

STEFANIE WEYMANN-TESCHKE

# The City as Performance

The  
Contemporary American Novel  
and the Power of the Senses

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Stefanie Weymann-Teschke





# 1 Introduction

Marco Polo, the fictional character of Italo Calvino's urban classic *Invisible Cities*, has a fairly easy job: Kublai Khan, the emperor of the Tatars, has asked him to report back on the cities that he has visited on his travels through the ruler's kingdom. Modeled on the historical Venetian explorer, Calvino's protagonist is not only much travelled, but also a well-versed storyteller – as such, nobody should be better suited for the task than him. And yet, as *Invisible Cities* gets under way, the emperor and his guest are faced with a problem: The two of them do not speak the same language (*Invisible Cities* 21).<sup>1</sup> While during their conversation they are able to solve the problem by reverting to non-verbal communication, gestures, and telling objects (*IC* 21), language remains an intractable concern on the level of fictional mediation. Language and the city – how can they be joined most fruitfully? Judging from the trajectory of Calvino's book, the answer would have to be: only with some difficulty.

With its repeated articulations of distrust in language Italo Calvino's novel is a perfect example of postmodern city literature. In fact, many of the cities that Marco Polo describes directly speak to the inadequacy of words to accurately portray urban reality: "There is no language without deceit," closes, for instance, Marco's tale of Hypatia, a city boasting its own language that for all its novelty may be just as treacherous as any other sign system (*IC* 47-48). Equally, in approaching the city of Tamara, the explorer is struck by the layers of signs greeting him: "You penetrate it along streets thick with signboards jutting from the walls. The eye does not see things but images of things that mean other things [...]" (*IC* 13). Upon entering this circuit of endless deferral, the city itself falls from view: "However the city may really be, beneath this thick coating of signs, whatever it may contain or conceal, you leave Tamara without having discovered it" (*IC* 14).<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Hereafter quoted as *IC* with page numbers in parenthesis.

<sup>2</sup> One cannot help but be reminded of architects Robert Venturi, Denise Scott and Steven Izenour's description of desert towns in *Learning from Las Vegas*: "From the desert town on the highway in the West of today, we can learn new and vivid lessons about an impure architecture of communication."

The limitations of language do not slip the attention of Kublai Khan, either. Although the emperor and his interlocutor have in the meantime learned to speak the same language, Kublai Khan finds this new kind of communication to be lacking in expressive power:

*But you would have said communication between them was less happy than in the past: to be sure, words were more useful than objects and gestures in listing the most important things of every province and city – monuments, markets, costumes, fauna and flora – and yet when Polo began to talk about how life must be in those places, day after day, evening after evening, words failed him and little by little, he went back to relying on gestures, grimaces, glances. (IC 38-39)*

Recognizing the inability of words to adequately summon the realm of urban experience, Marco Polo and Kublai Khan henceforth engage in what may be described as an experiment of reduction: After relying for a while on a code of gestures, they soon come to prefer a state of absolute tranquility: “*in their conversations, most of the time, they remained silent and immobile*” (IC 39).

Instead of cutting Marco Polo’s urban tales short, this bold move towards non-communication signals a different mode of storytelling: a mode that is not predicated on words as marks-of-reference, but uses silence as the ultimate vanishing point of discourse. For silence, realizes Kublai Khan, is the birthplace of the imagination:

*But what enhanced for Kublai every event or piece of news reported by his inarticulate informer was the space that remained around it, a void not filled with words. The descriptions of cities Marco Polo visited had this virtue: you could wander through them in thought, become lost, stop and enjoy the cool air, or run off. (IC 38)*

The little low buildings, gray-brown like the desert, separate and recede from the street that is now the highway, their false fronts disengaged and turned perpendicular to the highway as big, high signs. If you take the signs away, there is no place. The desert town is intensified communication along the highway” (25).

It is, perhaps, in this manner that *Invisible Cities* has to be read: as an imaginary dialogue between two largely silent interlocutors, in which the words as they are found on the page are but afterthoughts, the remnants of a journey taken in mind only, producing impressive, but essentially invisible cities.

The reader of Calvino's novel, of course, struggles with the idea of being privy to a muted conversation.<sup>3</sup> While the author sets apart the dialogue between Marco Polo and Kublai Khan from the urban tales proper by means of italicization,<sup>4</sup> the move towards silence naturally affects the city portraits as well. Embedded in a conversation that takes place in silence "*most of the time*" (IC 39), the 55 cities that the explorer describes in the course of the novel are almost dreamlike. Flights to the realm of imagination,<sup>5</sup> Marco Polo's urban tales are caught between silence and the semiotic process, never committing to an authoritative reading of urban space, thereby allowing multiple, oftentimes contradictory interpretations to coexist. Places to "*wander through [...] in thought*" (IC 38), the cities of Calvino's novel are brilliant thought experiments that only reluctantly surrender to the sway of language, a regrettable, but simply inevitable condition of representation.

