flaneur promenading the city and the detached spectator taking in the panoramic sights serve the dictate of the structure they imagine, the defiance of the *voyou* signals the sign's insurgent character.<sup>12</sup>

If the concept of policing the streets rests on the fallacy that the ruling force determines the boundaries, the *voyou's* elusive, run-away character reminds us that boundaries are not constituted by exclusion but by mutual acknowledgment across the line they inscribe. The destabilizing, subversive, unsettling challenge of the street is not that one side sets the protocol and thus mechanically produces its response, as the Foucauldian model of the production of delinquency as the product of the social order would have it. Instead, the movements of and in the street show that the boundary walks away from us, i.e. the *voyous* that we follow and that we inhabit both sides of the border. The rigorously dialogical model in which the *voyous* must be imagined provides us with the conceptual framework required to rethink civil society: not just as sitting on one side of the fence or the other, but as limit concept. Irreducible to either side of the divide between the private and the public that rests on the traditional concept of the subject, the street calls for an

alternative approach that makes subjectivity instead of the subject its point of reference: the conflicted self that I follow and that I am, that I re-imagine as I renegotiate it is also the point of departure that serves as the ground and corner stone to comprehend the double-sided agency, the dialogical character that defines street life. The peculiarity of the street's productive clash between the private and the public is thus not a closed space, not a static place but the ground on which space and place, and that means also agency and power are negotiated.<sup>13</sup>

The voyou reminds us—sometimes with a loud, even unpleasant voice and sometimes silently, sometimes eloquently and sometimes annoyingly—that arresting the sign results in arresting not just the signified, the voyou that I follow, pursue, chase, and hunt, but also the signifier, the claimed free agent, representative of power, legitimacy, and sovereignty. Just as the sign sits on the fence and loses its meaning when it falls and lands on either side of it, the individual reduced to one side of the fence or the other suffers the amputation of either the private or the public dimension. And we all know what the experience of the phantom limb suggests: the compensatory reproduction of what is lost but irreplaceable.

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freedom and poetry  
that no teleology  
can deliver, and  
which the clattering  
passage of dashing  
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every passing day*

Humpty Dumpty however knew better before his fall. And so do those who have not excised their own voyous from their selves. Maybe next time we walk the street we will be better prepared not to “other” our fellow travelers but recognize their alterity as the chance to accept with them also our own differences, ourselves as other. The street would then no longer be conceived as the prime real estate where private interests seek to negotiate their claims at the expense of public costs. Rather than simply reshuffling the dirt—Heine's telling allegory of the micro-politics of land expropriation and its unfavorable redistribution—Heine figures the street as the site where we follow the voyous that we are. Street-space provides the grounds for the freedom and poetry that no teleology can deliver, and which the clattering passage of dashing carriages continues to promise us with every passing day. Instead, reclaiming the street as the path that is also the goal—as in the pointed, anti-teleological moment in which Heine takes to the streets—reminds us of that promise of freedom that, just beneath the mud of an unfulfilled modernity, the poet's dream so eloquently reclaims.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>For Lessing see Goetschel (2004:pp.211).

<sup>2</sup>Cf. the following entry in the Grimm dictionary of the German language for the word street: “das recht auf die strasze ‘das recht zur öffentlichen demonstration’ *bekanntmachung des Berliner polizeipräsidenten v. 13. 2. 1910, s. Büchmann gefl. worte* (1926) 607; *strasze frei! die straszen frei! ruf der polizei oder der demonstranten bei zusammenstößen, s. Klemperer l(ingua) t(ertii) i(mperii)* (1949) 245.”

<sup>3</sup>See especially the section “Le voyou que je suis” in Jacques Derrida (2003:95–103). For the English translation see Jacques Derrida (2005:63–70).

<sup>4</sup>For the critical significance of the “mercurial” double agency of Hermes as god of both hermeneutic and thieves, i.e. interpretative and economic circulation, see Slezkine (2004).

<sup>5</sup>Hazel Hahn observes that “a form of visual culture began to emerge on the Grands Boulevards in the 1840s when they first began to be explicitly celebrated for providing a unique, continually changing, spectacle of new amenities and sights that were considered refreshing to the eye and a stimulus to reflection.” Hahn (2007:158). However it was not until the 1880s that neon lights replaced mechanically moving boards (ibid:164).

<sup>6</sup>See the important study of Papayanis (2004:103).

<sup>7</sup>The following quotes are from Heine (2006). For the German, see Heine (1975 vol.4).

<sup>8</sup>In a helpful footnote to this passage Heine’s translator Jeff Sammons notes that Heine may have had Jacques-Louis David’s (1748–1825) 1814 painting *Léonidas aux Thermopylae* in mind exhibited in the Louvre.

<sup>9</sup>The Paris opera did not move to today’s site, the Palais Garnier at the Place de l’Opéra until 1875.

<sup>10</sup>See Harvey’s first chapter in *Consciousness and the Urban Experience. Studies in the History and Theory of Capitalist Urbanization*, “Money, Time, Space, and the City” (1985:1–35).

<sup>11</sup>Rothschild is introduced in the Börne book early on 18–21 with reference to the notorious passage in *The Baths of Lucca (Travel Pictures)*, Heine, *Sämtliche Schriften*, vol. 2, 425. For other references to Rothschild of the same period cf. for instance *Lutetia*, articles XXXII (31 March 1841), Heine, *Sämtliche Schriften*, vol. 5, 354–6 and LVII (5 May 1843), 451–53.

<sup>12</sup>Oddly oblivious of this dynamics, Michel de Certeau’s “Walking in the City” operates with a notion of structure that seeks to map the city as if it were an objective and static phenomenon rather than a complex political, i.e. socially dynamic process that does not rest on firm ground but rather, runs with the sign as voyou who represents the borders between public and private that mark and thus produce the urban space, see de Certeau (1984:91–110).

<sup>13</sup>For a discussion of the critical model dialogic offers, see Goetschel (2008) and in English, Goetschel (2005).

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