THE WILDERNESS CITY:
An ESSAY on METAPHORICAL EXPERIENCE
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Metaphor and the city

From its very beginnings, reflection on the city has had a mixed outcome. Some have praised the city as an oasis of civilization in a desert of intellectual darkness and stony custom.[1] Others have seen it as a center of alienation, licentiousness, crime, and social instability.[2] As a social phenomenon, the city in history has been all these and more: It has been a center of commerce, education, and culture; a locus of change and freedom; a patron of architecture, design, and the other fine and applied arts. And on the other side of the scale the city has sown false hopes, spawned squalor and despair, and encouraged new and more powerful forms of social control and oppression. By concentrating population, it has abetted the self-consciousness and conflict of social classes and, in this century, the emergence of 'mass man' and mass culture.

The language by which we characterize the city reflects the same ambivalence, and metaphors have given eloquent expression to its diverse faces. The city may be an cultural oasis, a hub of commerce, the citadel of government, and the

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[1] "The city is a fact in nature, like a cave, a run of mackerel or an ant-heap. But it is also a conscious work of art, and it holds within its communal framework many simpler and more personal forms of art. Mind *takes form* in the city; and in turn, urban forms condition mind." (Mumford 1938, Introduction.) "Living in cities is an art, and we need the vocabulary of art, of style, to describe the peculiar relationship between man and material that exists in the continual creative play of urban living. The city as we imagine it, then, soft city of illusion, myth, aspiration, and nightmare, is as real, maybe more real, than the hard city one can locate on maps in statistics, in monographs on urban sociology and demography and architecture." (Raban 1974, ch. 1.)

[2] "Just as language has no longer anything in common with the thing it names, so the movements of most of the people who live in cities have lost their connexion with the earth; they hang, as it were, in the air, hover in all directions, and find no place where they can settle." (Rainer Maria Rilke, *Worpswede* (1903).) "I live not in myself, but I become / Portion of that around me; and to me / High mountains are a feeling, but the hum / Of human cities torture." (Lord Byron, *Childe Harolds's Pilgrimage* (1812), cto. 3, st. 72.) And. most pointedly, "Prepare for death, if here at night you roam, / And sign your will before you sup from home." (Samuel Johnson, *London*.)

fount of civilization. No single metaphor for urbanism provides a complete picture but rather each reflects one facet of a complex phenomenon. Some figures suggest optimistic possibilities and express ideals for urban design. The 'garden city' conveys a fusion of nature and culture, a cultivated nature in which control takes a quietly benevolent course in promoting the flowering of people's lives in an Edenic urban setting (Howard 1945, Stein 1957). The 'forest city,' beloved of Finland's planners, defers to natural imperatives more respectfully, seeing urban success less in controlling nature than in envisioning a harmonious collaboration in which the forest is a benign setting for human habitation.[3] The 'machine city' reflects the technocratic goal of subjugating nature, imposing the human imprint on the landscape through what Victor Hugo called "the somber sadness of right angles:" survey grids, street grids, and housing tracts.[4] The 'asphalt jungle' conveys something of the urban social patterns that emerge in predatory gangs, gratuitous violence, and the venal exploitation of the weak.[5] To this perhaps Calvino's 'invisible cities' offer an antidote in the regions of imagination and fantasy (Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities*, 1974).

All these metaphors are true, for all convey aspects of urban life and the multiple conditions and experiences that cities offer. Each metaphor both captures and creates a greater understanding of the city.[6] To make such a claim, however, does not settle the issue but only raises it anew: For what is metaphor and how does it function? Despite the fact that metaphor has been the subject of philosophic and literary reflection since classical times, it remains elusive. This is so even though metaphor is almost as common a subject of discussion in its own right as it is an object of use. Perhaps we can best explore the first by examining

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[3] Munkkiniemi was the earliest of these planned forest communities. Tapiola, later, gained international prominence and was widely imitated.

[4] Walter Gropius and the Bauhaus exemplified this aesthetic: "We want an architecture adapted to our world of machines, radios and fast motor cars, an architecture whose function is clearly recognizable in relation of its forms." "Every architect must understand the significance of the city in order to be able to engage actively in city planning: he must recognize '*simplicity in multiplicity*' as a guiding principle in the shaping of its character. Form elements of typical shape should be repeated in series." (Gropius 1959: 28, 29.) Frank Lloyd Wright observed that the steel and glass sky-scraper is a mechanical building, a "machine pure and simple."

