

Reaction to “Armilla” from Italo Calvino’s “Invisible Cities”

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Spring 2007
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Water is life. Coming out of Arizona, the man was fully aware of that fact. “Hydrate Or Die” ran the old motto. Armilla showed him a different slant on that idea.

At first glance, the spray of water, the frolicking of maidens, these things said “water is play,” but there was more to be said.

He approached a young woman lounging in a giant claw-foot white porcelain tub. If her skin matched the tub in color and purity, he did not notice.

At first there was enchantment in walking along the hillside surrounded by plumbing rising clean and geometric from the ground. Time, though, had quashed that.

After continually failing to attract the attention of one inhabitant after another he was starting to feel affected by the surrealism of the situation.

“Excuse me,” he said. This woman looked at him. The first acknowledgement he had achieved. Suddenly he found himself foundering. The questions all came rushing at him at once and none seemed to be the most important. “Where does the water come from?” She looked away; back to her knee for a little scrub. There was a small hint of a shrug as she turned. “But... Hey... Please?” he tried.

There was no more to be had from this bathing-beauty either. The man sat down, leaning against her tub, and thought about weeping. At least he would know where that water came from.

It hadn’t been the question that troubled him most, yet it was the one that came to the fore. Not a bad question.

Acres of pipes and hundreds of bathers and thousands upon thousands of gallons of sparkling clean cool water. Yet not another vision of municipal support anywhere. The location was empty on his maps save for the word “Armilla”. There were no reservoirs shown and no obvious run off down the valley.

The water, he presumed, had to come from somewhere eventually working its way into the plumbing system through the showers, tubs, loos and sinks and then off down the drains and back into more subterranean plumbing to go... Well, to go away.

The water in the pipes reminded him of his journey up from Arizona. He walked about with his pack on his back and his gait set by his own whim. So too, the water churned and tumbled through the pipes; lively and full of action. Yet ultimately the water’s life was restricted to the bounds of the pipe. So too, his journey across the land was restricted by the limits of his maps, the expectations of those at the other end. The water was forced through the pipes under pressure just as he was forced along his route by different yet equally compelling pressures.

Here in Armilla, the water burst forth from spigot and faucet, tap and bib. It lived a moment in the sun sparkling and free only to be gathered up by sleek white – always white – porcelain and ushered back into pipes and along its narrow constrained way.

The man sighed and looked to the woman. His attentions rolled off her like the cool water. He lifted his pack and set off down the road, ushered along by the indifference of white porcelain.

Life, Armilla had taught him, is water.