

THE CITY, LITERATURE AND OUR FUTURE

The city's readability and habitability go together. Modern critics should join the urbanists and architects.

Jan-Hendrik Bakker

Scalloped waves

In the early twenties of the previous century the American author John Dos Passos lived in Brooklyn, not far from the Brooklyn Bridge which had been opened in 1883. It was there that he worked on his great novel *Manhattan Transfer* and there is little doubt that he has been standing and staring over the water many times. So do his characters, mostly poor immigrants and peasants who had arrived there before by ferry. One of the main characters, if it makes sense to use this expression because the novel counts about forty New Yorkers who can claim this title – but anyway, one of these persons, Jimmy Herf, because he's the one we are talking about, at the end of the novel takes the ferry *away* from Manhattan, back to Brooklyn, and from there further forward on Long Island, while someone is giving him a ride. Fleeing away from the city where his mother had brought him when he was still a schoolboy. The river, as magic borderline between in and out, fulfils an important role in this book. The novel opens with a scene about fortuneseeker Bud Korpenning, sitting on the ferry deck seeing Manhattan come near. He feels slightly excited, because suddenly he's full of hope that things will turn out right now that he is nearing 'the center of things', the place where it all happens. Dos Passos tells us how Korpenning is looking at a violin player.

'Bud Korpenning sat on the rail watching him, his back to the river. The breeze made the air stir round the thight line of his cap and dried the sweat on his temples. His feet were blistered, he was leadentired, but when the ferry moved out of the slip, bucking the little lapping scalloped waves of the river he felt something warm and tingling shoot suddenly through all his veins (...)'

About seventy five years before Manhattan Transfer would appear in 1925, Walt Whitman had also spoken about ‘scalped waves’. In the same words and the same context. In his sublime poem ‘Crossing Brooklyn Ferry’, which only appeared in the second edition (1856) of *Leaves of Grass*, under the title ‘A Sun-Down Poem’, Whitman celebrates the evening hour at the East River, the lap lap of the water against the ferry while passengers are heading home. He makes the seagulls cry and the ‘scallop-edged waves’ gently roll. There’s little doubt Dos Passos has known this poem, admirer of Whitman as he was. But it is not impossible at all ‘scalped waves’ would have come to Dos Passos’ mind even without Whitman. What is at stake here is not Dos Passos referring to Whitman’s famous poem, but the image in the reader’s mind, connecting Dos Passos’ spirit with Whitman’s over a period of 75 years, locating the two on Brooklyn’s and Manhattan’s quays. We too, standing there in reality or imagination, are reminded of Dos Passos’ immigrants and Whitman’s vision, while the latter is speaking to future generations who, just like him (and us), will be standing on the riverside, or the deck, enjoying the fresh breeze, the sight of the scalped waves and Brooklyn’s hills. Thanks to literature this place has got its magic – even more after the events of 9/11.

But the Manhattan-Brooklyn ferry not only brings together Dos Passos and Whitman, it also unites New York as it was before the Civil War with the metropolis it had become after the opening of the Brooklyn Bridge, which enabled the city to become the Capital of the 20th century, like Paris was of the 19th century. In Whitman’s days Long Island was still vast rural country. If you climbed the hill at Flatbush you were offered the sight of an undulating, nearly treeless landscape, eastwards reaching as far as the Atlantic. Brooklyn was still a small town, counting no more than 40.000 souls. This feeling of the Long Island landscape plays a crucial role in Whitman’s poetry. His New York still bears the signs of rural backgrounding, while at the same time it is already losing its origin. The New York of Dos Passos is the dynamic, restless city of the roaring twenties.

The world becomes one city

The year 2007 is the first one in history in which, according to UN-figures, more people live in cities than outside. It means the world is rapidly urbanizing, probably becoming one big city. Anyway, futurologists and urbanists foresee giant conglomerations of metropolitan areas to still larger mega(lo)polises which will cover huge parts of the earthy surface. This prospect, which are already factual developments in some cases, have led to the introduction of the expression ‘the end of the city’ in the urbanistic discours. Of course, cities still exist, but they are becoming more and more museum pieces. The old town centers have become touristic attractions, places where you can have fun, visit musea and sit on terraces. Only very few do actually live here, at least not the middle class.

