Urban Signs and Urban Literature: Literary Form and Historical Process

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We now have a number of important books that connect the evolution of the city with historical events: Lewis Mumford’s *The City in History* and his *Culture of the Cities*, Leonardo Benevolo’s *The History of the City*, and Wolf Schneider’s *Babylon is Everywhere: The City as Man’s Fate* are perhaps the best of those which come to mind.¹ We also have a number of books that connect the city and the literary text: Max Byrd’s *London Transformed: Image of the City in the Eighteenth Century*, F. S. Schwarzbach’s *Dickens and the City*, Alexander Welsh’s *The City of Dickens*, Donald Fanger’s *Dostoevsky and Romantic Realism*, and Burton Pike’s *The Image of the City in Modern Literature*,² just to name a few.

This paper attempts to bring all of these divergent matters together in a way that not only relates urban texts to literary texts but also suggests that these texts are as much influenced by historical change as is the city itself. My assumption is that the literary text codifies ideas and attitudes about the city and that as the city itself changes under historical influence, so do these codes, exhausting traditional modes as they call for new meaning, often by parodying the emptiness of the older forms.

For purposes of this paper, I have divided the evolution of the modern city into three phases: the commercial, the industrial, and the world city—traditional categories, except for perhaps the third, which Daniel Bell refers to as the post-industrial city and David M. Gordon³ as the corporate city. In what follows I shall argue that we have already gone beyond those terms just as emphatically as post-modern literature has gone beyond the modern.

One can argue that the modern commercial city came into being at 2:00 A.M. on Sunday, September 2, 1666, when a fire started in London’s Pudding Lane and burned for five days, by the end of which the London of Chaucer and Shakespeare was no more. Christopher Wren designed a new London while the fire was still raging, a plan that would have made the Royal Exchange the center of the city with magnificent boulevards radiating away from it. While Charles II
liked the plan, he found it impossible to implement because the real estate rights were prohibitive. Although Wren’s plan failed, it tells us a great deal about a shift in ideology: the old idea of the spiritual city, founded as a sacred burial place with the sanctuary in the center, had given way to the commercial city organized around the East India House, the Bank of England, the Royal Stock Exchange, and other trading firms and counting houses. It was this new commercial London that gave rise to a new breed of men who became wealthy from trade and other investments, men who made money by handling money, men like Thomas Gresham, the founder of the Royal Exchange, and the banker Josiah Child, as well as others like James Bateman, John Fryer, Peter Delme, Thomas Harley, Hugh Awdlely, Nicholas Barbon, Theodore Hannsen, Jacob Jacobson, and Peter Fabrot.

In *The Complete English Tradesman* (1726), Daniel Defoe said of this new class, “our merchants are princes, greater and richer, and more powerful than some sovereign princes,” and he contrasted the “immense wealth” of this new commercial class with the declining fortunes of the landed aristocracy. It was this new class which in great part was responsible for the magnificent new townhouses that dominated such squares as Leicester, Bloomsbury, Soho, Red Lion, and St. James, built by such families as the Befords, Harleys, Portlands, Portmans, and Grosvenors. These houses were to the city what the estate was to the country. This was also the London of the new coffeehouses which, among other matters, served as clearinghouses for commercial business, as Lloyds was a clearinghouse for mercantile insurance. Each coffeehouse encouraged a different clientele, but those which served the new commercial investor also supplied commercial information (regarding the arrival and departure of ships, stock listings, and so forth) and thus were in effect the first newspapers. More formal newspapers came into being soon after and were the voice of the city. This was the London that by 1700 had a population of 575,000; by 1750, 675,000; and by 1800, 900,000, or over ten percent of the combined population of England and Wales. Soon after the turn of the century, London became the first city in the Western world to have a population of over one million.

