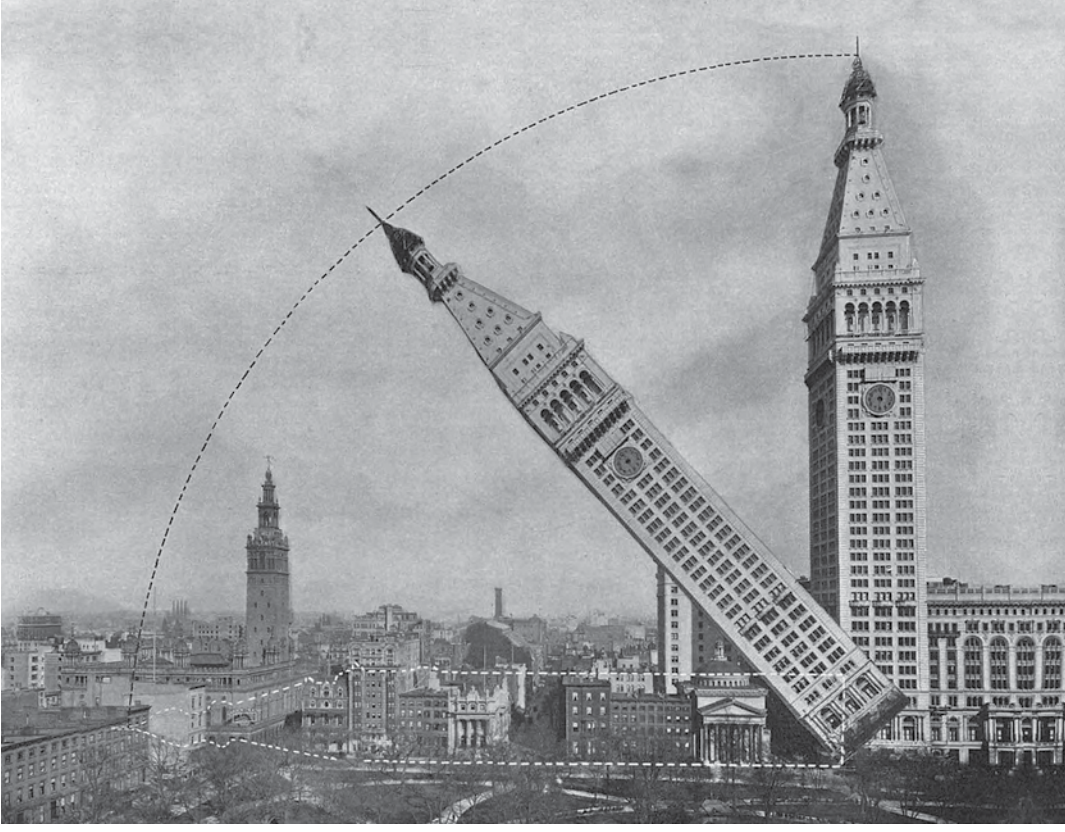

PROSE POETRY AND THE CITY

DONNA STONECIPHER

PROSE POETRY AND THE CITY

Illuminations: A Series on American Poetics

Series Editor, Jon Thompson

Illuminations focuses on the poetics and poetic practices of the contemporary moment in the USA. The series is particularly keen to promote a set of reflective works that include, but go beyond, traditional academic prose, so we take Walter Benjamin's rich, poetic essays published under the title of *Illuminations* as an example of the kind of approach we most value. Collectively, the titles published in this series aim to engage various audiences in a dialogue that will reimagine the field of contemporary American poetics. For more about the series, please visit its website at parlorpress.com/illuminations.

Books in the Series

Prose Poetry and the City by Donna Stonecipher (2017)

PROSE POETRY AND THE CITY

Donna Stonecipher

Parlor Press
Anderson, South Carolina
www.parlorpress.com

Parlor Press LLC, Anderson, South Carolina, USA

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper.

