

SVEND ERIK LARSEN

Between Nowhere and Everywhere: Literature and the City

I. WHAT AND WHERE IS THE CITY?

It may sound almost too trivial: urban studies have the city as their *object*, that is, a *place* with a limited number of discernible social and material characteristics. If urban studies cannot come up with reasonable answers to questions such as "What is a city?" and "Where is a city?," and thus conceive the city as an object in a certain place, we can hardly identify them as urban studies at all. Although this may sound trivial, it is not. On the contrary, it is wrong. At least as the problem appears today.

In the seventh book of his *Politics*, Aristotle focuses on the city, the *polis*, as an object with a specific identity intimately related to a given locality. The identity of a city is bound to its social, albeit naturally-founded, structure: the whole urban fabric is kept together by its unbroken link with the basic, primarily sexually determined, relation between man and woman, via family and the household, to the state, where the naturalness of their basic relationship penetrates everything else. This makes the city a self-contained unity of a limited size, where every citizen is able to oversee at a glance its site and people and hence contemplate his own place within the urban totality and in the cosmos as a whole. (Of course, as far as Aristotle was concerned he had in mind only the adult male population of free citizens who gathered at the *agora*). The continuity running from nature to culture — the true identity of the city — is kept alive by this contemplation, and the purpose of the city's social life is to give man the possibility of thus contemplating it (see Larsen 1993). This would be the answer to the question "what is a city?"

The city is not an ideal unity; rather, it actually takes place. The said place must possess certain properties which will enable the city's material layout to be visible to everyone's eyes and which will not only nourish the city but provide it with protection. Were this not the case, there would be no object of contemplation. A proper place must have a coastline suitable for building a harbour, enough fertile land in the vicinity, water within its confines, and a point from which it is visible as a centred, self-contained entity — the high tower on the central *agora*. Such a place is not created, but found. It already has an identity of its own, a *genius loci*.

Originally this notion referred to the spirit defining and protecting a particular place. In due time it became a more abstract label for its identity as a place, that is, for its potentially harmonious relationship with humans and their activities. To describe or depict a part of the environment as a place, and not just as an arbitrarily delimited slice of land, means to describe it in accordance with certain discursive or visual codes found, for example, in classical topological poetry or in landscape painting (see for instance Johnston, Cosgrove). Building a city *in* — and not *on* — a place requires that we respect its spirit, that we comprehend its identity as a place-to-build-a-city, and not as a place for something else, and that we construct the city in accordance with these guidelines. We cannot build cities anywhere we like and expect them to be good cities. This would be the answer to the question "Where is the city?"

But when it comes to the modern city, for example, London or Paris, Vienna, Berlin in the mid-eighteenth century, via the American cities a century later, to today's cities strewn all over the continents, such answers, as well as the questions looming behind them, tend to be obsolete. If we want to grasp the identity of the modern city, and not just measure the city with the standards of yesteryear, we will have to take a different approach. All modern cities are endlessly redefining their boundaries and can be located on any point of the globe: Phoenix, Arizona, cannot be inhabited without air conditioning; Brasilia has been built against all the conditions of the place; Saint Petersburg in the Russian swamps figures as an early example of the same tendency. In this sense the city is, or can be, ubiquitous and has become a universal cultural condition of life. Even if it is not to be actually found from pole to pole or having exactly the same form the world over, it is everywhere a cultural principle. The city it turns out does not find a place but defines it.

If this sounds as a trendy postmodern fancy, take a look at the American census (Wattenberg). Urban dwellers were first counted as a specific group in 1870. The criterion for an urban dwelling was any area with more than 8,000 inhabitants possessing a certain material and social cohesion. In the following censuses up to 1906 the criterion of 8,000 inhabitants changed but, strange enough, it moved down and up and down again, regardless of the fact that the urban population increased steadily throughout the period. What was apparently lacking was a stable criterion for identifying the city. From 1906 to 1940 the demographic definition was stable, but between 1940 and 1950 it was again set adrift up to the time when metropolitan areas were introduced as an additional urban form. Simply put, the city resists the obvious questions pertaining to its identity and place. It should be noted that the same fluctuations have occurred in contexts more complex than the census, for instance, in the arts (see Conrad) or in science, especially the social sciences, e.g., the Urban Studies pioneered by the Chicago School (Park et al.).

If we downplay the importance of the city's material appearance in terms of inhabitants and area and proceed to foreground it as a social and mental form, two other examples attest to the same difficulty. The famous essay by Georg Simmel "The Metropolis and Mental Life" from 1903 is one of the first analyses of the modern metropolis as more than a place or a thing. Simmel shows it to be the frame of the entire life world of human beings — from bodily experience to mental structure, from individual existence to social interaction. But although Simmel presents an astute and still inspiring analysis of the complexity of life founded on urban conditions, the point of departure for his evaluation of the metropolis is the traditional closed European city as it has been conceptualized within the Aristotelean tradition. In his argument, the modern city is not regarded as an object in its own right, but rather as a negative contrast to the well-known traditional city.

