

City as the Site of Externalized Subjectivity

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The character of the relationship between the individual and its environment has always proved to be a meaningful basis for analyzing literary texts. For the last 300 years, since the Enlightenment, this has meant an ever greater attention to the relationship between the individual and its surrounding urban environment. It may well be that there are so many comprehensive literary analyses of the city because we can draw many meaningful parallels between our experience of the city and our experience of the text. A traveler traverses the city in very much the same way as a reader who reads the text – in order to grasp or make sense of his environment she must be constantly mobile and attentively map his surroundings. The experience one gets from a city and the experience one gets from a text can in many respects be considered empiric equivalents – for example, their existence contains both loss and promise, and the multiplicity inherent to them requires constant interpretation and re-interpretation.

In this way, Richard Lehan's extensive survey *The City in Literature*¹ takes us on a three-hundred-year long literary walk in the empiric history of the city. It starts from Enlightenment's strict belief in the individual and its property, in reason and technology which transforms nature into mere material usable in the industrial pro-

cess; then takes us further through the cities of Blake, Dostoevsky, Doyle, Eliot, Mann, Joyce and Orwell which all – in their own specific and characteristic way – see the individual as someone somehow opposed to or estranged from his urban environment, and finally ending up in the postmodernist city of Thomas Pynchon, where the subject has totally dispersed, because the city can no longer be governed by any convenient structuralizing principle.

In many respects, Lehan's walk is a classic one constituted by many common and widespread notions about different literary eras – from the enlightenment where the individual is an organic part of the city, through romanticism and naturalism where the individual is already clearly separated from its urban environs, onwards towards modernism where, for example, decadence and aestheticism can be considered as the final attempt to somehow "root" or "ground" the individual to the city, and finally to postmodernism which designates the dispersion of the subject to the city's confusing and oppressive multitude. The movement here has a clear direction – from the city which was supposed to be the supreme manifestation of human reason and abilities to the city which undermines the importance of these same powers; from the city which sanctifies the individual to the city in the name of which the individual has to be sacrificed.

The textual dimension of the literary work also seems to reflect this walk: starting, for example, from naturalism's cold and desperate mimesis, reflecting the possible Marxist notion of the worker's estrangement from his own work; through

¹ LEHAN 1998.

Proust's modernist prose with its long, voluminous and complex sentences which can in this respect be interpreted as a desperate attempt to somehow fully reflect the coherence of an identity that is already on the verge of dispersal, the long sentence here somehow trying to sum up "everything at once" – and onwards to post-modern prose which, with its often unorganized narrative structure, schizophrenic textual organization and the lack of a coherent individualized speaking voice, signalizes the subject's powerless and unconditional surrender to its environment. Walter Benjamin once characterized the individual's relationship to the city in his book about childhood memories, titled *Berlin Childhood around 1900*. The passage goes as follows:

Not to find one's way around a city does not mean much. But to lose one's way in a city, as one loses one's way in a forest, requires some schooling. Street names must speak to the urban wonderer like the snapping of dry twigs, and little streets in the heart of the city must reflect the times of day, for him, as clearly as a mountain valley.²

I think that if this passage is interpreted literally, it is a good description of an experience gained from a walk in what we might call a modernist city - it is sometimes easy not to find one's way around there but, at the same time, it is hard to get completely lost. But if we take Benjamin's passage metaphorically, it may turn out to be a convenient characterization of the modernist subject: it is never completely itself (for example, because it is in some way estranged from its urban environment). But it thoroughly acknowledges this "not-being-oneself", and precisely be-

cause of this acknowledgement, it is never completely lost: it is this affirmation of being somewhat "out-of-itself" that really establishes it as a coherent subject. So, to put it back in Benjamin's terms, it may not often find its way in life (or find itself in life), but it will not totally lose it way either. In this respect, although its coherence is constantly threatened, the modernist subject is still firmly grounded: it is its contradiction with its environs and itself that is the source and the real site of its subjectivity.

The problem of subjectivity is much more complex if we approach the so-called "postmodern subject" and its relation to the postmodernist literary city. Benjamin's assertion about finding one's way in the city is no longer valid here – and not because the postmodern subject has already lost its way but rather, and by way of a minimal difference, because there is already nobody there to lose it.

