correspondents at large
LONDON

Readable City

RACHEL BOWLBY

"READING THE CITY" IS SO COMMONPLACE A METAPHOR THAT WE TEND NOT TO SEE OR HEAR IT AS SUCH: IT IS AN INDIFFERENT BUILDING in the lexicographical landscape, something we see and pass by every day without giving it a second look. Geographers, sociologists, and architects, as well as literary critics, all speak of—and write about, and design courses on—the "legibility" of the city, usually taking the phrase for granted, taking "reading" as read. But why should it seem so obvious to speak of reading in relation to urban experience? (Or, putting this from another direction, why does "reading the village" sound like a contradiction in terms?) And what kind of reading is being evoked when we go about "reading" the city?

Reading "city reading," we come first to a relatively simple meaning, suggesting a process of orientation. If you can read the city, or bits of it—this landmark, this person, this street—then that means that "you know where you are." The city that is read in this way is like a map of itself, with repeated signs that have readily supplied meanings. "Readers" decode what they see, smell, or hear; their capacities to do this differ according to their skills in general city literacy or in the signs of this particular city or neighborhood, or according to the variable legibility of the signs out there to be read.

In book 7 of *The Prelude* (1805), city reading appears in several guises, beginning with this simple sort, which suits a process of gradual familiarization with what is initially strange. Wordsworth evokes the contrast between the fantastic travelers' tales of London that he heard in his Lake District childhood and his own experience of the place in adult life, and he uses a reading metaphor: "And now I looked upon the real scene; / Familiarly perused it day by day" (139–40). The speaker teaches himself to read the city "scene." Later, referring to the infinity of urban spectacles "that do each . . . / Look out for admiration" (567, 571), he says that he did not make "unto myself a secret boast / Of reading them with quick and curious eye" (579–80).

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But against and alongside the readable Wordsworthian city is something else, an unreadable London of "blank confusion!" where nothing and no one is known:

> How often, in the overflowing streets,
> Have I gone forwards with the crowd,
> and said
> Unto myself, "The face of every one
> That passes by me is a mystery!"
> (695, 594–97)

Uninterpretability, multiplied ad infinitum—the crowd, the overflowing, "every one"—is at the other extreme from the sameness and comparability that is presumed for a practice of decoding, in which sights and persons are read according to known classifications and there is no "mystery," nothing hidden or incomprehensible. From this endless series of unknowable passersby, Wordsworth chooses one,

> a blind Beggar, who, with upright face,
> Stood, propped against a wall, upon his chest
> Wearing a written paper, to explain
> The story of the man and who he was. (611–14)

The description, including mention of a story that cannot be read by its blind subject, brings into the picture of the city a piece of real writing whose superficial legibility—the speaker can see what it says—only points to another kind of unreadability, through the sense of an irrevocable separation of the man himself from the "paper" that supposedly tells his story and "who he was." Whereas the metaphoric perusal of the city brought things closer, made them "familiarly" everyday, the actual "written paper" here marks a distance. Literal legibility—the identifiability of sequences of letters and their meaning—is the sign of a more fundamental absence of human understanding, in which the impossible connection between two men appears as the inability of one really to "read" the other.

Poe's "The Man of the Crowd" (1839) invokes versions of the same three kinds of city reading. In the story's opening scene in a London coffeehouse, the convalescently curious narrator has "a cigar in my mouth and a newspaper in my lap," in which he has been intermittently "poring over advertisements" (84). This actual reading then gives way to a study of the rush-hour crowd of pedestrians passing the window, in which "I descended to details, and regarded with minute interest the innumerable varieties of figure, dress, air, gait, visage, and expression of countenance" (85); some of these varieties he then systematically proceeds to separate out and list, together with their identifying features. This urban observation is displayed as a form of classificatory comprehensiveness. The omnivident narrator calls it reading: "it seemed that . . . I could frequently read, even in that brief interval of a glance, the history of long years" (87). Finally, the third kind of reading appears in the shape of the "absolute idiosyncrasy" of a figure who cannot be classified and whose hidden and therefore unreadable story spurs the narrator to the futile pursuit that occupies him for the rest of the tale: "'How wild a history,' I said to myself, 'is written within that bosom!'" (88). Poe's story is framed at both ends by a declaration of unreadability that is itself cast, unreadably, in a foreign language: "*er lässt sich nicht lesen*" (84). But the words are immediately translated—"It does not permit itself to be read"—as if to make utter unreadability at least readable as such. At the beginning the sentence is referred to "a certain German book"; at the end the subject is the elusively unknowable "man of the crowd" himself.

