Metaphorical Ways of Narrating the City.
London - A Macrometaphorical City

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Abstract: We are condemned to wander – critically, emotionally, politically, passionately – in a world characterized by an excess of sense which, while offering the chance of meaning continues to flee ahead us. This is our world, our responsibility, our only chance. In this paper, we see that **the metropolis** narrated by Peter Ackroyd and Penelope Lively is above all 'a myth, a tale, a character, a living-body', an imaginary construct, 'a telling' that helps some of us to locate our home in postmodernity. To inhabit a city is to be immersed in a common experience. It is the chatter of the city that now maintains this site of a discourse and dialogue. In the metropolis, it becomes necessary to form a new sense of ethics in its multiple and differential histories. The Mind - being it of the Reader or of the Writer - is eventually the site of sense.

Keywords: imaginary construct, metropolis, myth, discourse, dialogue

> *The City is an ideogram : the text continues.*
> Roland Barthes, *Empire of Signs*, 1982 :31

Contemporary fiction achieved some measure of 'ironic distance' from a culture of greed and acquisition explored in a variety of ways. Modern urban fiction generates its own form of myth, a changeability often labelled as 'post-modern'. This term serves almost as a shorthand label for a whole *new phase of writings concerned with tensions of the city,* which can no longer be seen as the domain of middle-class professionals alone, the territory of so much previous post-war urban fiction.

The metropolis is, above all, a myth, a tale, a telling that helps someone to locate our home in modernity, there to find new gods, the new myths, called for by Nietzsche. *The*

metropolis is an allegory, in particular it represents the allegory of the crisis of modernity that we have learnt to recognize in the voices of Baudelaire, Kafka, Woolf, Wilde etc. To go beyond these bleak stories of exile and that grey, rainy country of the anguished soul, is to establish a sense of being at home in the city, and to make of tradition a space of transformation, rather than the scene of a cheerless destiny. For this, metropolis is not simply the final stage of a poignant narrative, of apocalypse and nostalgia, it is also the site of the ruins of previous orders in which diverse histories, languages, memories and traces continually entwine and recombine in the construction of new horizons.

In postmodernism we are witnessing the shift from a stable and rational directive reading, when the text was considered a present matrix in which sense is encountered and constructed and into which the reader is cast, to a kind of 'interactive reading', meaning not only a documentary reading, but also a question of understanding.

Social and cultural senses become not a goal, but a discourse, not a closure but a trace in an endless passage that can only aspire to a temporary arrest, to a self-conscious drawing of a limit across the diverse possibilities of the world. It is precisely *this lack of fixed referent* or *stable foundation* that produces meaning. For to produce it does not mean to touch a sacred stone or turn the right key that will reveal the nature of things, but involves tracing out a recognizable shape on the extensive complexity of the possible. Our interpretation of the society, culture, history and our individual lives, hopes, dreams, passions and sensations, involves attempts *to confer* sense rather than *to discover* it. For it is we - with our histories, languages, memories and constraints - who make sense. We never arrive at the bottom of things: the analysis remains open. Our constructions are destined to be incomplete, interminable.

The concept of new and forgotten identities came to the fore during the end of the twentieth century, emerging from the underclasses and margins. The ethnic plurality of London and society's changing constructions of gender are central themes of this *new generation of writers*. So, we can spot the *presentation and transfiguration* of the urban environment as one essential characteristic of postmodernist literature.

To inhabit a city is to be immersed in a common experience, and above all to participate in a significant extension of the term, synthesized in the idea of choice. It is the chatter of the city that now maintains this site of discourse and dialogue. In the metropolis it becomes necessary to form a new sense of ethics.

But this exploitation of the towns is not something new in literature, since even medieval writers placed their heroes and plots in towns, but then what is the main *characteristic of the postmodern way of narrating the city?* According to Dorothy Porter's article *Imagining the City* (1989, reprinted in WtC2 :1), every city has two aspects : 'the binding idea of the city as revered and deplored centre of religious, military and political power' and 'the physical presence of the city in the identifiable space and time' (1989, reprinted in WtC2 :1).

