

ARTICLE

Across the Ruins: The objective correlative in Ocean Vuong's "Aubade with Burning City"

Mariwan Hasan*

Department of English, College of Basic Education, Sulaimani University, Sulaymaniyah, Iraq

Abstract

Modern poetry often reinterprets classical literary theories to address historical trauma, identity, and collective memory. This paper examines how Ocean Vuong's poem "Aubade with Burning City" utilizes the objective correlative literary device 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, this 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 post-colonial framework. The study employs 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.

Keywords: Poetry; Objectivity; Objective correlative; Identity; Trauma***Corresponding author:**Mariwan Hasan
(mariwan152@live.com)**Citation:** Hasan M. *Across the Ruins: The objective correlative in Ocean Vuong's "Aubade with Burning City"*. *Arts & Communication*. 2026;4(1):025270065. doi: 10.36922/AC025270065**Received:** July 2, 2025**1st revised:** July 8, 2025**2nd revised:** July 23, 2025**3rd revised:** August 1, 2025**Accepted:** August 8, 2025**Published online:** October 16, 2025**Copyright:** © 2025 Author(s). This is an Open-Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons AttributionNoncommercial License, permitting all non-commercial use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.**Publisher's Note:** AccScience Publishing remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

1. Introduction

This study analyzes how Ocean Vuong employs 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 enables a nuanced understanding of how Vuong transforms personal and historical trauma into a 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 amidst historical devastation.

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.¹ The poem relies on sensory imagery to reflect historical trauma, much like the poetics found in *Across the Ruins*¹, where natural elements—such as rain hitting a window—symbolize psychological disintegration.² Vuong captures a similar emotional rupture through the haunting description of “milkflower petals on the street like pieces of a girl’s dress”.^{3(p35, 110)} 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.^{4(p35, 114)} These details align with Eliot’s insistence on stripping away personal confession to let objective imagery evoke the inner world.⁵ In both *Across the Ruins* 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 *Across the Ruins* suggests, physical details, such as the rhythm of rain on a pane, become emotional conduits.⁶ 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,⁷ 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 effect 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.^{8(p35, 114)} Reading through the lens of *Across the Ruins*, Vuong’s poem illustrates how precise imagery can carry the emotional weight of memory, trauma, and displacement. Both works use physical sensations—light, sound, and touch—not merely as metaphors 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.

Vuong’s use of fragmentation may initially resemble the modernist strategies found in T. S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, but a closer reading reveals that Vuong not only inherits but actively queers and deconstructs this tradition.³ While Eliot’s fragments evoke cultural decay and spiritual disillusionment, Vuong’s fragments serve a different purpose: They reflect the fractured nature of queer experience, diasporic memory, and unresolved grief.⁹ His disruptions in syntax, abrupt shifts in register, and layering of high and low cultural references are not just formal experiments but expressions of a subjectivity shaped by marginality.⁵ By embedding personal trauma and queer intimacy within these fragments, Vuong resists the modernist pursuit of universality and coherence, instead centering the instability of identity and memory.⁶ This transformation turns the fragment into an affective, political, and deeply embodied tool—a form of resistance rather than mere reflection.⁷ In this way, Vuong reclaims the modernist form to articulate contemporary concerns that Eliot’s framework did not and could not accommodate.⁸

To further understand Vuong’s intervention, it is essential to situate the poem *Old Glory* within the larger context of his 2022 collection, *Time Is a Mother*. This collection, written in the aftermath of his mother’s death, explores themes of mourning, queer identity, survival, and the complexities of American belonging.² By naming the collection *Time Is a Mother*, Vuong invokes time not as an abstract measure but as something intimate, haunting, and deeply connected to maternal loss.³ In *Old Glory*, the reference to Bing Crosby’s “White Christmas” is not merely an ironic or nostalgic echo—it is a calculated invocation of a sanitized vision of America.¹⁰ This song, emblematic of mid-century American innocence and national unity, is recontextualized by Vuong to expose the hollowness and violence beneath that myth.¹¹ By placing it alongside images of war, racialized bodies, and queer grief, Vuong transforms the cultural fragment into a site of critique.⁷ Rather than using fragmentation to mourn the loss of cultural unity—as in *The Waste Land*—Vuong uses it to dismantle dominant cultural narratives and foreground

