

“Ellul’s City in Scripture and Poetry”

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Last summer I had the privilege of visiting Jerome Ellul and his parents at their home outside Bordeaux, and of examining some of Jacques Ellul’s archives with Jérôme, in particular a number of handwritten poems which had never been published. As a professor of French literature I was drawn to the poems and eager to help Jérôme with transcribing them into typewritten form and translating them into English. The first four poems that Jérôme scanned and sent me were poems Ellul had written to accompany the publication of his book *The Meaning of the City*, but which the editor had declined to publish at the time. It is evident from our current vantage point that these poems not only enhance the substance of Ellul’s book, but that their very personal meaning also sheds light on the author himself, who dared to expose his emotions and experiences in a way that reveals both his profound engagement with this topic, and indeed, a part of his inner life.

To the reader of these poems who has no familiarity with the book, the vehemence of the author in his condemnation of the city would certainly be surprising, if not perplexing, as it finds little explanation in the poems themselves. It is only when they are read in conjunction with the book that the basis for the poet’s attitude is disclosed. Thus, I would like to take a few moments to review the major themes of the book pertaining to an understanding of the poems, before turning to the poems themselves.

The Meaning of the City, as a theological work, analyses the role of the city as portrayed throughout the Bible with tremendous scope and originality – with the city’s development being used as a metaphor for the trajectory of humankind, from its rejection of God to its final redemption through Christ. However, instead of tracing the biblical narrative of humanity from its origins in a garden to its final destination in a heavenly city, Ellul begins with man’s revolt against God and its manifestation in the building of the first city by the first murderer, Cain, thereby conferring on the city from the very beginning the notion of spiritual rebellion which Ellul sees as its root. Condemned to be a fugitive and a wanderer for the sin of having killed his brother, Cain flees from the presence of the Lord and builds a city, in an attempt to end his wandering and establish a secure place, a home, which in fact he never finds. For Ellul, “The seed of all man’s questings is to be found in Cain’s life in the land of wandering” (3). His relationship with God

now broken, he finds no comfort in the mark of protection God puts on him. Ellul affirms, “The city is the direct consequence of Cain’s murderous act and of his refusal to accept God’s protection . . . For God’s Eden he substitutes his own, for the goal given to his life by God, he substitutes a goal chosen by himself – just as he substituted his own security for God’s. Such is the act by which Cain takes his destiny on his own shoulders, refusing the hand of God in his life” (5).

Ellul sees in Cain’s creation of the city the beginning of all civilization. He goes on to elucidate the origins of basically all the significant cities in the Bible, stating that “All the builders were sons of Cain and act with his purpose” (10). Tracing the steps of Nimrod and other pagan builders, he examines the multiple purposes of the city as it develops, including the role of Nineveh as an agent of war, Babylon as the synthesis of civilization, and Pharaoh’s cities as economic strongholds, showing that there are spiritual powers behind each of these. Spiritually speaking, the kings of Israel fare no better than their pagan counterparts, despite having been chosen by God. This is true of Solomon, the first builder King, who succumbs to his desire for power and riches and puts his confidence elsewhere than in the Lord when he begins to build his cities, which are often consecrated to foreign gods. His son Rehoboam builds many fortified towns which replace his dependence on God, causing him in turn to be rejected by God. The central problem the city represents for Israel, according to Ellul, is the clash between the spiritual power of the city, and the spirit of grace which God wants to bring to bear upon the city. There is a fundamental opposition between the Lord and the city, and a “consciousness . . . of the city as a world for which man was not made” (42).

The Meaning of the City thus provides the theological underpinnings for Ellul’s depiction of the city in his poems. For Ellul, “The city is cursed. She is condemned to death because of everything she represents” (47). Ellul cannot do otherwise but reject the city in his poetry, just as he sees God doing in his theology. The reason for this divine rejection, Ellul maintains, is that “[i]nto every aspect . . . of the city’s construction has been built the tendency to exclude God” (53). This would seem all the more so in the modern city, where natural beauty has been replaced by lifeless artifice, and human agency by technological progress. Before touching on the final destiny of the city, as it unfolds at the end of Ellul’s book, let us now turn to the poems Ellul wished to incorporate into his exegesis of the city, considering not only their poetic value, meaning, and support value in relation to the book, but in particular, their revelatory value as it applies to Ellul’s life, emotions, and personal spiritual journey, as a man living in the city, like most of us are compelled to do.

