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Paradigms of the Ecocritical Canon in T. S. Eliot's Early Poems

Abstract I: A partire da una prospettiva ecocritica, questo saggio intende analizzare alcune delle oltre 40 poesie che T. S. Eliot scrisse tra il 1909 e il 1914 in un taccuino dal titolo *Inventions of the March Hare*. Pubblicati per la prima volta nel 1996 da Christopher Ricks, i primi componimenti eliotiani offrono uno sguardo critico sul degradato ambiente urbano quale strumento primario dell'esperienza stessa della modernità. Obiettivo di questo studio è quello di individuare come il fatiscente *cityscape* eliotiano sia già espressione di una consapevolezza ambientale che coincide, per certi versi, con la scoperta da parte di Eliot della poesia simbolista francese.

Abstract II: Taking into consideration T. S. Eliot's early poetry from an ecocritical perspective, this article investigates a few of the more than 40 poems he wrote in the years 1909-1914 in a notebook he called *Inventions of the March Hare*. Edited in 1996, the volume includes poems which highlight his concern with the (un) natural world and his implicit critique of the degrading environment caused by the spoiling consequences of modernity. Focusing on the representation of the wasted urban landscapes portrayed in these poems, emphasis will be given to Eliot's environmental awareness, which coincided to some extent with his encountering the *maudite réalité* of French symbolist poets.

The idea that we humans are completely immersed in a self-enclosed sphere of our own we can call "culture" while non-humans are part of a non-ethical sphere of "nature" is the leading assumption [...]
(Val Plumwood 2002: 51).

[...] non c'è orizzonte oltre la città
(Bacigalupo 1991: 500).

A "study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment", better known as ecocriticism, which opens up to the representation in texts of the environmental crisis and its deep connection with the cultural crisis is a recurrent theme in literature, assuming with Timothy Clark "[t]he inherent greenness of the literary" (Clark 2011: 19). From Emerson's *Nature* (1836) and Thoreau's *Walden* (1854), widely recognized as the archetypes of a cultural process aiming to explore "all facets of human experience from an environ-

mental viewpoint" (Adamson, Slovic 2009: 7), by way of Carson's manifesto of the environmental movement, *Silent Spring* (1962), up to William Rueckert's first recorded use of the word "ecocriticism" in his *Literature and Ecology* (1978), the model of literary and poetic texts "that speaks about nature and points to nature" (Maran 2007: 280) often fixes itself rightly in that intersection between the environmental crisis and the cultural crisis.

It was in 1992, with the founding of the Association for the Study of Literature and the Environment and in 1996, with the publication of Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm's *The Ecocriticism Reader*, that ecocriticism gained his first definition and was finally recognized as an intellectual movement¹. "[D]efined more by its issues and challenges than by any particular method" (Clark 2011: 165), ecocriticism does not try to adhere to any stringent methodology. On the contrary, as Salvadori properly highlights in his in-depth overview of ecocriticism, at issue are not ecocritical approaches but *trends* or *waves* of the ecocritical idea (2016: 677).

Focusing on the specific wave of ecocriticism which considers literature as functional to the emergencies posed and caused by the environment crisis on the one hand and an exemplification of modern man's interior void on the other, Modernist poetry presents a lively view on modern society, and is often concerned with urban landscapes as *one of the factors responsible for the generation of* human alienation. In particular, attention will be devoted to T. S. Eliot's early poems as an instance of the spiritual *malaise* he identified in modern society, foretelling many ecocritical analyses. Trying to investigate what seems most distinctive about Eliot's environmental concern with and commitment to the (un)natural world, this article pinpoints his implicit critique of the degrading environment produced by the destructive consequences of modernity in a selection of his juvenile poems entitled *Inventions of the March Hare* (henceforth *IMH*).

Edited by Christopher Ricks in 1996, the volume includes Eliot's formerly unpublished poems, which he had written since November 1909 and decided to transcribe in a brown leather notebook in 1910, during his summer vacation in East Gloucester. A task he also accomplished "during the following year in Paris, on his return to Harvard and, finally, on arrival in London in 1914" (Gordon 1998: 33)². A few months before *The Waste Land* was published, Eliot gave the manuscript to John Quinn, his American benefactor, including Ezra Pound's conspicuous deletions and emendations. At the same time, he sold him the *IMH* notebook with about fifty poems for the sum of 140 dollars, on condition that it should remain unpublished since, in Eliot's words, it was a "private poetry-workshop" (Eliot 1957: 196) and, as such, "unpublishable" (Reid 1968: 540). In 1958, the New York Public Library

¹ "Ecocriticism, also known as literary ecology or environmental literary studies", in Alfred K. Siewers's words, "is a field of criticism that emerged in the late twentieth century as a slightly delayed response in the humanities to the global emergence of the environmental movement in the 1960s and 1970s" (2010: 205).

