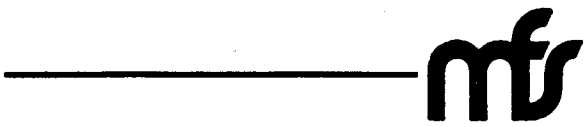
modern fiction studies

the modern novel and the city

spring 1978 $3.00
volume 24 number 1

mfs

THE MODERN JEWISH NOVEL AND THE CITY: FRANZ KAFKA, HENRY ROTH, AND AMOS OZ



Hana Wirth-Nesher

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE NOVEL and the rise of modern cities have taken place concurrently. As society has tended more and more to become concentrated in what we call cities,[1] the novel has been a major literary response, concerning itself with the complex interaction among individuals in groups and between individuals and society. Picaresque heroes may roam the countryside, but some of their most critical challenges, like those of Don Quixote in Barcelona, take place where men are sophisticated, population is dense, and anonymity makes intrigue and false appearances commonplace. Moll Flanders finding refuge on the teeming London streets, the small circle of reformers in Henry James's *The Bostonians*, the posh New York of Edith Wharton, or the monied residents of Howells' Back Bay: these are all contained in novels that take place in the city, but they are not city novels. In each of them, the city is a homogeneous closed system—the same faces keep turning up, and a small part of the city acts as a backdrop for the ac-

[1]According to René Dubos, in 1850 there were only four cities with more than 8 million inhabitants, but in 1960 there were 150 (*Beast or Angel? Choices That Make Us Human* [New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1974], p. 79).

tivities of one set of inhabitants. The city as it appears in the modern novel about the city is a different sort of place—it is heterogeneous, sprawling, and complex, and it elicits particular behavior on the part of its inhabitants.

First, it is important to distinguish between a novel that takes place in a city, but where it functions merely as background, and a novel about the city. To do so, it is necessary to examine a few pertinent definitions. For the purpose of this paper, I am interested in two perspectives of the city—sociological, the city as a particular form of human interaction, and architectural, the city as a particular arrangement of man-made forms in space.[2] My intent is to show how social interaction and space in the city are translated into style in the novel. The social and spatial perspectives will obviously overlap, as form can condition human behavior, while behavior also affects the form that the environment takes. "For sociological purposes," writes Louis Wirth in his seminal essay "Urbanism as a Way of Life," "a city may be defined as a relatively large, dense, and permanent settlement of socially heterogeneous individuals."[3] In attempting to define urbanism as a mode of living, Wirth goes on to make the following observation:

> The multiplication of numbers of persons in interaction, makes full contact of personalities impossible. The result is a "schizoid" property of urban personality. Urbanites meet in highly segmented roles. Their relations are secondary rather than primary. Contacts are impersonal, superficial, transitory, and segmental, leading to reserve, indifference, a blasé outlook and the immunization of one's self against the claims of others.[4]

Heterogeneity is the key term here, helping us to see why a well-known novel like Howells' *The Rise of Silas Lapham,* while set in Boston, is not really about the city. In his depiction of the self-made moral American businessman and his family's struggle for social status, he makes no mention of the diverse population of Boston at the time. In Lapham's Boston, the same small cast of characters continues to appear, and all action is concentrated among an elite group of Back Bay socialites. Boston, for Howells, is still a town, self-contained and homogenous. In

---

[2]Among the very few book length works which discuss the city and the novel is Blanche Housman Gelfant, *The American City Novel* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1954.) Gelfant's approach is sociological, and she examines a typical manner of life characteristic of the city as a whole. She also distinguishes between a "local color city novel" where "characters act against a static urban setting that is not the vital and necessary condition for their acts" and city novels, which she groups into three categories: "portrait" revealing the city through a single character; "synoptic" revealing the city as a personality; "ecological" focusing upon a neighborhood or city block.

As distinguished from that of Gelfant's book, my method consists of discovering how style is an intermediary linking both the social *and* spatial dimensions of the city.

[3]Louis Wirth, "Urbanism as a Way of Life," *American Journal of Sociology,* 44 (July, 1938), 1-24.

[4]Wirth, p. 60, reprinted in Robert Gutman and David Popenoe, eds., *Neighborhood, City, and Metropolis* (New York: Random House, 1970).

contrast, novels about the city, like Henry James's *The Princess Cassamassima* or Saul Bellow's *Mr. Sammler's Planet* include the heterogeneity and the resulting "urban personality" with its segmented roles and feelings of alienation from each other.[5]

As far as spatial definitions of the city go, Kevin Lynch has thus far offered one of the best: "Like a piece of architecture, the city is a construction in space, but one of vast scale, a thing perceived only in the course of long spans of time."[6] This suggests that the city is a temporal art form—a construction, like a novel—that is never experienced in its totality, but perpetually offers new angles of visions, and new vistas, much like the experience of reading and rereading. Lynch is interested in the mental image of a city held by its citizens, what he calls its legibility, "the ease with which its parts can be recognized and can be organized into a coherent pattern."[7]

Cities, of course, did not become dense, large, and socially heterogeneous, only in this century.[8] We should not, as Wirth cautions us, confuse modern capitalism and industrialism with urbanism, for there were certainly pre-industrial cities.[9] As a functioning presence in literature, however, the city did not appear in the novel as more than background until characters began to manifest the behavior that sociologists have been identifying as peculiarly urban and until those characters became conscious of the city as heterogeneous and so vast that it could not be perceived at one time. This is far more likely to occur when the author himself has had such an experience, and this in turn most likely when the writer has been by dint of the role society and history have assigned him an outsider, a minority member, or one who feels strongly the fragmented, secretive, and unfamiliar aspects of the city.

