



Preface:

**The Narrative Identity of European Cities in
Contemporary Literature**

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While I was reading the content of this issue, a sentence kept popping up in my mind almost as an accidental *motto*: “The centre did not hold, the centre did not hold” - with which I became familiar as the title of a documentary about journalist and author Joan Didion - as it seemed to reflect the strong impressions produced by these six articles published in this issue. Still, maybe not so accidental as they share the theme of the peripheral, sometimes ex-centric or off-centred nature of the mid-size cities here studied and represented, not only among the European context but also as other urban forms, capitals, and other big-size cities.

However, as I searched for the correct quote associated with Joan Didion, it is, in fact, “the centre will not hold”. *Will*, verb, thus referring to a future event, something yet to happen. *Will not*, an announced action with the determination of a fate.

‘Will not’ instead of ‘did not’. My memory glitch on time bounced from a consummated past event to something destined to happen or act in a particular way, but it turned out not to be irrelevant as I resumed reading this journal issue and writing its preface.

The exact sentence derives from Yeats’ poem *The Second Coming*, 3rd verse as ‘Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;’ (Yeats, 1989). Yeats’ “The centre cannot hold” suggests a situation where everything is out of control, and one cannot feel safe because the core can no longer hold the weight and collapses. Reading the poem, we understand that Yeats is probably alluding to an image of the tragic reverse of fortune and a society under dissolution. Of course, the sense is not that different with Didion, although she did not precisely write it herself.¹

¹*Slouching Towards Bethlehem* is a 1968 collection of essays by Joan Didion that mainly describes her experiences in California during the 1960s. It takes its title from the poem *The Second Coming* by W. B. Yeats. *The Centre Will Not Hold* is the title of a 2017 documentary with and about Joan Didion, directed by Griffith Dunne.

Curiously, the distance between Yeats' 'cannot' and Didion's 'will not' expresses a subtle divergence from a mere observation of a fact or impediment to a fatalist statement, an augur.

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Not being trained as an architect and without any literature studies background, my avid reading habits brought me to architecture and urbanism. A growing interest in houses, rooms, streets, ruins and gazebos portrayed in books inflamed my spatial fantasy. It led to a more consistent study of the subject of both the architectural imagination of writers as well as the "literary narrativeness" of architectural design and experience.

That idea led me to organize in 2010, in Lisbon, the 1st conference on architecture and fiction with the title *Once Upon a Place*, where I first met architect, professor and poet Klaske Havik, who, a few years later followed with the organization of the 2nd conference on these subjects, under the name *Writing Place*, taking place in Delft in 2013. Auspicious meetings and very productive *wills* and *dos* also led to continuing to develop research on what was, at the time, the emergent subject of the architect and literature. Soon after, led by Klaske Havik and a few other colleagues, we submitted the COST Action proposal, *Writing Urban Places: New Narratives of the European City*, granted in November 2018.

As stated from the beginning, according to the original proposal and in the action's *Memorandum of Understanding*,

"By recognizing the value of local urban narratives - stories rich in information regarding citizens socio-spatial practices, perceptions and expectations -, the action aims to articulate a set of concrete literary devices within a host of spatial disciplines; bringing together scientific research in the fields of literary studies, urban planning and architecture; and positioning this knowledge vis-à-vis progressive redevelopment policies carried out in medium-sized cities in Europe." (2019, p. 3)

So, early in 2019, we started gathering people to build the network, hence soon met this issue's co-editors on the occasion of several meetings and events. Interestingly, this editorial team embodies much of the *Writing Urban Places* spirit and features, that is, a transdisciplinary and interdisciplinary group with a remarkable literature and narratology background yet focus on contemporary territories, both fictional and experiential, with a significant geographic spreading in the European map, working together via this diverse network.

Writing Urban Places' Working Group 2, a very active group, steered this collaboration. Sonja Novak, WG2 co-leader, is devoted to how theoretical reflections may stimulate the thinking and praxis of narrating urban places of medium-sized European cities, which she first joined to explore literary heterotopias. Her earnest study to establish connections outside her fields of expertise was also applied within the network in several participation formats, namely by organizing the PhD Training School *Urban Chronicles in Empirical Context*, in Osijek, 2022. Eventually, a fruitful and fantastic collaboration of *Writing Urban Places'* Working Group 2 and NALANS, a Scopus-indexed journal, brought together industrious editors and researchers.

It is evident that this issue of the *Journal of Narrative and Language Studies: On the Narrative Identity of European Cities in Contemporary Literature*, besides the editorial cooperation between WG2 members, reverberates with our action themes and concerns. In

addition to focusing on mid-size European cities, its content also conjures up the hypothetical incidence of the centre as an idea, even in peripheral realities. Reading the articles, although not surprising under the current world state of affairs, we acknowledge the presence and dominance of the socio-politics over other dimensions. The narratives studied and presented here are no love stories or comic reliefs. Nonetheless, they give us a critical, sharp and relevant reading on the value of local urban narratives and further developments.

References

Yeats, W. B. (1989) *The collected poems of W.B. Yeats*. Collier Books.

COST Action CA18126 Writing Urban Places. New Narratives of the European City. (2019) *Memorandum of Understanding*. URL: <file:///C:/Users/Korisnik/Downloads/CA18126-e-1.pdf> last accessed 9th February 2023.