

The *Placebo* Effect

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Today, I, Avery Medjuck, am on my way to becoming a new person. Actually, I won't be a completely new person; I'll simply have a slightly different identity. I'll be born somewhere around the years 1985 or 1986, instead of the 1989 that is the *actual* year of my birth. It's likely that I'll be from the state of Maine, Texas, or even Illinois, instead of California, the state where I *actually* reside. There's no point guessing what my address will be—I suppose that's up to the person who is crafting the small, slightly expensive piece of plastic that I purchased a few days ago and am now on my way to pick up. It's this flimsy (but hopefully not too flimsy) piece of plastic that will allow me to achieve my semi-new identity, an identity that will allow me certain privileges that the true Avery Medjuck would otherwise be denied (unless I'm in Europe or certain parts of Canada . . . but I won't go into too many details on this front). I step out of the freezing New York air and into the place-that-will-not-be-named, climb a set of stairs, and knock on the door of the person-who-will-not-be-named. And knock again. Nobody home, I guess. Well, it's three o'clock now, I muse. Maybe if I brave the cold and head up to Madison Square Park to spend a few hours with Roxy Paine, the person I'm waiting for will have returned by the time I walk back. Seems like a decent enough plan, so I step out into the streets once more, leaving the creation of my new, artificial identity for later.

When I say, "spend some time with Roxy Paine" I don't mean the person. I've never met Mr. Paine. Actually, until very recently, I thought that Paine was a woman. As it turns out, the old adage "looks can be deceiving" applies even to names. Today, I'm actually headed to Madison Square Park to spend some time with three of Paine's sculptures: *Conjoined*, *Defunct*, and *Erratic*. After a twenty-minute walk through the wind tunnel that is Fifth Avenue, I see the park and inside it, Paine's silver trees and silver rock.

The three connected works, literally rooted to the ground, depict organic bodies similar to those that exist elsewhere within Madison Square Park,

but these trees are constructed from polished stainless steel pipes, rods, and plates welded, bent, and cut to create these proto-natural forms. *Conjoined* is a forty-foot tall sculpture of two trees that initially grow toward the sky in the normal fashion, and then turn in midair to meet one another. Their leafless branches intertwine in the space between their two trunks, so that it is difficult at points to tell where one tree ends and the other begins; the union of the two trees is both intriguing and surreal. *Defunct* portrays another variety of tree, one that stands pillar-like in contrast to the twisting branches of *Conjoined*. As the name implies, *Defunct* has seen better days; it has been attacked by some sort of fungus that protrudes from its polished surface. Jagged, broken branches jut from the tree's trunk. *Defunct* seems to be dead. The third sculpture, *Erratic*, is a massive, fifteen-foot-wide boulder partially split down the middle. Not only is it the only *metal* rock in the park; it is the only rock of any kind. Erratic indeed.

The three sculptures are pristine mimics, scale representations of the varied organic bodies that one normally finds in a park. Only the stainless steel from which they are formed gives them away, reflecting both their true metallic identities and the grey tones of surrounding skyscrapers. The first time I saw the sculptures, I didn't even know that I was seeing them. I was sitting in a coffee shop across the street from the park, staring through the window towards the organic life of the square, only to realize that the life I was looking at was not alive after all. I had arrived at the park in search of a respite from the constant sound of honking taxis and the omnipresent shadows of tall skyscrapers. I had sought a place where I might, at least for a moment, forget that I was sitting in the heart of one of the world's biggest cities. Madison Square Park was the closest park on the map (aside from the currently under-construction Washington Square Park), so I had chosen it.

André Aciman once looked to Straus Park as a place where he could transport himself from the reality of New York City to another place altogether. In the essay "Shadow Cities" he writes, "Depending on where I sat, or on which corner I moved to within the park, I could be in any of four or five countries and never for a second be in the one that I couldn't avoid hearing, seeing, and smelling" (368). To Aciman, Straus Park was a place where he was able to forget the reality that surrounded him, where the realistic was overshadowed by the remembered. In Straus Park he was able, at least in his own mind, to be in the city of his birth: Alexandria, Egypt. He explains, "The real New York I never see. . . . I see only the New York that either sits in for other places or helps me summon them up. New York is the stand in, the ersatz of all the things I can remember and cannot have" (369).

