



**'They were incurably given to rove':
T. S. Eliot's *Practical Cats*, London and the Petit Flâneur**

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Abstract: T. S. Eliot's collection of children's poetry, *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats* (1939), takes London as its central theme. These poems welcome the child into the city through their cat characters, who are lively urban wanderers and, in doing so, these poems seek to overcome any dichotomy between "the child" and "the city". Eliot, as with other modernists, worked to rethink existing models of childhood, in light of social developments in the early twentieth century, generally known as "modernity", which includes mass urbanisation. In effect, Eliot rejects earlier, prevailing models of rural childhood, to suggest in *Practical Cats* that children can delight in the urban, introducing children to city life, and to London specifically, through concepts of playfulness, individuality and disorder. In these ways, *Practical Cats* represents the pinnacle of Eliot's urban poetry, both chronologically and in its vibrant representation of the city.

Keywords: T. S. Eliot, poetry, children's literature, modernism, flânerie

This essay argues for the importance of seeing T. S. Eliot's *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats* (hereafter *Practical Cats*, 1939) as London poetry for children. I will draw on the work of children's geographers such as Colin Ward and Owain Jones to consider the positive role that Eliot's *Practical Cats* can play in introducing children to the city, and in considering children's potential place in the city. I will briefly introduce Eliot's collection of feline poetry, and then trace some developments in the works of urban thinkers who discuss children in the city, in particular the French poet and essayist Charles Baudelaire, and finally see how these ideas can relate to *Practical Cats* in presenting *petits flâneurs* (as I will define below). Eliot, as with other modernists, worked to rethink existing models of childhood, in light of social developments in the early twentieth century, generally

known as “modernity”: in Eliot’s case, this relates to increasing urbanisation, and directly stands against the prevailing influence of Jean-Jacques Rousseau and, following him, the Romantics, whose ideas I will return to below. In effect, Eliot rejects Rousseau’s model of rural childhood, to suggest in *Practical Cats* that children can delight in urban life, welcoming the child into the city through playfulness, individuality and disorder.

Practical Cats originated in letters from 1934 to Eliot’s godson, aged seven, and Eliot published it in 1939. Eliot’s collection of poems has no overarching narrative and is simply fifteen short poems related by theme; the majority of the poems deal with an individual cat, and the collection was made internationally famous through Andrew Lloyd Webber’s musical, *Cats*. The three key focus points in critical work on *Practical Cats* to date are names (see studies by Harmon, Olson, Sanders), the opposition of religion and play (Bay-Cheng, Clowder, Hodge) and the inventiveness of Eliot’s rhythms in these poems (Douglass). Paul Douglass particularly focuses on the extraordinary and captivating rhythms of the poems, using such a variety of beats as dactylic tetrameter, iambic octameter, and varying verse and foot length within poems. Douglass ultimately concludes that if a child is to learn anything from *Practical Cats*, it is the importance of living playfully. Of the critical accounts of the poems so far, Marilyn Olson’s work on *Practical Cats* most closely relates to my own in pointing to the importance of London in the poems: for Olson, the playfulness of the poems is about finding pleasure in life and naming is about maintaining one’s individuality when faced with the apathy and anonymity of city living. Olson observes that the final poem of the first edition, ‘The Ad-dressing of Cats’, is a practical guide to city life: ‘The question of the importance of names ends, in other words, with the encouragement to work oneself into social relationships by graceful steps’ (Olson: ‘Cats and Aliens in the City’, 159). While Olson looks at naming in the urban children’s literature of Eliot and Diana Wynne Jones, this article will aim to reflect on Eliot’s work within its historical context, particularly within ideas of “modernity” and the metropolis up to and in the 1930s. We will see that Eliot’s cats function as petits flâneurs and, through them, Eliot evokes a sense of the difference it makes for the city walker to be a child, to experience the city from a child’s body.

