

**Zénó Vernyik, *Cities of Saviors. Urban Space in E. E. Cummings' Complete Poems, 1904-1962 and Peter Ackroyd's Hawksmoor*. AMERICANA eBOOKS, University of Szeged, 2015, 170 pages**

From the early 1960s onwards, with the publication of Kevin Lynch's *The Image of the City* (MIT Press 1960), a paradigm change occurred within urban studies. The city is no longer a study of design, architecture, history, and planning in isolation; instead, it is analyzed as a complex interdisciplinary phenomenon—Zénó Vernyik's *Cities of Saviors. Urban Space in E. E. Cummings' Complete Poems, 1904-1962, and Peter Ackroyd's Hawksmoor* is an excellent contribution to the “reading the city” method within the field of literature.

“Reading the city” theory suggests that the city, as an archetype of historical imagination and cultural representation, has manifested itself in various constructed images and narratives. The city collects many meanings in which people invest their interpretations and by which they try to create their histories. In this sense, the city resembles a text, as Neil Campbell and Alasdair Kean argue, and this text can be constructed as an “inscription of man in space” (162). This strategy invites different layers of interpretations ranging from the dominant readings to various interdisciplinary approaches. Lynch argues that people in urban situations formed mental maps of their surroundings consisting of five basic elements (paths, edges, districts, nodes, landmarks) (2). Therefore, the city can be interpreted as a cultural representation, and legibility (also called imageability and visibility) means the extent to which the cityscape can be ‘read’ (Lynch 2). Vernyik's book provides another uncharted dimension to the metaphoric interpretation of urban experience by scrutinizing the city as an imagined space. His reading of the city offers an asymmetrical comparison of the urban spaces (New York and London) depicted in E. E. Cummings' poetry and Peter Ackroyd's novel *Hawksmoor*. Vernyik's *Cities of Saviors* works with the spatial theories of Mircea Eliade, Michel Foucault, and Gaston Bachelard.

Moreover, Vernyik maps new notions of the cartographic fictional space based on Christopher Bollas's ideas, providing a solid and cohesive theoretical framework for the volume. *Cities of Saviors* is a pivotal contribution to the fields of English and American Studies by reinterpreting the oeuvres of both authors. A similar comparative book on these two authors has yet to be published.

Zénó Vernyik is a Hungarian literary scholar living in the Czech Republic and working at the English Department of the Technical University of Liberec. Vernyik specializes in British writers of Hungarian origin (primarily Arthur Koestler and George Mikes), modern and contemporary American and British literature (mainly E. E. Cummings and Peter Ackroyd), and urban literature. Vernyik's free-access e-book was published by *AMERICANA eBooks* (general editors: Réka M. Cristian and Zoltán Dragon). This digital-born edition contributes to the book's novelty by its very mode of publication, addressing an expanded audience interested in the topic.

*Cities of Saviors* includes five chapters focusing on the urban literature of both authors, offering bracing new critical perspectives. Vernyik compares in his volume "the spatial structure of the urban poems of E.E. Cummings and those of the urban prose of Peter Ackroyd, as represented by the novel *Hawksmoor*" (1). Vernyik argues that Cummings's New York City and Ackroyd's London present a sacred space organization as a twisted reinterpretation of Christian symbolism. These urban spaces serve as heterotopic localities of the time-space compression, and the source of this interpretative framework is a Christ figure. Moreover, the dichotomy of sacred and profane space can serve the function of an alternative interpretative paradigm (102). One of the novelties of Vernyik's book is the emphasis on the fact that it offers an asymmetrical comparison of the spatial representations of the urban poems by E. E. Cummings and *Hawksmoor*, the novel by Peter Ackroyd. In Vernyik's interpretation, the common ground for comparison is that both authors created a sacred spatial representation of New York and London by using Christian symbolism in the texts. Vernyik's book is an elegant and brilliantly structured comparative analysis. The book breaks down into three chapters with an Introduction, a Conclusion, and four Appendices. The aims of the introduction are clear and logical and meet the mentioned goals throughout the volume.

