

RICHARD HOWARD

My name is Richard Howard and I am a teacher, a translator, and a poet. I live in two radically different American cities, New York and Houston.

For a good part of the year, I live in Houston, Texas, where I teach literature at the University of Houston (this year, we are concentrating on the work of Emily Dickinson, concentrating on all 1,776 of her poems, 200 each week!) and where I write poems. For what is apparently a bad part of the year, unless it is the better part, I live in New York City, where I have been – and for some years to come where I shall be – making a new translation of Proust's novel *In Search of Lost Time*, and where I write poems. Evidently the activity that persists in either place, whatever their differences from each other, and whatever the discrepancies in my professional life during the months I am in either residence, is the writing of poems.

So there must be something in common – some residual and pervasive element about living in both or in either that makes such making possible. I think that the fact that the national conventions of our two political parties were held this past year in the two cities makes it easier to suggest the differences, and the abiding urban identities, of the two megalopolises. In any case I shall try to offer some account of how a man may live an intellectual life in American cities, contradictory as such a proposition may on the face of it appear, and contradictory as those cities themselves may be.

where it is easy to escape Others, where there is always room and time to find, or create, more of the Same, and where you can dangerously forget the Differences. The imminence of otherness – that is New York's character, and its advantage. New York is a place where it is impossible, as it is eminently possible in Houston, to universalize the human plight (such universalization being the most dangerous of our uses of our intelligence, as we may observe from the Houston-carpentered platform of the Republican National Convention).

Such universalization – the choice of an apocalyptic view of this or any other time – is a clog in, or, to put it better still, a blindfold over our awareness of the possibilities of change. What seems in Houston an almost lyrical stasis, the present moment, is in New York never an absolute but a prelude.

The American visionaries, as I may flatteringly call them, who endanger our perception of differences, of others and of change (and who have thereby done so much to abolish our political consciousness) are sometimes among our greatest writers – Emerson, for example, and Thoreau. It is notable that their vision of the country, and of a citizen independent of the pressure of change and acquisition, was achieved in lives lived not in the cosmopolis. Thoreau came but once to New York, visiting Whitman in Brooklyn and noting in his journal his disgust at finding the metropolitan poet sharing a bed with his retarded brother, the chamber pot under that bed far too evident for the fastidious senses of a man from Concord. Indeed, the visionaries of the major phase of American literature, plausibly including Melville and Hawthorne, even Poe and Longfellow, carved out a non-urban reality founded on the use of language (a function peculiar to the United States). Such use can afford to ignore the demands of otherness. But in some sense, for an intellectual, an artist, an educator, only the Great City can rehearse possibilities of Mutual Recognition . . . can overcome

there have been poets, where there are poets, where poets will be, oneself among them. The city as conflictual maze is where the student, the artist, the thinker comes to a consciousness of possible change.

Yet we have, in America, we have noticeably in Houston, the converse tradition: the tradition of the prophet who comes down from the hills, who shakes his fist in the marketplace, against the marketplace, and returns to his (comparative) solitude. In this role, Faulkner takes the baton from Thoreau, and Frank Lloyd Wright (answering an enquiry as to how he would solve New York City's problems: "Level it!") reminds us of Emerson in his repudiation of any hope for the City as a vessel of human happiness. Indeed, I have never met a burgher of Houston who did not believe that the best of Houston was in its evasions of urbanity, in its visionary capacity to recapitulate, in measures of space and time, the virtues of Open Country.

Yet that happiness, the pursuit of which is an American axiom, if it is to mean anything more than acquisition and counting, must be a metaphor for consciousness, for the consciousness of more life, that blessing that Jacob demanded of the angel at Peniel. And it is in New York, of the five American Big Cities where I have lived, that as a poet and a student and as a teacher I have been afforded a principal consciousness of life; not of an abstract and universalized life – the Good Life I can so amazingly live in Houston for a good part of the year – but of individual, conflicting, disputed lives, whose response to their dilemmas and determinations produces what politics we can find credible, neither tyranny nor whistling in the dark (again, the Republican platform, issued from Houston), but rather that agon of consciousness that is what I think happiness, and certainly poetry, means.

It is only when other voices sound in the echo chamber that our own has any vibrations of significance, that our own is

In Houston we acknowledge two entities – my students have two subjects in their extremely subjective poems, their bodies and the weather, both wonderfully consistent. And this elision tends to produce a poetry of rather blank universals, a poetry of that narcissism that is so often observed to be our characteristic and death-dealing art form. Only in New York – in my own experience of New York, I must say – in the most overscored and obliterated, self-obliterated, metropolis, continually remaking its premises from vestiges of its ruins, the city with every deficiency, can the beleaguered artist and poet and intellectual come up (and out) with a credible version of a made reality, human wealth beyond counting and beyond acquisition.