Italo Calvino's novel, published in Italian in 1972, may stand representatively for a popular mode of narrating the city that has, in many respects, dominated postmodern urban discourse. Spearheaded perhaps by the great artist of urban unreality, Thomas Pynchon, cities in literature have increasingly become fantastical spaces. Ihab Hassan, for instance, speaks of a "dematerialization of metropolis in contemporary

<sup>3</sup> Although we are told early on that Marco Polo and Kublai Khan remain largely silent and immobile, the narrative reproduces pages upon pages of dialogue. That parts of the dialogue are, in fact, imaginary can be intuited only from occasional interruptions by the narrator: "*These words and actions were perhaps only imagined, as the two, silent and motionless, watched the smoke rise slowly from their pipes*" (IC 98).

<sup>4</sup> In contrast to Marco Polo's urban tales, the dialogue passages interrupting his reports are invariably italicized – a variation on writing "under erasure" as practiced, for example, by Jacques Derrida (cf. *Of Grammatology* 60)?

<sup>5</sup> At some point Kublai stops sending the explorer on expeditions altogether and prefers to play "*endless games of chess*" with him – another form of dialogue that has the added advantage of doing completely without words (IC 122).

American fiction” in his essay from 1981. Arguing that the “immaterial” city, “invisible, imaginary, made of dream and desire” has always been part and parcel of history (94), Hassan’s run through various literary traditions and urban imaginaries finally leads up to the postwar era, in which the “dematerialization of metropolis” asserts itself forcefully: With reference to Donald Barthelme, for instance, Hassan shows how the city in literature has turned into a “mental construct,” “reconstructed from verbal shards, sad, zany, or wise” (103). Picking up this thread, Heinz Ickstadt in his essay “Trash and Collage: The City in Post-Modern American Fiction,” too, points to the unreal character of the city in literature:

Contemporary American fiction – so Ihab Hassan tells us – has lost the city as an object of narration. For even where it is reproduced, in seemingly unbroken referentiality, as an identifiable topographical locus, the city represented in the text is clearly an imagined place. Barthelme’s, Auster’s or DeLillo’s New York, Pynchon’s San Francisco and Los Angeles are found but, most of all, invented cities. They flaunt their artificiality and display themselves as linguistic constructs – thereby pointing toward the constructive character of what an earlier urban literature referred to as real. (331)

Although Ickstadt shows this “postmodern urban discourse,” whose origins he locates in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, to be anything but closed (“Trash and Collage” 331),<sup>6</sup> it may be save to say that this “dematerialization” has reached new heights in postmodernist literature: Like Barthelme’s urban knight in the short story “The Glass Mountain” climbing up a skyscraper-like structure and disappearing into fairytale land, the fictional city more often than not ducks behind a veil of fantasies, signs, and symbols never to be penetrated completely, least of all with words.

<sup>6</sup> In his reading of Don DeLillo’s *Players* and Thomas Pynchon’s *The Crying of Lot 49* Ickstadt shows how this “postmodern discourse” can be subverted from within through complex processes of recycling: Contemporary city literature, he argues, in “its rearrangement of used-up matter, its collages of the waste and bric-a-brac of the city and its semiotic system signal[s] a consciousness of entropy, but also a desire to survive *in, by, and against* a culture whose trash it playfully recycles” (“Trash and Collage” 351).

Judging by the proliferation of urban unrealities in literature, Calvino's cities – indecipherable, indescribable, invisible – have certainly become a familiar sight. But as compelling as his urban tales may be, as potentially frustrating is their message: If the city as a purely imaginary construct can literally symbolize and mean anything, it may just as well mean nothing at all.<sup>7</sup> Is there, then, another way? Can the city be depicted as other than unreal, as other than “de-materialized” or “abstract”? This study answers in the affirmative on both counts. It explores several novels published between 1997 and 2011 that narrate the city by other means. Attesting to a general discontent with semiotic approaches to the city, which all too often peter out into abstractions, the seven novels discussed here stand exemplary for a new mode of narrating the city. Representing it as anything but a phantasm, the novels counter the invisible cities of postmodernism by showing the city to be an intensely real, an intensely lived place.

The “spatial stories” (de Certeau 115, *passim*) analyzed in the following chapters reclaim the city as an authentic place. The strategy that the authors employ to represent urban reality is, seemingly, ordinary: Effectively, the novels reproduce subjective urban experiences, following several protagonists on their encounters with urban space. On second sight, however, the intricacy of their storytelling reveals itself in the manner in which the novelists extensively draw on the senses as the only authoritative measure of the real. In fact, the senses in each novel assert their right with such insistence that the fictional urban landscapes within the novels arise almost naturally and effortlessly. Unlike Calvino's silent flights to the realm of fancy or the verbose but just as unreal cities of Pynchon or Barthelme, the cities

<sup>7</sup> After providing an outline of three modes of representing the city in literature – “Städte des Allegorischen,” “Städte des Realen” and “Städte des Imaginären” – Andreas Mahler in his essay “Stadttexte – Textstädte: Formen und Funktionen diskursiver Stadtkonstitution” draws the following noteworthy conclusion: “In der Funktion als Exemplum gibt es ihn schon lange nicht mehr; als das Abbild des Realen beginnt er obsolet zu werden; als Konstrukt des Imaginären hat er vornehmlich Konjunktur in postkolonialen Literaturen oder als geschlechterprojizierende Phantasmagorie. Die Stadt wird zum All-Ort und zum Nicht-Ort; sie verliert ihre Prototypik, ihre Semantik, ihre Spezifik, sie wird austauschbar” (35).

