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Atmospheres of Contamination: Pollution, Embodiment, and Urban Alienation in T. S. Eliot

Abstract I: Questo articolo rilegge la poesia urbana di T. S. Eliot alla luce del "*material ecocriticism*" (Barad 2007; Bennett 2010; Iovino & Oppermann 2014), interpretando la metropoli moderna come un'ecologia materiale nella quale atmosfera, corporeità ed esperienza collettiva si costituiscono reciprocamente. Attraverso l'analisi di alcune poesie della raccolta *Inventions of the March Hare* (1909-1917), unitamente a "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" (1915) e *The Waste Land* (1922), il saggio ripercorre l'evoluzione dell'immaginario atmosferico eliotiano, mostrando come nebbia, fumo, fuliggine, polvere e siccità operino non soltanto quali emblemi della crisi moderna, ma anche come presenze materiali capaci di modellare la percezione, orientare le relazioni sociali e configurare l'alienazione urbana quale esperienza incarnata. L'approdo conclusivo di *The Waste Land* dischiude infine una possibilità di rigenerazione fondata sulla riattivazione dei processi ecologici e relazionali.

Abstract II: This article re-examines T. S. Eliot's urban poetry through the lens of "material ecocriticism" (Barad 2007; Bennett 2010; Iovino & Oppermann 2014), interpreting the modern metropolis as a material ecology in which atmosphere, corporeality, and collective experience are mutually constituted. Through an analysis of selected poems from the collection *Inventions of the March Hare* (1909-1917), together with "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" (1915) and *The Waste Land* (1922), the essay traces the evolution of Eliot's atmospheric imagination, showing that fog, smoke, soot, dust, and drought function not only as emblems of modern crisis but also as material presences that shape perception, orient social relations, and configure urban alienation as an embodied experience. The concluding movement of *The Waste Land* ultimately discloses the possibility of renewal grounded in the reactivation of ecological and relational processes.

Keywords: T. S. Eliot, material ecocriticism, atmospheric pollution, embodiment, urban alienation.

1. Introduction

The modern metropolis occupies a pivotal place within T. S. Eliot's early poetic imagination. Far from functioning merely as a geographical setting, the city is conceived as a dynam-

ic ecology through which the contradictions of twentieth-century modernity are enacted, embodied, and made perceptible. In poems such as "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" (1915) and *The Waste Land* (1922), metropolitan space is persistently associated with atmospheric opacity, social atomisation, corporeal vulnerability, and spiritual exhaustion. Urban landscapes therefore operate not as passive backdrops against which human existence unfolds, but as active milieus that orient perception, shape social relations, and mediate the subject's engagement with the material world.

Critical studies of Eliot's early poetry have traditionally foregrounded cultural fragmentation, existential disorientation, and religious crisis (Drew 1949; Gardner 1949; Kenner 1959; Brooker & Bentley 1990; Brooker 1994). Such approaches have yielded fundamental insights into his representation of modern subjectivity and the erosion of shared structures of meaning. More recently, scholars have directed increasing attention to Eliot's engagement with environmental modernity, exploring the intersections between ecological degradation, industrial pollution, and metropolitan life (McIntire 2015; Terblanche 2016; Black 2018; Rubenstein & Neuman 2020). While recent ecocritical scholarship has significantly expanded our understanding of Eliot's poetry, less emphasis has been placed on the material agency of polluted atmospheres and on the ways they mediate embodied experience and participate in the formation of urban subjectivity. While recognising fog, smoke, soot, dust, and urban waste as emblems of psychological paralysis or civilisational decline, this article also examines them as material presences that actively structure sensory apprehension and corporeality and organise the rhythms of everyday life.

Such a perspective proves especially fruitful because polluted air occupies an intermediate position between surroundings and body. Neither wholly external nor entirely internal, fog, smoke, and industrial residues traverse the boundaries separating city and organism, physical milieu and subjective consciousness. The aerial dimension of the metropolis thus becomes a privileged site from which the entanglement of environment, corporeality and perception may be reconsidered.

