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The Greater Torment: Religious and Secular Desire in the Poetry and Criticism of T.S. Eliot

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The Greater Torment:
Religious and Secular Desire in the Poetry and Criticism of T.S. Eliot

Senior Project Submitted to
The Division of Languages and Literature
of Bard College

by
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The miser whose treasure has been taken from him. It is some of the frozen past which he has lost. Past and future, man's only riches.

Gravity and Grace, Simone Weil

Therefore this and any other case of desire is desire for something which is inaccessible and absent. If there's you need, miss, or lack, then that's the kind of thing you can desire and love.

Yes?

Symposium, Plato

Introduction

What is Desire?

Even before T.S. Eliot could view Dante as an authority on the religious life, he saw him as his poetic master. He claimed that “more can be learned about how to write poetry from Dante than any other English poet” (712). What was it to be “learned”? Though Eliot explicates Dante’s literary merits at length, praising the *Inferno* for its vividness of image and simplicity of language, Dante’s metaphysics of desire was foundational to the formation of Eliot’s own thought and poetics, both before and after his conversion to Anglo-Catholicism in 1927.

“Purgatorio 15” makes the distinction between spiritual desires and material desires:

For when your longings center on things such
that sharing them apportions less to each,
then envy stirs the bellows of your sighs.

But if the love within the Highest Sphere
should turn your longings heavenward, the fear
inhabiting your breast would disappear. (*Purg.* 15.49-54)

The language of “longing” and “love” are used between these two stanzas to describe the discrepancy between finite objects of desire and the inexhaustible desire for the “Highest Sphere.” When finite objects of “longing” are scarce a competition arises that corrupts desire. Worldly desire is thus isolating and jealous, sustained in a continually shrinking echo chamber of “envy.” Desire restricted to the material world contracts upon satiation and resists connectivity; if it is shared, it inspires envy, yet if it is not shared, it is selfish. Spiritual desire, the redirection of “your longings heavenward,” is unbound and flourishes when shared: “And when there are more souls above who love, / There’s more to love well there, and they love more, / and, mirror-

like, each soul reflects the other” (*Purg.* 15.73-75). Divine love and spiritual “longings,” the act of redirecting horizontal desires vertically, multiplies “love,” mirroring it in others as it is mirrored in the self. The spiritual object of desire expands while the “envy” and “fear” of material desire “disappears.”

What, then, does this mean for Eliot? Though Eliot did not assent to Dante’s metaphysical schema early in his career, the problem of desire haunted much of his poetics and thought. Whether the vision of desire’s heavenly multiplication or its inverse, its material division, Eliot explored desire and its discontents both before and after his conversion. As a young poet he dramatized the modern’s distance from the ideal of “love within the Highest Sphere,” emphasizing both the sense of emptiness and the depravity in material desires.

The emptiness in a poem like “Portrait of a Lady” is demonstrative of the material desires warned against in “Purgatorio.” It captures the potential for isolation in emotional intimacy; the insurmountable distance between two figures’ disparate desires is measured by a failed friendship. An elderly woman attempts to forge a relationship with a younger man, but as her unreciprocated object of desire, he is utterly estranged from her attempts. She tries to establish a rapport of cultural affinity, playing him Chopin, but “Inside [his] brain a dull tom-tom begins / Absurdly hammering a prelude of its own” (“Portrait of a Lady”). The poem explores the incongruity between the two figures’ desires and how, in their interaction, the sharing “apportions less to each” (*Purg.* 15.50). The conflict of their disparate desires begets a sense of emptiness not dissimilar from Virgilio’s characterization of material desire begetting a state of muted despair, one that “stirs the bellows of your sighs” (*Purg.* 15.51).

But their mutual misunderstanding yields to a deeper problem. The young man cannot even name his own desires. Sitting in a park and listening to “some worn-out common song,”

smelling the hyacinths, he recalls “things that other people have desired. / Are these ideas right or wrong?” (“Portrait of a Lady”). He cannot identify desirable objects spontaneously; they only appear to him in mediated form, as “things... desired” by “other people.” Recalling René Girard’s theory of “mimetic desire,” the theory that desire for an object is always indirect and modeled off another’s desire, the speaker of the poem finds his own internal life lacking, and he thus searches for models to try and triangulate his desires with. There is a sense that his own value system is fundamentally unstable and his desires, thereby, unknowable. The abstract question of “right” and “wrong” is a deep problem for modern desire. Though he retreats to the inward space, there are no depths of emotion -- only a vacuity of obsolete models. Rather than finding solace from the confusion of social life, he hears a “dull tom-tom” in lieu of Chopin and the mechanical fatigue of the song in the park exacerbates his own mechanical fatigue. Musicality inspires inwardness and contemplation—this is not a strange paradigm—but nothing is found beneath the upper firmament of consciousness but a sense of vacancy. The poem is thus not spiritually febrile; it simply has no vocabulary for imagining desire under terms other than its own, and further, the speaker does not even possess the capacity to desire. The faculty of desire is utterly depleted of energy, whether it be material or spiritual.

What exactly happens to desire in the age of secular modernity? “Portrait of a Lady,” in many ways, captures Eliot’s primary concerns with modern desire. The problem of lifeless longing looms over the poem, and is ultimately not resolved within its own space. Jose Casanova identifies the secular as a “central modern epistemic category,” claiming that secularities are “codified, institutionalized, and experienced in various modern contexts and they parallel correlated transformations of modern ‘religiosities’ and ‘spiritualities.’” The secular is what Charles Taylor calls the “immanent frame.” In *A Secular Age* it “constitutes a ‘natural’ order, to

be contrasted to a ‘supernatural’ one, an ‘immanent’ world, over against a possible ‘transcendent’ one” (542). Though Eliot uses Dante as a model, his approaches to desire ultimately exist within this “immanent frame.”

In order to understand why Eliot used Dante as his metaphysical model, it is important to understand how desire functions in the “immanent frame.” Eugene Goodheart makes the useful distinction between desire within a religious imagination versus desire within a secular imagination:

Desire exists beyond need. Need is determinate, it demands and achieves satisfaction: it expresses man’s animal nature. Desire is a “spiritual” energy; it represents” the indefinable in human life. In a religious sense, it has as its object identification with the will of God. Desire does not disappear with the disappearance of God, but becomes necessarily insatiable... Only a God worthy of devotion could chasten desire and make it satiable. “Modern” desire persists in the wake of the disappearance of God. (3)

While religious desire forges an ultimate “object identification with the will of God,” secular desire does not have a preeminent object to identify itself with. The “disappearance of God” means the disappearance of an ultimate object. Secular desire can be seen as fragmented, creating an array of disparate objects to become attached to rather than a single absolute. Desire for a single object became *desires*. Figures within Eliot’s poems are often fixated on an object of desire that is either unfulfilling or unfulfillable. The poems frequently portray figures undertaking a search for an object of desire, and thus describe a condition in which desire longs *to desire*, or to discover an object worthy of desire *as such*. This is exemplified in the dizzying confusion of aimless desires in “Prufrock” and “Gerontion”; deprived of viable historical models for action, neither of them can discern any suitable objects of desire. These distilled voices are

extended into moments in *The Waste Land*: “What shall we do tomorrow? / What shall we ever do?” It is even further addressed in what is sometimes considered Eliot’s most mature poem, “Burnt Norton”: “Over the strained time-ridden faces / Distracted from distraction by distraction.” Desire, subject to distraction, begins to digest itself. Secular desire exists in a self-begetting cycle. There is no satiation in secular desire’s rotation of objects it can attach itself to. But religious desire, in its boundless love for God, is inexhaustible. Goodheart is making the claim that the operations of religious desire do not disappear with the “disappearance of God,” but are folded in and assimilated into secular desire under modern terminology. For Goodheart, whether desire is religious or secular, it is a “spiritual energy.”

Though he calls the order of secular desire into question by using a medieval metaphysics as his model, Eliot is, by virtue of being a modernist, ultimately subject to the conditions of secular desire. It is, however, these moral and spiritual boundaries that he is struggling against. In this project I will be examining the nexus of desires in Eliot’s literary criticism and poetry prior to his conversion, exploring the struggles of the formation of Eliot’s religious sensibility through the lens of desire. Beginning with Eliot’s theories on culture and the “dissociation of sensibility,” I will map the coordinates of the desire lurking behind the demands he places upon the modern poet, the emotional life, and the cultural landscape. This will then be placed into conversation with “The Love Song of Alfred J. Prufrock” and “Gerontion,” exploring the ways in which Eliot’s cultural concerns compliment, and are even challenged by his poetics. In my second chapter I examine the taxonomic shift from cultural desire to spiritual desire between Eliot’s first two collections of poetry, *Prufrock and Other Observations* and *Poems: 1920*, to *The Waste Land*. I argue that, though *The Waste Land* is sometimes interpreted as a document of cultural decay and even of modern atheism, the poem is fundamentally ascetic. In its attempts to

reorient desire beyond what Taylor calls the “immanent frame,” spiritual desire is probed through an apophatic discourse, using examples of debased desires in order to illuminate images that work towards the realm of, in Dante’s words, “love within the Highest Sphere.” The poem works through the spiritual and moral problematics that ultimately culminate in the conversion. Finally, through this hermeneutic of desire, I will establish the beginning of a groundwork for ways to read Eliot’s consummate work, the *Four Quartets*. The *Quartets*, due to their musicality and devotional nature, have a way of resisting stringent interpretation. Perhaps this is a symptom of the very desires that occupy the text and their esotericism, or perhaps I have been moved by the *Quartets* a few too many times, but think of the work I have done here as a step—maybe one of many—in grappling with the *Four Quartets*. The secular desire of Eliot’s early work may be, in Goodheart’s words, “insatiable”; however, the desire of the *Four Quartets* that begins its articulation in *The Waste Land* is ultimately inexhaustible.

Desire, in all moments, is engaged in a type of struggle. It is a spatio-temporal system occurring in the present, while projecting yearning, emotion, and other metaphysical energies into an ever-receding horizon line. Considering secular desire: once the object of desire is attained, or the horizon line is approached, another horizon, or object, is inevitably born. Secular desire is sustained by its own system, which is ultimately a system of despair. Desire becomes momentarily attached to an object, but is constantly retreating to find new objects. Under these rotational terms, desire may never be fulfilled. What, however, occurs if the rules of this temporal system—the structure of the horizon line or the general approach to it—are violated? This may take the form of contemplation of the object rather than efforts at its attainment, or

perhaps an acknowledgement that the object can never truly be “attained.” It also, perhaps more likely, may be a change in what the very object of desire is.

Eliot’s religious disposition offered a new form for imagining desire. In a letter to Paul Elmore More, a Christian humanist, Eliot wrote that those without a religious instinct seem:

to be unconscious of any void—the void that I find in the middle of all human happiness and all human relations, and which there is only one thing to fill. I am one whom this sense of the void tends to drive towards asceticism or sensuality, and only Christianity helps to reconcile me to life, which is otherwise disgusting. (*Letters*)

Eliot was certainly conscious of “the void” through the whole of his career, but it is in his Christian sensibility that he finds some reconciliation in dealing with it. The “void,” for Eliot, was present before, but it was articulated under different terms. Prior to it being imbued with religious significance, the void he found “in the middle of all human happiness and all human relations” was bound up with Emile Durkheim’s concept of anomie. Durkheim developed his theory of the anomic condition in his study *Suicide*, in which he ascribes a cultural causality to the psychological state of modern aimlessness. The etymology of anomie stems from the Greek word for “lawlessness”: to be *a-nomos*, or without law governing human conduct. Anomie is a mass portrait of the individual disembedded from the social fabric within a culture unable to uphold a robust system of values. Durkheim described anomie as an “insatiable will,” and the “malady of the infinite” because the desire for guiding principles under the anomic state can never be fulfilled, and therefore they can only become more intense. The individual’s estrangement from a system of values is certainly a void in what Eliot calls “human happiness,” but it is also a void in desire. The void is further augmented in desire becoming more intense while its objects become more remote. How can desire be a fulfilling faculty if its objects are

“infinite”? This form of secular desire is defined as a “malady” by Durkheim, or a spiritual disease. If we are to think of it in terms of sickness, *The Waste Land* is a search for the cure to such a spiritual disease: Eliot manages to fold the cultural problems he is concerned with in his early work into a poetic quarrel with the spiritual, re-organizing desire to non-material ends.

Early in Eliot’s career, he did not yet possess the religious vocabulary to identify the “void” in the cultural landscape. Regardless, he was attentive to the sense of absence in the modern. Durkheim’s characterization of “insatiable will” has strong resonances with Goodheart’s theory of secular desire as “necessarily insatiable.” The crux of both their arguments characterizes modern desire by its impossibility of finding fulfillment. Both thinkers represent secular desires through the excess in objects it can become attached to, but I would like to draw attention to what happens to desire when it loses a robust normative framework and becomes anomic. What would it mean to recognize the void in all “human relationships and all human happiness” without any moral redemption? Eliot’s own thought became radically reoriented towards different ends after, and even before, his conversion. The religious instinct drove him towards “asceticism and sensuality,” providing intelligibility to his suffering. In the same letter to More, Eliot wrote: Eliot steeped his religious sensibility in the ascetic tradition, aligning it with the “dark night” of St. John of the Cross’s *Dark Night of the Soul*, and the desert, the canonical site of withdrawal. Religion, for Eliot, provides a sense of satiation in the knowledge that desire is fundamentally insatiable, and thus it is not the disappointment of worldly desires that Eliot is referring to, like that of the “insatiable will,” but a “pain” and “misery” that are generative and perhaps even sacramental.

