On Walking and Chicago

Max Bloom

In my high school years, I spent many days taking the train to New York City and going for long walks there. Accompanied either by my father or my friend Noah, I grew to incorporate the routines of that city into my psychic frame: the furious lines of traffic along the vertical avenues of Lower Manhattan, the pedestrians entering and exiting posh cafes and shops in Brooklyn Heights and Park Slope, buses rushing past the beautiful Art Deco of Grand Concourse in the Bronx, subway cars suspended above the East River on the Manhattan Bridge, or Metro North trains passing overhead at Park Avenue and 125th Street. Admittedly, I never came to know the city like locals do, systematized in accordance with routines, understood from the perspective of a single residence, experienced both in the

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He never did care for the river.

day and the night. I saw it rarely at night, I did not suffer through any of the various inconveniences that must attend daily New York life. Nor did I share in many of those more sublime moments that come with living in a place: dawnlight shafts coming in through the window, for instance, turning vast cityscapes - Art Deco, modern, townhouse, brick, and glass—tawny and golden in the clear morning light. I had no home in New York and that made all the difference: the city to me was by necessity multi-nodal. There was no neighborhood for which I could construct a sizable list of decent restaurants; but for East Flatbush and the East Village, Chelsea and Greenpoint, I could furnish the memory of a good meal.

Over the course of four years I took a fifteen- to twenty-mile walk through New York at least once every couple months. By my best estimate, I walked at least three hundred distinct miles of New York City sidewalk, through all of the boroughs save Staten Island. Certain areas of the city acquired specific resonances for me; I came upon Sunset Park again and again, a neighborhood in the southeastern corner of Brooklyn of small turreted brownstones that fell down steep bakery-laden slopes from the park itself, a grassy space at the summit of the neighborhood where stooping elders

Montmorency's ambition in life is to get in the way.

and high-pitched children kicked soccer balls back and forth. From the park issued one of those tremendous city panoramas that make New York feel so infinite: Southern Brooklyn rowhouses, glassy harborwater, and then the towers of Lower Manhattan exploding from the water and racing their way up the slender island. I think back on Sunset Park and settle into something of a reverie: I think of conversations with my father and my friends, and of *mole poblano*. I think of the first time I walked with Noah and our friend Marie through Sunset Park at the end of a very long walk, how we arrived at dusk, when the park was full of families and the clothing stores and restaurants along the main strip overflowing with customers, how the neighborhood felt livelier than any place we had walked through in miles, how the fading light reflected just right on the brick buildings, how I felt sweetly that I had discovered something, even if it was simply something that had always been there and I had just come across it for the first time.

It has been a year now since I have left New Haven, a year now living in Chicago—less, if times back home are discounted—and I have just begun to know it: I take weekly or fortnightly walks, on bright cold Saturdays or Sundays, uncovering the neighborhoods and streets of a new city. And as I make my walks I have succumbed to my guilty pleasure of endlessly making comparisons. I could never keep myself from judging Chicago neighborhoods against corresponding New York quarters; observing how the townhouse styles of Old Town and Wrigleyville compared to those of the West Village or Boerum Hill; determining whether Lincoln Park's bourgeois aesthetic could compete in grace with that of Riverside Drive; comparing the views from the Blue Line and the Red Line with those from the 7 train or the Metro North tracks.

Chicago did not at first win many of these comparisons. The best neighborhoods in the world bear with them a vast chorus of activity, Jane Jacobs' "sidewalk ballet"—neighbors and friends meeting up with each other, children running around, shopkeepers greeting regular customers. For a long time, I had trouble finding that in Chicago. On my early walks, I had the sense that the Chicago pedestrians were always just passing through on their way to another place: I didn't often see children or teenagers walking around by themselves

or, for that matter, adults walking without a definite end in mind. Often when I saw two friends talking with each other, they would suddenly duck into a coffeeshop or a restaurant. People seemed to use the sidewalk primarily for traveling; all the intimate conversations, meet-ups, and bored languishing took place inside.

