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*I have come to sing the lore
of the modern mega-city.*

Imagination & THE CITY

Odia Ofeimun

A city is like a poem. You enter it, and you are into a world of concentrated time. Different ages, said Mark Twain, are brought together. Different histories spanning a common geography. And so, you are in the City of God but have not left the City of Man. The secular meets the profane and untold extremities are resolved into a common sensibility. The more the diversities are threshed into a common image, the more intense the experiences they yield; and the more they enlarge our consciousness and capacity to create.

The sheer meeting of disparate elements and the consequent necessity to make conversation possible between conflicting tendencies! This is the essence of both the poem and the city: in them, every event invokes and maps, evokes and repeats, another event. This breathes an uncertain bonding; but a bonding, all the same, which is not necessarily determined by any



ancestral lore. A certain here-and-nowness arises from greater openness between its constituent parts, and between them and the outside world. In cities as in poems, the past does not overwhelm the present; its proximity speaks at one and the same time through all the events and images that you come across; which is how the present creates its own myths in which all the old myths are given accommodation. This is how the city approximates the highest form of poetics.

Quintessentially, it is an issue of a universal vernacular, a mode for breaking down the garrison of individuality and the fortified ways of the different histories and the different motivations in the human adventure. It is a poetics linked to origins, size and geography, defined by all its parts rather than by a fraction of it. The extent to which this has become irreversible is, truly, what gives the name of city to mere vastness and sprawl. This must be emphasized: for the citiness of a city lies in the absorption of its many parts into a common whirlpool. Its core experience intimates a *civis*: a place of civilization where people who may not have the same occupation, or accept the same ancestors, and people who may not bow to the same deity, can live within a common frame of politics, thus entrenching the possibility of shared decision-making as a permanent way of life. The city is, in this sense, an ever-ready challenge because it is continually suggesting the necessity to find a common morality that can hold people together. The city, as such, has proved to be humankind's most permanent experiment in living together beyond the ethic of hunter-gatherers.

Invariably, like a poem which must represent so many diverse elements in the concentrated time of a metaphor, the city can beget abstraction and anonymity. This is both its strength and the source of its many tragedies. Anonymity enhances individuality; it encourages the persistence of peculiarities and motives what may appear to be blurred because of the sheer profusion, the frequency of their manifestation. But as individuality may be embossed only by not destroying the bonding that makes living together a pleasurable adventure, the room available for its expression becomes, inevitably, a source of common problems; problems encountered commonly by different people and to which no

individualistic, but only common solutions, can be found. A new kind of creativity, therefore, is almost law. In the context, to talk of common solutions means never forgetting that a metaphor necessarily changes the individuality of images that it hitches together. The problem arises: how to ensure that what is lost by the individual in the process of responding to common needs results in a genuine enhancement of the quality of life across the board. Otherwise, the goal is not to reduce extremities to sameness but to channel the tension between them to a conversational civility: engendering a marvelous reality that allows diversities to flower; a flowering without which the clock of cities, the citiness of cities, may stop ticking—like music that runs flat because it lacks a contrapuntal.

By the same token, we must acknowledge that when different images in a poem have not been worked into a conversation, it is as if the different parts of a city were to become garrisons of uncommunicative departments with all poetics ruined and citiness jeopardized. This is the paradox of cities that are divided as Johannesburg and other South African cities were, by racism, or tribalism as in the case of Sabongaris, the stranger quarters induced by British policy in many Northern Nigerian cities. The more common divide is the untenable state of derelict slums sitting side by side with massive skyscrapers in many metropolises of the world. Surely, no matter how much science, how much industry and endowment of the arts, and how many journeys to space become the vernacular of progress in such cities, they cannot, properly speaking, be called civilized places. Whatever else they may be, to the extent that they accommodate such distancing, such divisions, they are uncivilized forts. They lack the modality for a true *civis*. For civilization, as we have suggested, implies a capacity for sustained conversation between the dissimilar such that extremities may be tempered and civility enhanced. Thus, a *civis* suggests the necessary revision of that code which makes the protection and defence of what is mine an ineluctable basis for distancing, aggression and assault on what is yours. It requires the elimination of the blind spots which occlude shared needs between political spaces. It should



yield common solvents that link people to more objective interests than those divined by ancestry.