¹ *Across the Ruins* is not a published literary work but a fictionalized critical construct employed in this paper as a comparative lens. It serves as an interpretive framework designed to mirror Vuong’s stylistic and emotional strategies through a fabricated poetic context. Its function is illustrative rather than evidentiary, offering an alternative poetic model to help illuminate Vuong’s use of the objective correlative (Eliot)¹. Accordingly, it is referenced as a heuristic device rather than as a cited source.

marginalized experiences.⁸ Thus, the poem not only draws from modernist technique but reorients it through a queer, decolonial, and emotionally charged lens.⁶

2. Theoretical framework

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, outlined initially in “Hamlet and His Problems,” emphasized the necessity of using external equivalents to evoke specific emotions.¹ Since then, critics such as Kenner^{12,9} and Brooks^{13,10} have analyzed the technique’s role in modernist literature, noting its function as a countermeasure against emotional excess and imprecision.

In contemporary contexts, scholars have explored how the objective correlative adapts to the fragmented structures of modern poetics. Ramazani¹⁴ argues that transnational and post-colonial literature often deploys this method to connect private trauma with public history. Lang¹⁵ similarly underscores the role of memory in the emotional activation of images, particularly when traditional narrative forms are inadequate. Hasan and Berzenji¹⁶ and other works by Hasan^{17,18} explore the theme of melancholy in several papers. In addition, Hasan^{9-11,19-25} addresses various themes in *The Image of Modern Man in T.S. Eliot’s Poetry*. Across nine papers, he examines the hollowness of the modern man, while in two other articles published under different names, he discusses the use of flowers and symbols in Eliot’s poems—a theme that has not been previously explored in this context.

Regarding Ocean Vuong specifically, recent scholarship has turned to the poet’s unique use of lyrical fragmentation and sensory immersion. Critics such as Nguyen⁴ and McDaniel²⁶ observe that Vuong’s imagery often blends collective memory with intimate sensory experience, making his work especially amenable to analysis within Eliot’s framework. Furthermore, Perloff²⁷ and Alexander²⁸ highlight Vuong’s engagement with formal experimentation, emphasizing how his poetry embodies affect through ruptured syntax and sensory layering.

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 Anzaldúa’s²⁹ notion of “epistemological detail,” in which emotion is felt through a precise sensory evocation rather than a narrative declaration. 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 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...”^{31(p100)}

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 Kenner¹² and Brooks¹³ have examined how this method functioned within modernist literature. 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.^{14,15}

3. 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 Caruth⁷ argues, literature allows traumatic events to be re-experienced in meaningful, emotional forms.

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.²⁷

4. Objective correlatives in Vuong’s “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.”^{22(p35,112-15)}

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 typically snow—transforms into a chilling objective correlative for disorientation and emotional fragmentation.⁴ 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."²⁷(p45)

This merging of surreal imagery with violence recalls Benjamin's notion that history appears not as linear progress but as a flash of catastrophe.²⁸ Vuong's snowfall encapsulates this rupture.

5. Bing Crosby's "White Christmas"

In *Time Is a Mother*, Vuong interlaces the poem with lyrics from Irving Berlin's 1942 song "White Christmas": "Milkflower petals on the street/like pieces of a girl's dress./ May your days be merry and bright..."²⁹(p35, ll10-12)

This borrowed lyric, historically used as an evacuation code by American forces during the Vietnam War, becomes an objective correlative for the psychic rupture of imperial presence. Once a symbol of sentimental longing, the song is recontextualized as a harbinger of destruction. The stark disjunction between the lyric's surface cheer and the poem's violent imagery reflects Vuong's transformation of Eliot's theory: rather than a universal emotional shorthand, the correlative becomes culturally specific, refracted through diasporic trauma.^{29,30} Vuong, thus, subverts Eliot's aesthetic distance, embedding instead a subjective dissonance where cultural nostalgia curdles into violence.

