

1

LITERARY URBAN STUDIES

An Introduction

Lieven Ameel

Literary Urban Studies: An Introduction

Cities in literature have long fascinated readers, writers, and scholars, from the cities in Homer's epics to Dickens's London or Balzac's Paris, to the urban environments in contemporary crime novels or in speculative fiction. As the world has moved into the urban century – an era in which more than half of the world's population lives in urban environments – this interest in cultural representations of city experiences continues to flourish. The growing interest in the literature of what is at once mankind's most reviled and most celebrated cultural artifact has gradually led to the development of literary urban studies into a discipline in its own right. Witness to this development are the numerous courses devoted to the study of city literature, regular conferences on the subject, and the considerable research output published in monographs, journal articles, and book chapters.

The Routledge Companion to Literary Urban Studies provides a methodical overview of the fundamentals of this developing discipline and a detailed outline of new directions in the field. It consists of 33 newly commissioned chapters that provide an overview of contemporary literary urban studies. The *Companion* includes chapters focusing on theoretical approaches as well as chapters on key literary genres, with case study chapters covering a range of different geographical, cultural, and historical settings. The final chapters provide a window into recent new directions in the field.

This *Companion* positions itself within a stimulating set of publications that have recently come out in the field. One such work is the *Palgrave Handbook of Literature and the City* (Tambling), a comprehensive work that provides a wealth of essays on individual cities and themes in city literature. Introductory works to the study of city literature include the *Cambridge Companion to the City in Literature* (McNamara) and the *Cambridge Companions to New York, Los Angeles, London, Berlin, and American city literature*. Several relevant monographs, some by authors also involved with individual chapters in this *Companion*, have been published in the early 2020s; such works include introductions to literary urban studies by Jason Finch and by Jens Gurr (Finch, *Literary Urban Studies*; Gurr). The present book – *The Routledge Companion to Literary Urban Studies* – aims to be less encyclopedic than the handbook edited by Jeremy Tambling, but more wide-ranging in terms of genres, periods, and geographical contexts than several of the other

recent companions published in the field. The three focal issues of this *Companion* are (1) key concepts and genres of literary urban studies; (2) a reassessment and critique of classical urban studies theories and the canon of literary capitals; and (3) methods for the analysis of cities in literature.¹ The aim is to provide the reader with practical insights into the particular methods and approaches that can be applied to the city in literature.

Studying City Literature

The study of literature is, by necessity, concerned with the raw material of literature – the *literaturnost* of literary texts (cf. Jakobson). Literary scholars are concerned with the poetic language of their material, with the workings of stylized plot developments, rhetorical tropes, and poetic voice, and with the materiality of turned pages or on-stage performances. In a similar way, all studies of the city – including the study of the city in literature – are concerned with the “citiness” of its source material (see Finch and Ameel; Finch et al.). What does it mean – in formal, referential, or material terms – for a literary text to take the city as its focal point, as the presence from which character, language, plot, and voice take part of their meaning? How does the citiness of city literature make that literature – and literary urban studies – different from other texts and scholarly approaches? To what extent does the raw material constituted by the urban realm demand other kinds of approaches, as opposed to other kinds of literary texts? In each of the chapters of this *Companion*, these questions are present at least as part of a general background that informs the analysis.

In terms of quantitative urban studies, citiness can be seen here, first, as consisting of the three Ds of density, diversity, and dimensions. Urban environments are thus defined by being more diverse and more dense, with built environments and social structures that have larger dimensions in terms of size and scale than provincial or rural environments. But such a focus on quantifiable features would be only a first step and will have to be complemented by experiential, social, and cultural aspects of citiness, such as those summed up in the “[f]our Cs of the urban experience – culture, consumption, conflict and community” (see Parker 4). Cities, in short, can be defined as exhibiting, nurturing, and perpetuating particular patterns of culture, consumption, conflict, and community.² The four Cs (in Parker’s terminology) and three Ds (as summarized here) of the urban condition, as they appear within urban studies, have to be complemented in important ways when considering narrated city experiences in literature and other media. Key concepts with acute relevance for the urban experience in literature are (1) simultaneity, (2) contingency, and (3) temporal layeredness. Simultaneity comprises how events and impressions may happen simultaneously to one character or to a host of characters, the experience of different temporal layers or social worlds being simultaneously present, and the simultaneous experience of readerly audiences. Contingency can constitute an important plot device, but it can also be a way to foreground complex relational networks and the possibilities of individual self-fulfillment. Temporal layeredness is not only a material condition of the city but also a source for rich personal and communal experiences, from the epiphany to alienation and nostalgia. To this set of concepts must finally be added the more recent interest in (1) the functional, (2) scalar, and (3) networked nature of urban experiences.

