University of Tehran

Faculty of World Studies

Myth of New York City

In Five Novels by Paul Auster

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In the Name of God

Abstract

The City is one of the most important concepts in the field of cultural studies. Different

scholars have approached this concept from different sociological, literary and mythical

perspectives. There are three types of myth with regards to the city. The third kind of

myth in this context, the conceptual basis of this study, is concerned with the city

becoming mythical through literary imagination.

To introduce the concept of myth, this dissertation glosses over the theories of

prominent thinkers concerning ancient and new myths. The hypothesis of this study is

that the myth of New York has been portrayed through literary works by Paul Auster

(1947-Present). Five novels by Auster (*New York Trilogy*, *Leviathan* and *The Brooklyn

Follies*) were chosen. From them, six city-related elements were collected and

categorized in order to answer the following questions: Has the author presented an

imaginative and interesting description of New York City physically and has the author

made the city and its events mythical?

The method used is Philipp Mayring's qualitative content analysis. The model presented

by Jalal Sattari in *The Myth of Tehran* is also employed. Three theories in the field of

urban studies are used for categorizing the elements: Karl Marx's city/countryside

opposition, Walter Benjamin's Flânerie and Henri Lefebvre's concept of "fighting for

space". The conclusion is that it is not the city that has become mythical in these novels, but rather the people who interact with the city and have chosen it as a place for wandering and searching for their lost identities.

Key Terms: Myth, Modern Myths, City, Place, Novel, Modernity, Sociology of Literature, Flâneur, Identity.

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Table of Content

Table of Figures

Chapter 1

Chapter One: Introduction

Introduction

A City is not only a place for living but it is also a common concept for the people who live in it. Social matters and culture are constructed within the structure of a city; as a result, city has meaning beyond a physical surface. "There are three kinds of approaches regarding the city, in the words of Jalal Sattari, who relates city to myth" (13-14)[*].

The first one explains city as mythical basis. The initial point is that the mythical city has an inspirational and mythical basis on which it is structured. In other words, its makers, architects and planners have not built it on a regional, endemic, environmental, social, political and economic basis; instead, they have made it according to a pattern which is not necessarily compatible with the mentioned needs. One of the best examples of these kinds of cities is Rome. Nowadays, Rome is the capital city of Italy and its building started in 753 BC. The history of Rome begins with myth, and so Rome can be a good example of cities that built upon myths. There are other cities in the world with the same background, but they do not exist anymore.

To explain the myths about the foundation of Rome, it should be mentioned that there are two myths: the myth of Aeneas and the myth of Romulus and his twin brother, Remus. It should be added that "Aeneas is sometimes introduced as founder of Rome, but the myth of Roman foundation that is most familiar is that of Romulus, the first king of Rome" (Gill).

Here each of these myths will be introduced in order to make clear what was previously said about building a city based on myths. The first myth can be summed up thus: "Aeneas was a prince and a great Trojan hero. During the Trojan War, he was wounded by the Greek hero; but his mother, Venus, who was a goddess, saved him. After ten years of fighting, finally, Greek army found a way inside the city. Aeneas had to escape toward Italy. He succeeded to establish a great new kingdom: Italy" (Hoena 15). And Rome was founded as the capital of Italy.

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[*] All quotations from Jalal Sattari are translations by the present author from the original Persian.

The second myth of the founding of Rome is the story of two brothers named Romulus and Remus. Their uncle thinks that they can be a threat to his power. "Amulius had to arrest their mother, Rhea Sylvia, and two boys. They were condemned to die. Instead of burying them alive with their mother, Amulius had them placed in a basket and float down the River Tiber" (Guerber 18). Their uncle was unable to change their destiny and they were protected by a she-wolf. She looked after them until one day a shepherd found them. "Years later, they decided to found their own city. Romulus and Remus wanted to use signs in sky. They could not decide on the exact site and started building separate sets of walls. Each twin claimed his was the city .They fought and Remus was killed by Romulus. He did continue to build up his city, which was named Rome" (Cawthorne 2).

As was mentioned, "Rome was founded up on the myth of a perfect marriage between the goddess of beauty and the god of triumph. The former, Venus, was the mother of Aeneas; the latter, Mars, was the father of Romulus. Aeneas and Romulus became the two most revered heroes of the new empire" (Kearney 84).

In conclusion there are two very different myths about the founding of Rome. Both of these myths have survived throughout the centuries to be very well known. As Kearney sees it, "the original purpose of mythologies, for Rome as for all major empires and nations was to provide its people with a sense of original identity. Myths were thus deemed to convey some kind of primordial power to the extent that they narrated a sacred history" (87).