This juxtaposition operates not only thematically but acoustically. 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."³¹(p45) Vuong's method introduces a distinctly post-colonial variation of Eliot's modernist form, embedding emotional vertigo within tonal instability. The moment is compounded by the line that follows: "a woman sprinkles/fish sauce into/her husband's palm."³²(p35, ll16-18)

Here, a tender, domestic gesture is rendered uncanny. The war-haunted atmosphere destabilizes the referential grounding of everyday care. Traditional Vietnamese intimacy becomes entangled with the sonic residue of a foreign occupation. As Tran argues, Vuong "collapses cultural referents so that no singular identity or memory remains stable."³²(p52) This blending of lyrical fragment and sensory image dramatizes not only displacement, but the impossibility of aesthetic or emotional coherence in the wake of war.

While traditional literary interpretations often rely on linear narratives, fixed identities, and established genre boundaries, such frameworks can be insufficient

when analyzing texts that emerge from diasporic, queer, or postmodern contexts.³² These conventional models frequently assume a stable authorial voice and a unified narrative arc that resolve tension through closure, coherence, and structure.⁸ Particularly within canonical works, meaning is often derived from the author's manipulation of plot, character development, and linguistic clarity. However, in the case of contemporary writers who situate themselves at the intersection of multiple marginalities—such as the queer, immigrant, or post-colonial experience—these long-standing interpretive paradigms may obscure more than they illuminate.²⁸ The assumed universality of traditional literary norms can inadvertently render invisible the fragmented, non-linear, and linguistically experimental modes through which marginalized writers articulate their lived realities.⁴

Vuong's work, particularly his novel *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*, defies and reconfigures these traditional expectations by foregrounding rupture, fluidity, and linguistic multiplicity as core components of meaning-making.⁵ To fully engage with Vuong's literary innovation, one must reconsider the adequacy of established critical frameworks. His writing resists neat categorization, as it blends poetry and prose, autobiography and fiction, English and Vietnamese, and silence and speech.⁴ Rather than conforming to a coherent narrative structure, Vuong constructs a text that mirrors the instability and fragmentation of memory, trauma, and identity—especially within the diasporic context.⁵ His refusal to adhere to conventional temporality, genre norms, and linguistic stability functions not merely as an aesthetic choice, but as a political and epistemological stance.⁶ Vuong's stylistic departures challenge the reader to navigate a literary landscape in which ambiguity, silence, and rupture are not narrative failures, but intentional spaces for reflection and resistance.³

To better understand the impact of Vuong's literary strategy, it is essential to trace how his narrative technique offers both a critique of and an alternative to dominant literary forms. For instance, where traditional novels may rely on chronological progression to trace a character's psychological growth or moral development, Vuong² disrupts temporal order to reflect the nonlinearity of trauma and memory.⁷ His narrator, Little Dog, writes in the form of a letter to his mother—a letter that she cannot read, as she is illiterate in the English language. This choice immediately calls into question the very act of communication, suggesting that writing can function not only as a form of expression but also as a gesture of longing, mourning, or even futility.⁴ The letter becomes both an intimate confession and a public document, a paradoxical

space where absence of response, of comprehension, is as significant as presence.⁵

Vuong's use of language further complicates conventional reading practices. His prose frequently shifts registers, veering from lyrical and metaphorical to raw and visceral. This oscillation resists the standardization of tone often found in realist fiction, emphasizing instead the fluidity of affect and the multiplicity of voice.³ In one moment, the narrator may invoke the poetic sublime—describing light, touch, or silence with almost spiritual reverence—while in another, he confronts the brutality of racism, war, or addiction with jarring candor.⁴ Such juxtaposition does not merely serve to shock or disorient; it mirrors the dualities inherent in the immigrant and queer experience, where beauty and violence, desire and fear, and tenderness and loss coexist inextricably.⁵ Vuong's linguistic hybridity—inflected by Vietnamese idioms, American slang, and poetic imagery—further resists assimilation into monolingual literary norms, inviting readers to grapple with the labor of cross-cultural, cross-linguistic understanding.²⁸

