

Cities¹

By Elena Ferrante

Translated from the Italian by Ann Goldstein

One morning-- it was summer, a very hot Neapolitan summer, I was eleven-- two boys who were scarcely older, playmates who were silently in love, invited my sister² and me to get an ice cream. Our mother had absolutely forbidden us to leave the courtyard of the building where we lived. But we were tempted by the ice cream, by the prospect of love, and decided to disobey. One act of disobedience led to another. We didn't limit ourselves to going to the café at the end of the street, but, absorbed by the pleasure of acting as uninhibited women, we kept going, all the way to the gardens of Piazza Cavour, to the Museum.³

At a certain point the air turned black. It began to rain, with thunder and lightning, the liquid sky dripped down on us and ran in torrents toward the sewers. Our escorts looked for shelter, my sister and I didn't: I already saw my mother anxiously shouting our names from the balcony.

We felt abandoned in the rain, and we ran, lashed by the heavy water. I held my sister by the hand, shouting at her to hurry, the rain was soaking us, my heart was pounding. It was a long overexcited moment of disorder. The boys had left us to our fate; the home we were running toward was surely a place of punishment, anything could happen there. I was aware of the city for the first time. I felt it on my back and under my feet, it was running along with us, panting with its dirty breath, horns honking madly, it was alien and known at the same time, limited and boundless, dangerous and exciting, I recognized it by getting lost.

That impression remained. Ever since, every city has existed only when it abruptly enters the blood that moves the legs and blinds the eyes. I took the wrong street many times not because I didn't know the way home but because the known space also felt my anxiety and opened up before me in erroneous routes, and the erroneous routes were also a desire for error, possibilities of flight from my mother, of never returning home but wickedly getting lost in the streets, in all my most secret thoughts.

I had to stop, tug on my sister so that she wouldn't run away, grasp the thread of orientation, which is a magic thread, to tie one street to the next, making tight knots, so that the streets would calmly settle down and I could find the way home. At first our mother was overcome by emotion, because we were alive, then, just because we were alive, she punished us by spanking us with a trowel.

As for your question about the cities of Delia, of Olga,⁴ I want to try to answer by starting with that run in the rain. I soon left Naples, and, as it happened, I lived in various and distant places. I rarely got along well with the cities I lived in. Now cities all seem to me merely prostheses, but with different effects: either they remain dead material, forever alien, or they become one with your body and you feel them as an active part of what you feel. Only in that second case do cities count for me, for better or worse. Otherwise they are meaningless topographies. Even if they have beautiful, evocative names and fascinating traces of the past, they don't excite me even as a tourist; I have little interest in being a tourist with my nose stuck in a Touring Club guide. Starting with that experience of

¹ This is an excerpt from *La Frantumaglia* (The Act of Falling Apart), a 2003 volume of her correspondence with editors.

² If Claudio Gatti is correct that Elena Ferrante is actually a pseudonym of Anita Raja, some of the biographical details here may be invented, including the fact that Raja even had a sister (Raja's only sibling is a brother). See the Notes for *My Brilliant Friend* for more information.

³ Piazza Cavour is a square in the historic center of Naples, made up of gardens that occupy all the central part of the city. It is a short distance from the National Archaeological Museum (Museo Archeologico Nazionale).

⁴ Delia is the narrator of Ferrante's *Troubling Love* (1992) and Olga is the narrator of Ferrante's *The Days of Abandonment* (2002).

late childhood, the true model of urban involvement is Naples pressing in on me and confusing me as I run in the storm.

I must tell you, however, that the aftermath of that run was crucial. I mean the calming down, regaining eyes and ears, seeing the city as if I had redrawn it with anxieties and its pleasures. I mean the resorting to a thread that reconnects the places shattered by emotions and allows us not only to get lost but to govern our getting lost.

In this regard there is a passage by Walter Benjamin⁵ that I am very fond of. Over the years I've found everything I need there: the descent to the Mothers of an urban area seen through the eyes of a child, the city-labyrinth, the role of love, the troublesome governess, even the rain that falls on childhood. I'm referring to the opening chapter of *Berlin Childhood Around 1900*, entitled "Tiergarten."⁶

I'm not going to talk here about Benjamin's gaze, the extraordinary gaze of eyeballs that are pupils in their entire spherical surface, and which therefore see not only before, not only outside, not the afterward that is in store but the ahead-behind, the inside-outside, the after in the then-now, without chronological order. I wish to emphasize, rather, the marvelous opening that goes: "Not to find one's way around a city does not mean much. But to lose one's way, as one loses one's way in a forest, requires some schooling."

