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T.S. Eliot: These Fragments I Have Shored Against My Ruins

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by

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On Margate Sands.
I can connect
Nothing with nothing.

- *The Waste Land*, T.S. Eliot

This project—in broad strokes—is concerned with the loss of belief in an Absolute. This modern, though perhaps not modern*ist*, occurrence encompasses many philosophical, literary and cultural problems, and engenders many impulses that underscore philosophy, literature, and poetry, such as the impulse to return to an originary unity—to, somehow, end where one "began." But this beginning is itself imagined by the person who is no longer experiencing "immediately." Immediacy is a construction.

One of the underlying themes of this project is the tension between a "metaphysics of presence" and a "metaphysics of absence." Part of the methodology is to read Eliot contra Eliot and, for better or worse, psychologize his critical tenets. This is to say that I read them as, in a sense, obsessions and preoccupations. In doing this, the impulse toward—the obsession with—certain critical terms and ideals become themes unto themselves in Eliot's critical writings. For example, from Eliot's insistence on finding an "objective correlative" and his preoccupation with form, we get a straight link to the recurrent anxietes in the poetry about embodiment. Eliot's major suspicion of an all-pervading metaphysical separation manifests as an anxiety about *difference*.

The implication is that Eliot's critical ideals run counter to the poetry. The philosophical 'neuroses,' the preoccupations, and the general mood of skepticism and dissatifaction engendered by Eliot's involvement in philosophy as a graduate student at Harvard, on the other hand, inform the poetry. I will, then, read against his early criticism and with his philosophy. His philosophy—including his graduate dissertation, "Knowledge and Experience in the Philosophy of F.H. Bradley," and other graduate school papers and notebooks—while largely ignored or considered, as Eliot himself put in in the introduction to the published dissertation, a "biographical curiosity," has been

reconstructed by recent criticism: Jeffrey Perl's *Skepticism and Modern Enmity*, Louise Knapp Hay's *The Negative Way*, and Harriet Davidson's *T.S. Eliot and Hermeneutics* are a few examples. Although the focus of the arguments differs, there is a kind of trend, and one might argue, at least a few points of convergence. As I understand it, this recent criticism contributes to an exposition of Eliot's philosophical bent as contextualist, i.e., nothing is "meaningful" or even "intelligible" in and of itself, that is, without a "context." For "meaning," we must arbitrarily close the discourse—and leave something out.

Certain strings running through the analyses of the poems are the problem of time and temporality as they relate to necessity and contingency, "subjective" and "objective" foundations for "knowledge," the idea that nothing corresponds with "itself" *or* connects fundamentally to other things, and, building on this, that there is no "whole," no "system," that is unthreatened by either excess or lack.

Eliot's poetry is, from the early poems from "Prufrock and Other Poems," through *The Waste Land*, to "Ash-Wednesday" and *Four Quartets*, consistently concerned with "disunity." One major disunity is the "disunity of man," which is to say that one never coincides with himself, others, or the world. A reading of "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" and "Gerontion" will set the ground for discussing Eliot's thought on this problem. He is driven, in equal parts fascination with nontheistic faith and disillusionment with analytic philosophy of Bertand Russell and other logical positivists (although he perhaps as critical of Irving Babbitt's humanism and William James' pragmatism), to Indic philosophies and religions—where contradiction, *and* the renunciation both of metaphysics and the *need* for it, meet.

One of the major take-aways—perhaps *the* take-away—is that Eliot works to ground "absence" in the world, I suspect "ontologically" but at the least "epistemologically." The solution, if there is one, is figuring difference as immanent. Eliot's conversion—as for example, Perl has argued—is not a matter of his having given up on meaning and "truth," although Eliot would be the first to say that "truth" only has "meaning" in a given context, an arbitrarily closed discourse. But in any case, his converstion is not a reversal of earlier beliefs but, if anything, a further confirmation. It remains a philosophy of contextualism, and embodiment for meaningfulness, only Eliot moves from the embodiment of presence, or sameness, in his early critical works to the embodiment of absence, or difference. Part of the project is to show how the former "never was," but, even at the time of writing, was undermined. This is, finally, meant to suggest that the move from the objective correlative to the event of the Incarnation as guiding metaphor, parallels the move from presence to absence, and from sameness to difference.

(1) Presence

Objective correlative, Dante: vision, materiality, embodiment, context.

In the 1921 essay "Hamlet and His Problems," Eliot first speaks of an "objective correlative." Central to Eliot's claim is that Shakespeare inherited, more bluntly, appropriated, the plot of an earlier play by Thomas Kyd. *Hamlet* is "superimposed upon much cruder material which persists even in the final form." In the earlier play, Eliot argues, Hamlet's "motive was a revenge-motive simply," and "the action or delay is caused solely by the difficulty of assassinating a monarch surrounded by guards." Crucially, the "'madness' of Hamlet was feigned in order to escape suspicion." The plot of Kyd's play, unlike that of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, did not stem from Hamlet's psychic disturbance.

Eliot isolates "the feeling of a son towards a guilty mother" as the central emotion in *Hamlet*, but claims this emotion-as-motive is not itself why the play is "most certainly an artistic failure." He writes,

> The subject [the feeling of a son towards a guilty mother] might conceivably have expanded into a tragedy like these, intelligible, self-complete, in the sunlight. *Hamlet*...is full of some stuff that the writer could not drag to light, contemplate, or manipulate into art... We find Shakespeare's *Hamlet* not in the action, not in any of the quotations that we might select, so much as in an unmistakable tone which is unmistakably not in the earlier play.

Eliot's description of artistic success—"intelligible, self-complete, in the sunlight"— is significant. "In the sunlight" implies a lack of what we might call "dark material," for dark material is only so when it is inexplicable, and "self-complete" implies a system, safe from the encroachment of dark material, as well as a closed text whose references and emotions make sense without recourse to anything outside of it. "Intelligible" simply follows. Strangely, the "feeling" that there is "some stuff" Shakespeare could not "drag to light," and "manipulate into art," cannot be localized; rather, the essence of *Hamlet*—and thus of the artistic failure—is the "unmistakable tone." It is important for Eliot that this "tone" is something added to the "earlier play," as not following from the material but superimposed upon it.

What Eliot calls an "objective correlative," then, is the facticity, the "external facts," e.g., "a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events," that is adequate to the representation of a certain emotion. It is a view of art as "objectified" emotion—which is uncontroversial enough—but in such a way that there remains a necessary connection between object and the emotion it represents or transmits. Thus, Hamlet the character is "dominated by an emotion which is inexpressible, because it is in *excess* of the facts as they appear." The events are not adequate to the expression of the stuff that, as a consequence of the mismatch, now appears to us in excess.

Further, Eliot suggests that the "identity" of Hamlet with his author is valid only in this sense: "Hamlet's bafflement at the absence of objective equivalent to his feelings is a prolongation of the bafflement of his creator in the face of his artistic problem." Hamlet's problem is Shakespeare's problem. The implication is of Hamlet as a projection of Shakespeare's "artistic problem," which is that he cannot find the images, events, or facts

that would provoke the emotion he is trying to express. Thus, the emotion is unintelligible; he cannot make anyone understand *what* it is or *why* it arises. Meanwhile "Hamlet's disgust is occasioned by his mother, but his mother is not an adequate equivalent for it" (48). Thus, Hamlet himself cannot understand the disgust. Because it has no objective correlative, "it therefore remains to poison life and obstruct action." It obstructs action because "none of the possible actions can satisfy [Hamlet's feeling]," because his feeling is simply not a response to anything *in* the text. It does not, Eliot argues, plausibly arise from the plot—which is that of the earlier play where Hamlet's madness, the impossibility of action, Hamlet's problem is of an emotion that cannot find "outlet in action," and Shakespeare's of an emotion that he "cannot express in art." Further, "the intense feeling, ecstatic or terrible, without an object or exceeding its object, is something which every person of sensibility has known," but that "the ordinary person puts these feelings to sleep," and "the artist keeps it alive by his ability to intensify the world to his emotions." Finally,

> We must simply admit that here Shakespeare tackled a problem which proved too much for him. Why he attempted it at all is an insoluble puzzle; under compulsion of what experience he attempted to express the inexpressibly horrible, we cannot ever know… We should have, finally, to know something which is by hypothesis unknowable, for we assume it to be an experience which, in the manner indicated, exceeded the facts. We should have to understand things that Shakespeare did not understand himself.

Eliot's essay on *Hamlet* is exceptionally interesting not only for its theory of the objective correlative—which really is a theory of art as embodiment: feeling must be contextualized, and something "real" or "external" must explain it—but for the fact that the encroachment of the "inexpressibly horrible" on the text is so problematic for Eliot. *Hamlet* in many ways, as Eliot is aware, is *about* its "excess," its protagonist's paralysis resulting from a

hyper-self-consciousness, yet Eliot calls for it to be explained away by an event, a situation, something external. In a sense, this is understandable: Eliot rightly thinks that art should provoke feeling—in a sense, empathy—and Hamlet's feeling is simply unintelligible. It is not intelligible in general but unintelligible in its context, for it has none. This raises, of course, questions like what *is* an appropriate context—e.g., is there ever really a *context* for madness? And what *is* poetic versus prosaic material—e.g., can madness just not be written about, artistically? Isn't the problem of madness, "consciousness," existential despair, original sin just that, that it is in "excess" of the facts? If so, one cannot expect it to *not* be poetic material but, also, one cannot expect to ever find any objective correlative. In a sense, this is precisely what will always intrude. We might call it a remainder, the inassimilable. What Eliot faults in *Hamlet*, it seems, is the intrusion of the text on itself, its own fixation with what is outside of the text. The text intrudes on itself with what is outside the text, perhaps something like Life Itself. It is not that this is *wrong* but that the intrusion is not "art," but life disrupting art.

