“Berlin is a skeleton which aches in the cold”: the city as fictional autobiography in Christopher Isherwood’s *Goodbye to Berlin*

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In *Christopher and His Kind*, his “revisionist” autobiography published in 1976, Christopher Isherwood partially debunks the well-known version of his bohemian sojourn as a British expatriate in Berlin from 1929 to 1933, where he had “gathered” the material that would form the subject matter of his autobiographical novels *Mr Norris Changes Trains* (1935) and *Goodbye to Berlin* (1939). The author, then in his early seventies, an American citizen, and a militant gay intellectual, put it quite bluntly by stating that “To Christopher, Berlin meant boys” (*CK* 10). The main motivation that prompted the promising young writer to experience the “abroad” of the agonising Weimar Republic in Berlin from 1929 to 1933 was in fact not so much the fascination for a mythical city of European culture, as its lure as an erotic pole of attraction, notorious for its sexual freedom. Berlin was a true centre of cultural and artistic innovation and vitality, and, at the same time, also a decadent, economically depressed and aesthetically drab place, which, nonetheless, provided inspiration and existential fodder to the maturing artist.

Isherwood, as many of his generation had done or were to do, also in other cities, fled to Berlin to pursue the personal freedom that, as an upper class homosexual, he could not find at home, and while there he also experienced the onset of one of the darkest periods of European history. It was in the aftermath of the rise to power of the Nazi Party, at the end of February 1933, the event which concludes the last section of the novel, “A
Berlin Diary", that Isherwood left Berlin definitively, never to return until after the second World War.

The city as the locus of history in the making, a city of history and the city itself as history: Goodbye to Berlin owes much of its literary reputation to this nexus. Berlin is foregrounded in this text as the elective site of an expatriation that was common to many other writers of the Thirties generation (Auden, Spender, MacNeice), where Isherwood pursued his personal quest for an identity as an artist and as a homosexual. Yet, even though Goodbye to Berlin is a novel of the city it is not altogether a novel about the city, not a valedictory elegy dedicated to it, as the suggestive title would have it. Rather, it displays a complex texture of themes and motifs which has the "world-city" of Berlin as its sustaining setting, structure and nexus, and which adopts a sophisticated textualisation of the city embedded in a primarily "realistic mode" and articulated from an autobiographical perspective.

The mutual interconnectedness of the urban and the textual, of city and text, is an informing principle of this fiction, and a subtly inflected one. The shared textuality of the urban and the literary is developed along thematic lines that stem from a basic autobiographical matrix: the city as the elected location for the construction of a personal, sexual and ideological identity, the structural identification between the narrating self - who is also an authorial projection - and the city metaphorized as body, and, finally, the city as illusion, artifice and cluster of isolated realities, in its turn related to a problematic caesura between individual and community. Furthermore, the elusive nature of the violence that pervades the city - at first imploded like its economy and then dramatically exploding as in the last section - the second "Berlin Diary" - is associated with the illusory transparency of the mimetic realism of the narrative that discloses - or better uncovers - polysemies and hidden depths of signification under the either colourful or drab surface of things, settings and characters.

In Goodbye to Berlin, then, the city and the text, both disjointed in separate though interrelated units, constitute the location of human his/stories cast over the disturbing scenario of a History which turns into nightmare with the rise of Nazism.

The novel is episodic, in Isherwood’s words, "a roughly continuous narrative" formed by six pieces, "the only existing fragments of his original project of a huge novel about pre-Hitler Berlin that was to be entitled
Die Verlorenen (The Lost) (GB, preface)”. In the prefatory note Isherwood defines the book as a “short loosely connected sequence of diaries and sketches”, and disclaims the autobiographical identification of the namesake narrator as well as of the characters. The first section, “A Berlin Diary (Autumn 1930)” is about the narrator’s life in the Nollendorfstrasse and his teaching a rich Berlin family, the second, “Sally Bowles” focuses on a flamboyant and bizarre English girl and on the Berlin demi-monde; “On Reugen Island” gives the account of the unstable homosexual relationship between a working-class German boy and a neurotic Englishman, and is the only episode that is not set in Berlin. The final two, “The Nowaks”, “The Landauers”, and the concluding “A Berlin Diary” depict the ominous background of the rise of the Nazis to power and the progressive collapse of the Berlin citizenship.

As a discontinuous, fragmented novel, Goodbye to Berlin is also the narrative of the discovery of a world-city, a metropolis the opaque and elusive surface of which it fathoms and which it aims to recreate imaginatively making use of some metonymies and metaphors, through the narration of a number of its private histories that are interrelated by the autobiographical first-person narrator. The episodic structure of the text, with its six separate sections, is in keeping with a treatment of the city as a displaced and disconnected reality where nobody and nothing is actually as it appears.

The text thus renders that ambiguity and ambivalence of the city which is one of its most important typifying traits, one that - to quote Burton Pike - “has been associated with the city since the beginning of Western literature” (Pike xiii) and of which, conversely, the city is a figure in literature (Pike 9):

Indeed, the image of the city stands as the great reification of ambivalence, embodying a complex of contradictory forces in both the individual and the collective Western minds. (Pike 8)

The very conception of the narrative revolves around this type of ambivalence, in so far as, through the medium of a first-person narrative, it presents and explores a city which in each of its every significant part, in its places, customs and attitudes, is but the outcome and effect of an impression. A city which ultimately is other than it seems, and which seems what is not. This also applies to the characters that people it and
who are portrayed in the sections of the novel, and this double coding of being and seeming - or rather of not-being - informs much of Isherwood’s narrative strategy.

