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SUSPENDED BETWEEN *VILLE* AND  
*UNREAL CITY*: THE SYMBOLIST ROOTS  
OF T. S. ELIOT'S URBAN VISION

To one acquainted with late-nineteenth-century French verse and the poetry of high modernism as represented by T. S. Eliot, the latter's great indebtedness to French symbolism is unquestionable on the level of both form and content. Arguably, nowhere is this influence more visible than in Eliot's evocations of the modern metropolis, especially when they are set against the urban vision of Nerval, Baudelaire and Rimbaud. The speakers of Eliot's urban poems may be seen as twentieth-century incarnations of the symbolist *flâneur*, the archetypal metropolitan stroller whom we first saw wandering the streets of Nerval's and Baudelaire's Paris. Like his symbolist counterparts, Eliot's Prufrock embarks on an urban odyssey, hoping that his peripatetic ways will help him overcome the anxieties which torment him: his sense of confusion and alienation, his overwhelming loneliness, and, most importantly, the philosophical and existential dilemmas which preoccupy him.

For the *flâneur*, whether he appears in French symbolist poetry or Eliot's pre-conversion verse, there is only one step from existential confusion to a phantasmagoric confusion of urban images. In this respect, the following passage from Nerval's *Aurélia* is particularly relevant:

Un soir, vers minuit, je remontais un faubourg où se trouvait ma demeure, lorsque, levant les yeux par hasard, je remarquai le numéro d'une maison éclairé par un reverbère. Ce nombre était celui de mon âge. Aussitôt, en baissant les yeux, je vis devant moi une femme au teint blême, aux yeux caves, qui me semblait avoir les traits d'Aurélia. Je me dis: «C'est sa mort ou la mienne qui m'est annoncée!» (Nerval 757).

The urban scenery composed of streetlamps, whose light reveals the presence of a mysterious woman, suddenly gives way to the labyrinth of some “hôtellerie”, “un vaste édifice composé de plusieurs salles” (757). Lost in “les longs corridors” (757), Nerval’s narrator is subject to the thoughts and fears which overwhelm Prufrock: a premonition of death on the one hand and philosophical dilemmas, implicit in the allusion to “conférences philosophiques” (757), on the other. The phantasmagoric connotations of the experience are reinforced by the fact that while the beginning of his urban odyssey is seemingly rooted in reality, the rest of it is merely an account of a dream. Nerval thereby equates the urban with dreamlike changing scenes, and phantasmagoria becomes an emblem of the protagonist’s mental and spiritual state: even his fear of death has to do with the fact that a street number happens to correspond to his age. The oneiric urban labyrinth is suggestive of man’s confusion: “Je me perdis plusieurs fois dans les longs corridors” (757), the narrator confesses. Ultimately, Nerval’s urban journey, with its admixture of dream and reality, turns out to be, just like Prufrock’s, a metaphor for life, death and destiny: “je continuai ma marche en suivant les rues dans la direction desquelles elle était visible, marchant pour ainsi dire au devant de mon destin, et voulant apercevoir l’étoile jusqu’au moment où la mort devait me frapper” (759). It is as if Nerval were rewriting in poetic prose the consecutive lines of *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*, in which the speaker is exposed to “certain half-deserted streets” (Eliot 11) which are “The muttering retreats/Of restless nights”(11) and which, as we subsequently find out, “follow like a tedious argument/Of insidious intent/To lead you to an overwhelming question” (11). As in the case of the narrator of *Aurélia*, the urban journey brings the time-obsessed Prufrock to a realisation of his own mortality and intensifies the fear of death which paralyses him:

I have seen the moment of my greatness flicker,  
And I have seen the eternal Footman hold my coat, and snicker,  
And in short, I was afraid (14).

