

Paris as 'unreal city': Modernist conceptions in Michiel Heyns's *Invisible Furies*

Paris as 'unreal city': Modernist conceptions in Michiel Heyns's *Invisible Furies*

Michiel Heyns's sixth novel, *Invisible Furies* (2012) is deeply inscribed in the author's profound engagement in and knowledge of the grand modernist tradition. The article aims to illuminate and discuss this underrated novel in terms of some of its modernist attributes by relating the work conceptually to the works of great modernist writers, particularly T. S. Eliot and E. M. Forster, in order to demonstrate its impressive literary scope and density of meaning. While there are direct allusions to Eliot's poetry in the text, it is a certain sensibility and perspective that reminds the reader forcibly of Eliot's vision, particularly in *The Waste Land* (1922) and *The Hollow Men* (1925). Eliot's image of the "Unreal city", derived from Baudelaire's *Les sept vieillards*, is particularly pertinent. A number of modernist concerns or themes are addressed in this context, in particular the ambiguous merits and value of the aesthetic, social alienation, the city and the concept of Forster's "eternal moment" (his equivalent to Joyce's "epiphany", Virginia Woolf's "moment of being" and Eliot's "moment in and out of time") as a possible means of salvation in the face of the meaninglessness of a spiritually and emotionally arid, modern existence. **Keywords:** Michiel Heyns, *Invisible Furies*, modernism, T. S. Eliot, eternal moment.

Invisible Furies (2012) is the sixth novel by the acclaimed South African novelist, Michiel Heyns. Most of Heyns's novels have been awarded (or were at least short-listed for) important literary awards. *Lost Ground* (2011), the predecessor of *Invisible Furies*, won both the Sunday Times Fiction Award and the Herman Charles Bosman Award, two of the most significant prizes for South African fiction in English, and was shortlisted for two more, the M-Net Prize and the University of Johannesburg Prize for English fiction. *Bodies Politic* (2008) also won the Herman Charles Bosman Prize and was shortlisted for the Sunday Times Fiction Award, the M-Net Prize and the University of Johannesburg Prize for English fiction, while *The Typewriter's Tale* (2005) was translated into French and shortlisted for two international prizes, the Commonwealth Writers' Prize (Africa) and the *Prix Femina Étranger*, and was awarded one, the *Prix de l'Union Interalliée*. Heyns's latest novel, *A Sportful Malice* (2014) has also been awarded the Herman Charles Bosman Prize while his first two novels, *The Children's Day* (2002) (translated into both French and Dutch) and *The Reluctant Passenger* (2003) (translated into French) were both shortlisted for the Booksellers' Prize. While reviews were on the whole positive, it is striking that *Invisible Furies* did not receive a single award or even nomination. It is my contention that this

profound and complex novel has been severely underrated. The present article aims to illuminate and discuss the novel in terms of some of its modernist attributes by relating the work conceptually to the works of great modernist writers, particularly T. S. Eliot and E. M. Forster, in order to demonstrate its impressive literary scope and density of meaning.

That Michiel Heyns is well-versed in modernist literature is evident to anyone who has followed his career. His affinity for the work of Henry James is reflected in the fact that a chapter of his critical work, *Expulsion and the Nineteenth-Century Novel* (1994) is dedicated to James's *The Golden Bowl* and that his skilful and erudite novel, *The Typewriter's Tale* (2005), is inspired by aspects of James's life and work. Heyns's intellectual relationship with E. M. Forster has also been investigated (see Wessels, "The public"). His acclaimed and prize-winning 2006 translation of Marlene van Niekerk's majestic novel, *Agaat*, moreover illustrates the consummate ease with which he can plug into the modernist tradition as he—apparently effortlessly—substitutes appropriate allusions to the works of, for example, W. B. Yeats and T. S. Eliot for references to Afrikaans literary works in the original which would not resonate adequately with international readers.

Invisible Furies likewise bears witness to his engagement with the modernist tradition. By his own admission in the acknowledgments (296), the plot is largely derived from Henry James's *The Ambassadors*, as are some of the thematic concerns which are elaborated in Heyns's novel. While this re-writing in itself constitutes a rich intertextual modernist construct deserving of academic enquiry, it is not the focus of this article, which will investigate aspects of modernist conceptions in the novel principally in light of the work of another great modernist, T. S. Eliot and to a lesser extent, E. M. Forster. A number of modernist concerns or themes will be addressed in the course of the article, in particular the ambiguous merits and value of the aesthetic, social alienation, the city and the concept of "the eternal moment" (or "epiphany" or "moment of being" as it is also known). The article does not suggest that every parallel drawn between Eliot's (or other modernists') work and Heyns's amounts to a direct allusion (although there are some of these) but rather that they reveal a similarity of conceptualisation that can be brought to bear on Heyns's novel to illuminate the complexity and wealth of its conception.