Despite the markedly cinematic quality of this novel and of all Isherwood’s style, the city in *Goodbye to Berlin* is also theatrically connoted: it is a stage, where the dynamics of impersonation, posing and play-acting are constantly at work. The narrative in fact highlights the artificial quality of the urban and human *milieu* of Berlin by emphasizing an element of artificiality that is all-pervasive. Most notably, the frequent references to make-up, as in “Sally Bowles”, to travesty and more generally to deceitful, false impressions are as pervasive as the term “sham”, together with the “plaster” pasting the surfaces of buildings and interiors. And it is precisely in the context of this artificiality which informs the characterisation, as well as the descriptions of the urban interiors and of the murky nightlife (including the transvestitism which was so prominent in the earlier *Mr Norris Changes Trains*), that the sexual reticence of the autobiographical narrator has to be considered. “Christopher Isherwood” is in fact apparently attracted by Sally Bowles’ sexual buoyancy, and similarly seems to attract the withdrawn and inhibited Bernard Landauer, but his emotional attitude towards the characters is never fully explicitated, often toning down his role as a fully-fledged character and suggesting an element of voyeurism and of disturbing non-commitment.

A significant feature of the ambivalence of the city is also its moral opacity: a Berlin that is at once both fascinating and drab is also encoded in the novel in terms of textual strategy, since the self-proclaimed transparency of the documentary-like narration is actually contradicted from its very inception by an interpretive and subjective filtering of scenes and characters that ultimately amounts to a clear infringement of realistic objective detachment. The two first paragraphs of the novel - that contain perhaps the most famous statement in Isherwood’s work (“I am camera...”) - are in fact a sort of *pars pro toto*, a synecdochic key to the ostensibly impersonal and objective tone of the entire narrative:

From my window, the deep solemn massive street. Cellar-shops where the lamps burn all day, under the shadow of top-heavy balconied façades, dirty plaster frontages embossed with scroll-work and heraldic devices. The whole district is like this: street leading into street of houses like shabby monumental safes crammed with the tarnished valuables and second-hand furniture of a bankrupt middle class.
I am a camera with its shutter open, quite passive, recording, not thinking. Recording the man shaving at the window opposite and the woman in the kimono washing her hair. Some day, all this will have to be developed, carefully printed, fixed. (Goodbye to Berlin 9, my italics)

The initial passive reception of the exterior data is in fact bound to be re-elaborated through a creative process, where the photographic/cinematic metaphor of the writing/narrating self (“I am a camera”) is actually a metaphor for the creative literary process rather than the explicit acknowledgement of an artistic technique.

This narrative and stylistic strategy, together with the sophisticated handling of a metonymic and metaphoric mode combined together (Lodge 199-200) suggests that Goodbye to Berlin is more of a “writerly” than a “readerly” text, to borrow from Barthes’s terminology. This aspect of the text indirectly problematizes its apparent distance from a Modernist fictional mode, in spite of the gratifying liveliness of the realistic diction, and engages the reader’s active participation in the process of inferring the moral significance embedded in the representation of Berlin as a world-city, a symbolic city that has become an emblem of modern history. Furthermore, the very disconnected form of the novel and the fragmented quality of the life it presents may be read in the light of an emphasis laid on “the collapse of a decadent city, ready and often willing to fall before the Nazi threat” (Stevenson 37). These structural and formal aspects, which could figure as part of a reader-response dynamic, are thus another constituent of that peculiar semiotic nexus between city and text, a condition of mutual encoding and reciprocal hermeneutics whereby each interrogates the other.

The elusive trasparency of the realistic diction is thus an important constituent of the contamination between the urban and the textual: Berlin is not, in fact, the intelligible reality that can be read and interpreted through a documentary memoir or reportage, but rather a far more elusive, deformed and equivocal entity requiring constant decoding and interpretation, once imaginatively perceived. This applies to settings and characters alive: for example, the second section of the novel, “Sally Bowles”, is entirely devoted to the charming character of a nineteen year-old bourgeois English girl who lives in Berlin trying to become a cabaret singer. She sponges a living out of rich men but eventually ends up being cheated by an adolescent crook². Sally herself is the most overtly posing, exaggerated,
stylized character, self-consciously role-playing to the point of becoming camp (Thomas 126). In addition to the pages devoted to her, a very brief passage of the section reads as emblematic of the pervasive motif of dissimulation and fictiveness that connotes the city and its inhabitants:

A few days later, he took me to hear Sally sing.
The Lady Windermere (which now, I hear, no longer exists) was an arty ‘informal’ bar, just off the Tauentzeinstrasse, which the proprietor had evidently tried to make look as much as possible like Montparnasse. The walls were covered with sketches on menu-cards, caricatures and signed theatrical photographs ...(GB 37-8)

The quotation is relevant - and even exemplary - in that it is apparently irrelevant in terms of plotting and thematic texture. It merely contains a description of interiors that is part of the depiction of the city; it is uneventful, stylistically flat and unimpressive and yet, within the compass of a few lines, on closer scrutiny, it displays an understated articulation of the semantic dominant of elusiveness, dissimulation and counterfaction of reality. The dive no longer exists, it is now “arty”, pretentious though informal, the proprietor has “evidently” tried to “make” the place “look like” an equivalent of the much more fashionable Bohemian quarter of another European capital. Even the walls are covered and altered by images, which are incomplete and distorted replicas of the originals (“sketches” and “caricatures”).