Similarly, it is a phantasmagoric evocation of an urban labyrinth that opens Baudelaire’s *Les Petites Vieilles*: “Dans les plis sinueux des vieilles capitales,/Où tout, même l’horreur, tourne aux enchantements” (1: 89). The presentation of the city as a fantastic maze is taken further by Rimbaud in the *Villes* poem whose opening words are “L’acropole officielle outre les conceptions de la barbarie moderne les plus colossales”

(226). This initial sentence announces the central theme of the poem, which is the impressiveness of the modern metropolis. Faced with the city, the speaker marvels at its monumentality: "j'ai tremblé à l'aspect des gardiens de colosses et officiers de constructions" (226). The large-scale architecture and all the amazing sights he is exposed to fill him with questions to which he finds no answers. He considers the city not only in terms of its size, but also in terms of its depth, and finds it unfathomable: "j'ai cru pouvoir juger la profondeur de la ville! C'est prodige dont je n'ai pu me rendre compte: quels sont les niveaux des autres quartiers sur ou sous l'acropole?" (226). If we subscribe to Sacchi's view that the layers Rimbaud's city consists of could be sociologically interpreted (38, 89), we cannot escape the conclusion that the essence of *Villes* is the condition of its speaker, the modern man, lost, anxious and confused in the maze of modern civilisation, of which the urban centre is only an emblem. The statement which particularly strikes one upon reading the poem is "Pour l'étranger de notre temps la reconnaissance est impossible" (Rimbaud 226). Through this one sentence, the somewhat naive, overwhelmed visitor to the city acquires an infinitely more tragic and universal dimension. The city is no longer just a place, but a temporal entity as well, making the stranded speaker of the poem not only a tourist in the modern city, but a stranger lost in his time. The answer to the questions which torment him is that there are no answers, since "la reconnaissance est impossible".

The symbolist image of the city inevitably gravitates towards phantasmagoria and also in this respect Eliot follows in his French predecessors' footsteps. For the author of *The Waste Land*, the modern metropolis is as much a "cité pleine de rêves" (Baudelaire 1:87), a dreamy city, as Baudelaire's Paris, as Eliot himself admits in his *Notes on The Waste Land* (69). Like the symbolists, Eliot equates the urban with the nocturnal, which helps achieve the phantasmagoric effect: it is, after all, "the night" that reveals, in *Preludes*, "The thousand sordid images/Of which your soul was constituted" (23) and which leads, in the morning, to "such a vision of the street/As the street hardly understands" (23). Baudelaire's *Confession* or *Le Vin des Chiffonniers* are but two examples of poems which might have inspired Eliot's images of the metropolis at night. In the former, "La pleine lune", "la solennité de la nuit" and "Paris dormant" (l: 45) form the background to an urban stroll, while the latter is set "Au cœur d'un vieux faubourg, labyrinthe fangeux", illuminated by "un réverbère/Dont le vent bat la flamme et tourmente le verre" (l: 106). Eliot's standard urban inventory may be traced back to

Nerval, Baudelaire and their symbolist followers: the evening, the full moon, the fog and the streetlamp, the hallmark of the city-night association. Baudelaire's *Le Crêpuscule du Soir* shows how a combination of these elements contributes to the almost demoniac quality of the nocturnal cityscape:

Cependant des démons malsains dans l'atmosphères  
S'éveillent lourdement, comme des gens d'affaire,  
Et cognent en volant les volets et l'auvent.  
A travers les lueurs que tourmente le vent (l:94-5)

In *Le Crêpuscule*, demons embody the city's nature, and personification becomes one of the devices Baudelaire employs to evoke the urban. The city turns into an animate being, and assumes a life of its own. *Les Sept Vieillards* presents Paris as a "colosse puissant", where "Les mystères partout coulent comme des sèves" (l: 87). In "Le Crêpuscule du Matin", the French capital becomes the gigantic body of a hard-working old man: "le sombre Paris, en se frottant les yeux,/Empoignait ses outils, vieillard laborieux" (l: 104). In *Le Vin des Chiffonniers*, this association is taken further: the mention of "Vomissement confus de l'énorme Paris" (l: 106) likens the city to a vomiting organism. Strikingly, Eliot shares Baudelaire's penchant for animation and personification of the urban, the key phantasmagoric metamorphoses the cityscape undergoes in his poems. Thus, in *The Love Song* the fog famously "slides along the street,/Rubbing its back upon the window-panes" (12) and makes a whole series of movements which liken it to a cat, while "The winter evening" of *Preludes* "settles down" (22) as a human being would. The tendency culminates in the *par excellence* phantasmagoric opening of *Rhapsody on a Windy Night*:

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 (25).