Because the city as a dense heterogeneous society tends to instill in its inhabitants the sense of a threatening "other," the modern Jewish novel becomes a classic example of how the city functions symbolically in modern literature. Like Leopold Bloom in Joyce's *Ulysses,* who roams the streets of Dublin as an outsider because he is a Jew, the characters in the novels I have chosen to discuss, Henry Roth's *Call It Sleep* (1970), Franz Kafka's *The Trial* (1925), and Amos Oz's *My Michael* (1934), never lose their sense of strangeness in the urban environment. If

[5]Here are a few examples of city novels which are of the same sort of the three I discuss in that space and social interaction are translated into style: Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*; Theodore Dreiser, *Sister Carrie*; and Charles Dickens, *Bleak House*.

[6]Kevin Lynch, *The Image of the City* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1960), p. 1.

[7]Lynch, p. 3.

[8]René Dubos has pointed out that there were cities more than 5000 years ago. Babylon, for example, numbered more than 200,000 inhabitants in the 6th century B.C. (*Beast or Angel?*, p. 77).

[9]It is certainly an exaggeration to say, as Gelfant does, that modern technology has produced the city.

heterogeneity is a distinguishing factor between the town and the city, then the perspective of the city from a character who is painfully aware of being unintegrated reveals a great deal about the place of the city in the modern novel.

These novels are representative in terms of both the Jewish and urban experience. Certainly during recent history, the period of the modern novel, the Jews have been an urban people. This was largely due to earlier laws prohibiting land ownership by Jews in Europe and to the precarious status of Jewish communities. As a result, Jews could be and were periodically banished from their home countries.[10] The cities in these novels, New York, Jerusalem, and Prague, were and still are, with the exception of Prague, whose Jewish community was exterminated in the second world war, major urban centers of Jewish life in this century. And the novels set in these three cities provide three different twentieth-century urban experiences: poor immigrant neighborhoods (*Call It Sleep*), a politically divided city (*My Michael*), and a faceless mass bureaucracy (*The Trial*). Uniting these three city novels are a few common denominators all stemming from the "outsider" status of the characters: feelings of loneliness, alienation, insignificance, being lost, and a general dread and awe of that which underlies the city. In each analysis of these works, I have attempted to show how these feelings are transmuted, through differing concepts of space and society, into plot, characterization, and metaphor.

The only novel written by Henry Roth, *Call It Sleep,* was published in 1934 but did not receive its deserved critical acclaim until 1956, when it was named twice in a symposium of the *American Scholar* as one of "The Most Neglected Books of the Past 25 Years."[11] David Shearl, the book's main character and central consciousness, is six years old when he and his mother Genya arrive at Ellis Island to rejoin his father Albert who immigrated from Poland several years before them. The Shearls, like others who were part of the massive wave of Jewish immigration from Eastern Europe during the early part of this century, settled on New York's lower East Side and Brownsville in Brooklyn.

Written in the indirect free style so that the perspective is always that of the child with the exception of a Prologue and one chapter seen

[10]In his description of eighteenth-century Frankfurt, Howard Morley Sachar writes in *The Course of Modern Jewish History* (New York: Dell, 1958), p. 25: "But as the traveler continued down the long business thoroughfare, turning from time to time to sample the wares in crooked little side streets, he found his way barred by what appeared to be yet another small city within the larger urban area, a dwarfed, walled-off collection of alleys and creaking ancient buildings, its ugliness and loneliness in marked contrast to the warmth and charm of greater Frankfurt. . . . This little encincture—a hideous anomaly in one of Europe's most dynamic market communities—was the Judengasse, the ghetto of the Jews."

Sachar also analyzes the place of the Jew in the West after the formal emancipation from the ghetto in Western Europe and during the new ghettoization in the Pale of Eastern Europe.

[11]*Call It Sleep* was named by both Leslie Fiedler and Alfred Kazin.

through the eyes of a rabbi,[12] *Call It Sleep* begins in 1906 with David's arrival when he is six years old and takes place over three years. Most Jewish immigrants would indeed find their way to the East Side with its dense tenements, crowded streets, and thriving Yiddish culture. Here is Irving Howe's description of the East Side about the time that the Shearls arrived:

In 1890, within the small space bounded by the Bowery on the west, the river and its warehouses on the east, Houston on the north and Monroe on the south, there were some two dozen Christian churches, a dozen synagogues (most Jewish congregations were storefronts or in tenements), about fifty factories and shops (exclusive of garment establishments, most of which were west of the Bowery or hidden away in cellars and flats), ten large public buildings, twenty public and parochial schools—and one tiny park, on Grant and East Broadway. Gangs of German boys pressed down from the north, Irish from the south. A dominant impression of the Jewish quarter, shared by immigrants and visitors alike, was of fierce congestion, a place in which the bodily pressures of other people, their motions and smells and noises seemed always to be assaulting one. Of space for privacy and solitude, there was none.[13]

The first chapter opens with David's frustration at not being able to reach the brass faucet of the kitchen sink to get himself a drink of water:

Standing before the kitchen sink and regarding the brass faucets that gleamed so far, each with a bead of water at its nose, slowly swelling, falling, David again became aware that this world had been created without thought of him.[14]

From this opening statement, it is apparent that Roth will use the child as a representative of immigrant status in the New World, and he does so successfully, for to the greenhorn in New York, vulnerable to exploitation, disease, and danger, it did indeed seem (as Howe's descriptive details make abundantly evident) that the world was created without thought of him. Through David's naive piecing together of information, we learn that his mother Genya had had an unhappy romance with a Gentile in her native Poland, who had then abandoned her to marry a wealthy Polish Christian. All that remains of that moment in her past is a picture of corn flowers purchased from a peddler and reminding her of the landscape where she was in love and of the day she hid among the cornflowers to witness her lover riding off in the carriage of his fiancée. It serves as both a nosegay of early romance and a rebuke for her having sinned against her people in associating with a Gentile.

