

Introduction: 'Travelling the Urban Space'

(Franziska Meyer & Vanna Motta)

In recent years literary critics have paid as much attention to the City as to travelling. By bringing together these two themes, this volume seeks to avoid the restrictions of both historicity and spatiality. For this reason, the papers of the seminar series 1998-99 cover a variety of urban spaces, travelled at different times. The cities visited range from New York to Rome, from London to Berlin, from Paris to Montreal and Salt Lake City. The times of travelling span the late nineteenth century to the 1920s and 1930s and the immediate post-war years to the 1970s. The papers highlight diversity by taking their examples from literature in English, French, German and Italian. At the same time, they share a concern with the historical construction of space – whether analysing fascist or decadent, naturalist or realist, modernist or feminist texts.

Charles Burdett's paper analyses some of the numerous texts written during the Fascist period on the United States by authors such as Ciarlantini, Mario Soldati, Margherita Sarfatti and Emilio Cecchi and demonstrates the different connections such texts have with the politics of the time.

Perspectives of the United States changed over the critical period between 1930-1936, in same ways reflecting the trajectory of Italian foreign policy. Burdett argues that whilst at the beginning of the 1930s we can talk of a fascination with the United States, an admiration for American material progress and technical innovation, by 1936, the year of the signing of the Rome-Berlin axis, the United States is seen by some Italian writers as the antithesis of the collective values of Fascism. Depending on whether the authors appropriate or reject Fascist discourse, in the texts examined the United States becomes either the 'utopian object of desire' for the young writers opposing Fascism or the antithesis of Fascist values for those who support the regime.

The paper stresses how the perception of the United States can be extremely ambiguous and contradictory, for instance, M. Sarfatti, in spite of being one of the best known authors during the 1930s, and a supporter of the regime, is nevertheless taken by American optimism, the enormity of the architecture of the States and also, in particular, by the energy, strength and discipline of American women. But her discourse centers on the similarities and parallels she sees between Northern American and Italian culture, where Italy, or rather 'the Graeco-Roman ideal', is presented as the basis of American culture. Burdett asserts that her recognition of a shared civilisation between Italy and the United States serves an important function in the text: on the one side it legitimises the United States as an imperial power because of its undoubted technical superiority, and on the other, given Italy's lasting cultural influence on the whole of Western civilisation, it also promotes Italy's aspirations to colonial expansion.

Views closer to official Fascist thinking were expressed by E. Cecchi. His observations were published as newspaper articles over a period of two years and later col-

lected into a volume, *America amara* (Bitter America). In the second part of this paper Burdett shows how Cecchi's description of the 'inevitable effects' of racial differences is closely linked to the Fascist idea of the superiority of a society which is racially homogenous. Cecchi presents the reader with an overall negative vision of the United States, a country that, according to him, in rejecting the 'puritanical' principles of the founding fathers, has become chaotic, violent, and has degenerated to such an extent that it no longer possesses any ideals or any values. In Cecchi, the landscape of New York's skyscrapers becomes a metaphor for the pride and the 'godless religion' of the whole of the United States, and, on a representational level, even American fiction is seen by the writer simply as a catalogue of 'sinister emotions and impulses'.

Burdett concludes his paper by emphasising how Cecchi's negative discourse on the American lack of collective ideals becomes an apologia for Mussolini's 'moral revolution'. The Fascist regime is presented as the antithesis of the individualistic and materialistic culture of the United States, acting as guarantor not only of the country's institutions but also of the Catholic religion and the traditional values of Latin civilisation.

Fabio Vighi's paper examines Pasolini's extensive use of toponyms taking into consideration not only the author's early poetry in dialects but also his letters and articles. Vighi traces the theoretical link between the poetry written in the region of Friuli and Pasolini's literary production in Rome. The paper's argument is that the different topoi in Pasolini's texts acquire a strong ideological significance on the one hand as conventional signs with specific and clear topographical connotations and on the other as *adorati toponimi* (adored toponyms) aspiring to become the very object they name.

In this light, Vighi argues, Pasolini's toponyms embody the search for a privileged utopian space where the reconciliation between nature and culture is possible. The paper shows how Casarsa, the village of Pasolini's mother, is accorded by the writer a mythological aura, whilst the whole of Friuli provides him with a romantic, dream-like subject matter evoked by the use of toponyms. Vighi asserts that Pasolini's interest in toponymy gives him the possibility of recognising an almost mythical link existing between the physiognomy of the inhabitants of Friulan villages and the villages themselves. Thus, these villages are raised in Pasolini's early poetry to the status of animated beings, capable of giving life. But Vighi argues that the author's love for villages and rural communities underpins a critique of modern society which can be seen in Pasolini's dislike of cities, or at least, in his unease with Friulan urban spaces.