The response of the writers to such urban processes is complex, and it determines different attitudes: the presentation of the city either in a diachronic or synchronic perspective. What is even more spectacular is the fact that sometimes these perspectives interweave. It is an emphasis on complexity and richness on a new social and metaphysical basis. A pluralistic society, where *a new sensibility* is formed which finds oversimple "harmony" false and unchallenging. We will focus upon the works of two writers: Peter Ackroyd and Penelope Lively, and more precisely on *Hawksmoor* (1985) and *City of the Mind* (1991).

There are many attempts in both works to define the process of writing and also some reading strategies by using a parallel between architecture and literature. Many exegetes of postmodernism insisted on the relation between postmodernism as trend in architecture and its literary resonance. Architecture is considered one of the forms of art which illustrated, according to Hegel's[34] theories, the 'symbolic art'. The 'symbolic art' is considered by Hegel the first form of art which consisted in the simple search of the 'figuration'. The Idea hasn't found the shape in itself, so there always remains the fight and the aspiration of finding / reaching it. The fundamental type of art of construction is the symbolic form of art. Architecture is the art which orders symmetrically the external world, taking it closer to the spiritual one, creating this way the 'time of eternity' in Hegelian vision. The symbolic art refers to an exterior existence, rendered/displayed in an immediate presentation, which does not have to be understood literally, but it requires to step (in)to a deeper level, a larger approach, getting beyond the first level, until reaching their profound signification.

"… and now continue : draw the erect elevation of this Structure in face or front, then the same object elevated upon the same draught and centre in al its optical Flexures. This you must distinguish from the Profile, which is signified by edging Stroaks and Contours without any of the solid finishing: thus a book begins with a frontispiece, then its Dedication, and its Preface or Advertisment. And now we come to the Heart of our design: the art of Shaddowes you must know well, Walter, and you must be instructed how to Cast them with Care. It is only the Darkness that can give trew Form to our Work and trew Perspective to our Fabrick for there is no Light without

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[34] G.H.F. Hegel, *Despre art   i poezie,* Vol. I-II, Selecție, prefață și ediție de Ion Iano i, Bucuresti, Editura Minerva, 1979.

Darknesse and no Substance without Shaddowe - and I turn this Thought over in my mind : what live is there which is not a Portmanteau - of Shaddowes and Chimeras?). I build in the Day to bring News of the Night and of Sorrowe […] And work trew to my Design: that which is to last one thousand years is not to be precipitated." (Ackroyd, 1985: 2)

The things that the writer emphasises are the 'shadows', the areas where the reader has the freedom to play. The centre is not that centre which the structuralists with their totalizing theories talk about, but exactly these areas of indeterminism. We can trace here the influences of the deconstructivists and the Tel Quel movement, which worked with the concept of 'textuality', in opposition with 'play/work'. The text is seen as a network of meanings, where the 'paths' are numerous, without overlapping each other in an annoying way, without any dominance. The text becomes a 'galaxy of significance', and not a structure of significance.

" I have instructed you in many things and principally in this – I am not a slave of Geometrical Beauty it takes its Shape in front of you, alwaies keep the Structure intirely in Mind as you inscribe it. First, you must measure out or cast the Area in as exact a Manner as can be, and then you must draw the Plot and make the Scale. I have imparted to you the Principles of Terrour and Magnificence, for these you must represent in the due placing of Parts and Ornaments as well as in the Proportion of several Orders : you see Walter how I take my Pen? […] The designe of the Worke, together with every several Partition and Opening, is to be drawne by straight-edge and compass: as the Worke varies in rising, you must show how its Lines necessarily beare upon one another, like the web which the Spider spins in a Closet; but Walter do this in black lead and not in inke – I do not trust your pen so far as yet." (Ackroyd, 1985: 2)