In her *Essai de philosophie urbaine* (1986), Anne Cauquelin draws the logical conclusion: there is no empirical criterion for what or where the city really is, so that as a preliminary step we need a philosophical analysis of the conditions for the question "What is a city?" The classical analysis of the city approaches it from the point of view of construction. Presumably, the city had been built, reached a point of completion, if not perfection, and endured until it deteriorated and ceased being a real or a good city. The rise and fall of the city offered an explanatory narrative model applicable to real as well as to mythological cities: Babylon, Niniveh, Rome, Atlantis. However, when it comes to the constantly changing modern city, Cauquelin propounds that both destruction and construction are aspects of equal importance. Every city is always both a ruin and an emergent phenomenon, it constitutes a state of permanent transition. Accordingly, the city is defined from the point of view of time rather than from that of space. The city is an ongoing socio-spatial process rather than a socio-spatial place, as Spiro Kostof has clearly pointed out in his chapter on the "Urban Process" (245-305).

Aristotle defined the city not only in accordance with what he actually perceived in Athens as an urban reality, but also in accordance with Greek philosophy and its definition of substance and locality, its theories of identity, its cosmology, etc. Of course, the city itself was not a discursive phenomenon, but its identity was. In this respect modern urban analysts are late relatives of Aristotle: they are trying to construct a discourse in their search for the identity of the city and for our identity within it. Although the city remains a material phenomenon occupying certain places, its identity is no longer derived from this fact but from its processual and global character.

II. CULTURAL UNIVERSALS

Literature is an essential part of this discursive project. The paradox which looms before us is to come to grips with an object which, at the same time, is not an

object, a local phenomenon which, at the same time, appears to be universal. In order to embrace something that transcends any particular human culture and is yet a formative force in all cultures, literature exploits and reworks a fundamental feature of language: the power of human language to make certain phenomena appear as stable universals independent of their empirical status. It may be that philosophers contest the truth of their logical or ontological status as universals, and linguists certainly do not include them among the universal categories of grammar. Nevertheless, there *are* transcultural themes and topics, such as nature, love, hatred, sea, land, forest, etc. with which we deal as universals, simply because we talk about them in every discourse or in the more elaborate forms of language usage by resorting to the definite form singular without the article or to equivalent grammatical forms which decontextualize or derelativize them. In this fashion Nature, Love, the Sea, and so on are promoted to absolutes. Such phenomena play a double role in our everyday life: they cover a vast field of highly specified and endlessly varied material experience, from the variegated familiar landscape to the sublime wilderness, from the pond in our backyard to the Pacific Ocean, from the affection for our pets to the universal love of God, etc. At the same time they are integrated into the semantics of individual languages as unifying conceptual elements which transcend the specificity of these respective languages.

However, they are not absolute ideas. In fact, their roles as unifying guidelines in our striving to grasp the world as it undergoes changes from one semiotic system to another, as well as their specific meaning and importance, vary from one culture to the next. Nature in physics is not identical with Nature in everyday speech, Nature in Western thought is not identical with Nature in Indian mythology. Nevertheless, Nature remains an overarching unity in each of these specific cultural semiotic systems and contexts. Certain constructs within a given cultural context, which might at one point in time have been regarded as absolute, may lose their importance as unifying semantic pivotal elements. In secularized societies, for example, religious fundamentals like Sin or Evil, are subject to such changes, while later key concepts, such as the philosophical concept of the Individual and its social counterpart, Human Rights, become presumably unquestionable cultural foundations.

Literature is a major cultural force in the formation of the double role of cultural fundamentals. It brings together the universal and the specific in such a way that the resultant relation is always in a process of change. Due to the very fact that literature is a verbal art, and thus tied to a specific language, it always localizes the universal in a cultural context and removes the abstract character of the universal, so dear to philosophers and, to a certain extent, to linguists. On the other hand, due to the fact that literature creates fictitious universes of unlimited possibilities, it also endows local life and the locally lived cultural identity with a transcultural perspective.

At this point we will return to the *City*. Both an ideal unity and an entity which refers to specific material phenomena, the city is one of these changing cultural universals. In many cultures the city has carried such a double significance radiating varying meanings, but nowadays the increasing importance of Urbanity as a unifying cultural principle at all levels of culture has become a fact of global relevance. In today's literature, the *va-et-vient* between the local and the universal, being the dynamic centre of all cultures and literatures, finds significant expression in texts related to urban culture. The city is a global phenomenon founded on local conditions and, at the same time, giving local conditions a global perspective. This dialectical dynamics is specifically orientated toward modern urban culture, because this is a culture that acquires its specificity precisely from its capacity to generalize, to delocalize, to globalize, to universalize. Modern urban culture appears to assume the same character in large parts of the world and, at the same time, to dominate and homogenize the cultural context to which it belongs, a process additionally reinforced by communication networks, mass media, and so forth.

