1
Into the Labyrinth

> Autobiography has to do with time, with sequence and with what makes up the continuous flow of life. Here, I am talking of a space, of moments and discontinuities.
>
> Walter Benjamin, *One Way Street* (1932)

'Now let me call back those who introduced me to the city', wrote Walter Benjamin in the 1930s, remembering his childhood in old Berlin. In his case, it was nursemaids; in mine, my mother. She planted within me, never to be eradicated, a conviction of the fateful pleasures to be enjoyed and the enormous anxieties to be overcome in discovering the city.

Every excursion we made together was an immense labour, a strenuous and fraught journey to a treacherous destination: we waited for buses that never came, were marshalled into queues that never grew shorter, walked down endless streets in the hot sun. Our destinations also were terrible. The Tower of London, Hampton Court and Madame Tussaud's were theatres of cruelty: *here* was the exact spot upon which Anne Boleyn was beheaded; *this* was the gallery along which Catherine Howard ran desperately to beg Henry the Eighth for mercy; here was the Chamber of Horrors with its electric chair.

There were also the crowds of that first, weary, hot, London summer. I had never seen crowds like those. The insolence, the promiscuity of the crowd, jostling my mother and myself, seemed like a vast yawn of indifference. The stale suits and rayon dresses brushed against us, bodies against bodies. The air seemed yellow with a kind of blasé fatigue. My mother tried to keep her hat tipped forward, her little veil in place, her corsage of soft suede anemones – blue, rose-red and purple – crisply pinned against the navy crêpe of her dress, but I felt the vulnerability of her pretensions exposed, and together we seemed so insignificant and lost.

I saw and snatched a pound note from beneath the feet that tramped across a mosaic floor in the food hall of our local department store. I was offered the forbidden chewing gum by departing American soldiers. We took boat trips down the Thames. And on one occasion there were fireworks: the crowd swarmed darkly, softly, beneath the trees; there was a hiss, and gold, white and magenta stars burst silently towards us, to melt away just out of reach.

Our visits to the Zoo and to Kensington Gardens expressed some

longing for what was so absent from the stony streets in which we lived and wandered: a memory of the rural life we had left behind. Walter Benjamin recalled the park as a scene of bourgeois domestic harmony:

> There were serpentine paths near the lake and . . . benches . . . at the edge of the sand pit with its ditches, where toddlers dig or stand sunk in thought until bumped by a playmate or roused by the voice of a nursemaid from the bench of command; there she sits stern and studious, reading her novel and keeping the child in check while hardly raising an eyelid until, her labour done, she changes places with the nurse at the other end of the bench, who is holding the baby between her knees and knitting. Old, solitary men found their way here, paying due honour, amid these scatterbrained womenfolk, among the shrieking children, to the serious side of life: the newspaper.[1]

and perhaps my mother hoped to find a lost tranquillity in the green vista with its lines of trees in faultless perspective. The flowers and especially the spring blossoms, like all flowers in cities, appeared as a luxury item set against the urban fabric, rather than as an invasion of nature or a rural enclave; they symbolised some other, idealised world.

The Zoo was a very different experience, for there again were the crowds, jostling to stare at the infant gorilla and the apes. This was an old-time crowd, more of an eighteenth-century 'mob' come to stare at whatever exotic spectacle was on offer – a hanging, lunatics at Bedlam. Screams of laughter greeted the antics of the chimpanzees, those caricatures of humanity. Family groups approached the tiger's cage with a frisson of fear. Always for me the great question was whether to brave the reptile house, where huge snakes lay so creepily still. Their malevolent, horrible inertia gave me nightmares, yet I could never resist. 'I won't look' – but I always did.

The reptile house was for me that Minotaur's chamber cited by so many writers who liken the city to a labyrinth. Benjamin's Minotaur was 'three-headed', being the three prostitutes in a small Parisian brothel. In either case, fear mixed with an obscure or suspect pleasure lay at the heart of the city's secret courtyards and alleyways.

In Benjamin's adolescence the Berlin cafés played their part in introducing him to the world of pleasure that is one layer in the geology of the social city, and years later he remembered the names of those cafés like an incantation: the Romanisches Café, the Viktoria, the West End Café. Those salons were neither exactly public nor private space, and yet partook of both, and in them

bohemia and the bourgeoisie mingled as part of the quintessential urban spectacle:

> For one of the most elementary and indispensable diversions of the citizen of a great metropolis, wedged, day in, day out, in the structure of his office and family amid an infinitely variegated social environment, is to plunge into another world, the more exotic the better. Hence the bars haunted by artists and criminals. The distinction between the two, from this point of view, is slight. The history of the Berlin coffeehouses is largely that of different strata of the public, those who first conquered the floor being obliged to make way for others gradually pressing forward, and thus to ascend the stage.[2]

There were, of course, no comparable cafés in London in the mid 1950s, when I was myself of an age to explore the city alone, coffee bars and jazz clubs offering a poor substitute. Soho drinking clubs were barred to me, in any case unknown. I nevertheless roamed London, solitary, engaged in that urban search for mysteries, extremes and revelations, a quest quite other than that of the wanderer through the natural landscape: a search less hallowed, yet no less spiritual.

Christine Mallet Joris's *Into the Labyrinth* was the title of the second lesbian novel I ever read (the first being, of course, Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness*). *Into the Labyrinth* was French, and, unlike Radclyffe Hall's Edwardian romance, fitted precisely into my aimless, desperate walks and rides round London's streets, squares and inner suburbs. The heroine, a schoolgirl, discovered love in a house on a street called, romantically – and inappropriately – the *Rempart des Béguines* (the Rampart of Nuns). The adventures and sufferings attendant upon her sexual initiation took place in the bedrooms, hotels, the theatres and cafés of a great city – a city like a magic set of boxes, with, inside each box, a yet smaller and more secret one.

This recurring image, of the city as a maze, as having a secret centre, contradicts that other and equally common metaphor for the city as labyrinthine and centreless. Even if the labyrinth does have a centre, one image of the discovery of the city, or of exploring the city, is not so much finally reaching this centre, as of an endlessly circular journey, and of the retracing of the same pathways over time.

