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## The City in Literature

In *The City in Literature: An Intellectual and Cultural History*, Richard Lehan explores the dynamism of urban imagery, examining links between literary expression and the history of the city. In a sweeping analysis of western literature from Greek mythology to Thomas Pynchon and from St. Petersburg, Russia to Los Angeles, California, Lehan persuasively argues that transformations in the structure and function of cities influenced the form of the urban novel. He links developments in urban literature with developments of the city, ascribing various narrative methods and trends to historical stages of urbanization.

Lehan, a professor of English at UCLA, reaches across the disciplinary divide and grounds his literary analysis in an historical context. Although historians might wince at the lack of footnotes or historiographical analysis, Lehan successfully links the academic fields by weaving together a discussion of urban literature with an exploration of the changes occurring within the city itself. As he explains in his preface, “[A]s literature gave imaginative reality to the city, urban changes in turn helped transform the literary text. This shared textuality—this symbiosis between literary and urban text—became the methodological basis for this book” (p. xv). Lehan thus relies on literature to examine changes and constancies in the function, physical structure, and conceptualization of cities.

Historians who wish to explore divergences in how people of varying socioeconomic backgrounds regarded

the city might be frustrated by Lehan’s evidentiary basis, which is limited to a select collection of novels written about the urban experience in Europe and the United States. Readers who expect a discussion of the entire urban scene will be disappointed, not only because of the broad conclusions he reaches from this limited range of sources, but also because he does not fully examine the socio-economic factors that motivated the work of the novelists. Nevertheless, historians will find great benefit not only in the breadth of this work—which sweeps across eras and two continents, if not across socio-economic groups—but also in its instructive demonstration of how to read poetry and prose as evidence. By analyzing how the forms and functions of the city shaped literary trends, Lehan demonstrates the interconnectedness of structures and ideas. His methodological innovations offer historians a strategy for exploring not just the themes and images of urban literature, but also what the particular narrative methods can tell us about the history of the city.

Avoiding the jargon-laden analysis that makes non-academics (and even some of us within the academy) shudder and turn away, Lehan presents intricate arguments and complex concepts in clear, astute, if sometimes abstract, prose. Through an extensive, comparative approach, Lehan explains the origins of several prominent recurring themes that appear in both urban literature and history, including the threat of the “other”; the effects of ethnic, racial, and economic diversity on community within the city; the contrasts of individual opportunity and alienation; the difficulty of knowing or explaining a

city; and the relationship between the city and the frontier, and between the metropolis and the hinterland. As Lehan argues, these themes continued to appear in urban literature, but the forms in which they were expressed and the meanings with which these concepts were infused hardly remained static. For example, beginning with an analysis of ancient western cities and Dionysian images of chaos, Lehan describes how images of order and disorder repeatedly emerged as dualistic elements in urban portrayals. The theme of chaos appeared in different narrative forms that reflected the historical stage of the city, from the Victorian-era tale of Bram Stoker's *Dracula* to the postmodern imagery in Paul Auster's *New York Trilogy*.

As the city grew and its social and economic functions became more complex, authors developed new methods with which to describe the metropolitan landscape. Various stages of urban development thus generated new ways of conceptualizing the city. As Lehan explains, "Comic and romantic realism give us insights into the commercial city; naturalism and modernism into the industrial city; and postmodernism into the postindustrial city. The city and the literary text have had inseparable histories" (p. 289). With continued urban expansion, modernist conceptions of the city focused on the complexity of the metropolis as embodied by the image of the crowd. "The crowd," Lehan explains, "became a metonym for the city in modernist discourse" (p. 71). Rather than a gathering of individuals, modernists perceived the crowd as a potentially dangerous mob, whose alienated members had lost their individuality. With the increasing diversity of the crowd, cities seemed to pose a challenge not only to order, but also to the organic community. Looking backwards to an idealized past of cultural homogeneity, poets like Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot warned that a mechanized metropolis, driven by individualistic materialistic desires and the power of money, would lead toward "cultural entropy" and a desolate urban wasteland. Authors of the modern metropolis depicted individuals as either alienated and alone amid the decadent crowd or searching for identity in a centralized power and embracing a totalitarian state. Here, Lehan might have discussed more concretely the socioeconomic backgrounds of authors like Pound and Eliot, explicitly identifying the sources of their anxieties (and thus the motivations for their narrative methods) in the historical conditions of the metropolis.

Acknowledging the significance of national context in these literary texts, Lehan describes how responses to the modern city varied across space. While themes of

order and chaos continued across the Atlantic, Lehan argues, differences in the historical contexts of the Old and New Worlds shaped the ways in which the city was conceptualized; while feudalism, imperialism, and totalitarianism informed European urban literature, American authors, artists, and architects reacted to and in turn shaped images of the frontier (p. 167). Americans' fascination with their nation's transition from rural to urban and with the perceived democracy of the frontier informed much of their literature. For instance, in America, fears of cultural degradation and community decay appeared less in espousals of dictatorial nationalism and more often in the Jeffersonian ideals of republicanism and the myth of the yeoman farmer.