The personification of the streetlamp turns out to be the poem's organising principle: it is the lamp's utterances that introduce the subsequent sections of the poem, provoking a series of recollections and associations, and structuring the protagonist's inner experience. The dreamlike

changes of the cityscape the speaker of *Rhapsody* beholds culminate in the vision of a personified moon, which "winks a feeble eye" and "smiles into corners" (26).

It is not only Nerval's and Baudelaire's lesson in the phantasmagoric that Eliot has absorbed. Rimbaud's *Nocturne vulgaire* is as much a poem of nocturnal phantasmagoria as Eliot's *Rhapsody* or *Preludes*. Here too, the "souffle" of the opening sentence evokes the wind blowing amid buildings: "Un souffle ouvre des brèches opéradiques dans les cloisons, - brouille le pivotement des toits rongés, - disperse les limites des foyers, - éclipse les croisées" (Rimbaud 232). As in Eliot's poems, the function of the wind does not merely consist in constituting the setting. Its gusty, vertiginous gyrations evoke the fluid, blurred and chaotic nature of what is going on in the mind of the sleepy or the sleeper. Thus, the combination of lunar figures, which immediately bring to mind the "lunar synthesis" and "lunar incantations" (Eliot 25) of *Rhapsody*, with leaves and breasts which whirl in the speaker's oneiric vision aptly marries inner and outer reality. The link between the weather, nighttime, dream and human consciousness is explored, the "I" of the *veilleur* being at the centre of the poem and an oneiric vision unfolding before his eyes. The fact that the opening image of the wind is also the closing one reinforces the inner-outer parallel, simultaneously pointing to the circular, vague character of dreams, as reflected in the poem's composition. The phantasmagoric aspect of Rimbaud's urban vision is even more conspicuous in *Villes (L'acropole)*. Here too, the streetlamps become larger than life as the French poet depicts "des quais chargés de candélabres géants" (226). Their artificial light is sufficient to turn the cityscape into a dreamlike landscape, bizarrely distorted and giantly blown out of proportion:

Le faubourg, aussi élégant qu'une belle rue de Paris, est favorisé d'un air de lumière; l'élément démocratique compte quelques cents âmes. Là encore, les maisons ne se suivent pas; le faubourg se perd bizarrement dans la campagne, le «Comté» qui remplit l'occident éternel des forêts et des plantations prodigieuses où les gentilshommes sauvages chassent leurs chroniques sous la lumière qu'on a crée (228).

It is with a phantasmagoric depiction of streetlamps that Rimbaud's "L'orgie parisienne ou Paris se repeuple" closes: "Et les gaz en délire, aux murailles rougies, / Flambent sinistrement vers les azurs blafards!"

(76). The same image recurs in *Scènes*: “Dans des corridors de gaze noire, suivant les pas des promeneurs aux lanternes et aux feuilles” (246). Phantasmagoric *par excellence*, as the poet himself indicates in the mention of “les autres fantasmagories”, is also the nocturnal *décor* in section three of Rimbaud’s *Métropolitain*. As in Eliot’s *Rhapsody*, street-lamps make the urban images fragmentary and disquieting:

Lève la tête: ce pont de bois, arqué; les derniers potagers de Samarie; ces masques enluminés sous la lanterne fouettée par la nuit froide; l’ondine niaise à la robe bruyante, au bas de la rivière; ces crânes lumineux dans les plans de pois – et les autres fantasmagories – la campagne (236).

Sacchi’s analysis of *Métropolitain* (229) enables one to notice further affinities with *Rhapsody*. Rimbaud’s passage evokes a cityscape in which unexpected, incomprehensible details emerge from darkness. They seem to be parts of some larger stories, with which the poem’s reader is not familiar. Juxtapositions of seemingly disparate details are charged with meaning and yet remain elusive. Familiar, banal objects are defamiliarised, and “une décomposition rhétorique du réel” (229) takes place. The cityscape is no longer “normal”, but no explanation is given. What can be felt, however, is “une atmosphère globale de dépaysement” (229): subject to phantasmagoric transformations, the metropolis is not steeped in the concrete anymore, instead gravitating towards mystery, fantasy and abstraction.