Moreover, the pivotal merit of the work is that it "significantly modifies the image and critical understanding of both authors" (Vernyik 4). Chapter Two focuses on the representation of urban space in E.E. Cummings' selected works. Chapter Three scrutinizes Peter Ackroyd's London as a cartographic fictional space and sacred heterotopias following Foucault's concept. Chapter Four compares the similarities in urban spaces in the selected works of the two authors. The rich and detailed Appendices are beyond doubt the merits of the volume and show extensive and meticulous research on the topic by supporting the crit-

ical understanding and methodology of the comparison, explicitly focusing on the lists of words and poems “used in urban context” (Vernyik 142) by the two authors respectively.

The image of New York City depicted in Cummings’s poetry is organized around the sacred vs. profane dynamics of the city space, which acts “as temples and portals between the three zones of heaven, earth, and underworld” (Vernyik 3). Meanwhile, the city manifests itself as “a female and eroticized savior, going through stages in the life of Jesus Christ, and sacrificing herself for the inhabitants of the city who at the same time constitute her body” (Vernyik 3). Ackroyd’s London image is based on seven central locations, namely churches built by Nicholas Dyer. According to Vernyik, these churches serve as occult portals in space-time by providing escape routes to the architect from his crimes and the chains of time and human existence (3). According to Vernyik, Dyer is not a selfish mass murderer but a controversial and subversive savior with messianic tendencies who transcends the moral categories of good and evil (114–116). Moreover, Dyer is transgressing the confines of religion.

The novelty of Vernyik’s text and research is that he focuses on the neglected and uncharted urban space territories via Cummings’s modernist readings. Moreover, the book provides a unique perspective on Peter Ackroyd’s novel by highlighting that the author likes playing with and inventing purely fictional details and selling them for historical fact (Vernyik 86). This technique of mixing fact and fiction challenges the reader’s comfort zone about understanding the world.

The rich sources of the Appendices (117), enriched with excellent charts and newly constructed terminology (e.g., cartographic fictional space), strengthen the comparative dimension of the book in tandem with the organized, meticulous research. Vernyik uses many quality academic and primary sources to support his argumentation, which he communicates effectively to the readers. The comparative study compares Cummings’s and Ackroyd’s oeuvre from the perspective of the modernist urban space by reconstructing the lost sacred space. As Vernyik argues, the dichotomy of sacred and profane space can serve the function of an alternative interpretative paradigm (102). To strengthen the sacred characters of the urban space, he scrutinizes the magic numbers related to the city and the beings of the urban spaces (misfits, outsiders, beggars, prostitutes, etc.) (119). As Vernyik claims, Cummings and Ackroyd focus on

the creation and functionality of sacred spaces, which are strongly related to a central character, a Savior figure (3-4). Following his argumentation, for Cummings, the Savior is the city constantly sacrificing herself depicted as a female sexualized body, meanwhile in Ackroyd's novel, the architect Nicholas becomes a Savior since he builds his churches to provide an escape route and saves the city's inhabitants from the trap of time – both of them visibly revolt the classical savior figure of Jesus Christ into a more controversial and subversive one. Vernyik points out the similarities of the urban space that originates from the heavy presence of sacred symbolism (129) and the shared respect of the two authors for the Modernist tradition, canon, and “older” generations of authors.

The novelty and relevance of Vernyik's book lie in the careful and focused selection of sources, the comparative dimension of the urban space, and the research that highlighted the uncharted perspectives of Cummings's and Ackroyd's works. The book is assuredly a stimulating and invaluable re/source for students and scholars interested in current trends of city representations in literature. Furthermore, the book is undoubtedly a noteworthy contribution to English and American studies. *Cities of Saviors* presents an uncharted dimension of an asymmetrical comparative analysis of urban spaces in E.E. Cummings' poetry and Peter Ackroyd's *Hawksmoor*.

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### Works Cited

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