Citiness, as it appears in city literature, pertains first of all to the city’s particular *presence*: in the words of Burton Pike, the urban environment as “a presence and not simply a setting” (Pike 8), which extends its influence to character and plot development as well as to the languages and tropes that are used (Ameel, “The City Novel”). Material aspects of the city and the tacility of urban experiences, in this view, also find their way into the formal features of literature: in the

language of the contemporary city novel but also in the tropes of the early modern urban panegyric or, in antiquity, in the Panhellenic networks of ideas woven together on the stage. Citiness, in the context of literature, relates also to the material, cultural, and networked conditions that have enabled the existence of particular material forms of literature, from newspaper sketches catering to new urban audiences (see, e.g., Hamilton) to early modern metropolitan tragedy (Greenberg). Citiness is also bound up with city-based networks of authors, publishers, critics, and readers and with the broader material infrastructures that underly literary practices, networks, and institutions.

All this means that, for the scholar of city literature, questions of referentiality will be of particular concern. It has always been possible to think of literary cities as realms of the imagination, constellations of tropes in an intertextual network. Recognition of rhetorical tropes, intertextual references, and conventions of genre and period will be essential for unpacking the meanings embedded in any given city text. But equally important is a keen attentiveness to how a city text communicates with the material city of its time: what groups are deliberately omitted, what functions are foregrounded, what spatial connections are made? The utopian city in Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward*, for example, is thoroughly informed by the material, social, and cultural realities in late-nineteenth-century Boston. Similarly, the ways in which the cities of the Greek novel in late antiquity do *not* resemble their real-world counterparts are couched in generic and rhetorical language, but they are also intimately bound up with questions of real-world power and empire, because the lack of referentiality is one way in which traces of the Roman Empire were erased from eastern Mediterranean culture (see Saïd). An attentiveness to the referential dimension of city literature does not necessarily mean to focus on static descriptions of recognizable streets or named buildings. Rather, to examine experiences of the city in literature means to look for relationships, modes of movement, networked encounters, and everyday practices and routines.

Classical Literary Urban Studies

At the background of this *Companion* is a view of literary urban studies as a developing scholarly field in its own right. Within this field, there are two groups: a group of classical studies and approaches centered on canonical literary cities and city authors, and postclassical approaches that draw on classical studies while also challenging, critiquing, and complementing these. One aim of the *Companion* is to give the reader a solid sense of the most foundational texts and approaches in literary urban studies and to clarify how contemporary studies contribute to these foundations while developing the field in new directions.

Classical literary urban studies, as it developed in the second half of the twentieth century, focuses for the most part on a limited group of “alpha” cities, with an emphasis on the novel (and, in particular, realist, naturalist, and high modernist novel) and modernist or early modernist poetry. It is indebted to, and develops alongside with, a key set of texts from urban studies and (cultural) geography, including Georg Simmel’s “The Metropolis and Mental Life,” Walter Benjamin’s Arcades project (*The Arcades Project*), Henri Lefebvre’s *Critique of Everyday Life*, and Michel de Certeau’s *The Practice of Everyday Life*. In its view of city literature, classical literary urban studies tends to suggest an evolutionary storyline that moves from city to city and from one artistic paradigm to the next. The aim is in part to write a historical overview of the development of city literature, moving through literary periods from Romanticism, to realism and naturalism, to modernism, to postmodernism, to the present time. This is also a geographical journey that moves, for example, from Dickens’s London and Zola’s Paris to the St. Petersburg of Dostoevsky,

and then on to the London of Woolf, the Dublin of Joyce, the Berlin of Döbblin, and the New York of Dos Passos, continuing to the LA of Pynchon.

Volter Klotz's seminal work *Die Erzählte Stadt* from 1969 is one of the founding texts of this tradition: it starts out with the cities of Alain-René Lesage and Daniel Defoe and ends with Andrei Bely, John Dos Passos, and Alfred Döbblin. Other influential studies that trace the evolution of city writing in Western literature along similar trajectories include Burton Pike's *The Image of the City in Modern Literature*, Richard Lehan's *The City in Literature*, Bart Keunen's *De verbeelding van de grootstad* ("Imagining the Metropolis"), and Robert Alter's *Imagined Cities*.

