



London Impressions in Poetry

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Abstract

In this article, the author wants to theorise the dialectical images of London as signs, by using an Impressionist way of reading the visual and the verbal representations. Through reading three poems of London: William Wordsworth's 'Composed Upon Westminster Bridge, September 3, 1802', Oscar Wilde's 'Impression du Matin', and Carol Ann Duffy's 'Woman Seated in the Underground, 1941', the author intends to show an awareness of the Impressionist narrative technique in terms of the spatial representations of the city. The impressions – in both visual and verbal terms, come to show the way in which London is a gendered space, synthesising masculine and feminine metaphors into a sequence of unique narrations. Each moment represents a personal, a specific, and a dramatic London, which is depicted in colours, shapes, lines and emotions.

Key Words: London, Impression, Dialectical Aesthetics, Representation

Introduction

The aim of this research is to show the way in which metaphors and signs of the urban space come to construct visual impressions, revealing through three poems about London. Each one of them can be read separately. And yet, the visual and verbal images in the poems come to indicate a coherent image of the city of London, bringing out a personal sensibility of this particular urban space.

William Wordsworth and the Impressive Sublime

William Wordsworth, in his poem, 'Composed Upon Westminster Bridge, September 3, 1802', brings the reader into a world of the Impressionist London. The specific date, month and year come to remind us (although Wordsworth himself would not be aware of that) the way in which the French painter Claude Monet used to paint his *Haystacks*, in different times of a day, or, during several particular hours of a season.

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Monet's *Impression, Sunrise* (1873) is considered as a work of art, which is ground-breaking. It is not because Monet painted something specifically beautiful. In fact, quite the opposite, it is because of the ugliness of the painting. It is ugly, because it does not represent a traditional academic way of looking at visual objects. As Belinda Thomson pointed out, in several reviews, for example, in *La Patrie*, or in *Le Charivari*, Monet's 'impression' in painting is only considered as a sort of 'distorted' reality (Thomson 125), which looks like an unfinished and an immature experiment. The audience and the critics of Monet's time found that it is difficult to digest his way of depicting an impression – especially when they saw on his canvas – those broken strokes, quick brushes, bright, sharp and vivid colours, and the blurred industrial background, which makes the whole thing look extremely untidy and dirty.

And yet, just because of this way of painting, Monet explores his way of expressing his own impression of a particular time, in a specific day. His impression has been put on his canvas, as a kind of memory found by the painter, in his own studio. Somehow, the authors would argue, before Monet's painting, Wordsworth's impression of London, which is lingering on a very special moment in the morning, on Westminster Bridge, on a specific day, comes to show the readers a sense of an impressive sublime.

Composed Upon Westminster Bridge, September 3, 1802

Earth has not anything to show more fair:
Dull would he be of soul who could pass by
A sight so touching in its majesty;
This City now doth, like a garment, wear
The beauty of the morning: silent, bare,
Ships, towers, domes, theatres, and temples lie
Open unto the fields, and to the sky;
All bright and glittering in the smokeless air.
Never did sun more beautifully steep
In his first splendor, valley, rock, or hill;
Ne'er saw I, never felt, a calm so deep!
The river glideth at his own sweet will:
Dear God! the very houses seem asleep;
And all that mighty heart is lying still! (Ford 331)

The phrase 'Dear God!' expresses the gratitude – the need to thank God for the impressive sublime that Wordsworth felt in London, at that specific moment of September 3, 1802. The beauty of London comes to the eye of its beholder, so stunning, as Wordsworth could not find anything 'more fair' in this world. If there is someone, whose soul is not touched by what he or she sees in that morning of London ('A sight so touching in its majesty'), it means that he or she must be extremely '[d]ull'. This 'sight' is a visual impression, showing the power and the greatness of London – as one sees a kind of 'quality of awesome' (Baldick 321), in a way which one's thought and soul can be lifted.

London is, in the eye of its beholder, like a Queen, 'silent', fresh and innocent, who 'wear[s]' a beautiful morning light. This light opens the eyes of the beholder, making him or her feel the beauty of London through '[s]hips, towers, domes, theatres, and temples'. Looking at 'the fields' and 'the sky', the viewer can see that the morning air is very 'bright' and clear ('smokeless', unlike Monet's grey and black industrial background on the canvas). This impressive sublime, created by the bright morning light – the sun, comes to make the viewer 'I' feel 'a calm so deep!' – a visual impression which makes one feel profoundly touched, as 'Never' before, in four negativities (the 'Earth has not', 'Never did sun', 'Ne'er saw I, never felt'); as 'the mighty heart is lying still' – as the view itself is so breathtaking – in a way that it is so occupied, 'so entirely filled with' (Day 184) the beauty of London.

