

## CITYSCAPES – Canadian Urban Space as Portrayed in Selected Fiction and Non-Fiction

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The city was rarely a setting of choice for Canadian writers until the last half of the 20th century. This is very much in contrast to the United States, where the texts of naturalists like Theodore Dreiser come to mind immediately with their visceral presentations of New York and Chicago. Such narratives were followed by the modernists – Francis Scott Fitzgerald’s *New York*, then Nathaniel West’s *Los Angeles*, on to postmodernists like Thomas Pynchon and Paul Auster. While Canadian literary space had tended to be bucolic – the Prince Edward Island villages and farms, the wilderness and arctic, which so captured the imagination of Europeans from the time they appeared in Canadian writers’ narratives as well as the vast prairies and the ubiquitous small town, whether that of Sinclair Ross or Alice Munro – this has been Canadian space for most writers. Perhaps it was only logical, since in a country with such a relatively small population, the cities did not take on the lustre or style, not to mention the importance of European or American urban areas – there was no nightmare–paradise paradigm.

Even later, when the majority of the population began to live in urban agglomerations, the setting of texts, fuelled perhaps in part by nostalgia, was often rural. If one accepts the fact that ‘nostalgia is a longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed’ (Boym 2001: xiii) perhaps these texts reflect that desire for a simpler, less complicated setting.

But in the latter part of the 20th century, we see an urban discourse emerging – Margaret Atwood’s novels of Toronto with their detailed naming of districts, streets etc. present only one example. The new immigrant writers, those who come from East India, the Caribbean etc. invariably set their narratives in urban space: M. J. Vassanji and Austin Clarke come to mind at once – the city is their space. As well one could mention the portrayal of the immigrant Jewish quarter of Montreal by Mordecai Richler or Gail Scott’s treatment of that same city and other texts that are set in Winnipeg, Vancouver etc. But, I intend to focus

on how the two cities of Toronto and Calgary have been represented at times in fiction and in creative non-fiction, a genre much neglected in our study of Canadian literature in Europe. What kind of picture emerges of the urban space in Canada here? Is it portrayed as differing at all from its American counterpart and, if so, in what ways?

The rise of the city has been seen as ‘inseparable from various kinds of literary movements – in particular the development of the novel and subsequent narrative modes: comic realism, romantic realism, naturalism, modernism and postmodernism’ (Lehan 1998: 3).

All of the above ‘contain sub-genres like the utopian novel, the gothic novel, the detective story, the young-man-from-the-provinces novel, the novel of imperial adventure, the western, science fiction and dystopian narratives’ (Lehan 1998: 3). Most of these can as well be found in Canadian fiction. The city, once an enlightenment ideal, was later questioned in romantic, modern and post-modern thought (Boym 2001: xv). In the discourse of urban space, that space was seen as a place cut off from spiritual energy. It was the American writer Nathaniel Hawthorne who first conceived of the city as ‘paved solitude’ (see Lehan 1998: 5–6).

It is certainly clear that, when one examines the history of the city as such, one can see how, over time, community – the original idea of people living together in an integral place – was replaced by anonymity and this is a characteristic we find more and more presented in the depiction of Canadian urban space, whether in fictional or non-fictional texts. The industrial city, which the naturalists in Europe and the USA described, is a perfect example of how isolated the individual can become in an urban area.

In American texts the city is often a space of extremes – of threat and promise, ‘poisonville and paradise’ and with the postmodernists like Thomas Pynchon this space becomes mysterious, at times the work of *urban conspiracy*. But overall in these narratives there has been a portrayal of the emptiness of life in the materialistic urban space.

On the whole, Canadian writers have not been so intensely pessimistic and certainly, in true Canadian fashion, do not tend to give the reader a sharp delineation of positive/negative. There is more of an acceptance of the urban scene, rather than what might be termed a *demonisation* of it. The emptiness exists, but the ‘mean streets’ of American cityscapes are, in the Canadian discourse, often

just those of the 'geography of nowhere' to borrow a phrase from James Howard Kunstler in his study of 'the rise and decline of America's man-made landscape' (see Kunstler 1993).