As the titles of their urban cycles *Tableaux parisiens* and *Paris* indicate, for Baudelaire and Corbière respectively the modern metropolis is still a concrete city, namely the French capital. For Rimbaud and Eliot, by contrast, the urban centre is a semi-abstract amalgam of all contemporary cities, containing elements of each and yet not identifiable with any of them. It is an oneiric variation on the urban theme that the two poets compose, Eliot’s vision being nightmarish while Rimbaud’s is a mixture of dream and nightmare. It is perhaps to Rimbaud, more than to any other symbolist, that Eliot is indebted for his poetic rendering of the urban. Rimbaud’s poems whose very titles, general and geographically unidentifiable, suggest a preoccupation with the phenomenon of the modern city, namely *Ville*, the two poems entitled *Villes* and the poem *Métropolitain*, bear striking similarities to Eliot’s vision. *Ville* deplores the homogeneous, nondescript and tasteless nature of the metropolis, whose very “modernity” is questioned in the ironic mention of “une

métropole crue moderne" (222). If the city is a microcosm of the universe, its condition stands for the condition of mankind, low and debased. The city is inhabited by "Ces millions de gens qui n'ont pas besoin de se connaître" (222): individuals disappear amid the anonymous masses, which makes real human contact impossible. They lead similarly mechanical lives and urban existence is in fact death-in-life: what Rimbaud's speaker sees from his window is a parade of contemporary ghosts, "des spectres nouveaux roulant à travers l'épaisse et éternelle fumée de charbon" (222), which immediately brings to mind the "Unreal City" passage of *The Waste Land*:

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 (Eliot 53).

As in Eliot's magnum opus, the three hallmarks of metropolitan existence evoked in *Ville* are death, "la Mort sans pleurs", hopeless, impossible love, "un Amour désespéré", and crime, "un joli Crime", all three "piaulant dans la boue de la rue" (222), whimpering in street mud, an image which might have been conceived by Eliot. Emotional emptiness and atrophy are inherent in the urban condition, making the city dehumanised. This is reinforced by ironic references to nature inserted into the "urbaness" of the poem: the exclamation "notre ombre des bois, notre nuit d'été!" (222) bitterly suggests that the urban has come to replace the pastoral in the modern era, bringing to mind Eliot's "testimony of summer nights" (58) in the urban mock-idyll which opens *The Fire Sermon*. Similarly, Eliot's nymphs, who "are departed", echo Rimbaud's "Érinnyes nouvelles" (222). Both poets evoke an urban life which is miserable, sordid, tragic and utterly hopeless. Theirs is a debased cityscape, where the mythological goddesses and nymphs dwell only in their degraded, profane version.

In the two Rimbaud poems called *Villes*, the abstract, all-embracing metropolis is multiplied: the singular noun *ville*, the French word for city which constitutes the title of the previously discussed prose poem, is pluralised into *cities: villes*. This poetic manoeuvre makes one think of Eliot's "Unreal City", which, singular and still identifiable with London in part one of *The Waste Land*, gives way, in part five, to

“unreal cities”, which include not only the British capital but also Jerusalem, Athens, Alexandria and Vienna. The transformation is symbolic: Rimbaud presents imaginary, non-existent cities as he would like to see them. In the *Villes* poem whose opening words are “Ce sont des villes!” (224), the scenery provides a contrast to Rimbaud’s vision of the city in *Ville*. The urban centre as the French poet now envisages it is impressive and sumptuous. It is a place where the natural and the artificial coexist in perfect harmony. It is the apotheosis of perfection, of man’s reconciliation with nature, the product of a new golden age, a new world following the revolution which in Rimbaud’s view is the precondition of regeneration. It is a utopian vision, in which the urban – an emblem of the modern, future rather than past-oriented – becomes a reservoir of the poet’s hopes for a brighter tomorrow. Rimbaud’s city is thus an amalgam not only because it cannot be identified with any concrete location, but primarily because it is an idealised perfection. However, as the closing sentence indicates, the speaker of “Villes” is painfully aware that the reality falls short of his vision: “Quels bons bras, quelle belle heure me rendront cette région d’où viennent mes sommeils et mes moindres mouvements?” (224). The sense of loss he expresses confirms that the poem is merely an account of a dream, an oneiric cityscape nowhere to be found in the real world.

