Urban narratives: nostalgia or engagement?

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A walk through almost any city reveals traces of building, demolition and adaptation. Layers of time coexist in material space like strata in geological formations. A city's narrative, too, consists of layers of memory, experience and imagination, fusing different times in one space. But there is usually a prevailing narrative, built up in art or literature, reflected in mass culture and affecting future expectations. This is selective, giving narrative form to one history which shapes a city's future planning, design and use. James Donald asks, 'If the city is an imagined environment, and modernity is an attitude more than it is an epoch … what have been the dominant images and metaphors through which the modern city has been mediated?'[1]

This is my underlying question. I approach it through two tendencies in modernist culture: one which invites immersion in a city's ever-shifting sensations and chance encounters; and another which sees modern urban life as overwhelming, a place not for playful swimming but for drowning in the loss of certainty. I admit a sympathy for the former, a doubt of the latter. There are numerous cases representing both attitudes, and the negativity of an idea of the city (as generalisation) as overwhelming – what T S Eliot called too much reality – has produced a counter-narrative of rural bliss.[2] This counter-narrative shapes Eliot's epic poem *The Waste Land* (1922), and is found in early sociology. Its influence persists in terms such as concrete jungle and urban blight, as if to write off the modern city as a failure. And yet … cities are where people from diverse backgrounds live in close proximity, exchange ideas and aspects of their cultures, negotiate coexistence (with varying degrees of harmony or discord), and arrive at a reality which is always, as it forms, changing. For Eliot, this is the unreal city which gives rise to his reaffirmation of archaic vegetation myths and religious yearning (salvation in a non-determinate elsewhere). From the position of immersion in urban life, however, it is the retreat to rurality which is unreal (and unrelated to actual life in rural communities). But who am I to say what is real … ?

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[1] Donald, J. *Imagining the Modern City*. Athlone, 1999, p.27

[2] I examine the myth of rural bliss in *Paradoxical Urbanism*, Palgrave, 2021

Dystopian narratives, utopian possibilities

In the nineteenth century, rapid industrialisation and urban expansion produced dire living conditions for poor people (often driven from rural areas by agricultural mechanisation). At the same time, the power of the state increased through censorship and the imposition for a period of taxes on newspapers, both measures intended to suppress the radical (working-class) press. Reactions to industrialisation and what was seen by radicals as state tyranny were complex. In one way, the Romantic poets looked to exotic or classical pasts as antidote to present conditions, and to the rise of scientific rationality. In another way, visionaries – notably William Blake – lived as well as wrote in what amounted to an alternative sphere of spiritual love. But by the mid-nineteenth century, with a major reduction in printing costs through steam technology, and an increase in adult literacy, realist fiction – from Elizabeth Gaskell and Chares Dickens in the 1840s to 1860s to Joseph Conrad and Conan Doyle at the end of the century – depicted cities as sites of poverty, disease, crime and moral decay. In this fiction, poor families are crowded into filthy hovels, criminals lurk in dark, twisting alleys and secret agents plot to overthrow (usually foreign) governments. London is shrouded in fog (as it really was), and industrial cities are black with smoke and grime (as they were). If this is fiction, however, the image became ingrained. It did so partly because realist fiction is, as it says, based on real conditions. For instance, the men who make a living by fishing corpses from the Thames in Dickens' *Our Mutual Friend* (1865) existed. And the depiction of poverty and disease was supported by social research – which led to improvements such as new sewers, model housing estates, and the opening of public art museums. Yet despite reforms, the generalised image of the city in literature remained bleak, informing twentieth-century impressions of inner city spaces as sites of crime and dereliction. Even when young professionals and new bohemians re-occupied inner cities from the 1960s onwards, part of the attraction was living on the urban edge, in a perceived frontier zone.

Now, bleak impressions of city life seem more or less normalised in culture and beyond; but this has never been the only possibility. Although all societies form dominant narratives (reflecting the interests of a dominant class or a regime), they change in a process not unlike that of verbal languages. Narratives and languages, that is, are *produced*, not given. Verbal languages entail rules but also everyday usages which in time reform the rules. Modification in this way emphasises the continuous production of language in a dialectic relation. As the rules are modified, new usages become new rules, and so forth. In a similar way, urban narratives are produced and reproduced. But there are choices: if the dominant image or narrative of urban life reacts to an accumulation of cultural representation – as layered as a city's archaeology – then the dominance of impressions of a wasteland leads to escapism in the form of suburbanisation or nostalgia for a rural idyll; yet there is equally a possibility to read cities as sites of vitality and potential, not only of proximity and diversity but also of material and social mobility and citizen agency.