While there are direct allusions to Eliot's poetry in the text, it is a certain sensibility, a certain perspective, which reminds the reader forcibly of Eliot's vision, particularly in the two closely related poems, *The Waste Land* (1922) and *The Hollow Men* (1925). Not only do these two poems emanate from the same period in Eliot's career but they also express a similar perspective on the morally and spiritually enervated and exhausted society which Eliot depicts in the poems, describing his view of Europe and the West in the mid nineteen-twenties. While according to Eliot's own admission, *The Waste Land* was entirely personal in origin, depicting as much an inner

landscape as a social or spiritual landscape, it has come to be hailed as the voice of a whole generation. I would contend that it has remained one of the most powerful expressions of modernity and of a recognisable, modern and contemporary moral and social landscape, even more than ninety years after its original publication.

In *Invisible Furies* Christopher Turner, a middle-aged South African, travels to Paris on a mission for his life-long friend, Daniel de Villiers, the affluent owner of a famous wine-estate at Franschoek, to retrieve the latter's son Eric from what is assumed to be undesirable and possibly corrupt circumstances and elements in the French capital. Turner's attitude to the city is ambivalent as he recalls his previous visit to Paris in the company of Daniel thirty years before; a visit which involved possibly the greatest happiness he had ever experienced (in his friendship with Daniel during those days), but which was spoilt by the arrival of Daniel's friend, Marie-Louise (who would become Eric's mother) and his prompt consequent exclusion from the golden glow of Daniel's attention and ostensible affection. Thirty years later Christopher soon falls under the spell of both the enchanting city of Paris and of Eric, whom he had known as a rather lumpen young man in South Africa, but who appears to have been transformed into an elegant, handsome and attentive youth. He finds Eric involved with a beautiful, restrained older woman, the South African-born former model, Beatrice du Plessis, whom Christopher cannot help but like and admire. He therefore decides to renege on his undertaking to Daniel to bring the boy back, as he comes to believe that Eric is not only happier but a better man in Paris.

Early on in the novel, Heyns already provides hints that the beauty of Paris may not be as guileless as it may seem. When Christopher arrives he identifies Paris as "still a whore with a heart of stone" (7) and detects in its modern manifestation the "gloating malevolence of the *tricoteuses*" gaily knitting while enjoying the sight of aristocrats being beheaded during the revolution (7). He senses "something ancient and sinister and French" (11) that perturbs him. However, these initial qualms are soon countered by the powerful attractions that beauty holds out to him as he, in his quest to find Eric, is introduced to the glittering and glamorous *beau monde* of the Parisian fashion world. When Christopher meets Eric de Villiers for the first time, he delays the face-to-face encounter momentarily to give him "time to prepare, as it were, a face with which to meet his countryman" (75). This direct allusion to Eliot's *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* ("...there will be time / To prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet" [Eliot 14]), somewhat characterises Christopher as sharing the ambivalences, the indecisions, the difficulty to take a stand, that Prufrock has come to represent iconically—"not Prince Hamlet" but only "an attendant Lord" (Eliot 16). Yet, like his Jamesian original, Lambert Strether, Christopher never loses his sceptical sensibility and moral sense entirely and his friend Martha, like her original, Maria Gostrey in *The Ambassadors*, remains a fairly cynical witness who prevents him, to some degree, from losing sight of reality. As a result the tension between the aesthetic

appearance or idea and the moral reality lies at the core of the novel; reflecting the tension in Eliot's famous line in *The Hollow Men*: "Between the idea and the reality / [...] Falls the shadow" (Eliot 85).

The intrinsic insubstantiality of appearance is also introduced very early in the novel when Christopher compares the Boulevard St Germain on his arrival to "a film set with action figures" (8). This view is reiterated later when he sits at a street café, "facing the great stage of the street, with its troupe of strolling players all imagining themselves at the centre of the drama—all except the poor wandering tourists..." (20). Both suggest that Paris presents a self-consciously contrived surface appearance, an enactment rather than substance. His cynical comment on the cobbled streets that if "Paris hadn't been so damned picturesque, it may have been more negotiable" (8) eventually acquires moral resonance. The beauty of Paris is exposed as premeditated artifice: when Christopher sees a young man carrying baguettes on a bicycle, he observes:

But in Paris bread has lost its innocence and become self-conscious. Could the young man really be unaware of *composing*, the verticals of the baguettes counterposed by the horizontals, diagonals and circulars of the bicycle frame and wheels? And the couple kissing on the Place St Michel, as couples are forever kissing in Paris: if it had not been for Robert Doisneau, would they have kissed right there? (17, italics in original text)¹

Christopher's sceptical contemplation echoes the notion that "Life imitates Art far more than Art imitates Life" expressed by Oscar Wilde in his essay "The Decay of Lying" (1889), implicitly ascribing to contemporary Paris the values of the decadent movement of the 1890s where artifice was valued over the naïve appreciation of natural beauty as sanctified by the romantic tradition—the association with "decadence" inevitably bearing implications of moral decay. This connection with moral degeneracy is confirmed by the narrator when, contemplating a postcard with a picturesque depiction of a little boy running down the street with a baguette, a photograph taken in 1952, he considers that "the boy was [now] probably a semi-alcoholic in his sixties, playing boules or chess in the Luxembourg Gardens, *corrupted for life* by the seductive gaze of that camera" (18, my emphasis). This already suggests that the preoccupation with appearance that characterises Parisian society, the obsession with the aesthetic, bears the seeds of corruption in its very beauty. Heyns quotes from Henry James's *Roderick Hudson* in one of the epigraphs to *Invisible Furies*: "hideousness grimaces at you suddenly from the very bosom of loveliness, and beauty blooms before your eyes in the lap of vileness" (6).