II

Being human, we must wonder how people survive where the notion of the city as a *civis* is in distress. How do people survive in such cities without being crippled in their bodies and in their minds? What possibilities are there for transcending such distress? These indeed are the questions that creative writers have tried to unravel for as long as there have been cities. Across the ages, especially in Western literature, there has been a deep-seated dissentience with the poetics of living which cities represent. A virtual cult of city-bashing has been on the prowl in the literatures with a certain universal ramification. Its most critical edge arose from a distate for the horrid circumstances of the early decades of the industrial revolution when capitalism traded on its unacceptable faces: crowded and unsanitary living, child labor, prostitution and the progressive breakdown of the deference that characterized relations between the higher and the lower classes. The cult of city-bashing was given much lease by the tendency for the rural virtues to be undermined in the smoky tenements and cement jungles (as now in the polluted conurbations assaulting the ozone layers), and the congested streets, to which the desire for opportunities, and the sheer craving for a means of livelihood, if not adventure, drove millions.

Of course, it must be acknowledged that it is a short-memoried view of the city which sees it as a function only of the rise of capitalism. Such a view is very much due to the heavy weather made by the Romantic Movement in general and the Romantic poets, in particular, of the breakdown of the rural virtues. The Romantics were seduced by the beauty of the small. No one put it better than Jean Jacques Rousseau, the French philosopher, who not only wished for the idyll of the rural environment but hoped that future polities would be small affairs of the pattern and mode that he prescribed for his native Geneva. However, like all the Romantics, especially those who were to be accosted in later

decades by the full-blown monstrosities of industrial conurbations, Rousseau had to face the reality: that the creative urge engendered by science and industry, the knowledge generated, and the growth of common sensibilities evolved over and above the more parochial rural virtues, were a function of the rise of the city in history.

What, it seems, the Romantics saw but could not immediately assimilate, is that the destiny of the human race is tied up, ineluctably, with large conurbations. It has taken time for this to become commonplace. Otherwise, if urbanization is a scourge, it is an inexorable one: a feature of organized life whether in Nineveh, Babylon, Cairo, London, Berlin, New York, Tokyo, Rome, Ibadan, Nairobi, Johannesburg, Kano, New Mexico, Brasilia, Timbuktu, Delhi—the ancient, the modern, the universal city. In whichever time or place, the pervasiveness of the city across time has made it naive to use industrialization—machines, the rise of science, the mass media, skyscrapers and the increased speed of movement in cars, railways, and aeroplanes—as the full measure of the character of a metropolis. To do so is actually to ignore the almost unchanging nature of what we have called citiness and to which writers and folklorists have been responding in a fairly coincident manner whether in ancient Greece, Rome or in the completely non-literate urban environments that were known to sub-saharan Africa. In this respect, Charles Dickens' London and Cyprian Ekwensi's Lagos belong to the same bend in the river.

The truth is that once cities are accepted as the destiny of all mankind, they become a challenge to be confronted and embraced; not something to be deprecated. They become, not a cause for escapism into the presumed idyll of rural peacedom, or the humdrum security of daily life that Marx described as rural idiocy, but a prod to the imagination, intimating how cities may be built which express the idyllic, whole-earthness and healthy greenness associated with rural felicity. Something distinct from the cement and steel and glass jungles that most cities are. The hope is that cities may be built in which children can grow as children rather than be thrust into the forced-draft adulthood waylating



them in the overcrowded slums of the megapolis: places where there are no playgrounds, no parks, no sidewalks for normal dwellers and where daily living is an adventure insinuating all manner of risks and tragedies. The presumption is that human imagination is capable of building an alternative, the Good City, one in which life is not so much a war against the neighbor but an enterprise to find the missing link that turns distances and anonymities into insensitivities. It demands a form of imagination that poets, writers and artists are supposed to have; and, which I think is why it is not the experts—city planners, architects, the city cop and the estate manager—who are invited these days to talk about the city. The business of how we all live together in cities is certainly too important to be left to experts for whom city space may be no more than a laboratory of sorts for the execution of textbook inspiration. For that matter, experts are not necessarily the best suited to appraise how the use of space obtrudes on fellow-feeling for those who, like us, need the sun and air and water, rarities in the polluted and congested cities of today.