The literary mind that best understood how this city worked was Daniel Defoe’s. A novel like *Robinson Crusoe* recapitulates the historical process: we move in the novel from isolation to community, from individual authority to government by consent, and from a wilderness to a primitive agrarian realm, to the beginnings of a commercial order. We move, that is, beyond the dictates of survival to a form of feudalism (where goods in a hierarchical society are produced for use
and not for sale), and then to the beginnings of commercialism. A spiritual agency demands that Crusoe be aware of signs from above—and the storm, earthquake, and his own illness take on special religious significance for him. But equally important, Crusoe becomes an expert observer of the physical world and develops a finely trained empirical eye. By observing how nature works, he learns when he can best plant his corn and when it is safest to risk the tides in order to fish and travel the ocean. Such an understanding of nature allows a certain amount of control over it, from which he eventually moves to a control over the animals and later the humans who come to the island. Although Crusoe will leave the island briefly for a return to England, he returns to the island to divide up the land, allowing some to be taken as community property, but reserving to “my self the Property of the whole,” with the right to sell it. Robinson Crusoe is the father of us all—the first of the modern men. And while this novel seems to have little or no connection to the city, it is, I believe, one of our most important urban novels because it explains the cultural and historical process by which the commercial (that is, the modern) city came into being.

If Robinson Crusoe anticipates the coming of London, the work that analyzes that London in detail is Defoe’s A Tour Through the Whole Island of Great Britain in which he gives one whole section of this book to a description of London itself. This is the famous “Letter V,” which appears in a two-volume collection of thirteen “letters” describing Great Britain. For Defoe, this discussion of London comes in the center of his book, because London itself is the center of this world, everything emanating from and controlled by its institutions. Defoe’s emphasis is upon commercial London as a marketplace and a trade center for the world. He estimates the size of London as seven and a half miles east to west, and five and three-quarter miles north to south, or slightly over forty-three square miles. Within this area he computes there to be 5,099 streets, lanes, and squares, encompassing 95,968 houses. And he estimates the population at 651,580. He describes at some length London moving beyond itself, incorporating the surrounding villages of Deptford, Islington, Miles End, Newington-buts, and Southwark, which in turn had incorporated Newington, Lambeth, and Borough. Defoe argues that the power had been transferred from the Court to the City, from a feudal to an urban realm. The Court now envied the City’s wealth, the City had outlived the attacks upon it by the Court, and the Court had to recognize that the City was “necessary” to its very being—both as a source of money and a source of defense. Defoe also saw in his Tour that a large urban population made a division of labor necessary, turning
the population into wage earners. The ability to earn good wages in
turn advanced the commercial base of the society. More than any
other document, Defoe's *Tour* showed how London had transformed
not only its immediate environs but all of Great Britain, moving the
population away from the land and away from the remains of a
feudal society toward a commercial society which turned on money.
Defoe was the first to see what has now become an axiom: that in a
premarket society, money follows power, but that in a market society,
power follows money.

But the prosperity that Defoe depicts in the city was not equally
shared by those who stayed on the land. Some of the landed families
—such as the Dukes of Leeds, Devonshire, Marlborough, and the
Earls of Pembroke, Bradford, and Portland—maintained their
wealth by investing in the new commerce or, like the Russells, in the
new joint-stock companies. Others maintained their positions by
marrying into the new money as did the Duke of Bedford when he
married his grandson to the granddaughter of Sir John Spencer, a
London merchant, or Lord Acton of Shropshire, who married the
daughter of a goldsmith from Leadenhall Street. But despite these
examples, a kind of class revolution was taking place with the center
of wealth shifting away from the landed class and toward a new,
urban commercial class which was a monied rather than a landed
aristocracy. Only 200 of today's peerage were created before 1800.
By 1802 only seventeen of James I's creations survived in the male
line.

The import of this is that many country estates were taken over by
such families of new wealth as the Clives, the Pitts, and the Gros-
venors; and a number of old estates went into decline as the source of
wealth shifted from the land to the city. This situation became even
worse under the influence of the enclosure movement which, be-
 tween 1760 and 1845, affected an area of more than five million
acres of common fields and forced the last of the tenant and yeoman
farmers off the land and into a surplus of farm labor, sending many
to the cities. The enclosure movement brought new land under
tillage and increased the needed food supply, but it was also a land
grab influenced by commercial speculation and protected by a new
legal and political system.