S A N: 2 5 4 - 8 8 7 9

Cataloging-in-Publication Data on File

1 2 3 4 5

Illuminations
Series Editor: Jon Thompson

Cover image: "If the Metropolitan Tower were to fall, how far would it extend?" *Sientific American,* 26 June 1909. © 1909 by Munn and Co.
The untitled poem "[Life inside grid object . . .]" by Dawn Lundy Martin, from *Life in a Box Is a Pretty Life*, is reprinted with the kind permission of Nightboat Books.
The poem "Mayor of Hell" by Elizabeth Willis, from *Turneresque*, is reprinted with the kind permission of Burning Deck.
Interior design: David Blakesley
Cover design: Veronika Reichl

Parlor Press, LLC is an independent publisher of scholarly and trade titles in print and multimedia formats. This book is available in paper, cloth and eBook formats from Parlor Press on the World Wide Web at http://www.parlorpress.com or through online and brick-and-mortar bookstores. For submission information or to find out about Parlor Press publications, write to Parlor Press, 3015 Brackenberry Drive, Anderson, South Carolina, 29621, or email editor@parlorpress.com.

Contents

PROSE POETRY AND THE CITY

1. Preliminaries

When Charles Baudelaire wrote the first theoretical text ever written about prose poetry, it took the form of a dedication to the editor of the newspaper that would publish his prose poems, Arsène Houssaye. In it, he wrote, "Which one of us, in his moments of ambition, has not dreamed of the miracle of a poetic prose, musical, without rhythm and without rhyme, supple enough and rugged enough to adapt itself to the lyrical impulses of the soul, the undulations of reverie, the jibes of conscience?" Then he connected this dream to cities: "It was, above all, out of my explorations of huge cities, out of the medley of their innumerable interrelations, that this haunting ideal was born" (ix-x).[1]

This Ur-text for prose poetry is almost always printed in French and English editions of *Le Spleen de Paris* (also known as *Petit poëmes en prose*—little poems in prose),[2] even though Baudelaire did not necessarily intend for it to be there—the book was published posthumously in 1869. The letter, so poetic it is almost a prose poem itself, functions as a useful theoretical pendant to the form Baudelaire was experimenting with. But what exactly did Baudelaire mean by the curious statement about cities? It is all the more curious since a "huge city"—Paris—figures heavily in the formal poems of *Les Fleurs du Mal*. Which is to say that, for a time at least, rhymed and metered verse must have

1. Unless otherwise noted, all translations of Baudelaire and Rimbaud are by Louise Varèse.

2. Baudelaire alternated these titles in his letters and manuscripts.

seemed an adequate formal vehicle in which to express what it was like to explore huge cities.

In fact, over the century and a half since Baudelaire's letter was published,[3] the notion that the prose poem has a special relationship to the urban has become something of a chestnut, such that, for example, in her 2004 *Boxing Inside the Box*, a study of the prose poem and women writers, Holly Iglesias could state as a matter of fact:

> In the French context, a tradition of stringent syllabic versification, neoclassical formality and Romantic reverie could no longer match the social realities of an increasingly urban and industrial European landscape. Charles Baudelaire found a solution to this dilemma by pursuing what he described in the preface to *Petits Poèmes en prose* as "a poetic prose." (12)

And American poet Cole Swensen, also in 2004, in a brief essay called "Poetry City," wrote: "Prose poetry was the most radical new poetic form [in Modernism], and the one most tied to the urban." Although a number of scholars have dissected Baudelaire's dedication, and have even cast doubt on its sincerity, I wish to take him at his word and ask why, after having written *Les Fleurs du Mal*, his experience exploring "huge cities" led him to believe that his customary elaborately rhymed and metered verse would not be adequate to the "innumerable interrelations" that cities represent. More fundamentally, the question I would like to ask is: What, if anything, do the city and the prose poem have to do with each other?

In this essay, I consider the idea of prose poetry as ontologically urban, as uniquely expressive of urban experience, as claimed initially by Baudelaire, and as examined by a number of contemporary critics who have written on the prose poem, several writers of prose poetry, urban theorists, linguists, architectural theorists, and writers on the sublime. The

3. It was printed in *La Presse* introducing a set of twenty prose poems on August 26, 1862 (Mackenzie introduction to Baudelaire 2008, xiii).

appellation "prose poem" itself, as many have pointed out, is a contradiction in terms and foregrounds a transgression of form. Form is my preoccupation here: the use of prose "form" to contain poetic "content" (if we temporarily subscribe to the notion of a separation of form and content that has been systematically destroyed for a century or more by various writers, though never quite definitively).