taking shape in the selected texts are built on the most solid of grounds.<sup>8</sup> To capture the building of these highly sensuous places I propose to approach the city in the selected novels as performance. Proceeding from the assumption that movement plays a constitutive part in shaping the literary setting (cf. Hallet and Neumann 20), I interpret the city in each literary work as the result of spatial practices enacted by the fictional characters: The urban setting in each novel can thus be described as coming into being through the manner in which figures of the fictional world actuate, form and experience it. Here, notably, it is the sensory quality of their practices that renders the city real. The cities taking shape at the hands, ears, nose and eyes of fictional characters are thus the expression of a highly subjective urban experience, but they are also the product of spatial artistry: It is as touchable, audible, smellable and visible works of art that the cities in these novels demand to be approached.

Chapter two presents a brief walk through the city in literature exemplifying en route four established narrative frameworks to write (about) fictional urban landscapes. Following a discussion of the city as setting, metaphor, character and text, chapter three develops the theoretical foundations of my own reading of the city as performance. After anchoring my approach theoretically via writings on space by Henri Lefebvre and Michel de Certeau, this chapter takes a look at the history of the city and the senses and outlines the particular function that sensory experience performs in the texts here discussed. In a third step, I examine how movement in and through a literary landscape within the novels may be seen as being constitutive of a form of spatial art. Using as an example the most sensuous of urban practices – walking – I trace its genesis as a creative practice to Henry David Thoreau's writings on walking and the literary tradition of *flânerie*, before working out its artistic potential via Michel de Certeau's discussion of walking as a creative act in his study *The Practice of Everyday Life*. The term performance, finally, brings all these elements to bear on the literary texts in question, allowing for a reading of the city in literature that underlines its irrefutable actuality as a world of sensory experience.

<sup>8</sup> In his reading of DeLillo's *Players* Ickstadt glimpses a "city of the senses," too ("Trash and Collage" 350). Unfortunately, this notion is not pursued further.

Chapters four to seven record seven performances of the city in selected works of contemporary American literature. To refer to the seven novels as ‘spatial stories,’ as I have done, may at first glance seem unfounded. Why not classify them as city novels? While it is, indeed, possible to fit the literary examples in question into Blanche H. Gelfant’s classic definition of the city novel in that every text exhibits an “active participation of the city in shaping character and plot” (*American City Novel* 5), her typology of city novels does not sufficiently capture the complex interplay between urban setting and fictional characters that the texts at hand reflect.<sup>9</sup> It is for this reason that I prefer to describe the novels as ‘spatial stories,’ an expression adopted from Michel de Certeau’s *The Practice of Everyday Life*. In de Certeau’s use of the term, spatial stories do not designate a specific category of texts that share a particular attitude towards space. Instead, they are first and foremost “treatments of space” (de Certeau 122). As such, they can take various forms and shapes. From “oral descriptions of places, narrations concerning the home, stories about the streets” (de Certeau 118), to “meta-stories” in juridical discourse, laying out and interpreting the space of law (de Certeau 122), these stories are more than spatial descriptions. They radiate space, give form and shape to it, stage and transform it.<sup>10</sup> Spatial stories, as I understand the term, are then not so much stories *about* space, as they are *in* and *through* space: They can be thought of as movements across a vast territory, the contours of which are subject to change. As such, the seven novels that I discuss in this study make excellent spatial stories not because of their capacity to generate their own space – this is, after all, a characteristic of every piece of writing – but because the very process of spatial construction can clearly be discerned in them. These stories are, then, not only treat-

<sup>9</sup> In *The American City Novel* Gelfant distinguishes between three forms of the city novel: the “portrait novel,” which is basically a character study, documenting a hero’s coming to maturity in the city (11), the “ecological novel,” which focuses on a specifically defined spatial unit such as a neighborhood, whose urban manners it then studies (12-13), and finally, the “synoptic novel,” which looks at the city as a whole (14-15).

<sup>10</sup> Discussing its ability to delimit and differentiate spaces, de Certeau notes that a spatial story “even has distributive power and performative force (it does what it says) when an ensemble of circumstances is brought together. Then it founds spaces” (123).



ments of an exceptional space: the city. In that they demonstrate most impressively its coming into being, these novels also offer spatial trajectories that help us reassess and gauge modes of telling the city in literature.

The spatial stories at the center of this study bring together several authors, genres, and literary styles: Don DeLillo's novel *Cosmopolis* offers a look at New York City, while simultaneously diving into the world of high finance, capitalism, and terrorism. John Wray's novel *Lowboy* is the coming-of-age story of a schizophrenic boy. Karen Tei Yamashita's multi-plot novel *Tropic of Orange* offers a transnational perspective on Los Angeles sprinkled with hints of magic realism. *Homer and Langley*, E. L. Doctorow's novel from 2009, retells, in fictionalized form, the famous urban myth of the Collyer brothers, two of New York City's most notorious hoarders. Teju Cole's *Open City*, the author's first published book in the United States, is the story of a Nigerian psychiatry student in New York City, who explores the city on foot. Iva Pekárková, a Czech author who lived in the U.S. for twelve years, tells the story of Gin, one of a few female taxi drivers in New York. *Chronic City*, Jonathan Lethem's New York novel from 2009, finally, is on the best way to follow Calvino's footsteps into the land of invisible cities, before changing course halfway through.

