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Lost in the City.

“Do you suppose them to be in London?”
“Yes, where else can they be so well concealed?”

Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*.

The five novels I have written take place either in a very large city, the city I have lived in all my life, Buenos Aires, or in a small village, the fictional town of Malihuel. When trying to recreate the former in my first novel, *Las Islas*, (*The Islands*), something happened to me that I'm still trying to make sense of. From the outset I deliberately and, I might add, perversely set out to introduce elements of unreality, to create a quasi-fantastical landscape of Buenos Aires: on the one hand, by anticipating its future development: the posh district of Puerto Madero, with its imposing glass towers, was in 1992, when the novel was written, and is set, a hazy development project: I built it in my novel before it was built in reality – the paper city preceded the city of concrete; and what's more, erecting these edifices of words gave me a sense of achievement that mere mimesis, that the depiction of the existing city, had never awarded me. On the other hand, this demon of unreality led me to place the offices of the sinister State Intelligence Agency in the underbelly of a shopping centre located in the intersection of Córdoba and Paraguay Streets. As you probably are not acquainted with the city I'm talking about, at least not to such an extent, I might as well tell you, not only that the said shopping centre doesn't exist, but also that those two streets never meet. “I have you now”, or even more so, “I'll fix you”, were the childish words of triumph I directed on such occasions to the real city stretching outside my window. Why would I do such a thing? Well, here goes my first tentative answer: a huge metropolis like Buenos Aires grows and changes at such a dizzying rate that the writer wishing to depict it will find that his or her picture of the city has become anachronistic by the time the book gets published. Trying to stay a step ahead, representing the near future as the near past, or introducing impossible features which the future will never be able to bring about, is one way of allowing the tortoise of literature to overcome the hare of reality.

Something very different happened to me with Malihuel, a small fictional town that I decided to erect on the foundations of the real village I used to spend my childhood summers in. In my narrative innocence, I thought this was the easy way out, and in order to make my task even easier I decided to visit the original town, some twenty years after my last childhood stay. I met all my old friends, walked all of its streets, took pictures of every single spot, made home movies, got hold of plans on which I mapped all the public buildings, the shops, the prominent landmarks... And after my visit, while I was writing the novel which was to be called *El secreto y las voces* (*The Secret and Its Voices*) I pestered my friends with letters asking all sorts of questions, such as: “At what time do the newspapers arrive?

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What kind of trees stand before the bank? When did the power plant stop operating?” The task begun under the banner of practicality and expediency became an obsession in its own right: for a long time I was more intent on getting my fictional town right than in writing the actual novel.

Why, when trying to represent the modern metropolis, was I possessed by what I have called the demon of unreality, and the depiction always veered towards the fantastic or the unreal; and when tackling the small town I wanted my picture to be not just realistic, but downright real? Only later did it dawn on me that through trial and error I had stumbled upon one of the basic truths about the Argentine literary tradition: for us, the city is the territory of the fantastic and the magical; our small town, and rural literature in general are, with a few exceptions, thoroughly realistic. In this we are at radical variance with the tradition of magic realism, which could never gain a secure foothold in Argentina. Many readers and critics, abroad, lump magic realism and the Argentine fantastic, as represented by Jorge Luis Borges, Adolfo Bioy Casares or Julio Cortázar, into one: but both genres couldn't be more at variance, or even at odds. The difference I have pointed out is a minor but dependable one: the fantastic, in Borges, Bioy or Cortázar, will usually occur in an urban environment.

The other demon that grabbed at me while I was building my cities of paper was the demon of totality. In the case of Malihuel, my small town, I gave in wholeheartedly, and subjected my readers to a chapter including a detailed description of all its streets, shops, buildings and outlying areas; and to yet another chapter in which its daily routine, as seen from the highest vantage point, the church spire, is played out in its entirety, beginning with the opening of the first bakery to open and ending with the closing of the last late night bar. It was also possible to represent a complete social map of the town: from the poorest laborer to the richest ranch owner, the inhabitants of Malihuel all know each other personally, they walk the same streets, they interact daily on a personal basis.