One aspect in Canadian texts featuring urban space is the homogenised and globalised quality, which is often present. Canadian cities have been described as displaying 'homogeneous economic forces and a global culture which promote simplification' (Willis 1997: 62). Randy William Willis maintains that the creation of the so-called regional, sometimes found in architecture, that tries to 'reflect something of history and geography of the places where they are situated, stands in direct contrast to the utilitarian, universal landscapes which are the latest expression of emergent globalised advanced capitalism. A material culture imposed from a disorienting global/American space is replacing local spaces or moulding them into landscapes of consumption.' (Willis 1997: 62–63.)

What are these landscapes then? A character in a recent novel portrays the suburbs of a major city as follows:

Square miles of meagre modern houses whose principal purpose was the support of TV aerials and dishes; factories producing worthless junk to be advertised on the television and in dismal lots ... everywhere roads and the tyranny of traffic no one would have wished it this way, but no one had been asked. Nobody planned it, nobody wanted it but most people had to live in it. (McEwan 1998: 68.)

Is this a description of the outskirts of Toronto? It could easily be what one sees driving through the suburb of Mississauga to the Centre City from the airport. It happens to be from Ian McEwan's award-winning text *Amsterdam* set in London. But the landscape is familiar. Canada has joined the world in its urban space (or sprawl one might say), but have Canadian writers taken up the challenge truly and portrayed this – the anonymity, the sense of being part of a great machine that one finds in Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49* (1965) or do we get a tourist view, the way Canadians would like to see *the city* – a place of multicultural harmony, cute ethnic neighbourhoods?

As one of the protagonists in Margaret Atwood's acclaimed novel *The Robber Bride* thinks when walking along the streets of Toronto: 'It's soothing to be among strangers ... She likes the mix on the street here ... Chinatown has taken over mostly, though there are still some Jewish delicatessens and farther up and off to the side the Portuguese and West Indian shops of the Kensington Market.' (Atwood 1995: 39.)

There is no sense of the apocalyptic here – as in Fitzgerald’s valley of the ashes or Nathaniel West’s scenes of Los Angeles and nothing like Pynchon’s entropy. And what of the ‘crowd’, which so dominates the way many writers present the city metonymically – Zola, Dreiser, West, Ellison, Auster to name only a few? Crowds offer a way of reading the city. Where are the crowds in Canadian fiction? There are some ‘crowd scenes’, but none that register strongly in the imagination. None that inspire a sense of foreboding or threat which appears so often in American fiction, beginning as far back as Nathaniel Hawthorne.<sup>1</sup>

In the 1930s writer Morley Callaghan was the first to try to portray a Canadian city, in this case Toronto. It has been said that ‘no one had presented so coherent and so illuminated picture of a Toronto that is now submerged as any cathedral *englouti* under the weight of a prosperity translated into concrete towers and suburban warrens’ (Woodcock 1976: 203). In Callaghan’s texts, even when he wrote of the criminal element, the general sense of threat was missing. Certainly, the urban space was not idyllic, but neither was it a hell. Part of this is due to the constant mention of green spaces that can somehow ‘defuse tensions and undermine potential threats of the streets’ (Edwards 1998: 219). It can be noted that Toronto’s green spaces and ravines still feature in the fictional and non-fictional narratives. One has only to examine novels and short stories by some of the leading contemporary writers like Margaret Atwood, Timothy Findley or M. J. Vassanji to note this. Yet while there are no menacing crowd scenes here, no sense of being in a maze, certainly there is already a feeling of that anonymity referred to earlier and lack of caring that is so typically portrayed in urban fiction.

Canadian urban space in narratives can be a place where, to use Scott Fitzgerald’s words about New York, ‘behind much of the entertainment that the city poured forth into the nation there were only a lot of rather lost and lonely people’ (Fitzgerald quoted in Lehan 1998: 218). Fitzgerald goes on to tell of two cities existing in New York – the first limitless and the second his ‘drab room in the Bronx ... my square foot of the subway’ (Lehan 1998: 218). Compare this to Norman Levine’s depiction of urban space, his cityscape. ‘A large bare room on the seventh floor in the centre of Toronto. It looked shabby from the outside.