To investigate these dynamics, this article draws on "material ecocriticism" (Barad 2007; Bennett 2010; Iovino & Oppermann 2014), whose emphasis on the agency of matter and the intra-actions between human and nonhuman forms challenges conventional subject/object epistemologies in favour of a relational ontology. As Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann argue, within this framework, material forms – including bodies, objects, landscapes, atmospheric phenomena, toxic substances, and organic and inorganic matter – "intra-act with each other and with the human dimension, producing configurations of meaning and discourses that we can interpret as stories" (2014: 7). Accordingly, this perspective reconceives literary spaces not as passive symbolic settings but as material ecologies actively participating in the production of meaning.

The analysis is further informed by Stacy Alaimo's concept of "trans-corporeality" (2010), which foregrounds the porous exchanges between bodies and their material surroundings. Read through these coordinates, Eliot's metropolitan landscapes cease to function as static representations of modern crisis and instead appear as dynamic ecologies in which corporeality, atmosphere, and the built environment continually co-constitute one

another[1]. From this standpoint, fog, smoke, dust, and other airborne residues permeating Eliot's poetry invite interpretation not simply as figurative devices or symbolic projections but as material elements constituting metropolitan experience.

Through close readings of selected poems from the collection *Inventions of the March Hare*, together with "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" and *The Waste Land*, this study examines the emergence of polluted urban environments in Eliot's early poetry, the relationship between contaminated space, fragmented embodiment, and metropolitan alienation in "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock", and the collective dimension of aerial degradation in *The Waste Land*, where environmental, corporeal, and spiritual forms of dislocation converge within Eliot's delineation of the modern city. It further proposes that Eliot's early poetry never reduces modernity to irreversible decline. Instead, recurring images of rain, thunder, and metamorphosis disclose the possibility of ecological and relational renewal emerging from the very conditions of environmental and existential exhaustion. These dynamics simultaneously establish interpretative trajectories that continue to inform Eliot's later poetic production, where questions of atmosphere, embodiment, and material interdependence assume increasingly ethical and spiritual significance.

2. Material Agency and the Making of Perception: *Inventions of the March Hare*

Eliot's earliest poetry registers the material transformations brought about by industrial modernity through an atmospheric imaginary that develops from the poems collected in *Inventions of the March Hare* to "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock". By the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, London had become almost synonymous with dense fog, coal smoke, soot, and noxious emissions: phenomena that altered not only the physical appearance of the metropolis, but also the sensory texture of everyday life. As Michael Rubenstein and Justin Neuman observe, the city was increasingly enveloped in sulphurous smog and toxic pollutants, conditions that reconfigured ordinary encounters with urban space and fostered new expressions of environmental awareness (2020: 65-66). Modernist writers were thus confronted with an atmosphere whose opacity, density, and material intrusiveness demanded new modes of literary representation.

Recent ecocritical scholarship has emphasised Eliot's acute responsiveness to these transformations. Elizabeth Black argues that his poetry repeatedly registers "the environmental impact of modernity as seen in the dust on the trees and the industrial pollution" (2018: 100), while Rubenstein and Neuman identify him as "modernism's principal poet of urban pollution" (2020: 67). Yet the significance of these atmospheric phenomena exceeds the limits of documentary realism, as their material presence points towards a more active role in the constitution of metropolitan experience.

This environmental imagination is already discernible in the collection *Inventions of the March Hare*, "the only direct […] record of [Eliot's] private experience during these years" (i.e., 1909-17) (Ackroyd 1984: 37). Several poems anticipate concerns that will later receive fuller articulation in "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" and *The Waste Land*. The "Capric-

[1] See also Terblanche (2016: 4).

es" (1909-10)[2], for instance, repeatedly evoke scenes marked by ash, grime, rain, and visual obscurity. The first two poems juxtapose the "ashes" of the "helpless fields" with grim urban imagery – "The yellow evening flung against the panes / Of dirty windows" (Eliot 1996: 13-15) – while the third, set in Montparnasse, similarly portrays a bleak "landscape grey with rain / On black umbrellas, waterproofs, / And dashing from the slated roofs", a degraded environment marked by "blackened trees" and "plastered houses" (Eliot 1996: 14).