At this point I want to introduce three narratives of the modern city, from social theorist Michel Foucault's *Madness and Civilisation,* from historian Luc Sante's *The Other Paris*, and from geographer Jennifer Robinson's *Ordinary Cities*. These illustrate an urban dialectic, and hence the role of narratives and prevailing images in determining how cities are understood and can be imagined.

Foucault describes the scene outside a city gate in seventeenth-century Paris, after the end of leprosy, at the beginning of institutionalised insanity:

> … wastelands which sickness had ceased to haunt but had left sterile and long uninhabitable. For centuries these reaches would belong to the non-human. From the fourteenth to the seventeenth century, they would wait, soliciting with strange incantations a new incarnation of disease, another grimace of terror, renewed sites of purification and exclusion.[3]

Sante describes the Zone in Paris, the marginal, semi-inhabited land outside the city walls:

> Initially the Zone was a sort of tundra, empty grassland with the occasional lone tree, crossed by trails like deer runs, two-story buildings visible here and there on the far horizon … the ragpickers were the first to colonise the space. Ragpickers had been an integral part of city life since its unrecorded dawn, but they had never had an easy time

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[3] Foucault, M. *Madness and Civilisation: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason.* Tavistock Press, 1971, p. 3

> of it. Besides the financial precariousness of the trade, there were successive waves of persecution by the authorities.[4]

Robinson looks at another axis, between modernity's civilised surfaces and an underlying real or imagined barbarity:

> Perhaps paradoxically, at the heart of many of the foundational texts of Western modernity we find the figure of the primitive. Identifying the dynamism and modernity of the Western city has often depended on figuring some other places and people as traditional, at best rural, at worst primitive. Contemporary thinking about cities silently reproduces the idea of an eternal savagery that sustains the fantasy of (Western) urban modernity. It … has come to support a hierarchical analysis of cities in which some get to be creative, and others deficient, still tainted by the not-modern, placed on the side of the primitive.[5]

Foucault and Sante picture wastelands at the margin of a city as if these non-ordered and unbounded sites affirm (through their barbarity) the safety of enclosure within a city's walls, ensured by bringing marginal populations under control. In the 1850s, the Prefect of the Seine, whose name, Poubelle, is now the French word for dustbin, required all household waste to be contained in such bins, and to be collected by the authorities. The aim was to terminate the trade of ragpicking, identified as socially as well as spatially marginal.

The ragpickers lived in self-built shacks (*favela*) where they sorted through the city's waste. Charles Baudelaire identifies with them, mapping his voluntary marginality as a poet earning a living in a market economy onto the ragpickers' involuntary marginality. For Baudelaire this is a counterpart to aestheticism: imagination confers freedom from the dominant social code, and withdrawal is passive resistance to the regime. But the price is an uncertain social status and lack of a guaranteed income. Meanwhile Baudelaire lingers in the iron-and-glass arcades where shops sell luxury goods (and fine art prints), observing others and his own reflection in shop windows. In his apartment he conjures distant splendours: golden light on the Seine, scented mysteries, exotic eroticism. But he writes art criticism, too, looking at the painting of modern life and the everyday, the mundane not the exalted, which suggests a second dialectic of dullness and ordinariness, of a heightened, idealised city and a city of the mass public and (at the time) rapidly evolving mass culture.

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[4] Sante, L., *The Other Paris: An Illustrated Journey Through the City's Poor and Bohemian Past*. Faber and Faber, 2015, pp. 58-59

[5] Robinson, J. *Ordinary Cities*. Routledge, 2006, p. 13

The remodelling of Paris in the 1850s-1860s saw a centralisation of the city in the image of a highly centralised regime under Napoleon III. Working-class quarters in the inner city were demolished to make space for wide boulevards lined by bourgeois apartment blocks (and to serve as free-fire zones in case of insurrection). The poor were peripheralised (and still are). This reinforces the idea of the city as a centre within a wider wasteland. Again, there is a choice of attitude: Foucault and Sante site the wasteland outside the city walls; Robinson relocates it *within* the city, as a counter-image to the ideal.

