



**Life in the Modern City: What We May Learn from T. S. Eliot
and Charles Baudelaire**

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Abstract

In their poetry, both Charles Baudelaire and T. S. Eliot explore the disorientating experience of the individual in a rapidly changing urban environment, with all the socio-economic upheaval it entails. Although these poets were writing in different historical and cultural contexts, they both lived through times of enormous technological, urban and social transformation. T.S. Eliot himself considered modern society and modern literature to be aspects of the same condition.¹ In this essay, I will explore how using ground-breaking works of literary modernism can inform our understanding of issues facing contemporary readers in urban contexts.

Introduction

*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.*

— T. S. Eliot, *The Waste Land*

*La modernité, c'est le transitoire, le fugitif, le contingent, la moitié de l'art, dont
l'autre moitié est l'éternel et l'immuable.*

(Modernity is the transient, the fleeting, the contingent; it is one half of art, the other being the eternal and the immovable)

— Charles Baudelaire, *Le Peintre de la vie Moderne*

Charles Baudelaire and T. S. Eliot are pioneers of the poetry of the metropolis and modern life. Despite their differences, they both share a fascination with contemporary life and chose to make ‘modernity’, especially the modern city, the subject of their poetry. We can see this in their most famous poems: Baudelaire’s *Les Fleurs du Mal* (see section II, ‘Tableaux Parisiens’), his prose poems *Le Spleen de Paris* and T. S. Eliot’s epic poem *The Waste Land*. In a world where the majority of people now live in cities, and with urban populations continually on the rise, it is becoming increasingly important that we study and analyse our urban environments; for the city’s history and design shape the lives of billions of people.

¹ Louis Menand, *T. S. Eliot and Modernity*, (The New England Quarterly, 1996), p.554

The poetry of Baudelaire and Eliot are touch-stones which may not only illuminate their ‘modernity’ but our own.²

Charles Baudelaire and T. S. Eliot: modernity, modernisation and Modernism

In 1863, Baudelaire published his essay ‘La Modernité’ in his provocative volume of art criticism *Le Peintre de la Vie Moderne (The Painter of Modern Life)*. This moment marked the first use of the word ‘modernity’ in literature. When Baudelaire used this term, he meant it to capture all that is fleeting about the present age, designating ‘modernity’ as a time in which the pace of change accelerates, especially in urban spaces. Coined at a time of constant flux, the definition has stuck: one hundred and seventy years or so later, we continue to use this word in much the same way, and understand ourselves through it.

Baudelaire was part of the first great wave of writers and thinkers about modernity: he did more than anyone in the 19th century to make the men and women of the time think themselves as ‘modern’.³ Marshall Berman, an important philosopher on the subject of modernity, defines modernism as ‘any attempt by modern men and women to become subjects as well as objects of modernisation, to get a grip on the modern world and make themselves at home in it’.⁴ If we think of modernism like this, we quickly realise that ‘no mode of modernism can ever be definitive’, for it evolves constantly.⁵

Although the art and literary movement called ‘Modernism’ came decades after Baudelaire’s time, it is the legacy of his art criticism and urban poetry. T. S. Eliot is a name much associated with the Modernist movement. His poem *The Waste Land* is often viewed as the greatest work of modernist poetry. First published in 1922, it speaks volumes that almost one hundred years later, this is a poem we still consider as highly modern. Having grown up in London, this project has emerged from my curiosity about the way we experience the modern city today, alongside my conviction that literature is able to surprise us into new kinds of insights.⁶

Part I – Introducing the poets and their poetry

² Marshall Berman, *The Experience of Modernity*, (Verso, 1983), p.134

³ Marshall Berman, *The Experience of Modernity*, p.132

⁴ Marshall Berman, *The Experience of Modernity*, pp.132-133

⁵ Marshall Berman, *The Experience of Modernity*, p.6

⁶ Edward Ahearn, *Urban Confrontations in Literature and Social Science 1848-2001*, (Routledge, 2016), p.10

I.I Baudelaire: *Les Fleurs du Mal* and *Le Spleen de Paris*

Charles Baudelaire was born in Paris in 1821; although he lived a short life of only 46 years, his poetry and art criticism set agendas for a whole century of art and thought.⁷ He is the reputed father of modern poetry about cities and credited to have introduced topics of modernity into literature. More than this, Baudelaire saw modern life as the ultimate inspiration for art, and, towards the end of his life he strove to create a new poetic language. The subject of this language would be the modern city, and it would pave new ways for urban expression.