Yet one never retraces the same pathway twice, for the city is in a constant process of change, and thus becomes dreamlike and magical, yet also terrifying in the way a dream can be. Life and its certainties slither away from underfoot. This continual flux and change is one of the most disquieting aspects of the modern city. We

expect permanence and stability from the city. Its monuments are solid stone and embody a history that goes back many generations. Rome was known as the 'Eternal City'. Yet, far from being eternal, in the sense of being outside time, Rome, like all cities, is deeply time-bound.[3] Although its history gives it its character, and a patina of durability, in modernity especially the city becomes ever more changing. That which we thought was most permanent dissolves as rapidly as the kaleidoscopic spectacle of the crowds and vehicles that pass through its streets. As Siegfried Kracauer wrote of Berlin in the 1920s:

> If some street blocks seem to be created for eternity, then the present day Kurfurstendam is the embodiment of empty, flowing time in which nothing is allowed to last . . . Many buildings have been shorn of the ornaments which formed a kind of bridge to yesterday . . . Only the marble staircases that glimmer through the doorways preserve memories: those of the pre-war world.[4]

Walter Benjamin noted this constant destruction and replacement in his inventory of the cafés he had once frequented. The Viktoria Café 'no longer exists. Its place – on the corner of Friedrichstrasse and Unter den Linden – has been taken by one of the noisiest luxury cafés of new Berlin, against which the earlier one, however luxurious it may have been in its day, stands out with all the magic of the age of chandeliers, mirrored walls and plush comfort.'[5]

Even if the building itself – a café, hotel or department store – survives, its life may have long departed. It is still possible to visit some of the original Vienna cafés, famous at the turn of the century for their astonishing intellectual and bohemian life. Today they are almost empty, and dust floats down the bars of sunshine that reveal worn velvet and threadbare carpet, while a bad-tempered waitress surveys her deserted realm.

The London of the 1990s, for all the destruction that has occurred, is a livelier place than gloomy 1950s London. Today I am nevertheless sometimes conscious of a nostalgia for that vanished city: for the hushed interior spaces of long-defunct department stores with their carpeted trying-on rooms; for the French provision stores of Soho, replaced first by stripshows, later by fashion boutiques; but most of all for the very gloom and shabbiness now banished by gentrification, redevelopment and the commercialisation of leisure. It felt safe, and as you wandered through the streets you sensed always that pervasive English privacy, of lives veiled by lace curtains, of a prim respectability hiding strange secrets behind those inexpressive Earls Court porticoes.

In my mid teens I was unfamiliar with the writings of Benjamin, but I intuitively identified with an urban consciousness of which his reminiscences are one of the most beautiful examples. This consciousness had been developed by the dandies and '*flâneurs*' (strollers, loiterers) of mid-nineteenth-century Paris. They had relished the kaleidoscope of urban public life and had created from it a new aesthetic, perceiving a novel kind of beauty in streets, factories and urban blight. In the 1930s the anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss discovered this beauty in an even more intense form in the Latin American cities he visited. He wrote that although 'São Paulo was said at the time to be an ugly town . . . I never thought São Paulo was ugly; it was a "wild" town, as are all American towns.' This quality of 'wildness' was, Lévi-Strauss felt, due to exaggerated and surreal contrasts. Extremes of wealth and poverty, of enjoyment and misery, made an essential contribution to this perception of the city. It was just those things that were shoddy and awful about city life that constituted its seduction, its peculiar beauty. What Lévi-Strauss found strange and evocative about the cities of the New World was their premature decrepitude, the incongruity of concrete skyscrapers alongside shanty towns, of Victorian Gothic churches jumbled up with bleak warehouses, creating a stone landscape as melancholy as it was striking.[6]

His perception, like that of the dandies, 'makes strange' the familiar and disregarded aspects of city life. It inverts our values: what was once seen as marginal becomes the essence of city life and that which makes it truly beautiful, even if its beauty is a beauty of ugliness. This new definition of beauty and meaning places the underside or 'Other' of city existence at the centre of consciousness. The nineteenth-century Parisian *flâneur* did not care about the pomp of the 'official', public city being created by Napoleon III and Baron Haussmann; it was the trivial, fragmented aspects of street life that appealed to him.

Lévi-Strauss was a latterday *flâneur* who discovered in the streets of São Paulo and Chicago a heartrending nostalgia not for the past but for the future. Their street canyons and windswept vistas suggested a lost future that was never to be, and ached with the yearning of human aspirations destined ever to fall short of the grandiose hopes that inspired them.

This sophisticated urban consciousness, which, as we shall see, reached a high point in central Europe in the early twentieth century, was an essentially male consciousness. Sexual unease and the pursuit of sexuality outside the constraints of the family were one of its major preoccupations.

This in itself made women's very presence in cities a problem. The

city offers untrammelled sexual experience; in the city the forbidden – what is most feared and desired – becomes possible. Woman is present in cities as temptress, as whore, as fallen woman, as lesbian, but also as virtuous womanhood in danger, as heroic womanhood who triumphs over temptation and tribulation. Writers such as Benjamin concentrated upon their own experience of strangeness in the city, on their own longings and desires, but many writers more definitely and clearly posed the presence of women as a problem of order, partly *because* their presence symbolised the promise of sexual adventure. This promise was converted into a general moral and political threat.

Nineteenth-century planning reports, government papers and journalism created an interpretation of urban experience as a new version of Hell, and it would even be possible to describe the emergent town-planning movement – a movement that has changed our cities almost beyond recognition – as an organised campaign to exclude women and children, along with other disruptive elements – the working class, the poor, and minorities – from this infernal urban space altogether.

Sexuality, was only one source of threatening ambiguity and disorder in the city. The industrial city became a crucible of intense and unnerving contrasts. The hero, or less often the heroine, of urban literature was lured by the astonishing wealth and opportunity, threatened by the crushing poverty and despair of city life. Escape and entrapment, success and disaster offered heightened, exaggerated scenarios of personal triumph or loss of identity.

There was another contradictory aspect of city life. The sociologist Max Weber argued that the western city developed a typical form of political organisation: democracy. Feudal lords found that they were unable to retain their hold over their vassals, bondsmen and serfs once these had settled in cities. It was in the western late medieval city that men and women for the first time came together as individuals rather than as members of a kin group, clan or feudal entourage. The western city evolved political organisations which displaced existing paternalistic and patriarchal forms, and so the way was opened both to individualism and to democracy during the transition from feudalism to capitalism.

