

## CITINESS AS LITERARINESS

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Cities are accepted today as being increasingly heterogeneous and internally disconnected arenas of social existence (Massey 1992). They are “territorial arena(s) of social interaction composed of difference and conflict, of related and unrelated connections, of social and economic heterogeneity, of parochial and universal aspirations, and of local and global determinations” (Amin and Thrift 1995:97). Each setting, with its distinctive sense of place and its “bringing into play of locally sedimented, practice-based knowledge and experience and the mobilization of collective memory, always produces a conjuncture of the local and the more global which is in some measure unique “ (Pred 1989:221).

This obscure property of cities, their uniqueness, is ultimately resistant to interpretation and theorization, because, I think, it operates on another register altogether – in the relationship between people’s daily lives and the material and imaginary realities of urban space. It is what everyday life in a city is about, *the aboutness of everyday life*, the meaning of a city, its citiness.

“Taipei is a city like all cities. In the crawling summer heat, a towering forest of concrete buildings melt into the pool of asphalt that permeates its daily life. It shouts its ‘citiness’ down neon thoroughfares and forges its inhabitants into city people – hustling, clever, calculating – appreciative of city things – glamour, noise, lights and money”. (Johnson, R 1977, Feb)

The notion of “aboutness” is used by Arthur Danto (1981) to distinguish mere things, as he calls them, from representations. Things lack “aboutness”. They

simply are, flesh, blood, stone, metal, plastic. As representations, on the other hand, they both are, and are about something else. They carry meaning, convey information; they are about something, the signifiers of a signification, a meaning. Such meanings are conferred upon things by social processes and are open to paraphrase, analysis and interpretation. Blanchot (1999a) argues that this mobilises both negative and positive operations. Firstly, through the act of naming, language causes the thing being named to disappear, to be annihilated. Language erases the particularities of an actual thing, for the same word can refer to many such things, and positively replaces it with the idea of that thing, an abstraction - the cat ceases to be a real cat and becomes an idea of a cat. We cease "to be able to approach anything or experience anything except through the meaning (we) ... create" (Blanchot 1999a:380). From this follows that we can only speak of things in abstractions, in generalities. For when we name a particular thing, we are not naming it in particular, but rather associating it with all the generalisable properties associated with that name. In everyday communication, an illusion is maintained that there is a real thing referred to by the abstraction of language, the ideas through which we speak it, but, in reality it has been, to use Blanchot's word, "annihilated" (1999a:379).

To get back to the city. On the one hand, it is an object, an artifact (Rossi1981) and a process. It can be studied, measured, quantified, written about, theorized, mapped, designed, interpreted. In order to do so, some representational language, be it words, images, diagrams, maps etc. are used, all of which operationalise a negative/positive substitution of abstract idea(s) for the real thing. The city disappears and is placed by the language in which it is described.

There is something however about cities that resists such ways of knowing; which no matter how accurate the statistics or insightful the interpretation, refuses our grasp. In Stephen Pile and Nigel Thrift's words: "The city as a whole can never be known" (Pile and Thrift 2000). We are always, no matter how

extensive our knowledge of it, left with the sense that the city has eluded us. No matter how much we try to comprehend it, we always fail.

The clue to this lies, I think, in the singularity or uniqueness of a city. While our language about cities generalizes them, makes them comparable with other cities, able to circulate as part of urban (or sociological or cultural etc.) discourse, cities themselves are unique. They are unparaphraseable. So, for instance, no matter how many common physical, historical, economic, socio-political, or cultural features it might have in common with them, Johannesburg cannot be substituted for Munich or Philadelphia for Taipei. This observation initiates an entirely different approach to knowing cities. If cities are indeed unique and unparaphraseable, then, as such, they have more in common with poetic than literal language, with literature than information. Insofar as the city exceeds interpretation, it operates like a work of literature does. For while they have economic, political, social and cultural histories which can be identified and in relation to which they can be described, interpreted, explained, judged etc., cities also display a resistance to such interpretation. My thesis is that this lies, not in some deep or hidden meaning that we have failed to uncover about a city, or in a theory not yet written, but rather in the unique and particular way cities shape the lives of those who live in them, what I have called their “citiness”.

This can be understood, I think, analogously, through Blanchot’s concept of the “literariness” of a work of literature.

Literariness, for Blanchot, is something that occurs when language is released from its signifying, descriptive or narrative function and becomes material effect - rhythm, sound, colour, contour, style etc. (Blanchot 1943). He refers to this as the double negativity of literature (Haase and Large 2001). Information bearing language communicates by the dual operations of negating the presence of reality, and positively substituting ideas for things. In literature however, “the word does not transform the negativity of language into the positivity of the

concept, but stubbornly maintains and preserves it” (Haase and Large 2001:32). The “thingness” and the “aboutness” of language are superimposed. Language no longer substitutes concepts for things, it no longer communicates, but becomes itself, becomes “other”, circulating among, between and within the world of words itself. This explains the resistance of literature to interpretation or comprehension, or rather the infinite displacement or slippages of meaning that occur within it. Failure to understand literature cannot be attributed to insufficient knowledge, but rather to its inherent autonomy, its “otherness”.

The city asserts its otherness in a number of ways.