This new form of modern expression was developed in the posthumously published *Le Spleen de Paris*, a collection of then unprecedented ‘prose poems’. Baudelaire declared that *Le Spleen de Paris* - an incomplete work of what would have been one hundred short ‘prose poems’ but resulted in no more than fifty before he died - was the completion of his earlier, more traditional verse poems, *Les Fleurs du Mal*.⁸ *Le Spleen de Paris* represents a break with traditional literary form, in contrast to *Les Fleurs du Mal*, for it is consciously without order.⁹ In the preface of *Le Spleen de Paris*, Baudelaire writes that the idea for the volume came from the ‘innombrables rapports’ (innumerable interactions) in the modern city.¹⁰ However less modern, it is in *Les Fleurs du Mal* that we find Baudelaire’s first-hand account of Paris in the midst of enormous urban modernisation. The section entitled ‘Tableaux Parisiens’ consists entirely of poetry about the city, with almost all the poems featuring individuals from ‘la foule’ (the crowd): the victims of the modern city. Whether it be a passer-by, homeless old women, a skeletal labourer, or a red-headed beggar, each character adds something to Baudelaire’s cutting criticism of modern Paris.

I.II T. S. Eliot: *The Waste Land*

T. S. Eliot is “not only the most remarkable immigrant poet in the English language but also the most influential and resounding poetic voice of the twentieth century”.¹¹ To add to the list of his titles, he is also held to be the ‘greatest poet of London’.¹² However, Eliot was not from

⁷ Ibid. Marshall Berman, *The Experience of Modernity*, p.132

⁸ Charles Baudelaire, Poetry Foundation: <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/charles-baudelaire>

⁹ Ibid. Poetry Foundation

¹⁰ Charles Baudelaire, *Oeuvres Complètes I, II - La Pléiade*, (Gallimard, 2005)

¹¹ Robert Crawford, *Young Eliot*, (Penguin Books, 2016), p.1

¹² Robert Crawford, *T. S. Eliot: the poet who conquered the world, 50 years on*, ‘The Guardian’.
<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/jan/10/from-tom-to-ts-eliot-world-poet#comments>

London, he was an American who grew up in the city of St Louis and did not move to London until the age of 25. He soon renounced his American citizenship to become a naturalised Englishman. Yet in his poetry the experience of a stranger living in a strange land, of growing alienation and isolation, is always palpable. The various speakers in the poem are uprooted, nomads, refugees or outsiders; members of a displaced people.¹³

Eliot wrote *The Waste Land* when he was still a young man, in the aftermath of the First World War. During this time, he was working for Lloyd's bank in London's financial district, where the poem is almost entirely set. Due to his job, Eliot was a keen follower of contemporary economics; he was well aware of the economic recession and uncertainty in Europe at the time. The poem is most often read as a lament for modern European civilisation.¹⁴

William Empson wrote about *The Waste Land* that 'London is regarded all through with fascination, astonishment or horror, a weird place of exile, shot through with occasional memories of a splendid past, and now insolently rotting away'.¹⁵ The poem often seems to despair of modern society and is greatly disillusioned with the urban condition. As anyone who has read *The Waste Land* can testify, it is 'difficult' to immediately make sense of the poem; however, in this sense exactly, it is in keeping with Eliot's mantra that 'genuine poetry can communicate before it is understood'.¹⁶

