

EDITOR'S NOTE



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Writing the City, Narrating Identity

It is a commonplace today to say that the city underlies the long process of modernity, along with progress, secularization, and capitalism. Unlike cultural historians, who aim at opening new vistas for the understanding of the city in terms of urban mapping, urban memory, cultural anthropology, consumption habits, rituals, customs, social practices and, most significantly, cultural meanings derived from multifarious interpretations of the material world, urban theorists have long been engaged in defining urban experience in an eclectic manner. In doing so, they have transgressed self-contained disciplines in order to broaden the scope of urban studies – an academic subject first established by the sociologists of the Chicago School in the 1920s – by approaching the city via architectural design, geography, ecology, economics, environment, sociology, psychology, demographics, town planning, political governance and, ultimately, gender, class, and race. Through the prism of such a consciously interdisciplinary approach, cityscape has not only been conceived of, but also configured as lieu, community, landscape, region, location, and habitat. Furthermore, this kaleidoscope of discourses has revealed how various topographies articulate the projection and transformation of cities into places of lived experience, imaginary lands and communities, places of individual and collective self-reflexivity, alienated and fragmented spaces, colonial and postcolonial geographies, technologized or post-human cityscapes. Thus, the cultural studies-inflected jargon employed by the foregoing critical and cultural(ist) approaches has played a substantial

role in creating an epistemology of the urban, whose main task is to identify the criteria for, and the cartographic methods of, grasping a variegated urban life, on the one hand, and its theory and practice, on the other.

In light of these introductory lines, a number of legitimate questions arise: How does literature write the city? How does the literature of the city respond to the theoretical challenges mentioned above? What types of city does literature create or portray? Is literature responsible for creating an epistemology of the urban?

The articles included in the present volume provide fruitful answers to these questions. They start from the premise that literature and the city – the big city, in most cases – exist in a dialogic relationship. Bluntly, this conflation shows that the history of the city is as long and dense as that of literature itself. Kevin McNamara has rightfully observed that “literary forms such as epic, myth, drama, encomium, and eulogy have been building blocks of civil religion, civic history, and collective identity for millennia” (1). These literary forms, I argue, have been serviceable instruments for shaping and reshaping the symbolic imaginary indelibly related to important centres of socio-economic and (geo)political-administrative power represented by the big cities which, inevitably and necessarily, have always existed as landscapes of the human mind. Literature has thus been responsible for mapping out and nourishing the mythopoetic identity of the city perceived as a space with a highly symbolic legitimation granted by the very act of narrativization or poeticization meant to appropriate the urban space. Be they archetypal cities like Athens, Rome, Jerusalem, Byzantium, Alexandria or modern secular metropolises such as London, Paris, Amsterdam, Berlin, New York, literature has mythologized the reality of urban life and, furthermore, inscribed it in a dynamic flux of imaginary representations. By scrutinizing the protean urban imaginary that gives birth to a mythology of the city forged by a large plethora of narratives and symbolic spaces, literature responds to the theoretical instances and exigencies imposed by urban studies. Petruța

Năiduş's exploration of the first city atlas, Civitates orbis terrarum, is a case in point. Focusing on a six-volume collection of town images elaborated by Georg Braun and Franz Hogenberg between 1572 and 1617, Năiduş shows how the rediscovery of the Ptolemaic notions of geography and chorography was employed so as to represent the city and to provide information about its spatial configuration. Năiduş's subtle and elaborate analysis blends classic and modern city representation practices with the metaphor of the theatre which accounts for both the Renaissance universalist ideal and the bodily dimension of the atlas upheld by the printing of city views.

Acutely aware of the social, cultural, economic, and political changes that have affected the city over time, literature has recorded these historical occurrences and articulated them into a poetics of space reflected in a variety of representations of the city. In other words, all these changes captured by literature are highly suggestive of the heterotopic nature of the urban space, which questions dichotomies such as real-fantasy, centre-margin, replacement-displacement, reterritorialization-deterritorialization, high-low culture. The city as a mental space is perhaps best illustrated by Michel de Certeau's essay "Walking in the City," where he opposes two ways of looking at the city: one is the panoramic, all-encompassing view from above, the other is the personal, subjective view of the city as a pedestrian or as a "practitioner of the city" who lives "down below, below the thresholds at which visibility begins" (Certeau 93). The act of walking, suggests Certeau, creates a network of "intersecting writings" which "compose a manifold story ... shaped out of fragments and trajectories and alterations of spaces" (93). His semiotics of space juxtaposes a panopticon-like perspective of the city with a poetic one endorsed by walking practices that metaphorically write the urban imaginary. According to McNamara, Certeau's urban epistemology is mirrored by literature "as a distinction between literary cities presented as totalities by narrators who look out (or down) on the urban scene, and the limited

perspective of a character or characters in the streets” (3). The “cities presented as totalities” are archetypal or symbolic sites that stand for ideal or utopian fictional habitats whereas cities perceived from a narrow angle are a distorted version of space predicated on a subjective experience “built from perceptions, emotions, and memories” (McNamara 3). The other five contributions included in the first section of the volume are telling examples of how one type of literary city or a melange of the two is tackled in the works of contemporary writers.