The novel keeps on reminding the reader of the paramount importance of appearance in Parisian society. Explaining the role of the *claqueur*, a good-looking and elegantly dressed individual who is hired to be present and to applaud enthusiastically at fashion shows—an occupation that young Eric has adopted in Paris—the

enormously wealthy but ugly young American, Zeevee, elucidates that “it’s a convention, a pleasant tribute to the make-believe of the fashion world, where appearance counts for all” (52). Invited to a dinner at Zeevee’s palatial apartment on the Ile St Louis in the heart of privileged Paris early in his stay, Christopher becomes aware of “the crass externality of it all, the credo and ethos of a society dedicated to and defined by appearances” (123). On the same occasion the famous fashion-designer, Alessandra Giovanelli (with more than a hint of Donatella Versace about her), states dismissively, “*Le gout, c’est rien. Le style, c’est tout!*” (123)—taste is nothing, style is everything—suggesting that all that matters is the appearance, the surface, that there is no innate ordering principle when it comes to beauty. Zeevee elevates beauty to a kind of moral good in itself: “beauty, even when it is commercially motivated, sanctifies or at least justifies the endeavour of producing it, even of marketing it” (56). And while Christopher retains some moral scepticism, thinking on a walk with Eric on the banks of the Seine about “what a trap and a delusion, [it is] too, that implication that to be surrounded by such beauty is to be happy; or that such happiness as it may offer is lasting”, he is eventually seduced into admitting that it has become difficult to tell the “moral order of things” from “the aesthetic order of things” (223). He is full of admiration for Eric, for having arranged his life in Paris “beautifully” (223), acquiescing to the blurring of the line between “beautiful” and “good”.

Heyns finds a splendid metaphor for the tension between the beauty that is paramount in Paris and the moral inertia it may hide, in his depiction of the Châtelet metro station. Châtelet is one of the biggest and busiest metro stations in Paris, where many of the city’s metro lines meet and cross. It therefore encompasses a warren of underground passages and is bleak and depressing, frequented, apart from busy Parisians or bewildered tourists being shunted to eventual destinations, by the unfortunate fringes of Parisian society, lurking and begging in its endless, gloomy corridors. Above it is the famous Palladian-style *Théâtre du Châtelet* and a *quartier* that includes the timeless beauty of Notre-Dame Cathedral and the imposing elegance of the *Palais de Justice*, although it is also not far from the less salubrious red-light district of the rue St Denis. When Christopher visits the metro station on his first day in Paris, the narrator, reflecting his musings, calls it

the subterranean nerve centre of the city. If a city could be said to have a subconscious, it must be this, he thought, as he huddled against a graffiti-covered wall, gazing at the unstaunchable flow of passengers dodging, elbowing shouldering, striding, strutting, sauntering, each intent on a single destination, assignation, confrontation; a million uncoordinated impulses converging here to be redirected and dispatched, shunted according to the dictates of a tentacular network of electronic and mechanical components along crepuscular corridors, moving walkways and echoing tunnels, to emerge at last as purposeful human action” (19).

The scene evokes T. S. Eliot's depiction of a London crowd on their way to work in 'The Burial of the Dead', in the first part 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.
Flowed up the hill and down King William Street,
To where Saint Mary Woolnoth kept the hours
With a dead sound on the final stroke of nine.
(Eliot 62)

In both scenes the involuntary "channelling" of people by architectural constructs, a bridge or the corridors of the subterranean metro station, is emphasised.

The phrase "Unreal City" appears repeatedly in *The Waste Land* but the depiction in "The Burial of the Dead" is arguably the most elaborate and significant. The phrase itself is derived according to Eliot's own notes from Charles Baudelaire's poem "*Les sept vieillards*" in his celebrated 1861 collection *Les Fleurs du Mal* (Eliot 77; an earlier edition in 1857 did not include this particular poem.) While Eliot's poem depicts London as the "unreal city", suggesting the moral and spiritual vacuity of its denizens, the tenuousness of their hold on life and reality, Baudelaire's source poem interestingly refers to Paris:

*Fourmillante cité, cité pleine de rêves,
Où le spectre en plein jour raccroche le passant!
Les mystères partout coulent comme des sèves
Dans les canaux étroits du colosse puissant.*

Or in William Aggeler's translation:

Teeming, swarming city, city full of dreams,
Where spectres in broad day accost the passer-by!
Everywhere the mysteries flow like the sap in a tree
Through the narrow canals of the mighty giant.
(Aggeler in Baudelaire)

