

## INTRODUCTION

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# The City as Social Form

The city is the way we moderns live and act, as much as where.

—James Donald



That the city is a social form is a banal observation. But trivial truths sometimes contain the crux of a problem. Let us put pressure on the words *social* and *form*. They are not incompatible, but they do not entail one another either. Form belongs in the realm of aesthetics, that is, the domain of sensible perception, Aristotle's *ton aistheton eidon* (*On the Soul* 424a), but also in the realm of intelligibility through a complex form of recollection, the dialectic, which for Socrates was actualized in responsible exercise of citizenship. By social we understand the nature and quality of the collective space that results from arrangement of human relations according to certain political norms and ideas, whose first visible expression the city is.

What is the city if not an idea supported by temporal and spatial paradigms? There is no *idealism* in this assertion. Everything human that exists in space and in time, everything *local*, and thus *real* in an empirical sense, is bound up with the evolution of historical problems for which the city is at once the visible formulation and the attempt to resolve them. This evolution is subject to contingency, but it takes place under the aegis of models, which are at once moral and belief systems. Such models contribute powerfully to the forms of settlement but also to the sorts of experience the city promotes or deflects. This is to say that, as social form the city fulfills a symbolic function. Which is still a fairly banal observation. But it also means (and this may be less intuitive) that as social form the city hinges on all systems of signification, thus providing not only a synthetic “feel” for the individual’s participation in those systems but more important a useful frame to study specific developments in one or the other such system. The city is thus the sum of

all relations among its inhabitants as well as between them and outsiders, people immersed in other systems. It is important to note that these relations are not only synchronic but historical as well. They include the elements of tradition and memory, which determine the social form of the city by preserving its continuity or stimulating departures from it.

Notwithstanding the semiotician's outlook, a city is much more than a collection of signs. If planners speak of its "legibility," the real city always reveals a stubbornly presemiological density. To insist on the city's legibility without considering this density and opaqueness distorts our knowledge more than enhancing it. It is also a defensive reduction of contingency, which seduces by making us feel in control of the obscurity that envelops the city's superficial transparency. In the opening chapter of *The Man Without Qualities*, Robert Musil describes the reactions of bystanders to a traffic accident. Looking at the scene, a lady feels discomfited until the man standing next to her says that trucks have an exceedingly long stopping distance. This comment brings her immediate relief: "She had already heard this word in the past, but she did not know what stopping distance was and did not care to know. It was enough for her that through this word the horrible accident could be brought into some kind of order and turned into a technical problem, which no longer confronted her immediately" (Musil 11).<sup>1</sup> Technical terms seem to reinsert anxiety-arousing experiences into logic, and this may well be one of urbanism's critical functions. By organizing experience into an apparent structure, linguistic mediation allows us to read the city in a numbed state of indifference to its indeterminate aspects. Yet on the margins of the code there is room for disorder and, according to Richard Sennett (*The Uses of Disorder*), pragmatic reasons for it as well.

Strictly speaking, urban legibility depends on the existence of textual continuities. If the city is readable and may be spoken of as a text, it is because it functions as the semantic space for a number of interlocking discourses.<sup>2</sup> The city as intertext makes possible the textual city: a shifting organization of traces left in memory by a literary culture that condenses great amounts of experience. In the *Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*, Rilke explains, "For the sake of a verse, one needs to see many cities, people, and things" (21). Furthermore, one needs to collect many memories, to be able to forget them, and then to wait patiently until they arise again in us, in our gaze and gestures, as part of our "spontaneous" being (21-22). Malte writes this in connection with his inability to turn his experience of Paris directly into poetry. Before it can be said, the city must be mediated by memories whose origins have been lost—in other words, by anonymous, homeless memories. For the city is the product of obscure actions undertaken by unknown

