

What Paris means to T. S. Eliot during 1910-1911

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When we discuss Eliot's cultural identity as a poet, we often refer to his American heritage as well as his British one. Eliot in his later years made it clear that some of his poetic sources come from his childhood memory in St. Louis where he was raised as a Unitarian.

Many studies have focused on Eliot's ambiguous religious identity before his conversion into Anglo-Catholicism in 1927. However, few studies have dealt with Eliot's cultural identity during his Parisian year between 1910 and 1911 when the poet lived in the middle of the Latin Quarter of Paris.

Nancy Duvall Hargrove depicts Eliot's determination to study French literature and language against his strict mother's persuasion not to study abroad. It reads:

In March 1910, Eliot informed his parents of his desire to spend the following academic year in Paris. In a letter dated April 3, 1910, his mother made clear her disapproval of such a venture and tried to dissuade or at least to discourage him from various tactics: "I have rather hoped you would not specialize later on French literature. . . . 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" (Letters 13). . . . His desire to live in Paris was so strong that he somehow prevailed over this formidable force, who no doubt spoke for his father as well, and even secured their financial backing. (1)

As for his daring determination to study in Paris, we know that Eliot as a young student at Harvard was very influenced by Arthur Symons' *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* (1899), which kindled his enthusiasm for the Symbolist poems. (2) Those poems depicting the metropolitan spiritual landscape in both Laforgue and Baudelaire inspired Eliot very much to compose his early poems. (3)

The opening scene in "Preludes" reminds readers of the corrupt and decadent atmosphere on the streets in Paris those days. It reads:

The winter evening settles down
With smell of steaks in passageways.
Six o'clock.
The burnt-out ends of smoky days.
And now a gusty shower wraps
The grimy scraps

Of withered leaves about your feet
And newspapers from vacant lots . . . (4)

One might say that Eliot composed his early poems greatly influenced by the French symbolist poets at that time. It was really challenging for a young American poet to write a free verse in a colloquial style. Eliot's poetic experimentation with a free verse can be found in every poem in *Prufrock* (1917).

The readers find an eccentric image of the moon in "Rhapsody on a Windy Night."

Twelve o'clock.
Along the reaches of the street
Held in a lunar synthesis,
Whispering lunar incantations
Dissolve the floors of memory
And all its clear relations,
Its divisions and precisions.
. . . .
The lamp hummed:
'Regard the moon,
La lune ne garde aucune rancune,
She winks a feeble eyes,
She smiles into corners. . . . (5)

The deliberate readers might know that few poets could deal with the moon as poetic material to depict such a dismal and somber scene in the past. In an interview in New York, Eliot explained why he chose the form of free verse in his early poems:

My early *vers libre*, of course, was started under the endeavor to practice the same form as Laforgue. This meant merely rhyming lines of irregular length, with the rhymes coming in so *libre* as much *vers*, especially the sort which Ezra called "Amygism." Then, of course, there were things in the next phase which were freer, like "Rhapsody on a Windy Night." I don't know whether I had any sort of model or practice in mind when I did that. It just came that way. (6)

The readers might have the impression that Eliot did not have any specific form in mind to write poems. However, the young poet unconsciously tried to create a free verse in English. The course of such a story is discussed in Hargrove's previously mentioned book. She explains that Eliot wrote poems imitating the poetic style of Laforgue.

The "full extent of Eliot's debt to Laforgue is almost impossible to exaggerate" (46), as Erik Svarny suggests. . . . While Laforgue was the most influential of the Symbolist poets that he discovered through Symons, Eliot often acknowledged how powerfully the group as a whole affected and inspired him. He said, for example,

that they evoked in him “wholly new feelings” with the force of “a revelation” (“The Perfect Critic” 5) that influenced the direction of his life. . . . The most immediate effect was to convince him that he must go to their homeland to seek his own poetic voice. In “What Dante Means to Me,” Eliot states that Laforgue taught him how to develop that voice: “Of Jules Laforgue, for instance, I can say that he was the first to teach me how to speak, to teach me the poetic possibilities of my own idiom of speech.” (7)

Eliot seems to have been listening to the sounds, intonations, rhythms and poetic expressions of the language in a French-speaking country. (8) The following passage in “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” might be one fruit of his continuous effort to articulate what he really wanted to say in his own words.

