

The Journal  
of the  
T.S. Eliot Society



2024

*The  
Journal  
of the  
T. S. Eliot Society (UK)*

*2024*

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**ISSN 2977-0130 (print)**  
**ISSN 3033-3768 (on-line)**

First published in Great Britain in 2024

*The Journal of The TS Eliot Society (UK)*

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Cover illustration by courtesy of Kathryn Rathke.

Printed in the United Kingdom by  
Print-Out Printers  
8-10 High Street, Histon  
Cambridge CB24 9JD.

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## EDITORIAL

It is a great pleasure to present this my first issue of the Journal as editor. By way of introduction I should explain that I have taught in Theology at the University of Exeter since 1993. During the 1990s I also conducted extensive research on Eliot, leading to a 732-line verse biography of the poet. This was published with three companion essays as *A Love and its Sounding: explorations of T.S. Eliot* (Salzburg, 1997). I have now returned to the study of the poet, and am delighted to complement this work by editing the Journal, with invaluable help from the advisory team.

This issue, I am glad to say, contains some significant surprises, as well as featuring contributors from a range of continents and backgrounds. The articles are arranged chronologically in terms of Eliot's work. Wei Zhou points up Eliot's sensitivity to items of fashion, male and female, and how this can be traced back to his encounter with the work of Laforgue. She also shows how skilfully the early Eliot used words and phrases about clothing to convey characterization.

Our second essay is from Jolly Das, based at Vidyasagar University in West Bengal. It is sometimes said that Eliot's acquaintance with Eastern religions was only with the Harvard version of same. So it is both reassuring and fascinating to see an academic from India showing us how deep and extended was his commitment to original Indic texts. She also offers us some interesting readings of his poetic work, tracing, for example, possible Indic interpretations of the spirituality of *The Cocktail Party*.

Malcolm Harvey connects Eliot, especially the plays, with the Law and Literature movement, and through that with the traditions of Athenian drama. He argues plausibly that Eliot's fascination with both Greek tragedy and detective stories is evident in the construction of his dramas, which are 'investigations' with criminal, psychological

and spiritual dimensions.

John Matthew Steinhafel springs a major surprise in his essay on Eliot and Ralph Ellison. One might not have imagined that a literary figure who identified himself so heavily with the Establishment, and who has been tainted by repeated allegations of racism in the form of anti-semitism, would have been an influence on a black writer early associated with communism, and whose most famous book compares different nuances of racism between New York and the American South. Yet Steinhafel shows convincingly that Ellison used and marked works by Eliot, and he makes fascinating links with *The Family Reunion*.

The alert reader will note that our next contribution, a note by David Ashton on the genesis of 'Burnt Norton', should in strict chronology precede a focus on *The Family Reunion*. But it seemed natural to take 'Burnt Norton' with the other Quartets. (That said, questions can be raised about the integrity of that sequence, given how different is the ending of 'Little Gidding' from the ending of what became the first Quartet.) Ashton offers us another surprise, by showing that the enigmatic vision in the garden of Burnt Norton can have an ordinary physical explanation. Eliot transmutes that vision into great poetry, but anyone could have seen what he saw.

In the last of our major articles, Adil Khan subjects the Quartets to a psychological and metaphysical analysis based on the work of Jacques Lacan. This is a skilful analysis of Eliot's motif of renunciation, and how, paradoxically, renunciation intensifies the association with the object of desire.

The issue ends with an extended review of Lyndall Gordon's *The Hyacinth Girl*. This both seeks to do proper honour to Gordon's pioneering work on the relation between Eliot and Emily Hale, and also shows how the critical response to Gordon has evolved since her early work on Eliot.

I very much welcome feedback on the issue, and also correspondence exploring possible future contributions. I am delighted to say that the Journal has followed the example of many important periodicals in becoming open-access; anyone now may read this and future issues on-line through our website [tseliotsociety.uk](http://tseliotsociety.uk), without fee (though only members of the Society can receive a free print copy).

Christopher Southgate  
Editor



## T. S. Eliot's Sartorial Imagination: Poetry, Fashion and Culture

Wei Zhou

T. S. Eliot became a fashion headline in early 2023. In the wake of the centenary of *The Waste Land* in 1922, this landmark poem was the theme of Christian Dior's 2023-24 menswear show directed by Kim Jones. In the dim light, actors Robert Pattinson and Gwendoline Christie read *The Waste Land* aloud on the screen, accompanied by live music composed by Max Richter.<sup>1</sup> In tandem, models walked to display garments inspired by the poem's motifs of water and regeneration.<sup>2</sup> Poetry and fashion are brought together on the catwalk, where the text and the textile interact through multi-media.

