



Emplaced, Encountered: The City As Nexus Of Power In Peter Ackroyd's The Plato Papers

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In his book, *The Plato Papers*, Peter Ackroyd offers a novel configuration of power: far from being monolithic and self-evident, it takes on subtle dimensions, exerting not a towering influence, but rather manifesting itself in word-making and world-writing: it is not just discourse in the Foucauldian sense that evinces traces of this power, but speech in its literal denotation. Plato, London's philosopher, expounds upon the City's history as both teacher and historian, thus appropriating power. His recounting – and therefore, reshaping – of history is made possible through an agency that is seized within the social sphere. The mutability of the past, its ambiguities and uncertainties, are the playing field within which antagonistic forces meet, inextricably dialectical. But it is an emplotted realm, rooted in a (meta)physical space, that is the subject of retelling: London itself, a ghost city, fluid. Set firmly in the middle of paradigmatic war, it is both pivot and catalyst, acting as an arena for clashing world-views. My paper seeks to investigate precisely how the interplay of time and space factor into notions of agency and power, what destabilizing workings they enforce, and what configurations they give rise to. Methodologies will include urban studies, critical theory and liminality studies.

Keywords: power, agency, liminality, urban studies, postmodernism

Weber's dichotomy of power (*Macht*) and domination (*Herrschaft*) influenced many theoreticians in his wake. Whereas power is encountered whenever an individual's enforcement of his will is fulfilled despite resistance, domination is to be found whenever commands are obeyed by groups of individuals (Weber 53). Power, always "socially amorphous," arises unpredictably as a result of "all conceivable combinations of circumstances;" domination's definition, then, is simpler, and refers only to the carrying out of commands. Dahl, in famously formulating power as the formula "A has power over B to the extent that he can get B to do something that B would not otherwise do," (Dahl 203) influenced many other theoreticians of power. His framework for analysis covers notions of base, means, extent and scope

of power, which were later developed by other writers on the subject. Returning to the agents A and B, base refers to "all the resources - opportunities, acts, objects, - that [A] can exploit" and is essentially inert, requiring active use. Means cover various displays, "threats or promises to employ the base" or even their application. Scope refers to the ways B can react to A. Finally, extent can be accounted for in probabilistic terms: how many times, calculated on average, will A's actions have full effect? (203) These aspects, the author claims, can only be analyzed in relation to each-other, and, moreover, they must manifest themselves overtly: there is, then, no possibility of "action at a distance" (204): "In looking for a flow of influence, control or power" there must be a visible connection between A and B. Interestingly enough, Dahl also refers to the notion of

negative power, exemplified thus: if an injunction of A upon B to do X results in B doing Y, therefore averting the possibility of B taking a third course of action Z, we can say that negative power is at work (205). Baudrillard describes a power system defined within the binary of domination and hegemony. The latter is seen as a continuation and a perfection of the former. Domination, on the one hand, is a “relationship of force and conflict,” marked by violence on the side of or against oppression, where the duality of dominator and dominated is still active (Baudrillard 33). Agents within hegemony are “the hostages far more than the slaves,” trapped under consensus rather than servitude (34). It is an abstract form, a transcendence of real domination into “the domination of networks, of calculation and integral exchange.” Revolution, the counterforce to domination, gives way to reversion and auto-liquidation; it is no longer a valid tool inside hegemony, as it can act as “the impetus or the vector” for it. Manifesting itself through simulations, “the excessive use of every sign and obscenity,” hegemony leads to a degeneration of values, firmly ensconced in mockery and parody (35). The proliferation of empty signs, where even power is only “the parody of the signs of power,” is the chief mechanism of hegemonic forces. Within hegemony, agents are “prisoners of the ‘nexus,’ of the network, connected for better or for worse,” disenfranchised (37). Catastrophically, hegemony brings about the end of principles and critical negativity, spelling the “closure of every account and all history,” thus ensuring its own continued existence (50). The novel begins with a prefatory remark on what power itself can bring about: in the throes of “revelations and lamentations” there is the essence of Plato’s downfall, a “cruel superstition,” a metaphysical agent in its own right, acting in “boundless dominion” over the minds of his fellow citizens (Ackroyd III). Plato’s first oration, concerning Charles Dickens - instantaneously recognized by his readers as Charles Darwin - shows another aspect of power. The author of *The Origin of Species*, at the same time the author of *Great Expectations* and *Hard Times*, portrays the life of a hero “obsessed by ‘struggle’, ‘competition’” (6) in what Plato considers a “morbid and ludicrous” manner. He refers to the distinctions made by the author between race, gender and class and the way these are used as quintessential factors in human conflict. Mouldwarp is construed as an age of warring nations, of colonizing efforts: “a dark world indeed,” he says, “dominated by the necessity of labour and the appetite for power.” (7) In this we may see a concerted distancing from the troubling history of Mouldwarp, and a positioning above it, describing power games that are a thing of the past, brought up as entertainment for idle crowds that have already adopted differing values and for whom power struggles, whether overt or covert, certainly have

