

T. S. Eliot and Paris

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Cyrena N. Pondrom asserted that the intellectual dominance of France in the early decades of the last century was outstanding.¹ It is a matter of fact that American expatriate writers such as Gertrude Stein and Edith Wharton lived in France seeking a literary career.² Some of the expatriate writers at that time wrote their works in French even at the risk of losing their cultural identities. As for the reason of their conversion into French writers, Eliot gives an interesting remark in *The Criterion* in 1934.

Younger generations can hardly realize the intellectual desert of England and America during the first decade and more of this century. In the England desert, to be sure, flourished a few tall and handsome cactuses, as well as James and Conrad (for whom the climate, in contrast to their own, was relatively favourable); in America the desert extended, *a perte de vue*, without the least prospect of even desert vegetables. The predominance of Paris was incontestable.³

The above-quoted passage is what Eliot recollected in his later life. One might say that Eliot makes an unerring judgment on the literary climate in the early decades of the twentieth century. The observation of Eliot's mentor, Ezra Pound is much more harsh and astonishing to the readers of English literature. Pound contends:

‘For the best part of a thousand years English poets have gone to school to the French, or one might as well say that there never were any English poets until they began to study the French . . . The history of English poetic glory is a history of successful steals from the French . . . The great periods of English have been the periods when the English showed the greatest powers of assimilation’.⁴

Pondrom advocated both Eliot and Pound's views on the barren literary climate of London in the early part of the last century. Pondrom explains:

French influence was ubiquitous in the innovative movements of poetry in London between 1908 and 1920; French intellectual currents were far more extensive and important than those of any other foreign origin in this period; and the rhythm, metric, subject, and form in imagist, vorticist and immediately succeeding poetry all exhibit properties which were inspired or reinforced by French practices or by poetry on criticism in the French language. Neither Eliot nor Pound was excessive in his emphasis upon the paramount influence of France on the English poetic world between 1908 and 1920. ⁵

Then, why did Eliot seek so seriously for a literary career in Paris ? This is a very difficult question to answer. Eliot might have had a challenging determination to convert from an English poet into a French poet (he was longing for that). Many young poets at that time sought after their literary careers in London, Boston or New York. ⁶

It is worth considering what attracted Eliot to Paris, because such a consideration might give some light on Eliot's early years as a poet. Many scholars seem to have undervalued his stay in Paris as a visiting student for a year, which influenced his early poetic style.

Lyndall Gordon does not seem to make much of Eliot's stay in Paris for a year. She explains in her work, *T. S. Eliot* :

. . . Eliot was nourished in Paris by the kind of intellectual ferment he had missed in America, the poetry he wrote during 1910 and 1911 affects more alienation than ever . . . The pressure of Eliot's own inhibition burst its barriers in a riot of obscene verse – exactly what his mother had feared in the immoral influence of Paris. Later, Eliot excised from his Notebook this start of an 'epic' about the sexual exploits of Christopher Columbus, King Bolo, and his Big Black Kween . . . Otherwise, Paris did not change Eliot very much Eliot imposed upon his observations of the city a point of view already manifest at Harvard, a mixture of horror at the monotonous drabness of the poor and boredom with the smug formulate of academics. A thinker in a gloomy garret gazes at the constellations and they do not enlighten him . . . ⁷

Gordon has consistently stated that Eliot's sojourn in Paris was minor through his life. However, Nancy Duvall Hargrove regards Eliot's Parisian year as a significant moment. Hargrove summarizes the significance of Eliot's sojourn in Paris in *T. S. Eliot's Parisian Year* :

. . . he was seeking his poetic voice in French poetry. He reveals in "What France Means to You" that it was not chance that led him to Paris in 1910, explaining that, because of his reading the poetry of Charles Baudelaire, Jules Laforgue, Tristan Corbière,

Arthur Rimbaud, and Stéphane Mallarmé as an undergraduate at Harvard, France had come to represent “la poésie”[poetry] to him, and he believed that “the kind of poetry that I needed, to teach me the use of my own voice, . . . was only to be found in French” (“Yeats” 248). . . . His year in Paris provided him with a gold mine of cultural, intellectual, and personal experiences that extended his horizons in many directions and influenced him and his works in significant ways. He always looked back on it with nostalgia and acknowledged its impact upon him, describing the Paris of that time perhaps most memorably as “un présent parfait” . . . ⁸

One might say that the young poet prepared well for his studying abroad, which may be a rare opportunity for average American students at that time. His reading experiences at Harvard could be a driving force which made him go to Paris despite what his mother said in her letter.