Prior to the Eliot-themed show, Jones designed a womenswear show inspired by Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* (1928) for Fendi as his couture debut in 2021. Jones's recent reception of high modernism in haute couture illustrates the enduring reciprocity between fashion and literature. Woolf, for example, established her fame writing about fashion by contributing to British *Vogue* and exploring what she calls 'frock consciousness',<sup>3</sup> the sense of the self through clothes, in her novels in the mid-1920s. Jones's Dior 2023/24 show, so fully and operatically engaged with *The Waste Land*, elicits a timely question about Eliot's fashion sense as a poet and how fashion inspires his poetic imagination.

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<sup>1</sup> Kim Jones, 'Dior Men Winter 2023-2024 Show', YouTube video, 18:11, posted by 'Christian Dior', Streamed live on 20 Jan 2023, accessed 11 January 2024, [https://www.youtube.com/live/6\\_gmukGV2fc?si=jj82fg2lgOyrXiY](https://www.youtube.com/live/6_gmukGV2fc?si=jj82fg2lgOyrXiY).

<sup>2</sup> Lauren Cochrane, 'Kim Jones Brings Eliot's *The Waste Land* to Dior's 2023-24 Menswear Catwalk', *The Guardian*, 20 January 2023. <https://www.theguardian.com/fashion/2023/jan/20/kim-jones-brings-eliots-the-waste-land-to-diors-2023-24-menswear-catwalk>.

<sup>3</sup> Virginia Woolf, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, eds. Anne Olivier Bell and Andrew McNeillie, vol. 3, 1925–1930 (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1980), 12.

A growing body of modernist and cultural studies has explored the connection between modernism and fashion, foregrounding clothing as an important mediator between the self and the world. Lisa Cohen conceptualises Woolf's coinage 'frock consciousness' as a way to particularize female subjectivity'.<sup>4</sup> Sophie Oliver links the ephemerality of fashion to the contingency of modernism in her examination of Mina Loy's essay 'Modern Poetry' (1925), first published in the fashion magazine *Charm*.<sup>5</sup> Elizabeth Sheehan's sustained study on how writers engage with fashion to observe, question and critique social transformations in the early twentieth century also discusses the legendary couturier Paul Poiret's involvement in modernist literature.<sup>6</sup> As Eliot's unpublished or uncollected materials have been made increasingly available,<sup>7</sup> the poet's early verse and drafts show his interest in deploying clothes and their indications of the wearer's gender, class, age and nationality to build up a poetic lexicon. Eliot's fashion sense in his expanded corpus has drawn certain critical attention. For example, Beci Carver briefly comments on the typist's kimono in the draft of *The Waste Land*, enquiring about cultural appropriation in the context of global exhibitions and mass consumption.<sup>8</sup> Despite these fruitful studies, Eliot's written fashion has not yet been extensively discussed.

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<sup>4</sup> Lisa Cohen, "'Frock Consciousness": Virginia Woolf, the Open Secret, and the Language of Fashion', *Fashion Theory* 3, no. 2 (1999), 150; [10.2752/136270499779155032](https://doi.org/10.2752/136270499779155032).

<sup>5</sup> Sophie Oliver, 'Mina Loy, Bessie Breuer, *Charm* Magazine and Fashion as Modernist Historiography', *Journal of Modern Periodical Studies* 11, no. 2 (2020): 248–69, <https://doi.org/10.5325/jmodeperistud.11.2.0248>.

<sup>6</sup> Elizabeth M. Sheehan, *Modernism à la Mode: Fashion and the Ends of Literature* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2018), [muse.jhu.edu/book/61959](https://muse.jhu.edu/book/61959).

<sup>7</sup> For example, *The Waste Land: A Facsimile* (1969) edited by Valerie Eliot, *Inventions of the March Hare: Poems 1909-1917* (1996) edited by Christopher Ricks, the two-volume *The Poems of T. S. Eliot* (2015) edited by Christopher Ricks and Jim McCue, and the ongoing collections of Eliot's letters co-edited by John Haffenden and the late Valerie.

