THE CITY READER

edited by

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Editors' introduction  One way to look at urban society and culture is through the prism of the arts. Novels and short stories – as well as paintings, sculptures, musical compositions, and architectural designs – are all created out of specific urban contexts and all reflect, to one degree or another, the social, political, and economic conditions of the urban cultures that give them birth.

Burton Pike, who is a professor of comparative literature at Queens College and the Graduate Center of the City University of New York, explores the ways urban culture is reflected in literature and how what he calls “the literary city” or “the word city” expresses the underlying social psychology of the city's people. In The Image of the City in Modern Literature (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1981), he recalls Sigmund Freud’s use of an urban metaphor in Civilization and Its Discontents to explain the workings of the unconscious and writes that “during the nineteenth century the literary city came more and more to express the isolation or exclusion of the individual from a community, and in the twentieth century to express the fragmentation of the very concept of community.”

Although the city has been a constant and recurrent theme of literature since the very beginnings of urban civilization, Pike notes that the image of the city has been highly ambiguous and contradictory. “The word-city,” he writes, “… leads a double life, evoking deep-rooted archetypal associations while its surface features reflect changing attitudes and values.”

Pike's analysis of Hawthorne, Henry James, Freud, and Dostoyevsky in “The City as Image” is an excellent introduction to a consideration of the question, “How do the arts today – our novels and paintings, our films and television – reflect and express our urban culture and community?” It also opens the door to an entire body of analytical literature on the relationship of arts culture to society. For literature, Diana Spearman’s The Novel and Society (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1966) is an excellent overview, and Raymond Williams's The Country and the City (London: Oxford University Press, 1973) is especially insightful on the relationship of Charles Dickens to nineteenth-century London. For painting, one should consult Arnold Hauser’s chapter on “Impressionism” in The Social History of Art (New York: Knopf, 1952) and T. J. Clark's magisterial The Painting of Modern Life (New York: Knopf, 1985).

For the relationship of architecture to urban life – an enormous field – one can begin with Spiro Kostof’s A History of Architecture: Settings and Rituals (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985) and Mark Girouard's Cities and People: A Social and Architectural History (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1985). In addition, David Harvey’s “Monument and Myth: The Building of the Basilica of the Sacred Heart” from The Urban Experience (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989) is a tour de force of Marxist cultural analysis that ties the major themes of nineteenth-century French politics to the construction of Sacré-Coeur.

**BURTON PIKE, “The City as Image”**

from *The Image of the City in Modern Literature* (1981)

The crowd had rolled back and were now huddled together nearly at the extremity of the street, while the soldiers had advanced no more than a third of its length. The intervening space was empty — a paved solitude between lofty edifices, which threw almost a twilight shadow over it.

Nathaniel Hawthorne, "The Gray Champion"

Since there has been literature, there have been cities in literature. We unthinkingly consider this phenomenon modern, but it goes back to early epic and mythic thought. We cannot imagine *Gilgamesh*, the Bible, the *Iliad*, or the *Aeneid*, without their cities, which contain so much of their energy and radiate so much of their meaning. Small settlements and villages had, then as now, some direct connection to the land around them, and provided clear and limited social functions. But cities were from the beginning something special. As centers of religious and military power, as well as of social life on a large scale, they were things apart.

The city has always been man's single most impressive and visible achievement. It is a human artifact which has become an object in the world of nature. Cities are a plural phenomenon: There are many of them, but though each has its individual history, they all seem to exemplify similar patterns. The most basic of these is the interpenetration of past and present. On the one hand there is the visible city of streets and buildings, frozen forms of energy fixed at different times in the past and around which the busy kinetic energy of the present swirls. On the other hand there are the subconscious currents arising in the minds of the city's living inhabitants from this combination of past and present. These currents include the city's ties with the realm of the dead through its temples, cemeteries, and ceremonies as well as its old buildings, and also its functions as the seat of secular power, embodied in kings, governments, and banks. Northrop Frye, following Kierkegaard's concept of repetition as re-creation, writes that "the culture of the past is not only the memory of mankind, but our own buried life, and study of it leads to a recognition scene, a discovery in which we see, not our past lives, but the cultural form of our present life." The city is, as Joseph Rykwert characterizes it, a curious artifact "compounded of willed and random elements, imperfectly controlled." It has even been called "a state of mind."