[5] W. R. Burnett, *The Asphalt Jungle*, 1949; "The city is not a concrete jungle, it is a human zoo." – Demond Morris, *The Human Zoo*, 1969, Introduction.

[6] Carl R. Hausman develops an interaction theory that recognizes the creative function of metaphor (Hausman 1989).

the second, hoping to grasp something of the special quality of metaphorical thinking by probing into the way it works in a particular case.

This inquiry into the aesthetic of the city has, therefore, two objectives. One is to explore the dimension of urban life suggested by a still different metaphor, 'wilderness,' in the hope of discovering what distinctive vision of urban life the 'wilderness city' can provide. The other is to use this investigation to uncover something about the meaning and function of metaphor – more exactly, about metaphorical experience.

Wilderness as a metaphor for the city

The meaning of 'wilderness' has a long and varied history. The shift in its connotation from a dark and dangerous place that fills one with foreboding to a place of adventure, discovery, and even of exhilaration and awe began in earnest in the West during the eighteenth century. Over the past hundred years, 'wilderness' has acquired a still more positive connotation, becoming a place to be valued and protected, and a source of values and of human connections with the rest of the natural world (Rolston 1989: 118–143). When the wilderness metaphor is applied to urban experience, however, the word reverts to its earlier, forbidding sense of a trackless domain uninhabited by humans.

Wilderness differs in curious ways from the comparable metaphors of garden and forest. Unlike these, which convey human use and cultivation, wilderness is a dark metaphor. It does not elevate or romanticize the city but relates it instead to an ominous place, evoking a feeling of apprehension. The effectiveness of this metaphor may actually lie in its very obscurity and ambivalence. Working inversely, it illuminates the city through its very darkness. To the extent that regarding the city as wilderness tells us something about it that we might not obtain in other ways, it is useful. To the extent that this metaphor tells us something about ourselves, it may be even more useful. I find wilderness to have both such values, and in a rather unexpected way.

Thinking of the city as wilderness leads us in unusual directions. We may, at times consider the city overwhelming and hostile, not a place for preserving and promoting human values. Its unfamiliarity makes the city appear confusing, threatening in its very strangeness. These traits become more recognizable, even acceptable, when a city's features are seen as analogous to those of a wilderness,

some of them benign, others less so. For example, one can find a parallel between the momentary respite from immersion in the density of a city or wilderness either by the panoramic view from the observation deck of a skyscraper or a broad boulevard, or by the sweeping panorama one might obtain from a mountain top, bluff, or tall tree. The aroma emanating from a bakery or restaurant might remind one of the odors of different vegetation or ground surfaces, such as pine needles or wet soil. The odor of decaying leaves or the effluvium of a marsh or swamp in the hot sun may resemble the smell of garbage containers on the sidewalk awaiting pickup or the exhaust of motor vehicles. Moving among buildings and along streets has some of the perceptual quality of moving among stands of trees and through openings in the vegetation. The background hum of traffic is reminiscent of the wind rushing through the trees when a front is coming through. Pushing one's way through a crowd resembles the experience of pressing through dense growth. Constant concern over making a misstep influences our passage through both city and wilderness, while the background apprehension of danger from motor vehicles and muggers parallels the constant threat, real or imagined, from the deadly creatures thought to inhabit a wilderness. In both city and wilderness, feeling out of place is a vivid component of the experience. With familiarity, the wilderness city may change into something different, such as a park or jungle. The last of these finds common ground between tribal warfare and the urban dangers of gang wars. As a metaphor, wilderness preserves its darkness.

For metaphors embody values. They are judgments just as much when hidden behind figurative language as when they are displayed openly. When traffic becomes a torrent and urban crime is endemic, the city is described as a jungle, the reference being to the threatening features of wild nature. Generally, when the city is compared with nature, it comes out behind. From Aesop, "Better beans and bacon in peace than cakes and ale in fear,"[7] through the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, "God the first garden made, and the first city Cain,"[8] and "God made the country, and man made the town,"[9] the city has often been regarded as a fearful and dangerous place, to be shunned in favor of the peace and safety of the countryside. However, when unchanneled nature is tamed into

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[7] Aesop, "The Town Mouse and the Country Mouse".
[8] Abraham Cowley (1618–1667), "Of Solitude", II.
[9] William Cowper (1731–1800), "The Task", Bk. I, "The Sofa", 1.749.

a garden, it is no longer fearsome but a setting for gentle pleasures preferable to city life.

