

Reflections on T. S. Eliot's "Preludes"

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30 September 2004

G. I. Literature Tutorial

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T. S. Eliot: Preludes (1917)

I

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;
The showers beat
On broken blinds and chimneypots,
And at the corner of the street
A lonely cab-horse steams and stamps.
And then the lighting of the lamps.

II

The morning comes to consciousness
Of faint stale smells of beer
From the sawdust-trampled street
With all its muddy feet that press
To early coffee-stands.

With the other masquerades
That times resumes,
One thinks of all the hands
That are raising dingy shades
In a thousand furnished rooms.

III

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.
And when all the world came back
And the light crept up between the shutters
And you heard the sparrows in the gutters,
You had such a vision of the street
As the street hardly understands;
Sitting along the bed's edge, where

You curled the papers from your hair,
Or clasped the yellow soles of feet
In the palms of both soiled hands.

IV

His soul stretched tight across the skies
That fade behind a city block,
Or trampled by insistent feet
At four and five and six o'clock;
And short square fingers stuffing pipes,
And evening newspapers, and eyes
Assured of certain certainties,
The conscience of a blackened street
Impatient to assume the world.

I am moved by fancies that are curled
Around these images, and cling:
The notion of some infinitely gentle
Infinitely suffering thing.

Wipe your hand across your mouth, and laugh;
The worlds revolve like ancient women
Gathering fuel in vacant lots.

In “Preludes”, published in 1917, T. S. Eliot contrasts the vulnerability and resilience of urban man. He creates a collage of images drawn from a single day in a lower-class street in the early 20th century, choosing such images as portray the numbing dailyness of life, the decay that time brings, and the griminess of life, especially, perhaps, life in the city. Though these images lead the poet to a sympathetic and even pitying notion of the city, the poem ends with a shocking image of the coarse and resilient self-reliance of the individual city dweller.

The poem embraces a single twenty-four hour day in a city street, beginning at 6:00 in the evening, and ending the following evening about the same time. It begins at the end of the day, in winter, in light rain, as darkness falls. The first stanza is heavy with images of the ends of things, especially of ends by consumption. “Burnt-out ends of smoky days” suggests the uselessness and bitterness and trashiness of cigarette butts, the litter of withered leaves, of useless-because-old newspapers, and of chimney pots black with soot, the remains of burnt fuel. The lonely cab-horse standing with head down and blinders on, waiting, creates a sense of resignation. There is nothing here to suggest a particular night. This is any night or every night. There is no identification of a particular city; this is any city or every city.

In the second stanza, morning comes to the street, but this is not a dawning of bright light and promise, but rather of the tedious resumption of stale life. The street is muddy, and trampled, and smells of old beer. The morning brings the resumption of “masquerades”—there is not even a sense of genuineness here, but only repetition of every morning’s menial activities, which are somehow not entirely what they seem. Like the prior evening, this morning has nothing in it to set it apart from any other morning. Additionally, in this stanza we begin to suspect that there is nothing to distinguish any person from any other. The street is trampled by the muddy feet of everyone alike going to the coffee

stands. The image of “all the hands...in a thousand furnished rooms” carries forward this idea of the non-individuated mass of working people, all doing the same thing.

Yet in the third stanza an individual is addressed, a singular “you”, whose sleep and awakening are described in the past tense, as if to place them within the evening and morning already described. She appeared briefly in the first stanza, where the wind wrapped withered leaves about her feet. Presumably, hers was one of the hands raising dingy shades in the morning. The stanza describes her going to bed, falling asleep, dreaming, awakening, and momentarily thoughtful at the start of the day. Again, though, there is nothing here to specify an identity of the “you” in question, nor to specify any particular morning or evening. This woman could be any age. She, herself, is dingy. Her hands are soiled, perhaps by manual labor, and her feet yellowed with age, or callus, or the staining of cheap shoes worn in damp weather. She is able to sleep though her dreams reveal her own sordid nature. She is reflective. She knows herself. She knows the street.