It is along similar lines that Eliot acts in *The Waste Land*. Though his vision of the urban is bleak, the way he builds up his image of the city bears the mark of Rimbaud. Like his French predecessor, Eliot mingles disparate elements to achieve a unique fusion of the real and the fantastic, the past and the present, the geographical and the oneiric, the historical and the mythic. The sumptuous, evoked by the description which opens *A Game of Chess* and by references to Elizabethan splendour later on in the poem, finds its parallel in Rimbaud’s depiction of “chalets de cristal et de bois” and “palmiers de cuivre” (224). Mythology is the key element exploited by both poets: in *Villes* as well as in *The Waste Land*, “Toutes les légendes évoluent” (224), to use Rimbaud’s words. Thus, Eliot’s nymphs parallel Rimbaud’s “centauresse sésaphiques”, “la naissance éternelle de Vénus”, “Diane” and “Les Bacchantes des banlieues” (224). When actual geographical names are mentioned, be it Rimbaud’s “boulevard de Bagdad” (224) or Eliot’s “Jerusalem Athens Alexandria/Vienna London” (65), they hardly seem more real than the mythological locations they are juxtaposed with. When the historical is evoked in *The Waste Land*, it serves mainly to build up a fairytale ambience of splendour: in this respect, Elizabeth and Leicester’s retinue



corresponds to Rimbaud's "cortèges de Mabs" (224). Both poems include a mingling of the urban and the natural, starting with sea imagery and culminating in the image of mountains, the "fabuleux fantômes des monts" (224) in *Villes* and the "mountains of rock without water" (Eliot, 64) in *The Waste Land*. In both poems too, music accompanies the peculiar spectacle: Rimbaud's "corporations de chanteurs", his "groupes de beffrois" and "chasse des carillons" as well as his "musique inconnue" (224), are echoed, respectively, in Eliot's Verlainian borrowing of "ces voix d'enfants, chantant dans la coupole" (59), the reference to "Saint Mary Woolnoth" which "kept the hours/With a dead sound on the final stroke of nine" (53), the mysterious, disquieting mentions of the music which "crept by me upon the waters" (60) and the "whisper music" (66) played by an unnamed woman on the strings of her hair. The result, in both cases, is a fantastic metropolis, a heterogeneous, oneiric conglomerate of people, places and times.

Rimbaud's and Eliot's metropolis is symbolist in the same sense in which Mallarmé's ideal flower is an "absente de tous bouquets" (360), the essence of all existing flowers, which, however, is nowhere to be found in the real world. This is even more visible in Rimbaud's other *Villes* poem, where, just like Eliot in *The Waste Land*, he evokes various geographical locations at the same time: the city the speaker finds himself in partakes of London, Paris, India, and yet fails to be any of these places. It is the idea of a city rather than a concrete urban centre, a Platonic concept of the urban which exists off the map. It is, ultimately, the universal idea of not just the city, but of the dense, tangled reality of the modern world and civilisation. This is confirmed in yet another of Rimbaud's city poems, *Métropolitain*, an urban *tableau*, whose five sections correspond, in Sacchi's interpretation (223), to five stations of the metro. The speaker is thus a commuter on an urban journey and the poem a record of his itinerary, simultaneously condensing the multifarious aspects of the metropolitan experience. The metropolis observed from such a vantagepoint comes to encapsulate the essence of modernity. Rimbaud's poem combines a sense of the urban with a sense of novelty: the city with its cutting-edge architecture and the young families that inhabit it is a celebration of the new. It becomes *the* City, at once contemporary and universal, a conglomerate of all landscapes, objects, riches and possibilities. This urban bazaar has global relevance, and its modernity parallels the *par excellence* "modern" character of Rimbaud's *uvre* (219). As the images seen from a carriage window follow one another in cinematic succession and at an unreal speed, the city in

Rimbaud's *Métropolitain* becomes, Sacchi argues (223), a new mythic land, encompassing everything, even its own prehistoric beginnings, even the primitive and the natural exemplified by the desert on the outskirts of the city. The reference to Damascus – the venue for St Paul's illumination – towards the end of the poem points to its prophetic content. "Prophetic realism", the term Hackett applies to Rimbaud's urban poems (66), is perfectly relevant not only to the French poet, but also to the Eliot of *The Waste Land*. Analogically, the prophetic dimension of Rimbaud's urban vision Sacchi comments on (224) is just as applicable to Eliot's Tiresias: it consists in seeing what is profoundly concealed and thus invisible to the majority, in focusing on what is at once fascinating and repulsive, splendid and monstrous, and what consequently makes the city-dweller's experience ephemeral, unreal, fragmentary and factitious. A perfect example is the way Tiresias, "throbbing between two lives" (59), introduces and concludes the scene of degraded lovemaking between the typist and "he young man carbuncular" (60):

I Tiresias, old man with wrinkled dugs  
 Perceived the scene, and foretold the rest –  
 I too awaited the expected guest.  
 (...)  
 (And I Tiresias have foresuffered all  
 Enacted on this same divan or bed;  
 I who have sat by Thebes below the wall  
 And walked among the lowest of the dead) (60).