The city has been used as a rhetorical topos throughout the history of Western culture. But it has another aspect as well, whose referent seems to be a deep-seated anxiety about man's relation to his created world. The city crystallizes those conscious and unconscious tensions which have from the beginning characterized the city in Western culture. Only such a crystallization can explain man's deep preoccupation with the city, or account for the hypnotic attraction of its destruction since Troy, Sodom and Gomorrah, and Carthage.

"Man constructs according to an archetype,"
writes Mircea Eliade. Man's city and temple, as well as the entire region he inhabits, are built on celestial models. The act of Creation was a divine act; when man creates, he repeats the divine act, and formalizes the connection through ritual. The sacred city or temple is symbolically the center of the universe, the meeting point of heaven, earth, and hell. The sacred rites of the founding of the city were repeated in regular recurrent festivals, and in its monuments. The founding of cities, even as late as those of the Roman Empire, was a matter of myth and ritual to which practical concerns were completely subordinated. "The city had to be founded by a hero," Rykwert says, and the "hero-founder had to be buried at the heart of the city; only the tomb of the hero-founder could guarantee that the city lived." The distance from this rite of the early city to Pushkin's vivified statue in *The Bronze Horseman* is not as great as one might at first suppose.

This book is interested in the response of the human imagination to the phenomenon of "city." From the beginning the image of the city served as the nexus of many things, all characterized by strongly ambivalent feelings: presumption (Babel), corruption (Babylon), perversion (Sodom and Gomorrah), power (Rome), destruction (Troy, Carthage), death, the plague (the City of Dis), and revelation (the heavenly Jerusalem). In Christian thought, the city came to represent both Heaven and Hell. Significantly, the early cities of the epics and the Bible have retained their metaphorical force throughout Western history, as if they stood for certain constants of feeling. Thus Proust could make an important metaphorical point by calling one of the volumes of *In Search of Lost Time* "Sodom and Gomorrah." Several centuries earlier, in 1667, John Dryden had the inspired idea of dedicating his poem "Anius Mirabilis: The Year of Wonders 1666" to "the Metropolis of Great Britain, the most renowned and late flourishing City of London." Noting in his dedication that he is perhaps the first person to dedicate a poem to a city, Dryden celebrates London for having survived a war, a plague, and a devastating fire: "You, who are to stand a wonder to all Years and Ages, and who have built yourselves an Immortal Monument on your own Ruins. You are now a Phoenix in her ashes, and, as far as Humanity can approach, a great Emblem of the suffering Deity."

The city has often been celebrated as the place where the pulse of life is most strongly felt. Samuel Johnson, although well acquainted with adversity in London, never tired of praising the city in poetry, essays, and conversation. His famous epigram is a paradigm of the city's vitality: "When a man is tired of London, he is tired of life."

In modern times the real cities of Western Europe and America have generally tended to be associated with the evils of human nature; ideal cities, on the model of Revelation, have been put off to some vague future time, as in Blake's vow to build Jerusalem in England's green and pleasant land, or the alabaster cities of "America the Beautiful," which gleam (rather curiously) "undimmed by human tears."

The double view of the real city and the mythic city is not so mysterious as might first appear, for all myths are attempts to explain realities. Most basic myths are, however, attempts to account for occurrences of nature. The myth of the city must rationalize an object built by man which, because of its size and concentration of ritual and power (religious, governmental, military, financial) has displaced nature in the natural world.

The myth of the city as corruption, the myth of the city as perfection: this bifocal vision of Western culture is still very much with us. Indeed, the image of the city stands as the great reification of ambivalence, embodying a complex of contradictory forces in both the individual and the collective Western minds. The idea of the city seems to trigger conflicting impulses, positive and negative, conscious and unconscious. At a very deep level, the city seems to express our culture's restless dream about its inner conflicts and its inability to resolve them. On a more conscious level, this ambivalence expresses itself in mixed feelings of pride, guilt, love, fear, and hate toward the city. The fascination people have always felt at the destruction of
a city may be partly an expression of satisfaction at the destruction of an emblem of irresolvable conflict.