<sup>8</sup> Beci Carver, 'What Women Want: The Modernist Kimono', *Modernism/modernity* 22, no. 2(2015): 309, <https://doi.org/10.1353/mod.2015.0044>.

This essay makes a critical intervention by investigating how Eliot repurposes the semiotics of fashion in his early poems by drawing upon the sartorial consciousness in late nineteenth-century French literature, visual art and popular culture as well as the fashion trends led by Ballets Russes and Poiret in early twentieth-century Europe. In particular, I will focus on Laforgue's and Symons' influence on Eliot's satire of dandyism and the intertextuality between Eliot and his literary and artistic precursors, such as Manet, Zola and Huysmans, in their depictions of lingerie. I will examine how Eliot engages with clothing as a poetic idiom to explore theatricality and sexuality by negotiating between social constraints and artistic freedom in 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock' (1915; shortened as 'Prufrock' hereafter), *The Waste Land* (1922) and other relevant poems. Taking a historicist approach to the texts and intertexts, I will unearth the connotations of the clothing items in these poems, thereby shedding new light on the tension between the stricture and flux in metrical and thematic terms.

### **The Formal and the Flannel: Dress-coding Theatricality**

In December 1908, Eliot discovered Arthur Symons' *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* in the student union at Harvard University, and the rest is history. Symons introduces Laforgue by quoting the latter's friend and fellow Symbolist poet Gustave Kahn, '*fort correctes, de hauts gibus, des cravats sobres, des vestons anglaise, des pardessus clergymans, et de par les nécessités, un parapluie immuablement placé sous le bras*', which can be translated as: 'very correct, tall gibuses, simple ties, English jackets, clergyman overcoats, and for necessity, an umbrella immutably attached under the arm'.<sup>9</sup> The incredible attention Kahn paid to these details reflects Symbolist poets' artistic ideal of making the self as art. As with this sartorial punctiliousness, Laforgue's poetry, Symons writes, 'is really *vers libre*, but at the same time, correct

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<sup>9</sup> Arthur Symons, *The Symbolist Movement in Literature*, ed. Matthew Creasy (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 2014), 54. A gibus is a collapsible top hat named after the hatmaker Antoine Gibus. In this essay, the translation of French into English is my own unless otherwise stated.

verse, before *vers libre* had been invented'.<sup>10</sup> The elements of alexandrine structure in Laforgue's *vers libre* are rigorous and exact, demonstrating what is freedom with style.

Symons' portrait of the artist as a young dandy must have impressed Eliot. As Herbert Howarth comments, 'There was an element of this Laforgue already in [Eliot]; it was easy to progress to the pose from the urbane dandyism, the perfection of dress, manners, and accomplishments, which was the Harvard style in his time and in which he excelled'.<sup>11</sup> Laforgue died the year before Eliot was born but was only twenty-eight years his senior. When Eliot first encountered Laforgue's image via Symons, men's fashion had not undergone significant changes in the long Belle Époque. Eliot's appropriation of Laforgue's dandyism is more than a self-fashioning strategy as he adroitly exploits the connotations of clothes in his context to fashion his poetic language. In his early poem 'Spleen' (1910), Eliot draws upon the hat etiquette of his time to enable a sartorial shorthand,

Bonnets, silk hats, and conscious graces  
In repetition that displaces  
Your mental self-possession  
By this unwarranted digression.<sup>12</sup>

In the rhymed lines, a pattern of a 'correct' free verse borrowed from Laforgue, bonnets and silk hats operate as a synecdoche for women and men. While the bonnet was a generic term for women's hats, the silk hat, another term for the top hat since the fabric became the default material in the mid-nineteenth century, was almost exclusively upper-class men's headwear at that time. From these silk hats, the reader, especially the

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<sup>10</sup> Symons, *Symbolist Movement*, 54.

<sup>11</sup> Herbert Howarth, *Notes on Some Figures Behind T. S. Eliot* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1965), 105.

<sup>12</sup> T. S. Eliot, 'Spleen', in *The Poems of T. S. Eliot*, eds. Christopher Ricks and Jim McCue, vol. 1, *Collected and Uncollected Poems* (London: Faber & Faber, 2015), lines 3–6. All citations from Eliot's poems are from this volume unless otherwise stated.

audience of *Harvard Advocate*, where the poem was first published, would get an idea of the wearers' gender and class.