Learning to get lost in a city, precisely: hearing the names of the streets like the snapping of dry twigs, like mountain gullies that reflect the time of day. Benjamin talks about it in an anomalous sort of writing, a vortex-like writing that seeks to reach the *difficult to express*, what is deep down and barely visible. When does the city become the city of being lost? Where is the origin of the labyrinth, when is one schooled in the art of getting lost? "This art I acquired rather late in life; it fulfilled a dream, of which the first traces were labyrinths on the blotting papers in my school notebooks. No, not the first, for there was one earlier that has outlasted the others. The way into this labyrinth, which was not without its Ariadne,⁷ led over the Bendler Bridge, whose gentle arch became my first hillside."

The dizzying velocity of the writing is beautiful, the going back, in just a few lines, to the ink marks on the blotting paper of childhood, in search of the primary labyrinth. Is the intuition of the art of getting lost in the city in that swirl of ink? No, the valley goes deeper, there's an *even before*, a before that comes before the squiggles on the blotting paper. One has to go back. The original urban labyrinth is in childhood. It's the labyrinth that in the form of the park at the zoo in Berlin in which the child Benjamin navigated a mysterious corner where "in fact must have lain the couch of that Ariadne in whose proximity I first experienced what only later I had a word for: love. Unfortunately the Fraulein intervenes at its earliest budding to overspread her icy shadow. And so this park, which, unlike every other, seemed open to children, was for me, as a rule, distorted by difficulties and impracticalities."

The primary labyrinth is sketched by the child's gaze as it wanders in the mystery outside the house, far from his guardian divinities, and encounters love for the first time. It is *difficulties and impracticalities* that the child Benjamin experiences when the icy shadow of the governess is cast over his Ariadne (there is not a city-labyrinth, therefore, without a Pasiphae who gives birth to the Beast-Minotaur, without an Ariadne and love), disturbing the apparition. The adult Benjamin will dream forever of that getting lost which began when he crossed the Bendler Bridge, and will seek the thread enabling him to return to that experience and transform it into art that can be expressed, apprehended.

Of Benjamin's Ariadne we know nothing, of course, he tells us not about her but about the childhood of a small Berlin Theseus; it's only natural. But for me the faint apparition of the girl,

⁵ Walter Benjamin (1892-1940): German Jewish philosopher, cultural critic, and essayist

⁶ German for "zoo"

⁷ Ariadne, in Greek mythology, was the daughter of Pasiphae and the Cretan king Minos. She fell in love with the Athenian hero Theseus and, with a thread or glittering jewels, helped him escape the Labyrinth after he slew the Minotaur, a beast half bull and half man that Minos kept in the Labyrinth. Here the legends diverge: she was abandoned by Theseus and hanged herself; or, Theseus carried her to Naxos and left her there to die, and she was rescued by and married the god Dionysus.

immediately covered by the icy shadow of another woman, the governess-mother-monster, is unforgettable. If Theseus is stopped at the incapacity to orient himself, it's little Ariadne who preserves the art of getting lost, it's she who possesses the thread that can control it. I've loved this myth since I was a child. It's very possible that that day in Naples, in the storm, I thought of Ariadne, and that I thought of her many years later, describing Delia who, wandering through the city, gets lost in her childhood. As a very studious and dreamy middle-school adolescent I often had fantasies of guiding the hand of Theseus as he killed the Beast, my blood relation, leading the hero to safety, abandoning for him the city-prison and my terrible family, sailing to another city, discovering him ungrateful behind the appearance of the fine curly-haired youth, and finally winning for myself wild and vengeful joys, perdition with Dionysus, perdition that at fifteen I desired more than I did later, as an adult.

With myths there is always something that shifts within. Years afterward-- by then grown up and in a completely different frame of mind-- I returned to Naples for several months; I had my own problems. I retraced many of the routes of my childhood, including the one I had taken with my sister in the rain. I rediscovered the anguish of that breathless run, but also the pleasing impression of a city that was mine and no one else's, hostile and seductive, which I had taken possession of for the first time on that long-ago day. I recalled the image of the labyrinth as an ordinary space, a known place that, with oneself, is suddenly disrupted by a strong emotion. I got some books (including that vast captivating hodgepodge that is Graves's *The Greek Myths*⁸), I wanted to see if the myth would help me describe, by giving me distance, a story of intolerance, flight, love, and abandonment: not the abandonment experienced by Olga⁹-- that came much later, when I had understood that to write well you have to do the opposite of what the handbooks prescribe, get close, shorten the distance, abolish it, feel the pulsing veins of living bodies on the page.