For to be a poet in New York means to contend with existence in other aspects, on other levels, down other streets, and not to assume to oneself the role – and the singing-ropes, the mantle – of the poet as a sure thing, as an unquestioned assumption. Perhaps it is the fascination of what's difficult, above all, for these days New York is increasingly difficult to live in if your life and your living are discrepant. No one (not even W. H. Auden, when he lived here, as he so often said, "not an American but a New Yorker") sustains the "realities" of life by poetry; therefore the poet must do something else, must be something, I would say, and perhaps in such being is my central assent to this problematic urban agglomeration: to be a poet in New York means to contend with the Other. . . . My own poetry has become, in consequence, largely a matter of other people, largely a matter of people of the past, whose achievements, whose failures, and whose amusements it has been my study to reinvent, to recount, if not to record. The constant distraction of what I must call the cross-purposes of New York enable such a poetry more busily, more stirringly than the usual, the classical semipastoral assumptions so readily found in Houston, assumptions so rife in the relative peace and quiet of a

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New York City is not a place where a Republican National Convention would be welcome. This was a truth immediately perceived by the Republican National Committee, which chose for its site the most imaginary, the most idealistic, the most unreal of all our Unreal Cities, as T. S. Eliot calls them. New York, then, is a place where you are constantly compelled to acknowledge, and to a certain degree to welcome – even while resisting – Differences. It is a city not of the Same, but of Other People. Houston is a city

the temptations, which I feel so powerfully here in Houston, of those visionary and impersonal systems which seek to dissolve the very concept of personal agency.

It appears initially paradoxical that the agglomeration of several million lives is where an individual discovers existence most readily, most characteristically. But it is by sustaining itself, by prevailing against – rather than by evading – hive and huddle that the self is discovered as a personal agency. One is a poet where

not merely a delusion. And it is in New York, often contemptuously referred to as "the city that never sleeps," that a consciousness of others is necessarily generated, to the advantage of one's own. In Houston as in Los Angeles, the first difficulty I have encountered among students of poetry, among nascent poets – beyond the general American resistance to the existence of the past, even (and especially) to the past of poetry – is the ease with which the very existence of Other Poets, living and past, is elided.

writers' colony, for example – a place where time and space are set aside (exactly the problem: that setting aside) for poetry, for just poetry.

No such accommodation for me (except during the good months I spend in Houston!). It is just the conflicting enterprises by which my days and nights are imbued, in fact invaded, which call forth what poetry I can imagine. New York is the site where someone is always – famously – awake, and someone always

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asleep, the poet being that someone, of course, simultaneously awake and asleep; the site where life assumes its most harrowing aspect (and most healing). And it is just because of what Montaigne calls *cette belle contexture des choses* that I have been able to spin and inweave my own particular threads, which I am certain would snap in my hands at the permanent solicitation of what has always been called the provinces. Some of our poetry – I suggest Emily Dickinson – is not only admirable but representative in its genius “to see New Englandly” – or southwesterly or pacifically: to see from a society whose vantage is the same, as if Americans had never conglomerated in a village larger than Amherst, in a company more populous than a country graveyard. But there is another strain of American poetry that finds its *raison d'être* in New York, city of overscorings and obliterations, urban palimpsest of voices – voices of Whitman and Crane, Moore and Auden, Ashbery and Merrill, Field and Hollander, all of whom have determined Manhattan’s poetic “crossings,” though they may no longer live there on a regular basis, though they may, as I do, venture into the boundary vacuities of Houston – voices raised and fading in the echo chamber of all our despairs and hopes. ■

These essays were delivered as part of the program “Berlin Meets Houston – Houston Meets Berlin: Topographies of Literary Experience,” held in Houston from 12 to 18 October 1992. A joint project of the Goethe-Institut Houston and the Literary Colloquium of Berlin, it brought five Berlin writers to Houston for exchanges with Houston writers. Thanks to Rick Spuler and Sven Arnold for facilitating publication of these essays.

The big German cities are the relatively young daughters of industrialization and war. Unlike its counterparts in England and France, German industry began to develop only in the mid-19th century. It received a decisive shot of capital in the arm when, following the 1870–71 war, the German Empire imposed on defeated France reparations in the (for the time) astronomical amount of five million gold francs. (The German language has preserved the memory of these origins in words like *Fabrikstädte* – “factory towns” – and *Mietskaseme* – “rented barracks,” i.e., tenement blocks.)

In the year 1849, Berlin, the city of my birth, numbered 412,000 inhabitants. By 1871, the population had more than doubled; 1877 saw the one million mark passed, 1905 the two million mark. In the portion of the surrounding countryside that was incorporated into greater Berlin by a zoning reform in 1920, the population jumped from 105,000 in 1871 to 1.7 million in 1910.

In the same year, in the foreword to one of the first representative selections of “urban poetry,” Theodor Heuss spoke of “socialistic” and “sociological” poetry, with which the Naturalists reacted to the (socially) explosive urban development. Admittedly, the diagnosis was outdated before it was made public. In the “expressionistic decade” of 1910–20, the social and critical canon of naturalistic themes was ruptured, “big city” became the metaphor of an aggressive and destructive attitude towards life and the world, fear mingled with fascination, and the big city appeared as threatening as it was tempting. The hookers at night on the *Friedrichstrasse* looked terrific, but they probably all had syphilis.

