

Mapping the Contours of Changing Social Spaces in *The Waste Land*

Sumegha Vaid

Ph.D. Scholar, Department of English and Cultural Studies, Panjab University, Chandigarh

Abstract: French philosopher Henri Lefebvre emphasized that all space is social in human society. Such social spaces are governed by a system of expectations and responses that are rarely articulated as such because they seem self-evident in everyday life. The paper brings in his concept of social space and relates it with the images of changing social spaces in *The Waste Land*. While TS Eliot mourns the loss of culture and spirituality to the advent of modernism, he also seems to lament the incessantly changing space in the wake of industrialization and capitalism. Besides, this idea of social space can also be thought of in terms of phenomenological space, which implies that lived space and our perception of it are mutually constitutive. Thus, social space changes us as much as we contribute to changing it. *The Waste Land* undeniably cuts across spatiotemporal borders. While its timelessness is often discussed, how it upholds its relevance in space is relatively less discussed. The paper examines how the spatial aspect of the text manifests the poem's thematic universality across national borders.

Keywords: modernity, natural vs artificial, nostalgia for idyllic past objective correlative, phenomenological space, production of social space

Eliot's vision of the modern world is that of an un-livable desolate place. Several images of changing natural spaces indicate this hiatus between the past, which was a reassuring space, and the present, which is listless. The poet uses phrases such as "Winter kept us warm" (5) and "Summer surprised us" (8) when talking about the old days. There are images of children sledging in the mountains. These indicate that changing seasons are used to evoke positive feelings in the speaker. Modernization has changed the physical appearance of the spaces and

the social relations which constituted them; hence, such occurrences do not seem to amuse him anymore. The poem opens with the lines, "April is the cruellest month, breeding/Lilacs out of dead land" (Eliot 1). At another point in the poem, he says, "We who were living are now dying" (329). This death is undoubtedly the physical decay of the land induced by pollutants which are the byproducts of modernity. However, it is also the death of specific social relationships and values which comprised the space before the onset of modernization.

According to Lefebvre, 'nature' has been modified by human activity and, therefore, can be seen as 'produced'. Unlike factory-made products, it is free of any unmistakable stamp of the producer or the process of production and is hence prone to be relegated to the realm of the transcendental (68). *The Waste Land* points towards this produced aspect of nature:

The river sweats
Oil and tar
The barges drift
With the turning tide
Red sails
Wide
The barges wash
Drifting logs... (Eliot 266-74)

The river is laden with cargo as well as industrial waste. It is perceived as nothing more than a channel of transportation. Furthermore, the very demarcation of natural and urban is more a product of social convention and discourse rather than being something self-evident. To quote Lefebvre, "...nature is being murdered by 'anti-nature'—by abstraction, by signs and images, discourse, as also by labour and its products. Along with God, nature is dying—'Humanity' is killing both of them—and perhaps committing suicide into the bargain" (71). By humanity, Lefebvre means social practice, and indeed, this suicide seems to be the epicentre of Eliot's

lament. Degradation of nature alone might not have been a matter of concern. It is the ensuing change in the public sphere that ails him.

The Waste Land implores us to look at the enormous amount of waste produced both culturally and physically. Before industrialization and in its nascent years, the emphasis was on production. Progress was seen in terms of buildings, products, and innovation. The focus has now shifted to consumption. The waste that we produce is an indicator of our consumption and hence of the quality of our life. *The Waste Land* is a poem about waste comprising not only of the oil and tar and the sandwich papers floating around in the Thames but also people and places that have become useless. The overproduction of material from the previous culture, which we see in the "Game of Chess", is re-conceived as waste since it is plucked from its context and reproduced as a commodity of mass culture. He calls these decorations "withered stumps of time"(104). Even the "brown fog" (207), which is integral to the matrix of its imagery, is an industrial waste. At the same time, its presence contributes to making London the gloomy city that it is.

Space is not an a priori background or context for agents and social actions. It is shaped by social relations and modes of exchange as much as it shapes them. Furthermore, modern space is becoming increasingly social to the extent that it is difficult to distinguish between social and natural space. Eliot talks about the Thames and says, "The river bears no empty bottles, sandwich papers, /Silk handkerchiefs, cardboard boxes, cigarette ends/Or other testimony of summer nights" (178-79). The river bank, apparently a natural space, holds social significance only so far as it is populated with a crowd. In the absence of the people who have littered the river, the river bank is an entirely different space. Ironically, it seems that it is not the death of the river that Eliot is grieving but rather the demise of the social activity which once composed it.

