

***The City and the City*, by China Miéville,
London: Pan-Macmillan, 2009, 373pp.**

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Unpacking a Library #1: Strász in Beszel and Elsewhere

In his 1931 essay “Unpacking My Library,” Walter Benjamin rates borrowing books and failing to return them¹⁾ second only to writing them oneself in terms of preferred modes of acquisition. Actually buying them is a bronze medalist in his rankings. As for downloading them onto some kind of e-reading tablet, this prospect would doubtless have both excited Benjamin in terms of its technological innovation, and utterly dismayed him. For the collector, a crammed Kindle would be a poor substitute indeed for the sensuous pleasures of ageing volumes lining serried bookcases. One wonders what a talk about collecting e-books would be like indeed and whether one can really “e-collect” anything at all.

In any case, I will begin this little series of reviews for *Localities* in the spirit of Benjamin’s act of unpacking not only

1) This is, after all, a “talk” about *collecting* books and not about reading them.

with a borrowed book, but also one I simply chanced upon while casually perusing the shelves off my local public library in South Manchester.²⁾

Given my own fascination with modern urban culture, its title promised me a double pleasure: *The City and the City*, a noirish detective story/police procedural by the intriguingly named London-based writer China Miéville. It was a book I had once seen reviewed in the newspapers, quickly added to my Amazon shopping basket, saved for later, and then completely forgotten about. Spotting it years later in the Fantasy/Science Fiction section reminded me not only of its existence, but also of Benjamin's own joy in sudden rememberings and unexpected rediscoveries during absent-minded browsing in bookshops and leafing among antiquarian dealers.

So what is this tale of two cities exactly? The idea of twin cities joining to form one larger metropolitan area (Minneapolis-St. Paul, Buda and Pest, and my own Manchester-Salford) is not unfamiliar; the self-styled twinning of cities is now a commonplace exercise in civic partnership and international goodwill. Some divided cities have been reunified (Berlin) while others (Jerusalem) remain torn to this day. Polarized cities of gated wealth and ghettoized poverty shamefully proliferate under neoliberalism, but this book treats us to something quite

2) The reader of this review will doubtless be reassured to learn that *contra* Benjamin, and in a different spirit, that of good citizenship, it is a book I have dutifully returned. I even paid the fines.

different, rather disturbing but brilliantly described: the double or doppelganger city. What Miéville ingeniously conceives and, it must be said, astonishingly sustains, is the notion of two cities, independent city-states in fact, occupying the same time and space but perceived by their different populations as distinct. There is Beszel, a seemingly grim and ruinous Eastern European or Balkan city, an estuarine conurbation whose docks and industries have dwindled and declined, and there is Ul Qoma, a city whose economic prosperity has run counter to Beszel and now boasts a Dubai-like skyline of steel and glass towers. The two cities are interlaced, interwoven, and found one within the other, interpenetrating and imbuing each other, but without any interaction. This curious double urban complex is scrupulously separated and segregated. There are those areas that are in one or the other (“total” Beszel or “total” Ul Qoma) and then there are those that are in both (“crosshatched”). The inhabitant of Beszel may walk the “same” (crosshatched) street “grosstopically” as an Ul Qomanian, a street that is a “topolganger,” but it has a different name,³⁾ and, from birth, s/he has been trained both to identify instantly and then not to notice, those who are “elsewhere,” who are actually in the other city, and who are foreigners in a foreign country. Deftly dodging each other as pedestrians on the pavements or as motorists on

3) For example, KarnStrász in the Besz Old Town is Ul Maidin Avenue in the Old Town of Ul Qoma.

the asphalt, they have acquired through long schooling and then simple habit the remarkable capacity to “unsee” and to “unsense” each other.⁴⁾ The people of Beszel “unsee” the entire Ul Qoma cityscape and unsee it in the most finely detailed, localized way. Of a crosshatched greenspace (Madjlyna Green in Beszel, Kwaidso Park in Ul Qoma), we learn, in a passage that is both comic and sinister:

“There are parts where even individual trees are crosshatched, where Ul Qoma children and Besz children clamber past each other, each obeying their parents’ whispered stricture to unsee the other” (p. 234).