At first sight, it seems like Nicholas Dyer gives the instruction which the classics were so engaged to, when every type of creation had to follow some precise rules: time, place and order. But it is just a kind of irony, because he clearly states that he is not the slave of 'Geometrical Beauty', which was the ideal of the classic writers and architects. The parallel between the process of writing and architectural creation is made here explicit. The most radical new conventions concern beauty and composition. In place of Renaissance harmony and modernist integration, there is the new hybrid of 'dissonant beauty or disharmonious beauty'. Inevitably, art and architecture must represent this paradoxical view, the oxymoron of 'disharmonious harmony'. It is therefore not surprising that we deal with countless formal paradoxes in postmodern work, such as 'asymmetrical symmetry', 'syncopated proportion', 'fragmented purity', 'unfinished whole' etc. That is why Dyer tells his pupil not to make the final project in ink, but in lead, so that there would be an open perspective, something which can be modified.

"I have turned him [Walter] into a proper Scholar, and steer'd him safe among the Books which lie in his way. I acquainted him with certain Prints of Aegyptian Obelisks, and advised him to study them well and copy them; I instructed him in my own Scriptures – in Aylet Sammes his britannia Antiqua Illustrata, in Mr Baxter's Book *Concerning the Certainty of the World of Spirits*, in Mr Cotton Mather his *Relations of the Wonders of the Invisible World* and many other such, for this is fit Reading for one who wishes to become a thoro' Master. The Length of my necessary Instructions is too great to compleat here but there were four things I taught walter to consider: 1) That it was Cain who built the first City, 2) that there is a true Science in the World called *Scientia Urbanum* which, as to the publick teaching of it, has been suppressed but which the proper Artificer must Comprehend, 3) that

Architecture aims to Eternity and must contain the Eternal Powers: not only our Altars and Sacrifices, but the Forms of our Temples, must be mysticall, 4) that the miseries of the present Life, and the barbarities of mankind, the fatall disadvantages we are all under and the Hazard we run of being eternally Undone, lead the True Architect not to harmony or to Rationall Beauty but to quite another Game." (Ackroyd, 1985: 9)

The same idea, of 'disharmonious beauty' and one which justifies it, is *pluralism*, both cultural and political. As we have seen, the fundamental position of postmodernism in the 1970s was its stylistic variety, its celebration of difference, 'otherness' and irreducible heterogeneity. In architecture, the stylistic counterpart of pluralism is *radical ecclectism* – the mixing of different languages to engage different tastes, cultures and define different functions according to their appropriate mood. These ideas are clearly illustrated in the following fragment:

"This is a pile of bricks. Carefully arranged bricks, I grant you, but a pile of bricks none the less. You may call it a late Georgian house with a neo-classical portico and Coade stone dressings. Others might just call it a house. A Martian would call it a pile of bricks, if he had got as far as identifying a pile of brick. You can take it to pieces in order to build something else with bricks. You can pull it down in order to use the space it occupies for another building. Or you can give it a new significance because you have stopped thinking about it as simply a pile of bricks". (Lively, 1991: 26)

To pull this heterogeneity together is a grid frame, presented as something analogous to a classical order. A square wall pattern, like the renaissance application of pilasters, appears again and again, inside and outside, to form the conceptual ordering system. But it is used in a dissonant, not harmonious way. The Renaissance harmony is mixed with Modernist collage even in the background structure that is

supposed to unify the fragments. While such extreme eclecticism may be questioned for such a small building, it does serve to characterise the heterogeneous functions. It also underscores why this eclecticism is radical: because unlike weak eclecticism, which is more a matter of whim, it is tied to very specific functions and symbolic intentions. Another motive for the heterogeneity is its communicational role – the idea that ecclectic language speaks to a wide and divergent audience – something of a necessity for a public who lives in a perpetual change.