---

[12]After David's futile search for holiness in his urban world leads to his fabricating a story about his past that is obviously heretical, Roth gives the reader the rabbi's thoughts in order to present the deterioration of the traditional Jewish community through more discerning eyes than those of David.

[13]Irving Howe, *World of Our Fathers* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976), p. 70.

[14]Henry Roth, *Call It Sleep* (New York: Avon, 1934), p. 9. Future references will be cited in the text.

Eventually, we learn that Albert, the bitter, cynical man whom Genya married, also has something to hide—he had watched his father being gored to death by a bull without coming to his aid. On the wall of their tenement apartment, a set of bull's horns provides a reminder both of Albert Shearl's strength and virility before he came to be bullied by others in the New World and of his sin, for he believes that he murdered his own father. There is little love between Albert and Genya, but great dependency, for Genya knows Albert's secret, and he eventually, through David's distorted mumblings in Hebrew school, learns of hers. This is not the place to enter into a discussion of the obvious Freudian implications of this book, but it becomes clear early in the novel that the non-Jewish world is a great threat to the Shearls. David inherits this legacy in his own way by making friends with a Gentile boy who uses him as a pander to "play dirty" with David's cousins. This reinforces in David what he has been saying to himself throughout the novel, "Never trust anyone."

But is the city that gives this novel its energy, the heterogeneous city. This is a noisy book with a cacophony of voices, all with heavy accents: the Jewish street peddler, the German gangs, the Irish cop, the Italian street cleaner. The Jewish immigrant, who brought with him a fear of the Gentile world, had no trouble adjusting to both the friction and tolerance of city life. All of David's conflicts occur when he leaves his own neighborhood and he encounters children from other ethnic backgrounds. The two most significant confrontations are with a group of three boys older than he who force him to throw a sheet-zinc sword between the tracks of the elevated train and with Leo, the Polish boy who introduces him to a way of life with fewer restrictions but more license and vulgarity. In the first incident, David has just left his street to go down to the river's bank in order to perform a Passover ritual, the burning of unleavened bread, the *chumitz*. By doing so in a non-residential part of the city where he can sit down to watch a graceful tugboat, he leaves himself open to encounters with other boys who are playing along this edge of the city. Recognizing that he is a Jew, despite his protestations—"I'm a Hungarian. My mudder 'n' fodder's Hungarian. We're de janitors"—they taunt him and finally bully him into throwing the sword between the tracks and releasing power. "Like a paw ripping through all the stable fibres of the earth, power, gigantic, fetterless, thudded into day! And light, unleashed, terrific light bellowed out of iron lips" (p. 253). David rushes back to Avenue D where he lives, but the hidden power furtive beneath the tracks has left an impression.

In his second confrontation David is befriended by Leo, a Polish boy who is not guarded by an over-protective mother as David is and who shows him the wonders of life from the roof of his brownstone, the

joys of kites and skates, for example. In the New York cityscape, the roof becomes a new spatial environment, a symbol of freedom and power:

> David could tell by looking at him, that the other had come up to the roof out of assurance—this was only another phase of his life. David himself had come up tentatively, timidly, because there was no other place to go. . . . He had never seen his face before—that blond hair, those blue eyes didn't belong to Ninth Street." (p. 300)

Meeting Leo allows David to step out of his territory, both socially and geographically. Unlike the cellar, where he has crouched before out of fear, the roof is the place of assurance. The laws of territoriality are at work here, and the roof clearly belongs to Leo; David feels like an intruder. Roth's four section headings—the cellar, the picture, the coal, and the rail—are all symbolic of the cityscape from David's perspective. Three of them, the cellar, coal, and rail, are images from an underground, a murky world below the surface of the city, dark places which David fears, but also his only refuge. Coal, the source of light and warmth, is stored in the black cellar, just as sparks of power are contained in the dark rails beneath the city pavement. The only allusion to nature in this book is a picture, bought in the treeless streets and hanging on the dingy wall of the tenement room.

Roth makes excellent use of what E. K. Brown has called "the expanding symbol"[15] in his development of the coal, rail, and light imagery. As the one source of holiness in his dark world, his mother, becomes tarnished by his suspicions of her "playing dirty" with Luter the part-time boarder, by his awareness of sexuality between his parents, and by the voyeurism of boys who watch his mother bathe, David turns elsewhere to find God in the city. Struck by the Biblical passage read in his *heder* class which describes the angel purifying Isaiah by touching his tongue with a burning coal, David links the coal, the darkness of the world beneath the city streets, and the spark generated by striking the subway rails. Despite the harsh sarcastic reproach by his teacher—" 'Fool!' he gasped at length. 'Go beat your head on a wall! God's light is not between cartracks.' "—David escapes the wrath of his father at the book's end by seeking God between the tracks. Taking the iron ladle that is both the instrument of his father's physical prowess (David cannot forget the day he watched his father beat two men who stole milk from his truck) and an image of his mother's forsaking him, he thrusts it between the tracks and is burnt by the electric charge. "Never trust anyone."

