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English 1302 Sec. 049

February 14, 2012

Loss of Space Makes a Society Stronger

In this world of constant uncertainty and danger we strive to organize and shape the space surrounding us to provide security, stability and an understanding for our existence. The environment, be it a major metropolitan city or a small village, can become a source of major impact on an individual’s personality, in a way, a source of identity and reference for the opinions and world views. It is hard to underestimate the devastating effects of sudden and violent destruction of such an important place from a person’s life as in the event of The Great Fire of London in 1666. A natural disaster makes no distinction between the rich and the poor and strikes equally heartless to the descendants of Lords and Dukes and simple peasants as “the very fabric of urban and social meaning” becomes “undone into topographic incoherence” (Wall 5).

An event of the magnitude of The Great Fire of London is bound to produce a response of equal enormity in literature and poetry. Many manuscripts dedicated to the Great Fire came into existence. One of these dedications is the poem by John Dryden. The poem reflects every aspect of the fire and a wide range of feelings evoked in the heart of an English loyalist. To Dryden the fire is a real and distasteful enemy who robs England of the wealth and luxury with a mighty fiery sword that France and Holland could not take away with the power of cannons and battleships (Dryden L. 838).

Throughout the poem, the trust and admiration for the King are obvious as Dryden’s attitude reflects the feelings of the general population of London at the time. England in the 1660’s presented a thriving, victorious country on the “edge of political, economic, social, aesthetic, and urban change (Wall 5)” brought with the restoration of the monarchy with Charles II (Wall 5). The new King patronized the arts and sciences and encouraged the development of trade. Another one of his contributions that will greatly influence the cultural and political scene was the reinstallation of the Church of England as the state religion which would bring some tension from the competing Roman Catholics but also attempt to unite the country under the same religion. The fire strengthened the public’s affection for their ruler as reflected in Dryden’s portrayal of Charles II as a caring King with a “tender breast” who feels the pain of his people, but who does not grieve idly or break down in the face of disaster, but who instead courageously leads the effort to extinguish the fire, and puts hope in the hearts of his subjects by “cheer[ing] the fearful and commend[ing] the bold” (Dryden L. 967).

Social change resulting from the Great Fire is also documented in Dryden’s poem. In the decades leading up to the Fire, continuous urbanization turned the once majestic city of London into a cauldron of religious, social and cultural tension despite the seeming prosperity and “the whole context of life in London” was “mined with anxiety, disruption, instability, indeterminacy” (Wall 6). By erasing the social attributes of wealth and prosperity, the fire erased the social boundaries separating the classes. The part of social identity of Londoners that anchored in these attributes was erased and “the rich grow suppliant and the poor grow proud” (Dryden 997). Those who had previously prided themselves on having a lot now had to become humble and learn to cope with living in scarcity as “riches and accommodations in stately and well-furnished houses were […] reduced to […] misery and poverty” (Pepys 457). On the other hand, those who had lived in poverty prior to the Fire now had a chance to “grow proud” as they were equal in social wealth, or rather poverty. The collapse of social boundaries is evident in the narratives of The Great Fire, as indifferent “people” turned into united “we” as is evident in a *Gazette* account (Wall 11).

Locations and buildings often communicate meaning and set the mood. Grand domes and spacious ceilings of a cathedral, for example, set the mood of quiet and reverence. Lavish and rich decorations of a palace, on the other hand, create an image of greatness, power, wealth, and pride in the accomplishments of an individual’s country. Geographical location of a street itself can communicate the appropriate manner to talk and dress. The Great Fire of London eliminated the social clues implied by geographical location and the style of decoration. The sense of loss is evident in the narratives of the fire that almost always include representations of “inaccessibility, unfamiliarity, dislocation, and the breakdown of network” (Wall 34). Emptied of its past meaning, the space was now open to new interpretation for the rebuilding of the city. As Walter George Bell states “they rebuilt London, to their enduring honor” (Bell 288). However, the great psychological importance of location and purpose of the buildings is evident in the fact that the city officials made a great effort to preserve the “ancient webbing” of streets, although many buildings were modernized and spaced further away from each other to prevent fires in the future.

Like any great tragedy, in many ways, the Fire contributed to creation of the new sense of unity among the citizens and social identity of an individual as a Londoner. The citizens “viewed foreigners more than ever as intruders”. In part, these feelings were caused by the suspicions of foreign sabotage as a possible reason for the Fire and also by the feeling that Londoners as a body of people endured this tragedy together and those who had not experienced it side by side with their neighbor could never truly become a part of the city. In the recent years of the history of the United States, the devastating events of the 9/11 produced a similar effect. The loss of every life became more than a loss in someone’s family, it became a loss of “one of us”, and that loss would not ever be forgiven and those even mildly resembling the foreigners who committed the terroristic act will always produce hostile feelings in the hearts of Americans.

The Great Fire of London shows the importance of stability and familiarity in the lives of humans. In the constant effort to make “lived space” into “known space”, citizens pull together to rebuild even after the most devastating events. But these destructive forces provide an opportunity for us to rebuild not only the physical outline of our space and not only the spatial framework to refer to. More than anything, it allows us to rebuild the sense of unity and human bond that too often gets lost in times of calm. Humans at times need a tragedy to unite, be it a war, a natural disaster or a terroristic act. In a world in which we do not face a common enemy or obstacle, the selfish human nature gets carried away with the well-being of self. Like World War II and the Holocaust, The Great Fire of London destroyed many lives and many cultural artifacts to once again remind us what a gift we have in our neighbors and fellow citizens and how strongly our lives are interconnected to create the ever-lasting web of life.

Works Cited

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