When this happens, the text of *Hamlet* becomes open, and fails to be a system or to attain a unity; as Eliot puts it, it fails to be "self-complete." "Hamlet and His Problems" is especially strange given Eliot's formal strategies: recontextualization, isolation, intrusion, fragmentation, allusion, and openness; and his thematic obsession with, for example, what cannot be expressed (or perhaps what *need* not be expressed in which case the argument of "Hamlet and His Problems" is not that Shakespeare failed but that he should not have attempted). It is possible that Eliot distinguishes between narrative verse and poetry proper, but there is no indication of it here. At the very least, we can say that Eliot does "attempt," and presumably out of an inexplicable "compulsion." Also possible is that Eliot

never attempts "self-completion," and does not aspire to finding an objective correlative, thereby avoiding the problem. Or we might say that Eliot is interested in *formal* objective correlatives. It does not seem particularly interesting to choose between the possibilities; rather, this essay will focus on the idea of the "remainder," that which is in excess to and threatens a "system," and Eliot's contradictory desire for embodiment, not in the sense of the physical body but in the sense of form, of circumscription of experience. For meaning, and value, there must be a necessary kind of embodiment of experience.

By contrast, we might look at Eliot's commentary on Dante, whom he regarded as not better than Shakespeare, but as having a "peculiar lucidity—a poetic as distinguished from an intellectual lucidity." This quality he associates with Dante's writing in a language closer to Latin. In such a language "the thought may be obscure, but the word is lucid, or rather translucent," in contrast to the opaque word of English poetry. Eliot also finds Dante's historical moment relevant: "Dante's advantages are due not to greater genius, but to the fact that he wrote when Europe was still more or less one" (208). Eliot imagines Dante's time as a moment where religious, cultural, and governmental beliefs were unified, not only the spheres unified *with* each other but belief was unified across Europe. In other words, there was a "mind" of Europe. From Eliot's use of "*still* more or less one," it is evident that he views the current situation as, in a sense, "fallen." The current state of Europe is one of fallenness, dissociation, of spheres or sects of interpersonal power but nothing totalizing—perhaps the "finite spheres" of experience from Eliot's dissertation on Bradley provides the appropriate metaphor here.

But more importantly, Dante wrote in images. For Eliot, Dante is a master of allegory, a technique Eliot associated with "intelligibility." What Eliot *really* praised in

Dante, I want to say, was his particularity and, one might say, the overwhelming immanence of his religious scheme.

> What we should consider is not so much the meaning of the images, but the reverse process, that which led a man having an idea to express it in images. We have to consider the type of mind which by nature and *practice* tended to express itself in allegory: and, for a competent poet, allegory means *clear visual images* (209).

That Dante wrote in "clear visual images" had a special status for Eliot. It was not simply a mode of writing which he respected, but suggestive of Dante's mind, and of a *kind* of being in the world. It is not that he could simply transmute his visions into art, in the sense of a "modern painter of still life" (209). Rather, Dante's imagination is "visual in the sense that he lived in an age in which men still saw visions." Further,

> It is a psychological habit, the trick of which we have forgotten, but as good as any of our own. We have nothing but dreams, and we have forgotten that seeing visions—a practice now relegated to the aberrant and uneducated—was once a more significant, interesting, and disciplined kind of dreaming. We take for granted that our dreams spring from below: possibility the quality of our dreams suffers in consequence (209).

Eliot associates Dante's language with absolute presence: Dante had *visions*, real and palpable, not *dreams*, flimsy and immaterial. Dreams are a debased form of visions; they imply the supernatural, i.e., "spring from below," but a supernatural *presence*, i.e., the supernatural made immanent. Eliot writes, "But as the whole poem of Dante is, if you like, one vast metaphor, there is hardly any place for metaphor in the detail of it" (210). Eliot's Dante might be compared to the emergentism theory of consciousness in contemporary philosophy where an "immaterial" consciousness, because this is a dualistic theory of substance, arises or "emerges" from the sheer complexity and relation of the material parts of the body. Eliot advises that one acquaint oneself well with Dante's poem first part by part, even dwelling specially on the parts that one likes most at first, because

we cannot extract the full significance of any part without knowing the whole" (211). Eliot's disposition in his early critical work to both presence and unity is, I will claim, at odds with the impulse of his poetry.

> Even though he used fictional characters among his historical characters, the Inferno is relieved from any question of pettiness or arbitrariness in Dante's selection of damned. It reminds us that Hell is not a place but a *state*; that man is damned or blessed in the creatures of his imagination as well as in men who have actually lived; and that Hell, though a state, is a state which can only be thought of and perhaps only experienced, by the projection of sensory images; and that the resurrection of the body has perhaps a deeper meaning than we understand (216).

This is a peculiar passage of criticism because, for one who is not Eliot, there does not seem to be a clear connection between the observation that Dante was right to "introduce among his historical characters at least one character who even to him could hardly have been more than a fiction" and what Eliot believes this reminds us, "that man is damned or blessed in the creatures of his imagination as well as in men who have actually lived." The link, it seems, has to do with Dante's "projection of sensory images." It does not matter that some of the characters are fictional because, although the characters are constructed, the "state" of hell is not. The "projection of sensory images" makes the fictional characters just as "real" as the historical characters because the way they suffer is "real." *Although* hell is a "state," and not a material place, it can only be intelligible and "perhaps only experienced" through "sensory images." It is clear that Eliot is attracted to Dante's unapologetic emphasis on the material—this is why Eliot remarks, "the resurrection of the body has perhaps a deeper meaning than we understand." It is a case of body—surface—acquiring the "deeper meaning" one reserves for the "immaterial."

Immediately following this observation on the "resurrection of the body," Eliot describes the "experience of a poem" as "the experience both of a moment and of a lifetime" (216). There is literally no transition between the two thoughts suggesting, however, some relation internal to Eliot's mind. This is perhaps that "a moment," a particular moment in the here-and-now, has a "deeper meaning," which is the experience of a lifetime. Eliot describes this experience of both "a moment" and "a lifetime," relating it to one's experience of others:

> It is very much like our intenser experiences of other human beings. There is a first, or an early moment which is unique, of shock and surprise, even of terror; a moment which can never be forgotten, but which is never repeated integrally; and yet which would become destitute of significance if it did not survive in a larger whole of experience (216).

It is curious but fitting that Eliot would connect the experience of the temporal and "a lifetime" to an experience of others. As we see in "Prufrock," "Gerontion," and *The Waste Land*, the problem of time—the same problem of the temporal and the eternal that comes to a head in *Four Quartets*, which itself explores the problem of time and the *self*—is intimately connected to the problem of others. Both stem, it would seem, from a similar if not identical anxiety: the anxiety, I think, that one only ever gets a disconnected part, a "moment" or a body part like the "arms" of which Prufrock says, "I have known them all," without eternity or consciousness, respectively. What if all one has is the "moment," devoid of the meaning it would get from "surviv[ing] in a larger whole of experience," and what if all one gets is a fragmented, disconnected sense of others that only heightens one's sense of solipsism *or*—and perhaps this is the worse fate—one's sense that his own self is as fragmentary and dissociated and, effectively, not a "self" at all, for how can there be "one," if it is even a "thing," an entity, at all? Eliot consistently explores these possibilities in the poems. Here, he seems to say that, as the body and the material are the way to the "deeper meaning," the experience of the moment is the way to the "larger whole of

experience." In other words, one must go through the body to the deeper but perhaps not *immaterial* meaning, and one must go through the moment to the "lifetime." The "deeper meaning" and the "larger whole of experience" imbue the particular and the temporal with value—otherwise both would become "destitute of significance"—but it is only through the particular and the temporal that one gets to the significance. Vigilius Haufnuensis, Soren Kierkgaard's pseudonym in *The Concept of Anxiety*, makes the similar point that without eternity there is no moment (91). It is only through the consciousness of the "larger whole of experience," of the lifetime or of eternity, that there is the particular moment. *But,* the lifetime or the eternity is only "accessible," made possible, through the particular moment. Although Eliot speaks, here, of the intersection of "a moment" and "a lifetime," we might imagine that Eliot's point is structurally the same.

At the same time, there is an optimism in Eliot here that we do not find in his poetry; or, at least, the poetry shows a greater ambivalence to the possibility of, for example, an intense experience of other human beings, "an early moment which is unique, of shock and surprise, even of terror, a moment which can never be forgotten." That there is such a "unique," evidently significant because it "can never be forgotten," moment is optimistic for Eliot. That this moment is an experience of *others*, that there *can* be such "contact," of shock and surprise, is more so. This is not to suggest that Eliot converts, at some point, from an anxiety of the insignificance of the particular ("unique"), the material, and the temporal, to belief in the significance of all three. Eliot has, as we can see, always been interested in the this-worldly: visions, not dreams. If Eliot envisions a nightmare—an empty and haunted industrial London with dead bodies, as in *The Waste Land*—it is because the world *is* that nightmare. The nightmare is of this world. But it is to suggest

that he has not yet reached the point where "dreams," and the immaterial, do not threaten the presence and solidity of the here-and-now.

But Eliot's fascination with Dante—*because* the material is still in tension with the immaterial, in Eliot's mind at this time—is that reading Dante does not require one to believe in what Dante believed. Although we require, Eliot concedes, "more and more to grasp the whole from *idea* to image" (emphasis mine) as we ascend from the *Inferno* to the *Paradiso* because, with the former, "we could…grasp the concrete end of it, its solidification into imagery," whereas the latter calls on us to bring idea into consort with image, we are not "called upon to believe what Dante believed" (221). Rather, we are called upon "more and more to understand it," the belief. Further, "If you can read poetry as poetry, you will 'believe' in Dante's theology exactly as you believe in the physical reality of his journey" (221). Again Eliot emphasizes the "physical reality of [Dante's] journey," *because* Dante's words impart that "physical reality." That is, in order to believe in the "physical reality of his journey," one need only believe the words. Here, Eliot is thinking of poetry and words as ultimately "translucent," present. Poetry is not a matter of *idea*—the reader "suspend[s] both belief and disbelief"—but becomes so simply because we feel the need to "writ[e] books about books," because the world is not "divided between those between those persons who are capable of taking poetry for what it is and those who cannot take it all" (221). Rather, most of us are "impure," a mix. It is not simply the "physical reality" of Dante's journey, and the materiality of his words, but that there is something "material" to his belief as well, something to which Eliot is very much attracted. Dante's "private belief," Eliot writes, "becomes a differing thing in becoming

poetry." This is, Eliot believes, "the advantage of a coherent traditional system of dogma and morals like the Catholic," and, further, Eliot writes,

> When I speak of understanding, I do not mean merely knowledge of books or words, any more than I mean belief: I mean a state of mind in which one sees certain beliefs, as the order of the deadly sins, in which treachery and pride are greater than lust…as *possible* (222).