If one of the writer’s functions is to give voice to aspects of culture which are fragmentary perceptions, or preconscious or perhaps even unconscious feelings in the mind of the citizen, then the city is one of the most important metaphors at his command. Technically, the city is an ideal mechanism for the writer, especially the novelist; it enables him to bring together in a plausible network extremely diverse characters, situations, and actions. But this should not mislead us, as readers, into dismissing it as a mere contrivance. The image of the city is a figure with profound tones and overtones, a presence and not simply a setting. This emerges, for instance, in the peculiar opening pages of Moby Dick, in which Ishmael and the city dwellers of Manhattan are drawn magnetically to the edge of the water, yearning outward from their city existence—which itself is presented in strongly negative terms. Moby Dick is not a “city novel,” and yet it begins with the image of the city. This opening passage, which arouses resonances in the characters and the reader, stands in a long tradition of the city as a figure for ambivalence in literature.

These conflicting resonances of the image are reinforced by a writer’s and reader’s own experiences of city life, whether real or imagined. What exactly does happen when one experiences a city in real life? The question itself makes us realize the complexity of the problems facing anthropologist, sociologist, writer, and critic. The basic problem is how to reduce a cacophony of impressions to some kind of harmony. Kevin Lynch has tried to categorize some aspects of this problem as far as empirical response is concerned. The inhabitant or visitor basically experiences the city as a labyrinth, although one with which he may be familiar. He cannot see the whole of a labyrinth at once, except from above, when it becomes a map. Therefore his impressions of it at street level at any given moment will be fragmentary and limited: rooms, buildings, streets. These impressions are primarily visual, but involve the other senses as well, together with a crowd of memories and associations. The impressions a real city makes on an observer are thus both complex and composite in a purely physical sense, even without taking into account his or her culture’s pre-existing attitudes. “Observer” is a slightly awkward term to use here since it indicates a person who is, with some awareness, looking at the city from a detached viewpoint. “Observer” applies better to the writer and the narrator than to the citizen. In daily life most urbanites go about in the city concentrating on their immediate business; they swim in the urban ocean without being particularly aware of it. Susanne Langer may call architecture “the total environment made visible,” but this remark would certainly nonplus Leopold Bloom.

There is a paradox in this entire situation. The city is, on the one hand, incomprehensible to its inhabitants; as a whole “it is inaccessible to the imagination unless it can be reduced and simplified.” But on the other hand, “any individual citizen, by virtue of his particular choices of alternatives for action and experience, will need a vocabulary to express what he imagines the entire city to be.”

Many writers for whom the image of the city is important have been urban journalists and dedicated flaneurs, saunterers through the streets of real cities who have paid careful attention to their impressions. Balzac, Dickens, Poe, Baudelaire, Whitman, Dostoevsky, and Zola all fit this mold exactly. But even writers who don’t share with the others the peculiar and difficult problem of transposing the urban scene from personal impression to literature. For there is a gulf between the living experience of a real city and the word-city of a poem or novel. How does one make printed statements, ink on paper, into “London,” “New York,” or “Rome,” aside from the associations evoked by the names themselves? Even the sociologist and the urban historian, whose primary obligation is fidelity to empirical reality rather than to the imagination, must, as we say, “reduce” the city to words; for them, as well as for creative writers, the process is one of metaphorization. The sociologist and historian would ideally like to establish identity between the sign and its
meaning; the writer calls attention to the separation between them.

[...]  