Similarly, and more significantly, the distance and even the gap between the apparently drab and destitute interiors of the city and their symbolic and metaphoric overtones is illuminating as to the narrative strategies that Isherwood employs to draw a figurative perception of Berlin, by reducing the cityscapes into a host of metonymic images. In this respect, the description of the interior of the narrator’s lodgings in the first pages of the opening section is one of the most remarkable passages of the whole novel:

The extraordinary smell in this room when the stove is lighted and the window shut; not altogether unpleasant, a mixture of incense and stale buns. The tall stiled stove, gorgeously coloured, like an altar. The washstand like a Gothic shrine. The cupboard also is Gothic, with carved cathedral windows: Bismark faces the King of Prussia in stained glass. My best chair would do for a bishop’s throne. In the corner, three sham medieval halberds (from a theatrical touring company?) are fastened together to form a hatstand. FrI. Schroeder unscrews the heads of the halberds and polishes them from time to time. They are heavy and sharp enough to kill.
Everything in the room is like that: unnecessarily solid, abnormally heavy and dangerously sharp. Here, at the writing-table, I am confronted by a phalanx of metal objects - a pair of candlesticks shaped like entwined serpents, an ashtray from which emerges the head of a crocodile, a paperknife copied form a Florentine dagger, a brass dolphin holding on the end of its tail a small broken clock. What becomes of such things? How could they ever be destroyed? They will probably remain intact for thousands of years: people will treasure them in museums. Or perhaps they will merely be melted down for munitions in a war. Every morning, Fr. Schroeder arranges them very carefully in certain unvarying positions: there they stand, like an uncompromising statement of her views on Capital and Society, Religion and Sex (GB 10-11).

The religious and military imagery that informs the description and, by establishing a sort of debunked, degraded reduction of the “uncompromising” solemnity of German society as it is embodied by a petty bourgeois, pretentious household, creates a powerful ironic effect that strengthens the synechdochic relationship of the apartment to the city and its society. Every object in the room is a reminder of an encumbering and by now incongruous past, like the street the narrator watches from his window, “deep solemn massive”, and yet ironically so, as the similes and the juxtapositions suggest. The kitsch paraphernalia of a lower-middle class Berliner household produces an ironic effect that does not diminish the feeling of menace and hostility associated with potential harm, violence and destruction. In houses like this - “like monumental safes” - the ponderous past of the German capital is iconized by a grotesque parade of lifeless but hostile relics, that may survive, though uselessly, or end up melted down by a war. Making use of a sort of interior decoration-paysage moralisé, Isherwood suggests that it is in a room like this, in an apartment of the city, that the old order is stubbornly preserved in the face of impending collapse.

Furthermore, the mutual - though not complacent - connectedness of city and text in Goodbye to Berlin both engages with and distances from some typically modernist tropes and modes, often derived from the nineteenth century literary imagination. Perhaps foremost among these is that of the artist, or the equivalent of the artist, in the city, namely “an observer who brings a distinct consciousness to the city, or a consciousness in pursuit of the effect of urban activity on another location or place” (Lehan 77). In Goodbye to Berlin, “Christopher Isherwood” is an artist, a frustrated young writer who is striving to fulfill his creative project in the city,
drawing from that alien urban environment the creative sap that had dried up in England, a home he has come to refuse.

This structural principle whereby the narrative focus of the novel is also an autobiographical projection and an articulation of the artist-self allows for a constant interplay between the “distinct consciousness” and the many-faced city as it is fleshed out by its “metonymic” human jungle.

And it is precisely in the person of the autobiographical namesake narrator that the link between the city and the text is figuratively expressed and structurally conceptualised in both the opening and closing sections of the novel, as if to emphasize that autobiographical self-centredness which informs the narrative perspective of the narration. This is probably the most relevant and most complex aspect of that nexus which links the textualisation of the city and the urbanisation of writing, and it works both in terms of identification and of narrative strategy. “Christopher Isherwood” as narrator and co-protagonist is the main interpreter of the city and he is only apparently untouched by the pervasive artificiality and elusiveness that surrounds him: as Alan Wilde put it, capturing the essential ambiguity of the character:

In the Berlin of the novel, where there is everywhere sham, disparity, and deception and nowhere satisfactory personal relations, Christopher is, in fact, perfectly at home. Giving English lessons to wealthy pupils who refuse to learn or to take him seriously and doing, as far as one can tell, a minimum of writing, for all his dreams of being a novelist, he enters with Sally, Peter, Otto and Bernhard into relationships that are hardly relationships at all and through them into still more transient encounters with peripheral representatives of The Lost. (Wilde 72)

His detachment, however, dramatises the abiding need for community and belonging that is a typifying feature of the artist-figure in the city, and that inevitably involves a host of literary antecedents and a tradition that dates back to the nineteenth century. Isherwood had already dealt with the theme of the outsider’s stance in the city where politics-as-history acts as a primary social agency in his earlier Mr Norris Changes Trains, published in 1935 and also set in Berlin, where the protagonist and narrator, “William Bradshaw”, the antecedent of his later fully namesake narrator4, ultimately remains a mere spectator of the sinister progress of the Nazis in a climate of violence and intimidation. In one of the novel’s most frequently quoted passages, the city crowded for a Communist party meeting
convincingly foreground the Thirties British intellectuals’ dubious allegiance to ideological commitment through the narrator’s detachment:

They were not spectators. They participated, with a curious, restrained passion, in the speech made by the red-haired man. He spoke for them, he made their thoughts articulate. They were listening to their own collective voice. At intervals they applauded it, with sudden, spontaneous violence. Their passion, their strength of purpose elated me. I stood outside it. One day, perhaps, I should be with it, but never of it. At present I just sat there, a half-hearted renegade from my own class, my feelings muddled by anarchism talked at Cambridge, by slogans from the confirmation service, by the tunes the band played when my father’s regiment marched to the railway station, seventeen years ago. (Mr Norris 52)

In Goodbye to Berlin, a dialogue with Bernhard Landauer in “The Landauers” shows the uneasy condition of non-belonging common to the “leaning tower”- intellectuals, with their “desire to be whole, to be human [...] and the longing to be closer to their kind”, to quote Woolf’s famous essay (“The Leaning Tower” 119) as one exempted from the ideological guilt of the lack of commitment that surfaces in the earlier novel. This is a motif that “dates” the novel to its publication, at the end of the Thirties’ parable, as it no longer resonates with the poignancy of Auden’s idea of “making the necessity for action more urgent and its nature more clear” (Poet’s Tongue ix), but is rather toned down, almost reduced to the existential malaise of the expatriate who will not pose as an exile, and yet is acutely aware of his displacement:

“You are tired of Berlin, at last?”
“Oh no...I feel more as if Berlin had got tired of me.”
“Then you will come back?”
“Yes, I expect so.”
“I believe that you will always come back to Berlin, Christopher. You seem to belong here.”
“Perhaps I do, in a way”. (GB 223-4)

Berlin as one of the capital cities of Europe and an emblem of the decline and decadence of Western civilization becomes an elective homeland for the artist/intellectual and a literary art that are no longer able to sustain wholeheartedly the model of the “parable-art” and the ideological commitment of the Thirties5.
The intersection of the aesthetic dimension of the city with the metalinguistic implications of creativity brought about by “Christopher Isherwood’s” role as an artist in the city is also of relevance in this respect. Significantly, in the identification between the narrator and the city, the creative impasse of the young writer who has chosen Berlin as the site of his apprenticeship corresponds to the lack of any aesthetic fascination for the city, which is never perceived nor read “as a work of art”6. The visual dimension of the city is not at odds with descriptivism, but is almost completely lacking in the sense of amplitude and scope that is proper to the metropolitan urbanistic and architectural dimension. Rather, the urban imagery of Berlin is reduced to a disconnected and fragmented spatiality, an oppressive and crumbling monumentality or a sombre bourgeois solidity, weighed down by the now incongruous past of Wilhelmine Germany, undermined by depression and by material and moral bankruptcy. The urban space of Berlin therefore is oppressive and obstructive, as if to keep off the threat of final disaster.

It has been anticipated that the main and most interesting link between the city and the text in the novel is thus conveyed by and through the narrator’s persona: not merely in relation to his role as an artist, but, more crucially, on a structural level, as if to emphasize the self-centred drive that informs the narrative. Albeit he is not a forerunner of the Postmodernist unreliable or God-like narrator, the “I” of the opening section in fact has already implicitly projected himself as the author of the narrative in the transition from being a mere camera (or better camera-eye) to a discerning creative subject who will develop and carefully fix what he has witnessed and who, in the concluding section, openly identifies with the city. This identification is at the core of two of the most vibrant and resonating pages of the entire novel, where the cycle of seasons is symbolic of the dark parable of history and the city itself is metamorphosed and anthropomorphized into the classic representative trope of the body:

Tonight, for the first time this winter, it is very cold. The dead cold grips the town in utter silence, like the silence of intense midday summer heat. In the cold the town seems actually to contract, to dwindle to a small black dot, scarcely larger than hundreds of other dots, isolated and hard to find, on the enormous European map. Outside, in the night, beyond the last new-built blocks of concrete flats, where the streets end in frozen allotment gardens, are the Prussian plains. You can
feel them all round you, tonight, creeping in upon the city, like an immense waste of unhomely ocean - sprinkled with leafless copses and ice-lakes and tiny villages that are remembered only as the outlandish names of battlefields in half-forgotten wars. Berlin is a skeleton which aches in the cold: it is my own skeleton aching. I feel in my bones the sharp ache of the frost in the girders of the overhead railway, in the iron-work of balconies, in bridges, tramlines, lamp-standards, latrines. The iron throbs and shrinks, the stone and the bricks ache dully, the plaster is numb. (GB 230)