Ellul's City in Poetry

Poem 1 - Lights over the City

(Note: Pending publication the poems being presented at the conference will not be posted on the website.)

"Lights over the City" is a very personal poem, as the first-person pronouns "I" and "my" immediately reveal. We begin with the poet following his dream, which turns out to be more of a nightmare, as it thrusts him into heart of the city, where all is false, just like the hearts of the people who live there. The industrial forms of cast-iron and cement which replace the natural vegetation in the city's landscape reflect, in fact, the inhabitants' hearts made of magnets. Forged in the hardest of materials, incapable of expressing individuality or true emotion, these hearts have all come out the same, and their force of attraction is anything but human. Ironically everything appears to be natural and simple, as if it has always been this way; it is only the poet who is not duped by what he sees.

In the sky, a simple button turns everything to red, and through artificial illumination, nature is once again obliterated; and just as there is no natural vegetation in the city, there are no birds flying in the sky. The metaphor used to describe the sky is as repulsive as the poet can possibly make it: it is nothing but an ugly stretch of ground, entirely vilified by the vomit of an enormous drunk.

Through this and the other images in the poem, the senses of the reader are attacked by the hideous portrait of the city that emerges: the stench of vomit fills our nostrils like the foulness of pollution that blankets the modern city; in terms of sight, everything is artificial – from the industrially made imitations of plants and trees to the red, electric light; on a tactile level, everything is hard and cold, including people's hearts; and the absence of birds moving in the sky, while suggesting the death of nature, reinforces the sense of immobility in this stifling atmosphere.

These impressions of the city are followed by the poet's interrogations as to the source of the vile substance that now transforms the sky – not only destroying the natural canopy of light, but figuratively, one might add, obscuring our dreams of truth and beauty, freedom and dignity, and highlighting the city's failure to produce anything of worth for humanity. Does the responsibility lie with the individual, the society, the technological world we have created, or elsewhere, the poet ponders. While not rejecting human civilization outright, he nevertheless condemns in the strongest possible terms our

modern relinquishment of all that is human, for the sake of a society that produces nothing but dung, nothing but a betrayal of all that we are.

The last verse of the poem depicts again a presumably red light, a fire, that is now accompanied by the dense vibration of an electrically charged environment permeating the whole cityscape. Everything is swallowed up by the strange pale coloring that fills the atmosphere, emanating from black transformers crouched down in the night like beasts in the jungle, flooding the black sky with their abnormal light. An absence of passion characterizes this electrically controlled world, which is directed by man, and suggests once again the city dwellers' hearts of magnets which now evoke the idea of electromagnets running on electricity and manipulated by its current, reinforcing the absence of the human and the power of technology in this strange city humankind has built for itself.

Poem 2 - Streets

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In Ellul's second poem, "Streets," he opens up on an even more personal level, situating himself in the city in a very tangible way. Like the "strange pale coloring" in the previous poem, the streets swallow up the passers-by, especially the vulnerable. The poet's familiarity with these streets is accompanied by a sense of alienation which runs throughout the poem, although it is not technology which alienates him this time, but the superficiality of the people who walk the streets, and the absence of meaning which characterizes their lives. The poet seeks his identity in streets he cannot relate to, but the reader suspects they are simply a catalyst for his intense self-searching which will never find any answers here, because in reality it has little to do with the streets themselves.

The pressure to conform is revealed in the second verse, where the poet is reduced to the common level of the masses, advancing at the same pace as them, unable to maintain a distinct identity, and turning into something he knows is not him. Nothing stands out in the crowd, either positively or negatively, because "everything is meaningless in the street, especially life." The poet's existential crisis is lived in the street, heightened by the banality and pretense of the people around him, arousing his hatred for all that is false, all that is polished and artificial in society. The streets are also a "swallower of souls," because everyone has, in effect, sold their soul to the mediocrity of the city, renouncing a higher way and ending up empty, just like the poet. This emotional poem, replete with exclamation marks, evidently reflects a time in his life when Ellul was searching for truth and meaning and when nothing on the

human level could satisfy his deepest longings, least of all the activities of the city played out in lifeless streets he was obliged to travel.

