

## UNDER THE SAME ROOF

*And if the City falls and one man survives  
he will carry the City inside him on the paths of exile  
he will be the City*

--Zbigniew Herbert

### 1

Civilisations migrate following the meridians, Joseph Brodsky once maintained, in a wish to give a broader meaning to his own personal vicissitudes. Living as an exile, far from his native city, he had to define the world afresh by transposing his angle of vision and discovering some other St Petersburg. He found it in Venice – a second homeland, where in the Grand Canal it was not the waters of the Mediterranean that flowed, but those of the River Neva.

An exile – and this is apparent in the etymology of the Greek for exile – *exoristos* – is one who is forced to live beyond the limits, that is, outside the city, because the city is the human creation *par excellence* which poses in the most categorical manner the question of limits, of their magnitude and their layout. The urban planner and the architect, consequently, in a more tangible way than anyone else, make a reality of an idea or a concept. Because they build, define, and through the harmony of patterns and lines regulate time.

While the writer conceives a story and during the course of writing it, is at liberty to change it as often as he wants, the architect and the town planner do not enjoy the luxury of changing the basic axes of their plans. Small interventions are all that they can bring about; otherwise any radical change in the general design runs the risk of invalidating it in its entirety. It is for this reason, in any event, that the doctrine that the aim of the architect is to put everything under one roof has remained unchanged for centuries. The architect or the planner does not function selectively; he does not except society or a part of society from his personal planning. Everything – and everybody – has to find their place in the big house which he creates on their behalf. And any mistakes which he makes have consequences for subsequent generations.

### 2

The city is the offspring of Western civilisation, and has been ever since antiquity a hive of democracy. It is not simply the built landscape, but where everything happens, where everyone co-exists and can, has the right (and, naturally, also the obligation), to decide about public affairs, as was the case in the Athenian democracy of the fifth century BC. This tradition has remained alive – with its inevitable adjustments, and its historical impairments, of course.

When, in 1996, we were preparing the Candidature File of Athens for the 2004 Olympic Games, I discovered, not without surprise, that on the long, narrow 'Olympic Ring' which divided the city into two, almost all of its infrastructure (hospitals,

ministries, services) was laid out. It was on this that the Master Plan of the Games – in other words, the city's functioning at a time of exceptionally heightened demands – was based. But my surprise was even greater when I arrived at a further realisation: that this long, narrow ring enclosed notionally the Long Walls of Pisistratus, which were built to link Athens with Piraeus in the sixth century BC. So we had only to follow the ancient plan – even if those walls do not survive today.

Which, then, was the city which we were talking about, and which was that which pre-existed? The imagination can lead you to strange conjectures and arbitrary projections, but that happens only when the historical line is missing: the sense of before and after, the logic which obeys need – when, of course, the latter does not arise as a consequence of survival, but of the thirst for freedom. And what else, in the last analysis, does creation mean if not freedom, that is, a step up of life? In this particular instance, what Benedict Anderson argues in *Imagined Communities* receives confirmation: that the past acts as an imagined reservoir of the present.

### 3

I have spent the greater part of my life in cities, great or small. Thus it was to be expected that I should have correlated from a very early age the building with the text, the structuring of space with the structured language of writings, thus raising the philosophy of construction into a major premiss of creation. In art, as in life, it seems that the mathematical axiom of Évariste Galois holds good: that any problem, if you succeed in posing it, has its answer. Consequently, all the features of coincidence are a consequence of a knowledge which pre-exists, and so nothing seems to be self-evident if no one discovers it.

We say that in art commonplaces are to be avoided. What else, though, is a city but precisely this: a common place? And, in any event, weren't the great works based on the logic of commonplaces? Shakespeare drew from common areas – that is, public narratives – the myths of his works, he didn't discover any unknown myth and he invented nothing, and Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides did the same. Just as the city belongs to everybody – and the same is the case with its extension, the country – so common narratives make up its fabric. Of course, everyone recounts these in his own way – referring them back not only to the region of personal experience, but also of human convention. And herein lies the difference between the major and the minor – a difference which still has force today, in a world in which the inflated number of narratives eats away at texts as inflation eats away at the value of money.