Henri Lefebvre explains how a city is not a unique work of art but a product. The architectural structures which constitute the city and give it a semblance of unity were originally designed and constructed for different social and economic purposes. The expressiveness and unity are imposed on cities in retrospect through art, literature, and tourism discourse. However, cities are constantly being consumed, and their significance is always in flux. There are not one but two London cities in *The Waste Land*. One is the London of ideality frozen in the past, the demise of which Eliot laments. The other is the representational space of London, or in other words, the lived reality. It is strewn with sandwich papers and brown fog, and people engage in futile conversations in bars. It is a space of confusion, aridity, and desolation. The city continually provides the opportunity for further industrialisation and movement away from Eliot's lost London. This feeling of the loss of an idyllic homeland is a universal leitmotif in literature. Nevertheless, was London any different in the past? It was always a lived space continuously making and remaking itself and its people.

Capitalism and industrialisation were significant factors in shaping London. They introduced a new set of social relationships entirely different from those dominant during feudal times. It brought together people from different cities, cultures, and social strata as workers in a homogenizing system. Isolation and unfamiliarity were its byproducts. The fast-paced industrial life also brought about changes in the very nature of the public sphere, which Eliot connects with deteriorating human values and low culture. In "The Fire Sermon," Eliot paints a bleak picture of people working in an office. He pictures them as a shapeless mass, devoid of individuality: "At the violet hour, when the eyes and back/Turn upward from the desk when the human engine waits/Like a taxi throbbing waiting" (215-17). This is undoubtedly a consequence of the changed production system, but London as space is a significant determinant in how these social relationships come to play. Lefebvre says, "[space is] not the outcome of a quality or property of human action in general, or human labour as

such, of 'man', or social organization. On the contrary, it is itself the origin and source—not distantly but immediately, or rather inherently—of the rationality of activity" (72).

The city in *The Waste Land* is not a mere container of the actions that are taking place. It instead makes those actions possible and, to some extent, inevitable. "Itself the outcome of past actions, social space permits fresh actions to occur while suggesting others and prohibiting others. Among these actions, some serve production, others consumption" (Lefebvre 73). The poem talks about smaller spaces within the city. The bars, the typist's room, and the hall in which people are playing chess are all seemingly autonomous enclosed spaces. But Lefebvre's category of social spaces conflates the two distinct categories of private and public space to some extent. The city and the smaller spaces which constitute it interpenetrate each other. Thus, private activities also contribute to the representational space or the lived space of London and vice versa. Seemingly private activities such as the loveless sex in the typist's room, the meaningless banter in the bar, and the hollow ostentatiousness of the wealthy lady's house—all are rationalized by the space in which they are enframed and simultaneously produce the space in which they are taking place.

Regarding the French philosopher Henri Bergson, space can be understood on two levels—one, the conception of space, and two, the perception of space or the lived space (26). The latter, he says, is affected by qualitative differences and can be understood as phenomenological space. On the other hand, the conception of space pictures it as a homogenous background in which every point is a set of coordinates on the map. When Eliot reminisces with nostalgia and says:

Summer surprised us, coming over to the Starnbergersee
With a shower of rain, we stopped in the colonnade,
And went on in sunlight into the Hofgarten,
And drank coffee and talked for an hour. (8-11)

For the speaker, Starnbergersee and the cafes in Hofgarten do not merely point on a map. They are associated with peace and prosperity. However, since the two places have changed in the Lefebvrian sense with the advent of capitalism and modern values, they also change in the Bergsonian sense. They are no longer the agreeable places they used to be. The space called home is no more a permanent dwelling associated with the feeling of kinship and familial love. It is rather like the typist's room—a temporary residence that is in shambles. Even the love-making which takes place in this setting is devoid of love and emotion.

In contrast to this is the ostentatious hall in "The Game of Chess", wherein people do not think or talk. The hall feels like a dark, dingy alley despite the numerous sculptures, perfumes, and decorative materials. The childish happiness is gone, and so are the Christian values. Devoid of these, London city does not seem to be the glorious imperial centre that it was in the past but an urban desert.

Descriptions of places are employed to evoke certain feelings. While German cities, Starnbergersee and Hofgarten, are associated with images of people happily drinking coffee and talking, the modern world is associated with the images of an arid wasteland:

What are the roots that clutch, and what branches grow

Out of this stony rubbish? Son of man,

You cannot say or guess, for you know only

A heap of broken images, where the sun beats,

And the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief,

And the dry stone, no sound of water. (Eliot 19-24)

Spaces are objective correlatives for emotions and feelings. The kind of activities that used to take place in the prosperous and cultured Hofgarten cannot take place in modern-day London. It is due to the loss of intellectual culture and Christian values that London seems to be dry and barren. Moreover, by alluding to disparate cultures and places, the text resists

particularity, and London becomes a metonym for any other modern city. Consequently, Eliot's personal grief transmutes into an expansive universal lament on modernity.

