

EN

# AS THE DAWN DRAWS EVER NEARER

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Fotografía: José Manuel Márquez Corona

Night, Latin *nox*, French *nuit*, is the name we give to that time during which the sun dwells below our horizon [...] As indeed Thales said, in agreement with Moses: there was night before ever the first day was born.

Zedler's Encyclopaedia<sup>1</sup>

Below our horizon –that has a disturbing ring, evoking a distant past that we have long since put behind us. And the thought that night has existed for longer than day does not sit easily with our perception of things. Night, says Richard A. Bermann, is “that fantastical time in which, strangely, the world is dark”. We lead our lives, for the most part, in the daytime. It is during the day, by the light of day, that we work, think and function according to rules that we regard as being of our own making. When –strangely– it grows dark, we begin to sense once again that beyond those rules there may exist another life, not determined by us. The alternation of day and night, day and night remains constant as we move ever further away from a “natural” way of life, and the coming of darkness is a forceful reminder that this is no easy matter. It is the same with autumn and winter: surely the sun should always be shining! Outside, even as I write this, it is the season of falling leaves and chestnuts, which I stow away in the pockets of my (much too thick) jacket, where they will stay until I toss them into the canal next spring. And the street lamp outside the window, which in May and June seemed to beckon to me to come out for a late evening stroll by its light, already wears a halo of delicate threads, which look like mist and soon will actually be mist. Now the lamp is urging me to spend a cozy evening at the kitchen table, with friends, or writing at my machine. The fact that I ignore its advice and go out regardless, time and time again, is presumably –apart from the sheer pleasure that it gives me– the result of a process of civilization that warrants closer examination.

The dividing of day from night, like the separation of the waters from the dry land, took place at the very beginning of creation –those who are unwilling to believe this account construct an alternative story– and this division has, ever since, been a basic component of human experience. Do what I may, at some point it will grow dark, and I am affected by that change. What seemed to be mine, during the day, is no longer mine. A curtain has been drawn across it.

The moment when someone first dared to lift that curtain and explore what happens on the stage of life during the hours of darkness marked the beginning of a new story which continues unbroken right up to my street lamp in the Admiralstrasse in Berlin. Who was that first enquiring spirit? An unanswerable question, one of those that have dogged all research into the night from the start. Research into the night? There is no such branch of study, “obviously” not, because under the traditional classification of the disciplines it would appear too frivolous –or because actually it would be rather too wide a field. Those whose research touches on the phenomenon we call “night” are generally clinicians engaged in sleep research, astronomers or criminologists. The humanities have paid virtually no attention to the night.

This is a pity, for the separation of day from night is one of the fundamental distinctions that shape our life. The word “strangely”, used in my opening quotation from Richard A. Bermann –a Viennese-born cultural journalist who died in exile in New York, and who wrote his best pieces in the late 1920s for the *Berliner Tageblatt*– perfectly epitomizes our modern relationship to time: light is seen as the norm, darkness as an aberration. And an inconvenience: it stops you from reading or working effectively, you can’t make out who is in front of you, what is ahead, what awaits you at the very next corner. Can one at least assume a historical moment at which this mode of perception replaced an earlier uncomplaining acceptance of nightfall? Probably not. It is more likely that at every period there were individuals whose curiosity led them to peep behind the curtain. The philosopher Vilém Flusser starts out from the premise that humans are diurnal creatures “trying to take possession of the night”.<sup>2</sup> The urge to dominate this “space” too –for, odd though it seems, the night-time is perceived as a space– may indeed be one of the constants in all human society; certainly the debate about whether the attempt to cross that boundary is useful or not, permissible or not, an opportunity or a risk, is among the perennial major themes of cultural history. In his reflections on the street lamp,

Flusser identifies the two poles of the debate: for some the lamp, the “vanguard of the day’s onslaught on the night”, represents “illuminist enlightenment overcoming obscurantism”, while for others it “violates the majesty of the nocturnal darkness”. Is it a symbol of the desired victory over obscurity and mystification, or merely a “shining example” of how humanity is losing touch with its roots?

