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**CITY IMAGERY IN THE EARLY POETRY OF T. S. ELIOT**

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**Abstract**: In T. S. Eliot’s early poetry the city mirrors the existence of modern man: an existence in which human beings feel trapped and have come to believe that they do not have the possibility to transcend the self anymore. In losing his sense of morality, his ability to choose between right and wrong, modern man has cut himself off from others and has denied himself the only real way of overcoming the limitations of the self: love. The city imagery used by Eliot adds a sensory level to the reader’s experience: we can visualize as well as hear and smell the city through which the speakers in the poems move. Their inner feelings of loneliness and desolation are enhanced by the poignant images the author chooses to use, since the speakers themselves have become part of the life of the city. The connection with Matthew Arnold’s poem “The Buried Life” is meant to suggest that underneath the life of the city, we may still find the real life, the buried life, that the desire for transcendence and the need for love cannot always be covered up by the imaginary projection of the city. This idea, underlined by Stephen Spender in his approach to Eliot’s early poetry opens up the possibility of an ethical interpretation, as well as allowing the reader an insight into how the poet’s search for an answer to “the overwhelming question” began.

The early poetry of T. S. Eliot creates an atmosphere of desolation and confinement, a poetic space populated with characters that have lost their sense of purpose and in most cases their sense of morality. An essential element in creating this atmosphere is the compelling city imagery used by Eliot. The dark back alleys and the one-night cheap hotels, the faceless crowd that flows over London Bridge, all these images reveal the city as a place of damnation. The inner world of the speakers that walk along the streets of the city is reflected by the outer cityscapes, as in the symbolist poetry Eliot references so often.

The purpose of this paper is to analyze and clarify the significance of the city imagery used by Eliot, and also the powerful aesthetic impact the tropes chosen by the poet to express it have on the reader. I will also try to argue that since the city reflects the condition of modern man, the state of moral degradation he has reached, the imagery Eliot uses is meant to draw the reader’s attention to this aspect, to raise awareness.

To begin with, I will discuss “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock”, a poem in which the scene is set from the start on the streets of a city that seems as desolate and gloomy as the speaker’s mood.

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Let us go then, you and I,
When the evening is spread out against the sky
Like a patient etherised upon a table;
Let us go, through half deserted streets,
The muttering retreats
Of restless nights in one-night cheap hotels
And sawdust restaurants with oyster-shells:
Streets that follow like a tedious argument
Of insidious intent
To lead you to an overwhelming question… (Eliot, The Complete 3)

Even though it is not a very long or detailed description, this passage hints unmistakably at the illicit and immoral life of the city. The mention of the cheap hotels and sawdust restaurants suggests that the people living in the city are focused on fulfilling their physical needs rather than seek fulfillment on a spiritual level. They forget or they choose to ignore that living on a higher level of consciousness is even possible. What makes Prufrock different is, as Stephen Spender suggests, his lucidity: “Prufrock is superior to the inhabitants of his world because he is conscious of being inferior. He suffers, which means that he is one of those who knows that he is in a Baudelairean hell. He glimpses boredom and horror” (Spender 34-35). To be in a Baudelairean hell means to be trapped within the self and failing in the attempts to reach out to others.

His failure, for which he despises himself, is failure to relate either with another person or with the Absolute. He is isolated, he cannot communicate. Although the fact that he is conditioned by the society in which he lives may account for his spiritual and sexual enervation, this does not excuse his moral cowardice. The fact that he is able to see his character as the projection of circumstances is still no excuse for his inertia. (Spender 35)

Prufrock has betrayed the truth because even though he is aware of the corruption around him and of the fact that he is conditioned by it, he still thinks he might not be held responsible for what he is. From Eliot’s perspective, that kind of self indulgence, of indecision and self pity is not acceptable, even more, it is the very thing he is trying to warn us about. Spender, who knew Eliot, writes about him in the following manner:

It would be doing less than justice to Eliot as poet and critic to present him simply as a figure of universal benevolence. Under the kindness there was a penetrating intelligence, under the intelligence irony, and under the irony an almost Swiftian ferocity. The ferocity was closely allied to his daimon and to attitudes of a severity alien to most modern minds: for instance, his goal of love beyond that of created human beings. He knew extremes of ice and fire, and of the dark night of the soul. He is most a poet when he is describing extreme conditions, and the Dantesque circumference which is drawn around his work is of consciousness always at the most extreme state of awareness of horror or boredom or glory. (Spender 51-2)