By the nineteenth century this had become contradictory because commentators and reformers of that period claimed to value individualism and democracy, but as cities grew, the mob became a revolutionary threat. The dangers seemed especially clear in American cities, already becoming for Europeans a paradigm of all that was new, and Alexis de Tocqueville was one of the first to voice this

heightened, paranoid fear of the crowd in the nineteenth-century city, reporting that:

> the lowest classes in these vast cities are a rabble more dangerous even than that of European towns. The very lowest are the freed Negroes, condemned by law and opinion to a hereditary state of degradation and wretchedness. Then, there is a crowd of Europeans driven by misfortune or misbehaviour to the shores of the New World; such men carry our worst vices to the United States.

As he saw it, it was 'the size of some American cities and especially the nature of their inhabitants' that constituted a danger, even 'threatening the future of the democratic republics of the New World'. He predicted that the new urban crowd would destroy those infant republics 'unless their government succeeds in creating an armed force . . . capable of suppressing their excesses'.[7]

There were women as well as men in the urban crowd. Indeed the crowd was increasingly invested with female characteristics, while retaining its association with criminals and minorities. The threatening masses were described in feminine terms: as hysterical, or, in images of feminine instability and sexuality, as a flood or swamp. Like women, crowds were liable to rush to extremes of emotion. As the rightwing theorist of the crowd, Le Bon, put it, 'Crowds are like the sphinx of ancient fable; it is necessary to arrive at a solution of the problems offered by their psychology or to resign ourselves to being devoured by them.' At the heart of the urban labyrinth lurked not the Minotaur, a bull-like male monster, but the female Sphinx, the 'strangling one', who was so called because she strangled all those who could not answer her riddle: female sexuality, womanhood out of control, lost nature, loss of identity.[8]

Yet the city, a place of growing threat and paranoia to men, might be a place of liberation for women. The city offers women freedom. After all, the city normalises the carnivalesque aspects of life. True, on the one hand it makes necessary routinised rituals of transportation and clock watching, factory discipline and timetables, but despite its crowds and the mass nature of its life, and despite its bureaucratic conformity, at every turn the city dweller is also offered the opposite – pleasure, deviation, disruption. In this sense it would be possible to say that the male and female 'principles' war with each other at the very heart of city life. The city is 'masculine' in its triumphal scale, its towers and vistas and arid industrial regions; it is 'feminine' in its enclosing embrace, in its indeterminacy and labyrinthine uncentredness. We might even go so far as to claim that urban life is actually based on this perpetual struggle between rigid,

routinised order and pleasurable anarchy, the male–female dichotomy.

Perhaps the 'disorder' of urban life does not so much disturb women. If this is so, it may be because they have not internalised as rigidly as men a need for over-rationalistic control and authoritarian order. The socialisation of women renders them less dependent on duality and opposition; instead of setting nature against the city, they find nature *in* the city. For them, that invisible city, the 'second city', the underworld or secret labyrinth, instead of being sinister or diseased as in the works of Charles Dickens and many of the writers we will encounter later on, is an Aladdin's cave of riches. Yet at the same time, it is a place of danger for women. Prostitutes and prostitution recur continually in the discussion of urban life, until it almost seems as though to be a woman – an individual, not part of a family or kin group – in the city, is to become a prostitute – a public woman.

The city – as experience, environment, concept – is constructed by means of multiple contrasts: natural, unnatural; monolithic, fragmented; secret, public; pitiless, enveloping; rich, poor; sublime, beautiful. Behind all these lies the ultimate and major contrast: male, female; culture, nature; city, country. In saying this I am not arguing (as do some feminists) that male–female difference creates the deepest and most fundamental of all political divisions. Nor am I arguing that the male/female stereotypes to which I refer accurately reflect the nature of actual, individual men and women. In the industrial period, nonetheless, that particular division became inscribed on urban life and determined the development and planning of cities to a surprising degree and in an extraordinarily unremarked way. It will be one purpose of this book to explore how underlying assumptions, based both on this unconscious division and on consciously spelt-out ideas about women's rightful place, have determined the shape of contemporary cities.

We shall also explore how women have lived out their lives on sufferance in the metropolis. For although women, along with minorities, children, the poor, are still not full citizens in the sense that they have never been granted full and free access to the streets, industrial life still drew them into public life, and they have survived and flourished in the interstices of the city, negotiating the contradictions of the city in their own particular way.

The contradictions and intensity of urban life have produced strong responses, one of which has been a corrosive anti-urbanism. For many years I took for granted the assumption that a great city was the best place to live, and Paris and New York seemed the only possible – and even more magical – alternatives to the shabbier but

comfortable and accommodating ambience of sub-bohemian London. It was only my involvement in 'alternative' radical politics in the 1970s which alerted me to the hatred many 'progressive' people feel for cities, and to an alien point of view, which self-righteously attacked the ugliness and vulgarity of urban life while setting out some rural or small-town idyll as the desired alternative. I had known that many rightwing writers feared the modern city as destructive of the traditional patriarchal order; but to me the anti-urbanism of the left seemed like a betrayal, and made me permanently disillusioned with utopianism. William Morris in particular – a writer who seems exempt from any criticism by socialists to this day – demonstrated in his utopian *News from Nowhere* a retreat from modernity and a nostalgia for patriarchalism that I found suffocating.

Anti-urbanism has a long history, partly related to industrialisation; developments in the 1980s and early 1990s have served to make such ideas even more threatening and more plausible. One development is our growing ecological consciousness; another the redevelopment of inner cities as uninhabited office or business districts; a third the parallel growth of inner-city ghettoes inhabited by a so-called 'underclass'; fourthly, the simultaneous suburbanisation of more and more of the countryside. The result is that today in many cities we have the worst of all worlds: danger without pleasure, safety without stimulation, consumerism without choice, monumentality without diversity. At the same time, larger and larger numbers of people inhabit zones that are no longer really either town or countryside.

We need a radically new approach to the city. We will never solve the problems of living in cities until we welcome and maximise the freedom and autonomy they offer and make these available to all classes and groups. We must cease to perceive the city as a dangerous and disorderly zone from which women – and others – must be largely excluded for their own protection. There are other issues, of course, equally important. Leisure and consumption must cease to be treated purely as commodities controlled by market forces, nor can adequate housing ever be provided so long as it is regarded as a mere byproduct of urban development and property speculation.