It would seem Eliot is fixated here on the coherence of Dante's belief—the fact that it is a "system," and that it has a palpable "order." The understanding that belief can be material, orderly—and thus *literal*—is required to understand Dante. One must understand that belief is literal, present, and embodied. Yet, Eliot's point seems to be, one may disagree about the content of the belief—one has to understand, however, the full import and force of "belief."

Although we have uncovered many of Eliot's important concerns—time, others, the self—there are other interesting parts in Eliot's Dante essay. For one, Eliot remarks that "Dante understands deeper degrees of degradation and higher degrees of exaltation," in relation to Shakespeare who "understands a greater extent and variety of human life" (217). The image is of a vertical- and horizontal-axis respectively. Eliot writes, also, "It is apparently easier to accept damnation as poetic material than purgation or beatitude; less is involved that is strange to the modern mind" (217). Perhaps this is, in a sense, Eliot's problem. I would argue that Dante's poetry is for Eliot an ideal to which he cannot aspire—it represents the perfect embodiment, is itself the perfect embodiment of the perfect embodiment. In other words, it is Dante is Eliot's greatest example of a poet who finds the objective correlative. He cannot aspire to it because, as he writes in "The Metaphysical Poets":

> We can only say that it appears likely that poets in our civilization, as it exists as present, must be *difficult*…The poet must become more and more comprehensive, more allusive, more indirect, in order to force, to dislocate if necessary, language into his meaning (65).

This is because the "mind of Europe" is not unified, for one. The implication is that modern civilization is peculiar, unprecedented, and that in some way or another there has been a "turn." Dante's Europe for Eliot is that—perhaps imagined out of necessity to understand the present—unified past that serves as a reference, a foil to the current situation. Dante's Europe allowed for the translucent word, as well as order, a system, and experience and expression that did not exceed the forms which contain them.

Reading Eliot's earlier, minor poetry, one might surmise that it is not for lack of trying that Eliot does not begin to grasp at the ideal which for him is Dante's poetry. But what Eliot succeeds in doing is providing a vision of emptiness, the emptiness of modern urban life among

> Faint stale smells of beer
> From the sawdust-trampled streets
> With all its muddy feet that press
> To early coffee-stands

Looking for the "material," and literal, as Dante did, Eliot can only tackle a grim reality, can only take "damnation as poetic material," for that is all there is for that is all he sees. Take, for example, "Preludes," which appears in five parts in *Prufrock and Other Observations* (1917). The poem itself both aspires to a disgusting corporeality—a disgust evident in most of Eliot's poetry written prior to his conversion to the Anglican faith—and comments on

> The thousand sordid images
> Of which your soul was constituted;

There is, then, the poet's realization that the "damnation" of modern life makes it so that one—the poet—*must* comment on the emptiness of pure literalness, because the only literalness "available," so to speak, is that of "degradation." We get, then, lines like

> You had such a vision of the street
> As the street hardly understands;

where "vision" exceeds the "street" which is empty of significance, the external not adequate to the internal or, put differently, the internal exceeding the external, and lines like

> His soul stretched tight across the skies
> That fade behind a city block,
> Or trampled by insistent feet
> At four and five and six o'clock;
> [...]
> The conscience of a blackened street
> Impatient to assume the world.

in which the "degradation" of the soul is evident, as the soul is "stretched" across the fading skies, and "trampled by insistent feet" in the meaningless temporality of "four and five and six o'clock." The "conscience of a blackened street" wants, thus, to "assume the world," such that the world is *only* this, reduced to this. The poet-speaker chimes in,

> I am moved by fancies that are curled
> Around these images, and cling:
> The notion of some infinitely gentle
> Infinitely suffering thing.

The poet cannot but help to comment on "these images," to feel "moved by fancies" that "curl around" the images. The "fancies" are "the notion of some infinitely gentle/ Infinitely suffering thing," a suffering brought on by this vision of emptiness but exceeding it in its infinitude. Even in this vision of corporeality and the purely sensory with which the poem begins,

> The winter evening settles down
> With the smell of steaks in passageways.
> Six o'clock.

> The burnt-out ends of smoky days.

there is an anxiety about time, the anxiety that "the moment" does not imply or hint at "a lifetime." The metaphor, "the burnt-out ends of smoky days," compares the ephemerality of a day to the ephemerality of a cigarette, an ephemerality that leaves merely an "end," which is to say, not only that which is discontinuous with one's future (an *end*, literally) and the "whole" of one's experience, but also that which is useless so that, after the fact, only insignificance is left although the sensory experience may have been pleasant. Each moment is, to negate the expression from *Four Quartets*, "unattended," left meaninglessly in the past like a cigarette end on the ground. There is also the haziness of the smoke that obscures the day—the days are "smoky," their possible significance obscured. The metaphor is so literal that it seems Eliot might view it as the kind of metaphor he picks out in Dante: a metaphor that does not *add* idea to what one sees, but one that simply allows the reader to *see* better. But that is, evidently, far from the case as there is already present here, in "Preludes," one of Eliot's major anxieties about time, which is that the moment is both more *and* less than eternity—and that the significance of the moment is both more *and* less than the significance of eternity. Eliot fears, it would seem, both the more *and* the less, because both are, perhaps, at once the case.

(2) disunity

Prufrock: the self, temporality, despair, impersonality and absence.

Separation

An enigmatic first line, "Let us go then, you and I," "Prufrock" lends itself to varying interpretations. One might read "you" as J. Alfred Prufrock's object of affection, the person to whom he "sings" his love song, a woman with "arms that are braceleted and white and bare."

"Sings" is in scare-quotes because Prufrock does not ever say, much less sing, anything at all, and the only reference to "singing" is the mermaids' singing, and the only references to "voices" are in the last line stanza,

> We have lingered in the chambers of the sea
> By sea-girls wreathed with seaweed red and brown
> Till human voices wake us, and we drown.

and when, in considering the arbitrariness of life in time that in a sense discloses all, all that would be necessary and essential, but the particulars it discloses are only contingent, at worst ridiculous, Prufrock soliloquies

> For I have known them all already, known them all:—
> Have known the evenings, mornings, afternoons,
> I have measured out my life with coffee spoons;
> I know the voices dying with a dying fall
> Beneath the music from a farther room.
> So how should I presume?

The "us" that human voices wake, and the "we" that linger and drown, may or may not be Prufrock's object of affection and the same "you" from the poem's beginning. However, before the "linger[ing] in the chambers of the sea" stanza quoted above, Prufrock is alone, constructing a situation where he makes a decision,

> I shall wear white flannel trousers, and walk upon the beach.

Interestingly, the only part of the poem where Prufrock's action is not hypothetical in the sense of "Let us go, then," "I shall," or "If one," is the lingering in the chambers of the sea with the sea-girls.

The other "voices" in the poem are those of Prufrock's hypothetical dialogue, like

> If one, settling a pillow by her head,
> Should say: "That is not what I meant at all.
> That is not it, at all."

and other "if one…should say" constructions. Any of Prufrock's utterances are tempered by the "if," or more explicitly a "to wonder," which make them all into hypotheticals, a few unrealized possibilities among other possibilities. The women who "come and go/ Talking of Michelangelo" are the only instance of a "talking" that may occur outside of Prufrock's head, but their actual words are imagined, as in

> [They will say: "How his hair is growing thin!"]

and

> [They will say: But how his arms and legs are thin!"]

There is, also, the imagined dialogue of the "you" figure in the first stanza,

> "Oh, do not ask, "What is it?"

Prufrock not only imagines his own utterances, but also imagines those of others: the women "who come and go," and the "you" figure that haunts the poem. There is no

dialogue outside of Prufrock's head, although the "women talking" and the "mermaids singing each to each" both imply external vocalization. But their speaking, the actual content of which Prufrock only imagines, is somehow not a speaking to which Prufrock is privy or, in the case of the mermaids, to which Prufrock *feels* he is privy. The women who "come and go/ Talking of Michelangelo," are spatially set off as if to emphasize Prufrock's separation from any such bourgeois conversation, if it is even a conversation and not a "talking" as aimless as their coming and going. Explicitly, Prufrock reveals his anxiety about the mermaids: "I do not think that they will sing to me." This line, like that of the women who come and go, is also set off from the stanzas before and after it. Prufrock is most separate when the speech of others is called into question; his internal dialogue can literally not come into contact with *actual*, non-hypothetical utterance.

What, exactly, is Prufrock's despair? It is more than the paralyzing inaction of Hamlet who, Prufrock thinks, "he is not, nor was meant to be," because even to be Hamlet would be grandiose presumption. Prufrock's despair is that nothing coincides with itself, with anything else, and much less with its meaning.

First, the self does not correspond to, nor coincide with, itself. In *The Sickness Unto Death*, Kierkegaard calls this the "disunity of man." Man is not his "true self, which means that he is not a *self* at all" (Bretall, 340). The opening lines of *The Sickness Unto Death* may be of use to understanding Prufrock, a character who many have dismissed as either a mere parody of excess in the sense of "excess" Eliot derides in the character of Hamlet, or a "divided self" in the sense of a schizophrenic—and "Let us go, then, you and I," refers to this sick, divided self. It is not that the interpretations are wrong, for Prufrock is certainly an ironic character; irony is what allows the transcendent self to, for a moment,

escape the facticity of the empirical self. Prufrock, as both speaker of the poem and its "protagonist," is aware of irony as a means of transcendence—thus, in his dramatic and desperate self-awareness, he is able to escape mere temporality. He is able to "live," as it were, in possibility because, in his hesitation to be a self

> In a minute there is time
> For decisions and revisions which a minute will reverse.

It is this same ability to "transcend" the fact of temporality that allows Prufrock to say

> For I have known them all already, known them all:—
> Have known the evenings, mornings, afternoons,
> I have measured out my life with coffee spoons;
> I know the voices dying with a dying fall
> Beneath the music from a farther room.
> So how should I presume?