Almost every novel written near the last half of the eighteenth cen-
tury touches on at least one of these matters. Richardson's *Clarissa*
(1747–48) is most revealing, since the Harlowes are members of the
new commercial class intent on marrying Clarissa into another prop-
ertyed family so that they can increase their holdings and better
make claim to the aristocracy. Almost all of the narrative events in
The narrative patterns in these and other gothic novels are very similar. The story is set in the past—in a feudal castle or a landed estate that has been touched by the hand of death and is caught in the process of decay. The connection between the past and the present has been disrupted by a fraudulent claim upon the state, or the estate has come by new owners—often rich merchants or members of the new city’s commercial class, or the estate has been intruded upon by the new city types such as the libertine whose hardened heart and jaded virtues are the by-product of his city ways. The end result is that the world of the old father has been disrupted by the ways of the new, and a kind of curse has been put on the land, which disrupts the natural processes in a mysterious, sometimes in a supernatural way.

The symbiosis between the city and countryside was breaking down. When the historical signs of this breakdown were translated into literary codes, what we got was the gothic novel. And if the relationship between the city and the countryside was unsettled, what was going on beneath the surface of the city was equally unsettled and unsettling. The city was subverting itself from within. In a commer-
cial system, everything comes back to what is for sale; in the case of Moll Flanders and Roxana, this becomes their bodies. Those who cannot fit into the commercial system become homeless, like Colonel Jack and Moll Flanders, and often take to crime or piracy, as in the case of Captain Singleton. The city tries to impose a grid upon nature, to harness its energies and turn a profit; but beneath the grid is an underground, a city within a city, one undermining the other. London as a system is quick to discard what it cannot use. As a result, we get a sense of human detritus as an unfortunate by-product of the city. Such outcasts usually end in the New World: in the American colonies, as is the case with Moll Flanders and Colonel Jack; or in Africa, Brazil, and the South Seas, as with Captain Singleton; or on the Continent, as with Roxana. Thus Defoe’s London leads to the world, usually the underdeveloped world, from which it brings in raw material, precious metals, and slave labor for its colonies, and to which it exports its commercial goods and social outcasts.

This paradigm will be repeated over and over, with changes of emphasis only, even as the urban structure is transformed from a commercial to an industrial, to the world city. What we begin to see is that a by-product of the city is waste—or more specifically junk. Krook’s junk shop in Dickens’s Bleak House and Boffins’s Bower and Mr. Venus’s taxidermy shop in Our Mutual Friend testify to how junk is the end product of a commercial society. The city can only function if things wear out and are used up—and this is true for humans as well, as Little Nell, Jo the streetsweep, and Little Dorrit all testify. If Dickens tends to concentrate upon the dereliction of children, orphans, and helpless women, it is because his appeal is to the heart—that is, to sentiment or the power to do good in the face of evil. Evil in Dickens’s world is always substantial and lurks beneath the surface of the city. It is often inseparable from the men who embody the institutions of the commercial city—men like Tulkinghorn or Jaggers, the lawyers who control those around them by controlling information, men who know how institutions work or men who have fathomed secrets that lie buried in the heart.

In The Journal of the Plague Year, Defoe brought a commercial observer into the infected city to read and to interpret the urban signs—the famous H. F. whose final conclusion is that the plague comes from natural and not divine sources and is thus not an indictment of the commercial process. As we move from Pepys to Addison’s spectator, the text uses an observer of the city who becomes more distant in the way he observes. In Wuthering Heights, in the character of Lockwood, Brontë will bring this spectator into the gothic countryside where he will misread the signs of the changing landscape. In his
book on Baudelaire, Walter Benjamin discusses this literary figure in detail, refers to him as the *flaneur*, and sees him as the new reader of urban signs. “To him the shiny, enamelled signs of business are at least as good a wall ornament as an oil painting is to a bourgeois in his salon. The walls are the desk against which he presses his notebooks; news-stands are his libraries and the terraces of cafes are the balconies from which he looks down on his household after his work is done.”