Yet at the 'commonsense' level of our deepest philosophical and emotional assumptions, the unconscious bedrock of western culture, it is the male–female dichotomy that has so damagingly translated itself into a conception of city culture as pertaining to men. Consequently, women have become an irruption in the city, a symptom of disorder, and a problem: the Sphinx in the city.

Women are placed at the centre of my argument for this reason.

For a woman to make an argument in favour of urban life may come as a surprise. Many women and much feminist writing have been hostile to the city, and recent feminist contributions to the discussion of urban problems have tended to restrict themselves narrowly to issues of safety, welfare and protection.[9] This is a mistake, since it re-creates the traditional paternalism of most town planning. Women's experience of urban life is even more ambiguous than that of men, and safety is a crucial issue. Yet it is necessary also to emphasise the other side of city life and to insist on women's right to the carnival, intensity and even the risks of the city. Surely it is possible to be both pro-cities and pro-women, to hold in balance an awareness of both the pleasures and the dangers that the city offers women, and to judge that in the end, urban life, however fraught with difficulty, has emancipated women more than rural life or suburban domesticity.

With so vast a subject as life in cities, much has inevitably been left out. Many omissions have been regretted but deliberate. Necessarily, the result is something of a collage, as fragmentary and partial as the experience of city life itself.

In assembling this 'collage' I have used a variety of texts – fiction, journalism, government reports – assuming that all contribute on equal terms to a 'discourse' about the city. In using the term discourse, I wish to alert the reader to the idea, often expressed in the urban literature, that the city itself is a 'text' – that is to say, that it is something to be read and interpreted. It is an artefact, a work of art, created by the human mind and imagination, and contains many layers of meaning. Yet paradoxically (because the city is always contrasted with 'nature') it also appears as a *natural* phenomenon. Marcel Proust described Venice as 'a network of little alleys' and these, 'packed tightly together', dissected 'in all directions with their furrows a chunk of Venice carved out between a canal and the lagoon, as if it had crystallised in accordance with these innumerable, tenuous and minute patterns':

> Suddenly, at the end of one of these alleys, it seemed as though a distension had occurred in the crystallised matter. A vast and splendid *campo* of which, in this network of little streets, I should never have guessed the scale, or even found room for it, spread out before me surrounded by charming palaces silvery in the moonlight. It seemed to be deliberately concealed in a labyrinth of alleys, like those palaces in oriental tales whither mysterious agents convey by night a person who, brought back home before daybreak, can never find his way back to the magic dwelling which he ends by believing that he only visited in a dream.[10]

Here, the texture of the city is both natural – crystalline matter – and the substance of dreams, which are the involuntary workings of the mind.

Perhaps we should be happier in our cities were we to respond to them as to nature or dreams: as objects of exploration, investigation and interpretation, settings for voyages of discovery. The 'discourse' that has shaped our cities – the utilitarian plans of experts whose goal was social engineering – has limited our vision and almost destroyed our cities. It is time for a new vision, a new ideal of life in the city – and a new, 'feminine' voice in praise of cities.

2

From Kitsch City to the City Sublime

> With cities it is as with dreams: everything imaginable can be dreamed, but even the most unexpected dream . . . conceals a desire or, its reverse, a fear. Cities, like dreams, are made of desires and fears, even if the thread of their discourse is secret, their rules are absurd, their perspective deceitful, and everything conceals something else.
>
> Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities* (1972)

On a wet afternoon we sheltered in the arcades beneath the front, separated from the beach by a litter-blown promenade. The sea churned and sucked at the pebbles a few yards below, but here we entered a zone of images, divorced from nature.

Each boy gambler – some were alone, some in little clusters – faced his machine as if it were a destiny, pulled knobs and twisted wheels to bring an ideal world on to his screen: but this life desired was a place of death, and each game re-enacted an ultimate struggle between Good and Evil. Armed police gunned down robots with laser rays and the cavern echoed with imitation machine-gun fire.

I too sat mesmerised. In front of me unreeled the straight road to infinity, and on the horizon a skyscraper city rose beyond a lake. We raced towards it. Suddenly the expressway passed between the clifflike blocks and we were in the city. Skyscrapers pressed in on us, casting their shadow along the street. The automobiles ricocheted through in silence, swerving from side to side. And then we'd left the city behind, we were back where we'd started, once more we were hurtling towards the city of the future, which was as far away on the horizon as it had been at the beginning of the journey, once more a mirage beyond the stretch of water.

This empty city was familiar. I recognise it now. It's a memory, an illusion now reborn as a computer game, debased but authentic, of Le Corbusier's Radiant City, in which magnificent motorways converge towards the towers, monumental, empty, and white, the mirage of a perfect city. Here, in the half-life of the amusement arcade, where human existence is at its most inconsequential, where thwarted holidaymakers loiter and loaf away an afternoon spoilt by the rain, failing to ward off boredom, Le Corbusier's grand design fleetingly revives in the form of a computerised memory flicker. The difference is that his city, born as a dream of the future, now suggests some hideous hallucination of the present.

Popular culture, in this case children's culture, brings into circulation all sorts of ideas about cities. A future without cities is projected, for example, by the children's video *He Man and Shera*. The characters inhabit a landscape which combines nursery-picture graphics with memories of moon landings. The Rebels live in a land of Robin Hood; the Evil Horde inhabit futuristic interiors hewn out of rock. This world is both pre-industrial and post-holocaust. Cities no longer exist.

An alternative image of the city is found in the Babar books. Jean de Brunhoff wrote *Babar the Elephant* and *Babar the King* in the 1930s, when the architect Le Corbusier was designing his Radiant City; and Babar the elephant, unlike the creatures of *He Man and Shera*, still had confidence in the city: a city, that is, of a certain kind. He set up the city he founded, Celesteville (named after his wife), as an enlightened *Cité Industrielle* or garden city: 'our houses will be by the water in the midst of flowers and birds'.

Although Babar's first sight of 'civilisation' when he left the jungle was a French colonial (African) town, his own Celesteville, 'most beautiful of towns', is based on the principles of French reforming socialism that were influential in early-twentieth-century France. 'Each elephant has a house of his own.' Life is wisely zoned and regulated in Celesteville – the 'Palace of Work' (with a library) is next to the 'Palace of Pleasure'; and all the elephants are issued with 'good working clothes and lovely holiday costumes'. The infant school is a progressive one; the children do not sit in regimented rows to learn by rote, but in small groups at round tables.