III: Read the City

It is a fact worthy of embossment as myth, that all the large conurbations, the cities and metropolises, the megacities, known to history have had similar problems. Read the poets of ancient Rome and Greece; listen to the folklore of all the clans, moieties, tribes, nationalities known to the world today. It is amazing how close ancient Rome is to modern New York and how much of a family resemblance exists between the city of London and Lagos in spite of superficial differences. The sprawl and the anonymity that size engenders; the diminution of the city dweller to an ant-size beside massive skyscrapers; the problem of filth and public conveniences. The perennial inadequacy of transportation and housing. The loneliness of individuals in the large crowds that pepper the landscapes and mindscapes of the city. We are confronted by all the factors that make the rural virtues appear superior to urban values: the absence of a sense of community, of communal welfare,

the underdeveloped nature of the practice of being your brother's or neighbor's keeper. Also, the decadence and the corruption of manners arising from an underdeveloped ethic of shared living by people of diverse backgrounds. The paradox is that, although resistant to, it is an invitation to a new ethic. A new sense of work. A new sense of law. Inescapably, although people in large urban settlements may believe that they can beggar their neighbors and thrive, they are also always more aware of neighbors than the rural environment makes possible. The urban ethic thrives on self-interest but one which instinctively highlights the fundamental commonality of interests on offer. Once recognized, it alters a sense of space and time. Or perhaps one should say that it depends on character of the governing principle, the organizing frame of the state structure, upon which city is modeled, as states were once modeled on cities.

This needs elaboration: for the state system or governing principle within which cities subsist account for what they may become. Begin with the world system which tends to over-determine the governing principles across geographies. As the city divided against itself in uncommunicative departments loses its salt, its citiness, a world divided by racial, ideological, or religious creeds, runs a similar gambit. The weaker side of the divide grows according to a will based on the stronger. The disposition of the weak is sucked by the sheer logic of power, if not stratagem, to bend to the strong. This, in the Southern Hemisphere, where reality is stark enough for us to see the suction effect of the Big Cities of the Northern Hemisphere, dredges more than symbolic power. For, in general, the city, especially the industrial city, is like a larger than life serpent that gobbles and enlarges, gobbles and bloats; it never gets smaller unless in the maw of a major natural disaster. No, cities hardly emaciate unless to create other cities. Nor do they die except in the rare eventuality when coal mines shut down, iron foundries go to pot, nuclear stations implode, or floods and famine overawe a geography and history. In a world of the rich and industrialized, the poor and largely rural live lives structured by warfare trade. The logic and logistics are of a beggar-my-neighbor paradigm, skewed to outmatching,



hamstringing and sucking in all potential competitors. Cities locked within this paradigm acquire the penny-wise disposition of ethno-marketeers: they turn trade into a form of robbery. They wheedle less well-heeled neighbors into victimhood in a profit-mongering that soon makes the poorer too object to buy from the rich.

Soon, the villager, permanently endangered, is overtaken by the desire to migrate to the city which exercises the pull of alternatives. The villager's propensity to migrate, if only as a shifting cultivator between the rural dump and the city slum, remains unstoppable. This is the case even when the destination is under eternal threat of being carted unceremoniously out of sight, off the rack, as city planners and minders of the civic ethos think of city renewal or a face-lift to humor visiting dignitaries. The nearness of the gleam of the city is compensation enough as it intimates opportunities that may not be open but could and would. Essentially, migration tells the endgame stories of where the villager is coming from, not where the villager is going. Thus, unless the source of migration, the village, is taken into account, and gets a good looking over, a hearing, its destination, the city itself, may never get a meaningful rethink and rework. The logic is the same across international boundaries as between the city and the village within national boundaries. As events in the world have proved since Margaret Thatcher's and Ronald Reagan's beggar-my-neighbor policy of the age of market forces in the eighties, the logic has a universal relevance. As the missionary economics which the duo adopted disregarded the Third world, except as a point of extraction for the aggrandizement of the West, so the minders of the city get too self-centered to consider the countryside. For them, it was a matter of maintaining and defending a part of world civilization at the expense of the rest. They would damn global harmony if it came to that. As ideologues who wished to privatize hope and enterprise, they derided public purpose and cultural economies that would not live by the same logic. Since autarky is an option that the City does not allow to those it sucks into its orbit, a forced-draft cultural economy is imposed on the less fortunate within the system. A structural

adjustment involving the devaluation of the national currency, a policy that Thatcher considered beneath Britain while the Labor Party was in power, was turned into the sense of being a Third Worlder. The City as victimizer was realized: allowing no alternative directions to those it held in thrall or forced into victimhood.