Looking at Baudelaire's Paris through the lens of living there in the 1930s, after fleeing Nazi Germany, in borrowed or rented rooms, Walter Benjamin sees the city as a ruin-in-progress. Underneath its surface of civilisation are dark voids: catacombs, quarries, and the modern tunnels of the Metro.[6] The city as ruin-in-progress is the necessarily unfinished city, a site of the as-yet-unthought and as-yet-undone (as well as of its undoing). I think this informs the idea of history – a process of writing (narrative or story-telling) – which Benjamin develops in the 1930s as a foil to the universalised history produced from a position of power. From an opposite position, the historical narrative of Germany after 1932 entails lost crowns in the Rhine and an Emperor buried under a hill who rises up in a time of greatest need: myths manufactured in reaction to economic catastrophe, and to promote the regime as legacy of a gold-tinted past.

A danger in celebrating either an unreal history or an unreal rural idyll is that it produces both a negativity which undermines the potentials of city living, and a tendency to dwell in gloom in a present which is rendered worse than the past. From this arise narratives of the universal (unquestioned) decline and fall of past civilisations. This might be read as a facet of a taste for ruins (as it partly was in the eighteenth century); but to me it is inadequate not only because it relies on the unreal but also because it becomes prescriptive, ushering in a doom which negates efforts to make cities more conducive to human and non-human well-being. A key example of such gloom at the level of universal narrative is Oswald Spengler's account of the decline-and-fall of Western civilisation, in effect a theory of entropy in which, crucially for my argument, the modern city is not simply the outcome but the *cause* of that decline.

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[6] Benjamin, W. *The Arcades Project*. Harvard, 1999, p. 85

Literary historian Richard Lehan summarises Spengler's view:

> Man [sic], no longer at one with the land, moved to the new money-centred city. The rise of a new breed of money brokers turned the old-world destructively upside-down: Faustian man became Enlightenment man; the priest-king became the new Caesar, the man of money and power; a primitive sense of race was lost in the decay of civilisation.

I could write that Spengler's view of rural life is problematic, based on unreality and a rose-tinted lens. In that way it is aligned to a history of anti-urban literature; as a literary image it could be set aside as partial, a personal view which the reader is invited but not compelled to share. But I do not think that was Spengler's aim (in the 1920s). And because his text has gained some currency, not only in literary criticism, I say it is wrong. Not only, in fact, was rural life marked by famine, disease, compulsory labour and a rigid class structure, hence no idyll at all, but also the universalisation of one narrative is the projection of one perspective in an act of power. That is why certain regimes, as in Germany in the 1930s, use narratives of the kind offered by Spengler. Albert Speer, for instance, Hitler's architect, proposed an architecture designed to ruin well at the end of the thousand-year state (*Reich*). Further, such doom-peddling offers no critique of modernity, only its condemnation.

Hope

In contrast, Benjamin sees hope in modernity, as Susan Buck-Morss says in reference to his *Arcades Project*:

> The debris of industrial culture teaches us not the necessity of submitting to historical catastrophe, but the fragility of the social order that tells us this catastrophe is necessary. The crumbling of the monuments that were built to signify the immortality of civilisation becomes proof, rather, of its transience. And the fleetingness of temporal power does not cause sadness; it informs political practice.[7]

Similarly hopeful, Georges Seurat's painting *Bathers Asnières* (1883-84, London, National Gallery) articulates a utopian programme. Members of the artisan class relax by the Seine at

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[7] Buck-Morss, S. *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades* Project. MIT, 1989, p. 170

Asnières, a Parisian suburb. The economic problem of scarcity is solved by mass production (indicated by the factory chimneys on the horizon). On the opposite bank, the bourgeoisie take their ease, if more formally, in *Sunday Afternoon at the Grande Jatte* (1884-86, Chicago, Art Institute). Taken together, the two paintings depict the whole of society – workers and bourgeoisie – enjoying a Sunday afternoon. But while Sunday is the day of rest for workers in the present, in Seurat's paintings Sunday becomes every day. This perpetual Sunday is aligned to a genre of prints and minor painting (where it is called Holy Monday); but there most artists depict workers who are not working as idle shirkers, Seurat, informed by Peter Kropotkin's writing on anarchism, depicts the state of ease as everyone's right. Industry, no longer a source of grime, enables cornucopia; and the chimneys on the horizon have been moved, from my on-site observation, to a central position (also as part of a play of vertical and horizontal intervals). In keeping, Seurat invents a modern visual technique, fusing colour science with the classical composition of Piero della Francesca and Puvis de Chavannes. And in another, small painting, Seurat depicts the Eiffel Tower, built for the centenary of the 1789 Revolution, and a monument to modern engineering.