The poems are mostly set in London, except for one set on a train to Scotland, a metropolitan focus that matches with Eliot’s poetry on the whole; he is well known as an urban poet, particularly for *The Waste Land*, ‘The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock’ and the *Preludes*. Although the children’s literature critic Peter Hunt sees *Practical Cats* as merely ‘a major poet’s whimsies’, I believe it is also worth considering *Practical Cats* not only as urban poetry, but as Eliot’s final sustained urban work (Hunt: *An Introduction*, 125). It details parts of London in the lives of many of its cats, such as Bustopher Jones of St James Square, Mungojerrie and Rumpleteazer in Victoria Grove and Cat Morgan in Bloomsbury. Indeed, a French translator of *Practical Cats*, Jacques Charpentreau, points to the importance of the city for these poems in his preface. He implies that a key value of the poems is in introducing children to London, in proposing his intention to introduce French readers to Paris instead:

Les chats formant une aristocratie internationale [...] il m'a semblé nécessaire non seulement de traduire ce savoureux manuel, mais de l'adapter à notre propre civilisation. Car nous avons aussi nos chats pirates comme Grostigré (ils ne hantent pas la Tamise, mais la Seine), nos chats mondains comme Florimond d'Orsay (ils ne fréquentent pas St James, mais les Champs-Élysées), nos chats voyageurs comme Roulifrotamble (ils ne roulent pas vers l'Écosse, mais vers la Côte d'Azur)

[Since cats form an international aristocracy ... it seemed necessary to me not only to translate this delightful manual, but to adapt it to our own civilisation. For we too have our pirate cats like Growltiger (they don't haunt the Thames, but the Seine), our worldly cats like Bustopher Jones (they don't frequent St James, but the Champs-Élysées), our travelling cats like Skimblehanks (they don't drive to Scotland, but to the Côte d'Azur)] (Charpentreau: *Chats!*, 6, my translation)

Charpentreau even posits Eliot as a flâneur, imagining him wandering the streets of London: 'Voilà quelques années, on pouvait voir dans les rues de Londres un monsieur distingué s'arrêter de temps en temps au cours de sa promenade pour saluer comme il convenait d'importants personnages. Ce gentleman était T. S. Eliot; ces personnages importants, c'étaient les chats' [Some years ago, one could see in the streets of London a distinguished gentleman stopping from time to time as he walked, to greet important individuals as befitted them. This gentleman was T. S. Eliot; as for these individuals, they were cats] (Charpentreau: *Chats!*, 5, my translation).

The city setting for *Practical Cats* puts it in stark contrast to the general trend in children's literature, both in the 1930s and today. In 1981, Bruno Bettelheim assessed the representations of urban life in school books for children and lamented that few even depicted cities: 'While urban life is not described as undesirable—nothing is in these books—it is denied importance through complete neglect, that suggests to the child that it is not worth being paid attention to' (Bettelheim: 'The Child's Perception', 229). He also condemns those few books that did show urban life, such as Irma Simonton Black's *Uptown, Downtown* (1965), from which Bettelheim quotes the following: 'The little girl came out of her new house, and what do you think she saw? Just a corner. She went around the corner, and what do you think she saw? Just another corner. She went around that corner, and what do you think she saw? Still another corner' (Bettelheim: 'The Child's Perception', 230). He argues that presenting the city in this way gives children a problematic sense the 'emptiness and purposelessness of a city existence', which we can see happens through the dull repetition of basic words ('corner') (Bettelheim: 'The Child's Perception', 230-31). Another example he provides also puts forward its sense of city life through a strict structure of predictable repetitions and simplistic language (Bettelheim: 'The Child's Perception', 231). As Bettelheim astutely notes, such children's literature 'tends

to discourage both interest in literature and living in cities'; there is a damaging effect in continuing to believe that "childhood" and "the city" are opposing terms, while increasing numbers of children live in cities (Bettelheim: 'The Child's Perception', 231). Not only will urban children develop a negative view of their own living environments, but this may also decrease their engagement with literature, which will appear distant and less identifiable to them. Jenny Bavidge performed a similar study of children's literature about cities in 2006 and found that this situation has not improved (Bavidge: 'Stories in Space', 324). As such, we can see that *Practical Cats* is exceptional in children's literature for its representation of the city. As we will also see below, it is equally exceptional in Eliot's oeuvre for showing the city in a positive way.

Rousseau's Influence on Ideas of Childhood

One essential reason for this negativity towards urban life for children can be traced back to the hugely influential tract *Emile* (1762), by Rousseau. In *Emile*, Rousseau proposes an "ideal" model of child-rearing based on the idea of the child's freedom to explore and learn for himself (not herself, for Rousseau), staying at a country home and having concrete discussions about the world that they see with a live-in tutor. Rousseau shows a clear preference for rural over urban life, saying that cities breed sin, artificiality and false maturity. He claims that 'La société a fait l'homme plus foible' [society has made man feebler], and he wants to raise Emile 'loin des noires mœurs des villes que le vernis dont on le couvre rend séduisantes et contagieuses pour les enfants [far from the black customs of cities whose varnished surfaces make them seductive and contagious for children] (Rousseau: 'Emile', 309, 324). Rousseau makes a dual claim for both the countryside and children as "innocent" and "natural", in contrast to the city and its people.