Though the question had long turned idly in my mind, I first started to think I might have the beginnings of an answer about the relationship between prose poems and the city as I read the French philosopher Michel de Certeau's essay "Walking in the City" in his book *The Practice of Everyday Life*. The central premise of De Certeau's book, that supposedly passive consumers turn into active producers through the practice of "tactics" wielded as part of the survival strategies that we all engage in as part of everyday life, manifests itself in urban environments in the ways in which city-dwellers use the givens of the city idiosyncratically to construct unique paradigms of use. As the essay begins, the author is standing atop the World Trade Center looking out at New York City; he perceives that there are two New York Cities, the one he sees from above—an abstract, conceptual city—and the one experienced by the people below, "in" it—a lived city, thus laying out a rhetoric of vertical and horizontal positions. It struck me at the time that many of De Certeau's observations about the relationship between the subject and the objective city that the subject is walking through seemed to apply uncannily to prose poetry, in the sense of a lyric subjectivity moving through prose.

This essay is a record of my investigation into this question. It is as much of a flâneur as Baudelaire's figure moving down the Parisian boulevards, wandering, stopping to examine a painting in a gallery window or to sip a coffee in an outdoor café; it constructs an apparatus of Baudelairean *correspondences* inquiring into how the built environment of the poem relates to the built environments most of humanity now calls home. In the essay, I limit myself largely to American and French poetics, not only because the cross-pollination between these two countries' poetries has been profoundly influencing both since

at least Baudelaire's affinity for Poe in the mid-nineteenth century, but also because in the only other countries whose poetical histories I am well acquainted with, the UK and Germany, the prose poem has never really caught on (and in some circles is still automatically classified strictly as prose—"prose miniatures," in Germany). It is also an investigation into the historical trajectory of the prose poem; over the century and a half since Baudelaire's *Petits poëmes en prose* was published, prose poetry branched into two main types. On the one hand, there's the Baudelairean: poems that make heavy use of narrative structures and that bear more than a passing resemblance to short-short stories or flash fiction, such as those of Russell Edson; on the other there's the Rimbaudian: surrealistic or dreamlike collections of sentences full of unlikely, or unexplained, juxtapositions, such as in the prose poems of Rosmarie Waldrop.

The pinnacle of my wanderings found me wondering if the reason why Walt Whitman "invented" free verse in New York City and Charles Baudelaire "invented" the prose poem in Paris, both around the middle of the nineteenth century, and both in urban contexts, could be in some way related to the respective architectural fabrics of the two cities—New York City's vertical skyscrapers versus Paris's long horizontal Haussmannian façades. While Whitman was writing *Leaves of Grass*, inventions in steel manufacturing and elevator safety were contributing to the erection of the first seven-story buildings in New York, which constituted the infancy of the skyscraper (buildings Whitman extolled in his prose writings); while Baudelaire was at work on *Le Spleen de Paris*, Baron Haussmann was reshaping Paris with long, uniform blocks, in the process destroying the even more horizontal "old Paris." Both Whitman and Baudelaire met the challenges of burgeoning modernity with new modes of writing, but it was Baudelaire's enigmatic statement about huge cities I found irresistible to track.

At the end of my exploration, I arrived not at definitive conclusions about the nature of the prose poem (and by extension, free verse), but at a labyrinth I didn't expect to find (and might never make my way out of). Perhaps one could say I

ended up at the top of my own skyscraper, looking out at an intricate web of lights below me.

* * *

Not long ago, I attended a lecture by cultural theorist Homi Bhabha at the Haus der Kulturen der Welt in Berlin, in which he said in the opening remarks of his talk, which was on Kant and cosmopolitanism, that he had been "putting things together that had never been put together in that particular way before." "I have a whole set of reverberations," he said, "but no conclusions." This struck a chord with me, for more than drawing conclusions, "putting things together that had never been put together in that particular way before" has been my task in this book. I leave the reader to draw their own conclusions from the reverberations.

2. The View from the Top of the World Trade Center/"... this Lust to Be a Viewpoint and Nothing More"

As "Walking in the City" begins, De Certeau is standing atop the World Trade Center in New York City. The New York that he sees far below him turns, by virtue of his perspective, into a "picture"; its circumference perceptible, it becomes a representation, like a map or a painting. The actual life being lived among its buildings and streets is erased by the bird's-eye view, though De Certeau is still aware of its existence. This moment of standing far above the city leads De Certeau to the perception that, in fact, cognitively speaking, there are two cities: first, the city seen from a distance (in this case, from above), the city as *idea* (the "Concept-city"), immobile, "synchronic"—a cartographer's or painter's or urban planner's city (this city is a "text" that only turns legible from above). And second, as the camera zooms from the "panoptic vision" made available at the top of the World Trade Center down into the streets themselves, the city as *lived city*—a plethora of millions of wildly divergent individual experiences moving through time—which in turn nullifies the map, the picture. This second city is the city of stories, legends, myths. The man standing atop the World Trade Center enjoys panoptic vision; the people down below are "blind." According to De Certeau, the objective given of the first city, the Concept-city, as an administrative and legal entity within which each city-dweller is positioned, is appropriated

by the city-dweller—particularly the pedestrian[4]—through what he calls "tactics."