It was for this reason, anyway, that Hippodamus, the father of urban planning, did not develop of the Hippodamian city plan as a simple arrangement for buildings, but as a model for life in society. Of the Hippodamian cities, scarcely anything has remained: the Piraeus of the age of Pericles ceased to exist centuries ago, and it was only recently that the anchorage of the Athenian fleet was discovered under the water; it is anybody's guess when – and if – this will fully come to light. Miletus too has been destroyed, as well as Thurii in Lower Italy.

If anyone wished to find a representative city which fits, multiplied many times over, of course, on the Hippodamian scale, this is to be found outside Greece, and its name is New York – and more specifically, Manhattan. If the three years when I lived there in my thirties exerted such a fascination over me, I suppose now that this is due to a kind of atavistic memory, the existence of which, to begin with, I had not suspected: that

here a plan was being applied which was so primeval and at the same time so modern that it was impossible not to be enthralled by it – particularly in the case of someone who was attempting to express himself and to put himself under the roof of the New York sky, together with what he had brought within himself.

So after the first period of exultations and enthusiasms generated in me by the Big Apple, I discovered a super-magnified section of the Greek world in hybrid form, and, consequently, all that I needed in order to express what I knew, to confirm what I suspected, to verify some of my hypotheses, as I felt the emotion of the adult who finds again the youth of the ages, as they were mutated into the past of his childhood and rendered the present rhythmical. I say 'rhythmical' because the city was a vast orchestra and its conductor the sky.

#### 4

Since the great city is for the writer the womb of narratives (the definition tells us so as well: metro-polis), their repetition, the game with their variations remains inexhaustible. Such a game can be at one and the same time a blessing and a curse, because there is no metropolis which does not present itself with a dual nature, as manichaeic and contradictory. Baudelaire experienced Paris as a privilege and a condemnation, as a dazzling dungeon where he served his sentence (to write about it), lost amid its Luciferian radiance out of which the black ode of the abyss rose up. He himself behaved like a prince of a dark kingdom in which shone the wrinkles of children who had grown old prematurely, because their stolen youth was outside the notional walls of the city, and these walls were the bonds which he tried to break by the invocation of his demons, wrapped in the heavy clouds which shut off the horizon of imagination.

In Cavafy, the city serves as a constant present, a phantom and a fossil in the dark territory of History. It is no accident that two of his finest poems are entitled *The Walls* and *The City*.

Auden's city takes on the characteristics of the ancient Greek city-state, to which he adds a feature unknown to the ancients: original sin. For this Alexandrian of the North, nothing lay outside it, everything was a confluence or an effluence on the edges of its streets.

There was no great literature without the city in the twentieth century – in the Western world at least, that is, in the civilisation of night. The poets whom Plato crowned, and exiled from his *Republic*, returned to the city and wept over the ruins, like Eliot in the *Waste Land*. Others – and among them *par excellence* Brecht – saw it dawning in the asphalt, the rubbish, and the smoke like an ill-omened star which those who came after would spit upon, in passing judgment on the offences of their forebears. Because the poets had no other way of taking revenge on the philosophers, of deriding the Socratic dialectic, of showing everyone that *raison*, the cause, is a nightmare, that the enclosed cities appear like ectoplasms of the mind, like labyrinths in which we can get lost and not care whether we find the way out, because Ariadne is now dead.

Baudelaire discovers his Ariadne in the whore; Benjamin in his turn discovered Baudelaire and then his own Ariadne, the daughter of Baudelaire's prostitute. His planetary city, the kingdom of Cronus – which is why Susan Sontag entitles her essay

devoted to him *Under the Sign of Saturn* – is the territory of night and of shadow, thus confirming that the metaphysics of light have their roots in darkness and refer us to the alien.