In addition to the danger of leaving his own ethnic group and of

---

[15]E. K. Brown, *Rhythm in the Novel* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1950).

turning to the city's technology for security, David also faces the danger of leaving his own territory, his neighborhood, and being unable to find his way back. Two factors contribute to his inability to return home, one social and the other spatial: dialect and monotony. His heavily accented English makes it impossible for someone outside his own ethnic group to understand his address; helpful passersby interpret his "Boddeh Stritt," as Potter, Bodder, Bahrdee, and Botter streets. Secondly, the monotonous city layout affords him no landmarks by which to orient himself; he had counted on the telegraph poles to do that. "Though he conned every house on either side of the crossing, no single landmark stirred his memory. They were all alike—wooden houses and narrow sidewalks to his right and left. A shiver of dismay ran through him." David's city is homogeneous architecturally but heterogeneous socially. He is caught in a dreary labyrinth with inadequate clues to guide him. "Everybody knew Boddeh Stritt. There was a grocery store in it and a candy store in it and a barber shop." This lack of overview about the city is not restricted to a child like David; his mother also has no knowledge of New York beyond "Boddeh Stritt." Only his daring Aunt Bertha takes him all the way uptown to the Metropolitan Museum where they spend more time worrying about finding their way out than enjoying the works of art. Every minute in the museum, they trail behind another couple: " 'We must look at things with only one eye,' she cautioned him, 'the other must always be on them!' " (p. 148). The move from rural life, the Jewish *shtetl* or village, to the city and enlightenment, a prevalent theme in Jewish literature of the nineteenth century, has been translated here as a move from the provinces of the neighborhood to the secular world of the city beyond that border.

Only in the prologue, described in the third person omniscient narration, is there a major city landmark, the Statue of Liberty, which disappears from sight as soon as the immigrants leave Ellis Island. Roth's language here serves as an overture to the theme of the city's cold, metallic, and impersonal atmosphere.

> And before them, rising on her high pedestal from the scaling swarmy brilliance of sunlit water to the west, Liberty. The spinning disk of the late afternoon sun slanted behind her, and to those on board who gazed, her features were charred with shadow, her depths exhausted, her masses ironed to one single plane. Against the luminous sky the rays of her halo were sparks of darkness roweling the air; shadow flattened the torch she bore to a black cross against flawless light—the blackened hilt of a broken sword. (p. 14)

Notice that she appears as a piece of technology, who is "charged," "ironed," and "blackened." Only in this prologue are the immigrants positioned geographically in relation to the Jersey coast-line, Brooklyn, and Ellis Island. Once they enter the streets of their own neighborhoods, the city is transformed into a mysterious labyrinth.

Call It Sleep ends with an eloquent reiteration of the density and heterogeneity of the city. Right before he falls asleep after his escape from death, David once again sees, hears, and feels the moments of his pain as he lay on the street with the electricity charging through him. First, his tightly closed eyelids strike sparks characteristic of his cityscape —"glint on tilted beards, shine on roller skates, dry light on gray stone stoops," "glitter of rails," and "oily sheen on the night-smooth rivers." These lights are generated by metal, stone, or polluted water. Then he feels enveloped by sounds: "the shrill cry," "the scream of fear," "the bells," "the roar of crowds." But nothing expresses the variety, anonymity, density, and ultimately the degradation of city life on the East Side more than the urban synecdoche—David's vision of shoes and feet as he lies prostrate and helpless on the cobblestones.

It was only toward sleep one knew himself still lying on the cobbles, felt the cobbles under him and over him and scudding ever toward him like a black foam, the perpetual blur of shod and running feet, broken shoes, new shoes, stubby, pointed, caked, polished, buniony, pavement-beveled, lumpish, under skirts, under trousers, shoes, over one and through one, and feel them all and feel, not pain, not terror, but strangest triumph, strangest acquiescence. One might as well call it sleep. He shut his eyes.

Jerusalem, Golden Dome of Mosque "Omar"

Few cities could be as different as Jerusalem and New York. In the American city, the iron grid of asphalt and the dense jigsaw of buildings have completely conquered the island, obliterating all traces of nature. But in Jerusalem, despite its centuries of civilizations, it is the hills that always dominate, that appear ready to envelop and crush the city at will, and that outlast each layer of shards and stone. The winds of the Judean hills, sweeping over the city like God's whirlwind in the book of Job, overawe man's pretensions and dwarf even the most bold and brilliant of his structures.

In this setting of gold and silver domes and stone bulwarks and in this meeting place of the Levant and the West, Israeli novelist Amos Oz has situated the events of his novel, *My Michael.* Published in Israel in 1968 and in English translation two years later, the novel is the first person narrative of Hannah Gonen, an Israeli born young woman who leaves her studies in literature to marry an aspiring geologist, Michael. The rest is a tale of frustration. Michael, Hannah soon discovers, is a sterile, excessively earnest academic whose obsession with identifying rocks she finds incomprehensible and his goals for scholarly publication and university advancement petty. Hannah can find no outlet for her sensual longings—her husband seems distant and dull, and the city treats her with stony indifference. The novel is a record of her disappointments, neuroses, and fantasies. Since Hannah grew up in Jerusalem before it was partitioned into Jewish and Arab sectors after the Israeli War of Independence in 1948, she can remember neighborhoods, streets, and Arab inhabitants who now exist for her only behind barbed wire, stone walls, and in her own mind. Her favorite fantasy, a sexual and political one, recurs throughout the book and is its culmination: two old playmates, Arab twins Aziz and Halil who are her subjects in an imaginary kingdom, by her own command slip into Israel at night carrying explosives, commit sabotage, and return to her at dawn.

