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For the Casablanca encounter, April 2009  
 'Writing In and Beyond the City'

## CITIES IN LITERATURE

When I read your on-line announcement of "Souk Ukaz", especially when fiction and poetry's love affair with the *polis* was mentioned, I started thinking of the dictum „God made the country and the devil the city“. Most novels and poems that come to my mind somehow confirm this proverbial saying rather than a lovey-dovey relationship, especially in literary pieces from the periods of naturalism, modernism and postmodernism when cities became even more generally dominant than before. There are critical studies that indicate that even in the classical period writers of antiquity had ideas about the city as an alienating device<sup>1</sup>. It seems that writers, not only novelists, actively dislike cities and for various reasons find them centers of iniquity, Sodoms and Gomorrah in the Biblical parlance, or cities of the plain, as Cormac McCarthy titled his 1998 anti-city pessimistic novel. This definite attitude becomes prominent much earlier than McCarthy, of course-- at least as early as the pre-Romantic poets from the 18th century, where one can think of William Blake's poem "London" from *Songs of Experience*. It is similar to Charles Baudelaire in *Fleurs du mal* (1857) with his Parisian apparitions, but also for Theodore Dreiser in whose *Sister Carrie* (1900) Chicago and New York both appear to be entities with their own separate appetites and interests, divorced from the interests of their inhabitants, separate malevolent beings, so to speak.

It was in high modernism, however, that the theme of the city as a hellhole reached its provisional peak: from T. S. Eliot's "unreal city" whose inhabitants look like the souls of the dead in Dante's Inferno in *The Waste Land* (1922), to *Manhattan Transfer* (1925) in which New York is a city of appearances and not realities, like all the great cities of the past, and John Dos Passos in the chapter appropriately entitled "Metropolis", draws the parallel of destruction and coming oblivion that awaits all great human creations, cities included. One could point out that F. Scott Fitzgerald spoke in the same year, in the same tone, of New York in *The Great Gatsby* whose narrator returns to his hometown in the Midwest, in Minnesota, having been disappointed by the metropolis, where he came for fame and fortune. The city of Paris appears

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<sup>1</sup> Cf, Peter I. Barta, *Bely, Joyce, and Doblin: Peripatetics in the City Novel*, University Press of Florida, 1996.

also bleak and commercial in the second Ernest Hemingway novel *The Sun Also Rises* (1926); this fact is confirmed in his fictional memoir which appeared much later, posthumously, in 1964 under a seductive but highly ambiguous title *A Moveable Feast*. Joyce's *Dublin* from 1922, Andrei Bely's *Petersburg* (1916), Alfred Döblin's *Berlin Alexanderplatz*, 1926: one could go on and on till the present day and not much of this tone would have changed in literature. Why is it so? Why haven't we been able to assimilate cities as a habitat which could be used by writers at least as a kind of neutral territory, as Nathaniel Hawthorne would have demanded, and not a space behind the enemy lines? Aren't there salient, redeeming urban characteristics as well, the positive sides of cities, including beauty and romance of an urban ambience? It seems to me that there lies quite a challenge for the writers of the future to try and express the appealing, even romantic aspects of urban life. Futurists did try to cultivate the literary use of the machine and the industrial city as poetic subjects, but they didn't quite succeed. There ought to be new attempts. As urban conglomerations grow all over the world, as we have twenty six urban areas now, each larger than ten million inhabitants, we should try to deal at least impartially with our more and more frequent habitat. Beauty, they say, is in the eye of the beholder. But it is also possible that cities as we know them will disappear under the pressure of country folks moving into them without becoming citizens, like it happened all over the world, Southeastern Europe not excluded. There is also the possibility that cities will be destroyed in the manner in which my city, Sarajevo, was demolished during and after the last war. Then the only literary approach will be through memory. Maybe then it will be possible to write with nostalgia about cities that used to flourish once and now are no more.

5. V. 2009.