

***"What is the Citie, but the People? True, the People are the Citie."  
Coriolanus, Act III., Sc. I.***

***The Postmodern City of Dreadful Night:***

***The image of the city in the works of Martin Amis and Ian McEwan***

by Peter Chalupský (Saarbrücken: VDM Verlag, 2009. 133 pp. ISBN 978-3-639-14446-8)

The central theme of Peter Chalupský's work is the literary representation of the city and urban experience in late 20<sup>th</sup> century British prose fiction. The text is structured as a combination of diachronic and synchronic approaches. The first section entitled "The City as the Writer's Object of Interest" establishes the major patterns of imagining urban space in late Victorian, modernist and post-war British literature. It contains brisk yet logically structured evidence that the city, as one of the major *topoi* of 20<sup>th</sup> century Western writing, has been embraced in a tone ranging from celebratory to gloomy, even dystopian. The author shows that the almost mesmerizing potential of the city in modern times springs largely from its commonly imagined fragmentary, heterogeneous, pluralist and anxious nature echoing broader yet analogous concepts of the modern human condition. This section thus fittingly functions as a prelude to the main parts of the book in which Chalupský advances his arguments in reading Martin Amis's (ch. 2, pp. 27-79) and Ian McEwan's (ch. 3, pp. 80-124) novels from the last two decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Amis and McEwan are approached as postmodern novelists who did not only explore the urban milieu in a multitude of ways rooted in previous periods, but also as writers whose use of the city gradually changed. The book thus traces the curves indicative of their specific transformations.

Amis is presented as tending to deploy the city imagery for constructing "satirical probes into the consciousness and conscience of people in the late twentieth century," (126) and for addressing the issues of identity, otherness (*Other People: A Mystery Story*, 1981) and modern commercial culture (*Money: A Suicide Note*, 1984). Moreover, Chalupský shows how this range was expanded in later novels by voicing broader issues of uniformity, the cyclical nature of everyday existence and "hunts" for pseudo-reality - simulacra substituting for the "real" (*London Fields*, 1989). While the text repeatedly claims that Amis's novels "exploit" urban space and its inhabitants for giving increasingly alarming expression to hostile, dystopian and even apocalyptic visions, an important aspect of Chalupský's attentive reading is the identification, in Amis's work, of a glimmer of hope.

The title of the following chapter "Ian McEwan - From the Haunted to the Moral" already suggests that McEwan's engagement with the city is equally dynamic, yet qualitatively different from that of Amis. Chalupský argues that McEwan's early novels construct the (sub)urban environment as a nightmarish wasteland and metaphorical evocation of the contemporary degeneration of human relationships through oppression, loneliness, isolation, cruelty and fear (*The Cement Garden*, 1978; *The Comfort of Strangers*, 1981). In later prose (e.g. *Amsterdam*, 1998) McEwan does not only "universalize" his use of the urban space, but he also gestures towards optimism by rendering the city as a place where moral choices and what Chalupský calls the "ever-present struggle of human conscience with the temptations and snares of life, altruism and selfishness" (104) are among the prime remedies that may lead to the reinstating of a functional society. Thus, from a comparative point of view, this chapter soundly illustrates that while McEwan has always explored his characters' inner workings more than Amis

(tending towards types and caricatures – e.g. John Self in *Money*), what gradually gained momentum in his later novels was the psychological dimension and the complexity of character construction.

On the whole, Chalupský's book is ambitious in trying to grapple with a complex issue, yet it benefits immensely from its narrow and clearly defined scope. The author performs a sequence of detailed, revealing and convincing readings of two contemporary novelists from a perspective that is quite refreshing when viewed in the context of other existing criticism of these writers. Going through the book, one is constantly reminded of the fact that to employ the city in imaginative literature, be it as a setting, theme or symbol, is not a mere reiteration of an established pattern. Chalupský's analyses show that to engage with the urban environment is to deal with a "text" offering itself to endless interpretations, rereadings and rewritings. Repeatedly, he draws attention to the fact that Amis and McEwan, as well as their fictional characters (e.g. Clive in *Amsterdam*), interpret the city in different and evolving ways. It is with this aspect of critical awareness that Chalupský approaches both novelists as authors of postmodern urban fiction, forming only two out of numerous other threads that have been and undoubtedly will continue to be woven together in the endless and vibrant tapestry of the urban space.

In the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the poetics of place as a form of thematic criticism has taken numerous forms ranging from archetypal, phenomenological to environmental and ecocritical. Chalupský, too, draws some attention to the dialectic opposition of the city and the country explored in most of the above-mentioned approaches. Yet, generally, he reads literary representations of the urban space through the prism of sociology and postmodern theories of art. This enables him to explore the relationship between an individual and environment seen as a process of mutual interaction, influence, conditioning and analogy. The author shows that the city can function as a vehicle for exploring the major aspects of postmodern thought expressed for example in terms of irony, fragmentation, isolation, plurality, commerce, politics and tourism.

Chalupský seems a trustworthy guide through the complex terrain of his thesis. Along the way the reader meets numerous critics and theoretical concepts from literary, cultural and sociological backgrounds. However, it is somewhat unfortunate that in most cases these are only briefly mentioned and their propositional potential is not further applied to the author's own analysis (perhaps with the exception of Zygmund Bauman's identity patterns of a postmodern man). Raymond Williams and his canonical *The City and the Country* may be taken as an example. On the one hand, Chalupský views the work as representing "a crucial influence which has helped to shape many contemporary writers' fictional treatment of the city;" (21) on the other hand, Williams' arguments and influence are not really explored to the fullest. A similar claim can be made about Roland Barthes (37-38) and Jean Baudrillard's simulacra (49), mentioned only through a secondary source (Linda Hutcheon's *Poetics of Postmodernism*). A more detailed examination of the arguments of these commentators would have undoubtedly enriched the tone of Chalupský's already enticing argumentation.

Any book of literary criticism fulfils its mission only when it can be used for further exploration of the same or related area. In this respect, it is regrettable that the publisher does not attach to Chalupský's well-researched text at least a name index, which would enhance its usability. Also, the text was not carefully edited in terms of other formal details (e.g. typos and a missing endnote on page 130).

*The Postmodern City of Dreadful Night* does not only announce a fresh and pleasant dawn in Amis and McEwan criticism, but, due to its socio-literary approach, it also offers valuable conclusions to researchers in other fields. Moreover, Chalupský's receptive reading of the dynamic urban space and its literary representation shows its constant and inevitable Janus-faced nature: the city may be abhorred, criticised or juxtaposed with the idyll of the countryside, yet it remains one of the most unceasingly fascinating and inspirational literary *topoi* known in Western imagination.

by Ladislav Vít