different connotations and instantiations. Plato decries Dickens’s plea for “heavy destruction” and his grim dictum that the strong should live and that the weak should die, refusing his celebration of the “spectacle of violent death” engendered by “combat and slaughter.” He enjoins his public not to laugh when he reveals that Dickens ascribes all these principles to the idea of evolution: the traveller “is only the protagonist of a novel,” he reminds them (8). Dickens is ultimately discarded as a writer unable to grasp “the motive power” behind his reality, trapped in self-made conflict for the sake of conflict. Another kind of agency entirely is brought to the public’s attention when Plato discusses E A Poe’s (Eminent American Poet in his understanding) observation on the mysterious power of houses upon their inhabitants, altering their lives through an “importunate and terrible influence,” foretelling the kind of power that would manifest itself fully in subsequent ages, beyond the “degraded power” of Mouldwarp (33). Going further back in history, Plato muses upon the fantastic agencies at work in the Age of Orpheus, when “gods themselves took the shape of swans or bulls” and when Orpheus himself, through the “powers of musical harmony” altered the fabric of reality around him (41). Likewise, the Age of Apostles presents its own intricacies in defining power as manifested in “prayer and penance” towards a god of “blood and sorrow” right until the violent end of that faith and the transition to the Age of Mouldwarp. Seen as a time wherein the “cult of webs and nets” enforced “enslavement as well as worship,” we can easily imagine it as a hegemonic age. Mouldwarp men toil under the “superstition of progress” informing their every move, bereft of their “visionary powers” (48). Their ability to sustain the world around them, in the strictest physical sense, is used even in the absence of knowledge, leading to the decay and disappearance of the universe. The consequence of their deeds culminates in bloodshed, first against the scientists and then against machines, seeking to undo the “false reality that had been constructed around them.” (50) The Londoners of Mouldwarp are bound to “preordained patterns” and senseless walking-about without any rhyme or reason; their garments, donned to “mock and parody each other,” demonstrate a celebration of their joy in absurdity.

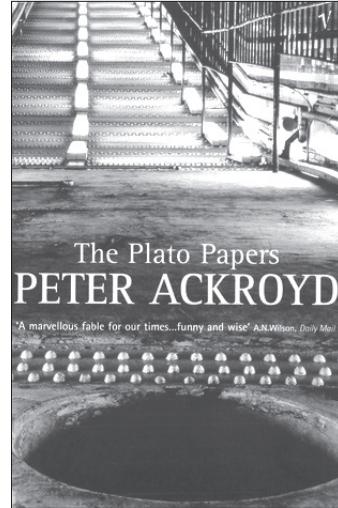
Of course they could not escape the tyranny of their dimensions, or the restrictions of their life within the cave, but this afforded them extra delight in contrast and discontinuity. Within the precincts of government and of business, of living and of working, they derived great pleasure from reversals and oppositions. The air was tainted by the inhuman smell of numbers and machines, but the city itself was in a state of perpetual change. (Ackroyd 90)

Life itself, to them, is a game of patterns enacted



mechanically, of action performed for action's sake. Their destruction of the "screens and signs" that sustains their life, the "night that now enshrouded their world" is what brings an end to their darkness and a new-found awareness of their own inner power for world-shaping. What becomes apparent in the Age of Witspell is a consciousness of divine power that is found within each individual, as a subpart of London's own metaphysical agency ascending to godhood.