In such a cultural context the universalizing impact of the culture itself tends to subsume other universal features of existence and turn them into abstract and empty instances of the Other: Nature, God, Love, Hatred, etc., become cultural voids which are often perceived as manifestations of death, as an absolute absence of human presence that evokes *Angst* and not fear, as Søren Kierkegaard would have put it. Here, literature can function as a medium in which the Other — culturally real as it is — is given new concrete forms through which are opened up new localizing possibilities that have not yet become an integral part of the culture. Especially those literary works which reflect the emerging city, or emerging aspects of urban life, will have the power to make modern man experience the balance between a local identity and a universal perspective as a lived experience of cultural transition.

III. LITERATURE IN THE STREET: BALZAC

The *street* seems to be the spatial unit privileged by literary narration and description which aims to reformulate cultural identity determined by urban universality (see Andersen; Jukes; Kostof; Çelik et al.; Ballegaard and Larsen). The street assumes two important roles: it keeps a city together as an intrinsic communication network, and it indicates the way out of the city to a place different from the one you actually find yourself in, ultimately to the Other. The street is a space for the movements of individual bodies as well as for changing perceptual perspectives and sensual experiences, and thus for the transformation of identity. Under such conditions, the urban experience, universal as it is, becomes locally situated. How do human subjects acquire a cultural identity in this context? Are they able to do so?

Let us look at this problem with the help of excerpts from two literary works, each of which is related to one of the two roles of the street. One is Honoré de Balzac's *La Cousine Bette* (1846), the other is Walter Benjamin's *Berliner Kindheit um Neunzehnhundert* (1933). The first concentrates on a vision of life seen from the immanent network of streets as an urban enclosure, the second looks at life from the streets conceived as an element within the urban fabric that leads you into open space, the unstable space of Otherness. In both cases localized life acquires a translocal meaning and unifying universal notions materialize as place-bound subjective values.

The narrator in Balzac's novel presents the dilapidated neighborhood of Cousine Bette in the old yard of the Louvre in central Paris, a slum area of crooked alleys until it was cleaned up during the renovation of Paris in the mid-nineteenth century:

Between the narrow access to Pont du Carroussel and Rue du Musée any man visiting Paris, if only for a few days, will notice a dozen of houses with ruined façades whose discouraged owners do not repair anything.... Rue du Doyenné and the dead end belonging to it are the only pathways inside this gloomy and isolated block of houses, where the inhabitants seem to be ghosts since you never see anyone. The pavé is placed on the same level as Rue Froimanteau, but much lower than the roadway of Rue du Musée. These houses are already buried by their higher surroundings; furthermore, they are covered by the eternal shadow from the tall galleries of the Louvre, on this side darkened by the blow from the Northwind. The darkness, the silence, the icy air, the cavelike depth of the place compete in making these houses a kind of crypts, of living tombs.

When one passes this dead and only halfway neighborhood in a coach and the eye tries to penetrate the small Rue du Doyenné, the soul freezes; one may wonder who can actually live there, and what will happen in the evening when this alley is turned into a robbers' den [coupe-gorge] and the atrocities of Paris unfold almightily from the cover of the coat of night. (Balzac 80f)

As the above passage shows, when writing about Paris, Balzac resorts to very minute and local details such as street names, local establishments and historical events that really took place. In addition, he always pictures the city as a space of a cultural transition with effects beyond the urban space itself. The platform for this perspective is often, as in the excerpt above, the street. It is here that the local and the universal are brought together in a body-related experience that penetrates Balzac's artistic language, both on its descriptive and metaphorical levels.

In the *impasse* all movements are virtually brought to a halt, excepting an ongoing process of decay and death. The many metaphorical expressions of death show that the impediment to bodily movement is absolute, not just circumstantial. We are engaged in a confrontation between life and death. The network of streets does not seem to contain any concrete individuals, at the most there is the anonymous stranger ("any man") on a brief visit and somebody

("one") in the background passing by safely within the enclosure of his coach. To keep one's distance is a wise precaution in this neighborhood. However even at a distance one cannot remain here, but will have to keep on moving, to watch *de passage*, in order not to be absorbed by the claustrophobic surroundings. Distance turns out to be not a position but a process.