With a city like Buenos Aires, on the other hand, totality, even the illusion of totality, is ruled out from the outset. Joyce could boast that if Dublin were to disappear from the face of the earth, it could be rebuilt in its entirety from the pages of his *Ulysses*. But his Dublin was, by modern standards, a provincial capital, boasting no more than 300.000 inhabitants: and *Ulysses*, as you all know, is a massive novel, boasting no less than 260.000 words – not quite one word per inhabitant, but close. You can conceivably put all of Dublin into such a book. A modern metropolis, on the other hand, is larger than any book, even larger than the collected work of any single author. Dublin can belong entirely to Joyce, as Lisbon to Pessoa, but no single author could claim to ownership of modern London, Paris, Buenos Aires or Mexico City. The most any author can aspire to, is to make some specific area or neighborhood his: thus, in Argentina, we can speak of Borges' Buenos Aires, or Marechal's, or Roberto Arlt's: and in every case it is not just specific gazes, but different neighborhoods, or routes, we are talking about. Where the metropolis is concerned, the best any single writer can aspire to is a collection of vivid fragments that, taken together, might suggest the rest: synecdoche is the mandatory trope when the depiction of a great city is what is at stake.

When asked if he had read all of *Ulysses*, Borges gave an astute answer: he admitted he hadn't, but said he could still talk about it, in the same way he could say he knew Buenos Aires without necessarily having walked every single one of its streets. This was more than

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a clever way out: it is the immodest proposal of a method. The best way to read novels like *Ulysses*, or to get to know large modern cities, is to get lost in them.

Nathaniel Hawthorne, who was wont to set his stories and novels in small towns like Salem, Massachusetts, had to change location for his story “Wakefield”: if man is to move out of his house and live around the corner for twenty years, without his wife ever finding him out, this can only be done in a city like London. It is also in London that the ears of the opium eater eagerly wait for the steps of a loose woman who is also a lost girl: De Quincey vividly recreates the *experience* of the intricate maze of London streets out of the hopeless search of his autobiographical character for his close and forever lost friend Ann.

In a small town, privacy and anonymity are only possible in the interiors: as soon as you step out the door, you become a social being. The converse holds true for the big city: indoors is where you are a social being, anonymity and alienation begins at your doorstep. The big city is the haunt of the *flâneur*, the indefatigable walker who is going nowhere, whether it be Baudelaire walking the Paris streets, Stephen Dedalus those of Dublin, or Borges’ crepuscular walks along what he called ‘the shores’ of Buenos Aires. Once again: if the modern city is a labyrinth, it stands to reason that the most authentic way of experiencing it is by getting lost in it.

But the *flâneur* has an incurable limitation. His repeated aimless steps sooner or later tend to wear a rut. He will seldom stray into the areas inhabited by ‘the others’ (basically, the very poor or the very rich). And even when he does, he will do so as an outsider, a mere observer – and his observations will be usually limited to the life of the streets, as the interiors are barred to his gaze. Because one of the main features of the modern metropolis, one that makes it particularly irritating for writers aiming at some kind of totality, is the fragmented nature of its social geography. The different classes, sometimes the different ethnic and religious groups, are often not in touch with one another, separated by boundaries few wish or even dare to cross.

In order to get your characters across or into these different areas you need to give them a purpose. This is one of the reasons why in the 20th Century a new figure appears that replaces the *flâneur*: the detective. I am thinking, of course, not of the static kind that sits back and sips tea in an English country house until sufficient corpses accumulate to allow him to formulate a hypothesis, but of his more energetic, and especially more mobile, counterpart of the U.S. *noir* tradition: whether it is Sam Spade tirelessly walking, or taking the San Francisco trams, or Philip Marlowe cruising the avenues and canyons of L.A. in his automobile, the detectives have a purpose that takes them from the neighborhoods *and* houses of the very rich, against which the crime is generally committed, to the dregs of society, where crime – at least the sort of crimes a private eye can investigate - is thought to originate. The detective, as Fredric Jameson pointed out in his essential essay on Raymond Chandler, becomes a literary device that can be relied on to fit together the parts of the picture puzzle, to stitch the patches into some kind of quilt.