individuals who acceded to the urbanite condition by forgetting their particular origins. In his preliminary draft for what later became *Berlin Childhood Around Nineteen Hundred*, Walter Benjamin acknowledged the impossibility of reconstructing the memories of his earliest city life, “had not Paris set before me, strictly transcribed,<sup>3</sup> the two forms in which alone this can legitimately—that is, with a guarantee of permanence—be done” (“A Berlin Chronicle” 5). The first form, which Benjamin abstains from emulating, is Proust’s *Recherche*. The second, which he does not identify, can only be Baudelaire’s clippings of city life in his *Spleen de Paris* and *Petits poèmes en prose*, the format that underlies Benjamin’s snapshot technique in *One-Way Street* and other city texts up to *Passagen Werk*. Thus one city may mediate the memories of another, and literature (amply understood) may provide the only access to the urban unconscious. Valentin Volosinov said roughly the same thing when he asserted that the sign always refers to another sign, and that consciousness can only emerge with the material presence of signs. As inmates of language, we become aware of the city as an ultra-encoded environment, even if this reality turns out to be semiologically disheveled and requires unending interpretation.

It is doubtful that modernist novels such as *Ulysses*, *Manhattan Transfer*, or *Berlin Alexanderplatz* taught their readers to apprehend modern city life by refining their perceptual categories or helping them develop new ones. Certain critics assumed that modernist techniques “duplicated” the complexity of urban stimuli and honed the city dweller’s subjective responses. The truth is that even the most sensual and least conceptual language massively simplifies the experience of the city. The city is too densely encoded to permit its experience to be recaptured by means of representational tricks. What great authors offer us is a skeletal inscription of how it felt to live in a city at a given moment, how its generic traits affected a particular consciousness. Even so, the invitation to recapture an author’s experience plays on the referential fallacy, the assumption that stable references exist. But references do not remain unchanged. Time has slipped between the author’s perceptions and the reader’s; not the empty time of classical physics but the time of experience, including that of the texts themselves. Once it is awakened, semiological awareness prevents us from stepping into mythopoetic space as if it were actual space. Who has ever visited Roland Barthes’s *Empire of Signs*? Or Wittgenstein’s city of logic?

Even writers whom we associate with narrowly mimetic conventions consciously encode a reality that remains illegible outside the text. At the beginning of *Eugénie Grandet*, Balzac speaks of certain hieroglyphs carved on the doors of the houses in Saumur: “The History of France

is there in its entirety" (6). History is always carved at the threshold of the private. It is the side of the private that opens onto public space. Balzac decodes this history and recodes it in his *Comédie humaine*. In *Bleak House*, Mr. Tulkinghorn is able to decode London before the city's residual opacity proves fatal (Dickens 668). Paul Valéry, in *Monsieur Teste*, defines Paris as a city made up of words: "It seemed to me that we advanced towards a cloud of words. One thousand evolving glories, one thousand titles of works *per second* appeared and perished indistinctly in this growing nebula" (81). Cloud, nebula, obscurity, and dissolution of meaning are metaphors for the modernist *skepsis* about the correlation between discourse and the city.

Although it was never a question of duplicating experience, the desire to say the city established a tradition with its own canon, generic formulas, protocols, images, and innovative counter-images. That tradition cannot be narrowed to any given genre. Attempts to relate the city to a specific genre, such as claims by Volker Klotz, Camille Dumoulié, or Roger-Henri Guerrand of an intrinsic connection between the city and the novel, founder on the evidence of much urban poetry, but also of journal and travel literature since the eighteenth century, beginning with Boswell's *London Journal* and Addison's essays for the *Spectator*. Dieter Ingenschay has pointed out the existence of Spanish drama that does not merely locate the action in a city but stages the city itself, making it "function as a protagonist" ("Language of the City" 123). Benjamin famously claimed that a dynamic perspective of the city became available only through film.<sup>4</sup>