Fyodor Dostoyevsky's narrator in *Notes from the Underground* says: There are intentional and unintentional towns. New York is firmly in the second category; for a long time I believed that Chicago was in the first. There are Chicago neighborhoods, particularly the wealthier neighborhoods, where every restaurant, store, apartment building, and bike stand seems as if it has been put up by some calculating entrepreneur; in New York, apartment buildings, grocery stores, used bookstores, and restaurants all mix together without any apparent sense of order or design, except as products of the great haphazard city. Generally speaking, the city is full and there is not room for the entrepreneurs and capitalists to configure the streets and their relation to the streets; the great dead weight of the city has done that for them. Much of Chicago is like this, too, but the neighborhoods I first chanced upon—many of the iconic sections of the Loop and the North Side, for instance—were not. Consider, for example, the stretch of Clark and Wells Street moving north from the Near North Side where, it seems, whole blocks are taken up by chain restaurants and Chicago institutions (Lou Malnati's, Portillo's) that have consciously modeled themselves on the interstate architecture of the Midwest. I spent several of my first walks passing through

these blocks, and it was hard for me to convince myself that I was passing through a real city. The businesses seemed set up for tourists, not residents, and everything felt a little too orderly.

These perceptions were unfair—stereotypes with some truth to them, and a long list of exceptions each. They became less convincing to me as I saw more of the city and realized that these impressions rarely held consistently, that Chicago is no homogeneous place and that a single adjective that describes Ravenswood perfectly will fall apart a few miles west in Avondale. Moreover, I grew to notice the advantages Chicago has over the other cities I know; I, familiar with New York City as my urban model, was simply not primed to notice them at first—at least not consciously.

Chicago's charm was what I eventually did notice—or, perhaps, noticed immediately and eventually came to recognize that I noticed. I have always been charmed by New York. But the charm I feel from New York is inseparable from the iconic grandness of the city: the cover of Woody Allen's *Manhattan* (man and woman; bench; Queensboro Bridge) says it all for what I love about that charm: it's an interaction between the contained and introspective world of the individual and the supernal expanse of the great city. In Central Park you see skyscrapers across a park; in Brooklyn Heights you see skyscrapers across a river. Even where you can't see skyscrapers, the feeling of density, the complexity, reminds you that they are there.

I experience a different type of charm in Chicago: it is simultaneously a more widespread and more local phenomenon. More widespread because it is present in street after street; in hundreds or thousands of locations across the city, many of them scarcely known, rather than in a few iconic streets and scenes. More local because it arises from interactions at the level of the neighborhood or the block, rather than from the sweeping vistas of the city. I notice this type of charm at North Broadway in Uptown on an early walk through the city: the quiet groupings of pedestrians around the Vietnamese restaurants at Argyle; the white-tile 1930s buildings; the patches of five or six-story buildings dotting irregularly the horizon; the Red Line trains stopping; the residential streets leading east to the beach, with their russet faded-glory apartments;

heading west towards Ravenswood, well-shaded and quiet, with dog-walkers and neighbors conversing under the greenery. I notice it crossing on Archer Avenue at the South Fork of the Chicago River, seeing from the bridge the Midwestern houses and baroque churches of Bridgeport . I notice it whenever I pass the intersection of Clark and Irving Park in Lakeview, where there is visible to the south the hint of the Wrigleyville clamor (traffic picking up, denser businesses), and, to the east, Irving Park curves up and then down in a long arc to the apartments on Lake Michigan. The charm of these moments, a charm that feels rarer in New York, is in how all the world, and all the scope of human interaction, is pared down to the narrow scale of the neighborhood in sight: the *banh mi* restaurant, the Foursquare houses, the El stop. The background clutter of the universe disappears; urban domesticity takes over.

Chicago can do this because it is an unusual American city: it is dense enough that its neighborhoods are vibrant with pedestrian life, yet it is not so dense as to give me the feeling of an undifferentiated whole. The very aspects of the city that can make it at times unpleasantly dissimilar from New York—the lack of cohesion and easy pedestrian access between neighborhoods—manage as well to partition impressions and create a more varied space. The range of aesthetic impressions in Chicago never failed to impress me. Even

To return to our present trip: nothing exciting happened.