Wordsworth's verbal impression is a sunlight effect, which comes way before the French Impressionism was known. And yet, Wordsworth did not concentrate on the depiction of visual realities – for example, the colour, the shape or the line of 'the river' Thames, the '[s]hips, towers, domes, theatres, and temples', 'the fields' and 'the sky'. Instead, he made the viewers see the beauty of London through the light, in a way which that particular morning touches our soul, when we read this poem. It is a light, which does not have the heat of the Summer. It is also not a light, which shines as the way of the noon time. That morning light of beauty, as Wordsworth saw it, was only bright enough, to make the narrator see things, people and objects in London in a way of appreciation, as the phrase 'Dear God' indicates the 'virtue' and the 'dignity' (Hartman 126) of the inwardness of a human being in Wordsworth's sense.

Oscar Wilde and London Impressions

Impressions du Matin

The Thames nocturne of blue and gold
Changed to a Harmony in grey:
A barge with ochre-coloured hay
Dropped from the wharf: and chill and cold

The yellow fog came creeping down
The bridges, till the houses' walls
Seemed changed to shadows, and St. Paul's
Loomed like a bubble o'er the town.

Then suddenly arose the clang
Of waking life; the streets were stirred
With country wagons and a bird
Flew to the glistening roofs and sang.

But one pale woman all along,

The daylight kissing her wan hair,
Loitered beneath the gas lamps' flare,
With lips of flame and heart of stone. (Ford 452)

In four stanzas, Oscar Wilde shows the readers the way in which the city of London is seen from a far, a general view in the first stanza. That view, again, comes nearer and nearer to our views, stanza by stanza. Firstly, it was the night, as the colours 'blue and gold' shown. The street lamps come to reflect on the Thames, like 'a Harmony in grey', as the colour comes to represent an unclear view of the Thames in a 'chill and cold' atmosphere.

In the second stanza, although the 'yellow fog' comes ('creeping down') to cover the visible world of London, the narrator, in a way, can see even clearer, for the visual objects are vivid and are slowly becoming more specific to the view – 'the bridges', 'the houses' walls', 'and St. Paul's / Loomed like a bubble o'er the town'.

In the third stanza, we can see that the London scene becomes even more into details, as we are a part of it. People are waking up, as if we can see them, and can hear 'the clang'; can see the bird on the roof and hear its song. The street of London is getting busier and busier, when the day begins, as people make noises and their activities make London streets a crowded space. For example, the morning traffic ('country waggons') on the street comes to change the previous harmonious grey atmosphere into a different mood.

In the fourth stanza, the narrator again, zooms in, bringing our visual focus to 'one pale woman all alone'. She is the sign of the dialectical aesthetics of London, coming to be the opposite pole of all those people as the crowd, with their activities, noises – as she is 'alone' and silent. The narrator wants us to see this woman, as if all the Impressionist way of depicting London in the previous three stanzas has only one function, which is just to make the viewers ready to see this woman. Although the sun is 'kissing' her, and yet, her hair is wet, her heart is cold (like a 'stone'). She is wondering around, aimlessly, under 'the gas lamps' fire' – even her lips seem to be as red as a flame, her action, as far as we can see from the narrator's eye, is meaningless and without any passion or feeling.

What is going on here? All these Impressionist sensations of London in Wilde's poem cannot bring this woman to feel. This woman, although nameless, comes to remind the author a painting of Édouard Manet's, *Olympia* (1863, in Smith 48). In the painting, Olympia is a posed, naked figure, waiting for 'her client' (Smith 49). There is a contrast between her facial expression and her inner feeling. Although she looks very calm in the painting, as Paul Smith pointed out, her 'locket' shows that 'she loves someone' (Smith 50). Again, as Smith suggested, 'any sex she might have with us is purely and simply for the money' (Smith 50). In other words, Olympia is able to do the business, without feeling a thing, simply because we are not the one in her heart – as in her locket. There is no confusion between her inner world and the external reality.