Modification in the understanding of cities is often worked out textually before it transforms the reality itself.<sup>5</sup> Historians cannot do without literary texts, not just as documents but also as interpretive paradigms. To tabulate the phases in the understanding of the modern city, Carl Schorske resorts to moral categories that are literarily mediated: the Enlightenment city of Virtue, the Victorian city of Vice, and the modernist, transvaluated city "beyond good and evil" (Schorske 96). As stages in a sequence, these categories are not only diachronic but also dialectical; the first two represent the thesis and antithesis of an urban ideal, while the third mediates the ethical-urban conflict in the realm of modernist aesthetics. It is doubtful that the social and physical reality of cities can be organized so neatly. Schorske, however, is not concerned with experience but rather with cultural valuations—in other words, with concepts that function as criteria of readability and configure the city in the social consciousness. Similarly, literary images react on urban signs, confirming or challenging previous images. This does not mean that the city disappears behind the literary sign, or that signs have nothing to do with the "real" city. It

means that the city, as a manifestation of social practices, is an aggregate of symbolic forms, a signifying space every inch of which has been the object of semiotic struggles. On this battleground the writer is—to use Marge Piercy's graphic term—a combatant (209).

Semiologized and resemiologized on countless occasions, the city offers itself not as a neutral referent but as a resistance that signals the presence of an alien meaning. Before becoming text, the city is already intertext. This means that there is no primordial image of the city, only "after-images," time-laden images inscribed with the history of their own production.<sup>6</sup> Nowhere is the composite nature of the urban sign as clear as in the cities in which we have never lived and that we build in our minds from haphazard images and a handful of stories, like Marco Polo in Calvino's *Invisible Cities*. The estrangement that we experience if we ever visit these cities does not stem from the clash between fiction and reality but from the evidence of a much larger text than we knew or cared for. To "know" the city better, to "dwell" in it, we must appropriate a potentially infinite number of texts. This is usually what we do in a new city: we listen to stories or read them. The more of them we can collect and retain, the more we feel we know that city.

As can be inferred, I consider literature an exceptionally efficient mode for representing the city—and, in fact, for designing its social form—throughout modernity. Even if today other forms of representation linked to electronic (and above all visual) media are taking over literature's function in generating the forms of urban self-awareness, literature has been and remains a major source for understanding the modern city. The reader will find in this book neither an overview of literature on Barcelona—a genre with still relatively few examples<sup>7</sup>—nor a history of the city supported by occasional literary references. Rather, this essay is, or wants to be, an analysis of the formation of the modern image of Barcelona—an image with dates, and thus a dated image, which emerged in the second half of the nineteenth century and was promoted, fought, wiped out, conscientiously restored, and eventually discarded about a century later.

By "image" I do not mean something exclusively visual, but rather a representational configuration in the social imaginary. Such an image can never be univocal. That is why this book breaks up the historical continuum into segments, which though in diachronic order represent different dimensions, conditioning factors, and contingencies of the living reality called Barcelona: monuments, architecture, city planning, transportation systems, tourism, the defining power of the gaze, a classic order and its underside, violence and its aftermath, trauma and hope, national identity and language politics, memory and idealization, economic development

and speculation, and of course the myth of the city and its stark political reality. These and other aspects that I have unconsciously neglected or consciously set aside add up to a representation, or better yet the mixture of blindness and insight into their city that Barcelonans elaborated over the course of one century.

By calling the city a signifying space, I do not suggest the necessity of any meaning. Does not the city change daily around the places and objects that constitute its marks of identity? How many of these signs are essential to establishing identity in time? There is no ready answer to these questions. Nor do I claim to have marshaled the proper references or adequately circumscribed my object of study. Perhaps the pertinent question is, *When does the city cross the line into otherness and become a different city?* The premise of this study is that cities do become other in time, and that the boundaries between the many cities a city contains in its diachronic dimension are made of air, like gardens of love in medieval romances. Those cities within the city are kept apart by the consciousness of their inhabitants. They know that their city, identical in name and geographic coordinates, differs from the city of their ancestors and from the city of their descendants. They know it because their city has become unrecognizable in the space of one generation.