This lucidity, this honesty that for Eliot goes beyond the search for philosophical or scientific truth, is what makes him an uniquely qualified observer.
His ironies, like sharp knives, cut through the fabric and reveal what is underneath. This is in fact the “overwhelming question”\(^1\) that Prufrock does not dare to ask: what will one find beneath the apparent “life” of the city, with its temptation and crowds and the bells of Saint Mary Woolnoth tolling as a warning or simply as an announcement that the end is coming? Beneath all that, buried deep, is the real life, the buried life. This expression is used by Eliot in “Portrait of a Lady” and it references a Matthew Arnold poem with the same title. Stephen Spender not only reveals the connection to the poem by Matthew Arnold but also draws a comparison:

Eliot, like Arnold before him, is haunted by the contrast between the modern world of distraction, journeyings to and fro, traffickings in values purely material, money-making, work-routines, which form a surface, like a moving platform, carrying us along upon it, and, underneath, the real life. In Arnold’s poem of that name, “The Buried Life” is the occasional but very rare situation in which lovers communicate their deepest feelings, needs, and aspirations consequent on the very condition of being alive, knowing they have to die, needing love – a fundamental, mutually-meeting seriousness, that is to say. On this seriousness is based joy as well as sorrow. And without the recognition there is neither joy nor grief, only a numbing and hurrying frustration. (Spender 40)

In describing this moving platform one might as well be describing the city, to be more precise the city as a symbol of the decadence of civilization. The reason for the disintegration of modern civilization is that moral values have been put aside without being replaced by anything else. The genuine relationships that one can establish with others through love or friendship and that would lead to a sense of moral responsibility have been replaced by superficial encounters that are purely based on the mutual interest of fulfilling certain needs or social obligations, after which the other person becomes expendable. Eliot describes these types of encounters very often in his poetry (the lady and her visitor, Prufrock and his unknown companion\(^2\), many of the scenes in *The Waste Land*) and many of them are set on the background of a city scene. Very possibly, in contemplating the alienation between a person and others but also between a person and their real self, he has the words from “The Buried Life” in mind:

> Alas, is even Love too weak
> To unlock the heart, and let it speak?

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\(^1\) It is very interesting how Balchandra Rajan uses the metaphor of the “overwhelming question” in his study of Eliot’s poetry, as a guideline for interpreting not just his earlier texts but also his later poetry. The search for love, for an authentic connection with the other that the question symbolizes is a constant in Eliot’s work as well as in his life.

\(^2\) In interpreting “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” different critics offer different suggestions about who the companion might be. The first possibility is that it is a woman that Prufrock is courting. Nevertheless, this courtship ritual turns out to be meaningless and empty because Prufrock is not in love with his companion, he is actually too wrapped up in his own fear and indecision to fall in love with anyone. The second possibility is that Prufrock is talking to himself, a version that underlines even more his inability to love and connect.
Are even lovers powerless to reveal
To one another what indeed they feel?
I knew the mass of men conceal’d
Their thoughts, for fear that if reveal’d
They would by other men be met
With blank indifference, or with blame reprov’d:
I knew they liv’d and mov’d
Trick’d in disguises, alien to the rest
Of men, and alien to themselves – and yet
The same heart beats in every human breast. (Arnold, Complete “The Buried Life”)

These lines almost remind us of Gerontion’s moving plea, as he realizes at the end of the poem that he has lost his passion, the very ability to love and connect with others:

I that was near your heart was removed therefrom
To lose beauty in terror, terror in inquisition.
I have lost my passion: why should I need to keep it
Since what is kept must be adulterated?
I have lost my sight, smell, hearing, taste and touch:
How should I use them for your closer contact? (Eliot, The Complete 23)

The same longing that moves Gerontion, a desire for a closer contact with the person he loves, also moves the speaker in “The Buried Life”. They are both nostalgic because of what they have lost, wishing they could experience again the blissful state love had afforded, the only real difference being that Eliot’s character has no hope of recovering what was lost, while the speaker in Matthew Arnold’s poem has not given up hope yet.

