

On Life and Meaning

MARK PERES

Episode 7 – David Wagner – Cities and Memory

Personification of Place

And now a personal word,

David Wagner creates spaces that linger in the mind. In 2007, in *Charlotte Viewpoint*, in an essay entitled “Personification of Place,” I wrote:

*Hog Butcher for the World
Tool Maker, Stacker of Wheat
Player with Railroads and Nation’s Freight Handler
Stormy, husky, brawling.
City of the Big Shoulders*

So begins “Chicago” by Carl Sandburg. The poem is the first in a series of fifty-five that appeared in his book *Chicago Poems*, published in 1916, that personified the city, giving voice to its landscape and defining Chicago ever since. In their muscular free verse, the poems celebrate the fierce and laughing industrial terrain of the city. Sandburg speaks of the city as a “tall bold slugger” and about how “by night the skyscraper looms in the smoke and the stars and has a soul.”

Sandburg’s meditations on his city of “lifted head singing so proud to be alive and coarse and strong and cunning” have become part of city lore, giving Chicagoans an origin myth on how to behave. Every Chicagoan worth his or her salt weathers the cold and leans into the wind. Every Chicagoan gives nod to grit, toughness, and sinewy strength. ... Sandburg’s elegies are in a long tradition of citizens giving personality to place. We see in the city a face and an intent. We see in it identity as unique as our own. We speak of its disposition, struggles, and achievements, giving cities characteristics of humanity.

The ancient Greeks believed that every place had its own consciousness given form in a city god or goddess. Tyche was the presiding deity of a city and focus of

city loyalty. During the Hellenistic era, Tyche was tangible to the common touch, impressed on local coins with a turreted crown, symbolizing the walls of the city and local feelings of security, welfare, and happiness. The cult of the city god or goddess brought pride of place to the polis. Capturing the complexity of local pride, Tyche connected with both Nemesis and Agathos Daimon—the vexing and good spirits of interpersonal exchange. Images of Tyche as a man or a woman or as young or old reflected the different personalities of city-states. In medieval art, Tyche was depicted carrying a cornucopia, a ship’s rudder, and a wheel of fortune, presiding over the entire course of local fate.

We see personification of place again in Rudyard Kipling’s “The Song of the Cities,” in which the British imperialist has nineteenth century Bombay, Calcutta, Rangoon, Halifax, and other cities speak of their own qualities as tribute to the British realm. Cape Town dreams of one land under the empire “from Lion’s Head to Line.” With no sense of irony, each city is its own person, singing lyrics of colonial aspiration and acclaim, all finding glory as individual subjects of Queen Victoria.

Hundreds of popular songs are sung today about the cities we live in, from Randy Newman’s “Baltimore” to Bruce Springsteen’s “Streets of Philadelphia.” In “L.A. Woman,” The Doors personify the City of Angels and embrace her dark magical tension. We can imagine Jim Morrison in the heat and night of Sunset Boulevard and imagine ourselves too in love with the searing, yearning embrace of Los Angeles. We can imagine the flirtation of Hollywood, the beckoning of Santa Monica, the lies of Brentwood. We can imagine the city as a nubile starlet, as a reigning star, and as an aging movie queen ready for her all-too-strange and harrowing close-up.

In all these instances, the city lives. It breathes, hurts, and offers salve. It churns, congests, and absorbs our confidences upon its warm asphalt skin. The city asks for toil, seduces desire, and leaves us let down. There is the angst and promise of place, mirroring our imperfections and all that we are.

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