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CONSCIOUSNESS OF SCENE
IN ELENA GURO’S WORK

“The unlit street stared emptily into the rooms, and the rooms returned its stare.”
Pasternak

“. . . You had such a vision of the street
As the street hardly understands: . . .”
T. S. Eliot

Raymond Williams, in his seminal book *The Country and the City*, argues convincingly that in the twentieth century “all sources of perception seem[ed] to begin and end in the city. . . .”¹ The cities, as the chief source of inspiration for a modern new art, host the realism of what Williams calls “the new anguished consciousness.”² There, a form of decisive modern awareness emerges not only as vision, but embodiment. Other scholars, William Sharpe and Leonard Wallock,³ in an illuminating article “From ‘Great Town’ to ‘Nonplace Urban Realm’: Reading the Modern City,” explore ways the urban environment serves and shapes aesthetic perception in its poets, and enables literary “readings” of the city. Their concern is with the city as a psychological and social landscape, an artifact, and as an urban state of mind. As much as cities have provided means of artistic expression, their predominant connotations in the nineteenth century were loss of purpose and meaning, pursuit of social ambitions, struggle, indifference, the emergence of industry and its effect on the population. If the

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². Ibid., p. 239.
modernist aesthetic takes the city as its locus, and as one of its most important characters, it also celebrates the transitory in cities, and features the colorful, the artificial and alienated brought fourth by industry, technology, depravity, noise and confusion. The city of Modernism also demonstrates the multiplicity of meaning, dissolution of community, and loss of causal and sequential connections.

At the beginning of the century representations of city life often turn for recovery of a spiritual dimension to the internalized, psychological landscape of the city and the effect it has on human consciousness. As depicted, the city often stands for the condition of the society as a whole, and as a source of artistic inspiration. No one saw the city as a repository of images and scenes serving this conversion more subtly than Elena Guro (1877-1913), whose modernist painter's/writer's eye and lens envisions for us a unique consciousness of scene, and whose contemporary experience shapes our views, while helping us interpret the “text” of the city, its metaphors and representations.

Guro explores the enormously rich potential for modern consciousness of perceiving and knowing the city, of mapping a subjective poetics of reading and writing the city and its texts, while walking and seeing, and ultimately recording what she sees. I will specifically concentrate on the awareness of unsettling scenes, framed for our deep reflection and meditation, and on the ethical implications of the modernist act of seeing in Guro’s work. This central concern of her work, I argue, is to make the reader see in a new way an isolated vision, and isolating a kind of solidarity of longing and loneliness, often suppressed by imposed and colonizing structures. As well, her eye penetrates a too organized way of knowing, thus giving not only a more authentic sense of others, but also of the self. The reader is made to see the dangerous and tense relationship between the scene/spectacle on the street, and the psychic private life of the observing, specifically modern, no longer innocent consciousness. As the narrative consciousness is no longer innocent, neither is active gazing at a scene.

It should be kept in mind that for Guro the mode of perception of things and life is visual and that it emphasizes physical objects as protagonists of a scene. Guro tries, like Joseph Conrad, to make the

4. Ibid., p. 6.
5. All the translations from the Russian are mine, unless otherwise indicated.