In his self-identification with the transcendent self over the empirical self, Prufrock imagines that he has "known" all, including the death of others—who are, of course, disembodied voices. So how should *I* presume is a good question because, in escaping temporality, he has also denied his "self." To presume, then, is to choose—to commit to an action in the here-and-now. After Prufrock asks

> And how should I then presume?
> And how should I begin?

his first answer is to bring himself back to the temporal, although still only "hypothetically":

> Shall I say, I have gone at dusk through narrow streets
> And watched the smoke that rises from the pipes
> Of lonely men in shirt-sleeves, leaning out of windows?

However, to return to the temporal would require being a *self*, and not just a self but a despairing self because, as Prufrock knows only too well, that self would *not* be itself. Faced with this knowledge, Prufrock immediately says,

I should have been a pair of ragged claws
Scuttling across the floors of silent seas

That would solve Prufrock's problems as, although he would be "scuttling" meaninglessly "across the floors of silent seas," there would be no pretense of meaning, and no consciousness of meaninglessness.

As I mentioned earlier, the interpretations of Prufrock as a Hamlet-type or a schizophrenic are not wrong—there are undeniable elements of both in the existential interpretation. However, they fail to take Prufrock's despair as genuine and valid, dismissing it as a parody of Hamlet's excess or offering a matter-of-fact explanation. Prufrock's thoughts *are* in excess of the "facts," and necessarily so, and Prufrock *is* a divided self. But let us look to *The Sickness Unto Death* to understand why. The opening lines are this:

> Man is spirit. But what is spirit? Spirit is the self. But what is the self? The self is a relation which relates itself to its own self, or it is that in the relation which accounts for it that the relation relates itself to its own self; the self is not the relation but consists in the *fact* (emphasis mine) that the relation relates itself to its own self. Man is a synthesis of the infinite and the finite, of the temporal and the eternal, of freedom and necessity, in short it is a synthesis. A synthesis is a relation between two factors. So regarded, man is not yet a self (Bretall, 340).

While this is an infamously difficult passage to parse, it becomes quite clear when we use Prufrock's problem to illustrate it, and when we, in turn, illustrate Prufrock's problem with it. Prufrock's problem is that he does not relate his self to his self; he wishes to *not* be himself, as when he relates his self to *either* the merely "eternal" or the merely "temporal," and fails to be a "synthesis" of the two. His fear and anxiety stem from relating to only of the terms of the syntheses: he fears that each "moment" is *necessary*—that is, each moment has too great a weight, the weight, one might say, of infinitude: thus, he asks, "Do I dare?/ Do I dare disturb the universe?" He relates himself to "freedom" in his anxiety

over "necessity." He lives in possibility, i.e., freedom, and not necessity but, also, in the eternal and not the temporal. In this way he does not relate his to his self; he is thus not a "self" proper because the self consists in the *fact* that "the relation relates itself to its own self." To not be a "self," according to Kierkegaard's pseudonym Anti-Climacus, is to be in despair. To be in disunity, thus, is to not be a self: "Man is not a unity, but a disunity; he is not his true self, which means that he is not a *self* at all" (Bretall, 340).

Prufrock, also, does not relate his self to his self because he is in despair that he cannot become nothing. That is, he does not will himself to be himself. Anti-Climacus writes,

> The fact that despair does not consume him is so far from being any comfort to the despairing man that it is precisely the opposite, this comfort is precisely the torment, it is precisely this that keeps the gnawing pain alive and keeps life in the pain. This precisely is the reason why he despairs—not to say despaired—because he cannot consume himself, cannot get rid of himself, cannot become nothing (342).

Prufrock's despair is precisely that he "cannot become nothing," as he wishes to become, for instance, when he thinks he should have been a pair of claws. But it is also that he cannot become everything, i.e., live in infinitude, freedom, and eternity. In so doing he does not even will to be *something*, much less himself. Paradoxically, however, it is this despair that keeps him alive, "keeps life in the pain," and so perpetuates Prufrock's despair over himself.

Another mode of being in despair is to live in the sensuous and psychosensuous, perhaps lending meaning to all of the references to food or "the novels, the teacups" and "the sunsets, the dooryards, and the sprinkled streets."

But what is this despair Anti-Climacus speaks of, and why does it matter? Commenting on the work, Robert Bretall says, "*The Sickness Unto Death* is an investigation of this corruption in human nature, which of course is what the Church calls

sin, but which Kierkegaard, in accordance with the "psychological" viewpoint here adopted, calls *despair*" (340). Despair is, then, for the self to not coincide with the self—and this non-coincidence is "sin." Although Prufrock is an arreligious poem, and written decades before Eliot's conversion, Eliot was attuned to the separation of self from self, of self from others—and of a general disunity, fragmentation, and *either* contradiction and paradox or complete noncoincidence—long before his conversion. Eliot would most likely view this disunity as "embedded," this "sin" as, in a sense, original sin.

This is to suggest that Eliot is aware of an absence, and a necessary difference, in the self as in all things. At this point in his poetic career, i.e., at the time of "Prufrock," but also "Gerontion," and *The Waste Land*, he does not embrace it. Yet the knowledge is there.

This is also to suggest that critics have misunderstood the import of Eliot's theory of impersonality in poetry as articulated in "Tradition and the Individual Talent" in 1919, four years after the publication of "Prufrock." After comparing "the mind of the poet" to the "shred of platinum" that remains "inert, neutral, unchanged" during a chemical reaction, despite the fact that the combination takes place "only if the platinum is present," Eliot writes that "the more perfect the artist, the more completely separate in him will be the man who suffers and the mind which creates; the more perfectly will the mind digest and transmute the passions which are its material" (41). Further, "it is not the 'greatness', the intensity of the emotions, the components, but the intensity of the artistic process, the pressure, so to speak, under which the fusion takes place, that counts" (41). This has been interpreted as Eliot's affinity with the New Critics, who believed in a kind of unity or autonomy of the text, and who did not think biographical information of the author, or

anything "outside of the text," such as historical information, cultural trends, the means of production, etc., should inform a reading of a text. But Eliot states it well himself that the theory of impersonality is, in effect, an attack on unity as such:

> The point of view which I am struggling to attack is perhaps related to the metaphysical theory of the substantial unity of the soul: for my meaning is, that the poet has, not a 'personality' to express, but a particular medium, which is only a medium and not a personality, in which impressions and expressions combine in peculiar and unexpected ways. Impressions and experiences which are important for the man may take no place in the poetry, and those which become important in the poetry may play quite a negligible part in the man, the personality (42).

In other words, Eliot is pointing to the fact that there is not a *necessary* relation between the poetry and the mind that produces it; this is because, as Eliot believes, there is an element of contingency in all things: impressions and expressions important to the person may or may not be important to the poetry. The reason why Eliot is struggling to articulate himself here, "to attack" the "theory of the substantial unity of the soul," is that he has not articulated his belief in the noncoincidence of the self, and of a fundamental disunity. There is only a contingent relation between what a person produces, and the person's "mind, because there is a necessary absence in both the self, and in the work that the self produces. Echoing Eliot's clever but quite serious remark that "Poetry is not [as in the Romantic theory] a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality but an escape from personality" (43), Jacques Derrida writes in "Force and Signification":

> To grasp the operation of creative imagination at the greatest possible proximity to it, one must turn oneself toward the invisible interior of poetic freedom. One must be separated from oneself in order to be reunited with the blind origin of the work in its darkness. This experience of conversion, which founds the literary act (writing or reading), is such that the very words 'separation' and 'exile,' which always designate the interiority of a breaking-off with the world and a making of one's way within it, cannot directly manifest the experience; they can only indicate it through a metaphor whose genealogy itself would deserve all of our efforts. For

in question here is a departure from the world toward a place which is neither a *non-place* nor an *other* world, neither a utopia nor an alibi, the creation of a 'universe to be added to the universe' [...] The universe articulates only that which is in excess of everything, the essential nothing on whose basis everything can appear and be produced within language; and the voice of Maurice Blanchot reminds us, with the insistence of profundity, that *this excess is the very possibility of writing and of literary* inspiration *in general.* Only *pure absence*—not the absence of this or that, but the absence of everything in which all presence is announced—can inspire, in other words, can make work, and then make one work. The pure book naturally turns toward the eastern edge of this absence which, beyond or within the prodigiousness of all wealth, is its first and proper content. The pure book, the book itself, by virtue of what is most irreplaceable within it, must be the 'book about nothing' that Flaubert dreamed of—a gray, negative dream, the origin of the total Book that haunted other imaginations. This emptiness as the situation of literature must be acknowledged by the critic as that which constitutes the specificity of his object, as that *around which* he always speaks. Or rather, his proper object—since nothing is not an object—is the way in which this nothing *itself* is determined by disappearing. It is the transition to the determination of the work as the disguising of its origin. But the origin is possible and conceivable only in disguise. Rousset shows us the extent to which spirits as diverse as Delacroiz, Balzac, Flaubert, Valery, Proust, T.S. Eliot, Virginia Woolf...has a sure consciousness of this [...] To these voices should be added that of Antonin Artaud, who was less roundabout: 'I made my debut in literature by writing books in order to say that I could write nothing at all. My thoughts, when I had something to say or write, were that which was furthest from me. I never had any ideas, and two short books, each seventy pages long, are about this profound, inveterate, endemic absence to any idea...' The consciousness of having something to say as the consciousness of nothing: this is not the poorest, but the most oppressed of consciousnesses. It is the consciousness of nothing, upon which all consciousness of something enriches itself, takes on meaning and shape (8).

It is eerie how much Derrida sounds like Eliot in parts of this; that Derrida refers to Eliot is also a tip-off. "Force and Signification" is a fascinating essay but we will only focus on the parts that are most relevant, although, relatively, they all are. For one, there is the idea that "one must be separated from oneself in order to be reunited with the blind origin of the work in its darkness." While this is something that Eliot remarks in "Tradition and the Individual Talent," although he is not nearly as "aware," and if he is, not nearly as explicit, this theory of creation and inspiration echoes what critics have said about Eliot's mode of creation and inspiration.