Taken together, these images of smoke, dirt, moisture, and suspended particulates do more than delineate an urban setting: they establish the atmospheric conditions through which Eliot's metropolitan spaces are imagined and experienced.

A comparable dynamic informs "First Debate between the Body and Soul" (composed in January 1910)[3] and the untitled 1911 urban-interior poem beginning "The smoke that gathers blue and sinks", where corporeal existence appears increasingly conditioned by the physical properties of its surroundings. Dust-laden trees, acrid odours, smoke-filled rooms, and stagnant air generate a sensory milieu that, both visually and olfactorily, acts directly upon the body. Particularly revealing is the recurrent image of torpid smoke:

> The smoke that gathers blue and sinks
> The torpid smoke of rich cigars
> The torpid after-dinner drinks
> After dinner insolence
> Of matter "going by itself"
> Existence just about to die
> Stifled with glutinous liqueurs
> Till hardly a sensation stirs
> The overoiled machinery … (Eliot 1996: 70).

The atmosphere evoked here cannot be reduced to a symbolic projection of psychological malaise. Smoke, alcohol, odours, and enclosed interiors converge to produce a perceptual field characterised by lethargy, diminished responsiveness, and corporeal inertia. Eliot thus anticipates one of the central concerns of his later urban poetry: the extent to which material surroundings participate in shaping bodily awareness, so that consciousness itself emerges as inseparable from the environments through which it moves.

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[2] The three short poems entitled "Caprices" were composed between 1909 and 1910 and belong to Eliot's earliest experiments with the modern city. The first two are set in Cambridge, whereas the third, written during the poet's Parisian stay, was subsequently retitled "Caprice in Montparnasse", replacing its original Cambridge setting with the Parisian district. Beyond reflecting Eliot's biographical trajectory, this revision already anticipates his tendency to dissolve the specificity of individual cities into a broader metropolitan imaginary, a tendency that reaches its fullest expression in *The Waste Land*, where ancient and modern urban spaces converge within the collapse of cultural and historical boundaries.

[3] Composed in January 1910 and originally entitled "Reflections in a Square", Eliot (1996: 228), this composition is an early dialogic poem centred on the opposition between body and soul. Its refrain structure reflects Eliot's engagement with Jules Laforgue's "debate-poems", while its representation of the divided self anticipates the lyric subject later developed in "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock". The poem has also been read as reflecting Eliot's early engagement with Baudelaire, particularly in its juxtaposition of ordinary and uncanny imagery within the representation of modern urban experience.

3. Polluted Atmospheres, Subjectivity and Embodiment: "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock"

Eliot's understanding of material surroundings as active participants in embodied experience reaches one of its most accomplished formulations in "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock", where the metropolis is encountered through the pervasive presence of fog, smoke, soot, and stagnant water:

> The yellow fog that rubs its back upon the window-panes,
> The yellow smoke that rubs its muzzle on the window-panes,
> Licked its tongue into the corners of the evening,
> Lingered upon the pools that stand in drains,
> Let fall upon its back the soot that falls from chimneys,
> Slipped by the terrace, made a sudden leap,
> And seeing that it was a soft October night,
> Curled once about the house, and fell asleep (13)[4].

The yellow fog occupies a far more complex role than that of a conventional urban detail. Through a sequence of distinctly feline movements – "rubs", "licked", "lingered", "curled" – Eliot endows the atmosphere with an autonomous mobility that enables it to traverse surfaces, thresholds, and architectural boundaries. It glides across windowpanes, settles upon stagnant pools, gathers soot from chimneys, and ultimately infiltrates the domestic interior, circulating through the metropolis with an agency that exceeds any merely decorative or symbolic function. The city is thus presented not as a static landscape but as a dynamic ecology animated by material forces that continually permeate and reconfigure the spaces they inhabit.

By dissolving the distinction between exterior and interior, between the built world and individual consciousness, the fog actively structures urban perception, becoming the medium through which metropolitan reality is encountered. The city is never apprehended independently of its polluted air; visibility, sensory awareness, and spatial orientation are constantly mediated by an atmosphere that intervenes between observer and surroundings. Rather than serving as an inert backdrop, polluted air becomes the material condition through which urban life acquires form.

