

City and Travel.

Walking the (Un)Known City

This exploration starts from a position between two states, fixation and awareness; that is, the mixture of sensations we experience when looking at our well-known city from a visitor's perspective, or strolling through unknown cities when we travel, pretending we are long-time residents. Walter Benjamin distinguished between losing our way in the city, something he considered uninteresting and banal, and the concept of being lost—as in a forest—something much more complex: “that calls for quite a different schooling. Then, signboards and street names, passers-by, roofs, kiosks, or bars must speak to the wanderer like a cracking twig under his feet in the forest” (Benjamin *Reflections* 7-8). It is a way of reading the city. Imagine that you are in your city and all of a sudden, unexpectedly, between two bureaucratic errands, you find yourself with a morning of leisure. This in turn allows you a moment of freedom, and you start walking with deep uncertainty through streets that suddenly you see under new light, as if you were on a journey in a far country. You start walking without a fixed direction or purpose, allowing yourself to be lost. Lost and found. You start finding yourself, or you find another self. Writing the city as you walk. Letting yourself be lost in your daily life with the eyes of a visitor, (re) discovering the many stages and absurdities of your life. Or, on the

contrary, while you travel, you imagine living many different lives in a city that is not yours but feels like one as you act as a non-tourist. What an experience, to be able to see through the eyes of locals, not taking photos as tourists do, guided and accompanied by someone native. Learning the little secrets of window-shopping for everyday life. Not searching for souvenirs. Maneuvering reality as the locals do. Returning home from work with a tired face, walking with slow steps. Looking beyond what has become your new everyday reality, even if it is only your temporary reality. And then all of a sudden, you write a note about your experiences, because to travel and write means to observe. Suddenly the unknown city becomes friendly. You feel at home in a strange place. These are some of the impressions that influence a city dweller or a traveler who lives in an unfamiliar city for a brief period of time.

One Sunday morning in October 1998, I visited the magnificent train exhibition organized by RENFE and the Spanish Ministry of Public Works in Barcelona's Estació de França, to commemorate the 150th anniversary of the arrival of the railway to Spain. I was merely an escort for my son Víctor-Alexandre, who at the time was five years old. Children have an amazing ability to clarify for us the paradoxes of life and solve our great ontological questions. As soon as we started the tour he surprised me with a comment that at first seemed a childish confusion: "commuter trains are metros," he said. In vain I tried to correct him: commuter trains do not run underground like the metro and subways; like the rest, particularly high-speed trains ("lo morrut" as *Euromed* is known in Tortosa) are just trains. This obvious distinction between an underground and a train made me think about what should be the point of tangency between local culture and a cosmopolitan urban way of life. We do not go hiking with a metro (or the *Metro-Vallès*), but to work, or to do short errands. When we decide to go hiking or traveling, we take a train (car, plane, ship). The metro has the familiarity of everyday life and is a routine trip, during which we never look at our neighbor's faces. The train opens its doors to excitement and adventure; it is a trip to unknown territories with fellow travelers that can open up doors to other worlds. Trains, according to a definition by French anthropologist Marc Augé, get us to "places,"

where a toponym defines a series of historical and identity relations. The Paris Talgo, the Orient-Express, the so-called Shanghai Express (a train that used to go from Barcelona to Vigo in a mere 24 hours), and the Trans-Siberian railway have far more exotic and deep literary resonances: they all suggest worlds imagined, invented memories, reading desires. Needless to say the names of subway lines (colors, letters, or numbers), are not as exciting. Or even station names (Vallcarca, Guineueta, Chueca, Chamberí) do not provoke the same level of emotions. I used to think that trips to faraway places produced a superb literature whereas urban errands had hardly any literary weight, but I have come to discover that exploring everyday life can be just as exciting or even more so. We leave our cities to explore distant exotic landscapes and we never get to know what lies beneath those realities, coming back emptyhanded to our everyday life.

I am interested thus in two typical twentieth-century phenomena and their literary impact: first, the literary contact with a city, seen partly as a journey, or an exploration of the everyday. Secondly, the various phases of a literary journey through the twentieth century, an experience that has become progressively easier and more affordable, and has opened the door to contact with the Other.

I am most indebted to Rosalba Campra of the University of Rome "La Sapienza," Antonio Monegal at Universitat Pompeu Fabra, Andrés Soria Olmedo at Universidad de Granada, Enric Balaguer, Universitat d'Alacant, Elide Pittarello, from Università Ca' Foscari Venezia, Maria Fernanda de Abreu from Universidade Nova de Lisboa, Cristina Sánchez-Conejero, University of North Texas, among many others, for the opportunity to present early versions of this work to inquiring audiences. I would also like to mention Claudio Guillén, a good friend, a teacher, and an intellectual reference, who invited me to present part of these materials at "Fundación Ortega y Gasset" in Madrid; the title of this work is the result of a fruitful discussion with him. Other people with whom I had the opportunity to discuss the ideas in this book are Delphine Bahuet, Tom Cushman, Joan de Déu Domènech, Montserrat Iglesias, Jonathan Knudsen, Kathleen McNerney, Joaquim Molas, José Muñoz Millanes, Susana Reisz, Heike Scharm, Marilyn Sides, and Rosi Song. I would like to thank all of them. Particularly Chiara

for encouraging me, and Sarah and Alexandre, who patiently supported and endured years of research and writing.

Earlier versions of some chapters have been published in different venues. I thank the editors for their kind permission to publish excerpts of them: "On Rivers and Maps. Iberian Approaches to Comparatism," *New Spain, New Literatures*, edited by Luis Martín-Estudillo and Nicholas Spadaccini. Hispanic Issues vol 37. Vanderbilt University Press, Nashville Tennessee 2010: 3-26; "'Decrèpita i teatral'? On Literary explorations of Barcelona," *Catalan Review* XVIII, 1-2 (2006): 149-160; "Les llums i els noms de París: de Proust a Villalonga," *Homenatge a Víctor Siurana*, Lleida: U. de Lleida, 1997: 149-165; "Exile in the City: Mercè Rodoreda's *La plaça del Diamant*," *The Garden Across the Border: Mercè Rodoreda's Fiction*, Edited by Kathleen McNerney and Nancy Vosburg, Selinsgrove: Susquehanna University Press, 1994: 31-41; "Arquitectura de la palabra: la trilogía urbana de Eduardo Mendoza," Enric Bou and Elide Pittarello, eds., *(En)claves de la transición. Una visión de los Novísimos. Prosa, poesía, ensayo*, Madrid-Frankfurt: Editorial Iberoamericana-Vervuert, 2009: 103-128; «Back from the USSR». Viatgers al país dels Soviets, *Rivista Italiana di Studi Catalani* 1 (giugno 2011): 35-47; "Ligeros de equipaje: exilio y viaje en la España peregrina (1936-1969)," *Revista Hispánica Moderna* (Columbia University) LII,1 (junio1999): 96-109.

I have received funding from different sources to prepare this book. I would like to mention a Salomon Grant and one from the Center for Latin American and Brazilian Studies, both from Brown University. A generous fellowship "Chair of Excellence" from the Universidad Carlos III in Madrid and Banco de Santander, in the fall semester of 2011, gave me the time to finish this project.

Venice-Madrid-Barcelona, March 3, 2012