In tracing his own morphology of power, Agamben discusses the paradox of sovereignty. Its principal feature lies in positioning itself within and outside the law, and its main exercise is in creating legal exceptions (Agamben 15). What is implied in this act is a movement of the sovereign outside the sphere of legality in order to engender legality itself (17). But this is to be read not as a separation from law, but as paradoxically maintaining a relationship to it. The exception itself is what justifies law (18), and in being a casting out, it is interiorized by law in order to make sense of itself: what is at stake is not the "control or neutralization" of the trespass, but its value as the "creation and definition of the very space in which the juridico-political order can have validity." (19) The process is one of "fundamental localization," the tracing of a threshold between what is outside and what is inside the law which makes it ultimately interpretable. Much like words can correspond to reality without pointing to a concrete referent, being "meaningful in [their] not-denoting," so does the sovereign exception exist as a "pure potentiality" without being bound to specific references (20). Transgression itself is a natural precursor to law, and as such it enshrines itself as being the birthplace of order (26); without it, law is nothing more than a "dead letter" (27), it is law without life. In presenting himself as an outsider while still acting as the orator - which is to say, a powerful agent - Plato creates an exception through his own self. "He cannot help his nature," says Ornatus. "He revels in it. 'Consider my plight.'" (Ackroyd 97) He corrupts the youth with his "lies and fables" in order to legitimize the discourse of his own society. His teachings of "the world not as it is but as it might have been" are destabilizing while paradoxically strengthening the position of the city's defenders. In donning the identity of "Plato the witless" (102) he frees himself from the sovereign position of orator and steps outside its own power so as to transgress against morality. He undermines and subverts the stalwart confidence of his Londoners by questioning his own: "I have always taught that you must know yourself. That is why I have looked into myself, too, and I realise I am not always right." (102) He lectures on the properties of dice, holding one such "witty stone." Its unpredictability bespeaks the unpredictability of human life.



That is why I stop and think. Let us suppose that after a hundred, or even a thousand, throws we could still not be sure which side it would turn upon. Can we doubt that the anxiety would begin to affect our own lives? Why do we speak of human certainty, when this little stone will always trip us up? Perhaps I am being witless again. Perhaps not. (Ackroyd 103)

He urges his fellows to question their beliefs and to think critically and to consider the stories of those "who stood alone against the world" in defence of their truths. Thus he creates a threshold: between accepted values and original thought, between the unwritten laws of London demanding obedience and the lifeforce in upholding truth. This is a moment constitutive of a stronger legality which then pushes against the offense in what we can term negative power, following Dahl: exile is averted under claim of madness, Plato being depicted as a "dreamer or mistaken visionary who is not worthy of attention." (Ackroyd 134) As a consequence, Plato resorts to self-exile, demanding to be taken "beyond the walls of the city, never to return." The open conflict in his trial comes to a scornful conclusion in that the orator refuses to be robbed of agency by being cast aside as a madman, choosing instead to leave the confines of the city and the sanctuary of the law, fulfilling the sovereign paradox. The potentiality, in this sense, becomes a one-time instantiation. The peace of the city is restored and Plato is removed from the safety of the city. Ackroyd does not offer much in terms of providing a clear sequence from that point onward, only that the orator departs the city "in triumph" (138) accompanied by the children he has taught. He is said to have visited other cities to tell his stories, or otherwise that he returned to Mouldwarp to live in invisibility, or that, truly lost in his own folly, the philosopher "simply entered another dream" (139). What then, lies beyond the city, and the rigors of its law? The possibility of life itself, not only in other ages occurring simultaneously, but in the novel's present moment, is something to be

doubted: a foggy in-between of even more unstable potentiality, hinted at only in legends. But this is the result of Plato's exercising his power in speaking against the morality of London.

Hayward, in her recounting of ways in which power was studied throughout the twentieth century, refers to its myriad facets as they were described by philosophers and sociologists. She discusses the notion of power understood through the lens of knowledge, intentionality and praxis (Hayward 18). Wartenberg's contribution lies in defining power as something existing within a social field populated by agents, some of which are "peripheral:" agents on the borders of the playing field that provide power to the two agents caught in a struggle. Hayward stresses the effects power has "for all social actors, within and beyond relations in which they participate." (27) Identity arises through power, and action is subservient to it: free action does not function within a vacuum; rather, it is a social function. A human's ability to "think, feel, perceive, reason" as well as to see oneself as belonging or not belonging to a particular space can only be validated within the social sphere (30). Power, then, should not be seen as an instrument, but as a mechanism that institutes boundaries and fields of action, manifested in "laws, rules, symbols, norms, customs, social identities, and standards" that have a bearing on "inter- and intrasubjective action." This is power de-faced, in Hayward's own terminology, a view of power that can be seen at work in the structuration and alteration of social boundaries (31). Luke's analysis of the dimensionality of power provides useful insight into its shifting theoretical underpinnings. He quotes Dahl's view of power as involving decision-making within the realm of direct and observable conflict; wherever elites decide upon a course of action against the desires of any other group, there is decision-making that evinces conflict (Luke 13). Conflict is an integral part of power, and it is a conflict "between preferences, that are assumed to be consciously made, exhibited in actions." (14) The two-dimensional view of power, espoused in Bachrach and Baratz's writings, goes against the undue "importance of initiating, deciding and vetoing" (qtd. in Luke 18) and takes on a more subtle understanding of its functions, in that it produces the narrowing of scope within decision-making itself. Two-dimensional power deals with prevention and limitation of what is potential, rather than what is manifest. However, Luke believes that both of these theoretical frameworks focus too much on conflict, be it "overt or covert." They ignore the interconnectedness between power that arises through "collective forces and social arrangements." (22) The malleability of desires is a prime example of this: whether by means of mass media or socialization processes, an individual's wants are influenced, and this, too, is power. The shift in