Particularly revealing in this respect is the recurrent image of the windowpane. Instead of marking a stable division between private and public space, the window assumes the character of a porous threshold across which matter incessantly circulates. Smoke, soot, moisture, and atmospheric residue traverse its apparent solidity, unsettling any rigid separation between body and environment and thereby enacting the trans-corporeal entanglement described by Alaimo (2010). Eliot's imagery consequently foregrounds the permeability of embodied existence, suggesting that metropolitan life unfolds through continuous exchanges between human subjects and the material conditions that simultaneously sustain and constrain them.

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[4] All page references for quotations from the poem included in this study refer to Eliot (1969).

The fog's languid suspension further contributes to the formation of a perceptual field characterised by hesitation, sensory attenuation, and diminished responsiveness. These qualities are not projected onto the surrounding haze by Prufrock's consciousness; rather, they arise from his immersion within a polluted urban ecology in which atmosphere and subjectivity are mutually constitutive. Alienation consequently ceases to appear as a purely psychological condition and instead assumes the form of an entrenched mode of dwelling within a materially compromised world.

This dynamic becomes even more apparent as Prufrock moves through the "half-deserted streets" and notices "the smoke that rises from the pipes / Of lonely men in shirt-sleeves, leaning out of windows" (15). The inhabitants of the metropolis appear simultaneously isolated and interconnected, enclosed within domestic interiors that nevertheless remain permeable to the polluted air circulating beyond them. Smoke therefore performs a paradoxical function: it establishes a shared atmospheric condition while reinforcing separation, anonymity, and emotional detachment.

Traditional criticism has generally interpreted the yellow fog either as an expression of "numbing spiritual torpor" comparable to Baudelairean *ennui* and the Christian tradition of *acedia* (Hargrove 1978: 51), or as a pervasive "spiritual miasma" (Drew 1949: 33). While these readings remain illuminating, Eliot's imagery equally invites attention to its sensory and material dimensions. The haze does not merely signify paralysis; it actively produces the perceptual conditions through which paralysis becomes imaginable and experientially tangible, turning pollution into an agent that participates in the formation of modern subjectivity rather than simply reflecting it.

Eliot's polluted metropolis consequently exceeds the logic of metaphor. Fog, smoke, and soot function simultaneously as atmospheric realities and material agencies, contributing to the creation of a consciousness marked by uncertainty, hesitation, and estrangement. Rather than mirroring Prufrock's condition, they actively shape it, revealing metropolitan alienation as an ecological phenomenon arising from the unstable reciprocity between bodies and the environments through which they move. In this respect, the poem anticipates the broader urban vision of *The Waste Land*, where a polluted atmosphere ceases to define the experience of an isolated individual and instead comes to articulate the collective condition of an entire civilisation.

3.1. From Metropolitan Perception to Corporeal Vulnerability

If Eliot's early urban poetry demonstrates that polluted atmospheres actively shape metropolitan perception, "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" reveals their most profound consequences at the level of embodiment. Alienation no longer appears merely as the effect of a degraded urban milieu, but becomes inscribed upon the body itself, reshaping the individual's relationship with physical presence, social interaction, and material existence. The metropolis does not simply surround Prufrock; it determines the very conditions through which he inhabits both himself and the world.

The protagonist's surname has long attracted critical attention. Although Eliot most likely encountered the name through advertisements for the Prufrock-Littau furniture company in St. Louis, scholars have frequently noted its suggestive resonance with terms such

as "proof", "rock", and "frock", associations evoking solidity, permanence, and social decorum (Terblanche 2016: 31). Whether intentional or accidental, these echoes illuminate one of the poem's central tensions: the aspiration towards stability and belonging coexists with an inability to establish any enduring relation with the surrounding world.

As Terblanche notes, Prufrock inhabits a reality in which objects, gestures, and ordinary encounters no longer provide reliable points of orientation (2016: 32-35). Rather than participating directly in lived experience, he remains suspended within repetitive cycles of anticipation, self-surveillance, and deferred action. His estrangement therefore exceeds the boundaries of psychological uncertainty, disclosing a progressive detachment from immediacy, relationality, and lived presence. Prufrock consequently emerges as a paradigmatic figure of metropolitan modernity, incapable of inhabiting either place or self with any genuine sense of belonging.

