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Holism and Division in Dreams of the Metropolis

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In Italo Calvino's novel *Invisible Cities*, the Venetian explorer Marco Polo presents fifty-five brief, suggestive portraits of metropolises to the emperor Kublai Khan in imagined conversations that combine freewheeling, inspirational speculation with moments of anxious regulation. When Kublai challenges Polo on the nature of the cities he describes, Polo contends that "Cities, like dreams, are made of desires and fears, even if the thread of their discourse is secret, their rules are absurd, their perspectives deceitful, and everything conceals something else" (44). In his response, Polo strikes a balance between claiming that cities might reveal the hearts and minds of those who build and dwell within them and recognising that this putative affinity is bound up in layers of complex obfuscation. Cities for Polo can embody, reveal or represent essential human qualities, but reaching these plural truths is a difficult task. How we imagine urban environments can say a great deal about ourselves as both individuals and collectives, but metropolises are often figured as speaking in difficult tongues.

Much modern (and, indeed, Romantic and postmodern) city writing focuses overwhelmingly on the aspects of cities that Calvino's Polo places after his "even if", arguing that seeking to encompass a city is a fool's errand. Such writing rejects definition in favour of asserting the alienating effects of metropolitan complexity. It conceptualises urban spaces as zones within which self-consciously literary protagonists are fated to encounter confusion, disaffection and disenchantment, which serve to bring home to them the irreducible value of their own interpreting subjectivities. This approach has a strong presence in the academy in discourses elaborated by twentieth-century theorists such as Walter Benjamin, Roland Barthes, Guy Debord, and Michel de Certeau. Such critical writings often ignore or impugn high views or abstractions that depict cities as collective symbolic and social endeavours. De Certeau, for example, describes the "panorama-city" as "a 'theoretical' (that is, visual) simulacrum, in short a picture, whose condition of possibility is an oblivion and a misunderstanding of practices" (93). He is far from alone in implying – I believe erroneously – that conceptual versions of cities are inevitably dangerous totalisations to which the correct ethical response is to assert subjective independence by claiming that "Places are fragmentary and inward-turning histories, pasts that others are not allowed to read" (108).

The critical privileging of narratives of urban drift and disintegration has pushed collectivising and unironically transcendent city writing into marginal spaces. This tendency is particularly dominant in realist writing, but suspicious attitudes also manifest in less mimetic genres. As Helen Young concisely puts it, in much contemporary urban fantasy “[t]he metropolis is understood as both symbol and manifestation of the problems of modernity” (141). However, fantastic traditions have also created and preserved spaces within which imaging entire cities can be an act of utopian ethics, a powerful mode of critique or a means for thinking about how we might productively align with our urban environments. Some spaces of urban possibility have been developed through experimental and avant-garde practices like Calvino’s, while others utilise the reconfigurable affordances of older tropologies. In employing such techniques, even relatively conservative imaginaries can obtain a kind of contextual radicalism through daring to imagine a whole, rather than falling back on the dominant topos of fragmentation. Real cities are inevitably knotty and multifaceted, but to assert that they are only this is to deny their capacity for serving as loci for developing consensuses and observing and partaking in the interactions of difference. In building cities together, we accomplish things that exceed our individual capabilities. In reading and writing cities together (which, after all, takes rather less work than constructing them in reality), we can create a multiplicity of potential ways of understanding what the conurbations we have created could mean for us.

In this essay, I propose to address how and why a diverse cluster of fantastical and experimental writers have profited by cutting through the Gordian knot of realist complexities to make assertions about the essential characteristics of imagined metropolises. The principal subjects will be fictions by M. John Harrison, Terry Pratchett, J.R.R. Tolkien, Ursula K. Le Guin, Calvino, G.K. Chesterton, and N.K. Jemisin. As the size of this company indicates, my aim will not be exhaustive analysis of a particular example, but rather to evoke a wide range of productive uses for whole imagined cities in order to counter negative stereotypes about holistic conjurings. Some of the metropolises I will discuss represent unifying ideals, but they are far from being as myopic and deceptive in their doing so as critiques like de Certeau’s would imply. In these texts, holistic evocations and the conjuring of oppositions produce ideals and counter-ideals that can help us address the important issues that Polo’s statement to Kublai Khan implicitly raises. If our cities conceal aspects of our ambitions and longings,

how are these crystallised, and what might we learn from attempting or imagining their interpretation?

Imaging cities holistically and mapping urban characteristics through evoking stark divisions are both traditions with deep roots. A quintessential example of an imagined urban unity is “that great citie, the holy Hierusalem, descending out of heauen from God” in *Revelation* (22:10). The New Jerusalem manifests holistic qualities in numerous ways. It is displayed to John of Patmos by an angel from “a great and high mountaine” (22:10), from which its layout and character can fully be discerned. It emits a unified and unifying light. It displays a perfect symmetry, forming an enormous square, with three pearl gates on each of its four walls. Its vast dimensions are grounded in multiples of twelve, a figure derived from earlier Biblical numerologies and from Christ’s apostles, who are also represented by the precious stones that form the city’s literal and figurative foundations. Rather than being concentrated in a single temple or distributed unevenly, grace permeates the whole metropolis, breaking down the hierarchies of power that usually manifest in urban topography. While some are barred from entry – “any thing that defileth, neither whatsoever worketh abomination, or maketh a lie” (22:27) – the city itself is a place of transcendent togetherness, whose inhabitants are open to each other and guaranteed to be worthy of trust.

The conclusion of *Revelation* represents a powerful act of wishful projection, but one that is grounded in the evocation of alternatives. While the New Jerusalem is a unified city, its existence within the larger structures of the Bible qualifies its utopianism by deflecting it into the future and juxtaposing it with other urban possibilities. Alexander Irvine has noted perceptively that “utopian disappointment informs the ancestry of the fantastical city” (204), and this is often true on multiple levels, operating within works as well as within larger traditions. The speculative New Jerusalem is built on the ruins of prior disappointments. In *Revelation*, it opposes and replaces Babylon, which has “become the habitation of deuils, and the hold of euery foule spirit” (18:2). If the New Jerusalem is brought together in the light of God, Babylon’s unifying feature is the prevalence of sin: “For all nations haue drunke of the wine of the wrath of her fornication, and the Kings of the earth haue committed fornication with her, & the Merchants of the earth are waxed rich thorow the abundance of her delicacies” (18:3). Both the New Jerusalem and Babylon are totalising representations, but each acquires further vividness through the contrast, which conjures a critical reflection on

the community values that should ground a harmonious urban space. Another counterfoil and context for the promised city is the one whose glory was lost: the Jerusalem of *Lamentations*: “How doeth the citie sit solitarie that was full of people? How is she become as a widow? She that was great among the nations, and princesse among the prouinces, how is she become tributarie?” (1:1). What might be gained in the New Jerusalem is shaped and shadowed by the Jerusalems that came before. Its imagined unity is thus contingent on moving beyond the forms of division that plagued earlier bearers of its name. In this respect, it is not a promise, but a challenge.