Apart from who the establisher of Rome was, there is another important question regarding the place. Where was Rome established exactly? Another myth provides the answer. According to tradition, "Rome was built on seven hills, all located east of the River Tiber some fifteen miles upstream from its mouth" (Couch 205).

"These seven hills were known by the names of the Aventine, the Capitoline, the Caelian, the Esquiline, the Palatine, the Quirinal and the Viminal hill" (Arnold 13). These hills had a very important role in ancient Roman mythology, religion and politics. "The Palatine Hill, by tradition, is where Romulus founded the city" (Funiciello et al 36).

As Sattari mentions, cities were seen as signs of gods. "Therefore cities were built according to an ideal plan which ancient people believed to be the structure of the greater world. Thus the building of cities was accompanied by special rituals, and these rituals had mythological aspects. An example of this is the foundation of Rome, which started with the burrowing of a trench called Mundus" (17-18).

In Science of Mythology, Jung and Kerenyi refer to this ritual which was executed for the foundation of Rome. Jung quotes from Ovid's Fasti: "According to the most detailed account of Roman city-foundation, Plutarch's biography of Romulus, there is mention of a circle which is described from a center; the center takes the form of a circle pit called a Mundus" (13). Grandazzi talks about Mundus as "the center of the city and of the world" (168). However, later, this kind of circle and city-plan failed to correspond. "This form is theoretically conceivable only as a square within a circle, in the Indian culture these circle were called Mandala" (Jung and Kerenyi 14).

Plutarch, the Greek philosopher and historian, completely explains the story of Rome foundation regarding mythical rituals through Romulus's biography in his book:

> Romulus, having buried his brother Remus, together with his two foster-fathers, on the mount Remonia, set to building his city; and sent for men out of Tuscany, who directed him by sacred usages and written rules in all the ceremonies to be observed, as in a religious rite. First, they dug a round trench about that which is now the Comitium, or Court of Assembly, and into it solemnly threw the first-fruits of all things either good by custom or necessary by nature; lastly, every man taking a small piece of earth of the country from whence he came, they all threw in promiscuously together. This trench they call, as they do the heavens, Mundus; making which their centre, they described the city in a circle round it. Then the founder fitted to a plough a brazen ploughshare, and, yoking together a bull and a cow, drove himself a deep line or furrow round the bounds; while the business of those that followed after was to see that whatever earth was thrown up should be turned all inwards towards the city; and not to let any clod lie outside. With this line they described the wall, and called it, by a contraction, Pomoerium, that is, postmurum, after or beside the wall; and where they designed to make a gate, there they took out the share, carried the plough over, and left a space; for which reason they consider the whole wall as holy, except

where the gates are; for had they adjudged them also sacred, they could not, without offence to religion, have given free ingress and egress for the necessaries of human life, some of which are in themselves unclean. As for the day they began to build the city, it is universally agreed to have been the twenty-first of April, and that day the Romans annually keep holy, calling it their country's birthday. At first, they say, they sacrificed no living creature on this day, thinking it fit to preserve the feast of their country's birthday pure and without stain of blood. Yet before ever the city was built, there was a feast of herdsmen and shepherds kept on this day, which went by the name of Palilia. (16-17)

It should be added that traditions do not agree on the size of Romulus' city. "There are a great number of uncertainties in the sources, which reveal numerous reworkings of the legend corresponding to the various stages of the development of Rome" (Grimal 407). So Rome -in myth at least- "was founded in 753 BCE" (McCarty 17). What can be gained from these myths is only better knowledge of a people who lived in ancient times. These myths reflect the manner in which the Roman people wanted to be known to the world. According to Cornell all these myths and stories have an ideological aspect: "The most revealing sign of this is the way it defines the identity of the Roman people as a mixture of different ethnic groups, and of Roman culture as the product of various foreign influences. There could hardly be a greater contrast with the foundation myths of the Greek cities, which insisted on the purity and continuity of their origins" (Cornell 60).

The second type is the city which is called utopia. Webster's Online Dictionary defines it in two parts: "1. an imaginary island, represented by Sir Thomas More in a work called Utopia, as enjoying the greatest perfection in politics, laws and the like, 2. any place or state of ideal perfection". And in another definition, "Utopia as colloquially understood is introduced as a good, but non-existent and therefore impossible, society" (Levitas 2).

Sir Thomas More's work, Utopia, is as influential in Western philosophy as Farabi's position is in Islamic philosophy. Farabi used "Medina Fazeleh" to refer to this city, the place whose leaders are philosophers. Unlike Farabi's work, Sir Thomas More works on Utopia as a literary genre. The book, written in Latin in 1516, is about