Vighi argues against the traditionally held view that Pasolini's move to Rome caused a break with Communist ideology. The paper asserts instead that Rome enabled him to develop the theoretical potential of his Friulan poetics, since it was here that his critique of modern society took on a more socially oriented stance. In Rome it is the *borgate*, the slums in the Northern part of the capital, that provide a link between the country and the city, and elicit the use of toponyms, and here too the toponyms

go beyond their topographical value to achieve an exclusively utopian quality. The paper concludes by emphasising how it was at this point that Pasolini, moving away from orthodox Marxism and Gramscian philosophy, called for a revision of left-wing thought which would include a category of irrationality, a concept that Vighi makes very clear Pasolini could never positively define in his work and that proved to be especially problematic at a time when the Italian Communist Party had a very inflexible approach to socio-political and aesthetic problems.

Fiona Littlejohn's paper undertakes a comparative reading of two city novels set in London and Berlin in times of economic depression in the late 1920s. In both novels, Gabriele Tergit's *Käsebeer erobert den Kurfürstendamm* (Cheesebeer Conquers the Kurfürstendamm) and J.B. Priestley's *Angel Pavement*, female and male characters respond differently to a changing urban environment: the paper shows striking similarities in the perception of the city under the aspect of gender and generation.

In both texts women's experiences of the living city contrast starkly with men's views of a lifeless city. While the two middle-aged male characters perceive the effects of modernisation as an alienating threat to traditional patriarchal values, the very same phenomena provide the younger female characters with spaces for mobility and liberation. Both men project their fears, as Littlejohn argues, on the urban landscape; they respond to its threats by retreating into 'non urban spaces', as the interior of the private home, or by clinging to rural niches within the city. The two professional women, on the other hand, are travelling through the city on their own, which helps them to break free from the constraints of the domestic interior. However, these liberating journeys are not independent of their economic situation. In Priestley's novel the horizon of the female protagonist's urban journeys is restricted by her income. This leaves her dependent on the financial resources of a male companion, whose company is also crucial for gaining access to places which are normally no-go areas for women.

This paper explores questions of class, as well as gender, and serves to challenge notions of the City and its images in literature, such as those which exclusively identify urban modernism with universalising tendencies, when the dominant discourse in modernist literature identifies experiences of isolation and strangeness as "the reality of all human life" (Raymond Williams).

In the texts by Priestley and Tergit the two female characters, both of whom are from middle class backgrounds, differ in their perceptions of the harsh economic realities of city life in the late 1920s. Priestley's protagonist responds to her negative perceptions of commercialisation by taking imaginary flights of fantasy into sheltered scenes of bourgeois family life or into travel literature, where women visit exotic places as companions to adventurous men. This heroine leans towards romanticised perceptions of her surroundings which also mirror the contemporary imperialist values. Tergit's text, on the other hand, provides a female protagonist with a more realistic perspective, one which also contrasts with the escapist fantasies of her male counterpart. Here the woman is shown as being more at home in the city. Walking about freely without 'any particular purpose', she is not dependent on a

male companion. This construction of a female city dweller challenges, according to Littlejohn, the gendered concept of the flâneur, which is prevalent in literary perceptions of the City. However, the different perspectives on gender relations employed by Priestley and Tergit do not, in the end, prevent either woman from being deserted by their male lovers - who leave the city on their own in order to explore other spaces.

Nicholas White's 'Journeys around Maupassant' leads the reader into the ambiguities of metaphorical spaces. When looking at texts by male authors (including Maupassant, Zola, Huysmans, Flaubert) and their complex notions of travel, White sees travel writing as dramatising 'the challenge to imaginative writing to take the readers where they have not been'.

Challenging an alleged 'lack of alterity' in local journeys (Tzvetan Todorov), White considers 'the very charm of alterity' in nineteenth century writing. Maupassant's story *En voyage* (1882) serves as an example of rising doubts about the 'feasibility of travel writing in general'. White argues that the matter of writing is more important than the journey itself, both when looking at this text, which suggests that the process of telling is more significant than the story told, and when looking at *Bel-Ami*, in which male adventures are brought to the reader by a female voice. However, following Todorov, White argues, that ideological self-awareness in literary analysis should aim at avoiding the temptations of metaphoricity which conflate journeys and writings. At the same time, the etymology of the term 'metaphor' in which concepts of displacement and reference collapse renders the 'resistance to the metaphorical potential of travel' ambiguous.

