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THE ANTAGONISTIC CITY:  
A DESIGN FOR URBAN IMAGERY  
IN SEVEN AMERICAN POETS

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A THESIS SUBMITTED AS REQUIRED  
FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY  
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## PREFACE

Ultimately this study springs from a fascination with cities and the way people see them. And because I am wedded to poetry as a way of seeing, it seemed natural to look for a way of viewing the city through the eyes of a number of American poets. I chose: Walt Whitman, Stephen Crane, Edwin Arlington Robinson, Robert Frost, Hart Crane, Wallace Stevens and William Carlos Williams. Their writing spans one hundred and twenty years. In that time, the United States changed from a nation of farmers to a nation of city and suburban dwellers. The reality changed, and so did its impact on the minds of people.

I chose the poets I did because I believe that an urban focus can help deepen the understanding and enjoyment of these poets' writing, just as their poetry adds to the ways in which men and cities can be viewed. The established place of these writers in the American canon has been another criterion for selection. Finally, I was attracted to them as poets. In the case of Stephen Crane and Robinson, this was not for the usual reasons which establish these writers in the pantheon.

A curious thing happened as I set out to view the city through these poets' eyes. I became increasingly aware that they were using the city (and other spatial and geographical features, as it turned out) to look at something else. City became metaphor. They were using urban imagery to treat themes

not necessarily urban, themes related to the various modes in which men grow or fail to grow to maturity. With this change in focus to the city as metaphor, it became increasingly important to introduce other spatial and geographical images. The most important of these is nature (in opposition to man and his artifacts), both wild and cultivated. The significance of a poet's use of city images is intimately bound up in his use of images from nature. The two cannot be separated.

The result has been to establish a design, incorporating all these geographical images, in terms of which each poet's work can be seen in high relief. The design, described geographically as a pattern of withdrawal and return, is discussed at some length in the Introduction. It will be seen to furnish the underlying structure of each successive chapter.

I want to thank some people who helped to get me this far. Firstly, I want to thank Dr Wystan Curnow, my Supervisor, who gave me plenty of rope and at crucial junctures, helped me untangle it. I owe much to a financial grant from the American Council of Learned Societies, without which I would never have got to the United States. That visit crystallized a number of things for me. It was an energizing visit. The late Professor Normal Holmes Pearson, Professor Trachtenberg and Professor Leo Marx were kind to me over there. Their encouragement was worth more than they perhaps realized at the time. I would like to thank the English Department here in Auckland for the climate of support. And most of all, I would like to thank my wife, Judy, and the children, for making sure that this thing did not consume us.

## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this dissertation has been to investigate the significance of urban imagery in the work of seven American poets: Walt Whitman, Stephen Crane, Edwin Arlington Robinson, Robert Frost, Hart Crane, William Carlos Williams, and Wallace Stevens. Although I have concentrated on the poetry, I have also ranged freely over the published writing of all these men.

My conclusions can be reduced to these two propositions:

1. That the significance of a literary city can be understood only in conjunction with an attempt to explore the significance of other literary landscapes.

2. The significance of the city (and other landscapes) as metaphor is to be understood in terms of a basic process whereby the self is realized. This process is most simply represented geographically by a pattern of withdrawal and return, with the city and wilderness figuring as poles between which the self moves.

The second proposition can be elaborated as follows:

The process begins with the individual in a condition of alienation from his culture. This is culture, not just as a system of meaning and value, but culture as a way in which experience is ordered. At this point in the process, the city becomes a metaphor for the structures whereby a culture orders

its common experience.

The most basic ground for social alienation is that these structures serve to cut the individual off from experience. The response to this alienation is a desire to undergo a reductive process whereby orientative structures are simplified or demolished. The aim of such a process, which has a corresponding metaphor in the geographical metaphor of withdrawal, is to restore contact with experience.

The experiential world is characterized by the absence of structure. Its cardinal metaphor is nature as wilderness (wildness), though, again, the city as oceanic and dislocative can fulfil a like function. It is in the unmediated intercourse with such a world that the self is realized. At this point a sense of meaning and value arises as experience is assimilated and integrated. The result of such an integration is a structure valid for the self--a structure, we might note, with no claims to permanence or finality. What is discovered in the wilderness is not so much a final structure, as a way of structuring.

Which is what the realized individual brings back to the society from which he remains alienated. As the city can serve as metaphor for social structures, so it can serve as a metaphor for the structure (and the way of structuring) that might be--an ideal city. The final task is the discovery of a role that might facilitate the realization of this authentic culture.

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