INTRODUCTION: URBAN SPACES IN LITERATURE

Petr Chalupský and Anna Grmelová

> *It is as if the urban, even as it struggles to find a home for what remains*
> *most incongruous, may be in the process of becoming the more natural*
> *location for narratives of self (re)possession.*
> Ivan Callus

The idea of this issue originated in the panel entitled "Urban Spaces – Patterns of Change for the British Novel," dedicated to diversifications of the urban novel and held at the 9th International Conference of English, American and Canadian Studies, co-organized by the Czech Association for the Study of English (CZASE) and the Department of English and American Studies at Masaryk University in Brno. This special issue expands the debate in the panel and includes further contributions to the topic by four international scholars.

Although the city, both as setting and subject matter, appeared in medieval and Renaissance literary works, urbanism and its imaginative and creative reflections have been "at the heart of western culture, the source both of political order and of social chaos"[1] since the Enlightenment. The rapidly developing modern metropolis proved to be an inspiring enough environment for artists and thinkers because of its immense variability and diversity, as well as the boundless promise it held. As Malcolm Bradbury puts it, "[t]here has always been a close association between literature and cities. There are the essential literary institutions [...] There, too, are the

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[1] Richard Lehan, *Literature and the City: An Intellectual and Cultural History* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998) 3.

intensities of cultural friction and influences, and the frontiers of experience."[2] Understandably, the city provoked ambivalent attitudes and feelings in many who were thrilled by the opportunities it afforded for their self-realization but who, sometimes hypocritically, also feared its vices and abhorred the crudity of its life. This perspective was especially vulnerable to the dangerous temptation "to reduce the historical variety of the forms of interpretation to what are loosely called symbols or archetypes."[3] It generated the binary opposition of the corrupt city and the untainted country to affect urban narratives for more than two hundred years, an opposition that would be put under critical scrutiny in the second half of the twentieth century.

What urban literary works have in common is that they reflect the discursive heteroglossia that resonates in the texture of each city, at the core of which lies an ultimate otherness on the personal, social, cultural and political levels that permeates and determines the modern city dweller's everyday experience. By appropriating, juxtaposing and eventually reconciling distinct, often seemingly incongruous, tendencies and phenomena, the city incites conflicts, controversies and dissonances that find their outspoken vent in various literary renderings. "Cities, that is, may concentrate and exemplify forces to be resisted […] but by gathering people and prompting spontaneous interaction, they also provide the space to resist those forces"[4] claims John Clement Ball in support of his argument that the best postcolonial narratives exploit the city as a natural milieu for resistant and oppositional voices by which they manage to "convincingly balance an embrace and a critique of the metropolis."[5] All the works discussed in this issue's articles variously explore (sub)urban spaces as sites of incessant interference of resistant, subversive, transgressive or conflicting energies.

Yet as Richard Lehan has shown, there is an experiential difference between the European city and the American city: "In Europe, the city had to define itself against its medieval origins and the transformation from feudalism; in America, against the wilderness and the frontier experience."[6]

[2] Malcolm Bradbury, "The Cities of Modernism," *Modernism* (1890-1930), ed. Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane (London: Penguin Books, 1976) 96.

[3] Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (1973; London: The Hogarth Press, 1985) 289.

[4] John Clement Ball, *Imagining London: Postcolonial Fiction and the Transnational Metropolis* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004) 24.

[5] Ball, *Imagining London*, 23.

[6] Lehan, *Literature and the City*, 167.

However, the relation between the landscape and cityscape has gone through an array of metamorphoses throughout the history of American literature until the present so that, as Ivan Callus demonstrates in his interpretation of the latest American fiction in this issue, "[s]elf-renewal, if it happens, must happen in the city."

The articles in this volume explore diverse representations of urban space from the Enlightenment to the present (2010). The chronological scope of the issue thus ranges from eighteenth-century enactments of women's urban experience, through discussions of nineteenth-century English and American urban fiction to a variety of late twentieth-century and early twenty-first century British, Irish, postcolonial and American literary renderings of the city. The contributions suggest the current range of critical approaches to literary representations of urban space, with a special focus on the rich variety of representational and generic shifts in late twentieth-century and early twenty-first century rewritings of the city.