Nonetheless, a modern language does not guarantee a modern critique. Notably, Eliot uses the modern method of collage in *The Waste Land*, attempting to emulate voices from street life (but retaining the all-seeing perspective of the narrator). But he uses this modern-ness to withdraw into personal incoherence and the compensations of myth and religion. Eliot was not influenced by Spengler (*The Waste Land* being published before Spengler's book in English translation) yet I think he shares that sense of pre-ordained gloominess, projecting it onto the city of London, where he lived and worked in a bank before becoming an editor at Faber and Faber (at the time the leading publisher of modern poetry). The perception of decline can be found, too, in Germany sociology in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, to which I now turn.

Community and society

Ferdinand Tönnies argues that urban life is free from the ties to the land and kin of rural life butthat, however welcome this may be it is at the cost of a sense of belonging, which he calls community (*Gemeinschaft*). In cities this belonging gives way to voluntary association and bonds of common interest, which he calls society (*Gesellschaft*). Community and society are generalising constructs, and influential in attitudes to social development. Community conveys continuity while society carries a burden of contingency, demanding mental work to maintain an always-unguaranteed equilibrium. Tönnies lived in a rural area, and I think overplays the attractions of community as a reaction against urban expansion (rapid in Germany in the period). When Tönnies says that rural life is imbued with permanence, he is reacting against a pace of change in cities and a perception of impermanence in urban life which the supposed permanence of rural life anaesthetises. The difficulty, as said above, is that the lost rural idyll never existed. The bonds to land and kin were real, like the poverty; but in a Germany only recently unified, seeking its identity, and with widespread migration to cities, elements of the past suitably reconstructed become cherries on the cake of social and cultural wish-fulfilment.

Modern urban life offers no such illusion, only the contingency of continuously re-shaped human relations and built environments. Writing in Berlin in the 1900s, Georg Simmel, like Tönnies, contrasts rural continuity to the shifting conditions of urban life. But Simmel lived in Berlin's West End and empathises with metropolitan conditions. In *The Metropoles and Mental Life* (1903), to use the correct title,[8] he identifies a metropolitan state of mind, the blasé attitude, produced in the over-stimulation of modernity.

In Berlin, Simmel walks in crowded streets, sees streetlights and trams, reflections in shop windows, and cinemas showing newsreels which bring the world into Berlin in a perpetually shifting present. The liquid medium of money is an object of fixation, and a metaphor for metropolitan life. Human agency is enacted in, and relies on, real and imagined scenarios. Past and present, time and space, reality and imagination, all intersect. It is exciting, and it overstretches perception. The introjection of this snowstorm of external sensations leads to what Simmel calls the blasé attitude: a protective shield; a way of coping, not a retreat. The modern urban subject acts and dreams within a matrix of multiple human and non-human forces in a tide – history, narrative, story – which never ends. Coincidentally, in the 1950s, Hannah Arendt sees the formation of a mature self as viable only in this matrix of mutual perceptions (a possibility denied to Jews in Germany after 1933 when they are increasingly excluded from public spaces and social relations).

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[8] The essay is often called Metropolis and Mental Life; Simmel uses the plural in German.

Richard Sennett, influenced by Arendt, sees North American suburbia as another realm of denied maturity. In *The Uses of Disorder* (1970) he argues that suburbanites see people they describe as others as intruders who desecrate white middle-class family life. In defence of this unreal ideal, suburbanites sense a shared determination to remain inviolate, which he reads as an immaturity which limits urban potential. Interestingly in this context, Robinson (above) looks to a post-colonial framework of creative and dynamic cities.