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<sup>1</sup> See the short story *My Kinsman, Major Molineux* for a demonic city crowd depiction, as well as Lehan’s discussion of the force of the crowd in the chapter ‘The City and the Text’ (Lehan 1998).

But one wall was all glass.’ (Levine 1982: 515.) Levine uses the adjective ‘shabby’ frequently. In Vassanji’s Toronto this adjective changes to ‘drab’ like Fitzgerald’s drab reality.

Levine goes on to describe the view from his apartment. The office building lights the protagonist sees at night make ‘the city look wealthy, full of glitter, like tall passenger liners anchored close together in the dark’ (Levine 1982: 515). But the following day, on the ground, walking around the view is somewhat different. ‘The cold wind blew loose newspapers down Yonge Street. It looked shabby and raw.’ (Levine 1982: 516.)

In this scene one gets the feeling of the oppositions in the city, which Fitzgerald had presented years before in New York and Dreiser before him – the sense of contrasting space in the day-to-day reality. Levine uses an interesting metaphor here – his protagonist walks through an area of the prosperous in Toronto; he doesn’t specify which one. In front of the spacious lawns are the usual, neatly tied green garbage bags. He watches impassively while a pack of dogs descend and tear open each bag spreading garbage all over the lawns (Levine 1982: 516).

Yet another element of Levine’s cityscape is its compartmentalisation – which is very important in any depiction of Canadian urban space – we find these spatial arrangements as well in *The Robber Bride* – Rosedale, the Annex, the Toronto Islands, the ethnic areas, Queen Street – borders and boundaries exist here. Toronto lends itself well in many fictional texts to a description of the breaking off into districts that differ sharply, just as the lives lived in them will differ.

As for the particular, something uniquely identifying Toronto, a favourite symbol is that of the CN tower. In Vassanji’s *No New Land*, it blinks cryptically at the immigrant protagonist throughout the text and, when he is asked where the god is in this city, he points out of the window of his run-down high-rise building to the Tower, ‘There. There is our god. But he is a deep one. Mysterious.’ (Vassanji 1991: 186.) The tower tends to be an element of the Toronto skyline that is definitive about the city, but every text in which it appears gives it a different significance. For the secure Anglo Canadian characters in Atwood’s novel, it holds no deep significance, but is simply viewed as an expensive real estate. Thus, this presents the contrast between the perspective of the immigrant and non-immigrant in this famously multi-cultural city.

Going on to creative non-fiction, in Myrna Kostash’s early text *No Kidding: Inside the World of Teenage Girls*, she writes also of Toronto – of the street life

on Yonge, etc. and then tellingly of a girl from Regent Park – Canada’s oldest largest public housing complex – full of single mothers, the unemployed, the incapacitated, the marginalised. The teenage inhabitant of this space, whom Kostash is interviewing, points out that every three-storey building is laid out in exactly the same way. She describes the ugliness of the community centre with its ‘contracted, greasy dun-coloured walls, kicking aside litter etc.’ (Kostash 1987: 170). Yet for all its nastiness it is like a village, taking care of its own, while ‘outside’ [meaning here in the city at large – *N.B.*] all is ‘phoniness’ and private ambition where people like Nicole are crumpled up and tossed away in bins’ (Kostash 1987: 170). So even in the worst case scenario, a kind of garrison mentality, which has been seen as one of the elements of Canadian identity, may exist within the city’s enclaves.

Moving away from Toronto, as it has been depicted by some Canadian writers, to go further west, a telling portrait of a Canadian city emerges in Norman Ravvin’s *Hidden Canada: An Intimate Travelogue*. I am referring to the chapter on Calgary ‘Mapping the Boom and Bust – A Guide to Perfect Calgary Time’ (Ravvin 2001: 73). We are told that Calgary is said to be ‘famous in architectural circles for having fewer pre-1960 structures than any other city its age in the world’ (Ravvin 2001: 78). Downtown Calgary, especially the blocks tucked up against the Bow, hides an amazing record of change and disruption. ‘The past,’ he writes, ‘is as vanished as any Babylonian suburb on the Tigris’ (Ravvin 2001: 78). Describing those neighbourhoods of the past where he grew up, the author maintains that ‘the careful layering of residential status, the changing pattern of wood-built to stone-built houses, is gone, as if these men’s doings were swept up in the snow one morning’ (Ravvin 2001: 79).