By making the street lamp the focus for his thoughts, Flusser clearly indicates that this question only becomes relevant once artificial sources of light are widely available, giving a greater number of people access to the night. This points us towards the second decade of the nineteenth century, when gas lighting first appeared and became widely used in the streets of large cities—in the case of Berlin it was said that up to then the feeble oil lamps had shed just enough light to show how dark it really was. From 1819 onwards cities gradually became lighter. And it was not long before a connection was made between this fact and public morals, the supreme example being a much-quoted passage from the *Kölnische Zeitung*, which opposed the artificial creation of light both for theological reasons (“because it may be seen as an interference with the divine order”) and on moral grounds (“gas lighting has a damaging effect on morality”).

It is interesting to trace the history of the reception and interpretation of that quotation. To contemporaries eager for progress it inevitably sounded ridiculous, the expression of an attitude that they wished to see consigned to the past. But as the night in the cities became ever more brightly, ever more garishly lit up, that opinion was sometimes cited in a different spirit. Of course no one wanted to be identified with its bigotry and puritanism, but every so often the longing for some element of darkness in a relentlessly illuminated life would make itself heard. Ernst Bloch, in one of his *Verfremdungen* essays, discusses ghosts and horror stories and adds: “There is another night with a welter of new horror stories in it, a night which remains truly opaque because such flashes of light as there are derive too much from the electric bulb alone and not enough from a different kind of illumination, that of thought.”<sup>3</sup> The increasing presence of artificial lighting led to an altered concept of the night and all things nocturnal, and inspired different images and associations. Suddenly what had once been merely a reactionary view, easily dismissed—the defence of the night against the onward march of day—could be seen as a valuable reminder that on the reverse side of everyday experience

there might be other things to be discovered, things of beauty and terror, hidden from our daytime perceptions.

This awareness showed itself earlier and more profoundly in literature than in politics or science. When Thomas Kernert met Jorge Luis Borges in Buenos Aires, Borges told him that, like Rudyard Kipling, “he had been an insomniac for many years and had therefore long since taken to wandering at night through the streets of Buenos Aires, *his* Buenos Aires. This Buenos Aires always began at sunset, in the “twilight of the raven”, as the Hebrews, according to him, called the dusk.”<sup>4</sup> Kernert emphasizes that it is the streets of *his* city that Borges seeks out. And this city of his belongs to him more completely in the hours of darkness than by daylight. In this the writer is a Romantic, with a long line of predecessors.

The original Romantics discovered the night just before it began to disappear. They provided us with the metaphors that still remain valid: Beauty, first and foremost. Then mystery. An unfathomable quality. And otherness. All of that still lives on, the Romantics say, it is simply no longer easily recognizable. But it is there, whether we see it or not. And we see it better in the evening than in the morning. “The artificiality of the street lamp seems artistic in the evening and a mere artifice in the morning, because evening is the time of art, and early morning that of reality,” writes Flusser. Is this true? Even for us today, is it not rather the case that in the morning our memory of the night is laden with nostalgia, while the prospect of the coming day is already overlaid (what would be the counterpart of “overshadowed”? We still lack the necessary words...) with thoughts of the daily round? But perhaps that is only the view of someone who has to get up early in the morning to go to work and so forces himself to restrict his evening activities. Down, boy, Kurt Tucholsky might have written at this point.

An advertisement in my newspaper promises me new, effective night-vision devices which achieve what the process of civilization has been promising for so long: “night is turned into day”. And among my collection of cuttings I find news items headed “As busy as a late-closing Saturday” and “A hit with customers”, referring to the day when that beloved relic, the German law on shop opening hours, was first amended and shops were allowed to stay open on Thursdays until 8.30 p.m. This, by the way, occurred on the eve of October 7, 1989, and it might be amusing to speculate whether it could have been this first step towards a relaxation of shop-

ping hours, signalling a general opening up of things, that dealt the coup de grâce to our German Democratic Republic (celebrating its 40th and last anniversary on that very day), and not Martin Walser. I wrote that sentence at 11.43 p.m. Outside, the street lamp stands waiting.