These biblical city imaginaries marshal rhetorical and moral force through positing their subjects as possessing dominant characteristics. Rather than insisting on the ungraspable complexities of urban environments, they use writing’s stark powers of definition to sketch positive and negative models that can be offered as grounds for discussion or consensus. Attaching unities to places can be particularly powerful in religious rhetoric, but is by no means limited to theologically-inflected texts or fantastical projections. Two secular examples of strong urban identities with considerable cultural influence would be democratic Athens and mighty Rome. These contested Classical characterisations linger as literary ideals that can be activated to speak to contemporary concerns, but which can also be supplemented and challenged with more detailed historical evidence to negotiate truth claims and ethics. Such identities do not constitute the last word on these cities; rather, they act as first words, points of understanding from which new dialogues, consensuses, and contentions can be built. Conceptual cities like these can thus serve as powerful shorthand for articulating complex concepts, just as Calvino’s *Polo* asserts (and practices). In using imagination to render a city as a knowable text, we can open a common space for negotiation.

The abstracting power of speculative literature makes it particularly well suited to the task of conjuring imaginary cities to experiment with thought and affect. A compelling – if relatively involved – example is M. John Harrison’s *Viriconium*, assembled from the ruins and salvage of the Afternoon Cultures, revering “stability and poetry and wine-merchants” (“The Pastel City” 27). It takes no more than this very short description to strike the base note of a civilisation fading into phantasmagorical decadence. This note resonates with real-world examples and their literary interpretations – there is certainly something of W.B. Yeats’ *Byzantium* here – while allowing space for variations on the theme. Summarising the city at

the end of the second of the three longer stories set there, Harrison evokes Viriconium's "achingly formal gardens and curious geometries, its streets that reek of squashed fruit and fish; its flowers like purple wounds on the lawns of the 'Hermitage' at Trois-Vertes; its palace like a shell" before ending his sentence, "how can one deal with it in words?" ("A Storm of Wings" 359). The irony, of course, is that Harrison knows perfectly well how to make a metropolis from words: by evoking pregnant details that do just enough to fire readers' imaginations to collaborate in the city's construction. As the Viriconium stories proceed, the city recedes deeper into imagination, until in the last story, it has become an aspiration, theoretically reachable from our world, but existing most strongly as a dream of a more intense existence:

In Viriconium the light was like the light you only see on record covers and in the colour supplements. Photographic precision of outline under an empty blue sky is one of the most haunting features of the Viriconium landscape. Ordinary objects – a book, a bowl of anemones, someone's hand – seem to be lit in a way that makes them very distinct from their background. The identity of things under this light seems enhanced. Their visual distinctiveness becomes metonymic of the reality we perceive both in them and in ourselves. ("Young Man's Journey" 546)

If the New Jerusalem is a city of faith, Viriconium is a city of art, acting as a locus of desire for beauty, freedom and meaning while evoking attendant concerns regarding appropriation, usefulness and the justice of disorder. While we are told we cannot know everything about Viriconium, its strongly evoked core identity allows us to participate in the fascination felt by the characters who inhabit and strive for it. We can understand something of their fealty without perceiving every detail of their visions.

The idealising power of such cities serves as a potent counterpoint to the alienated modes of thinking about the city that are generally preferred in literary fiction. The New Jerusalem is a coherent projection, utopian in the sense developed by Ernst Bloch in that it represents an ideal to aspire towards. Viriconium is more self-consciously complex in its moral implications, but its representations nevertheless admit the fascination and desirability of city life, encoding the importance of its inhabitants' communal creation of an ethos over time. The core identities of both these projected cities possess a powerful and controlled

(albeit not necessarily exclusive) symbolic capital that grounds the manners in which they can be negotiated.

By contrast, in canonical literary writing, the city is often a space of uncontrolled and uncontrollable profusion. This mode might be typified by William Wordsworth's description of London as a "monstrous ant-hill on the plain/ Of a too busy world!" (177). There is a form of unity here, but it is a form that can never resolve into a genuinely meaningful kind of existence and to which individuals like Wordsworth can never be reconciled. In his autobiographical account in *The Prelude*, Wordsworth takes a path followed by numerous later writers by setting his subjectivity against the city, arguing that it serves best as "a solemn back-ground, or relief,/ To single forms and objects" and asserting that in crowds "The face of every one/ That passes by me is a mystery!" (197). Selves cannot properly be negotiated in Wordsworth's London; they can only be defined against it.

While struggling to find a place for forms of literature that were increasingly interested in the mental experiences of individuals, Wordsworth and other Romantic-period writers played a key role in writing up cities as the paradigmatic spaces of an encroaching modernity. The modes of perception they privileged encourage negatively inflected, or even paranoid, engagements with urban space, in which the writer is a temporary intruder. Such writing almost inevitably foregrounds individual experiences, a tendency from which some critics have sought to draw sharp aesthetic hierarchies. Opening his book *Imagined Cities*, Robert Alter disparages scholars who "speak about how the novel 'represents' or 'reflects' the reality of the city" (ix). Instead, he emphasises the importance of "the practice of conducting the narrative [...] through the moment-by-moment experience—sensory, visceral, and mental—of the main character or characters" (x). His subjects in examining "experiential realism" are principally the usual suspects: Gustave Flaubert, Charles Dickens, Andrei Bely, Virginia Woolf, James Joyce, and Franz Kafka. For Alter, worthwhile city imaginaries are constituted by characterised subjectivities; he contends that "what a writer will pick up in the city depends on his or her own sensibility, psychology, and preoccupations" (158). Rather than representing shared experiences, such accounts fetishise particularity. The high place from which John of Patmos views the New Jerusalem is not a desirable location for such evocations. Instead of an equal wide survey, the quintessential experience of the metropolis in such writing is defined by rushes of images, cross-cuts, and fragments.