The term around which Lehan structures much of his analysis of American literature—"frontier"—carries a great deal of historiographical baggage as the continuing center of a lively scholarly debate, little of which he addresses. Neither the frontier nor images associated with it have remained static throughout American history, rather displaying diverse and variable meanings even within a single era. Lehan's analysis would have been strengthened by a fuller exploration of the multiple conceptualizations of the settlement process. By conflating the experiences of all settlers, he ignores the work of numerous scholars who have described the diversity of experiences by Euroamerican, Indian, Mexican, and Asian migrants.

Despite the lack of a full discussion of the complexity of frontier imagery, Lehan adeptly and provocatively introduces the category of region into his analysis. Noting differences between depictions of the city in Europe and the United States, as well as differences between the northeastern, southern, midwestern, and western U.S., Lehan leaves little doubt that the location of a city, as well as regional characteristics in its development, shaped the ways in which authors perceived and described cities. (Note especially his discussion on pages 186 and 191.)

Lehan concludes his book with an analysis of Los Angeles—the "last major city to grow" out of Enlightenment notions of progress, property, and the conquerable frontier (p. 257). Again linking conceptualization and structure, Lehan demonstrates how the postmodern city influenced the literary style of Thomas Pynchon. As with the postmodern city itself, Lehan argues, Pynchon creates a world in *Gravity's Rainbow* where there is "no center, no principle of unity, no way to connect parts to something greater" (p. 276). Disjointedness, abstraction, the lack of a core amid undefined sprawl give

the sense of Los Angeles—the quintessential postmodern metropolis—as an unknowable place. Having begun his analysis in the “scriptable world of Enlightenment London,” he concludes in the “discontinuous, decentered, unscriptable world of postmodern Los Angeles” (p. 291).

Despite the extensive chronological and geographic scope of Lehan’s impressive undertaking, some voices have been lost. A range of literary works that both reflected developments in urban history and shaped future depictions of the metropolis are not discussed. For example, Lehan chooses not to include dime novels, booster tracts, or other popular literature in his analysis, thus neglecting the influence of these works on the major novels written by literary luminaries. In addition, the perspectives of women, the working class, and members of various ethnic and racial groups—taken together, the majority of urban dwellers—are not fully analyzed. Their portrayals offer alternative conceptions of the commercial, industrial, and postindustrial city that would shed light onto not only prevalent literary trends, but also the complex motivations behind the narrative methods which artists employed in their depictions of the city. Significant authors who might have complicated this analysis of American literature include Toni Morrison, James Baldwin, Upton Sinclair, Anzia Yezierska, Henry Roth, Kate Chopin, Claude McKay, Armistead Maupin, and Horatio Alger. Differences between Fitzgerald’s and Yezierska’s depictions of New York, for example, belie assertions that time and place alone differentiated conceptualizations of the city. A comparison of these works would add depth to the breath of Lehan’s analysis by exploring the socioeconomic factors that caused two authors writing about the same city at the same time to depict radically different urban scenes.

Although the task would require the further expansion of *The City in Literature*’s already broad focus, an analysis of the rich diversity of literary voices and styles within a single era could only add to Lehan’s argument of the influence of city form in shaping literary form. Other

historians and literary scholars, including Thomas Bender, Andrew Lees, Adrienne Siegel, and Dana Brand have linked class, race, ethnicity, gender, and occupation with attitudes towards cities, asserting that the social position of authors and artists informed their conceptualization of the city.[1] Lehan leaves relatively unanswered questions of whether and why different authors writing at the same moment in history saw and described different urban images.

When seeking to understand a particular metropolis with its agglomeration of residents, physical structures, and functions, we often grasp for central themes or images. Authors too shape their conceptualization of the city by reducing a single place to a set of scenes and stories. Many scholars have studied these complex images in order to examine our ambivalent attitudes toward the metropolis. Lehan ventures further, however, demonstrating how we can gain additional insights into the history of a city by examining the narrative methods of its chroniclers. Expanding his focus only would add to this method of analysis and to its fascinating conclusions.

#### Notes

[1]. Thomas Bender, *Toward an Urban Vision: Ideas and Institutions in Nineteenth-Century America* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1975); Andrew Lees, *Cities Perceived: Urban Society in American and European Thought, 1820-1940* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985); Adrienne Siegel, *The Image of the American City in Popular Literature, 1820-1870* (Port Washington, N.Y.: Kennikat Press, 1981); Dana Brand, *The Spectator and the City in Nineteenth-Century American Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

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