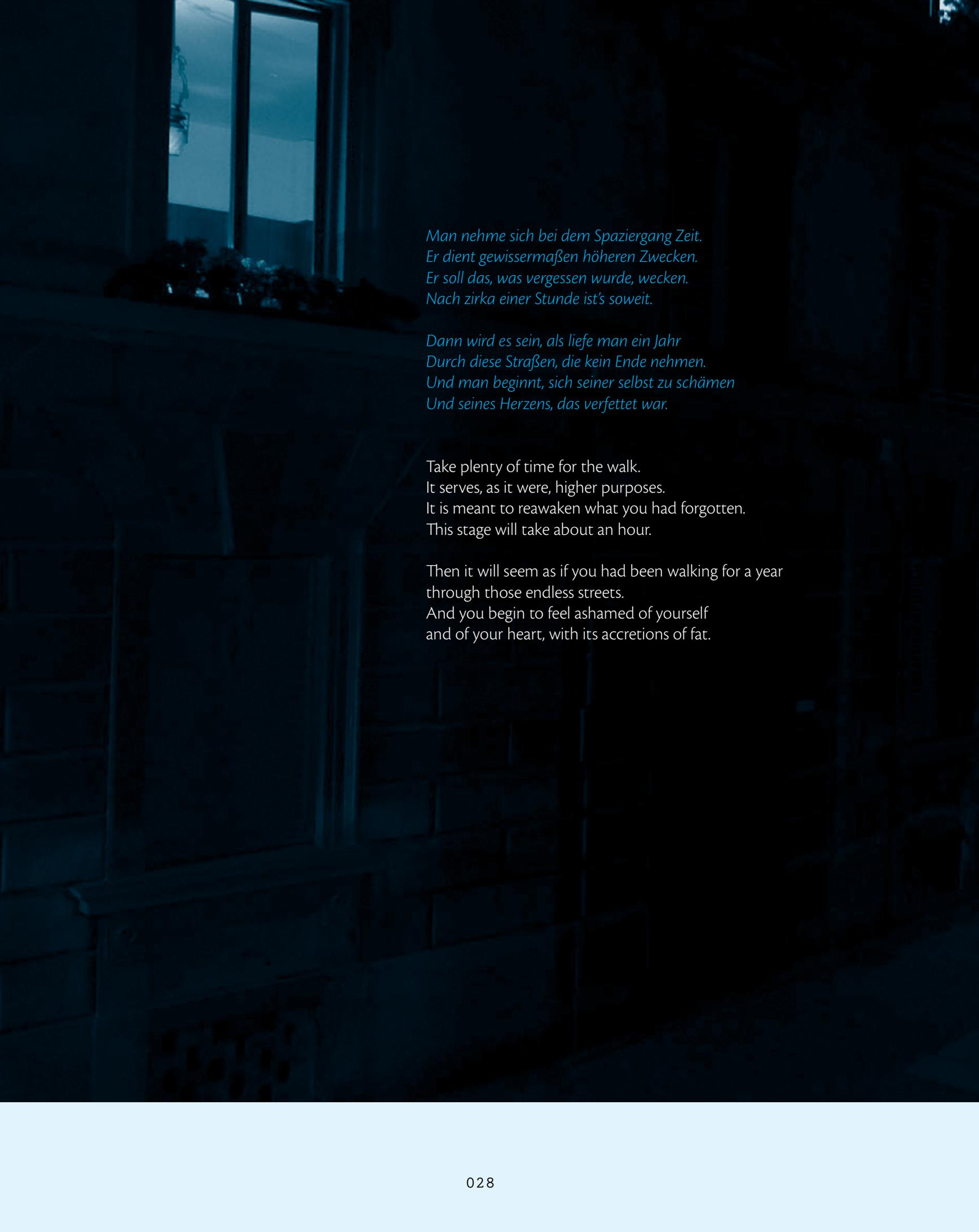
“Going out for the evening” became a topic of discussion in London as early as the 1820s, in Paris shortly afterwards, and in Berlin especially in the years just after the German Empire was established. Who can afford to go out? Who can safely do so? Where do they go? What do they encounter in the streets? Fear and boldness are the two states of mind most strongly associated with the night, and within the kaleidoscope of variations on them, “going out” finds a middle ground. A nice text of 1831, published in the *8-Uhr-Abendblatt* to mark the 60th anniversary of the foundation of the German Empire, tells us that “the Cafe Bauer –[which] never closed its doors from November 1877 to New Year’s Eve 1881– became the focus of Berlin’s incipient night life”. Here we have the term “night life” (already closely associated with a place of retreat, an indoor location). The phrase proclaims that the night is alive. And that people are living their lives at night. And, further, that there is a special time in the city, a time which can be used by those who do not have to get up in the morning and can therefore “go out” in the evening. In the small hours that follow evening they create a time in the city all of their own. Don’t they know that it can be dangerous? A tricky question. One answer might be: yes, but they do it anyway. An alternative answer: no, it is no more dangerous than during the day, they must have other reasons.