Cities can be founded anew, whether as a result of historical crisis (Berlin reemerging from a Europe formerly divided at the Brandenburg Gate) or in the course of their own evolution, when new conditions precipitate another mode of existence. But cities can also remain anchored in the identity that they acquired during a particular phase of their history. In such cases, cities have character. The identity of New York or Chicago stems from a period when these places acquired the ideal configuration that they still retain in people's minds. City myths often build on such configurations at the precise moment when the city is approaching a historical threshold. In the 1980s, Barcelona was one of these transitional cities. The social earthquake of the late sixties and seventies and the political drift into formal democracy between 1975 and the mid-1980s had a particular intensity there. The sense of impending transformation, made more acute by Barcelona's selection as host for the 1992 summer Olympic games, focused Catalan consciousness on its foremost modern stage. Barcelona again became the frame for a sustained reflection on the collective experiences that had defined Catalan modernity. Modern Barcelona had come into being exactly one century earlier. In the 1880s the city had entered the world stage and initiated the historical cycle that was winding down on the eve of the 1992 Olympics.

The foundations for this cycle were laid in midcentury, after the city burst through its historical confines and spread like oil all over the plane

between the Besós and Llobregat rivers. The ramparts lost their protective function in 1715 but were kept in place by the government as a restraint on a city that twice bucked the king's authority. The ramparts turned Barcelona into a prison where reprisals could easily be taken against a pent-up population. Richard Sennett explains that in the sixteenth century the cannon changed the terms of battle in the siege of cities: "Cannons changed the meaning of density and crowding; the adage of safety in numbers of the medieval commune was countered by the experience of penned slaughter" (*Conscience of the Eye* 182). Henceforth it was in the interest of cities to increase their space in order to offer as thin a target as possible, and conversely it was to the advantage of the attackers to wreak terror on a concentrated population. Spanish authorities reserved this advantage in Barcelona until the second half of the nineteenth century. Tearing down the walls therefore held extraordinary significance for Catalans; it was an epochal event marking not only the aggregation of urban space but also a mutation of consciousness.

Creation of this new consciousness was celebrated with the city's first Universal Exposition of 1888, a rite of passage signaling Barcelona's recognition as a budding metropolis. It was in the last decades of the nineteenth century that all the elements that were to endow Barcelona with a modern personality came into view: a puissant industry, an organized working-class movement, the fin-de-siècle art and architecture locally known as modernisme, standardization of the Catalan language (a cornerstone for literary revival), emergence of a theoretically mature Catalan nationalism, and of course the city itself, which spread westward to assimilate villages and orchards into the regular grid of its newfangled rationalistic Expansion.

The exhilaration of rebuilding Catalonia on a humanistic basis came to grief during the Spanish Civil War, and above all in the postwar. Defeat, the exodus of the intellectual and political elite, the dissolution of all Catalan institutions, a ban on public use of the language, destruction (by fire and pulping) of a large part of the literary and historical legacy, confiscation of archives for use in the repression of Catalans, purges and discrimination, the constraints and fiscal depredation of the Catalan economy, and efforts to reduce Catalonia to a province marked a new stage in the city's status. This was, in the words of a Spanish novelist, a "time of silence," when nightly executions and constant fear of reprisals achieved in large part the erasure of Catalan memory. This is the city described by Mercè Rodoreda in *Time of the Doves*, a novel about Catalonia's tragedy. This novel shows that, when defeat supervenes, the survivors' only hope is to withdraw to the no-man's-land of everyday life to preserve an emotional link between the past and the future. To be

again someday, Barcelona had to be, in the long decades of the Franco regime, a remembered city.