In Dickens, this figure becomes the detective who from Nadgitt in *Martin Chuzzlewit* to Inspector Bucket in *Bleak House* cuts through the anonymity of the city, unlocks the secrets that hold many of the characters in bondage, and helps the summer sun to burn away the winter fog. And as in the case of Esther Summerson in *Bleak House*, the mystery often unfolds at the grave, as when Inspector Bucket traces Esther’s mother to the grave of Nemo and unlocks her from the past by revealing her parentage. The first cities—Ur and Uruk—were founded as a place where wandering tribes could return to worship the dead, and the idea of the city has never been separated from the reality of death. But by the time we get to Dickens, as both F. S. Schwarzbach and Alexander Welsh have shown, the fate of the living is inseparable from the fate of the dead. As Schwarzbach points out, both *Oliver Twist* and *Nicholas Nickleby* end in the graveyard of Agnes and Smike, and “the dead are what link the living to a vision of their childhood memories which prefigure the joys of paradise,” joys that Alexander Welsh finds ministered to by Dickens’s feminine angels. Dickens’s city seems to mediate between the living and the dead. In its worst embodiment it is brokered by the money-counters like Ralph Nickleby and Quilp in *The Old Curiosity Shop*, John Chester in *Barnaby Rudge*, and Jonas Chuzzlewit, or its functionaries like Bumble in *Oliver Twist* and Pecksniff in *Martin Chuzzlewit*. In its redemptive possibilities, it is represented by Pickwick, Mr. Brownlow, the Cheeryble brothers, Esther Summerson, Sydney Carton, Pip and Lizzie Hexam—many of whom must pass through a near terminal illness before they can function effectively in the city of the living. The city also seems to mediate between nature and civilization. Over and over, Dickens describes the city extending to a kind of middle ground between the city and the countryside—a strange, eerie, primitive realm, often a world of marshes, of water and mud with often a house sinking into the mud, or a sluice gate, or a mill. Where water and land meet, where the country and the city intersect, or where the present and past verge, we have narrative flash points in Dickens’s fiction. This becomes a kind of modern hell which many of Dickens’s characters enter before they enter the city itself. Out of this world
comes a primitive evil, slink various human outcasts who are almost mutant forms of humanity. In *Oliver Twist*, Bill Sikes emerges from and goes to his death in such a region, as does Quilp in *The Old Curiosity Shop*, and Bradley Headstone in *Our Mutual Friend*. In *Great Expectations*, Orlick slithers from such a realm with a primitive evil clinging to him. Such a realm is always on the verge of reclaiming the city, a realm into which the city is seemingly about to sink. The image—and it is an obsessive one with Dickens—seems to suggest the tenuousness of the city. Defoe was confident that modern man could impose his will upon nature, create structures of authority like the city that would minister to the wealth that it created. Dickens seems less confident of this prospect, showing us that what is outside the city—first in what it inhumanely discards, and second in what is subterranean in its nature—has the capacity to reclaim the prideful city and its monuments to self.

The most graphic illustration of this pattern is in Hugo’s *Les Misérables*, where we have a dramatic contrast between Jean Valjean, the urban outcast, and Javert, the police inspector, who embodies social authority. In the original city, the fort stood to protect the inhabitants from threats from without. In the Victorian city, the fort has given way to the prison, protecting the inhabitants from what is within the city. Javert interestingly was born in prison and is using his life to repudiate all that falls outside of urban order and control. This explains his hatred for Jean Valjean, who has been sent to prison for stealing a loaf of bread and whose sympathies are with the poor and the outcast. The famous descent into the Paris sewers is a descent into an urban hell, using the typologies of Dante, a descent that is into the land of the dead, even to the extent that Valjean crosses a River Styx and is released from this hell by a gatekeeper of the dead, Thenardier. As with Dickens, Hugo’s characters seem to have to pass through the land of the dead before they can be redeemed in the new commercial city—a theme that will become pervasive in modern literature as one can illustrate from such works as Pound’s *Cantos*, Joyce’s *Ulysses* (especially the Hades and Circe episodes), and Eliot’s *The Waste Land* with its journey to the cemetery at the Chapel Perilous. Other texts like Balzac’s *Père Goriot*, in which Rastignac commits himself to the city from the graves of Père Lachaise cemetery, and *The Great Gatsby* and *Sister Carrie*, only multiply examples. Those who have passed through the city and into death seem to know the mysteries that unlock the city’s doors and to make the passage through it possible. They tell us how fragile we are, how illusory the city’s monuments, and how distorting the commercial process can be. The nineteenth-century novel often begins with the young man leaving the
provinces to seek a higher and essential self in the city and closes with such a young man trying to be reunited with the family that he left behind. Such is the story of *Great Expectations*, *The Red and the Black*, and *Lost Illusions*. The more the city seemed to move beyond the human scale, the more technology changed the dimensions in the way man functioned, the more the literary imagination took solace in remnant forms of humanity—the city of the dead and the family that was left behind.