Eliot’s professed attraction to “asceticism and sensuality” is probed in his earlier poetry. Though the pairing had not fully come into articulation in the way it does in Eliot’s letters to

More, he continually investigates their relationship. “The Love Song of Saint Sebastian” portrays the despotism of material desire, melding the categories of the ascetic and the sensual in a manner that is, without the reconciliation of religious morality, sadomasochistic. This poem recasts the *vita* of Saint Sebastian, and in the process, desire is recast, as well. The historical Saint Sebastian’s martyrdom is positioned at the intersection of the temporal and the eternal, but his story has exegetically been imagined as embodying the pleasure in pain, and vice versa; thereby lending itself to secular interpretation. The highly erotic imagery of arrows puncturing his skin has over time forged an association between Sebastian and homo-eroticism. The meeting of desire for God and erotic desire is thus dramatized in his martyrdom. Eliot taps into these symbolic associations in the “Love Song”; playing up the exegetical strains, while exaggerating the distance between the historical Saint Sebastian and the Saint Sebastian of the poem. The poem is addressed to a “you,” but the object of love, in being attached to another human, is finite. Both narratives of Saint Sebastian are of gratuitous violence; however, for the Sebastian of the poem, there is no transformative quality to the pain. His physicality does not serve a purpose beyond its own ends of self-satisfaction. The speaker traverses the territory of ascetic practice—he wears a “shirt of hair” and claims to “flog” himself—but his devotional actions are attached to erotic desire, deriving both “torture” and “delight.” In being restricted to lust, Saint Sebastian’s actions do not, however, move beyond himself. His asceticism is represented as if it is sacrificial, yet it is unclear if the “you” has any interest in the sacrifices, or if his “Love Song” warrants these actions. Eliot’s Saint Sebastian goes through the motions of ascetic practice, but he ultimately does not discipline his desire, existing in a state of superfluous sensuality. The Saint Sebastian of the poem is thereby characterized by debilitating lust.

The Dantean “envy” that Guido del Duca posits, that material desire gives way to desire’s diminishment, is dramatized to the utmost extreme in this poem: “And I should love you the more because I mangled you / And because you were no longer beautiful / To anyone but me” (“The Love Song of Saint Sebastian”). This poem possesses the vocabulary of the religious imagination, but it does not implement it. Further, it understands the “negative” and the “apophatic” qualities of religious desire, but it is only able to represent them through self-abasement and destruction. In mapping the physicality of suffering and desire onto the secular, the actions become tinged with horror. According to the pilgrim of “Purgatorio,” worldly objects of desire are diminished upon satiation, inspiring “envy,” but Eliot parodies this sentiment. The object of desire does not merely contract, but is tortured and terminated. Saint Sebastian attempts to claim sovereignty over his object of desire, but in his object being human, he “mangles” her. The desirous momentum of the “Love Song” resembles the energy with which one devotes themselves to faith, but it is filtered into a tyrannical, erotic desire, thus making the very faculty grotesque. Despite the language of the poem, the sacramentality of suffering is made obsolete.

In the pages that follow I will attempt to trace the progression of Eliot’s orientation towards desire. Beginning with the limited conception of desire as being tethered to the temporal world, and moving into a vision of desire in which the desire for a normative culture is assimilated into spiritual desire. I acknowledge the desires of *The Waste Land* are not synonymous with the ascetic desire in Eliot’s letters with More, but *The Waste Land* is precisely a struggle towards a metaphysical system. Desire, in all its form, is made manifest throughout Eliot’s works: the tragic implications, as well as the breadth of possibilities that desire can give way to. The problem of desire figures prominently in Eliot’s thought, and, though I am thinking

primarily in the categories of the spiritual and the material, or the religious and the secular, Eliot's position within these dichotomies is not absolute.

The language of desire is necessarily capricious; it constantly shifts depending on the subject-object relationship at stake. The object-identification of desire can vastly change its charge, and ultimately, it does not always give way to a total coherence. This is, however, an occupational hazard of investigating Eliot's relationship to that which is, in Goodheart's words, a "spiritual" energy" that represents "the indefinable in human life." Whether it be material, moral, or spiritual, desire is contingent upon a struggle. The kind of struggle Eliot was involved in—what he was struggling towards and against—shifted throughout his career. With the formation of his religious sensibility, the nature of the objects, as well as how he understood himself to be interacting with them, shifted. This certainly correlates to Eliot's conversion to Anglo-Catholicism, but the moment of conversion is ultimately not a marker of *belief* and *disbelief*. These categories are slippery, and ultimately inconsequential to my polemical purposes. Ultimately I would like to argue that Eliot's turn to religion provided a metaphysical order for desire that was perhaps more important than the actual system of belief. His religious instinct channeled the despairs of secular desire into "the very dark night and the desert," offering it a place to expand, be given meaning beyond "ordinary pain and misery," and even become sacramental.

Chapter One

The Dissociation and Limited Desire

Secular desire is, and can be, attributed to a vast reservoir of objects. Before Eliot began to reckon with the moral problems of the modern as spiritual problems, his primary lens was focused on the cultural and literary landscape. In 1919, Eliot published “Tradition and the Individual Talent”¹ and a few years later, “The Metaphysical Poets.”² Both of these texts stake a claim on the modern sensibility by calling for a more unified order through the negative; stating what is *not*. Eliot’s continual insistence on re-integration, whether it be in terms of literature, the moral life, or the wider cultural landscape, is ultimately an expression of desire. As stated, desire is fundamentally capricious, involved in a continuous cycle of attachment and retreat, but Eliot’s secular desire for re-integration contains an inexhaustible supply of objects. The massive desire for re-integration is thus constantly renewed by any semblance of discord, which, in the modern age, he perceived to be constant. What, then, does it mean for Eliot’s work, particularly in the early years, to be driven by a desire that, at its foundation, may be insatiable?

To understand Eliot’s unfolding thought about desire, we have to first understand his theory of the “dissociation of sensibility.” It is perhaps the deepest cultural problem for Eliot, as a cultural diagnostician and a poet. Eliot first coined the term in an essay he published on “The Metaphysical Poets” in order to describe what he considered to be the deficiencies in modern poetic language. The “dissociation of sensibility” names the state and process of the internal

¹ Here after cited as: *Selected Prose*, TIT

² Here after cited as: *Selected Prose*, MP

life's atomisation, in which, at some point in the seventeenth century, the emotions became isolated from the intellect and vice versa. In marking the "dissociation" as the moment of rupture in the internal life, Eliot asks the modern poet to charge emotion with thought and thought with emotion. While the "dissociation" primarily describes the state of modern literature, many of his other critical theories follow the same integrative impulse. The typical Eliotic standard follows: he identifies a brokenness or an absence and addresses it through the rhetoric of, whether explicitly or not, re-association. Eliot's consistency in thought to assimilate that which he understands to be atomised is demonstrative of his underlying desire for unification, which, in his early years, was limited to culture and the material world. In this chapter I will analyze the theoretical strains of Eliot's overarching project in re-unifying the "dissociation of sensibility," and how they are made manifest in his early poetics, particularly through "The Love Song of Alfred J. Prufrock" and "Gerontion."

Eliot claims there is "a direct sensuous apprehension of thought, or a recreation of thought into feeling" in Chapman and Donne. Something, however, occurred in the interim between Donne and the period following Milton and Dryden: "The sentimental age began early in the eighteenth century, and continued. The poets revolted against the ratiocinative, the descriptive" (*Selected Prose*, MP 63-64). He claims that they "felt by fits, unbalanced." Eliot critiques the romantics for dwelling too much in the emotions, suggesting that the balance of thought and feeling was drowned by the feeling self. Eliot is not making an argument for the cultural priority of reason, but the swelled sense of self in romanticism is, for Eliot, inimical to the production of good writing. He repeatedly speaks on the gravity of "*significant* emotion," (*Selected Prose*, TIT 43) which occurs when the faculties of thought and feeling are not distinct operations, but inform and are informed by each other. The effort to re-integrate emotion and

thought into a balanced, unified whole would, for Eliot, create a better poetry and by extension, a more robust cultural ethos. Eliot's integrative impulse is the driving energy behind his theory of the "dissociation," and in its demands, he embarked on what I will be calling the project of re-association.

The project of re-association is ultimately not limited to "sensitivity." There is an analogy to be made between Eliot's story of the "dissociation of sensibility"—that at some point in the seventeenth century the interior life became fractured and disorganized—and how he viewed the modern landscape. Couched within his laments for a unified sensibility are explicit demands he makes upon the "mind of England" (*Selected Prose*, MP 64) to re-associate the emotions and the intellect. Through mapping the singular, internal "dissociation" onto the "mind of England," Eliot draws a direct link between the state of culture and civilization. David A. Moody wrote that if Eliot's poems become cultural critiques, they do so in order to "give the fullest expression of the poet's own mind and feeling" (79). The internal landscape and the external landscape thus exist in a porous exchange for Eliot. There is an abiding similarity in the way Eliot describes the dissociated internal life and his vision of modernity. In "Ulysses, Order, and Myth," Eliot calls culture an "immense panorama of and anarchy which is contemporary history" (*Selected Prose*, 177). Both the "dissociated sensibility" and the dissociated culture follow the same rhetorical pattern: that something in the past *was*, and now due to subtle historical currents, it is now *not*. The cultural "futility and anarchy" of modernity has resonances with the literary "fits" of thought and feeling post-seventeenth century, and in some sense, are of the same concern. The individual sensibility, the state of literature, and the state of culture, for Eliot, exist in continuous parallels with each other. Though Eliot's theory on the "dissociation of sensibility" most explicitly concerns the individual processing of thought and emotion, the "dissociation" expresses more

than just the internal life, but can, and frequently is, extended onto the whole of scope of the modern.

The “dissociation of sensibility” addresses the problem of the imbalance between the thinking mind and the feeling self and by extension, their excess. Eliot’s theory of the “objective correlative” is similarly concerned with an excess of emotion in the structure of an art object, and further, the excess of emotion in the internal life. Eliot first expounds this theory in an essay entitled “Hamlet and His Problems,” in which he critiques *Hamlet* as both a literary object and Hamlet as a literary character.³ Concerning the form of the play, he claims:

The only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding an “objective correlative”: in other words, a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that particular emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked. (*Selected Prose*, 48)

Eliot emphasizes the importance of “equivalence” in emotion and action in order for the sensory and the narrative to be linked up in a meaningful way. The artistic problem of *Hamlet* is that it lacks a formal symmetry; the sequence of events do not justify the emotions of the play. As the play is deficient in finding an “objective correlative,” Eliot finds Hamlet’s character to be “dominated by an emotion which is inexpressible, because it is in *excess* of the facts as they appear.” His disgust for his mother is a “feeling which he cannot understand; he cannot objectify it; and it therefore remains to poison life and obstruct action” (48-49). Hamlet is overwhelmed by an immense, amorphous, and ultimately corrosive feeling, but he is unable to “objectify” it, and

³ Here after cited as: *Selected Prose*, HHP

therefore unable to extract himself from it enough to consider it analytically, and by extension, act. In being over-saturated with feeling, both Hamlet's emotions and the narrative facts are obfuscated, which in turn "obstruct[s] action."

Eliot portrays the state of the modern internal life as utterly ungovernable, but implicit in his diagnostic of the "dissociation" is the idea of recovery, or re-association. He identifies modern man as being plagued by his own divided self, thereby urging the "mind of England" to grasp thought sensuously and feel cerebrally. There is, however, a certain fatalism to Eliot's pronouncement that the seventeenth century gave way to a "dissociation of sensibility [that] set in from which we have never recovered" (*Selected Prose*, MP 65). A cooperation between thought and feeling would, for Eliot, lead to a reinvigoration of the senses and poetic language; but this "cooperation" is a distant, not yet attained model for the organization. In Frank Kermode's *Romantic Image* he describes the reverberations of the doctrine of "dissociation" in modernist thought, claiming it had "an implicit parallel with the Fall. Man's soul, since about 1650, had been divided against itself, and it would never be the same again" (167). Through the parallel of the Fall, the whole "mind of England" is implicated in a collective original sin, some primeval event in which the mind's faculties and culture at large became divided; yet implicit in the Fall is salvation. Kermode's invocation of the narrative of man's Fall from grace necessarily recalls a past prelapsarian vision. The "direct sensuous apprehension of thought, or a recreation of thought into feeling" (*Selected Prose*, MP 63) that Eliot praises in Chapman and Donne establishes the qualities of seventeenth century poetry to be the object to strive toward.

Eliot posits a model for the ideal modern mind, but in doing so, he forges a direct lineage with the past. The rhetoric of progress and the evolution of the "mind of England" is thus placed under scrutiny. He suggests that the course of culture is not merely a steady accumulation of

knowledge, but that it is a non-linear, self-reflexive dialogue. The present is then always conversant with its past. Rather than dwelling on the precipice of historical memory, Eliot uses the past as a beacon amidst the “futility and anarchy” (*Selected Prose* “Ulysses, Order, and Myth,” 177) of the modern. He recalls the seventeenth century as an era in which the internal life with not divided, using it as a model for how to structure the present. Further, Eliot calls for a full reckoning with the whole of the western tradition in “Tradition and the Individual Talent” by suggesting that our predecessors are absolutely integral to the formation of the modern. Eliot temporally disrupts memory as a linear structure through his construction of the “historical sense” and the “traditional sensibility”:

The historical sense involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence; the historical sense compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole of literature of Europe from Homer and within the whole of literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order. (38)

Eliot argues that in order to be modern, one must have a robust awareness of history; but further, like a phantom limb, the past must have a tangible “presence.” He is not, however, asking the poet to merely maintain memory, but to reanimate it. In this moment Eliot looks admiringly to the poets of the seventeenth century, and in the same turn asks the modern poet to reintegrate the “whole of literature” into his own imagination: the prelapsarian vision of the past he posits is intended to be assimilated into the present. The present moment is not distinctly *new* or *other* for Eliot, but is reliant on the past, forming a “simultaneous existence” and a “simultaneous order” that the poet can become agent to and conversant with. He creates an imagined literary community spanning over vast amounts of space and time as an attempt to re-integrate a culture

dissociated from its own roots. The past and present are constituent to the modern, but their relationship does not merely run skin deep: It is “in [the poet’s] bones” (38). To merely have an awareness of history does not make the writer “traditional,” but it is a sense of the “timeless and the temporal together,” a sense of their deep-seated association. Eliot’s demand for the modern to reorient the entire scope of cultural time, to assimilate history into the present moment, is in and of itself a massive, perhaps object-less desire. Eliot identifies objects in the outer-world, yet in the enormity of their pursuit, they are vast and fleeting.