While each of these novels approaches the city differently, it is precisely the diversity in topical scope and genre that makes these texts plausible pointers towards a different mode of narrating urban space in contemporary literature. Published between 1997 and 2011, these novels reach beyond the playful construction of invisible cities. Instead, they make do with the vagaries of postmodern urban space and the unreliability of language as a representational medium to retrieve, in reflective continuity with modernist traditions, a city that can be apprehended, lived and transformed by the urban individual. To reflect the particular role that sense perception and experience plays in each text, the main chapters of this study are grouped into four sense categories. Reversing the traditional hierarchization of the senses, chapters four through seven explore several performances – six of New York City and one of Los Angeles – that are formed by the sense of touch, hearing, smell and sight.

Chapter four discusses two performances of New York City that are distinctly molded by the sense of touch. The protagonists of Don

DeLillo's *Cosmopolis* and John Wray's *Lowboy* both enact their cities guided by haptic experiences that give rise to two very subjective and partly disturbing performances of the metropolis. The city in both novels takes shape at the touch of the protagonists, whose bodily movements map out an intimate geography of New York. Eric Packer, the wealthy asset manager in DeLillo's *Cosmopolis*, rediscovers his body as the essential entryway to experiencing the city at a primordial level: A reluctant walker at best, Eric emerges from his cocoon-like limousine out of a reawakened desire to reconnect with his past. By and by, this desire results in a state of contiguity, in which body and city complement each other. The longing for absolute spatial proximity takes a pathological turn in John Wray's *Lowboy*. The protagonist of the same name, whose body perception is severely distorted by schizophrenia, experiences the city alarmingly close. After escaping from a mental institution he disappears into the city's subway tunnels, where his haptic experience leads to the discovery of a very different New York.

In chapter five, the protagonists perform the city by relying strongly on their sense of hearing. Despite the fact that Homer Collyer, the narrator-protagonist of E.L. Doctorow's *Homer and Langley* and Manzanar Murakami, one of the main protagonists in Karen Tei Yamashita's *Tropic of Orange*, hardly ever move, the two characters practice *flânerie* in a most distinctive form. Blind Homer Collyer, nearing the end of his life, embarks on a proverbial walk down memory lane. Committing his life to paper, Doctorow's protagonist reflects on the life that he and his brother Langley have led. Moving backwards in time he rebuilds from auditory memory his New York. Pitted against Homer Collyer's sound walk, the second part of the chapter examines a case of aural *flânerie* that takes place in Los Angeles. Manzanar Murakami in *Tropic of Orange* has taken up his post at a busy L.A. freeway to compose from the sounds of traffic a symphony of epic proportions. While remaining stationary on his concrete podium on an overpass, Manzanar throughout the narrative builds a moving performance of the city on the basis of urban noise.

Whereas the chapters usually feature and compare two performances of the city, chapter six marks an exception in that it concentrates on a single novel: Jonathan Lethem's *Chronic City*. Owed in part to the complexity of the book – with its 528 pages, the novel's scope is particularly broad – its unique feature, compared to the other novels under

scrutiny, is its obvious postmodern outlook. Lethem's novel for large portions of the narrative treats the city as a gigantic simulacrum, a simulation that is more real than reality itself. After unsuccessfully attempting to disenchant this urban fiction, however, the main characters are led towards rediscovering the urban through the sensory modality of olfaction. Albeit comparatively late in the narrative, the sense the least communicable in literature opens a path towards a different New York City: By rediscovering the spatial properties of smell, the characters at the end of their fictional journey through simulated New York are put in a position to re-experience the city as intensely real; a place, essentially, to be sniffed out.

The analysis of city novels finally closes with a reading of Teju Cole's *Open City* and Iva Pekárková's *Gimme the Money* as two exemplary visual performances of New York. Approached from the traditional interpretation of flânerie as above all an art of seeing, the two novels are read as texts that reinvigorate this art form in their own particular fashion. Teju Cole's revamped version of the flâneur combines the precise, clinical perspective of a psychiatrist with the photographic look that Roland Barthes outlines in his *Camera Lucida*: Focused on the obscure, on things not readily accessible to the eye, Cole's protagonist illuminates New York City according to his own visual parameters. In Pekárková's novel, on the other hand, the performance of New York is considerably directed by a visual aid that the protagonist employs: As one of the few female taxi drivers in New York City, she engages in a form of motorized flânerie. Here, the car becomes the primary means of visualization and an artist's tool, with which to repaint the city.

While each of the spatial stories tells New York City or Los Angeles differently, these seven performances depict the city in literature as a very tangible place. In fact, its actuality cannot be missed: Demonstrating that there is, indeed, an art to experiencing the urban through the senses, the textual examples return to the city in literature an undeniable substance and depth. They also celebrate the urban individuals, who in their spatial practices perform the city as a sensuous masterpiece, an artistic process that the following chapters seek to trace.