The wilderness environment does not stand apart; it has no ontological status. Nor is it a neutral object. What we understand by wilderness is a cultural meaning, its significance and associations hold for the culture in which we participate. We have noted how the idea of wilderness is historically conditioned, changing in the eighteenth century from a wild place haunted by darkness, danger, and desolation, to one where we can encounter, admire, and enjoy nature. This transformation in meaning is part of a process that still continues, as we reconfigure nature from a threat into a resource, from a source of wealth into a haven of respite from the pressures of urban life, from a playground into a domain demanding respect for its own inherent values.

Metaphorical reciprocity

Oddly enough, the metaphorical relation between city and wilderness seems to work in both directions. One might think to gain a better understanding of the city by seeing it as a reconstructed, rationalized wilderness, interpreting the city, that is, through the image of wilderness, even though one somewhat smoothed over by a coating of civility. If, on the other hand, we start with the city, it is easy to impose our sense of urban experience onto the meaning of wilderness, ascribing to wilderness the fears and dangers we feel in the city. Not without some reason did Shakespeare characterize Rome as a "wilderness of Tigers,"[10] nor has Rome been the only city to figure in such descriptions. In this case, the city may be thought of as a metaphor for our cultural construction of wilderness. Once we enter into the metaphor, neither direction for developing metaphorical meaning seems independent of the other.

What insight does the wilderness metaphor have for the city? Like any metaphor, it enlarges experience by expanding its connections and reference. The metaphor of wilderness helps us grasp urban experience in a way that is clearer from being articulated in this fashion. Urban experience becomes more understandable, even if not more congenial, by being seen as exhibiting the hostile, dangerous, dark traits of wilderness (wilderness → city). In spite of the fact

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[10] "Dost thou not perceive That Rome is but a wilderness ofTigers?", William Shakespeare, *Titus Andronicus*, III, i, 54.

that the meaning of wilderness is a cultural construction, it nonetheless helps us grasp the experience of the city, the ultimate cultural artifact. To consider the city a trackless region uninhabited by humans is, of course, literally false, yet from the standpoint of experience it may be singularly accurate. By its endless extent, overbearing structures, and mammoth scale, the city overpowers its small and fragile inhabitants. With hard pavements dominated by cars and trucks, patterns of streets and sidewalks decreed by geometrical figures and their distances unwalkable, the city is hostile to the passage of the human body. In the uncaring impersonality of the big city, the lonely, lost lives of many of its dwellers and its blatant aggressiveness and masked cruelty, the city thwarts humane feeling.[11] Grasped through this metaphor, the city is not the fount of freedom and the flower of culture we thought it was. Behind the veneer of customs, conventions, and institutions we discover the raw harshness and brutality of wilderness.

At the same time and conversely, the plausibility of the wilderness metaphor comes from our experience of the city. Urban experience reappears in the way we construct the meaning of wilderness (city → wilderness). The metaphor tells us what we think about the city: that it is not a haven of safety but a place of danger, not the center of civilization but a maelstrom that consumes it. Wilderness becomes the underlying image of urban experience. Moreover, in proposing that civilization lies merely on the surface, the metaphor leads us to rethink the meaning of civilization, itself. It encourages a reconsideration not only of our values but of our mode of life. We are reminded here of the practice of the Chinese literati. Depicted in many paintings, these officials in retirement left the court cities to live in the countryside and follow the more civilized pursuits of entertaining friends, drinking rice wine, and writing poetry. For them it is not the city that is the seat of culture but the countryside, perhaps even the wilderness. Understood in this way, then, the city becomes not the opposite of wilderness but its double. Wilderness is not only a metaphor for the city but its mirror.

Thus the meaning of wilderness city is reciprocal. The alien and hostile conditions we find in wilderness tell us something about the city. At the same time, we project our experience of the city onto our understanding of wilderness,

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[11] Samuel Johnson called wilderness "a tract of solitude and savageness," OED (Oxford, 1933), Vol. XII, p. 124/3. The etymology of 'wilderness,' from the Old English, probably from 'wilddeor,' wild beast, is strikingly apposite. See *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language,* 3rd ed. (Houghton Mifflin, 1992), pp. 2041/2.

turning wilderness into a reflection of our sense of urban life. This figurative equation, then, has no independent meaning. Metaphor, here and perhaps elsewhere, embodies reciprocity: Not only can we say that wilderness is a metaphor for the city, but that the city is also a metaphor for wilderness.

