

Objective Correlatives of City and Places in T.S. Eliot's *the Waste Land*

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Abstract: Although T.S. Eliot is primarily appreciated as a poet, his contribution in the field of literary criticism and literary theoretical discussion are greatly important. The interrelationship between his criticism and his poetic work is marked by many concepts that are materialized in his artistic creation. The objective correlative is a perfect example of this phenomenon, since it is Eliot's original notion and also because it has been applied to a large extent in his poems. This article aims to investigate the objective correlative from a theoretical point of view and in comparison to other theoretical concepts explicated in Eliot's critical essays. In addition, the article addresses the use of this literary device in the capacity of urban life, urban ambiance and urban sites in T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, where metropolitan elements provide not merely a setting for the development of the content, but also one of the most recurrently encountered motifs. Eliot's use of metropolitan details in this poem contributes in the portrayal of modern life by supplying a composite of emotional, logical and sensory reactions, compatible with his description of the objective correlative, which in turn enables a unified experiencing of the poem.

Keywords: T.S. Eliot; objective correlative; Unreal City; cityscape;

1. Sensibility and emotion

Among Eliot's most important contributions in the field of literary studies is his concept of the dissociation of sensibility, first introduced in his 1921 essay "The metaphysical poets". The dissociation, according to Eliot, occurred when thoughts and feelings did not meet in perfect unison. In speaking about the poet John Donne, Eliot described that Donne's thoughts constituted *an experience*, a totality of sensory perceptions and intellectual reasoning that merged inseparably into the *poet's mind*. In contrast to the *ordinary man*, whose *experience is chaotic, irregular, fragmentary*, in the mind of the poet, *these experiences are always forming new wholes*. (p. 64) Eliot's notion of sensibility is, in fact, quite complex. He is careful to distance it from the conventional association with emotions.¹ As becomes clear in his essays, especially in the aforementioned "The metaphysical poets", as well as in "Tradition and the individual talent" and "Hamlet and his problems", sensibility, sometimes used interchangeably with "feelings", is to Eliot the use of senses and the total of perceptions collected by this use. As opposed to this, emotions represent the subjective / personal reaction of either reader or poet, or in other occasions, the one inherent in the poetic work. (SW, pp. 28-29)

Being a firm believer that the esthetic purpose of art cannot be achieved with a work suffering from the dissociation of sensibility, Eliot elaborated this concept further, providing a more practical way to achieve the desired opposite: unification of sensibility, thus avoiding the disparity between emotions and the external elements that would provoke them:

The only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding an "objective correlative"; in other words, a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that particular emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked. (SW, p. 49)

¹ In his chapter "Tradition in 1919: Pound, Eliot and 'the historical method'", Massimo Bacigalupo introduces the term "desynonymizing" (2007: 104) originally employed by Coleridge to distinguish between 'Imagination' and 'Fancy'.

The objective correlative translated the subjective into the objective, or rather, provided an objective basis for what would be a subjective experiencing of the former. The reader could not be *asked* to feel or perceive an emotion without having a source to derive it from, and the various elements of the work itself, such as characters, their actions and the occurrences within the plot had to be justified by this same foundation. Only in this way could the literary work achieve the necessary harmony required for the achievement of esthetic beauty.

Eliot endorsed and revised the principles of unity, coherence and order throughout his career as a critic and literary theoretician, and correspondingly employed them in his poetic work. In fact, so much is this statement true, that even the most fragmented of his writings possesses an undeniable harmony with fragments far from uniform acting as different instruments in an orchestra. The use of the objective correlative can be at times hard to isolate from the multitude of the other components of the literary work, and above all, it is itself made up of a series of constituents whose number and dimensions can vary to a considerable degree. But as its original purpose entails, it is supposed to bring *an emotion* or a complexity of emotions woven together with thought, not an entire isolation of either. Thus, the instruments of an objective correlative can be incidences, characters, settings or any possible combination between them. For the purpose of this article, I am going to discuss several instances of Eliot's use of places, dwellings and cities in *The Waste Land* to illustrate one of his most fundamental preoccupations: that with the human condition in an era devoid of faith in fellow beings and greater things.

2. Unreal City

Eliot's metropolitan settings are uncovered to the reader fragment after fragment and a handful of isolated details at a time. Thus, trying to draft an accurate mind map of these urban sites is neither easy, nor fruitful. The particularly narrow field of view with which we are provided becomes in itself an important literary device in creating the *right mood* for experiencing Eliot's poems, partly because of the mysteriousness that seems to open doors towards feeling and accepting rather than simply understanding.

The frequency of urban images draws attention to their importance in Eliot's depiction of modern life and civilization. Critics have even gone so far as to hint that the city is the real protagonist of *The Waste Land* (Long, 1985, p. 145).