## 2 A Walk Through the City in Literature

“Tell me another city.” (IC 85)

Among the 55 cities that Marco Polo describes to the emperor Kublai Khan in *Invisible Cities* not one resembles the other. Despite the categories that Calvino introduces to group several cities together, every city narrated stands on its own, bears its own name and exhibits architectural, historical and socioeconomic peculiarities to make it appear thoroughly unique. Given the idiosyncrasies that each of the 55 narrated cities displays, the confession that Marco Polo makes halfway through the novel comes as a surprise. After a night of nonstop reporting the explorer informs Kublai Khan that his stories have come to an end. Incredulous, the emperor suspects that Marco Polo still has one city up his sleeve: “*There is still one of which you never speak,*” he tells his guest and demands to know why there has not been any mention of the explorer’s hometown (IC 86). Prompted about Venice and its strange absence from his reports the explorer responds with a smile: ““*What else do you believe I have been talking to you about? [...] ‘Every time I describe a city I am saying something about Venice’*” (IC 86). It is another of Calvino’s ingenious masterstrokes to build throughout his novel a most diverse urban landscape only to return it to a single place. Having Venice play the role of “*a first city that remains implicit*” (IC 86), as Marco Polo puts it, is thereby anything but reductive. Quite to the contrary, in providing the *genius loci* to Marco Polo’s imaginary travels, Venice is not only the explorer’s first and final destination, but also the most invisible city of all. Approached from no less than 55 different angles, the city is still not described exhaustively.

Like Marco Polo’s fictional Venice, there are many ways of approaching the city in American literature. Whether it is New York City, Los Angeles, Chicago, San Francisco or Boston, the cities that have been narrated by different writers in different literary periods have as many faces as there are roads leading towards them. Exceeding by far Marco Polo’s 55 different ways to narrate Venice, the approaches taken towards the city in American literature are, naturally, too numerous to count. Neither is it possible to identify, as does Marco Polo, “*a first city that remains implicit*” (IC 86), to find within the numerous city repre-

sentations in American literary history a gravitational center towards which urban narratives move. What can be done, however, is to examine those roads towards the city that have been travelled most. Looking at the vast array of critical studies on the city in literature, four modes of representation seem to emerge, which authors have repeatedly turned to in order to give form and shape to their cities. Heeding Kublai Khan's advice to "begin each tale [...] from the departure" (*IC* 86), I thus propose to take a walk along these four roads, roads that may break off or merge. Eventually, they pave the way towards (yet) another city, whose story is waiting to be told.

## 2.1 The City as Setting

"Each city receives its form from the desert it opposes" (*IC* 18)

"In imaginative literature," writes Leo Marx, "the concept of the 'city' must be understood as in large measure an abstract receptacle for displaced feelings about other things" ("Antiurbanism" 164-165). Presented as an argument to correct the misconception of an antiurbanist attitude in American literature,<sup>1</sup> Marx's statement points to an important role that the city has traditionally been assigned in literature. A mode of representation I will refer to in the following as 'the city as setting,' it denotes a literary practice, in which the city provides the necessary background for plots and themes to develop. While it thus fulfills a range of functions – from creating a specific atmosphere to providing an implicit means of characterization – the city itself does not reach the status of subject matter in itself. Instead, it is a literary means to an end, which has been popular until the beginning of the twentieth century:

<sup>1</sup> In *The Intellectual versus the City: From Thomas Jefferson to Frank Lloyd Wright*, Lucia and Morton Wright note: "We have no persistent or pervasive tradition of romantic attachment to the city in our literature or in our philosophy, nothing like the Greek attachment to the *polis* or the French writer's affection for Paris. And this confirms the frequently advanced thesis that the American intellectual has been alienated from the society in which he has lived, that he has been typically in revolt against" (1-2).

The city in pre-twentieth-century novels written in English is almost wholly *topos*, a place, a locale which is the backdrop for realistic dramas of individual consciences making choices in order to solve personal dilemmas of love, marriage, work, war, parental origins, psychic identity – the themes are familiar. (Augustine 73)<sup>2</sup>

Examples of this mode of representation are numerous. In *Sodoms in Eden* Janis P. Stout, for instance, analyzes the cities of Edgar Allan Poe as “devices for the creation of atmospheric effects and the exploration of abnormal psychological states. They are not objects for analysis in their own right” (54). Equally, in the work of Nathaniel Hawthorne, she submits, “setting is typically [...] an initial focus of interest through which to approach larger or at any rate more abstract concerns” (92). A case in point is *Scarlet Letter*: Here, interestingly, both the town of Boston as well as the surrounding wilderness serve as a means for the author to treat larger concerns (cf. Stout 95).<sup>3</sup>

In using town and country as two opposing settings Hawthorne is, of course, not alone. As Stout shows throughout her study, contrasting urban with rural settings is a common thread running through American literature.<sup>4</sup> Here, associations of the city with civilization, modernity, as well as crime, alienation and isolation meet images of peace, community, creativity and spirituality, which are traditionally linked with rural pastures.<sup>5</sup> Literary treatment of this opposition repeatedly takes the form of a dual movement: the hopeful individual’s move from the country to

<sup>2</sup> In a similar fashion, Andreas Mahler speaks of an allegorical function of the city that survives until the 18<sup>th</sup> century and is then superseded by modes of representation that try to emulate, in mimetic fashion, real and existent cities in literature (“Stadttexte” 28).