While Alter's subjects are novelists associated with the Victorian period and with High Modernism, elements of the tradition he traces remains influential in the writings of contemporary psychogeographers such as Iain Sinclair, which privilege the neglected and the overwritten:

On the south side of Roman Road, beyond the sorry huddle of stalls, and out behind the low and middle-rise barrier of public housing, is the relic of Victoria Park Cemetery (VPC 1845), one of the most notorious bonepits of its era. They folded whole streets into the clay, stamped them down below the grassline as they were later to stack them above. Ground lucky to call itself contagious. This is where the Australian Aboriginal cricketer "King Cole" was buried, lace-lunged, and where a commemorative eucalyptus tree still struggles for life. Meath Gardens is a favourite of mine, one of the extramural city's most numinous (unvisited) locations. Rain is a given here, even when the surrounding streets are ritzed with sunlight. Trees, fat with the arguments of the dead, take on the most extraordinary shapes. They dominate otherwise undistinguished turf. They repel dogs. (39)

This visionary passage typifies some of the strengths of a style grounded in evoking mental assemblages. Sinclair employs alienated urban subjectivity as a potent mode of witnessing: a means of recording the violence of metropolitan authorities and the strange specificities of zones that most inhabitants neglect. His texts model a kind of engagement vested in both painstaking research and oblique strategies of movement and attention. In Sinclair's company, new layers of the city are revealed, decoded, and created for readers who are prepared to follow his unconventional trails. This is a highly seductive mode, and one with numerous analogues in non-realist fiction. Stefan Ekman writes that modern urban fantasy's key thematic concerns include "[d]ark, labyrinthine, or subterranean settings that obscure our view; social outcasts we consciously look away from; and fantastical beings that hide out of sight [which] combine to produce a strong focus on that which in some sense or other is not seen" (463). Like Sinclair, and like modernist theoreticians of the city, many of the urban fantasies Ekman examines are preoccupied with a countercultural project of decoding hidden aspects of the city, invested primarily in rendering idiosyncratic urban complexity.

In many respects, this is a logical and attractive approach: cities are big, complicated places with tangled histories and numerous stakeholders. However, there also inherent and potentially problematic contradictions in asserting metropolitan complexity through self-reflexive textuality. Writers and critics are often suspiciously keen to claim that cities work like the books that ground their expertise. For example, Richard Lehan claims that “the city and its literature share textuality [...] Shared are constructs built on assumptions about the mechanistic, the organic, the historical, the indeterminate, and the discontinuous. From Defoe to Pynchon, reading the text has been a form of reading the city” (8). Lehan is certainly correct in that metaphors of textuality are commonly employed in discussing metropolitan environments. When Teju Cole’s narrator Julius in *Open City* describes a New York site he encounters as being “a palimpsest, as was all the city, written, erased, rewritten” (59), he is treading over very well-worn ground. However, such metaphors of equivalence occlude the insistent drive of the finite narratives into which they are incorporated, which serve to order the city even when resisting urban hegemonies. Sinclair, for example, possesses a vast knowledge of metropolitan arcana, but is necessarily selective in his writings. His prose can suggest and record happenstance, but the choice to do so imposes a method and a discrete structure. Similarly, *Open City* asserts palimpsestic multifariousness while itself being a slim literary novel told from a single, self-consciously pretentious point of view. Text, as a form of highly structured linguistic communication, possesses rationalising and determining powers that literary writing (somewhat perversely) often finds uncomfortable and embarrassing. In this respect, the common analogy between writing and the city functions as a defensive manoeuvre that implicitly asserts the inexhaustibility of the literary work: if texts and cities can be made to seem the same, texts must also contain multitudes.

However, in practice, the equivalence between cities and texts is not particularly neat. As Calvino has it, “the city must never be confused with the words that describe it” (61). Stating that cities are like texts is not a disinterested assertion, but one that sets up authors (as highly-qualified text-shapers) in positions of power over urban environments. In literary modes that privilege subjectivity, readings redound upon writers, and few writers wish to be identified as banal or quotidian observers. The self-interested assertions of authors and critics have thus created a dominant discourse of city writing with a vested interest in propagating the contradictory idea that cities are fiendishly and alienatingly complex while also yielding fruitfully to bounded textual expertise. While this can be true, it should be clear that this is

not the only possible strategy for tracing urban meaningfulness, as is evidenced both by the effectiveness of alternative representations of cities in forms like statistical accounts, aerial photographs, and synoptic topographies and by city writing that leans in to the rationalising and abstracting possibilities of text.

The fetishisation of profuse textuality can be an effective way of resisting urban platitudes and autocracies, but it can also become problematic when it is used to place its creators at the apex of the kinds of hierarchies they affect to critique. The virtuosic displays of sensitivity developed by the alienated masters of urban complexity have created an ugly undercurrent that perceives cities as necessarily degrading the humanity of those less adept at textual decoding. We might think of T.S. Eliot's sneering depiction of "the typist home at tea time" and the "young man carbuncular" in "The Fire Sermon" (*Waste Land* III, ll. 222, 231), or the passage in Lewis Mumford's influential 1938 study *The Culture of Cities* where he asserts that

This metropolitan world [...] is a world where the great masses of people, unable to have direct contact with more satisfying means of living, take life vicariously, as readers, spectators, passive observers: a world where people watch shadow-heroes and heroines in order to forget their own clumsiness or coldness in love, where they behold brutal men crushing out life in a strike riot, a wrestling ring or a military assault, while they lack the nerve even to resist the petty tyranny of their immediate boss: where they hysterically cheer the flag of their political state, and in their neighborhood, their trades union, their church, fail to perform the most elementary duties of citizenship. (258)

In Mumford's depiction, most city dwellers are fundamentally inadequate, using metropolitan distractions to avoid both moral responsibility and the emptiness of their lives and minds. According to implicitly dystopian modes like this, cities wreck us unless we possess a kind of privileged subjectivity that is not in itself enough to change anything, but can at least allow us to register how far others have fallen. In this discourse – a disturbingly common one – literary accounts present the views of a few sensitive survivors bemoaning the sins of an incomprehensible Babylon, with no New Jerusalem in sight. In lighting out for under-recognised particulars, the general can be condemned to wrack and ruin.

The intense negativity towards cities and their populations developed through self-consciously elite textuality is, when you think about it, rather disturbing. If the dominant mode in literature is to assert that we should not like and cannot really reconcile the zones of the earth's surface where humanity has most obviously asserted its control, then something has gone wrong somewhere. Cities, after all, are collaboratively constructed from buildings designed (albeit sometimes badly) to be our homes and host our networks and institutions. They are built on ground that we have reshaped and honeycombed, connected by roads and wires and pipes that allow for the transmission of food and water and people and power. They are symptoms, evocations, and enablers of concentrated humanity. This being the case, it is remarkable that literary writing so often insists on condemning or turning away from them in order arrogantly to claim that nature is more welcoming and comprehensible (a deeply dubious and ironically anthropocentric proposition). Similarly, it is odd that so much lauded city writing insists that the only interesting way of reading the city is against the grain. Are the environments we have shaped together really so objectionable that any gestures towards unity deserve principally to excite contempt? Or is it rather that our tendency to privilege urban writing that highlights the textual, the discontinuous, and the self-reflexive has led to a situation where literary representations are rewarded for imagining the trees, rather than the forest?

