

City, Soul and Myth

I

Since the first third of my title, *City, Soul and Myth*, has been widely and well expanded upon in these days of discussions, my job will pay more attention to soul and myth. And, curiously enough, the contemporary use of the word soul comes straight out of the city: soul music, soul food, soul brother, and soul-sister. Not from the churchyard cemetery, but from the city streets. Less from suburbia and exurbia than from old neighborhoods and nightgown.

This intimacy between city and soul seems already given—given, that is, unless cut from each other by predefined ideas of efficient urban planning on the one hand—the city as a kind of technocrat’s space-ship immune to fun, funk and fury—and on the other hand, ideas of soul that keep it exclusively personalized, a chambered interiority quite apart from jostling on the public sidewalk.

The idea of soul that we shall now be pursuing has two sources, neither at all personal and private. The first comes from John Keats: “consider the world the vale of soul-making, then you will find the use of the world.” The other is more ancient, all the way back to Plato and Renaissance thought: the idea of the *anima mundi* or soul in the world, of the world, inseparable except in abstract thought from one’s own personal psyche. Both Keats and Plato imply the soul is all around us, or as the psychologist C. G. Jung wrote: not the psyche is in me, but I am in the psyche. In the world of the street my soul is being made.

Street is implied by the very word for city in Greek. *Polis* means throng crowd, flow as the populace moves along the streets, the vehicles course along the highways, and currents of goods, ideas and information circulate through the city gates. *Polis* in

its roots connects with *poly* (many), with *plus* (more), *pleroma* (full), with *palude* (marshland, swamp).

If the inherent soul of the city reveals itself in the flow of “polis”—a word more in tune with Liverpool than with Providence—then perhaps it becomes clearer why there is such strong desire to straighten out cities, to organize them rationally, to maintain schedules, to plan for crowd control, and create academic departments of urban design. If the city is nominally related to the swamp and threatened with overcrowding and overpopulation, the congestion caused by the city’s historic drawing power, then of course planning imagines renewal as opening, widening, clearing, hastening as did Paris with Haussmann, New York by Moses, or Washington D.C., the enlightenment city par excellence raised upon swamplands. We recapitulate the earliest myths of city-building, of civilization, in our projects: Gilgamesh constructing the thick walls of Uruk against the primeval chaos; Marduk, founder of Babylon, overcoming the swamp monster Tiamat. So the bulldozer and drainage culvert flatten and widen and dry out our civilized cities, symbolically overcoming the fetid and rank threat of the uncivilized wild, symbolically homaged with well-spaced plantings of leafy trees.

“Civilized”—Isn’t that what we aim for with our concern for cities. When we look for inspiration, for regeneration, urban transformation, renewal, for cities of quality—topics addressed by the symposium roundtables. Are we aiming to establish a more civilized city? When we ask about the future of the city, of progress, improved urban design, better health and services, have we not been caught up by the myths of progressive march of civilization? And when we move to an air-cooled high-rise way

above the street, or the exurban subdivision, or retire into the gated guarded asylum is not the fear of the swamp monster still lurking in our souls along with visions of the New Jerusalem, the Heavenly City, the City on the Hill?

What is a civilized city? What do we mean by “civilization”? I have turned to my own profession to find a reply, for I have asked myself and my colleagues: is psychoanalysis a work of civilization or of culture? By becoming more civilized—tamed, mannered, adapted, and participatory—do we therefore become more cultured? If civilization requires cohesive structures of architecture, engineering, law, government, education, finance, supply and distribution—in short bureaucracies of maintenance—to name but a few of the institutions that support civilization and are essential to cities, where does culture figure in, if at all? A city can be imagined, constructed, and can function efficiently, and progressively improve its functioning without theaters and music, think-tanks, artists’ quarters, red-light districts, stray dogs and sparrows, without a helter-skelter variety of eateries, street vendors, and pubs, without celebrations and commemorations, even without controversial newspapers and multiple radio stations.

Culture and its ferment may be a desirable accessory, but is it necessary to civilized order and security? Moreover, should places and budgets for culture be provided in urban planning? Such provisions may as well stifle culture as promote it. Culture seems to be beyond rational control of civilization.

I have come to the conclusion that the work of psychoanalysis is one of culture because we have given up the addiction to the progress myth and adaptation to the institutions and conformities that civilization rightly demands. Our work with soul

tends to follow the resistances to civilization, those symptoms of inadaptability -- depression, breakdown, outrage, panic, idiosyncratic peculiarities which have drawn the patient deeper into questions of fate, love, death, purpose, questions of soul that seem so often at odds with the requirements of civilization. “What’s madness,” asks the poet Theodore Roethke, “but nobility of soul at odds with circumstance?”