Eliot juxtaposes several disparate spaces so that reading the poem becomes an act of traversing these places. The placement of geographically distant spaces together in this way makes the reader's imagination move back and forth between the city and the desert. He talks about the city and equates it to "A heap of broken images, where the sun beats, /And the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief, / And the dry stone no sound of water" (22-24). At the same time, he describes the desert in the following words:

Here is no water but only rock
Rock and no water and the sandy road
The road winding above among the mountains
Which are mountains of rock without water. (331-34)

He is pointing towards the physical similarities between the two geographical points and the similar psychological states that they invoke. To quote Spencer Morrison:

These symbols do not simply bind urbanity to wilderness zones by foregrounding shared geographical or material features, nor do they link these spaces by reference to standard psychological states; instead, these figurative connections rely upon and elaborate, intricate links between material space and subjectivity itself. (28)

Hence, the text becomes a montage of images exemplifying the complex mental makeup of Eliot and, by extension, that of the modern 'everyman'. This finds echoes in the Confessions of St Augustine: "I wondered, O my God, too much astray from Thee my stay, /in these days of my youth and I became to myself a waste land" (Book II).

The experience of space is always situated in temporality. Our experience of space and time is so convoluted that one cannot be separated from the other. Nevertheless, Lefebvre

argues that "[The] manifest expulsion of time [from space] is arguably one of the hallmarks of modernity" (96). In other words, modernity diminishes consciousness of the passage of time. The changes in the weather, the position of the sun, and other temporal manifestations of nature, which accounted for an essential dimension of space, lose importance. Capitalist values see time as another commodity that can be sold, bought, and measured in terms of money. Lived time loses social interest, and the passage of time is marked and ascertained merely in terms of hours and minutes on measuring instruments. This feeling, I believe, is what runs throughout the text of *The Waste Land*. While the cities located in the past are characterized by a change in seasons and a feeling of joy, present-day London is static. It is an "Unreal City, /Under the brown fog of a winter dawn" (Eliot 61).

Throughout the poem, Eliot hardly ever allows his readers to enter the metropolis in summer. There is a perpetual winter in the text. The only sign of the passage of time is the bartender, who keeps telling the ladies to leave the bar. This loss of interest in the manifestations of time makes the city a different phenomenological space than it was previously. Owing to the worldwide expanse of capitalist values, the loss of the experience of time has become a universal phenomenon.

Lefebvre uses the phrase 'liquidation of history' (122) concerning space in the modern world. Social space has always been and is still in flux. It is more of a palimpsest than an object which can be disintegrated into neat smaller elements and subsequently studied part by part. Modern social space is teeming with anachronisms. While many people migrate from rural to urban spaces for a better life, others find an escape from the complex life of cities in the countryside. Alongside completely mechanized large-scale farms, small-scale organic farms also thrive. There are elements of urbanity in the rural and, at the same time, residues of the rural in cities. By extension, the London city of Eliot's imagination cannot be completely idyllic and jovial. Towards the end of the poem, Eliot asks, "Shall I at least set my lands in

order?" (425) Impelled by a keen nostalgia for the bygone era, the author hopes to reorder the physical and social space of the urban experience, and consequently, life itself. "This question announces the possibility of a future spatial order that repairs the present's fragmentation..." (Morrison 24). Nevertheless, it remains highly questionable if the numerous social and economic networks that prevail today can be erased from space and replaced by new ones to make a move back in time.

Under the spell of the city, which claimed him as a young man and retained him until his death, Eliot made poetry out of London's streets, squares, buildings, and districts. Like many of his other works, *the Waste Land* is soaked in urban imagery. It indexes urban experience in the texture of its spatial images:

The Waste Land's technique of figuring Eliot's London through the frames of desert and jungle geographies, Eastern and Western spiritual traditions, and historical and literary allusions renders the process of reading city space also one of archaeology.... Superimposed upon the poem's chartable London place-names, these strata situate the city within more broad senses of time and place than simply the London of 1922. (Morrison 26)

The configurations and reconfigurations of social space contribute significantly to both the poem's semantic texture and its complex imagery. The change, like social space, entails a change in different human experiences. Additionally, nostalgia for an idyllic past, the undercurrent of the entire poem, has found expression in literature worldwide. Thus, Eliot's poem ceases to be a period piece and cuts across spatial and temporal borders.

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