So the process by which the writer evokes the city appears to parallel the process by which the citizen seeks to encompass his experience of it. The writer's task is both to evoke and to organize many kinds and levels of response in the reader. It is not the artist who dreams, says Kenneth Burke, but rather the audience, “while the artist oversees the conditions which determine this dream.” In this process of overseeing it is clear that the city evoked in words, especially in a fictional text, is toponymical rather than topographical. The name of the city and whatever physical features are labeled function within the relational context of the work; their reference to the real city outside the text may appear to be direct, but is actually indirect. One test of this is the coherence of the word-city to readers who are not the author's contemporaries or countrymen. Raskolnikov's walks through the streets of St. Petersburg in Crime and Punishment can be mapped, and would evoke certain associations in readers of Dostoevsky's time and place, but Dostoevsky evokes a thematically coherent city in the text itself, which makes sense a century later to readers in other countries. There are writers who do not sufficiently generalize the city in this way; for example, it is very difficult for a reader to follow Heimito von Doderer's Vienna novels without a thorough topographical and social knowledge of Vienna. Thus, however artfully the word-city may be decked out with the trimmings of a real one, they are parallel or analogous rather than identical: Dickens's London and London, England, are located in two different countries.  

Writers seem to pay careful attention to this difference between reality and image. For instance, though Flaubert, Hugo, Balzac, and Dickens have been praised for the realistic urban descriptions in their novels, close examination shows that they typically create in their fictions the Paris or London of a time considerably before the actual time of writing. Through the use of the conventions governing verb tenses in narration, they give the impression of describing a present scene when they are actually inventing the picture of a past one. It is as if, by displacing the city backward in time in this fashion, they wished to insure its metaphorization, to place it as firmly as possible in the realm of the imaginary while at the same time presenting it as a “reality.” The result of this procedure is not the evocation of a historically past city but a palimpsestic impression, which results in a tension between the city as past and the city as present.  

To point out the discontinuity between the empirical city and its fictional counterpart is not to suggest that in using this image the writer has in mind a secret, coded meaning which the reader is challenged to decipher. That would make the city too literally symbolic, when actually it seems to function primarily as both an emblem and an archetype. As such it has more various and more diffuse associations and resonances than a symbol can generally encompass. However the city-image may function, it always brings into the text a power of its own; it might be more accurate to say that a writer harnesses this image rather than that he creates it.

Whatever the variety of associations this word conjures up, it has one irreducible core. “City” is, by any definition, a social image. Throughout history, and literary history, it has chiefly represented the idea of community, whatever values might be attached to it in any particular context. For religion, philosophy, and literature from the time of the Greeks and the Old Testament, the image of the city was the image of a community, whether positive or negative. But then this idea began to shift its ground. “From the Renaissance onwards,” writes Ian Watt, “there was a growing tendency for individual experience to replace collective tradition as the ultimate arbiter of reality.” The modern form of realism began with the idea that the individual could discover the truth through his senses, and this concept led to the rise of the novel as a literary form. Whereas earlier literary forms had been characterized by making “conformity to traditional practice the major test of truth,” the primary criterion of the novel was “truth to individual experience.” Thus the plot
of the novel "had to be acted out by particular people in particular circumstances, rather than, as had been common in the past, by general human types against a background primarily determined by the appropriate literary convention."

One of the favorite devices of the eighteenth-century novel was to play off an individual outcast against an urban community of shared values. Moll Flanders is a criminal operating on the community of bourgeois mercantile London (although her religious conversion reunites her with society on a higher level for both). The primacy of the community's shared values is still operating in Balzac, if with less conviction; Balzac's heroes and heroines are typically outsiders, like Rastignac or Lucien Chardon, whose goal in life is to get to the top of the shaky heap. But the presence of Vautrin in Balzac's world shows how the idea of an urban community as a community of shared values was losing its force. Vautrin strikes a different note from Moll Flanders; her criminality defines the boundaries of an integral community she is operating against, his subverts the whole idea of a community which Balzac presents as essentially corrupt to begin with. And throughout the nineteenth century we find that the isolation of the individual rather than the cohesion of urban society becomes increasingly the focus of the image of the city. Dickens's extreme emphasis on portraying urban eccentrics is an indirect witness to this shift; Baudelaire's neurotic poet and Dostoevsky's underground man and Raskolnikov are direct statements of it.

This new emphasis on the isolated individual applies not only to characters in novels, but also to the stress which nineteenth- and twentieth-century writers and critics put on the concept of the narrator (or, in poetry, the speaker), whose individualized point of view is the lens through which the reader views the world of the work. Of special interest is the way in which character or narrator typically presents himself alone against the city, an isolated individual consciousness observing the urban community. It is this stance which makes Hawthorne's "paved solitude" a paradigm for the city in modern literature.