² "The span of time during which they were written took Eliot through graduation at Harvard, a 'romantic year' in France, Cambridge postgraduate classes in Sanskrit philology and Buddhist philosophy, study in Europe, the writing of a doctoral thesis on the idealist F. H. Bradley, a decision – to Eliot's family's intense disappointment – not to become a Harvard professor but to remain in Europe (his father died in 1919 thinking his youngest son had wasted his life), grueling early years of schoolteaching and lecturing in England, his crucial friendship in wartime London with Ezra Pound, marriage to Vivien Haigh-Wood, the publication of his first book" (Jenkins 1997, April 20).

bought the notebook from Mr. Quinn's nephew, Mrs. Conroy, but it was not until October 25, 1968 (three years after Eliot's death), that the Berg Collection of the New York Public Library announced its rediscovery, together with *The Waste Land* manuscript. The announcement was amplified in December of that same year, when Donald Gallup published a detailed review of Eliot's first poems, entitled "The 'Lost' Manuscripts of T. S. Eliot", in *The Bulletin of the New York Public Library* LXXII.

Written in direct language characterized by ironic tones, the *IMH* collection is made up of complete poems, parts of poems, and early versions of a number of Eliot's main poetical works (later included in the volume *Prufrock and Other Observations*, 1917)³, taken both from the notebook and Ezra Pound's papers at Yale⁴. Attracted by the symbolist poets' thematic array⁵, which opens to humanity's neurosis, sickness and hypochondria, cityscapes and urban interiors are the real settings of these *juvenilia* – as they were to be of Eliot's later compositions, among them: *Rhapsody on a Windy Night*, *Preludes* and *The Waste Land* –, permeated by a decadent atmosphere given by yellow smoke, foggy horizons, vacant lots and blind alleys.

The *IMH* poems display a sequence of demystifying images steeped in autobiographical perspectives gained from Eliot's journeys in America and Europe: "My urban imagery was that of St. Louis, upon which that of Paris and London have been superimposed" (Eliot 1960: 422; see also Crawford 1987: 6; Gordon 1998: 24). The short poems collected under the title *Caprices* (1909-1910) are a case in point. The first two are set in North Cambridge, whereas the third⁶ dates to his stay in Paris, and was subject to a change of place. Eliot modified its title, and replaced the original setting (North Cambridge) with Montparnasse (Paris). Just like North Cambridge, Montparnasse is figured as another grim and decaying place in the poem, a location with no clearly discernible reference points. Eliot's cityscape appears like a suspended place, due to the absence of any connection with the external world. The only connection established is that with his inner mysterious spaces, which expresses the sense of displacement experienced by modern man:

"Fourth Caprice in Montparnasse"

We turn the corner of the street
And again

³ The notebook displays the first versions of the poems included in the collection of *Prufrock and Other Observations* (1917): "Humoresque (After J. Laforgue)", "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock", "Portrait of a Lady", "Preludes", "Rhapsody on a Windy Night", "Morning at the Window", "Mr. Apollinax", and "Conversation Galante"; and the early versions of the poems found in the "loose leaves" and later published in *Poems* (1919), *Ara Vos Prec* (1920) and *Poems* (1920): "Gerontion", "Burbank with a Baedeker: Bleistein with a Cigar", "Sweeney Erect", "A Cooking Egg", "Mélange Adultère de Tout", "Lune de Miel", "Dans le Restaurant", "Whispers of Immortality", "Mr. Eliot's Sunday Morning Service", "Sweeney Among the Nightingales" and "Ode".

⁴ The latter were removed from the notebook probably by Eliot himself before they were bought by Quinn. See also Lyall 1996.

⁵ Eliot was studying at the Harvard Union Library when he discovered, in 1908, Arthur Symons's *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* (Eliot 1928: 5).

⁶ The "caprice" set in Montparnasse is the fourth, according to the poem title. Actually, there is no mention in the notebook of the third, which was probably lost or destroyed (cf. *IMH*: 111).

Here is a landscape grey with rain
 On black umbrellas, waterproofs,
 And dashing from the slated roofs
 Into a mass of mud and sand.
 Behind a row of blackened trees
 The dripping plastered houses stand
 Like mendicants without regrets
 For unpaid debts
 Hand in pocket, undecided,
 Indifferent if derided.
 Among such scattered thoughts as these
 We turn the corner of the street;
 But why are we so hard to please? (*IMH*: 14).