Shall I say, I have gone at dusk through narrow streets
And watched the smoke that rises from the pipes
Of lonely men in shirt-sleeves, leaning out of windows ? . . .
I should have been a pair of ragged claws
Scuttling across the flows of silent seas. (9)

The appearance of an urban walker seems to reflect the influence of the Parisian figure who usually strolls around an urban setting. (10) One might say that Eliot as a young poet seemed to have closely observed Parisian bars, cafes, restaurants and nightclubs to use as subject matters later in his poetry. (11) Such behavior of the poet can be illustrated by the following passage:

He arrived in Paris . . . must have been impressed by its sights: the broad boulevards, the outdoor cafés, the open-air markets, the glorious parks, the Seine River, and such famous landmarks as the Tour Eiffel, the nearly-completed Basilique du Sacré Cœur, the Cathédrale de Notre Dame, and the Musée du Louvre. The streets were crowded with trams, autobuses, bicycles, and both open and closed cars, some driven by ‘emancipated women in bee-hive veils’ . . . (12)

One might imagine that Eliot was able to deepen his insights into French culture through the companionship of prestigious writers and artists in such an enlightened city. Hargrove mentions that Eliot could not speak fluent French, however, he polished his French with conversation lessons with his tutor Henri-Alban Fournier. (13)

Hargrove explains:

His spoken French was apparently not very good when he arrived in Paris, as revealed in a letter of April 26, 1911 to his cousin Eleanor relaying the comment of the *femme de chambre* [maid] in his pension that a new American boarder “does not speak French very well yet. He speaks as Monsieur [Eliot] spoke in November” (*Letters* 18). To remedy this deficiency, he acquired as a tutor Henri-Alban Fournier (better known by his pseudonym Alain-Fournier), a twenty-four-year-old Frenchman

who gave him conversation lessons in French and instigated his reading of the works of such writers as Philippe, Claudel, Gide, Péguy, and Dostoevsky (in French translation). (14)

It is not hard to visualize that the young poet was trying to cultivate his language skills and deepen his literary knowledge in a circle of intellectual and sophisticated friends in Paris. In other words, Eliot could be called a cosmopolitan who could play the role of cultural bridge between Anglophones and Francophones in the heart of one of the illuminating cities of Europe.

According to Hargrove, reading Laforgue's poems gave Eliot an ironic, detached and cosmopolitan voice. (15) She further explains the strong influence of the prestigious French writer, Philippe:

Philippe's two novels showed him the Parisian underworld of prostitutes and pimps in grim areas of the city, an innovative subject, as evidenced in Alain-Fournier's and Rivière's letters, and inspired him to try his hand at creating similar portrayals of urban landscapes in poems such as "Preludes," "Rhapsody on a Windy Night," "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," *The Waste Land*, and *Four Quartets*. (16)

This passage proves that Eliot's sojourn in Paris during the year of 1910-1911 was quite fruitful in his assimilation of French culture. The following passage indicates how Eliot tried to brush up on his French:

Hearing French on a daily basis and absorbing its rhythms, inflections, slang, vulgarities, and idiomatic expressions gave Eliot the ability to echo them authentically in his own poetry, to write in a voice similar to what he so admired in Laforgue and yet to give it his own stamp. (17)

The readers unanimously can argue with the idea that Eliot's skill with the French language was excellent in reading, writing, and speaking the language. However, Eliot did not want to be a bilingual poet despite his extraordinary level of that language. In an interview, he explained why he wrote several poems in French in *Collected Poems*:

At that period I thought I'd dried up completely. I hadn't written anything for some time and was rather desperate. I started writing a few things in French and found I could, at that period. I think it was that when I was writing in French I didn't take the poems so seriously, and that not taking them seriously, I wasn't so worried about not being able to write. I did these things as a sort of *tour de force* to see what I could do. That went on for some months. (18)

Eliot articulates what he thinks about writing in the French he had acquired with great effort during his sojourn in Paris.

. . . . I had at that time the idea of giving up English and trying to settle down and scrape along in Paris and gradually write French. But it would have been a foolish idea even if I'd been much more bilingual than I ever was, because, for one thing, I don't think that one can be a bilingual poet. I don't know of any case in which a man wrote great or even fine poems equally well in two languages. I think one language must be the one you express yourself in poetry, and you've got to give up the other for that purpose. And I think that the English language really has more resources in some respects than the French. I think, in other words, I've probably done better in English than I would ever have in French even if I'd become as proficient in French as the poets you mentioned. (19)

Eliot's emphasis on his native tongue might reflect his insightful observation of French people's respect for their language and culture. It is not farfetched to say that foreigners in France can not help but to be aware of profundities of French culture and language during their sojourn.