Like *The Waste Land*, Rimbaud's *Métropolitain* is a poetic combination of reverie and myth: the oneiric mingles here with impressions and pure emotions rather than mere physical objects. The mention of "possessions de féériques aristocraties ultra-Rhénanes, Japonaises, Guaranies, propres encore à recevoir la musique des anciens" (236) is expressive of Rimbaud's magic urban geography, his map of the region of dreams, in which the northern and the tropical appear side by side, in which ancient musique is played now, times are mixed, and the past is present: "il y a des auberges qui pour toujours n'ouvrent déjà plus" (236). Section three, devoted to "la campagne" with "les derniers potagers de Samarie" (236), evokes the biblical countryside of Palestine, situating *Métropolitain* outside time, in the realm of multicultural legends.

But if Rimbaud's method is similar to that of *The Waste Land*, the effect is altogether different. While Rimbaud's vision in *Ce sont des vil-*

*les!*, unrealistic as it may be, is primarily hopeful and flamboyant, Eliot's is gloomy and depressing. While the French poet is enthusiastic, the author of *The Waste Land* is bitterly ironic. The same elements are used by Eliot, but they are coloured differently. Overtones of splendour serve to emphasise, through contrast, the omnipresent theme of urban degradation. Thus, the splendour of the past makes the deprivation of the present even more poignant. The loftiness of the historical and the mythic makes the "here and now" seem even more pathetically prosaic, while their aesthetic superiority reinforces the impression of present ugliness. As a result, there is little hope for mankind in Eliot's vision. Rimbaud's city-dwellers celebrate the joy of new labour, "la joie du travail nouveau" (224), whereas the inhabitants of Eliot's urban wasteland travel to work and back like automatons. To the narrator of *Villes*, a *voyant* as endowed with visionary powers as Rimbaud himself, who sees "Des fêtes amoureuses" which "sonnent sur les canaux" (224), Eliot opposes Tiresias, the sad, powerless prophet, contemplating the remains of picnics whose participants were today's fallen nymphs and "the loitering heirs of city directors" (58). However, in Rimbaud's urban poems, hints of the gloomy, the depressing and the monstrous may be also detected. The splendour of his urban vision in *Métropolitain* includes an evocation of the poverty of young families whose youth parallels that of the city. The fact that it is "des boulevards de cristal" which are "habités incontinent par de jeunes familles pauvres" (236) suggests that the mirage is doomed to failure. This "mésalliance rimbaldienne", as Sacchi terms it (224), indicates that the fear and pessimism underlying the French poet's take on the modern metropolis provides an analogy to the bleakness of Eliot's urban vision, though there is in Rimbaud an enthusiastic, flamboyant sense which is not to be found in *The Waste Land*.

What links Rimbaud's and Eliot's urban poetry is an aura of impending doom: the perfection of the crystal buildings, the French poet seems to imply, can hardly conceal the chaos, violence and ugliness of the world. The exclamation "La bataille!" (236) uttered by the prophet-speaker of *Métropolitain* to conclude a section in which the image of the sky touching the earth suggests chaos reveals Rimbaud's insight into what is hidden: the last battle of our civilisation which unfolds in the present, the last stage of a historic struggle, an Eliotesque awareness of an inevitable global cataclysm. Unsurprisingly, *The Waste Land* as a poem of urban decay and disintegration, symbolised by the "Falling towers" of "the city over the mountains" which "Cracks and reforms and bursts in the violet air" (65), sends the reader back to Rimbaud's "L'orgie pari-