Not only was the city becoming an illusion, but the processes that took place in the city were equally illusory. Defoe believed that commercial value came into being through work; Dickens showed how it came into being through manipulation and speculation. Money began to make money. By the time we get to a novel like Gogol's *Dead Souls*, there is no connection between value and the commercial process. Chichikov goes into the countryside to buy up dead souls (that is, the titles on dead peasants) which he then mortgages at the bank, turning the city of the dead into a commodity. The commercial system promoted schemes that exploited the system itself rather than encouraged useful production. In Gogol’s “The Overcoat” and “The Nose,” he shows how this process, carried to extremes, anticipates the world of Kafka. As the city becomes less friendly and more hostile, the inhabitants become more alienated, the landscape more grotesque, and the process itself more absurd. H. G. Wells carried this idea even further in *Tono-Bungay* where the patent medicine that makes Uncle Ponderevo wealthy is only slightly injurious to the health of those who use it and where schemes, like the search for quap, move the commercial process into a stage of imperialism (the invasion of the wilderness, the killing of the natives, and the exploitation of natural resources). Conrad would take the imperial city as his subject and show how the demands at the extremeties can eat away the heart of the imperial city, leaving even greater waste—the waste of natural resources, of human dignity, and of the urban system itself. T. S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* finds its being right here, in the contrast between the commercial city and the mythic imagination with its cyclical sense of history that allows memory to voice from the city of the dead warnings to the city of the living, as Eliot’s Tiresias comes from the underworld to foretell it all in the commercial center of London.

If we see the beginnings of the commercial city in the works of Defoe, we see its endings in the works of Dickens, who carries us into the industrial city in a novel like *Hard Times* with its depiction of Coketown. Dickens had anticipated the industrial city in novels like
Dombey and Son when he described the railroad transforming the urban landscape. Perhaps the most important element in the rise of the industrial city was the invention of the steam engine in 1769 which freed the factory from rural water power and moved it into the city, bringing the workers with it, and creating the terrible slums that took hold in all the major industrial cities of the Western world. Burgess and Park of the University of Chicago best described the way the industrial city evolved, passing through a series of concentric circles. “The first ring from the central business district is a zone of transition, of warehouses and the residences of the poor. Then comes a ring of the more solid working class; then the white-collar professions, with the richest pushing outward to escape the intrusion of the other groups as the city grows.”

The most fulsome depiction of the industrial city is not in the sentimental novels of Dickens but in the naturalistic novels of Zola—novels like L’Assomoir and Nana, which take us to the proletarian depths of the city and to its comfortable heights, the salons corrupted by the money that comes from this social imbalance, from the surplus profit and exploitation of the workers, to put it into the Marxist terms that serve as a subtext for these novels. Zola’s world is one of limits; if one is to have great wealth, then there must be poverty. Zola describes the political shifts of the peasants in the countryside as they jockey for profit in the Second Empire. But the physical center of his Rougon-Macquart novels is Paris. While Germinal and La Débâcle are not city novels, they show how the city controls what goes on in the coal mines of the north or in the intrigue that leads to war. No one can escape the reach of Paris as Zola dramatically shows in L’Argent. The biological processes of life and death have been transformed in the modern world, moved from the realm of nature to the realm of the city. In Le Ventre de Paris (1873) and Au bonheur des dames (1883), he describes two kinds of marketplaces: the Halles Centrales which supplies food, and the modern department store which supplies material goods—which show the new industrial city organizing the means to satisfy biological needs. The industrial city was a power structure that organized the way goods came into being, were distributed, and finally consumed. When raw materials or markets became scarce, the city reached beyond itself and created empires in England, France, Belgium, and Germany—a process that would eventually play itself out in two global wars in 1914 and 1939. As Jacques Ellul has shown, as these societies became more technologically sufficient, they also found the means of controlling the masses, the information that reached the masses, and the liberties that were allowed them. The industrial city takes us to the doorsteps of the totali-
tarian city. Nathanael West showed in *The Day of the Locust* (1939) how an unsatisfied, restless, disorganized mass could easily explode into an anarchic protest at the same time that it harbored the potential to be reorganized by a super ruler as was happening in Hitler’s Germany.