"perceptions, cognitions and preferences" shows its true capabilities, in that they preclude open conflict from breaking out (24). Writing on agency, Giddens considers that acting is a matter of having the ability to "intervene in the world" through a range of "causal powers." (Giddens 14) However, agency cannot function without resources, which, in Giddens's view, are parts of social systems that are seized upon by knowledgeable agents (15). However, resources are not power in and of itself, but rather instruments "through which power is exercised" that manifest themselves only within instantiations of social relations. He stresses the "regularized relations of autonomy and dependence" that take place between agents as catalysts of power, while noting that resources themselves can become malleable, and can be used by those with less power to influence those with more (16). Social relations, in turn, evince both syntagmatic dimensions, seen as the "patterning of social relations in time-space involving the reproduction of situated practices," and paradigmatic dimensions, or "modes of structure" that are recursively invoked in such instances of reproduction (17). Social structures, then, are not static artifacts, but rules of transformation that are embodied within specific instantiations and "memory traces" which describe patterns of human agency. Within the playing field of agents, there is a burdening necessity to maintain what Giddens terms "ontological security," the averting of any actions that can undermine the "intelligibility of discourse." (23) Structure, regarded through the lens of "recursively organized sets of rules and resources," becomes overt only in specific instantiations of social practices (25). These, in turn, are inscribed in history, which is the only space where self-identity can be reached (36). Clegg stresses the relational aspect of power, situating it in a "field of force" where it is engendered, and where human agency manifests itself. It cannot be understood as something that can be possessed outside of social relations; however, should certain conditions be reproduced, then power becomes reified (Clegg 207). Reified power, its most "pervasive and concrete" embodiment, is most often met with resistance. In this struggle, resistance to power may either become power itself, instituting a new field of force, or it may serve to reinforce the current relational field within which an already established power operates. Resistance is an inevitable reality whenever power is exercised, and it can be envisioned as a struggle between two agencies trapped in a "dialectic to power." (208) Clegg's notion of episodic power, manifesting itself between individual agents bound by "rules, relations and resources" is never static, depending on whatever social configuration it finds itself in (211). Barnes proffers a critique of Weber's theoretical legacy and the unfortunate antinomies present in Habermas's work. Weber, on the



one hand, described class action as a repository and sum of individual agencies directed in any given direction, rather than taking into account the notion of collective agency. (Barnes 83) This individualist vein carried over to Habermas and his dualist approach to explaining agency. Habermas is accused of being Manichean: “it is indeed an unwritten rule,” writes Barnes “of sociological theory that ‘system’ is evil and ‘agency’ good,” which explains the popularity of Habermas’s framework. However, Barnes discards the duality of the Habermasian intentional/systemic dichotomy. Sociology’s penchant of conceptualizing social change in a way that “focuses on some valued feature of our present society” is misguided: it sometimes relies upon a faulty mechanism, as in Habermas’s case, that of the “inversion of valued features” of modern life (91). Discussing the necessity for responses whenever agency is involved, Barnes remarks that virtually all societies, in functioning as “a backdrop of social relations,” enforce an appropriate response, but it is modern societies par excellence that hint at “relationships [...] with large, ‘impersonal’ social institutions” which, by dint being “spread widely over great numbers of individuals” do not provide much pressure (96). In his discussion of power, Stone remarks on several key aspects: it is interpersonal as well as intergroup; it depends not only on intention but context as well, hinging on the “logic of the situation” (Stone 35). Systemic power, on the other hand, does not display itself in open competition or in “purposive activity” that manifests intention (36), but relies rather on the “durable features of the socioeconomic system” (37) which assign various “advantages and disadvantages” to one group or another, depending on the whim of the public officials. It does not require open conflict, nor does it interfere with the process of decision making, lying in the “imperatives of the situation” that alter or preserve the validity of social institutions (38). Two agents with equal power can expect different outcomes whether or not they position themselves within the graces of those who command systemic power. His reading of power is one which seeks to understand its mechanisms removed from its brute and absolute, which is to say, direct and observable, effects, placing it firmly within a system that is subject to upheaval and caprice. Ornatus, in telling Sidonia about his conversation with Plato, remembers his curiosity in Plato’s decision to go on a journey away from the city. Having followed its commandments and having been trained in its secrets, it makes no sense to him why Plato should want to depart. The ontological stability of the city, an agent in its own right and not just a protagonist, is threatened by his movement. It is unclear to Ornatus why Plato would want to remove himself from the beauties and goodness of London.