the two miles from the Lawrence Avenue stop on the Red Line to the Kimball Avenue stop on the Brown Line suggest a multiplicity of cities: the down-at-heel Art Deco neighborhood near the lake, with its narrow crowded streets and the elevated rail line is quintessential Chicago, gritty and historic. The stretch from Western to the Metra line at Ravenswood is residential and quiet, placidly Midwestern, with kids wrestling in lawns and playgrounds on the residential streets off Lawrence. In Albany Park, the wide dusty street, lined with immigrant businesses and crowded, suggests Queens or Brooklyn. Certainly there are distinct neighborhoods in New York as well: the demographic space between a place like Mott Haven and the Upper East Side, only a forty-five minute walk away, is tremendous. But for any two neighborhoods in New York, I always felt a common imprint of New-York-ness. The continuity of the whole of New York City is one of the things I have always loved about it and one of the things I have always found limiting about it. Chicago is its complement. Chicago neighborhoods partake in a bewildering multiplicity of forms and moments, forsaking any attempt at unity for an interweaving of distinct personalities. Consider the way that neighborhoods blend fluidly into each other in New York, while in Chicago they are so often separated by open space—underpasses, railroads, highways, canals, parks, the industrial area where the old stockyards used to be on the South Side. Both of these—the New York City cityscape, typified by its ever-visible skyline, and the Chicago streetscape, configuration of bar, shop, and restaurant—are visions of the infinite, in the whole or in parts.

Chicago seemed to me totally natural in its patterns of life. In neighborhoods across the city, the dominant impression I have received has been one of community and routine. This impression is present in New York as well, but I believe it is complicated by the fact that everyone in New York knows that they are living in New York and so New York stops becoming an ordinary place of ordinary lives. All the international fixation, the domestic celebrity and attraction, the representation and rerepresentation in literature and film—these all make New York City wonderfully exceptional, but they also make it hard for any neighborhood in New York to feel entirely organic. On the other hand, I remember walking through Irving

Park in the late spring, where there were families sitting and talking on bungalows and taking their children to church and buying new cars and driving to work. The streets were attractive, not grand; they bordered on the suburban in places. But there was that calming sense that hovers over most of those Chicago neighborhoods not immediately adjacent to the downtown charm. This was the charm I came to notice so much in Chicago – the charm of being a place engrossed in the rituals of everyday life.

I have begun to fall into those rituals myself. I take Saturday walks around Hyde Park and notice familiar sights: children playing in Nichols Park, the dusky brick of the Catholic church on 55th and Woodlawn reflecting rivers of melting ice, the passerby filing past the records on the sidewalk by the shops on 53rd, the ornate limestone blocks of Kenwood and North Kenwood, a woman delivering mail to the old mansions that line Ellis around 44th Street, a softball game at 50th and Dorchester, the massive Romanesque façade of Kenwood Evangelical Church. Walking back from classes in the afternoon, the great flat stretch of 55th Street, Washington Park on one side, the low stretch of urban renewal leading to Lake Michigan on the other, has always made me feel calmer at the end of the day.

The feeling of settling in is a feeling I never had with New York—sure, I grew to know more and more of it, but at the end of the day, each day, I was riding the train back to Connecticut. Most of my time in Chicago is not spent on long walks but in the little exercises of living in a place—leaving home groggy in the morning, making my way on Friday nights to my favorite restaurant, killing time by wandering around the university quads or across the Midway to the '30s architecture of Woodlawn. In the morning through the window there *are* those dawnlight shafts I never experienced in New York. They reflect off the brick buildings across the street, buildings I could feasibly draw from memory. If I look through my window at night, I see the glow of the streetlights on a line of oak trees, and I see the shadows of the leaves on old Neo-Classical apartments. I like my block; I like my neighborhood. I like the Victorian houses on Woodlawn south of 55th; I like the dome of the old shuttered Christ Scientist church on Blackstone; I like the waves of Lake Michigan on the Point; I *really* like Harold's Chicken. When I return to the

city after time on the East Coast, and take the 55 bus from Midway past the taquerias and bungalows of Gage Park, the churches and greystones of Englewood, and back across Washington Park to my stop on Ellis , I feel like I have come home. I couldn't say now whether I like Chicago or New York more. They are very different cities and I know them in very different ways. But I miss either of them if I spend too much time away.

The people falling back respectfully on either side