

*Where are you riding, Dolores Haze?  
What make is the magic carpet?  
Is a Cream Cougar the present craze?  
And where are you parked, my carpet?*

—Vladimir Nabokov, *Lolita*

## Three Giants *and a Midget*

AS FAR AS I KNOW, NO ONE has yet observed that three of the greatest figures of twentieth-century art and thought kept company with the same small, annoying person. The three great men were Federico Fellini, Vladimir Nabokov, and Martin Heidegger, all of whom spent much of their lives in debate with the same doppelganger, the same reductive, rationalist nerd who inhabited their minds and whose pesty arguments they spent much of their lives answering and refuting. From the point of view of city building, this coincidence would not matter much if it were not this same pesty nerd who captured the minds of architects sometime early in the twentieth century. It was he who led them in their rampages against the traditions of urban culture and who continues to hold them in bondage to this day, even reasserting himself as a would-be environmentalist. The pesty nerd is something more menacing than the imaginary playmate that three-year-olds hang out with. He is the sort of demon who inhabits a human form, again and again, sometimes achieving considerable renown, as did the philosopher Rudolf Carnap.

Some explanation is in order. It is probably Fellini who disclosed the identity of the little man and his own struggles with him most clearly. Fellini wrote a part for him in his autobiographical masterpiece *8 1/2*. The protagonist of *8 1/2* is Guido Anselmi, a film director played by Marcello Mastroianni, then at the peak of his movie-star glory. Guido is in crisis. He is in the midst of a vast and expensive production, and his muse has deserted him. He is attempting to weave a film around the collage of dreams and memories that haunt him. But, while the entire production company waits, he can think of no link, no rational glue that makes the fractured mosaic in his mind lucid and comprehensible.

Guido's tormentor is his cowriter and designated alter ego, Daumier Carini, played by a singularly unattractive actor named Jean Rougeul (opposite the handsome and infinitely charming Mastroianni). Carini thinks Guido's script is a mess—meaningless fragments “drowned in nostalgia.” Guido's most beguiling fantasy is of a gloriously buxom twenty-three-year-old Claudia Cardinale as a nurse/goddess dressed in white, who appears and reappears as an enigmatic apparition. Carini tells Guido that of all the symbols in his story “the girl in white is the worst”. He tells Guido to get rid of her and to assert “stringent, unassailable logic.” The whole point

of *8 1/2* is that Carini doesn't get what is most central and important—the collage of dreams and half memories, of cosmological eroticism and fragmented juxtaposition that constitute the human psyche. Guido is all soul; Carini is a mind without a soul. Guido is the hero, Carini the fool. In the last great scene of *8 1/2*, all the characters of Guido's memories and fantasies, Claudia Cardinale included, join hands and dance around him in a majestic cosmic game of ring-around-the-rosy, never having found their way into a reductive linear narrative of "stringent, unassailable logic."

Vladimir Nabokov concocts characters like Carini all through his works, sometimes in the guise of "a Viennese quack" (first name, Sigmund), whose way of thinking is so arid that he knows nothing of butterflies and cannot converse with children. In his masterful *Ada*, the fool appears first as the imbecile pedant, Dr. Froit of Signy-Mondieu-Mondieu, then as his double "a Dr. Sig Heiler, whom everybody venerated as a great guy and a near-genius, in the usual sense of near-beer." The demented mother of the hero easily outwits both of the psychiatrist fools on her way to what must be literature's most sane and charming suicide. Later the fools reappear as the "the social-scene commentators, the moralists, the idea mongers" for whom the rapture of a gravity-defying young acrobat is unknowable.

At the beginning of *Lolita*, a psychologist named Dr. Blanche Schwarzmans puts in a brief appearance, her name a typical Nabokovian multilingual word play for one who sees the world only in black and white. Frequently asked about his disdain for Freud and Freudians, he once replied, "Let the credulous and the vulgar continue to believe that all mental woes can be cured by a daily application of old Greek myths to their private parts." Mockery of the little man, his internalized antagonist, was a sport he clearly enjoyed.

Nabokov's Freudians were the most consistently ridiculous of his "idea mongers", forever cramming the infinite nuances of human character into a few ugly little boxes of arcane terminology, as if no further insight were needed or possible. Nabokov's disdain for reductive thinking was largely aesthetic, for more than anything he savored the beauty of complex things—orchids, butterflies, human females, and above all, language. The Edenic world of *Ada*, so exquisitely described in twentieth-century English's most gorgeous prose, is the lost civilization he watched the Bolshevik brutes destroy. Freud, Lenin, Gropius—he had no use for any of them.

Those three characters had not a trace of a quality that Nabokov possessed in abundance—irony and self-mocking wit accompanied by voracious interest in everything—from Dante and Goethe to Dick Tracy and cowboy westerns. Reductive systematizers—Freudians, logical positivists, modernists—are a leitmotif in the works of Nabokov and Fellini, a recurrent theme and a persistent annoyance, but not the main subject of their poetic grandeur.

It was Martin Heidegger, however, who devoted the most concentrated attention to the annoying little fellow. For Heidegger as a young man, it was Descartes who epitomized reductive, arid rationalism, and he devotes long sections of *Sein und Zeit* (Being and Time), the major work

of his early career, to the systematic demolition of Cartesian arguments. Keep in mind that Cartesian rationalism is nothing less than the very foundation of modernity, assimilated to the degree that it passes for what we call “common sense” two hundred years later.