Miéville’s ingenuity here is to unfold this bizarre urban scenario in the course of his narrative with such skill that it succeeds completely in enfolding the reader within it. Mercifully eschewing the kind of expository or explanatory paragraphs that I have just written above, we are introduced⁵⁾ to the city and the city one step at a time by a puzzling phrase here and an unaccountable utterance there, through the precision of Miéville’s paradoxical prose. Innocent of the peculiarities of the duopolis, we read of a Besz suburban wasteland in the most matter-of-fact, deadpan tone:

4) This might be seen as a radicalization of the sociologist Erving Goffman’s notion of “civil inattention” which pertains to the everyday practice of both politely heeding and politely ignoring the presence of others in public space.

5) Literally “led into.”

“There were places of crosshatch in the larger streets and a few elsewhere, but far out the bulk of the area was total” (p. 20).

Such expressions are part of an incremental and intense initiation into the spatial, perceptual, and linguistic complexities and contradictions of these cities. In describing his neighbourhood on the southeastern side of the Old Town, our protagonist and first-person narrator, Inspector Tyador Borlú of the Extreme Crime Squad (ECS) of the *Besz policzai*, tells us:

“Laced by the shadow of girded towers that would loom over it if they were there, Ascension Church is at the end of VulkowStrász, its windows protected by wire grilles, but some of its stained panes broken” (p. 29).

The reader must somehow reconcile the commonplace, the damaged church, with the conundrum of “if they were there.” Of his apartment itself, we learn:

“In the mornings trains ran on a raised line metres from my window. They were not in my city. I did not of course, but I could have, stared into the carriages—they were quite that close—and caught the eyes of foreign travelers” (p. 30).

His route to work through the local crosshatched streets is described thus:

“I walked. I walked by the brick arches: at the top, where the lines were, they were elsewhere, but not all of them were foreign at their bases. The ones I could see contained little shops and squats decorated in art graffiti. In Beszél it was a quiet area, but the streets were crowded with those elsewhere. I unsaw them, but it took time to pick past them all” (pp. 30-31).

This duality of the cities is nothing other than a self-sustaining collective fiction which, played out and replayed each and every moment, transforms the fiction into a fact, a compelling way of life. The only thing that is actually shared by the citizens of these cities, each within the other, is the very code itself. Break this and the whole fiction would collapse. And so it is that, logically, infractions of the code, whilst pardonable in minor cases and those involving tourists, are otherwise the most heinous of all crimes: breach. “Breach” is “a code, an axiomatic protocol more basic by a long way than any I was paid to enforce” (p. 45) Borlú reflects at one point. “Breach” is the name of an axiomatic principle, the term for an actual act or non-act (a refusal or a failure to unsee), and the title of that seemingly omniscient, omnipotent security service charged with policing the urban frontiers. Breach is the ever-vigilant guardian of the collective suspension of disbelief that sustains the city and the city, a role it successfully performs because transgressions are rare. Breach, the rule, is so internalized, so much a part of the mundane habitus of both cities, that most citizens dutifully and diligently police themselves. As Ashil, an

agent or “avatar” of Breach informs Borlú:

“It’s everyone in Beszel and everyone in Ul Qoma. Every minute, every day. We’re only the last ditch: it’s everyone in the cities who does most of the work. It works because you don’t blink. That’s why unseeing and unsensing are so vital. No one can admit it doesn’t work. So if you don’t admit it, it does” (p. 370).

It is a measure of Miéville’s artistry that, as we enter into this fiction, it becomes more compelling and convincing for us as readers, suspending our incredulity too, insisting that we don’t blink either, ensuring that we also make it work. For me, one of the reasons for this is that the author shares and attends to Benjamin’s recognition of the city as a “linguistic cosmos,” composed of toponyms, streets names, signs, and vernacular. Indeed, both the nomenclature and clipped dialogue of the book seem pitch perfect. Besz suburbs like Lestov and Kordvenna replace, and street names like Gunterstrász and Uropastrász and those of individual characters (Shukman, Corwi et al) sound just right, and this is no less true of Ul Qoma with its language of Illitan, a language whose modernization and change to the Roman script in the 1920s pre-dated and inspired Atatürk we are told in a typically exquisite detail (p. 50). Above all it is the local language itself, the everyday police jargon and colourful street slang, which is so sharp, snappy, and ultimately persuasive. On a run-down out-of town estate, Corwi tells Borlú

about the local youths who hang around and deal in a little *khat*: “One of the boys has a little shiv, but really little. Couldn’t mug a milkrat with it - it’s a toy. And a chew each. That’s it” (p. 5). A “shiv”? Miéville knows when to spell it out for us and when not. Here he doesn’t. And *gudcop/badcop* (p. 17) need no explanation either except to clarify that here in Besz they have become verbs—a witty touch. And then there is *ébru*: a racist term for an immigrant, formerly a word for Jew. The plausibility of these clipped colloquialisms is key to the credibility of these incredible cities.