The emphasis on *sight*, the penetrating eye, also contributes to the distance. An essential feature in the analysis of urban culture, and for that matter of modern culture in general, is the assumption that it is predominantly a visual culture. Sight delineates one of the two extremes of our sensual experience. It reaches out to the most distant horizon for our senses and possible bodily movements, giving us an overview of our world. The other extreme of our sense experience, *touch*, is also involved, although indirectly. With touch we experience the immediate borderline between ourselves and other bodies and objects. Sight tells us how far we can get and still remain in a recognizable world; touch, on the other hand, informs us how close we can get to others before they threaten us, penetrate our bodies or destroy us. In the quotation from Balzac, the sense experience related to touch is an effect of the threatening closeness and of the cold, blowing wind, and it is expressed in the image of the street as a claustrophobic grave and in the French expression, "un coupe-gorge," meaning a "robbers' den."

Touch tells about death, sight helps one keep a necessary distance. However, the most essential thing to take note of is the absolute nature of the properties pertaining to this urban locality. There are no alternative places to go to. Within it distance is never a lasting phenomenon, you will always be exposed to something that can touch and ultimately destroy you. The solution would be to constantly keep on the move — always on your guard, ready to escape, never to settle down permanently, never to relax. The possibility of the existence of a wholly different place is but an implicit part of the narrator's imagination: "one may wonder who can actually live there," which hints at a vague notion of another dwelling place.

The contrast between standing still and moving is also foregrounded by the four anonymous, deindividualized subjects that appear in the text. Two of them are place-bound and thus related to death and decay: the powerless owners of the houses who have surrendered to destruction, and the unreal inhabitants, called ghosts. The two other subjects, the visitor and the passengers of the carriage, called "any man" and "one," are safe, but always in a position of a kind of urban refugee. These four subjects are general and anonymous, not individual persons of flesh and blood. Consequently, these positions, as a whole, indicate the general conditions of subjectivity determined primarily by bodily experience, not by intentions and will. Through abstraction the local living conditions are desubjectivized and generalized, if not universalized.

IV. LITERATURE BEYOND THE STREET: BENJAMIN

We will now move to imperial Berlin before the First World War. The young Walter Benjamin does not walk deeper into the maze of streets to an *impasse*, but follows the street out of the city. However, since the city is ubiquitous, this outside also exists within the city itself. Such an outside is the urban park, linked to the streets which give access to and criss-cross it tying it thus up with the whole urban fabric. Such is the layout of *Hofjägerallee* in the Tiergarten, a huge park in central Berlin. In his childhood memoirs *Berliner Kindheit um neunzehnhundert* Benjamin describes his excursions into the park. In its umbrage he finds himself in nature but he is there on urban conditions. The park is characterized by Benjamin as a bewildering experience as soon as you have left behind the well-trodden paths and streets. Streets indicate where to walk, but not where to walk to, they now appear to have led to nowhere. The more you walk the more you are confronted with new and unforeseen possible directions. Ultimately they deprive you of any specific sense of direction.

In Benjamin's park the environment does not become an overwhelming and claustrophobic enclosure, as was the case inside Balzac's slum. Instead it dissolves into fragments. For Benjamin this situation constitutes the general urban living conditions which — and this is the surprising point in Benjamin — you ought not to avoid but rather learn.

Not being able to feel at home in a city is nothing. But getting lost in a city in the same way that one gets lost in a wood needs to be learnt. Street names must talk to the wanderer like the cracking of dry twigs, and the narrow streets in the center of the town must tell him the time of the day just as clearly as a mountain slope. I learnt this art late in life; it has fulfilled the dream that made its first marks as labyrinths on the blotted paper in my notebook. (23)

Walter walks into the park in order to learn to cope with this confusion. The *first* step he takes is to approach the main symbols of the centralized power of imperial Germany, the statues of the former Prussian King Frederik Wilhelm and Queen Louise. However, as he approaches "closer in space" the statues are perceived from their base, that is from a frog's-eye view, losing their recognizable shape and dissolving into fragments and distorted forms. In contrast to Balzac, distance and sight is here dominated by closeness. As Benjamin the child rambles around, the same type of experience is repeated elsewhere in the park.

His *second* move, prepared for by the repeated use of the pronoun "I" as subject throughout the text, amounts to a reorganization of the whole space as his own subjective space, that is, as a realization of the dream referred to in the quotation. He discovers "new viewpoints," he lives for a moment in a world of

his own making that is an inverted image of the real world, just like the figures he had jotted down on the blotted paper of his notebook.

His *third* move constitutes an attempt to deindividualize this space and make it collectively valid in spite of its subjective character, namely through collective symbols of mythological origin (Ariadne, Charyatides, the Hesperides, the old Gods etc.). Through symbolic means, a subjectively imagined world, based on sense experience and thus localized in a specific time and space, becomes a universal living condition within an urban space. In a world of transition, coherence is discursively created by means of the symbolic.

