

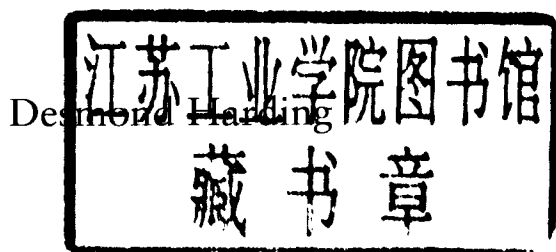
Writing the City

Urban Visions & Literary Modernism

Desmond Harding

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Preface

The silhouette of the great city, its roofs and chimneys, the towers and domes on the horizon! What a language is imparted to us through one look at Nuremberg or Florence, Damascus or Moscow, Peking or Buenos Aires. What do we know of the Classical cities, seeing that we do not know the lines that they presented under the Southern noon, under clouds in the morning, in the starry night? The courses of the streets, straight or crooked, broad or narrow; the houses low or tall, bright or dark, that in all Western cities turn their facades, their faces, and in all Eastern cities their backs, blank wall and railing, towards the street; the spirit of squares and corners, impasses and prospects, fountains and monuments, churches or temples or mosques, amphitheaters and railway stations, bazaars and town halls! The suburbs, too, of neat garden-villas or of jumbled blocks of flats, rubbish heaps and allotments; the fashionable quarter and the slum area, the suburb of Classical Rome and the Faubourg Saint-Germain of Paris, ancient Baiae and modern Nice, the little town-picture like Bruges and Gothenburg and the sea of houses like Babylon, Tenochtitlan, Rome, and London! All this has history and *is* history.

~ Oswald Spengler, "The Soul of the City"

From Plato's conception of the human soul as analogous to the ideal city to Sigmund Freud's evocation of Rome as a metaphor for the eternal laws of the mind, the empirical city and its subjectively perceived image in Western culture has always existed as a complex and discontinuous site of convergent interests rather than a logically or conceptually clarified idea. Arguably, the greatest work of art created by the city is the city itself, for in its totality urban civilization represents the apex of human achievement. Moreover, as an art form in search of its own perfectability, the city also stands for the central foundation upon which the broad range of human experience draws its energy and charts its course. Indeed, culture-capitals

such as Athens, Jerusalem, Alexandria, Rome, Vienna, Paris, London, New York, and Los Angeles have long been looked to as symbols through which writers legitimate their struggles for cultural authority.

In the context of American history in particular, European literary models and cultural discourses have provided a wealth of conceptual and symbolic frameworks for the chronicling of American urban topoi in relation to their Atlantic counterparts. In our own time, the city has once again been opened up in multifarious ways by American and continental writers, urban historians, and literary theoreticians in their interdisciplinary pursuit of a new poststructuralist vocabulary of urban experience. The metropolis we are now confronted with is a “de-centered” postmodernist city, the culmination of a progressive devaluation of the Enlightenment idea of the city as the form and symbol of an integrated social relationship. Yet the pervading sense of ambivalence that commonly informs transatlantic responses to the postindustrial megapolis is not essentially “new”; if anything, such hermeneutic quests are symptomatic of a shared sense of crisis recuperated down the years, which finds its most radical expression with the advent of the modernist city. In tracing the contours of European and American urban modernism, we not only enter fully into the enduring significance of the city as a charged symbol of human consciousness, but also experience the city anew as it speaks to us in the form of unfolding discourses marked by debate, disagreement, and intervention.

Writing the City: Urban Visions & Literary Modernism makes visible the coalescence of culture, history, and language raised in the act of reading the representative fictions of James Joyce and John Dos Passos as textual codings of a poetics of transatlantic urban modernism. In particular, I attempt to redefine critical emphases and theoretical conceptions of urban modernism as the function of a London-Paris-New York axis—an assumption that all too often elides the vital historical importance of Dublin as central to the formation of an Atlantic system of metropolitan identities and discourses. These Atlantic identities should not be viewed as discrete categories of “center” and “margin”; rather, I prefer to illustrate the interplay and hybridization of identity across seemingly disparate cultural formations, so as to contribute further to our ever-increasing understanding of modernism. The modernist epoch involved a global shift across a range of cultural, social, political, and economic contexts each marked in their own way by struggle and contradiction, ambiguity and anguish, renewal and faith. In order to understand both the localism and universality of international modernism, therefore, we need to develop comparative approaches that make it possible to synthesize cultural discourses that have no direct ties to one another yet exhibit correlative patterns of thought.