What are these tactics? The pedestrian, he writes, "goes only here and not there" (98). The pedestrian does or does not stop at a red stoplight, depending on how much of a hurry he is in or how he feels about authority, takes a shortcut through a back alley to get where she is going, stops to window-gaze at a bookshop but not at the jewelry store next to it, though both present themselves as equally available. Tactics render the city subjective, and thus transform it into the second city, the lived city. Both cities, the Concept-city and the lived city, coexist at all times, and a person is to varying degrees in a state of greater awareness of one or the other—which can be, as in the case of De Certeau's World Trade Center epiphany, a function of position and optical perception. The walker in the city is practicing "everyday life"—she is the individual tactically maneuvering with forces greater than she is, transforming herself with agency from a consumer into a producer.

This view from the top is a fantasy that has been in place since before such a viewpoint was even possible; it's the fantasy of the voyeur, who can observe without participating, who is turned, De Certeau writes, into "a solar Eye, looking down like a god" (92). The city from the top of a skyscraper is apprehended primarily as a spatial entity, while emphasis in the "lived city" leans toward the temporal. The city from above appears timeless—a train runs around a track like a toy train, around and around and around, suspended in a dreamlike tableau removed from the exigencies of time—while down below, it is the same train that a city-dweller is impatiently awaiting on a platform in Queens because he is worried about being late for work. With its panoptic vision, the solar Eye can see that the train is on its way; the worker, however, "blind," suc-

4. De Certeau posits an unmarked pedestrian in an idealized scheme, but of course walking in any city is always contingent upon the body doing that walking (or moving)—some bodies are more mobile than others, more welcomed than others, more able to recede into anonymity than others.

cumbs to anxiety and to rumors, i.e., stories, about the lateness of the train.

The representation of the city made possible by the verticality of the World Trade Center foregrounds its monolithic, monologic character. The view from the World Trade Center is

> the analogue of the facsimile produced, through a projection that is a way of keeping aloof, by the space planner urbanist, city planner or cartographer. . . . The voyeur-god created by this fiction . . . must disentangle himself from the murky intertwining daily behaviors and make himself alien to them. (92–93)

In other words, not only are dialogue, exchange, interaction, all rendered invisible, but the voyeur must actively "disentangle himself from the murky intertwining daily behaviors," he must reject what Baudelaire called the huge city's "innumerable interrelations." The author is "a solar Eye looking down like a god," but, like many gods, he is a lonely god, and whatever language he emits is immediately swallowed up by the emptiness surrounding him at such a height. Once the "god" has disentangled himself from the crowd below, he can represent the city however he likes—as a map, as a picture, as a concept, as a poem spoken by an "I"—with minimal resistance from contending agencies.

De Certeau uses a number of different names for the Concept-city, the city that results from the vertical perspective: "geometrical space," "panoptic spatial organization," the "urbanistic system," among others—which reflects, in part, the fact that there is not just one Concept-city, but that "Concept-city" stands for a type of conceptualized thinking that is engendered by either literal or figurative positions (actual distance, as atop the World Trade Center, or imaginative distance, as in the work of the city planner). He also blurs his terms when writing about experience in the "lived city": at times it is a "poetic" experience of space, at others he characterizes it as a "pedestrian unfolding of the stories accumulated in a place" (110). For De Certeau, who was not a literary scholar as such, the slippage

between "poetry" and "stories" likely did not matter; he used them interchangeably to indicate, let's say, semantic activities of the imagination. But poetry and stories are not only fundamentally different types of activities of the imagination, as I will show, but in fact, through its association in literary theory and linguistics with verticality and with monologic utterance, the poetic actually shares more structural similarities with visions of "panoptic spatial organization" as enacted by standing atop the World Trade Center than it does with the "blind" walkers "writing" the text that is illegible to them down below. In this sense, the poetic perspective is equated with a totalizing vision shared by the city planner and the bureaucrat. The city planner, the bureaucrat, the mapmaker are all preoccupied with organizing space in a monologic fashion (even if they are working collectively—the collective's voice becomes one voice)—the dialogue enters in when these forms are put into practice, among contending subjectivities, in the lived city.