An alternative, and definitely more static, approach, was adopted by some European writers, for whom a single building could become a microcosm of society as a whole (once again, synecdoche asserts itself as the dominant trope). I quote Jameson: “The symbol of social coherence and comprehensibility was furnished by the nineteenth-century Parisian apartment house, with its shop on the ground floor, its wealthy inhabitants on the

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second and third, petty bourgeoisie further up, and worker's rooms on top along with the maids and servants". Zola resorted to this device in his novel *Pot-Bouille*, as did Georges Perec in his *La Vie Mode d'Emploi*, and Spanish author Camilo José Cela in the aptly named *La colmena* (*the Bee-Hive*). In America (I mean the American continent) we haven't been so lucky. Most apartment buildings included elevators from the start, which leveled and sometimes even inverted their social scale (the most expensive apartments are on top). Much has been said about technological progress diminishing the possibilities of literature (the telephone killing epistolary literature, the plane rendering voyages too dull to relate), but so far the elevator has gotten off the hook. Let me indict it here: the elevator has made life in a single building socially homogeneous, thus rendering it less interesting from the point of view of literary representation. It is now a unit, but cannot constitute a microcosm, or even a cross-section, of the 'life of the city as a whole.

So in my Buenos Aires novels I had to rely on detectives of a kind, characters with a quest which would force them to go into places their ordinary lives would never had taken them to. By the time I was writing my fourth novel, *La aventura de los bustos de Eva* (*The Adventure of the Busts of Eva Perón*), I thought I had managed to give, if not a complete picture, at least a sampling of the different social and architectural fabrics that together compose the quilt of Buenos Aires. Then I realized I had left out the shanty town, what we in Argentina name with a quaint oxymoron: *villas miseria*, 'misery villas'. As I am a staunch believer in tradition, or rather, into falling back on what others have done when I myself am at a loss, I got hold of all that had been previously done by my predecessors. To my disappointment, I found that very little had been attempted, and still less achieved: a novel from the 50s in the social realist vein, full of good intentions and purple patches adequately ragged and begrimed; a couple of very bad stories brimming with empowerment and uplift, and a rather good recent novel by César Aira, called precisely *La villa*, in which the 'villa' in question was a roughly circular maze with streets curving inwards from the rim and disappearing, without ever intersecting one another, into the inaccessible centre: the whole structure covered by an ever-changing arrangement of light bulbs which, we discover at the end, form a series of signals to guide drug dealers and buyers, and mislead the police. But before you get carried away in your enthusiasm and start booking package tours for Buenos Aires, let me warn you that this is not the way we usually do it in Argentina, or rather, that such a shanty town never existed nor could exist. I felt a certain kinship with it: it was the poor relative of my shopping centre cum-sate intelligence building located in the corner of two streets that never meet. It worked on paper because it could never be found in the streets: once again, the big city asserted itself as the privileged territory of the fantastic.

This, I am afraid, does not hold true for all countries. In Brazil, literature has produced at least one powerful and plausible rendering of the world of the *favela* or shanty town: the novel *Cidade de Deus* (*City of God*) by Paulo Lins, which was made into a very successful and powerful movie. Why would this be so? The first difference I could spot was this: all the Argentine attempts I had read (including my own) were carried out by middle class writers peering into the shanty town, full of moral indignation, or condescending benevolence, or revolutionary zeal, or mere curiosity: it was, inevitably, an external view. The Brazilian novel, on the other hand, was written by a man who grew up in the *favela* and somehow, miraculously, acquired the education to write a complex literary text. The odds

¹ In his essay, Eliot Weinberger indicts air-conditioning on more or less similar grounds.

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against this happening often, or even more than once, are so staggering that it is no wonder there are no more examples of the same.