By expanding the concept of writing and representation and their relation to the city-as-text to include the claims made in Joyce's *Dubliners* (1914), *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916), *Ulysses* (1922), and Dos Passos' *Manhattan Transfer* (1925), I argue that Joyce's internationalist vision of the Irish capital, which takes form at the violent nexus of Ireland's national emergence, generates powerful epistemic and cultural tropes that reconceive the idea of the modernist city as a moral phenomenon in transcultural and transhistorical terms. Joyce's importance for cultural relations of the Atlantic rim is underscored by his own struggle for Irish cultural authority. Positioning himself as the privileged voice of modern Ireland, Joyce subverts the coherent, authoritative pronouncements of nineteenth-century British imperialist discourses, while simultaneously challenging the false consciousness of provincial Catholic Nationalist ideology. In keeping with the book's interpretive transatlantic paradigm, a large portion of *Writing the City* is given over to Dos Passos' role in the re-construction of a new form of American urban poetics, one marked by linguistic transformations and dislocations of style and form to represent the mix of sounds, styles and cultures that is modern America: Manhattan. Americans have always looked to New York as the gateway between Europe and the United States as well as the center of the nation's literary consciousness; indeed, from Washington Irving's mock-heroic descriptions of the city to Walt Whitman's increasingly guarded sense of New York as a symbol of democratic optimism, the city has offered thematic and formal challenges for generations of American writers. Central to Dos Passos' conception of New York, and by extension American modernism, is the legacy of Jefferson's failed vision of the republic, an idealized sense of community inexorably eroded by the rise of Hamiltonian federalism and the industrial state. Assuming the role of modernist historian and cultural saboteur, Dos Passos reconceptualizes the image of the metropolis by transforming the idea of the European city in history into an American urban Colossus.

Chapter one begins by tracing the aesthetic philosophies and critical ideologies of urban modernism as a means for providing a context for the transatlantic paradigm underpinning *Writing the City*. Using interpretative strategies taken from literary criticism, social history, urban studies, sociology, and cultural studies, I investigate the fundamental connection between European and American modernism as a shared historical moment, and locate the significance of this association in the wider interdisciplinary context of evolving conceptions of the city in transatlantic intellectual thought from the Enlightenment through post-modernism.

In more local terms, chapter two examines Joyce's topographical conception of Dublin in *Dubliners* as a structurally grounded discourse that straddles naturalist and modernist literary formations. Writing at the close of a European epoch of capital and culture, Joyce betrays the diachronic realities of Dublin as a form of hereditary pathology even as he poeticizes the entropy of modern existence, creating a new urban landscape—and the language used to speak its reality—out of the fragments of Irish history.

By extension, chapter three on "The Dead," which forms the heart of the book, demonstrates the ways in which Joyce transplants the philosophical contours of Wordsworth's epitaphic mode to the locus of the metropolis. Opening up an ontological space similar to the Romantic poet's conception of language-as-incarnation, "The Dead" serves to mediate competing conceptions of urban modernity and historical consciousness by forging a link between Joyce's aesthetic vision—and passion—for Ireland at the expense of unmasking nationalist mythologies of the peasant periphery as the cultural locus of the nation.

Chapter four analyzes the workings of Joyce's sociological imagination in *Portrait* alongside the contemporary theoretical investigations of pioneering sociologist Georg Simmel, in order to illuminate in thematic and nonlinear terms the ways in which these writers blur the epistemological and disciplinary boundaries separating the metropolitan novel, social theory, and sociology.

While a substantial portion of *Writing the City* investigates Joyce's reconfiguration of cultural modernity, chapter five focuses on the broad impact of Joyce's urban fiction on the aesthetic principles and critical ideologies of American modernism, of which Dos Passos is a paradigmatic example. In the context of American letters, the proletarian theory and practice of representative city-former Dos Passos is commonly regarded as grounded in a tradition of pragmatism, social criticism, and political partisanship dating from Emerson and Thoreau. While this association is certainly resonant, I instead establish Dos Passos' entropic urban fiction as rooted firmly in a transatlantic pattern of thought, one that deconstructs the boundaries between history and fiction, creating a new kind of cultural history and a new kind of fiction.