The night is a rich source of metaphors for security and insecurity, morality and immorality. At night, the images say, the hidden, darker sides of human interaction and of the individual psyche are revealed. A good example of this comes from an unlikely source. In 1925 Nahum Sokolow, one of the Zionist movement’s leading thinkers, made a speech at the fourteenth Zionist Congress in Vienna in which he told the delegates, most of whom had *not* decided to go and live in the old-new land, what life there was really like. “We are now starting to instal street lighting in our towns in Eretz, Israel.” That society on its way to becoming a state had already built towns, and these were speeding ahead with developments that other places had taken centuries to achieve. Sokolow –the man who translated Theodor Herzl’s novel *Altneuland* (Old-new Land) into Hebrew and gave it the

title *Tel-Aviv* before the town that was to bear the name even existed– talks of the “dangers of dark streets” and then adds: “The minds of men are like streets and public ways, there are wanderers, people passing through, both good and bad, but there are also dangerous visitors; an evil thought is like a thief in the night, seeking the cover of darkness. Have light everywhere, leave none of those dark hiding-places of the mind where vice breeds, where falsehood lies concealed and error entrenches itself...”<sup>5</sup> Poor darkness, blamed for so many things! And it is always the town whose evening and night life attracts criticism –darkness in the country, at the woodland edge, between villages, has retained an innocence which the night in the town has lost. Night in the big cities has a history of its own. In material terms it is a history of street lighting, social functions and amusements, a history of the night patrol and closing times, of prostitution and sleeping rough. But there is an imaginative side too, a history of fears, of horrors, of fascination, a history of guilt and innocence, poverty and riches, splendour and misery, order and disorder.

But apart from all discourse about “night life” as a time-space of pleasure, exuberance and relaxation, night also acquires a political dimension when it is linked with the subject of Germany. From one of the *bouquinistes* by the Seine I bought a book by Hervé le Boterf which describes *La vie parisienne sous l’occupation allemande* (Parisian life under the German occupation) and is subtitled *Paris bei Nacht* (Paris by night). Here, night means the curfew; it conjures up a regime of terror, and the dread of dawn arrests.

Reality encompasses much that is a product of our imagination, while conversely the ideas and images we associate with the night are interspersed with fragments of the real world. All of this accompanies the walker in the night. There is a poem by Erich Kästner, *Nächtliches Rezept für Städter* (Recipe for city-dwellers at night), which opens with the exhortation to take “any bus”, to get off just anywhere –into the night– and simply start walking.



*Man nehme sich bei dem Spaziergang Zeit.  
Er dient gewissermaßen höheren Zwecken.  
Er soll das, was vergessen wurde, wecken.  
Nach zirka einer Stunde ist's soweit.*

*Dann wird es sein, als liefe man ein Jahr  
Durch diese Straßen, die kein Ende nehmen.  
Und man beginnt, sich seiner selbst zu schämen  
Und seines Herzens, das verfettet war.*

Take plenty of time for the walk.  
It serves, as it were, higher purposes.  
It is meant to reawaken what you had forgotten.  
This stage will take about an hour.