The city of Jerusalem is not merely background in this novel; it plays a dominant role in that its characteristics are intertwined with the psychology of the central consciousness. It is important to note here the geography and terrain that Hannah Gonen inhabits in the Jerusalem of the 1950's. First, it is a divided city, with the ancient walled town, famous ancient sites such as the Western Wall of Solomon's Temple and the Tower of David, and major hills such as Mount Scopus and the Mount of Olives in the Arab city under the rule of Jordan. The Jewish city, outside and to the west of the city's walls, is relatively new and for the most part of uniform tan stone buildings covering hills of the same hue. (There is a city ordinance requiring that all buildings be constructed of the local stone.) Surrounding the city topographically are the Judean hills, vast stretches of bare, dramatic hills that bring cool winds

Jerusalem, Ancient Tomb in Kidron Valley

to the city and are covered, for the most part, with shadows and rock, not forest. During the 1950's when this novel takes place, the city of Jerusalem occupies the tip of a narrow corridor of Israeli territory and the hills surrounding it on three sides are all Arab lands. The Hebrew Jerusalemite sees those hills as not only naturally formidable, but also as politically hostile. The city itself in its totality is heterogeneous, a mixture of Jew, Moslem, and Christian. Its places of worship encompass many cults and sects, and its buildings house Armenians and Poles, Germans and Arabs. As in many cities, there is tolerance but little interaction among the inhabitants of different cultural or ethnic groups, but this city has the additional dimension of an impermeable barrier between two hostile populations.

What all of this means is that Hannah Gonen lives in a city that may be fairly homogeneous as a section but is heterogeneous organically. Unlike the "other" of ethnic neighborhoods accessible to all in a city like New York, Jerusalem has an invisible hostile area hidden behind hills and walls. But it clearly remains a threatening "other" whose presence is felt even in the parts it does not inhabit, by the force of

memory, guilt, and fear. And even in the modern Jewish city of Jerusalem, a variety of cultures dwell side by side. Hannah mentally runs through some of the neighborhoods:

> Bayit Vagan, an isolated hill-fort where a violin plays behind windows kept shuttered all day, and at night the jackals howl to the south. Tense silence broods in Rehavia, in Saadya Gaon street, after the sun has set. At a lighted window sits a gray-haired sage at his work, his fingers tapping at the keys of his typewriter. Who could imagine that at the other end of this very street stands the district of Shaarei Hesed, full of barefoot women wandering at night between colored sheets flapping in the breeze, and sly cats slipping from yard to yard? Is it possible that the old man playing tunes on his German typewriter cannot sense them? Who could imagine that beneath his western balcony spreads the Valley of the Cross, an ancient grove creeping up the slope, clutching at the outermost houses of Rehavia as if about to enfold and smother them in its luxuriant vegetation?[16]

By most social criteria, *My Michael* is surely a novel about the city.

In Jerusalem, social and spatial features will overlap even more dramatically than in other cities, chiefly because the layout of the city is a constant reminder that its inhabitants are at war and that one group is physically almost completely surrounded by the other. We will return to this later. The hills themselves are indeed dominant in all of Hannah's meditations about her life. During one of her early walks with Michael she records:

> Shadowy hills showed in the distance at the ends of the street.
>
> "This isn't a city," I said. "it's an illusion. We're crowded in on all sides by the hills —Castel, Mount Scopus, Augusta Victoria, Nebi Samwil, Miss Carey. All of a sudden the city seems very insubstantial. (p. 26)

For Hannah, "In the after glow of sunset the Jerusalem hills seemed to be plotting some mischief" (p. 32). At nightfall in Jerusalem, "at the ends of the streets you can glimpse the brooding hills waiting for darkness to fall on the shuttered city" (p. 108). In her fantasies, these hills are brooding not only as natural phenomena but as enemy territory: "Worn commando uniforms with greases. A blue vein stands out on Halil's forehead. . . . Aziz uncurls and throws. The dry shimmer of the explosion. The hills echo and re-echo. . ." (p. 105).

But there are other meaningful spatial dimensions of the city. Hannah Gonen lives in an urban area where dwellings are visible miles away, because they cling to bare hills, but at close range they are mysterious, because Middle Eastern architecture frequently means inner courtyards and outer walls. In fact, there are layers of walls—an outer city wall, the walls of a compound, the outer wall of a courtyard, and then the walls of a dwelling itself.

---

[16]Amos Oz, *My Michael* (New York: Knopf, 1970), p. 108. Future references will be cited in the text.

And the walls. Every quarter, every suburb harbors a hidden kernel surrounded by high walls. Hostile strongholds barred to passers-by. Can one ever feel at home here in Jerusalem? I wonder, even if one lives here for a century? City of enclosed courtyards, her soul sealed up behind bleak walls crowned with jagged glass. There is no Jerusalem. . . . There are shells within shells and the kernel is forbidden. . . . I cannot know what lies in wait for me in the depths of the Russian Compound, behind the walls of Schneller Barracks, in the monastic lairs of Ein Kerem or in the enclave of the High Commissioner's palace on the Hill of Evil Counsel.