A characteristic transition from modernist to postmodernist subjectivity can be found in a passage from the beginning of Thomas Pynchon's novel *The Crying of Lot 49*. Protagonist Oedipa Maas (surely a female Oedipus?) has just arrived home from a Tupperware party with the knowledge that she'd been appointed as an executor to the will of Pierce Inverarity, a very rich man (and a supposed metaphoric embodiment of America in this novel). This appointment will later draw Oedipa into many confusing and chaotic dead-end adventures concerning the possible discovery of a worldwide secret network of outcasts. But this is how Pynchon describes her inner condition after her arrival home:

² BENJAMIN 2006, 53.

Oedipa stood in the living room, stared at by the greenish dead eye of the TV tube, spoke the name of God, tried to feel as drunk as possible. But this did not work. She thought of a hotel room in Mazatlan whose door had just been slammed, it seemed forever, waking up two hundred birds down in the lobby; a sunrise over the library slope at Cornell University that nobody out on it had seen because the slope faces west; a dry, disconsolate tune from the fourth movement of the Bartok Concerto for orchestra; a whitewashed bust of Jay Gould that Pierce kept over the bed on a shelf so narrow for it she'd always had the hovering fear it would someday topple on them. Was that how he'd died, she wondered, among dreams, crushed by the only ikon in the house? That only made her laugh, out loud and helpless: You're so sick, Oedipa, she told herself, or the room, which knew.³

What we have here, in this passage, is on the one hand the subject's desperate try to grasp her self-consciousness in its entirety, in very much the same way as a complex modernist passage would – except that this try ends in fragmentary ruins and Oedipa thinks of four or five almost meaningless random things at once. And on the other hand we have her self-testimonial that she is sick or “out of herself”, and the surrounding room which already knows her inner truth. I am tempted to interpret this latter part literally – it is as if Oedipa arrives at her “inner truth” for the first time only after the room has already recognized it. Or, to put it yet in another way, Oedipa's inner confession is no longer something that comes from somewhere “deep inside” her, but it is rather a symptom or a momentary reflection of the characteristics of the room that surrounds her. Pynchon's passage can therefore be read as the transition or collapse of a fragmentary consciousness onto the sur-

face of the environment around her. And this is how I would like to metaphorically describe the concept of the postmodernist city: it is created when the coherence of the subject has been sacrificed for the sake of the city and the city has taken on an impersonal consciousness of its own, thus becoming “the subject-less room that knows”.

In the survey that I have already mentioned, Richard Lehan uses similar terms to describe the nature of the post-modern city. In a similar vein to that of post-structuralist philosophy, he cites the loss of a transcendental signifier as the defining focus of the postmodernist literary city.

If the city can be considered a system of signs we need a transcendental signifier (be it God, nature, history or the rational mind) to hold the other signs in place.⁴

But without such a signifier

the city becomes a system of dead signs, interpreted as best we can. Without a transcendental signifier, urban signs begin to float, and meaning gives way to mystery. Viewed from within a system as unstable as Derrida's system of language, the city loses claim to being “real”. What we bring to the city is what we get back: the “echo” principle becomes the basis for our reality. The signs – failing to point towards a redeeming God (as they did for Robinson Crusoe), or a redeeming history (as they did for Hegel), or a redeeming nature (as they did for Wordsworth) or a redeeming art (as they did for Henry James) – become self-referential. [---] Lacking transcendence, the city cannot go beyond that what it consumes; the mind cannot go beyond itself.⁵

This “not being able to go beyond itself” denotes the merging of the subject with her urban environment in the post-mo-

³ PYNCHON 1999, 1.

⁴ LEHAN 1998, 265-266.

⁵ LEHAN 1998, 265-266.

dernist novel. In coherence with the post-structuralist notion that language is not able to sufficiently refer to anything outside its borders, the city – as is also the case with Oedipa in Pynchon’s novel – now only gives back that which one takes along with herself into it. Oedipa is left only with her own endless doubts and nothing certain or any outside to rely on. To quote Lehan again: “The city becomes a state of mind: it thinks us and not the other way round.”⁶ Consciousness is no longer independent (as it was in the modernist system of the subject’s estrangement); rather, it is perished to be a part of the city itself. (And, as a side-note, does this creation of the cityscape through the collapse of the consciousness not remind us of Žižek’s interpretation of the classic Hegelian take on the opposition between transcendence and immanence: immanence only occurs when transcendence is sacrificed and it falls back to immanence)⁷ So, instead of the modernist subject who was in opposition with the urban environment that estranged her in various ways (and it was often a creative opposition), there is in a postmodernist novel a “room that knows”, a borderless space of impersonal, externalized subjectivity. Some tendencies in today’s consumer society seem to point towards this space of impersonal subjectivity – as Dani Cavallaro says, in her survey titled “Cyberpunk and Cyberculture”, advertising and media take the individual’s personal desires, emotions and fantasies and translate them into images of ideal and desirable products. These images then tend to cancel out personal preferences of taste because