Another painting of Manet's also comes to indicate a very similar dialectical relation between the outer space (what people can see) and the inner space (which is invisible to the others). Although the barmaid is all dressed up, as if she is ready to serve her clients, there is something in her eyes, which comes to show a feeling of 'melancholic' (Smith 54). In Manet's *A Bar at the Folies-Bergère* (1882, in Smith 53), she is a barmaid – that is her profession. And yet, because of the emotions in her eyes, we know that she is not, at least, heartless. The contrasts between the inwardness and the public space, as the author would argue, illuminate

‘the psychological effects’ (Rubin 83) of Manet’s visual sensations, as all the colours, lines and the visible cannot cover the barmaid named ‘Suzon’ (Rubin 83), and her emotion.

Through reading two women in Manet’s paintings – Olympia and Suzon, the viewers can see the dialectical aesthetics of the inner and the outer spaces, for the psychological tensions these two women show us. Somehow, this poor nameless woman in Wilde’s poem is just a visual representation, like all other visual objects in London, such as a bridge or a wall (even the Cathedral has a name, ‘St. Paul’), as Wilde wrote her this way. Even she is kissed by the sun, surrounded by all colours and sensations of that very London morning, still, she gives us the dialectical aesthetics of London in the poetic form. As she is incapable of feeling a thing, she is the sign of a total ‘visual pleasure’ (Olin 209). In other words, she can be anyone’s ‘imaginary possession’ (Pollock 53), which can be identified with any other visual objects in London, under the gaze of the narrator and the viewers, as the richness of the external visible world comes to be the opposite of her internal world.

Carol Ann Duffy: A Woman in London

Although there is no date, nor month, Carol Ann Duffy’s poem, ‘Woman Seated in the Underground, 1941 *after the drawing by Henry Moore*’, in many ways, reminds in the readers Wordsworth’s London, as the authors mentioned in the first section of this paper. When we juxtapose Duffy’s poem and Wordsworth’s, the readers can see the way in which these two poems represent the dialectic image of London, synthesising the positive and the negative emotions, the inner and the outer spaces.

In Wordsworth’s poem, the city of London is represented as a Queen – who is quiet, fresh, and beautiful. With the effect of the morning sunlight, the narrator has the impressive sublime, feeling peaceful, calm, and thanking God for bringing him the beauty which he had never seen before. And yet, in Duffy’s London, the reader can see that the narrator is a woman. She somehow represents a sense of nothingness in London.

The narrator ‘I’, this woman, is again, a nameless one (‘I know I am pregnant, but I do not know my name’), just like the one we see in Oscar Wilde’s poem. Everything seems to be gone in the Second World War – memory, love, a family (‘Someone / is looking for me even now), a place to live, a possible wedding ring, and a handbag. At the end, she seems to us, is both physically and mentally lost in the crowd. The readers do not know anything about her – her name, her identity, her background. Her phrase ‘Dear God’ is not a gratitude to the beauty of London, as in Wordsworth’s narrator shows us. On the contrary, it is a cry, which is trying to recall a lost soul.

Woman Seated in the Underground, 1941

after the drawing by Henry Moore

I forgot. I have looked at the other faces and found
No memory, no love. *Christ, she’s a rum one.*
Their laughter fills the tunnel, but it does not
comfort me. There was a bang and then

I was running with the rest through smoke. Thick, grey
smoke has covered thirty years at least
I know I am pregnant, but I do not know my name.

Now they are singing. *Underneath the lantern*
by the barrack gate. But waiting for whom?
Did I? I have no wedding ring, no handbag, nothing.
I want a fag. I have either lost my ring or I am
A loose woman. No. Someone has loved me. Someone
is looking for me even now. I live somewhere.
I sing the word *darling* and it yields nothing.

Nothing. A child is crying. Mine doesn't show yet.
Baby. My hands mime the memory of knitting.
Purl. Plain. I know how to do these things, yet my mind
has unravelled into thin threads that lead nowhere.
In a moment I shall stand up and scream until
somebody helps me. The skies were filled with sirens, planes,
fire, bombs, and I lost myself in the crowd. Dear God.
(Ford 690)

Duffy's poem is like an elegy. In this poem, the readers can see that London Underground is a space. It comes to represent 'the violence of death and the fears associated with it', as one can see in 'ruins' (Scott 167). People tried to hide away from 'sirens, planes, fire, bombs'. As Clive Scott phrases it, apart from death, there are some 'other kinds of loss: national pride, social solidarity, self-belief' (Scott 167).