Henry James's The American Scene is a work of non-fiction written by a novelist. Many of its passages combine the personal reactions of a sharp-witted observer of cities with the boldness of the novelist's invention. James frequently sees the city as casting back an image of truth at a self-deluded character, as Paris does to Strether in The Ambassadors; in The American Scene the image is cast back at James himself. Summing up his impression at seeing New York again after an absence of a quarter-century, James writes that the skyscrapers and the league-long bridges, present and to come, marked the point where the age . . . had come out. That in itself was nothing - ages do come out, as a matter of course, so far from where they have gone in. But it had done so, the latter half of the nineteenth century, in one's own more or less immediate presence; the difference, from pole to pole, was so vivid and concrete that no single shade of any one of its aspects was lost. This impact of the whole condensed past at once produced a horrible, hateful sense of personal antiquity.

In this complicated reaction to the city James makes the physical city an organism like himself, whose changes and rhythms in both time and space are, however, on a different scale and rhythm from his own. It is this discrepancy which reminds him so abruptly of his "personal antiquity" when suddenly faced with "the whole condensed past." The overall impression of the physical city to one who observes it, as James does here, is of buildings and streets deposited in sedimentary fashion over a long period, and implying a future ("present and to come").

[...]

However, the image of the city seen historically only partly explains its fascination. At a deeper level, as I have indicated, the widely varying historical cities of Western culture are the same city, a powerful archetype-emblem representing deep-rooted social and psychological constants. For this reason history and cultural psychology are intimately linked in any study of the literary city. An arresting example of this symbiotic relationship occurs in an essay which lies on the borderline between science
and poetry, Freud’s *Civilization and Its Discontents*. The figure of the city was a strong emblematic magnet for Freud; he is elsewhere drawn to Pompeii and London. In this late essay he uses the city of Rome as an incidental but profound and curious analogy. In seeking to illustrate the point that the primitive part of the brain still survives in the brain of modern man, Freud turns to the city as illustration. He first refers to “the history of the Eternal City,” which he only then goes on to identify as Rome. It is as if this common tag for Rome (“the Eternal City”) were important for him in a literal sense, standing for something which has survived through time basically unchanged; this is indeed the argument Freud goes on to develop. Traces of early stages in the development of the brain still survive in the modern brain, he argues, in the same way that traces of the history and prehistory of the “Eternal City” still survive in present-day Rome.

In a remarkable flight of the imagination, bordering on reverie, Freud asks his reader to visualize a surrealistic picture: wherever we might look in contemporary Rome we would see, simultaneously with a present building and occupying the same space, all the earlier structures which had ever stood on that one spot. As if rousing himself, he then goes on to reject his own analogy. One cannot, he says, represent mental life in pictorial (that is, spatial) terms. But the analogy has been made, and it has been made with the evocative power we might expect from a poet. Indeed, the comparison has so much force that Freud himself felt it necessary to comment further on it. As he continues his argument, he returns to the strictures of scientific discourse, but he notes in one of those asides which seem to hang in the air long after they are spoken: “The question may be raised why we chose precisely the past of a city to compare with the past of the mind.” It is a question he does not really answer.

Freud’s subject in this passage is the mind, not the city. He uses the city only as an illustration, and yet, for both author and reader, the image seems to have resonances which have nothing to do with the context. His point would be quite clear without any image at all. Freud’s life provides an interesting clue to the power of this particular figure. His biographer Ernest Jones points out that Freud attached great importance to Rome, and that this city had great emotional significance for him. Jones concludes that for Freud “Rome contained two entities, one loved, the other feared and hated”; in other words, that it was for him a perfect emblem of ambivalence.