5

The writer and the poet map out the pathways of imagination in the Dark Forest of buildings. And just as in the Ptolemaic maps there is a *terra incognita*, the same is true of cities. Next to someone who is living is someone else who is dying. Two metres from joy and life are sorrow and illness. The cenotaphs of memory are added notionally on to the blocks of the buildings; the grid of the city depicts the cell of memory – and in memory the living co-exist and converse with the dead.

This is one of the reasons why the older cities grow, the more fascinating they seem, to remind us that creation operates only as an antidote to the discontinuity of time and to sudden stops. We call the process of mnemonic supplementation imagination; this goes beyond emotion, the first experience, the initial impression, the sense, even that rarified material we call atmosphere.

And so, the writer, living in cities, retains strong inside him two primary emotions: that of origin and identity, of belonging, that is, together with the feeling of being orphaned, since he remains exposed to the surroundings, with the unseen shadow always behind him of the one who is enclosed and wants to get out of the limits, the negative of his self which he sometimes finds and sometimes loses in the successive layers of the labyrinth, that is, in the built environment.

6

In the light of the above, one might reasonably ask: is, then, architecture an art, and if yes, how is it connected with literature? Or even with the other arts – but this latter question would take me far out of my way. But why do I suggest a question which was answered even in antiquity, since architecture belongs among the six known arts?

I am provided with a motive by the views of certain modern architects who create vast buildings in the cities of Asia, maintaining that architecture is a science and not an art. As fetishists of the materials and of technology and the prey of money, they have not the slightest hesitation. Some, moreover, argue that the enormous ant nests which they design, these glittering Towers of Babel of our time, which compete in height with one another, are the sculptures of our age. There is, nevertheless, a vast difference between someone who builds in space and one who composes building masses. I don't know to what extent a person who turns his back on the planner and prefers to be herded together with the financier and the dictator, forgetting man and squandering his talent on the dystopias of grandiose ideas, is an architect.

In the cities which he designed, Hippodamus took care that all the houses should have their facades facing South. I think of that very often, since my last house, like the one before it, faces South. The building complex in which I live today was designed by a well-known architect, an aesthete, a poet, and one who enjoys the reputation of being 'eccentric', since his designs give rise to problems for the engineers – technical difficulties the overcoming of which raises the cost of construction.

I have been told – and I found it very amusing – that the engineer who was responsible for the electrical installations and the plumbing of our complex, when he

saw the architect's plans, said to him: "The way you've planned it, where are the cables and the pipes going to go?" The reply of the architect was: "To me that's a matter of complete indifference. I don't design houses for engineers, but for people".

7

For the writer, language is the cradle of commonplaces, the prolegomena to all narratives. In the knowledge that his personal life is no more than a passing through, he realises that, as with all plans, codes, and materials of every nature, language also is itself a thing of the past. But then what is the meaning of creation? Since the aim of creation is to leave its imprint on life, a great part of the life of the writer is taken up with the life and death of others. These determine – without necessarily defining – his relation with the community and society. Creation is none other than familiarisation with the commonplace, a topology which becomes typology and generates the symbolic field. But in this field, the dangers of mannerism are obvious. There is no other way of avoiding these than constantly redetermining the limits. Thus, as you live in a city, so you read it as if it were a text which lies beyond language. As to your own texts, you have to regard yourself as very lucky if others take them to be language readers of the city.

It is said that Flaubert asked Maupassant to describe a street to him in such a way that without Maupassant telling him the names of people and buildings, Flaubert would understand straightaway what street he was talking about. It is also said that when Joyce was writing *Ulysses*, he always had a map of Dublin open before him. The second instance leads us to the conclusion that no text has meaning when the structural character is missing. Thus, together with the answer to the question 'what goes before and what comes after the narrative', its counterpart must also be given: 'what is next to what'. These two lend an aura of authenticity to the conventions, and because of them, both comparisons and metaphors take on meaning – creating, that is, by using creation which has gone before, rendering the heterogeneous homogeneous, giving meaning to the use of another language, and changing the object by altering the code of reference.