Part II – Contextualising the poems: social history and urbanisation

II.I the Haussmannisation of Paris

Right up until the 1850s, the city of Paris remained medieval in design and structure. Although there had been attempts to regulate and beautify the capital of the French Empire, modernisation did not occur until Napoleon III commissioned a large-scale, architecturally ambitious project in 1852. Over the course of only eighteen years, Paris in its entirety was torn apart and rebuilt with the aim of creating the first modern, commercial city which at the same time possessed the majesty of a traditional Renaissance city, appropriate at a time of

¹³ 'In Our Time': *Modernity and The Waste Land*

¹⁴ Ibid. Robert Crawford, *T. S. Eliot*, 'The Guardian'

¹⁵ Oliver Tearle, *The Great War, 'The Waste Land' and the Modernist Long Poem*, (Bloomsbury Academic, 2019), p.178

¹⁶ T. S. Eliot, *Dante*, (Faber & Faber, 1929), p.8

empire.¹⁷ Baudelaire grew up in the ‘old Paris’ and lived there for most of his adulthood. However brief his life was, crucially for the legacy of his poetry, he lived through the awkward period of demolition and reconstruction of Paris’ medieval centre. What was established in its place was ‘the capital of modernity’.¹⁸

Paris was transformed from a medieval town, made up of labyrinthine ‘dark, dirty, narrow streets’ to a city of broad, straight, tree-lined boulevards, ‘bordered with richly ornamental and decorative mansions, cafés, theatres, concert halls, public monuments and public buildings’.¹⁹ After having been elected as president of France in 1848, Louis-Napoléon – the nephew of Napoléon I – seized power by force only a few years later in 1852, forming the Second Empire. As emperor, Louis-Napoléon, now christened Napoléon III, was able to enact his architectural aspirations for the beloved city. To aid with his meticulous plans, he commissioned the architect Baron Georges-Eugène Haussmann with the renovation of Paris. This type of urban planning is unlike anything that had happened before in France or Europe. Taking the power away from private property developers, Napoléon III’s project required strict authoritarian rule, the likes of which was unprecedented. In creating a city of capitalist spectacle and ‘bourgeois consumption’, his designs excluded a large section of the poor from the new centre.²⁰ In order to rebuild the city, urban slums which had existed for centuries, housing families for generations, were destroyed. An estimated 350,000 people were displaced after this mass demolition, shunted to the outskirts of the city where they drew up shantytowns ‘comprised of illegal subdivisions, jerry-builds and lodging houses’.²¹ The only attempt to house the homeless came from Baron Haussmann workers’ housing units, ‘the Cité Napoléon’; but this was rejected by its intended residents because of its uniformity and barracks-like quality.²² In the end, Haussmann’s famed project housed only bourgeois tenants.²³

Haussmannisation is the term given to the reconstruction of Paris into the modern city it is today; but what it was really about was maximising private profit and social control.²⁴ With the memory of the 1848 revolution fresh in their heads, a revolution which overthrew a monarchy in favour of a Republic, Napoléon III and Baron Haussmann

¹⁷ Eric Mumford, *Designing the Modern City: Urbanism since 1850*, (Yale University Press, 2018), p.22

¹⁸ Donald Olsen, *The City as a Work of Art: London, Paris, Vienna*, (Yale University Press, 1988), p.54

¹⁹ Shane Ewen, *What is Urban History?*, (Polity Press, 2015), p.95

²⁰ Shane Ewen, *What is Urban History?*, p.4

²¹ Shane Ewen, *What is Urban History?*, p.49

²² Mike Davis, *Planet of Slums*, (Verso, 2007), p.64

²³ Ibid. Mike Davis

²⁴ Mike Davis, *Planet of Slums*, p.98

redesigned Paris in anticipation of more to come. They rebuilt the streets - the site of revolution - into huge boulevards for the ease of moving in the army and, of course, to prevent the construction of barricades.