sienne ou Paris se repeuple". Dated "Mai 1871" (76), the poem revolves around the collapse of the Commune of Paris, one of the key events in French history. Both Eliot's magnum opus and "L'orgie parisienne" are city poems and simultaneously poems of the aftermath. While *The Waste Land* is set in an unnamed post-World War I metropolis, Rimbaud's poem depicts the French capital in the wake of the crushed rebellion. In both poems, the central vision is thus that of "A heap of broken images" (Eliot 51), of the disjointed and the fragmentary. Rimbaud conveys, as does Eliot, the madness of the fight and the madness of the aftermath, with its filth, disorder and confusion. Like Eliot, who inserts the reference to "the ships at Mylae" (53) into the "Unreal City" passage, which is a poetic tribute to World War I victims, Rimbaud refers to ancient history in his evocation of a recent historical event: "Les boulevards qu'un soir comblèrent les Barbares" (72). In the midst of it, a poet – the word being capitalised as "Poète" (74) – contemplates the chaos in which people can only eat, drink and copulate. His position as the pensive but also passive and helpless observer of man's folly and downfall, as well as the overall context of Rimbaud's œuvre, in which being a poet is tantamount to being a visionary, make it possible to again establish a parallel between him and Tiresias. Like Eliot's prophet, Rimbaud's "Poète" is driven to condemn mankind as a mass of "Syphilitiques, fous, rois, pantins, ventri-loques", the condemnation culminating in Paris being likened to a whore, "la putain Paris" (74). The city is consistently personified in the poem, but the connotations the personifications have are not always negative. The city of Paris, though destroyed, is glorified and celebrated as if it were one of the Commune's heroes: in fact, it is even sanctified, becoming "la Cité sainte" (72) and "Cité choisie" (76). The personification enables the speaker of Rimbaud's poem to address the French capital directly, just as Eliot does in the "Unreal City" passage of *The Waste Land*: "O cité douloureuse, ô cité quasi morte / (...) / Cité que le passé sombre pourrait bénir" (74).

The similarities are, however, accompanied by differences. While Rimbaud's speaker is proud to recall the city's heroic past, Tiresias sadly states "I had not thought death had undone so many" (Eliot 53). Despite the overall destruction he witnesses, the "Poète" firmly believes Paris is strong enough to survive all this: "Elle se secouera de vous, hargneux pourris!" (Rimbaud 74). There is, inherent in his vision, an anger, militancy, vigour and hope which *The Waste Land* lacks. Rimbaud sees Paris as a Phoenix-like city that will rise up against oppression: "La rouge courtisane aux seins gros de batailles / Loin de votre stupeur tordra ses

poings ardens!" (74). Though the city has been tortured, the attempted rebellion has sown the seeds of renewal:

Quand tes pieds ont dansé si fort dans les colères,  
Paris! quand tu reçus tant de coups de couteau,  
Quand tu gis, retenant dans tes prunelles claires  
Un peu de la bonté du fauve renouveau (74).

The motif of rebirth appears in both poems, but only in *L'orgie parisienne* is it accompanied by the narrator's belief in its likelihood: "Corps remagnétisé pour les énormes peines,/Tu rebois donc la vie effroyable!" (74). Thus, Rimbaud's poem ends on a note of bitter triumph. Despite its present ugliness, the poet celebrates the paradoxical beauty of the city, which the turbulent events of the Commune have elevated to poetry: "L'orage te sacra suprême poésie" (76). When in the poem's closing stanza the speaker announces that everything is back to normal, he seems to suggest that the ordeal the city has gone through will contribute to its being stronger and allow for its rebirth: "L'ancien jour effaré rafraîchit vos regards" (72). There is, in Rimbaud, a sense of spiritual victory and a belief that regeneration will be possible, which provide a sharp contrast to *The Waste Land's* dominant mood of stagnation and resignation. The difference does, of course, stem from the different nature of the historical events behind the two poems: the youthful, idealistic French revolt versus World War I, a pointless slaughter on a global scale. However, another reason for this divergence must be the disparity between Rimbaud's and Eliot's respective poetic outlooks. Throughout his œuvre, the French poet expresses the belief that only the destruction inherent in revolution can bring renewal in all areas of life. This view is later fully expressed in such poems as *Vertige*, with its apocalyptic, infernal vision of bloodshed, fire, murder, cries and rage. The poem is an explosion of Rimbaud's revolutionary urges, expressive of a desire for and celebration of destruction, and an overall determination to make it new. When the French poet speaks of overthrowing "Tout ordre" and of "l'Aquilon encor sur les débris" (130), he employs the Eliotesque motifs of order and debris. However, unlike the author of *The Waste Land*, who has the Fisher King ask in the poem's conclusion, "Shall I at least set my lands in order?" (67), Rimbaud does want the order to be reversed rather than brought back. Underlying *Vertige* is an urge to destroy history, to abolish the old and the established: "Industriels, princes, sénats: /Périssez! pouissance, justice, histoire: à bas!"