This is a depiction of the Canadian cityscape that falls into the discourse of American space – that instinct to remake the past, to demolish and build anew. Perhaps Canadian cities have adopted this mode and gone beyond the Americans in some cases. The question is asked, ‘What did it mean to grow up and work all your life in a city that was constantly remaking itself? How did it feel to establish a business in a neighbourhood where everything familiar vanished but for the odd, sad relic that escaped demolition by chance?’ (Ravvin 2001: 79.) Ravvin goes on to describe the house his parents had lived in:

The house is gone now, a gravel parking lot replacing it a number of years back. It was the kind of stucco and wood house that would be prized in other cities where

character buildings stand a chance, but Calgary is not one of those places. (Ravvin 2001: 82.)

This Canadian city is one where ‘the past had nothing to do with the promise of prosperity, which rode on the evening breeze with the scent of grilling sirloin and the perfume of lush lawn cut and bagged’ (Ravvin 2001: 85). The city is summed up when the narrator states, in referring to Calgary ‘...and the longer you stay away, the more you feel upon returning, that the city you knew is gone’ (Ravvin 2001: 90).

What does this say about cityscapes in the Canadian reality, in Canadian prose? The nostalgia here is ‘a longing for place, but actually it is a yearning for a different time’ (Boym 2001: xv) as well. That this occurs in the Canadian urban discourse places it in the mainstream of what is seen as being at the core of the modern condition ‘the mourning of displacement and temporal irreversibility’ (Boym 2001: xvi). Part of what Ravvin expresses in his essay would appear to be what Svetlana Boym (2001: xiv) refers to as the affected yearning for a community with a collective memory, a longing for continuity in a fragmented world. ‘While memories are motionless and the more securely they are fixed in space, the sounder they are.’ (Bachelard 1964: 8–9.)

Canadian cities are depicted as part of the North American discourse in the emphasis on change and this very factor causes one to feel the passage of time more strikingly. When buildings are preserved, the illusion is induced that nothing, including the observer has aged. When one finds only a parking lot where the family business was, and no familiar landmarks as is the case with Ravvin in Calgary, then the emotion induced is that of insecurity and the melancholy of time passing and of one’s own age and eventual decay. It has been stated that the sense of time affects our sense of place, that the past needs to be rescued to strengthen our sense of self (Tuan 1977: 186).

The emphasis on change, the sense of alienation and the commodification, which may occur when some historic buildings are simply kept as souvenirs, all of these factors can be found in the urban discourse, just as they are found in the cities themselves and in the resulting globalised cityscape or urban sprawl.

Canadian cityscapes contain all of the above and, while the land and natural environment continue to be important symbolic concepts around which formulations of identity accumulate today, the majority of Canadians live in large and small urban centres, so the city, of necessity, assumes a greater importance

in the general Canadian literary discourse. Even though it may not be part of what one likes to see as the myth of Canada. This cityscape contains its particular elements in each case, especially those of spatial categorisation, such as the neat divisions into districts, very apparent in Toronto, which may be regarded as compartmentalisation. One has only to examine any text written by recent immigrants to see this aspect of urban life. While it appears colourful to have districts dominated by certain cultures and nationalities, this can have an alienating effect on the inhabitants. At the same time, it is very much a part of the discourse of any urban space these days architecturally and in its 'insecurity and instability' which Louis Wirth claims, 'are at the heart of the modern metropolis' (quoted in Edwards 1998: 213). Here there is the continental sameness.

When we see depicted the high-rise apartments, office towers and the outlying urban malls, the result is also a banalisation of space, an ordering of it in urban conformity that results in a dehumanising homogenisation of the terrain.

The question might also be asked as to whether a particular city is portrayed as masculine or feminine? Where do Canadian cities fit in this paradigm – Paris seen as feminine, New York masculine? Can Canadian cities be gendered in a similar way? And how would such a gendering add to our understanding? Would Toronto's linear streets and phallic Tower gender it as masculine and, if so, how would that effect our reading of the urban texts? These are the questions still to be explored.