Like Aciman I hoped that I might forget New York and be transported to my own home—Santa Barbara, California. There, a twenty-minute walk would take me not to the nearest park, but to a much more natural place of beauty: the Pacific Ocean. It had been almost four months since I left California, and the novelty of New York had long since worn off, leaving only the realities of everyday life. I ached for home, much as Aciman yearned for Alexandria. And in the absence of Santa Barbara, Madison Square Park did the trick. I was not lying next to the ocean, but while I sat in the park, that didn't seem to matter. There, for the first time, the sirens seemed quieter, the honking taxis fewer, and the skyscrapers smaller. Only *Conjoined*, *Defunct*, and *Erratic* kept the illusion from becoming complete. When I walked into the park and looked more closely at the sculptures, the truth was evident. The imitations were life-like, but they were not real, and I couldn't let myself forget that. Those were not trees. That was not a rock. They were “ersatz”—human constructs that could not hold a candle to the real thing. They were only representations. Paine's lie, rendered with stainless steel, reflected my own lie. The illusion of respite was incomplete.

It's ironic to note that part of one of the most grandiose and symbolic sculptures of all time—the Statue of Liberty—was once housed within the confines of Madison Square Park. From 1876 to 1882, the *arm and torch* of the Statue were displayed within the park as a means to raise money for the construction of the rest of the 150-foot tall monument (“Mad. Sq. Art 2008”). The Statue was often the first sight of America for the millions of Europeans who immigrated to the United States by ship. It came to be recognized not just as a symbol of the United States, but of the ideals of liberty and freedom. The Statue was a symbol that, in the words of Alexandra Kollontai, a Soviet revolutionary who visited the United States in 1916, “caused the hearts of our European fathers and grandfathers to beat with triumphant happiness and exultation” (244). Like Aciman's Straus Park, my Madison Square Park, and Paine's three sculptures, the Statue of Liberty is a work of art that matters not because of its real, tangible, outward appearance (it is neither terribly impressive nor beautiful, aesthetically speaking), but because of the ideals and imaginings it represents.

On my second trip to Madison Square Park, my powers of imagination fail me. Standing on the corner of Fifth Avenue and Twenty-third Street, I see only a pitiful little park in the midst of a massive Manhattan intersection. The shadows of the surrounding skyscrapers are as imposing as ever, and the sirens of passing police cars, ambulances, and fire trucks cannot be escaped.

Santa Barbara and the Pacific Ocean, places that I hoped the park would once again evoke for me, are still more than three thousand miles away. The problem is that I've seen the truth—only a week earlier I had been home for winter break; I had seen the *real* ocean, smelled it, swum in it, felt the sand beneath my feet. I had experienced the reality of home, not just my postcard-like impressions and imaginings of it. With the vivid memories of home still fresh in my mind, my “shadow city” wasn't good enough. Madison Square Park truly was, to use Aciman's word, “ersatz”—a substitute for something better (369). I had come to the park because it represented an ideal—a pastoral escape within a bludgeoning urbanism—but the representation no longer held up against the reality I had recently experienced. I saw the artificiality of such a representation. But even more than that, I saw the inadequacy of trying to pass off an inferior item as genuine.

In 1916, Alexandra Kollontai likewise had her notion of an idealized representation shattered. When she entered the United States, the Statue of Liberty had been hidden by a thick layer of fog, and it was only on her departure, four months later, that she was able to see the statue that represented so much to her. She writes of the experience:

By then America had already ceased to be for me the promised land of possibility. During those four and a half months I had seen politicians insistently preaching in favour of militarism and the bitter struggle waged by labour against unrestrained American capital, the power wielded by the American police and the omnipotence of the trust kings, the corruption of American courts, the servility of the American capitalist press . . . and the 'freedom' of the independent church. . . . Now I had a clear picture of what America is really like, a clear picture of the 'land of freedom.' (244)

Once Kollontai got close enough to see the truth (or at least her own perception of the truth) a mere representation was meaningless. Once *I* had seen the truth, I too knew that what I had thought was real was nothing more than a stand-in, a representation. The trees were made of metal.

As it turns out, *Defunct* and *Conjoined* aren't the only metal trees that Roxy Paine has created. In fact, the two sculptures bring his count to thirteen. And while the titles of the works Paine has placed in Madison Square Park tend towards physical description (*Conjoined* is two trees whose branches intertwine, *Defunct* is a dying tree), the titles of some of the artist's previous works make explicit the sense of imitation conveyed by the pieces. One tree, placed in Central Park in 2002, was titled *Bluff*; another in Sweden was titled

Imposter. One placed in the St. Louis Art Museum was titled *Placebo* (“Roxy Paine Bio”). The word “placebo” is an interesting choice for a title because, unlike the others, it doesn’t simply suggest that the tree is a fake. In medicine, a placebo is a drug without active medicinal ingredients that is prescribed to make a patient feel as though he or she is being treated, or to act as the control for a clinical trial. When the patient doesn’t know that he or she is being deceived, the placebo can actually cause his or her health to improve. However, the nature of the “placebo effect” is such that the benefit of the placebo is nullified once the patient knows that he or she is not receiving “real” treatment (“Placebo Effect”). Once the trickery is revealed, the effect is lost.