The contraction of the city to a small black dot, in its use of a typographic image, is also overtly allusive to a textual conceptualization of the city that is further complicated by the idea of the map. The blank space and blank page of the “enormous European map” is another trope conventionally associated with the literary treatment of the city, that of the map and the (mental, “cognitive”) mapping of the metropolis. The organic connotation of the description - the town gripped by the cold and contracting like a living body - is thus temporarily suspended and abstracted into a historicized dimension, though a dramatically dehumanized one, since what that European map represents is fated to catastrophe, once violated by the aggression of Nazism. The sick body of the city is thus a figuration of a body politic that is irredeemably sick, and this entropic image of a living world-city shrunk to invisibility suggests that the text (the narrative) and the human histories of Berlin are doomed to get lost in the impersonal blank page of Europe. And the antimony between the country and the city resurfaces in the poetic transfiguration of the Prussian plains into a besieging “waste of unhomely ocean”. The metamorphosis is finally complete when the city is turned into a body, and the morphology of the city becomes anthropomorphic. It is in this “body in pain” that city and artist, city and narrator, the locus of civilization and the stranger in the city meet and conflate; and it is this organic figuration of the city, further reduced to a human skeleton, that concentrates the empathy of the identification, which, nonetheless, is immediately countered by the dehumanisation of that common body, which is not made of limbs and arteries and skin: what throb and shrink are the hard, solid metallic or earthen structures and ribbing of the city, in a further metamorphic stage.

The dehumanising quality of pain and moral disintegration thus projects a tension between a vision of the city as a body in pain and a vision of the artist/subject as a dehumanized but suffering mechanism in
the entrails of the metropolis. The organic transfiguration of the city, and its final hermeneutics, however, is to be completed in the following passage, where Berlin is depicted as a twofold, deceiving Janus-faced reality, that sums up several recurrent tropes of the novel:

Berlin is a city with two centres - the cluster of expensive hotels, bars, cinemas, shops round the Memorial Church, a sparkling nucleus of light, like a sham diamond, in the shabby twilight of the town; and the self-conscious civic centre of buildings round the Unter den Linden, carefully arranged. In grand international styles, copies of copies, they assert our dignity as a capital city - a parliament, a couple of museums, a State bank, a cathedral, an opera, a dozen embassies, a triumphal arch; nothing has been forgotten. and they are all so pompous, so very correct, all except the cathedral, which betrays in its architecture, a flash of that hysteria which flickers away behind every grave, gray Prussian façade [...] (GB 230-1).

But the real heart of Berlin is a small damp black wood - the Tiergarten. At this time of the year, the cold begins to drive the peasant boys out of their tiny unprotected villages into the city, to look for food, and work. But the city, which glowed so brightly and invitingly in the night sky above the plains, is cold and cruel and dead. Its warmth is an illusion, a mirage of the winter desert. It will not receive these boys. It has nothing to give. (GB 231)

This double vision of Berlin thus amounts to a poetic and suggestive epitome of the ambivalence of the city, where the glittering surface is a sham, a collapsing cluster of empty and dangerous simulacra (copies of copies) and “the real heart” is actually a small wood that lures a destitute humankind as if it were a promised land, only to prove a devouring, heartless wasteland. It is inevitable, in fact, to connect the inherent destructiveness and deathly quality of the “winter desert” with the cruelty of the spring in Eliot’s Waste Land, despite the apparently opposite valence of the seasons. And it is in this climactic vision of the city that Isherwood engages with a host of tropes and motifs that are both heavily indebted to a Modernist, Eliotian model, and more generally to a late nineteenth-century archetype of the Infernal City, of the city as a devouring femme fatale, and hence to a belated decadent imaginary. It is worth mentioning, in this regard, that Isherwood was already well-acquainted with Baudelaire’s urban imaginary, since he had translated his Journaux Intimes in 1930.

Furthermore, this double-hearted devouring Berlin which draws the naive young boys from the country to their destruction is also reminiscent, in its powerful symbolism, of that pervasive idea of the city as threatened
by degeneration and urban entropy, as a result of its being irreversibly cut off from its primary source of nourishment, the land (Lehan 127).

The deadly cold that connotes the city in these suggestive images which introduce the final catastrophe, the Reichstag fire on February 28th 1933 and the Nazis’ seizure of power, is anticipated by another descriptive element of powerful symbolic resonance towards the end of “The Nowaks” section, centred on Christopher’s stay at the Nowaks’, an impoverished working-class family living in a destitute neighborhood, with whom Christopher takes lodgings. Christopher is leaving the sanatorium where Frau Nowak is confined, eluding the disturbing embrace of a few sick women who would like to withhold him, in a desperate longing for a moment of sympathy and intimacy. Recoiling from those sad, pathetic figures, “their lit faces ghastly like ghosts against the black stems of the pines” - an image which cannot help recalling Pound’s famous poem “In a Station of the Metro” (“The apparition of these faces in the crowd: /Petals on a wet, black bough”), “Christopher” is on a bus driving to the city, “through the deep unseen snow”. The darkness that swallows the ghostly figures of the consumptive women is matched by the covering snow; the city is thus covered by a deathly shroud, in what reads as a tribute to Joyce’s “The Dead”, and is one of the most resonant examples of intertextual allusiveness to a modernist imagery of the city. In particular, the snow is, according to Monroe K.Spears’ study on the urban imagery in Modernist poetry, “what seems to be the basic modern symbol for isolation and absence of community”, established as an archetype precisely by Joyce (99).

Significantly, this is one of the most overtly symbolic dramatizations of the theme of isolation in the novel, and it is suggestively contextualised in the transitional space between the city and its extreme outskirts in the country, a kind of suspended limbo, a no-man’s land where the individual can find a renewed form of humanity, before being reclaimed by the insensitive uniformity and anonymity of the city that is conveyed by the symbol of the snow.