The apparent action characterizing the first line of the poem comes to a sudden interruption in the second line, where the pedestrian's vision of a grey landscape appears to disappoint his quest for a different landscape: "And again / Here is a landscape grey with rain". "Scattered thoughts", as the "minor considerations" informing the "First Caprice in North Cambridge" (*IMH*: 13), stand out against a movement merely going to be an illusion and preceding one's renewed fall into inactivity. The sound of rain falling is replacing the sinister humming of the piano played on the street by the poor musician of the "First Caprice". As a sort of subterranean hissing, rain is the only element of movement within this landscape. Falling with its monotonous continuousness on umbrellas and roofs, finally forming a mush of mud and sand on the street, rain is functional to the sense of paralysis and griminess of Eliot's picture of Montparnasse. And the *promeneur* realizes, in his unstructured attempt to search for a different vision, that the immutability of the cityscape he is observing, exemplifies the inalterability of his own existence, which finally engenders indecision and indifference. Yet, it is the very vision of the urban environment that increases the wanderer's *malaise* and paralysis, leading him to the potential discovery of his own self. Eliot's poem dramatically suggests a world in which material and inner realities are felt as one both by the anonymous "we" and by the reader, and the city reflects exactly the psychic disintegration of the modern soul.

As a man of his own century, Eliot realized fairly early that only by living within this historical reality would he be able to make his own poetry the most accomplished representation of the urbanized soul, sweeping from virtue to vice. He became an urban poet wandering alone through the dirtiest and most squalid streets of his city, observing and translating his sensations into his poetry: "I learned that the sort of material that I had, the sort of experience that an adolescent had had, in an industrial city in America, could be the material for poetry" (Eliot 1965: 126). Subsequently, he forged the inhabitants of his "Unreal City": a paralytic "we" existing in a lifeless state, leading an alienated existence survived to "hibernate among the bricks / [...] / Indifferent [...] / And apathetic", even "Careless, [...]" to the rebirth of nature and life ("Interlude in London")⁷; or the *promeneur solitaire*, Eli-

⁷ Eliot's rejection of traditional associations of spring, as the symbol of the rebirth of nature, with regeneration and new life remains a leitmotif throughout his poetry.

ot's key symbol of the crisis of the modern I, who lives and rambles through shabby streets on urban nights (Bacigalupo 1991: 500). The *promeneur's* eyes dwell upon the most sordid aspects and elements of the modern metropolis he is crossing, inhabited by "lonely men in shirtsleeves", "women spilling out of corsets", and "children whimpering in corners", who recall in the reader's mind the prostitutes, drinkers, and smokers portrayed by Baudelaire in *Les fleurs du mal*⁸. It is widely attested to what extent the French poet shaped Eliot's poetic vision from the beginning up to his mature works, infested with images of urban decay and hellish landscapes. Eliot continued to pay his respects to Baudelaire more than any other symbolist poets, such as Laforgue or Corbière, whose influence he ascribed to a limited period of his youth. Eliot considered Baudelaire as the only poet to have grasped the sense of his age in the "ennui of modern life":

Baudelaire perceived that what really matters is Sin and Redemption [...] and the possibility of damnation is so immense a relief in a world of electoral reform, plebiscites, sex reform and dress reform, that damnation itself is an immediate form of salvation – of salvation from the ennui of modern life, because it at last gives some significance to living (Eliot 1999: 422).

From Baudelaire Eliot learned how to perceive the awfulness and dissolution of the modern city, exemplifying the symbol of the seductress who leads "her" victims inside the domestic walls or along alleys, squares and lots of sin and alienation. Instead of preserving a meaningful contact with nature, Eliot's protagonists are unable to understand its flow, which determines the coming of spring after winter and that of new life from death. They are incapable of taking part in nature rituals, and the cycle of birth and death is somewhat psychically interrupted⁹. Eliot was not oblivious to primitive rituals, like those described in Frazer's *The Golden Bough* (1890), feeling their mysterious allure and cathartic function¹⁰.

Eliot's city dweller suffers the images conveyed by the metropolis and remains astonished, unarmed in his own paralysis, as an expression of his own disillusionment and, in Butler's words, he reveals himself as a "parasitical city dweller, traditionless, utterly matter-of-fact, religionless, [...], unfruitful" (1994: 136).