And this leads us to the complex and contested political world of Beszel and Ul Qoma that Miéville conjures up: as might be expected, the cities are host, on the one hand, to nationalists and separatists of varying degrees of extremism and racism (True Citizens in Beszel, and Qoma First elsewhere, Neo-Nazis in both) and, on the other, those factions who seek to bring the cities together, the Unificationists or, as they are felicitously termed, the “unifs.” Moreover, and this is simply inspired on Miéville’s part, there are those heretics who dare to think the unthinkable: that secreted in the interstices of the two cities there exists a third city, the mythical city of Orciny, which is the ultimate yet invisible governing force in both Beszel and Ul Qoma.

All these give the author enormous scope for some profound insights into urban living today and opportunities for delightful

playfulness.

Of the latter, one of my favorites is the presence in Beszel of UIQomatown, a small district like a Chinatown that is home to migrants and exiles from elsewhere and a place where one can find supermarkets and restaurants specializing in UI Qoma food, fashions, and so forth. As one might imagine, this fragment of one culture in the space of another causes untold confusion to everyone who ventures there regarding who is in which city and whom one may see and must unsee.

Then there are Miéville's delightful and disturbing observations on childhood in these cities. Growing up in Beszel, Borlú recalls, involves the "intense learning of cues. We pick up on styles of clothing, permissible colors, ways of walking and holding oneself, very fast. Before we were eight or so most of us could be trusted not to breach embarrassingly and illegally" (p. 80). But of course, these adult-imposed restrictions and prohibitions are exactly the kind of constraints that children are tempted to test and tamper with, and not just while clambering amidst the crosshatched trees. "As kids we used to play Breach," (p. 46) Borlú admits, adding later, in something reminiscent of Andrei Tarkovsky's film *Stalker* with its circumnavigations of the forbidden zone:

"There are places not crosshatched but where Beszel is interrupted by a thin part of UI Qoma. As kids we would assiduously unsee UI Qoma, as our parents and teachers had relentlessly trained us ... We used to throw stones

across the alterity, walk the long way around in Beszel and pick them up again, debate whether we had done wrong” (p. 86).

Above all, there are Borlú’s experiences in Ul Qoma which constitute the second part of the book. The brutal murder of a 24-year-old American PhD student, Mahalia Geary, her body found dumped in waste ground on the outskirts of Beszel, originally sets Miéville’s whole narrative in motion, the course of the investigations providing the book’s central plot, though in many ways this is the least interesting aspect of it: hokum centered on a team of Canadian archaeologists, their curious finds at a dig in Bil Y’an in western Ul Qoma, and an out-of-print book purporting to prove the existence of Orciny. As is so often the case with the very best detective fiction, the dialectical structure of the crime, the investigation, and the (re)resolution are themselves only a series of alibis for the exploration and articulation of something much more profound and substantial: who we are and how we live. Here, as the plot thickens for Inspector Borlú, he is required to pursue his enquiries in Ul Qoma, which he does in the proper way by crossing at the official border post of the two cities, their Checkpoint Charlie so to speak, a conjuncture enveloped by the strange construction that is the Cupola Hall. One enters this vast building, a “giant, baroque, concrete-patched coliseum” (p. 72) from Beszel, passes through the Besz border controls then through their Ul Qoma counterparts, and then exits into the

other city, not a different *part* of the city of course, grosstopically almost exactly where you were before you entered the Hall, but you emerge to see the other city and unsee your own. This sudden perceptual switch, like a Gestalt shift, leaves Borlú in a state of confusion and consternation:

“I looked at what Dhatt showed me. Unseeing of course, but I could not fail to be aware of all the familiar places I passed grosstopically, the streets at home I regularly walked, now a whole city away, particular cafés I frequented that we passed, but in another country. I had them in the background now, hardly any more present than Ul Qoma when I was at home. I held my breath. I was unseeing Beszel. I had forgotten what this was like; I had tried and failed to imagine it. I was seeing Ul Qoma” (pp. 161-162).