Later in his essay, when De Certeau is writing about the localizing tactics of legends and myth, which the hyperrationalized city tries to stamp out, he compares the Concept-city to a totalitarian system:

> It is a symptomatic tendency of functionalist totalitarianism . . . that it seeks precisely to eliminate these local authorities, because they compromise the univocity of the system. (106)

As we will see, the poem's association with monologism and the vertical place it in close relation to this very "univocity."

The paradox is that the texts of the Concept-city (laws, handbooks, protocols, histories, etc.) conjured from the vertical perspective are usually written in horizontal, non-literary prose. Once the perspective shifts, and the subject is walking through the streets, the effects of this legal and administrative entity take on real form and serve to control her actions and movements—laws, infrastructure, private vs. public space, etc. They become objective, factual, informational—"prosaic"—and it is this prosaic administration of the city against which she wields "tactics."

The prose that Baudelaire invited into his poems to form his hybrid "poems in prose" was that of fiction rather than nonfiction prose.[5] And the city as a space of dialogic encounters is, as we will see, a fictionalized space. The "god" of poetry loses his halo, as Baudelaire writes in the prose poem "Loss of a Halo," and enters into the prose of the city—either the dialogic prose of fiction, or non-literary, administrative and legal prose—and it is in the negotiation between them that the prose poem is born.

Any act of creativity is a kind of tactic. But we might consider Baudelaire's adoption of the prose poem in the context of Haussmann's Paris as a radical tactic to take back some of the agency threatened by the "huge city's"[6] growing crowds.

All this is what made me think, while reading De Certeau's essay, of Baudelaire's remark that his prose poems were called into being by his explorations of huge cities.

5. Though a case could also be made for another genre, that of the journalistic anecdote then coming into its own in newspapers. But even the journalistic anecdote rests on the mechanics of fictional narrative.

6. Let's briefly consider what "huge" means: Paris's population grew steadily throughout Baudelaire's lifetime; by 1846 it had surpassed one million inhabitants; New York City's population, by comparison, was about half a million in 1850. By 1890 (Whitman's deathbed edition of *Leaves of Grass* was published in 1891), it had swelled to 1.5 million.

3. The Double City

Once one starts looking for it, this notion of a "double city"—Concept-city and lived city—appears again and again, particularly in France but not exclusively. The double city has much to tell us, both about verticality and about the universality of the desire to look down from a height on the rest of humanity. What is to be gained from this vantage point? A lot—even the power to think conceptually, according to the writers I'll examine. As a topos, this "double vision" will take us from the city to the country—and even to outer space.

For, though it was perhaps perfected in the city, the double vision is by no means limited to it; it can also be produced if the "picture" is a pastoral landscape seen from the top of a large hill, say, or a country village viewed from a bell tower. In Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*, the curé of a church has a similar experience from the top of his steeple:

> From the top of Sainte-Hilaire . . . the whole countryside is spread out before you like a map. Only, you cannot make out the water . . . to get it all quite perfect you would have to be in both places at once; up here on the top of Saint-Hilaire and down there at Jouy-le-Vicomte. (quoted in Frank 130)

In Proust—as is so often the case in Proust—this doubleness signals a lack; you can only ever be in one place at one time, either at the top of the steeple or "down there," and thus you are for-

ever doomed to be missing one or the other perspective. The result is the manufacture of longing. De Certeau is more sanguine; the two can be experienced at once—though only conceptually, from above, in our heads—and only at a remove. The people moving en masse down in the lived city, however, are blind because they do not possess the "solar Eye" and merely form part of the ant-like "networks of these moving, intersecting writings" (93) seen from above.