To address these issues, I believe it is worth paying more serious attention to fantastical forms of writing that dare to dream about larger urban ideals, rather than confining our attention solely to nightmare visions that construct the built environment “as despot, as vampire, as alien enemy” (China Miéville, “The Conspiracy of Architecture”, 30). While texts that render cities as comprehensible wholes can be condemned (sometimes rightly) as airy-minded utopianism or coercive propaganda, this does not exhaust their potential, which might encompass important practical as well as philosophical or aesthetic ends. In his 1960 study *The Image of the City*, Kevin Lynch employs a suggestive alternative linkage between text and metropolis when he argues that the most important quality for an ideal city is legibility. “Just as [the] printed page, if it is legible, can be visually grasped as a related pattern of recognizable symbols,” he writes, “so a legible city would be one whose districts or landmarks or pathways are easily grouped into an over-all pattern” (3). For Lynch, legibility represents a life-improving ideal. However, the “would be” in his statement is important. In practice, he recognises that cities seldom resolve neatly into patterns:

Like a piece of architecture, the city is a construction in space, but one of vast scale, a thing perceived only in the course of long spans of time. City design is therefore a temporal art, but it can rarely use the controlled and limited sequences of other temporal arts like music. On different occasions and for different people, the sequences are reversed, interrupted, abandoned, cut across. It is seen in all lights and all weathers. (1)

In this passage, Lynch highlights the qualities of spatiality and temporality that city writing also commonly enjoys. However, his use of the textual metaphor of legibility and his evocation of controlled and limited sequences both speak to writing's under-recognised potential for conjuring shared perceptions that might allow us better to understand what we do when we make a city together. Understanding is, after all, a precondition of effective agency. It is, as Lynch asserts, difficult to create a legible city in bricks, mortar, and systems, but it is not so difficult to suggest one in prose, and such suggestions might in turn be read back out as we seek to know what we and our ancestors have done when we have reared up buildings and connected ourselves through them.

The stakes here are high, as can be shown by turning directly to a fantastical example. In the universe of Terry Pratchett's Discworld, belief literally shapes reality. This tendency is often employed for comic effect, but Pratchett was aware of its serious implications, as he shows in one of his finest pieces of writing, a dialogue between Death and his granddaughter:

“All right,” said Susan, “I’m not stupid. You’re saying humans need...*fantasies* to make life bearable.”

REALLY? AS IF IT WAS SOME KIND OF PINK PILL? NO. HUMANS NEED FANTASY TO BE HUMAN. TO BE THE PLACE WHERE THE FALLING ANGEL MEETS THE RISING APE.

“Tooth fairies? Hogfathers? Little—”

YES. AS PRACTICE. YOU HAVE TO START OUT LEARNING TO BELIEVE THE *LITTLE LIES*.

“So we can believe the big ones?”

YES. JUSTICE. MERCY. DUTY. THAT SORT OF THING.

“They’re not the same at all!”

YOU THINK SO? THEN TAKE THE UNIVERSE AND GRIND IT DOWN TO THE FINEST POWDER AND SIEVE IT THROUGH THE FINEST SIEVE AND THEN *SHOW* ME ONE ATOM OF JUSTICE, ONE MOLECULE OF MERCY. AND YET YOU ACT AS IF THERE IS SOME...SOME *RIGHTNESS* IN THE UNIVERSE BY WHICH IT MAY BE JUDGED.

“Yes. But people have *got* to believe that, or what’s the *point*—”

MY POINT EXACTLY. (*Hogfather* 335–6)

Death’s point is that societies and our consciousnesses of ourselves as humans both depend on shared values with no straightforward material basis. It might be argued that while Death is technically correct that justice and mercy do not manifest at the atomic level, they are nevertheless materially instantiated in forms such as judges, courtrooms, and written codes of laws. In this, they are like cities, which also exist as networks that bridge the material and the conceptual, combining buildings and infrastructure with histories, memories, fears, and desires. Cities are shared speculations, but the forms that such sharing takes are hard to discern, as both Calvino and Lynch recognise from their different perspectives. This being the case, one of the strongest benefits of imagining unreal cities is to make legible ways of sharing urban space that can be discussed, negotiated and fed back into our lived experiences. While we may live ensconced in the power structures of a particular real city, we can choose whether to inhabit or withdraw from an imagined one, and we can pass easily between numerous options. Imagined cities can often fruitfully be read in paranoid fashions, but to say that this is the only acceptable approach is to deny the reader’s ability to take discerning imaginative possession of textual territories. The power of readerly choice means that the whole cities of fiction are never uncomplicatedly totalisations, as impositions on bricks-and-mortar cities might be. Rather, their status as fictions makes them alternatives that can be used both to focalise real-world issues and suggest conceptual solutions to the difficulties of urban perception. As the examples in the rest of this essay demonstrate, such interventions

can take numerous different forms, encompassing idealism, realism, moralism, pragmatism and visionary conjecture.

One of Pratchett's own enduring contributions to the collective urban imagination is a burgeoning metropolis that carefully balances realism and ideals. Ankh-Morpork is not a nice city – it is venal, corrupt and violent, as Pratchett establishes whenever he introduces or reintroduces it:

Poets long ago gave up trying to describe the city. Now the more cunning ones try to excuse it. They say, well maybe it *is* smelly, maybe it *is* overcrowded, maybe it *is* a bit like Hell would be if they shut the fires off and stabled a herd of incontinent cattle there for a year, but you must admit that it is full of sheer, vibrant, dynamic *life*. And this is true, even though it is poets saying it. But people who aren't poets say, so what? Mattresses tend to be full of life too, and no-one writes odes to them. Citizens hate living there and, if they have to move away on business or adventure or, more usually, until some statute of limitations runs out, can't wait to get back so they can enjoy hating living there some more. They put stickers on the backs of their carts saying 'Ankh-Morpork – Loathe It or Leave It'. They call it The Big Wahooni, after the fruit. (*Moving Pictures* 13–14)

A helpful footnote to this passage glosses “Wahooni” as a fruit “twenty feet long, covered in spikes the colour of earwax” that “smells like an anteater that's eaten a very bad ant.” There is a technicolour fizz to Pratchett's prose, but it does an excellent job of capturing the ways in which the joys and frustrations of urban living can be tightly intertwined. In earlier Discworld novels, Ankh-Morpork is often a backdrop, setting or starting point, but its character and the character of its population are established early on. Pratchett displays some concerns about the ease with which city denizens can be led; he is, after all, the author who wrote that “the intelligence of that creature known as a crowd is the square root of the number of people in it” (*Jingo* 436). Several of his plots discuss the sensational and disruptive fallout of the sudden appearance of technologies such as film, shopping malls, guns and rock music. However, while the madness of crowds is a problem, the city's diverse population also commonly provides the solution. This role is most obviously taken by the City Watch in one of the Discworld's principal narrative strands, but in various books, the city's beggars, undead, and even its academics play crucial roles in setting things to rights. In his later phase,