“Listen to me, Plato. We have all grown up together within the city. We have obeyed its injunctions. We have been instructed in its mysteries. You yourself were chosen to guide us with your oratory. We spend our lives contemplating its goodness and beauty. We hear you expounding upon its inner harmonies. Why try and discover something else beyond its Wall?” (Ackroyd 83)

This would seem to run counter to the intelligibility of discourse: stepping away is not something the Londoners would understand, being part of the collective body of London, and the only way they can conceive of this act is under the asperion of madness. Upon answering that a journey can be undertaken in other ways than physical, „while remaining in the same place,” (Ackroyd 84) his friends become nonplussed, and choose not to pursue the matter. The metaphysical distance of his travels is not something they can countenance, and the relevance of becomes readily transparent when considering the theory of power through the lens of social fields, three-dimensional power and systemic power alike. Plato, in acting from a place of agency, goes against the collective agency of London. His methods are, in a way, both subtle and direct. In enjoining the Londoners to think and to doubt, he is attempting to change cognition and to influence perceptions, consciously seizing upon the resources of privileged speech and secure social position. The other agent is the spirit of the city, referring itself through an elusive „we.” Constitutive of systemic power while wielding episodic power, situating itself between individuality and collectivity. Its shape is elusive, much like most characters in the novel, but it creates itself through speech. It threatens to pass a sentence that would lead to Plato’s condemnation, should he not be able to defend himself. His way of retaliating is argument and discourse, debasing himself so as to temporarily suspend his power: he is the witless Plato, bereft of knowledge but armed with courage, speaking freely of his journey to the underworld and the lessons he received within the cave. The city judges this as blasphemy, rejecting the message that Mouldwarp men were its ancestors. The social field within which Plato finds himself also has its voice: „The citizens already murmur against you,” the city ominously declares (104). Far from being an innocent mouthpiece for truth, he changes impressions and beliefs, and he is accused of corrupting the minds of children. The child Myander tells his father Ornatus about Plato’s methods. Subversive ideas about leaving the city having already being imparted to them, Myander professes his belief in Plato’s teachings. „We do not move beyond the city because there is no reason to do so,” his father replies. It shines with the „light of human care,” and to leave it is nothing but folly. „Why wander beyond our bounds, where we could grow weary?” (106) The children,

however, prove receptive. Plato rejects his teacher's command that he should „fulfil [his] form” and rejoice in ways of living passed on to him without his consent. „I wanted to find the truth that was true for me alone,” Plato tells them (107). This is an overt rejection of values imparted from above, and in this act of resistance it is perhaps unclear who the peripheral agents are. In a city that is undivided, where every being is subservient to a larger identity, we can either see the children as being peripheral, if we take Plato's „mature” audience as the opposite force, or the adults, if we look at the social relation arising between Plato and his pupils. All these factors are constitutive of power struggles between Plato - the solitary, fragmented agency - and the metaphysical city. „There are no certainties. So take nothing for granted,” he advises, „ask them this: ‚How can I be sure for what existence I have been chosen for?’” Conflict thus rises to the surface, precisely because Plato does not treat his pupils like children. Ornatus urges that his son avoid him, and that Plato is on trial for his false messages. He denies the existential disturbance he has caused, claiming instead that he only tried to make them ask questions. The city tries to undermine him, asserting that, should he have revealed to Mouldwarp Londoners that they were captive inside a cave, he would have been treated as a simpleton and a deluder, or, even more heinously, as a self-deluder. Yet Plato essays to change their view. The citizens of Mouldwarp were not the „celebrants of power” he had envisioned them to be, but simple „slaves of instinct and suggestion” comforting themselves with a frail sense of agency and freedom. The city reveals its form in its attempt to sway Plato: „Here we are all one city. We are the limbs of the city. We are a common body. How can you wish to part yourself from us?” (117) To trespass against the collective vision is akin to blasphemy, and the agency of the city cannot allow it. Plato's assertion that their society might itself be part of another city's dream is delusional: „We know that we exist. We know our history. We are not the figments of anyone's imagination.” (123) His prophecies about the doom of London are rejected, and his sentence is averted, blamed on madness, „some fevered dream or hallucination.”