II

There is a mythical component within these contrasting impulses of civilization and culture. A look over the shoulder at the model polis of the historical imagination with its protective Goddess, Athene, shows the contrasting myths at work.

Athene has been summoned up as “protectress of the civic order” and source of the idea of rational progress (Shearer, 21, 28). Many of her images present her dressed in defensive armor, shielded, helmeted, weaponed, with a small figure of victory on her shoulder. She guided the city magistrates, and the city’s generals with grey-eyed sober counseling. She was called a fortress, expressed by the militant defensiveness of a city’s spirit, and the renewal of that spirit in victory: compare Liverpool over Chelsea, over Milan! (In fact, and just by the way, the melting pot integration of the disparate populations of the bulging American cities at the turn of the twentieth century was enabled by the whole city’s identification with its baseball team and the public democracy of the local stadium.)

Athene also gave intelligence, reflection, wise decision-making to leaders such as Ulysses, and the foresight we now literalize as planning. She gave skills and inventive devices, and wove together irreconcilable factions -- weaving of wool was one of those skills and “belonged” to Athene. From Athene’s perspective, we might

say, the soul of the civilized city was like a fabric, an integrated fabrication laboriously constructed by many minds and many hands.

To keep civic order means keeping youth in line. Athene was patroness of the men's societies called *phratría*—rather like clubs or fraternities or guilds—that wove together young men with civic feeling. As well, she protected the institution of marriage: parents took their daughters to the Athenian acropolis before marriage to bring them under her aegis. Athene's mind, and its civilizing ideals, furthered the progress of an intelligent civic order. Her influence extended to Rome where she became Minerva, one of that city's great triad of ruling dominants. Her complex mind was now given to simpler practical civilizing skills: Roman roads and arches, Roman laws, schools and teachers, and schools where teachers learn, “normal” schools as we call them. To civilize Minerva-Athene normalizes.

The term “normal” comes from *norma*, a Latin word meaning a carpenter's square. “Normaliter” means in a straight line, directly; “normalis” means according to the square, and “norma” itself is a technical term for a right angle. The right angle is applicable anywhere, universally identical, like the Roman law of the Empire, like the theorems of plane geometry, like the international style of right-angled architecture of Corbusier and Richard Meier. Thus, civilizing the unwieldy land has come to mean normalizing with the straight lines of the surveyor, with plats, overriding actual terrain and the existing boundaries of local cultures. These archetypal roots in language and myth don't die; even today our common speech uses “straight” and “square” for a normalized person.

Athene did not rule alone—there were twelve Olympians and others beside. In fact, Athene had particular trouble with Dionysos, Poseidon, and the goddess of sensual pleasure and sexual love, Aphrodite. Dionysos frequently referred to as Lord of Souls, with his dancing crowd of followers, his wine, and his underworld relation to cult mysteries and the natural force of life's vitality was hardly civilized in Athene's sense. No moderation here, no sober prudence or foresight, no defensive strategy or victory; rather, Dionysos was often a victim. His associated animal, the goat, was not allowed on Athene's grounds.

The conflict with the great god of oceans and rivers, Poseidon, lies in the very foundation of the Athenian city. In the beginning, says the myth, both an olive tree and a spring of salt-water appeared miraculously out of the ground. A majority of the people, by one vote only, decided for Athene's gift, the olive—so necessary for civilization, olive oil for cooking, for lighting, for healing. Yet, barely preferable over the wild sea surge, the unpredictable floodings, and the luring deeps. Poseidon and Athene were also conflicted over the gift of the horse: this animal "belonged" to Poseidon, but the controlling bridle was given by Athene.

Control, discipline, order, the marriage and the household as central to the city. While Athene reinforced the home and gave honor to its handwork, Dionysos calls young women to desert their tasks and run to the hills to dance. And, while Athene was always called "virgin," Aphrodite was promiscuity itself. She was shown almost or altogether naked, with doves and roses, open to temptation, while Athene is clad in metallic armor with a giant shield that warns keep your distance. These three archetypal powers seize our eyes and loins with desirable embodiments of beauty,

flood our emotions, and call us out of the city altogether in youthful riot. Their excess inspires beyond civility and urbanity.

Their diverging styles do show a common trait: subversion, interruption, surprise. Is this not exactly how culture affects civilization, and how the soul of the street often disorders well-made plans? Let me put the distinction this way: Civilization gets the job done as well and reasonably as possible. Culture is song; the song that breaks out in the midst of the job. Civilization looks back to learn and forward with hope. Culture pops up, sprouts in a petri dish. It infiltrates the city, subversively, through the back alleys of disrepute. Like a disease it finds its own carriers. Whether helped or hindered by civilization, culture is essentially autonomous, unpredictable and largely unlearned. Culture breaks into civilization and is often assimilated by it. Counter-culture, *avant-garde*, street-fashion, pop-music, dance and slang become appropriated by civilization. From slum wall to modern art museum in only a few years.