Then it will seem as if you had been walking for a year  
through those endless streets.  
And you begin to feel ashamed of yourself  
and of your heart, with its accretions of fat.



Here the imagination is taken along on a literal journey through the night. It's time I tried it again. There are various obstacles. At the entrance to the Underground station two men are quarrelling; one has his dog on a leash but is about to let it loose. There is another entrance; our urban excursions are marked both by minor defeats and minor successes. I help a Turkish mother manoeuvre her pram precariously down the steps, and am rewarded with a warm smile. The guard shouts, "Stand clear, please" (the obligatory "please" is delivered like an order), but then someone does open the door for me, and as I get on the uniformed figure emits a cry of protest: "Does nobody take any notice of me?" No, by this time of night nobody does. We're off exploring. A young woman, with two dogs in jackets she has knitted herself is selling the homeless people's magazine. Everyone has already heard her story, the animal lovers frown as they give her something, the rest of us bury ourselves behind our newspapers or put on a vacant expression. Where to? "Get off just anywhere" –so I pick a number. The man sitting opposite me has eight elephants on his tie (what's *he* doing on my proletarian Underground?), so I'll get off at the eighth stop: Bernauer Strasse, that icon of Berlin in the era of the Wall. Fine. Formerly –I don't know if there is a cultural situation anywhere else in the world where, as here, "formerly" means only nine years ago– the arc-lights along the border strip made the night as bright as day. Remnants of the wall still stand. I have a choice between the districts of Wedding, Prenzlauer Berg and Mitte; the street really is "endless" –*formerly* it was so different. It is fairly dark. In those days anyone flying into Berlin could tell the difference between East and West simply by the amount of light to be seen: West Berlin, a subsidized shop-window for the West, was a sea of lights, the strip alongside the Wall was glaringly bright, and beyond that all was darkness. On the far side of the Wall was the other city. Here they are creating a permanent reminder of the Wall, which is to be reconstructed complete with all that went with it –especially the old regime's glaring floodlights. It seems absurd, especially just now, in the dark, when it is no longer possible to read the explanations provided. What am I doing here? "*Cette piquante et amoureuse inclination qui voue les hommes à la nuit et aux choses nocturnes m'a toujours frappé*" (I have always been struck by that subtly exciting, amorous tendency that draws men to the night and all

things nocturnal), writes Alberto Savinio, whom I have brought with me on this outing. At the corner stands a prostitute –she ought not to be here– surprising the passer-by with an enchanting, beaming smile, perhaps in response to the balmy summer night. These walkers, what are they after? Encounters and solitude –where else could one find the two together? I salute them –they perform a labour of healing. Many windows are already dark; I wonder, but would really rather not know, what is going on behind them. The street itself is more straightforward, its imposing buildings and its dirt both openly displayed. Sleep, says Savinio, makes slavish captives of us. It holds back our progress, and he who resists it is liberating himself (and will of course suffer for it next morning). There is a café-cum-bookshop called Village Voice; its lights are already out.

Now it is night. The evening, when there was still some life here, has slipped over into night without one noticing it. Anyone who is still here now, whether friend or foe, a positive encounter or a threat, is my kin. He does not, as Savinio says, let Nature turn him back into a child and sing him to sleep. "I can sleep when I'm dead", they used to spray on the walls. Savinio is always writing about sleep; I read his text, leaning against a wall, and begin to feel tired. To pass beyond the stage of tiredness really does take an hour, as Kästner said. Then you are ready to proceed. Berlin is still Berlin but at the same time it becomes quite simply the city as such. As you walk you develop a feeling for the street, a feeling which transcends any topographical limitation. Memories of other cities, other texts, mingle with what is around you at the present moment.

On the Koppenplatz there is a memorial, which, of all the many such reminders in my city, is the most troubling. A table, a chair standing upright, a chair that has been knocked over. A poem by Nelly Sachs, set into the ground, explains what requires no explanation but does need constant repetition: that something has changed since then, everything has changed. This is what the buildings all around the square, dating from so many different periods, have to tell us. In the dark their narrative is not very specific: full understanding can probably only be achieved by the light of day. But at night you begin to feel that you *could* understand: freed from the avalanche of daytime impressions, you stand still and feel yourself growing receptive to such messages.