The Romantics, in England and beyond, drew on Rousseau's sense of the child's innocence and valued childhood as a discrete part of one's life, as is particularly evident in the poetry of Wordsworth, Blake and Hugo. For example, in 'Ode' (1815), Wordsworth writes: 'But trailing clouds of glory do we come [/] From God, who is our home: [/] Heaven lies about us in our infancy!' (Wordsworth: *Poems*, 273). The spiritual innocence of children and enormous value placed on childhood is evident here. Moreover, like Rousseau, Wordsworth sees the child as innately belonging to nature, rather than corrupt human society: he calls the boy in his poem 'Nature's Priest' (Wordsworth: *Poems*, 273).

This valuation of childhood follows on into the Victorian period in a similar manner. Indeed, where Rousseau's ideas about the innocence of children are in the poetry of the Romantic period, they are codified in law in the Victorian period. In this time, children's education is made compulsory, and laws reduce children's working hours, particularly factory and mining work. The cumulative effect of these laws was to shift from a sense of children as a potential labour force, valuable for their earning capacity, towards a sense of childhood as a time to be nurtured and protected. In literature, too, authors put forward representations of

vulnerable (urban) children to encourage social change towards protecting them, as Dickens does in *The Adventures of Oliver Twist* (1839), with Paul Dombey in *Dombey and Son* (1848) and with Jo in *Bleak House* (1853). The sense of the child as innocent and even redemptive persists from the Romantics, in such novels as George Eliot's *Silas Marner* (1861) and in artwork from the period.

Baudelaire's Urban Children and Mysterious Cats

Towards the end of the twentieth century, at the forefront of literary modernism, the Parisian poet Baudelaire turned away from this mainstream valuation of the natural, to explore the sublimity of city life. Baudelaire is often thought of as the originator of *flânerie* in poetry, of urban aesthetics and a poetics that faces up to modern life. In *Le Peintre de la vie moderne* (1863) [The Painter of Modern Life], he writes:

Pour le parfait flâneur, pour l'observateur passionné, c'est une immense jouissance que d'élire domicile dans le nombre, dans l'ondoyant, dans le mouvement, dans le fugitif et l'infini. Être hors de chez soi, et pourtant se sentir partout chez soi; voir le monde, être au centre du monde et rester caché au monde, tels sont quelques-uns des moindres plaisirs de ces esprits indépendants, passionnés, impartiaux, que la langue ne peut que maladroitement définir.

[For the perfect flâneur, for the passionate observer, it is an immense joy to set up house in the many, in the undulating, in the movement, in the fugitive and the infinite. To be away from home and yet to feel everywhere at home; to see the world, to be at the centre of the world and to remain hidden from the world, such are among the smallest pleasures of these independent spirits, passionate, impartial, which the tongue can only clumsily define.] (Baudelaire: 'Peintre', 691-692)

The ecstasy of city walking is entirely about a mobile spectatorship, with the walker described as a 'kaléidoscope doué de conscience' [kaleidoscope gifted with consciousness] (Baudelaire: 'Peintre', 692). The flâneur is absorbed into the emotions of the crowd as he walks, which Baudelaire describes as a kind of drunkenness in his prose poem 'Les Foules' [The Crowds]: 'Le promeneur solitaire et pensif tire une singulière ivresse de cette universelle communion' [The solitary and pensive walker draws a singular drunkenness from this universal communion] (Baudelaire: *Spleen*, 91).

In *Le Peintre de la vie moderne*, Baudelaire talks extensively of children, and of the child's fascinated gaze as a model for the flâneur. He writes that 'la génie n'est que l'enfance retrouvée à volonté, l'enfance douée maintenant, pour s'exprimer, d'organes virils et de l'esprit analytique qui lui permet d'ordonner la somme de matériaux involontairement amassée' [genius is no more than childhood regained at will, a childhood now gifted in self-expression, with a manly body and an analytical mind that allows him to order the sum of material he has