Performing an analytical tour de force, Nicolas Tredell examines four types of urban space – the furnished room, the office, the café and the street – in Laura Del-Rivo’s novel The Furnished Room (1961). Translated as sites of networking and escapism from family life, the suburb, and the Church, they are scrutinized in tandem with the olfactory and visual senses that enable the existentialist protagonist of the novel, Joseph Ignatius Beckett, to recollect their physical presence. At the same time, Tredell delves into the main character’s wrong choices, which are the result of his break with reality and visionary experience fuelled by epiphanies. Ultimately, the contributor persuasively demonstrates how the urban space comes to be shared by women and children alike, who continue to live the space in Beckett’s absence and to be willing to develop networking and to experience epiphanies.

In her essay on Angela Carter’s magical realist novels, Nina Muždeka mounts her argument by mingling Roland Barthes’s l’effet de réel with the novelist’s ideological subversion of patriarchal stereotypes. A perfect illustration of how utopia, the image of a symbolic city, incorporates subjective experience, the contribution highlights the effects of magical realism on the city interpreted not only as physical space, but also as a narratological construction beefed up by historical, socio-political, and financial factors and stereotypes of identity. Muždeka’s stresses the fact that Angela Carter portrays the city by having recourse to a wide range of perspectives – colonial, post-imperial and apocalyptic – and concludes that the form of Carter’s

fictional city is deep seated in her firm political commitment and feminist agenda.

Joe Varghese Yeldho's insight into the experience of dwelling in Ann Petry's The Street attests to the fact that literature is engaged in representing not only space as such, but also the way of life specific to a particular space. Reputed for her manner of describing life in Harlem, Ann Petry is read by Yeldho in terms of the music of everyday life in black communities. By employing Heidegger's theory of dwelling conceived as habitation, Yeldho provides a complex analysis of black nomadic dwelling in Harlem, as opposed to white ownership, and to foreground the sound of jazz as metaphor for living anew.

Raluca Andreescu's piece offers a descriptive yet comprehensive vision of the dark side of Washington D.C. in a collection of short stories titled D.C. Noir (2006), edited by George Pelecanos. Read as an attempt to reconstruct an urban puzzle, the article ironically presents the symbolic image of the "City upon a Hill" as pulverized into a myriad of sordid lives in the neighbourhoods and sketches a cartography of the capital's underworld dominated by gloomy family relations, racial and gender discrimination, and corruption. Andreescu shows that D.C. Noir is a literary document that evidences recent anti-utopian attitudes towards American culture, thus challenging the time-honoured ideology, values and perceptions of city life in the U.S. Andreescu's contribution may also be indicative of what Richard Dennis calls "the topography of the text itself – its structure, composition, narrative modes, varieties of language and style" (88). Such a reading allows us, readers, to understand this type of texts as city-texts.

The last article in the first section proposes another reading of "a particular mood or quality" (McNamara 3) in Margaret Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale. Raluca Moldovan elaborates on the dystopian Republic of Gilead which is patterned after the Puritan colonies of seventeenth-century

New England and functions as a totalitarian regime or a merciless theocracy in full control of the characters' lives. Concurrently, Moldovan furthers her demonstration by identifying similarities and dissimilarities between the novel and its sequel Testaments – in which urban imagery is, however, less evident, since it borrows many fictional elements from the novel as such – and the 2017 TV adaptation of The Handmaid's Tale.

Devoted to a few case studies, the second part of the volume complements the themed section, providing samples of identity construction in twentieth-century canonical British and American texts. The common denominator of the four contributions is the epistemology of the self narrated, explored, interrogated or (re)fashioned through the prism of critical methodologies such as feminism, race studies, and psychoanalysis. Subrata Chandra Moẓumder, for instance, considers Sylvia Plath's poetry to be an artistic weapon wielded against an oppressive, patriarchal society. Mixing biographism with close-reading analysis, Moẓumder unravels Plath's psycho-sexual torture which she represses by poetically reinventing herself as the Phoenix. Irene Rabinovich writes about Rosa Sonneschein, a prominent figure in late nineteenth-century American journalism, activism, and fiction. Rabinovich makes an important contribution to the revisionist paradigm into which Sonneschein's literary work has been framed by expounding on the conflicting attitudes towards Judaism, feminism, and Zionism in the context of the fin-the-siècle's changes within American society. Malcolm Bradbury's campus novel Eating People Is Wrong is the subject matter of Noureddine Friji's essay, in which he reads racist judgements and practices foisted upon black African students in accordance with George Lakoff and Mark Johnson's analysis of metonymy in their Metaphors We Live By. Friji thus claims that attitudes towards race may be explained by metonymic concepts like "black head" or "black face," which translate black students' identity as inferior and alien. Richard Kovarovic delights us with a deft and thought-provoking analysis of trauma in Ernest Hemingway's "Now I Lay Me"

and “*A Way You’ll Never Be.*” Kovarovic sheds new light on The Nick Adams Stories by looking into memory types, the narrative role played by episodic personal memory, and the disorderly nature of traumatic memory.

Finally, I wish to express my deepest thanks to the reviewers for taking the time to read and make suggestions and insightful comments on the articles included in the present volume. Last but not least, I would like to thank the ABC Studies team for having readily accepted my proposal to edit an issue which hopefully shows that literature and the city have always been intimate bedfellows.

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