We have to make the city first, and then talk about it; but if we don't talk about it before we create it, how are we then going to make it? This is a metaphysic of another kind which some have called Angst, that is, according to the surrealists 'a voice of the Devil'. Because we all know that the city will always be secondary to nature. What man creates functions parabolically, it is parenthetical in the eternal cycle of life and death. This is why St Augustine envisioned in the *City of God* an image outside the limits. Today, however, we forget that this city seemed much more real in the Middle Ages than a contemporary metropolis as we see it in photographs.

8

In antiquity, nature was the world of the poet and the city of the philosopher. The conflict between poetry and philosophy, which resulted in the defeat of the former, led, according to Robert Graves, the Greeks down a wrong path. The maxim of this Oxonian black sheep gives expression to the distance, small or great, between nature and the city. In earlier times, however, things were not like this. In his *Utopia*, for example,

**Thomas More considers the ideal city that whose buildings will be in harmony with the landscape, and later, Emerson dreamt of the creation of a New Jerusalem in the New World.**

**In the Far East, the concept of the city is directly linked with the ekistic complexes which developed around the palace of the prince or the emperor, whereas for Islam, cities were something temporary – since the value of the written text was considered secondary to faith. Given that faith moves mountains, what do we want with cities?**

**But civilisations, as we have said, migrate. And with them, cities, or, more correctly, the designs and ideas on which they were built. Literature, as we know it in our own times, follows the evolution of cities, because organised life, institutional life, brings people closer, even if some imagine that it distances them from God – in any event, there exists even today a city of God with a history of more than ten centuries: the Holy Mountain of Athos.**

**Narratives map cities; literature provides them with annotations. A large part of classic novels, of poems, and, of course, of essays can be regarded as maps or annotations of cities. *The Waste Land* is a map or annotation of post-War London, only Eliot saw London as a palimpsest of the idea of the modern city in writing the most outstanding poetic elegy which the twentieth century has bequeathed us with the consciousness of an architect, an archaeologist, and a wounded believer who stands impotent before the sway of money and the painful discovery that prayer on its own cannot save him. And his city's residents do not drink water from the river of oblivion, because the Thames is not such a river, while not even his dead are dead precisely, but rather the living dead.**

**London glorified Eliot, but it didn't save him. For that reason, whereas the *Waste Land* ends with a choked whisper, he himself was to find peace in the places of quiet, of calm and silence – those which he describes in the *Four Quartets*.**

## **9**

**Modern metropolises which constantly extend their limits leave the writer powerless in the face of the swelling of magnitudes. This is, then, another expression of the inexpressible, since no text is capable of elevating itself to the order of magnitude of the metropolises. The modern hell, therefore, goes beyond us, and its price is called acquisition.**

**The cities of Hippodamus, as we imagine them from the descriptions which have been preserved in the texts of Aristotle, are Apollonian: built to specifications, balanced, algebraic, geometrical – in other words, axioms of design which respond to the challenges of empty space – they have, that is, a religious as well as secular significance. But modern metropolises are Faustian. Brilliant one day, dark the next, at one moment mythical, they lead to exultation, while immediately afterwards they appear as depressing, massive, and crushing, stone seas of Angst, in which everything shrinks.**

**In changing the order of magnitude in height and breadth, man is cut off from himself, the axiom of identity ceases to apply, he becomes another person, one who does not know and one who does not suspect, and there comes a time when he is in danger of losing contact with his symbols. What seemed to Baudelaire to be fruitless desire, in the modern writer is converted into reality. As he passes through the**

imperceptible Cavaffian walls, he often prefers to be alone, because in this way he believes that perhaps he will become everyman, whereas within the monstrous cities he is no-man, an awareness robbed of organisation.

Can we live today in nature, ignoring cities? (But civilisation without the city, or the idea of the city, is unthinkable.) Can we, I wonder, turn our back on civilisation? There are two examples, one from antiquity and the other from modern times: the ancient poet Timocreon, and Robert Graves. Both regarded themselves as a maimed fox, which, in order to escape from the snare in which they'd been trapped, bit off their tail with their own teeth. This snare is called civilisation. It is the society of cities.

