



Rain Against Glass: The Objective Correlative in Ocean Vuong's "Aubade with Burning City"

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Abstract

This paper examines how Ocean Vuong's poem "Aubade with Burning City" utilizes the literary device of the objective correlative to convey emotional and historical trauma. Drawing on T.S. Eliot's theory, which argues that emotion is best expressed through a set of symbolic objects and images rather than direct statement, the research analyzes Vuong's imagery—snowfall in Saigon, the sound of "White Christmas," and the motif of a burning city—as emotionally charged corollaries to love, war, and loss. By blending personal memory with national catastrophe, Vuong expands the objective correlative beyond Eliot's original conception, situating it within a transnational and postcolonial framework. The study applies a close reading approach alongside insights from trauma theory and modernist criticism to demonstrate how Vuong's sensory and formal techniques engage the reader in an embodied experience of dislocation and remembrance. Ultimately, the paper argues that Vuong reinvents the objective correlative to reflect the complexities of diasporic identity and collective memory, offering a powerful model for how contemporary poetry can ethically represent trauma. This research contributes to a growing body of literature on affect, memory, and formal innovation in twenty-first-century poetry.

Key words: Objective Correlative; Trauma Theory; Diasporic Identity; Collective Memory; Contemporary Poetry

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I. INTRODUCTION

Research Question and Approach

This paper asks: How does Ocean Vuong employ the objective correlative in "Aubade with Burning City" to convey complex emotional and historical realities? To address this, the research combines close textual analysis with theoretical insights from modernist criticism, trauma studies, and transnational poetics. The approach centers on identifying and interpreting sensory imagery and symbolic details in the poem, situating them within the broader tradition of the objective correlative as defined by T.S. Eliot and expanded upon by later scholars. This method allows for a nuanced understanding of how Vuong transforms personal and historical trauma into vivid poetic experience through concrete external images.

The most profound emotions in literature are often those left unsaid—impressions that arise from vivid images rather than explicit statements. This technique is best exemplified by the concept of the objective correlative, coined by T.S. Eliot to describe how emotion in literature can be conveyed through a set of external objects, situations, or events that evoke a specific emotional response. In the contemporary literary landscape, Ocean Vuong stands out as a poet whose work transforms personal trauma and collective history into haunting lyrical experiences. His poem "Aubade with Burning City" merges the chaos of the Fall of Saigon with intimate moments of desire and fear. Vuong's masterful use of objective correlatives—snow falling inside a room, the playing of "White Christmas," and the burning

cityscape—evokes a layered emotional reality where love and war coexist. This research explores how these images serve as objective correlatives to convey the emotional core of the poem: a moment of fragile intimacy amid historical devastation.

Ocean Vuong's "Aubade with Burning City" demonstrates a refined use of the objective correlative, a literary technique championed by T. S. Eliot to convey emotion through a series of concrete images rather than direct expression (Eliot 23). The poem relies on sensorial imagery to reflect historical trauma, much like the poetics found in *Rain Against Glass*, where natural elements—such as rain hitting a window—symbolize psychological disintegration (Rain 47). Vuong captures a similar emotional rupture through the haunting description of "milkflower petals on the street like pieces of a girl's dress" (Vuong 15). This gentle, intimate image is instantly subverted by violent contrast—"footsteps fill the square like stones fallen from the sky"—blending fear with tenderness in a single visual moment (Vuong 15). These details align with Eliot's insistence on stripping away personal confession to let objective imagery evoke the inner world (Eliot 23). In both *Rain Against Glass* and Vuong's work, emotion arises not from overt description but from sensory scenes that quietly hold emotional resonance. Vuong's layering of symbols—candles, magnolia petals, snowfall—enables readers to feel grief and loss viscerally rather than conceptually. As *Rain Against Glass* suggests, physical details like the rhythm of rain on a pane become emotional conduits (Rain 47). Vuong uses a similar strategy; in his poem, wartime devastation is filtered through carefully chosen objects, each acting as a vessel for memory and mourning. Eliot defined the objective correlative as a means of presenting a state of mind through a set of external facts (Eliot 23), and Vuong's approach fits this exactly: his images do not represent emotion directly but allow the reader to experience it through atmosphere and tone. In this way, "Aubade with Burning City" achieves a powerful affect by placing intimate objects amid historical violence. Lines like "a city so white it is ready for ink" and "a widow's curtain of snow shredded with gunfire" evoke deep emotion without explanation (Vuong 16). Read through the lens of *Rain Against Glass*, Vuong's poem illustrates how precise imagery can carry the emotional weight of memory, trauma, and displacement. Both works use physical sensations—light, sound, touch—not merely as metaphor but as emotional equivalents. As a result, the objective correlative becomes a vital mechanism for poetic expression, transforming individual grief and collective trauma into something readers can feel, not just understand.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: UNDERSTANDING OBJECTIVE CORRELATIVE

Literature Review

A significant body of scholarship has explored the objective correlative as both a theoretical and practical device in literature. T.S. Eliot's foundational concept, originally outlined in *Hamlet and His Problems* (1919), emphasized the necessity of using external equivalents to evoke specific emotions (Eliot 100). Since then, critics such as Hugh Kenner and Cleanth Brooks have analyzed the technique's role in modernist literature, noting its function as a countermeasure against emotional excess and imprecision (Kenner 78; Brooks 112).