On a smaller scale, Eliot’s also makes demands for integration in the process of writing poetry. His characterization of the poet’s mind in the act of writing is not contingent upon mending that which has been dissociated, but it is still involved in the act of association. He constructs an image of the ideal mind of the poet in “The Metaphysical Poets,” likening it to a sieve through which experiences, sense-perceptions, and knowledge are strained and translated into poetic form. The poet is constantly forming “new wholes,” negotiating a nexus of objects and placing them into association. Eliot provides an image for what the proper mind looks like when “it is perfectly equipped for its work”:

It is constantly amalgamating disparate experience; the ordinary man’s experience is chaotic, irregular, fragmentary. The latter falls in love, or reads Spinoza, and these two experiences have nothing to do with each other, or with the noise of the typewriter or the smell of cooking; in the mind of the poet these experiences are always forming new wholes. (64)

To fall in love or read Spinoza may be altogether separate acts, but if the faculties of thought and feeling are syncretized, then they are not discrete. In other words, consciousness in all moments demands an act of integration. Experience is dialectically ordered by synthesizing thought and

feeling into a new object, or a “new whole.” His call for the poet to be constantly “amalgamating disparate experiences” resonates with his graduate dissertation, *Knowledge and Experience*.⁴ In his chapter on “Solipsism” he claims that the life of the soul is constantly involved in “the painful task of unifying (to a greater or less extent) jarring and incompatible ones, and passing, when possible, from two or more discordant viewpoints to a higher which shall somehow include and transmute them” (362). Such an inclusion and transmutation of “discordant viewpoints” is an act akin to what the “mind of the poet” should at all times be doing: “always forming new wholes.” Both acts of unifying “jarring and incompatible” (KE) thoughts and of “amalgamating disparate experiences” (*Selected Prose*, MP) resist isolating the internal faculties of the mind, bridging potential for unifying a dissociated sensibility. The poet is, under these terms, both an impersonal medium and, like Donne, bringing both his inner world and his outer world into union.

Eliot’s attitude towards Donne, however, changed drastically over the course of his career. In “The Metaphysical Poets” Donne was used as an emblem for how to order the emotional life and the feeling life, but in his later *Clark Lectures*, Eliot identifies Donne as a figure of, what he calls, “psychologism.” Eliot’s problem with the cultural turn to psychologism is both in the way that it creates a prioritized order of internal operations, but also in the way the psychological outlook finds its objects of desire. The revolution of the psychological was, for Eliot, “immense”: “Instead of ideas as meanings, as references to an outside world, you have suddenly a new world coming into existence, inside your own mind and therefore by the usual implication inside your own head” (635). Eliot’s theory of the psychological is in some sense a revision of the “dissociation of sensibility” and the “objective correlative.” The emotions, rather

⁴ Here after cited as: KE

than finding objects in the “outside world,” became the very objects of contemplation. The psychological imperative to turn inward buffered the inner world from the potential of the outer world. The psychological approach is thus always looking for better expressions of itself, but unable to find an object beyond itself, desire’s ability to grow outward is thwarted. The problem of psychologism, for Eliot, crystallizes some of his concerns with the brokenness of the internal life, as well as the excess of emotion in modern life; but further, he is beginning to articulate the importance of contemplating the object of desire, rather than the feeling of desire. Though he does not ascribe causality to the “dissociation of sensibility,” his later identification of what he calls “psychologism” is a main culprit in the brokenness of modern culture.

Eliot’s theory of the multiple dissociations and the “objective correlative” work through a massive amount of desires. In having an ever-widening inventory of objects, the desires of Eliot’s early career have a tendency to be spread thin. What does it mean for Eliot to be constantly involved in the project of re-association, while the actual fulfillment of this project may not be possible? His desire for unification, on the cultural and literary levels, are prosaically dictated in “The Metaphysical Poets” and “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” yet they are not expressed in their entirety. The poetic form allows Eliot to engage with the project of re-association in an altogether different manner, while also entertaining some of the problems he posed in his later *Clark Lectures* on psychologism. The poems offer glimpses into the emotional lives of the subjects of “dissociation.”

The narrators of “Prufrock” and “Gerontion” are dramatized embodiments of particular strains within the whole problem of “dissociation.” Eliot systematically inserts allusions of the past into his early poems, most notably in “Prufrock” and “Gerontion,” but the fragmented allusions juxtaposed against the modern landscape do not necessarily convene in a state of

unification. While this is in some sense an admittance that the imperatives of “Tradition” have not been rendered complete, Eliot exaggerates the distance between the past and the present, or in other words, the distance between his own critical desire and its object. The allusions are placed in direct proximity with the modern, yet in this effort to actualize the “pastness of the past” and its “presence,” they create an exaggerated sense of disunion between the historical and the modern. What does it mean for Eliot’s allusions to be placed into the space of the poem, which hypothetically should fortify some of his claims on time in “Tradition,” but for them to not necessarily become “associated”?

Beyond the poem’s allusive relationship to time, the voices in Eliot’s early work are frequently over-burdened by either too much consciousness or too much feeling; they carry the weight of the “dissociated” sensibility. Both “Prufrock” and “Gerontion” are figures subject to an unsustainable amount of desires. Eliot poetically dramatizes the qualities he theoretically criticizes. But if we are to consider the mass of objects desired after in the whole project of re-association, perhaps Eliot is not altogether separate from his poetic subjects. In this next section I will analyze “Prufrock” and “Gerontion” as case studies in Eliot’s own theory of the “dissociation” and desire, but further, how they relate to Eliot’s own tendencies.

“The Love Song of Alfred J. Prufrock” is a poem profuse with literary allusions, which in one sense calls attention to the continuity of the “pastness of the past” and of its “presence,” (*Selected Prose*, “TIT” 38) while on the other dramatizes the frictions and disparities between the ancient and the modern. Eliot begins the collection *Prufrock and Other Observations* with an epigraph from Dante’s *Inferno* in the original Italian that translated, reads “If I believed that my

answer were given to one who would return to the world, this flame would stand without moving. But because no one ever returned alive from this depth, if I have heard the truth, I answer you without fear of infamy.” This is from a moment in the 8th Circle of Inferno *XXVII* in which Guido da Montefeltro indicates the fraudulence and corruption of Florence to the pilgrim Dante. The intertextuality of the epigraph brings us into the text by obscuring the origin of voices; Prufrock’s voice assumes Dante’s and vice versa, as well as obscuring the spatial bounds of the poem. We are ushered forth to the edge of hell, and then drawn back into the world of the “Love Song.” Eliot introduces Prufrock’s worldview by establishing its relation to a hell-like landscape, parodying the grand stakes of Dante in its relation to a relatively normal, modern city. The spatial and intertextual confusion suggest Prufrock is in a modern, secularized iteration of Hell, but there is no indication of what the conditions and features of his damnation are; as far as we are concerned, Prufrock has committed no moral transgression. The allusions in “Prufrock” create a distinct temporal friction: In “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” the past is purported to create a symmetry and continuity between the ages, yet in the space of this poem, the radical incongruity with Dante parodies Prufrock’s perspective.

Though we are not cued into the qualifications of Prufrock’s damnation, one gets the sense that his cityscape with “streets that follow like a tedious argument” is not dissimilar from the private hell of the aimless modern malaises. Even yet, the apex of Prufrock’s wrongdoing resides in his anxiety over action: “Do I dare / Disturb the universe?” In his essay on “Baudelaire,” Eliot praises the French symbolist for being concerned with “the real problem of good and evil.” He claims that “in an age of progressive degradation, “ damnation itself “is an immediate source of salvation - salvation from the ennui of modern life, because it at last give some significance to living” (*Selected Prose*, 235). Prufrock is a figure condemned to the

damnation of the “ennui of modern life,” striving towards a “significance to living” through attempting to implicate narratives of the past into the modern, yet he is unable to transcend the perimeters of the secularized iteration of hell he inhabits.

Similarly, Prufrock attempts to traverse the territory of ascetic practice and biblical narrative, but the symbols of the past take on a relational meaning once mapped onto his own existence. “Though I have wept and fasted, wept and prayed, / Though I have seen my head (grown slightly bald) brought in upon a platter.” The idiom of having one’s head brought in upon a platter recalls The Gospel of St. Mark, in which Herodias asks for John the Baptist’s head brought in upon a platter during an extravagant banquet celebrating Herod’s birthday, and prefiguring the death of Jesus, the demand is carried out. John the Baptist is elevated to sainthood, but Prufrock is “no prophet - and there’s no great matter.” Unlike the dignity in the beheading of St. John, Prufrock’s beheading is made slightly ludicrous: His decapitated head has “grown slightly bald.” As a poem, “Prufrock” appeals to the “traditional sensibility” by mapping scattered allusions onto Prufrock’s own existence, yet unlike Eliot’s statement in prose, the incongruity between the pastness of the past and the presentness of the present is insurmountable. The symbols of the past function as proxies for older, more culturally intact forms for action to look to; but when Prufrock interacts with them, they are translated down and subsequently made absurd. Eliot plays out the tensions in Prufrock’s inability to integrate older narratives into the closed system of Prufrock’s modern dilemma; he attempts to open doors into other narratives, but the inconsistencies thwart any possibility for eclipsing the damnation of ennui. Despite his attraction to older paradigms, the invocation of allusions widens Prufrock’s distance from them.

While Eliot urges the poet to dwell in “not merely the present, but the present moment of the past,” (*Selected Prose*, TIT 44) Prufrock’s consciousness demonstrates the occupational hazards of integrating fragments of the past into the modern without a robust, integrative framework. He is a figure attempting to embody Eliot’s “traditional sensibility,” but in the immense, undisciplined order of his desires, he is unable to assent to their implementation. In contrast, however, with Prufrock’s yearning to implicate symbols of the ancient into the modern landscape, “Gerontion” is a poem that extends the Prufrockian perspective on historicity to its furthest extent: What occurs when the “struggle toward unification” is utterly relinquished?

Of all Eliot’s works, “Gerontion” is the most strikingly similar poem to “Prufrock.” Both are the first and most substantial pieces in their respective collections, and both hinge on figures occupying a distilled, implacable malaises. There is a moment in the interior monologue of “Gerontion” that dramatizes his thought process on existing in a world devoid of cultural integration:

After such knowledge, what forgiveness? Think now
 History has many cunning passages, contrived corridors
 And issues, deceives with whispering ambitions
 Guides us by vanities. Think now
 She 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, reconsidered passion.

The poem was first titled “Gerousia,” which broken down simply means old age and *ousia* - the Greek word for being. Gerontion’s name is reflective of his state of being: “Here I am, an old man in a dry month, / Being read to by a boy, waiting for rain.” While Prufrock progressively

grows older throughout the poem, Gerontion is old upon arrival. One gets the sense that the dry landscape, the burden of history, and Gerontion himself are coextensive images - distinct, yet at other moments interchangeable. The image of history as a house with “cunning passages” and “contrived corridors” is a device for analyzing it as something that is both inhabited and other, something that is fundamentally disorienting. The home, or the feminized “history” is given autonomy over the communal “us”: Its passages are “cunning” and “contrived,” created deliberately in deceit. The home is referred to as his own “decayed house” near the beginning of the poem, but by the end, it is merely a “rented house.” The home Gerontion inhabits, or history itself, actively work upon Gerontion as he is deprived of all semblances of autonomy amidst the confusion of history’s passages.

Gerontion’s recurring plea to “think now,” whether directed toward himself or an imagined audience, lends some sense of immediacy to the situation at hand. The poem, however, begins parched with our “old man in a dry month / Being read to by a boy, Waiting for rain,” and dismissively, ends parched: “Thoughts of a dry brain in a dry season.” While there seems to be moments for potential transformation in “Prufrock,” the voice of “Gerontion” makes no attempts to work outside of the poem’s own closed system. As opposed to the proliferation of allusions that are interwoven into the poem’s modern landscape of “Prufrock,” Gerontion overtly recalls allusions by stating them in the negative: “I was neither at the hot gates / Nor fought in the warm rain / Nor knee deep in the salt marsh, heaving a cutlass.” He makes reference to heroism and antiquity, yet as bygone symbols that have lost traction amidst the “contrived corridors” and “cunning passages” of time. Though the older models created an effect of incongruity in “Prufrock,” they were charged with a certain hope. In contrast, Gerontion announces his allusions as ineffectual. The images themselves are recognizable, but their meaning has

disintegrated. He possesses the memory of the past, the “historical sense” but is utterly estranged from it, and is therefore without the “traditional sensibility” (*Selected Prose*, TIT 38). What is still “believed” in only exists in “memory,” or lives as half-dead “reconsidered passion.”