This fracture first manifests itself through the body's continuous exposure to the material conditions of metropolitan life. Eliot situates corporeality within "half-deserted streets", the "yellow fog" (13) and enclosed urban interiors, suggesting that embodied existence is never insulated from its atmospheric surroundings. Physical presence consequently ceases to function as a stable foundation of identity and instead appears fragile, exposed and constantly subject to external scrutiny. Prufrock repeatedly imagines himself subjected to the gaze of others, dwelling obsessively upon the visible signs of ageing and inadequacy. His thinning hair, physical self-consciousness and anticipation of judgement reveal a subject unable to occupy his own bodily existence with ease. The body thus becomes a site of apprehension rather than belonging, of instability rather than continuity.

Such vulnerability is anticipated in the poem's celebrated opening image of the evening spread out "like a patient etherized upon a table" (13). Far more than a provocative modernist simile, this comparison establishes a pervasive state of corporeal suspension. By likening the evening itself to an anaesthetised patient, Eliot endows the metropolitan atmosphere with pathological qualities, transforming it from passive backdrop into an active medium through which perception and embodiment are mediated. Sensation is dulled, agency interrupted, and physical presence reduced to a state of passivity and exposure. As Frances Dickey and Bradford Barnhardt have argued, the image participates in broader cultural anxieties surrounding illness, contamination, and bodily fragility in the early twentieth century (2018: 16). The poem consequently presents the self not as autonomous or self-contained but as inherently precarious, its very mode of inhabiting the world shaped by an urban environment permeated by decay. Read within the historical context of early twentieth-century St. Louis, where concerns surrounding venereal disease, prostitution, and public sanitation informed everyday metropolitan life (Dickey & Barnhardt 2018), this imagery acquires an additional dimension, allowing fears of contagion and corporeal precarity to permeate even the prospect of human intimacy.

Prufrock's persistent hesitation before intimacy further intensifies this condition. The recurring question, "Do I dare?", signifies far more than indecision or social awkwardness: it articulates an anxiety grounded in exposure, contact and vulnerability. In Alaimo's formulation of trans-corporeality (2010), bodies never exist in isolation but remain continuously

implicated in exchanges with other bodies and with the environments they inhabit. What unsettles Prufrock is therefore not simply the possibility of rejection but the vulnerability inherent in relational existence itself.

This unease permeates the poem's rendition of metropolitan life. From the "half-deserted streets" to the "one-night cheap hotels", desire and apprehension become inseparable, while human contact is endlessly anticipated yet perpetually deferred. Awareness of bodily decline transforms intimacy into a source of anxiety rather than fulfilment, so that proximity generates exposure instead of communion. The city consequently emerges as a space where the longing for connection is continually frustrated by the ecological, social, and psychological conditions that govern urban existence.

Rachel Potter's observation that "[b]odies, in Eliot's poetry, carry the seed and the shape of their future deterioration" (2015: 139) proves especially illuminating in this regard. The corporeal precarity already evident in "Prufrock" anticipates the more radically fragmented figures that populate *The Waste Land*, where human beings appear increasingly spectral, disarticulated, and absorbed into landscapes marked by exhaustion and decay. The poem therefore constitutes a decisive stage in Eliot's metropolitan imagination, revealing the convergence of atmospheric degradation, bodily vulnerability, and urban alienation in the formation of a profoundly dislocated modern subjectivity.

4. Ecologies of Collective Alienation in *The Waste Land*

The corporeal estrangement that defines "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" does not remain confined to individual consciousness. In *The Waste Land*, it expands beyond the solitary subject to become the shared condition of metropolitan existence, permeating the collective rhythms of urban life and transforming London into a space where perception, movement, and human relations are governed by opacity, repetition, and exhaustion. "Unreal City" consequently designates less a geographical location than a distinctive mode of inhabiting modernity (Yang 2011):

> 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 (62).