Using the established connotations of silk hats to set up a situation of the polite society quickly, Eliot goes on to personify Life as a footman of correct dress and manners in the final stanza:

And Life, a little bald and gray,  
Languid, fastidious, and bland,  
Waits, hat and gloves in hand,  
Punctilious of tie and suit  
(Somewhat impatient of delay)  
On the doorstep of the Absolute.<sup>13</sup>

Jayne Stayer identifies a Laforguean 'hat trick' in the stanza: 'Symons's language is even copied by Eliot: Laforgue, Symons claims, "composes love-poems hat in hand," while Eliot's figure of Life waits "hat and gloves in hand."' <sup>14</sup> The verbal echo of the genteel and humble manner is refracted to explore the relationship between the everyday, a well-dressed footman on display, and the Absolute, the Hegelian concept of the free spirit, a master behind the façade. The refined figure of Life anticipates the eternal Footman as a cameo figure in the eponymous protagonist's consciousness in 'Prufrock'.<sup>15</sup>

In 'Prufrock', Eliot dramatises the protagonist's contrasting consciousnesses of his fashionable clothes and body image. In a setting of high society, as indicated by the lines 'In the room the women come and go / Talking of Michelangelo',<sup>16</sup> Prufrock dresses properly and fashionably: 'My morning coat, my collar mounting firmly to the chin, /

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<sup>13</sup> Eliot, 'Spleen', 11–16.

<sup>14</sup> Jayne Stayer, *Becoming T. S. Eliot: The Rhetoric of Voice and Audience in Inventions of the March Hare* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2021), 95.

<sup>15</sup> Eliot, 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock', line 85.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 13–14, 35–36.

My necktie rich and modest, but asserted by a simple pin –'.<sup>17</sup> At first glance, it seems that Prufrock appears in a morning coat after 'a soft October night' depicted in an earlier stanza.<sup>18</sup> Taking 'a toast and tea' as a time reference,<sup>19</sup> the following scene with Prufrock loitering in his morning coat showcases an aristocratic lifestyle of not working but spending the morning in the cultured, refined ladies' drawing room. The morning coat, a formal attire usually in black, was in trend in the early 1910s. The starched, three-inch collar was a separate item attached to the shirt with studs. Together with the tie and pin, Prufrock's ensemble is an epitome of men's style in the Belle Époque, for which '[t]he watchwords were "neat", "quiet" and "suitable"'.<sup>20</sup> Correspondingly, the lines depicting Prufrock's attire are formulated in a regular metrical pattern, rhyming on 'chin', where the collar duly reaches, and 'pin', which keeps Prufrock's tie in place. However, Prufrock worries about his body image and how it would be negatively perceived. Following the anxious thought, '(They will say: "How his hair is growing thin!")',<sup>21</sup> the reassurance from his clothes is soon abated by the concern: '(They will say: "But how his arms and legs are thin!")'.<sup>22</sup>

The contrast between Prufrock's dandy clothes and body image is indebted to Laforgue's creation of a dandified Pierrot in *Locutions des Pierrots*, which Symons quotes in *The Symbolist Movement in Literature*:

Encore un de mes pierrots mort;  
Mort d'un chronique orphelinisme;  
C'était un coeur plein de dandysme  
Lunaire, en un drôle de corps.

(Another of my pierrots is dead;

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 42–43.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 34.

<sup>20</sup> Amy De La Haye and Valerie D. Mendes, *Fashion Since 1900*, 3rd ed. (London: Thames & Hudson, 2021), 43.

<sup>21</sup> Eliot, 'Prufrock', 41.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 44.