I decide that I’ve done more than enough thinking about *Conjoined*, *Defunct*, and *Erratic*. So I decide that I’ll enlist the aid of some of the park’s other inhabitants to do the thinking for me. I stroll up to a young couple sitting dead center in front of *Conjoined*, and I ask them what they think of the sculpture, what they think that it means. The woman speaks up right away and mentions how ironic it is to have a park full of fake metal trees. I laugh, and then look to the young man who hasn’t said anything. “Umm, I dunno,” he says, looking unsure of himself. “Probably something about artifice.” Perfect. So perfect that it’s hard to believe this answer came from this quiet guy sitting on a bench. *Artifice*—it captures so much of what is embodied by both Paine’s sculptures and the park itself, both the clever deception that the sculptures are able to perform, and also the human impulse to construct, and to replicate.

You see, the trouble with Madison Square Park, the Statue of Liberty, and Roxy Paine’s sculptures does not lie in the attempt to create something that stands in for something else. Substitution is a natural human impulse, one born of necessity, and one that is often beneficial, as with my fleeting experience of home in Madison Square Park. The problem lies in the fact that sooner or later, the artifice becomes too convincing, or remembrance of the “reality” cheapens the imagined substitute, or the knowledge that something truer and better than the imitation exists, eventually slips from our memories. In “Las Vegas, or the Longest Distance Between Two Points” Rebecca Solnit, discussing the recent phenomenon of Las Vegas casinos built to resemble certain places that they clearly are not, muses, “Scary is the widespread willingness to accept simulations of real places, for just as these simulations usually forbid the full exercise of civil liberties, so they banish the full spectrum of sights, encounters, [and] experiences” (478). For now, my social instinct demands *real* human interaction, but sooner or later Facebook might well

prove convincing enough, convenient enough, that I quickly forget the difference between a typed message and the sound of a human voice. For now, *Madden '08*—the latest football videogame—doesn't compare to a *real* game of football, but I haven't yet played '09. Who knows if it will compel me to forget that the feel of the grass beneath my feet is what truly makes the game worthwhile?

Aciman seems willing to accept the “shadow cities” of Straus Park, but I imagine that if he could only return to Alexandria as I returned to Santa Barbara, if he could once again feel an Egyptian breeze and smell the Red Sea, then a park on the Upper West Side would be no more an adequate stand-in for his home than the New York, New York hotel in Las Vegas is for Manhattan. For Aciman and me there is hope, because in our minds we will always retain a glimpse of the real places that we often create stand-ins for—our homes. But this hope does not exist for those who have never experienced the genuine article, who have only seen the imitation. Aciman states, “Outside of comparing, we cannot feel” (369), but what hope is there for those who cannot compare, who must accept a lackluster imitation for the real thing? True, Aciman's substitute has allowed him to “feel” as if he were home in Alexandria, but by imagining his home, he is free to conjure a lesser fantasy that is certain to “banish the full spectrum of sights, sounds, [and] experiences.” There is a touch of desperation, the desperation of someone who has forgotten the true experience, in Aciman's statement, “I rather enjoyed my Straus Park-Italy and my Straus Park-Paris much more [than those real cities], the way sometimes I like postcards and travel books better than the places they remind me of” (369). In my heart, I can't believe him. It frightens me to think that I might eventually be willing to accept permanently a park or hotel in lieu of my home, a metal construct in lieu of nature. Yet even more worrisome is the possibility that symbols of freedom and liberty will come to replace the real thing, as the Statue of Liberty did in Alexandra Kollontai's eyes. Do stars and stripes flying above an impoverished, oppressed nation have any real meaning? Does an aircraft-carrier and a declaration of “mission accomplished” have any real significance when people are still dying by the thousands? For me, there can be no “shadow cities,” no Statue of Liberty, no metal trees. Once I know the truth, the placebo effect does not hold.

It is now five o'clock, so I decide to head back to the place-that-will-not-be-named to see if the person-who-will-not-be-named has returned. He has, and he gives me what I've been waiting for. I decide to go test it. I head into one of the many small markets on University and grab a few things. I take

them to the register where a cashier rings me up, then asks me for the little plastic item that I just picked up. I hand it to him. He looks at it, then at me, then at it again.

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