The adult elephants work in the mornings, and 'in the afternoon they do whatever they like. They play, go for walks, read and dream.' Some play tennis, others bowls, yet others swim or sail. In the evenings they watch French classical theatre. The high point of the year is the *Grand Fête* when the armed forces and the arts and crafts guilds march together in procession. The fact that it is guilds rather than trades unions is another reminiscence of the French non-revolutionary socialism of the period between the wars.

Babar's paternalistic city, with its colonial undertones, is a reformist utopia. In this perfect city, 'health', 'happiness', 'work', 'learning', 'perseverance' and other virtues have driven out 'despair', 'indolence', 'ignorance', 'cowardice' and 'laziness'.[1]

Celesteville is one example of the close links between the planning of cities and utopian ideals, of the belief that a perfect city can be built, a city that will solve all social and human problems. This belief is not new. In the late twentieth century, however, it has been recast. Utopia for the year 2000 is Disneyland: a 'degenerate utopia'.

In Disney World, Florida, Walt Disney planned the creation of a

whole city of the future – although the plan was not carried out. Where the classic utopia offered an alternative vision of society and often a critique of existing ones, Disneyland oppressively confirms the inevitable triumph of world capitalism on American lines. In Disneyland, historical events and geographical locations are reworked in such a way that they seem to lead inevitably to 'Tomorrowland' – the triumph of science and technology and a consumer paradise. There is an illusion of freedom and choice, but Disneyland actually pre-empts choice, both physically, in the layout and organisation of its space (not to mention the long queues for all exhibits, often described as hellish), and in its presentation of ideas. The single future offered by Disneyland excludes from consciousness all memory of the underside of capitalism. Instead of an acknowledgment of colonialism there is simply a journey through exotic, primitive places; instead of genocide there is the triumphal conquest of the American West; instead of poverty and unemployment there is Main Street, USA, the small-town paradise of American popular culture: the answer to Metropolis.[2]

In each of these utopian scenarios women play their appropriate role. In Celesteville women participate in social life but not in paid employment: companionate marriage and 'equality in difference' are the rule – the middle-class ideal of the mid twentieth century. Shera, the feminine equivalent of He Man, has Barbie Doll looks but plays an active role in the narrative, especially because she is equipped with a sword, which transforms her into the Princess of Power: a phallic woman for today.

In the amusement arcade we have reached a further stage. Instead of a coherent space, however oppressive, there is fragmentation and lack of meaning. The vision of the ideal city is reduced to a mere memory trace, no longer either dream or nightmare. About this depopulated city we feel nothing. It is a contemporary city seen and experienced as though it were in the future and *simultaneously* a ruin. The post-catastrophic urban landscape is simply *there*, and police and rebels, warriors and fugitives wrest an existence from it by killing. This city through which rival gangs hunt and slaughter is a city that has finally become wholly masculine. The domestic sphere, a high point of the industrial city, has disappeared. So have nature and women.

Almost from the beginning, the presence of women in cities, and particularly in city streets, has been questioned, and the controlling and surveillance aspects of city life have always been directed particularly at women. Urban life potentially challenged patriarchal systems. 'Civilisation', which meant luxury and consumerism

(although only for a minority), threatened the virtuous authority of the family. This theme has been a potent and enduring source of ambivalence towards city life.

In early Babylonian times, women enjoyed great freedom. Semiramis and Nicrotis were two famous and powerful queens of Babylon, and women are mentioned in documents as engaged in a wide variety of professions and callings. The temple priestesses and woman functionaries enjoyed high esteem and a respected position in their society. Sacred marriage and fertility cults centred on the temple. Female sexuality appears to have been reverenced as a civilising force. Very gradually, however, the status of women declined, a decline probably associated with military conquest, slavery and the impoverishment of the farmers, on whose agriculture the wealth of Babylon was based. Commercial prostitution developed and respectable women were gradually segregated from non-respectable or 'public' women. This segregation was symbolised in the veil, and in public laws and edicts regulating its use. Women were eventually controlled by a patriarchal form of family.[3]

In a famous satire the Roman poet Juvenal, writing in the early days of the Roman Empire (around AD 100), attacked Roman womanhood with unbridled hatred. Usually, this satire is explained as an expression of 'misogyny', which does no more than state the obvious. While the poem must, of course, be understood in its social and historical context, its theme is actually a perennial one: it links female immorality with the many opportunities provided by urban life for women to escape the authority of family and husband.

While Juvenal attacked the immorality of all aspects of Roman life, he regarded the women of Rome, or at least the women of the Roman upper classes, as the most vicious of all. Married or not, they made love with low-class gladiators and actors; Messalina, the wife of the Emperor Claudius, even went to the brothels to satisfy her lust. Juvenal implied that the corruption of Rome was founded upon the decline in female morality: the city gives free rein to women's sexual lusts, which escape control and become unbridled, defiled and even murderous.

In the mid fifteenth century Leon Battista Alberti wrote an architectural treatise that revolutionised Renaissance concepts of city planning. He also wrote a book on the family, undeterred by the fact that as a priest he never married. The form of the family in Alberti's rational and scientifically planned city was to be patriarchal. Women would be under the authority of their husbands, and their place was the private sphere. The family of which Alberti wrote was an early form of the bourgeois family, with its much vaunted virtues of thrift and hard work, and modesty and domesticity in women.[4]

Both western and non-western societies have regulated women's movement in cities, although to varying degrees. The protection and control of women have everywhere gone hand in hand, but cities have posed a challenge to men's ability to retain their hold. The city is the zone of individual freedom. There, the ties of family and kinship may be loosened and avenues of escape may open up.

Even in nineteenth-century Korea, a culture in which upper-class women were rigidly confined, a strange nocturnal licence operated. The lives of Korean women of the upper class were spent largely in seclusion, but sometimes the Korean lady left her house to visit family friends. During the journey it was imperative that she remain invisible, so she travelled in a sedan chair. Its bearers retired when she entered and left it in the enclosed courtyard for her to emerge from unseen. (The imperative of invisibility did not apply to working women, and the Korean lady's sedan chair was always accompanied by a slave girl or servant, who ran alongside the vehicle.)

At night, these restrictions were reversed. After the city gates were closed, it was men (save for officials and the blind) who were forbidden to appear on the streets, and the city was turned over to women, who were then free to walk abroad. They strolled and chatted in groups with their friends, carrying paper lanterns. Even in this dim light, however, they used unfurled fans to protect themselves from being seen, or held their silk jackets over their faces.[5]

So often, this has been women's experience of the city: to live in it, but hidden; to emerge on sufferance, veiled.