Eliot's description of an urban spiritual waste land to which I suggest Heyns's novel alludes, is embedded in Baudelaire's poem, and in an interesting twist the latter seems to relate more directly to the Parisian novel. The French poem depicts Paris as a phantasmagorical location where dream—or rather nightmare—and reality mix, where ghosts accost passers-by in broad daylight. This nightmarish quality

is transferred to and rendered in both Eliot's "Unreal City", inspired by it, and in Heyns's maze of tunnels, I would suggest. The French poem depicts "mysteries" flowing through the narrow channels—"les canaux étroits"—of the powerful colossus, or "mighty giant" as Aggeler translates it, of the city. This links with the image of people being impersonally channelled without recognition of their individual humanity, in an impersonal stream that "flowed up the hill and down King William Street" in *The Waste Land* and in "a million uncoordinated impulses converging here to be redirected and dispatched, shunted according to the dictates of a tentacular network of electronic and mechanical components along crepuscular corridors" in Heyns's Parisian underworld. The unhealthy, suffocating quality of the "Unreal city" is rendered in "the brown fog" of Eliot's London and in "*Un brouillard sale et jaune*" ("a dirty yellow fog") of Baudelaire's Paris. Christopher similarly regains "the open air with a sense of release" when he emerges from the "muffled closeness" of the metro station (19).

In both Heyns's Parisian netherworld and in Eliot's industrialised London, resistance by the individuals (being channelled in this impersonal way) to a significant engagement with one another is suggested: "elbowing, shouldering [...] each intent on a single destination" versus "each man fixed his eyes before his feet", avoiding all constructive interaction with one another. The notion that the typical Waste Land citizen, lacking spiritual, emotional and cultural vitality, is locked in his or her own selfhood, is crucial in *The Waste Land* and is emphasised in the concluding vision of the poem in the last section, "What the Thunder said". Based on the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishads*, sacred Hindu writings dating from the sixth century BCE, Eliot's poem uses the fable of the thunder speaking to gods, demons and people to delineate at least a vision of salvation from the Waste Land's moribund condition of emotional and spiritual enervation and aridity and does so in the three messages of the thunder, the second of which is "*Dhayadhvam*" or "sympathize":

Dhayadhvam: I have heard the key
 Turn in the door once and turn once only
 We think of the key, each in his prison
 Thinking of the key, each confirms a prison
 (Eliot 74)

Eliot's implication is that only through the empathetic use of the imagination, putting oneself in another's shoes to feel what he or she feels, can the prison of the self be opened so that there can be a meaningful engagement among people. Eliot's London Bridge passage as well as Heyns's Châtelet depiction suggests that this is not likely in the "Unreal cities" of London or Paris. It is indeed Christopher's credulous willingness to engage at face value with the citizens of Paris, to credit the illusions of appearance, which leads to his disillusionment at the end. Quite late in

the novel, Beatrice's attendant, Olga, trying to wean Christopher from his starry-eyed appreciation of the world he has temporarily joined, warns him, "You know only the part of Eric de Villiers he wants you to see. You do not see the ambition, the hunger for fame and recognition" (266). It is at his peril that Christopher ignores the isolated self-seeking nature of the individuals whom he encounters, each only intent on his or her own needs and desires, each isolated in his or her own elegant and luxurious fortress of greed.

"Seeing" becomes a significant motif in the novel. Imploring Zeevee to put him in contact with Eric, Christopher cries, "But can't you see that *seeing* him is exactly what I hoped you'd help me to do?" (69). Zeevee's response is pregnant with ironic meaning: "Well I guess in the end we all have to see for ourselves. But I may be able to place you in a relation that makes seeing possible?" (69). Not only does Zeevee's statement entail a claim for credit with regard to his intermediary role, but it also implies that "seeing" can be manipulated and is therefore not as reliable as Christopher appears to assume. Martha can be relied on to be more sceptical and she soon expresses her "trust in [Christopher's] acuteness to see *through* the situation" (74). Christopher's naïve appreciation of the aesthetic delight of his new environment and in particular of his handsome, attentive and sophisticated charge becomes a severe impediment for him to "see" clearly. He confidently declares to Martha, "I think coming to Paris has made me see things for what they really are" (224). To her response, "And has it made you see people for what they are" (224), he replies with touching, but misguided confidence, "I do feel that I have a clearer view of Eric than I had [...] On a clearer view he strikes me as admirable" (224). On further enquiry from Martha, he volunteers that Eric "has arranged his own life, here in Paris, quite beautifully" (225), confirming his confounding the aesthetic with the ethical, unable to discern the idea from the reality. Diane Awerbuck comments that, "[l]ike characters in fairy tales, [Christopher] assumes that truth and beauty necessarily concur".