Concerning the structuration of the public sphere, Habermas names several institutions that arose in pre-modern times, such as French salons and British coffee houses, initially spaces for discussing literature and art by those with „landed and moneyed interests,” gradually shifting towards debating politics (Habermas 33). What is important about these spaces was that they held a sort of primacy over key elements in social life for various agents acting in certain areas: writers presenting new books, musicians new music, etc. It would not be mistaken, then, to regard these as agentive loci, with their own written and unwritten rules. On

the principles of such societies, Habermas argues that they did not operate on the assumption that all were of equal status, but rather that status should be suspended in such arenas. The parity informing their discourse was the „parity of ,common humanity,” even though its full ideal was never met (36). The public thus began to be seen as inclusive, even as a gathering of private people, „readers, listeners, and spectators” freely debating whatever cultural product was at hand (37). Fraser remarks upon Habermas's reluctant acceptance of the fact that the public sphere, in claiming to be „open and accessible to all,” was far from being fully accessible, bringing up examples related to gender and class inequality (Fraser 118). The public sphere as an arena where free discussion between interlocutors acting as equals, socially and economically, is regarded as an untenable construct (119). Any discourse carried out in the public sphere, rather, was subject to „protocols of style and decorum” that are productive of social inequality. Fraser refuses the view of the public sphere as being a place of „zero degree culture,” bereft of any „specific ethos” that welcomes and tolerates cultural and social differences (120), and instead opts to show how „structural relations of dominance and subordination” influence the shape and accessibility of the public sphere. Participatory parity, she writes, would be better represented by a „plurality of competing publics” that might act as forums for subordinated groups (123). She calls them „subaltern counterpublics,” serving as arenas for the construction of counterdiscourses and articulation of subordinate „identities, interests and needs.” By being given voices, the subaltern are capable of shaping their own identity „through idiom and style.” (126) Plato's orations are presented in an unnamed space, the physicality of which, much like the rest of the London he is part of, is elusive. It is the main articulation point for agentive action, and it can be said that there is a suspension of privilege and status within it: Plato refuses his power as orator, and instead chooses to speak as a citizen like any other, stressing his own weaknesses and faults, presenting his narrative from the position of an outcast whose message is disbelieved for the sake of self-preservation. The public, in including him in their midst, is shaken by his outrageous teachings despite initially being entertained by the histories he expounds upon. Naturally, this equality is facetious, and Plato's concealing of his powers is only done as a rhetorical feat: if he debases himself, he does it only so that his teachings may slip under the heavily guarded prejudices of his fellows. The public sphere, then, to return to Fraser's idea, is evidently not a space of zero degree culture: its ethos confirms its own values, those of blind faith in the present moment and haughty disregard for what came before, and it defends them against the philosopher's barrage. In a sense, if Plato is to be seen as



constituting his own subaltern counterpublic, it is not from a place of genuine subordination, but feigned powerlessness, displaying the convoluted nature of the urban struggle.

I will now look at Lampugnani's description of future cities. He positions himself as a doleful prophet foretelling how a city might be configured in what he names the „telematic age.” He notes an evident shift from the physicality of things and places into the „invisible realm of data streams,” to which he assigns a revolutionary role (Lampugnani 193). The effects are potentially destructive, leading to crisis within the city, a paroxysmal restructuration. The arising edifice, the „telepolis, cyber city, digital city, city of bits,” is the aftermath of this turmoil. Cities, he writes, were always meant to promote speedy communication and reliable interaction „through spatial proximity” (199), but the telematic unsettles even these dimensions. This he contrasts with human ontologies, manifest in „nuances, tones of voice, moods and atmospheres” which cannot be relegated to electronic ways of being. The architecture of the telematic age has no physical expression; it is brought about in the interaction between „software and hardware,” in „small machines and hidden cables.” (200) But the city can endure as a hybrid - he gives the example of Venice, with its „maze of canals and its monuments” webbed with „glass fibre cables.” The old city serves as the core of the new, refitted and redesigned. Quoting from Victor Hugo, Lampugnani presents the apocalyptic vision of Frollo, who predicts the death of architecture brought about by the book; it can no longer „record and propagate people's thoughts” as cheaply and conveniently as books can (202), but he proposes a new image, that of „hard disks, diskettes, modem connections and data highways” which is more suited to telematic sensibilities. Even in the desolation of twentieth century urban sprawl, the city was a repository of historical and cultural change, an arena for power, showing „the events that have [...] damaged it or healed it, shaken it or strengthened it;” far more than its overt physicality, it is a „monument to itself and thus a piece of didactic theatre” in the lesson that it teaches (204). Positioning itself in the dialectic of profuse information, the telematic age evinces traits of totalitarian regimes; information, given freely and abundantly, can still be subject to manipulation, inducing „not education but satiety, helplessness and confusion.” (205) The telepolis being averted, the possibility of another city is brought to light, „a place of collective memory once more,” freed from the commercial, the cybernetic and the utilitarian, „selfless and not manipulative,” where its history and the forces that shaped it are rendered visible again. (206) This place reestablishes the importance of solidity and physicality, of elusive authenticity against an unending series of surrogates. In this vein, he writes of „expanses of water in which the city they are opening up and