Gerontion has an excess of the “historical sense,” but his body, his belief, and sense of vitality ultimately atrophy in the absence of “tradition.” The dissociation of cultural symbols and feeling in “Gerontion” is translated into the landscape he inhabits - existing on the threshold of dehydration and death, yet somehow still existent.

As Eliot tasks the poet to give life to memory through literature’s “simultaneous existence,” “Prufrock” and “Gerontion” are not expressions of Eliot’s own privately held truths, but embodiments of some of the cultural absences expressed in the doctrine of “dissociation.” Hugh Kenner identifies Prufrock as names with a voice: “He is the name of a possible zone of consciousness where the materials with which he is credited with being aware can co-exist.” The same can be said for Gerontion. The voices’ inundation in their respective “zones of consciousness” represent a set of cultural concerns that are not explicitly Eliot’s, but resemble many of his own concerns. Eliot writes that in order to refine a “consciousness of the past,” which is ultimately an effort against the dissociation, the poet must refine their own impersonal voice: “What happens is a continual surrender of himself as he is at the moment to something which is more valuable. What happens with an artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality” (*Selected Prose*, TIT 40). Eliot’s impersonal theory of poetry hinges on this approach. The voices taken on in “Gerontion” and “Prufrock” do not literally cast Eliot’s own internal life, or “personality” into verse, but they are symbolic; capturing and dramatizing a mood that is at once occupied, and other. “Gerontion” may be an expression of Eliot’s most nihilistic moods; yet at the same time, the theory of impersonality decenters the human subject as

the ultimate source of meaning, allowing for the distilled poetic perspectives to become sources from which the moral and spiritual problems of the modern can be extrapolated. Eliot's tendency to not attempt to make the very desires he posits actualized in his poetics further exaggerates the sense that perhaps his theoretical objects of longing are precisely distant. Through the impersonal order of poetry, Eliot is able to critically exaggerate the imbalance in excess of the dissociated sensibility.

Eliot's characterization of Hamlet as the embodiment of the "objective correlative" reads as if he is framing him as a proto-modern - a case study in what occurs under the "dissociated sensibility." There is, however, a tangible identification between Hamlet as a figure of "intense feeling, ecstatic or terrible, without an object or exceeding its object" (*Selected Prose*, HHP 49) and Prufrock. In the same manner that Hamlet's emotions exceed its object, Prufrock is a figure imprisoned in his consciousness with an excess of feeling that cannot be properly translated into explicit word or action. The very object of emotion that spurs the inaction is unknown, but it is both attended to and obscured through the profusion of excuses, questions, and prevarications: Before dealing with the unstated "overwhelming question" posed in the first stanza, he continually assures us there will be "time for a hundred indecisions, / And for a hundred visions and revisions, / Before the taking of a toast and tea." He incessantly reminds us that "there will be time," yet the object of action escapes each time he asserts it, and is again reinstated with another undermined action. Though the title of the poem is "The Love Song of Alfred J. Prufrock," the question of who he is speaking to and what his object of "love" is remains elusive. In the same manner that Eliot identifies Hamlet's desires as not having a proper object with which to correlate, Prufrock's engagement with desire enacts and exacerbates the problems stated in "Hamlet and His Problems." The recurring phraseology of "Would it have been worth

while” temporally disrupts the flow of the poem by positioning Prufrock’s perspective in the future, looking back on the world depicted in the poem, while simultaneously asking us questions on the value of the present. His temporal consciousness appears too big for him to process and contain; his awareness of time’s scope seems to have no limits. Prufrock amasses many objects of desire, yet in being manifold, none of them are attained.

Prufrock, unlike Gerontion, is a figure burdened by unbridled desires “without an object or exceeding its object,” leading to a state of paralyzed inaction. Despite Hamlet being something of a proto-modern model for the creation of the Prufrockian figure, Prufrock professedly denounces his relation to Hamlet. He exclaims: “No! I am no Prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be / Am an attendant lord, one that will do / To swell a progress, start a scene or two.” Both Hamlet and Prufrock are doomed by too much consciousness and too many emotions, but despite the “buffoonery” (Selected Prose, HHP 48) of Hamlet’s emotion, Prufrock is merely an “attendant lord” and is unable to elevate his own malaise to the realm of Shakespearean tragedy. There is no interplay of murder, jealousy, and revenge in his “Love Song.” Perhaps the most tragic element of the poem is, despite his unwavering insistence on invoking allusions, the dearth in meaning of the older models for action and his inability to locate any decipherable object to desire. Durkheim’s study on *Suicide* illumines some of the strains in Prufrock’s desire: “Unlimited desires are insatiable by definition and insatiability is rightly considered a sign of morbidity. Being unlimited, they constantly and infinitely surpass the means at their command; they cannot be quenched. Indistinguishable thirst is constantly renewed torture” (247). Prufrock’s desires are fatally unlimited. “After the novels, after the teacups, after the skirts that trail along the floor — / And this, and so much more? —”. Though Prufrock does not possess the ability to recognize the “morbidity” in his miserable predicament, that his desires are insatiable and his questions

unanswerable, his “indistinguishable thirst,” like the “objective correlative,” is sustained by a state of excess. As his desires “surpass the means at their command,” Prufrock does not possess the moral or spiritual paradigms to answer, or even pose, the questions he seems to be concerned with. The banality of the answers to said questions often involve unrelated objects like “tea and toast,” depreciating the momentum of the questions at hand and deflating the possibility for there to even be “so much more.”

Prufrock does not know which objects to desire, and therefore does not know what to act for. Action is oriented toward purpose, but Prufrock is a figure with an excess of impetus uprooted from any abiding purpose. Echoing Durkheim, Eugene Goodheart wrote that “It is precisely the elevation of [...] desire as a supreme value, that entails as one of its consequences of enervation. [...] Illimitable desire generates impossible and self-defeating expectations which produce the experience of despair” (13). Perhaps Prufrock does not consciously imagine desire as a “supreme value,” but it dictates the proceedings of his consciousness. In Prufrock’s inability to extract himself from his own over-saturation of desire, he is unable to identify what its object is; it is a self-begetting mechanism that “enervates” the potency of the feeling, while also sustaining itself on the feeling of “despair” without an object-identification. If Prufrock is unaware of the very objects he desires, how can his longings ever be made consummate? He asks us “Then how should I begin? / To spit out all the butt-ends of my days and ways? / And how should I presume?” By asking us how to “presume” while also asking how to “begin,” the very grounds of his actions and presumptions seem to have not yet begun to take form. Despite the poem being formulated as an extended question, he continually undermines his efforts to reach toward the elusive object in claims such as “It is impossible to say just what I mean!” It is almost as if his questions are a form of apophasis, yet he is not circumventing the object because it is

inexpressible; he prevaricates because the object itself is not made clear even to him. The images answering his questions either thwart the driving force of the query, or the questions themselves exceed any sensible object that it could be attached to. Prufrock's desire is objectless because of the manifold objects he attaches it to. He is a figure channeling his energy into objectless "illimitable desire," inducing a form of "despair" and paralysis, or in Durkheim's words, "constantly renewed torture."

While Prufrock's desire for meaning is not extinguished until the moment of his figurative death when "human voices wake us, and we drown," Gerontion establishes that his faculties of desire have already been extinguished long ago. He is a figure who has surpassed the terms of the objective correlative and escaped the bounds of "illimitable desire": He is both alienated from history and his own senses, and therefore alienated from any impetus. There is no need for him to comprehend and "objectify" the emotions because history and emotions have withered along with the rest of the landscape into "reconsidered passion[s]." What history gives, it "gives with such supple confusions / That the giving famishes the craving. Gives too late". The act of history "giving" is repeated five times in the stanza I previously quoted, yet what is given is either "too late," given "too soon," or offered with "such supple confusions," that it devours its object by "famish[ing] the craving." History is personified into a malevolent force working against humanity, and though its course is dictated by a temporal schema, the misalignment between it offering knowledge "too late" and "too soon" demonstrate how adrift Gerontion is from the past being an operative element in the present. Given "too late," knowledge of the past desiccates the "craving," or the potential for desire.

In contrast with Prufrock's excessive questions concerning how to act, Gerontion is under the impression that "neither fear nor courage saves us," suggesting that perhaps nothing will. As

mentioned prior, the dry landscape, the burden of history, and Gerontion himself are coextensive images. He recalls the power in the sensuousness of his youth that has been lost in old age, claiming “I have lost my passion: why should I need to keep it / Since what is kept must be adulterated?” Within the mental and physical landscape he occupies, all “passion[s]” are deadened and “adulterated” to the point of nonexistence. Gerontion has altogether lost his passion, his capacity for deep, uncontrollable emotion. Following the loss of a Prufrockian “passion,” Gerontion quickly pivots into the disintegration of the senses: “I have lost my sight, smell, hearing, taste and touch: / How should I use them for your closer contact?” This is the first moment in which Gerontion directly addresses a hypothetical reader, yet any attempt to forge a connective network with the reader is immediately impeded. In the same manner that cultural symbols which have been vacated of meaning haunt the poem, Gerontion’s sensual faculties are still present on the body, but are no longer operative. Prufrock’s stiflement was in excess, but Gerontion has lost both his “passion” and his sense, and thereby all methods for perceiving and processing external stimuli. Unmoored from history and connectivity, he and all other “tenants of the house” are merely “whirled [...] fractured atoms” - aimless, isolated units. Though there is a certain despair at the end of “Prufrock” when Prufrock “grow[s] old” and claims he does “not think [the mermaids] will sing to [him],” the despair of “Gerontion” is much deeper. Rather than the affliction being involved in a cycle of “illimitable desire,” Gerontion has resigned to a state of utter hopelessness.

Juxtaposed against the profusion of questions in “Prufrock,” Gerontion claims there is no “beauty in terror, terror in inquisition.” Unlike the aesthetic pleasure in the subdued horrors of Prufrock’s bourgeois drawing rooms scenes, the driving force of query has lost all substantial meaning in “Gerontion.” His language of “beauty” and “terror” is reminiscent of the grandeur in

the romantic sublime, but in contrast, the force behind grasping at “the burden of the mystery / [...] / Of all this unintelligible world,” (“Tintern Alley,” Wordsworth) is in itself an unintelligible pursuit for Gerontion. There is no purpose in the act of inquiry, no semblance of “beauty” or “horror,” and perhaps, in Wordsworth’s words, no necessary “burden of the mystery” at all. Perhaps “Prufrock” more closely resembles the desire of Wordsworth, but rather than it being a source of great pleasure, it eventually becomes an abstract energy with objects that fail to satisfy it. Gerontion is a profoundly unromantic figure, burdened by his thoughts of resignation without the capacity for contemplative emotion or desire. While Prufrock struggles against his state of paralysis, Gerontion sinks into his role as an “old man in a draughty house.”

In his essay on “Baudelaire,” Eliot wrote that the underlying sadness in romantic poetry is “due to the exploitation of the fact that no human relations are adequate to human desires, but also to the disbelief in any further object for human desires than that which, being human, fails to satisfy them” (*Selected Prose*, 235). The “sadness” of romantic poetry is similar to the “despair” of illimitable desire: Both are contingent upon the continuous act of desire that, without a correlating object, is not able to be attained and “satisfied.” Eliot picks up on the romantic strain of sublimity in “Prufrock,” parodying it through the mass of obtuse questions that grasp at something larger, but in their objectlessness, are fleeting. Eliot disparages the romantic “disbelief in any further object for human desires,” suggesting that they fail to satisfy because they are not properly ordered and directed, but he is also suggesting that, without articulating what they are, there may be objects of longing beyond the immanent frame. The charge of desire is here thus not relegated to the project of re-association. Prufrock probes an external mystery, but his consciousness is foundationally rooted in desires relegated to “being human,” barring him from a fulfilling satiation and inducing a state of despair. Desire is something of a spiritual disease for

both “Prufrock” and “Gerontion,” yet in deeply different ways: Prufrock is debilitated, yet sustained by the failure of his desires, while Gerontion is sustained in his acquiescence to desire’s futility. His desires do not strain toward any object at all, whether human, existential, or spiritual, but they are simply muted and impeded by his despondence.

“Prufrock” and “Gerontion” occupy discrete “zone[s] of consciousness,” (Kenner) but the poems are not only conversant in a similar dialogue; they are self-reflexively conversant with each other. “Gerontion,” a poem written five years after “Prufrock,” recalls the same set of problems—the dissociated sensibility and the dissociated cultural landscape—but their perspectives embody different moments in the larger spectrum of Eliotic moods. Prufrock claims that there will be time “yet for a hundred indecisions, / And for a hundred revisions,” which is echoed by Gerontion’s statement that “a thousand small deliberations / Protract the profit of their chilled delirium, / Excite the membrane, when the sense has cooled.” These are tonally very different sentiments, yet the same language of indeterminate prevarications creates a distinct lineage between the two poems. The monorhyme in Prufrock’s “decisions” and “revisions” communicates a redundancy that is repeated again in the next stanza, yet it is stated with playful irony. Unlike “Prufrock,” Gerontion’s “small deliberations” do not formally constitute the structure of the poem itself. Prufrock is too embroiled in his “indecisions” and “revisions” to himself perform the role of the cultural diagnostician, but Eliot endows Gerontion with a self-awareness that allows him to recall and have “such knowledge” of the Prufrockian malaises. The “small deliberations” that Gerontion refers to is a nod to the Prufrockian sensibility, but, as he claims, it “protracts the chilled delirium.” Gerontion possesses the capacity to recognize Prufrock’s stasis, but rather than succumbing to the allure of entertaining “a thousand small deliberations,” he actively sinks himself into a delirium of despair. The neutral scientific

language of a “membrane” being “excite[d]” evacuates all sensuousness and emotion that could potentially be derived from the “small deliberations,” and feeling is denigrated to the language of scientific analysis since he has “lost [his] passion” and his “sight, smell, hearing, taste and touch.” The moods of “Prufrock” are thus dramatized in “Gerontion,” but pushed into the realm of a terminal despondency that is made manifest in the landscape, the body, and history itself.