The two metaphoric senses of reading in both Wordsworth and Poe point to opposite types of interpretation. On the one hand, reading is a fairly straightforward, learned skill in which urban details are understood as signs with common meanings. On the other, there is the profound, in-depth "reading" that is inexhaustible and ultimately impossible, descending beyond evidentiary detail to the absolutely idiosyncratic, for which there is no

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shared code or language. This nonreading is prompted by the confrontation with someone or something that cannot be assimilated to a recognizable, known pattern. In the absence of the codes or keys that would make assimilation possible, there is "blank confusion" and dislocation: Poe rushes out of the café to follow his man, and Wordsworth's "mind did at this spectacle turn round / As with the might of waters" (615–16). Feasible, practical reading produces or enables the comfortable relation that gives urban subjects their imagined familiarity in and with their surroundings, while unreadability marks the breakdown of that settlement, as if exposing it as merely provisional. But the strangeness of *reading* as the term for either experience, either mode of relation to the city, remains.

Wordsworth's and Poe's texts provide clues to one possible explanation for why it might be that we "read" the city. Both include real reading and writing as part of their descriptions of London. Poe's narrator is initially absorbed by newspaper advertisements, among other things. In book 7 of *The Prelude*, apart from the blind beggar's written paper, there is mention of other forms of street lettering:

> Here files of ballads dangle from dead walls;
> Advertisements, of giant-size, from high
> Press forward, in all colours, on the sight;
> These, bold in conscious merit, lower down
> That, fronted with a most imposing word,
> Is, peradventure, one in masquerade.
> (209–14)

Words and images compete for the passerby's attention, demanding to be read—and Wordsworth and Poe take note of these forms of urban writing as prominent, in-your-face aspects of everyday urban reality.

Thus, the readable city in the nineteenth century is not only a metaphor. This city is readable—literally, whatever "literal" reading might mean, in this or any other context. Experiencing the city, where posters and newspapers are concerned, is also, plainly, a matter of reading. As something to do, by choice or by chance, whether glancing at a poster or stuck into a newspaper, and as involving a material "written paper" to touch or see, reading is really and unmetaphorically a part of everyday urban life. Long before Walkmans, let alone iPods, it can also provide people with their own semiprivate space in a public place. Like daydreamers, readers are in a world of their own, poring or perusing or just browsing; but their partial absence from this one, unlike that of daydreamers, is visibly marked by the presence of the book or newspaper.

There is a further way that actual reading is highlighted in the nineteenth-century city. In both metaphoric models of city reading, decoding and "depth," the letters themselves fade from significance, their role being only that of the means to the meaning, simple for one and unfindable for the other. In the case of advertisements, in newspapers and on walls, the letters stand out, not only if they are "giant-size," on the scale of the poster, but because they are part of a visually attractive design. Seeing the letters aesthetically is another kind of literal reading.

In the early part of the nineteenth century, more and more urban reading crossed the quotidian path of the city dweller. There was an increasing number of daily newspapers, with rising circulations. New printing technologies, especially lithography, greatly expanded the production of posters, as well as offering more sophisticated design possibilities, with the result that posters were everywhere you looked—or would have seemed so to twenty-first-century eyes. The nineteenth century was the multicolored age of the postered city—until, in its final decades, restrictions and regulations were introduced in European countries and in the United States. (Marking now this historical turning point, the phrase *Défense d'afficher* 'No bill posting,' followed by the precisely dated specification of the "loi du 29 juillet 1881" 'law of 29 July 1881,' can still be seen etched into Paris buildings. Ironically, only

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this writing on the wall can secure it forever as a writing- and image-free zone: no longer just a wall, it becomes a wall that has to be read as being just a wall—a wall that announces, in writing, that it is not a surface for reading matter.) Newspapers, too, had a Victorian high point, before the cinema and the radio and then TV cut into the primacy of this written news medium. And with the extension of education, people who lived in cities were now themselves mostly literate, seeing their urban world through reading eyes. We may have forgotten the details of this nineteenth-century backstory, but it helps to explain why in the twenty-first century, texting or not as we go, we are still, automatically, reading the city.

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