A variation of the Ariadne story fascinated me. It's the story of the Cretan girl who is now pregnant, and worn out by seasickness, and whom Theseus puts ashore in Amathus for fear she'll miscarry. The girl has just set foot on land when a strong wind forces the hero's fleet to put out to sea. Ariadne is desperate, about to give birth, suffering because of her lover's abandonment. Then the women of Amathus intervene, and, to console her, take turns writing her love letters, pretending they're from Theseus. The lie lasts until Ariadne dies in childbirth.

I worked on this story for a while, during those months in Naples. I invented in detail a sort of Campanian city of today, an Amathus that was like a town on the Amalfi coast. It was a city of female friendship and solidarity, but free in its thoughts and in its conflicts. I imagined a community of modern women writing consoling love letters to a modern Ariadne, the abandoned foreigner, attributing them to the traitorous lover. I was drawn to the possibility of describing how women dream of being loved, and so I applied myself mainly to four things: the women's effort to enter the head, the words of a man; the women's collaboration-- a true, harmonious group project-- to feign a man's psychic and lexical makeup; questioning themselves, on the other hand, to find out what they would have liked to hear from a man in love; the search-confession of what they would have said to the desperate Ariadne if, as was happening to some, amid endless contradictions, they had been hopelessly in love.

I remember that I liked imagining the arguments that preceded the drafting of the letters. But when I began to actually draft them, everything got complicated; in the end they seemed pointless effort-- I wrote two and stopped. Evidently the idea was weak, the letters tended to sketch an ideal male in whose reality no Ariadne, however desperate in her abandonment, would have believed, especially today; the city was too perfect; the community of women, even in its vivacity, seemed sentimentally full of good feelings and thus inauthentic. No, even in the case of cities dominated by women one can and must write only of city-labyrinths, the repositories of our complex and

⁸ a compendium of Greek mythology, with comments and analyses, by the poet and writer Robert Graves, first published in 1955

⁹ In Ferrante's *The Days of Abandonment*, Olga's husband Mario leaves her after fifteen years of marriage.

contradictory emotions, where the Beast¹⁰ is lying in ambush and it's dangerous to get lost without having first learned to do so.

The problem-- and here I'm expanding slightly on the subject of your question-- is that one has trouble imagining what sort of polis¹¹ women could construct, if they sought to do so in their image and likeness. Where is the image-model, what female traits would it resemble? As far as I know the city, for women, always belongs to others, even when it's their native city. It's true that for a long time now women representatives have actively taken part in the management of the polis but only on the condition that they don't take over, immediately, to try to really reinvent it. Those who try are disappointed, leaving behind a wake of bitter discourse or adapting to the clichéd phrases of contemporary politics.

Evidently the female city will be a long time coming and doesn't yet have true words. To look for them we have to descend beyond the squiggles of our blotting paper, into the labyrinth of our childhood, into the unredeemed chaos of fragments of our past and our remote past. An arduous undertaking. The heroines of myths are in general solitary, individuals without affiliation, in search of a small transient sovereignty, which, however, when it is achieved is paid for with shame, with their lives. Often they commit actions that deviate from the male order, at times they rebel against the laws of their native city. It's rare that they found a city. Only once, as far as I remember at the moment, does a woman decide to plan a polis of her own, oversee its construction, be *dux femina facti*. Obviously I'm talking about Dido,¹² a character it took me a long time to love completely.

As a girl I was annoyed by her suicide. In high school the story fascinated me not for what Virgil describes at length but for what Virgil barely hints at: the bloody story the woman has behind her, the brother who killed her husband, the flight from Tyre, the skill she displayed in Africa, the way she got the land on which to establish, with her sister, a new city. At the time I liked women who fled. For Dido I had at hand domestic inspirations with which to give her body. And here I should tell you that my mother was a dressmaker for a long period of her life, and that was important for me. With needle, thread, scissors, fabrics she could do anything. She altered old clothes, made new ones, sewed, unsewed, let out, took in, made tears invisible with skillful mending. Because I had grown up in the middle of all that cutting and sewing,¹³ the way Dido tricks the king of the Gaetuli immediately convinced me. Iarbas had said to her mockingly: I'll give you as much land as the skin of a bull can go around. Little, very little, an ironic male insult. The king-- I was sure, not for nothing was he the son of Amon-- must have thought that even if the bull's hide was cut into strips it would never surround enough land for the construction of a city. But I had seen the fair-haired Dido in the same concentrated pose as my mother when she worked-- beautiful, her black hair carefully combed, her skilled hands scarred by wounds from the needle or the scissors-- and I had understood that the story was plausible. All night (crucial labors are carried out at night), Dido had been bent over the hide of the beast, reducing it into almost invisible strips, which were then sewed together in such a way that the seams couldn't even be guessed at, a very long Ariadne's thread, a ball of animal skin that would unroll to enclose a vast piece of African land and, at the same time, the boundaries of a new city. That seemed to me true and had excited me.

