

Review of Zénó Vernyik, *Cities of Saviors. Urban Space in E. E. Cummings' Complete Poems, 1904-1962 and Peter Ackroyd's Hawksmoor* (Szeged, Hungary: Americana eBooks, 2015)

Eva M. Gómez-Jiménez

This book offers a stimulating discussion of the spatial structures of the urban poems by E. E. Cummings, and *Hawksmoor*, the novel by Peter Ackroyd. More concretely, it suggests that both Cummings and Ackroyd envisage a sacred organization of space in New York and London respectively, and that this is achieved through a reworking of Christian symbolism in these texts. The book starts with an introductory chapter, which is followed by 3 chapters which explore the urban spaces in the works selected. The author does this first through separate analyses (chapters 2 and 3) and then through a comparative study that shows the similarities in the works selected (chapter 4). After the conclusions and the references, Vernyik also includes 4 appendices, two listing words in Cummings poems “used in an urban context,” and two others listing Cummings’ urban and New York poems. Although not central to Vernyik’s results, these lists of words and poems serve as a very useful aid in understanding the methodology he follows regarding the selection and analysis of Cummings’ poems.

The introduction in Vernyik’s *Cities of Saviors* (2015) offers a clear vision of the book as a whole, the overall aim of which is to find commonalities in the spatial structure of the cities of New York and London in E. E. Cummings’ urban poems and in Peter Ackroyd’s *Hawksmoor*, respectively. In order to do this, Vernyik has approached the two modernist writers separately, while using an identical method in both cases: after (1) reviewing and critiquing the critical reception of each author in question, he (2) locates the city spaces in the literary text under analysis and then (3) identifies and describes the central localities in those spaces. In a fourth chapter, he compares urban space in Cummings’ poetry and Ackroyd’s fiction. Vernyik’s approach is based on a mix of models that mainly include the theory of sacred space (Mircea Eliade), the concept of heterotopia (Michel Foucault), the subjective experience of space (Christopher Bollas), the poetics of space (Gaston Bachelard) and the model of the flaneur (Stephen Paul Hardy). Such complex theoretical background is complemented with the relevant previous interpretations of the texts under analysis, which Vernyik

reviews in depth.

Vernyik devotes chapter 2 to a reading of urban space in E. E. Cummings' poetry. He begins by highlighting the limited attention (with a few exceptions) that urban space and city experience has received from Cummings scholars. Vernyik offers a clear description of the particular method he followed in selecting Cummings' urban poems from *Complete Poems 1902-1964*. This, I think, constitutes one of the more significant contributions of the book to literary studies in general, and to the study of Cummings literature in particular. Starting from McBride's 1989 *Concordance to the Poems of E. E. Cummings*, Vernyik made a list of the expressions that appear in the context of urban experience (Appendix 1), from which he derived the list of poems that deal with urban life. Electronic texts of the poems were accessed via the ProQuest database *Literature Online*, available through most university libraries. [For more on accessing this database, see the News & Notes section, page 175.] Vernyik then read all the poems containing urban expressions and examined the words and phrases, retaining only those that were relevant in terms of their use in the actual context of the poems (Appendix 2). This allowed him to obtain a final list of 152 of Cummings' urban poems, (roughly 15% of Cummings' whole poetic production) (Appendix 3). From these, 110 dealt specifically with New York (approximately 11% of Cummings' poetic production). Vernyik then describes the nature of urban space in Cummings' poetry, claiming it is rooted in Christian symbolism and the idea of a savior. This book greatly expands Vernyik's previous analysis of urban space in the poems in *Tulips & Chimneys* (see Works Cited list).

The reading of all these poems shows a New York City that is presented as a woman, at times strongly sensual and sexualized, as well as demonstrating that the vocabulary relating to sensuality mixes together with that of religion and devotion. The chapter finishes with a discussion on the heterotopic localities of E. E. Cummings' New York: McSorley's Ale House, Dick Mid's place, and Hassan's.¹ In light of these analyses, Vernyik sketches a map of New York City in which the sacred fictional space becomes organized into three heterotopic centers (the two bars and the brothel) surrounded by other named locations (2nd avenue, Greenwich Village, Coney Island, the Bronx Zoo, for example), as well as spaces that are unnamed in the poems. In the end, Vernyik shows that there are many different types of people in the New York poems, mostly underdogs, outsiders, criminals, prostitutes and beggars, presented by a poetic voice that shows "a range of reaction and attitudes . . . [that] reaches from active help and involvement through sympathetic feelings to factual though uninvolved description. Even less is the attitude that of a narrow, stubborn and bitter satire the author is often blamed for and that his poems may show else-

where” (49).