V. PASSING BY, OUTSIDE AND INSIDE THE CITY

Using a third person narrator, Balzac cries out for distance as the enabling universal living condition in a narrow space lacking an exit, where only the narrator has a glimpse of an imaginary other place. In order to control the fragmentation, Benjamin's first person narrator tries to get as close as possible to the objects lying around him in a confusing and inescapably open space. Balzac's deindividualized subjects try in vain to get away from the urban enclosure, but there is no alternative living space, only an implicit hypothesis of being in another place. Benjamin's highly individualized subject tries to create his own exclusive space in an open-ended urban wilderness which is the basic living condition of modern culture. There is no other place. The turning point for both is the sensing and experiencing body, dependent on the use of sight and touch, constantly on the move in the street.

Therefore, the vision of the city as a changing object, perceived from constantly moving positions, becomes a perceptual model for our perception of the world in general, because the city frames the entire fabric of our lifeworld. This mode of perception becomes the general condition for our construction of experience, formed by the city but by no means only relevant for the perception of the city itself. It embraces any perceived object whatsoever. The discourse that can adapt to this type of experience is the discourse of the modern city — of the identity of urban culture and of our identity founded on urban conditions (Larsen 1994a).

Since the early nineteenth century the importance of the *means of transportation* which takes one through the city and out of the city to nature, or even into nature, to other cultures, or to the world at large has considerably grown (see the quotes in Jukes 181ff). During transport the moving subject and the moving object have been unified under identical experiential conditions, and various types of vehicles have become the perceptual and conceptual pivotal point for the views not only from the city on the non-urban landscape, but also of the city and its urbanized subjects unified in the so called *paysage urbain*: on foot or on bike, from the train or the plane, from the coach or the car — you look from a *distance* at the surroundings as a *framed landscape*, perhaps through

a window or a screen, without being an essential part of them but having created a *provisional resting point* for your body (see Schivelbusch, Ch. 4; Clark, Ch. 3; Nye). Therefore, this operation, both material and mental, defines, along with other things, the subject as it distances itself from its surroundings. The structural operation at work here has been called the "technology of perception" (Green 83, 112), comparable to the perceptual effect of a filmic sequence shot with a "travelling" camera, that is, a camera moving on a dolly during the shooting. It was not founded by the city as such, but by science, art, technology and architecture during the Renaissance. Nevertheless, by implementing this operation within the whole lay-out of our everyday space and into the make-up of the categorial construction of our everyday world, the city has become the main cultural filter and as such it has penetrated the general approach we have toward ourselves and the world around us (see Cosgrove; Green; Larsen 1994b).

In this perspective we may perceive our urbanized surroundings either as exceptional travellers (explorers, tourists) or as commuters, which is the most common case. And in each case we may highlight arrivals or departures, and perhaps both, or the simple process of passing by. My point is that the focus of our increasingly urbanized perception shifts from the urban or non-urban surroundings to the perceiving bodies themselves, their senses and movements. The material surroundings are represented as an abstraction or even a fear provoking void, leaving the subjects with a desire to bridge the gap between subject and object through subjective projection or an *Angst* turning the interaction with people and things into destructive behavior. A few examples will illuminate this process, both outside and inside the city, beginning with the happy traveller still able to unify subject and object.

In Prosper Mérimée's novella *La Colomba* (1840), Miss Lydia, a rich English lady, arrives for the first time in her life by boat on Corsica. From the slowly-moving ferry she watches Ajaccio and its surroundings, strange and wild to her. Her observations are framed by an urban consciousness, a mental state of which she, unlike the narrator, is not conscious. We find comparisons made by the globe-trotting urbanite, observations on what is perceived to be missing from a normal urban setting, and finally a resting point in the strolling tourists with whom Miss Lydia can identify:

The magnificent panorama of the gulf of Ajaccio unfolded in front of the eyes of our travelers. It is with good reason one compares it with the bay of Naples. And when the small boat entered the harbour, a burning part of the maquis that covered la Punta di Girato with smoke reminded them of Vesuvius and added to the resemblance.... Instead of the elegant houses that you will discover everywhere from Castellamare to cap Misène, around the gulf of Ajaccio you will only find gloomy maquis and naked mountains. Not a single villa, not a single habitation.... No movements in the street.... No women, except some from the countryside who came in to sell their products. You could hear no noisy talking, no laughter, no singing as in the Italian cities.... In the evening some figures

appeared to enjoy the fresh air, but the strollers along the promenade were all foreigners.... (Mérimée 50)

