

Eliot Weinberger:

**THE CITY
(A few blocks)**

In the beginning, or one of the beginnings, the village. The Santals, an indigenous people living in the forest in the state of Bihar, in India, have a song that goes, in its entirety:

In the trees the birds are singing.
In the village the girls are singing.

An image of untroubled tranquility, humankind and nature in cosmic harmony. The girls sing and the birds sing. And even more: They sing to each other.

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In the beginning, or one of the beginnings, the city was not a mercantile center or even a military fortress. It was created by an authoritarian power as an expression of cosmic power, and built in the image of the cosmos itself. The city was the navel of the world, or the axis of the world, perfectly aligned (or, in Mesoamerica, deliberately slightly misaligned, for humans are imperfect) to the four directions. At its center was a raised structure—tower, ziggurat, temple, platform, pyramid, palace—where one could be even closer to the gods, so that the gods could better hear the human prayers, and the humans hear the divine instructions. And directly below the city was another city, the underworld, city of the dead.

The Babylonian cities were each modeled on a constellation: Nineveh on Ursa Major, Sippara on Cancer, Assur on Arcturus, Babylon on Cetus-Aires. The Han capital of Ch'ang-an was laid out in the pattern of the Big and Little Dippers combined, with the imperial palace at the Pole Star; the city of Hsien-yang according to the stars in the constellations we call Cassiopeia and Pegasus. The first Khmer capital, Yasodharapura, was itself a calendar, with 108 towers representing the four phases of the moon and the 27 lunar mansions, and

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sixty towers arranged in five sets of twelve that was the twelve-year cycle of Jupiter with which, in multiples of five, the Khmers measured historical eras. The city was not the macrocosm of a village, but the microcosm of the universe.

Cities were never new. Whether in Mesopotamia or Egypt or China, the ruler justified the construction of his city by stating that the design copied one handed down from the ancestors. In the fifth century BCE, a poem in the first Chinese anthology, the *Shi Ching*, the *Book of Odes or Songs*, sings the praises of King Wen, who had built the city of Feng, six hundred years before: “He made Feng according to the ancient plan. / He did not follow his own desires, / But worked in pious obedience to the dead.” Creation, in cyclical time, is always re-creation. The city—our model of novelty and modernity—was their model of antiquity. The city—our model of change—was their model of stasis. The city—our model of unfettered life—was ruled by the dead. In the 1930s, Thomas Wolfe wrote a short story with a matchless title: “Only the Dead Know Brooklyn.”

Our cities are full of stories. Their cities were themselves stories. The Inka capital of Cusco, which was in the shape of a jaguar, was organized in a net of invisible lines, connected by natural and artificial markers (*huacas*), with each line a songline to be followed, a mnemonic device for retelling their myths and histories. Around the central tower in Yasodharapura, which represented Mt. Meru, home of the gods, the 108 towers were arranged so that, from the middle point of any side, only 33 could be seen—the homes of the 33 gods of Indra’s heaven. From each of the cardinal points, only three of the five tallest towers could be seen: the three peaks of Mt Meru, which are the heavenly cities of Vishnu, Brahma, and Shiva. The city was a map of a narrative. Cities that feared no earthly enemies were laid out in grid patterns; those in disputed territory were labyrinths of alleyways and plazas, where an invading army would get lost and be defeated. Whether grid or labyrinth, cities were walled, for they were fortresses of cosmic power in a struggle against other powers: demons, the evil gods, the angry ghosts of the human dead. The city wall was magical before it was military, marking a place of order in the chaos of the world. Royal genealogies began with the date of the erection of the city walls—the establishment of the new order. Periodic mass circumambulations were celebrated, and special ones in times of disaster, drought, plague: a communal reassertion of who we are, where we are, what is our place in the world.