Proust's pastoral example is only one among many. John Brinckerhoff Jackson, in an essay sketching a history of the Western garden, "Gardens to Decipher and Gardens to Admire," in his collection *The Necessity for Ruins*, follows this desire for an aerial view within a pastoral setting back to the seventeenth century:

> In keeping with that growing desire for the aerial view which revealed the entire composition at a glance, the garden, in the words of a seventeenth-century French designer, was to be seen from above as one vast parterre, a single unit—hence the commanding position of the castle or palace with its terrace overlooking the succession of parterres, fountains, canals and avenues. (49)

The skyscraper can be understood as a direct descendant of that castle on a hill—except that it absorbs the hill into itself. A garden, of course, though it is composed of "natural," organic material, is no more natural than a city—it is thoroughly conceptualized planned space often masquerading as organically unfolding space (especially in the case of the English garden type, which has influenced gardens the world over).

The desire for these encompassing views from the tops of steeples and castles rose in tandem with the development of landscape as a commodifiable, objectifiable entity, as proven by the rise of landscape painting in Europe starting with Dutch landscapes in the seventeenth century and culminating with a craze for them in the nineteenth, when the Industrial Revolution was going full steam. The landscape painting came into vogue as the countryside began to lose out prominence to cities, which led the former to take on the nostalgic hue of a lost

paradise . . . but a highly commodifiable one. The landscape painting is a representation created by conceptual distancing, a kind of Concept-landscape akin to De Certeau's Concept-city. Raymond Williams, in his magisterial study of representations of countryside and city in English literature, *The Country and the City*, writes of the eighteenth-century landscape gardens that surrounded English country houses that the houses "succeeded in creating in the land below their windows and terraces . . . a rural landscape emptied of rural labour and of labourers; a sylvan and watery prospect . . . from which the facts of production had been banished." These landscapes were made possible by "the cleared lines of vision; the expression of control and of command" (179). So not only did the perspective from above provide "panoptic vision," but it erased the inconvenient facts upholding its superior position.

De Certeau focuses on the city, I think, for several reasons: first, because the contrast between the conceptual and the lived experience is far more perceptible in the city than in the country, and second, because the city is much more marked by the kinds of legal and administrative constraints represented by "the city" than are countryside or village. It is also, of course, the hub of global capital. It is the sharpness of the contrast between the rationalized socioeconomic systems of the man-made city and the unpredictable behavior of the people that use it that calls forth the cognitive split into two separate—if interdependent—entities. Williams refers to this as a "double condition," and calls it the city's most characteristic affect: "the random and the systematic, the visible and the obscured, which is the true significance of the city . . . as a dominant social form" (224).

The French philosopher and urbanist Henri Lefebvre, in his 1970 book *The Urban Revolution*, makes a similar distinction, but uses different terms: *habitat* and *habiting*. *Habitat* as a noun, Lefebvre explains, came into being when the practice of city planning did, when a few men decided with ink and paper how a mass of people should "habit," instead of that "habiting" unfolding organically, as it had for millennia (81). The fact that Lefebvre uses a noun and a verb for the two sides of

what he calls a dialectical relationship is telling (in the French original, he turns the French verb *habiter* into a noun, *l'habiter*). "Habitat" is a noun and also an object that can be perceived from the top of a skyscraper, like a map; it can be conceptualized and reified—but "habiting" cannot.

In a passage not dissimilar to De Certeau's scenario of standing atop the World Trade Center, Lefebvre figures this conceptual perception of the city from above as a kind of "u-topia" (no-place):

> On a map of Paris (the so-called Turgot map of approximately 1735), u-topia can be neither read nor seen, and yet it is there in all its glory. It is where the *gaze that overlooks the large city* is situated, a vaguely determined place, but one that is carefully conceived and imagined (imaged), a place of consciousness; that is, a consciousness of totality. In general, this place, imagined and real, is found near the borders of *verticality, the dimension of desire, power, and thought*. (129–30; emphasis added)

Lefebvre imagines a "gaze" overlooking a large city, from a "vague" place that nevertheless lends a "consciousness of totality." The "u-topia" and "consciousness of totality" are exactly what De Certeau experiences from the top of the World Trade Center, too: it is the Concept-city that momentarily suspends the lived city, "dis-places" it from that remove "overlooking." The lived city is not to be seen on the map or in the panorama of New York City spread out before the eyes of the viewer, but it is "seen" by the conceptualizing mind. The human being, who is himself full of unresolved contradictions, Lefebvre writes, is constantly navigating between the contradictions of the urban as experienced and the urban as conceptualized (85), as the person looking at a map or standing atop a skyscraper navigates between the conceptual and the experiential. For Lefebvre, the double city is a perpetual negotiation between concept and experience, and thus an analogue for lived human perception in general. But what we should also note here is Lefebvre's equating "verticality" with "desire, power, and thought," which will later take on greater significance in this essay.