decorating is reflected, refracted and transfigured.” (209) Lynch stresses that although being a synchronic fact, a city must be observed diachronically, „in the course of long spans of time.” Unfolding as it does, its temporal patterns may be „reversed, interrupted, abandoned, cut across,” highlighting the city's deep mutability (Lynch 1). Experiencing it means taking in its intricate topology, the concrete image always individually „soaked in memories and meanings.” The author proposes the metaphor of legibility, i.e pattern congruence, by giving the example of the ontological state of being lost and the ensuing „sense of anxiety and even terror” that can occur within illegible cities (4). Legibility is the mark of a co-created environmental image shaped not only by a society of individuals, but by an individual and the environment itself: the environment shows patterns, and the individual „selects, organizes, and endows with meaning” what is shown him (6). This relies upon the city's capacity to act as a „blank space” that encourages investigation and meaning-creation (9). Lynch's notion of imageability, an object's capacity to „[evoke] a strong image in any given observer” can be ascribed to cities that are „vividly identified [and] powerfully structured,” panoplies of constant change. But at the same time, the fragmentary nature of beholding is something that must be trained towards a way of seeing that involves „biological and cultural development” in sustained effort throughout one's life. It is another view of the city that Preston and Simpson-Housley explore in their introduction. Moving away from models drawn by geographers and sociologists, they follow in Saul Bellow's steps by looking at the „human experience, both individual and collective,” which the city acts as a repository for (Preston and Simpson-Housley 1). More than the physicality of their stone and water, they are to be „lived, suffered, undergone” in their ontological salience (2). Its representations in literature are multifarious, ranging from Utopias of „contained perfection” marked by „desirable and sustaining equipoise” in the Renaissance to „[sites] of guile, corruption, intrigue and false values” in the age of industrialization (2). They are both hellish and generative, but more importantly, they have risen to the status of abstract protagonist, as in our case. Suzanne Hall's study of Walworth Road in London offers a relevant discussion of another kind of London: a city full of borders and transitions caught in complex power relations. She begins by remarking that the sociological idea of boundary is inherently political and cultural, denoting a compulsion to „venture beyond,” on the one hand, and to „establish containment,” on the other (Hall 31). They bear the traces of laws and lived experience and enable the ontologies of (un)belonging and their conditions. Walworth is at the meeting point between two

overwhelming forces, power and social praxis, the interaction of which is a resulting sense of instability and impermanence. Quoting Lamont and Molnar, she adds that boundaries are „relational processes between prescriptive structures and lived experiences.” (qtd. in Hall 41) The imposition of structures bears the imprint of (political) power in a shifting historical context. Thus we can see what is meant by the idea that boundaries appear as an outgrowth of political praxis. Hall gives the example of the nineteenth-century institution of the workhouse and its inmate, regulated through „social classification and spatial segregation,” an embodiment of control exerted over the population by an all-seeing authority (46). Through the history of Walworth’s reconfiguration, we find signs of „dominance, standardization and fragmentation” (50) that resist effacement, still influencing cultural patterns in the present. In *The Plato Papers*, Ackroyd presents a vision of the telematic city in its revolutionary crisis and its obsession with information. Plato accounts for the apotheosis of information in Mouldwarp. An „ancient deity” acting out in „invisible presence,” it granted power to its worshippers (Ackroyd 16). The cult of information, in simply providing „words and images” for their own sake, has its roots in Mouldwarp ideology. Much like Lampugnani, Plato describes the effects of this cult as producing „anxiety and bewilderment” instead of fulfilment or joy. Mouldwarp obsessions with „every kind of violation and despoliation” bespeaks their penchant for being immediately and enduringly connected, even when the news describes only death and violence. Amusement, and not knowledge or wisdom, is the purpose of this activity, carried out in „dark ceremonies and slavish pieties” within a city that prizes parody and caprice. Confronted with the death of the world around them, even with their „computational tools, their forms of communication, their modes of transport,” (50) they give in to their powerlessness. The telepolis, allowing humanity only in expressions of rage and despair, readable only in the righteous destruction of its oppressive machines, is contrasted with the Age of Witspell and the return to magic and a new self-awareness. History, as described by Plato, is where power plays are mapped out, and it is only within the city that history can be enshrined. The didactic theater of London is shaped and reshaped within each passing age, but, as we have seen, Plato’s public is reluctant to accept its lessons. Indeed, in speaking of the reversal and interruption of urban patterns, in the magical resurfacing of architecture, Plato urges the citizens to consider his thesis on the coexistence of ages and the malleability of time. The legibility, on the one hand, and the imageability of London, on the other, are a problematic dyad: there are aporias in Plato’s interpretation of Mouldwarp London in that he does