they are marketed as universally appealing.⁸ But this externalization is not only the externalization of personal desires and emotions. If we look at the prosthetic status of many everyday objects around us and our increasing reliance on them, we may also take notice of an increasing externalization of our physical (and psychic?) functions.

And through such a line of thought, for example, the lack on the level of the character in science fictional writing becomes somehow meaningful. The usual criticism towards science fiction – and one of the main reasons why it has often been labeled “bad art” or “lower literature” – is because of its lack of the psychological dimension of its characters. On the basis of my previous argument I would like to claim that a great amount of science fiction has in this respect been misread: one might say that science fiction with its great textual emphasis on descriptions and worldliness and its minimal emphasis on the literary character who, in the text, is often reduced to the status of a simple proper name, represents the point of view of the fictional world rather than any single subject. As a side-note, the artificial or alien environments that science fiction projects can often be taken as a general spatial metaphor for urban environment, because, as Roger Luckhurst mentions in his survey *Science Fiction*, science fiction has always been the literature of more or less technologically saturated societies.⁹

Some well-known science-fiction authors (for example Charles Stross and Cory Doctorow) have fictionally materialized or “actualized” this collapse of the subject to

⁶ LEHAN 1998, 267.

⁷ ŽIŽEK 2004, 65.

⁸ CAVALLARO 2000, X.

⁹ LUCKHURST 2005, 3.

the structure of the city in the form of the possibility of uploading the consciousness to a digital network system – thus creating a city of bits which is exactly such kind of a “room that knows” outlined before. And hasn’t cyberspace or virtual reality sometimes been visually presented as an endless city – for example in Neal Stephenson’s cyberpunk novel *Snow Crash*,¹⁰ in the Hollywood movie *The Hackers* or, most prominently in William Gibson’s novel *Neuromancer*, where, among other things, it is described as “Lines of light ranged in the non-space of the mind, clusters and constellations of data. Like city lights, receding.”¹¹

Thus, and in conclusion, it could be said that text and the city (and sometimes cyberspace) form a sort of a chain of equivalence following which the transition from modernist subject to postmodernist subjectivity can be traced.

Postmodern architecture – as Fredric Jameson seems to point out using the famous example of the Bonaventure Hotel¹²– does not structuralize and organize space the way modern architecture does. Rather, it merely fills space and deprives our bodies of spatial coordinates. And largely the same can be said about the difference between the postmodernist novel and the modernist novel. In the modernist novel (again, consider Proust’s prose) textual space is attentively organized and structuralized; the subject’s antagonistic relation to its spatio-temporal environment and some organizing transcendental signifier are usually clearly evident.

In the postmodernist novel – the common and widespread example here being Thomas Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow*¹³– there is almost no flicker or reflection or reference of anything (any outside) whatsoever beyond the text: it is only the text itself that conjures the space it singularly inhabits. The text is not there to organize or structuralize something clearly exterior or “outside” but, paradoxically, only to fill the very same space the text itself takes up. (Also, and thereby, depriving the textual subject or the reader of its “spatial coordinates”.) This fully self-referential space is also “subjective without a subject” – in very much the same way as the postmodernist city is “a state of mind which thinks us and not the other way round”, the postmodern text is generated when the subject (the coherent figure of the author or the narrator) is sacrificed and collapsed straight into the textual dimension itself.

The post-modern novel projects a world where, strictly speaking, we cannot talk about a postmodern subject – but we can talk about postmodern subjectivity, one of the real sites of which is the postmodernist city where impersonal and externalized desires float freely without any organizing principle and the subject, if anything can be called that, is a momentary and fragmentary product or flicker of the cityscape’s continuous self-generation.

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¹⁰ STEPHENSON 2000.

¹¹ GIBSON 1984, 51.

¹² See imprints in JAMESON 1996.

¹³ PYNCHON 1973.

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