The fourth stanza brings us to the evening of the next day. There are descriptions again of certain daily recurrences, such as smoking the evening pipe and reading the evening newspaper. Now, however, there is the suggestion of another person of sorts, the “his” whose soul is stretched tight across the skies and is trampled by insistent feet. Who is this person? Perhaps it is the pipe smoker and reader of the evening news. Perhaps it is not any individual, but a personification of the street itself, the whole society whose presence and intercourse constitute “the street”. This “person” has eyes, a soul, a conscience, and an attitude.

If this is correct, and the street or city is personified here, then Eliot here begins to more directly characterize the attitude of the city. There is tension here, thinness and fading. There is also, nevertheless, an assurance “of certain certainties”. What might these be? Perhaps the certainty that each day will be essentially the same as all the others, that each day will be somewhat grimy, muddy, sordid,

dingy and faded. That fuel will burn down, and life's energy fade away. That today's newspaper will be tomorrow's litter, that today's pipe and today's coal will be tomorrow's soot on the walls and chimney pots.

I find it interesting that Eliot speaks of "the conscience of the blackened street." It might as easily read, "The blackened conscience of the street", and in my mind both ideas are suggested and resonate with each other. The street is blackened by the activities of its inhabitants, and likewise the collective conscience of the street may be blackened by different activities of those same inhabitants, by the "sordid images" of which their souls are constituted.

This conscience of the street is "impatient to assume the world". Depending on the meaning assigned to "assume", this phrase may suggest a desire to make assumptions about the world, or to take on the characteristics of the world, or possibly both in a double meaning. The first idea suggests a self-confident, matter-of-fact, "don't question too deeply" approach to life. The second suggests a comfort with the world as it is, with being identified with the world, with being "worldly." In either case, the impatience indicates an active and forth-going attitude toward the world. This is no timid, fearful or self-pitying conscience.

The poem ends with two short stanzas, each a single sentence, that may relate to the main body of the poem as the final couplet to the body of a sonnet. They present, in stark contrast, two impressions of the foregoing images, one from outside, one from inside.

The poet, who seems to think of the scene as a whole ("One thinks of all the hands...in a thousand furnished rooms.."), synthesizes it all into the "notion" of a single "thing". He sees the whole street, and all its people, and perhaps even its animals like the cab-horse, as one "infinitely gentle, infinitely suffering thing." Why "infinitely"? Perhaps Eliot wants to generalize to all such streets, in all such cities, down through time. Perhaps he wishes to evoke ideas of divinity or immortality, perhaps

even of Christ-likeness. The suffering here is easy to see, but why gentleness? In what ways do these images suggest gentleness? Perhaps it is the gentleness that comes from suffering, the sufferer's ability to empathize with other sufferers, the poor with the poor.

The final line is therefore the more shocking. There is a sense of coarse mockery here, an image of the ribald humor of the uncultured, or the primitive. It begins with an imperative to the "you" of the poem, the woman addressed briefly in the first stanza and more fully in the third, a woman who lives on this street, who goes to sleep with soiled hands and who, like the poet, has "a vision of the street." She is to wipe her mouth with her hand and laugh. No sense of suffering or gentleness here, no sense of self-pity. No, here is self-assurance, the assurance of "certain certainties." She understands and can survive in this world. Perhaps it is her understanding of the world that is portrayed in the final clause, "The worlds revolve like ancient women gathering fuel in vacant lots."

This last image may be seen looking down from one of those thousand furnished rooms onto an adjacent lot, the women seen from above, turning this way and that in a slow and random ballet. They are ancient; though poor, they have survived and will survive. They search for bits of fallen coal, or flammable rubbish, perhaps yesterday's evening newspaper or withered leaves for kindling. This fuel, the leavings of the street, they will burn to ashes and soot, blackening the street, as the days are burned, as they themselves are gradually consumed as the cycle of days continues on. This is simply the way of the worlds, and the city woman can look down upon it and laugh confidently. This is simply her world.

Which vision of the street is true, the poet's or the woman's? They are both true, of course. And, in a sense, they are both the poet's. It is, after all, the poet who tells the woman to wipe her mouth and laugh. And it may be that the final image is not only hers, but his also, another image of that infinitely gentle and suffering thing.