Another difference is that the Rio de Janeiro shanty towns are always set in the higher reaches of the city, the hills or *morros*: they are visible from every part of the city, as the city is visible from them – as a matter of fact, they offer the best views of city and the beautiful Guanabara bay, as any tourist can see for himself: one can take guided tours to most of the Rio *favelas*, agreements with the local crime lords and drug barons ensuring the safety of this version of urban anthropological tourism. Buenos Aires, on the other hand, is one of the flattest cities in the world: there are no highlands to speak of, and the shanty towns are inevitably built in the lowlands, and mostly rendered invisible – some by walls purposely built by the government to protect dwellers and visitors from these eyesores: one such of them is known as *Ciudad oculta* – ‘the Hidden City’. Unless you walk right up to it, you never see the shanty town from the other parts of the city, and you don’t see the city from the shanty town: both are mutually exclusive realities. And it would be hard even for the private eye to get into a *villa miseria*: he will inevitably be found out and gunned down.

But recently, on my last visit to Rio, I discovered another reason for the greater visibility of the Brazilian *favela*, that might help explain why it has become more amenable to literary or artistic representation. In the beautiful bohemian neighborhood of Santa Teresa, set on a very steep *morro* or hill, there are a number of *favelas* wedged into the interstices of the middle class neighborhoods. One of these, the *Morrinho* (little hill), includes in its heart a miniature *favela*, originally built out of hollow brick, and traversed by toy cars and toy building brick people, built by the *favela* children for their games, eventually growing out of all proportion, climbing the massive boulders and spreading its tendrils under the tall tropical trees – just like the real one. So the *favela* includes a miniature replica of itself, which became a tourist attraction and eventually was taken to, or rather rebuilt in, the 2007 Venice Biennale. This penchant for self-representation is something I haven’t seen in any of the Argentine *villas miseria*, or any other in the rest of Latin America. The Brazilian *favela* has an image of itself, and the rest of the city has an image of the *favela*, and the artists who are not of the *favela* are spared the humiliation of trying to become ‘the voice of those who have no voice’ and failing to find even a voice of their own. In my case, the *villa miseria* I represented in my novel was not so much any one existing in the outside world, but the one existing in the imagination of their middle class detractors: an amalgam of all the legends and prejudices that have accumulated over more than fifty years.

Perhaps this is something I learned from these attempts to represent the shanties: not to try and build cities of words directly on concrete reality, but upon the foundations of previous cities of words, just like – I’d give anything to avoid the obvious analogy with Troy, but can find no other, except the even more obvious analogy with a palimpsest – so, just like the successive layers of Troy, or a palimpsest. When these other cities of words are not available, it is as tricky to try to erect our own as it is to build a house from the roof downwards. Unless, of course, yours is a city of the imagination, like César Aira’s *villa* or Calvino’s aptly named ‘invisible cities’.

Lost in Fes.

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So what in the preceding text, written before my participation in the 2009 Souk Ukaz, was borne out by my experience of Fes, what modified, what cancelled out? Trying to stay true to my predictable metaphor of the palimpsest, I do not feel I can rewrite, or even revise, but must write over: the experience of Fes does not wipe out my experience of other cities, but is rather superimposed on them: at times obliterating (rather than erasing), at times supplementing, at times throwing into relief.

If there has ever been a city to which the idea of labyrinth is adequate, nay, inevitable, that city is obviously Fes. Its winding alleys, tunnels and maze-like pattern of streets, its repetitious sameness or, in the best of cases, its differences impossible to memorize or even place, guarantee that, unless you stick to the main thoroughfares, you will soon find yourself wandering aimlessly with no idea of where you're at. In order to function, in order to get us lost, the labyrinthine presupposes sameness, mirroring, symmetries whose overall pattern cannot be grasped – at least from the inside. If the story of Dedalus teaches us anything, it teaches us that a labyrinth can only be seen from the outside: either when you design it, or when you fly above it. What you need is a birds' eye view.

