W ith more than half of the world’s population living in cities by now, it is no surprise that literary and cultural studies should show an avid interest in the ways in which texts, discourses, and praxes engage with and are connected to urban environments. For a postcolonial engagement with cities, however, one might expect a slightly more ambiguous notion: on the one hand, it is in those parts of the world that used to be under colonial rule that researchers find their models of urbanity writ large: megacities and megalopolises are to be found in Asia and Africa, while European and US-American metropolises more often than not grow smaller. On the other hand, the centre–periphery dualism that underlies the notion of ‘capital’ or ‘urban centre’ also makes for the rather enthusiastic celebration of what is considered ‘urban’ by researchers of cities, thus giving the focus on the postcolonial metropolis a somewhat problematic aftertaste. My essay seeks to trace this ambiguity in two successive steps: first, it will explore the diverging imaginaries that come with ‘Western’ and ‘postcolonial’ cities, especially in the cultural negotiation of the complexities of cityscapes, which has “long been recognized as a key characteristic of urban life.” By emphasizing the aesthetic strategies by means of which literary experiences of the cities are created, it will, secondly, endeavour to introduce a way of reading the city and its fiction that opposes – or at least adjusts – the common stance of urban

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studies and overcomes the dualism between Western and postcolonial imaginaries of urbanity.

I will start with the contention that literary studies – and literary readings of the city – have much to contribute to the general task of researching the concept of urbanity. Particularly because ‘urbanity’ is as much a reality as it is an imaginative concept with which people associate cultivation as well as chaos, and progress as well as profligacy, it is the focus on discursive renderings that may help shed light on the complicated relationship of material reality and its appearance through discourse. In other words, cities are always both real and fictional because, as Victor Burgin suggests,

the city in our actual experience is at the same time an actually existing physical environment, and a city in a novel, a film, a photograph, a city seen on television, a city in a comic strip, a city in a pie chart, and so on.²

In addition, it is not only the imagination that permeates cityscapes; the opposite is also true: cities are inextricably linked to the very nature of the modern novel: “Cities are so integral to literature […] that many great works of literature almost depend on the city for their existence.”³

That ‘the city’ and ‘the text’ share interesting parallels is therefore not a particularly new insight, as Richard Lehan, among others, notes. In The City in Literature, he argues that since “the ways of reading literary texts are analogous to the ways urban historians read the city […] , reading the text has been a form of reading the city.”⁴ For me, this is a bit too facile, however, for when scholars claim that cities and texts are interrelated, it does not follow that both are to be treated as being identical. It is, rather, their co-constitutive functions that may be allowed for: as Jeri Johnson puts it with regard to the Modernist prose of Virginia Woolf and James Joyce, novels “interrogate the effect of the metropolis on the mental life of the individuals.”⁵ But in doing so, novels are active rather than receptive. Not only do novelists register what is going on in the modern

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