Pratchett shifted from imposing evanescent phenomena on the city to building in long-term changes, including a free press, a revised postal service, an analogue for the Internet, and a developed financial system, all of which he depicted as tools that could potentially unmask established privilege for the benefit of the oppressed. In his penultimate novel, *Raising Steam*, the invention of trains extends the city's sphere of influence further, and while there is some ambivalence about what is lost in the compression of distance, Pratchett is also clear that the city, despite – or perhaps because – of its venality and profusion, provides a space in which people can find the freedom to be themselves. “In Ankh-Morpork,” one character states, “you can be whoever you want to be and sometimes people laugh and sometimes they clap, and mostly and beautifully, they don't really care” (326). Ankh-Morpork remains a contradictory creation. Positive change within the city is attributed largely to the machinations of Lord Vetinari, a benevolent tyrant whose fantastical hypercompetence highlights the real-world difficulties of such transformations. However, characters like Vetinari provide Pratchett with mechanisms to skip over certain intricacies to imagine effects, affects, and consequences. In the course of his series, Pratchett invests seriously in conceptualising what a city might mean. In *Night Watch*, Commander Vimes, the sometimes-unwilling instrument of improvement (and a man whose latent racial prejudices dissipate over the course of the books in large part due to the influence of his urban environment), thinks of the city as “a *process*, a weight on the world that distorted the land for hundreds of miles around.” However, while Ankh-Morpork voraciously consumes, it also gives back “the dung from its pens and the soot from its chimneys, and steel, and saucepans, and all the tools by which its food was made. And also clothes, and fashions and ideas and interesting vices, songs and knowledge and something which, if looked at in the right light, was called civilization. That's what civilization *meant*. It meant the city” (391). Pratchett does not deny the mess and chaos intrinsic to urban life – Ankh-Morpork is in no way straightforwardly good – but he nevertheless sees cities as drivers of innovation, in both technological and social terms, and as places that can be made worthy of his characters' (and readers') collaborative investment.

Pratchett deals with Ankh-Morpork as a comic (although not trivial) setting, but more sublime versions of the admirable city are common across a range of modes. An obvious example is J.R.R. Tolkien's Minas Tirith, which draws heavily on biblical patterns and precedents, albeit with tweaks and modifications. While the New Jerusalem's number is

twelve and it displays a perfect symmetry, Minas Tirith's (like Gondolin's before it) is seven, and its design is turned to different symbolic purposes:

For the fashion of Minas Tirith was such that it was built on seven levels, each delved into the hill, and about each was set a wall, and in each wall was a gate. But the gates were not set in a line: the Great Gate in the City Wall was at the east point of the circuit, but the next faced half south, and the third half north, and so to and fro upwards; so that the paved way that climbed towards the Citadel turned first this way and then that across the face of the hill. And each time that it passed the line of the Great Gate it went through an arched tunnel, piercing a vast pier of rock whose huge out-thrust bulk divided in two all the circles of the City save the first. For partly in the primeval shaping of the hill, partly by the mighty craft and labour of old, there stood up from the rear of the wide court behind the Gate a towering bastion of stone, its edge sharp as a ship-keel facing east. Up it rose, even to the level of the topmost circle, and there was crowned by a battlement; so that those in the Citadel might, like mariners in a mountainous ship, look from its peak sheer down upon the Gate seven hundred feet below. (781–2)

Minas Tirith is an intimidating fortification, but also a city that shades into the ridiculous from an architectural viewpoint. Fantasy, particularly following on from Tolkien, is very fond of imagining cities built into mountains without thinking too much about all the extra effort necessary to supply them, or the fact that large buildings generally don't function easily on steep inclines. But these are comic mode questions, not in keeping with what *The Lord of the Rings* is seeking to achieve. To give Tolkien his due, he does account for Minas Tirith's food and water supply in his later descriptions, and the accomplishment of the city's design can be justified through its enormous age – by the time that Pippin first sees it, the Tower of Guard has notionally stood for over three thousand years. However, this is also somewhat beside the point. Minas Tirith is a narrative rather than a literal construction, and its qualities serve the narrative neatly. Tolkien's cities, like his story overall, turn in part on oppositions between light and darkness. The scene in which Pippin sees the light catch Minas Tirith as he approaches it with Gandalf recapitulates with reversed inflections an earlier scene in which Frodo and Sam set eyes on its dark twin, the captured city of Minas Morgul:

All was dark about it, earth and sky, but it was lit with light. Not the imprisoned moonlight welling through the marble walls of Minas Ithil long ago, Tower of the Moon, fair and radiant in the hollow of the hills. Paler indeed than the moon ailing in some slow eclipse was the light of it now, wavering and blowing like a noisome exhalation of decay, a corpse-light, a light that illuminated nothing. (730)

This is not subtle, but it does not need to be to fulfil its narrative function. Insisting on ambivalent shadings for Minas Tirith and Minas Morgul would detract from the effects they need to achieve. *The Lord of the Rings* works in part because it employs stark absolutes to create environments within which its more subtle reflections on power and ethics can flourish. In the service of this aim, its cities are wonders and challenges.

However, Tolkien is also capable of more radical acts of speculative urban construction. Those like Wordsworth and Mumford who set nature and the metropolis in opposition would do well to take a look at Calas Galadhon, which we first glimpse when Frodo sees “a hill of many mighty trees, or a city of green towers: which it was he could not tell” (370). That a metropolitan prospect can be “like a green cloud” (372) is a powerful provocation, as is the contention that a paragraph like the following might represent an urban experience:

They went along many paths and climbed many stairs, until they came to the high places and saw before them amid a wide lawn a fountain shimmering. It was lit by silver lamps that swung from the boughs of trees, and it fell into a basin of silver, from which a white stream spilled. Upon the south side of the lawn there stood the mightiest of all the trees; its great smooth bole gleamed like grey silk, and up it towered, until its first branches, far above, opened their huge limbs under shadowy clouds of leaves. (373)

That in Middle Earth this can constitute city writing is, I think, a genuinely visionary act of imagination. One wonders whether in composing this passage Tolkien was taking Sir Ebenezer Howard’s idea of the garden city to its fantastical conclusion. Within Tolkien’s legendarium, the “City of the Trees” (372) is an artefact of an older, fading culture, but in a moment where it has become apparent that our settlements have irrevocably marked the geological record, the idea of a peaceful city woven almost seamlessly into the natural world

seems like a positive vision to set against our many portraits of urban despair. Whether it is achievable is another question, but it is certainly a model that is compellingly and radically legible, and aspects of its narrative holism might productively be activated in blurring intellectual and material distinctions between the country and the city.