From its opening movement, *The Waste Land* presents London as a landscape in which visibility, orientation, and reciprocity have progressively deteriorated. Beneath the recurring "brown fog", the metropolis relinquishes the solidity traditionally associated with civic life and instead assumes the unstable contours of an ecology traversed by anonymous bodies deprived of destination, encounter, and mutual recognition.

The procession across London Bridge vividly exemplifies this diminished vitality. Although the crowd advances as a continuous current, its apparent unity conceals profound fragmentation: lowered gazes evoke bodies governed by routine rather than intention,

movement without agency, proximity without relation. Yet the "Sighs, short and infrequent" that are "exhaled" lend this collective exhaustion a distinctly material dimension, as breath passes from individual bodies into the surrounding haze. Corporeality and atmosphere consequently emerge as mutually permeable rather than discrete domains, their continuous interchange giving concrete expression to the trans-corporeal entanglement of urban life (Alaimo 2010).

Within this configuration, the "brown fog" performs a function that exceeds documentary realism. While unmistakably recalling the coal smoke and industrial pollution of early twentieth-century London[5], it simultaneously acquires a form of material agency, actively conditioning the perceptual field through which collective life unfolds (Iovino & Oppermann 2014). The haze condenses the drabness, anonymity, and spiritual exhaustion of the modern city, while its pervasive presence envelops the crowd in a symbolic "burial of the dead" (Hargrove 1978: 66-67). By compressing visibility and dissolving spatial contours, it reshapes the possibilities of encounter and orientation, producing an urban experience marked by sensory attenuation, uncertainty, and perpetual suspension.

This suspended atmosphere also reconfigures Eliot's dialogue with literary tradition. The procession crossing London Bridge inevitably recalls the souls wandering through Dante Alighieri's *Inferno*, yet Eliot relocates that infernal vision within the ordinary routines of modern civic life. His anonymous pedestrians are condemned neither by divine judgement nor by mythical destiny, but by the repetitive logic of industrial modernity itself. Estrangement consequently relinquishes its exceptional or metaphysical character and instead becomes the habitual cadence of metropolitan existence, exposing a civilisation in which circulation has supplanted community and routine has displaced participation.

The persistence of the "brown fog" acquires further significance in the third section of the poem:

> Unreal City
> Under the brown fog of a winter noon
> Mr. Eugenides, the Smyrna merchant
> Unshaven, with a pocket full of currants
> C.i.f. London: documents at sight,
> Asked me in demotic French
> To luncheon at the Cannon Street Hotel
> Followed by a weekend at the Metropole (68).

The transition from dawn to noon leaves the atmosphere fundamentally unchanged, suggesting that pollution has ceased to constitute an episodic phenomenon and has instead become the enduring climate of urban life. The same haze that enveloped the anonymous

[5] "Americans should remember that 'brown fog' and 'winter dawn' at, say, 8:45 A. M. are in no sense surrealistic for a Londoner. The short winter day of England is far more apt than ours to inspire nocturnals upon St. Lucy's day, and the office worker in winter may see the sun (if at all) only on weekends or through his office windows; the proverbial London fog was (and still is, despite smoke-abatement programs) often laden with soft-coal fumes", Day (1965: 287).

multitude now frames commercial negotiation, interpersonal exchange, and corporeal desire, extending its influence across the social and material fabric of the city and dissolving any distinction between economic and affective relations.

Mr Eugenides exemplifies this transformation with particular clarity. As Alessandro Serpieri suggests, he recalls the merchants and sailors traditionally associated with travel, fertility, and cultural transmission (1985: 109); yet Eliot systematically deprives these figures of their regenerative potential. His language is dominated by contracts, commodities, and financial procedures – "C.i.f. London", "documents at sight" – while even the invitation to luncheon and the proposed weekend at the Metropole are articulated according to the logic of transaction rather than reciprocity. Exchange survives only in its commercial mode, emptied of the relational dimension that once sustained communal life.

Within such an economy, bodies themselves become objects of circulation, mobility, and consumption. Desire is progressively detached from intimacy, social interaction from solidarity, and movement from genuine encounter (Drew 1949: 80).