<sup>3</sup> In her essay “The Problem of the City” Heather Roberts points out that “Hawthorne routinely makes allegorical use of the polarity between city and country/wilderness to underscore themes, such as the fall into knowledge or the tension between society and self, that run throughout his work” (296).

<sup>4</sup> For an equally stimulating analysis of nature in modern American literature see Arnold Goldsmith’s *The Modern American Urban Novel: Nature as “Interior Structure.”* Discussing works from Dos Passos to Saul Bellow, he interprets nature scenes and imagery as a “bridge between the harshness of urban reality and the world of spirituality, dreams, and fantasies” (14).

<sup>5</sup> On the association of rural landscapes with the creative imagination see Williams 127-141.

the city and the retreat from an urban surrounding to an idyllic rural scene.<sup>6</sup> In John Dos Passos's *Manhattan Transfer*, for instance, Bud Korpenning flees to the city of New York after killing his abusive father on the family farm. Bud's escape to the city, however, is not crowned with success. Ending up without money in miserable living conditions, his inner turmoil and fear of being apprehended by the police lead him to jump to his death from Brooklyn Bridge. Significantly, his last moments are suffused with remnants from his rural past, as the glow over nocturnal Manhattan is compared to "the way iron starts to glow in a forge," and the river becomes "smooth, sleek as a bluesteel gunbarrel" (Dos Passos 119). Bud's journey from the country to the city thus ends disastrously, his expectations slanted both by the city and his haunting memories.<sup>7</sup> Philip Roth's 2007 novel *Exit Ghost*, on the other hand, provides a recent example of a move in the opposite direction: The writer Nathan Zuckerman has withdrawn to an isolated country house in the Berkshires, leading a life of isolation and creative solitude. Upon a brief return to New York after almost ten years, Nathan's plan is to study the changes that have meanwhile befallen the city:

I started toward the subway to take a train downtown to Ground Zero. Begin there, where the biggest thing of all occurred; but because I've withdrawn as witness and participant both, I never made it to the subway. [...] Instead, [...] I found myself in the familiar rooms of the Metropolitan Museum, wiling away the afternoon like someone who had no catching up to do. (Roth 15)

Instead of catching up, Nathan's elude the city's present and seek refuge in the immovable past: "All the city would add was everything I'd determined I no longer had use for: Here and Now" (Roth 41). Tormented by the sheer presence of the city, the writer eventually retreats to his rural idyll.

<sup>6</sup> On that point, see Kreutzer: "Das literarische Sinnmuster und Strukturschema der kontrastiven Großstadterfahrung des Jugendlichen aus der Provinz lässt sich gar bis zu den Anfängen des amerikanischen Romans zurückverfolgen" (154-155).

<sup>7</sup> Ickstadt aptly remarks that the city here has become "an artificial world replacing nature – [...] but in a fallen state" ("Province and Metropolis" 233).

“It is significant,” writes Raymond Williams in his seminal study *The Country and The City*

that the common image of the country is now an image of the past, and the common image of the city an image of the future. That leaves, if we isolate them, an undefined present. The pull of the idea of the country is towards old ways, human ways, natural ways. The pull of the idea of the city is towards progress, modernization, development. In what is then a tension [...] we use the contrast of country and city to ratify an unresolved division and conflict of impulses [...]. (297)

The literary examples discussed above exhibit this inherent “pull”: Underlying the contrasting rural and urban visions in *Manhattan Transfer* as well as *Exit Ghost* is a fundamental sense of longing.<sup>8</sup> Nathan Zuckerman’s rural idyll is only temporarily disrupted by a brief encounter with an unfamiliar New York City. Since the city proves insufferable, the timelessness of Nathan’s pastoral retreat remains the only possible point of exit. On the other hand, it is Bud Korpenning’s longing for anonymity and the promise of a future that pulls him towards the big city. Fleeing his rural past, it is paradoxically the very anonymity of New York coupled with Bud’s rising paranoia that end his life.

While urban and rural landscapes are thus frequently used in literary texts to adumbrate separate and exclusive modes of reality, it is particularly the pastoral tradition so deeply anchored in American history and thought that reveals the opposition between rural and urban settings not to be as unequivocal as it appears. In his analysis of rural and urban images in literature, Williams opts for a perspective that understands the two settings as essentially interrelated (cf. 297). This reading is then put into practice in Leo Marx’ study of the various forms of the pastoral in American literature (cf. *The Machine in the Garden* 3-33). Distinguishing between a sentimental pastoralism that mainly rests on the romantic idealization of rural life and an elaborate, imaginative “pastoralism of mind,” Marx clears the way for a reading of rural and urban realms as continua of human experience (*Machine* 32). Rooted in the space of literature, it is the imaginative and complex pastoralism that transcends a sentimental idealization of the rural scene by juxtaposition with a “more

<sup>8</sup> On desire as underlying narrative structure see Ickstadt’s reading of Theodore Dreiser’s *Sister Carrie* (“Trash and Collage” 334).



complicated order of experience” (*Machine* 25). As Marx demonstrates further with his reading of Henry David Thoreau’s *Walden*, the pastoral ideal gives rise to a complex state of human consciousness, in which rural past and urban future can be joined (*Machine* 242-265). It is finally in this complex form of pastoralism that the contrast between country and city approaches Williams’s “undefined present” (297).