Unreal city is first mentioned in line 60 of *The Waste Land* and it is again echoed as such in lines 207 and 376. On the first instance, the grim ambience also introduces in the poem a dimension of plurality:

*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.* (WL, lines 60-63)

Along with the image of dead people inhabiting a city that is unreal and the power of such a dark vision, one of the most essential elements here is the word 'many'. Its importance is made more obvious by its repetition in the two consecutive lines, which intensify the multitude and highlight the presence of people against the impressive urban background. This plurality is a crucial element in the shaping of the ironic dimension of the use of the complex element of the city in Eliot's work: by stating that the utter solitude and isolation occur in the middle of a gigantic crowd, not in a small village where human contact is objectively less frequent or limited in terms of choice, Eliot, like many other Modernists (Chinitz, 2006, pp. 324, 326-328), is demonstrating the absurdity and dysfunctionality of human interaction in modern society. The allusions from Dante and Baudelaire which Eliot referred to in his notes intensify this crowdedness even more. Baudelaire's original text speaks of a 'city full of dreams' adding yet another dimension to the airy atmosphere, where 'ghosts by daylight tug the passer's sleeve' (Baudelaire, Campbell, 1952, p. 111). Baudelaire's ghosts and

dreams, Dante's desperate infernal crowd and Eliot's own added perspective of an individual that is part of that crowd as an equal, not as an observer, since he can participate in an atypical 'inside' conversation with another person of this crowd, all accentuate this feeling of disorder, semi-darkness, heavy air, anxiety, a nightmarish sensation that comes as a complex union of perceptions of many different sensory receptors. The scene is very visual, as made unavoidably such by means of the images, Dante's original text contains repeated auricular details and Baudelaire's ghosts rubbed against the sleeves of passers-by contribute with the tangible elements to make this passage one of the most complex in Eliot's work in terms of sensory intensity. All the overflow of perceptions create the feeling of helplessness, anguish and fatality which an outstretching of the persona's experience into the sensitivity of the reader. The London Bridge as setting is simultaneously merged with Dante's hell, Baudelaire's Paris, and the in the lines following also with Ancient Rome and Cathage. This disruption of both space and time continuum and the confusion resulting from it universalize the human pain and hopelessness and the futility of human efforts, like that of planting corpses in the garden and expecting them to bloom.

The second instance in which Unreal City is mentioned using this term is presented through the voice of Tiresias. The context is not as acute as that of line 60, but this time, Tiresias introduces the reader to a much deeper perspective, the daily lives of the inhabitants of Unreal. We see Tiresias being proposed to spend a weekend with Mr. Eugenides, the Smyrna merchant. A very interesting fact is that Mr. Eugenides is first mentioned as the 'one-eyed merchant' by Madame Sosostriis (see Sharpe, 1990, p. 196), thus similar to Tiresias in terms of his blindness. Tiresias is, as he plainly acknowledges, "I Tiresias, though blind [...] can see", able to perceive the truth and to understand both men and women and identify himself with both genders. The merchant, being one-eyed, belongs, alike Tiresias, to two worlds: that of those who can see and that of those who cannot. But neither of these qualities enables him to understand: his eye and his missing eye leave him as blind as the rest. The fact that he is similar to Tiresias does not make him comprehend the latter better than other people would. His carefulness with the documents for selling currants stretches to his business-like proposition, which is open and detailed. Although he is from Smyrna and can speak French (and proposes a weekend at the Metropole i.e. the city), instead of producing positive effects, his knowledge of the human nature has instead made him a cynical person who prefers objectifying his equals. In his chapter on *The Waste Land*, Cleanth Brooks explains:

The Syrian merchants, we learn from Miss Weston's book, were, along with slaves and soldiers, the principal carriers of the mysteries which lie at the core of the Grail legends. But in the modern world we find both the representatives of the Tarot divining and the mystery cults in decay. What he carries on his back and what the fortune-teller is forbidden to see is evidently the knowledge of the mysteries (although Mr. Eugenides himself is hardly likely to be more aware of it than Madame Sosostriis is aware of the importance of her function). Mr. Eugenides, in terms of his former function, ought to be inviting the protagonist into the esoteric cult which holds the secret of life, but on the realistic surface of the poem, in his invitation to a weekend at the Metropole he is really inviting him to a homosexual debauch. The homosexuality is secret and now a cult but a very different cult from that which Mr. Eugenides ought to represent. The end of the new cult is not life but, ironically, sterility. (Brooks, 1939, p.153-154)

This added dimension of the Smyrna merchant constitutes a second ironic dimension inherent in his character. The mystery that would provide details to help save the land from barrenness turns out to be his personal secret involving homosexual sex which in its turn cannot procreate. The ignorance of Mr. Eugenides of the higher mission he was supposed to carry out is tragic even more because of his original function as a guide and the fact that his exchange is with Tiresias, who is himself a seer, not a doer. Thus, all the chain of the transmission of the mystery is broken beyond recovery: the carrier of the secret is not aware of his mission, the secret he is keeping has been transformed into one that does not lead to the fulfillment of the

quest of humanity and neither to the secret of life (personal procreation), and finally, the message is given to another keeper of many secrets.