Later, at university, I still found things to dislike about Dido, I preferred the woman who was at the head of a great enterprise, the woman who was directing the construction of the enormous walls and the fortress of the new Carthage. I was especially struck by the fact that Virgil has her enter just

¹⁰ i.e., the Minotaur

¹¹ In ancient Greece, the *polis* referred both to the city-state broadly and the society that inhabited it, especially when characterized by a sense of community.

¹² see The Adventures of Aeneas on my web-site (the discussion that follows will make no sense if you do not know the details of the myth as recounted in Virgil's *The Aeneid*); the Dido and Aeneas story is very important in *My Brilliant Friend*

¹³ In autobiographical essays and interviews, Ferrante claims to be the daughter of a Neapolitan seamstress. Again, if Claudio Gatti is correct about his identification of Ferrante as Anita Raja, this is artistic license and not fact. See the note at the beginning of the selection.

as pious Aeneas, in the temple dedicated to Juno, is contemplating a bas-relief depicting a raging (*furens*) Penthesilea¹⁴ engaged in battle. I've always been disturbed by stories that introduce an almost imperceptible sign of future imbalances into a happy scene, that take your breath away with the specter of an abrupt reversal of fate. When she first appears, Dido, who is very beautiful, and escorted by young suitors, is serenely active, vigilantly governing the progress of works in the city, and I, as a student-reader-translator¹⁵ who already knew what would happen, from that moment on suffered at every word: I was sorry that that woman, in the fullness of her female vigor, would be consumed by a mad love, and would be transformed from happy, *lieta*-- Virgil's *laeta*, the adjective suited to her-- to furious, like the other, losing female model, Penthesilea *furens*. I was sorry for her and for the city, which was also rising auspiciously.

Only when I reread Virgil, to help me write the story of Olga, did I suddenly like Dido in every aspect. I have to say that I also liked Aeneas; his dull piety no longer seemed to me mannered-- well brought up men of today have some resemblance to him, with that same hesitant yet fierce *pietas*.¹⁶ This time I felt that the course of the story was true and agonizing, there was no hint of the faults I had found as a girl. But what made the strongest impression was Virgil's use of the city. Carthage isn't a background, isn't an urban landscape for people and events. Carthage is what it has not yet become but is about to be, material that is being worked, stone exploded at times by the internal movements of the two characters. Not coincidentally, even before Aeneas admires the beautiful Dido, he admires the bustling activity of the work of building, the construction of the walls, the fortress, the port, the theater, the columns. His first comment is a sigh: How lucky the Tyrians are, their walls are already rising. Into those walls he puts his feelings as a founder. They accommodate simultaneously the memory of his destroyed fatherland, the hope and yearning for the future city, and the desire of the nomad to camp in the middle of the foreign city, which is also a city-beautiful woman, to be possessed.

Cities are this, stone made suddenly alive by our emotions, by our desires, as we can see above all in the relationship between Carthage and Dido. The work is actively proceeding under the direction of this woman who has fled the horror of Tyre, the city that had abused her, the city where her brother shed the blood of his brother-in-law, and every feeling was forever polluted by the desire for murder. The queen doesn't want to repeat Tyre and organizes the great urban construction site according to what is just and lawful. She welcomes the foreign exile, she has taken care that the walls of the temple of Juno, goddess of marriage and childbirth, should display the horrors of war and murder, a sort of memento. And she is a woman in her full splendor, the youths who crowd around her say so. It's evident that under her direction Carthage aspires to be completed, amid endless difficulties, not as an enclosure for the Beast but as a polis of love.

Then passion explodes, absorbs all energy, turns into mad love. Immediately the city, too, reacts. What had been started stops, the work breaks off. Like Dido, the stones wait to decide their fate. If the love between Aeneas and her is happily fulfilled, becoming a joyful long-lasting connection, Carthage will gain power from it, the work will start up again, the stones will welcome the positive feeling of the human beings who are shaping it. Instead, Aeneas abandons her. Dido, the happy woman, becomes furious, raging. The past is joined to the future, Tyre virtually reaches Carthage, every street becomes a labyrinth, a place to get lost without art, and the blood that Dido has left behind returns to stain the new city. It is no longer unfinished. In the words of the dying Dido, Carthage is suddenly a city distinguished by hatred and revenge, and her final curse conclusively dismisses the hypothesis of a just polis: *Nullus amor populis nec foedera sunt*¹⁷ is her bitter cry.