The tone in German poetry that I myself find originally “urban” developed in the Berlin of the twenties. Its inhabitants and its authors took the city more for granted; the expressionistic pathos had been spent. Poems became more matter-of-fact, more laconic, quicker; they incorporated more elements of the witty and flippant colloquial speech. Walter Mehring should be mentioned first of all here, for his richly contrastive integration of the new language material into the old song and verse forms, though Erich Kästner became much more popular. Bertolt Brecht’s poems *From a Reader for City-Dwellers* stressed the social coldness of the big cities, and in this way again took up one aspect of the naturalistic program. When I was born in Berlin in 1934, Mehring and Brecht were just as “banned and burned” as Alfred Döblin, whose *Berlin Alexanderplatz* was THE German urban novel on the 1920s. The Nazis propagated “blood and soil” and denounced literary

modernity as “asphalt literature.” There never was anything like a National Socialist urban poetry.

I was able to discover my literary models, then, only after the war ended. I lived at that time in Pankow, a lower-middle-class district close to the borders of the formerly “red” Wedding. After 1945, I also lived in the Soviet sector, while Wedding lay in the French sector. The border ran along a city railway line, and I would cross over under a bridge to eat ice cream “in the West,” something you couldn’t find on our side “in the East.” The sector divisions of the four occupying powers emphasized the boundaries that exist within a big city and turned values upside down: Pankow had been a “better” neighborhood than Wedding, but now we belonged to the Russians and our proletarian neighbors to the French.

Perhaps it was this experience of boundaries that shaped my sense of the big city. It is not, by the way, necessarily a typical one for all big-city dwellers. The average Berliner lives not in Berlin but in his district – in Wilmerdorf, for example, in Neukölln, in Charlottenburg. In the everyday life of its inhabitants, the city is reduced to a manageable number of places, streets, squares – where one works, shops, enjoys leisure time. The automatic experience of a city dweller is not Big City Experience. It remains partial and particular. Theoretically, you could spend your whole life without ever leaving your neighborhood.

(Or your company car: a West Berlin trade union leader can’t keep an afternoon interview appointment at the local radio station because at that time of day his driver would be held up in traffic. He doesn’t know that there is a direct subway route from his trade union headquarters to the radio station.)

Urban experience must be consciously organized. You have to set out on excursions, venture forward, cross boundaries. In this way you wind up in unfamiliar parts, in neighborhoods where you don’t know your way around, may even feel “out of place.” There are streets that – at least at certain hours – one is better off avoiding, or subway routes on which the way you dress will attract attention or prompt an act of aggression. Eugène Sue, who was one of the first writers to try to fathom *The Secrets of Paris* (1842–43), dressed up as a proletarian and for safety’s sake took his boxing instructor along with him as a bodyguard. Even today there are districts in which a tie or polished shoes invariably stand out. There are other places or milieus, however, where you would perhaps never even gain admittance: that extends from boards of directors to circles of pimps.

The big city is a discontinuous, diverse assemblage, distinguished by the simultaneous and unbidden juxtaposition of the most varied people and ways of life. Perceptions and their meanings change with time and place: two teenaged Asians of for me unidentifiable nationality, conversing in their native language at midday on a crowded Kurfürstendamm bus, elicit totally different emotions from those triggered by the same young men with whom I am suddenly sitting alone at night in a subway car, and who are communicating in the same language – with lowered voices, as I now realize.

Two stations later they get out; I have been aware, not of them, but of myself. What appears to the eyes is often only appearance: even organized experience does not suffice. Deciphering a big city requires certain prior knowledge (which then again can only abstract or restrict one’s view). A city like Berlin is also a product of its own history, which has left its marks on the cityscape. They are sometimes obvious, as for example the Nazi architecture of the Olympic Stadium or around Fehrbelliner Square, and sometimes hardly noticeable, like the remnants of Hebrew characters on the weathered façades of the old Scheunenviertel.

Fortunately, a big city also has archives, libraries, and museums. They too provide pieces of the mosaic that big-city experience becomes, and which, by the way, is as unlikely ever to be completed as is the big city itself. Houses are torn down, others rebuilt, a slum is redeveloped and its social status changed, the butcher gives up and makes way for the antique dealer, the greengrocer gives way to the boutique. What we are witnessing in amazement now is what happens when a city divided for 28 years by a wall is pieced together again: a process far from complete, in which we shall all have to forge our own experiences.

Whoever wants to experience the Big City must stay on track. The work of an urban author parallels that of the private investigator in a detective novel. He must move throughout the length and breadth of the city and the society in which he lives, must keep his eyes and ears open, must do his research, must try to find out what others would prefer to keep secret, all the while trusting the poor as little as he trusts the rich. The difference has become clear to me through my work on my own detective novel. To be sure, my hero was threatened and violently attacked much more often than I in my whole lifetime, but in the end he had solved his case – at least the essentials. He knew where he stood. As a writer in a big city that is constantly changing, that is something I shall never know. ■

BERLIN