In addition to these diachronic works, there are numerous texts that in their general argument subscribe to this view of a developing city literature, while focusing on one particular period or one city. Often, such studies aim to write histories or overviews of one particular city or period as a possible model for other cities or similar periods in other contexts. They include early classical studies, such as Pierre Citron's 1961 two-volume study of Paris, and the research that has come into being surrounding the "Petersburg text" in the Tarto-Moscow school, as well as more recent work focusing on city representations in the context of one particular author (Woolf's London in Larsson) or a particular historical or literary period (e.g. Den Tandt; Nead; Prendergast).

In many respects, this group of scholarly work offers readings of the literary city that are still highly applicable. Part of their persuasive power is their attentiveness to the social and historical context of the cities they discuss and how they are able to clarify the development of literary movements (such as realism, naturalism, symbolism, and modernism) as thoroughly interconnected with the history of the cities that helped to shape them (see also Bradbury; Brooks; Hirsh; Williams; Wilson).

For cities, city dwellers, and literary traditions outside of the storyline sketched earlier – postcolonial cities, European peripheral or provincial urban centers – the suggestion in this historical narrative of a natural procession toward increasing complexity and sophistication presents considerable limitations. Large swaths of city experiences may end up being reduced to experiences that are catching up on what others, in the canonized capitals of modernity, have experienced first and more fully. In such a view, an examination of urban representations in Victorian London may be applied to other places and other times, but with the possible suggestion that these other places and times carry less power of generalization. In more general terms, the past decades have seen critics of the literary city increasingly agree that, "[T]he encompassing intellectual and literary project that was out to condense modernity in the form of the city has come to seem suspiciously reductive and should be supplanted by more localized, theorized, and political forms of knowledge" (Eeckhout and Keunen 902).

While classical literary urban studies needs to be critiqued and complemented, particularly in regard to how it focuses on a small set of cities and kinds of urban experiences and how it produces a particular view of the literary city's historical trajectory, it should be noted that it has always contained approaches that have focused on outsiders, peripheral characters, and subtle acts of everyday subversion. A key figure in city literature is the outsider, a figure that takes shape in socioeconomic terms, in the work of Bart Keunen and Luc de Droogh, and in symbolic terms, as a Dionysian figure, in the work of Richard Lehan. It is a figure that also has been approached in ethnic, gendered, and psychological terms elsewhere. Within the context of national literary histories, city literature and literary urban studies have tended to be places where linguistic, ethnic, and other minorities, formal experiments, and international networks are particularly well represented, from the role of American-Jewish literature (see, e.g., Wirth-Nesher), to that of minor literature such as that of Kafka's Prague (Nekula), to the importance of the Swedish-speaking minority in Finnish city literature (Pedersen).

Key Concepts

The figure of the outsider is but one of a larger set of key thematic approaches and key concepts within classical literary urban studies that are still of relevance in current studies of the city. These include, among others, the city walker, the map, the palimpsest, the aesthetics of the city, and seriality. The first, theoretical chapters of this *Companion* provide an introduction to these key concepts. City walkers, from Edgar Allan Poe's "The Man in the Crowd" to Baudelaire's *flâneur*, and the ways in which these figures have been read by Walter Benjamin (*The Writer of Modern Life*) and others after him continue to inspire literary authors and to provide ways with which to examine responses to modernity and late modernity (see Liedke's chapter on idling in this volume, Chapter 4). The compulsory map-making that can be found in nineteenth-century novels of exploration or in detective fiction provides a formal means that dictates how literature makes sense of the world and that also shows how readers may navigate a plot (see Lanigan's chapter on the map in this volume, Chapter 3). The palimpsest – as material phenomenon in the city's layered architecture, as temporal experience, and as literary device – may have found one of its richest outlets in interbellum modernist poetry, but its roots can arguably be found in early travel literature from Pausanias (second century) to Ibn Battuta (twelfth century), and it has found a new means of expression in twenty-first-century, future-oriented city literature (see Gurr's chapter on the palimpsest in this volume, Chapter 6). Aesthetic experiences are at the heart of our interaction with cities, in everyday life as well as in literary texts or in literary urban studies (see Chapter 5 by Keunen in this volume). And seriality is one of the underdeveloped, but crucial structures underlying city representations in literature and other media (see Chapter 7 by Sulimma in this volume). Most of these concepts – and their applicability beyond Western capitals of modernity and postmodernity – have also been contested within postclassical literary urban studies. The figure of the *flâneur* and the quintessentially modern aesthetic of shock have been criticized for being out of tune with everyday experiences of the city (see Moretti) and for being profoundly gendered (Wilson). Approaches to walking have been complemented by a renewed focus on mobility over the past decades, as well as by interest in the concept of idling (Liedke). In short, the "Key Concepts" chapters in this volume contextualize important thematic approaches and concepts within the relevant research literature, while also providing insights into how these concepts have become criticized and complemented in more recent research literature.