Whatever the conclusions, reading urban space presents a fascinating challenge. Perhaps, in the end, more than just providing a realistic setting for his or her fiction, the task of the writer is to attempt, in the urban discourse, to make the city comprehensible and to 'disalienate' to use a term coined by Fredric Jameson. He argues that the process of 'disalienation' in the city involves the practical reconquest of a sense of place and the construction or reconstruction of an articulated ensemble, which can be retained in memory and which the individual subject can map and remap along the moment of mobile, alternative trajectories (Jameson quoted in Ivison 1998: 51).

Finally in regard to Canada, it should be noted, as George Melnyk writes in *The Urban Prairie*:

We have been obsessed with the land and its meaning for more than a century. Perhaps it is time now to reflect on the cities we have built and seek to understand

how our identity is expressed through them. Such an exercise could herald a cultural renaissance. (Melnik 1993: 50.)

Canadian writing has been in the process of becoming more of an urban discourse, even while the nostalgia remains for the land – the wide spaces of landscape that both Canadians and foreigners like to see as emblematic of the country as a whole. The cityscape, having attained spatial presence in fiction and non-fiction, leads to an amplification of that which we like to see as the elusive Canadian identity, globalised as it may be. Perhaps a new urban Canadian wilderness is emerging. In *The Robber Bride*, Margaret Atwood's protagonist describes the cityscape of Toronto in the 1990s as seen from the islands in Lake Ontario in the glare of the noon day sun. No longer is there the forest that once existed, those open spaces of the past that always seemed to symbolise Canada for others. Instead she now sees that in the bright light 'it's just girders then, and slabs of concrete' (Atwood 1995: 47).

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## Linnamaastikud – Kanada linnaruumi kujutamise ilu- ja dokumentaal- kirjanduses

### Kokkuvõte

Varamatel aastatel kujutati Kanada kirjanduses peamiselt maakeskkonda. Kirjanikke paelus metsik maastik: kõnnumaa, arktilised alad, preeria, või ka väike-linn. Linnale ei pööratud tähelepanu, vähesed erandid välja arvatud, kuni 20. sajandi keskpaigani. Praegu, 21. sajandi algul, toimub romaanide ja novellide ning ka dokumentaalproosa tegevustik üha enam linnaruumis.

Kuidas kujutavad kirjanikud oma teostes Kanada linna? Kas neid esitatakse kui kõledaid keskkondi, milles “dehumaniseerivad tornid koormavad infrastruktuuri”, nagu James Howard Kunstler kirjeldab Ameerika linna oma provokatiivses tekstis *The Geography of Nowhere: The Rise and Decline of America's Man-Made Landscape*? Või kirjeldavad nad seda hoopis kui ruumi, mis on sellele maale ainuomane ja unikaalne? Neile küsimustele otsitakse vastuseid, analüüsides Margaret Atwoodi, Morley Callaghani, Norman Levine'i, Myrna Kostashi ja Norman Ravvini teoseid.

Linnakirjeldusi võrreldes on huvitav jälgida, mil määral avaldub Kanada kuulus regionalism linnaruumis. Kas on võimalik märgata erinevusi näiteks Calgary ja Toronto arhitektuuri ning linnaplaneeringu esitustes? Kas kirjanike tõlgenduses on linnaruum koht, kus indiviid saab areneda, või tekitab see surutist?

Samuti vaadeldakse konkreetse linnaruumiga seotud psühholoogilisi kogemusi. Millist mõju avaldab inimesele see, kui ta tuleb tagasi tuttavasse kohta ja avastab, et see on “linnauuenduse” käigus minema pühitud? Need küsimused pakuvad kirjanikele jätkuvalt huvi, nagu nähtub nii ilukirjanduslikest kui ka dokumentaaltekstidest. Käesolev artikkel on seega katseks laiendada ja uurida tavapärast ettekujutust Kanadast ning vaadelda, kuidas see avaldub tänapäevases linnakontekstis.