Modernisms

Modernity is a mess of loose ends. Its authentic histories are works-in-progress. Fernando Pessoa says in *The Book of Disquiet* (2002, written in the 1910s-20s),

> Nothing is ever sure in history. There are periods of order when everything is contemptible and periods of disorder in which all is lofty. Decadent eras abound in mental vitality, mighty eras in intellectual weakness. Everything mixes and criss-crosses, and truth exists only in so far as it is presumed.[9]

Pessoa uses multiple characters to personify the multiple voices in which he writes, at the same time in which Cubist artists use multiple viewpoints and collage. The texts are set in Lisbon in the 1910s but, despite being edited as a book, they are purposefully non-coherent: a non-teleological modernism which resembles Charles Darwin's theory of evolution as the outcome, without design, of proliferation, mutation and adaptability.

Like Baudelaire wandering the arcades, Pessoa's narrative is contingent on shifting urban scenarios; and on his participation in a milieu of writers meeting in a café in Lisbon (where his bronze likeness sits outside today, although the writers would have met inside). Avant-garde groups across Europe increasingly became as publics for their own innovations, and this lent them confidence in making claims to autonomy. Artists and writers were not only members of a society within the dominant society, autonomous like bohemians in previous decades, however, but also sought the autonomy of visual and verbal languages. While art conventionally represents the view through a window, in modernism the glass itself is the object of representation, a refracting medium. Similarly, art's relation to the wider society is a refraction, challenging conventions of perception as a means to question social structures.

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[9] Pessoa,F. *The Book of Disquiet*, Penguin, 2002, p. 235

Modernist avant-gardes met in cities, where most members were strangers: migrants from towns or rural areas, or from other countries, conversing in a second language. Before war cut communications in 1914, links between metropolitan cities in Europe (including Russia) enabled exhibitions to travel and different avant-gardes to maintain dialogues in a climate of internationalism (a position aligned to the Left). All this accelerated the pace of change, just as the cities in which avant-gardes met changed rapidly. And while art turns to inner realities, or states of psyche, in the 1880s and 1890s, its political content being coded or absent, the autonomy claimed by modernism is itself a statement of alterity. It means, that is, that another world is possible at least in imagination, its form constructed obliquely in an independent, aesthetic dimension. This is modernism's social contract: an indirectly critical space between present and future.

Avant-garde groups often met in transitional places such as the café – between domestic and public space – and this is reflected in a tendency to transitional realms in modernist art and literature. Among, for instance, Cubist groups in Paris, there was much interest in the fourth dimension (time), and the time-space continuum of modern mathematics. This does not mean that artists and writers became mathematicians; more that time-space is a trope for modernity. Similarly, images of city spaces involve intersections of viewpoint and place, as sense-impressions of here and there, now and then, inter-penetrate. This is Simmel's idea of a metropolis, where people align themselves to multiple communities of interest and engage in several senses of city and self at the same time: simultaneity.

Simultaneity

The term simultaneity is used by Guillaume Apollinaire writing on Futurism. Rather than producing a blasé attitude, however, he means immersion in everyday life. For instance, Blaise Cendrars' narrative poem *The Prose of the Trans-Siberian and Little Jeanne of France* reconstitutes a journey on the Trans-Siberian railway (which he undertook) fused with other times and places via the lens of his intimate relation to Jeanne, a young Parisian sex-worker. Its first form is a two-metre scroll produced in collaboration with artist Sonia Delaunay: on the right are texts in different colours and fonts; on the left, circles of refracted light. The poem begins in Moscow and ends in Paris, city of the Eiffel Tower, also a Ferris wheel. The Eiffel Tower figures, too, in Robert Delaunay's paintings of 1912, with intersecting spheres of refraction in slanting planes, in a series titled *Windows*. In *Cardiff Team* (1913, Eindhoven, Stedelijk Museum), an advertising billboard is appears, and a bi-plane passes behind the Tower (an image taken from a postcard).