involuntarily amassed] (Baudelaire: *Peintre*, 690, italics in original). The flâneur amasses information as he walks and transforms what he sees through an 'idealisation', due to his 'childlike perception': 'Tous les matériaux dont la mémoire s'est encombrée se classent, se rangent, s'harmonisent et subissent cette idéalisation forcée qui est le résultat d'une perception *enfantine*, c'est-à-dire d'une perception aiguë, magique à force d'ingénuité!' [All the materials with which his memory is cluttered are classified, are arranged, are harmonised and are subjected to that forced idealisation which is the result of a childlike perception, that is to say, a sharp perception, magical by dint of its ingenuity!] (Baudelaire: *Peintre*, 694, italics in original). Baudelaire likens the child's reception of the world's impressions to those of the poet in a crowd and to his own poetics through the image of drunkenness: 'L'enfant voit tout en *nouveauté* ; il est toujours *ivre*. Rien ne ressemble plus à ce qu'on appelle l'inspiration, que la joie avec laquelle l'enfant absorbe la forme et la couleur' [The child sees everything in newness; he is always drunk. Nothing more resembles what we call inspiration than the joy with which a child absorbs form and colour] (Baudelaire: *Peintre*, 690, italics in original).

It is important to note, however, that the child is not for Baudelaire valued *per se* as an artist: he criticises Constantin Guys' early works as 'barbouillages primitifs' [primitive scribbles], saying 'il dessinait comme un barbare, comme un enfant' [he drew like a barbarian, like a child] (Baudelaire: *Peintre*, 688). Rather, it is the adult who has maintained or reacquired those childlike aspects of himself that he can use with adult wisdom, who succeeds as an artist of modernity: Baudelaire praises Guys as a 'man-child': 'prenez-le aussi pour un homme-enfant, pour un homme possédant à chaque minute le génie de l'enfance, c'est-à-dire un génie pour lequel aucun aspect de la vie n'est *émoussé*' [take him also for a man-child, for a man possessing at every moment the genius of childhood, that is to say a genius for whom no aspect of life has become dulled] (Baudelaire: *Peintre*, 691, italics in original). For Baudelaire, the city walker and the artist of modernity cannot be a child; he must be a man.

As mentioned above, Eliot is well known for writing urban poetry, and he explicitly takes on Baudelaire as an influence on his work. For example, echoing Baudelaire's title 'Paris Spleen', Eliot wrote a poem titled 'Spleen'. It is primarily focused on capturing a mood, of 'Life, a little bald and gray, [/] Languid, fastidious, and bland', and contains a very Baudelairian image of 'Children and cats in the alley', conflating, as Baudelaire often does, children with cats, and situating them in the city (Eliot: *Poems*, 32). In *Le Spleen de Paris* [Paris Spleen], Baudelaire connects children and cats frequently, as in 'Le Joujou du pauvre' [The Poor Boy's Toy]. Here, he talks of giving gifts to children, who run away with them like cats with food: 'D'abord ils n'oseront pas prendre ; ils douteront de leur bonheur ; puis leurs mains agripperont vivement le cadeau, et ils s'enfuiront comme font les chats qui vont manger loin de vous le morceau que vous leur avez donné, ayant appris à se défier de l'homme' [At first they do not dare to take them; they doubt of their fortune; then their hands grip the gift livelily, and they run off like cats who are going to eat far from you the morsel that you gave them, having learnt to defy

man] (Baudelaire: *Spleen*, 112). Eliot displays his knowledge of Baudelaire's urban writing in reversing this very image in 'Rhapsody on a Windy Night': "'Remark the cat which flattens itself in the gutter, [/] Slips out its tongue [/] And devours a morsel of rancid butter.'" [/] So the hand of the child, automatic, [/] Slipped out and pocketed a toy that was running along the quay' (Eliot: *Collected Poems*, 27). With regard to *Practical Cats*, Kerry Weinberg sees a few points of connection to Baudelaire's three cat poems (Weinberg: *T. S. Eliot*, 63-65). Eliot's poems are of course very different in mood from Baudelaire's, with a far greater sense of levity, but in making his cats ecstatic city wanderers, Eliot merges two of Baudelaire's tropes, producing a feline city opus. In presenting London through the city's cats, Eliot puts forward the image of the petit flâneur, the cat and the child brought together in their littleness. Eliot's *Practical Cats* shows Baudelaire's influence on Eliot, bringing together Baudelaire's separate poetry of the city and of cats, but also bringing to them Eliot's play with rhymes and rhythms, and development of evocative, idiosyncratic individuals.