The paper shows how concepts of 'fictionalised journeys' or 'travel writing' infiltrated each other in the nineteenth century. Zola's images of Paris in *L'Assommoir*, for instance, make the very alterity of a geographically and socially segregated city visible. Here journeys beyond the tourist trail confront the travellers with the unfamiliar realm of a *langue du peuple* and undermine any possibility of a panoramic authority. Realist as well as naturalist narratives which aim to guide through a 'novelistic universe' set out to see everything, like contemporary guidebooks; both share, as White argues, an 'epistemological fantasy of total knowledge'. Decadent aesthetics, in contrast, purveying pleasure through words and their connotations, undercut such referential functions. Thus their evocation of exoticism should not be conflated with the fetishization of maps, found in realist and naturalist accounts, when, for instance, *Emma Bovary's* journeys on the map are represented as a 'delirium of desire'. Here, White argues, it is the 'tyranny of metaphor', which cuts the woman off from the 'realm of male adventure'. White presents Hennique's *L'Accident de Monsieur Hébert* (*Monsieur Hébert's Accident*) as another journey through the mind, in which map reading comes close to madness. Questions about the 'ways in which language maps' are raised by Zola's tale *Pot-Bouille* (*Pot Luck*).

Reflections on the 'interplay of private and public scenarios' conclude the paper. A comparative reading of different scenarios in nineteenth-century carriages follows the gaze of, amongst others, Flaubert, Maupassant and Zola. However, confronted

with Maupassant's 'reworking' of a 'set sex scene', the reader might wonder how 'fantasies of knowledge' can overcome scepticism about referentiality as well as doubts about the feasibility of 'seducing readers who are not party to the events'. Here the very interplay between forms of 'bourgeois imagination about the dangers of travel' and 'set' generic conventions of representation, triggers off the question, does Maupassant's carriage really takes us somewhere we have not been before?

Catherine Scott's paper travels beyond European spaces to lead to the scene of Quebec Women's theatre of the 1970s. Looking in detail at Denise Boucher's *Les Fées ont soif* (The Fairies are Thirsty) and at *La Nef des sorcières* (A Clash of Symbols), written and produced by a collective, Scott highlights two of the first feminist plays which became of central importance for future theatrical activity in Quebec in the 1980s..

Many women playwrights regarded the established theatre as an institution, which 'consolidated society's misconceptions' of women. Like other feminist writing of the 1970s in North America and Western Europe, these two plays posed questions about female identity by acting from a female-centred space. In making language and the patriarchal system of thought a centre of feminist intervention, Quebec women playwrights aimed at interrupting 'the structure of accepted forms of communication' and its 'phallogocentric order'.

As other writings of the time, the texts were indebted to contemporary French feminist theories (e.g. Hélène Cixous's) which provided a framework for theorising questions of language, the body and female desire. Theatre in its physical specificity that incorporates the body, provided spaces to transgress social norms in a public way. Quebec women used theatre, Scott argues, as a 'tool' to analyse the 'nature of representation' in patriarchal discourse, and to make deformations physically visible – presenting bodies 'tattooed with signs and symbols'. In Boucher's play, for instance, the 'Virgin Mary' was represented as a statue, and so 'Woman' and the images of her collapsed on stage.

The political impact of these attacks on the Catholic Church, the institution of marriage, the judiciary and, not least, the class character of Quebec society, perceptible in the politics of language, was mirrored by the sharp public reaction which Boucher's *Les Fées ont soif* provoked. Cultural objections against the arrival of Montreal working class accents on stage were based on notions of 'standard'. Religious objections led to a blasphemy trial which was expected to impose a ban. As a matter of irony, Scott demonstrates, the objections brought up in court in terms of 'censorship' and 'freedom of expression' revolved around 'central themes' of the play. It is interesting, however, that the plays staging body politics on a large scale and raising issues central to radical feminist politics, functioned institutionally, as Scott shows, within mainstream theatre. Whereas Quebec literature during and after the Quiet Revolution tried to create a 'Quebec space', concerned with constructing a national identity, Quebec theatre women abstained from seeking a place in this national movement.

In times of backlash – as some would argue – Catherine Scott’s paper is a timely reminder of the social impact feminism as a political movement had - an impact which reached far beyond the academy and aimed at social change; at the same time the paper shows with hindsight what has been gained on the journey from the debates of the 1970s, when feminism became feminisms.

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