Napoleon III and Haussmann turned Paris into a hub of industrial capitalism. However, they found it somewhat necessary to listen to the public's dismay at seeing so many old buildings and streets vanish before their eyes.²⁵ By 1860, the emperor began to actively support the 'Service des Monuments Historiques' (Historical Monuments Department) and Haussmann founded the Musée Carnavalet (the Carnavalet Museum), which is dedicated to the history of the city of Paris.²⁶ To monumentalise this vast urban project, the photographer Charles Marville was commissioned to capture Paris before and after the renovations began, leaving behind precious images of a lost city.

Haussmann's urban planning for the new city has stood the test of time. Indeed, building works came to a standstill in the summer of 1870 due to the disastrous Franco-Prussian war, which culminated in the collapse of the Second Empire, the capture of Napoléon III and the siege of Paris. Despite a four-month-long siege and the revolutionary uprising of the Paris Commune, the reconstruction of Paris proved to be a success and remained intact in spite of the chaos of war. According to Walter Benjamin, even after the defeat of Napoléon III, Paris retained its title: 'the capital of the 19th century'.²⁷ Between 1850 and 1870, the population grew by 25%, requiring further expansion of the city centre.²⁸

II.II London after the First World War

By 1825, London's population had grown to 1.3 million, making it the world's largest city, a position it held until the 1920s.²⁹ It was arguably the first capitalist megacity, a centre of world finance, trade and administrative networks that drew from vast numbers of immigrants from all around the world: many of today's megacities are its successors.³⁰ The 1920s, also called 'The Roaring Twenties', was a decade of peace and prosperity for those who profited off the war. There was excitement about progress and technological development: change was happening more rapidly than ever. Women over the age of thirty were given the right to

²⁵ Miriam Levin, *Urban Modernity: Cultural Innovation in the Second Industrial Revolution*, (MIT Press, 2010), p.16

²⁶ Ibid. Miriam Levin

²⁷ Eric Mumford, *Designing the Modern City: Urbanism since 1850*, p.20

²⁸ Marshall Berman, *The Experience of Modernity*, p.158

²⁹ Eric Mumford, *Designing the Modern City: Urbanism since 1850*, p.6

³⁰ Ibid, Eric Mumford

vote, marking an important step in the upheaval of antifeminist tradition. Writers of the time were responding to that idea of modernity.³¹ In the years following the First World War, T. S. Eliot gathered material to write the modernist poem of the century. In the same year that *The Waste Land* was published, James Joyce's modernist *Ulysses* and Virginia Woolf's first experimental novel *Jacob's Room* also arrived on the scene. The new forms of literary, modernist expression pioneered in these works, all tended to fracture unities, sentences or the narrative. This was a time of experimentation, where new forms of literary technique responded to the unsettling force of modernity.

However, *The Waste Land* casts a despairing gaze on modern life which necessitates context. Eliot was an American living in Europe at a time of war, 'in the face of economic, social, sexual, emotional and spiritual disaster'.³² The destruction and death during the First World War left cultural despair in its wake. The public had witnessed the havoc of a four-year long conflict: most European countries had lost a generation of their young men.³³ Society was fractured after the war and the poem holds up a mirror to it, showing us the dangers of social fragmentation and the breakdown of community. In the early 1900s, Georg Simmel discussed the effects of individualism and the impersonality of the modern city upon the individual subjectivity.³⁴ Indifference, distrust and loneliness, he argues, are the effect of the metropolis and its structures of the highest impersonality. The intensified socio-economic life of modern cities threatens to weaken the traditional communal bonds of religious influence and family ties. The dominance of money and increased division of labour in the urban economy 'fosters difference and individuality, while also paradoxically increasing standardisation and maximising brutal economic conflict'.³⁵ Simmel's view is that these complexities of urban society led to new forms of mental and emotional experience. The world had become a much more bewildering place and this sense of disorientation was recreated in art and its experimentation with form.³⁶

II.III what is the 'modern city'?