The texts contains a series of passages of metatextual or metafictional discourse, which come to demonstrate that the postmodernist novels has as a main purpose the 're-discovery of the writing pleasure', and also to re-gain the reader's pleasure for reading. The process of reading is wonderfully described in an allegorical way, as a kind of 'palimpsest reading, as

„his job (the reader's job) is that of rubbing away the grease and detritus which obscured the real picture of the world, in the way that a blackned church must be clesned before the true texture of its stone can be seen' (Ackroyd, 1993: 126).
The whole place is a chronicle, in brick and stone, in silent eloquence, for those who have eyes and ears.

The 'stone' has a symbolical implication in the book, and it can be the philosophical stone from the alchemist's oven, the quintessential result, and 'here' the reading itself. And because the postmodern novels tries to achieve a compatibility between the writing pleasure and the reading act as an enjoyable and productive act, Peter Ackroyd inserts in the text explicit clues of the writing process, a double coding one in order to facilitate the reader's mission.

"And let us begin; and as the Fabrick takes its Shape in front of you, alwais keep the structure in your mind as you

inscribe it. First you must measure out or cast the area in as exact a manner as can be, and than you must draw the Plot and make the Scale. I have imparted you the principles of terror and magnificence, for these you must represent in due placing of parts and ornaments as well as in proportion of several Orders […]as the work varies in rising, you must show how ite Lines neccessarlily beare upon one another, like the Spider spin in a closet.[…] the Heart of our design : the art of Shaddos you must know well.[…]to Cast them with due Care.only the darkness can give trew Forme, there is no Light without darkness, no Substance without Saddowwe[…] this being the Engravour of Work." (id.)

These lines may be considered as an *ars poetica* where the author draws a parallel between the architectural principles and those of a literary text. Representation involves repression; some things are shown, other are hidden; some things said, other unsaid. For in every representation the object represented is initially cancelled and then replaced, re-presented, in an other context and language. Representation, as Freud noticed, is „cannibalistic discourse". In the same direction we can interpret the warning „*DON'T FORGET*'' and the enigmatic drawing:

Reader   Text

Writer   Reader
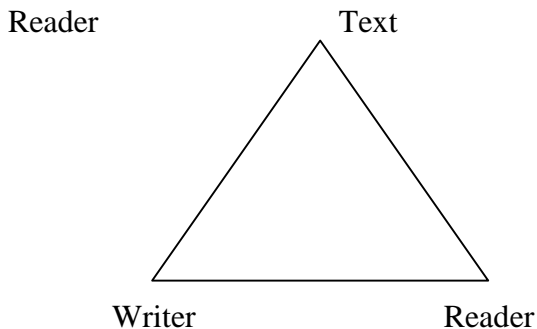
„The shape" was familiar to Hawksmoor; and suddenly it occurred to him that, if each cross was the conventional sign for a church, then here in the outline was the area of the

murders – Spitalfields at the apex of the triangle, St. George's-in-the east and St. anne's at the end of the base linne, and St. Mary Woolnoth to the west. Underneath had been scrawled in a pencil. 'that is to, let you know that I will be spoken about. 'and there followed another line, so faint that Hawksmoor could hardly read it, 'O misery, if they will die.' Then he turn the page and trembled when he saw the sketch of a man kneeling with a white disc placed against his right eye : this had been the drawing which he had seen issuing from the hand of the tramp beside St. Mary Woolnoth. Beneath it was peinted in capitals, 'The Universal Architect'. And he wondered at this as, surreptitiously, he placed the letter into his pocket" (Ackroyd, 1985: 166)