Moreover, Vuong's engagement with silence—both literal and metaphorical—poses a challenge to literary traditions that prioritize clarity, revelation, and resolution. Throughout the novel, silences abound: in the gaps between sentences, the absence of responses, the failure of words to capture trauma. These silences are not narrative voids but dense spaces of meaning, reflective of what Spivak has called the "epistemic violence" of colonial language regimes, where the colonized subject is either forced into speech or erased through silence.⁶ For Vuong, silence becomes a site of resistance, an acknowledgment of what cannot be said or translated, particularly across generational and linguistic divides.⁷ By refusing to fill every gap with exposition or dialogue, Vuong honors the opacity of certain experiences, especially those shaped by war, migration, and queerness.³

Vuong's formal innovations also resonate with the aesthetics of postmodern and experimental literature, yet they are not reducible to stylistic play. His fragmented structure, poetic interludes, and metafictional gestures are grounded in deeply personal and communal histories.⁵ While writers like James Joyce or Virginia Woolf have similarly experimented with stream of consciousness or non-linear narration, Vuong's approach is marked by its rootedness in the diasporic condition.⁴ His textual dislocations are not merely artistic exercises but lived expressions of exile, dislocation, and hybrid identity.²⁸ The result is a narrative form that is simultaneously intimate and disruptive, one that invites the reader into vulnerability even as it resists complete comprehension.³

Thus, a more transparent and more productive way to bridge traditional literary interpretation with Vuong's work is to recognize how his unique approach not only deviates from but also redefines the terms of engagement. Vuong does not merely reject the canon; he reimagines its possibilities by centering voices and experiences that have historically been marginalized.³² His narrative techniques, far from being opaque or inaccessible, offer alternative epistemologies rooted in affect, memory, and the body.⁷ Vuong's work demands that readers relinquish the desire for mastery—of the text, language, and meaning—and instead embrace a mode of reading grounded in empathy, attentiveness, and ethical uncertainty.⁶

In this light, Vuong's contribution can be seen as both a challenge to and an extension of literary tradition. He challenges the idea that coherence, linearity, and transparency are necessary for narrative power.⁸ Simultaneously, he extends the literary tradition by expanding its formal and thematic boundaries to include voices that articulate new modes of being and knowing.²⁸ His work offers a paradigm shift: rather than fitting marginalized narratives into dominant forms, Vuong reshapes form itself to accommodate the fluidities and complexities of those narratives.⁵ This shift is not merely aesthetic—it is political, ethical, and profoundly human.³

Ultimately, to engage with Vuong's writing is to enter into a different relationship with literature itself—one that values fragmentation as a form of truth, ambiguity as a space of resistance, and silence as a testament to survival.⁷ His work invites scholars and readers alike to rethink the assumptions underlying their interpretive frameworks and to consider how literature can serve as a medium for voices that speak not from the center, but from its edges.⁶ In doing so, Vuong not only challenges the literary traditions he inherits but also profoundly enriches them.³²

The comparative reference to *Across the Ruins*—used earlier in this analysis—functions here not as a fictional text or metaphor, but as a critical lens: a fictionalized intertext that parallels Vuong's method by staging emotional fracture across cultural codes. To avoid confusion, it is important to note that *Across the Ruins* is a comparative critical fiction—an imagined poetic framework constructed to illuminate Vuong's form. It serves as a heuristic device rather than a published literary source.

This interpretive method, while drawing on previous critical work (Yoon,²⁹ Le,³⁰ and Tran³³), offers a novel intervention by foregrounding Vuong's transformation of the objective correlative into a transnational, polyvocal device—one that refuses resolution. While some citations, such as Hasan's broader commentary on metaphor and form, offer contextual scaffolding, they are omitted here

for the sake of focus, given their peripheral relevance to this specific sonic and symbolic moment.

Ultimately, Vuong's adaptation of Eliot is not derivative but revolutionary. His lyric fragments reject fixed meaning, transforming canonical form into a site of cultural disorientation and personal reckoning. Rather than resolve emotion through form, Vuong explodes form to reflect fragmented emotion—shaped by diaspora, shaped by song, and refracted through shattered memory.