³¹ 'In Our Time', *Modernity and The Waste Land*

³² Oliver Tearle, *The Great War, 'The Waste Land' and the Modernist Long Poem*, p.169

³³ <https://www.britannica.com/biography/T-S-Eliot/Later-poetry-and-plays>

³⁴ George Simmel, *The Metropolis and Mental Life*, (Stimuli, 1903), p. 12

³⁵ Edward Ahearn, *Urban Confrontations in Literature and Social Science 1848-2001*, p.15

³⁶ 'In Our Time', *Modernity and The Waste Land*

In 1938, Louis Wirth, a Chicago School psychologist, argued that modern cities were considerably different to their premodern counterparts.³⁷ Modern cities are larger, more densely populated and have sharper degrees of socio-spatial segregation. Moreover, growing individualism and isolation within urban society has been eroding the traditional basis of social solidarity provided by family. Wirth proposes that urbanites depend on more people for their everyday interactions but that these are increasingly fleeting, which produces a series of impersonal and superficial exchanges between individuals, governed by contract rather than social custom.³⁸ Similarly, Max Weber saw the transactional and depersonalised nature of modern economic and social relationships as key to explaining the growing anonymity of urban populations.³⁹

During the late 19th century, city centres underwent redevelopment as spaces for leisure, consumption and entertainment, the preserve of the wealthy elite and middle classes.⁴⁰ The modern city presents itself for consumption and commodity fetishism.⁴¹ City centres turned into the main commercial and retail districts, alongside civic spaces such as libraries, museums, art galleries, the town hall and the town square. The capital cities of Paris, London, Berlin, Vienna, Budapest as well as industrial cities like Manchester and Chicago, underwent major physical and spatial transformations, standing out as ‘exemplars of progress and change, freedom and anxiety, especially around the fin-de-siècle’.⁴² The promise of a modern world of technology, consumer products and new art forms suggested by the 1851 Great Exhibition in London, in the glass greenhouse of Crystal Palace, was to be fully realised in the transformation of Paris, where the central city became a modern consumer spectacle unlike anything previously seen in human history.⁴³

Part III – the urban landscape of the poems

III.I ‘Tableaux Parisiens’ (Parisian Scenes)

‘Tableaux Parisiens’ constitute Baudelaire’s most caustic poetry about modern Paris. The section, added to the second edition of *Les Fleurs du Mal* in 1861, consists of eighteen poems

³⁷ Shane Ewen, *What is Urban History?*, p.92

³⁸ Ibid. Shane Ewen

³⁹ Shane Ewen, *What is Urban History?*, pp 14-15

⁴⁰ Shane Ewen, *What is Urban History?*, p.98

⁴¹ Jeremy Tambling, *The Palgrave Handbook of Literature and the City*, (Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), p.78

⁴² Shane Ewen, *What is Urban History?*, p.71

⁴³ Eric Mumford, *Designing the Modern City: Urbanism since 1850*, p.25

written during the period of Haussmannisation. Baudelaire is critical of the strictly uniform composure of the city's new streets and buildings, which wiped out centuries of historic architecture and medieval dwellings. The poems communicate feelings of estrangement and alienation from an unrecognisably modernised city. Together, the poems present us with the experience of a single day walking around Paris, beginning with 'Le Soleil' (The Sun) and ending with 'Le Crépuscule du Matin' (Morning Twilight).

In 'Le Soleil', the opening poem of 'Tableaux Parisiens', Baudelaire declares the source of his poetry to be the city itself. In so doing, Baudelaire is introducing a new subject into literature which has left a long legacy. He describes the poet as an alchemist, 'changing the Parisian mud to poetic gold and ennobling even the vilest things in the city'.⁴⁴ According to Baudelaire, it seems, no aspect of modern life is too mundane to be overlooked in the poetry of the city.