Fes might be a labyrinth; but, I soon found out, I only got lost in it during the night: Fes is a nighttime labyrinth alone. During the day, I discovered I was taking my cues from the people of Fes. "Oh, there's that old man selling cigarettes again" - "I know that peacock" - "This is the boy who sold me that carpet." Alberto Ruy Sánchez has called the city nomadic, which it is in a way: nighttime Fes reminds one of a desert on which, every morning, its inhabitants pitch up their tents; but in other ways it is quite the opposite: their positions are dependable, almost fixed. Living landmarks: you could speak of "the block where the old Berber woman sells rose petals". Fes is a living city in ways many Western cities are not: it is not complete without its people: what the night reveals are its bare bones, its people and merchandise providing its flesh, skin and clothing. In his story "The House of Asterion", Borges offers a rather gruesome application of the same principle: "Every nine years, nine men come into the house so that I can free them from all evil [...] One after another they fall, without my ever having to bloody my hands. Where they fall, they remain, and their bodies help distinguish one gallery from the others." The speaker of this story is none other than the Minotaur, his 'house' the Cretan labyrinth.

Because the houses of the medina look inwards, because they do not announce in their architecture their purpose or wealth, and the concept of façade seems to be alien to them, distinguishing features are few: to my inexperienced eyes at least, the same featureless wall could hide a riad, a hammam or a tannery. Some have suggested this is indicative of a certain native modesty, of a distaste towards extravagance, at least when compared to its opposite in Western architecture: the spectacular façade that hides a dingy interior. I am usually wary about these facile 'interpretations', so easy to formulate and so difficult to prove. Rather than a cause, or a reason, for this characteristic, I can only think of an effect: the effect it has on the alien visitor. The idea of a muffled city, a city that "has taken the veil" (as Melville said of Lima: let's not forget the multiple connections between the cities of North Africa and the colonial architecture of Latin America, via the culture of Moorish Spain), a city of mysteries. An Orientalist fantasy, if you will; still, a powerful and enduring one, linking the hidden gardens to hidden sex, giving substance to the idea that penetrating a city is like penetrating a woman, set forth by Alberto Ruy Sánchez and illustrated in his novels, such as *Los jardines secretos de Mogador* and *Los nombres del aire*. In Fes, you can never be quite sure of where one house ends and the other one begins, as Kipling's aptly

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named story “Beyond the Pale” illustrates: an Englishman in India courts a native girl through a grated window in a gully: eventually the window is walled up by the girl’s relatives and her lover can never find the front of the house: “One special feature of the case is that he does not know where lies the front of Durga Charan’s house. It may open on to a courtyard common to two or more houses, or it may lie behind any one of the gates of Jitha Megji’s *bustee*. Trejago cannot tell. He cannot get Bisesa – poor little Bisesa – back again. He has lost her in the City where each man’s house is as guarded and as unknowable as the grave; and the grating that opens into Amir Nath’s Gully has been walled up.”

‘The pale’ was, in occupied Ireland, the metaphorical extension of the city wall: the frontier between the civilized world and that of the ‘savages’ or barbarians. In North Africa, the wall traditionally divides the sedentary city dwellers from the desert, from the nomads; and crossing the wall, leaving the city, spells danger or even doom, as both *The Sheltering Sky* and “A distant episode” by Paul Bowles illustrate. Cities in Argentina were never walled, but its culture and literature in the 19th Century were clearly structured and aligned along the civilization / barbarity axis: the first was represented by the city; the second, defined by the generic term ‘the desert’, belonged to the gaucho or, more radically, to the savages, the nomadic indigenous inhabitants of the pampas and Patagonia. In his “Story of the Warrior and the Captive Maiden” Borges compares the fate of Droctulft, a Germanic barbarian who in the 6th Century A.D. changed sides and fought for Ravenna, and an English maiden abducted by an Indian chieftain of the pampas. This is how he describes a barbarian’s first impression of the city: “Wars bring him to Ravenna, and there he sees something he has never seen before, or never fully seen. He sees daylight and cypresses and marble. He sees an aggregate that is multiple yet without disorder; he sees a city, an organism composed of statues, temples, gardens, rooms, tiered seats, amphorae, capitals and pediments, and regular open spaces. [...] Perhaps a single arch is enough for him, with its incomprehensible inscription of eternal Roman letters – he is suddenly blinded and renewed by that revelation, the City. He knows that in this city he will be a dog, or a child, and that he will not even begin to understand it, but he knows as well that this city is worth more than his gods and the faith he is sworn to and all the marshlands of Germany. Droctulft deserts his own kind and fights for Ravenna.”²