In "First Debate between the Body and Soul" (January 1910), shattered and scattered images suggest the disintegrated state of modern humanity and sensibility:

The August wind is shambling down the street

A blind old man who coughs and spits sputters
Stumbling among the alleys and the gutters

⁸ It is worth noticing that Eliot had probably acquired *Les fleurs du mal* during his stay in Paris in 1909-1910. Furthermore, Baudelaire had already theorized the influence of urban landscapes on the contemporary poetic production in his *Le peintre de la vie modern* (1863).

⁹ For an insightful analysis of Eliot's vision of modern society, see also Serpieri 1985: 69-99.

¹⁰ In 1933 he wrote that "poetry begins, I dare say, with a savage beating a drum in a jungle, and it retains that essential of percussion and rhythm" (148).

He pokes and prods
 With senile patience
 The withered leaves
 Of our sensations –

And yet devoted to the pure idea
 One sits delaying in the vacant square
 Forced to endure the blind inconscient stare
 Of twenty leering houses that exude
 The odour of their turpitude
 And a street piano through the dusty trees [...] (*IMH*: 64).

Written shortly after the three *Caprices*, the poem was originally entitled *Reflections in a Square* (*IMH*: 228). The current title clearly evokes seventeenth-century metaphysical poetry¹¹ and, in particular, Ricks sees Andrew Marvell and his “A Dialogue between the Soul and Body” as a possible source (cf. *IMH*: 228). Centred on the insolvable dialectics between matter and spirit, the text is enriched with numerous images that the poet draws from his own philosophical background. Its structure, on the contrary – the interpolation of quatrains made up of terms repeated in the whole text, recalls Jules Laforgue’s *ritournelles* or refrains. Worthy of note is again the debt to Baudelaire. The most evident example is the image of the old blind beggar – an anticipation of Gerontion – which frequently appears in the notebook poems. The landscape prevails through a series of personifications – the wind, the houses, the piano, life itself in the antepenultimate stanza that materialises and evaporates – characterized by a sinister meaning and forerunners of unhappy premonitions:

Absolute! complete idealist
 A supersubtle peasant
 (Conception most unpleasant)
 A supersubtle peasant in a shabby square
 Assist me to the pure idea –
 Regarding nature without love or fear
 For a little while, a little while
 Standing our ground –
 Till life evaporates into a smile
 Simple and profound.

What clearly emerges here is the juxtaposition and incompatibility between the triviality of the physical element (from the “houses that exude / The odour of their turpitude”, to the refrain), and the spiritual one. The absolute, the pure Idea (“And yet devoted to the pure idea”), which the poetic voice addresses to find a place of salvation against materiality, dies

¹¹ The metaphysical poets, especially John Donne, were a great influence on T. S. Eliot in his early life. Eliot recalled that he was introduced to Donne as a student at Harvard and reviewed Herbert Grierson’s *Metaphysical Poetry* (Eliot 1965: 21). In 1921 he wrote the essays “The Metaphysical Poets” and “Andrew Marvell”.

of tediousness (“The pure Idea dies of inanition”). Condemned by its own missed action it will indeed be a source of frustration:

Imaginations
Masturbations
The withered leaves
Of our sensations –

As well as frustrating and vain will it be to scrutinize devitalized feelings in search of answers.

Uncertain city dweller of an unknown metropolis of the beginning of the century, Prufrock begins to take shape in the *IMH* poems as that passive and disoriented observer whose eyes build Eliot’s urban environments. The origins of “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” may be discovered in an early untitled manuscript, included in Eliot’s notebook between “Morning at the Window” (leaf 51) and “The Little Passion From ‘An Agony in the Garret’” (leaf 52):

Of those ideas in his head
Which found me always interested
Though they were seldom well digested –
I recollect one thing he said
After those hours of streets and streets
That spun around him like a wheel
He finally remarked: “I feel
As if I’d been a long time dead”.

Upon those stifling August nights
I know he used to walk the streets
Now diving into dark retreats –
Or following the lines of lights
[...]
And knowing well to what they lead
To some inevitable cross
Wheron our souls are spread. And bleed.

As suggested by Oser, the poem probably “belongs to the early draft material of ‘The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock’” (35), since he notices that Eliot’s handwriting is still the same as that of his Paris period (“elongated and spiky”). It was possibly included by a curator of the Berg Collection in the notebook from the “loose leaves” and, in Oser’s hypothesis, the “Agony in the Garret” may constitute a revision of its “middle strophes” (*ibid.*). Implicated in the *promeneur’s* wanderings, the narrator suggests how their walking through “streets and streets” promotes moments during which they share ideas. Night remains the privileged moment of wandering. Differently from “Prufrock among the Women”, the first draft of the famous poem, in “Of those ideas in his head” the streets walked by the wanderer

lead not to an “overwhelming question” but “To some inevitable cross”, where souls bleed. Yet, the thought processes of the wanderer remain achievable only “through dilapidated streets” as suggested by Ackroyd (1984: 38).