Postclassical Literary Urban Studies

There are still any number of studies that continue along the lines set out by classical literary urban studies. But recent studies of the literary city have also set out to critique and complement literary urban studies and to transform the field in the direction of new questions and new methodologies. Inevitably, this is not a process defined by stark paradigm shifts in quick chronological succession; rather, it is a question of ongoing dialogue. Some of the major works of what is considered here to be classical literary urban studies were published in the present century (see Alter), while important and influential corrective readings (for example, to the figure of the *flâneur*) had already been written in the 1980s (see Wolff).

Postclassical literary urban studies turns its attention to the kinds of cities, genres, spaces, characters, experiences, and practices that had remained largely out of sight in the dominant story of how the literary city developed along a trajectory of Western capitals of modernity and postmodernity. One aspect of this work is a focus on particular peripheral or second cities that had been largely overlooked: recent works include studies of Helsinki (Ameel, *Helsinki*), Mexico City (François),

Johannesburg (Kruger), Tokyo (Thornbury), and Sydney (Brayshaw) in literature. In part, such work is aligned with postcolonial interest in writing back to the center and the decentering Linda Hutcheon sees at work in postmodernist fiction (Hutcheon 57–61). In processes of decentering, however, the imagined center remains, to a degree, the keystone of meaning against which other sites or experiences are measured. In this respect, the terms “peripheral” and “second” have to be thoroughly contextualized and theorized when considering the specificity of literary city experiences outside of the canon of literary capitals (see the introductions to *Literature and the Peripheral City* by Ameel et al. and *Literary Second Cities* by Finch et al.). Postclassical literary urban studies, as we see it develop in this volume, aims not to approach peripheral or second-tier literary cities or regional urban centers in terms of emanations of classical or canonical city representations, but rather to take seriously the particular citiness of their historical, geographical, and cultural context. Such an attentiveness includes a keen awareness, for example, of the impact of the 1970 “October crisis” on the literature of Montreal (Morgan), or of the way in which a particular urban practice of informal settlements orders the literature of Istanbul (Prieto), or of how site-specific infrastructure shapes the postcolonial urban experience (Boehmer and Davies).

Postclassical literary urban studies critiques and complements earlier paradigms not only in the way it sees its object of study but also in the kinds of questions it asks and how it sets out to answer them. It is informed by adjacent academic fields such as critical geography, feminist studies, postcolonial studies, urban studies, and queer studies (see, e.g., Brown). It is a field that also shows a renewed interest in the actual, material city. In part, this is a paradigm shift informed by the material turn (see Ameel et al., *Materiality*) and by what has been called a tentative return of the real in literary studies (Boxall 127). This shift is also witness to the continued importance of phenomenology in the spatial humanities. One consequence of these paradigm shifts is an interest in the material networks of real-world cities (Boehmer and Davies), in how actual readers construct the literary city on the basis of their experiential knowledge (see Ameel and Ainiala), and in the researcher’s physical engagement with urban materialities in the course of fieldwork (see Finch, *Deep Locational Criticism*). This return to the real is also visible in teaching, from fieldwork or the practice of walking seminars (see, e.g., Ameel, “Panoramic Perspectives”) to forms of teaching that empower students to create their own narrated experiences of the city (e.g. Peterle).