Firstly, it exposes us to an excessive presence of others, of strangers, who call into question our ownership of the world.

“This principal is of great importance in understanding the sociology of the modern city. Social life in the large city ... shows a great preponderance of occasions to see rather than to hear people. One explanation ... of special significance is the development of public means of transportation. Before the appearance of omnibuses, railroads and street cars in the nineteenth century, men were not in a situation where, for minutes or hours at a time, they could or must look at one another without talking to one another”.

(Simmel 1912:26,27 in Benjamin 1999:433)

The modern city “others” us, creates unprecedented silences between us, preventing us from reducing others to the same as we are, putting them and it (the city) always beyond reach, and reminding us that ours is only a partial, fragmentary experience of the world <sup>1</sup>. The “worldliness” (Mbembe and Nuttall 2004:3) and the ethics of city life is life lived in the presence of radical otherness.

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<sup>1</sup> For Blanchot, after Levinas, this produces an idea of modern ethics as a response to the Other (see Blanchot 1993).

Second are questions of authorship. If, in literature, language does not merely concern the expression of ideas that are in my head, then what is said in literature can be said to exist separately from my own, individual existence. I am, in a sense, irrelevant to it. “It is not only the things that are annihilated by a language of which I make use, but ‘I’ myself disappear in it (Haase and Large 2001:61). In a similar fashion, the city annihilates authorship. It is most certainly a made artifact, yet by whom? The very multiplicity of agency at work in it means firstly that it is not made by any one. In other words, it is made by no *one*, which is the same as to say by *every* one. Urban life is constantly made and unmade by multiple realities, and authorship, no matter how prominent, quickly disappears into obscurity, anonymity or cultural history <sup>2</sup>. The city erases authorship for itself. Like the book, it:

“enters the world and carries out its work of transformation and negation. It too, is the future of many other things, and not only books: by the projects which it can give rise to, by the undertakings it encourages, by the totality of the world of which it is a modified reflection, it is an infinite source of new realities, and because of these new realities existence will be something it was not before”.

(Blanchot 1999a:372)

For Sigfried Kracauer, the city literally becomes subject. In his essay, ‘Cries from the Street’, in which he deals with abstract, anonymous feelings of unrest and fear in the streets of 1930’s Berlin, Kracauer suggests the following explanation: “Today, I assume that it is not people in these streets who cry, but the streets themselves. When they cannot stand it any longer, they cry out their emptiness” (Kracauer 1964:30 in Reeh 2004:119). The emptiness he speaks of, like the absence at the heart of language, is the emptiness at the social and cultural

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<sup>2</sup> Efforts to punctuate the city with authorship, as I witness daily in Philadelphia, by the guides who drive visitors around the historic core in horse drawn carriages pointing to and naming buildings of note and their architects, transform the city into dead, museological space.

center of the modern metropolis, bringing about the objectification of life itself (Simmel 1950).

Thirdly, like the work of literature, the city brings its authors / writers into existence, not the other way round.

“The writer only finds himself, only realizes himself, through his work; before his work exists, not only does he not know who he is, but he is nothing”.

(Blanchot 1999a:361)

The city is not authored by us, not written by us, but writes us. It writes us into being as city people, as people constituted by and living in “the constantly moving stream of money” (Simmel 1971:330) and does so as we “read” it, or, in de Certeau’s words, walk it, live our everyday lives in it. When we read a work of literature, it enters our everyday world. We can add it to the repertoire of books we have read, we can understand it in terms of its place in literary history or as part of a cultural milieu. We can read books about it and gain more knowledge of it and its author. This places it on the side of culture. There is however, another side to it. Blanchot (1999a / b) calls this the “work”, a singular experience of the book as we read it, and for which there are no general concepts of interpretation. Reading (the literary work) is not about comprehending or understanding, for it is “infinitely more and thus also infinitely less than all its interpretations” (Blanchot 1993:395); it simply affirms the work’s existence, animates it and brings it alive. In his essay, ‘Reading’ (1999b), Blanchot asks “What is book that no one reads?”; and answers, “Something that has not yet been written. One could similarly ask: ‘What is a city that no one lives in; and answer: A city not yet built. “Reading ... is not writing the book again, but causing the book to write itself or be written, this time without the writer as intermediary, without anyone writing it” (:429). So it is in reading that the literariness of the literary work and in everyday

life that the citiness of the city is constituted, and for which there are no words, only textures, sounds, shadows, light, glamour, noise and money.

“Then, quite apart from all those literary preoccupations, and without definite attachment to anything, suddenly a roof, a gleam of sunlight reflected from a stone, the smell of a road would make me stop still, to enjoy the special pleasure that each of them gave me, and also because they appeared to be concealing, beneath what my eyes could see, something which they invited me to approach and take from them, but which, despite all my efforts, I never managed to discover”.

(Proust, M. (1939:256) in Benjamin 1999:420)

This is the city in and of which Simmel, Benjamin, Kracauer, Debord, de Certeau, Wilson, Rendell and others lived, reflected upon and wrote / write. It is the city which runs like a thread through my work, in my attempt to understand the manner in which cities constitute themselves and their citizens as modern, urban and cosmopolitan.

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