Fate, which foresaw
How frivolous a baby man would be—
By what distractions he would be possess’d,
That it might keep from his capricious play
His genuine self, and force him to obey
Even in his own despite his being’s law,
Bade through the deep recesses of our breast
The unregarded river of our life
Pursue with indiscernible flow its way;
And that we should not see
The buried stream, and seem to be
Eddying at large in blind uncertainty,
But often, in the world’s most crowded streets,
But often, in the din of strife,
There rises an unspeakable desire
After the knowledge of our buried life; (Arnold, Complete “The Buried Life”)

The phrase “the buried life” can also be connected with “The Burial of the Dead”, the title of the first part of The Waste Land. The final passage in “The Burial of the Dead” is not only a compelling example of city imagery, but it is also
essential to the structure of the entire poem. Most importantly, it reinforces the meaning behind the title of this section, and brings the first movement of the poem to a close.

Unreal city,
Under the brown fog of a winter dawn,
A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many,
I had not thought death had undone so many.
Sighs, short and infrequent, were exhaled,
And each man fixed his eyes before his feet.
Flowed up the hill and down King William Street,
To where Saint Mary Woolnoth kept the hours
With a dead sound on the final stroke of nine.
There I saw one I knew, and stopped him, crying ‘Stetson!'
‘You who where with me in the ships at Mylae!
‘That corps you planted last year in your garden,
‘Has it begun to sprout? Will it bloom this year?
‘Or has the sudden frost disturbed its bed?
‘O keep the Dog far hence, that
’s friend to men,
‘Or with his nails he’ll dig it up again!

The metaphor “buried life” gains of course a new dimension in Eliot’s poem compared to the meaning it has in Matthew Arnold’s text. The reference to Cantos III and IV of Dante’s Inferno hints at the fact that in this case the buried life is the unlived life. The line “I had not thought death had undone so many” does not lament the death of all those people as such, but the fact that they had never lived, that they had never made a choice between good and evil. Trapped in the “unreal life” of the city, their undoing was not their death, but the fact that they had not chosen to redeem themselves before they died, condemning themselves to eternal damnation. The sight of the lost souls waiting to cross the Acheron in Charon’s boat makes Dante shudder and that horror, which resides at the core of The Waste Land as well, should not be taken lightly.

The reference to the church of Saint Mary Woolnoth and the “final stroke of nine” could actually be connected to the description of the city as well, because nine in the morning is the time banks open and Eliot actually worked as a bank clerk. People going to their jobs in the morning is a normal part of the life of the city. This is of course a rather biographical interpretation. The theological version would be that in the Gospels Christ died on the cross at nine in the evening. This is one of just many instances in which Eliot allows multiplicity of meaning to enhance the effect of the metaphor.

Last but not least, the line from Baudelaire implies that none of us is without sin. Eliot, like Baudelaire before him, is trying to bring us to the realization of a startling truth: that we are all no different from those lost souls trying to cross the Acheron. The degradation of the modern civilization and the city corrupts us as well, just like for instance arriving and living in the city of Carthage corrupted Saint Augustine. That is the reason why the third section of The Waste Land, entitled “The Fire Sermon” ends with a reference to the chapter in Confessions where Augustine

The last passage I would like to comment on is that from “What the Thunder Said” in which the city becomes the symbol of decadence and corruption, and also a reminder of the futility of history and of the fact that, as Eliot will write later in East Coker “Houses rise and fall”, just like civilizations rise and then crash and burn.

What is the city over the mountains,
Cracks and reforms and bursts in the violet air
Falling towers
Jerusalem Athens Alexandria
Vienna London
Unreal. (Eliot, The Complete 48)

These lines suggest that not only in modernity, but throughout history the city has been a space of illusion and corruption, and cities being torn down and rebuilt becomes an endless cycle as the wheel of human history turns.

The main conclusion that I will draw from this incursion into Eliot’s early poetry and the city imagery that creates the poetic space is that in order to escape the influence of the city one has to go beyond the surface, beyond illusion, and search for the real life, the buried life. For Eliot that meant communion with God, but that does not mean one has to make the same choice as he did. The important thing is to make a choice, and not remain like Prufrock suspended between indecisions.

Works Cited