When we approach modern times the urbanized view of the surroundings has become more casual, as in the following example from John Dos Passos' novel *U.S.A.* (1930-36): "The convoy of twelve Fiats and eight Fords ran along the smooth macadam roads south through the Forest of Fontainebleau and wound east through the winecolored hills of central France. Dick was driving a Ford alone and was so busy trying to remember what to do with his feet he could hardly notice the scenery" (1979, 2: 201f). Dick seems to be looking at the scenery without actually seeing it, but had he seen it his perception, so it seems, would only have been on the prereflective level of noticing. The half-consciousness of Miss Lydia and Dick is rendered by the merging of the narrator and the character. In post-World War II fiction such examples are legion as, for instance, when young Sal in Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* (1955) rambles around the States, always on the road between cities, holding both the one he has left behind and the one he is heading to in his mind. He is a commuter that always "goes home in October." The real place and the place in memory are equivalent, just as reading a book and reading a landscape are equivalent and substitutable activities:

At dawn my bus was zooming across the Arizona desert ... the great dry stretches leading to Mexican mountains in the south. Then we swung north to Arizona mountains, Flagstaff, cliff towns. I had a book with me I stole from a Hollywood stall, "*Le Grand Meaulnes*" by Alain-Fournier, but I preferred reading the American landscape as we went along ... at nightfall it was Kansas. The bus roared on. I was going home in October. Everybody goes home in October. (86)

From the travelling tourist, Miss Lydia, watching attentively while moving, via the distracted passer-by, Dick, both of them looking at an environment actually *there*, we have reached the modern commuter, Sal, viewing from a position belonging to an anonymous Everyman on a landscape that really does not need to be there.

What these examples describe as taking place outside the city can also be found within the confines of the urban street network. The prototypical description of the city as a moving complex of stimuli, almost absorbing the moving and perceiving subject to the point of annihilation, can be found from Émile Zola to Saul Bellow. In the following brief paragraph from Zola's *La Curée* (1871), the individual subject is simply absent as a grammatical element, thus transforming the thematically represented distance in Balzac's text into a grammatical structure: "However, the coach turned at the Madeleine [Church] and plunged into the boulevards. There it was filled with dancing flares, with reflexions from the shops and their illuminated windows" (Zola 158). In

Bellow's *Herzog* (1964), the neurotic Moses Herzog tries to resist the sensual bombardment. But the final claims sound more programmatic than factual ("But he'd...," "He had to..."), so the outcome remains undecided:

In the cab through hot streets where brick and brownstone buildings were crowded, Herzog held the strap and his large eyes were fixed on the sights of New York.... Somehow he felt himself part of it all — in the rooms, in the stores, cellars — and at the same time he sensed the danger of these multiple excitements. But he'd be allright. He was overstimulated. He had to calm down these overstrained galloping nerves. (Bellow 38)

VI. ARRIVALS AND DEPARTURES

The undecidedness of subject and place, the permanent feeling of being a transit passenger, associated with the moving vehicle is not solved even when related to more precise stations of the journey, like *arrival* to a city or to a particular neighborhood or the *departure* from it. In this context one may be a newcomer, one may be leaving for good, or one may be a commuter. Caroline, or Carrie, in Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* (1900) is definitely a newcomer. Upon her arrival in Chicago by train, the attraction — eventually proved to be fatal — she feels for her future lover Charlie Drouet and for the city of Chicago, stimulated by the train ride, emerge and grow simultaneously:

The train was just pulling out of Waukesha. For some time, she had been conscious of a man behind ... with natural intuition she felt a certain interest growing in that quarter. Her maidenly reserve ... called her to forestall and deny this familiarity, but the daring magnetism of the individual ... prevailed.... They were nearing Chicago. Signs were everywhere numerous. Trains flashed by them. Across wide stretches of flat, open prairie they could see lines of telegraph poles stalking across the fields towards the great city. Far away were indications of suburban towns, some big smoke-stacks towering high in the air.... Sister Carrie gazed out of the window. Her companion, affected by the wonder, so contagious are all things, felt anew some interest in the city and pointed out its marvels.... She did not hear thus very well. Her heart was troubled by a kind of terror. The fact that she was alone, away from home, rushing into a great sea of life and endeavor, began to tell. (Dreiser 2, 6-7)

When we turn our eyes from the singular arrival to the case of the commuter, the situation is different. In Alfred Döblin's *Berlin Alexanderplatz* (1928) one arrives onto the Rosenthaler Platz from its neighboring streets and leaves it again as part of a routine. Everything is described as if seen from the tram making its regular run. The viewpoint is not anchored within a particular individual; any passenger could have seen it in the manner it is described. Within the text the commuter's point of view becomes that of the reader. Therefore the grammatical subjects are most often things: houses, scattered words, vehicles,

nameless groups of people, etc. What we actually perceive are fragmented and loosely connected things. As far as the passer-by is concerned there is neither time nor need for synthesis. It is sufficient to register. A heap of things has identity only as a heap and not as a structure of stable individual elements. In Döblin, both the distance, mentioned when referring to Balzac, and the fragmentation, represented in Benjamin's work, are transformed into linguistic form. Only the network of streets and the trajectory of the tram constitute a fixed abstract urban structure inscribed onto an unstable material surface. There is not even room for the conscious limbo of Miss Lydia and Dick. These are the basic features embracing both the subject and the surroundings:

Rosenthaler Platz entertains itself.... *Invalidenstrasse* winds away to the left. Everything goes toward *Stettiner Bahnhof* where the trains from the Baltic Sea arrive: You are so sooty — yeah, here's dusty. — Hi, hello, good bye.... From the south *Rosenthalerstrasse* opens into the square. Over there Aschinger serves people with food and beer, concerts and bakery.... In *Elsässer Strasse* the entire roadway has narrowed itself down to a groove. (Döblin 41-42; Döblin's italics)

The disconnecting and desubjectifying force of the city is also shown when situations of intimacy are transformed into a catalogue of instances, as in the following farewell scene from Doctorow's *Ragtime* (1971). Similarly to the commuter's arrival, this scene of departure is rendered in paratactically combined sentences with no individual names to serve as grammatical subjects, only things such as the train, nouns for family positions (father, brother, etc.), social groups (office staff), social roles (porter, chief assistant, etc.), age groups (boy):

The next morning everyone rode down to the New Rochelle railroad station to see Father off. Some of the office staff was there, and Father's chief assistant made a short speech. There was a spattering of applause. The New York train arrived.... The little boy stared as the wiper with his oilcan checked the bass drive pistons. He felt a hand on his shoulder, turned, and his smiling Father took his hand and shook it. Grandfather had to be restrained from lifting bags.... Father shook the young man's hand. He had given him a raise and a more responsible position with the firm.... Mother beamed. She gently embraced her husband, who kissed her on the cheek. Standing on the rear platform of the last car, Father doffed his skimmer and waved good bye as the train went around the bend. (Doctorow 13)

To symbolically reduce the importance of intimacy and individuality in such a manner can prove fatal when confronted with an environment characterized by movement and vehicles. In *Berlin Alexanderplatz*, Franz Biberkopf's social and personal derailment reaches a decisive point when he is deceived and almost killed by the gang he has been drawn into. They are fleeing a car which had been chasing them when Franz is pushed out by Reinhold, the leader of the gang. Everything is still rendered by a paratactic structuring of sentences and events,

leaving no room for reflections or considerations, good or bad. What we have is merely a series of events:

Then Reinhold gave the man opposite to him a secret sign, in the car darkness and light alternated, there was a hunt going on. Secretly Reinhold has pushed his hand towards the doorhandle behind Franz. They rush into a broad street. Franz looks behind once more.... He tries to stand up, he slaps Reinhold in his face. But he is terribly strong. The wind blows into the car, snow flies in.... Then a stroke from a stick hits him sideways over the arm. The other in the car gives him a violent blow on the left hip.... Then a stroke hits him on the back of his head. Bent over him Reinholds throws the body into the street. The door slams. (Döblin 189)

The drama not only takes place in and around moving cars but is represented as if it were seen from a driving car with the reader as one of the passengers. The mapping of events and readers does not only occur within the syntactic structures, but Döblin, like many other writers, employs such narrative discursive devices as the interior monologue, a continuous syntactical flow, the stream of consciousness, and so on.

The following abbreviated scene from Hubert Selby's *Last Exit to Brooklyn* (1957) — a telling title in this context — evinces the use of some of these techniques. From the words "He tried..." up to the phrase "... across the street" it goes on for almost an entire page without a full stop, just like the acting and driving is a continuous movement without a stop.

Freddy ran to his car and the others jumped in and on the fenders or held on to open doors, and Freddy chased the doggies [three soldiers showing off] down the street.... the third panicked and tried to climb over the fence and Freddy tried to squash him against it with the car but the doggie pulled his legs up just before the car bumped the fence. The guys ... yanked him down and he fell on the edge of the hood and then to the ground. They formed a circle and kicked. He tried to roll over on his stomach and cover his face with his arms, but as he got to his side he was kicked in the groin and stomped on the ear and he screamed, cried, started pleading then just cried as a foot cracked his mouth, Ya fuckin cottonpickin punk, and a hard kick in the ribs turned him slightly and he tried to raise himself on one knee ... he fell on his side, his knees up, arms folded across his abdomen ... and their shoes thudded into the shiteatinbastards kidneys and ribs and his head rolled in the puke ... and Freddy kicked him in the temple and the yellowbastards eyes rolled back ... and someone yelled the cops and they jammed back into and on the car and Freddy started to turn but the prowl car stopped in front of them ... so Freddy stopped the car and the guys got out and off the car and slowly walked across the street. (32-33)

Linguistic structures such as those exemplified in Döblin and Selby make the boundary between observer and participant, writer and reader and other such oppositions a fuzzy one and obfuscate the clear profile of an individual subject against a distinct environment. Observing, writing, watching the city make you

a part of it whether you like it or not. The inevitability of involvement is most thoroughly felt when you want to avoid it as is the case with scenes of danger and violence.