. . . I have rather hoped you would not specialize later on French literature. I suppose you will know better in June what you want to do next year. And you will have the literary judgment of able advisers probably. I can not bear to think of your being alone in Paris, the very words give me a chill. English speaking countries seem so different from foreign. I do not admire the French nation, and have less confidence in individuals of that race than in English. ⁹

Eliot’s mother, Charlotte worries about her son’s future as a bright student of Harvard. Judging from the content of her letter, Eliot seems to have been brought up on a bed of roses in Saint-Louis. A Unitarian, Charlotte does not seem to have an affinity with the French since France was quite distant from their place of residence. It seems that Charlotte really wanted her son to strictly maintain Unitarianism through his life.

However, something went wrong with Eliot’s strict way of life when he happened to see a book called *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* by Arthur Symons. Peter Ackroyd explicates Eliot’s fateful encounter with Symons’ book:

It was a book, he was to admit later, that influenced the course of his life, principally because here he encountered the work of Jules Laforgue. In Symons’ chapter on the poet, he said, he discovered a temperament very close to his own—he could see himself clearly from the outside, as it were—and in that act of self-identification he learned how to speak freely for the first time. . . . Now the quickening process began. He was attracted primarily to the denial of conventional feeling in that poetry, both in its ironic skepticism about romantic passion and Laforgue’s refusal to reveal or even to take

seriously his own. . . . Now, in Laforgue, he discovered a tone and a formal technique which allowed these characteristics of his own temperament to be expressed. He was changed utterly—recognizing himself through someone other, he became the person whom he had wished to be.¹⁰

The readers might recognize a satirical tone of verse after Eliot was taken up with Laforgue's poems. The young poet gradually composed poems released from the conventional bondage of poetry. The following verse was composed on January, 1910.

Sunday: this satisfied procession
Of definite Sunday faces;
Bonnets, silk hats, and conscious graces
In repetition that displaces
Your mental self-possession
By this unwarranted digression.

Evening, lights, and tea !
Children and cats in the alley;
Dejection unable to rally
Against this dull conspiracy.

—“Spleen”¹¹

The above-quoted verse could never have been written unless Eliot had encountered Laforgue's free verse. Eliot's satirical tone is clearly evident in another poem, “Humouresque”(After J. Laforgue). It reads:

One of my marionettes is dead,
Though not yet tired of the game –
But weak in body as in head,
(A jumping-jack has such a frame).

But this deceased marionette
I rather liked: a common face,
(This kind of face that we forget)
Pinched in a comic, dull grimace;

Half bullying, half imploring air,
Mouth twisted to the latest tune;
His who-the-devil-are-you stare;
Translated, maybe, to the moon.

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The readers might notice the gloomy mood about these poems written after his encounter with Laforgue's poems. Ackroyd describes how Eliot's poetic mood changed after he read Symons' book.

There is a marked alteration in his undergraduate verse as a result. Where before he had expressed conventional themes in allusive and decorative style, after the assimilation of Laforgue he writes poetry which satirizes conventional sentiments and the predilections of the (Boston) bourgeoisie. . . . When he takes a line almost directly from Laforgue . . . the words precede the perception, and any 'feeling' associated with it. ¹³

There is no denying the fact that Laforgue had much influence on young Eliot. Eliot confesses that he could not have known about Laforgue without reading Symons' book.