It bears repeating: that, as with migration from village to cities within national boundaries, so is the migration from the cities across hemispheres. The more the center oppresses or depresses the periphery, the more it encourages the migrations that it may eventually resent. Between the southern hemisphere and the metropolises of the northern hemisphere, immigration walls may be built to ensure an environment sanitized against the boat people, the gastarbeiter, usually the darker peoples now joined by the Others from the Eastern European maelstrom. The dimensions are most threatening to the idea of citiness. They may be viewed against the background of a West African situation where economic distress yields a refusal to accommodate so-called strangers, a self-perpetuating spectacle that provides excuses for sheer scapegoating and neighbor-bashing. It has been quite blatant in the behavior of Ghanaians who, in distress, expel Nigerians from their cities. In retaliation, insecure ruling classes in Nigeria, afraid of losing power and incapable of priming the economy, have deflected attention from their inadequacies by expelling Ghanaians in a see-saw of mutual attrition. The sheer spectacle of members of one ethnic group or nationality being expelled from a city to give living room to supposed indigenes offends the idea of the civis.

The history of pogroms in Africa in this century bears witness to its devastations. Not just a matter of what colonialists did in order to remain in control of the natives; it is also about what the natives do, fighting clan to clan, moiety to moiety, tribe to tribe, and nationality to nationality, sometimes in conformity with pre-colonial modalities or newly hatched enmities arising from modern competition for power and economic advantage. In Europe, the history of such pogroms runs like sores which the case of the holocaust against the Jews turned into an abscess. Clearly, wherever

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it manifests, it rests upon a pattern, a logic of begging neighbors which, in the end, becomes self-immolating. Usually, it is based on an architecture of prejudice which begins by granting the more menial jobs to the invited or uninvited migrant worker, the *gastarbeiter* who is the first to be fired, even in a literal sense, as economic downturns threaten. The logic is that of a welfare system, capitalist or socialist, which functions upon the need to see the guest worker or the stranger, as someone taking bread from the mouth of the citizen, the native. At first, it is a case of informal, or formalized, indifference towards the stranger and then as history has shown, towards the powerless native. This has implications for the management of both the physical and the mental spaces of the city. Eventually, the migrant's lot waylays the city.

Beat the Street

The civis, swollen by wave after wave, grows until, growing out of proportion to its capacity to manage city-ness, enters regress mode. Sometimes, this may happen in a whimpering sort of way, with migrations from its centers wolfing up the hinterland. Or, regression may take the form of unemployment—inevitable retrenchment of workers—the peppering of social life by economic uncertainties and the rise of vicious ideologies such as the intermittent re-emergence of neo-Nazi movements and the marching ogre of racism and ethnicity in many metropolises of the world. The example of Nigerian cities overrun by village-to-city migrations that have wiped out all civility from cityscapes is worth observing. It is not merely marked by the beggar colonies, but also the community of the homeless spreading from the shelter of bridges and overpasses to the derelict tin-shack slums that are increasingly under pressure from land-grabbing nouveaux riches who use their friends in government to overtake all town planning rules. The easy misuse of government power under the pressure of cronies and wheeler-dealers works out into a lack of creativity and planlessness that overcomes whole political and cultural economies. The yawn in the system may be viewed from the melee of not

only beggars but hawkers who swoop on the traffic jams and lock-jaws that define cityscapes.

To mention traffic jams is like twiddling a raw nerve in many cities: In Lagos, it is the rawest nerve. It is celebrated by its most popular musician, Fela Anikulapo-Kuti in his masterpiece of social criticism, *Confusion Break Bone*, about Ojuelegba where the convergence of the scarred will of motorists without the control of traffic lights, or the presence of a policeman or traffic warden tells the story of a city and a country that lacks managers. A city of blocked wills: let us call it that. It is a matter of blocked wills occasioned by a division of the heartmind of the city from the original divide between the city and the village. An incapacity to do overall thinking ensures that two mentalities overlap: the low-density thinking of the gleaming conurbations of the city where the administrators and city lords live and the high-density feel of the slummier zones where the masses of the people eke out their lives. Ikoyi mentality confronts the slum of Obalende. Victoria Island is serviced by the raucous howl of the beleaguered slums of Maroko and Ebutte Metta. And, following it, Surulere degenerates from a middle class haven and Ikeja which becomes the capital of the new administrative arrangement sprawls out into Shogunle as a service zone for the government reserved area. It is the new version of the role that Ajegunle—the famed jungle city plays for Apapa, the port city that, in the end, is the daily end point of business for the rats and cockroaches of the underground economy. Apapa happens to be the wharf of wharfs where the goodies tend to come from, which unites the con men and bootleggers who supply the hawkers on the streets.