But the parable does not dispense with the projection. You don't save your face by refusing to look in the mirror. It isn't difficult for the city, as the great mirror, to steal your face as you wander in its streets, and the innumerable shutters (its openings) which open and close ceaselessly take your photograph without interruption. Why does this happen? Because in the built space, the time where the archives of memory are kept is imprisoned, and it is impossible for such archives to exist if they don't possess a vast number of images. In any event, without a succession of images there is no narrative, there is no writing. Even in the furthestmost fields of abstraction, the images from which the concepts have been derived still glimmer. Because if, in order to change the nature of the abstract concepts, you distort the etymology of the words, you deaden the senses at the same time.

So philosophy without literature is dead. Such was the mental torment which drove Nietzsche to madness, while much later, another philosopher, Adorno, with the memories of the atrocities of the Second World War still fresh, returned to morality in order to answer a variety of aesthetic and political questions and wrote the *Minima Moralia*, to which it is no accident that he gave the sub-title *art of life*.

## 11

Creation begins at the point where contradictions dawn. You re-create that part of the world which is yours not so much because you admire or abhor what you experience, but first and foremost because you can't fully explain it. Human imperfection produces art – that is why artists as well are not as a rule successful human beings. I have referred to Eliot above, and it is in no way out of place to recall that he began to feel happy only when he stopped writing. Marked by decay and the curse of the unfulfilled which haunts them (to recollect Browning), creative artists, in their anguished efforts to find what is missing, are doomed to remodel. And today, since they can't create moulds, axioms, and ideas, all that remains for them is the repetition of narratives and descriptions; but every time that they describe an object, they have to move it from its place. Isn't this, anyway, what 'metaphor' literally means?

Ever since antiquity we have known that time eats up everything. More recent times have added to this that space is the brother of time. So in building a city, we create a home for time, somewhere where we will live because we will die. Consequently, every narrative is a battle against discontinuity and powerlessness.

Morphologically, there is nothing more imposing than the city. The city may be the fairy and the Lilith of the eye, the retina of history, the multi-levelled mirror of the ages, but it is also the well of existence in which zero rules. Its very presence has the power to abolish its content and, together with it, our self. To write, then, means to

**build, to fill the void, to arrange my representations within the framework with which built space provides me, because below the sea of abstraction laps and above the wind of the void whistles, and I have to listen to this carefully in order to make out the voices of the dead which it is carrying.**

**12**

**Innumerable poets have addressed themselves to the city in a first person. Muse? Wicked stepmother? Prison? Memory and radiance? All these things together. But one always has the feeling that together with every weak heart there is also a great soul which dares to engage in dialogue with a gigantic image – and sometimes to challenge it. The city for the writer is a fetish in many versions which is activated by means of language. He names it in order to understand it, to invoke it, or even to exorcise it. In the present phase of civilisation, the narratives which enthrall us are those which give a metaphysical content to cities, and in order for this content to be derived, various techniques of conversation are recruited which serve as codes of a lost paradise, as keys to the exit, or often as whispers which describe an unadmitted inner exile.**

**What does all this mean? Where are we and where are the others? How can the writer remain faithful to himself without ending up autistic? The dialogue with the subject does not necessarily take on the characteristics of the environment; often, moreover, it is lost in a zone of dead speculations, particularly when we forget that what we regard as environment is something more than what we call decoration. Every secret, in order to be called a secret, needs a shell – and such a shell at present is the cities. The mystic finds his self in the open landscape where the presence of the earth is catalytic. But the man of the city discovers the mysteries in its dark corners, where the world is not unseen, is not beyond, let's say, the sky, but hidden.**