In his fundamental study The Country and the City, Raymond Williams identifies in the separateness of the people in the city, in a divided consciousness, torn between the desire to belong and the impossibility of belonging, a sustaining theme of the representation of modern urban experience. Considering the literary vision of London in the late 19th century,
Williams emphasizes the paradoxical sense that "in the great city itself, the very place and agency [...] of collective consciousness, it is an absence of common feeling, an excessive subjectivity, that seems to be characteristic" (215) and quotes Engels' The condition of the Working Class in England where it is stated that "in the crowding of the great city", [...] "The dissolution of mankind into monads, of which each one has a separate principle, the world of atoms, is here carried out to its utmost extreme" (216). This idea of the progressive narrowing of the individual subjects’ experience is central to much modern and Modernist thought, and seems to anticipate the English philosopher F.H. Bradley’s theory of the personal and exclusive experience of the “finite centres” that was to be so influential on T.S. Eliot’s early poetry. This tendency to a “monadic” conception of individuality becomes at odds with the possibility of a representable social totality also on a spatial level, as Fredric Jameson put it, in the forms created by the most important writers of the end of the nineteenth century to express what he calls “monadic relativism”:

what we begin to see is the sense that each consciousness is a closed world, so that a representation of the social totality now must take the (impossible) form of a coexistence of those sealed subjective worlds and their peculiar interaction [...] (Jameson 350)

This process is in fact rendered in Goodbye to Berlin in spite of the lack of focus on the “crowding” and the crowd itself, so crucial an issue in the textualization of the city in nineteenth and twentieth century literature. And it is worked out precisely by means of the emphasis laid on characterization and the creation of what Isherwood himself defined as “dynamic portraits”,7 but also by identifying the individual characters’ capacity to adapt and their animal-like, predatory survivalism as their primary existential attitude (as in the case of Friz Schröder, who will adapt to Nazism just as she has managed to get used to economic depression). This progressive self-sufficiency, selfishness and “monadization” of individual consciousness in the urban environment is thus associated to the pervasive animal imagery of the novel, whereby characters are constantly compared to animals, like Otto, the adolescent proletarian sponger who exploits the neurotic upper-class homosexual Peter Wilkinson, “naturally and healthily selfish, like an animal” (GB 112). A range of imagery which fits well within the figuration of a city as jungle, a human jungle, as if
to indirectly recall a late nineteenth century trope of urban fiction that recuperases the tale of adventures. This is most evident in “The Nowaks” section: here the narrative effectively depicts the material and moral drabness of a debased humankind that is almost numbed by hardship, and “Christopher” records the sinister, excruciating noises made by people forced to live in that degraded way with the eye of the self-conscious naturalist, well aware of their surviving strategies. “It was strange and mysterious and uncanny, like sleeping in the jungle all alone” (GB 153), is the end of the account of his sleepless night at the Nowaks’, spent listening to the noises coming from the neighborhood.

Thus the city - its tenements acting here as an urban synecdoche - becomes a dark forest, the proletarian slums an urban jungle fraught with a threatening, dark and loathsome vitality, in compliance with a naturalistic representative trope of the city as the seething heart of multiplicity and amorphousness. Consequently, the autobiographical narrator and authorial projection appears, in his turn, as a subject capable of adapting to that alien environment, almost out of some sort of anthropological curiosity, only to reveal what is the true and ultimate cognitive implication of that experience: the capacity of adaptation as a foil to estrangement and detachment. When he visits the Nowaks’ household in the Wassertorstrasse again, having taken his final leave from them, “crossing the muddy courtyard, inhaling the moist, familiar rottenness of the tenement buildings” he thinks “Did I really ever live here? Already, with my comfortable bed-sitting room in the West End and my excellent new job, I had become a stranger to the slums (GB 163).

One may be reminded, reading this passage, of that distinctively metropolitan phenomenon diagnosed by Georg Simmell whereby the individual in the city could not react to the whole of external stimulus with the same inner intensity with which he would react in a different social and geographical context. Simmell actually defines the inner side of this external withdrawal as “not merely indifference but, more often than we like to admit, a silent aversion, a reciprocal estrangement, a repulsion that at the time of a closer contact [...] can suddenly turn into hate and aggression” (Simmel 45, my translation).

Which brings us back to the displacement - existential, geographical and social - of the artist in the foreign, alien city, conceived as a counterpart to the relationship established between the text (this novel) and the
city, as one of reciprocity and connectedness, although in this case not fully converging.

The city of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the modern and contemporary city, the industrial and postindustrial city, is an essentially dehumanizing reality, and it is mainly this reality that literature has conveyed, represented and transfigured. As Lehan put it, “The final challenge of the city is to the very idea of humanity (282)”. The Baudelairian “four-millante cité”, the Eliotian “unreal city” that “had undone so many” as well as the protean postmodern megalopolis, the “Nowhere city” of the contemporary world have always derived their identity and physiognomy from an implied and inevitable process of de-humanisation. In Goodbye to Berlin this ultimate challenge is inscribed in the text in its twofold dynamic, which pertains to the characters and to the protagonist and narrator alike, along the lines of the structural identification between the latter and the city itself. Besides, it is foregrounded by the hostile, threatening and implicitly violent quality of objects, most notably domestic objects, as the very opening pages make clear, as well as by the implicit taxonomy of characters into predators and survivalists on the one hand and doomed victims on the other.