And it panics passersby in both cities who are unsure as to Borlú’s status, that is to say, his precise location: dressed as a Besz, acting like a Besz, clearly someone from elsewhere but seemingly here, and simultaneously someone apparently from here, yet on this occasion there. This is what it feels like to be dislocated, to be an anomaly, a walking disturbance, a perambulating punctum in the metropolitan quotidian.

For me, there are two particularly inspired scenes here, one reflective and nostalgic, the other furious and genuinely thrilling. In the first, Borlú is invited to dine at the home of his counterpart in the Ul Qoma *militsya*, Senior Detective Qussim Dhatt, and realizes that he is (grosstopically) a stone’s throw

from his own neighbourhood now elsewhere. On his stroll back to the hotel, he takes a detour and finds a crosshatched spot a couple of metres from his own apartment building from whence he can properly unsee it:

“In Ul Qoma I was in Ioy Street. It was pretty equally crosshatched with RosidStrász where I lived ... I was able to stop grosstopically physically close to my own front door, and unsee it, of course, but equally of course not quite, with an emotion the name of which I have no idea” (p. 238).

The reader will have a name for it: the uncanny. For what more elegant instance could there be of *heimlich-unheimlich* than this. For me, in a flash, in the mutual infusion of the uncanny and nostalgia, homesickness is revealed. These two emotions are to be always found, like the city and the city, the one within the other.

But the most taut and dramatic episode in the book for me is when, following the shooting in the Cupola Hall of a witness Borlú is accompanying across the border, the Inspector spies the assassin, or rather “unspies” him, as one is still in Ul Qoma, and the other is in Beszel. What follows is the most remarkable pursuit through the streets of the cities, or rather “unpursuit.” They start off at a walking pace, each in their own cities, the fugitive murderer secure in the knowledge he is “unobserved” and at the same time absolutely aware that Borlú is after him. Borlú avoids breach by focusing not on the fleeing man, but on the space just behind him. The killer heads for the sanctuary of

somewhere total Beszel, where he is sure he cannot be “unfollowed.” The pace quickens. They move in tandem. They are running:

“This was not, could not be a chase. It was only two accelerations. We ran, he in his city, me close behind in mine” (p. 285).

It is a testament to how we have been drawn into the logics of Miéville’s creation that the denouement of this game of cat-and-mouse comes as a complete shock (well, it did to me) and one that will, without giving away too much, be fateful for Borlú as he must forsake both Ul Qoma and Beszel for the shadowy realm that goes by the name of Breach in the third and final part of this literary triptych.

From start to finish, Miéville’s novel is an imaginative and literary tour de force playing deftly with so many issues and questions which the study of cities and urban localities must address: the everyday practice and paradox of physical proximity and perceptual/emotional distance; the ingrained urban habitus that goes not only unchallenged but unacknowledged, unrecognised; the politics of (in)visibility in our contemporary cities (who sees what, who and what go unnoticed, whom do we treat as if they are not there?); the coexistence of alterity and difference in multicultural environments; the incongruity and disparity of metropolitan elites in global cities and the urban poor; the crossing of borders

and thresholds, the experiences of dislocation and diaspora, exile and homesickness. Above all, the book foregrounds the theme of the city as uncanny which is right and proper. The double, the doppelganger was, after all, for Freud and Otto Rank, the quintessential instance of the uncanny, the unfamiliar-familiar. To become a stranger in one's own locale, to look with new eyes, as if for the first time, upon that which is close at hand and mundane, to see what customarily has gone unnoticed, to unsee what has hitherto preoccupied our gaze. We must pay attention elsewhere. This politics of distraction is more than just an optical shift; it is a restitution, a renewal and refinement through the estrangement of all our senses.

If we are to understand the localities we inhabit, perhaps we too must make our way across into that other city, elsewhere, and then return, along those very same grosstopically but wholly other streets previously taken, to unexplore our starting point that is no longer, and indeed is far from, home. This would be like opening up a box of our once-dearest possessions that had long been hidden away and forgotten, rediscovering one by one the precious articles and photographs we once knew. The joy of the recovery, of this renaissance of places, people, things and indeed of ourselves, is one shared by the unpacker of libraries.