Ultimately, the desire of “Prufrock” and “Gerontion” are drawn from the same Eliotic concerns established in the “dissociation of sensibility.” By casting the same perspectives he makes an effort against in his prose into poetic form, the voices are made studies in different cultural pathologies at different stages of the “dissociation”: “Prufrock” resembles the romantic inclination toward an excess in internality, while “Gerontion” resembles something far more ominous - a total detachment from any desire for re-association. The voices of “Prufrock” and “Gerontion” are not explicitly Eliot’s, but they are Eliotic. While these voices are symbolic distillations of particular cultural threads, Eliot is himself not excluded from the culture he makes his object of study. “Gerontion” is something of an expression of Eliot’s most nihilistic mood, but Prufrock’s relationship to desire is not terribly dissimilar from the way Eliot’s moral, cultural, and literary desires are articulated in the whole project of re-association.

The pursuit of re-association contains a multitude of objects and sub-desires. It concerns the composition of the internal life and the cultural landscape, and all of the sinews in between that have been broken by the moment of rupture - the dissociation. Prufrock is a figure representative of the problem of the “objective correlative,” burdened by an excess of emotions and desires that do not necessarily correlate to a decipherable object or action in the world. This problem, however, is perhaps the same methodological problem with the pursuit of re-association. Eliot is certainly not a representative of the “objective correlative,” but in the same

way Prufrock does not find any correlating objects to his vertigo of desires, perhaps Eliot does not either. He establishes what the objects of desire are, but they are only partially resolved in “the painful task of unifying (to a greater or less extent) jarring and incompatible ones, and passing, when possible, from two or more discordant viewpoints to a higher which shall somehow include and transmute them” (KE). What, however, occurs if there are too many objects for “the painful task of unifying” to process? Considering the immensity of demands for re-association, perhaps Eliot is, like Prufrock, burdened by an excess of his own desires.

Beyond the host of these desires being too vast, they are also limited. The secular desire Goodheart illustrates is “illimitable” because the objects of desire it orients itself towards are limited to the material world. Perhaps the amount of desires Eliot projects onto the cultural landscape is too vast, too expansive to ever be made complete. Harkening back to Eugene Goodheart’s distinction between desire within the religious imagination and desire within the secular imagination, Eliot’s earliest articulations of desire were restricted to the this-worldly objects. Without one ultimate object to identify with, Eliot’s desire for unification proliferates. Eliot critiqued “psychologism” for relegating desire to the internal sphere, but his early relationship to desire was also relegated to a particular scope. The aperture was certainly more extensive than a mere focus on the internal life, but compared to Eliot’s later ascetic professions of the role of desire, the possibility for it under the terms of “dissociation” is meager. Though Kermode’s analogy of the “dissociation” as the Fall is suggestive of salvation, Eliot’s project of re-association does not exactly possess the promise of redemption. The closest semblance of salvation resides in Eliot’s desires for re-integration, but the project of re-association is insurmountable, and as I have established, these desires are “insatiable.”

Eliot's early criticism exists in a miserable paradox because, though it strives towards unification, the fulfillment of its own efforts is necessarily impossible. Eliot had not yet articulated his Christian sensibilities in "Tradition and the Individual Talent" and "The Metaphysical Poets," but his continual insistence on unification, though written under thoroughly secular terms, has resonances with the Christian promise of unification with God. The objects of desire in his critical prose are relegated to the material world and the cultural landscape, and thus are barred from any purpose beyond the physical world. The impossibility of their fulfillment begets an extended disappointment in the present, but in *The Waste Land*, Eliot begins to widen his temporal scope. Desire, rather than being localized in the material world, is allowed to take other forms. The longing for tangible objects, the massive re-association, causes a type of suffering, but even so, the suffering is not necessarily rendered meaningful as it is not being oriented towards a higher purpose. What would it look like for the suffering desire causes to be comprehended? Eliot embarked on an almost impossible project in the effort of re-association, but in *The Waste Land*, Eliot begins to work through a radical reorientation of desire beyond the immanent frame.

Chapter Two

Seeing Through a Glass, Darkly: The Reorientation of Desire in *The Waste Land*

In a letter written to Otto Heller in 1923, Eliot commented on the perceived difficulties of *The Waste Land*: “The poem is neither a success nor a failure—simply a struggle.” (*Letters*, 574). Perhaps all of Eliot’s thought up to this point can be understood in terms of a “struggle,” but what does it mean for the poem itself to be a struggle? As I argued in the last chapter, Eliot extends the internal “struggle toward unification” (*Selected Prose*, “MP” 65) onto the literary, the cultural, and the historical, but what is *The Waste Land* struggling towards, or alternatively, against? The critical constructs surrounding *The Waste Land* typically go as follows: It is a poem saturated by the dryness of disbelief in the post-World War I era, but the showers in “What the Thunder Said” wash away all previous despair with the final lines of the poem, “Shantih shantih shantih.” While this is an attractive interpretive lens, it does not necessarily lend itself to imagining the poem outside the realm of the material world. Further, it does not deal with the multiple iterations of desire in the first four sections and the possibility that they are grasping towards something beyond their own representation. One of the primary problems with Eliot’s project for re-association was that its temporal scope was too narrow for the mass of desires that were projected into it. *The Waste Land*, however, contends with the the problem of desire through attempting a massive reorientation of what its objects are. In this chapter I will argue that, though *The Waste Land* was written five years before Eliot’s conversion to Anglo-Catholicism in 1927, the “struggle” of the poem is not limited to this-worldly desires, but rather that it creates an opening for desire to become attached to objects that are not restricted to the

material world. Eliot's secular language of the desire for re-integration, not finding a proper object in the physical world, is thus extended and re-directed into a religious discourse in the poetics of *The Waste Land*.

The Waste Land is marked by its fragmentation and multi-vocalism. The emergence of disparate voices express disparate desires, and they are continually obstructed and re-ordered by the emergence of another voice. The poem's multi-vocality creates an overarching structure, informing the contours of language and form, while also giving voice to an array of diverse desires. In the second section, "A Game of Chess," a bourgeois woman struggles for communication with her partner, asking him "Are you alive, or not? Is there nothing in your head?" which is abruptly squandered with the emergence of another voice who urges a figure named Lil to sleep with her husband who "wants a good time" after he has been away at war and she has gotten a series of abortions. The poem's multi-vocality radically juxtaposes two very different forms of intimacy against each other, yet both are rendered hollow. The structure provides order to the disorder of desires, structuring the plethora of voices; but in doing so, the desires are continuously negated for another to emerge.

The poetic device of multi-vocality parallels Eliot's critical insistence on the "struggle toward unification," (*Selected Prose*, MP 65) but in the amalgamation of distant voices in *The Waste Land*, Eliot is doing something considerably different. The insistence on aggregating and then negating bears resemblance to apophatic theology, the practice of approaching the divine through that which cannot be stated. While Eliot discursively states his objects of desire in the project of "re-association," *The Waste Land* begins to approach a vision of desire that considers its object fundamentally impenetrable. Fleeting representations of desire prod at an ultimate object that holds them all in tandem, but there is a sense that the greater object itself is

unknowable. The very faculty of desire, thus, becomes an object of study, calling into question how we *do* or *do not* desire, as well as the veracity of what our objects of desire are at all.

Through its multi-vocalism, *The Waste Land* is working toward an ascetic disciplining of the faculty of desire; at moments apophatically offering visions of debased desires, while at other moments offering glimpses into what a redirection of these desires could look like. As I stated in the previous chapter, the proliferation of Prufrock's questions may appear apophatic, but the resemblance is made ridiculous in the absence of any decipherable object. *The Waste Land's* object of contemplation is not necessarily the cultural landscape or the organization of the internal life, but how to direct desire at all.

Eliot marks both his literary criticism and his poetics by the language of "struggle." What, then, are its continual efforts against and what are its constraints? While the struggle in his criticism and the struggle of *The Waste Land* are related, they are not exactly the same. The whole project of cultural re-association is limited to the cultural, but the claim of *The Waste Land's* "struggle" is multi-valenced, opening the possibility for the struggle in desire to be considered under terms that are not restricted to the tangible. *The Waste Land* was, however, written two decades prior and is an exploration of desire that is not materialist, but does not explicitly avow an organized religious thought, either. There is not exactly a clean distinction between Eliot's concerns with culture and his concerns with the spiritual state of man. Eliot was of course writing on the state of culture while he was writing *The Waste Land*—"The Metaphysical Poets" was published just a year before *The Waste Land*—but I would like to make the distinction between these two distinct, yet mutually informative, modes of thought, while primarily focusing on the spiritual implications. As poetry allows Eliot to make statements that are not explicitly entertained in his prose, the capaciousness of poetic language opens up a

clearing for what the desires are that fuel its “struggle.” The cultural concerns of Eliot’s early career become assimilated into a more comprehensive vision of desire with a wider temporal scope. While the cultural concerns Eliot expresses in his early work are maintained and expanded upon in *The Waste Land*, the “struggle” becomes imbued as spiritual, beyond the material world.

As Eliot grew to think of desire as a metaphysical inevitability, something that can be at once unbound and satiable in its distance, he made his own distinction between material desire and spiritual desire. Concerning what occurs after sexual longing has been made consummate, Eliot wrote that “The union in ecstasy is complete, is final; and two human beings, needing nothing beyond each other, rest on their emotions of enjoyment. But emotions cannot rest; desire must expand, or will shrink” (CL, 660). If the perimeters of desire are restricted to sexual satisfaction, desire has an attainable telos, and that once being attained, the whole of “desire,” in all its possibilities, contracts. The imperative for desire to “expand” is evocative of the unbound religious desire referenced in *Goodheart*, but without the explicit usage of religious terms.⁵ Eliot is suggesting that, rather than desire exist in a closed narrative of personal longing and fulfillment, it can be enlarged to something greater than the self. He is calling for a reckoning with desire that is both beyond materiality, beyond human relations, and beyond an orientation towards an attainable end.

In contrast with Eliot’s attempts to detach desire from its colloquial connotation with lust, Freud is the paradigmatic model of secular desire that Eliot is working against. Freud posits sexual energy as the driving force behind all actions and longing in *Civilization and Its Discontents*, suggesting that they are all, what he calls, “displacements” of libido:

⁵ When I use the language of “religious desire” in this chapter I am not explicitly referring to religion as an institutional system of worship, but as attempts toward a transcendent, spiritual domain.

In this, sublimation of the instincts lends its assistance. One gains the most if one can sufficiently heighten the yield of pleasure from the sources of physical and intellectual work. [...] A satisfaction of this kind, such as an artist's joy in creating, in giving his phantasies body, or a scientist's in solving problems or discovering truths, has a special quality which we shall certainly one day be able to characterize in metapsychological terms. At present we can only say figuratively that such satisfactions seem 'finer and higher'. But their intensity is mild as compared with that derived from the sating of crude and primary instinctual impulses; it does not convulse our being. (26-27)

Freud's reductionist understanding of desire suggests that all loves—love for a friend, for an activity, for a partner—are mere modulations of basic sexual energy. The libido is sublimated into other, more socially acceptable outlets; but for Freud, sublimated objects are substitutional. They do not, like the “primary instinctual impulses” of the libido, “convulse our being.” His claims that all sublimated desires, the “artist's joy in creating” and the scientist's joy “in discovering truths,” are outgrowths of a more fundamental, primitive sexual energy. Freud's theory is near opposite to Eliot's: For Eliot, the “shrinking” of desire, the satisfaction of carnal love, is a manifestation of misdirected desires. Rather than imagining human activity as a misdirection of the libido, Eliot imagines the libido as a misdirection of a higher form of desire, something that, in his words, must “expand.”

The multi-vocality of *The Waste Land* is the primary poetic method that allows for the expansion of desire. The first manuscript of *The Waste Land*, before Ezra Pound severely edited it, was entitled “He Do the Police in Different Voices,” and in some respects, this may have been a more fitting title. The many voices of the poem, spanning massive amounts of time and space, find comfort in numbers, mutually obstructing and modifying each other in a continual process

of momentary edification that is quickly obstructed. Symbols and allusions resurface throughout, creating multiple layers of desire that interact through mutual interpretations and re-interpretations in the formation of an apophatic discourse. The etymology of “apophasis” means to speak “*away from*.” By speaking “away from” the ultimate object of desire that the poem is circumventing, *The Waste Land* gives voice to a multitude of desires that, through the negative, illuminate what is unable to be spoken of positively. There is a resonance between what Eliot is doing in *The Waste Land* and the negative theologies of the early church fathers. Cyril of Jerusalem, a theologian of the early church, wrote in his *Catechetical Homilies* that, “For we explain not what God is but candidly confess that we have not exact knowledge concerning Him. For in what concerns God to confess our ignorance is the best knowledge.” Eliot is doing something similar in *The Waste Land*: he does not “explain” what the object is that he is writing around, but in creating an inventory of what it is not, he comes closer to what it is. The onslaught of images of fertility, sexuality, and strained human relations, though they are debased, function as contemplative objects in a grander scheme.

Desires in *The Waste Land* are never explicitly named, and there is not one continuous recognizable desire in the poem’s set of symbolic associations, but the structure of the desires gesture toward their disciplining. Eliot creates an inventory of multiple forms of desire in order to purge them of their attachments. The objects of secular desire in *The Waste Land*, which I will analyze in the next section of this chapter, function as negations, reaching towards what is in, or beyond, *The Waste Land*.