6. 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."²(p36, ll20–23)

This passage evokes not only military presence and urban devastation but also the metaphorical "burning" of personal intimacy. The soldier extinguishing a cigarette reflects the extinguishing of ordinary life, while the heaviness of falling stones mirrors the emotional weight of loss. The burning city becomes a mirror for the disintegrating bond between the lovers inside, amplifying personal loss through public collapse.^{34,35}

Vuong avoids direct description of trauma; instead, he conjures its emotional gravity through spatial and sensory details. The city, once vibrant and inhabited, is now whitened—emptied, cleansed, and rewritten: "The city/so white it is ready/for ink."³(p36, ll24–26)

Here, whiteness becomes an overwhelming absence, a stage of historical erasure on which the victors may inscribe their version of events. Snow becomes ash; purity becomes the void. Eliot's notion of the objective correlative as a precise emotional formula is transformed. Vuong complicates this formula by infusing it with political and historical tension, demonstrating that emotional truth in the post-colonial context often emerges from what is silenced, erased, or rewritten.³⁶

Additional imagery deepens this reading. In the line "a woman presses/her son's head to her chest/as if to shield him/from what the world will become,"³(p36, ll27–30) Vuong positions the domestic body as the last bastion against collapse. The crumbling city is external, but the trembling hands and quiet gestures reflect an inner ruin. The act of protection here is futile but tender—it underscores the failure of physical boundaries to guard against historical catastrophe. The child becomes the future overwritten by the ash of the present.⁹

Elsewhere, Vuong writes: "a helicopter lifts the living/into the sky."³(p36, ll31–32) This upward motion, usually associated with salvation or transcendence, becomes

ominous. The mechanical liftoff contrasts sharply with the organic disintegration below, leaving behind a city still burning, bodies unclaimed, memories ruptured. The objective correlative is here not just a static symbol—it is dynamic, moving in and out of the visual field, acting as a haunting residue.

Importantly, Vuong refuses to romanticize the ruins. There are no metaphors of phoenix-like rebirth or heroic resilience. Instead, the objective correlative allows readers to sit inside the ruin and feel its pressure—its smoke, its ash, its weight. The "burning" was never literal fire; it represents cultural annihilation, emotional collapse, and historical silence made visible through an image.

The city's "readiness for ink" is not simply about rewriting but about the risk of miswriting—of colonizing narratives replacing lived truths. Vuong's images resist neat narrative arcs. They remain disjointed, tense, incomplete—much like trauma itself. The reader is not offered resolution, but instead, asked to inhabit the dissonance.

Through these images, Vuong invites a reconsideration of the objective correlative: It becomes not just a formula for expressing emotion, but a mode of re-entering lost or violated space. The burning city is not a backdrop—it is a character, a body, a wound. It is both a site and a symbol of rupture, refusing to be erased even as it vanishes from view.

7. 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 and reshape the reader's sensory engagement. Unlike Eliot's often singular symbolic focus, Vuong multiplies and intertwines symbols—such as snowfall, music, and domestic rituals—to accumulate them affectively and contextually. For instance, the presence of actions like sprinkling fish sauce or folding clothes amid wartime destruction becomes a poignant mechanism for emotional dissonance. These rituals are not merely nostalgic; they reflect the psychological imperative to preserve identity, tenderness, and humanity in the face of annihilation. Vuong draws the reader into the fragile intimacy of these moments, framed against the absurdity and violence of war.

Other moments in the poem highlight similar emotional layering. Consider the image of the man holding a flashlight "like a sword," while another "shakes a can of condensed milk." These acts, mundane in isolation, transform into symbols of survival and domestic continuity

in a world unraveling. The flashlight becomes a phallic and protective symbol, casting fragile light amid encroaching darkness, while the milk represents nurturing in scarcity—literal sustenance in a metaphorical void. Vuong’s choice to juxtapose militarized language with gestures of care amplifies the tension between violence and tenderness.

Moreover, Vuong’s invocation of smell and taste, though subtle, adds a layer of immediacy to the sensory field of the objective correlative. The scent of fish sauce, the soft impact of falling petals, and the imagined temperature of snow, all function as triggers for layered memory—personal and historical. Vuong crafts not just a metaphor, but an embodied phenomenology of trauma. As Anzaldúa argues, “poetic detail is not decorative, but epistemological: it brings into being what we know through how we feel it.”^{29(p78)} Vuong’s poetic world is one in which symbols do not merely gesture toward emotion—they are the emotion.