One of the most significant allusions in Eliot's "Unreal City" passage quoted above is the allusion to Dante's *Inferno*. The lines "I had not thought death had undone so many / Sighs short and infrequent were exhaled" are an allusion to the *Inferno* III: 55-7 and *Inferno* IV: 25-7. This allusion makes it clear that the Unreal City of London is part of the landscape of hell. The reference to the *Inferno* IV is to limbo, a part of hell reserved for those who lived "without infamy and without praise". It is particularly apt in describing the feckless citizens of Eliot's *Waste Land*, uncommitted to anything outside themselves. Heyns, likewise, implies that the beautiful façade of Paris hides an infernal reality. In light-hearted fashion Zeevee says to Christopher, "You see, my dear Christopher, what an infernal business fashion is. And I am condemned to the lowest circle of hell" (112). (The lowest circle of hell in Dante's *Inferno* is reserved for the treacherous, therefore the unreliable, the deceptive, those who have betrayed

significant individual relationships in particular.) When Eric tells Christopher his own version of his history in Paris, he acknowledges as the first step to his current assured position in society his being admitted to the world of a man called Fabrice, who introduced him to Zeevee and others who have proved useful to him. Without knowing the aptness of his remark, Christopher jokingly refers to that *entrée* as Eric's being admitted to the "belly of the beast" (183). However, these light-hearted hints of hell are only the prelude to a more serious encounter. The novel moves to a climax when Christopher is invited into the grand temple of aestheticism, the home of the famous fashion designer, Gloriani, who presides as a kind of high priest over the enchanted world Christopher appears to have gained admission to, the world mockingly referred to as the "belly of the beast" above. Gloriani's sumptuous apartment in the Place des Vosges, Paris's oldest and possibly most elegant square, significantly reveals what Dickens (107) in *A Tale of Two Cities*, describing Paris before the revolution, calls "the leprosy of unreality". It confirms contemporary Paris still to be an "Unreal City":

The size, proportions and relative bareness of the room suggested a stage set, awaiting the entry of the cast—unless, indeed, the performance had already commenced, for in the corner a group of people stood clustered—or *arranged*, for there was something in the symmetry of the grouping that seemed not merely random, but suggested a single centre of interest around which a tableau was composed. (249)

The implication is again one of artifice, of a glittering surface, of life imitating art. When Christopher discusses the opulent "furnishings and finishes" with Zeevee, the latter suggests that these *accoutrements* are all original and then carelessly admits that they may in fact be imitations, suggesting that those would be as good as the originals: "When the imitation is made by an expert, it defies detection" (251), he maintains. This should strike an ominous note with regard to Christopher's illusions of the goodness and beauty of both Parisian society and of Eric de Villiers in particular. At the centre of this gathering "Eric shone gold" (254), evoking the "golden Cupidon" in Eliot's *Waste Land* (64), beautiful but lacking in human warmth.² Also at this gathering, Christopher re-encounters Beatrice du Plessis's attendant, Olga, and it is she who starts unravelling the illusion for him. She recounts her own bitter experience as a former model in the unsparing, cruel and relentless world of Parisian fashion. Speaking of her arrival as a penniless refugee from Eastern Europe, forced into prostitution, she reflects on the "unreal" quality of Paris's reputation for beauty: "'People talk about the Seine,' she said, 'about its bridges, how beautiful, how romantic. But for me [...] for me they will always smell of piss and shit and unwashed clothes and unwashed people, dirty people.'" (260)

More significantly she also recasts Eric's behaviour in a more realistic mould for Christopher as being entirely self-seeking and ruthless. She suggests that he is

about to abandon the beautiful Beatrice du Plessis, whom Christopher credits to a large extent with Eric's transformation to a civilized, charming and "admirable" man, for her teenage daughter, Jeanne, who is not only beautiful like her mother, but also young and therefore desirable. Eric intends to exploit Jeanne not only for his own pleasure but also his own gain in order to build a career in the fashion world as her agent, a scheme for which he already has Gloriani's support. On being confronted with this perception, Eric admits to the substance of it, but tries to use his attractive manner to pass it off lightly as reasonable and innocuous. The calculated self-interest in his actions is confirmed in a conversation with Zeevee that Christopher overhears later that evening. Christopher is devastated by these revelations which also expose his own judgment to have been hopelessly shallow. Painful as the disillusionment is, Christopher realises that he has woken up from the phantasmagorical mixture of dream and reality that constitutes the "Unreal City" of Paris; on Eric's apparently concerned enquiry if he is not feeling quite himself, he replies: "Perhaps I am feeling myself for the first time since I've arrived" (273). He is now able to perceive Gloriani, who presides over this world of hollow appearances, as "vulgar in his self-assurance, in his perfectly turned-out clothes and his perfectly composed manner, his perfectly styled hair, his perfectly preserved complexion and his perfectly-toothed smile. He was beautiful, beautiful, beautiful; but he was hollow. He was a simulacrum, a trademark, a label." (269) He is, in fact, one of Eliot's "hollow men", "stuffed men", "shape without form" (Eliot 83), outline without substance.