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CHAPTER ONE

“Saxa Loquuntur”¹ The Modernist City

To make a novel out of a city, to represent the streets and the various districts as *dramatis personae*, each one with a character in conflict with every other; to give life to human figures and situations as if they were spontaneous growths from the cobblestones of the streets [...] to work in such a way that at every changing moment the true protagonist was the living city, its biological continuity, the monster that was Paris—this is what Balzac felt impelled to do when he began to write *Ferragus*.

~ Italo Calvino, “The City as Protagonist in Balzac”

ROME: THE ETERNAL CITY

On 2 September 1901, Sigmund Freud fulfilled a long-frustrated dream of visiting Rome, a city whose cultural and religious significance had weighed on the clinical psychologist’s mind for many years.² The impact of the *Urbs Aeterna* was as instantaneous as it was enervating: within an hour of arriving on the overnight train from Castello, Freud had bathed and written home that he felt a “proper Roman.”³ For the next twelve days he devoted himself to St. Peter’s, the Vatican Museum, and the Museo Nazionale, where he encountered Michelangelo’s statue of Moses for the first time. Freud marveled at the Pantheon, exclaiming “so this is what I have been afraid of for so many years!”⁴ And he roamed the rolling Alban hills before reveling, finally, in the Palatine, his favorite corner of the city. On 14 September, Freud departed Rome with a heavy heart for his home in Vienna. The consummation of the desire to go to Rome had been of the highest emotional significance; indeed, as he later recalled, it was the “high point of my life [...] I could have worshipped the abased and mutilated remnant of the Temple of Minerva near the forum of Nerva.”⁵

Despite the euphoria Freud experienced while in Rome, the symbolic importance of the city continued to oscillate in his mind between two iconoclastic poles. On the one hand, he revered the imagination and erudition of ancient Rome as the *archae* of European civilization.⁶ At the same time, the metropolis represented the “lie of salvation”⁷ embodied in Christian Rome, a latent manifestation that had in time overturned and superseded its classical antecedent. The first of these commingled cities, the topos of ancient Rome and renaissance Rome, was a cause for rejoicing; the other, Christian Rome, was a source of fear and distrust. At a deeply personal level, however, Freud’s correspondence to friends, family, and colleagues celebrated Rome as a life-affirming antidote to the anti-Semitic climate of his own “hated Vienna”⁸: “it [feels] quite natural to be in Rome; I have no sense of being a foreigner here.”⁹

All the same, for Freud the troubling dichotomy of Rome remained. Critics and biographers alike have argued that Freud’s “tormented, long-cherished and long-frustrated wish to visit Rome”¹⁰ was almost obsessional, neurotic even.¹¹ Taking Freud’s methodological presuppositions to heart, some have even looked to Freud’s relationship with Rome as a sort of skeleton key with which to unlock “some secret of his inner life.”¹² Some commentators maintain, for example, that the city represents “a charged and ambivalent symbol [that] stood for Freud’s most potent concealed erotic, and only slightly less concealed aggressive wishes, and glanced at their secret history.”¹³ Viewed alongside the persistent search for meaning in the Freud-Rome dialectic, Freud’s attachment to the phantasmal city remains as enigmatic as it is elusive. This point is all the more palpable given the psychical importance attached to the city in Freud’s case studies, theoretical writings, correspondence, and reflections.¹⁴

Perhaps the most compelling instance of the centrality of Rome occurs in *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1930), Freud’s provocative meditation on the irreparable conflict between the individual and his or her institutional surroundings, in which he argues that the study of human institutions must begin with the study of human nature. In the opening chapter, Freud invites the reader to consider as an analogy for the human mind the city of Rome, which he presents in transhistorical and cinemascopic terms. In order to clarify the principle “that in mental life nothing which has once been formed can perish—that everything is somehow preserved and that in suitable circumstances [. . .] it can be brought to light,”¹⁵ Freud summons up a stratified vision of Rome thus:

Let us, by a flight of the imagination, suppose that Rome is not a human habitation but a psychical entity with a similarly long and copious past—an entity, that is to say, in which nothing that has come into existence will have passed away and all the earlier phases of development exist alongside the later ones. This would mean that in Rome the palaces of the Caesars and the Septizonium of Septimus Severus would still be rising to their

old height on the Palatine and that the castle of S. Angelo would still be carrying on its battlements the beautiful statues which graced it until the siege by the Goths, and so on. But more than this. In the place occupied by the Palazzo Caffarelli would once more stand—without the Palazzo having to be removed—the Temple of Jupiter Capitolinus; and this not only in its latest shape, as the Romans of the Empire saw it, but also in its earliest, when it still showed Etruscan forms and was ornamented with terra cotta antefixes. Where the Coliseum now stands we could at the same time admire Nero's vanished Golden House. On the Piazza of the Pantheon we should find not only the Pantheon of to-day, as it was bequeathed to us by Hadrian, but, on the same site, the original edifice erected by Agrippa; indeed, the same piece of ground would be supporting the church of Santa Maria sopra Minerva and the ancient temple over which it was built. And the observer would perhaps only have to change the direction of his glance or his position in order to call up the one view or the other.¹⁶

In this instance Freud masterfully excavates the historicity of Rome in keeping with Mikhail M. Bakhtin's notion of the chronotope.¹⁷ According to Bakhtin, narratives must always represent space in the dimension of time: "Time, as it were, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history."¹⁸ In Freud's own time-space vision of an historically discontinuous Rome, the remains of the republican "Roma Quadrata" and the phase of the "Septimontium" are dovetailed so as to produce a fragmentary succession of virtual cities. Historical difference is eroded, and the archaeological traces of earlier settlements become enmeshed with the post-Renaissance jumble of the modern metropolis, so as to produce a simultaneous city flush with the weight of time and history. Freud's attempt to develop a structural theory of the mind by evoking the palimpsest of Rome is remarkable in several ways. In the first instance the conceit is coterminous with Freud's dramatic theory that "the unconscious knows no time, contains all times, annihilates the distinction (in time) between desire and fulfillment, is eternal."¹⁹ By extension, the metaphor is symbolic of Freud's personal triumph in coming to terms with his own life-long obsession with Rome.

Though certainly not the first to conceive of the mind-city metaphor as a way of shaping our understanding of the workings of human consciousness, Freud's metaphor isolates "the concept of an invisible dimension [. . .] in which the textual city incorporates space and time: the present, the past, and the implied future"²⁰ beyond the constricting formal boundaries of received notions of 'reality.'²¹ In addition, Freud's provocative strategy invites comparison with modern innovations within the novel (especially rapid multiple perspectives) in which *a priori* nonlinear conceptions of the city replaced the broken discourse of classic realism. Within this "mythic or 'fourth' dimension, the city's fragmentation is complete," in that "the many experiences of the characters are complemented by the contents of

their consciousness, which enter the text as independent agents.”²² Moreover, and as one commentator astutely notes, Freud’s speculations “draw attention to the redemptive project that leaves its mark on the archaeological metaphor, in spite of the dangers involved, for what cannot be lost also has the chance to be saved.”²³

This last point is of particular importance for the larger critical impulse of *Writing the City*, in that Freud’s evocative metaphor is suggestively close to the ways in which European and American modernist writers, particularly those experimenting with the form of the urban novel in the opening decades of the twentieth century, broke with outmoded nineteenth-century narrative modes of representation based primarily on sequential-causal principles.²⁴ Indeed, as the distended Victorian epoch drew to a close, already subjective perceptions and their attendant inner responses—predicated on a growing sense of restlessness and desire—were being developed by artists as a paradigm for more authentic accounts of everyday life than the rationalizing tendencies of positivist thought.

The heightened sense of subjective experience at work within the modernist novel challenged such cornerstones as mimesis, Aristotelian logic, Euclidean geometry, and Newtonian physics, which progressively appeared inadequate for coming to terms with the world of experience, especially the world of art.²⁵ Moreover, the debate was further agitated by Einstein’s Theory of Relativity, which categorically denied the possibility of a privileged point of view from which “reality” could be adequately and unequivocally observed or delineated. In an essay entitled “Rodin” (1911), German sociologist and cultural philosopher Georg Simmel praised the sculptor’s work on the basis that it aesthetically heightened the tensions of modern life while simultaneously releasing the individual from the anxieties of contemporary existence. More particularly, for Simmel the experience of modernity was grounded in the individual’s attempt to negotiate—and incorporate—external reality in relation to the psychic interiority of the self:

The essence of modernity as such is psychologism, the experiencing and interpretation of the world in terms of the reactions of our inner life, and indeed as an inner world, the dissolution of fixed contents in the fluid element of the soul, from which all that is substantive is filtered and whose forms are merely forms of motion.²⁶

According to Simmel, by first energizing and then unifying in aesthetic terms the form and function of art in his sculpture (and ultimately in the viewer), Rodin embodies and thus captures the essence of modernity. The external world is part of our inner world; accordingly, the substantive elements of reality are reduced to a ceaseless flux, and their fleeting, fragmentary, and contradictory moments are all incorporated into human subjectivity.

THE CITY IN HISTORY

"If the City is a text," Joyce Carol Oates asks, "how shall we read it?"²⁷ Cities are as old as the term *civilization*; indeed, more than any other phenomenon the city has provided the critical mass which produces civilization.²⁸ Even the basic etymology of the word reveals its ancient past, for behind the English word *city* lie the Latin words *civis* (citizen) and *civitas* (citizenry, citizenship). Of course humans have been reading cities in all sorts of ways since the generally agreed upon beginnings of civilization in Mesopotamia, circa 3500 BCE. When we read cities we invariably raise questions about how cities come into being, how they take shape and grow, and what purposes they play in social, political and cultural change.²⁹ According to Lewis Mumford,

The city is characteristic of most civilizations and is often considered their fullest expression. Its origins can be traced back beyond the 'urban revolutions' which took place [. . .] in Mesopotamia in the third millennium BC to the archaeological remains of Jericho and Catal Hoyuc (Anatolia). After all these centuries, the quality of urban life is still man's central concern.³⁰

Mumford, perhaps the most prolific urban historian of the twentieth century, articulated his own urban ideal in *The Culture of Cities* (1938) when he declared: "The city is the form and symbol of an integrated social relationship: it is the seat of the temple, the market, the hall of justice, the academy of learning. Here is where human experience is transformed into viable signs, symbols, patterns of conduct, systems of order."³¹ In many ways, Mumford's notion of the city as a uniquely human phenomenon where unity, cohesion, and coherence are the primary goals is in keeping with Aristotle's classical sense of the laws governing private man, as delineated in *Politics*. Echoing Mumford's idealistic hopes for the city, Jane Jacobs' examination of the city praises the idea of order (often dictated from below) in the form of diversity, vitality, plurality, and responsiveness to human need in her discussion of city sidewalks, parks, neighborhoods, and districts.³² As both a container and transmitter of culture, the idea of the city for Mumford constituted possibility, with civilization passing on from one generation to the next the fruits of human achievement. And yet it was on these same grounds that Mumford, who, toward the end of a life immersed in the history and culture of cities and city planning, faulted his native New York, an urban sprawl he felt had abandoned the idea of the city in history.

Mumford's lament is in fact representative of an ancient tradition of urban *angst*. Indeed, from Juvenal's *Satires* to Augustine's "City of God" to Virgil's *Eclogues*, an antagonistic sense of duality is central to the image of the city in classical and Judeo-Christian culture. In the Old Testament, the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the pastoral idyll of Eden gave rise to the first settlement. Cain, the architect and builder of humankind's first

planned community, constructed the first mythical city even as his hands were fresh from killing his brother, Abel. Babel itself was later cast out of the sky, while the venal twin-cities of Sodom and Gomorrah fell into corruption. Outside biblical narrative, in *The Bacchae*, Pentheus surrounds his city with walls, but secretly yearns for the libidinal vitality and freedom of the countryside that is lacking in his own realm, and which he consequently attempts to fortify his urban civilization against. In our own time, the diverse influences and common roots of Western civilization have given rise to a global pantheon of mythologized cities that not only exist as symbolic expressions of humanity in the form of distinct economic or political systems, but also have become part of the collective psyche of world history. At its furthest geographical and historical extreme, Richard Lehan argues that contemporary Los Angeles is metaphorically representative of the culmination of the "Idea of the West," which had its origin in late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century Europe in such texts as Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719). Carried west across the Atlantic and the North American continent to the Pacific, Lehan contends that this idea was embraced under such names as the Frontier Movement, Manifest Destiny, and the California Dream.³³