Twentieth-century Flânerie and the Urban Child

Twentieth-century urban writers and thinkers have attempted to broaden the scope of the flâneur. For example, critics like Rachel Bowlby, Enda Duffy and Caroline Pollentier have all sought to challenge the exclusivity of the flâneur, exploring modernist literature that pushes beyond the conventional model of the white middle-class male adult. Most significantly for this study, Eric Tribunella has asserted that there are child flâneurs in children's novels set in New York. For Tribunella, adult writers imagine a flânerie through the eyes of their child characters; they thus follow Baudelaire's dictum perfectly, as, with the faculties of an adult, they recapture a childhood sense of wonder (Tribunella: 'Children's Literature', 88). As such, there is nothing specifically childlike about the flânerie that Tribunella describes. He is significant in asserting that children can and have been flâneurs, but he only sees their 'innocent' gaze as enabling them to be flâneurs like adults are, without considering what differences there are between adults and children in their urban experiences (Tribunella: 'Children's Literature', 68-69).

While Tribunella points here to the historical belief in the 'innocence' of children, other theorists of childhood endeavour to push away from this potentially quasi-religious, or judgemental, approach to childhood. The children's geographers Paul Cloke and Owain Jones re-theorise the child out of 'innocence', to productively recognise the otherness of children and so open a space for a flânerie that is specifically childlike: 'we argue that, unlike romanticism, post-structuralism is concerned not so much with the *innocence* of childhood as with the *otherness* of childhood' (Cloke and Jones: 'Unclaimed Territory', 313, italics in original). Jones further argues against the Romantic tradition that sees children and cities as fundamentally opposed terms, the notion that "'childhood" and the "urban" are, at best, uneasy companions, and, at worst, symbolically incompatible' (Jones: 'Naturally Not!', 17). Cloke and Jones welcome children into city spaces,

in seeking to undo the historical association of childhood with innocence. They focus on 'disordered space', writing of the ability of children to territorialise unused, hidden and forgotten spaces, outside of adult authority.

In this, they echo the seminal work of Colin Ward on children in the city, his writing on construction work and what he terms 'unmake': 'The place that is becoming, the unfinished habitat, is rich in experiences and adventures for the child, just because of the plenitude of "unmake" bits of no-man's land' (Ward: *The Child*, 71). Ward's primary focus, however, as a geographical theorist, is in making the city more welcoming to children, rather than consigning them to areas abandoned by adults. He recognises that there are many dangers for children in the city, particularly since cars began to replace horse-drawn carriages in the 1930s, and that a child alone lacks knowledge specific to city living: 'The isolated child in the city is unfamiliar with the public transport system, with the use of the telephone, with the public library service, with eliciting information from strangers, with the norms of behaviour in cafes and restaurants', and so on (Ward: *The Child*, 50). At the same time, simply keeping children indoors and denying them access to the city can lead to children secretly going out and suffering accidents that some basic city knowledge could have prevented. For Ward, thus, a little supervised experience is better than being kept away from the city (Ward: *The Child*, 125).

More than this, he contends that children can gain much from city living if they can develop interests that create for them a personally mapped, 'specialised city':

Blessed is the child, rich or poor, with a hobby or a skill or an all-consuming passion, for he or she is motivated to utilise the city as a generator of happiness. [...] the child who is hooked on to some network built around a shared activity has found ways of making the city work for him. (Ward: *The Child*, 106)

His examples of such activities are following a band to different venues, or a football team to different stadiums, or being a musician and travelling to specialist shops. Ward also provides examples of children being given responsibilities in their local communities, buildings or parts of the city, and through these responsibilities, not only learning to enjoy city life, but to contribute to it in return. Ward's work is an impassioned injunction both to parents and to city planners not to reinforce boundaries between the city and children, and to recognise children as valuable members of urban society and not simply as nuisances or dangers to themselves.

More recently, Christopher Jenks also assesses the notion of urban space as inimical to childhood, and the position adults hold in this dynamic: 'The late-modern private child, predominantly the city child, is now often the victim of public space. The big "outside" is conceived as a dangerous place to be and the child is introduced to this risk both gradually and in company' (Jenks: *Childhood*, 88). That is to say, children are no longer welcomed into public spaces, but separated

off from them for their own purported safety. With his mention of adult company, Jenks hints at the role that adults can play in introducing children to city spaces, a role that can equally be taken up by adults in writing urban literature for children.