In *Words Alone* Denis Donoghue consistently returns to a counterintuitive but convincing claim for an element of "objectivity" in Eliot's words. "Objective," here, is not meant to necessarily connote the material, common-sense world of external things, but to connote, in this case, the autonomy and impersonality that Eliot's words have; in other words, they "precede" the subject. Donoghue writes,

> Especially when Eliot's poems were in question, I thought of the words as preceding or
>
> provoking the feelings that somehow emerged from their conjunctions [...] He seemed to have found the words first and the feelings a split second later. Words were not the vicar of his feelings, or instruments for their delivery according to a theory of literature as communication...It was pointless to assume that certain feelings, silently established, preceded [the words] and awaited their verbal destiny with patience (15).

Although Donoghue and Derrida are not saying quite the same thing, it is worth noting the relation between Donoghue's idea that "the words," in a sense, come from nothing—or from that which is purely affective: a "compelling rhythm," or a "motif"—and Derrida's idea that "only pure absence—not the absence of this or that, but the absence of everything in which all presence is announced—can inspire, in other words, can make work, and then make one work." For Derrida, one is compelled to produce as an attack on "nothingness." If we think back to "Hamlet and His Problems," and to Eliot's question about Shakespeare, namely, under what compulsion did he seek to express the inexpressibly horrible, we might answer with the compulsion of "nothingness." According to Derrida, this "essential nothing," this absence, in and of itself, *is* that which is "in excess of everything." In turn, it is the "basis" on which "everything can appear and be produced within language." But language, its particularity and the sheer *contingency* of the words, of each individual book in relation to "the pure book," the book about nothing, reveals the absence that underlies

and founds it, and all language: this is what Derrida means, I think, by "the way in which nothing *itself* is determined by [its] disappearing."

A part that is crucial and that I think would be missed if it were not pointed out, is that Derrida's "nothingness" belongs to the world or the universe. In the artistic "process," there is "a departure from the world toward a place which is neither a *non-place* nor an *other* world." Nothingness is embedded in *this* world. This is what I mean when I say that Eliot comes to conceive of an essential "difference" that is immanent—Eliot's shadows, darknesses, silences, and "between" states do not imply the "immaterial," or the "otherworldly." If they do, they do not do so *necessarily*.

Wallace Stevens

This is where Eliot diverges from Wallace Stevens who, like Eliot, is searching for a kind of Derridean "center," but finds that, like Derrida writes in "Structure, Sign, and Play," "the center is not the center" (279). To briefly explain what Derrida is talking about here, in what he calls "classical thought concerning structure," the center is paradoxically both within and outside the structure. The center is "outside" the structure because the "center" is not itself subject to the free play, to which the elements *within* the structure *are* subjected. Unlike the elements *within*, the center is fixed, given, and not subject to questioning. Further, "the center is at the center of the totality, and yet, since the center does not belong to the totality, the totality has its center *elsewhere*" (279). Derrida associates "centers" with presence or claims, at least, that in the history of Western metaphysics this has been the case. Examples of "centers" through the "entire history of

the concept of structure…[a history] which…must be thought of as a series of substitutions of center for center," include "essence, existence, substance, subject, transcendentality, consciousness, God, man and so forth" (279-80). Stevens opts for the self-constructed center in "Notes Towards A Supreme Fiction"; in "Sunday Morning," he reduces all supernatural phenomena to man. Even Jove in the clouds who "had his inhuman birth" was not "suckled" by a "mother, and "no sweet land," a reference to land that exists *for* man as in the Bible, "gave/ Large-mannered motions to his mythy mind." Although it might seem from the last lines of "Sunday Morning"

> At evening, casual flocks of pigeons make
> Ambiguous undulations as they sink,
> Downward to darkness, on extended wings.

that, even with what Donoghue calls Stevens' "translation downward" of the supernatural, that Stevens retains *some* notion of the "immaterial" or "otherworldly" in, for example, "ambiguous undulations" or "downward to darkness," it is more likely that Stevens reclaims these *for* nature and *as* natural. They belong to that

> …old chaos of the sun,
> Or old dependency of day and night,
> Or island solitude, unsponsored, free,
> Of that wide water, inescapable

that is life on earth without God though with things *like* God—i.e., Stevens (in *one* of his modes) has substituted one "center" for another, replacing God with the godlike which, in Stevens' "expression of paganism" becomes the sun, a "savage source" which is "not as a God, but as a god might be."

Ultimately, though it is not within the scope of this project, I would suggest that, unlike Stevens, Eliot *does* do away with the notion of a "center" altogether even as he accepts God, what some might call the ultimate "center." The antimetaphysical,

contextualist bent in his early philosophy, and his disdain for "systems," take him there. That, and his recognition of noncoincidence, difference, and fragmentation that is—paradoxically perhaps—fundamental in all things. The co-incidence of spirit and body, finitude and infinitude, the temporal and the eternal, in the incarnation makes Christianity essential, necessary rather than contingent; however, the *way* Eliot figures it is that essential difference is an expression of the truth of Christianity, and the truth of Christianity an expression of the essential difference.

In "Esthetique du Mal," Stevens is tasked with translating pain downward. Pain, like damnation, for Eliot *does* retain its link to the "supernatural." But, interestingly, not in the sense which Nietzsche derides in *On the Genealogy of Morals*. It is with the Nietzschean spirit of looking into the abyss, not escaping the abyss's look, with which Eliot takes suffering as evidence of the supernatural. In the 1930 essay on Baudelaire, Eliot writes,

> …such suffering like Baudelaire's implies the possibility of a positive state like beatitude. Indeed, in his way of suffering is already a kind of presence of the supernatural and the superhuman. He rejects always the purely natural and the purely human… Either because he cannot adjust himself to the actual world he has to reject it in favour of Heaven and Hell, or because he has the perception of Heaven and Hell he rejects the present world: both ways of putting it are tenable (232).

It is clear that Eliot is, in a sense, describing his own way. But it is just as evident that Eliot the man diverges from this description of Christianity. In so many words, Eliot calls Baudelaire's belief rudimentary, Eliot writing with fascination of Baudelaire's "discovering [of] Christianity for himself" in his "theological innocence" (231). It resembles, one might claim, Eliot's more adolescent way of looking at things. Eliot's Baudelaire *is* a nihilist in the sense in which Nietzsche means it in the *Genealogy*: he

rejects the actual world. But the wiser Eliot would, I think, not condone the escapism. We get a hint of his rejection further along in the Baudelaire essay. Although he writes of Baudelaire that

> the recognition of Sin is a New Life; and the possibility of damnation is so immense a relief in a world of electoral reform, plebiscites, sex reform and dress reform, that damnation itself is an immediate form of salvation—of salvation from the ennui of modern life, because it at last gives some significance to living…(235)

and so suggests that suffering gives meaning, in some sense *implies* meaning, to life, he also praises, first, that Baudelaire is concerned with the "*real* problem of good and evil" (235, emphasis mine) and writes that

> So far as we are human, what we do must be either evil or good; so far as we do evil or good, we are human; and it is better in a paradoxical way, to do evil than to do nothing: at least, we exist (236).

We do not have the option to will *nothing* over not willing; to be human is to either will evil or good. Suffering, for Eliot then, seems to suggest that the void, the realization of a nothingness, in *the actual world* has suggested an essential "difference," an absence, and this absence is immanent. In Christianity, it would seem, Eliot ultimately finds the incarnation, the corollary to the objective correlative that accounts for essential absence—as Eliot writes in "Little Gidding," "the incarnation is the gift half understood."

In his early career, which is to say, at the time of writing "Hamlet and His Problems," Eliot had it wrong, in a sense. This is not to say that Eliot is wrong and Derrida is right about the way things *are*—no one can really make that claim. Rather, it is to say that Eliot's own poetry runs counter to the metaphysics of presence that he articulates in the concept of the objective correlative. His poetry is, it would seem, founded on this "essential nothingness," and through his poetic development, Eliot becomes increasingly aware of it. The poetry—even the early poems and "Prufrock," but

especially *The Waste Land*, "The Hollow Men," the Ariel poems, "Ash-Wednesday," and *Four Quartets*—is permeated by allusions to "separation," a metaphor for this "experience," a metaphor which, as Derrida writes, *does* deserve a genealogical account. We also have "silence," "shadow," "darkness," "nothing," and, more generally, paradox. It would seem Eliot is trying to articulate the "essential nothingness," and is, at the same time, aware that *words* are both an *attack* on the nothingness which allows things to appear and be constituted in language *and* that these same words disclose the nothingness through which they appear. This is why Eliot resorts, I think, to paradox. As early as "Gerontion," for example, we get the perplexing phrase,

> The word within a word, unable to speak a word.

Like in "Prufrock," the inability to speak because words are contingent, because they will never express the infinitude, freedom, or the eternal to which Prufrock relates his self, because they will never be what one "means," the anxiety of "the word," of "a word," returns full-force here. The word, here, that is "within a word," cannot itself speak "a word." It is impossible to tell just what this "means," but I read it as Eliot's acknowledgement of a silent component within the word—in any word, there is an "embedded" absence, which is a "silent," unable-to-speak word "within." There is an "outer word," a sign, which discloses a presence, a thing, but that is founded on the absence within. Interestingly, the first line of the stanza in which this phrase appears is,

> Signs are taken for wonders. "We would see a sign!"

Although this refers to Gerontion's disillusionment with "signs" that connote the supernatural, it relates to the "absence" of "the word within a word, unable to speak a word." This is because, for Gerontion, the signs that "are taken for wonders" are empty of

belief. They are an example of what, later in the poem, an enigmatic "she," undoubtedly a Biblical figure,

> …gives when our attention is distracted
> And what she gives, gives with such supple confusions
> That the giving famishes the craving. Gives too late
> What's not believed in, or if still believed,
> In memory only…

Active belief, and meaningfulness, is the "forgiveness" Gerontion craves "after such knowledge."