With the coming of 'modernity' the cities of veiled women have ceded to cities of spectacle and voyeurism, in which women, while seeking and sometimes finding the freedom of anonymity, are often all too visible. They are in fact a part of the spectacle, and the kaleidoscope of city life becomes intensely contradictory for women. Commerce, consumerism and pleasure seduce them into its thoroughfares, yet men and the state continue their attempts to confine them to the private sphere or to the safety of certain zones. Since the Industrial Revolution a deadly struggle has been waged over women's presence in cities.

This struggle has often been carried on in a covert way, and in order to appreciate its persistence it is necessary to investigate many of the more general ideas about the development of cities and the conduct of urban life: controversies which often act to conceal an underlying disquiet that women are roaming the streets.

There is another and perhaps more profound way in which the male–female dichotomy has structured western thought about the city. The very possibility of the idea of the city implies its contrast to

nature, rural life or the wilderness. The city cannot exist without its opposite. And mapped on to the opposition of city and country, culture and nature, is male and female: man is culture and woman is the earth.

Central to Greek and Roman thought was a concept of 'civilisation', and since ancient times the idea of the city has been central to the idea of civilisation in western culture. Peoples were defined as 'civilised' or 'barbarous' and the civilised were the city dwellers: citizens. As early as 2000 BC the nomadic way of life was an alternative to the urban, suited to areas that could not easily have been cultivated by settled communities. In practice the two ways of life were complementary and even necessary to each other, yet they were seen as contrasting and antagonistic; there was conflict between the nomadic herdsmen and the settled farmers who began to build cities.[6]

Above all, ancient cities were sacred. The Babylonian cities had archetypes in the constellations, their form copied from an ideal celestial form. For the ancients, the building of a new city represented symbolically the act of creation; the city represented a microcosm of the universe; and thus the map of Babylon showed the city just as the Sumerians imagined Paradise. The Romans would dig a trench round the site where a city was to be founded, and this marked the point at which the nether regions met the celestial. It is in this sense that cities are perceived as 'eternal' – and they are in this way to be contrasted with deserts, the wilderness and uncultivated regions, which represent the chaos of the world before Creation.[7]

If the contrast between the city and nature stands also for the contrast between the male and female principles, then the building of a new city as an act of creation implies the merging of these two principles. One of the most influential twentieth-century writers on the city, Lewis Mumford, described the inevitable rise and decline of 'the city' through history. He traced the emergence of the first real cities to the merging of two earlier periods: the 'male' paleolithic period with its phallic tools; and the neolithic womb-like 'feminine':

> Under woman's dominance, the neolithic period is pre-eminently one of containers: it is an age of stone and pottery utensils – of vases, jars, vats, cisterns, bins, barns, granaries, houses, not least great collective containers, like irrigation ditches and villages . . .
>
> The order and stability of the village, along with its maternal enclosure and intimacy and its oneness with the forces of nature, were carried over into the city.[8]

Mumford believed that these qualities were perpetuated in the

contemporary urban neighbourhood or community. For him, even in the city woman represented the local, particular and domestic.

Mumford was one of the most ferocious opponents of the vast metropolis of the twentieth century. He believed that the city run out of control became 'megalopolis', and finally 'necropolis' (city of death). Socialists have been as uncritical of Mumford's views as they have of William Morris's. The dislike both men expressed for the huge metropolitan city, and their favoured solutions, have seldom been challenged or questioned, and it has hardly been noticed that one of the underlying reasons for their dislike was that the metropolis provided women with an escape from patriarchal relations. As we shall see later, Mumford's support for the 'garden city' was based in part on his belief that it would restore women to their primary maternal role.

Although sacred, Babylon and Rome were also worldly cities: urbane, civilised. The city represented freedom and an expansion of experience. Babylon lives on as the supreme – almost mythical – example of cosmopolitan wealth, beauty and refinement. Babylon is also a – feminine – cultural metaphor for wickedness. Modern culture inherits this association from Judaism. The Jews were a nomadic people, and for them Babylon represented not splendour and the civilised life, but exile. Nebuchadnezzar took the Hebrews captive and brought them to Babylon (commemorated in Psalm 137 with its lines: 'By the rivers of Babylon we sat down, yea we wept. We hanged our harps upon the willows'). They therefore associated Babylon's eventual destruction with just revenge. The Old Testament story of the destruction of Babylon implied that this was God's retribution and a punishment for its wickedness. The Protestant Church reworked this idea as the wickedness of Roman Catholicism and the Pope, whose Rome became the 'whore of Babylon'.[9]

In the Renaissance and Baroque periods the discourse on the city underwent a profound change. The city was detached from its religious origins, from the tradition that cities were always organised in accordance with sacred and religious imperatives. The city became secular; it became a spectacle, and an expression of the grandeur and power of the state.

The Renaissance rediscovered the classical Greek debate about the ideal political state. What should government be like? How should it take place? At the same time, Renaissance architects and artists tried in their work to express the ideal 'polis' or seat of political power in the form of their own city states.[10]

At this time two new kinds of writing about cities were invented: the architectural treatise (giving guidance on how to plan, design and build actual cities); and utopian literature (books about imagined

ideal cities and societies). These genres, which might seem very different, and which are usually discussed quite separately, not only arose at the same period, but both directed thinking about urban life and urban planning into certain channels which have endured until the present day.

Leon Battista Alberti's treatise on architecture and planning inaugurated an entirely new field of knowledge. His book was the model for many others – and even for the whole concept of planning, urbanism as an academic subject, and ultimately the town-planning movement.[11] Alberti wished for a rational, scientific approach to planning. His work aimed to elucidate the underlying universal and timeless principles which determine how a city – all cities – ought to be built.[12]

As the city's sacred function was eclipsed, it began to appear as the crucible for human perfectibility and order. Once its form was no longer determined by divine forces, it became the mission of men to create the perfect city, and the imagining of utopias was the result.

The utopia as a distinct literary form goes back to Sir Thomas More's *Utopia*, published in 1516. The classic utopian work is a description of an ideal city and society, an entity in which the town plan and the architecture – the totality of the organised, planned space – embody the political and social ideals of the society which has created this city. It is the embodiment in stone of a political order: the 'solid geometry' of a perfect way of life.