Now I will try an interpretation of this inscription. The four crosses may correspond to the main agents involved in the process of creation and implicitly in the process of reading: the *writer, the text and the reader*, who appears in double position, because in postmodern theories of reading, the r*eader* is in the *central position*. He interacts with the texts, asks the text questions, enters the text and then he returns to his exterior position and tries to use his experiences as a cooperative reader in his own world. Such a shift in emphasis from interpretation of a presumably already given reality to one that we come to construct and modify through the languages at our disposal is not reductible to one or another of the two dialogical poles: language or the 'real'. I think that the 'Universal Architect' is in fact the reader who possesses all the histories: the historically verifiable past. He will survive, he is the reader of all times, the one who makes the writers' works ("O misery, they (probably the writers) will die") overtake time. It is only guaranteed by the social and historical horizons that have permitted and continue to permit such a dialogue to take place. The reader now has the central position, he overtakes the place of the 'omniscient writer' which was considered in the previous

paradigms, to be the 'Creator', or, to paraphrase Ackroyd's syntagm, 'the Universal Architect'.

"He allowed the knowledge of the pattern to enclose him, as the picture on television screen began too revolve very quickly and then to break up into a number of different images. Where before the churches had been for him a source of anxiety and of range, now he contemplated each one in turn with a beneficient wonder as he saw how mightily they had done their work: the great stones of Christ Church, the blackened walls of St. Anne's, the twin towers of St. George's in –the-East, the silence of St. Mart's Woolnoth, the unbroken façade of St. Alfege's, the white pillar of St. George's Bloomsbury, all now took on a larger life as Hawksmoor contemplated them and the crimes which had been commited in their name. And yet he sensed that the pattern was incomplete, and it was for this that he waited almost joyfully.

He had come to the end by chance, not knowing that it was the end, and this unaticipated and uncertain climax might yet rob him of his triumph: his will be emptied, replaced by the shape of moving things as he sat in his dark room. (*Hawksmoor*, 1985: 214)

So, it seems like Barthes' statement which I have quoted at the beginning of this article upon the 'Postmodernist City - Underground London', needs an additional one:

„The City is an ideogram: the text continues and the reader reinvests it with his/her imagination".

„And yet he sensed that the pattern was incomplete, and it was for this that he waited almost joyfully" (Ackroyd, 1985: 214).

This impossibility of fully comprehending the world, of reducing it to a single, rational order of communication, is not a methodological defect or a cultural defeat. For it leaves us free to acknowledge an irreductible heterogeneity. The monologue of a totalizing theory is replaced by a continual dialogue across the 'hard surfaces' and 'local knowledge' of these differences,

where analysis does not represent the closure of the truth, but an attempted exchange conducted towards its own language and position. We are condemned to wander – critically, emotionally, politically, passionately – in a world characterized by an excess of sense which, while offering the chance of meaning, continue to flee ahead us. This is our world, our responsibility, our only chance.

We have seen that the *metropolis* is, above all, a myth, a tale, a character, a 'living-body', an imaginary construct, a telling that helps some of us to locate our home in postmodernity. To inhabit a city is to be immersed in a common experience. It is the chatter of the city that now maintains this site of a discourse and dialogue. In the metropolis it becomes necessary to form a new sense of ethics.

Further, we need an ethics that fully recognizes the body, previously considered as the site of error and evil, that recognizes its languages, written across its surfaces in the alphabets of sexuality, gender and ethnicity; that recognizes its rites and rights, its multiple and differential histories. the Mind is eventually the site of sense.

And I would like to end in the same manner I have started, with an illustrative quotation:

"When I walk through the corridors of the subway, I find that I am assailed by a multitude of signs which, taken as a whole, make up thee mythology of the world I live in, something like the collective unconscious of society, that is to say, at one and the same time the image it wishes to give out of itself; and the mirror of the troubles which haunt it… Shown up in the light of day as stereotypes, these images cease to function as snares from the moment they are taken up by a living discourse, which remains the only space for my freedom. I know now that this city which oppressed me is imaginary; and in refusing to submit in alienation to its constraints, its fears, its ghosts, I wish on the contrary to reinvest them with my own imagination." (Butler, 1980: 165-6)

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