Apollinaire reviewed the Delaunay's work in the 1913 Berlin Autumn Salon. Nine of Robert's paintings used 'Simultaneous' in their titles while Sonia exhibited posters, book covers and textile designs, fusing art and design in a refusal of conventional categories. For Apollinaire this is intoxicating. Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque, in the same years, use newsprint and decorators' woodgrain in collages; and Kurt Schwitters walks through Hannover carrying a suitcase into which he puts tram tickets, sweet wrappers, envelopes and stamps, and other urban detritus for use in his collages. In Lisbon, Pessoa contributes to the magazine *A Aguia*. In 1913 he writes,

> I'm going through one of those crises which they usually call, in agriculture, crises of over-abundance. Ideas come to my mind so fast, so abundantly that I have to carry a notebook, and even then the number of pages I fill is so great that I get lost, because there are too many, and other pages I can't decipher because I wrote them too fast.[10]

If Pessoa conveys a degree of modern anxiety, something similar might be said of Mina Loy, the most overlooked modernist woman poet.

Loy is usually mentioned in accounts of New York bohemianism as someone's girlfriend, or present in a gathering. Described as an emblematic avant-gardist, she uses material from popular culture, ordinary speech and poetic allusion in writing which stretches literary form into non-connected fragments, like word-collage with gaps. The poems are unpunctuated, and use abstract typography to space phrases over the page.

Intersections similarly permeate Apollinaire's poetry, although sometimes in a traditional metre. Yet that, too, is collage, pasting in one poetic form among others to emphasis the artificiality of all. In 1917, he cites the harmonies of Picasso's blue period, in a verbal web of glaciers, chandeliers, iridescent gold, and streaks of fire, and blues, the sound of a violin. The text is unpunctuated, and typeset so that the gaps between words form a schematic image of a boat with smoking chimney and a watery reflection.[11] In *Zone* (1912), memories frame present impressions, which the latter resemble and reconfigure. Weary of the old world, he meanders through Paris and far afield, ending in the suburb of Auteuil where his lover Marie Laurencin lives. There are repeated detours via the Eiffel Tower and aircraft hangars at Port aviation, seeing advertising posters and newspaper kiosks, and people reading about crime and popular entertainers with a background of factory sirens and traffic. The title lends the whole, fragmented city the name Zone. Yet the city is as re- as de-constructed. In the last two lines he says farewell, farewell as the setting sun sets resembles a disembodied head disappearing behind the city.[12] Virginia Spate writes,

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[10] Pessoa, quoted in Rabaté, J-M. *1913: The Cradle of Modernism*. Blackwell, 2007, p. 155

[11] Apollinaire, G. *Apollinaire on Art: Essays and Reviews 1902-1918.* MFA Publications, 2001, p. 451

> *Zone* embodies the infinitely complex mental experiences of an eccentrically erudite, cosmopolitan, rootless, urban man with an insatiable appetite for everything the city could offer. Although Apollinaire employed an extraordinarily heterogeneous range of images, they are united by his … musical voice. He fused images of contemporary Paris with ancient religious mysteries; memories of childhood piety with a naïve vision of Christ the first aeroplane; haunting images of the wanderers of Europe, of the emigrants, woven into fragmentary glimpses of his own wanderings or brought back into the present by the cheerful vision of a modern industrial street; prosaic objects, a broken love affair, crime stories, his own imprisonment … posters; places he had never been – Africa, China, America – mingled with those of intimately parts of his life … The poem embodies the very movement of a mind ranging throughout history, over the entire surface of the globe, turning back into its recesses, the illuminated darknesses of memory.[13]

For Apollinaire, darkness is a facet in a composition which depends on light. The same play of tones, and of figure and ground, emerges in Cubist painting and collage. It as if to say that now is the other side of then, or presence is the other side of absence. Both exist only by juxtaposition. In contrast, Eliot privileges the higher tone of the narrator's voice in *The Waste Land*, seeking an exit from an overpowering reality.

Wastelands

Simultaneity celebrates the metropolis. Eliot, in reaction against modernity, and after a war characterised by unprecedented, industrialised slaughter, turns to archaic vegetation myths and the rites of remote and exotic religions in his negative characterisation of the modern city (or modern life). London is subjectively subsumed in a fractured self which cannot heal (from another myth, the Fisher King) in scenes of ordinary life and the failure of his marriage to Vivienne Haigh-Wood, in the elite literary-social circles of Bloomsbury. The city seems to swallow its inhabitants. This is expressed in textual collage, as said above, using a modernist technique. But Eliot was not very good at rendering everyday speech, and some sections of the poem were re-written by Vivienne. Eliot is uneasy when confronted by ordinary life, and by bodily sensations; the dominant voice is that of the omniscient narrator.[14]