The city crowd became the subject of new concern. Books like Gustave LeBon’s *The Crowd* (1896) had great influence. As LeBon would show, civilization, which had always been directed by a small aristocracy, suddenly had to come to terms with crowds which had the potential to effect the “final dissolution” of modern civilization. George Orwell in *1984* (1949), Jack London in *The Iron Heel* (1908), H. G. Wells in *When the Sleeper Wakes* (1899), E. M. Forster in *When the Machine Stops*, all saw that a mass was only one step away from a master, and that the needs of a technological society, with its emphasis upon efficiency and control, played into the hands of totalitarian movements, as Zamyantan had shown in *We* (1924).

In his book on Baudelaire, Walter Benjamin describes Baudelaire’s fascination with the crowd, because the crowd embodied an energy that released the imagination. There is a mystery in the crowd, a sense of new possibilities, of new experience—a new lover, as Baudelaire suggests in “To a Passer-by”: “Somewhere, far off! too late! never, perchance! . . . We might have loved, and you knew this might be!” (45). Benjamin’s suggestion explains the sense of discontent the city inculcates because it offers so many possibilities that one feels something is being missed even in the act of experiencing; the city thus becomes inseparable from feelings of restlessness, dissatisfaction, and aimless desire. As West showed in *The Day of the Locust*, such potential can be frightening, at which point it overwhelsms our sense of identity, our desire for stability, and when not controlled can lead to frenzy or to the kind of neurasthenia that Eliot describes in *The Waste Land*. When the sense of experience latent in the crowd becomes threatening, when we have no real physical object for our fear, it can lead to the kind of paranoia that Pynchon describes in *The Crying of Lot 49*. The crowd can embody the city and ways of responding to the city, which is why the artist, from Poe to Baudelaire, often escaped into the crowd. As Benjamin has told us, “To Poe the flaneur was, above all, someone who does not feel comfortable in his own company. . . . ‘He is the man of the crowd’ ” (48). Baudelaire is the man in the crowd. He hated Brussels because there were no shop windows. “Baudelaire loved solitude, but he wanted it in a crowd” (50).

It is Baudelaire who takes us into the ways modernism (the literary movement) rejected the industrial city by establishing an elaborate aestheticism that never let it shine through. Joyce does exactly this in
A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man when Stephen Dedalus creates an aesthetic or artistic equivalent for all that he sees in Dublin: “His morning walk across the city had begun; and he foreknew that as he passed the sloblands of Fairview he would think of the cloisteral silver-veined prose of Newman; that as he walked along the North Strand Road, glancing idly at the windows of the provision shops, he would recall the dark humour of Guido Cavalcanti . . .; that as he went by Baird’s stone cutting works in Talbot Place the spirit of Ibsen would blow through him like a keen wind.” At some point in his career, Joyce also learned that he could transform literary naturalism and the city that emerged from it by superimposing a symbolic or mythic plane of reference upon it, thus establishing a contrast between the diminished city of the modern and the heroic city of the past, a contrast that reinforced his Viconian belief in the cyclical decline of modern man. And what Joyce did in Ulysses, Eliot would also do in The Waste Land.

When such ways of observing the city were challenged, we moved from the modern to the postmodern. In Mythologies (1957), Roland Barthes tells us that he distrusts myth for, unlike language, myth does not generate its own meaning; history supplies the meaning which is embedded in myth. The message of myth is taken as natural and true rather than as signs and mental processes by which man endows his world with meaning. In his The Empire of Signs (1983), Barthes applies this idea to a reading of a modern city. Tokyo, he tells us, has no center out of which the rest of the city radiates, as with cities of medieval origin in the Western world. Like Jacques Derrida, Barthes sees everything as writing, including the city on which there are written planes of inscription. As in the literary text, the city becomes a galaxy of signifiers, not a structure of signifieds: “the codes it mobilizes extend as far as the eye can reach, they are indeterminable.”

If the city of Defoe suggests the grid, and the city of Hugo the underground, the postmodern city suggests the labyrinth where experience is cut off from memory and memory from signification in a landscape of paranoia that defies repetition and fixity. In a recent essay, Fredric Jameson has tried to develop this idea with a detailed description of the Bonaventure Hotel in downtown Los Angeles, a hotel that fills space without ordering it. Jameson sees an equivalence between this hotel and multinational capitalism, which no longer has a center. American money is invested in Europe and Japan, European and Japanese money is invested in America, and the multina-
tional corporations that control this money invest it throughout the world. In Defoe's commercial city, Englishmen invested English money in English commercial adventures that may have sent ships around the world, but always in the name of England. In Zola's industrial city, Paris becomes the center of the Second Empire, just as London is the center of the British empire for Conrad, the center often weakened by its outreach to the extremes, but the center as something knowable and defined.