Utopia was Thomas More's response to the gradual breaking up of feudal society, the beginnings of early capitalist forms of agriculture, the rise of a merchant class, which was beginning to challenge the power of the aristocracy, and the growing centralised power of the state under the monarchy. It was also inspired by the recent discovery of the 'New World' – the Americas.

More's utopia was an anti-consumerist one, in which the main object was to give its citizens as much time as possible for leisure pursuits and study. There was to be little differentiation in the way in which the populace was clothed or housed. Their society was patriarchal, yet women played a full role in it. One function of the perfect city – a microcosm of the perfect society – was that it wiped out all social antagonisms, including that between the sexes; yet this problem was not to be solved by introducing equality between men and women. Rather, utopia rendered the patriarchal order benign, and above all rational.

Alberti claimed that architecture was the greatest of the arts. The architect, who reorganises the human world in accordance with his own vision, was the Renaissance 'complete man', the hero or superman. This idea, too, has lasted into the twentieth century,

when architects such as Le Corbusier have still claimed the right to design a perfect world.

There is a sense in which all town planning contains both a utopian and a heroic, yet authoritarian, element. Although its purposes may seem purely practical, it does claim to offer, like the utopian work, a permanent solution to the flux and flow of the ever-changing city. The plan is always intended to fix the usage of space; the aim, the state regulation of urban populations. This includes the fixing of women in their 'rightful' place.

The utopia, on the other hand, claims to be a vision of an ideal, and therefore offers, at least implicitly, a liberating vision. Yet it equally legislates against the possibility or need for change and spontaneity. Both the utopia and the architectural treatise proceed from the assumption that human deviance and unreason can be wiped out by the perfect plan. The utopia aims to stop history.

In the eighteenth century, or 'Enlightenment', the city signified both public hierarchy and grandeur and an essentially moderate and 'civilised' approach to urban living. The squares and terraces of Bloomsbury in London were built for city dwellers of varying classes and 'demonstrated an ideal of harmony and decorum over and above display and vulgar individualism'. Some of the Georgian 'new towns' (in Edinburgh, for example) were built in accordance with a growing desire to segregate the different classes of society, but the ideal remained social integration.[13] The moderate-sized pre-industrial city formed the basis for the philosophy of the new liberal economy of the late eighteenth century: in Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations* (1776), such a city represented the ideal form of social organisation within which political economy could proceed smoothly.

The intellectual leaders of the Enlightenment emphasised the harmony that linked human endeavour, God and nature. Harmony did not, however, rule out hierarchy; on the contrary, authority and hierarchy were essential to harmony, an important dimension of which was the contrast between men and women. Each sex had an appropriate role to play, but women's was essentially subordinate.

In spite of the Enlightenment emphasis on reason and harmony, new and more disturbing ways of perceiving the city also had their origins in eighteenth-century thought. A concept of the 'Sublime' took shape. At first, in the eighteenth century, the concept appeared as an extension of the Enlightenment ideal of civilisation. Gradually, however, it came to suggest certain much more extreme aspects of urban experience that emerged with the Industrial Revolution.

To begin with, the sublime or vast in nature served to reveal the omnipresence of the divine. The sublime was on a more than human

scale, but its grandeur would be destroyed by too great a sensation of dread. In 1757, however, Edmund Burke published a famous and influential essay, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*. This brought dread closer to the central meaning of the sublime. The sublime, wrote Burke, 'operates in a manner analogous to terror', and was 'productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling'. For Burke, the vast, the rugged, magnitude and infinity were sources of the sublime: dark and gloomy colours, night rather than day, silence and solitude.

In early-nineteenth-century German philosophy the concept of the sublime underwent further development, and became the attempt – necessarily doomed to failure – to express the infinite. External existence can never be adequate to the representation of the infinite, and thereby becomes degraded in comparison. The sublime becomes a tragic absence (the absence of God). Its meaning today has shifted again, for now it is used to describe the representation of the unrepresentable – that which cannot be spoken.

Burke and many of his contemporaries felt that the greatest and best architecture should be capable of 'fitting the mind with great and sublime ideas'. Massive, uniform buildings were thought to suggest infinity – and the sublime was an expression of infinity. For Burke, furthermore:

> All edifices calculated to produce an idea of the sublime ought rather to be dark and gloomy . . . darkness itself on other occasions is known by experience to have a greater effect on the passions than light . . . To make anything very terrible, obscurity seems in general to be necessary.[14]

These precepts were consistent with Neo-classical theory. Neo-classicism developed in the late eighteenth century, a revolutionary style which expressed the spirit both of the Enlightenment, and of the French Revolution. Architecturally and artistically it came as a reaction to the ornamentation of the Rococo. Neo-classicism was rationalism in stone, extending the scientific spirit to the built environment. Claude-Nicolas Ledoux was one of its foremost exponents in France, where, until the Revolution, he was employed by the state to design public buildings of a functional rather than a grand type – offices, factories and housing. It was just these sorts of public buildings, along with prisons, workhouses and asylums, that lent themselves to a sublimity of form: geometrically simple, monotonous, overwhelming and awe-inspiring. (He also designed a utopia.)[15]

Neo-classicism was well adapted to the buildings invented by the industrial city: new kinds of buildings for new and sometimes

terrible purposes. There was the factory, which ate up human lives even as it spewed out more goods than the world had ever seen. There were the workhouses, asylums and prisons – for the nineteenth century invented the 'total institution'. Confinement was the archetypal punishment for the age which claimed to cherish liberty before all else. The Panopticon, invented by the philosopher Jeremy Bentham, represented in theory the most perfect form of confinement coupled with surveillance; the ultimate realisation of the institutional sublime, embodying as it did the grandeur of authority in its most unremitting form. By the mid century there would be railways, viaducts, vast terminals; a little later there would be tenements, gasworks, power stations; there were already warehouses, arsenals. Above all, simply the rapid growth of cities was their most sublime aspect.