The latter settled down in suburbs during the sixties and seventies of the last century, in Vinex areas¹ and ahistorical completely newly built cities like Almere, Zoetermeer and Lelystad² or their equivalents abroad. I guess most of the Beijing, Paris or Sao Paolo middle class inhabitants share the same relationship with the old town, actually none. And that they use to visit these old towncenters even less. I also bet that conditions in these new dwelling areas will copy each other more and more, architecturally and social-culturally. In his magic-realistic novel *The Invisible Cities* (1973) Italo Calvino makes the Grand Kan, ruler of the Tartarian Empire, think, while he’s studying the atlas of his domain, ‘Where forms get exhausted in their variations and dissolve, the end of cities begins. On the last maps of the atlas rectangles flow out without beginning or end, cities with the shape of Los Angeles, the shape of Kyoto-Osaka, without form.’³ And in the same novel Marco Polo, again very anachronistically, complains, ‘How far one is moving away from the city, is what you’re doing no more than transpassing one suburb after the other, without ever succeeding in leaving it behind?’⁴

The process of urbanization is not anymore what it used to be two centuries ago. People do not move *into* cities, like they did in the eighteenth and nineteenth century, but

¹ Denomination of a new type of Dutch suburbs

² Middle great new cities in the Netherlands.

³ My translation from Dutch.

⁴ Idem.

they settle down *inbetween* cities, thus creating new urban area, airports, shopping malls, brain- and entertainmentparks and highways being the junctions of this new suburbanization, mostly situated far away from the original cities themselves. Even their jobs don't bring them in the old town centres, because they are employed in supermarkets, office compounds and hospitals which only have their locations on the outskirts of town. Months can pass away without visiting the center. To see a good movie, you don't have to go to the cinema nowadays, do you? And to contact others, the café isn't the only place anymore, there's also the Internet and the mobile telephone. Public life has changed drastically, we are not rooted in place anymore but can freely move through space, thanks to multimedia.

Chronotopical texture

Literature is condensation of the general into the specific. That's why literature is always a hymn to place. Because in place the particular becomes sensible, and it is only from place the universal can be evoked. Walt Whitman's poetry brings an evening rush at the Manhattan – Brooklyn ferry, one hundred fifty years ago, right before our senses. And the poet has a visionary feeling he can look forward for generations and generations, imagining precisely how others after him will have the same sensations of an evening on the water. Just like these generations (we!) will fancy the great poet standing there, looking to the scalloped waves. So like agricultural landscapes cityscapes are time-spaces, spatial knots of history and artistic imagination.

Kafka tells us how Josef K. was executed in a quarry, just outside town. We all know that kind of semi-deserted places. So the story triggers our imagination, adding to Prague's inner map another dramatic and highly symbolic, although fictitious, event, so powerful that every time we are visiting Prague, we are aware that we walk the same streets Josef K. once did. In this manner middle European city Prague is linked up to the notion that in life any moment of the day one can be patted on the shoulder and be told that charges against him are being prepared. The novel *Lawyer to the Punks* (1990) is

situated in the roaring, anarchistic eighties when young urban squatters⁵ and massive demolition ruled the old town center of Amsterdam. In this historic setting dutch writer A.F. Th. van der Heijden develops the personage of a periodical alcoholic, a social lawyer and defender of the young rioters, who's able to disappear completely in alcoholic euphoria for weeks, while cruising the urban nightly labyrinth. Thus, Van der Heijden has linked this drinker's fictitious psychology and lifestory with the objective history of the violently evacuated former House of Detention (illegally occupied by the squatters) and the death of one these squatters, Hans Kok.

Cities are narrative space in which writers develop their stories. These stories are begotten in the author's erotics with historical and architectural circumstances; after birth the writer brings them up and then sends them into the world. On that very moment, when these stories enter public space, they begin to interfere with the same environ they originally stemmed from. Chronotopical textures come into existence like that, tissues of facts and fiction, sense and meaning, mind and matter, all those complexities which make cities what they are, mixtures of myth, history and bricks. And without this narrative component the city would be unbearable, since memoryless we would roam the streets of glass and asphalt. That's why habitability of the city is also its readability. Habitability is not sufficiently guaranteed by police in the streets. We also need to understand that without any idea of its cultural stratification the city remains inliveable as well.

Storyless?

Modern *homo suburbanus* has turned into postmodern *homo suburbanus*. He dwells, works and recreates in the enormous though undifferentiated intermediate space between the old cities. This 'Interland' is not only interland in material sense, but in technological too since he is a member of the network society that has partly made him inhabitant of cyberspace. It's only very rarely that *homo suburbanus* visits the mother cities, sometimes on a saturday afternoon, looking for a good bookshop. Still these cities have set tight their stories in his head. New York, Amsterdam, London, Paris – he knows what

⁵ Wearing those cock's comb coiffure, typical for the militant punkscene of the eighties, which inspired Van der Heijden to the (literally translated) title *The Roosters' Advocate*.

they are and what they have to say, and which one of them appeals to him mostly. Daily, cinema and literature remind him on these cities, and otherwise derivate mediamatic forms like commercials or city representation of the so-called city marketeers will affect him.