Mapping London in *Practical Cats*

In *Practical Cats* itself, we can see the city is not explicitly focused on in the poems, but forms a backdrop to a number of them. Growltiger is known as 'The Terror of the Thames', and Mungojerrie and Rumpleteazer, for example, 'had an extensive reputation, made their home in Victoria Grove—[/] That was merely their centre of operation, for they were incurably given to rove. [/] They were well known in Cornwall Gardens, in Launceston Place and Kensington Square' (Eliot: *Practical Cats*, 17, 27). It is important to note, however, that not all the poems are set in outdoor urban spaces. Indeed, its first cat character poem, 'The Old Gumbie Cat', is domestic in setting all the way through: 'All day she sits upon the stair or on the steps or on the mat: [/] She sits and sits and sits and sits—and that's what makes a Gumbie cat!' (Eliot: *Practical Cats*, 15). I would argue, however, that in order to rethink a child's place in the city, Eliot connects this to a reconsideration of domestic space. Bettelheim claims the value of such domestic representations in introducing children to urban life: 'The manner in which we respond to our living in a city, and with it what our urban experience will be, is conditioned by the ideas of what city life is all about which we developed in and around our home, long before we had much direct experience with the city's wider aspects, or any ability to evaluate them objectively' (Bettelheim: 'The Child's Perception', 219). Several of the poems in *Practical Cats* are set in domestic spaces—'The Old Gumbie Cat', 'The Rum Tum Tugger', 'Mr Mistoffelees' and 'Mungojerrie and Rumpleteazer'—and all of these poems are concerned with order and disorder within the home. Jennyanydots is evidently an ordering force, in her efforts to train the other creatures of the house, but at the same time subverts the order of the humans in the house, by beginning her day in secret, after theirs has ended: she is thus the agent of a secret order, which opposes conventional (diurnal) order. The Rum Tum Tugger, in contrast, is an overtly disruptive domestic influence, enjoying nothing more than 'a horrible muddle' (Eliot: *Practical Cats*, 22). Mr Mistoffelees, Mungojerrie and Rumpleteazer are made into scapegoats for anything lost or damaged in the house: if something goes missing, the family claims, "'It's that horrible cat! [/] It was Mungojerrie—or Rumpleteazer!"—And most of the time they left it at that' (Eliot: *Practical Cats*, 27). As they are not seen performing the acts they are blamed for, they become symbols of disruption, not responsible for mere isolated incidents, but universally responsible for disorder. Apart from Jennyanydots, these domestic cats enter and exit the house with remarkable ease: the Rum Tum Tugger is 'always on the wrong side of every door', Mr Mistoffelees can simultaneously be on the roof and by the fire, and Mungojerrie and Rumpleteazer need only a window left ajar to break in or out of any house (Eliot: *Practical Cats*, 21, 27, 38). As agents of disorder and secret order within the household, and as figures easily capable of crossing the borders of domestic space,

these cats serve as a bridge between domestic and urban spaces. In relishing the disorderliness of these domestic cats, *Practical Cats* encourages its child readers to delight in, and not to fear, the chaos of the city.

While other urban children's picturebooks, like Alexis Deacon's *Beegu* (2003), often present a generalised cityscape, *Practical Cats* very specifically introduces its child readers to places in London. Barry Faulk notes that as Eliot was writing his urban poetry, in the 1920s and 30s, the nature of the city was changing, through the creation of specialised zones: 'With the rise of mass entertainment in the new metropolis, there was for the first time a concerted effort by capitalist entrepreneurs to rezone the city according to cultural differences' (Faulk: 'T. S. Eliot', 32). With this re-zoning, different parts of London came to be known for different kinds of entertainment, people and atmosphere. This is precisely played out in *Practical Cats*, in the clubs and eateries of St James Square in 'Bustopher Jones: The Cat About Town', the multicultural docks of the Thames in 'Growltiger's Last Stand', as well as in presenting Victoria Grove (the home of Mungojerrie and Rumpleteazer) and Bloomsbury Square (where Cat Morgan keeps the door). We can also see this sense of the zones of London in the children's books of the author and essayist Thomas Burke, whose *Billy and Beryl* series is predicated upon the children exploring new parts of the city. For example, in *Billy and Beryl in Chinatown* (1935), we follow the children's journey 'down the hill into the City, where the business is done; past the Bank of England and the Royal Exchange and the Mansion House. And then out of the City into Whitechapel, where the Jewish boys and girls live' (Burke: *Chinatown*, 14). In *Billy and Beryl in Old London* (1936), their taxi driver friend Old George comments:

It's wonderful how many countries there are in London. [...] There's streets round here which are almost entirely French. In Clerkenwell you can find two streets in which every house is owned by Italians. In Spitalfields you can find streets where English people are foreigners; all the residents are Russian. And there's the two Chinese streets in Limehouse where I took you last year. (Burke: *Old London*, 15)

From these passages, it is evident that London in the 1930s was considered to be a place divided by purpose (such as financial district) and groupings of nationalities. Eliot's poems, too, draw on the ethnic diversity of London, through its animal characters (in an often crude way), with mention of 'Heathen Chinese' dogs, and 'Persian' and 'Siamese' cats (Eliot: *Practical Cats*, 17, 34).