The first stanza in “The Burial of the Dead” performs an abrupt shift in vocality, demonstrating the pace with which desires emerge and retreat. Eliot immediately introduces the metaphorically fraught terms of fecundity and dryness:

April is the cruelest month, breeding
 Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing
 Memory and desire, stirring
 Dull roots with spring rain.
 Winter kept us warm, covering
 Earth in forgetful snow, feeding
 A little life with dried tubers.
 Summer surprised us, coming over the Starnbergersee
 With a shower of rain; we stopped in the colonnade,
 And went on in sunlight, into the Hofgarten,
 And drank coffee, and talked for an hour
 Bin gar keine Russin, stamm' aus Litauen, echt deutsch.
 And when we were children, staying at the archduke's,
 My cousin's, he took me on a sled,
 And I was frightened. And down we went.
 In the mountains, there you feel free.
 I read, much of the night, and go south in the winter.

“Memory” is necessarily concerned with the past, while “desire,” if material, is necessarily concerned with the future. “Memory” is restricted to what is available by thought and documentation; it is a modulation of experience. But “desire,” depending upon its object, has an entirely separate set of rules. Desire can be either fixed on the temporal or utterly removed from it. To recall Goodheart’s dichotomy, desire within the religious imagination and desire within the secular imagination operate under entirely different terms, and are even almost separate faculties. Where, then, does this coalescence of memory and desire position the present? The past of “memory” and the future of temporal “desire” displace the present moment, creating a relationship to immediacy that is not necessarily concerned with the tangible. Eliot establishes the poem as being fundamentally concerned with the exchange between memory and desire, what occurs between them, and what their objects are. As established in the previous chapter, a

“mixing” of the historical sense and the desire for re-association is the force behind much of Eliot’s cultural criticism, but of course, “memory” and “desire” do not denote static referents, and the poetic method, while concerned with much of the same problems present in the criticism, allows for the capaciousness of language to expand. “Memory” and “desire” are then given the space to suggest a slew of different meanings and objects, and further, be attached to a slew of different voices. The exchange between historical memory and the desire for “association” and re-integration are given the space to signify other memories, other desires, and the temporal chasm between the two.

“Memory” and “desire” are, however, spurred by the latent symbolism in the coming of spring. April, being the “cruellest month,” directly addresses time’s annual inevitability, while also making reference to Easter’s place in the liturgical calendar. The festival celebrating God’s redemptive acts and Christ’s resurrection inform April’s deep-seated symbolic relationship with the sacrality of spring and the renewal of life. The etymological roots of “April” are uncertain, but some theories posit it to be derived from the Latin “Aphrilis,” which translated means “to open,” evoking the bloom of spring. The language of the rain and the land “breeding,” however, imbues fertility with a sense of grotesque proliferation. Others have theories that since “Aphrilis” is derived from the Greek “Aphrodite,” the goddess of love, pleasure, passion, and procreation, more explicit references to human sexuality and rebirth are veiled in the very linguistic structure of “April.” The symbolism of renewal in the Christian and the pagan is blended, establishing a framework for the poem’s symbolic perimeters. The vastness of what “memory” and “desire” can connote is relegated to the symbolic paradigm of “April,” but in the act of establishing its myriad of associations, Eliot simultaneously violates the rules of their symbolic order: April is “cruel.”

The multi-vocalism of *The Waste Land* enacts Eliot's theory of "tradition" as a method for animating the past's memory to the utmost extreme, placing voices of the past in direct proximity with the present. The first voice of the first stanza in "Burial of the Dead," performs a strange ventriloquism with the opening lines of "The General Prologue" in *The Canterbury Tales*, which reads:

When that April with his showers soote
 The drought of March hath piercéd to the roote
 And bathéd every vein in such liquor.
 [...]
 (So pricketh them Nature in their courages),
 Then longen folk to on go pilgrimages.

The eroticism in the imagery of "showers" "pierc[ing] to the root" begets a renewal of life in the general landscape, which then inspires "longen folk to go on pilgrimages." The action of "piérced" prefaces "pricketh," which is a word that, over the course of the entirety of *The Tales*, is attached to situations of conquest, affection, and sexual intimacy. The landscape's fecundity is translated into the disposition and behavior of its inhabitants: "So pricketh them Nature in their courages." Unlike the speaker in the first part of the stanza in "Burial of the Dead," there is no discontinuity between the mood of April and the "longen folk." Eliot forges a direct identification between the opening of *The Canterbury Tales* and *The Waste Land*, but the voice in "Burial of the Dead" decidedly distances them. He revises the first few lines of the "General Prologue" in order to demonstrate the speaker's isolation from the natural world's usual symbolism, establishing the fraught baggage of April while lamenting the coming of spring. The voice of the first stanza is not necessarily isolated from the seasonal cycle—he is in fact deeply affected by it—but he re-orders the import of its symbols. As "memory" and "desire" were concealed by "forgetful snow," they were present, but just buried. In establishing *The Waste*

Land as a poem concerned with “memory” and “desire,” Eliot simultaneously establishes their burden.

While the first voice of the stanza establishes the suffering in the awakening of “memory” and “desire,” a second voice, without any formal signification, is starkly juxtaposed against the prior. The voice who tells us “In the mountains, there you feel free” is certainly not the same that claims “April is the cruelest month.” Marie, a sentimental figure of royalty reflects on her idyllic childhood and adulthood that is, unlike the first voice, dictated by popular symbolic paradigms of the seasons. For Marie, there is little value placed on the seasons; she just “goes south in the winter” to presumably escape the cold weather, and what the first voice positively values as the “dead land.” The many voices of *The Waste Land* take on meaning in their relationality. Marie modifies the previous statement, functioning as a counter to the suffering in the awakening of “memory” and “desire.” In contrast, for Marie, the coming of spring elicits the very pleasure that the first voice dreads. The pairing of the Eliotic and the voice of Marie is a distilled account of the poem’s wider discourse, maximizing over-consciousness in order to stage disparate perspectives. The interaction between these two voices, and this holds true for the rest of the poem, is an act of placing “jarring” and “incompatible” perspectives in direct conversation in the act of their transmutation (KE). Eliot stakes a claim on the encumberment of spring as a bulwark against the re-imagining of desire, positing the possibility for the dryness of the “dead land” to, unlike the world of “Gerontion,” take on a positive meaning. The strangeness of the Eliotic claim that “April is the cruelest month” resounds throughout the rest of the poem. At once drowned out and amplified by their juxtaposition, the cruelty of fertility is exacerbated by the carelessness of Marie’s voice.

As Eliot opens up the possibility for fecundity to be “cruel,” there are little to no visions of a positive representation of sexual desire within the space of the poem. A painting of the rape of Philomela by the “barbarous king” Tereus hangs on a mantelpiece in a sterile drawing room and, despite the myth’s violence, it is described as yet another “withered stump of time.” The temporal distance between “memory” and “desire” is conjured in by the presence of Philomela. The myth itself is recounted as a memory, or a “stump of time” by virtue of its surroundings and form, yet the story is a composite of violent, thrashing desires; those of lust, revenge, and impaired communication:

Above the antique mantel was displayed
 As though a window gave upon the sylvan scene
 The change of Philomel, by the barbarous king
 So rudely forced; yet there the nightingale
 Filled all the desert with inviolable voice
 And still she cried, and still the world pursues,
 ‘Jug jug’ to dirty ears.

The temporal distance between the past-tense of “cried” and the present tense of “pursues” is indicative of a struggle: “the world” has attempted to comprehend what Philomela tries to communicate, but the world is still in continuous pursuit. The object that “the world pursues,” or what her “inviolable voice” struggles to communicate becomes incoherent when it falls upon humanity’s “dirty ears.” The scene is placed in a space of over-sensuality: “Unstoppered, lurked her strange synthetic perfumes, / Unguent, powdered, or liquid — troubled, confused / And drowned the sense in odours; stirring by the air.” Both the myth of Philomela and the environment it is placed in provide a glimpse into two exemplaries of desire that mutually inform each other, but through the structure of the poem, are rejected. The aimless and “confused” over-sensuality that “drowns” the senses is a materialization of the “excess” in emotion of romantic

poetry that elicits a sense of despair in not having an object to attach itself to, leading to a stunting of the senses.

The excess of the sensuousness in environment and the excess of violence in the myth both lead to a state of speechlessness that is radically distinct from the moment with the hyacinth girl in “Burial of the Dead” in which a voice recounts: “I could not / Speak, and my eyes failed, I was neither / Living nor dead, and I knew nothing.” The speaker, recalling memories of the “hyacinth girl” is subject to total perceptual collapse. Wading in what he calls “the heart of light, the silence,” the voice becomes utterly suspended from both life and death, and all previous thoughts are done away with: “I knew nothing.” The sensual and linguistic apparatuses disintegrate when confronted by what is beyond the phenomenal, but Philomela is deprived of language because of the despotic desires and violence acted upon her. Rather than peering “into the heart of light, the silence,” or being inundated into sensual collapse by the presence of something greater, she is unwillfully stripped of her humanity.

Despite this, she still “filled all the desert with inviolable voice.” The arid open vistas of the desert are unable to host and sustain life, but the location amasses associative meaning throughout Eliot’s own work and the whole of the devotional tradition he inserts himself into. The barrenness of the “cactus land” in *Hollow Men* is representative of the modern’s incapacity for belief, but the desert is here doing something entirely different. The imagery of Philomela’s desert is reminiscent of the biblical association with ascetic struggle. The desert is the site of Christian purification and surrender. Its inhospitality strips life of all pleasure and excess. Philomela’s song that falls upon “dirty ears” fills the desert, the localized center for ascetic tradition, but the question of whether or not she is heard reverberates throughout the poem.

In the following section of the poem entitled “The Fire Sermon” her cries preface a sexual encounter between a young woman “typist” and a “young man carbuncular”: “Jug jug jug jug jug / So rudely forc’d / Tereu.” Her voice “filled all the desert,” but her calls are ultimately rendered indecipherable. The “memory” of myth bears a tangible relation to the preset and functions as an omen to the ensuing event. As Philomela remains in the form of a nightingale, her medium of communication requires Tiresias’s augury; however, if her song is an auspice, it falls upon “dirty ears.” This scene of modern erotic desire is recounted:

The time is now propitious, as he guesses,
 The meal is ended, she is bored and tired,
 Endeavors to engage her in caresses
 Which still unreproved, if undesired.
 Flushed and decided, he assaults at once;
 Exploring hands encounter no defence;
 His vanity requires no response,
 And makes a welcome of indifference.

By transposing the tragedy of Philomela onto a somewhat disturbing scene of modern sexuality, Eliot draws a direct lineage between the two narratives, but the conditions of their worlds alter the emotional and moral stakes implicit in the stories. While the myth of Philomela belongs to the enchanted order, the story of the young man carbuncular and the typist belongs to the disenchanted order; or in other words, the causal relationships in the latter are not charged with a cosmology.⁶ As opposed to the myth, the exchange between the young man carbuncular and the typist is devoid of the supernatural, but further devoid of any substantial meaning or moral framework. It is described in terms of militaristic language: he “assaults” and she puts up no “defence.” Though the scene provokes the boundaries of consensuality, its tone is mute; Tiresias

⁶ Charles Taylor defines the difference between the “enchanted order” and the “disenchanted order”: “I am invoking here [enchantment’s] negation, Weber’s expression “disenchantment” as a description of our modern civilization... I’m going to use its antonym to describe a crucial feature of the pre-modern condition. The enchanted world in this sense is the world of spirits, demons, and moral forces which our ancestors lived in.” (*A Secular Age*, 26)

sequentially recounts actions in a matter-of-fact voice. The woman is made utterly passive to the man's advances, and though they are "undesired," his "endeavors to engage her in caresses" are "unreproved." Though the young man was "flushed" and solitarily "decided" to "assault at once," not dissimilar from how Tereus "so rudely forc'd, there is no need for the carbuncular to use force because he "makes welcome of [her] indifference." There is a sense in which the sexual act is utterly neutralized in this scene and made inconsequential to the point in which it resembles rape, but is unable to access a moral framework that would recognize it as such.

After the man leaves, Tiresias says she "paces about her room again, alone / She smooths her hair with automatic hand, / And puts on the gramophone." The overpowering forces of desire that occur in the myth of Philomela are muted, sublimated into a neutral form of sexuality that is not subject to an overarching moral code. Eliot wrote in his essay on "Baudelaire" that "the sexual act as evil is more dignified, less boring, than the natural, "life-giving," cheery automatism of the modern world" (*Selected Prose*, 236). The "automatism of the modern world" is magnified in the woman's body, describing her "automatic hand" in terms of machine. The man and woman are further alienated from the sexual act through being identified by their occupation; their identities are contingent upon their labor. While Eliot writes that "damnation is an immediate source of salvation - salvation from the ennui of modern life, because it at last gives some significance to living" (236), the young man carbuncular and the typist represent an exchange in which carnality is entirely buffered from any robust moral framework, and is not terribly different from what, in Eliot's words in "Second Thoughts about Humanism," the "extremely clever, adaptable, and mischievous little animal does."⁷ This mode of sexual conduct

⁷ Eliot is here critiquing the humanist for borrowing certain aspects of religious morality without recognizing the importance of a robust moral foundation: "I cannot understand a system of morals which seems to be founded on nothing but itself—which exists, I suspect, only by illicit relations with either psychology or religion or both,

is simultaneously rendered mechanized and animalistic, utterly deracinated from a coherent value system. The sexual act is not able to be considered in terms of a “salvation” from the monotonousness of the modern because the act itself has been utterly demoralized; it is implicated in the very fabric of the “ennui of modern life.”