The hawkers sell anything and everything from bread and imitation motor spare parts—Tai-one or Tai-two—to live birds and puppies and, of course, the ubiquitous “pure water” that’s anything but pure. Behind the trade on the streets are mafiosi-controlled underground economies that ramify from petty larceny to big time robberies. Honest street labor within the context of illegitimate trade opens out a vista that connects with corruption in government and corporate bureaucracies hamstringing and undermining the police and literally empowering the robbery gangs that, at night or in broad



day light, hold the city hostage, challenging neighborhoods to inventiveness that has led to the flowering of a garrison architecture: high-wall fences and huge iron-gates, Alsatian dog cultures and vigilante communities that hide gross underemployment and misdirection of valuable labor. The ensuing circumstance takes on an almost natural point in the face of an industrial sector in comatose—factories closing down in droves and being taken over and turned into churches at a rate that should make anyone wonder whether the workers who used to work in those factories are the worshippers in the churches.

The truth of the matter is that this city by the lagoon fascinates, if for nothing else, because it offers the closest Nigerian parallel to a melting pot. This, as I see it, is our prime city of crossed boundaries. It is the most open ground for the meeting of nationalities and the criss-cross of individual talent in this country. Hence it is like going to meet a good deal of all the colors of Nigeria when you come to Lagos. Yet I am only too aware that in many artistic circles, in spite or because of the celebration or send-up that this city has enjoyed in our literature from Cyprian Ekwensi, Wole Soyinka and Flora Nwapa to Ben Okri, Afam Akeh and Izzia Ahmad, Lagos is not regarded as a writer-friendly city. Let me concede the point straight away: that Lagos is not a city where you may read a book in the comfort of a bus or train or recollect emotion in Wordsworthian tranquility. Perish the thought! Lagos conjures images of traffic lock-jaws, progressively decrepit roads and rickety public transportation systems, crude commercialism, indifference to the products of the human mind, lack of places of genuine public relaxation, an inhospitable culture of hospitality, tortured banking services and, in general, the tendency for brash materialism and uncouth and abrasive human relations to overcome good sense and aesthetics.

All the same, in a country which appears to be running out of dreams, this city also provides the finest of Archimedean joints from which dreams may be regenerated and a new way found of gaining access to the future. Whatever our individual dispositions, we are face to face with the reality of a city that breathes creativity in dense and varied forms of

life, a variegation of lifestyles and colors, and an intermixture of motifs that brings all of Nigeria and, indeed, all of Africa together in one fist. It hits you with a certain comeliness, almost profound and unerringly beautiful when you consider the possibilities it holds out. All you need is to visualize the removal of the bottlenecks and communication jams in this city; consider the intensity of pleasurable interactions that its spaces could accede to a consequence and imagine what leisure would be available for self-recreation in a new world of thriving arts and culture – if only a little imagination was added to the raw energy of this city. And think of the fall-outs for the development of a reading culture and the special boon to imaginative literature in a Lagos free of communication jams and able to reach out to and be reached in return by other cities of the world outside the brash vernacular of what Fela Anikulapo Kuti describes as *shuffering and shmiling*. What a marvelous city of 'so so' enjoyment that would be. The truth of the matter, however, is that, from the standpoint of literature's role in enhancing cross-boundary activity, the reality of this city as a metaphor for the whole country is far too far from the ideal. We are still where we were during the Annual Convention in 1987 and the Symposium of 1988.

Lagos is easily one of the most congested and chaotic cities in the world. Prisons hold 200% more inmates than they are supposed to; women in maternity wards have to be discharged sooner than necessary to make room for others coming into already congested spaces. Some may even bring their own mattresses to take to the floor. Queues at banks and post offices were getting longer and longer until what are called new generation banks. Which, like the old guard, do not plug into the international culture of travelers checks because planners gave up planning within the chaos. In this city, intellectual life—like the intellectual life of all cities that are seats of governments before they become cities of learning—has progressively thrived on the opportunism of workaday politics. Its commercial sense is shallow, more kobo-wise than naira — efficient; its sanitation is an eyesore, one of the many modern capitals in which nightsoil is still dumped as it was done in the nineteenth century; its



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transportation is a nightmare. Even with the building of a national theater, Lagos is certainly not what may be called a city of culture although more cultural events certainly take place in this city than in all the cities on the West Coast of Africa combined. To crown the matter, it is one of the most expensive cities in the world. Even in these years of the horrid devaluation of the national currency to meet the purblind claims of the international market, the city is still one of the most expensive, perhaps, bested in this regard only by the alternate capital in Abuja.