All were strictly compartmentalized: sacred zones; markets arranged by the goods sold and the services offered; residential districts for the rich, the poor, the merchants, or organized by clan; pleasure quarters, and so on. Cities were aggregates of villages, like villages in their daily life of familiarity and local interactions, but unlike villages in their specialization of class or task, and in their subservience to a higher power. Cities were hierarchical, as villages were not. The best metaphor for the ancient city is the skyscraper– boxes, horizontal in actual space, but metaphorically piled one on another by social rank, reaching to the gods of the sky– millennia before skyscrapers were constructed.

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The ancient city was an emblem of order in the chaos of the world, particularly the dangerous chaos of the natural world, with its dark forests, wild men, hungry beasts and hungry ghosts. With the simultaneous, and not coincidental, rise of both Romanticism and the industrial city, the images reversed: The natural world was one of tranquility and order; the city was pandemonium.

The literature of the city– nearly, but not all, modern literature– is panoramic, sometimes celebratory, often horror-struck: the hubbub of voices speaking different languages or dialects, the conglomeration of apprehended fragments. Its medium is the collage; its science that opposites attract; its logic that every proposition and its converse are equally true.

The modern city, it is often said, is built on anonymity. Its local goddess is Baudelaire’s passerby, its act of devotion what Walter Benjamin called the quintessential urban experience: “love at last sight.” Its mythic hero is the detective, the man who must find the name of the anonymous perpetrator of the crime.

But the modern city is, or was, as is less often said, a collection of neighborhoods. In the neighborhood, not all the names are known, but the faces are familiar. The stereotypical anonymity of the modern city is in its mercantile districts, or on its transportation, or in someone else’s

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neighborhood. Even speech was once narrowly local: In my city, New York, neighborhoods— except for the very poor— tended to be organized more by ethnicity than class. In my childhood, each still retained an identifiable way of speaking. Air-conditioning erased that sense of community, keeping everyone indoors in the summer, off the streets and in their own apartments— watching television, that overwhelming homogenizer of language.

The literature of the neighborhood was the vignette— one story or image from the millions of stories or images. (Or, in the case of Dos Passos and Bely and Döblin and others, a panorama made from many vignettes.) The poet picks out a detail, as lyric poets have always done. The fiction writer tells the tale of a few characters, as has always been told. Their fates may be senseless and cruel; their fates may no longer be determined by the gods; but their fates remain narrative conclusions (or inconclusions). If the city is chaos, the neighborhood, whether lives are happy or miserable, has a kind of order.

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The literature of the city was something new, in both form and content: the modernity of modern literature and the visual arts. The literature of the neighborhood was the antiquity within that modernity. But now something has happened to the city, largely in the Third World, as migrants from the countryside flood in, and metropolis becomes megalopolis. Except at the extremes of rich and poor, the neighborhood— the sense of the neighborhood— has vanished in the endless repetition of colorless apartment blocks, large or small. Many of the major cities are now nowhere. One inhabits a random spot identical to a million other random spots. In the megalopolis there is no place in the world, and community, as one longs for community, tends to be found in the structured societies of religion and ideological politics, or in the ad hoc networks of cyberspace.

The literature of the neighborhood is still being written in the last neighborhoods— the penthouses or the slums. But will be the literature of the megalopolis? Already late modernism, so-called postmodernism, is perhaps pointing the way: the novel that is short on memorable characters or compelling narrative, long on pyrotechnical wordplay and a glut of information; the poem that is a string of disconnected ironies and pastiches of appropriated language. A literature with everyone and no one, a literature where— as is said of the slightly crazed— “there’s nobody home.”

I suspect that those of us raised in the modern city, and raised on modernism, won't understand it at all.

The emptying villages; the cities that have become concentrated suburbs, where life unfolds beside the driveway or the parking lot; the cities that are theme parks devoted to their former glories, its citizens serving the gawkers; the shipwrecked cities of abandoned factories; the robot cities of the “new economic zones”; the three or four or five cities that still retain their vivacity, breathing the old-fashioned cosmopolitanism devoted to the new; and then, the megalopolis. This century, much of humanity will be adrift in the megalopolis– or, more exactly, stuck in its traffic. It remains to be seen how humanity will reinvent its humanness in the least human environment humans have invented.

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