the speaker exclaims, announcing the end of “Républiques de ce monde,” “empereurs,” “régiments,” “colons,” and “peuples” (130). It is no longer the destruction of one city, but of the whole universe, of pluralised “Cités et campagnes,” that Rimbaud evokes when he orders “Europe, Asie, Amérique, disparaissez” (130), and it is a destruction he eagerly anticipates. The poem ends as the speaker feels the earth beneath his feet shaking: “je me sens frémir, la vieille terre,/ Sur moi de plus en plus à vous! la terre fond” (130). The old world ends suddenly and violently for Rimbaud, “with a bang” rather than “a whimper” (Eliot 80), in a reversal of what Eliot envisages in *The Hollow Men*, and, on the part of the speaker, with enthusiasm which is the exact opposite of the resignation manifested by Eliot’s narrators.

Interestingly, the central image of urban destruction in *The Waste Land* – that of collapsing buildings – might be Rimbaud-inspired. In *Les Ponts*, the French poet combines elements such as the eponymous bridges, domes and the river with musical references. Such an association immediately brings to mind the nursery-rhyme phrase “London Bridge is falling down falling down falling down” (67) in the closing paragraph of Eliot’s poem. Like Eliot, Rimbaud might be referring to a popular song, *Sur le pont d’Avignon*, which would explain the rhetorical question “Sont-ce des airs populaires, des bouts de concerts seigneuriaux, des restants d’hymnes publics?” (222). The annihilation mentioned in the closing sentence of “Les Ponts” suggests that Rimbaud’s bridges too are “falling down”: “Un rayon blanc, tombant du haut du ciel, anéantit cette comédie” (222). The very choice of the bridge as motif is rich in symbolic implications. Bridges might be for Eliot what they are for Rimbaud: sites of meditation, marking rites of passage. However, though the images of destruction in Rimbaud and Eliot might be parallel, the poets’ respective attitudes to it differ. Eliot’s poetry is pervaded by a longing for order and stability, accompanied by a fear of all that can threaten them. Consequently, what the two poets perceive as the source of renewal differs too: while the Rimbaud of *L’orgie parisienne* believes the rebellious Paris should find strength within itself, the inhabitants of Eliot’s compound metropolis turn to an external authority, “To controlling hands” (67) for help and support.

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## ABSTRACT

T. S. Eliot's vision of the modern metropolis is heavily indebted to the French symbolists' treatment of the city. The figure of the urban *flâneur*, present in Gérard de Nerval's and Charles Baudelaire's poetry, resurfaces in Eliot's *œuvre*. The *flâneur* soon turns into the dreamer, and following in the French poets' footsteps, Eliot shifts from the urban and the real to the oneiric and the phantasmagorical. The nocturnal city becomes almost surreal, gravitating away from the concrete and towards the mysterious, the fantastic and the abstract. Joining the Plato-symbolists in their quest for the idea and the ideal, for abstraction and generalisation, Eliot, influenced largely by Arthur Rimbaud, creates an urban amalgam, multicultural and all-embracing, fusing past and present, the historical and the mustic, the natural and the urban, splendour and monstrosity. The resultant marriage of contradictions emphasises the painfulness and misery of the actual. The city thus presented is *par excellence* a microcosm of the universe and mankind, at once cosmopolitan and debased. Though Rimbaud's images are altogether more dynamic and flamboyant, what the two poets have in common is the prophetic dimension of their urban vision: a sense of impending doom underlies their magic-mythic metropolitan geography, and theirs is a world tottering on the edge of disintegration. Nevertheless, inherent in the symbolist-Eliotesque picture of urban degradation and spiritual atrophy is vague hope for regeneration, which the poets in question will seek to realise by other means.