John Brinckerhoff Jackson also writes about the double city, and how this perception was created along with the advancement of urban infrastructure, in another essay, "The Discovery of the Street":

> To the men of the Middle Ages, the most familiar image of the city was a conventionalized cluster of towers and bastions and roofs, vertical in feeling, so tightly compacted that there was no indication of the streets and spaces within it.
>
> The gradual supplanting of that essentially architectural image . . . by our own remote view *down* from outer space is one measure of how our perception of the city has changed. (55)

The representation of Hannover in this woodblock print by Heinrich Bünting (ca. 1584, see Figure 1) is an excellent illustration of the tightly compacted verticality Jackson is referring to. Our perception of the city changed, he writes, with the addition of streets, which evolved out of marketplaces and which enhanced the mobility of goods and services and of the residents themselves.

Figure 1. Wood engraving with view of Hannover from the west, from a chronicle by Heinrich Bünting, ca. 1584. Used by permission.

Streets mapped out a network of interactions that still accounts for any city's primary characteristic today, so that "we perceive the city less in terms of architecture than in terms of communication" (55). These two terms match De Certeau's double city: on the one hand "architecture," or the Concept-city, which is timeless, representational, "habitat"; and on the other, "communication," or the lived city, characterized by "habiting," in which the variables in any city at any given moment are interacting with and changing each other through time. According to Jackson, the Concept-city once dominated, but has been supplanted by the lived city in our perception via our increasing technological capacity to communicate remotely. Ironically, it was the development and expansion of the "communicating city" that created the ability to construct a World Trade Center in the first place—from the top of which the city could be turned back into "architecture."

But note that Jackson doesn't stop at the top of the World Trade Center and the "solar Eye" made possible there; the gaze he writes of comes all the way from outer space.

Which brings us to ancient Greece. For the articulation of a desire to view humanity from above can be traced back at least that far. In a dialogue written by the satirist Lucian (CE 125–CE 180) entitled "Icaro-Menippus: An Aerial Expedition," the character Menippus recounts to an unnamed friend a trip he makes to the moon and to Jupiter. Having purloined one wing from an eagle and one from a vulture, Menippus manages to attach them to his own back and then fly into outer space. Once on the moon, he looks down for a view of the earth and at first has trouble finding it: only the Colossus of Rhodes and the tower of Pharos help. Then, suddenly, he is able to see

> everything as clear as possible: looking down to earth, I beheld distinctly cities and men, and everything that passed amongst them; not only what they did openly, but whatever was going on at home, and in their own houses, where they thought to conceal it.

When the friend presses for details of what he saw from the moon, Menippus answers:

> You have often seen a crowd of ants running to and fro in and out of their city, some turning up a bit of dung, others dragging a bean-shell, or running away with half a grain of wheat. I make no doubt but they have architects, demagogues, senators, musicians, and philosophers amongst them. Men, my friend, are exactly like these.

Menippus's vision includes both of De Certeau's perspectives: at the same time he is able to see the cities from a distance, as objects, in which men run about like faraway ants; but he also sees the "lived cities," in which goings-on in the private realm ("in their own houses") are shown to him as through high-powered voyeur-binoculars. When his friend inquires suspiciously as to how such double (and intrusive) vision is possible, Menippus gives a wonderfully strange reply. While on the moon, he says, he was approached by the philosopher Empedocles, who advised him to take off the vulture's wing and wear only the eagle's: thus would he be granted eagle-eye vision. It is this vision, sharp and cold and supercilious, that allows Lucian to penetrate into the private sphere and that serves as the perfect vehicle for him to express his contempt for his fellow human beings (the philosophers come in for the worst of it). Only by gaining a perspective from above can he reduce them to the smallness—both literally and figuratively—of ants; and he uses this fanciful device of gaining an impossible perspective to launch a social critique.