The rhetorical use of wilderness has, in fact, an ironic twist, for wilderness as a natural environment exists more in history and imagination than in fact. With the disappearance of most of the primeval forests we have left only what are called, oxymoronically, wilderness parks. These are usually secondary 'wildernesses,' land grown over after the original logging and farming activities have been abandoned. Even these wildernesses are cultivated in the sense of being protected, often managed, always surrounded and impinged upon by human activities. Perhaps, in a similar fashion, the primeval wilderness has been overgrown in human experience by the city. The metaphor suggests that the city has become the new wilderness, evoking, on the one hand, feelings of intimidation and awe, a sense of the infinite, and the experience of absolute dependency; and on the other, danger and the wild behavioral traits of hostility, aggression, and violence.

A role for metaphor

There is still more at work here than reciprocity, for metaphor has an implicit advocacy role. When we speak of a garden city, we are not merely using a figurative expression. We are extolling the garden as a model for urban life and a qualitative goal of urban design. Similarly, the forest city urges an integration with nature in designing our cities, not just by including gardens and parks but in planting and retaining stands of large trees in close proximity with apartment complexes and shopping centers. The machine city presents a contrary model, glorying in human ingenuity, in engineering solutions to the problems involved in housing and servicing large concentrations of human activity. These metaphors have a rhetorical function, then, giving poetic force to an implied program for urban design.

The wilderness city has not, to my knowledge, been taken as such a model. It stands not as a goal but as a graphic expression of anguish at what urban experience has become for many less fortunate inhabitants of the modern city. As the positive meanings of wilderness become better known and more widely ac-

cepted, this urban metaphor may lose its critical force. Possibly the values of respect for environment and other forms of life might help develop similar human values in city living. I am not sanguine about such a change.

There is another, equally normative use of the wilderness metaphor, for the wilderness city also plays into the hands of the apologists for exploitation and selective advantage. The metaphor can be used not only to criticize the quality of urban life but to justify behavior we want to encourage in the market economy of mass society. There are those who advocate competitive and aggressive behavior, who find relief in anonymity, and who utilize the tensions in watchfulness, suspicion, and hostility as a stimulus to acquisitive striving. If the wilderness metaphor should lose its force or be coopted by the defenders of its traditional features, critics of urban ills will have to search for another, more telling image to give rhetorical force to their grievances. A new metaphor will have to be discovered to do the work of the old wilderness.

A function of metaphor

Finally, can the wilderness metaphor tell us anything about metaphor in general? One thing this discussion has shown is that the terms of an effective metaphor are not discrete meaning that are simply related through this linguistic figure. Rather, they work together in complex ways, each informing the other, so that the meaning of the terms within the metaphor is not independent of the metaphor but rather is created by it. 'City' and 'wilderness' are not simple linguistic entities but complexes of historical and social meanings. Out of their juxtaposition in a telling metaphor emerges an awareness that extends well beyond the meaning each of the words originally carried. This goes beyond interactionism, the theory of metaphor which maintains that one begins the metaphor with words whose meanings are antecedently fixed but influence each other in the metaphor (see Hausman 1989: 31). Joining them in a metaphor changes the terms because it alters their very meanings. There is more here than a linguistic form of the Hegelian dialectic, in which the metaphor synthesizes the meaning each term introduces separately. The meaning of 'wilderness' changes when juxtaposed with 'city,' and conversely, so that one can no longer speak of their prior significance in accounting for their function in the metaphorical expression.

Change occurs in still another way, for we have to consider metaphor not only as a linguistic complex but as one that functions within a socio-linguistic situation. Meanings do not stand apart from the holders of those meanings, and people use language in a setting that is always historically and socially changing. Metaphors, then, introduce and participate in that dynamic human context, and they cannot be extrapolated from it, either as individual terms or as a linguistic figure, without irreparable distortion.[12] As makers and users of metaphor, we do not stand outside and apart from its meaning, for we construct that meaning through our feelings, experiences, and behavior, as well as through our cognition.

My last and perhaps most curious observation brings together these others. For if metaphorical terms are not independent objects, if a metaphorical expression is not a self-contained meaning but joins with its users in a cultural context, it follows that an effective metaphor creates something new. What is created is meaning, but meaning whose dimensions extend beyond linguistic limits to enter into historical, somatic, affective, and imaginative orders. The metaphorical occurrence becomes an experience of embodied meaning, with all the dynamic forces inherent in embodiment. Thus the wilderness city with which we began has become more than we can say, even in the language of metaphor.

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[12] "Metaphors created integrated wholes that generate more than linguistic items and are something more than conceptual perspectives." (Hausman 1989: 45.)