Thus, in “Prufrock among the Women”, as the poem was titled in its earliest version, wandering becomes a necessity, a proposal:

Let us go then, you and I, [...]
When the evening is spread out against the sky
Like a patient etherized upon a table.

The cityscape appears as a symphony of colours, lights and images combined in a visual, tactile, and sensual alchemy, and evoking, in the reader’s mind, the colours, smells and sounds they are related to. But it is in the “Pervigilium”, the long section excised from *Prufrock and Other Observations* (1917)¹², that “urban squalor and dilapidation” (Ackroyd 1984: 37) perfectly mould with the symbols of the street and the night, and with the “Prufrockian I”. Prufrock imagines himself being finally alone, a single entity, and his journey already happened. The absence of “you” (standing for the sensitive self) possibly implies his reconciliation with “I” (his public mask); but reconciliation can only happen after the journey experience:

*Shall I say, I have gone at dusk through narrow streets
And seen the smoke which rises from the pipes
Of lonely men in shirtsleeves, leaning out of windows.
And when the evening woke and stared into its blindness
I heard the children whimpering in corners
Where women took the air, standing in entries –
Women, spilling out of corsets, stood in entries
Where the draughty gas-jet flickered
And the oil cloth curled up stairs.*

Isolation is the privileged condition: it is pursued during the afternoon but can only be achieved at sunset, when man finds shelter inside his dwelling, leaving the corrupting vapours of the world outside. At this moment, he feels free, physically imprisoned only in his body. He can finally sink into darkness, which prevents him from hearing his “madness singing” (l. 29).

Nicholas Jenkins, in his *New York Times* review of Ricks’s edition, emphasizes how in this first version of Prufrock “Eliot describes in clammy detail Prufrock’s tramping ‘through certain half-deserted streets’ [...]”, adding that “Here Prufrock relates more of his erotic forays into the ‘narrow streets’ of a social and emotional underworld”. Schuchard (1999: 11), Seymour-Jones (2001: 46) and Miller (2005: 155) have also pointed out the sexual element in the “Pervigilium”. However, what appears to be worthy of note, besides sexual attempts or

¹² “Prufrock’s Pervigilium” was a 38-line insertion in the middle of the “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock”.

imagination, is Prufrock's apocalyptic vision in the last stanza, culminating in his madness and the dissolution of the physical world:

- I have seen the darkness creep along the wall
I have heard my Madness chatter before day
I have seen the world roll up into a ball
Then suddenly dissolve and fall away (*IMH*: 43-44).

The penultimate line of the "Pervigilium" ("I have seen the world roll up into a ball") survives, with minor changes, in the last version of the poem: "To have squeezed the universe into a ball" (l. 92). Yet, if the "Pervigilium" overtly emphasises the disintegration of physical reality ("suddenly dissolve and fall away"), in the "The Love Song" the reader's attention is directed from the universe squeezed into a ball to Prufrock's fatal inadequacy to state his overwhelming question: "To roll it toward some overwhelming question" (l. 93).

"This Eliot", writes Jenkins, "the Eliot of nervous disease and sexual terror, is a hypercultivated sufferer, a poet whose writing articulates with dreamlike clarity not the perfections of European and American culture but its chronic anguish, a medium who transmits through his trembling fingertips not the music of personal evil but of fantasies and sicknesses widely shared"¹³. He drew upon symbolist poetry to create his own poetry. He added irony and grotesque images to portray his own century and used more philosophical insights than feeling in his early poetry, building off of what he learned from Baudelaire. Pondering on the blind alleys and vacant lots of the metropolis, investigating the mystifications of the individual consciousness, and experimenting with several poetic forms, Eliot's early poems form a kind of 'ecosystem' that invite a non-linear reading, a process taking place both within the text and in relation to other texts, contexts and places. They constitute a juvenile, but explicit critique of modern society together with a dramatization of modern sensibility, whose philosophical insights display the otherness of the natural world, even though what 'natural' may finally mean to the Prufrockian I is definitely hard to gauge in this context.

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¹³ <http://www.nytimes.com/books/97/04/20/reviews/970420.20jenkint.html> (consulted on 26/10/2017).

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