Vernyik’s third chapter, which deals with urban space in Ackroyd’s *Hawksmoor*, begins by sketching the critical reception of this novel. Vernyik highlights aspects such as the oppositional cultures displayed in Ackroyd’s depiction of London and the isolation of the characters who appear there, where limited interaction occurs. London is represented as a depressive and haunting place in this novel, a city full of violence, murder, dirt and poverty. After describing its structure and plot, and challenging Alex Link’s interpretation of *Hawksmoor*, Vernyik presents his own reading of the novel. To do this, he enumerates all the London locations in the book, including those references to London in the 18th century. (The novel, for those who are not familiar, presents two parallel stories of murders that take place in the 18th century and in the 1980s and occur in the same seven churches in London.) Interestingly, Vernyik points out that the seventh church in the list and the street in which it is apparently located are purely fictional. As he did with Cummings, Vernyik presents a map of the cartographic fictional space in *Hawksmoor* and explains that, in contrast to Cummings’ New York, Ackroyd’s descriptions of London are full of detail. After suggesting that the seven churches in the novel correspond to “the seven Starres in the Pleiades,” he argues that they are able to provide a means of moving between places, years, and epochs.

Following these two very insightful analyses, chapter 4 compares the fictional space in E. E. Cummings’ poetry and Ackroyd’s novel. Vernyik highlights the common features which demonstrate that urban spaces in both texts can be considered to have a sacred nature. They both show, for instance, a fragmented sense of space and both show a clear contrast between sacred sites and the other urban spaces. There are many references and allusions in Cummings’ poetry to biblical scenes, which parallels the symbolism displayed in Ackroyd’s *Hawksmoor*. The similarities between the two texts are also supported by some corroborating notes by the authors themselves, drawing upon some interviews with Ackroyd and Cummings’ personal notes. More importantly, both texts show heterotopic localities that somehow function in a similar way: serving as a means for some sort of communication, and even time travel or travel between the underworld, earth, and heaven; in addition, they are also bound to a central character, a savior-figure. They differ, though, in that (in Cummings’ case) the savior-figure is the city itself, while for Ackroyd, the figure is embodied in the 18th century character Nicholas Dyer. Other commonalities include the “misfits, outsiders, beggars, prostitutes and other downtrodden elements” in both texts, as well as the common affiliation that both authors show to Modernism. Both Cummings and Ackroyd shared a respect for tradition, also reflected in these texts. In this sense, the most significant difference

between Cummings' urban poems and Ackroyd's *Hawksmoor* consists of the strategy they follow to create their sense of the sacred: while Ackroyd goes beyond the religious frames of reference to create a new one, Cummings re-evaluates profane spaces in his poems, organizing the sacred space in his New York poems around three locations which are not sacred in principle: two bars and a brothel.

Vernyik closes with a summary of his book's main contributions to literary studies. These basically consist of a reframing of Cummings' poetry (beyond the lyric genre) and a better understanding of Ackroyd's *Hawksmoor*. This last chapter also suggests possible further studies of both writers, which will complement the work presented in this book very well.

Cities of Saviors presents a very detailed analysis of urban spaces in E. E. Cummings' poetry and Peter Ackroyd's *Hawksmoor*. This continues Vernyik's previous work on space in Cummings' *Tulips & Chimneys*. Methodologically speaking, I find it very useful that Vernyik explains, in a very transparent way, how he has selected the poems for analysis. He focuses particularly on the idea that Cummings has been generally presented as a transcendentalist, and consequently part of his production has been less explored by criticism. In that way, he claims that there are other Cummingses, as Landles has previously argued. The Cummings that Vernyik presents is fascinated with the symbolism of Christ's self-sacrifice and the holy communion, and in that sense, I am sure this book will serve as a departure point for further approaches looking at those 'other' Cummingses. It is also very laudable that Vernyik recognizes the need to extend his analyses to other Cummings poems and Ackroyd novels, to discover whether urban space is sacred in other texts by these authors that are not analysed in his book). Whatever scholars do in the future regarding these texts, *Cities of Saviors* will provide a very useful, enriching starting point.

Note

1. Editor's note: Michel Foucault defines "heterotopias" as real places that nevertheless function as "something like counter-sites," places where "all the other real sites that can be found within the culture are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted" (24). Foucault gives at least three examples of modern heterotopic sites: cemeteries, theatres, and brothels.

Works Cited

- Foucault, Michel. "Of Other Spaces." Trans. Jay Miskowiec. *Diacritics* 16.1 (Spring 1986): 22-27.
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