Martin Heidegger was a complicated fellow. There is certainly as much to despise about him as there is to admire and revere. He did invent a private language of the most awful neologisms (worse in German). He did wear lederhosen. And he was a Nazi, a relatively unrepentant one. Nonetheless, to some of us in architecture and city building he is a heroic figure, resurrected from obscurity and disgrace by the architectural historian and theorist Christian Norberg-Schulz. It was Heidegger, through Norberg-Schulz, who laid a philosophical foundation for the love of place and for the experience of the phenomena of places. Heidegger’s arguments and his strangely invented terminology give rationale and purpose to the places we try to construct and to their antecedents, the places we love. Long before the shortcomings of modernist thinking and the one-dimensional city of the slab block became so vividly manifest in the world, Heidegger laid bare its idiocy.

Heidegger begins his demolition derby of Cartesian rationalism with Descartes’s first premise, “I think, therefore I am.” Heidegger considers this a fundamentally backward proposition. It imagines human subjects fully formed, floating around on three-dimensional graph paper, bumping now and then into mute, brute objects that constitute the external world and have nothing to do with the making of the thinking subject in the first place. In this rational land of objects on graph paper (so like the modernist city), epistemology (knowledge) precedes ontology (being). For Heidegger, by contrast, people and their worlds are inseparable, and thinking before being—the subject/object dualism that underlies most of what we call modernity—is nonsense.

Exactly as Le Corbusier intended, the modernist city is a literal translation of the Cartesian universe into a built reality, a constructed metaphor of vast and terrifying dimensions. The Heideggerian conception of “place” was conceived by Norberg-Schulz and others in opposition to the Cartesian idea of “space” that underlies every stick of modern architecture and modernist town planning. The slab block (Zeilenbau) occupies and defines that very form of Cartesian space.

It is a crucial part of the story of the modernist city that Le Corbusier chose the term “Cartesian” to describe the skyscraper and slab-block landscape of his imagination, the landscape that became the dogma of CIAM and the built reality of so much of the modern world. What Le Corbusier meant by the evocation of Descartes was that these buildings would be the perfect embodiment of rational thought, standing free and unfettered in a matrix of undifferentiated space. They would ignore and ultimately eradicate the messy, irrational layering of centuries that burdened cities and distorted their architecture.

Heidegger spent a significant portion of his opus, *Sein und Zeit*, dismantling the narrow and impoverished Cartesian view of the world, a view that in Heideggerian terms “unworlds the world” and tries to drain things of all the meaning they have for us. For Heidegger, full-fledged space consists not of the arid universe of the  $x$ ,  $y$ , and  $z$  Cartesian coordinates with disembod-

ied objects floating amongst them, but of places of myth and history, where people belong and dwell, and where things matter, because they are laden with meaning. We are the worlds we inhabit, not dispassionate observers of mute externalities. They make us as surely as we make them; we don't exist without them or before them.

A Heideggerian "world" is the amniotic fluid of history, myth, and experience that we are formed within. Heidegger is a contextualist in a sense that is deeper and more evocative than the much more literal way in which architects normally use the word. The layers of history are a predicating condition for existence. An erased world, a ruptured world, is an oxymoron; it is not a world at all. A city, therefore, is a Heideggerian world, not unlike the world of a Fellini film. In fact, cities are the subject matter of many of Fellini's best films, either the Ravenna of his youth (*I Vitelloni*) or Rome (*The White Sheik*, *La Dolce Vita*, *8 1/2*, *Roma*). For Fellini, Ravenna and Rome were the repositories of myth and memory, indelible, and irreducible. If that renders them enigmatic and incomprehensible, that is quite all right.

For most of the last half of the twentieth century, including the time when Fellini and Nabokov did their work, Heidegger was dismissed in the English speaking world as a charlatan and a fake. Rudolf Carnap was the leader of the logical positivists in the 1930's, the ultimate Cartesian rationalist, the real guy Fellini's Carini parodied. He denounced Heidegger's writing as a dangerously confused concoction, not worth reading. And largely because of Carnap, it wasn't. Following Carnap's lead, Bertrand Russell, no less, called Heidegger's writings "language run riot."

Today the builders of cities—architects and town planners—are pressed to find or create convincing metrics (the word of the hour) to compete in the quest for the sustainable city. Reductive positivism, the tyranny of empiricism is with us as never before. We live an era of rating systems, points, and prerequisites, of universal codes and prescriptions, of measures that measure the measurable but will never measure the culture of the city, its most precious and fragile content and legacy. In this context, Norberg-Schulz's retrieval of Heidegger from academic banishment, his use of Heidegger to anchor an alternative to the arid graph paper city of numbers promulgated in the name of modernity seems more important and timely than ever. Perhaps he can lead us once more out from the dark shadows of Carnap.

The very name "Professor Carnap" sounds like a coinage from Nabokov, like Lolita's full name, Dolores Haze, the mists of sadness. The name "Carnap" could denote the essential characteristic of the century we just lived through, something soporific about our chosen way of getting about, going to sleep on the back seat, and forgetting the myths and history of our urban culture as the car runs rampant over it all, as it propels us through the graph paper universe of the modernist city or the ravaged landscape of sprawl.

*Magic carpet, car pet, carnap.*

*Wake up, little Susy;*

*The carnap is over.*