In "The Dead End of Formalist Criticism" Paul de Man makes the case that I.A. Richards' formalist criticism—which supposes a one-to-one correspondence between "the author's originary experience and its communicated expression"—is antithetical to poetry. De Man's critique, it seems to me, goes beyond a poststructuralist critique of the signifier-signified relationship. Perhaps this is because de Man shifts the focus from signification proper to experience, and with good reason. There is a difference, if only slight, between the signification of a meaning and the signification of an experience. We conceive of the former almost solely linguistically: it presupposes that signifiers signify transparently. But in the latter formulation, there is something else; and it is easier to refute the claims of formalist criticism on purely linguistic grounds, but more valuable to do so on ontological grounds. De Man's methodology here is, thus, to take formalist criticism on its own terms and, further, to its own "end." It is easy to think that words do not signify transparently and that, therefore, a theory of criticism that presupposes a definite meaning is—on a linguistic level—flawed. But what do we make when this definite "meaning" is not just a referent, and also not a concept, but an experience? I am thinking of these—referent, concept, experience—as increasing left to right from denotation to sense, from least to

most qualitative, from least to most *affective*. De Man, it seems, is concerned with not only the linguistic impossibility but also the ontological impossibility of formalist criticism, the latter of which depends on, though it also departs from, the former.

Richards' formalist criticism—as de Man reconstructs it—intends to uncover or apprehend the "meaning" of a work, but this meaning is the "experience" that engendered the work. The author's "labor" is thus to create a "linguistic structure that will correspond as closely as possible to the initial experience." Additionally, de Man writes, that once "it is granted that such a correspondence is established by the author, it will exist for the reader as well, and what is called communication can then occur." While "the initial experience [of the author] may be anything at all," there is something "romantic" about the experience. The experience is not only a "meaning" the author *sets out* to communicate, but also an experience that *engenders* the work. De Man explains that the experience "need not have anything specifically 'aesthetic' about it," but that, according to his reading of Richards, "art is justified as the preservation of moments in the 'the lives of exceptional people, when their control and command of experience is at its highest degree.'" We need not necessarily equate *experience* and *emotion* to think this reminiscent—somewhat—of Wordsworth's idea of poetic creation as "emotion recollected in tranquility." It is possible that, for Richards, "emotion" might be a stronger claim of subjectivity than "experience," because, as de Man suggests in a footnote, "moral order consists for [Richards] in a correctly hierarchized organization of human needs and these needs can be evaluated through the study of the 'experiences' of consciousness." There is perhaps a definite number of "experiences" that an artist or "exceptional person" might try to communicate; and these might somehow reflect or evidence a larger structure of "human needs." In any

case, Richards proposes that through careful study of a text the critic can move toward the experience that engendered it.

De Man, particularly concerned with the relationship between signifying construction and initial experience, writes that Richards' theory of criticism implies "highly questionable ontological presuppositions." De Man emphasizes the ontological presupposition that "language, poetic or otherwise, can say any experience, of whatever kind, even a simple perception." The problem with this is that—even if one concedes, in the case of the statement "I see a cat," that "there is a perceptual consciousness of the object and an experience of this consciousness,"—there is still the difficult question of "the working out of a…form of this experience." As de Man puts it, "Neither the statement 'I see a cat' nor, for that matter, Baudelaire's poem 'Le Chat' contains wholly the experience of this perception." This is because "instead of containing or reflecting experience, language constitutes it."

We should note that the *logical* impossibility of a "metaphor" to signify the author's originary experience, or any *one* thing at all, is de Man's permission to force the claims of formalist criticism beyond the text. If sign and signified necessarily do not align, then ambiguity is virtually endless, and it is logically possible that the "text implies…significations that, against the will of their author, are mutually exclusive." For this reason, "resolution does not occur in the text." While lesser types of ambiguity—what de Man calls "controlled pseudo-ambiguities"—can be "resolved," and especially well through formalist criticism, "true ambiguity" is an irresolvable, ontological condition. The implication of mutually exclusive significations makes ambiguity an ever-present condition. While formalist criticism proposes a reconciliation on the level of the text,

ambiguity as an ever-present linguistic condition makes reconciliation an issue that is beyond the text. Formalist criticism, thus, cannot proceed without acknowledging an ambiguity outside of the text—embedded, as it were, in the world, or more specifically in (the poetic) consciousness. This is its dead end. The logical impossibility of unity—on the linguistic level—is a poetic reenactment of an ontological impossibility of unity.

But it is unclear that the linguistic and ontological impossibility of unity necessarily "proceeds from the deep division of Being itself." De Man writes:

> The ambiguity poetry speaks of…prevails between the world of the spirit and the world of sentient substance: to ground itself, the spirit must turn itself into sentient substance, but the latter is knowable only in its dissolution into nonbeing.

Does linguistic *indeterminacy* relate meaningfully to the division of spirit and sentient substance? In other words: why should ambiguity—even as ontological condition—proceed from the division of spirit and substance? Perhaps the association is metaphorical: the impossibility of unified signification in poetry is *like* the impossibility of unified spirit and substance. But are the two really alike, or is there undue weight on the concept of unity? We must poetically—not linguistically—understand unity to relate ambiguity to the desire of consciousness to be both spirit and substance. And yet, we cannot take de Man's claims lightly: the "eternal separation between the mind that distinguishes, negates, legislates, and the originary simplicity of the natural" is for de Man the "only poetic theme." Not only that, but "it is poetry itself." We can take this to mean that any poem implicitly if not explicitly addresses the theme; it is, at the very least, a recurring poetic theme. But it might be more plausible to take it to mean that the tension between spirit and substance—itself a historical, theological, phenomenological narrative—is what is poetic

about poetry. It is, perhaps, the poetic thought of humanity. At the very least, de Man connects the unresolved because unresolvable text to the unresolved because unresolvable opposition between spirit and substance. And, as noted before, "poetry does no more than state and repeat this division." De Man's primary contention, it seems, is that poetry cannot act on the "deep division of Being itself" because this division is the condition for the poetry. Put only slightly differently: poetry is powerless to mend the fragmentation because the existence of the poetry is the evidence of fragmentation.

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(3) Immediate Experience

The Waste Land, Solipsism, and the Subject-Object Paradox of the Disunity of Self

The epigraph to Burnt Norton: although the logos is common to all each one behaves as if he had a private intelligence. My initial impression was that it was a directive: *don't* behave as if you have a private intelligence. Because the logos is common to all, it simply *isn't* true that we have a private intelligence. Logos, clearly, can save us from our solipsism, and ultimately our skepticism of other minds. It is "common," after all; shared, in the sense of Ludwig Wittgenstein's sense of it. In his criticism, Eliot constantly focuses on community, that our standards are created by consensus, and so forth. Perl argues that Eliot converts to Anglicanism in *particular* because it is allowed for a plurality of voices, a kind of truth by consensus. In his philosophy, Eliot sought to show how oppositions like "subjective" and "objective" were fundamentally unstable, because each term only has meaning in a particular context. "Reality," also, only has meaning in a certain context. The idea of a "private intelligence," and I think it wouldn't be wrong to think of this as *subjectivity* and ultimately inwardness in the Kierkegaardian sense of standing as an *individual* in relation to the eternal, infinite, and absolute that characterizes spirit and God, turns up multiply through Eliot's career. In The Waste Land, in the penultimate stanza where the thunder speaks, we get:

> Da
> Dayadhvan: I have heard the key
> Turn in the door once and turn once only
> We think of the key, each in his prison
> Thinking of the key, each confirms a prison
> Only at nightfall, aethereal rumours
> Revive for a moment a broken Coriolanus

In Eliot's own "Notes on 'The Waste Land,'" he cites F.H. Bradley's *Appearance and*

Reality,

> My external sensations are no less private to myself than are my thoughts or my feelings. In either case my experience falls within my own circle, a circle closed on the outside; and, with all its elements alike, every sphere is opaque to the others which surround it…In brief, regarded as an existence which appears in a soul, the whole world for each is peculiar and private to that soul.

In the excerpt from Bradley, "thoughts and feelings" are by default "private," because they are "internal" and within the realm of subjectivity, but the discovery is that "external sensations" despite their physiological basis are just as "private." Bradley is envincing an external-world skepticism that results in extreme subjectivity. In either case, external or internal, "my experience falls within my own circle," and that opaque sphere of experience is not simply one that is closed to the world, but one that becomes the world. The "whole world" is an "existence which appears in a soul," although not necessarily ontologically but epistemically. The force of the skepticism is this: internal, i.e., subjective, or external, i.e., objective, all is subjective, and the "whole world," although external, is subjective and "peculiar and private to that soul," in which the world regarded *as* an existence appears. From this footnote, we get the expression of radical subjectivity: the paradox as usual is language. In the same footnote, Eliot calls attention to Dante. In the *Inferno*, we find:

> ed io sentii chiavar l'uscio de sotto
> all'orribile torre.

This is untranslated in Eliot's notes, but one translation is "And I heard locking up the under door/ Of the horrible tower." Eliot, it seems conspicuously, truncates the second line, which reads, "Of the horrible tower; whereat without a word," and for that matter leaves out the third line as well, "I gazed into the faces of my sons." Dayahdvhan, tellingly, Eliot translates in his notes as "sympathise." In this "Dayahdvhan" section, beginning with "Dayadhvan: I have heard the key," we have an oscillation between

solipsism and the acknowledgment of other minds, but ultimately the true state is that of the former, the "prison" and Dante's horrible tower. We have the disembodied "I" of the thunder in the first line, who has "heard the key," but soon we have an equally enigmatic "we," who "think of the key, each in his prison." It is simple to see the incongruence between "we" and "each," and the implication, also transparent, is that the collective knows that "each" individual has this experience, for it is common. The next line, "Thinking of the key, each confirms a prison" enacts the trope that in thinking we fall into subject-object dualism. But it doesn't simply enact it: it is not thinking of the *door*, i.e., that which separates and keeps "each in his prison," but of the key, that evidences the fall. It is in thinking, then, of the self as in need of saving; in thinking of the key "each confirms a prison," but the salvation the self needs is precisely the salvation from "thinking of the key." The thunder's word, "sympathise," implies that we must sympathise in spite of this experience.

Ash-Wednesday and the Turn to "Immanent Difference"

T.S. Eliot's *Ash-Wednesday* (1930) is about time, space, paradox, shadow and illumination, color, multiplicity and unity, structural opposition, ignorance and knowledge. It is composed of six sections, or six smaller poems. Section I begins enigmatically *in media res*. We are already *in it*, so to speak, as the poem and stanza start with a dependent clause:

> Because I do not hope to turn again
> Because I do not hope
> Because I do not hope to turn
> Desiring this man's gift and that man's scope

I no longer strive to strive toward such things
(Why should the aged eagle stretch its wings?)
Why should I mourn
The vanished power of the usual reign?