In literature, the move towards blending rural and urban settings, uniting them in an as yet undefined present, finds beautiful expression in Walt Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass*. His “island city,” as David R. Weimer puts it, stands as “the perfect symbol for a poet celebrating not nature alone, nor the human individual in isolation, but these together in some vital ongoing relationship to society” (25). In Whitman, however, the city stops being a mere setting and becomes an object of narration in its own right. This move, naturally, is accompanied by certain narrative challenges, which writers have met in various manners. Among the strategies employed to narrate and portray the city, the process of metaphorization has proven particularly prolific.

## 2.2 The City as Metaphor

“In Eudoxia [...] a carpet is preserved in which you  
can observe the city’s true form.” (*IC* 96)

In the introduction to his study *The City as Metaphor*, David R. Weimer makes a convincing case for how best to approach the city in literature. “The categories we *most* require in order to deal with these cities are [...] not historical, sociological, or epistemological but metaphoric” (6). The error that both “literary and nonliterary specialists” have in his opinion committed, is to treat literary cities as real, to equate the places that historians and sociologists factually “record” with those cities that writers “create” (3-4). Approaching the city in literature as metaphor, on the other hand, remedies two problems. For one, it attributes to the literary city intrinsic value without ignoring its embeddedness in historical contexts: “[W]hile the cities imagined by Whitman, Stephen Crane, and the others have both historical and representative elements, faithful to fact and to the American experience at large, each is also to some degree autonomous and unique” (2). By thus freeing the literary city from the burden of fact and applying, instead, aesthetic categories to

its analysis, the city in literature, secondly, becomes a work of art, whose structural and stylistic features are more readily accessible.

*The City as Metaphor* in its entirety is thus dedicated to describing and examining the “singularity” of literary cities (13) and to capturing the expressive power of the urban in the oeuvre of several authors. In his readings Weimer thereby isolates powerful images: be it Whitman’s aforementioned “island city” (24ff.), Theodore Dreiser’s vision of the city as both trap and symbolized desire (65ff.) or F. Scott Fitzgerald’s Los Angeles, the “city of mirrors” (103), these images undoubtedly lend depth and width to the city as the central object of narration. To read the literary city as metaphor to Weimer may primarily represent a means to acknowledge its *raison d’être* as an object of study. Within the literary texts themselves, however, metaphorization proves a potent narrative technique, whose advantages are not far to seek.

In his well-known study *The Image of the City* urban planner Kevin Lynch discusses the importance of mental images that urban dwellers produce of the city in which they live. Employed not only as a means of orientation in the complex texture of the metropolis, “a good environmental image [also] gives its possessor an important sense of emotional security” and “may serve as a broad frame of reference” (4). Besides facilitating movement through the urban landscape, such imaging also plays an important role in urban dwellers’ attempts, as sociologists R. Richard Wohl and Anselm L. Strauss put it, “to grasp the meaning of [the urban environment’s] complexity imaginatively and symbolically, as well as literally” (523). Arguing that “apparently an invariably characteristic of city life is that certain stylized and symbolic means must be resorted to in order to ‘see’ the city” (523), Wohl and Strauss discuss several practices with which to master the complexity of cities:

Urban complexity [...] also leads us to conceive of cities as ‘really’ or ‘essentially’ like something else, something we already know and understand. In a word, complexity forces us to analogize. [...] The city may be termed or compared with a factory, a madhouse, a frontier, a woman. In all such phrasing the speaker draws upon the emotional and non-specific resources of language to make clear – in terms of something else which is already familiar – what seems to him to be the underlying meaning of an apparently confused and confusing urban world. (Wohl and Strauss 529)

To capture the city in telling images: What Lynch, Wohl and Strauss refer to is the ubiquitous desire to get a firm grip on something as vast as a city, while facilitating discourse about it. As systems of signification, metaphors therefore have a condensing function, translating a complex issue into expressive imagery. Still, they also work expansively, conferring to the object of study an imaginative quality and depth.

Nowhere is this imaginative quality and depth as palpable as in literature: Apart from functioning as vehicles to mythologize an urban experience and master the city's complexity, metaphors here generate an urban imaginary, whose contours are kaleidoscopically in flux. The process of metaphorization thereby hinges largely on questions of perspective, as two examples may demonstrate. In F. Scott Fitzgerald's essay "My Lost City" the description of the city starts with the introduction of a "first symbol of New York": "a ferry boat moving softly from the Jersey shore at dawn" (50). Picking up this image several paragraphs later, the reader finds Fitzgerald approaching the city by water. As he catches sight of his city after a long absence, the author writes:

As the ship glided up the river, the city burst thunderously upon us in the early dusk – the white glacier of lower New York swooping down like a strand of a bridge to rise into uptown New York, a miracle of foamy light suspended by the stars. A band started to play on deck, but the majesty of the city made the march trivial and tinkling. From that moment I knew that New York, however often I might leave it, was home. (54)