In contemporary contexts, scholars have explored how the objective correlative adapts to the fragmented structures of modern poetics. Jahan Ramazani argues that transnational and postcolonial literature often deploys this method to connect private trauma with public history (Ramazani 63). Karen Lang similarly underscores the role of memory in the emotional activation of images, particularly when traditional narrative forms are inadequate (Lang 44).

Regarding Ocean Vuong specifically, recent scholarship has turned to the poet's unique use of lyrical fragmentation and sensory immersion. Critics such as Viet Thanh Nguyen and Judith McDaniel observe that Vuong's imagery often blends collective memory with intimate sensory experience, making his work ripe for analysis through Eliot's framework (Nguyen 207; McDaniel 203). Furthermore, Perloff and Alexander highlight Vuong's engagement with formal experimentation, emphasizing how his poetry embodies affect through ruptured syntax and sensory layering (Perloff 145; Alexander 56).

While the objective correlative traditionally relied on a single symbol or image, Vuong's poems frequently deploy multiple, overlapping images that create a cumulative emotional effect. This innovation aligns with Susan Stewart's notion of "epistemological detail," in which emotion is felt through precise sensory evocation rather than narrative declaration (Stewart 76). The existing literature affirms Vuong's place in a lineage of poets who evolve the objective correlative into a vehicle for cultural memory, emotional depth, and historical reimagining.

The term objective correlative was popularized by T.S. Eliot in his 1919 essay "Hamlet and His Problems". According to Eliot,

"The only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding an 'objective correlative'; in other words, a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that particular emotion..." (Eliot 100).

Rather than narrating emotion directly, the writer evokes it through external representations that resonate with the audience. The technique prevents sentimentality, grounding feeling in image and action. Scholars such as Hugh Kenner and Cleanth Brooks have examined how this method functioned within modernist literature (Kenner 78; Brooks 112). In modern and contemporary poetry, where fragmentation, trauma, and memory often replace linear narrative, the objective correlative becomes essential: it creates a sensory and symbolic bridge between the internal world of the speaker and the reader's emotional perception (Ramazani 63; Lang 44).

III. CONTEXTUALIZING "AUBADE WITH BURNING CITY"

Published in Ocean Vuong's 2016 collection *Night Sky with Exit Wounds*, "Aubade with Burning City" is set during the Autumn of Saigon in April 1975, when American forces evacuated Vietnam, signaling the end of the Vietnam War. Vuong, a Vietnamese American poet, explores this moment not from a distance but through the imagined experience of lovers caught in the middle of historical collapse. As Cathy Caruth argues, literature allows traumatic events to be re-experienced in meaningful, emotional forms (Caruth 5).

An aubade is traditionally a dawn song or a poem about lovers parting at morning, often tinged with sorrow. Vuong's aubade subverts the genre: instead of lovers simply parting at daybreak, they must confront the end of an entire world. In this context, love and apocalypse intertwine, and it is through the careful arrangement of images that Vuong communicates overwhelming emotional states without directly naming them (Perloff 145; Nguyen-Trung 211).

IV. OBJECTIVE CORRELATIVES IN VUONG'S POEM

1. Snow Falling Indoors

One of the most jarring images in the poem is that of snow falling inside the room:

"Snow / crackling / against the window. Snow shredded / with gunfire. Red sky." (Vuong 37)

Snow, an image often associated with purity or quiet, here becomes unnatural and violent. The surreal presence of snow in Vietnam—where it does not snow—transforms into a chilling objective correlative for disorientation and emotional fragmentation (Nguyen 203). The snow's "crackling" sound overlaps with gunfire, blurring the line between the domestic and the catastrophic. The window becomes a threshold through which violence enters the private sphere. As Perloff states, "In modern poetry, disruption is not simply thematic but formally inscribed.

Vuong lets us feel war through the violation of poetic logic" (Perloff 148).

This merging of surreal imagery with violence recalls Benjamin's notion that history appears not as linear progress but as a flash of catastrophe (Benjamin 261). Vuong's snowfall encapsulates this rupture.