With the melting of silence during the “transition,” sequestered, half-forgotten words slowly found their way back into speech—words that were miraculously preserved in the tenuous path traced by poets in the long night of fear and forgetfulness. But between memory and hope fell the shadow. Peopled by liminal beings, post-Franco Barcelona lacked a sense of origin. With Franco or against Franco, many would not suffer Barcelona to remember itself. No longer Catalan and not yet completely Spanish, Barcelona was suspended in a bottomless present made of pure potentiality. Being no place in particular, it could be thought as the threshold to all places. In this haziness some discerned the lineaments of a world metropolis, a capital without a country, a garden of converging paths leading out of history. For others Barcelona had to reach back to the past not out of nostalgia but for the sake of acquiring relevance in the present. Beyond the city branded by fascism and whitewashed by the bland amnesia of the utopians, another city surfaced that recognized itself beyond its discontinuities, not in illusive coherence but in the laborious release of meaning locked in the past.

By the early eighties, the recovery was gathering momentum and a new cultural space opened at the heart of Catalonia, a historical flower in the post-Franco wasteland. But to the intellectual watchdogs of the rejuvenated Spanish state, the situation looked grim. Novelist Félix de Azúa famously compared Catalan culture to a sinking *Titanic*. The re-emergence of Catalanism, and especially of the Catalan language, was the culprit of the alleged debacle. The spectacle was amusing: people who had been, and in some cases still were, members of radical Communist organizations and splinter fractions to the left of the Communist party reenacted Falangist attitudes in relation to Catalonia. Shortly after approval of Catalonia’s statute of autonomy, Federico Jiménez Losantos and some three hundred Spanish functionaries living in Barcelona signed a manifesto intended to stop the recovery of Catalan as public language. It was the first move in an unceasing campaign to shore up the cultural subjection of Catalans beyond Franco.

Simultaneously with the language, the collective memory was also reclaiming the physical space of the city. Prewar names were restored to street and square, forbidden monuments were reinstalled in public spaces, and to greater effect the city was cleansed of its decades-old patina and art-nouveau façades repainted, allowing the graffiti and sculpture work to show up again. Eduardo Mendoza popularized this period in his novel *The City of Marvels*. Mendoza’s city is a reflection of modern Barcelona in the author’s rearview mirror. From his privi-



leged standpoint, we take a last look at the modern city before it recedes and enters the vague territory where history and myth commingle. Pre-Olympic Barcelona recognized itself in that view. It had fulfilled its duty of remembrance, but it was too enamored of itself to project an image of the future that it was already inventing. An acerbic critic of this period, Valentí Puig, exaggerates when he writes, "I wonder if to miss the novels about Barcelona that no one has written corresponds in some way to the nostalgia for a Barcelona that we have not experienced: the truth is that we know about it through memoirs and chronicles, but the Catalan novel seems to have allergy to the metropolis" (90). Contemporariness is hard to fictionalize, but an added reason for the scarcity of novels able to capture post-Olympic Barcelona may be that so many of today's writers seem dupes of the very fiction that has undone Barcelona's modernity.

This is not to say that there are no novels about present-day Barcelona. It is to say that since 1992 Barcelona has changed so rapidly that it will take literature some time to catch up. As Julià Guillamon explains, for a new landscape to become literature memory must set. Will there be literature, as we know it, he asks, when the new city finally sets in the collective memory? Will the city, subject to continuous transformation, come to rest in a stable image in the future? I think it is safe to answer that the new city will eventually have its narrative cycle, the literary supports of intelligibility and self-consciousness that human evolution secretes, and it will have the critical work needed to take it up to the level of reflection. Furthermore, just as that city will cease to understand itself as a posthumous reiteration of the modern, critical meditation will be guided by a new order of significance.

In a sense, this book comes too late. But then, is this not always the case where reflection is concerned? Completion of a historical phase and exhaustion of a particular identity cannot be verified before they become observable in the production of signs. In any case, the book is late with respect to its hermeneutic object, the city of which, strictly speaking, it can no longer be a part. In regard to a new order of consciousness, one that transcends the intentional phenomenon and that I would call past perfect consciousness—consciousness of the *had been*—no book ever comes too late. For this consciousness, distance from the eruption of forms is, on the contrary, an epistemological condition.