Writing Modernism through London and Paris

Examining the representation of urban spaces in T.S. Eliot's *The Wasteland* and Jean Rhys's *Good Morning, Midnight*

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Numerous writers from every era have been driven to write about cities, in search of what the author Josiah Strong saw as "the nerve center of our civilization" being "also the storm center" (128). This essay will discuss how, during the interwar period, Modernist writers chose urban spaces to communicate political, social and inner tensions. It will further analyze the representation of London and Paris in two modernist literary pieces, *The Waste Land* by T.S. Eliot and *Good Morning, Midnight* by Jean Rhys. It will considerhow Modernism portrays cities in a different way than other great urban writers, particularly Charles Baudelaire, and how it confronts the urban space with the rural or interior world. On a final note, it will briefly examine how these representations are constrained by the fact that both Eliot and Rhys were foreigners in the cities they wrote about.

Thomas Stearns Eliot (St Louis, 1888 – London, 1965) published *The Waste Land* in 1922. This was only five years after settling in England. The poem, considered one of Modernism's masterpieces, stands out for its fragmentation, going through different scenes, characters, settings and even languages. However, at the ending of the first part, "The Burial of the Dead", the focus is right on London:

> Unreal city,
> Under the brown fog of a winter dawn,
> A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so
> many,I had not thought dead had undone so
> many.
>
> (Eliot, I.60-64)

These few lines bring the reader to a delusional London, where a mass of people wander around damaged by presumably the Great War. The opening, "Unreal city", repeats itself throughout the poem, creating a parallelism between this quote and lines 207-208:

"Unreal city / Under the brown fog of a winter noon" (Eliot). This unifies the poem, despite its fragmented nature. Moreover, by choosing the adjective *unreal*, the poetic voice defies the limits of reality, presenting it as something subjective. This is one of the key concepts explored by Modernism. On the next lines, the word choice of *crowd* and the epistrophe of "so many" have an alienating nuance, emphasizing on the amount of people affected by the devastating ramifications of the war. The repetition also creates rhythm within the poem's free verse, just like the alliteration of the sound /d/ in "dead had undone" (Eliot, line 64). Using a more rhythmical device in this line communicates an apathic feeling of inertia, as individuals are driven towards desperation. While the poem advances, the poetic voice places itself in London: "Sweet Thames, run softly till I end my song, / Sweet Thames, run softly, for I speak not loud or long" (Eliot, II.183-184). There are constant references to the city's best-known streets and sights. Eliot alludes to London Bridge (I.63), King William Street (I.66), Cannon Street Hotel (III.213) or Queen Victoria Street (III.258), perhaps suggesting how while apparently life had moved on in London, just as the Thames runs softly, even the more well-off neighborhoods were deeply affected by the war.

Writing poetry about a city is not restricted to Modernism. The French poet Charles Baudelaire (Paris, 1821-1867) has been praised as the "first poet of the modern city" (Williams 38) standing out for its urbanity. Levy describes how his poetry "celebrated thecity and relished the magical liberation of anonymity of the crowded streets" (67). "Baudelaire's Paris remains a highly subjective and distilled vision" (Levy 67), somethingthat could also be argued of Eliot's "unreal city" (line 60). However, in Eliot's London, pessimism has irrupted Baudelaire's approach to the urban life. A crowd is no longer magical anonymity, but an alienating mass of devastated people. If Baudelaire was "the first poet of the modern city" (Williams 38), Eliot would be a poet

of the modern interwar period city, when Modernism tried to look for new representations of reality as an outcomeof the horrors occurred during World War I.

On a different note, Eliot's poem contains also interior settings that can still be linked to urban daily life. For instance, in line 141, "HURRY UP PLEASE ITS TIME", the poetic voice places the action inside a pub. By contrast, there are landscapes that completely escape the city boundaries. At the beginning of the fifth part, "What the Thunder Said", the settingdescribed has the characteristics of a desert: "Sweat is dry, and feet are in the sand" (Eliot, V.337). Later, similarly, the poetic voicetravels to a jungle (Eliot, V.396-400). This variety of landscapes not only coexist with London as an urban space but are included inside of it, symbolizing the spiritual desiccation and wilderness of the urban setting. Joseph McLaughlin considered *The Waste Land*'s London as an attempt of "a modern Babel" (172). This is particularly interesting in view of the political context of the time, when modernity broadened the horizons of individuals at the time that it made them loose their own culture. According to him:

> Writing in the war's aftermath, Eliot the cultural banker is trying to cut losses by collecting and reassembling the fragments of a culture that have yet to be destroyed or emptied of meaning (175).

Above all, it seems pertinent to remember that T.S. Eliot depicts the urban space as an alienating atmosphere in which the poetic voice pictures a variety of characters, landscapes, and languages. He portrays a city that brings all the world together while being a uniform crowd. As an immigrant that arrives to London, Eliot got to experience this depersonalization that the city perpetuated, as a mixture of backgrounds alienated the individual. As explored by Williams in *Politics of Modernism*, Modernist writing style, based on the subjectivity of reality and fragmentation,was very much due to the foreigners that arrived at European metropolis (16).