She also lives in a city that, because of its ancient roots, has a visible modern outer layer and centuries of hidden layers beneath the surface. That her husband Michael is a geologist adds a note of irony to Hannah's predicament: he too is seeking mysteries beneath the earth's surface, but they are the secrets of natural materials, not of the needs and forces of man. Furthermore, Michael is incapable of translating his work metaphorically to search for the inner needs of humans, in this case of his wife's mind. Here is Hannah's perception of her husband's work:

Beneath the surface of the earth, opposed endogenic and exogenic forces are perpetually at work. The thin sedimentary rocks are in a continuous process of disintegration under the force of pressure. Beneath the crust of hard rocks rages the blazing nucleus. . . . (p. 16)

But the outstanding emotion that Jerusalem elicits from Hannah is that of being lost (as David actually is lost for a time). In discussing the city as a construction in space, Kevin Lynch has observed that we find pleasure in labyrinths only under two conditions: 1) there must be no danger of never coming out; 2) surprises must occur in an over-all framework, and confusions must be small regions in a visible whole. Without these conditions, he writes, we experience the sense of being lost which "means much more than geographical uncertainty; it carries overtones of disaster."[17] For Hannah Gonen, the "labyrinth of temporary dwellings, huts and sheds leaning in smouldering anger against the gray stone" (p. 110) cannot be followed randomly with the pleasure this usually affords the city dweller, because it can lead to barbed wire, barricades, and no man's land. Labyrinths are frightening in Jerusalem for to abandon directions even temporarily can be dangerous. Hannah laments "the overpowering arbitrariness of the intertwining alleys" (p. 110), just as she fears arriving at the heart of the labyrinth.

Nor is she able to see her small region, modern Jerusalem in the State of Israel, as part of a visible whole. Spread over a number of hills, some of which reach into Arab territory, Jerusalem seems infinite, a borderless city. "There is no end to Jerusalem," Hannah thinks, gazing

[17]Lynch, *Image of the City*, p. 4.

at its settlements in the far hills "hidden amid her everwhispering pine trees" and by "bluish vapor" that comes from the Judean desert (p. 107). The hills fade into the invisible places she can never see. Even in her dreams, she imagines herself and Michael in Jericho, an Arab city a few miles east of Jerusalem. Moreover, these dreams often end in a devastating earthquake toppling her own city. The paradox about the city for Hannah is that on the one hand the section of it that she inhabits is too familiar—"Maybe it's a pity that Jerusalem is such a small city that you can't get lost in it," she says to Michael as they immediately identify their location after a taxi ride in the rain—while on the other hand, as a total city in her mind, it contains so much that is unknown that she feels immeasurably lost. Metaphors for this emotion always stress the city's vulnerability: "Villages and suburbs surround Jerusalem in a close circle, like curious bystanders surrounding a wounded woman lying in the road: Nebi Samwil, Shaafat, Sheikh Jarrah, Isawiyeh, Augusta Victoria, Wadi Joz, Silwan, Sur Baher, Beit Safafa. If they clenched their fists the city would be crushed" (p. 111).

It is clear that Oz is using Hannah to depict the isolation and fear that many Israelis feel partially as a country in a state of siege and partially as a small enclave of Western culture in a vast area of cultures and landscapes unlike what they have known.[18] Perhaps this is why the Arab names of villages are repeated throughout, for even their sound is foreign and exotic to European ears. In the north of Jerusalem, the narrator tells us, an elderly lady pianist practices ceaselessly new recital pieces of Shubert and Chopin. Farther north, "the solitary tower of Nebi Samwil stands. . .motionless beyond the border and stares night and day at the elderly pianist. . . . At night the tower chuckles, the tall thin tower chuckles, as though whispering to himself 'Chopin and Schubert . . .' " (p. 108).

Both the social and spatial aspects of Jerusalem in this novel express symbolically the awe and insecurity of its inhabitants, particularly during the period during which the novel takes place. Hannah Gonen continually asks existential questions that finally lead her to imagine self-annihilation. Jerusalem, as a Biblical visionary city and as a modern metropolis with borders and neighborhoods, serves as a perfect image for that frame of mind. Yehuda Amichai, the Israeli poet, has written

"Jerusalem is built on vaulted foundations
of a held-back shout. Without a reason

[18]Since Oz's novel concerns itself entirely with the European population of Israel which comprised the large majority of Israelis during the 1950's, I also am not including the North African Jewish population in this discussion. Furthermore, most Jewish literature has stressed Jerusalem as a Jewish city, where the Jew need no longer feel isolation or fear. Oz's treatment of the city is both ironic and unusual.

for the shout, the foundations would give, the city would totter;
if the shout is shouted, Jerusalem would explode skyward."[19]

The held-back shout is Job's perhaps, not daring to ask again.

If there is a novel whose pervading sense from first page to last is that of being irretrievably lost, it is Franz Kafka's *The Trial.* Few novels seem to depend as little on an external environment as this one, since it appears to be the fantasy or dream of a paranoid middle-class bureaucrat. The characters are incomplete sketches, and the shifts of setting defy the concepts of time and place that we are accustomed to in our world and in the worlds of novels. Yet this is an urban nightmare, for it is Lynch's urban labyrinth with no exit. It contains the moods of the previous two novels and magnifies them to a psychic state bordering on the absurd. Joseph K., the central protagonist, is arrested one morning for an unidentified crime, tried by authorities he cannot locate, and finally executed. The novel, written as a kind of dreamlike parable, records the futile efforts of Joseph K. to discover his crime, his prosecutors at the Court of Inquiry, and the source of his guilt. It is the fantasy of a paranoiac who believes his every move is observed and his fate manipulated by invisible conspirators.

