

TEACHING THE ART OF POETRY

WALKING THE CITY

by Chris McCabe

Unfold a street map ... place a glass, rim down, anywhere on the map, and draw round its edge. Pick up the map, go out into the city, and walk the circle, keeping as close as you can to the curve. Record the experience as you go ... Catch the textual run-off of the streets; the graffiti, the branded litter, the snatches of conversation. Cut for sign. Log the data-stream. Be alert to the happenstance of metaphors, watch for visual rhythms, coincidences, analogies, family resemblances, the changing moods of the street. Complete the circle, and the record ends. Walking makes for content; footage for footage.

Robert MacFarlane, *A Road of One's Own*

Most of us would agree what 'coincidence' means in daily life, but there is a strong case for this having a different meaning for poets. Jung used the term 'synchronicity' to describe the experience of two or more events that are apparently causally unrelated occurring together in a meaningful manner. To count as synchronicity Jung said the events should be unlikely to occur together by chance. However, for many poets who write about the city, the very happening of a number of events taking place by chance is enough to imbue what they see with enough meaning to create poetry.

Writers thrive on groupings of meanings. Contrary to the appearance of connections in life that happen in an everyday sense, one approach to writing is to go into the world alert and looking for the resonance of events that are taking place in simultaneous time.

A theory that underpins this approach is Littlewood's Law, which states that a person alert for eight hours a day will experience one event per second, which works out as one million experiences a month. Littlewood defines a miracle as a one-in-a-million event. On this basis each alert individual will experience a miracle per month. How much more likely is that miracle to happen, at least in poetic terms, if we head into the city actively hunting out the experience of events taking place?

The more you know about the past of your city the more likely it is that coincidences can take place, this is because you are opening for yourself a whole world of past language and experiences that can clash fruitfully in your work with what happens in the moment of your walking. However you are far from chained to the factual. To get a sense of how free you are to make associations and map your own routes through the city take a look at Guy Debord's (the man who created the term 'psychogeography') visual map of Paris: <http://imaginarymuseum.org/LPG/debordpsychogeo.jpg>

EXERCISE

- Open a map of your city and circle a location that you will walk to. This can be a place that has personal or historical significance or be completely at random.
- Notebooks at the ready, here are the following things you will be looking for as you walk towards the landmark you have decided / stumbled upon for your walk:
 - Listen for overheard comments. As these come to us in fragments they are often already loaded with poetic potential. One keynote for walking the city is that ears as well as eyes should be open at all times.
 - Look for a physical item that you can take away with you to write your poem. This could be something that you buy as much as something you find on the floor: a wrapper, a newspaper, a fragment of writing.

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- Try and remember a personal word from your past, perhaps a word your family used or that you and a partner invented for something. Read Paul Muldoon's poem 'Quoof' (<http://www.paulmuldoon.net/recordings.php4>) to get a sense of how powerful the densely personal can be against a broader backdrop, in this case New York. If nothing comes to mind then make up a word for something you see. This will be included in your poem later.
- Write down an historical connection which comes to you on your walk. This might be generated from what you have read about your city e.g. its commercial past, well-known figures or it may come from your own history, things that have happened to you at the places you are now walking past.
- Now for some imagination. Look upwards at the skyline : what will the city look like in the future? Try and describe, even if just in an image or a sentence, what the future of the physical metropolis might be. Think of this part of the exercise not so much as heading into the realms of sci-fi but, to use JG Ballard's term, dealing with the 'visionary present'.

WRITING THE POEM

- Your poem will be addressed to the item you found in the city. Take a last look at the item then hide it away before you start writing. At no point during the poem should you mention the name of the item or look at it. The purpose of hiding the item is to blur its edges a little, to turn the hard physical object into something more mysterious Whilst not naming the object use strong visual descriptions and adjectives 'You are red like..', 'Your edges sharp' etc.
- As you are describing the item start to include the other fragments of the city you have written in your notebook. If you are writing in stanzas then why not write one stanza about the item and the next from one of your sources? If you are writing a prose poem, which can be a very effective technique for city-writing, why not shift from item to source and back to item from one sentence to the next? The structure of your work will be: 1) Description of item 2) Overheard comment 3) Description of item 4) Personal word 5) Description of item 6) Historical connection 7) Description of item 8) Vision of the future city.
- Be as fluid as you confidence allows, weave in and out of your sources.
- The title of the poem will be the location of the place that you circled on your map. How does framing the poem with this title alter the significance of what you have written? Does it lend some mystery to the more literal and descriptive elements of the work?

Make it a habit to walk the city from now on listening and looking, looking for connections with the past and trying to imagine the future. Always have your notebook, should the miracle happen!

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