But what about the new urban world that is coming into existence, that globalized, semi-material, semi-digital, semi-urban and semi-rural, but far from traditional or agrarian dwelling areas, where the middle class is used to live all over the world nowadays? The world of airport architecture, of agglomerations round highways, the 'non-places' as the French sociologist Marc Augé⁶ says? In the words of Calvino, the places you cannot escape from. Do they still deliver narrative space?

In The Hague's Photographic Museum an interesting confrontation took place last year (2006). The debate was between Dutch authors Joost Zwagerman and Kees 't Hart. The first had been invited to comment on the work of Gregory Crewdson. Crewdson is a famous American photographer, regarded as belonging to those who focus on American suburban life. Joost Zwagerman, being affected by the theme of 'suburban mankind', turned out to be very enthusiastic about Crewdson's work. He showed a lot of wit and a sharp eye for iconographic details, but again and again moments of shortcircuiting occurred between him and his interviewer. 't Hart was eager to know what the stories were these pictures told the *novelist* Joost Zwagerman, but the latter refused to deal with that question, answering these pictures showed the very feature of suburban life itself, namely a complete standstill and a complete storylessness.

Who is right and who is wrong, is not the question. What matters is who we *prefer* to be right. Apparently life in suburbia can be seen as totally different. The way you look at it is already a prefiguration of that life. Storylessness is another word for senselessness. If Crewdson's pictures are scenes of speechless emotions, frozen in time, or if they represent moments belonging to a chain of feelings that show a kind of order, a narrative, is decided by implicit valuation of suburban life. Either we see it in the perspective of narrative-humanistic tradition, so common to Western thought, thus offering suburban citizen a context of sense, either we loosen it from any narrative

⁶ Marc Augé, *Non-Lieux. Introduction à une anthropologie de la surmodernité*, Parijs 1992.

context because we feel postmodern life is essentially timeless and a-historic, whether it be ultimate melancholica due to total estrangement, or desperate consumerism.

The sense of reading

The future of reading is essentially not about the relation between literary imagination and mediatechnology, but about the sense of reading itself. That's why asking about the future of reading is asking about future itself. What is the sense of reading related to our future? In the first place, reading can be defined as collecting meaning. (So the sense of reading is that it makes sense in the most literally way.) Having stressed that, we must say that future's biggest problem – and the future has already begun, only think of the effects of globalization – is how we, tenbillion souls within a couple of years, can succeed in feeling ourselves at home in a world which is so rapidly urbanizing.

What has literature to do with that? Well, if reading is collecting meaning, it co-produces this world. Literature, especially the novels we read, makes the homogeneous, undifferentiated space we have lived in since modernity, a heterogeneous landscape. It tells us about historic and fictitious events inside this space, thus transforming empty space into a web of places, each one of them having tens of stories, national ones, strictly personal, regional embedded or worldwide known. Literature *arranges* space, to cite philosopher Martin Heidegger.⁷ And it's only in place we can dwell.

Why novels? Not since cinema or popsongs, musicals and soap would not be strong narrative media. As a matter of fact, each one of them is able to deliver high quality reflections on our daily life, they too are able to arrange space. But novels already have done this for centuries, specialized as they are in human's daily existence and so having built a rich archive of personal and subjective experience. Starting from Don Quichot novels tell us how life is in big cities like Paris, Berlin or Dublin, or in villagelike semi-rural areas, or in deserted regions or in suburbia. And where else is told more intensely about men, nature and their confrontation? Current literature detected suburbia long before cinema invaded that area with movies such as *Magnolia*, *Close*

⁷ In German, 'räumt ein', Martin Heidegger, 'Bauen, Wohnen und Denken', in: *Vorträge und Aufsätze*, Pfullingen 1954.

Encounters of the Third Kind and American Beauty. Moreover, in its shape as good science fiction literature explores the future of dwelling in an urbanized, hightechnological society, often more penetratingly than movies do, I think.

For ages and ages, reading literature has been considered as an identity forming activity. I only recall the discussion about the canon, we have just finished. But literature is not only orientation in time, also in space. Now the question ‘who we are’ is becoming more complicated, but less urgent as well as we learn to understand that identity is closely bound up with literature and narrativity itself, the question rises ‘*where* we are’. Literature has to offer a lot here too. And again, we shall discover that the place where we live has been founded partly in the words we spent on it. We need history and imagination in order to dwell. So, future readers and critics, scholars and journalists, come and join the bricklayers, the estate agents, the mortgage bankers, the architects, the urbanists and the politicians – let’s make the city habitable again!

This article was originally a lecture, held at the congress The future of Reading, University of Utrecht, 28th of February 2007. The Dutch text will be published in *Vooys*, magazine for literature, May 2007. © Jan-Hendrik Bakker. Translation (with a few minor adjustments) by the author.