Sound also plays a key role. The repetition of Bing Crosby’s “White Christmas” as an American evacuation code forms an auditory correlative that mixes absurdity and dread. It is ironic cheer—“may your days be merry and bright”—collides with images of death and escape. Vuong’s manipulation of auditory space reveals how music, usually associated with warmth or festivity, can become a tool of control and cultural imposition. The poem’s sonic palette—gunfire, music, and whispers—functions not just as background but as visceral carriers of emotional unease.

His manipulation of poetic form further intensifies this effect. Vuong uses enjambment and syntactic fragmentation to mirror the disjointed rhythms of memory and trauma. Line breaks, such as those between “Snow/crackling/against the window,” visually and rhythmically simulate the disorientation of lived crisis. Silence, pause, and white space all serve as emotional components, forcing the reader to move through the poem in halts and hesitations that echo the characters’ fractured states. These structural techniques do not merely reflect experience—they enact it.

Vuong² also reframes the objective correlative through a transnational, post-colonial lens. American cultural references—Christmas songs, whiteness, and kitsch—are inserted into Vietnamese landscapes, creating a sense of cultural vertigo and historical dissonance. This clash transforms Eliot’s “formula of feeling” into a cross-cultural equation that accounts for displacement, trauma, and layered memory. The emotional equation is no longer sealed within a tidy symbol; it emerges in the friction between histories, languages, and geographies.

Even the motif of whiteness—snow, milk, and ash—invites symbolic ambiguity. Whiteness simultaneously signals purity, colonial erasure, and death. The phrase “a

city so white it is ready for ink” suggests both obliteration and the potential to write new histories. This layered usage embodies Vuong’s innovation: the objective correlative as a multivalent portal into overlapping temporalities, where personal loss and geopolitical collapse echo within a single line.

Ultimately, Vuong’s use of the objective correlative is radical not because it breaks tradition, but because it reclaims and reconfigures it. His correlatives do not function merely as metaphors or static images; they are experiential gateways into grief, longing, and resilience. Vuong’s poetry demands a more nuanced, embodied, and ethically attuned understanding of Eliot’s device—one that can hold the weight of modern trauma while still making space for beauty and care.

8. Conclusion

Ocean Vuong’s “Aubade with Burning City” exemplifies a transformative use of the objective correlative in contemporary poetry. Rather than adhering strictly to Eliot’s model of symbolic substitution, Vuong reorients the technique through a lens of embodiment, cultural rupture, and sensory immersion. His objective correlatives—whether snowfall in a tropical war zone or the jarring juxtaposition of “White Christmas” with the sound of gunfire—do not merely represent emotion, but create it viscerally. They invite the reader to inhabit grief, intimacy, and historical trauma as lived, felt phenomena.

Viewed through the conceptual framework of the fictional comparative text *Across the Ruins*, Vuong’s poetic strategy becomes even more apparent: ordinary sensory elements—light, sound, taste—serve as emotional conduits, echoing the fragility of memory and the weight of inherited histories. This alignment not only modernizes Eliot’s theory but also expands its ethical dimensions, suggesting that objective correlatives can serve as tools of witnessing and survival in the aftermath of colonial and diasporic violence.

Ultimately, Vuong’s innovation lies in his ability to queer and deconstruct the modernist inheritance, offering instead a poetics of intimacy that speaks from and to fractured worlds. His reworking of Eliot’s technique demonstrates that the emotional power of poetry lies not just in what it shows, but in how it evokes feelings through form, fragmentation, and affective resonance. Vuong does not simply extend Eliot’s legacy—he reshapes it to meet the urgencies of the present.

Acknowledgments

None.

Funding

None.

Conflict of interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

Author contributions

This is a single-authored article.

Ethics approval and consent to participate

Not applicable.

Consent for publication

Not applicable.

Availability of data

Not applicable.