Farther down one can see the bright lights of the capital's new entertainment district. During the evening swarms of visitors have passed through the area around the Hackesche Höfe, through the cinemas, nightclubs and theatres, and solitary individuals and groups are still on the move, exploring every nook and cranny, every courtyard, using the street and all it contains as their nocturnal living-room (even if they are still not quite at home in it –it is all a little too new and not yet properly lived-in). The truly sentimental journeyer through the night of the city, arrogant and solitary as he is and knows himself to be, avoids this area. That is misguided. "Berlin's greatest attraction is its programme of after-dark entertainment," the late lamented *Wochenpost* wrote in 1993, already thinking of this district, which at that time was a run-down area just waiting for the chance of a new future. For anyone wanting to know the true desires of Berlin's citizens, this is the place to discover them. Other great cities too have learned that centres of nocturnal entertainment cannot be artificially enhanced: for some years now Soho has truly become Soho again, and even Hamburg's St Pauli district and the mournfully beautiful Place Pigalle refuse to be cleaned up like New York's Times Square. The offbeat, the disreputable, even if it is commercialized and pre-packaged as never before, is an essential part of what those who walk the streets at night bring with them, what they seek, and what leaves them disappointed.

The process by which night-time has been invaded and conquered by the day has sometimes been described as one of colonization. This, like so many attempts at definition, is only a half-truth. What it overlooks is that the experience of the night, especially in cities, also changes those who undergo it. Of course it is a time hung about with hoary old clichés. Night is not a good time to be alone. All cats are grey in the dark. "Night is the friend of no man, that is to say that at night one may easily come to harm" (Zedler).

Taking to the streets to challenge those notions gives the night person a quiet satisfaction. He (for it is probably still a he) is familiar with

the clichés, he even takes them with him –but he seeks encounters, he seeks what is other and believes he will recognize it more readily in the dimness than by sunlight. In the night the senses are sharpened. Rain smells different. Tattered posters, in the gutters the wind-tossed remnants of that sea of words that is the city, look different. We feel, grope our way forward, walk less confidently than in the daytime. Sounds fall differently on the ear, especially footsteps, which at last engage our attention, implying a promise, hinting at danger.

The observant eye, which is the supreme urban attribute meets a new challenge at night, and is more finely tuned then. Away from the brightly-lit centres a whole world waits. By day I only *know* this; walking at night, I experience it. Petrol stations keep vigil, islands of light reassuring the walker that he has not left his city. And finally there is the long walk home, through empty streets, over bridges and remnants of the Wall, through the space marked out by the night –a space that is the perfect setting for the personal philosophies that my fellow-walkers in these early hours mumble to themselves or bellow out loud– and on to the canal, above which the first streaks of daylight are starting to show.

"As the dawn draws ever nearer, so darkness and obscurity melt away," Zedler concludes. That cannot be denied. What keeps some of us alive is the relative certainty that this too will pass, that darkness will return and the lamp out in the street will beckon once more.

## Notas

1. Johann Heinrich Zedler, *Universal-Lexicon*. It is considered the most important German-language encyclopedia of the 18th Century.
2. Vilém Flusser, "Von den zwei Seiten des Nachtgesichts: Was die Strassenlampe ans Licht bringt," *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung-Magazin* 5, (February 1993).
3. Ernst Bloch, "Technik und Geistererscheinungen," *Verfremdungen I. Literarische Aufsätze* (Frankfurt am Main, 1935 / 1962), 177.
4. Thomas Kernert, "Der alte Mann und die Stadt," in *Die Zeit* 16 (December 1988).
5. Nahum Sokolow, *Erziehungsreferat. Protokoll der Verhandlungen des XIV. Zionisten-Kongresses vom 18.-31. August 1925 in Wien* (London, 1926), 517. Stenographic report.

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