It would, however, be a mistake to stop with this personal explanation. There seems to have been in Freud’s thinking an association between civilization (*Kultur*) as the highest product of the human mind, and the city as the densest—and at the same time the most rarefied—distillation of civilization. This association is unstated, but it does not appear to have been entirely unconscious on Freud’s part, since he himself wonders in print why he chose a city as a metaphor. (This time he writes “a city” rather than “the Eternal City” or “Rome.”) One might speculate further that the choice of Rome is both appropriate and necessary for his comparison, for Rome presents the observer with the image of a living city in the present superimposed on the impressive ruins of a ghostly past. Rome is a living community, but its life rests on the many layers of the dead, who have left visible and grandiose reminders of their former presence. Rome is also, of course, one of the main foundation stones of our culture, the *locus classicus* of Western civilization: “at once the Paradise, / The grave, the city, and the wilderness,” Shelley called it in *Adonais*, the twin oxymorons underlining its ambivalence for Keats, Shelley himself, and European culture.

[...]

The word-city, then, leads a double life, evoking deep-rooted archetypal associations while its surface features reflect changing attitudes and values. Viewers of medieval paintings and woodcuts depicting cities are struck by the fact that a representation of Jerusalem, for instance, is that of a medieval city. E. H. Gombrich refers to the illustrations in Hartmann Schedel’s “Nuremberg Chronicle,” in
which the identical woodcut of a medieval city recurs with different captions as Damascus, Ferrara, Milan, and Mantua; all that these pictures were expected to do, Gombrich writes, “was to bring home to the reader that these names stood for cities.” What was to be depicted was the idea, not the concrete individualized form. Gombrich calls this “the principle of the adapted stereotype,” in which the illustrator depicts an inner stereotype derived from the current culture, rather than an objective rendering of a real city.

Such an adapted stereotype occurs in Hawthorne’s “The Gray Champion.” In this story from *Twice-Told Tales* the city is located in the past rather than the present: Hawthorne is ostensibly writing about Boston during the colonial period. But the fine icy chill of the passage which serves as epigraph to this chapter belongs to the writer of 1837, not to the screen Boston of “1689.” This single use of the image of the city contains many layers of meaning: “The crowd had rolled back and were now huddled together nearly at the extremity of the street, while the soldiers had advanced no more than a third of its length. The intervening space was empty – a paved solitude between lofty edifices, which threw almost a twilight shadow over it.”

[...] The metaphorical application of solitude to the city was by no means limited to America in the nineteenth century. Baudelaire, for example, was fond in his poetry of playing off the solitude of the observing poet against the city as a collective scene. Just how conscious and deliberate this was on his part can be seen in a section of *The Spleen of Paris* called “Crowds”:

> Multitude, solitude: equal and convertible terms for the active and fecund poet. He who does not know how to people his solitude will not know either how to be alone in a bustling crowd.

> The poet enjoys the incomparable privilege of being able as he likes to be himself and others. Like those wandering souls which search for a body, he can enter every person whenever he wants. For him alone, everything is empty...

> The solitary and pensive walker draws from this universal communion a singular sense of intoxication.

Ever the Latin linguist, Baudelaire begins by playing on the antiphonal contrast between “multitude” and “solitude,” manyness and oneness, which he proceeds to equate. Using the terms to mean “togetherness” and “isolation,” he throws them in the air and plays with them like a juggler. The isolated poet can through his imagination be the many as well as the one; he can be both “solitary and pensive” and partake at the same time of the “universal communion.” (Baudelaire’s use of the religious term is interesting, underlining as it does the integration of the individual into the sharing group in a ceremony of reconciliation.) As a poet, the individual must be isolated from the group in order to create, but through his imagination, and his poetry, he can join it. This sovereign freedom understandably produces in the poet “a singular sense of intoxication.” However, this intoxication is indeed singular. The underlying tone of this passage is not that of the playful equation of opposites, but the expression of a splenetic solitude; as Walter Benjamin has pointed out, Baudelaire’s attitude toward the city is predominantly negative. Henri Lefebvre, though not discussing Baudelaire specifically, has perhaps pinpointed this quirkiness more exactly in a thought about the extreme ambivalence of modern society. This ambivalence expresses itself in two contradictory obsessions, integrating and disintegrating. Lefebvre sees one of these obsessions, the compulsive need to integrate and be integrated, as a response to the other, the disintegration of the idea of community.

> Clashing contradictions: perhaps the central fascination of the city, both real and fictional, is that it embodies man’s contradictory feelings – pride, love, anxiety, and hatred – toward the civilization he has created and the culture to which he belongs.