Feminist cultural practice is applied in an article focusing on eighteenth-century representation of women's experience in London, and also in a discussion of suburban spaces and landmarks in Eavan Boland's poetry as well as in a critique of writers of bicultural ethnicity who enact London as a transnational city. An investigation of the postmodern urban Gothic in a London novel also echoes the analysis of Paul Auster's rendering of New York and its symbolic meaning in an interesting way which is by implication contrasted with the symbolic meaning of urban spaces in a novel by Charles Dickens. The ambivalent symbiosis of the urban and the rural as demonstrated in an interpretation of a novel by Jim Crace can be read as a parallel to the relationship of the cityscape and landscape in an article on the fiction of Joseph O'Neill and Don DeLillo which is a fitting conclusion to this special issue transcending a rigid divide between the urban and the (non)urban.

Our issue opens with a contribution by Soňa Nováková in which the differing early eighteenth-century representations of urban women in the texts of male and female writers are contrasted. While the first are scopophilic, voyeuristic narratives presenting these women as objects to be sexually, visually, or verbally consumed, transforming them into the sole property of the male gaze and reducing them to a source of both pleasure and anxiety for the male subject, the latter represent London as a potentially fulfilling environment for women. Although they capitalize on contemporaneous interest in the sexual image of urban women, they concurrently reflect satirically upon the readers' desires by depicting heroines who resist consumption and containment by male values, either by

attempting to act as sexual and economic consumers themselves or to profit from their commodity status on the marriage market. Nováková also demonstrates how mid- and later eighteenth-century fiction by and for women operates to stress the virtuous heroine, shifting the focus of its narrative gaze to protagonists who consume a narrow range of urban pastimes on their way to marriage, thus adopting a policy of non-representation that contributes to the development of the modern city as a text in which a woman is represented as an object with no desires and self-knowledge.

Charles Dickens's construction of urban space and its symbolic meaning in *Our Mutual Friend* is discussed by Zdeněk Beran. Unlike the structural principle of binary oppositions typical of the author's earlier works, where the thematic polarity closely correlates with the spatial arrangement of the fictional world, *Our Mutual Friend* consists of a complex web of localities which cannot be identified with either side of the novel's polarized milieu. As Dickens's former principle of horizontal dichotomies in the construction of space gives way to his new aesthetic conception of vertical surface-depth relations, the intrinsic meanings in the novel are not provided by the upper layer of topographic representation, but must be extracted from what lies beneath the more explicit surface meanings. This can be achieved through a thorough scrutiny of the novel's symbolism, namely that of the river Thames, and the strategy of semantic "reversality" of its central motifs and themes. In his polemics with J. Hillis Miller's assertion that "*Our Mutual Friend* is about 'money, money, money, and what money can make of life,'" Beran argues that the novel's in-depth symbolism and semantic reversals reveal that money serves as a mere tool for installing a more universal meaning of Dickens's dark vision of modern urban conditions, emphasizing the lethal character of the blind, egoistic passions for which a modern metropolis is a fitting scene.

According to Petr Chalupský, Jim Crace's novel *Arcadia* integrates a celebratory perspective with a satirical one, and as such exemplifies a new tendency in the development of the British urban novel in the early 1990s. *Arcadia* is a complex work as far as the theme of the city is concerned because it brings to bear a wide range of perspectives, such as the ambivalent symbiosis of the rural and the urban, the archetypes of modern city dwellers, the exploitation of public spaces and the importance of the agora for a functioning urban social life. The narrative combines various genres, namely the psychological novel, sociological and urban studies and the quasi or mock-pastoral, by which it also dramatizes some theoretical concepts related to modern urban life, such

as those of Raymond Williams, Michel de Certeau, Zygmunt Bauman, Guy Debord, and John Fiske. Chalupský shows how the generic and discursive hybridisation of the novel reflects the hybridisation that forms the very essence of modern city life, one which is simultaneously paradoxical and ambivalent but also stimulating and prolific in its mixing up of seemingly or ostensibly disparate, or even conflicting, tendencies and phenomena, and how it in effect contributes to the transformation of the contemporary urban novel.

Rudolf Weiss reads Charles Higson's blackly humorous London novel *Getting Rid of Mister Kitchen* as postmodern urban Gothic. Focusing on the features which substantiate the novel's postmodern Gothicity, he discusses the dubious ontological status of the narrator/protagonist, who is a highly unreliable homodiegetic narrator, a mad monologist, an epistemologically deficient narrator (due to excessive consumption of alcohol and drugs) who does not distinguish between dream and reality. Higson's construction of London is therefore based on psychogeography rather than geography as his egomaniac yuppie narrator hyperbolically recounts his crimes and transgressions during the day as he – in a postmodern deconstruction of the traditional *flâneur* – "races frantically through the contemporary metropolis, intent on confrontation rather than observation." The metamorphosis of Burke's notion of the sublime in Lyotard indicates an *aporia* in human reason, symptomatic of the fluctuating and uncertain postmodern world, a world to which Higson's anti-hero has adapted. Ultimately, as Weiss argues, the narrator/protagonist is not only a stranger in the city (Bauman), in a dystopian urban space, but also a stranger to himself.