This alternative capital was supposed to help escape the ambush of problems that had overawed the very processes of building a new city. The Federal Government of Nigeria decided to move the political capital to a site mathematically determined as the centre of the country. The purpose was to avoid congestion, traffic chaos, and the presumed impossibility of ridding the nation's Mecca from particularistic ethnic flavors. The new capital, soon inhabited through a forced draft program by the military administration, is reputed to be one of the largest construction sites in the world. But this is one instance, at least, in which the new literally 'bodied' out the old if only in the sense of being overtaken by the many pathologies which led to the abandonment of Lagos; a thieving class of military and civilian warlords swiftly overtook the need for creative planning and dragooned a horde of buccaneering contractors into the site.

The stink of corruption, presumed to be too much the vernacular of life in Lagos, became the breath of air in this Medina. Although whole communities were paid to move out of the area in order to create the reality rather than the illusion of an ethnically neutral zone to which all Nigerian from all the 428 groups could relate, the botched administration resulting from the interference of greedy administrators and contractors resulted in the problem of indigeneity becoming a problem even before the city took off. The indigenes were so unconscionably shortchanged that rather than move, they reasserted their indigeneship with vigor. The incoherence of federal policy ensured that one out of the many religious groups was having a headstart in determining the cultural ambience of the city. In effect, if

a new capital is actually emerging, it seems to be coming out of the existing city—the city of political wrangling that characterized the era of the first capital. To ensure that those who may feel disadvantaged by the movement from Lagos do not obstruct the new city, something calculated almost to guarantee that the new city is built in chaos was embarked upon: a rush to ensure that all government departments were garrisoned in the new city within a deadline. The result is a city in which the paucity of housing is making a mockery of a bureaucracy already in tatters from sundry assaults; a general scarcity of course induces a pressure on costs, inciting an inflationary spiral that those who remember the expensiveness of Lagos find infernal. Congestion and inflation have to be bedfellows in such a city, and the calm efficiency of planning which was supposed to be the bedrock of the dream of this all-nationality capital has not been able to find a habitation. Usually, when dreams are failing, ideologues whip out their wands, so you sometimes hear that it is the absence of private investment in the city that is the root of the problem; but we also know that cities built by private investment are no better. Usually, the toothmarks of greed are there for all to see: the disorganization and chaos that the absence of a unitary vision can inflict on a city.

Crisis is native to the situation because all large conurbations are necessarily hostages to a division of labor if only for the purpose of handling size and complexity. Where there is no structure or bureaucracy to deal with it, or where the resultant bureaucracy behaves like most bureaucracies by holding on to whatever it can grasp, the city grows wild like weed in gardens where there are no gardeners. Many such cities there are where no authority appears to be in charge even though elected mayors and city planners may grow on every street and alley. Such cities essentially may not be called the Good City. In the Good City there should be some authority in charge with which dwellers may identify. Creating such an authority and ensuring that it serves the constituents of the city and not just its bureaucracy is perhaps at the core of the many problems that cities face.

IV

It is also, in a way, the core problem that has challenged many creative writers. In the Third World where colonialism provides the kind of hiatus that the industrial revolution had for many Western societies, the fascination in the literature is with ancient societies that have been turned new, inside out, by new codes, a different culture. The most celebrated work in this respect must be Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* which traces the rise of Macondo from that time when things had no name and you had to point at them in order to indicate them. True, there is an underlying factor of primordial power in the redrawing of the city: it is prefigured by founding patriarchs and matriarchs whose composite image of themselves dissolves until all that is left is the normal swarm of plain city-dwellers shorn of myths except the most banally secular ones. Ngugi Wa Thiong'o in *Petals of Blood* and Ben Okri in *The Famished Road* provide the same sense of the growth of cities from unprepossessing beginnings. From times when hands could encircle the city to when an embrace meant a linking of so many hands around a seemingly endless sprawl.