Nothing is known of Joseph K. except his state of arrest and his immediate city environment. All of his relationships with others are superficial and one-dimensional. The other people inhabiting his world have a tendency to appear once or a few times and then to disappear completely, a characteristic of social interaction in the city. A man intrudes upon K.'s only refuge, his room, arrests him, and is never seen again. There is an endless flow of nondescript persons whose names may appear only in fragments or who may be identified solely by their occupation: the lawyer, the priest, the Manager, or Block, the tradesman. The segmentation of personality in the city which results in social interactions between roles, not between rounded human beings, is portrayed forcefully throughout *The Trial.* Typical of this impersonality and segmentation in the city is the recurring incident of the strange woman silently watching him from her window in the building opposite his own. K. watched from his own pillow "the old lady opposite, who seemed to be peering at him with a curiosity unusual even for her. . . ."[20] K.'s sole knowledge of her is what can be inferred from her behavior as a spying neighbor. After his arrest, "he could still see the old woman, who had now dragged to the window an even older man, whom she was holding around the waist" (p. 97).

---

[19]Yehudah Amichai, "Jerusalem," *Songs of Jerusalem and Myself,* trans. Harold Shimmel (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), p. 57.

[20]Franz Kafka, *The Trial* (New York: Schocken, 1925), p. 1. Future references will be cited in the text.

Although this is not a city depicted through realistic descriptions of neighborhoods or ethnic groups, K. has trouble understanding some of the strangers he meets; he is also ordered into totally unfamiliar parts of town where poor families lean out of tenement windows and debauched adolescent girls congregate in stuffy stairwells. In fact, much of the seamy atmosphere of this novel comes from the odd assortment of miserable people in demeaning situations, such as those waiting hopelessly in the lobbies of the courts of law. "They did not stand quite erect, their backs remained bowed, their knees bent, they stood like the street beggars" (p. 63). When K. obeys his first summons to appear in court, he finds himself in houses "almost exactly alike, high gray tenements inhabited by poor people."

In such surroundings, K. struggles to preserve his individuality, the struggle which Georg Simmel has described as man's chief concern in the city where, Simmel says, "life is composed of more and more of those impersonal contents and offerings which tend to displace the genuine personal colorations and incomparabilities" and where the individual "must summon utmost uniqueness to preserve his most personal core." K. is a man who cannot do that, who succumbs to the impersonal, vacuous, and monotonous world of the city. He is an example of Simmel's blasé urbanite whose perpetual confrontation with intense nervous stimulation makes him incapable of reacting to new sensations with appropriate energy.[21]

In his own boarding house, there is a turnover of strangers that never permits him really to know anyone and that produces jealously guarded privacy, secrecy, suspicion, and rumors about the boarders. Joseph K. feels like a stranger in his own city, not an unpredictable state of mind for a character created by an author who was a Jew in the Christian Austro-Hungarian Empire, whose lack of knowledge about Judaism made him uncomfortable in his own culture,[22] and who was a German speaker in a Czech speaking area. Interaction with others is also made difficult in this work by people frequently appearing in crowds or at distant windows.

The sordid atmosphere is derived in part from the cityscape Kafka provides as a setting and as a metaphor for the mind of Joseph K. Almost all of the novel, with the exception of a few street scenes and

[21]Georg Simmel, *The Sociology of Georg Simmel,* trans. Kurt Wollf (New York: The Free Press, 1950), pp. 410, 414, 422.

[22]In a letter to his father Kafka wrote, "But what sort of Judaism was it that I got from you?" He called it an "insignificant scrap." "At bottom the faith that ruled your life," he wrote, "consisted in your believing in the unconditional rightness of the opinions of a certain class of Jewish society, and hence actually, since these opinions were part and parcel of your own nature, in believing in yourself. Even in this there was still Judaism enough, but it was too little to be handed on to a child . . ." (*Letter to His Father* [New York: Schocken Press, 1953], pp. 75, 81).

the execution, takes place indoors, in closed rooms with a minimum of light and air. When he visits the lawyer, it is always dark, and Titorelli's room is hermetically sealed. "It's almost unbearable," K. complains. "Couldn't we open the window?" "No, replied the painter, 'It's only a sheet of glass let into the roof, it can't be opened' " (p. 155). The spaces in the book are usually too small for the number of people occupying them, such as the gallery of jurors at the first court, whose heads are bent forward because of the low ceiling of the attic, and the crowded stairwell on K.'s way to visit Titorelli, the painter. There is almost no mention at all of nature; instead, scenes take place in the sterile atmosphere of the bank, the seedy boarding house, and the courts of law, which are always located in stifling attics. K's environment is marked by density, darkness, stale air, and endless stairs.

As in *My Michael,* Joseph K. broods about hidden places in his environment, about life behind closed doors. Leaving the bank one evening, "he heard convulsive sighs behind a door, which he had always taken to be the door of a lumber-room, although he had never opened it" (p. 83). Behind this door in a low-ceilinged room, K. finds a whipper flogging the two warders who had come to arrest him. When he flings open the door on the following day, he comes upon an exact reenactment of the scene from the night before. "Clear that lumber room out, can't you?" he shouts at the clerks, but no one else seems to be sensitive to the muffled shrieks and secret crimes that take place behind closed doors. In the parable of the doorkeeper, commonly read as a metaphor for the inaccessibility of divine Law or ultimate authority, the vehicle is a city—a corridor of endless doors, each with a doorkeeper who, like all bureaucrats, has only limited responsibility. As a result, the seeker spends his entire life on the front stoop of the first door, never gaining admittance and never learning the secrets *behind* those doors.