We may know what preceded the declaration, a "turn," but if we have the effect we are still missing the cause, i.e., the first half of the causal relationship. A beginning like this has an element of inevitability and suggests a Heideggerian thrownness, the feeling of a determinism—I am 'thrown' into a world that is already meaningful to me, but this fact, also, is the condition for my freedom, the possibility for my self-determination, whether authentic or inauthentic.

The second word of the poem is "I," but there is no previous or subsequent development of a speaker. We might contrast this with "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" and "The Hollow Men." The former begins with, "Let us go then, you and I," the latter with, "We are the hollow men." But in this one we have something like the individual, the solitary 'I' that is neither an 'us' or a 'we.' Here the contrast is, also, with "Gerontion," the first line of which is, "Here I am, an old man in a dry month." In "Gerontion," "here" establishes place, "am" an 'existence,' "old man" a self or identity despite the poem's ambivalence toward the self qua self, and "dry month" something like a 'setting.' It is not simply because there is no 'constituted' speaker, as Eliot's poems, even "Prufrock" and "Gerontion," and most obviously "The Waste Land," undermine the idea of *either* a poet-as-speaker, as in Romantic poetry and its successors, or the speaker as a determined, narrative element. When Eliot does opt for a semblance of the latter, as in "Prufrock" and "Gerontion," the notion of the self and its metaphysics is itself the poems' and their respective speakers' foremost question; the effect is never, then, comfortable or unquestioned, but serves instead to call into question *the* question. The speakers' identities

are partial, fluid, not so much constituted in the world as in language, often ghostlike and hovering, always at-risk and threatened. In "Burnt Norton," the effect of the single, disembodied voice is also different—it presumes omniscience from the first lines, "Time present and time past/ Are both perhaps present in time future." Although the "perhaps" undermines the "omniscience," structurally the voice functions in that exalted way—even as the individual becomes the subject of the poem, as the *Four Quartets* in general are about coming to terms with the particular or individual, the temporal, when one wants to get to or *through to* the universal, and the eternal.

This is all to say that the first line, "Because I do not hope to turn again," is unsettling, not because there is not a clear speaker, space, or time, despite the spatial and temporal references in "turn," and "again," respectively, but because there is no precedent for this voice that is both individual ("I") and yet not constituted, with only suggestions of past time ("again") and movement ("turn").

The first section quickly announces the poem's technique of anaphora, which thematizes the notion of repetition, making it one of the poem's primary concerns. For all of the anaphora, however, there is only one identical line in the entire poem. It is

Lord, I am not worthy
Lord, I am not worthy

at the end of section III. The identical lines are set off from a preceding longer stanza, and the line that follows, and, from the end punctuation evidently completes the short, fragmented phrase

but speak the word only.

is structurally set off from the two identical lines it modifies. Similarly, the extreme indentation on the page draws attention to this line, and perhaps implies the isolation and

vulnerability of the "I" who "speak[s] the word only." It is hard to grasp the meaning of these lines, but that they form the only moment of perfect repetition in a poem filled with near-repetitions, disjunctions such as,

> Speech without word and
> Word of no speech

and references to sameness and difference, such as "The same shape twisted on the banister" in section III, is significant. It is only in the acknowledgment of a complete separation from God—taking "Lord, I am not worthy," here, to connote the categorical difference between man and god, the mortal and the divine—that there can be, perhaps only for a moment, the identity of two things. The identity in "the word," perhaps, is the closest man comes to being divine himself; in "speak[ing] the word," a mortal approximates God. And yet, that all this "I" can do is "speak the word only," not even the *Word* but the *word* and the word *only*.

It is commonplace to comment on the technique's inducing of a incantatory or meditative mood but aside from establishing a suggestive mood where ideas, convictions, are perfunctory—always already in passing, already in motion *away*.

> Because I do not hope to know again
> The infirm glory of the positive hour
> Because I do not think
> Because I know I shall not know
> The one veritable transitory power
> Because I cannot drink
> There, where trees flower, and springs flow, for there is nothing again

In these years, Eliot became obsessed with *between* states, a concept explored in the Ariel poems, "Marina," "The Hollow Men," and "Ash-Wednesday." The concept comes to a head, as do many of Eliot's lifelong preoccupations, in *Four Quartets*. It is also worth exploring the fate of the *between* in the plays, notably "Murder in the Cathedral." Is there

a change in the reckoning of the *between*? Whereas the notion itself—of *difference*, noncoincidence, at once nonlocated and multiply located—is a source of discontentment in, for example, *The Waste Land*, it was even then the proof of the supernatural, immaterial, or otherworldly. Or, rather, the separation and noncoincidence notable in the earlier poems becomes, in a sense, the very condition for faith in the later poems. "Ash-Wednesday," perhaps more than any other of Eliot's poems, suggests if not catalogues this "turn."

In *T.S. Eliot's Negative Way* Eloise Knapp Hay writes that "if Eliot had not first steeped himself in the negative way of Buddhism, he would not have found his bearings toward the negative way of Christianity" (69). It is a similar claim to one Jeffrey Perl has made about Eliot's conversion to Anglicanism.

In charting the secondary literature inspired by what Perl calls "the question of 'T.S. Eliot,'" Perl reminds one that

> by the centennial of his birth, Eliot had been associated with nearly every school or category of philosophy with which he could conceivably have been familiar, and given the assumption of polarity of schools, this ought not to have been possible (45).

With an eye to his dissertation on Bradley—published in 1964, after the first critic to write a dissertation on Eliot's dissertation pushed him to publish it—later critics construed Eliot as 'even something of a grammatologist' a la Jacques Derrida, "a logocentric Eliot who is anything but Derridean," a pragmatist in the vein of William James or Wittgenstein, the latter comparison drawn frequently from Eliot's comments in his dissertation that "reality" is determined by "'a community of meaning' whose existence is 'ultimately practical'" (45). Others still have contested Eliot's pragmatism; and for Harriet Davidson, who wrote *T.S. Eliot and Hermeneutics*, and Eloise Knapp Hay, who wrote *T.S. Eliot's Negative Way*,

and several other critics, Eliot is a "phenomenologist and hermeneuticist: Heidegerrian, for the most part, but before the fact Gadamerian, Ricoeurian, and existentialist as well" (46). Perl notes, also, that in 1987 Richard Shusterman made the case for Eliot's affinity with the analytic philosophy of Bertrand Russell and G.E. Moore (46).

Aware of these critics and "that their respective claims, if sometimes overstated, are both valid and incompatible," other critics like William Scaff portray Eliot as "a *bricoleur*, an eclectic system-builder," who synthesized others' insights. Another solution, and attempt to overcome all of the heterogeneity, is to look to conversion:

> First, there is Eliot's passage from skepticism to religious faith. Hillis Miller and Harry Antrim view Eliot as a convert from idealism to realism. The Eliot of Shushterman prefigures Wittgenstein in moving from a realist or analytic or objective phase into a skeptical or pluralist or subject mode (46).

However, Perl writes, Shusterman's claim—"the most convincing offered"—reveals the "inadequacy of all conversion theories" because "they presuppose a numinous distinction between the A and the Z from which and to which the convert has converted" (46). The "eclectist interpreter," Perl writes, "assumes that A and Z are different" but compatible. Conversion theories "assume as well that the convert from A to Z agrees that A and Z are not the same—the convert must intend conversion—and has changed his mind about which is better" (47). There is also the problem, both Perl and Shusterman note, of the binary notions of subject/objective to begin with; in discussing any kind of conversion where the terms are oppositional, we have to assume, at least perfunctorily, that the opposition is itself intelligible.

Perl cites "incoherence" as another way of making sense of "Eliot's contrariety," along with synthesis and "conversion from skepticism to belief or from belief to skepticism or from some variety of belief to another" (47). These critics, Perl writes, "have in

common with the advocates of Eliot as convert their sense that an expression of ambivalence cannot be coherent" (48). But they also "share as well the realization, sometimes dim and often angry, that Eliot saw matters differently" (48). The way Eliot saw things, Perl implies, is that

> opposed positions are connected naturally, connected by their opposition; and in a complex culture as in a complex personality, a wholeness of almost infinite, almost irrelative parts can happen solely through ambivalence. The consistency achieved by dialectic, one of whose unproven axioms is that opposed positions cannot both be true, is (from the standpoint of the whole) merely fragmentary, merely synecdochic, and certainly beside the point. (48).

Although Perl seems imply that there *is* a "wholeness," that wholeness is never to be realized or apprehended; the wholeness is another construction to explain why any position is "merely fragmentary, merely synecdochic." It is not as if there is a wholeness that is epistemically "closed" to us but somehow ontologically real; that the wholeness is "of almost infinite, almost irrelative parts" evidences that it is simply a way to conceive of *why* any one position is necessarily fragmentary. There is no perfect wholeness of opposed parts, no unification or synthesis, even if we suppose that the opposed parts are held in tension, juxtaposed but still separate, each feeding off of "difference." If, as Perl says, "the paired positions that dialectic sponsors are indeed opposed—but not the beings stating them, who developed dialectic in the first place to evade the painful knowledge that they could not be sure what they believed" (48), then there is a sense in which, in turn, we "developed" wholeness, an impossible standpoint and ontologically improbable or irrelevant, to explain the inadequacy of "dialectic," which one already suspected.

According to Perl, Eliot pitted "rival schools (and rival teachers) [and] turned their arguments against each other" (48). He did this not "to clear a space, nor to delay commitment until his mind was 'made.' He took each individual philosophy as an aspect

of a whole. The whole he took to be complex and therefore necessarily ambivalent" (48). This is all to say that we need not think of Eliot's literal conversion as a renunciation of something, but perhaps a deeper acknowledgment of what his early philosophy had already led him to: a disdain for Western metaphysics. In1939, Eliot wrote to his friend, "It is rather trying to be supposed to have settled oneself in an easy chair when one has just begun a long journey afoot" (Perl 48).