Eliot might not have been an isolated case concerning the awareness of such a grand nation. This idea can be explained by the passage below:

. . . he considered the subject of the purity of language has been most consciously cultivated and most jealously guarded in the past." He paid tribute to Valéry because he "gave a lifetime to the study, the preservation and the renovation of the language" and asserted that poets have the "responsibility of maintaining the purity of language without which our civilization will surely decline." (20)

Can't we state that Eliot was struggling with his own poetic voice to articulate what he really wanted to express in his linguistic environment abroad? As a matter of fact, the young poet cultivated an exquisite sensitivity toward his life and the daily events that took place in his neighborhood. (21)

"The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" was composed during his sojourn in Paris. It might be said that Eliot changed the verse style of Laforgue into his own in the poems. (22) Eliot says :

The yellow fog that rubs its back upon the window-panes,
The yellow smoke that rubs its muzzle on the window-panes,
Licked its tongue into the corners of the evening,
Lingered upon the pools that stand in drains. . . (23)

The readers might think that Eliot depicted such an urban scene based on his memories in Paris, not in London. As a consequence of such logic, the following passage in *The Waste Land* might have reflected Eliot's mental image of Paris using the style of the French Symbolist poets.

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.
Sighs, short and infrequent, were exhaled,
And each man fixed his eyes before his feet.

. . . .
'You ! hypocrite lecteur !—mon semblable,—mon frère !' (24)

It is generally admitted that Eliot composed the poem based on Baudelaire's *Fleurs du Mal*(1857). Hargrove states that Eliot adopted the image of a "stroller" in the Symbolist poems into his own poetry. (25) In addition Eliot learned to articulate what he wanted to describe in his poetry before coming to Paris. It might safely be said that Eliot could obtain significant literary and cultural materials in Paris, which were adopted in his own poetry later. Eliot, in a sense, might have been an English poet who was more at home in a Frenchman's poetic culture. The poet learned to express any feelings that were hovering in in his mind as poetic materials.

We are appreciative of Eliot's determination to compose in English, though he attained an extraordinary level in French. Eliot's remark at the interview in New York that "the English language really has more resources in some respects than the French" must be seriously taken into consideration. Eliot as an Anglophile poet must have been awakened by the sophisticated poetic style of the French poems, though he never turned into a bilingual poet. His belief in English-speaking culture might have led him to such a persuasive passage in "Little Gidding."

A people without history
Is not redeemed from time, for history is a pattern
Of timeless moments. So, while the light fails
On a winter's afternoon, in a secluded chapel
History is now and England. (26)

The above-cited passage clearly indicates that Eliot learned to have no hesitation in making clear his beliefs as an Anglo-Catholic in England. One might say that what Eliot learned and experienced in Paris made him a great poet in English-speaking countries, which led him to win a Nobel Prize in 1948.

Notes

- (1) Nancy Duvall Hargrove, *T. S. Eliot's Parisian Year* (Gainesville: The University Press of Florida, 2009), p.6.
- (2) Ibid.
- (3) Ibid., p.7.
- (4) T. S. Eliot, *Collected Poems 1909-1962* (London: Faber and Faber limited, 1963), p.23.
- (5) Ibid., p.26.
- (6) Edited by George Plimpton, *Writers at Work* (The Viking Press, 1963), pp.97-98.
- (7) Hargrove, Ibid., pp.6-7.
- (8) Ibid., p.272.

- (9) Eliot, *Ibid.*, p.15.
- (10) Hargrove, *Ibid.*, p.50.
- (11) *Ibid.*, p.9.
- (12) *Ibid.*
- (13) *Ibid.*
- (14) *Ibid.*
- (15) *Ibid.*, p.272.
- (16) *Ibid.*
- (17) *Ibid.*
- (18) Plimpton, *Ibid.*, p.98.
- (19) *Ibid.*, p.99.
- (20) Hargrove, *Ibid.*, p.269.
- (21) *Ibid.*, 271.
- (22) *Ibid.*
- (23) Eliot, *Ibid.*, p.13.
- (24) *Ibid.*, p.65.
- (25) Hargrove, *Ibid.*, p.271.
- (26) Eliot, *Ibid.*, p.222.

* closely related to his "machismo."