. . . I myself owe Mr. Symons a great debt: but for having read his book, I should not, in the year of 1908, have heard of Laforgue or Rimbaud; I should probably not have begun to read Verlaine; and but for reading Verlaine, I should not have heard of Corbière. So the Symons book is one of those which have affected the course of my life. ¹⁴

It can be said that Eliot's earnest commitment to reading the French Symbolists' led him to study in Paris. William Marx asserts that Eliot would never have chosen to live in Paris if he had not read Symons' *The Symbolist Movement in Literature*, or participated in Irving Babbitt's Harvard classes. ¹⁵ Marx further explains how strongly the young American was attracted to France. Marx states:

Eliot recollected that when 'it came to foreign writers' he was 'all for the French'. He went on to remark that during his 'romantic year' in Paris 'I had at the time the idea of giving up English and trying to settle down and scrape along in Paris and gradually write French.' ¹⁶

Although Eliot denied his initial intention to switch into French at the interview in his later

life,¹⁷ the young American was whole-heartedly attracted to the French in 1910. However, everything was not going well with him from the beginning of his sojourn in Paris.

Ackroyd depicts how hard it was for the young American to be assimilated to new surroundings.

It was his first visit to that continent; to be immersed in the atmosphere of Paris, having only previously tasted the excitement offered by Harvard professors, was akin to the experience of a drowning man who is suddenly plucked up into the air. His arrival might have been celebrated by Henry James – this carefully dressed, nervous young American (he was always an anxious traveler) with his precise, bookish French, announcing himself in a self-conscious fashion at the pension where he was to stay – 9 rue de l'Université, close to the Sorbonne and in the cultural center of the city, Eliot was to call it a 'romantic year' although his own official account of the effect which Paris exercised upon him is couched in characteristically intellectual terms.¹⁸

The reader might recognize Eliot's hardship to communicate with a maid of the pension in his bookish French. When Eliot went out and took a walk in the Luxembourg Garden, he confesses in a letter that he could not talk to the children playing with boats in French, because neither Eliot nor the children could speak French very well yet.¹⁹ Thus, Eliot had his French tutor Henri-Alban Fournier in order to improve his spoken French.²⁰ The French tutor advised the young American what kinds of books he should read to deepen his understanding of French Literature. It is a matter of fact that Eliot must have enjoyed a lively atmosphere in the intellectual and cultured city in 1910.²¹ Hargrove asserts that his French improved very much during the course of his sojourn.²² This is the reason that Eliot was able to write his 1944 essay in French entitled "What France Means to You." He says that it is exceptionally fortunate to visit Paris during the year of 1910 to 1911. Eliot writes:

. . . . Tantôt Paris était tout le passé; tantôt tout l'avenir: et ces deux aspects se combinaient en un présent parfait. Si c'est cela (notamment) que la France représente pour moi, peut-être est-ce grâce à un heureux accident du hasard. Mais ce n'est pas un accident qui m'avait conduit à Paris. Depuis plusieurs années, la France représentait surtout, à mes yeux, la poésie . . .²³

He stresses that it was not by chance for him to come to Paris but a fortunate coincidence. All the past and the future combined into a perfect present in Paris. The poetic voice he wanted to acquire can only be found in Paris, because France represented poetry for a

young American poet.

As Laforgue among the Symbolist poets had much influence on Eliot's poetic imagination, Eliot had to come to Paris to seek his own poetic voice.²⁴ Hargrove insists that the role of Paris in the Symbolist poetry movement must have compelled Eliot to wish to see what he himself could make of it poetically.²⁵

Eliot's acute observation of the streets in Paris can be unambiguously seen in "Preludes," III and "Rhapsody on a Windy Night." Eliot depicts an urban desolateness by using the image of "wanderer," which is taken from Laforgue's depiction of the Parisian figure the *Flaneur*.²⁶ Hargrove explains that the *flaneur* means an upper-class, sophisticated male who walks through an urban setting observing its details.²⁷

Eliot describes the urban landscape from midnight until dawn through the eyes of a young wanderer.