The horror of Christopher's disillusionment is driven home when, fleeing from Gloriani's palace of posturing and deception, Christopher encounters Fabrice, who had given Eric his first entry into this world and who now callously reveals to Christopher that Eric had made his initial way into the elegant, rotten world of Parisian society as a prostitute (with Fabrice as his pimp) and a drug-dealer. Stripped of all his illusions, Christopher involuntarily recalls the underground hell of Châtelet as he traverses the beautiful island of St Louis, where he had first encountered the glittering denizens of the beautiful shell of Paris's *beau monde* at Zeevee's puzzling yet spellbinding luncheon shortly after his arrival. He reviews

a city uniquely beautiful, and establishing its stringent, aesthetic standards as a law and a morality. Thou shalt be beautiful; thou shalt not grow old and tired, thou shalt pay my price in blood, sweat and tears. And, of course, it was beautiful, Christopher knew this. But he knew too, that underneath the tranquil river and the glittering squares slithered the humid corridors of Châtelet, endless ramifications and intersections of human purpose blindly pursuing its ends. *Piss and shit*, Olga had said, *piss and shit*. (291)

The loss of a kind of late-blooming innocence that Christopher suffers here is not only humiliating to him, but has more profound repercussions. One of the themes

that Heyns has retained from the original plot of *The Ambassadors*, is that of “a life lived”. Lambert Strether, on whom Christopher is to some extent based, exhorts little Bilham, a young American he encounters in Paris to

[I]ive all you can; it's a mistake not to. It doesn't so much matter what you do in particular, so long as you have your life. If you haven't had that what HAVE you had? [...] I see it now. I haven't done so enough before—and now I'm old; too old at any rate for what I see. Oh I DO see, at least; and more than you'd believe or I can express. It's too late. And it's as if the train had fairly waited at the station for me without my having had the gumption to know it was there. Now I hear its faint receding whistle miles and miles down the line. (James 149)

Christopher is very aware of the paucity of his own experience. Martha unapologetically tells Christopher that Daniel, Eric's father, “robbed you of your self-respect and then he robbed you of your youth” (227). After a few moments of happiness derived from the apparent affection and intimacy Daniel showed him thirty years earlier during two weeks in Paris, Christopher has been in emotional exile; without any acknowledged claim to Daniel or his affection, he has stayed on hand for such crumbs as might fall his way from the table of Daniel's life. Christopher declines to admit to Martha that “once, long ago, for a fortnight, he had been happier, here in Paris, with Daniel, than he had ever been before or since; and that his servitude had been determined by the vain hope of someday recovering something of that happiness” (228). While he may have been unable to “see” the reality of Parisian society as he thought he could, he does achieve some insight into himself through his encounter with Daniel's dazzling son. In an open-hearted conversation—just before he is stripped of his illusions—with Zeevee, who loves Eric with the same unrewarded devotion that Christopher has dedicated to Eric's father, Christopher does not suggest that he no longer loves Daniel, but claims that he has now “seen though [his own] feelings” (255):

‘Seen them for what they are, you mean?’

‘Well, seen them at any rate, for being futile, a waste of time.’

‘And how long did it take you to realize this?’

‘Thirty years, more or less. It has taken the son to make me see the father for what he is. (255)

On Zeevee's enquiring if this is because the son is like the father, Christopher expresses what “he hadn't been aware of thinking” (255), and finds some small grace for himself as regards the unrewarded passion of his life:

‘No,’ he said, ‘because the son is what the father could have been, if he'd followed the generous impulses of his nature rather than the promptings of his caution. In Eric, I can see what I once loved in Daniel, as I once knew him.’ It was not often that

Christopher used the word 'love', to himself or others, in relation to his feelings for Daniel de Villiers. (255)

Contemplating the attractive young Eric's life in Paris, Christopher ruminates poignantly:

It had not been an exemplary life; but it had been a life, which was more than Christopher would have claimed for his own existence since leaving Paris three decades before. And in being admitted to that life, he felt, he was regaining something of his own sense, now long in abeyance, of the potential of all life, including even his own. (205)

This small grace that Christopher has managed to wrest from his thirty years in an emotional desert is inevitably another victim of the ruthless destruction wrought by the egotistical, self-seeking denizens of the "Unreal City", the Waste Land of Paris. Not only are his optimistic illusions about the beautiful young man and the glamorous society in which he is making his way dashed and destroyed, but the small measure of mercy that he had managed to secure for himself in this relationship is also shattered as collateral damage.

Christopher is not left as emotionally destitute as one might expect, however. Jane Rosenthal comments that "[w]hat Christopher's visit to Paris has done for him, personally, ends inconclusively." In an interview with Mary Corrigall, Heyns comments, "I like the idea that characters are not too rigidly compartmentalized. You must make judgements in the end as Christopher had to do. But the judgments cannot be too clear-cut. In life they are not." What complicates the reader's perception of Christopher are the exact circumstances and implications of his (non-)relationship with Daniel de Villiers. Thirty years before, a young Christopher and a young Daniel had hid with others, including a brass band, under the Pont Neuf during a rain storm. To entertain the sheltering crowd, the band started playing "I can't give you anything but love" and Daniel joined in, hamming it up to amuse the others. He put his arm around Christopher's shoulder, made big eyes at him, and belted out with the music, in his strong tenor, 'Dream a while, scheme a while, we're sure to find happiness.' And Christopher had thought, who needs dreaming and scheming, this is happiness, standing under the bridge in the rain with Daniel's arm around him and a brass band proclaiming, 'love's the only thing I've plenty of, baby.' (23)

This proves to be the defining moment of Christopher's life. His heart fixes on an unworthy subject who tyrannically and egotistically dominates his life without ever giving anything substantial in return.