**13**

**Since all cities contain their myths, there is no city where you can't project another one on to it. In the waters of the Grand Canal in Venice, at one moment Amsterdam's Amstel is reflected, and at another the Neva of St Petersburg. Behind the Empire State Building rises the John Hancock skyscraper of Chicago. Next to the remaining neo-Classical buildings of Athens you see, as resident aliens, the corresponding buildings of Munich. And if for others this creates areas of comparison, for the writer it is only an unfolding of mythical variations which lead to other conclusions: that the narration remains unified, there is no autonomy, nothing is exhausted within itself, and cities, to the same extent as they contain shells of the soul, conceal a host of points of departure – which are not necessarily harbours, airports, or road hubs.**

**Make a fabric of cities, and you have created the world. Rank the cities, and you have created History, because here where you are at this moment someone else once walked, and then the space acts phantom-like on your consciousness and sensibility, then things take on their meaning, which you have the opportunity to familiarise yourself with, as your mother-tongue, if, naturally, you have the necessary patience and the luck required.**



As language is defined by the moulding structures, the same is true of cities. What recalls to mind a block of buildings is a series of representations which are likely to be coming from somewhere else, because memory and nostalgia remain primeval. For this reason, every time cities pass into narratives, they take on an archaic character. Then you can hear their rhythm, which arrives from way back, from a secular landscape whose existence up to that moment you had not suspected. Here is the well, and the water is very deep; even more deep is the current of the ages which pass, depart, and return, composing the melody of silence, "the sound", as Mandelstam said, "of time".

14

One of the basic characteristics of the true writer is his ability to change the order of magnitudes. In this also he is like the architect. What is meant, in any event, by the phrase we use about an important book, that what it describes to us appears 'larger than life'? Things often seem larger than life, even in the work of a pure-bred realist such as Balzac. No one, for example, thinks when reading any of his novels that the Paris of the time had no more than 500,000 inhabitants. The same is true of Baudelaire. In Balzac, Paris is the city of money, whereas in Baudelaire it is a phantasmagorical cave in which Lucifer is transformed into a morose dandy in a black cape. And if there is something which proves the power of literature, it is the realisation of how large something which objectively isn't seems; for example, this Paris of the nineteenth century, if compared with that of today.

In written texts, then, the city in itself does not create the order of magnitude. It is imposed by its super-magnified image, its extension into the ocean of memory. It is here that the magic of narratives lies, whether in verse or in prose. In great literature, cities are not simply images of their century, but of what is perpetual – and for that reason all of them contain the element of revelation, which the writer is called upon to discover, and, in discovering it, to find his self. Today, for example, the red signals on the tops of skyscrapers may be put there for the safety of air traffic during the night, but in the field of metaphor they blink like stars of an artificial universe which wakes up at night and covers modern megalopolises with a second layer of life, a touch which we feel almost physically, as if it were a current coming from the kingdom of a Pluto of the skies.

15

Time lengthens memories and bulks out narratives. And it is precisely this strange fact which renders cities magical. I was born in a small city of 35,000 inhabitants in Northern Greece and lived there until I was eighteen. The most vivid picture which I retain from that period is that imprinted on my memory in 1970, at 1:30 in the morning one warm summer night when I was leaving by train to go to Thessaloniki, where we had settled as a family.

The railway station was on the edge of the city, which at the time when I was boarding the train was lost, half-illuminated, behind some clouds. But as the train started to pull out, the Great Bear appeared in an opening in the sky, and with it at the back of the plain the effigies of the stars: the lights of the city, which for a very few moments were reflected on the glass of the window. At that same moment, the years

**which I had spent in the city passed before me like a flash of lightning, like a multiple image of a world I was not going to experience again. I believed at the time that I wouldn't see that image again. I was wrong. I was to find it before me, in expanded form, innumerable times in the years which followed, because it was conveying the voice of time, its unknown music which I would hear being played by larger orchestras, in the metropolises where I chanced to live.**

**This, I suspect, was also the supreme metaphor which has defined me. It seems to me that all these years now I have been doing nothing else but writing in serial form the libretto for that now fading music.**

***ANASTASSIS VISTONITIS***