INTRODUCTION

The city and its milieu have always been a source of inspiration and motifs for artists. The process of urbanisation brought rapid social, political, cultural and economic changes which evoked immediate responses of various kinds from those who are traditionally the most sensitive about such phenomena – writers – from the welcoming and celebratory to the rejecting and condemnatory. As a result of this the image of the city has been present in literature since the first urban societies appeared and to trace this back in detail would set a different aim from that which this work is going to pursue.

The main concern of my work is contemporary British literature and therefore I would like to focus on how the city is reflected in the works of British writers in the last decades of the twentieth century. In order to provide a certain historical context, the first chapter attempts to present a brief outline of how the image of the city has been developing and changing in English literature since the late Victorian period. Its main aim is to show how deep-rooted the phenomenon of the city, and London in particular, is in the tradition of English literature and the English imagination in general.

If we should mention the most notable contemporary British writers whose works are either set in cities or in some other way depict the urban environment, these would undoubtedly include Martin Amis, Ian McEwan, Peter Ackroyd and Hanif Kureishi, one of the most popular of contemporary British writers whose works are predominantly set in and deal with London, which makes Sukhdev Sandhu hail him as 'perhaps the first – and certainly the best and most important – Asian chronicler of London'[1] mapping 'the other identities effaced by Thatcherite ideology on the one hand, and by intellectual liberalism on the other', and concerned primarily with 'the ethnic plurality of London, and society's changing constructions of gender'[2]. It is necessary to note that Ackroyd differs from the other three at least as far as the subject matter of his novels is concerned, since he undoubtedly represents one of the major contemporary London chroniclers, and is arguably the best at focusing on the inevitable, yet often ambiguous, relationship between the city's historical and literary representations. Ackroyd is truly a London writer as most of his major works, both non-fictional historical books and fictional narratives, are closely connected with the city, which appears in them as an object of study, a theme, a setting, or at least as a significant socio-topographical background.

Ackroyd as a London chronicler follows the Dickensian tradition of depicting the city in its diversity, represented, among others, namely by George Gissing, H.G. Wells, Angela Carter, Justin Cartwright and Iain Sinclair[3]. Therefore, I decided to deal mainly with the first two above-

mentioned novelists, i.e. Martin Amis and Ian McEwan, and to reduce the image of the city to that which is either contemporary or allegorical or both. However, I have included a short chapter about Ackroyd's outstanding project of London's biography, a book that helped me greatly in understanding the city's literary character and became an irreplaceable source of inspiration for my own work.

Yet, not only is the postmodern, fictional city and its atmosphere central to this thesis, but also the people and characters that inhabit this space, since these characters, as literary functions, best express the most characteristic qualities of the postmodern, or postindustrial, world – non-linearity, fragmentation and the temporariness of human life and experience. The linear, predictable, invariable, socially and physically immobile and relatively unchanging (since unchangeable) existence in a modern industrial society controlled strictly by the state and its institutions (the school, the army, the factory, the family, the Church) was that of one life 'Project', one aim for the whole of life. Modern sociology, under the influence of Max Weber, traditionally uses the metaphor of *pilgrimage* (and a *pilgrim* for a modern person) to describe this idea. It is obvious that such a life is only possible in a neat and well-ordered world the structure of which is entirely independent on the individual.

However, Western society and its way of life has changed dramatically, especially since the Second World War, and no longer bears the conditions necessary for a pilgrim to make his or her life journey. The linearity of life has been broken into a great variety of individual, often isolated and discontinuous experiences and episodes and thus the Project has been replaced by many smaller, personal projects. The state has lost its concern for permanent control over its citizens; instead of blind obedience, adaptability, mobility and responsibility are required of an individual. Such an existence is varied, diversified and does not prefer values of a permanent character. As a result, the postmodern person's identity is much more difficult to capture in one metaphor or one pattern of behaviour (some theories even claim that the true postmodern personality is marked by the absence of identity) which would describe it in its unstable heterogeneity.

The Polish sociologist, Zygmunt Bauman[4] suggests that the personality of a postmodern person has dissolved into four identity patterns, the coexistence of which and permanent interchangeability of which, rather than their isolated occurrence, depict the fickle character of our postmodern existence. The first metaphor is that of "*the stroller*", the most typical representative of the postmodern urban culture who, hidden in the safety and comfort of his or her anonymity in the crowd, carefully observes, or better said gapes, and in his or her imagination projects other people's lives, feeling like a powerful director of human fate. Ironically, the gaper is happily ignorant of the fact that he or she is a permanent target of other gapers, and not only theirs since the most 'natural' environment for a gaper is shopping malls and centres, where they can become an easy prey of the

psychological snares and manipulations of the experts who stand behind such places' seemingly user-friendly design and layout. Secondly, he describes *"the vagabond"*, one without any firm bond to a place or person (this metaphor is most suitable for a postmodern understanding of the career and intimate relationships for which Anthony Giddens invented the term 'confluent love'[5]), whose sense of life lies in an incessant quest for change, new challenges and temptations. *"The tourist"* is the seeker of ready-made exoticism, a collector of prefabricated experiences, mostly in the form of photographs and souvenirs (meaning the mass tourism that changes the local culture and people's lives dramatically through its monetary arrogance). Finally, *"the player"* indicates the accidental character of postmodern life that is more and more frequently taken as a slightly (yet not too) risky "game" in which things might, but do not have to, happen and which is all in fun unless we look for some unchangeable and enduring regularities.

This work, thus, will concentrate on the depiction of the postmodern urban world with its characteristic and inseparable culture, atmosphere and inhabitants in selected works of Martin Amis and Ian McEwan, since they both tackle the theme very differently and, thus, enable a certain comparison. I will try to illustrate how contemporary British literature reflects the social conditions that are traditionally (yet often rather vaguely) termed as postmodern.

There is one final point I should mention – since any postmodern piece of writing cannot be discussed without regard to its style and peculiar narrative techniques, which themselves become one of the writer's main concerns, I feel obliged to include two chapters about the various postmodern themes and narrative devices Amis and McEwan employ in their works.

NOTES:

1) Thomas, Susie, ed., *Hanif Kureishi, A Reader's Guide to Essential Criticism* (Palgrave Macmillan 2005), p.61
2) Lane, R.J., Mengham, R., Tew, P., eds., *Contemporary British Fiction* (Cambridge: Polity Press 2003), p.71
3) See Bradbury, Malcolm, ed., 1996. *The Atlas of Literature*. London: De Agostini Editions Griffin House, chapter Dickens's London
4) For a more detailed analysis of the postmodern identity patterns, see Zygmunt Bauman, *Life in Fragments. Essays in Postmodern Morality* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers 1995), or in the Czech translation *Úvahy o postmoderní době*, transl. Miloslav Petrusek (Praha: Slon 1995)
5) See Giddens, Anthony *Runaway World* (London: Profile Books 1999)