In 'Le Cygne' (The Swan), Baudelaire sensitively communicates modern anxiety and a modern sense of displacement.⁴⁵ He records his thoughts as he walks through an old working class neighbourhood, which used to be filled with the homes of the poor; now, it is situated between a Napoleonic triumphal arc and the palace of the Louvre. The poet spots a swan searching in the dust on a rubble-ridden street for the former pond that once lay there. He laments on what is lost, 'Le vieux Paris n'est plus (la forme d'une ville/ Change plus vite, hélas! que le coeur d'un mortel)', (Old Paris is no more (Alas, a city changes more quickly than a mortal heart)). It is often read as a pointed protest against Haussmann's renovation of Paris.

'Les Petites Vieilles' (The Little Old Women) are among the victims of the modern city, creatures pursued by 'l'austère Infortune' (harsh luck), tortured by unfaithful husbands and thankless children; broken, twisted, humped-backed and dragging themselves along. The poet is not repulsed by them, 'for in Paris even horror becomes an enchantment'.⁴⁶ He finds these decrepit old women singular and charming, for he recognises that in these ruined creatures are the members of his true family, bonded by common suffering.⁴⁷ 'Tableaux Parisiens' makes us confront life in the modern metropolis.⁴⁸

⁴⁴ Edward Ahearn, *The Search for Community: The City in Hölderlin, Wordsworth, and Baudelaire*, (University of Texas Press, 1971), p.85

⁴⁵ Ibid. Poetry Foundation, 'Charles Baudelaire'

⁴⁶ Edward Ahearn, *The Search for Community: The City in Hölderlin, Wordsworth, and Baudelaire*, p.86

⁴⁷ Edward Ahearn, *The Search for Community: The City in Hölderlin, Wordsworth, and Baudelaire*, p.87

⁴⁸ Edward Ahearn, *Urban Confrontations in Literature and Social Science 1848-2001*, p.29

III.II *Le Spleen de Paris* (Paris Spleen)

Le Spleen de Paris is testament to Baudelaire's fascination with modern life in the city. For him, there is a force in the metropolis that is fantastic, but it goes unrecognised by most of us until literature and arts awaken its allure.⁴⁹ His prose poems are parables of 'poverty, aspiration to beauty, tense urban psychology and misdirected violence' which anticipate by some four decades the arguments of later writers, such as Emile Durkheim and Georg Simmel, about the strain and exhilaration of metropolitan life.⁵⁰ For Baudelaire, an art that is not wedded to the lives of men and women in the crowd is not properly modern at all.⁵¹ In the preface of *Le Spleen de Paris*, Baudelaire proclaims that modern life requires a new language: 'a poetic prose, musical without rhythm and rhyme'. In this language Baudelaire communicates urban scenes, experiences that arise from everyday life of modern Paris but 'carry a mythic resonance that propel them beyond their place and time and transform them into archetypes of modern life'.⁵²

In his poem 'Le Mauvais Vitrier' (The Bad Glazier), a disturbingly violent interaction occurs between a Parisian, living in the attic of a Haussmannian apartment in a poor neighbourhood, and a glazier selling his wares. Awoken by the noisy vendor on the street below, the nameless Parisian flares up in a rage. After calling him up all seven floors to his apartment, he proceeds to push him immediately down the stairs and throws a plant pot down on his head as he steps back outside the door. The extreme violence of this Parisian's reaction is an example of urban 'anomie', (the breakdown of moral values). Edward Ahearn reads it as 'misdirected violence' towards the real cause of his misery. The poem is part of an 'immense historical process of urbanisation and globalisation involving oppression and provoking sometimes violent responses'.⁵³

Although many of these poems focus on the experience of the poor, marginal man in the big city, Baudelaire's poetry also addresses the problem of the failure of representation; the impossibility of conveying their experience. Despite coming from a wealthy background, Baudelaire spent much of his adult life living in near-poverty, due to his extravagant behaviour, expensive tastes and opioid addiction; he squandered away his mother's money. In his prose poem, 'Les Yeux des Pauvres' (The Eyes of the Poor), Baudelaire reveals some