The exchange between the “young man carbuncular” and the “typist,” however, while it seems to be utterly amoral, is functioning under moral pretenses. This scene, dictated by Tiresias, is deployed as a voice within the apophatic discourse: It is established, but negated and enveloped into the wider structure of negation. Harkening back to Eliot’s claim in his *Clark Lectures* that “desire must expand, or will shrink,” the exchange between the young man carbuncular and the typist is representative of desire’s contraction. In Eliot’s “Second Thoughts on Humanism,” which I briefly quoted above, he wrote:

Man is man because he can recognize supernatural realities, not because he can invent them. Either everything in man can be traced as a development from below, or something must come from above. There is no avoiding that dilemma: you must either be a materialist or a supernaturalist. If you remove from the word ‘human’ all that the belief in the supernatural has given to man, you can view him finally as no more than an extremely clever, adaptable, and mischievous little animal. (*Selected Essays*, 433)

The “materialist” point of view and the “supernaturalist” point of view contribute to the interpretive lens through which the individual understands his humanity, but their differences are insurmountable, and thereby fundamentally incompatible. Eliot states that if the human is, however, deprived of a supernatural framework, he becomes reduced to the behavior of the “little

according to the bias of mind of the individual humanist.” Eliot’s meaning is here slightly different from my own, but the importance of a comprehensive moral system is deeply informative to his thought across the board.

animal.” Eliot’s retort that the foundation of what constitutes the human is his ability to “recognize supernatural realities, not [...] invent them” is demonstrative of his later approach to the “supernatural” as a metaphysical inevitability: it exists external to the ongoings of man. The most important substance of the “human” is, then, contingent upon belief in the “supernatural”; if “all that the belief in the supernatural has given to man” is eliminated, man is reduced to a brutally physical, materialist reality deflated of meaning. The young man carbuncular and the typist do not recognize “supernatural realities,” nor do they attempt to “invent them,” but the desire present in their exchange is representative of brute materialism and demoralization.

Following the materially driven desires of the young man carbuncular and the typist, Tiresias’s voice begins to vacillate between Augustine and the Buddha. The Augustinian allusion is drawn from a moment in *Confessions* in which he confesses his “unholy loves” in order to describe the process of the “ascent,” or the redirection of desire. In juxtaposition, the allusion to the Pali “Fire Sermon” is drawn from a sermon in which the Buddha preaches on the liberation of the senses through the cleansing force of fire. The collocation of these allusions provides a cross-cultural example of what desire can look like under the terms of a “supernatural reality.” The two texts are emblems of disciplined desire. The program of detachment in Buddhism involves an extinguishing of desire, while Christian desire, as demonstrated in Eliot’s *Clark Lectures*, necessarily involves an expansion. A monostich reading “To Carthage then I came” is situated on its own line near the end of “The Fire Sermon.” This moment is drawn from the beginning of “Book III,” a section in which Augustine is recounting his past sexual desires:

I went to Carthage, where I found myself in the midst of a hissing cauldron of lust. I had not yet fallen in love, but I was in love with the idea of it, and this feeling that something was missing made me despise myself for not being more anxious to satisfy the need. I

began to look around for some objects for my love, since I wanted to love something. I had no liking for the safe path without pitfalls, for although my real need was for you, my God, who are the food of the soul, I was not aware of this hunger. (55)

Augustine claims he was not “in love,” but was “in love with the idea of” love, identifying the object of desire to be desire itself. Augustine recounts going to Carthage from the retrospective place of recognizing his “real need” for God, spurring the question of what the monostich, “To Carthage then I came,” is doing at the end of the section. The syntax of “To Carthage then I came” creates a sense of temporal disorientation: Is the weight of “going to Carthage” currently occurring, or is it retrospectively recounted? The temporality of the statement alters whether or not the poem is in the throes of the “hissing cauldron of lust,” or if “Carthage” is invoked as a symbol of self-conscious reckoning with the hollowness of carnality as a “shrinking of desire.” Augustine’s statement at the beginning of “Book III” identifies, however, the “real need” for God. An inversion of Freud’s theory of the sublimation of the libido, Augustine identifies his sense that “something was missing” because his “hunger” and “real need” for God was clouded by fleeting, material desires.

The Buddha’s voice is interspersed with Augustine’s with lines like “burning burning burning.” As the section of the poem is named after the Buddha’s “Fire Sermon,” the cleansing of distracting sensual desire looms over the whole exchange between the young man carbuncular and the typist. Their actions, despite appearing morally vacuous, are moralized by their proximity to sacred, ascetic texts. A section of the actual sermon that Eliot is drawing on reads, “All things, O priests, are on fire [...] The eye, O priests, is on fire; forms are on fire: eye-consciousness is on fire; impressions received by the eye are on fire; and whatever sensations,

pleasant, unpleasant, or indifferent [...] that also is on fire.”⁸ The Buddha is here preaching about extinguishing all sensual desires in order to liberate oneself from suffering, yet if the young man carbuncular and the typist are emblems of what is attempting to be cleansed, they are nonetheless, present. The tension between the the young man carbuncular’s desire and the Buddha’s call for an extinguishment of desire dramatizes the struggle of *The Waste Land*, but their juxtaposition begets a new whole. The tension is an act of passing through “two or more discordant viewpoints to a higher which shall somehow include and transmute them” (KE, 362). Neither viewpoints are entirely shed in their interaction, but through negation, they gesture towards something other.

In his “Notes to the Waste Land,” Eliot claims that he chose to put *Confessions* and “The Fire Sermon” in dialogue with each other because they are “representatives of eastern and western asceticism.” Both texts are marked by a sufferance in the pursuit of re-ordering desires towards proper ends, despite the ends being drastically different. Augustine’s voice and the Buddha’s voice function as beacons amidst the moral disarray of the poem’s other voices; but they are also emblems of the entire project of *The Waste Land* itself. The ascetic practice must necessarily remain a “struggle” in order for it to be ascetic. Between the emergence of Augustine and the emergence of the Buddha amidst the disparate voices deprived of a moral framework, the apophysis of the poem is both striving towards something that is not able to be articulated within the poem’s own limits, while also being involved in the continual act of renunciation. Its renunciations, however, are not yet resolved and it is thereby, in Eliot’s own words, a “struggle.” There is the sense that, though not positively stated, an expansive desire lurks beneath the poem’s surface, beneath the fragmented allusions, and the multiple voices; a desire for a form of

⁸ Eliot cited Henry Clark Warren’s *Buddhism in Translation* in his “Notes to the Waste Land.”

“unification” that is not communicated in Eliot’s early criticism. Augustine’s claim to “descend, that ye may ascend” and the Buddha’s urge to eliminate desires are both at work in the whole structural pursuit of *The Waste Land*. Martha Nussbaum writes on the Platonic Christian tradition of “ascension” as the “consequence of this perceived tension between love’s energy for good and its subversive power” in order to “reform or educate erotic love” (469). The ascension hinges on the recognition of a capriciousness in “love” and desire; their potential for good is conditional to the object it is attached to. She continues: “The aspiring lover climbs a ladder from the quotidian love from which she began, with all its difficulties, to an allegedly higher and more truly fulfilling love.” *The Waste Land* is, in many ways, a step on such a ladder towards a “higher and more truly fulfilling love.”

The apophatic discourse of *The Waste Land* is a poetic meditation on the metaphysics of desire. A type of ascent, the constellation of voices I traced in the previous section provide some sense of order to desire through cataloguing material desire’s disorder. The poem’s multivocality is an investigation in how to orient desire to an object that is satiable in its insatiability, but further, how to orient desire toward an object that is fundamentally unknowable. The asceticism of *The Waste Land* is thus an exercise in humility. It is in this context that Eliot wrote on *The Waste Land*: “Only those who talk of discipline may have looked into the Abyss” (Kearns, 196). The apophatic discourse of the poem is an effort towards disciplining desire, and it is thereby a method of approaching the “Abyss.” It does not purport to *know*, but the method of apophasis probes it. The Apostle Paul said: “For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known” (Corinth.

13:12). *The Waste Land* is an effort in looking into the “Abyss” under the preconditions that all glimpses of it are seen “through a glass darkly.”

One form of contending with the “Abyss” is the recurring usage of *memento moris*, giving voice to the mystery of what occurs to desire post-mortem. If we are to understand death as the eclipse of secular desire in the absence of an eschatological union with the eternal, the *memento moris* in *The Waste Land* are brute materiality. However, if we are to consider religious desire, the promise of some half-seen satiation in death, the *memento moris* can connote more than just the end of life. Positioned at the threshold of the temporal and the eternal, the *memento moris* are a material semblance of what desire, religious or secular, can beget. A frantic voice in “Burial of the Dead” asks someone if “That corpse you planted last year in your garden, ‘Has it begun to sprout? Will it bloom this year?’” The image of the corpse as fertilizer parodies Whitman’s “Song of Myself” in which the “Leaves of Grass” are recognized as “the beautiful uncut hair of graves” (193). In contrast to Whitman’s loaded metaphor of grass as both the “handkerchief of God” and the “flag of his disposition,” the deployment of the inquiring voice darkly satirizes the Whitmanian image in the speaker’s exclamation of “O keep the Dog far hence, that’s friend to men, / Or with his nails he’ll dig it up again!” Eliot is here mocking Whitman’s pantheistic concept of God as an immanent; apart of all of the material world and the self. In contrast to grass as the “hair of graves,” the grave is here not even able to “sprout.” There is a sense in which this voice desperately attempts to take on the Whitmanian disposition, but comically is unable to because a dog will “dig [the corpse] up again” and squander any possibility for the remains of death to engender life.

In a different voice and a different mood, the Phoenician sailor’s bones in “Fear Death by Water” provide another form of the *memento mori*. “A current under the sea / Picked up his

bones in whispers. As he rose and fell / He passed the stages of his age and youth.” The voice points out that in death, the sailor has forgotten “the cry of the gulls, and the deep sea swell / And the profit and the loss.” As sensory memories of the sea dissipate in death, so does all “profit and loss”; the facts, experiences, and emotions of life are thus reduced to a pile of bones. The total of one’s “age and youth” are at once lost and fully comprehended in the, what Eliot earlier called, “Abyss” that is death. All movements forwards and backwards, all engagements in “memory” and “desire” are ultimately subject to perish. Rather than being inert and dug up by a dog, Plebas’s bones “rose and fell” with the drift of the sea. Eliot is drawing on deep-seated literary associations of the sea with faith: Matthew Arnold’s “Dover Beach” represents the receding tides as the fading “Sea of Faith.” The immensity of the ocean as Phlebas’ burial ground is far more contemplative and far more life-giving, even in the imperative to “Fear Death by Water,” than the comic inability to use a corpse as fertilizer.

Phlebas’s *memento mori* functions very literally under its etymological pretenses to “remember death”: “Consider Phlebas, who was once handsome and tall as you.” In the voice’s plea for consideration comes a quietness, something starkly different from the mania of the previously mentioned scene. The voice does not ask the reader to *know*, but merely to “consider.” The human is not here seen as attempting to instigate the cycle of life, or even assert any kind of dominion over death, but Phlebas is merely subject to “death” and “fear.” The usage of the *memento mori* is one such example in which the voices make a clearing for the potential of other-worldliness, but the images associated with the recurring language of “fear” provides another glimpse into the “Abyss.”

The Waste Land is, on the whole, unable to state its objects of desire - not because they are necessarily unknown, but because it is aware that the objects themselves may be

fundamentally unknowable in this life. There are, however, moments in which a voice of the apophatic discourse will, in its self-assured resemblance to religious language and paradigms, be suggestive of a more foundational, dominant thread of thought coursing through the poem, underlying all the images of debased desires. The memento moris provide oblique glimpses beyond the images of this-worldly desire, but they are nonetheless formulated in materialistic terms. This is, after all, the linguistic and moral paradigm that the poem has access to while striving after another. Another voice, however, following that of Marie in “The Burial of the Dead” marks a distinct tonal shift from any of the other voices in the poem. He claims that he will “show you something different,” suggesting that there is something lurking beyond the poem’s dermal layers of secular desire:

What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow
 Out of this stony rubbish? Son of man,
 You cannot say, or guess, for you know only
 A heap of broken images, where the sun beats,
 And the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief,
 And the dry stone no sound of water. Only
 There is shadow under this red rock,
 (Come in under the shadow of this red rock),
 And I will show you something different from either
 Your shadow at morning striding behind you
 Or your shadow at evening rising to meet you:
 I will show you fear in a handful of dust.

The image of desert dryness recurs throughout Eliot’s literary career, working within his own self-referential idiomatic tradition. It recalls the overwhelming desiccation and incurable despondency in the world of “Gerontion,” as well as the pleasure in being parched in the first seven lines of the poem. Considering desert imagery was used to express the desolation of “Gerontion,” the landscape’s infertility in which no “branches grow / Out of this stony rubbish” may be read synonymously with a dehydrated moral, but despite using the same imagery, it is doing something radically different here.

As “Son of man” is an expression in the sayings of Christ, its deployment as apostrophe in this stanza accrues biblical meaning. The voice channels fraught associations of the desert as the primary site for spiritual “struggle.” After he was baptized by John the Baptist, “Then was Jesus led up of the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil” (Matthew, 4:1). The temptation of Christ in the wilderness epitomizes some of the very struggles occurring in *The Waste Land*: Christ is offered a variety of objects, but renounces their temptation and thereby renounces the worldly desires they represent. The wilderness, or the desert, is the setting of Christ’s temptation, and it is the setting for the apophasis of *The Waste Land*. The multi-vocal structure of the poem poses a variety of different temptations, offering glimpses into alternate desires, but none of them are indulged as absolute. In contrast with the dread of aridity in “Gerontion,” this moment in *The Waste Land* converts aridity into a positive vision; something that is contingent upon an ascetic orientation to the material world.