Key Genres

Classical literary urban studies can be characterized by a strong focus on modernist, naturalist and realist literature, with occasional interest in less canonical genres such as the newspaper sketch and the detective story. But more recent work has broadened the scope of literary genres that are considered central for the development of the city, from the “metropolitan miniature” (see Chapter 10 by Huyssen in this volume), to the graphic novel (Davies, Chapter 12 this volume), to the fantastical in city literature (García), to urban experiences in young adult novels (Wistisen), or to city representations in children’s magazines and comic reels (Glasheen). The scope of crucial genres in city literature can be expanded to include, for example, the provincial or second-tier-city detective novel (see Chapter 11 by Pezzotti in this volume) or the non-fiction travel book (see Chapter 26 by Hannigan in this volume). One area of research that continues to demand more work is that of historical city genres. The prevalent focus on nineteenth- and twentieth-century urban experiences means that important historical genres with an urban focus have remained out of sight or that their study remains largely confined to historical fields. Such

genres include urban satire (see Chapter 8 by Gillies in this volume), the city panegyric (see Chapter 9 by Beneš and Morreale in this volume), or the Greek novel of late antiquity. Outside of Europe, the Persian poetic genre of the *shahrashub* (or city-disturber; see Sharma) is but one of the many examples that could be further examined within literary urban studies, as is the trope of elegy in descriptions of Baghdad in travel narratives and poetry (see Cooperson) or the *sehringiz* genre in Ottoman poetry (see Calis-Kural).

In the “Key Genres” section of this *Companion*, a selection of city genres is introduced. The section aims to give readers an introduction to particular genres, their importance for the development of city literature, and insights into the interconnectedness and historical continuity of city writing across genres. The characteristics of the genre of the city panegyric, for example, which was of particular importance in European antiquity, the Middle Ages, and early modern times, may be of immediate relevance to the reinvention, during the last decades, of the city poet laureate. The epistemological questions at the heart of the detective novel can be seen at work in a number of contemporary literary texts that thematize the uncertainties surrounding pollution and catastrophic climate change (see Ameel, “Antti Tuomainen”). And the formal techniques associated with the nineteenth-century newspaper sketch can be traced to experiences of modernity and also to innovations in visual media that continue to be at work to this day (see Huysen; Chapter 10 by Huysen in this volume).

Outline of the Companion

The *Companion* is divided in four sections, with three theoretical and methodological sections (“Key Concepts,” “Key Genres,” and “New Debates”) and a set of case studies focusing on individual cities, authors, or regions. The first section, following two introductory chapters, sets out key theoretical approaches to the city in literature: idling, the map, the palimpsest, aesthetics, and seriality. The aim of the first section is to lay the methodological groundwork of the *Companion*, to contextualize key concepts in earlier research, and to offer a critical assessment of existing theories in literary urban studies.

The second section focuses on a selection of key genres in literary urban studies: satire, the panegyric, the metropolitan miniature, the city novel, the crime novel, and the graphic novel. This section also provides insights into particular periods and cultural-geographical areas, with discussions of genre that are centered on particular contexts. Satire, for example, is approached by looking specifically at urban satire in classical Rome; the urban encomium is presented by focusing on medieval Italy.

The third, and longest, section consists of chapters that deal with individual cities or groups of cities. In this section, the aim was to include a variety of different literary cities, including second-tier cities, global capitals, provincial centers, cities in crisis, cities at their peak, postcolonial cities, cities in minor literatures, and more. The chapters in this section do not aim to offer comprehensive historical overviews of the literature of a particular city. They are, for the most part, structured around a particular approach. Johannesburg in literature is examined by way of theatre and urban planning (in Chapter 14 by Halligey); Mexico City is approached from the perspective of civil society (Chapter 20 by François); and literary Athens takes shape through character types in contemporary post-crisis literature (Chapter 18 by Pulkkinen).

The fourth and final section is structured around new debates and new directions in literary urban studies, including queer and trans theories, feminist approaches, postcolonial studies, trans-locality, and the future city.

Speaking metaphorically, literary urban studies as a field can be said to resemble the city itself: it is a space where people from all kinds of backgrounds and with a range of different aims and perspectives meet and interact. And it is never finished – there are always some structures to be refurbished or adapted, some fallow land to be repurposed, and new kinds of methodologies, approaches, and experiences to be incorporated, always in ways that build on what is already there. In both of these senses, this *Companion* hopes to resemble its object of study.

Notes

- 1 These are consistent with the thematic points of interest in the field of literary urban studies as they have been developed within the Association for Literary Urban Studies and within the Palgrave book series on literary urban studies. Here, as elsewhere when referring to general developments in literary urban studies, I rely heavily on the work carried out together with colleagues within ALUS.
- 2 For a more developed exposition of this argument in the context of literary second cities, see Finch et al. 5–11.

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