Poem 3

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For the first time a ray of hope appears in the third poem, standing out against the vileness of the city, portrayed once again by imagery that irritates our senses. The poet himself is in the throes of a personal drama, as his soul wrestles with temptation – but this time he throws up some reckless words to heaven, the prayer of a desperate man, and in the midst of his hopelessness appears a sign: the symbol of the cross, etched across the sky by two lifeless branches, but infused with hope by the star looking on, signifying certainly an animate being, a Being who cares and who sees our plight.

Poem 4

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This final poem represents a drastic change in tone and vocabulary on the part of the poet. Darkness changes to light, as he now relates a spiritual experience which has radically transformed his life. Having opened the door a crack to the hope of the cross in the previous poem, he now throws it wide open, flooding the first verse with light. In lines slightly reminiscent of Pascal's "Memorial," in which he begins the description of his dramatic conversion experience with the exclamation, "Fire," Ellul focuses on the light that has opened his eyes to the truth of the Gospel: "Light on the eyes, light in the sky / nothing rumbles or passes by disturbing the light." Serenity and nature replace the negative emotions of the previous poems, turning the "bitter sorrow endured within the trembling" to the "fulfilment of the eyes covered with light." Just as the personal God Pascal discovers at the time of his conversion is not the God of "philosophers and scholars," Ellul's God is not, first and foremost, "all-powerful and all-existential," but rather a loving God who seeks out the individual and guides him into His light.

This discovery has not come easily for the poet. Having endured in the "brutal world" of the city the "chaos of crushing iron, stone, and steel where the flowers and fruit are forged from the abnormal," he realizes nonetheless that God was seeking him, despite his thoughts and actions, despite himself, and indeed, against his own natural tendencies to reject God. It is God's love, described here in the most tender of terms, that made all the difference for Ellul, winning him over in the midst of his painful emotions, including suicidal thoughts and a desire to escape from reason, maybe even into madness. He

understands that God was searching within his frail humanity the “pure gold” that God himself had placed in his frame of dust, seeing both his eternal value and his rich potential in this life. He knows it was God who directed his struggle and led him to Himself, and has protected him from the dreadful consequences of the fall which he will never see, being covered by God’s love.

This last thought leads Ellul to a sudden consciousness of the day of judgement, coming to end life in the city, or the world, where ordinary lives are being lived out in total oblivion to their current state of degradation or impending doom. The last two lines, somewhat surprising, suggest to me the poet’s awareness of human destiny, which abruptly descends on him with the grim realization that there are others in this world who have not yet seen the light, who are still oppressed by the life of the city, and whom he cannot forget as he goes about living in their midst. His description of God’s love and grace throughout the poem seems too poignant for us to think that he now fears judgment for himself, I would submit, but points rather to his compassion and quickened sense of responsibility for the rest of humanity who have yet to experience this love.

In *The Meaning of the City*, after discussing extensively the condemnation of God upon the city, Ellul comes to a chapter with a different tone, that opens with the following words: “But it is in these cities we must live.” (72). He then quotes Jeremiah’s injunction to the captives of Israel being carried off to Babylon, “But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare will you find your welfare” (Jer. 29: 7). God will carry out His own judgement, contends Ellul, but He asks us to participate in the life of the city and to seek her welfare, praying for her and warning her of judgement, but always with a desire to see lives spared. It is with this in mind that I read the concluding lines of Ellul’s last poem, where the awareness of the coming judgment falls upon the poet who knows he must reach out to the city, in the end.

Before concluding his book, Ellul examines the role of Jerusalem in the world, and the watershed moment of Christ’s coming in history, presenting finally the miracle of the New Jerusalem, the heavenly city that transcends all that exists in the world. God does not restore His original order at the end, explains Ellul, but creates another, where He makes all things new. Man wanted to create a city where God would be excluded, but God will create a city where He will be all in all. It is here that Christ’s final victory will be realized, for God himself will fulfill all the hopes of His people.

As we study the poems Ellul has produced to accompany this book, we find early parallels in the poetic themes of dehumanization, degradation, alienation, and despair, intersected by a ray of hope that converges with the poet's search for something more. While the book devotes a chapter to the transformation Christ's life brought to the world, Ellul's final poem relates the transformation of his own inner life through his encounter with Christ, powerfully contrasted with his earlier poems and concluding with his return to the needs of city and a new realization of the role he must play. His poetry does not develop the latter themes of the book because it stops with his own personal story. But through his poetry he opens up his life in a way that makes his theology come alive and convinces us that it has much more to do with his own personal reality than with theory and exegesis alone.