In fact, the foremost narrative concern is with the characters in the city, the “doomed” or “astray” figures of pre-war Berlin, Die Verlorelen, the “Lost”9 that walk the city stage, rather than with the anonymity and mystery of the crowd. Despite the prevalent metonymic mode of the novel, there is little glimpse of the crowd behind the faces that “Christopher Isherwood” encounters and portrays. This is all the more significant in so far as the crowd is one - if not the primary - human constituent of that system of signs that animates the city, and, as Lehan reminds us, “each crowd offers a way of reading the city”(9). While the large, extensive crowd becomes simultaneously an object of revulsion and fascination for the artist and a spectacle for the flâneur, the individual and the crowd became increasingly distinct and separated. This principle is an informing one in Goodbye to Berlin, to the extent that - as already illustrated - this separateness is a prominent aspect of the pervasive theme and motif of estrangement and isolation.

Significantly, in the novel the crowd is practically deleted, erased; it is almost an absent presence, a “hidden figure”, to borrow Walter
Benjamin’s famous simile referred to Baudelaire’s poetry (Benjamin 162), fragmented and disseminated in a series of encounters, of separate entities, of singular human types, often depicted in contexts which are apart, such as houses and boarding houses, cafés, restaurants and nightclubs, rather than in the constant and open flux of streets and squares. If Modernist discourse had presented the crowd as a metonym for the city (Lehan 71), then Goodbye to Berlin in a way proves its anti-Modernism in this respect as well as in others such as characterisation and temporality, even while making an extensive and remarkable use of the metonymic mode.

In connection to the motif of the crowd, it may be tempting to see “Christopher Isherwood” in the novel as a latter-day, dried-up version of the flâneur, whose “very special purpose”, according to Benjamin, is to “endow this crowd with a soul” (Benjamin 191). In fact, the autobiographical narrator walks the city stage and its domestic backstages, rather than monumental and open vistas more as a voyeur than as a flâneur. His perceiving and representative mode is one of selecting and isolating, almost silhouetting human characters while keeping them firmly placed in context, and transforming them into portraits, a narrative mode which significantly parallels the treatment of the spatial and descriptive quality of the metropolitan reality. The city and the crowd are similarly disassembled and disconnected, reduced to isolated, though metonymically representative, units which ultimately recombine to form the fragmented but interconnected canvas of a bankrupt world, under the guise of the “loosely connected sequence of diaries and sketches”.

The spatiality of the city in the novel is also significantly compressed and reduced, and it seems to display a sort of disregard for that important metonymic constituent of the city that is the street, as the main location of the crowd. Goodbye to Berlin at times almost suggests a negative comparison with the urban novel that includes a celebration of the city as street life, as in the paradigmatic case of Joyce’s Ulysses, where the urban reality in its simultaneously secular, mythical and symbolic quality, and the very idea of the “stream of life” mainly exist in and along the streets.

In Goodbye to Berlin the most significant occurrence of the street as both a metonym and a metaphor of the city is to be found in the celebrated opening pages of the first section (“the deep solemn massive street”) and in the dark, ominous overtones of the Wassertorstrasse, in the working-class district where Christopher takes lodgings at the Nowaks’.
The entrance to the Wassertorstrasse was a big stone archway, a bit of old Berlin, daubed with hammers and sickles and Nazi crosses and plastered with tattered bills which advertised auction or crimes. It was a deep, shabbily cobbled street, littered with sprawling children in tears. Youths in wollen sweaters circled waveringly across it on racing bikes and whooped at girls passing with milk-jugs. The pavement was chalk-marked for the hopping game called Heaven and Earth. At the end of it, like a tall, dangerously sharp, red instrument, stood a church. (GB 128)

The allegorical overtones are here overt as well as ironic, and interestingly associated with a textual and graphic inscription of the urban scenery that displays the inherent violence of the period and is in keeping with the allegorism of the domestic interiors described in the opening pages.

[...] Down in the murky pit of the courtyard where the fog, in this clammy autumn weather, never lifted, the street singers and musicians succeeded each other in a performance which was nearly continuous. There were parties of boys with mandolins, an old man who played the concertina and a father who sang with his little girls. Easily the favourite tune was: Aus der Jugendzeit. I often heard it a dozen times in one morning. The father of the girls was paralysed and could only make desperate throttled noises like a donkey; but the daughters sang with the energy of fiends: ‘Sie kommt, sie kommt nicht mehr!’ they screamed in unison, like demons of the air, rejoicing in the frustration of mankind. Occasionally a groschen, screwed in a corner of a newspaper, was tossed down from a window high above. It hit the pavement and ricocheted like a bullet, but the little girl never flinched. (GB 146)

The coin that resounds like a bullet hitting the ground is thus a simile that alludes to the inherent and impending destructiveness of the “frustration of mankind” that troubles the neighborhood and the street life.