I am trying to insist upon the uncaused, timeless aspects of culture: that it is marked mainly by surprise. Surprise, which means seized by the sudden, is a category of its own, not merely something new. Surprise offers more than novelty; the renewal it brings is a freshening, enlivening, blessing. To confuse novelty with spontaneity keeps us still within the framework of rational development, as if it were possible to develop a surprise. It seems surprise is genuinely so shocking and disruptive that it has to be tamed by comparisons with the known and old. How ready civilization is to disparage cultural surprises with words like “That’s nothing new!” And how often those who would make culture try so hard to do something “new.” But “new” and

“old” are terms belonging to progressive civilization; they are curses when applied to culture. The soul is neither new nor old, or it is both at once, utterly fresh as each morning’s dream, yet rooted in archaic patterns of eternal myths.

Culture does not so much evolve or decline. It seems rather to appear and disappear. For a while in this city, this quartier, this cafe, this theatre troop or little magazine, architecture team or graduate department there is a flourishing. Then it goes elsewhere. Its origins are mysterious and its endings sometimes explosive, or accidental, or simply peter out. In this sense culture has more than linguistic affinities with the occult and the cult. The beginnings of my own field in Vienna and Zürich, and its later peculiar blooming in Paris show this combination of cult, occult and culture. Above all, it is a shared phenomenon in which the little groups involved are themselves surprised by their shared love for their common imagining, becoming soul brothers and soul sisters.

Think of the motley few in Elizabethan taverns who gave English its marvelous language, the few who made the German Romantic movement, think of the intellectuals in Vienna before World War I, of Mistra in the late middle ages, Ficino’s academy, friends of the heart, in Florence in the 15th century that re-inspired cultures across Europe, Dada in Zürich, Bloomsbury, Silicon Valley, Black Mountain College, the painters, their critics, their women in Manhattan in the 1950s, the few friends who became the “Invisible College” that began the Royal Society. Think also of four young guys and their girls in a Liverpool garage. Small groups sharing each other’s minds, madnesses and mattresses. The French Revolution began; it is claimed, with a conversation in a Parisian cafe. Did Liverpool, did Providence re-create themselves so

surprisingly owing to a common inspiration within a small group? Did the renewal of these two cities arise from Athenian wise counsel alone, or was something else at work?

Perhaps the general term “culture” is too civilized; perhaps there are only sub-cultures, counter-cultures, emerging cultures, lost cultures, and culture clashes. Perhaps the city that can pride itself on its culture will boast less of its symphony orchestra and foreign movie theatres, but rather of the mix of differences—backgrounds, social experiments, distinct neighborhoods, historical remnants—and of a general sense of possibility that here in this city something can begin, something generative, non-conforming, unhampered by the city as such, a place where Aphrodite or Dionysos or Poseidon, or any other of the immortals and the muses may alight awhile, and smile.

Please understand that my references to myths, my reliance on myths is for the sake of imagination which the symposium roundtables and keynoter Charles Landry call for. These myths were the source of the incredible imaginative powers of the Greeks in every field—the sciences, mathematics, architecture, city-building, warfare, political theory, and philosophy, as well as the arts, especially theater. The Greek mind so filled with myths continues to nourish imagination, for these myths are a primordial source of both Western culture and Western civilization long ago and still today.

III

The *polis* as plural, as poly, bears upon one of the more pressing concerns of city life today: immigration. How can the various sub-cultures be integrated into the dominant civilization? Can they be integrated unless they are first welcomed? As

Jacques Derrida observed in a work shortly before his recent death, the question of immigration turns essentially upon hospitality. Immigration asks cities to be hosts.

Already some cities are taking the lead in determining attitudes toward immigrants, by offering justice and protection—classic gifts of Athene. Even more, some cities are beginning to take the lead in determining their own destiny by resisting subservience to the nation state. Fifty-six United States cities have adopted referendums to create less fearful conditions for migrants from elsewhere; in particular these cities have moved not to allow their local police to enforce federal immigration laws. For instance: Chicago. Executive Order 89-6, establishes that no city agency shall request information about or otherwise investigate . . . the citizenship or residency status of any person unless required by legal process. Detroit: Local Resolution (12/02); and Baltimore City Council Resolution (5/03): Police Departments shall refrain from enforcement of federal immigration laws. Los Angeles, Special Order 40 (11/79, in revision), prohibits the Police Department from initiating police action with the objective of discovering the immigration status of a person and from enforcing immigration law. Anchorage, San Francisco, Portland Maine, Minneapolis, Albuquerque are among the fifty-six.