Dead from chronic orphanism;  
It was a heart full of dandyism  
Of the moon, in a funny body.)<sup>23</sup>

Pierrot, a stock character in French pantomime, is a sad clown with a distinctive look of a white-painted face and a white blouse for the French peasant. In the fin-de-siècle Paris, Symbolist poets, such as Léon Hennique and J.-K. Huysmans, and visual artists, such as Jules Chéret and Adolphe Willette, transformed Pierrot into a dandy.<sup>24</sup> In Willette's comic strip entitled 'Pierrot Fumiste' published in *Le Chat Noir*, a weekly magazine run by the eponymous cabaret, on 18 March 1882,<sup>25</sup> Pierrot dresses almost in a dandy ensemble: a top hat, a tailed coat, matching trousers and leather shoes, which are all in black. Only the frilled collaret of this character's white blouse indicates his original look. Pierrot's new image, reinvented by Willette and his contemporaries, has a significant impact on Laforgue's reimagining of this clown. In his 1882 pantomime also entitled *Pierrot Fumiste*, Laforgue recasts Pierrot as 'a poète très lyrique et boursier, 30 ans' ('a very lyrical poet and scholar, 30 years old').<sup>26</sup> The one in 'Locutions des Pierrots' XII, with a dandy's heart and a funny body, is able to evoke the contrast between the stock character's avant-garde, dandified look and his traditional, clownish clothes. Pierrot's funny body, alive or dead, falls short of matching his sense of self as a dandy.

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<sup>23</sup> Jules Laforgue, *Locutions des Pierrots*, in *Oeuvres Complètes de Jules Laforgue*, vol.1, *Poésies: Le Sanglot de la Terre, Les Complaintes, L'Imitation de Notre-Dame la Lune* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1923), 12. 5–8. See also Symons, *Symbolist Movement*, 55.

<sup>24</sup> *Pierrot Sceptique* (1881), a pantomime co-written by Symbolist poets Léon Hennique and J.-K. Huysmans, illustrated by Jules Chéret, presents a dandified but dangerous Pierrot who murdered his own tailor. See Léon Hennique and J.-K. Huysmans, *Pierrot Sceptique: Pantomime*, illustrated by Jules Chéret (Paris: Édouard Rouveyre, 1881), [ark:/12148/bpt6k10665969](https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:fr:sh:12148-bpt6k10665969).

<sup>25</sup> Julian Brigstocke, 'Defiant Laughter: Humour and the Aesthetics of Place in Late 19th Century Montmartre', *Cultural Geographies* 19, no. 2 (2012): 226. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44251470>.

<sup>26</sup> Laforgue, *Pierrot Fumiste*, in *Mélanges Posthumes*, 9th ed. (Paris: Mercure de France, 1923), 87.

Eliot's Prufrock can be read as a reincarnation of a Laforguean, dandified Pierrot, a subject explored by scholars.<sup>27</sup> What has not yet been examined is how Eliot devices a sartorial satire in this scene by manipulating the non-linear temporality and the complicated dress codes for various occasions, even in the course of a day in the Belle Époque high society.<sup>28</sup> Exploiting the polysemy of 'pin', Eliot pictures a social conundrum in which the tie pin that secures Prufrock's neckwear controls him under the scrutinising gaze of one or more women in the room:

The eyes that fix you in a formulated phrase,  
And when I am formulated, sprawling on a pin,  
When I am pinned and wriggling on the wall,  
Then how should I begin  
To spit out all the butt-ends of my days and ways?  
And how should I presume?<sup>29</sup>

The formulated phrase may exist in eye contact only, but the anticipation of a sequential verbal exchange already stresses Prufrock. Pondering over how he could 'spit out' his daily life, the ungentle manner of speaking indicates inelegant conduct. Prufrock's persona as a dandy is undermined by his suspectable background or experience, and he contemplates how to reveal it to his female companies: 'Shall I say, I have gone at dusk through narrow streets / And watched the smoke that rises from the pipes / Of lonely men in shirt-sleeves, leaning out of windows?...'.<sup>30</sup> As Stayer writes, most of the poem is 'rooted in the social realities of Brahmin culture and the squalid poverty of North Cambridge' in New England.<sup>31</sup> Prufrock's contemplation reminds the reader of his journey from the humble environment of sawdust restaurants and cheap hotels to the

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<sup>27</sup> For example, Robert F. Storey, *Pierrot: A Critical History of a Mask* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), chap. 6.

<sup>28</sup> Christopher Breward, *The Hidden Consumer: Masculinities, Fashion and City Life 1860-1914* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999), 46, 49.

<sup>29</sup> Eliot, 'Prufrock', 56–61.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 70–72.

<sup>31</sup> Stayer, *Becoming T. S. Eliot*, 211.

drawing room at the beginning of the poem.<sup>32</sup> The recurrence of this setting that creates a sense of déjà vu seems to suggest Prufrock appears in this morning coat in the evening. Prufrock may wear the wrong clothes at the wrong time and become a social ridicule, which is implied in half realisation: ‘And I have seen the eternal Footman hold my coat, and snicker’.<sup>33</sup> The time is out of joint.