Anna Grmelová shows that writers of bicultural ethnicity are salient voices in the transformation of contemporary British urban fiction, both contributing to its variety and rendering London as a transnational city. Comparing Sam Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners*, the pioneering novel about the Windrush generation, to Andrea Levy's revisiting of the same period half a century later in her *Small Island*, Grmelová maintains that the heterophony of voices employed by Levy contributes not only to showing London changing into a diaspora space but also to challenging the essentialist discourse of English ethnocentrism. The article shows that the Caribbean couple's creation of a home, firmly rooting them in London, is a major departure from *The Lonely Londoners* and that Levy also shows sensitivity to the extent to which the notion of home in black experience contradicted the focus in much white, middle-class feminist criticism on the home and family. The article argues that informed by knowledge of the

extent to which post-war Caribbean immigrants contributed to the political, linguistic and cultural fabric of contemporary British society, *Small Island* speaks to Selvon's seminal work and establishes a dialogue that both illuminates a tradition and celebrates a transculturalism transcending the lonely lives and frustrated expectations of the Windrush generation in London.

Anton Pokrivčák explores the symbolic meaning of the American city from the early latent presence of Boston in Hawthorne's fiction through Herman Melville's representation of the Manhattan Financial District in "Bartleby, the Scrivener" in which the city acts as a wall (border) – an impenetrable materiality, to the contemporary depthlessness of the environment in Paul Auster's *New York Trilogy*. The protagonist of *City of Glass* (the first part of the trilogy) is like the unnamed narrator/protagonist in Charles Higson's London novel, which Rudolf Weiss examines, "[l]ost not only in the City, but within himself as well"[7] as the city becomes a state of mind in both novels. Due to the ontological mixing of realities Auster's New York, as Pokrivčák argues, is no longer the border between the "here" and "there," as in the case of "Bartleby" but is both surrounding and within the individual, reducing him to nothingness. An insight into the postmodern existential situation is also the focus of the other two parts of the trilogy in which the characters are also engulfed by the city – a postmodern place of free-floating alienating signifiers.

Employing feminist cultural practice, Fiona Becket expands the discussion of urban spaces in examining the significance of the suburbs and landmarks of Dublin in Eavan Boland's poetry "as a specific location, as emblematic, and as informing a complex sense of alienation and belonging." As Becket demonstrates, the suburb (the "fragile" and "transitory" space which for Boland has its own "cadences") represents "a layering of history and experience that is central to Boland's poetics." Accordingly, landmarks such as the cemetery feature in her poetry as a space combining the personal and familial with the monumental and impersonal. Likewise, the Liffey and its environs are reimagined in her poetry with the intention of repudiating established poetic values: in foregrounding the private and domestic Boland's poetry challenges the clear lines between mythic and domestic space and between the public and the private, reviewing assumptions about gender and national myths. Becket is interested primarily in poetics and the space of the poem as a particular *locus* of creativity, and how in Boland it

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[7] Paul Auster, *The New York Trilogy* (London: Faber and Faber, 2004) 3-4.

becomes the kind of space which is best suited to the creative interrogation of structures and ideas.

In his analysis of Joseph O'Neill's *Netherland* and Don DeLillo's *Point Omega*, Ivan Callus examines how recent fiction set in the United States has been ambivalent about the traditional assumption that vast, non-urban spaces are the more natural site for self-renewal, and that the unlimited landscape provides the best contexts for restorative and redemptive living. Exploring the metaphor of the placement of a cricket field in New York in *Netherland* and the motif of the paroxysm in a desert in *Point Omega*, Callus suggests a new emotional and cognitive remapping of the non-urban in the novels' wider meanings, and shows the distinct ways in which the two narratives reassess the trope of finding one's self in the open country by relocating the immemorial inner conflicts accompanying self-discovery and a sense of arrival from a non-urban to an urban milieu. He also brings to bear relevant theoretical observations by Giorgio Agamben, Jean Baudrillard and Jacques Derrida, not only in order to problematize the traditional binary opposition of the open landscape and the urban, but also the notion of American topographical, political and cultural openness in the wake of September 11.