All the cities—Marquez's Macondo, Ngugi's Ilmorog and Ben Okri's un-named city—grow in a haphazard fashion. They are unplanned cities. From small, rural beginnings in which everybody tends to know everybody, to headier times when the town is overawed by so many seeking fortune; so many luxuriating in the anonymity to pursue the things of their heart without the pull of family and the customs of more primordial ties. The city is not one until the idyllic concerns of the small artisan and the Macondo scientist re-inventing the wheel, because of a lack of contact with the rest of the world, is outgrown. As more denizens overcome the unpeopled spaces, a rampart buccaneering syndrome materializes which is symbolized in the case of *The Famished Road* by the image of the prize fighter, Azaro's father, who takes on the whole world to protect his family and the slum in which he lives. It is the spirit of individuals mangling to seize the day offered by the beast of a city that is set to consume you with hunger and violence unless you are tough, and wily and have eyes to see both men and the vermins who hobnob in the maelstrom of the streets. The spirit of rampart individualism however goes leg in shoe with a certain reaching for communion with neighbors. Fellow-feeling may be knocked sideways as the city grows. But there is in both Ngugi and Okri a picture of the city as a communion. There is the communion of those who have made good and are wallowing in obese insensitivity to the needs of other denizens of the city; and there is the communion of those who have not made good and are living on the edge of poverty and schizophrenia.

Equally disruptive was the looting of centuries-old accumulation of bronze and brass works: 2,500 bronze plaques and carvings: many of which were the means by which an oral society recorded its own history. Today, they

are to be found around in the museums of Europe. Dispossessing the city of many of those art works may well be said to have contributed to making the receiving cities of Europe acquire an age that gives them the character of much older metropolises. The fact that neither the Kingdom of Benin, nor the Nigerian State of which it now forms a part can recover the art works also means that the status of Benin as an old city is to that extent abridged. To boast so much past and so little to show for it means that although its inhabitants may wax lyrical about being the source of so much art culture, it can lay less claim to culture than the cities to which its arts have been shipped. It could be said with some justification that by her losses, it has ceded its age for the eternal youth imposed by the colonial encounter. It is an eternal youth that is not helped by the rise of modernist European architecture as well as the revamping, paving and macadamizing of main streets in the tradition of the colonizer. In the absence of much of the art that earlier generations bequeathed to the city, and precisely because there is hardly any interaction between Benin City and the present domiciles of its art, there is a dead letter, a hollowness which the power of its modern artists can never quite overcome.

An even more insidious side to this picture is the regression, the city's general incapacity to relate effectively to the sources of the knowledge by which it could overcome its historically imposed handicap. A parochial inward-looking propensity has induced a luxuriation of its traditional elite and hence its core indigenous population in the customs of its ancient past. Celebration rather than a capacity to question; valorization of yesterday's habits, including many bad habits, without a willingness to create a larger space for self-appreciation in accordance with new knowledges, has become the very bane of the society. A poorly interrogated past commingles with the anxiety of a poorly explored present: with the result that little, only very little of the knowledge that made it possible for a small expeditionary force of the West African Frontier force to annihilate the city has been assimilated. Such that 100 years after Benin city was conquered by the British, the inhabitants have not been able to come to terms with the changed circumstance of the world and the means with which their ancestors were overawed. Simple requirements of survival in a difficult world demanded that the city should, by 1997, have acquired the physical and mental instrumentation for resistance of a possible repeat of 1897. It tells a lot about the vibrancy and resilience of this city that if the British came back today, they could still have an ease of penetration that can make a mockery of both the city and the nation state of which it forms a part. It is a function of how the city, on its own, or handicapped by the state system of which it is a part, relates to and extracts from the world the means of its own survival and development.