Tolkien's metropolises principally have unifying effects in themselves, with the contrasts being struck between them. However, imagined cities can also frame important ethical questions through evoking internal contradictions. A good example is a story that its author, Ursula K. Le Guin, described as having had "a long and happy career of being used by teachers to upset students and make them argue fiercely about morality" ("Introduction" x). Le Guin's story begins as an idyll, as "the Festival of Summer" finds the harbour of Omelas "sparkled with flags" and the town thronged with processions ("Ones Who Walk Away" 1). Omelas in festival season is a paradise, one that its narrator worries will seem too perfect for readers to countenance. However, the happy sunlit scene contrasts sharply with the city's hidden secret: a cramped, locked, windowless storage room in a basement in which

a child is sitting. It could be a boy or a girl. It looks about six, but actually is nearly ten. It is feeble-minded. Perhaps it was born defective, or perhaps it has become imbecile through fear, malnutrition, and neglect. It picks its nose and occasionally fumbles vaguely with its toes or genitals, as it sits hunched in the corner farthest from the bucket and the two mops. It is afraid of the mops. It finds them horrible. It shuts its eyes, but it knows the mops are still standing there; and the door is locked; and nobody will come. (5)

The horror and the power of Le Guin's story lies in the conceit that Omelas's happiness is directly and ineluctably contingent on a child's misery: "If the child were brought up into the sunlight out of that vile place, if it were cleaned and fed and comforted, that would be a good thing, indeed; but if it were done, in that day and hour all the prosperity and beauty and delight of Omelas would wither and be destroyed" (6). This is not an assertion that could be made in strictly realist city writing, or in forms that focus on individuals rather than communities, but in Le Guin's hands, it crystallises the hidden infrastructure of exclusions and inequalities that underpin comfortable urban existences in the agony of a single figure. The story concludes by imagining two different responses. The first is the response of the

citizenry in general, who try to reconcile the bounty of their circumstances with the pain that guarantees their prosperity:

Theirs is no vapid, irresponsible happiness. They know that they, like the child, are not free. They know compassion. It is the existence of the child, and their knowledge of its existence, that makes possible the nobility of their architecture, the poignancy of their music, the profundity of their science. It is because of the child that they are so gentle with children. (6–7)

However, Le Guin also depicts a small number of people who are unable to accept the conditions of existence in the city. These people “leave Omelas, they walk ahead into the darkness, and they do not come back. The place they go towards is a place even less imaginable to most of us than the city of happiness. I cannot describe it at all. It is possible that it does not exist” (7).

Saying anything conclusive about “The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas” is difficult because it is formulated so perfectly as a challenge, an act of imagination that in concluding exhorts further work from its readers. One response might be to imagine reactions beyond the two that Le Guin traces. Rather than walking away, might not some citizens of Omelas feel the moral imperative to free the child, come what may, taking a position of active opposition rather than removing themselves from direct complicity? Another reaction would be to remark cynically that the prosperity of many British cities in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was fundamentally underpinned by the slave trade, and this did not make their populations as kind as the citizens of Omelas are imagined to be. Nor do modern citizens reflect regularly on the abuses inherent in the supply chains that facilitate their modes of life. Neither does evidence suggest that very unequal cities are places of notable goodness – if anything, the opposite is the case. But such reflections do not gainsay or undermine Le Guin’s story, in which an imagined, impossible city serves as a perfect parable for considering the moral conditions of metropolitan living. To dwell in a city is necessarily to rely on others, and Le Guin confronts us with an exceeding potent abstraction of this fact. In asking us to imagine what we would do in Omelas, she seeks to provoke her readers out of complacency. To what extent are we countenancing suffering in return for our own comforts?

The challenge Omelas presents is stark, but other valuable effects can be achieved with urban sketches through processes of reflection and accumulation. The individual metropolitan parables in Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities* are even briefer than Le Guin's story, reflecting four of the values their author laid out in his abortive Charles Eliot Norton Lectures: Lightness, Quickness, Exactitude, and Visibility. However, their tightly defined qualities are suspended in networks within which they are continually shadowed, divided and doubled, in line with Calvino's fifth favoured literary principle: Multiplicity (*Six Memos*). As Robert Macfarlane has recently contended, in Calvino's book, "every city has its invisible city" (*Underland* 148). In fact, the situation is even more complex, as within individual portraits more than one alternative is often mooted and the cities also interact in chains and threads that include memory and desire (resonating with *The Waste Land*), but also thinness, trading, eyes, names, skies, and concealments. The conceits of each short depiction are tight and lucid. Macfarlane's favourite is "the impossible city of Eusapia, in which the inhabitants of the living city are accompanied by 'an identical copy of their city, underground', a 'Eusapia of the dead'". In discussing Eusapia, Macfarlane notes the pattern that plays out again and again in *Invisible Cities*, writing that "over time the symmetry between upper and lower cities becomes so acute that 'in the twin cities there is no longer any way of knowing who is alive and who is dead'" (148). Other split-yet-united invisible cities include Sophronia, half circus and half business district, but where every year the business district leaves town (*Invisible Cities* 63). The city of Melania is constructed around a constant succession of dialogues that change from act to act (80–81). Pyrrha is first Polo's idea of what it will be like, and then a subjective experience that blasts away his imagined version (92–93). In Perinthia, "the order of the gods is reflected exactly in the city of monsters" (145). In Euphemia, memories can be traded for different ones, the city reconfiguring as its merchants' identities change (36–37). The inhabitants of Beersheba believe it to be paired with both a celestial city of pure gold and a fecal, underground city, "the receptacle of everything base and unworthy." Its inhabitants long to merge with the former and fear the latter, working frenziedly to beautify their city with "noble metals and rare stones" (111). However, Calvino's narrative proceeds to an elegant inversion:

In Beersheba's beliefs there is an element of truth and one of error. It is true that the city is accompanied by two projections of itself, one celestial and one infernal; but the citizens are mistaken about their consistency. The inferno that broods in the deepest

subsoil of Beersheba is a city designed by the most authoritative architects, built with the most expensive materials on the market, with every device and mechanism and gear system functioning, decked with tassels and fringes and frills hanging from all the pipes and levers.