Beyond capturing the zones and landmarks of London, *Practical Cats* is filled with places that cannot be mapped. There are thirteen pubs and clubs named in the poems, but also generic places such as 'the neighbouring pub', 'the Theatre' and 'a small basement flat', which can only be known to those personally involved in those places (Eliot: *Practical Cats*, 24, 35). In Michel de Certeau's theory of the illocutionary act of city walking, he writes on these kinds of references as a subversion of authoritative accounts of the city: such places 'become liberated spaces that can be occupied', as they are 'names that have ceased precisely to be

“proper””; as such, they build ‘a second, poetic geography on top of the geography of the literal, forbidden or permitted meaning’ (Certeau: *The Practice*, 105). Richard Badenhause asserts that these unnamed spaces are ‘most significant due to their very indeterminacy, which allows alternative occupations of those spaces to function as creative acts in themselves’ (Badenhause: ‘Totalizing the City’, 103).

It may appear, then, that *Practical Cats* contrasts with *The Waste Land* in its approach to the city, since *The Waste Land* only names landmarks, such as London Bridge and King William Street, and so allows itself to be precisely mapped. However, the early drafts of *The Waste Land*, published in a facsimile with Ezra Pound’s emendations, reveal that Eliot’s original vision for *The Waste Land* has much in common with *Practical Cats* in its representation of the city. In the final version of *The Waste Land*, the individuality that is so central to the characters of *Practical Cats* is all subsumed into the figure of Tiresias. Eliot cut eighteen characters from the poem, thus emphasising Tiresias’ position and undermining the individuality of the remaining characters as they merge into him (Badenhause: ‘Totalizing the City’, 94). The change in title from *He Do the Police in Different Voices* to *The Waste Land* itself attests to Eliot’s move from working-class subversive voices to an overarching moral vision. Indeed, while Badenhause sees Eliot censuring his own interest in the everyday multiple voices and individuality of the city, under Pound’s strict guidance, *Practical Cats* can be seen as the ultimate expression of Eliot’s original poetic vision of the city. The opening section of *The Waste Land*, ‘The Burial of the Dead’ originally began with personal mapping, multiple voices and the exuberance of city living: ‘First we had a couple of feelers down at Tom’s place, [/] There was old Tom, boiled to the eyes, blind’ (Eliot: *The Waste Land Facsimile*, 5). Badenhause concludes that this early draft of *The Waste Land* ‘deeply reflects the individualized vision and personal interests of Eliot, for it includes extended references to or meditations on some of the writer’s pet interests [...] and even a character named Tom, a notably personal echo that never appears in any of Eliot’s published poetry or drama’ (Badenhause: ‘Totalizing the City’, 108). While the final published version of *The Waste Land* excised all of these, favouring instead a universal and authoritative vision, *Practical Cats* revives Eliot’s personal and individual sense of the city.

Another significant difference between *Practical Cats* and *The Waste Land* is the tone of these poems. Although there are moments of humour in *The Waste Land*, its fragmented free verse style and recurrent use of null rhymes (for example, rhyming ‘this red rock’ with ‘this red rock’, and ‘so many’ with ‘so many’ at the ends of lines) means that it fits with Bettelheim’s examples of lifeless, repetitive language (Eliot: *Collected Poems*, 53, 55). On the other hand, *Practical Cats* begins with a regular iambic beat for the first four lines of its first poem, ‘The Naming of Cats’, but soon breaks out of that into a new, more complex structure, a change demarcated by the inverted metre of the words ‘First of all’ to start the fifth line (Eliot: *Practical Cats*, 11). The poems are generally regular in their rhythms and rhymes, but each unique in how they develop them, allowing for structure and repetition, but making those structures in themselves new and

exciting. For example, Eliot rhymes unusual and invented words with each other, such as 'quorum' and 'Jellylorum' in 'The Naming of Cats', switches up line lengths for changes of pace in 'The Old Gumbie Cat', and gives rolling, locomotive internal rhymes for 'Skimbleshanks: The Railway Cat', such as in the line 'Saying "Skimble where is Skimble has he gone to hunt the thimble?' (Eliot: *Practical Cats*, 11, 15-16, 51). In these ways, Eliot's rhymes and rhythms avoid predictability, suggesting that repetition can be exciting and, even where the same features recur (as in urban landscapes), they need not be boring for the child.