The awareness of a moment of transcending significance is a common preoccupation for a number of the great modernist writers. T. S. Eliot defines "the moment in and out of time", James Joyce calls his version "epiphany", Virginia Woolf contemplates

the “moment of being”, and Elizabeth Bowen calls it “life surprised at a significant angle.” It is, however, E. M. Forster’s “eternal moment” that seems to be most relevant here, as it constitutes a moment that lends meaning to an otherwise imperfect and unsatisfactory life (see Wessels, “Human kind” 16–7). Forster’s concept of “the eternal moment” is beautifully illustrated by his short story with that title (Forster 188–222).

The story describes the visit by a well-known writer, Miss Raby, to an alpine village where she had experienced such a transcendent moment many years before when a young and handsome guide declared his ardent love for her during a trip into the mountains and begged her to run away with him. Being a prudent young girl, she declined the proposal, but encapsulated the experience in her most famous novel. The success of the novel caused the village to become a popular tourist destination and the pristine beauty of the village has consequently been damaged irreparably. Miss Raby is horrified about the unintended effects of her action but nevertheless tries to re-capture something of the glory of the moment by seeking out her young lover, who unfortunately turns out to have grown into a rather obsequious and sleazy hotel manager. The visit appears to amount to an unsettling failure. However, Miss Raby would not agree as she gains from it the ability to assess the intrinsic value of the eternal moment that she experienced in the mountains with the young man and to plumb its full significance, appreciating

that the incident upon the mountain had been one of the great moments of her life—perhaps the greatest, certainly the most enduring; that she had drawn unacknowledged power and inspiration from it, just as trees draw vigour from a subterranean spring. Never again could she think of it as a half-humorous episode in her development. There was more reality in it than in all the years of success and varied achievement which had followed, and which it had rendered possible. [...] A presumptuous boy had taken her to the gates of heaven; and, though she would not enter with him, the eternal remembrance of the vision had made life seem endurable and good. (Forster 216–7)

Likewise, Christopher has not only been “robbed” and demeaned by his enduring rootedness in that moment of transcendent happiness under the Pont Neuf, as Martha suggests, imprisoned and denatured by it, but he has also drawn strength from it, as from “a subterranean spring”. It has certainly been “enduring”. According to David Medalie (71), Forster’s eternal moment is “paradoxically, located within time and yet able to transcend the flux of time; consequently, it is left behind and yet never left behind”. Having admitted the futility of his love for Daniel to Zeevee, Christopher continues: “And yet, I wouldn’t *not* have had it, this passion. Such as it was, with its stern demands and its meagre rewards,’ he smiled self-consciously, ‘it has been my life. And it has sustained me. No doubt it could not have been otherwise’” (256).

Clearly the moment under the Pont Neuf thirty years ago is Christopher’s “eternal moment” investing his life with meaning and purpose and the disillusionment

wrought by Eric and his friends in the “Unreal City” of Paris cannot undo that. Even the realisation that Eric is in fact exactly like his father, and Daniel, the undeserving object of his passion, just like his son, “the father looking through the eyes of the son, the brutality beneath the beauty, the final indifference of youth and strength to all but its own supreme claim to life” (274), cannot destroy this reality. The “indifference” mentioned here is also a key characteristic of the inhabitants of Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, as commitment to anything beyond the self is resoundingly absent from that emotional and spiritual desert, that world of “broken images”, of furtive meaningless sexual encounters, of Londoners in limbo, fixing their eyes only before their own feet. It is also this indifference, this absence of commitment, of consideration for others that is first addressed in the redeeming message of the thunder in “What the Thunder Said”, the fifth and final section of *The Waste Land*. The first directive of the thunder is “Datta”, to give. And what has to be given, is the self:

The awful daring of a moment’s surrender
Which and age of prudence can never retract
By this, and this only, we have existed
(Eliot 74)

The poet suggests that it is only by the terrifying courage to surrender, to give oneself unconditionally, so that this giving is not subject to a change of mind or to self-interest, that one can gain emotional and spiritual vitality, that one can escape the “Unreal City”, the infernal limbo of a hollow existence. He suggests that this momentous but also momentary action, of which many around one may not even be aware, is the most important act of one’s life, determining the quality of one’s existence. And so Christopher’s “eternal moment” with Daniel under the Pont Neuf, is not only, as Martha would suggest, the cause of a blighted and arid life, but also something which paradoxically constitutes Christopher’s salvation, distinguishing him from the glittering, beautiful, nefarious, hollow citizens of Paris’s “Unreal City”.