Intent on piling up its carats of perfection, Beersheba takes for virtue what is now a grim mania to fill the empty vessel of itself; the city does not know that its only moments of generous abandon are those when it becomes detached from itself, when it lets go, expands. Still, at the zenith of Beersheba there gravitates a celestial body that shines with all the city's riches, enclosed in the treasury of cast-off things: a planet aflutter with potato peels, broken umbrellas, old socks, candy wrappings, paved with tram tickets, fingernail cuttings and pared calluses, eggshells. This is the celestial city, and in its heaven long-tailed comets fly past, released to rotate in space from the only free and happy action of the citizens of Beersheba, a city which, only when it shits, is not miserly, calculating, greedy. (112–13)

Each of Calvino's diminutive portraits provides a legible angle on urban experience by making each city about one thing, but their presence in a carefully curated gallery means that each totalisation is also a fragment. When Kublai asks why Polo never discusses the city from which he hails, Polo says "Every time I describe a city I am saying something about Venice", elaborating by stating that "To distinguish the other cities' qualities, I must speak of a first city that remains implicit. For me it is Venice" (86). *Invisible Cities* thus operates as both a series of exquisite absolutes and a larger meditation on urban experience. Each multiform city is an object in itself and a crystallised perspective on cities in general. None affect to be literal realities, but as imaginaries they suspend before us utopian and dystopian conceits and ask us to pass between them, searching, like Polo, for the elements that we would have endure as ideals, warnings, and worthwhile experiences.

In moving towards a conclusion, I want briefly to consider two final examples that imagine powerful activations of city identities to create resonant connections between citizens. The enormous charm of the first, G.K. Chesterton's *The Napoleon of Notting Hill*, is ill-served by a summary that must necessarily omit a great deal, but to get to the end, a brief rush through is needful. In Chesterton's novel, the Wildean Auberon Quin is selected by a peculiar set of circumstances to be King. To amuse himself, he concocts elaborate invented

histories for a series of London boroughs, which he presents to a meeting of Society for the Recovery of London Antiquities:

So long as Hammersmith is called Hammersmith, its people will live in the shadow of that primal hero, the Blacksmith, who led the democracy of the Broadway into battle till he drove the chivalry of Kensington before him and overthrew them at that place which in honour of the best blood of the defeated aristocracy is still called Kensington Gore. Men of Hammersmith will not fail to remember that the very name of Kensington originated from the lips of their hero. For at the great banquet of reconciliation held after the war, when the disdainful oligarchs declined to join in the songs of the men of the Broadway (which are to this day of a rude and popular character), the great Republican leader, with his rough humour, said the words which are written in gold upon his monument, 'Little birds that can sing and won't sing, must be made to sing.' So that the Eastern Knights were called Cansings or Kensings ever afterwards. (77)

Quin thus fabricates a series of potentially resonant traditions suggested by place names, and then uses his royal authority to issue a proclamation in order to reinstate the boroughs "in their ancient magnificence" (80). This greatly irritates the civic authorities, who consequently have to wear uncomfortable liveries of Quin's design and spend rather more time than they otherwise would carrying halberds around. However, little meaningful changes until a new Provost of Notting Hill, Adam Wayne, refuses to allow a connecting road to be bulldozed through his borough. When Wayne brings his objections to the King, Quin realises with a combination of horror and delight that Wayne takes the city romances he has fabricated completely seriously. As Wayne forcefully explains, Quin's sublime invented histories have allowed him to articulate and legitimate his sense that his home is important and meaningful:

"I was born, like other men, in a spot of the earth which I loved because I had played boys' games there, and fallen in love, and talked with my friends through nights that were nights of the gods. And I feel the riddle. These little gardens where we told our loves. These streets where we brought out our dead. Why should they be commonplace? Why should they be absurd? Why should it be grotesque to say that a pillar-box is poetic when for a year I could not see a red pillar-box against the yellow evening in a certain street without being wracked with something of which God keeps the secret, but which is stronger than sorrow or joy? Why should any one be able to

raise a laugh by saying ‘the Cause of Notting Hill’?—Notting Hill where thousands of immortal spirits blaze with alternate hope and fear.” (116)

The upshot of this contention is that the ceremonial halberds are used in a bloody war between the boroughs, which Notting Hill wins by employing the ingenuity of inhabitants inspired by Wayne’s vision. Notting Hill stands for a while, but eventually its golden age fades and it is defeated by the other boroughs, their own identities sharpened into glory in opposition. For Wayne, this is inevitable and right; as he puts it, “Notting Hill is not a common empire; it is a thing like Athens, the mother of a mode of life, of a manner of living, which shall renew the youth of the world” (280).

The most disturbing element of Chesterton’s vision is the extent to which he correlates glory and violence: it is hard to imagine that he would have published the same book in 1924 as he did in 1904. However, the story he tells is wondrous and profound and ridiculous, and recognises itself as being all of these things. In the final moments of the book, Quin, who has finally been fired up by the myth and caught up in the fall of Notting Hill, confesses to Wayne that the histories of the boroughs were “a vulgar practical joke on an honest gentleman” (297). Wayne, though, is unfazed by this:

When dark and dreary days come, you and I are necessary, the pure fanatic, the pure satirist. We have between us remedied a great wrong. We have lifted the modern cities into that poetry which every one who knows mankind knows to be immeasurably more common than the commonplace. But in healthy people there is no war between us. We are but the two lobes of the brain of a ploughman. Laughter and love are everywhere. The cathedrals, built in the ages that loved God, are full of blasphemous grotesques. The mother laughs continually at the child, the lover laughs continually at the lover, the wife at the husband, the friend at the friend. (300–301)

Chesterton’s conclusion seems to capture an important truth about imagining the unity of a city, which will always be potentially both an imposition, as Quin’s invented histories are, and an ideal with a powerful affective force, as Notting Hill is for Wayne, and as he consequently makes it for those who follow and oppose him. While we might not wish to countenance the violence that drives Chesterton’s Notting Hill to glory, we might nevertheless want to take seriously both Quin’s enjoyment of the unrealities of cities and

Wayne's powerful affective attachments, both of which serve to make meaningful environments that might otherwise have been dismissed as banal or unthinkingly destroyed. Both Quin and Wayne make visible cities that were never there for others, and in doing so, they remake the meanings of their worlds, expanding possibilities on a far wider scale.