The Trial's cityscape is an endless labyrinth, an apt metaphor for the legal and psychological labyrinth that has trapped Joseph K. Not only is there no escape for him, but an added sinister twist in this labyrinth is that even when he really retraces his steps, as in his return to the first Court of Inquiry, nothing is ever the same. A labyrinth with no permanent landmarks—the ultimate urban nightmare. No clues are available to locate that confusion on a map of any sort: Where does the Court of Inquiry end? Who has the ultimate authority? Even the lawyers take on each case in segments, no one person ever seeing its development from beginning to end. Division of labor in K.'s city has trapped man in an endless web of bureaucracy. Comprehensive overviews do not exist in K.'s world, only rickety stairs leading to ramshackle attics that go on forever.

In terms of the city as an external metaphor of a state of mind in *The Trial,* the ending reinforces the feeling of being uncertain, abandoned, and lost. Joseph K. is executed, not in the cramped quarters of the inner city, but on the dreary outskirts, that no man's land that is neither populated enough to provide human support nor rural enough to provide the inspiration of nature. Kafka's symbolic language is like that which Erich Fromm discusses in his example of an expression of the mood of being lost and deserted: "You see yourself in the outskirts of a city just before dawn, the streets are empty except for a milk wagon, the houses look poor, the surroundings are unfamiliar. . . ."[23] Two executioners drag Joseph K. to the outskirts at night: "So they came quickly out of town, which at this point merged almost without transition into the open fields. A small stone quarry, deserted and desolate, lay quite near to a still completely urban house" (p. 227). This is an area where open fields do not yet qualify as nature and where urban man locates some of the industry that supports city life, such as the stone quarry. Contributing to the loneliness of this moonlit night on the city's fringe are the unfullfilled expectations that K., or any of us, normally brings to an urban landscape—we expect inhabitants. Man-made structures require men; only urban paths can be perceived as deserted. So in this ugly midway point that contains neither the serenity of nature nor the company of humanity, Joseph K.'s loneliness, alienation, and sense of being lost end in his death.

In all three of these modern novels, the social and spatial experience of the city has been translated into style. For Roth, New York's lower East Side consists primarily of voices, and his style is garrulous, noisy, and colored by dialects overflowing into each other, like the shrill and guttural echoes in the courtyard of a highrise at dinnertime. The rapidity of his sentences, tripping over each other, conveys the city's density. In *My Michael,* Oz makes use of architecture and geography to wrap his central characters in an atmosphere of mystery, fear, and awe. Finally the overabundance of qualifiers in Kafka's prose create a feeling of uncertainty in the reader, while his vague descriptions, lacking in personal detail, express the monotony and vacuity of city life.

These novels are representative of both the Jewish and urban experience not only because, as mentioned before, they are about major centers of Jewish life and about three dominant city experiences in this century—the immigrant quarter, the divided city, and the bureaucratic structure. They are also representative in that they depict three different types of Jewish character in modern history and three different

[23]Erich Fromm, "The Nature of Symbolic Language," *The Forgotten Language* (New York: Holt Rinehart, & Winston) and reprinted in *The Norton Reader* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1973), p. 129.

states of being an "outsider." David Shearl, the immigrant child on New York's lower East Side, is part of the great wave of Jewish immigrants early in this century who came to what they believed was the golden land, *die goldene medinah;* he is a triple "outsider" as immigrant, Jew, and child. Hannah Gonen, the Israel born Jerusalemite, is the child of a powerful historical movement, Zionism, that achieved a few pyrrhic victories. Although she is in the Jewish homeland, its political structure and sometimes its bare earth seem to deny her presence there, keeping her an "outsider." Joseph K., the European bureaucrat and urbanite, deludes himself into believing he has become assimilated into the non-Jewish secular world. Kafka, the Jew alienated even from his own Jewishness, is a type of ultimate "outsider." The labels are, of course, reductive and by no means representative of all Jewish types of this century or even of Jewish novels. But each of these characters does reveal a strain of modern Jewish history and, more inclusively, of modern history insofar as much of it has been contained in an urban experience. Although K.'s nightmarish paranoia may be a symptom of Kafka's extreme sensitivity, paranoia did exist among Eastern European Jews between the world wars and was ultimately vindicated. And, of course, paranoia, the fear of vague, faceless, unknown forces pressing down on the individual, has often been the city experience of the lone, isolated soul.

In each of these modern city novels, urban man is an "outsider," spatially and socially. He is faced with layers of walls, of real stone, of dialect, of religion, and of law. The city in each case is an amorphous place, a state of mind marked by endless streets, stairs, or hills, and man's private space in that crowded universe is very small—a tenement kitchen, an apartment cubicle, a rented room facing a brick wall. And beneath that civilized frame, an underground renders all its structures precarious: the rails of the train beneath the sidewalks of New York, Michael's blazing nucleus beneath the earth's surface in Jerusalem, the dark chambers hidden behind the maze of doors in K.'s Prague. In each of these modern Jewish novels, the city is inseparable from the frame of mind of the characters and the vision of life held by the author. As in all works of fiction, they are tied to real places which are, by the cartography of the imagination, transformed into illusory cities on maps of our own making.