¹⁴ an Amazonian queen in Greek mythology, the daughter of Ares and Otrera and the sister of Hippolyta, Antiope and Melanippe

¹⁵ Ferrante claims to have a degree in Classics. Again, this may be artistic license.

¹⁶ Latin for duty, loyalty, or devotion; the English word *piety* derives from it

¹⁷ Let there be no love or alliance between the nations (*Aeneid* IV.624)

This is the result of getting lost in the urban labyrinth without art, without a thread: *No love, no accords*. The Virgilian connection between love and the constitution of civic life is significant. Certainly the wars between Rome and Carthage had economic and political causes, not the abandonment of Dido by Aeneas, not the removal of love, which is only a poetic cause. But why “only”? I-- like anyone who loves literature-- believe that the poetic causes say more than the political and economic causes, in fact they go to the heart of the political and economic causes. I’m one of those who believe that it’s precisely the exile of love from cities that leaves them open to economic and political oppression. Until there is a widespread culture of love-- and I mean solidarity, respect, a movement toward a good life for all, the antidote, in other words, to the furies and to the easy impulse to annihilate the enemy-- the reality of war, of devastation, means that the accords of communal life will always be provisional, truces for catching one’s breath and recovering weapons and renewing the desire for destruction.

No love between peoples, then, no accords: the two things go together. One line says more than a thousand ponderous readings. And there’s nothing to be surprised at. Writers of stories know that the poetic causes are not moths with transparent wings. They have flesh and blood, passions, complex feelings: poetry is digging around in one’s belly with movements that are never predictable. Dido is nourished on sweat and saliva, she’s not a crust of caramel on the top of a *crème brûlée*. She can curse the person she still loves; she can kill herself with a gift from the beloved.

As a girl, as I said, I detested that suicide. I thought that as a woman you go into labyrinths with a magic thread that can control getting lost. And yet I’m convinced that the mistake of every new city lies at its roots, is in its claim to be a city of love while leaving no possibility for labyrinths, a place neither difficult nor impractical, a space of joy, with no furies lying in wait. Even a feminine city-- a future that redeems the past-- risks not knowing how to completely reckon with itself. It’s a shortcut to set aside what is formidable about women, to imagine us merely as organisms with good feelings, skilled masters of gentility. Maybe that’s useful for encouraging us, for political growth, but those who create literature have to make hostility, aversion, and fury visible, along with generous sentiments. It’s their task, they have to dig inside, describe women from close up, feel that they are there, Aeneas or no Aeneas, Theseus or no Theseus.

I don’t like to think, as we often tend to do, that the tremendous actions of the heroines of myths are merely the product of a pernicious male racket, of a patriarchal plot: in the end it’s like attributing to women a lack of humanity, and that isn’t useful. We have to learn, rather, to speak with pride of our complexity, of how in itself it informs our citizenship, whether in joy or in rage. To do this we have to learn the art of getting lost in the difficulties and impracticalities, there is no Ariadne who doesn’t cultivate somewhere a troubling love, the image of a beloved mother who nevertheless gives birth to suicidal dolls and minotaurs.

Listen to us, see us. Sometimes in the urban labyrinths we fearlessly ask burial for our brother, sometimes we collaborate in the killing of our stepbrother and flee with his murderer, in certain cases we kill our children, more often we utter terrible curses before falling victim to the furies ourselves. The story of Virgilian Carthage expresses well how consumingly the polis lives on the feelings of its citizens. It also expresses what happens when love-- the thread both for getting lost and for finding our way-- is banished, each breath becomes fire, the accords of civic life dissolve.

But that’s enough, what counts is to try and keep trying to sew for ourselves with needle and thread the perimeter of the city. As a diligent student I was never bored by winter afternoons spent on the lines of the *Aeneid*. It was wonderful to see the queen on the throne as she managed equitably the enormous work site, a rare occasion to dream of founding a city. I tried out endings different from the one in which she stabs herself with the sword that was a gift from Aeneas. I imagined that she expelled the furies, found love again, learned the art of getting lost and finding the way out. Every so often I would get up and go to the window; my cold feet prevented me from studying. Often when Naples comes to my mind, it’s a cold city in a storm.