In postmodernism, the commercial and the industrial city have given way to the world city, and once again the way the city encodes its messages has been transformed. The literary embodiment of this new city is a work like Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966), the story of Oedipa Maas, the woman trying to come to terms with the world of the father in the maze. In trying to resolve the legacy of Pierce Inverarity, she journeys through Barthes's city without a center, which in Pynchon's novel is Los Angeles, renamed San Narciso since it gives back, like an echo, what is brought to it. All the themes that we saw in Defoe, Dickens, and Zola—the waste, miscommunication, secrets that hold the city together, the dead that beckon from their graves—all seem to leave signs that point toward a secret organization named the Trystero. But like an echo, Oedipa is not sure that the Trystero really exists or is just the rebound of the paranoid suspicions that she has brought to the city. She believes the Trystero had its origins in the seventeenth century—that is, with the rise of Puritanism and the commercial city—and that it moved across Europe, and then an ocean, and then a continent before it arrived in Los Angeles. The Trystero lives off the waste the system leaves behind, lives off entropy—mechanical, communicative, and human entropy—turning commodities into physical waste, communication into noise and then silence, and human resources into death. Such seems the legacy of the city, of Pierce Inverarity's order and control. But like Barthes's reading of the text, Oedipa's reading of the city finds only plural meanings; the networks are many and interact, without any of them being able to surpass the rest. What she ends up with is all signifiers and no signified.¹³ Pynchon's *Lot 49* is only one of a number of postmodern novels that have ideologically redefined the city; Gaddis's *The Recognitions* (1955), DeLillo's *White Noise* (1985), and Pynchon's own *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973) are others that come to mind; and more examples are available in science fiction, especially novels like Samuel Delaney's *The Einstein Intersection* (1967).

As the function of the city changes, its very nature changes, and those changes alter our ideologies that are encoded in cultural signs,
including our literary texts. Walter Benjamin has told us as much: "Every epoch not only dreams the next, but while dreaming impels it toward wakefulness. It hears its end within itself, and reveals it . . . by ruse. With the upheaval of the market economy, we begin to recognize the monuments of the bourgeoisie as ruins even before they have crumbled" (176).

The commercial, industrial, and world cities cannot be divorced from the systemic processes that brought them into being—and neither can they be divorced from the ideological processes that they in turn bring into being. For as Roland Barthes has told us, such processes are the means by which man endows his world with meaning. If such is the case, then the consequences for literary criticism are greater than we seem to be aware, because it means that the better we read the city, the better we are reading the literary text.

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NOTES


7 Schwarzbach, p. 61.

8 As summarized by Tabb and Sawers in Marxism and the Metropolis, p. 10. For a more
direct understanding of Park’s views, see Robert Ezra Park, Human Communities: The City and Human Ecology (Glencoe, Ill., 1952), esp. pp. 13–51 and 118–41.


10 James Joyce, A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man (New York, 1944), p. 204.


13 The vertigo that Barthes and Oedipa Maas experience, of course, takes on special meaning in the era after Nietzsche, Heidegger, and William James and American pragmatism where an ideal or essential reality is challenged and cut off by the “bracketing” of consciousness or by defining all metaphysical/epistemological problems as semantic and linguistic matters. But Pynchon is not working with figural or other linguistic theories of dispersal in Lot 49. The more immediate influence here is a book like Norbert Wiener’s The Human Use of Human Beings (Boston, 1950) which deals with information theory. Within every system of organization, Wiener tells us, is a process of disorganization (of entropy). As my essay has tried to show, Defoe, Dickens, Zola, and Joyce, in their different ways, saw the way the city, as a social system, disrupted itself from within. This was not a purely linguistic matter for any of these writers—not even Joyce. And it is not a purely linguistic matter for Pynchon who embodies such disruption in the historical process he identifies with the Trystero. This is why in such readings I think it important to see such disruptions on a historical/cultural/ideological level—and not simply and inclusively in terms of a theory of nonreferential language (for which there is no known proof and which privileges this argument in a way that its proponents attack other arguments for being privileged).