Subject-Object Separation, Unity, Immediate Experience

When we speak of "unity" and "disunity," what might we mean? Eliot's dissertation, "Knowledge and Experience in the Works of F.H. Bradley," has been particularly helpful here. In it, we find Eliot's handling of "immediate experience." Unity was then, and remained, a problem for Eliot; in particular, it was his dissatisfaction with false unity that became the central concern. In particular, Eliot renounced the false notion in philosophy that one could arrive at a "unity," that is, that one can unite fragmentary experience, *through* philosophy. The conclusion he draws in his dissertation is that, "Therefore philosophy can ultimately be founded on nothing but faith" (*Knowledge and Experience*, 103).

In "Mystical and Pragmatic Knowledge and Experience in *Four Quartets*," critic Donald Childs argues that pragmatic knowledge and experience is as, if not more, important to *Four Quartets* as mystical knowledge and experience. "Mystical," though connotative and hard to define, is used here in a somewhat general sense to pertain to "the

ultimate experience of our reality," in contrast to "the experience of ultimate reality" (146). Critics traditionally mark as "mystical," Childs notes, "the moment in the garden when the lotus rises, the moment 'Quick now, here, now, always,' [and] the moment of 'Midwinter spring' when 'The soul's sap quivers'" (146). These are regarded, in other words, as the intersection of the temporal and the eternal, the human and the divine, appearance and reality—or, if not, as Childs figures it, a point of "contact," reconciliation, or "tension between what Eliot calls in his dissertation the subject side and the object side of human experience," then a dissolution of the one in favor of a coming into the other. Childs starts from the remark Eliot made during an interview after the publication of *Four Quartets*, that "intellect pushes to its limits leads to mysticism," and, further, "all human faculties pushed to their limits end in mysticism" (144).

The remark is strange, but unsurprising given Eliot. Childs works to construe it from Eliot's dissertation *Knowledge and Experience in the Work of F.H. Bradley*. Eliot's dissertation is preoccupied with the subject-object dichotomy and, especially the first chapter, deals with "immediate experience," or "feeling," as the state where "neither any subject or object exists." Although in the dissertation Eliot resists "the urge to resolve the subject-object dichotomy into oneness," there is a kind of ambivalence. If we *think* of immediate experience we no longer are "in it," and it becomes lost to us. The question is whether immediate experience has value, if it can constitute, found, or guide knowledge. Childs quotes from the dissertation,

> Experience…both begins and ends in something which is not conscious… At the beginning then consciousness and its object are one… As we develop subject and object side, they seem to approximate independence … That objects are dependent upon consciousness, or consciousness upon objects, we most resolutely deny… But if we attempt to put the world together again, after having divided it into consciousness and objects, we are

> condemned to failure… Yet the original unity—the 'neutral entity'—though transcended, remains, and is never analysed away (28-30).

Here, the "original unity" is transcended but not analysed away (whatever, for now, this could possibly mean—i.e., what the difference is) but, especially pertinent, is that experience begins and ends in unity. Childs writes, "Pursue to its limit the subject side or object side formulas that try to 'put the world together' and you are bound to arrive at the original unity that all epistemological practice actively or passively hypothesizes as the putative beginning and end of the distinction between consciousness and its objects" (149). Implied is that the world begins in a unity that immediate experience apprehends, "epistemological hypothesis" or a "metaphysical theory," which figures as in the dissertation as a kind of faith, ends in the unity as well. The original unity may be given but its subsistence requires faith, or will. It requires faith because we never attain a total perspective from which to apprehend *all*. There is no such perspective, but, "by the nature of human being—a being he regards as inevitably social, constructing its reality through agreement (through a coming to one mind about what constitutes reality)—'We are forced to the assumption that truth is one, and to the assumption that reality is one' (*KE* 168)" (149). In other words there is an inescapable inclination to unity, that figures in metaphysical theory, and, it seems, an earnest attempt to subsume discontinuity under a greater unity that can recognize but transcend it. The inclination may be, in one of the most quoted parts of Eliot's dissertation, to pass "when possible, from two or more discordant viewpoints to a higher which shall somehow include and transmute them" (147-8).

The "mysticism" of the *Four Quartets*, Childs argues, hearkens to Eliot's graduate school interest in the philosophies of Henri Bergson and William James. They represent

for Eliot two incomplete pictures—the former the "object side," the latter the "subject side"—and contribute to different impulses. Both, though, claim to get past metaphysical issues, and to mediate between the "real and the ideal," a promise to which Eliot responded with attraction and suspicion. Bergson emphasized intuition in place of intellect: "reality cannot be thought; it must be intuited" (Childs 151). James, conversely, thought philosophical ideas valuable insofar as they affect practice. For James, truth "is not a stagnant property inherent" in an idea but "truth *happens* to an idea. It *becomes* true, is *made* true by events" (153). Childs claims it is James' pragmatism that both "prevents the dissertation's arrival at Bradley's Absolute" and "complicates the poem's drive towards a mystical 'still point'" (153). James' pragmatism represents the "subject side" because it denies an ultimate truth and any reference point beside "human need." Pragmatism intended to bypass philosophy about truth or reality offering itself as a "method of settling metaphysical disputes that otherwise might be interminable" because "if no practical difference whatever can be traced, then the alternatives mean practically the same thing" (154). For James "truth" is mutable, and the human being is a creative agent in its construction. According to Childs, Eliot is what Richard Rorty would call an intuitive realist, "'one who thinks that 'deep down beneath all the texts, there is something which is not just one more text but that to which various texts are trying to be adequate'" (154).

> I should say that it was at any rate essential for Religion that we should have the conception of an immutable object or Reality the knowledge of which shall be the final object of the will; and there can be no permanent reality if there is no permanent truth. I am of course quite ready to admit that human apprehension of truth varies, changes and perhaps develops, but that is a property of human imperfection rather than of truth.

However, Eliot writes in his dissertation of the "world not as ready made…but as constructed, or constructing itself" (*KE* 136). Childs thus stresses an impulse in Eliot to

construct the object of belief, echoing a particularly bewildering moment in Eliot's poetry from *Ash-Wednesday*: "Consequently I rejoice, having to construct something/ Upon which to rejoice" (61). It is bewildering because Eliot rejects the "inner voice," the "conscience" that makes a humanist ethics possible, and also because it is a property of human being, in this case an "imperfection," that makes the "human apprehension of truth" varied. The question, then, is—why rejoice?

Eliot also writes in his dissertation, "If anyone asserts that immediate experience, at either the beginning or end of our journey, is annihilation and utter night, I cordially agree" (156). Childs writes, "On the one hand, 'There is only the fight to recover what has been lost/ And found and lost again and again.' On the other, there is 'perhaps neither gain nor loss'" (157). Childs views the passage on the limits of language as aligning with "the dissertation's insistence on the remoteness of the Absolute from any verbal formula that tries to embody it" (157). Further,

> Disrupting the Christian Eliot's conviction that variation in the 'human apprehension of truth' is a 'property of human imperfection rather than of truth,' I suggest, is the nagging suspicion of the pragmatic Eliot that variation in the apprehension of truth is indeed a property of truth—the suspicion, that is, that truth *happens* to an idea. It *becomes* true, is *made* true by events.

This tension between givenness and constructedness might contribute to an ambivalence in the *Four Quartets* when it comes to the experience of the real or immediate, when it comes to "mystical" experience. Truth must be both given and constructed, it would seem—one might call this "interpretation," and refer to Heidegger's concept of *thrownness*: we are "thrown" into a "world" which is always already meaningful to us.

There is, also, in the *Four Quartets*, the problem of whether it unfolds something "positive," that is, a "positive result." Cleo McNelly Kearns, who explores the influence

of Indic traditions on T.S. Eliot, has focused extensively on how Nagarjuna's teachings might influence the *Four Quartets* in this manner. In speaking of Josiah Royce, Eliot's teacher who studied Buddhist and Upanishadic thought, Kearns writes,

> For the mystic, absolute knowledge was—had to be—a contradiction in terms. Final identity with "what-is" could be seen only as darkness or annihilation [terms from Eliot's dissertation] which, at the least from the perspective of the inquiring mind, tended both to solipsism and to a denigration of thought. If, as the mystic claimed, the goal of philosophy was beyond consciousness, inexpressible, an absolute beyond which relational knowledge was transformed into something else, that goal was like a zero in an equation, a term that "quenched" thought rather completed it (Kearns 98).

But for Eliot, it would seem—perhaps owing to Indic thought—would always have that paradox of "immediate experience." Immediate experience is *foundational* to knowledge but, as soon as it becomes *knowledge*, it is no longer immediate. This is a part of the essential difference, the non-coincidence he found in the world, and the unity that could never be. This unity is the unity of subject and object, because immediate experience is "before 'subject' and before 'object,'" and so is that state of unity. Eliot will never, it seems, not even in the *Four Quartets*, renounce

> …the summer, the unimaginable
> Zero summer?

despite that it is "unimaginable," in that in "imagining" it one both destroys it—because it is unimaginable—and becomes aware of its absence, and its utter unattainability.

> Quick now, here, now, always—
> A condition of complete simplicity
> (Costing not less than everything)

We have, here, nothing less than surrender. The "condition of complete simplicity" has everything to do with Eliot's preoccupation with immediate experience. Eliot wrote in his dissertation, "If anyone asserts that immediate experience, at either the beginning or

end of our journey, is annihilation and utter night, I cordially agree" (156). That to experience *immediately* is, in a sense, to have renounced *everything*, is not a new conclusion for Eliot—it is what he began with, as an impossibility, and the question is whether the exploration—as represented *by* and undertaken *in* the *Quartets*—has made it "possible."

Immediate experience is, to Eliot, significant. There is the recognition, here, that the desired end is really the beginning. That is, the desire for the "beginning" fuels the poet's exploration of human experience. It seems we have "begun" and "ended" with utter night and annihilation—the condition of complete simplicity "cost not less than *everything*," but we have gained the "now, here, now, always," the brief moment of intersection between the temporal and eternal in the *now*. The "now" is the "still point" Eliot speaks of in "Burnt Norton," the still point which is never still, never absolute. But if the *Four Quartets* taught us anything, it is that it is okay to "end" with "utter night," for the end is not the end.