In *Dombey and Son*, Charles Dickens described the endless restless motion and turbulence of the city; and also the vague, indeterminate regions that the new developments produced at the edge of London, and which were evocative of the sublime in a different and more disturbing way. These regions carried the horror of the sublime – the horror of indeterminacy – which was increasingly to become a feature experienced and noted by writers on the city:

> The first shock of a great earthquake had, just at that period, rent the whole neighbourhood to its centre. Traces of its course were visible on every side. Houses were knocked down; streets broken through and stopped; deep pits and trenches dug in the ground; enormous heaps of earth and clay thrown up; buildings that were undermined and shaking, propped by great beams of wood. Here, a chaos of carts, overthrown and jumbled together, lay topsy-turvy at the bottom of a steep unnatural hill; there, confused treasures of iron soaked and rusted in something that had accidentally become a pond. Everywhere were bridges that led nowhere; thoroughfares that were wholly impassable; Babel towers of chimneys, wanting half their height; temporary wooden houses and enclosures, in the most unlikely situations; carcases of ragged tenements, and fragments of unfinished walls and arches, and piles of scaffolding and wildernesses of bricks, and giant forms of cranes, and tripods straggling above nothing . . . In short the yet unfinished and unopened Railroad was in progress.[16]

In *Les Misérables*, Victor Hugo explored a similar but even bleaker and more sinister marginal region, that of the *barrières* or ramparts on the outskirts of Paris, a region where the city seemed to 'disappear':

> It was not a wilderness, for there were inhabitants; not country, for there were streets and houses; not town, for the streets were rutted like country roads, and grass grew in them; nor was it a village, for the houses were too high . . . The place was utterly dismal . . . One was conscious of being between the Salpêtrière, part women's prison and part madhouse, of which the cupola was visible, and Bicêtre with its barrier – between the madness of women and the madness of men. As far as sight could reach there was nothing . . . but slaughter houses, the wall, and an occasional factory looking like a barracks or a monastery . . . trees in parallel rows, featureless edifices in long, cold lines, with the monotony of right-angles. No accident of terrain, not an architectural flourish, not a bend or curve: a glacial setting, rectilinear and hideous. Nothing chills the heart like symmetry, for symmetry is ennui and ennui is at the heart of grief . . . But at nightfall, particularly in winter, at the time when the last light faded and the wind whipped the last brown leaves off the elms, when the darkness was at its deepest, unrelieved by stars, or when wind and moonlight pierced gaps in the clouds, the boulevard became suddenly frightening. Its straight lines seemed to merge and dissolve in shadows like stretches of infinity . . .[17]

Here is the sublime in precisely the terms in which Burke described it. Yet perhaps Burke would not have recognised it as such. For it has become above all sinister, and what is absent is the aristocratic, masculine strength which for Burke stamped the sublime with an unquestionable authority. Present in its place is that absence of God which seemed to threaten chaos.

This vision of the sublime was to seem now terrifying, now strangely beautiful as the industrial period progressed. In the first years of the twentieth century the French journalist Camille Mauclair wrote of the new suburbs of Paris as 'obscure and tragic places', which nevertheless had their own beauty, a beauty distinctively modern, the new beauty of the industrial cityscape, summed up by the spectacle of the plain of St Denis, 'with its thousands of smokestacks, its smelting fires, its innumerable beacons, its interlaced highways where from all sides spreads the beautiful mother-of-pearl smoke which the twilight embraces'.[18]

'The sublime' is, therefore, not just an abstract theory, but an idea that has seeped into the collective consciousness to become one of the ways in which the experience of urbanism is understood, re-evaluated and transformed. The search for the meaning of the

city, or for meaning in the city, takes many forms, not the least important of which is to create new forms of beauty.

This new beauty, though, will never be without a kind of unease. For Siegfried Kracauer, 'knowledge of cities is bound up with the deciphering of their dream-like expressive images'. He described Berlin as permeated with 'formless disquiet'; while the Parisian *faubourgs* were 'the huge asylum of ordinary people . . . [communal life takes] the form of an asylum, that is certainly not bourgeois but neither is it proletarian in the sense of chimneys, barracks and *chaussées*'.[19]

Burke's concept of the sublime depended crucially on the way in which he distinguished it from the beautiful. It is as if the classical ideal of symmetry splits into two. It is taken up into an awesome ideal of grandeur, the sublime; in which vastness, suggested by monotony and sameness and devoid of decoration, is also meant to suggest the *irregular* vastness of nature. At the same time beauty comes to be defined in diminished, restrictive and above all *feminine* terms.

For what is so striking about Burke's contrast between the sublime and the beautiful is the totally *gendered* nature of these two aesthetic terms. For sublime we may read manly, and all the attendant attributes of strength, authority, power, domination and magnificence. Beauty by contrast becomes explicitly weak and frail. Burke even argues that where beauty 'is highest in the female sex', it 'almost always carries with it an idea of weakness and imperfection'. Because women are aware of this, he asserts, 'they learn to lisp, to totter in their walk, to counterfeit weakness, and even sickness'. Yet he then says that this is *natural*: 'in all this they are guided by nature'!

For Burke beauty consists in smallness, smoothness and gradual variation, in 'the deceitful image, through which the unsteady eye slides giddily, without knowing where to fix or whither it is carried'. Delicacy and fragility are 'essential' to his idea of beauty. The sublime and the beautiful are, Burke concludes, 'indeed ideas of a very different nature, one being founded on pain, the other on pleasure'.[20]

Mary Wollstonecraft criticised this division along sexual lines, so it did not pass unremarked at the time, but she was in a minority. The philosophy of taste – aesthetics – increasingly made a distinction between the grand style and the particular, associating these with masculinity and femininity respectively. The association of femininity with ornament – and by implication with triviality – was to persist through the nineteenth century.[21]

On the other hand, a sentimentalised rural beauty seemed increasingly desirable by contrast with the sublime of the nineteenth-century industrial city. Adam Smith and Thomas Jefferson had approved the virtuous civic pride of the eighteenth-century cities which were of

manageable human size. Many rulers and reformers in the nineteenth century felt that the new, huge metropolis was unmanageable. For the optimistic, familiar, rational world of the Enlightenment, the metropolis substituted a vast, phantasmagoric and unearthly space, in which everything was fearsome and even uncanny because it was wholly strange.

In these cities the intelligentsia divided. Some immersed themselves in the new element of urban life – the *flâneurs* we have already encountered; others aimed to impose order, planning and control; yet others railed against the city altogether, and sentimentalised a lost rural idyll. The first two of these contrasting approaches might be said to correspond to a feminine and a masculine approach: surrender and mastery. The story of the nineteenth- and twentieth-century city is largely of the triumph of intervention and mastery over appreciation and immersion. Perhaps it is time to reverse those priorities.