Every street-lamp that I pass
Beats like a fatalistic drum
And through the spaces of the dark
Midnight shakes the memory
As a madman shakes a dead geranium

—"Rhapsody on a Windy Night"

The poet depicts the scene "of the street / Held in a lunar synthesis." One might say that Eliot as a young student seems to be so insightful as to use a lunatic and desolate image in depicting a sophisticated and civilized city. It seems that Eliot projects what he learned from the Symbolists into his poem. There is something common concerning the image, rhythm, connotation and usage of words between "Rhapsody on a Windy Night" and "Pierrots" of Laforgue. Laforgue writes.

Les yeux sont noyés de l'opium
De l'indulgence universelle,
La bouche clownesque ensorcèle
Comme un singulier géranium.

—"Pierrots"

Laforgue describes the darker aspect of the urban city, which might be inherited by Eliot's poetry. It can be said that the "géranium" of Laforgue's poem was incorporated into "a dead geranium" in "Rhapsody on a Windy Night." This is an example of how much Eliot was influenced by Laforgue. The same can be true of "Preludes," III about the poetic image Eliot depicts.

You tossed a blanket from the bed,
You lay upon your back, and waited;
You dozed, and watched the night revealing
The thousand sordid images
Of which your soul was constituted;
They flickered against the ceiling.

—“Preludes,” III

Such a depiction is derived from his experience staying in Paris. The poet tries to describe the desolate and unclean mind of a fancy woman. Thus what Eliot read and experienced during the course of his stay could be unconsciously incorporated into his poetic lines throughout his life. It can be said that the literary influence of Paris was not temporary for the young American; what he acquired in Paris became an integral part of his soul and body to produce great poetic works in his later life.

William Marx asserts that Eliot was not an insider in Paris; he came to realize the insurmountable barriers that prevented him from becoming a French poet.²⁸ The real barrier between France and America was not the Atlantic Ocean, but the English Channel, which separates Anglo-American from French culture.²⁹ It is true that the English were content with the current state of the literary and intellectual climate in the first decade of the last century.

Eliot might have tried to be solitary to know the urban city much better. It can be said that being solitary in Paris stimulated him to acutely observe his surroundings in order to produce significant works during his whole career.

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Notes

1. Cyrena N. Pondrom, *The Road from Paris* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974), p.1.
2. Jason Harding, ed. *T.S.Eliot in Context* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), p.25.
3. ‘A Commentary’, *The Criterion*, XIII, 52 (April 1934), p.451.
4. Pondrom, *Ibid.*
5. Pondrom, *Ibid.*, p.2.

6. Harding, *Ibid.*, p.26.
7. Lyndall Gordon, *T.S.Eliot: an Imperfect Life* (London: Vintage, 1998), pp.54–55.
8. Nancy Duvall Hargrove, *T.S.Eliot's Parisian Year* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2009), pp.2–3.
9. Valerie Eliot, ed. *The Letters of T.S.Eliot* Volume I (London: Faber & Faber, 1988), p.13.
10. Peter Ackroyd, *T.S.Eliot* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1984), p.34.
11. T.S.Eliot, *Poems Written in Early Youth* (London: Faber & Faber, 1967) ed. by Valerie Eliot, p.32.
12. *Ibid.*, p.30.
13. Ackroyd, *Ibid.*, p.34.
14. *The Criterion* (January 1930), p.357.
15. Harding, *Ibid.*, p.26.
16. *Ibid.*
17. 'Interview with T.S.Eliot' *Writers at Work : The Paris Review Interviews*, Second series, ed. George Plimpton (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977), p.110.
18. Ackroyd, *Ibid.*, p.40.
19. *The Letters of T.S.Eliot*, *Ibid.*, p.16.
20. Hargrove, *Ibid.*, p.9.
21. *Ibid.*
22. *Ibid.*, p.13.
23. T.S.Eliot, "What France Means to You" in *La France Libre* (London : June 8,1944), p.94.
24. Hargrove, *Ibid.*, p.7.
25. *Ibid.*
26. *Ibid.*, p.50.
27. *Ibid.*
28. Harding, *Ibid.*, p.31.
29. *Ibid.*, p.25.