The view of New York City's skyline from a distance here produces a synecdochic effect as the image concentrates the complexity of the urban landscape in a still life.<sup>9</sup> Analogous to what Kreutzer describes as the "Überblicksmethode" 'synoptic method' (78, my translation), the onlooker here seizes the city from a distance, framing the landscape in a panoramic view. More importantly, however, the Manhattan skyline

<sup>9</sup> See Frederik Tygstrup's discussion of the experience of space in modernist prose, in which he makes use of the still life to express the production of urban landscapes in literary texts: "What results is an image, not in any visual sense – the text is no ekphrasis of a real or fictional canvas – but as a schematization of a field of reality, whose order is examined through artistic presentation." (264)

serves as scaffolding for Fitzgerald's metaphoric rendition of New York City: Akin to an undulant wave the city here receives symbolic ordering in a controlled upward and downward movement, mimicking the emotional upheaval and exaltation in which the author finds himself upon revisiting New York. A powerful urban vision, the figurative representation of the city as wave here structures the plane of apperception along visual parameters, taming the "majesty of the city" (Fitzgerald 54). Drawing on "the emotional and non-specific resources of language," as I quoted Wohl and Strauss earlier (529), Fitzgerald's expansive urban metaphors play on familiar forms – "glacier," "strand of a bridge," "miracle of foamy light" – to culminate in the most intimate of urban metaphors: "home" (54).

Compared to Fitzgerald's approach by boat, Carrie Meeber's arrival in Chicago in Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* is accompanied by no less alluring imagery. The novel's first chapter, tellingly entitled "The Magnet Attracting: A Waif Amid Forces" (Dreiser 1), introduces the city as follows:

To the child, the genius with imagination, or the wholly untraveled, the approach to a great city for the first time is a wonderful thing. Particularly if it be evening – that mystic period between the glare and gloom of the world when life is changing from one sphere or condition to another. Ah, the promise of the night. What does it not hold for the weary! What old illusion of hope is not here forever repeated! Says the soul of the toiler to itself, "I shall soon be free. I shall be in the ways and the hosts of the merry. The streets, the lamps, the lighted chamber set for dining, are for me. The theatre, the halls, the parties, the ways of rest and the paths of song – these are mine in the night." Though all humanity be still enclosed in the shops, the thrill runs abroad. It is in the air. The dullest feel something which they may not always express or describe. It is the lifting of the burden of toil. (Dreiser 6)

The narrator comment preparing Carrie's first innocent steps in Chicago paints a picture of urban levity. Close to nightfall, the city presents a veritable spectacle of lights: "the glare and gloom of the world," "the lamps," the "lighted chamber." This mythic city holds sway over the "weary" incantationally, luring them out with the promise of merriment. Unfortunately for Carrie, this is a promise that the city will not keep. Only a few paragraphs later, the protagonist experiences firsthand how

dazzlingly deceptive the city really is. Being greeted by her sister at the train station, Carrie suddenly feels the heavy weight of the city: “Amid all the maze, uproar, and novelty she felt cold reality taking her by the hand. No world of light and merriment. No round of amusement. Her sister carried with her most of the grimness of shift and toil” (Dreiser 7). It is this constant push and pull, the lifting up and tearing down that characterizes Dreiser’s Chicago: Throughout the novel, the city is framed as a powerful magnet, whose force Carrie feels constantly.<sup>10</sup>

Whether imagined as a majestic wave or magnetic force, these images of the city certainly open a “broad frame of reference” (Lynch 4). Captured in expressive imagery, the city looms large within the texts. While conceiving of the city in metaphoric terms thus renders it a ubiquitous force, metaphorization as a literary process also brings with it a particular dynamic, as a return to the literary example may demonstrate. For while the magnet metaphor in Dreiser’s novel serves as a structuring device with which to gauge the sway that Chicago has over its inhabitants, it also frames the city in a recognizable shape. Within this framework Chicago remains unchanged: The city in *Sister Carrie* from beginning to end is a magnetic field, constantly pushing and pulling its inhabitants towards or away from it. Exposed to these forces, the urban individual is invariably at risk. Carrie, looking for a job on her first day in Chicago, is overcome by “a sense of helplessness amid so much evidence of power and force which she could not understand” (Dreiser 11). In comparison to the powerful city, the urban individual is but a figment, a puppet following its prescribed course: Here, it is the employed imagery that helps reinforce an imbalance. As a stabilizing force, the magnet metaphor constitutes the narrative’s focal point, significantly reducing the character’s scope of action. Metaphorization in this case may bring order by clothing the city in familiar images, but it also introduces predictability: For the characters, exposed to Chicago’s magnetic field, the only ways are up or down (cf. Ickstadt, “Kaleidoscope of Images” 208). Imaging the city as a wave, magnet, machine or jungle, may open expansive frames of reference. Within them, however, the fates of its inhabitants are already sealed. This is perhaps, one of the limits of approaching the city as metaphor: What is gained in vividness and narrative control is forfeited in flexibility.

<sup>10</sup> See also Weimer’s comments on the magnet analogy in Dreiser (9).