The desecration of the mystery leading to a loss of the path towards the success of the quest is at the same time an underneath layer in the general suffering of the dwellers of Unreal City. The whole section is pervaded by a sense of loss and multifold violation of all that is considered sacred, by numerous sexual encounters of a distasteful nature: rapes, random and insignificant seasonal relationships, passionless intercourse, possibly prostitution or raptports of similar nature. All these point to the isolation regardless of present human contact, the loss of faith in fellow beings, and like in "Gerontion", a loss of passion. The presentation of all the details, both narrative and descriptive, form a complex union which succeeds in transmitting the feeling of abandonment and failure as well as the logical dimension to rationalize the situation. The following passage includes a change in perspective and through the voice of Tiresias we see the other side of Unreal City. The evening comes, the workday is over and it is time for the inhabitants of Unreal to go back home, but what awaits them inside the walls is not a warm family atmosphere. The modest room of the typist who is slowly growing old (Her drying combinations touched by the sun's last rays,) awaits the visit of the young man who goes on fulfilling his urges without love, or neither passion, but only as part of a 'because I have a chance' ritual. The description of the ambiance in the room is an excellent example of the translation of thought and feelings into *external facts*. The emptiness, exhaustion and hopelessness of the woman are reflected into her furniture, the lack of space and order in her room. In addition, the loneliness and the absence of love and care into her life are emphasized by details such as those regarding her dinner preparation with food being laid out in tins, the fact that she clears her breakfast dishes at tea-time, implying that nobody else is home and above all, by the divan, normally a living room object, which at night she uses as her bed. Additionally, the fact that the undesired sexual contact occurs inside her home is an indication of the degree to which the barrenness, physical or spiritual, has invaded modern society. The home is only another decaying temple that no longer provides protection, affection, attention or understanding. It is the lack of, desire, love or even hate and violence that makes this a very grim example of modern urban decadence. The typist is "hardly aware of her departed lover", and it is the lack of emotions, both positive and negative that create the general feeling of desolateness that contributes into the background image of the wasteland and serves as a uniting detail for the bigger picture.

With the exception of addressing it as 'city' in line 259, Eliot uses the name 'Unreal' again in line 376. This instance is particularly important due to its alteration of the setting viewpoint. Throughout the poem, despite the changes in setting mainly through allusion or even through direct mentioning, Unreal City is constantly identified as London (Doyle, Winkiel, 2005, p. 264). The map uncovered fragment after fragment presents London cityscape, with its buildings, landmarks, streets, and more. But in this context, London is mentioned separately as if to be distanced from Unreal City, which is now functioning as a separate entity. Yet, it must be pointed out that this context depicts the similarity, not the difference between the cities mentioned in lines 374-376, thus also making Unreal an amalgamation of all the other cities whose names are evoked and at the same time a symbol of all urban centers in a multitude of locations. In his address "Influence of the Landscape upon the poet", Eliot stated that "[his] personal landscape ... [was] ... a composite" (ILP, 1960, p. 421), adding that "[his] ... urban imagery was that of St. Louis, upon which that of Paris and London have been superimposed." (ibid., p. 422) In fact, this, at the same time, is the best way to understand Unreal City: as a merging of the characteristics of all modern cities with their physical features and the similar ambiance of crowdedness, lack of order and simultaneous paralysis. It almost feels as if the ghost of Unreal City haunts its each and every modern counterpart, making it impossible for itself to have a specific location or exact temporal dimension. The above context universalizes Unreal placing it on the same rank with all the real-life cities mentioned in the lines preceding it, which are all portrayed in a process of apocalyptic destruction. Its urban scenes are no longer depicted as inhabited by crowds as in the other instances, but as desolate places reminiscent of the past. The sensory details enfolding this passage contain again visual, olfactory and auditory elements, which evoke a complex general feeling of mystery, nostalgia and loss. Images of aridness

persist even stronger and the urban setting is intermingled with semi-rural landscapes and details. The universalizing of Unreal constitutes a culmination of despair that creates a suffocating feeling of hopelessness and inability to escape. The prison mentioned in lines 411-414 is, in fact, the last urban setting mentioned directly in the poem, along with London Bridge that is now *falling down*, as if to signal a loss of connections between earth and water, thus a permanent loss of hope for equilibrium.

3. Conclusion

Although *The Waste Land* contains numerous images of draught, stones, rocks, arid soil, shattered glass, dry plants, dust, etc., its most dramatic passages are placed in urban settings. Providing occasions for human interaction, the urban background offers the clearest picture of the human condition in modern society. Eliot gives the typical modern metropolis the name "Unreal city", which contains London landmarks and milieu, but also various elements of other modern cities. Unreal City is one city in particular, but it stands as a symbol of modern urban decay and has neither place nor time restrictions. Its major function in the poem is that with its inside and outside backgrounds, it provides the necessary elements to articulate the message of the poem. The use of multifold sensory details serves as Eliot's poetic device to *translate thought into feeling* and it demonstrates his view on what he called 'the objective correlative'. Among all the instances of the use of the objective correlative in Eliot's poetry, this is probably the most complex, because it involves a very well-organized structure that through contextual modifications holds true for all *The Waste Land*. It is very important to mention that in order for Unreal City to be considered as an objective correlative, it should be viewed as a composite of details, images and sensory elements, not as a solid unique entity, which it is obviously not. In this respect, Unreal City provides not only meaning to *The Waste Land*, but it offers a complexity of perceptions that lead to *experience* the poem with both mind and emotions.

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