The semiotics of the desert landscape exaggerate the speaker’s claims, placing them into a wider devotional dialogue beyond the temporal perimeters of the poem. Directly addressing the reader as “Son of man,” the voice says, “You cannot say, or guess, for you know only / A heap of broken images.” The “heap of broken images” harkens back to a phraseology in “Gerontion,” in which Gerontion addresses the state of the self, history, and culture as whirled “fractured atoms.” They are present, but isolated and un-integrated. While Gerontion resigned to the sense the “chilled delirium” in his miserable problem of a perhaps unanswerable question, “After such knowledge, what forgiveness?”, the voice of this stanza possesses a vastly different sense of man’s accessibility to knowledge. For Gerontion, the object of his failing desires resides somewhere in the “cunning passages” of history, and the “fractured atoms” are an emblem of his broken surroundings. In contrast, however, the “heap of broken images” in *The Waste Land*

refers to the totality of all that man is unable to access - not merely the cultural. It is a radical acknowledgement of man's inability to find total coherence in the "broken images" of the physical world, and a looming sense that there is more beyond them - perhaps even a unification. There is little that man can "say" or "guess" because his knowledge is limited to the chaos and disorder of the material world.

The whole structure of the poem is arguably a "heap of broken images," but behind the brokenness is a semblance of unification. Gavin Flood wrote: "The ultimate goal of Christian asceticism has been the reconstitution of the pre-fall state through withdrawal and self-mastery" (145). As man's knowledge is limited to these "broken images," what is it exactly that he "cannot say, or guess"? The whole goal of the Christian ascetic is to induce a return to the prelapsarian through the discipline of "withdrawal and self-mastery," which in a sense, is exactly what the reader of *The Waste Land* is inundated into through its apophatic structure. Eliot's own "struggle toward unification" in "The Metaphysical Poets" places desire in the temporal world; however, the form of "unification" that is attempted in *The Waste Land* approaches transcendent unification; that of, in Flood's words, the "pre-Fall." The poem is fundamentally sustained by its own ascetic impulses, its humility to not assert knowledge over its objects, and its acknowledgement that it fundamentally cannot state a single, comprehensively true point of view.

The voice of the stanza claims: "I will show you something different from either / Your shadow at morning striding behind you / Or your shadow at evening rising to meet you." The temporal thrust of secular "memory" and "desire" invoked in the first stanza is here mirrored and spatialized by the "shadow at morning striding behind you" and the "shadow at evening rising to meet you." Memory projects the consciousness backwards in time, while desire projects

consciousness forward into the future. Dictated by the diurnal cycle, “memory” and “desire” appear and disappear like clock-work in the morning and evening. The temporal thrust of these shadows addresses the liminality of temporal life. The shadows spatialize “memory” and “desire,” giving them a material timeline, but the individual is constantly wading in their shadows. Considering Goodheart’s concept of “illimitable desire” and Durkheim’s concepts of anomie and anomie as “constantly renewed torture,” the continual emergence of the shadows is similar to how secular desire behaves. The secular form of desire represented in the shadow metaphor does not have an ultimate object; it is fractured and transitory, attaching itself to disparate desires and memories that continuously recur with the rising and setting sun. It is constantly involved in a cycle of emergence and retreat. In these constant extensions of “memory” and “desire,” the shadows envelop the individual. To drown in the shadows of temporalized “memory” and “desire” is to become subject to their potential for tyranny. The problem is, however, that the bridge between the shadows and the “you” is never sufficiently put into union: they are always either “striding” or “rising.” This is not terribly disparate from the argument I make in my first chapter on why Eliot’s whole project of re-association does not have a correlating object. In the absence of a single, meaningful object of desire, the project for re-association is simply too vast, too expansive for the integrative impulse to make any form of satiation intelligible.

This voice of prophecy, however, claims he will show us “something different.” Following the voices’ statements on what he will *not* show us, he positively claims, “I will show you fear in a handful of dust.” The texture in a “handful of dust” parallels the “heap of broken images” stated a few lines earlier. The “dust,” however, is imbued with religious meaning that is absent in the deeply materialistic “broken images.” Considering the entire structure of *The Waste Land* is an apophatic discourse, an exercise in the disciplining of desire, the closest symbolic

glimpse into the unknowable “Abyss” is “fear in a handful of dust.” In the book of Genesis, God punished mankind with mortality after they ate from the tree: “In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken: for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return” (Gen. 3:19). As Adam and Eve’s progenitors, Eliot invokes the lineage of mankind’s sin, as well as his finitude. The whole of human life, all birth and death, are comprehended in the image of “dust”: “for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return.” The corpse as fertilizer near the end of the “Burial of the Dead” was an act attempting to emulate the cyclicity of dust in Genesis, but, like the other apophatic voices demonstrating debased desires, it was ultimately thwarted.

The “fear in a handful of dust,” however, gives the “Abyss” that Eliot identifies as *The Waste Land* its fullest symbolic expression. It is, in many ways, the consummate image of the poem: it is what is purported to be “shown” to us, not *told*. The “fear in a handful of dust,” as opposed to the other memento moris throughout the poem, is sacramental. It is a visible symbol of the spiritual realities that are reckoned with throughout the space of the poem, as well as an admittance of man’s ability to know precisely what occurs after and before the “dust.” It is evocative of time on earth, while gesturing towards what occurs after: “*Oh how great is thy goodness, which thou hast laid up for them that fear thee; which thou hast wrought for them that trust in thee before the sons of men!*” (Psalm 31:19). Fear may be interpreted as simply fear of nothingness, but nothingness is not synonymous with the “Abyss.” Fear is a devotional emotion; deeply entwined with what God “hast wrought for” humanity after death. This moment suggests that desire post-mortem does not eclipse, but, in Eliot’s words, “expands” (CL, 660).

The Waste Land was written before Eliot’s conversion to Anglo-Catholicism, but it is “struggle” and a step towards the formation of Eliot’s religious sensibility. The ascetic discipline

of the poem is ultimately in the throes of its own struggles toward giving discipline to desire. The “unification of sensibility” (MP) that he established in his early critical prose takes on an explicitly spiritual valence in *The Waste Land*, attempting to approach a “unification” with that which is beyond the tangible, the knowable, and the human. In its transition to the religious imaginary, Eliot’s desire is not merely to see “through the glass,” but it is aware of its own limits; aware that all attempts are seen “darkly.”

Conclusion

Towards an Interpretation of *Ash Wednesday* and *Four Quartets*

Terminate torment
Of love unsatisfied
The greater torment
Of love satisfied
 Ash-Wednesday

By the time Eliot converted to Anglo-Catholicism, or by the time he had latched onto a cohesive metaphysics of desire, he found “love satisfied” to be “the greater torment.” Only desires of the secular imagination can be “satisfied.” They are, however, fundamentally unfulfilling and thus, as Durkheim stated, “constantly renewed torture.” Love, regardless of its satisfaction, is characterized by torment for Eliot. The “greater torment” attached to the love “satisfied,” however, lacks a comprehensive cosmology and a robust moral framework. Its “greater torment” is deprived of a grander meaning.

To recall Eliot’s letter to Paul Elmore More: He claimed religion brought him “something above morals, and therefore extremely terrifying; it has brought me not happiness but a sense of something above happiness and therefore more terrifying than ordinary pain and misery; the very dark night and the desert.” The “torment” Eliot is here entertaining is beyond secular categories of emotion; Eliot lodges himself within a larger tradition of Christian suffering and ascetic practice, thereby placing himself in closer proximity to thinkers like Augustine and St. John of the Cross than that of his contemporaries, like William Carlos Williams and Ford Madox Ford. By the time Eliot was writing *Ash Wednesday* and the *Four Quartets*, he was writing in kairotic time rather than chronological time. Charles Taylor defined the kairotic: “the time line encounters kairotic knots, moments whose nature and placing calls for reversals” (54). Eliot’s

relationship to “torment” transcends the bounds of linearity, allowing him to be in direct conversation with both a wider ascetic tradition and the transcendent.

In some respects, Eliot’s religious instinct allowed him to perform what other modernists were attempting with temporality. He was able to do access kairotic time, the emotional intensity that gives way to momentary collapses of linearity. He did this, however, not just through his poetics, but through his entire metaphysical system of desire and his religious cosmology. The French philosopher Henri Bergson wrote extensively on the modern experience of temporality. He was primarily concerned with the capacity for standardized hours, similar to Benjamin’s concept of homogenized time, to dissect experience into mere segments. By establishing “true duration” in diametric opposition with the duration that time-keeping mechanisms enact, he imagined time to be based in the intensity of experience and memory. Bergson’s polemic against empty time is in part a reification of the individual against the mechanization of industrial concepts of time, imagining exercises of pure intellect and rationality to be an assault against more fluid conscious states. The narrativity of Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway*, for example, follows the structure, or perhaps lack thereof, of consciousness through the intensity of sensation and emotion. This is a feat restricted to the realm of poetics. Its own object of contemplation is a break from the chronos. In contrast, Eliot’s ability to break from the chronological, by the time he was writing his later works, was necessarily symptomatic of his other spiritual objects of contemplation. Eliot’s relationship to religion allowed for “reversals” and “knots” (Taylor) in time’s linearity both through poetic structure, but also through a more enveloping, immersive religious instinct.

While desire is a spatio-temporal structure, contingent upon its object and where it is located, religious desire allowed Eliot to break from the confines of desire as an ever-receding

horizon line. Visions of desire course through Eliot's thought, but their objects are relational to his ontological orientation. The struggle in the formation of Eliot's religious sensibility can be traced through the images Eliot uses in his poems. Eliot gravitates towards the same symbols, but their evolution alters depending on context. For example, the consummate image of *The Waste Land*, "fear in a handful of dust," is loudly echoed in *Ash Wednesday*. "Fear" and "dust" are what is "shown" to us in *The Waste Land*. It is what is being spoken *away* from through apophatic circumvention, but *Ash Wednesday* and *Four Quartets* directly speaks *to*, or *on*: "Wherefore I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes" (Job 42:6). Job, like many other figures of the bible, uses dust and ashes as the visual symbol of repentance. Ash Wednesday is also the first day of Lent in the liturgical calendar, marking the services of penitence. What is contained in the "fear in a handful of dust" is thus given life and expanded upon in *Ash Wednesday*. The poem is a devotional document fully reckoning with the conversion, and at the same time, reckoning with the reconciliation of secular desire and religious desire. It is a document coming into the knowledge, and thus the renunciation, of "the greater torment."

I initially began this process with an interest in writing on the *Four Quartets*, and this is where I would like to end it. A section of the final stanza of "Burnt Norton" reads:

Desire itself is movement
 Not in itself desirable;
 Love is itself unmoving,
 Only the cause and end of movement,
 Timeless, and undesiring
 Except in the aspect of time
 Caught in the form of limitation
 Between un-being and being.

Eliot reads desire as "movement," or expansion. As opposed to the digestion of desires in the previous line, "Distraction from distraction by distraction," desire is in constant motion. It is not static, and further it is not an object to be sought after. The promise of pleasure latent in desire is

what Augustine attributes to leading to his “unholy loves” in *Confessions*, but Eliot here posits desire as an external reality that cannot be its own object. “Love” may stir the emotions and be moving, but the “Love” Eliot is here speaking on possesses its own reality. It is not a love of the emotions or a love subject to what Eliot identifies as “psychologism” (CL), but it is a constant, “unmoving” metaphysical reality. It exists with or without the presence of humanity. As Eliot wrote in *Seconds Thoughts about Humanism*, the human is able to recognize “Love” as a supernatural reality, but the human is not the ultimate center of “Love,” and thus his own loves and desires are not the ultimate center, either.

For Eliot, the human is “Caught in the form of limitation / Between un-being and being.” Recalling the shadows of “memory” and “desire” in *The Waste Land*, Eliot renders temporal time a “limitation.” It is, however, a step, and not the final one. Eliot prods at the limits of the phenomenal world, while recognizing that material life exists between “un-being and being,” and is thereby not fully knowable. He positions the greater “Love” above temporality; it is “timeless,” caught in the interaction between the temporal and the eternal. This moment of entrapment is what is accessible to the material: it is the “fear in a handful of dust” (*The Waste Land*). In the same manner that Eliot conceived of his religious sensibility as constantly evolving, I would like to think of my relationship to Eliot doing the same. I have found that my relationship to the *Quartets* changed every time I engage them, and perhaps, like the objects Eliot is striving after, his own words are inexhaustible, as well. I am thinking of this project as a step.

Unlike the apophatic discourse of *The Waste Land*, the “struggle” Eliot articulates in his letter to Heller is not resolved in the *Four Quartets*, but it is given another life. It is, in some sense, another step on a set of stairs. The formation of Eliot’s religious sensibility allowed him to

engage in a form of desire that is fundamentally inexhaustible. Desire is not merely an emotion, but a metaphysical energy that became sacramental. What does it mean for the strivances towards the unmovable “Love” Eliot refers to in “Burnt Norton” to have no attainable telos? Desire is indeterminate, but in channeling it into something beyond the material world, Eliot gives meaning to its “torment” (*Ash Wednesday*). I do not mean to say that religion, for Eliot, was instrumental to gaining a sense of solace from the suffering of secular desire, but religion provided Eliot with an order and system of meaning that was not found in the “immanent frame” (Taylor).

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