Practical Cats also makes space for the range of social classes that Eliot aimed to depict in *The Waste Land*, reaching all the way down to the criminal underclass. The cats in these poems are perhaps more masterful of their urban surroundings than children are likely to be, but they are nonetheless petits flâneurs in the size and scope of their relations to city space. Indeed, Tribunella talks of children evading the gaze of adults and finding freedom in city streets: 'Partly because of their status as second-class citizens, children are sometimes able to roam without being noticed' (Tribunella: 'Children's Literature', 68). While Tribunella puts this down to social reasons, their ability to go unseen can also be a matter of physical stature. As can be seen in the illustrations for the picturebook *Beegu*, children may experience the city differently to most adults purely because they are smaller, and so can traverse the city differently. In *Practical Cats*, Macavity and Mr Mistoffelees are especially noted for being hard to find: 'You may meet him in a by-street, you may see him in the square—[/] But when a crime's discovered, then *Macavity's not there!*' (Eliot: *Practical Cats*, 42, italics in original). Further, the criminal cats of the poems, such as Mungojerrie and Rumpleteazer, have their child equivalents in such figures as Dickens' Artful Dodger. Ward makes mention of such street-wise urban children:

Some children steal, not because they have no access to the purchase money, but because they find it a less arduous task than the verbal encounter with the seller. They move like strangers through their own city, so that one is forced to admire those cheerful rogues who know every inch of it backwards and get involved in much more serious and sophisticated offences, just because they have absorbed the structure and functions of the city. (Ward: *The Child*, 47)

Like these 'cheerful rogues', Eliot's cats are thus exemplary petits flâneurs in their mastery of the city, not despite, but because of their small stature and ability to go unnoticed. Ford Madox Ford also reflects on the difference that size makes, in beginning his modernist tract *The Soul of London* (1905) by imagining a child's perception of the city:

If, as a London child, he have [*sic.*] wandered much in the streets, there will remain to him always an odd sensation of being very little, of peering round the corners of gray and gigantic buildings upon grayer vistas of buildings more gigantic—so, with a half touch of awe, we scramble, as relatively little in maturity, round the base of an out-jutting

cliff into what may prove a gray cove or what may be a great bay. It is the sense of making discoveries, of a world's opening-up. (Ford: *The Soul of London*, 4-5)

For Ford, the child's littleness itself provides a fresh perspective on the cityscape, and he implies a sense of wonderment in the child seeing the city, even through the greyness and repetitive urban structures. Eliot's *Practical Cats* elaborates on just such a perspective through the disruptive and exciting movements of its cat characters, echoed in the unique rhymes and rhythmic structures of the poems.

Conclusion

The penultimate poem of *Practical Cats*, 'The Addressing of Cats' teaches children how, in the anonymity of city living, to find allies and create their own personal mappings of the city through entering into relationships with other city dwellers. Eliot recaps what he has presented of cats in the collection: 'You've seen them both at work and games, [/] And learnt about their proper names, [/] Their habits and their habitat' (Eliot: *Practical Cats*, 55). As we have seen, it is precisely this attention to play, to confident individuality (alluded to in their 'proper names') and to 'habitat' that is essential to Eliot's poems here. The practical introduction to urban life made evident in this poem undergirds Eliot's entire collection, and *Practical Cats* can thus be seen as the pinnacle of Eliot's urban poetry, as well as chronologically being his last major urban work. These poems bring together the varied influences of Baudelaire on him, his personal vision of the city, his class interests in the spectrum of cats presented and focus all of these into a text that both officially and subversively maps London as a way of introducing the city to a child audience.

Eliot's *Practical Cats* writes against the mainstream valuation of the child in nature, rejects the supposed "innocence" of childhood to delight instead in disorder, and to present petits flâneurs mastering the codes of the city. Rejecting Rousseauvian ideas, and following on from the impact of Baudelaire's urban and cat poetry on Eliot, the city is a central figure in *Practical Cats*, raising the question of urban childhood. While Bettelheim notes the dull repetitions of most city writing for children, which can discourage children from enjoying urban environments, Eliot's poetry is replete with lively rhymes and unexpected rhythms. In this way, the urban content of *Practical Cats* is tied to its poetic forms and Eliot shows individuality and playfulness flourishing in London. Eliot presents urban life as exciting, playful and welcoming for small mischievous beings, like cats or children, with his original and vibrant rhyme schemes and strong characters bringing London alive for his young readers.

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