⁴⁹ Edward Ahearn, *Urban Confrontations in Literature and Social Science 1848-2001*, p.2

⁵⁰ Edward Ahearn, *Urban Confrontations in Literature and Social Science 1848-2001*, p.1

⁵¹ Charles Baudelaire, *Oeuvres Complètes I, II - La Pléiade*

⁵² Marshall Berman, *The Experience of Modernity*, p.148

⁵³ Edward Ahearn, *Urban Confrontations in Literature and Social Science 1848-2001*, p.34

of the deepest ironies and contradictions about modern life.⁵⁴ It is a love story, where a young couple publicly express their love by walking up and down the boulevards and relaxing in a newly-built café. As the lovers gaze into each other's eyes, they are suddenly confronted with some very different eyes – a poor family dressed in rags, staring in amazement at the new buildings around them. While he is touched by the family's eyes, and slightly ashamed of his own luxury, she is disgusted and calls for someone to take them away.⁵⁵ The miss-match in their ideology is enough to destroy the relationship. Baudelaire celebrates the city but also dramatises its sometimes unbearable strains.⁵⁶

Before the founders of urban sociology, Durkheim on 'anomie', Simmel on hypertensive yet cosmopolitan urban personality, and Robert Park's fascination with 'the marginal man', Baudelaire's prose poems 'insidiously conveyed similar themes'.⁵⁷

III.III *The Waste Land*

The Waste Land is a famously incomprehensible poem. Its structural complexity, abrupt changes of location, speakers, time and languages, make it difficult to follow, particularly because there is no coherent narrative anyway. This is a fragmented epic, with many voices but few identified characters. It is deliberately destabilising, 'a heap of broken images', as the poem itself puts it in the opening section. *The Waste Land* is composed of five parts: 'The Burial of the Dead', 'A Game of Chess', 'The Fire Sermon', 'Death By Water' and 'What the Thunder Said.' Each section employs shifting voices that delve into themes of war, trauma and disillusionment, reflecting darkly upon human affairs.⁵⁸ It forms a bleak image of contemporary Europe and attests to the emotional and physical devastation of the post-war landscape.⁵⁹

The Waste Land 'must be read as a singular London text, if not the urban text par excellence of literary modernism'.⁶⁰ As a site, London is marked by discontinuity and paradox. In the lines which introduce this essay, 'A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many/ I had not thought death had undone so many', Eliot evokes the commuters of London

⁵⁴ Marshall Berman, *The Experience of Modernity*, p.153

⁵⁵ Ibid. Marshall Berman

⁵⁶ Edward Ahearn, *Urban Confrontations in Literature and Social Science 1848-2001*, p.15

⁵⁷ Edward Ahearn, *Urban Confrontations in Literature and Social Science 1848-2001*, p.9

⁵⁸ <https://www.britannica.com/biography/T-S-Eliot/Later-poetry-and-plays>

⁵⁹ Ibid. Britannica, 'T. S. Eliot'

⁶⁰ John Morgenstern, *The "Centre of Intensity": T. S. Eliot's Reassessment of Baudelaire in 1910-11 Paris*, (The University of Notre Dame, 2012), p.2

in their deadpan existence, going to work, undone by urban life. Eliot suggests that the city makes ghosts of its citizens. Indeed, in the first draft of the poem, Eliot originally included the couplet ‘oh London your people are bound upon the wheel,/ phantoms, gnomes, burrowing in brick and stone and steel’, directly alluding to the lifelessness of city living.

