

On Life and Meaning

MARK PERES

Episode 7 – David Wagner – Cities and Memory

What Carl Sandburg, Greek Mythology, Rudyard Kipling And Jim Morrison Have in Common

And now a personal word,

When I hear David Wagner speak about cities and memory, I'm reminded of the poem *Chicago* by Carl Sandburg.

*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 the poem begins. The poem is the first that appears in his book *Chicago Poems*, published in 1916, that personified the city, giving voice to its landscape, and defining Chicago ever since. In its muscular free verse, the poems celebrate the fierce and pugilistic terrain of the city. Sandburg speaks of the city as a 'tall bold slugger,' and 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 course and strong and cunning' have become part of city lore, giving Chicagoans an origin myth and instructions on how to act. 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 the human condition.

The ancient Greeks believed that every place had its own 'consciousness of place' given form in the city-goddess known as Tyche. Tyche was the presiding deity of cities 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 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. 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 19th 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 empire 'From Lion's Head to Line.' Each city is its own person, singing lyrics of colonial aspiration, all finding glory as individual subjects of Queen Victoria. With all irony lost.

We personify those things with which we are in relationship. Place determines who we know and what we do, and therefore, to a large extent, who we are.

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*, Jim Morrison and The Doors personify the City of Angels and embrace her in dark magical tension.

*I see your hair is burnin; Hills are filled with fire
If they say I never loved you; You know they are a liar
Drivin down your freeways; Midnight alleys roam
Cops in cars, the topless bars; Never saw a woman so alone*

We can imagine Morrison in the night and heat 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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