Prufrock’s impostor syndrome in the drawing room may thus stem from being an impostor of a lower social standing, as he confesses in a theatrical gesture near the end of the poem:

No! I am not Prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be;  
Am an attendant lord, one that will do  
To swell a progress, start a scene or two,  
Advise the prince; no doubt, an easy tool,  
...  
At times, indeed, almost ridiculous—  
Almost, at times, the Fool.<sup>34</sup>

Laforgue’s reinventions of Hamlet and Pierrot as uncanny doubles may have inspired the identities that Prufrock denounces and reclaims. In the story ‘Hamlet ou les Suites de la Piété Filiale’ included in *Moralités Légendaires*, Laforgue retells the Shakespearean tragedy by refiguring Hamlet as a thirty-year-old dressed in black.<sup>35</sup> A strange man and half-brother of the madman Yorick, the Laforguean Hamlet scripts the play based on his father’s sudden death. Before the performance, Hamlet leaves the palace and dies in the moonlight over Ophelia’s tomb. This version of Hamlet is more like a fool than a prince and resembles the sad clown Pierrot in Laforgue’s poetry and pantomime. As Jennifer Forrest

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<sup>32</sup> Eliot, ‘Prufrock’, 6–7.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 85.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 111–19.

<sup>35</sup> Laforgue, ‘Hamlet ou les Suites de la Piété Filiale’, in *Oeuvres*, vol. 3, *Moralités Légendaires* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1924), 37.

points out, ‘Hamlet had arrived in France through the circus entrance’,<sup>36</sup> having been satirised and parodied in French popular theatre in the nineteenth century. Following this cultural trend, Laforgue satirises Hamlet as he does Pierrot and dresses them up in his own image of a dandy with a self-mocking twist.

By revealing Prufrock as an attendant lord on stage, Eliot perhaps also alludes to Lord Pierrot, Laforgue’s other figuration of the stock character, who struggles to converse with women in the poem ‘Autre Complainte de Lord Pierrot’. Prufrock’s double selves referred to as ‘you’ and ‘I’ in his internal dialogues resonate with the plural ‘we’ complaining about how to talk to the woman at the beginning of ‘Autre Complainte de Lord Pierrot’: ‘Celle qui doit me mettre au courant de la Femme! / Nous lui dirons d’abord, de mon air le moins froid’ (‘The one who should let me know about the woman! / We first say to her, in my least cold air’).<sup>37</sup> By appropriating the lines ‘Et moi d’un oeil qui vers l’Inconscient s’emballe: / “Merci, pas mal; et vous?”’ (‘And I with an eye racing towards the Unconscious: / “Not bad, thanks. And you?”’),<sup>38</sup> Eliot highlights the woman’s scrutinising gaze and icy indifference. After reclaiming his clownish role, Prufrock exits or at least imagines that he exits the stage, which is not a performing area in a theatre but a social situation of heightened performativity.

Near the end of ‘Prufrock’, the change of the scenery and the change of clothes register a sense of relief with recourse to a kind of informality permitted by society:

I grow old ... I grow old ...  
I shall wear the bottoms of my trousers rolled.

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<sup>36</sup> Jennifer Forrest, ‘Clownesque Poetics in Jules Laforgue’s *Moralités Légendaires*’, *Dix-neuf: Journal of the Society of Dix-Neuviémistes* 20, no. 1 (2016): 84, [10.1080/14787318.2016.1141851](https://doi.org/10.1080/14787318.2016.1141851).

<sup>37</sup> Laforgue, ‘Autre Complainte de Lord Pierrot’, 1: lines 1–2. The entire poem is quoted in Symons, *Symbolist Movement*, 58–59.

<sup>38</sup> Laforgue, ‘Lord Pierrot’, 1: 11–12.