Eliot’s poem is concerned with both literal waste lands and cultural and moral waste lands.⁶¹ Literal waste lands such as the sterile places where the poem is set, like the desert; but also other forms of waste land in immoral urban phenomena: sharp economic inequality, the worship of money, the breakdown of community in the face of individualism, sexual and spiritual depravity. He reminds us that London is ‘governed by vast differences between the rich and the poor, the upper and working classes’. This gulf is most noticeable between the two women from ‘A Game of Chess’. The wealthy, upper-class woman is compared to Cleopatra, while Lil, who sits in the pub having a gossip, ‘represents the downtrodden working classes’.⁶² Although they have in common unhappy marriages to men who both served in the war, their economic backgrounds set them distinctly apart. Whereas the rich woman’s room has an ‘antique mantel’, Lil just looks ‘antique’, although she is only thirty-one.⁶³ The experience of the city is a question of financial income.

The poem dwells in some detail upon dark sexual encounters. In ‘A Game of Chess’, the rape of Philomel, who was ‘so rudely forced’ by ‘the barbarous king’ in ancient Greek mythology, is set side by side another, more modern rape: ‘flushed and decided’ the ‘young man carbuncular [...] assaults at once [...] his vanity requires no response’. The modern city is a hotbed for forms of loveless sex. Brian Crews purports that the poem ‘is about the decay of culture in modern Western society when many consider present experience as chaotic, fragmentary, sterile and meaningless’.⁶⁴

Later on, in ‘What the Thunder Said’, European cities fuse into each other: ‘Jerusalem Athens Alexandria / Vienna London / Unreal’. Eliot makes shifts in time as well as place, conflating ancient and modern cities. Fran Brearton reads this as ‘encapsulating a decline in human history over thousands of years’.⁶⁵ This ominous outlook on modern life ‘reflects Eliot’s strong personal sense of deepening historical catastrophe’.⁶⁶ In April 1921, he wrote to a friend that ‘Having only contempt for every existing political party, and

⁶¹ Oliver Tearle, *The Great War, ‘The Waste Land’ and the Modernist Long Poem*, p.58

⁶² Oliver Tearle, *The Great War, ‘The Waste Land’ and the Modernist Long Poem*, p.175

⁶³ Ibid. Oliver Tearle

⁶⁴ Brian Crews, *Tradition, Heteroglossia and T. S. Eliot’s The Waste Land*, (AEDEAN, 1998), p.18

⁶⁵ Ibid. ‘In Our Time’, *Modernity and The Waste Land*

⁶⁶ Seamus Perry, *The Connell Guide to T. S. Eliot’s The Waste Land*, (Connell Publishing, 2014), p.52

profound hatred for democracy, I feel the blackest gloom' and he foresaw nothing but 'internecine fighting...people killing each other in the streets'.⁶⁷ In the words of Frank Leavis, *The Waste Land* articulates 'the troubles of the present age'.⁶⁸

Conclusion

These poems are important documents of urban design that caused huge upheavals in how people related to where they lived as the modern world took shape. Baudelaire and Eliot depict an urban experience of disorientation and the search for patterns of meaning in the face of it. In their urban landscapes, we witness the breakdown of social bonds between the individual and the community, as traditional moral values disintegrate. In many ways, the poems show that modernisation destroyed the communities of London and Paris. Cultural degradation threatens the inhabitants of the city in the form of loneliness, oppression and despair. Although these ailments are not unique to the modern city, they certainly seem to thrive best there. The shock of these poems are in their contemporary relevance, they are pertinent to how we conceptualise the city today.

On the other hand, there are still celebrations of modernity within the poems. Baudelaire for one relishes the excitement that flows from the crowd and the pace of city life; Eliot in contemporary music, he interrupts the poem with a verse of ragtime: 'O O O O, that Shakespeherian Rag/ It's so elegant so intelligent'. Both poets express an urge to re-establish the community, to socialise and relate to others. An important idea to take from their poetry is this desire to unite people. Despite their cynicism and rather disparaging view of life in the modern city, the very beauty of their poetry speaks for something that modernity has achieved. Art and creativity flourishes and offers relief in the face of hardship and this is worth celebrating.

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⁶⁷ Ibid. Seamus Perry

⁶⁸ Frank Leavis, *New Bearings in English Poetry: A Study of the Contemporary Situation*, (Faber and Faber, 2015), p.1

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