The structure of a city can be described as organic in two widely different ways: in one of them, organic means ‘spontaneous’: the city is an aggregate of building blocks more or less haphazardly superimposed on one another, following the dictates of geographical and human whim. Streets, alleys and lanes are merely the spaces left between these building blocks (which explains why some are so narrow a person will have to go in sideways). Most medieval cities in Europe, medinas in North Africa, or South American shanties, follow this pattern. There is a *villa miseria* near the port of Buenos Aires, close to the poshest areas of the city, called Villa 31. It has resisted all attempts to relocate it, even during the military dictatorship. It is also one of the few shanties that is - almost inevitably - visible: it can be viewed both from the freeway that links the airport to the city center, and from most long-distance buses departing the central bus station. After my return from Morocco, every time I pass the Villa 31 (and am not driving) I close my eyes, cover the naked walls of hollow brick with antique mortar and see the ancient medina of Fes. The offered ‘solutions’ to the problem of the shanties have always divided into two groups: urbanization of existing struc-

² Borges, J. L. *Collected Fictions*, N.Y., Penguin, 1998. I have taken the liberty to correct the absurd “He knows that in this city *there* will be a dog, or a child.”

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tures, or (usually forcible) demolition and relocation in a ‘planned neighborhood’. My visit to the Fes medina has made me veer towards the former. A city made of buildings more or less haphazardly piled one on top of each other does not necessarily have to become a nest of disease, promiscuity and crime. Given basic services such as electricity, running water, garbage disposal and a minimum security (organized by its inmates rather than by external police forces) the vicious cycle of the shanty might be converted into the virtuous one of the medina. But of course, this is a concern more for city planners than for writers.

On the other hand, a city can be organic, or at least ‘natural’, in that it is a mirror of some aspect of the universe: a constellation, a sacred animal such as a jaguar, a calendar (a curious instance of this I included in my novel *La aventura de los bustos de Eva*: a city with the shape of the (unmistakable) profile of Eva Perón. Since my novel includes, among other niceties, a brothel where all the girls are dressed as different versions of Evita, most readers think it is yet another one of my fantasies. Nothing further from the truth: the city, Ciudad Evita, actually exists, it was built during the Peronist decade (1945-55) and might be sighted by any visitor entering the city from the international airport. Its contour, alas, can only be deciphered from above: like the Nazca lines.) This purposeful mirroring of nature involves a central authority, both religious and political, able to establish and impose a conceptual order that is then translated into an architectural one: that is, planning. As Eliot Weinberger sums it up in his essay: “the city was not a macrocosm of the village, but the microcosm of the universe.”

Fes is organic in the first of these senses, and even viewed from above its pattern, figure or center are not easy to establish. Trying to explain to myself the mixture of confusion and exhilaration derived from walking its streets, I remembered this little-known text by Borges – little known because it does not exist in printed form, but was delivered in an oral interview:

“There is something curious about labyrinths. The idea of getting lost is not in itself strange, but the idea of a building purposefully constructed for people to get lost in, that is strange. The idea of a builder of labyrinths, the idea of a Dedalus or, if you will, of a Joyce, and of an architecture whose purpose is that people, or readers, should get lost, that is a strange idea [...]

“But in the idea of the labyrinth there is hope as well. Because if we could be certain that this world was a labyrinth, then we might feel safe. Because if it is one, then there is a center - even if that center is terrible, even if it means the Minotaur. But we don’t know if the universe has a center. Maybe it isn’t a labyrinth, maybe it is no more than a chaos, and then we are really lost. But if there is a secret center to the world, be it divine or demonic, we are saved [...]. In the midst of the perplexity of life, we need to believe that the universe has a coherent form, that it is a labyrinth. But we can’t be certain that this is the case.”

This, ultimately, might be the lesson of labyrinthine Fes: a city, like a book, can be a labyrinth, but never a mere chaos. Even if we cannot apprehend their order and the secret center, we know there is one, and maybe even an architect as well. It might not be for us, but there it is. We can rest assured, we can get lost in them with abandon and delight.

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