The "brown fog" thus signals a decisive expansion of Eliot's urban imagination, transforming atmospheric contamination into a shared material condition of collective existence. What unsettled the relationship between perception and embodiment in "Prufrock" here comes to shape the metropolitan community as a whole, producing crowds deprived of orientation, interactions governed by exchange value, and identities increasingly absorbed into anonymous networks of circulation. From this exhausted civic ecology emerges one of the poem's most powerful apocalyptic visions, where corporeal depletion, social fragmentation and environmental desolation converge beneath the ominous atmosphere of the "violet hour".

4.1. Impure Apocalypses under a Viole(n)t Sky

No figure in *The Waste Land* epitomises the instability of modern existence more completely than Tiresias. Simultaneously male and female, young and old, participant and observer, he occupies a liminal position from which individual experience opens onto collective diagnosis. Through his gaze, Eliot reveals a world in which bodily life, social relations, and metropolitan routines are governed by the same processes of depletion already traced across the poem:

> I Tiresias, though blind, throbbing between two lives,
> Old man with wrinkled female breasts, can see
> At the violet hour, the evening hour that strives
> Homeward, and brings the sailor home from sea,
> The typist home at teatime, clears her breakfast, lights
> Her stove, and lays out food in tins.
> […]
> I too awaited the expected guest.
> He, the young man carbuncular, arrives,
> […]
> The time is now propitious, as he guesses,
> The meal is ended, she is bored and tired,
> Endeavours to engage her in caresses

Which still are unreproved, if undesired.
Flushed and decided, he assaults at once;
Exploring hands encounter no defence (68).

The episode opens with one of Eliot's most forceful images of corporeal exhaustion. Workers leave their desks not as autonomous subjects but as components of what the poem itself calls a "human engine" (68), bodies synchronised with the repetitive rhythms of industrial labour. The typist returns home bearing the imprint of the working day upon her body; the young clerk approaches desire through movements emptied of attentiveness, reciprocity and affective presence.

What follows is therefore more than a scene of moral desolation. Sexuality itself becomes subject to automation, reduced to a sequence of habitual actions that persist despite the disappearance of genuine encounter. Eliot condenses this condition in the famous conclusion of the episode: "His vanity requires no response, / And makes a welcome of indifference" (68). Physical proximity endures, yet mutual recognition has largely vanished; the relation between the typist and the clerk is sustained not by reciprocal desire but by repetition, inertia, and indifference.

The "violet hour" further intensifies this atmosphere of suspension. As Sarah Cole states, it occupies a threshold between anticipation and loss, activity and dissolution (2012: 74). Eliot's chromatic choice, however, performs a function that extends beyond symbolic association. Violet envelops bodies, interiors and urban space within a unified perceptual field, dissolving the boundary between private experience and the broader material reality in which it unfolds.

This suspended tonality gradually radiates beyond the private scene to define the poem's apocalyptic vision:

What is that sound high in the air
Murmur of maternal lamentation
Who are those hooded hordes swarming
Over endless plains, stumbling in cracked earth
Ringed by the flat horizon only
What is the city over the mountains
Cracks and reforms and bursts in the violet air
Falling towers
Jerusalem Athens Alexandria
Vienna London
Unreal (73).

The anonymous encounter observed by Tiresias now assumes planetary proportions. Isolated bodies become "hooded hordes", while the typist's confined room gives way to cracked earth, empty cisterns, exhausted wells, and collapsing cities. Ecological depletion and collective disintegration emerge as parallel expressions of the same historical condition. The sequence linking Jerusalem, Athens, Alexandria, Vienna, and London dissolves geographical and temporal boundaries, presenting urban civilisation itself as a precarious formation exposed to recurring processes of rupture, disintegration, and renewal.

Cole's remark that "violet" almost becomes "violent" (2012: 74-75) illuminates this transformation with particular force. Throughout the poem, beauty and catastrophe coexist within the same atmospheric register: the colour accompanying exhausted desire gradually comes to foreshadow civilisational collapse. Yet Eliot does not allow destruction to constitute the poem's final horizon.