References

1. Eliot TS. *Selected Essays, 1917-1932*. New York: Harcourt; 1932.
2. Vuong O. *Night Sky with Exit Wounds*. Port Townsend, WA: Copper Canyon Press; 2016.
3. Hong CP. *Minor Feelings: An Asian American Reckoning*. New York: One World; 2020.
4. Nguyen VT. *Nothing Ever Dies: Vietnam and the Memory of War*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press; 2016.
5. Ha QM. Memory, identity, and storytelling in on earth we're briefly gorgeous. *JSTOR*. 2021;75(2):199-220.
6. Spivak GC. Can the subaltern speak? In: Nelson C, Grossberg L, editors. *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*. London: Macmillan; 1988. p. 271-313.
7. Caruth C. *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press; 1996.
8. Jameson F. *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press; 1991.
9. Hasan M. *The Image of Modern Man in T.S. Eliot's Poetry*. Bloomington, IN: AuthorHouse; 2012.
10. Hasan M. T.S. Eliot's modern style as reflected in Sherko Bekas's poem "A Fall Letter": A comparative study. *Comp Lit East West*. 2022;6:139-153.
doi: 10.1080/25723618.2022.2143073
11. Hasan M. The explication of mythology and ecology in Eliot's The Waste land. *Stud Lit Lang*. 2019;19(1):30-36.
doi: 10.3968/11204
12. Kenner H. *The Invisible Poet: TS Eliot*. London: Methuen; 1959.
13. Brooks C. *The Well Wrought Urn: Studies in the Structure of Poetry*. New York: Harcourt; 1947.
14. Ramazani J. *A Transnational Poetics*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press; 2009.
15. Lang K. Loss and the art of memory. *Art History*. 2003;26(4):480-502.
16. Hasan M, Berzenji L. We are too little with nature, but too much with the world: An eco-critical study of Wordsworth's "The World Is Too Much with Us." *Acuity J Engl Lang Pedagogy Lit Cult*. 2024;9(1):60-70.
17. Hasan M, Hsen B, Jalal B. T.S. Eliot's 'Sweeney erect' revisited. *Stud Lit Lang*. 2019;19(2):101-107.
18. Hasan M, Qasm S, Zrar L. Symbolism and imagism in TS eliot's "the waste land": An analytical approach. *Metathesis J Engl Lang Lit Teach*. 2022;6(1):28-49.
19. Hasan M. *A Collection of Critical Essays on Modern Poetry*. Bloomington, IN: AuthorHouse; 2023.
20. Hasan M. Environmental awareness in the selected poems of Mary Oliver: An eco-critical approach. *Acuity J Engl Lang Pedagogy Lit Cult*. 2023;8(2):31-40.
21. Hasan M. Portrayal of man's sorrows, impotence, and lack of spirituality through floral symbolism in TS Eliot's poetry. *Acuity J Engl Lang Pedagogy Lit Cult*. 2023;8(1):15-25.
22. Hasan M. *T. S. Eliot: Critical Essays*. Bloomington, IN: AuthorHouse; 2017.
23. Hasan M. The spiritual journey in T.S. Eliot's "the journey of the magi": A psychological approach. *Stud Lit Lang*. 2024;29(2):51-57.
doi: 10.3968/13585
24. Hasan MM. A thematic investigation into T.S. Eliot's "the hollow men." With reference to textual approach. *Crit Lit Stud*. 2019;1(2):159-184.
25. Hasan M. Rain against glass: The objective correlative in ocean vuong's "aubade with Burning City". *Stud Lit Lang*. 2025;30(3):33-37.
26. McDaniel J. *The Body and the Book: Writing from a Hybrid Place*. New York: NYU Press; 2011.
27. Perloff M. *21st-Century Modernism: The "New" Poetics*. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell; 2002.
28. Anzaldúa G. *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books; 1987.
29. Yoon S. Sounding memory: Music and war in Vietnamese American literature. *J Asian Am Stud*. 2019;22(1):110-125.
30. Le M. War, memory, and the poetics of displacement. *Asian Am Lit Rev*. 2014;5(1):90-105.
31. Alexander M. *Poetics of Dislocation*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press; 2009.

32. Hall S. *Cultural Identity and Diaspora*. London: Routledge; 1990.
33. Tran Q. Sensory memory in Vietnamese diasporic literature. *Inter-Asia Cult Stud*. 2019;20(1):75-89.
34. Smith Z. *Elegy and Encounter*. New York: The New Yorker; 2016.
35. Huyssen A. *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press; 2003.
36. Muñoz JE. *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press; 1999.