Franz looses his arm but survives and another of Selby's characters is wounded. But Charley Anderson in John Dos Passos's *U.S.A.* is killed in a car with which he almost reaches some kind of identification as he speeds to catch up with a train so as to pass the tracks before the train gets to the crossing:

They were catching up on it, past the lighted observation car, past the sleepers with no light except through the groundglass windows of the dressingrooms at the ends of the cars. They were creeping up on the baggagecars and mailcars and the engine, very huge and tall and black with a littel curling shine from Charley's headlights in the dark.... "Hell, I can beat him to the crossin'." ... The bar was down at the crossing. They crashed through the bar.... The car swerved around on the tracks and stalled. He was jabbing at the starter with his foot. The crash wasn't anything.... He had to keep on talking [in the hospital]. He was too hoarse. His voice was a faint croak, he was so thirsty. They couldn't hear him. He had to make them hear him. He was too weak. (1979, 3: 377-78, 384)

Life and language are broken off at the same time both for Charley and for the reader. The last sentence peters out into the open blankness of the page. Above and beyond any recourse to sophisticated discursive devices, silence is the ultimate point of identification for both.

Within the urban world both subject and object, the reader and the character, the victim and the killer, the observer and the participant are interchangeable positions, part of the same catalogue of things and possibilities for subjective positionings. Death and silence stand as the only limit to this interchangeability which might therefore accrue a slight touch of mythology, reminding us of Benjamin, as is the case in John Dos Passos's *Century's Egg* (1975) where we, like Charley Anderson, are sucked down: "Immediately the traffic is sucked underground into the tranquil routine of the Lincoln tunnel, interminable as officework, tiled like the bathrooms advertised by roadside motels.... The evenmeasured light faded into harsh sunlight. Cops. New York" (1975, 18). In this instance, an implicit or anonymous subject, an Everyman, is absorbed by the world — sucked underground like into a grave, reborn to the realm of light on the other side of the tunnel. What we have is the myth of death and resurrection with the New York cops serving as midwives. Through the universalizing discourse we return to a place, a city, to New York, so that it can eventually become *our* place. Through the power of language literature can reconstruct the urban lifeworld and thus unify its conflicting mental and material, universal and local features and enable us to envision it as a possible place for a modern mythology and a place where one would be able to dwell.

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GEOFFREY W. GUEVARA-GEER

Lazarillo de Tormes and the Little Tramp of *Modern Times*: Two Modern *Pícaros* Find Their Way

"[N]o social role in modern times
can be a perfect fit" (Berman 22-23).

As feudalism slowly gave way in sixteenth-century Spain, a new kind of character wandered, stunned but alert, toward modernity — the *pícaro* was born. Left to fend for himself by a social order with no place for him, Lazarillo de Tormes, the first evolved *pícaro*,¹ began to improvise and survive by taking advantage of the vestiges of stability which constrained him. Later *pícaros* also survived by propping themselves up on falling social edifices and duping those who are dazzled by the shiftiness of modern times. They have continued to adapt to the escalating pace of frenzied change. This adaptability has kept the *pícaro* alive and well enough to stumble all the way from the river Tormes to Charlie Chaplin's misfit tuxedo. In this four-century stumble, the *pícaro* has wandered the borders of modernity. His path is the eroded trail of absolutes and accelerated time which brings us from feudalism to the doors of postmodernity. By observing the survival strategies of the *pícaro*, we can see the loopholes of modernity's many hegemonies from its margins. The *pícaro* offers a lesson in liberty from the school of hard knocks.

In the pages that follow, I will show how Lazarillo and the Little Tramp, though separated by centuries and continents, share the time and space of modernity. Inevitably, this will begin with a discussion of modernity itself. Of interest here is how the tradition of modern representation has changed since its early Renaissance manifestation in *Lazarillo*, to its later, more recent incarnation in *Modern Times*. The times and trials of modernity, we will see, are reflected in the picaresque character, a character born with the genesis of modernity. Careful attention will be paid to how these two characters each survive their

1 The standard English translations of the *pícaro* as a rascal or rogue seem inadequate here. By using the Spanish word *pícaro*, I hope to call attention to this character's birth in Renaissance Spain as a literary birth of early modernity.