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[12] Apollinaire, G. *Zone*, trans. Beckett, S. Dolmen Press, 1972, p. 22

[13] Spate, V. *Time and Space Died Yesterday*. Kettles Yard Gallery, 1976, p. 10

Given an unrelenting fusion of the dull, grime of ordinary life and Eliot's inheritance of a Romantic escapism, I think a comparison with Spengler's entropy is justified, if coincidental. Eliot's fractured language is a metaphor for a desolation which inhibits his relation to the city, and modernity in general. And the traditional form of the printed page in *The Waste Land*, in contrast to Apollinaire's innovative typography, affirms a coherence which Eliot finds lacking in modern London life. In keeping, his poetic persona is ancient and modern (the title of an Anglican hymn book); and his sympathy is with the old. At one point in *The Waste Land*, Eliot constructs an Elizabethan trope: Queen Elizabeth and the Earl of Leicester (her secret lover) sail in a gilded barque towards white towers on a Thames which flows and sparkles. The next lines depict a modern, industrial Thames which sweats oil and tar, and drifts rather than flows. The short ballad-like lines stand out from the modernist forms used elsewhere. The purity of red, white and gold stands against the murky grey and brown of the modern, industrial river. Perhaps that secret love between Elizabeth and Leicester in their airy sphere is also what Eliot lacks in his own life, his sexuality being furtive and unsure.

For Eliot, reality is contaminated, and the city a waste-land inhabited by ghosts. The ghosts are the war-dead, undeniably, but also other spectres in his mind. Retracing his daily route over London Bridge, going to the bank, he says, looking at the crowds, he had not thought that death had undone so many. The city is unreal, shrouded by brown fog. The exit from all this dreariness is the supernatural, or afterlife, figured in the medieval Grail myth, archaic vegetation rites, and Eastern religions (which he encountered as a student at Harvard). At the end, he can only set fragments against his ruin (which is as if to say setting ruins against fragments, since ruins are fragmentary). Part of that ruin is war damage. Another part is the rebalancing of social values which occurred after 1918, as in votes for women, reduction of class privilege, new technologies, and new kinds of social relation. Eliot reacts against this, not trying to be a Baudelairean bohemian but as a conformist searching for a lost cosmos of fixed coordinates. Similarly, the literary critic F. R. Leavis – Eliot's defender as a modern poet – regrets the rapid change which characterises the Machine Age, and, 'the final uprooting of immemorial ways of life, of life rooted in the soil.'[15]

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[14] see Miles, M. *Cities and Literature*, Routledge, 2019, pp. 112-118

An exit?

Simmel sees a prevailing pessimism in Berlin, but locates it in modern culture, not the city in which he continues to live, offering an explanation rather than a lament. In 'The conflict of modern culture' (1918) he notes a divide between social and personal life which leads to a sense of meaninglessness. This is darker than his 1903 idea of a blasé attitude, and – like *The Waste Land* – is after the war (in which Germany was defeated, then humiliated by the peace terms); yet Simmel still looks for adaptation, not for dissolution. He cites German Expressionist art as introducing new aesthetic forms which indicate an absence of a shared symbolic order: 'The fact that for at least several decades we have no longer been living by any sort of shared idea, nor indeed … any idea at all is … only another manifestation of the negative aspect … of this intellectual current.'[16] But this lack of coherence is precisely the non-coherence – which is not incoherence – of modernity, its intersections and its play of time and space. For Simmel, subjective culture needs immediate experience and sensory input, while objective culture – the sphere of public opinion – requires form.

In German cultural discourse form is aligned to aesthetic order, each culture producing a characteristic aesthetic. In German art history in the 1900s, abstraction is seen as expressing a Northern European sensibility in contrast to the realism of classical art. The distortions of perception in medieval art are not bad drawing but an alternative way of seeing, governed by feeling. This validates abstraction, and especially German Expressionism in the 1910s-20s, as conveying the conditions in which it is produced. The artist's state of psyche becomes the subject-matter, projected onto and re-shaping city-scapes. Simmel notes that intellectuals sometimes turn to mysticism but explains this as an escape from a reality seemingly lacking form. He concludes that life aspires to the unattainable.