Mary Watkins, who assembled this data, asks whether this is a first small step toward a post-national consciousness. Are we re-constituting the city as the core of civilizational values prior to the nation-state, re-constituting both historically back to the city-powers of ancient Greece, and still under the Roman Empire, through the city-states of Italy until 1860 and Germany until Bismarck. And further than history: are these referendums declaring an independence of the City archetypally, attempting to

align the current city with the ideal City on the Hill, since these ordinances in effect declare that it is to the city we must turn for justice and dignity and for the guarantees of security from totalitarian centrism.

Again, Derrida: “If we look to the city, rather than the state, it is because we have given up hope that the state might create a new image for the city.” Again Watkins: “When a nation goes far astray in the practice of humane conduct, then our cities could become more like autonomous zones that can differentiate themselves from national agendas,” recovering the ethic of hospitality, realizing the longing for fairness and a welcoming heart. In other words, cities of soul . . . remember the street: soul brother, soul sister.

A city of soul will be invitational, curious and appreciatively receptive to what moves at the margins, in the marginalized, whether in the *barrios* or *favelas*, or among groups of unacclaimed artists, or activist protestors with radical agendas. The city of soul will allow, maybe even find ways to provide for, the spontaneous uprising of the unfitting. The immigrant is not a barbarian because he speaks a foreign language; rather he and she are importing another culture into a pre-established harmony that harbors tendencies of totalitarian intolerance.

Immigration brings to the city every sort of administrative problem—educational, social, services, job market, and housing. These concerns are already well-known and addressed by competent experts. The further task is one of psychology: the fantasized threat and fear of the alien.

As there is a statistical criminal and a statistical madman in each human psyche, so there is a statistical immigrant, an alienated outsider, if not newly arrived, at least

with a fresh eye, an outsider's views upon our all-to-familiar city. This "inner" immigrant sees the faults, the ruthlessness and ugliness, as well as the astounding opportunities of the civilization he or she shares with the hosts. This critical unassimilated observer has much the same perspective as the artist and the critic, the philosopher and the psychological analyst. It is like an eye of culture.

To discover the immigrant component of one's own psyche is a major calling of leadership, and then to use this perspective of the outsider all the while committed to Athene's civic order, and to lead the city by inviting the immigrant component with its unconventional aesthetic perceptions into the deliberations regarding every aspect of the city's plans from traffic routing, street signage and lighting, to school curricula and budget pruning—this is a leadership task.

Little need to remind you here that this city, Providence, was founded by a convicted man who escaped and who considered himself a kind of immigrant among the native landowning people. Roger Williams exemplifies leadership that sees the faults of his society with the eyes of the culturally oppressed. May I suggest he was a man of soul who stood against the superior civilized colony to his north that had no tolerance for sub-cultures.

IV

Let us recapitulate. The regeneration of cities must look to the street as well as to the structures rising from it, to culture as well as to civilization, to soul as well as to project. This because ultimately, Aristophanes matters more than aqueducts. Ultimately civilization, even when it has the upper hand and enforces the rules it makes, is only the administrative service to culture's productive imagination. Therefore, the valences shift: instead of finding support for culture—artists' grants,

public spaces for manifestations, honoring sub-cultures, proactive participation by leaders in cultural life, and restraining the heavy hand of uniform nationalism in favor of local civic feeling—rather than these praiseworthy integrative attempts of civilization to normalize culture, the city would turn to poets and chefs, radical visionaries, movie-makers and teachers, and nurses, protestors from sub-cultures, animal proponents, tour guides and fashion designers, curmudgeon traditionalists, nerdy students, and the journeymen who work the streets. They are not merely “the public.” Each is a seed of the spontaneous. Each with rebellious critiques and peculiar fantasies that are usually left outside the development of the cities they inhabit. Though outsiders and amateurs to urbanism’s civilized discourse and complexities, they are the real insiders, the throng of culture for whom civilization’s plans are made. They need to be drawn to the drawing board, invited to think carefully, devise and project, introducing them to the mental work of Athene, for after all, in their own worlds each is a skilled practitioner whether of the saxophone or of the *crepe suzette*. Culture has the possibility of rising up when a handful of people fall in love with each other’s ideas. They become drunk and insane with ideas. This moves the culture. In this way we harness the outrage, bridle the objections and possibly generate fresh surprises. Urbanism and these incredible works of artistry—our society’s great cities—cannot be left only to the normally sensibly civilized if the soul of the city is our care—for the soul is not altogether civilized.

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