Shall I part my hair behind? Do I dare to eat a peach?  
I shall wear white flannel trousers, and walk upon the beach.<sup>39</sup>

It is tempting to make an easy connection between Prufrock's baldness and ageing here, especially given the previous mention of thinning hair. However, baldness bothered men of all ages in the 1900s, including fashion victims of 'over-enthusiastic brushing, or even "rotting of the roots" from too-liberal application of hair dressings such as pomade'.<sup>40</sup> When old age is indeed the cause, as in 'Spleen', Eliot frankly puts 'a little bald and gray'.<sup>41</sup> Parting hair behind is not merely an attempt to cover the bald spot but a reference to the stylish slick back hairstyle in the 1910s. (An immediate point of reference is the hairstyle of Jack Dawson, played by Leonardo DiCaprio, when he attends the first-class dinner party in the 1997 film *Titanic*. The hairstyle requires grooming products and techniques beyond Jack's reach in normal circumstances, though other real upper-class gentlemen, including his romantic rival Cal Hockley, played by Billy Zane, can afford to maintain it.) While a slick back hairstyle may be too formal, eating a peach, a rightful enjoyment in the summertime, seems too casual. Given the immense sense of formality in the poem, Prufrock does not dare to let the sticky juice flow over his chin. These seemingly trivial questions are related to the level of personal freedom Prufrock can enjoy in tandem with the level of social formality he needs to maintain on a casual occasion.

In contrast, Prufrock does not hesitate about wearing white flannel trousers on the beach. In the early 1910s, white flannel trousers were semi-formal attire for men in the seaside resort, associated with trendy concepts such as youth and athleticism. The resort wear liberates Prufrock from formal wear and occasions, though such liberation is paradoxically compliant with a rigid dress code. White flannel was reserved for men's casual summer wear in the early twentieth century. Mainstream American newspapers were eager to report any related trend and transgression. In

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<sup>39</sup> Eliot, 'Prufrock', 120–23.

<sup>40</sup> Catherine Hayward and Bill Dunn, *Man about Town* (London: Hamlyn, 2001), 22.

<sup>41</sup> Eliot, 'Spleen', 11.

1910, *The New York Times* reported that ‘the most conspicuous figure in the Senate [on 24 May] was Senator Bourne in a new white flannel suit’.<sup>42</sup> In shock, a fellow senator responded to a journalist: ‘Go tell Jonathan Bourne that he is not in a summer garden’.<sup>43</sup> The Senate chamber was not the only place where white flannel was inappropriate. The railroad tycoon James J. Hill ‘caused a sensation’ by appearing in white flannel in downtown St. Paul, Minnesota, on 22 July 1907.<sup>44</sup> In 1915, white flannel remained a staple material of men’s garments for spring and summer at the convention of the National Association of Merchant Tailors.<sup>45</sup> When there was a sudden interest in white flannel for women’s wear in January 1915, the *Washington Post* reported that the fabric was ‘similar to the kind used by one’s big brother in the summertime’.<sup>46</sup> In Eliot’s poem, white flannel thus represents a safe form of escapism for Prufrock, who intends to wear it as appropriate to the season and the occasion.

The image of white flannel associated with the seaside recurs in Eliot’s early poems collected in a notebook, which he named *Inventions of the March Hare*. Eliot purchased the notebook in Gloucester, Massachusetts, where he spent many summers at his family’s beach house with a porch.<sup>47</sup> Even on holiday, social rules still apply, as demonstrated by the 1910 poem ‘Goldfish (Essence of Summer Magazines)’, which is largely a reflection of the social life of Boston brahmins, including the Eliots, in

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<sup>42</sup> ‘Bourne in White Flannels. And Other Like Harbingers of Summer Appear in Senate and House’, *New York Times* (1857-1922), 25 May 1910, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

<sup>43</sup> ‘Bourne in White Flannels’.

<sup>44</sup> ‘J. J. Hill Imitates Twain. Causes a Stir in St. Paul by Appearing in White Flannels’, *New York Times* (1857-1922), 23 July 1907, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

<sup>45</sup> ‘Tailors Don Summer Suits of Silk or White Flannel for Style Parade’, *Washington Post* (1877-1922), 11 February 1915, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

<sup>46</sup> Eleanor Gunn, ‘Introducing White Flannel’, *Washington Post* (1877-1922), 21 January 1921, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

<sup>47</sup> Stayer, *Becoming T. S. Eliot*, 7.

their seaside rendezvous:

On every sultry afternoon  
Verandah customs have the call  
White flannel ceremonial  
With cakes and tea  
And guesses at eternal truths  
Sounding the depths with a silver spoon  
And dusty roses, crickets, sunlight on the sea.<sup>48</sup>

On the semi-formal occasion of the afternoon tea, white flannel as a dress code is imposed through the half rhyme of ‘ceremonial’ and ‘call’. The tea party is not necessarily less relaxed than the drawing-room social in ‘Prufrock’, but dress rules are followed, and drama is avoided. The subtle irony of the ‘white flannel ceremonial’ as an upper-class essential may be just a mild complaint of the speaker measuring his tea with a silver spoon.