The movement towards renewal begins almost imperceptibly within the ruined chapel:

> In this decayed hole among the mountains
> In the faint moonlight, the grass is singing
> Over the tumbled graves, about the chapel
> There is the empty chapel, only the wind's home.
> […]
> Only a cock stood on the rooftree
> Co co rico co co rico
> In a flash of lightning. Then a damp gust
> Bringing rain (73-74).

The cock, the lightning, and the arrival of moisture interrupt the prolonged logic of sterility that has governed the poem from its opening pages. After dust, drought, stagnant air, and exhausted bodies, circulation returns to the landscape. Rain matters not simply because it symbolises redemption[6], but because it reactivates the material processes upon which regeneration depends: the movement between sky and earth, fertility succeeding desiccation, and exchange overcoming paralysis.

The closing movement of *The Waste Land* consequently remains suspended between catastrophe and possibility. Eliot neither resolves the fractures of modernity nor offers an unequivocal vision of salvation. Instead, he imagines renewal as an ecological process emerging from exhaustion itself, one that unfolds alongside an ethical and spiritual reorientation, suggesting that even landscapes marked by pollution, corporeal depletion and fractured communal life may still retain the potential for reciprocity, change and material renewal.

5. Concluding Remarks

While earlier criticism has predominantly approached Eliot's metropolis through the paradigms of cultural fragmentation, spiritual crisis, and modern alienation, the close reading undertaken in this article has sought to demonstrate not only that these elements are inseparable from the material conditions within which they emerge, but also that polluted atmospheres participate actively in the formation of embodied subjectivity.

"The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" and *The Waste Land*, in fact, reveal the modern city as far more than the backdrop to social, cultural, or spiritual decline: they configure it as a dynamic ecology in which atmospheric pollution, corporeal existence, and collective life

[6] As Carmen Gallo suggests, the violet atmosphere that precedes it may also evoke the liturgical symbolism of both Lent and baptism – rites associated respectively with suffering, death, purification, and resurrection, Eliot (2021: 159).

continually shape one another. From this perspective, fog, smoke, soot, dust, and drought consequently function not merely as symbolic emblems of modernity, but as material forces that condition perception, affect, and human relations.

Read through these eco-material and trans-corporeal frameworks (Barad 2007; Alaimo 2010; Bennett 2010; Iovino & Oppermann 2014), corporeal fragility, depleted intimacy, anonymous crowds, and ecological exhaustion emerge not as isolated motifs but as interconnected manifestations of a shared metropolitan ecology. Bodies, buildings, weather, and atmospheric residues participate in the same web of relations, continually reshaping perception, movement and social interaction. Alienation consequently appears not as a purely psychological or philosophical condition, but as an embodied mode of existence generated through the unstable reciprocity between human subjects and the worlds they inhabit.

Yet Eliot refuses to allow exhaustion to define the final horizon of modernity. The arrival of rain after prolonged drought introduces an alternative logic grounded not in transcendence but in circulation, reciprocity, and renewal. These configurations do not disappear with "Prufrock" and *The Waste Land*, but continue to inform Eliot's later poetry[7], where questions of atmosphere, embodiment, and environmental interdependence acquire increasingly ethical and spiritual dimensions. The possibility of inhabiting modernity differently therefore depends upon recovering those fragile forms of interdependence that bind bodies to one another and to the more-than-human world of which they are part.

Eliot's metropolis consequently emerges neither as a purely symbolic landscape of decline nor as a passive backdrop to human experience, but as an active ecology endowed with material agency, where atmosphere acquires historical force and polluted matter participates in the formation of subjectivity itself. From the yellow fog of "Prufrock" to the long-awaited rain of *The Waste Land*, Eliot ultimately imagines modernity as suspended between depletion and regeneration, thereby suggesting that even the most exhausted landscapes retain the latent possibility of renewed perception, reconfigured relationality, and revitalised forms of collective life.

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[7] These lines of inquiry are pursued further in *Ash Wednesday* (1930) and attain their most sustained elaboration in *Four Quartets* (1943), where Eliot broadens his investigation of the relationship between human experience and material reality beyond the metropolitan framework that defines his earlier poetry.

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