It is a chastened Christopher, standing on the *Pont des Arts* at the end of the novel, who acknowledges a loss, “a loss of what beauty seems to promise, a loss of the illusion that beauty can be possessed on terms other than its own” (292). Nevertheless listening to a busking soprano singing Mahler’s *Rückert* lieder, he still acknowledges the lasting value and power of love for love’s own sake (“*Liebe du um Liebe, o ja mich liebe*”) (293), and while it is suggested in the words of the next song that he may have “died to the world’s hurly-burly” (295), there is also the possibility that he may find “rest in a quiet realm” (295). Despite the painful experience of being forced to reconcile the beautiful “idea” with its grim “reality”, in spite of acknowledging the limited choices that remain for him as an aging man, Christopher does not leave the “Unreal City” of Paris merely as a dejected and defeated crust of a man; having had the “awful daring” to surrender himself unconditionally to love, he leaves with his soul intact.

Endnotes

1. Robert Doisneau (1912–94), famous French photojournalist who gained particular fame in the 1950s for a photograph of a couple kissing in the streets of Paris.
2. A Game of Chess, the second section of *The Waste Land*, depicts a woman, whom Eliot identifies as the Belladonna (a name which means beautiful lady in Italian but is also a designation for a hazardous poison) in a stifling, gaudy, over-decorated room. The scene is an extended allusion to the description of Cleopatra on her barge on the Nile, in Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*, Act II Scene 2. The interest in the allusion lies in the discrepancies between Shakespeare's original depiction and Eliot's re-creation of the scene. Cleopatra is surrounded by pretty dimpled boys like smiling cupids (l.146), whereas the poisonous Belladonna is surrounded by golden Cupidons (Eliot 64), lifeless though glamorous imitations of the real.

Works Cited

- Awerbuck, Diane. "Beauty in vileness." Review of *Invisible Furies* by Michiel Heyns. 19 Jun. 2012. 6 May 2015. <<http://dianeawerbuck.bookslive.co.za/blog/2012/06/19/beauty-in-vileness-a-review-of-invisible-furies-by-michiel-heyns>>.
- Baudelaire, Charles. "Les sept vieillards" from *Les Fleurs du Mal*. With English translation by William Aggeler (1954). 2004. [1861] 3 May 2015. <<http://fleursdumal.org/poem/221>>.
- Corrigall, Mary. 2012. "Through the Screen of Literature". Interview with Michiel Heyns in *The Sunday Independent*, 23 Sept 2012. 4 May 2015. <<http://sundayindybooks.blogspot.co.za/2012/10/through-screen-of-literature.html>>.
- Dante Alighieri. *The Divine Comedy* of Dante Alighieri. The Italian Text with a Translation in English Blank Verse and a Commentary by Courtney Langdon, vol. 1 (Inferno), Cambridge: Harvard U P, 1918. 22 May 2014. <<http://oll.libertyfund.org/titles/2308>>.
- Dickens, Charles. *A Tale of Two Cities*. 1859. Oxford: OUP, 2008.
- Eliot, T. S. *The Complete Poems and Plays of T.S. Eliot*. 1969. London: Faber, 1978.
- Forster, E. M. *The Eternal Moment*. Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1954.
- Heyns, Michiel. *A Sportful Malice*. Jeppestown: Jonathan Ball, 2014.
- _____. *Bodies Politic*. Jeppestown: Jonathan Ball, 2008.
- _____. *Expulsion and the Nineteenth-Century Novel*. Oxford: OUP, 1994.
- _____. *Invisible Furies*. Jeppestown: Jonathan Ball, 2012.
- _____. *Lost Ground*. Jeppestown: Jonathan Ball, 2011.
- _____. *The Children's Day*. Jeppestown: Jonathan Ball, 2002.
- _____. *The Reluctant Passenger*. Jeppestown: Jonathan Ball, 2003.
- _____. *The Typewriter's Tale*. Jeppestown: Jonathan Ball, 2005.
- James, Henry. *The Ambassadors*. 1903. New York: Harper, 1948.
- Medalie, David. *E. M. Forster's Modernism*. London: Palgrave, 2002.
- Rosenthal, Jane. "Moral tussle in the city of lights." Review of *Invisible Furies* by Michiel Heyns in *Mail & Guardian*, 21 Jun. 2012. 4 May 2015. <<http://mg.co.za/article/2012-06-16-moral-tussle-in-the-city-of-lights>>.
- Shakespeare, William. *Antony and Cleopatra*. 1623. London: Penguin, 1972.
- Van Niekerk, Marlene. *Aqaat*. Trans. Michiel Heyns. Cape Town and Jeppestown: Tafelberg/ Jonathan Ball, 2006.
- Wessels, Andries. "'Human kind cannot bear very much reality': modernist perceptions of time and experience", inaugural address, Chair of English, University of Pretoria, 24 Mar. 2009. 29 May 2015. <http://repository.up.ac.za/xmlui/bitstream/handle/2263/9516/wessels_paper.pdf?sequence=5>.
- _____. "The public, the private and the power of love: decisive tensions in Michiel Heyns's *The Children's Day*." *English in Africa* 39.1 (2012): 57–72.
- Wilde, Oscar. "The Decay of Lying." *Selected Essays*. Ed. Richard Aldington. London: Heinemann, 1946. 33–61.