On the whole, then, the multifarious, choral and dialogic breadth of much realistic urban fiction is thinned out, narrowed to single units, much like the sense of the free flow of the individual consciousness which is typical of Modernist urban fiction. Similarly, the sense of potential totality of the mental and physical city as a site of endless possibilities and encounters, as Williams describes it, is reduced to separate cityscapes - the streets, the rooms and apartments and the cafés of the German metropolis - with no real and uninterrupted vital flow to connect them. The topography of the mind that is so crucial a constituent in Modernist and Postmodernist literary imagination is here mainly articulated in a fragmentary set of spatial and - above all - human units, never to reconstitute a wholeness or a
eness, nor what Jameson calls the “imaginative or imaginary sense of the city as an absent totality” (Jameson 353). Rather, the novel seems to hint at the Modernist idea of the city as a place that embodies the prison of the self and dramatizes that peculiar feature of the city as a social and cultural reality that - once more, in its ambivalence - is at the same time inclusive and exclusive, both neutral and receptive in its indifference and anonymity and hostile in its collapse and bankrupt ethos. And this moral and historical bankruptcy is both the powerful focus and the background of the concluding page of the novel, where the narrator takes his final leave from the city.

Today the sun is brilliantly shining; it is quite mild and warm. I go out for my last morning walk, without an overcoat or hat. The sun shines, and Hitler is master of this city. [...] I catch sight of my face in the mirror of a shop, and I am horrified to see that I am smiling. You cannot help smiling, in such beautiful weather. The trams are going up and down the Kleiststrasse, just as usual. They, and the people on the pavement, and the tea-cosy dome of the Nollendorfplatz station have an air of curious familiarity, of striking resemblance to something one remembers as normal and pleasant in the past - like a very good photograph.
No. Even now I can’t altogether believe that any of this has really happened... (GB 255-6)

“Fugitive past, fugitive present, fugitive future: conceived as sub-servient to time, the city as an image can consist only of mirrors or mirages, which constantly refract and reflect shifting lights and angles in time”; this remark by Burton Pike (136)11 is suggestively resonant in the light of the last paragraph of *Goodbye to Berlin*. The depth of the city can be unexpectedly baffling when interrogated by the individual, and even hopelessly unfathomable: as in Italo Calvino’s *Invisible Cities*, in the beautiful picture of the city that, seen from its opposite sides seems to continue in perspective and to multiply its repertoire of images, while in fact it is depthless, “consisting only of a recto and verso, like a sheet of paper, with one figure on each side, that cannot detach nor look at each other” (Calvino 105, my translation)12.

The mirrored image of the narrating self, the artist-observer in the city is yet another metonymic instance of that game of textual and creative re-invention of the city that has been entrusted to the first-person narrator. The valediction from Berlin is thus articulated in the form of an insight of a disturbing estrangement, if not an alienation from the self and from the
experience of that city turned into a personal testimony. A “stranger to himself”, to borrow from Kristeva's definition of a condition of the subject, the autobiographical narrator realizes that the dystopic present of Hitler’s rise to power has already become a personal, private memory, and, as if to prolong and sustain the opening image of the camera-eye, it has already become the subject matter of another fictional memoir, another story, another text made of cityscapes turned human, of gazes, glimpses and images of a world-city.

The character of Sally Bowles was to assume a life of its own, being transformed by each successive representation on stage or screen. The novel in fact inspired a 1951 stage play, “I Am A Camera”, a hit Broadway musical in the 1960’s, and the much celebrated film version, “Cabaret”, directed by Bob Fosse in 1972.

For a subtle stylistic analysis of the passage see D.Lodge, “In The Thirties”, 199-200.

“William Bradshaw” are in fact Isherwood’s middle names; he was born Christopher William Bradshaw Isherwood.

In “Psychology and Art To-Day”, Auden claimed that art consists in telling parables “from which each according to his immediate and peculiar needs may draw his own conclusions.” (http://www.kirjasto.sci.fi/whauden.htm). “Parable-art”, that is teaching art, is opposed to “escape-art”, and “the parable is something that each person must historically decide on” (E.Mendelson, “W.H.Auden: From Myth to Parable”).

To borrow the title of Donald Olsen’s book *The City as a Work of Art*.

Isherwood refers to two of his novels as “portraits” (*Goodbye to Berlin* and *Prater Violet*; “what I mean is a portrait that grows...and by successive stages, the viewer is encouraged to look deeper and deeper into the picture, until finally it looks completely different to him”). Quoted in Alan Wilde, *Christopher Isherwood*, p. 68. In *Christopher and His Kind* (p.143) he stated that “he used this term to describe a novel whose interest depends on the gradual revealing of a character, rather than on action, crisis and confrontation”.

See A.Wilde, *Christopher Isherwood*, 67.

“The Lost”. In *Christopher and His Kind* Isherwood explained the three separate meanings of the term as “those who have lost their way”, “the doomed” and the astray, “those whom respectable Society regards as moral outcasts”. The link which binds them is that “each one of them is conscious of the mental, economic and ideological bankruptcy of the world in which they live” (CK 135-136).

See, for example, the famous passage in the VIII chapter of *Ulysses*, “The Lestrygonians”, quoted, among others, by Raymond Williams (244), where the destruction of the cities in history is associated to the idea of the “stream of life”, with the effect of emphasizing the proliferating and abiding resist-

Pike refers to the ending of G. G. Marques’ One Hundred Years of Solitude.

"Da una parte all’altra la città sembra continuì in prospettiva moltiplicando il suo repertorio d’immagini: invece non ha spessore, consiste solo in un dritto e in un rovescio, come un foglio di carta, con una figura di qua e una di là, che non possono staccarsi né guardarsi".
Opere citate, Works Cited
Zitierte Literatur