

## LITERARY GEOGRAPHIES

**Darran Anderson (2015) *Imaginary Cities*. London: Influx Press, 233 pp. £6,99 (e-Pub), ISBN: 978-1-910312-01.**

Darran Anderson's *Imaginary Cities*, published by Influx Press and being republished with Chicago University Press in April 2017, is a book that will be of relevance for everyone interested in cities of the imagination – an *Invisible Cities* for the present century. The author does not hide his indebtedness to Italo Calvino: the motto of the book is borrowed from the Italian master, and in other respects, too, *Imaginary Cities* resembles Calvino's seminal work, with short chapters describing a variety of imaginary cities: cities utopian, futuristic, dystopian and apocalyptic; cities ideal, planned, or dreamed; unbuilt or once-built. In the brief and elegant chapters of this delightful book, Darran Anderson moves through thousands of years of thinking on all things urban, from Biblical cities to Jane Jacobs, from Victorian futurologists to Judge Dredd; from early modern city utopias to messianic ideal cities.

It is a timely publication given the continued interest in spatiality within the humanities and the social sciences, and the flourishing academic research in the field of literary urban studies. While cities are at the centre of the book, this is also, and perhaps even more so, a tribute to the human imagination, and an investigation of the strong sentiments – from adoration and awe to hope and fear – that have been attached to mankind's arguably greatest cultural artefact.

For readers who know the author from his twitter feed (@oniropolis has more than 20,000 followers), it will perhaps come as a surprise that the evocative images from his social media profile, many relating to imaginary cities, are lacking from this book. But this is a visual work nonetheless, and the complete lack of images is perhaps only fitting for a book that invites its readers on an imaginary journey. Every new chapter, every turn of the page brings new incentives to run to the library or to go on a real-life *grand tour* of the urban wonders of the world.

The book is written in a lively style that is at once engaging and accessible. However, the out-of-breath cadence of the narration, which takes the reader on a roller coaster through layers upon layers of overturned libraries, is not without its imperfections. The author's occasional desire to enumerate everything possible about a certain subject results at times in sentences stacked with details and disparate references that each could have warranted lengthy excursions. In some such cases (the 'Hitler house', the 'Lion-faced house in Awash', 'the Face House in Kyoto'; all mentioned without much in the way of framework between brackets in one sentence), the reader is left with all references, no context and little meaning.

*Imaginary Cities* is not intended as an academic book in its most rigorous sense, and while the easy readability of the text and the lack of cumbersome academic references are refreshing, the

general reader would have benefited from some of the marginalia associated with a more academic (or more rigorously edited) publication. A reader interested in looking up the many fascinating literary and journalistic quotations in the text faces a daunting task. A coherent bibliography is lacking, many of the quotes are second-hand, and the references given in the endnotes of each chapter are not very helpful. Trying to look up a quote from Petronius's *Satyricon*, for example, is fairly impossible with only the page number to go by, without other publication details. This is a pity especially for a book such as this one, which offers a treasure trove of references.

There are also occasional inaccuracies – Stanley did not claim the Congo for Belgium, but for Leopold II – and there are quite a number of misspellings, especially in the abundance of non-English names. Herman Pleijl and Juhani Pallasmaa should be Pleij and Pallasmaa, and further spelling errors include, amongst others, 'Radio Collines Milnes' (which should be 'Mille Collines'). Some of these inaccuracies may well have been amended in the Chicago University Press edition, which was not yet available when this review was finalized. From time to time, the author's desire to tell a good story turns fiction into dubious fact (such as the anecdote of De Sade in the Bastille when it was stormed).

Leaving these points for improvement aside, the short chapters in *Imagined Cities* are little gems, some scratching the surface of what could have been full-length book studies, others refined and fine-grained essays, such as the wonderful treatment of the Tower of Babel (pp. 54-58), which introduces a theme that continues as a basso continuo in subsequent chapters that deal, amongst others, with skyscraper mania, vertical suburbia, and the figure of King Kong. Particularly absorbing is the way in which the separate chapters move through a range of temporal levels, exploring the palimpsestic experience of real-life cities, and the way in which past images of the future inform our present urban lives. The haunting presence of the future is rarely felt so vividly as in the many chapters in this book dealing with past visions of cities-to-be.

There are many new cities to be explored here, and many books. There is Bruno Taut's *Die Stadtkrone* (1919), which uses the city-as-body model; Paul Scheerbart's crystal cities in *Das graue Tuch* (1914), or John Ames Mitchell's *The Last American* (1889) in which 'travelling Persians sail into the ruins of New York City, which for eleven centuries has 'decayed in solitude' (Anderson 491-2). One of the numerous forgotten books brought to life here is Amedeo Tosetti's *Pedals of the Black Sea* (1884), in which, '[f]estooned with cannons and powered by fifty Tatar cyclists, the iron egg of Malacovia [...] terrorised the local population and hid by lowering itself into the Danube' (Andersson 164).

Perhaps one of the most gratifying aspects of *Imaginary Cities* is constituted by Anderson's many insightful aphorisms, combining a healthy sense of humour with a critical political edge. When describing, for example, how Northern Korean architecture shares conspicuous features with post-industrial Western urban waterfronts:

Repatriate Pyongyang's Mansudae Apartments to Hong Kong or the French Riviera, the Grand People's Study Hall to Japan, give the monstrous Ryugyong Hotel a lick of paint and a glass refit and it would be fit for critical celebration on the former docklands and seafronts of any sparkling metropolis. (Anderson 133)

Or how Anderson questions the “Copenhagenisation” of future cities, duly noting that future ‘[d]ystopias will have cycle lanes and host World Cups’ (208). Or the current interest of urban development in industrial heritage: ‘With time, horror becomes heritage. First as tragedy, then as farce, then as commodity’ (74). Or again, juxtaposing dystopia and utopia: ‘Dystopias are partly a lesson in the dangers of getting what we want, even if that is happiness. In a city of enforced glee, the gloomy man is crucial as the only advocate of freedom’ (416-7). Darran Anderson himself appears at times in this book as the “gloomy man” of his own aphorism, bringing a satirical note to the ‘city of enforced glee’ that can be found in so many books extolling the triumph of the city and its creative classes.

Darran Anderson’s next book, *Tidenrack*, will be published in 2018 with Vintage in the UK/Europe, and Farrar, Straus and Giroux in the US. *Tidenrack* is being advertised as a personal history of the city of Derry from the perspective of the river Foyle. Given the author’s elegant and evocative style, his attention to historical detail and ability to weld broad sweeps of urban history with the personal and the local, this book, too, will be a publication that all readers with an interest in literary geography will be looking forward to with eager anticipation.

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