The crowd was noisy, as the narrator overheard 'their laughter' and their 'singing'. However, all these sensations only represent something as empty. Even the narrator's own singing, for instance, 'the word *darling*', comes to reveal 'nothing'. In the poem, the reader cannot see any vivid poetic motives or impressions. There is no sign of any quality of aesthetic beauty, or, 'involuntary memory' (*mémoire involontaire*, in Nägele 128), because the narrator seems to have nothing to remember, or, she simply cannot remember anything which happened before the war. Although her baby was not born, she started imaging herself to be a mother. And yet, her hands are only imitating someone else's 'memory of knitting', as she does not have one.

With Henry Moore's drawing, the readers can identify Duffy's poem with another kind of sublime, in a way which the sense of beauty – the way one feels spiritually lifting, as in Wordsworth's impressionist sublime – does not come from pleasant sensory experiences. On the contrary, in the poem, this woman in the London Underground shows the readers the way in which the experience of the sublime is aroused 'by pain and terror' (Day 183), with a kind

of 'hellish' and 'visionary significance' (Spalding 139). The author would argue, the image of this woman in London comes to represent a binary pole, which is on the opposite side of William Wordsworth's, forming a dialectical aesthetics of the city of London.

In Wordsworth's poem, as Allison Lin claimed in her book *London Poetics*, the reader can see that

'[t]he poet's inner self, his soul, comes to identify with London, seeing the city as a representation of the essence of a majestic grace (nature, the Sun) and a cultural power (in different architectural forms), which touches and moves the poet's soul. The city of London here, is a great inspiration, which reinforces the poet's subjectivity [...]' (Lin 77 - 78).

London is represented as a feminine sign, under the gaze of the male poet. The narrator sees her as a Muse, 'a great inspiration', which makes his soul calm, so that he is able to write about his impressive sublime. And yet, Duffy's woman, as one can see in several Moore's drawings, comes to show a chaotic and somehow, a ruined city. Although this nameless woman is also trying to think, to remember. However, the city of London does not come to her as a representation of peace and calm. Some drawing of Henry Moore can visualise this point for us. Moore's *Study for 'Group of Shelterers during an Air Raid' 1940-41* (Tolson 28) shows a group of faceless tube shelterers, sitting together as injured figures. They seem without any hope, without any past, and only with an unknown future.

Duffy does not write about a 'smokeless', a clear picture of London, as in Wordsworth's poem. The readers can only see the dark, smoky, and dirty lines which come to construct the group of human figures, in a tunnel, as if there is no way out. The author would argue that Duffy's narrator is more like a 'prayer' (Bloom 138), when we consider her phrase 'Dear God' as a dialectical pole of Wordsworth's. The woman prays. Her 'Dear God' indicates more heavy weights of life, and the burden of survival.

Conclusion

In this paper, the author argues that the dialectical aesthetics of London illuminate not only aesthetic questions about Impressionism, but also the way in which those aesthetic issues of Impressionist techniques were determined and conditioned by gender and spatial concerns, in the urban context of London. A nameless woman, who does not have a clear and a known identity, can be read as a sign, illuminating the 'dialectical motifs' (Abrams 100) of London, in terms of gender (masculine and feminine) and space (inner and outer). Starting from above the ground, we have Wordsworth's gaze as a male poet, which comes to feminise London into a Muse, as a sign of inspiration for a male author.

However, in the London Underground, we can see that Duffy's woman is a sign, which comes to represent 'nothing' – as she has no name, no memory. Oscar Wilde's poem shows the best, when the two opposite pole meet – under the sun, in the middle of the crowd, the streets,

colours, noises and sensations of London, there is this one cold, wet and heartless woman, who does not have an emotion, and who is impossible to be accessed and to be understood in an emotional way. Each poet, William Wordsworth, Oscar Wilde, and Carol Ann Duffy – all of them show the way in which Charles Baudelaire defines ‘modernity’ (Baudelaire 12), because each one of them depicts their own impressions of London in their own fashion, combining the hardship of life in the hope of the smallest thing in the dialectical aesthetics of London.

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