From a European urban-historical perspective, intellectual historian Carl Schorske has isolated three major conceptions of the city in history since the eighteenth century: the Enlightenment city of Virtue, which for Voltaire, Adam Smith, and Gottlieb Fichte variously embodied the dynamic of civilization; the anti-rational industrial Victorian city of Vice denounced by Blake and Wordsworth, Engels and Marx; and, finally, Spengler's terminal modern city, an entity "beyond good and evil."³⁴ Speaking in the broadest cultural terms, Schorske's three recursive stages embody the mythologized metaphoric associations often associated with the city in history, from the classical period to the present. Intrinsic to Schorske's discontinuous concept of the city are the New Jerusalem of the Book of Revelation; St. Augustine's City of God (intimating the perfectability of man and woman); the soul-punishing urban crucible of sin dedicated to Mammon in the form of Babylon or Sodom; and the deracinated, decentered city of Babel, which feeds on the communitarian disconnection of the spirit of the polis, a city of "permanent transience."³⁵

Schorske's schematic analysis is symptomatic of an enduring insistence in the West to answer a central, perhaps even impossible, question asked of the city since the city began: What *is* the city? In literary terms, Blanche H. Gelfant has divided the American city novel into three main types: the "portrait," in which the city is revealed through the experiences of a single character, often a youth from the country; the "ecological," which focuses on one element of the city, for example a neighborhood, a street, or even a house; and the "synoptic," in which the city itself becomes the major protagonist.³⁶ While Gelfant's schema allows for a useful discussion of Ameri-

can fiction during the period between 1890 and 1940, Schorske is nonetheless quick to point out that all such attempts to provide an answer to the question “What is the city?” are highly questionable. Schorske’s skepticism is well founded, for any attempt to provide a definitive answer is surely suspect. Not only is the idea of the city a sub-topic in literature, painting, history, psychology, and sociology, but it has also become a focused concern in the multidisciplinary field of urban studies.³⁷ In Schorske’s final stage of progression for the city (the coda of urban history), humanity is figured like Poe’s “Man of the Crowd”: neo-nomadic, and dependent upon the spectacle of the ever-changing urban scene to fill the “void of a desocialized consciousness.”³⁸ This last classification is particularly relevant for urban studies, in that in keeping with an overarching theme of historical discontinuity, Schorske’s pronouncement defines for the nineteenth-century city a new and radical break with its past. Up until this point, notions of self-perception and identity had not yet completely fused with the increasingly intrusive presence of the city as the essential ground of modern existence.

Raymond Williams notes that attempts to codify the genealogy of the modern city that involve the mapping of historical discontinuities are themselves culturally symptomatic of periods of “ideological transition.”³⁹ In other words, like artistic responses, social scientific commentaries more often than not surface when debates concerning the city are at their most intense. As Schorske’s reflective argument reiterates, historically there exists an identifiable series of what Williams terms “rhetorical contrasts”⁴⁰ between the town (more often than not identified as an overdetermined sense of greed and corruption) and country life (symbolic of an idealized golden past)⁴¹ that together are consistent with the mythology of the city. Schorske’s own particular brand of urban rhetoric is prescient in that it foreshadows perhaps our own (latent) ideological transition to a new period of cultural pessimism regarding the city. Indeed, we now find ourselves at the end of a period in which, as many contemporary urban theorists and writers would have us believe, there has been a progressive devaluation (symptomatic of a cultural and intellectual crisis) of “the city as a concept”⁴² in western culture since the Enlightenment.⁴³

The work of William Sharpe and Leonard Wallock is a notable contribution to this debate. Their prescriptive trilateral analysis of the evolutionary phases of the city allows room for a degree of sympathy with Schorske on the grounds that his analysis highlights not so much a progressive devaluation of the city as the progressive betrayal of the city as affirmation.⁴⁴ Elaborating on the perceived sense of crisis affecting urban society and culture, Sharpe and Wallock contend that we are now at a point of structural transition, a Viconian *ricorso*, if you will, to a new kind of city and are thus experiencing a “crisis of terminology”⁴⁵ similar to that felt by observers of early industrial Manchester and later by the modernist investigators of Paris, London and New York. In our post-modernist stage of the