While the awakening of Chesterton's Notting Hill is metaphorical and allegorical, N.K. Jemisin's *The City We Became* centres on a more literal fantastical awakening, as New York rises to a form of consciousness through a diverse group of avatars. As in Chesterton, stories told about the city serve as catalysts, but while Wayne's transformation of Notting Hill is catalysed by Quin's fabricated romance, the awakening of Jemisin's New York is the result of processes of fractious accumulation:

People still tell stories of how terrible the Bronx is. At the same time, somewhere, some realtor is talking up how amazing it is, so that people with money will come and buy up everything. At the same time there are the folks who live here, for whom it's neither terrible nor amazing; it just is. All of these things are true, and that's just within our own reality. It's not just *decisions*, is what I'm trying to say. It's... Every legend of this city, every lie, those become new worlds, too. All of them add to the mass that is New York, until finally all of it collapses under its own weight... and becomes something new. Something alive. (166)

While Chesterton posits a singular vision of urban distinction around which others rally, for Jemisin, a city is made great by the multiplicities it contains. The avatar of New York entire is compromised early in the narrative, and it falls to the representatives of the various boroughs to rescue him. The borough-avatars draw undeniable power from their environments, but their supernatural abilities both align with and fail to overwrite their individual characters and experiences. In Jemisin's world, it is helpful to be able to reconfigure reality with maths, but equally important to know how to negotiate the city's mechanisms of power, or where Guastavino tiles remain in place. The avatars are structuring forces that gesture towards the quintessential, but their distinct viewpoints remain crucial: they are free to argue, wisecrack or even reject their investment in the city's coming-into-life. The neat plotting in *The Napoleon of Notting Hill* divides Wayne's zealous belief from Quin's satirical impulse, in the spirit of the paradoxes for which Chesterton was notorious. By contrast, Jemisin is politically and aesthetically invested in a messier version of urban

fidelity. New York's saviours care seriously about the city's well-being, but they also delight in the ridiculousness of their abilities and remain enjoyably cantankerous about the pressures put upon them.

Jemisin's heroes are essentially characterised by their rising to the challenge of respecting and valuing difference. Conversely, the extra-dimensional intrusions that threaten the city take forms including forcible gentrification, not-so-veiled racism, capitalist homogenisation, and "squamous eldritch bullshit" (18). The Women in White, the multiform avatar of New York's Lovecraftian invader, shudders theatrically at the city's "hybrid vigour":

You eat each other's cuisines and learn new techniques, new spice combinations, trade for new ingredients; you grow stronger. You wear each other's fashions and learn new patterns to apply to your lives, and because of it you *grow stronger*. Even just one new language infects you with a radically different way of thinking! (342)

In her fantastic New York, Jemisin takes pains forcefully to counter H.P. Lovecraft's paranoid fear of the consequences of urban mixing. She argues directly and indirectly through her characters and plotting that healthy, worthwhile urban wholes are made up of mixed and multifarious parts. When the invader is eventually unmasked as a city itself, it is one characterised by creepy similitudes: "fair R'lyeh where the streets are always straight and the buildings all curve" (428). Embracing the flattening promised by R'lyeh can only be the result of an insular desire to reduce urban experience to something wholly controllable. In the narrative thread dealing with the avatar of Staten Island Jemisin paints a compelling character study of how someone ostensibly sympathetic might end up desiring such exclusionary certainties, but the thrust of her book is that taking the plunge into the city's contradictions is the only way to reach a genuine understanding. "New York is so full of shit sometimes," thinks the city's avatar as the story concludes, "and nobody knows that better than New York". Nevertheless, the characters' experiences end with a bright moment of consensus that personifies the potential joys of compatible yet different understandings: "'No place in the world that can compare,' I say, and we all smile with the magic of this truth" (434).

Towards the end of *The Image of the City*, Kevin Lynch sets out some provocative desiderata for what a productive urban space should be like:

[W]e need an environment which is not simply well organized, but poetic and symbolic as well. It should speak of the individuals and their complex society, of their aspirations and their historical tradition, of the natural setting and of the complicated functions and movements of the city world. But clarity of structure and vividness of identity are the first steps to the development of strong symbols. By appearing as a remarkable and well-knit *place*, the city could provide a ground for the clustering and organization of these meanings and associations. Such a sense of place in itself enhances every human activity that occurs there, and encourages the deposit of a memory trace. (119)

Here, Lynch seems to be arguing for the creation of cities that are more like those in Fantasy than those modelled within paradigms of literary modernity. It is difficult to know the extent to which it would be possible or ethical to put his ideas into practice architecturally. Real cities are complicated and messy and ungraspable; designing them to have finite meanings risks the kinds of dystopian totalisations that theorists and psychogeographers rightly write against. In revisiting Lynch over half a century on, we would probably want to revise his sense that urban communities can comfortably share a single set of aspirations or one historical tradition, although there may be potential in a more intersectional form of his ideas (along the lines that Jemisin paints in her vibrant, squabbly New York). However, Lynch's conceits about the clustering and organisation of symbols and meanings have undeniable value for understanding the benefits of imagined cities, which can be particular without ever being the only choice. A text will always be more limited than a real city, but this can be empowering, as well as a source of despair. The imagined cities I have discussed and others like them are experiments that we can move easily between; if Neil Gaiman's divided London in *Neverwhere* does not speak to us, we might travel to China Miéville's divided London in *Un Lun Dun*, or his interlaced cities of Beszel and Ul Qoma in *The City & The City*, or to Catherynne Valente's sexually-transmitted metropolis Palimpsest, or Josiah Bancroft's Tower of Babel, or Patricia McKillip's two Ombrias (in and out of shadow). There are myriad written ways to frame meanings for cities. The more we have to select from, reject and refine, both as individuals and collectives, the better. James Donald has contended that "The city has always stood not only for the vanities, the squalor and the injustice of human

society, but also for the aspiration to civilized sociation” (xi). While acknowledging, recoding and interrogating difference is a crucial part of city writing, dreaming out in stark terms how metropolises might be better or worse has powerful potential for thinking about how cities might draw us together, rather than casting us into ever-perplexed solitude. Like fantasies in general, imagined cities presents propositions that are transparently unreal while offering us the potential to choose experimental immersion. By asking us to imagine experiencing the world differently, they create a possibility for change.

Note

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Abstract

This essay examines fantasies that imagine and characterise entire cities, arguing that the value and interest of this practice has been neglected due to the contemporary critical focus on oppositional or paranoid views of metropolises articulated through the perspectives of alienated individuals. After using *Revelation* and M. John Harrison's Viriconium stories to sketch out how evoking whole cities can function, the essay analyses the limits of dominant critical discourses that depicts urban fragmentation through self-conscious metaphors of textuality. It contends that while such discourses can be valuable and legitimate, they can also lead to elitism and narrowmindedness when assumed to constitute the whole picture. By way of contradistinction, the essay considers six case studies (Terry Pratchett's Ankh-Morpork, J.R.R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*, Ursula K. Le Guin's "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas", Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities*, G.K. Chesterton's *The Napoleon of Notting Hill* and N.K. Jemisin's *The City We Became*) to explore how urban totalities can be activated as signifiers, questions, and sites of positive and negative affect. It concludes by arguing that the abstracting powers of text and the fantastic allow the creation of holistic urban imaginaries that avoid domineering totalisation through manifesting as both alternatives and shareable common property.

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