This was also the case of another immigrant writer. Jean Rhys (Rosseau, 1890 – Exeter,1979) published *Good Morning, Midnight* in 1939. The plotrepresents Paris as a problematic space, as the main character went there to find herself and, in the meantime, the streets interact with her:

> Then you can see outside into the street. And the street walks in.
> It's one of those streets – dark, powerful, magical…
> "Oh, there you are," it says, walking in at the door, "there you
> are.Where have you been all this long time?"
> Nobody else knows me but the street knows me.
>
> (Rhys 88)

This extract makes for a perfect example of another well-known characteristic of Modernist writing: the stream of consciousness. Mimicking a persons' brain, the narration has unfinished sentences, repetitions, and relies a lot on punctuation. Moreover, her wholestream of consciousness lies in between the real and the unreal. The personification of theParisian Street, even having a dialogue with it, makes the reader question the reality of Sasha's narration. The urban space in *Good Morning, Midnight* is therefore set as a place of self-recognition, for which typically modernist techniques such as the stream of consciousness and the subversion of reality are indispensable. The reader gets to know Sasha's fears, which a lot of times are introduced by a feeling of rejection by the city: "hetells me that he loves this part of Paris, the Quartier Latin, because he loves youth. I look very hard at him when he says this" (Rhys 51).

Jean Rhys fills her novel with references to the city's famous streets and sights, in a similar fashion to much of Modernist Literature, such as Eliot´s *The Waste Land.* The Champs-Elysées (9) and the Luxembourg Gardens (50) are only two examples, but the

most noteworthy use of Paris' references in *Good Morning, Midnight* is itself explained inthe novel: "when you go from one part of Paris to another, it's just like going from one town to another – even from one country to another? The people are different, the atmosphere is different, even the women dress differently" (Rhys 51). To that end, each reference to a different neighborhood or to a street of Paris defines Sasha not only in her search for recognition but also from the point of view of Paris' habitants.

Having explored this Modernist representation of Paris, it is important to look into howit differs from its precedents. During 19th Century Literature, Charles Baudelaire popularized a paradigmatic Parisian urban figure: the *flâneur*. A *flâneur* is an easy-going character that wanders around the City of Lights, an urban explorer always open to adventure. Provided that Sasha also arrives to Paris without a mission, Hildebrand namedher a *contra-flâneur* (4). Just as Eliot introduced desperation to Baudelaire's urban poetics,Rhys subverts the *flâneur,* making the character a depressed woman that fails to fit into deParisian society. Moreover, set in 1937, this book came into life at the end of the interwarperiod, when the tension between the European countries was more than visible. This canbe spotted in the book's portrayal of the *Exposition Internationale des Arts et Techniques*as a vivid nightmare. Once again, through Modernist writing, the tensions of the interwar period encounter Baudelaire's love for modern cities.

It is now necessary to confront this portrayal of Paris with *Good Morning, Midnight'*s interior settings, especially the hotel, symbol of homelessness, "Rhys's signature trope" (Britzolakis 459). A hotel is the cosmopolitan representation of liminality. It is neither a public nor a private space. As a narrator, Sasha identifies herself in this in-betweenness, as someone that lives in anonymity in "the Hotel-without-a-Name in the Street Without-a- Name" (120). The hotel is a parallel of Paris, as in being both a place of escape and a cagefor Sasha. As Thacker argues:

> The dissolution of spatial categories (inner/outer, room/street) in the course of the novel parallels the narrative arc of Sasha herself, whose initial aim is to locate herself within Paris and thus to have 'arranged my little life' (56).

Therefore, the use of the hotel and the city serve to a similar purpose. Whereas at the beginning of the novel they seem to be positive for Sasha's interests the novel itself shapes them as problematic spaces.

Furthermore, just as it has been stated that Paris' neighborhoods define the people insideof them, living in a hotel is by itself a social distinction. Inside the hotel, as an interior space, Rhys introduces people from different backgrounds and ethnicities. By doing this, Rhys not only uses both urban and interior spaces to symbolize Sasha's inner dilemmas, but also exposes again the political and social atmosphere of the time. In her article, Britzolaskis insists in the importance of this remark:

> interwar Paris, the cosmopolitan capital par excellence, plays an ambiguous role as, on the one hand, a place of refuge for Europeans fleeing political or ethnic persecution, and, on the other, a site of increasing xenophobia and racial paranoia in a climate of political and economic volatility (460-461).

In the same way that Eliot had experienced himself the depersonalization that immigration brought inside a European metropolis, Rhys as a creole would have gotten toknow how cruel Europe can be to someone that is in-between. As the Second World War approached, not having a clear origin could be frightening. Once again, Williams was right when he stated that foreigners were the ones tobetter apply Modernist writing to the reality of European Metropolis in the interwar period.

In conclusion, Eliot's and Rhys's portrayal of the urban space uses Modernist writing techniques such as fragmentation, stream-of-consciousness and the uncertainty of reality to communicate the political and social circumstances of the interwar period, differing from their precedent urban writers, such as Charles Baudelaire. The juxtaposition of interior spaces and exotic landscapes is always within the city, either through a parallelism,as in *Good Morning, Midnight* or absorbing them all, as in *The Waste Land*. Being immigrants, they got to experience the bitter sweetness of European metropolis, where strangers either lose their identities or try to hide in between the crowds. After all, a stormwas coming towards them, and London and Paris' habitants could feel it.

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