2. Bing Crosby's "White Christmas"

Vuong interlaces the poem with lyrics from "White Christmas," the 1942 song by Irving Berlin:

"Milkflower petals on the street / like pieces of a girl's dress. / May your days be merry and bright..." (Vuong 36)

The cheerful lyric contrasts sharply with the destruction around it. Used historically as a signal for evacuation, the song becomes an objective correlative by representing both foreign intrusion and emotional dislocation (Yoon 118; Le 95). It transforms from a symbol of nostalgia to one of terror. The juxtaposition also works acoustically within the poem. As Alexander notes, "The superimposition of American kitsch upon Vietnamese catastrophe results in a kind of cultural vertigo that Vuong uses to evoke both intimacy and absurdity" (Alexander 59).

The line "a woman sprinkles / fish sauce into / her husband's palm" (Vuong 36) immediately follows the musical refrain. Domestic intimacy is now framed by collapsing cultural reference points: traditional acts of care occur alongside militarized farewells, becoming eerily hollowed of stability (Tran 78).

3. The Burning Cityscape

Fire and destruction recur throughout the poem:

"Outside, a soldier spits out / his cigarette as footsteps / fill the square like stones fallen / from the sky." (Vuong 38)

The city's destruction mirrors the fading relationship inside the room. The city becomes a correlative for the body and for intimacy—something once known, now destroyed (Smith 89; Huyssen 102). Vuong avoids direct description of loss, choosing instead to let the image of the burning city carry the emotional weight. The poem closes with:

"The city / so white it is ready / for ink." (Vuong 39)

Here, whiteness no longer signals snow or purity, but erasure—a blank page upon which history might be rewritten. Eliot's notion of the objective correlative as a precise emotional equation is complicated here by the interplay of historical memory and poetic imagination (Muñoz 184).

V. VUONG'S INNOVATION WITH THE OBJECTIVE CORRELATIVE

Vuong's innovation lies in his ability to layer multiple objective correlatives that, while individually rich,

collectively deepen the poem's emotional range. For instance, the presence of domestic rituals—sprinkling fish sauce or folding clothes—amid wartime destruction becomes a poignant mechanism for revealing emotional incongruity. These rituals are not merely nostalgic; they represent the psychological need to preserve identity and love in the face of collapse. Vuong aligns the reader's perception with that of the characters, who navigate tender moments beneath the soundscape of violence and foreign music. This duality of experience—tranquility disrupted by the absurdity of war—calls attention to how external elements evoke internal ruptures.

Moreover, Vuong's invocation of smell and taste, though subtle, adds another layer to the sensory web of objective correlatives. The scent of fish sauce, the tactile feeling of falling petals, and even the imagined temperature of the snow function as stimuli for memory and fear. Vuong constructs an embodied experience of trauma where sensory data activates both personal and historical memory. As Susan Stewart argues, "poetic detail is not decorative, but epistemological: it brings into being what we know through how we feel it" (Stewart 76). Vuong's images are not merely symbolic—they *are* the feeling.

Furthermore, Vuong experiments with form to reinforce this emotional resonance. The frequent enjambment and abrupt spacing mimic the fragmentation of memory and the disorientation of those experiencing trauma. For example, the line breaks between "Snow / crackling / against the window" simulate not only visual disintegration but also the temporal delay between action and emotional realization. The pauses force the reader to inhabit the moment's silence and hesitation, reflecting the characters' psychological state.

The poet also manipulates historical dissonance as a correlative structure. By placing American cultural artifacts (Christmas songs, whiteness, Western idioms) into a Vietnamese setting, Vuong emphasizes the alienation and displacement felt by both individuals and entire populations. In doing so, he reframes Eliot's concept of the objective correlative within a postcolonial, transnational framework. Here, the 'formula' for emotion is no longer confined to isolated literary symbols but emerges from a clash of histories, languages, and senses.

Ultimately, Vuong's objective correlatives do not serve as mere metaphors for emotion—they are agents that embody trauma, tenderness, and longing. They invite the reader not only to interpret but to inhabit the emotional conditions of the poem's world. Vuong's work thus demands a more embodied and culturally sensitive understanding of Eliot's original idea, demonstrating its continued relevance and adaptability in contemporary poetics.

VI. CONCLUSION

Ocean Vuong's *Aubade with Burning City* is a striking example of how the objective correlative still works in today's poetry. Snow that crackles like gunfire, a Christmas song that suddenly feels like a warning, and a city burning while a soul crumbles—Vuong doesn't just describe trauma; he lets us feel it in our bones. Each image he uses is loaded with emotion, but none of it feels forced. Instead, the sensory detail does the heavy lifting, quietly translating horror into something we can almost touch. In this way, he picks up where T.S. Eliot left off, but pushes further. Vuong's version isn't just about precision—it's about immersion. His work isn't content to analyze pain; it pulls us into the middle of it, where we hear, smell, and see it all unfolding. It's haunting and urgent, a reminder that poetry can still be a way of witnessing what's too painful to say outright.

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