But the double city can also be an inducement to dreaming. In a notation in his compendium of fragments about Paris, *The Arcades Project*, Walter Benjamin, a great explorer of "huge cities" himself and one of the most important thinkers on Baudelaire, imagines this same cognitively double city (this time Paris, not New York), but with the components of its "administrative and legal entity" merely dreamed, and never executed: "To set up, within the actual city of Paris, Paris the dream city—as an aggregate of all the building plans, street layouts, park projects, and street-name systems that were never

developed" (410). The "dream city" situated within the "actual city" reveals the latter to be more a locus of desires than a set of inevitabilities. The dream city is the conceptual, all the more so as its concepts, never actualized, remain figments of the imagination, the realm of "power, desire, thought," the u-topia that can only be seen from above. The city planner, the landscape architect, the poet (the namer), stand at a distance atop the skyscraper and "dream" of possibilities of organizing the space; then Benjamin dreams of setting up this dream city within the actual city, as if all the city's possible fates had not vanished, but remained present in the cityscape as a kind of ghostly overlay.

In Baudelaire, Benjamin found the literary figure through whom the rise of the urban, a subject he was deeply invested in, was most poignantly expressed. As has been noted, however,[7] he, curiously enough, never directly addressed the radical form of prose poetry that for Baudelaire was a "haunting ideal" born out of his "exploration of huge cities."

And finally, as we are now already in Paris, let's look at an essay Roland Barthes wrote about standing atop not the World Trade Center, but the Eiffel Tower. This vantage point reveals to Barthes the "dialectical nature of all panoramic vision" (243). Akin to De Certeau's notion of the two cities, Barthes writes about the two contradictory effects the spectator feels while looking out at Paris from such a height: first, bliss, and second, the impulse to decipher:

> . . . on the one hand, it [the panoramic vision] is a euphoric vision, for it can slide slowly, lightly the entire length of a continuous image of Paris . . . perceived in the distance in the bliss of altitude; but, on the other hand, this very continuity engages the mind in a certain struggle, it seeks to be deciphered, we must find *signs* within it. (243–44)

7. "Even so profound and radical a critic as Benjamin managed to all but ignore the *Petits poèmes en prose* in his important studies of Baudelaire's work." Monroe 1987, p. 101.

Because of the cognitive work it makes us do, the panoramic vision allows us to transcend mere sensation (lived experience) and see things in their structure (to conceptualize). "Hence it is the advent of a new perception, of an intellectualist mode," writes Barthes (242)—via which we arrive at Lefebvre's habitat (planning from above) rather than habiting (organically unfolding). He goes on to cite Victor Hugo's *Hunchback of Notre Dame* as an example of an early literary desire for a "bird's-eye view," thus linking the desire to Romanticism. And standing atop the Eiffel Tower and looking out at Paris does, for Barthes, invest the city with a naturist Romanticism:

> The Tower overlooks not Nature but the city; and yet, by its very position of a visited outlook, the Tower makes the city into a kind of Nature; it constitutes the swarming of men into a landscape, it adds to the frequently grim urban myth a romantic dimension, a harmony, a mitigation. (241)

Here Barthes also makes clear that the conceptualization of the "landscape" is a product of physical and intellectual remove. But his conclusion, that the remove induces a Romantic dimension, stands in fascinating contradiction to Lucian's: whereas Barthes's vision from above of the "swarming of men" bathes humanity in a harmonious glow, in Lucian's, the swarming men seen from above recall only the worst, most bestial aspects of human nature. (De Certeau, too, writes of a "swarming" mass: "Their [the footprints of urban pedestrians] swarming mass is an innumerable collection of singularities" [97]. De Certeau is more interested in the play of collectivity and singularity than in assigning value.) It's also hard not to discern a poetic vision in Barthes's theory of a resulting "romantic dimension, a harmony."

Like Lucian, Barthes also points out the fantasy of being able to see inside people's private lives: "By rising above Paris, the visitor to the Tower has the illusion of raising the enormous lid which covers the private life of millions of human beings; the city then becomes an intimacy whose functions, i.e., whose connections he deciphers" (246). The "bliss

of altitude" results in a double sense of being both above, and privy to, the private lives of others, like De Certeau's voyeur, but the "connections"—like Baudelaire's "innumerable interrelations"—are something the solar Eye must *decipher*. The perceiver cannot let them exist as such; they must be treated like a code to which the conceptualizing brain applies itself, "struggles" to make meaning or to project meaning; meaning can no longer be separated from point of view. As De Certeau says atop the World Trade Center, the city below him becomes a text that must be read. Habiting can only be rendered habitat by thought, by the "intellectualist mode."

When I look more closely at the history of and discourse around skyscrapers in later sections, this compendium of spatial fantasy will continue to reverberate. Now that we've begun to understand the relationship of verticality to the city, let's look at some aspects of the horizontal experience.