

Harold Nicolson, “The Charm of Berlin” (1929)

Abstract

During the Weimar era, vignettes about cities were commonly featured in feuiltons and newspaper supplements. Certain newspapers even had their own city correspondents, who were responsible, among other things, for writing descriptive accounts of city life. “City portraits” were also featured in magazines with intellectual pretensions – the following piece, for example, appeared in *Querschnitt*, a magazine founded by art dealer Alfred Flechtheim. Written by the British diplomat and novelist Harold Nicolson, this article (which appeared in *Querschnitt* in English), employs topoi that were commonly used in reports about Berlin at the time. Thus, Nicolson made reference, for example, to the palpable acceleration of daily life brought about by new means of transportation, which he, like others, associated with dynamism and psychic restlessness. Additionally, he also emphasized the youthfulness of Berlin, which – when compared to London and Paris – had been relatively slow in achieving the status of a metropolis.

Source

The Charm of Berlin

My bedroom in Berlin looks out upon the elevated railway. It looks at it diagonally, across and aslant a triangle of loose-soiled garden. The garden contains a green bench, a long rectangle of red carpet which has hung for eight months upon a cord, a golden ball of glass on a green pole, and a large china statue of a bulldog. The bulldog turns his tail upon the trains as they rattle or thunder above him, but the glass ball reflects them very quickly. I have seldom seen any motion so quick and so continuous as the flashing reflection of the trains that skim around the golden ball. When I tie my tie in the morning, I stand by the window and look at the trains. The local electric trains jingle past me, like virgins going to school, like kingfishers or canaries darting across the shadow of a pool. For my garden is a pool. The great European trains flap up from the main stations like storks or herons, lumbering along so slow at starting, the black vans that terminate their scarlet Mitropa bodies, trailing clumsily backwards like the black legs of a heron or a stork. For they are off to the smell of leather which greets one at Eydkühhnen, or to the smell which greets one at Bentheim of a proximate and salted sea. At night, when I tie my white tie for the evening (a symbol of bondage) the gold ball and the bulldog are no longer visible. There are no intermediaries between me and the Reichsbahn. The electric trains soar upwards as they pass me, they are chariots of gold, they are the rockets which carry people, who have been to tea at Rummelsburg, back to supper at Charlottenburg, they are the comets on which the intellectuals of Wilmersdorf are borne enchanted to the no less cultured homes at Weißensee. I look up at them and see a blur of light, the mist upon the windows, a man leaning outwards against the pane. They look down at me and see an English diplomatist (stout and amiable) tying his white tie. They think, if they have time to think “That man is a foreigner and as we passed him he was tying a white tie.” They think, if they have time to think, “What is it that prevents us Germans from being able to tie a white tie?” But I, for my part, who am by then putting on my waistcoat, I think only, “What on earth is it which gives this town its charm?”

Movement in the first place. There is no city in the world so restless as Berlin. Everything moves. The traffic lights change restlessly from red to gold and then to green. The lighted advertisements flash with the pathetic iteration of coastal lighthouses. The trams swing and jingle. The jaguar in the zoo paces feverishly all night: the planetarium when closed flings revolving planets upon its ceiling: the directors of the museums pace their corridors alone at midnight. They are showing the Luca Signorelli by the light of an electric torch; they are explaining to a photographer from Holland the importance of the Turkestan

frescos: they are merely unable to sleep. In the Tiergarten the little lamps flicker among the little trees, and the grass is starred with the fireflies of a thousand cigarettes. Trains dash through the entrails of the city and thread their way among the tiaras with which it is crowned. The jaguar at the zoo, who had thought it was really time to go to bed, rises again and paces in its cell. For in the night air, which makes even the spires of the Gedächtniskirche flicker with excitement, there is a throbbing sense of expectancy. Everybody knows that every night Berlin wakes to a new adventure. Everybody feels that it would be a pity to go to bed before the expected, or the unexpected, happens. Everybody knows that next morning, whatever happens, they will feel reborn.

This physical and luminous movement finds its parallel in the dynamics of the brain. At 3 A. M. the people of Berlin will light another cigar and embark afresh and refreshed upon discussions regarding Proust, or Rilke, or the new penal code, or whether human shyness comes from narcissism, or whether it would be a wise or a foolish thing to turn the Pariser Platz into a stadium. The eyes that in London or in Paris would already have drooped in sleep are busy in Berlin, inquisitive, acquisitive, searching, even at 4 A.M., for some new experience or idea. The mouths that in Paris or London would next morning be parched for bromoseltzer, in Berlin are already munching sandwiches on their way to the bank.

Second to movement comes frankness. London is an old lady in black lace and diamonds who guards her secrets with dignity and to whom one would not tell those secrets of which one was ashamed. Paris is a woman in the prime of life to whom one would only tell those secrets that one desires to be repeated. But Berlin is a girl in a pullover, not much powder on her face, Hölderlin in her pocket, thighs like those of Atalanta, an undigested education, a heart that is almost too ready to sympathize, and a breadth of view that charms one's repressions from their poison, and shames one's correctitude. One walks with her among the lights and in the shadows. And after an hour or so one is hand-in-hand.

Movement and frankness. The maximum irritant for the nerves corrected by the maximum sedative. Berlin stimulates like arsenic, and then when one's nerves are all ajingle she comes with her hot milk of human kindness; and in the end, for an hour and a half, one is able, gratefully, to go to sleep.

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