not correspond physically to its dimensions, and his reading of the city is fundamentally precarious. But even within shifting visions, London does evoke a strong image as per Lynch’s description, pieced together by means of an unstable gaze that repeats itself through time. Unstable and impermanent, London is rendered visible both through a metaphysical agency and the practical power of human agents, arising at the meeting point between the two.

Moving on now to institutions within language, I will focus on Searle’s observations about the necessity and primacy of language to the creation of institutional facts. This is based on the premise that language, as it is, is „logically prior,” arising before any other institutions (Searle 60). What makes language crucial, in this sense, is that words are symbols that „by convention mean or represent or symbolize something beyond themselves.” Words, by dint of being conventional devices, represent notions that do not inhere in them, notions that can be understood publicly (61). These notions are mental representations, beliefs, and mental attitudes in general (63). Even the way we conceptualize days or months is rooted in language, without which they would be virtually meaningless; this conceptualization works only through convention and public meaning (66). Some objects are language-independent, in that they can be pointed out as referents without further need to explain abstract ideas. Within a game, keeping score requires language to create the notion of score-keeping, whereas practical referents, such as participants or objects involved, exist without needing words to make sense of them (68). The metaphor of game points can be thus extended to „money, governments, private property” and so on, and these, in turn, point out institutions, involving „powers, rights, obligations [and] duties.” (70) These „relevant deontic phenomena” arise through language. There is a necessity to assign symbolic functions to objects that are not inherently marked whenever we refer to institutional reality (75), and these functions are subject to diachronic change. The dimensions of symbolic power are explored at length by Bourdieu. It is the stuff of „symbolic universes” (Bourdieu 164) such as myth and language - and other means of interacting with the world - and it is instrumental in shaping reality precisely because it is gnoseological in nature: common knowledge acquired through symbols can appear only when the symbols themselves are commonly accepted (cf. Durkheim’s notion of „logical conformism”). Symbols become transparent only through consensus, which influences and alters social order. Within the realm of ideology, it becomes readily apparent why there is symbolic struggle between different classes: it manifests itself not through physical violence, but through the desire to enforce a „definition of the social world” that reflects each class’s interests faithfully (167). What is interesting



is that symbolic systems are elaborated by specialists within the field (168), and I will demonstrate this in my analysis of the novel. Symbolic power offers an interesting parallel to the use of force when analyzing their scope: it leads to the mobilizations of classes, and it is ultimately fuelled by belief (170). This is relevant when discussing Plato's redefinition of Mouldwarp concepts. Part of Plato's orations involve presentations of words and their meanings, precisely because of the loss of their original contexts. Although the postmodern artifice of parody is well studied, its incorporation in Ackroyd's novel demands an analysis into what the act of defining words entails from the point of view of power. Plato, then, defines „decadence“ as „a belief in the recurrence of the decades so that, for example, the 2090s resembled the 1990s.“ (Ackroyd 13) „Common sense“ is „a theory that all human beings might be able to share one another's thoughts, so that there would in reality be only one person upon the world.“ (13) Similarly „god“ is explained by resorting to history: in the Age of Apostles, „the supreme ruler of the universe;“ in the Age of Mouldwarp, „a mechanical and scientific genius;“ and finally, „the principle of life reaching beyond its limits“ in the Age of Witspell (15). Describing ideology, Plato defines it as the „process of making ideas,“ a work carried out in „silence and solitude“ by artisans „trained in mental workhouses or asylums.“ (15) All these notions and representations are, in a Searlean sense, rooted in language, and they cannot be pointed out without a symbolic system. They are labels that correspond to abstract ideas without which they would not be communicable. However, in providing these definitions Plato is their sole author, and the problem of history's reliability is magnified in this exercise of power. There is no linguistic convention to speak of. Plato reconstructs the past by means of narrative within the symbolic universe of language. Bourdieu's symbolic power is useful in this analysis: Plato is, then, a specialist within his field, seizing power and using it, altering the mental representations of his audience without any kind of opposition. These are some of the ways in which theories of power can inform our reading of Ackroyd's novel, ranging from sociology to literary theory: what arises is a multidisciplinary analysis that shows precisely in what ways power is embodied and conceptualized within the text.

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