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[15] Leavis, F.R. *New Bearings in English Poetry*, Penguin, 1976, pp. 71-72

[16] Simmel, G. 'The Conflict of Modern Culture,' in Frisby, D. and Featherstone, M. *Simmel on Culture*. Sage, 1997, p. 80

I think a difference between Simmel and Eliot, then, is that the unattainable end to which life aspires is not, for Simmel, contained in archaic or exotic myths, but in the actuality of flux as a permanent historical condition in which layers of past, present and imagined future are co-present. This is not entropy but a dialectic, or a coming-to-terms with modernity as it continues to change. The outcome is open; history, like evolution, is non-teleological. The method is engagement.

Conclusion

In the art and literature of simultaneity, in the 1910s, to engage means incorporating signs of everyday life and material culture – the bi-plane, the Eiffel Tower, and the advertising billboard, in Delaunay's painting – in a depiction of the modern city which celebrates chance encounters in an environment of proximity and diversity. The metropolis is cosmopolitan, in other words; and avant-garde art spans the aesthetics of high culture and the proliferation of mass culture. The narratives it constructs are sedimented with the excitement and vitality of modern life, and contribute to the continuing building of a cumulative urban story.

In contrast, *The Waste Land* depicts London as a realm in which miserable souls seek an unattainable wholeness. It is one of the best known poems in English, and its technique is clearly modernist. I think, however, that its content is largely Romantic, an escape, not an immersion. And, despite the poem's status, I am going to say that the attitude it reveals is inadequate, a kind of helplessness which breeds resignation to a future of decline, not hope. The privileging of the narrator's voice, too, implies both a traditional view of poetry and, importantly here, a position of power-over the urban scene onto which Eliot projects a scenario of ruin. This is a political as well as a cultural problem, and I want to end by returning to Benjamin, writing on the idea of history while fleeing from Fascism:

> The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the state of emergency in which we live is not the exception but the rule. We must attain to a conception of history that is in keeping with this insight. Then we shall clearly realise that it is our task to bring about a

> real state of emergency, and this will improve our position in the struggle against Fascism.[17]

This is political praxis. And it is a merging of Marxism and Judaic Messianism, in which latter redemption illuminates the present like a light shining from the end of history. History, in turn, and with it stories of city living, is (like Marxism) dialectic. The subjective and objective forces of which Marx wrote contend on an axis of potentially creative tension. Each polarity is not-the-other; and the work of history, or culture, is done along that axis, potentially as a reading and writing which portends a future freed from oppression. As Benjamin observes, history – the prevailing narrative of a society's development – tends to be written by those who hold power. He looks to an alternative, a history produced by and for the benefit of the oppressed (among whom he probably saw himself in 1939). This is not the universalising voice of a narrator, but the cacophony of voices which articulate ordinary lives. There is an element of desperation in Benjamin's last texts – when the Nazis invaded France he was deported to a camp, then unsuccessfully tried to cross the border into Spain before, as he might have put it, returning his soul to its maker. Yet there is hope that a better world might arise, and that it will be produced in political praxis. Esther Leslie writes,

> Benjamin's last jottings look at the nightmare of industrial labour and how so much destruction has become possible amidst such productivity. The next bloody massacre colours these formulations. Benjamin hopes to relate history in ways that do not reinforce the sense that such history as has happened was inevitable. He wants to suggest that the rulers who have ruled need not always rule. … Progress, the continuation of business as usual, is catastrophic.[18]

The short paragraphs are fragmentary but do not withdraw into a fantasised past (because hope, like the Messiah, is ever-present, appearing unexpectedly). A new history is required to re-write the oppressed past; it will not be a single voice or a universal image, but part of a continuing progression of intersections, time replete with a presence of the now. I read the art and literature of simultaneity is one instantiation of this, but there are many others. And this matters because imagining the now fractures the surface of the oppressive reality, and thus opens insights as to what else might be possible. The entropy of Spengler's history and Eliot's poetry diminishes this vitality, which is why I refuse it and look instead to hope, and the proclamation of the World Social Forum: Another world is possible.

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[17] Benjamin, W. 'Theses on the Philosophy of History,' *Illuminations*. Fontana, 1973, p. 259

[18] Leslie, E. *Walter Benjamin: Overpowering Conformity*. Pluto, 2000, p.168

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