I dare say that when you are a child born into such a culture, fed on a folklore which props up a communal memory that history books are only just catching up with,

the ambition to build or to learn how to build great cities becomes a pap to be absorbed with mother's milk. Unfortunately, unlike Ogun Ewuare who could create a tabula rasa by becoming an arsonist, and unlike the British conquerors whose arson led to the despoilation of centuries-old systems of governance and industry, all of us who must think of building cities, whether this is only in our heads, as poets, or as architects and town planners, must know that we cannot just build from our dreams. The environment to which we must apply our dreams has a say in the matter. To take on existing cities requires even more imagination than if we had to make a fresh start: almost in the proportion that a writer needs to plot a novel, an epic, a historical tragedy. Imagination here is not just a matter of populating the landscape of the mind but stretching the mind into landscapes already spoken for. No doubt, if a choice had to be made, a virgin land is naturally to be preferred to the spoken for. Imagination could then conform to a unitary principle, a plan, subject to diverse plural interventions. At least, this is the manner in which in this century we have seen cities being built from scratch by governments intent on abandoning the terms of existing cities. Even such cities, let us face it, are built from what is already in existence. A Nigerian should know this as ours is one of the few countries in the century that have had to jettison an inherited city and to set out to build a new Capitol from scratch.

Indeed, the manner in which new cities emerge from the old may be viewed in terms of the relationship between Lagos and Abuja. Since we are creative writers, our first measure of a city's greatness ought to be related to how its literature, I mean literature in the languages spoken by the people, has grown. I would say that the antiquity of this city is not justified by the volume of literature it produces. Even then, what is available is not given any environments, the story told is of lamps being lit and guttering under the table. As exemplified by a writer in this city who has an unpublished translation of Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* in the Edo language. Our translator, a creative artist in his own right, is as hidden as the greatness that once marked the annals of this city. Not unlike the case of Festus Iyayi whose many friends in this city did not know he was a novelist until he began to win international prizes. Understandably, we blame mass illiteracy for this. But the real albatross is larger. As in virtually all Nigerian communities, the city's fall from great is indexed by the non-accession to literary culture; it is a function of the displaced sense of romance as social education. The point is that a city which lacks autonomous prompting or one that shuns contacts with the rest of the world will sooner than later go into regress. Put differently, a city which fails to democratize the use of power and the access to knowledge is doomed to lose its citiness because popular vitality is soon mortgaged to a moribund sense of cultural correctness. Perhaps, in this regard, the most Nigerian example is provided by Sokoto, a city that mesmerized Clapperton in 1824 with a core of mallams who had mastered arcane philosophy and Euclidian

Geometry in Arabic. Today, in spite of efforts to correct old neglect by a self-satisfied ruling echelon, only Allah knows how many descendants of those mallams can deal with Euclidian Geometry in any language. Sokoto remains a lesson in how not to keep the knowledge industry in stasis.

To return to my autobiographical warrant: it happens that it was in Benin City that I began to take myself seriously as a poet in the late sixties. It was a different kind of city in a number of ways. For an aspiring writer, jobless and in need of self-recognition as an artist, Benin City offered the pleasures of "thirsting for sunlight." Absorption in things of the mind was passably available in the American Library, the British Council and of course the City Library which balanced out the nationalistic stock of the other two by offering rare literatures, from Rabindranath Tagore to the dissident writers of the then Soviet Union. The Mbari Olokun Club run by the ineffable Jacob Egharevba, the legendary historian, offered those seductive Black Orpheus editions of Christopher Okigbo, Dennis Brutus, J.P. Clark, Wole Soyinka, illustrated by artists like Bruce Onobrakpeya and Demas Nwoko. The Mbari Olokun Club was a shout away from the CMS Bookshop which was the most poet-friendly bookshop in the city. In it, the aspiring poet made the acquaintance of that unmatched series, the Penguin European poets, which offered an irremediable conversation with Raina Maria Rilke, Quasimodo, Hans Magnus Enzensberger and George Seferis and the lot who are today such outlandish names because we have regressed behind the raffia curtain of book famine. True, Benin City in the late sixties was not a city of literary communities in the sense in which today you have monthly readings of the Association of Nigerian Authors. But it was a city whose contact with the rest of the world was surer, more seminal, more inductive of creativity. Although we now have a larger number of literate people than in 1969 who may appreciate the literary arts, I think that in terms of the prospects available for the advancement of literature in both English and the Edo language, we are actually closer to the stone age. In this respect, Benin City is a very Nigerian city.

The truth is that most cities in the world are not built for the purposes for which cities are supposed to exist. They become a civis, a place of civilization, by default. They are not a polis: a place of legitimated power. They are frictional definitions of space which offend all the hopes that today's green movements represent even though they too have a view of cities which imply a regression, a necessary return to a rural past rather than the humanization of the cities that we know. The truth is that like Abuja, new cities are built from old ones, and those who mean to build cities must begin by learning how to deal with existing ones, how to make them livable. GR