In Eliot’s other 1910 poem ‘Suite Clownesque’, however, the flannel wear does not help the speaker, an actor from Broadway,<sup>49</sup> blend in but makes him stand out as a clown on the beach:

If you’re walking on the beach  
When the girls are ready for a swim  
You hear everyone remark  
Look at him!  
You will find me looking them over  
Just out of reach  
First born child of the absolute  
Neat, complete,  
In the quintessential flannel suit.<sup>50</sup>

Assuming a metaphysical pose of the ‘first born child of the absolute’, the speaker, a remnant of a Laforguean Pierrot, longs for the swimsuit-clad girls from a distance but resists his desire. Although he is attired

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<sup>48</sup> Eliot, ‘Goldfish (Essence of Summer Magazines)’, 3. 1–7.

<sup>49</sup> Eliot, ‘Suite Clownesque’, 3. 6.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 3. 15–23.

appropriately, he attracts attention from other beachgoers as if he were still a clown on stage. The colour of the speaker's flannel suit is unstated but could be white, considering the presence of white flannel in Eliot's other poems and its prevalence as a summer item (indicated by the news quoted earlier). The white flannel attire, a new symbol of informal dandyism in 'Goldfish', makes the wearer in 'Suite Clownesque' a spectacle like Pierrot's new costume. The politics of looking here is as class-conscious as the women's gaze in 'Prufrock'. The connotation of the white flannel as occasional freedom from social restraints and expectations is restored in 'Prufrock', which highlights the fabric's flexibility ('I shall wear the bottoms of my trousers rolled'), which is suitable for coastal activities, such as a beach walk. The formal attire and the white flannel operate as sartorial cues to coordinate the tension of and relaxation from the social predicament that traps Prufrock.

In the wake of 'Prufrock', Eliot does not depict menswear in his poems until *The Waste Land*, partly perhaps due to the material limitations he faced as an immigrant living in wartime England. The European fashion industry that slumped during the Great War was recovering under the principle of simplicity in the post-war years. The silk hat was replaced by the bowler hat. In a draft of *The Waste Land*, Eliot reminisces about the good old days when he and his friends dressed up for vaudeville. The original draft opens with a passage set in Boston:

(Don't you remember that time after a dance,  
Top hats and all, we and Silk Hat Harry,  
And old Tom took us behind, brought out a bottle of fizz,  
With old Jane, Tom's wife; and we got Joe to sing  
'I'm proud of all the Irish blood that's in me,  
'There's not a man can say a word agin me').<sup>51</sup>

In this passage mixed with references to musical songs, Eliot casts top hats, perhaps referring to upper-class young men like Eliot and his

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<sup>51</sup> T. S. Eliot, *The Waste Land: A Facsimile and Transcript of the Original Drafts*, ed. Valerie Eliot (London: Faber & Faber, 2011), 1. 3–8.

Harvard fellows, and a cartoon character, Silk Hat Harry, as the post-show partygoers. Silk Hat Harry was an anthropomorphised dog in Tad Dorgan's comic strip *Silk Hat Harry's Divorce Suite* (originally entitled *Judge Rummy*), a courtroom comedy serialised between 1910 and 1922. In the comic strip, Silk Hat Harry and other characters 'played the roles of men-about-town, walking upright, attired in fashionable suits and hats, engaging in drinking, womanizing, betting, and swindling, frequently trying to get the better of each other'.<sup>52</sup> The courtroom comedy ridicules characters and their affairs and troubles without making moral judgements. With the artistic license of Dorgan's cartoon character, Eliot caricatures rule-breaking dandies and turns the illegal gathering, which involves alcohol and prostitution in the context of Prohibition, into a carnivalesque event.

However, Eliot deleted the passage from the final text of *The Waste Land*, in which the only silk hat appears in Part III 'The Fire Sermon':

He, the young man carbuncular, arrives,  
A small house agent's clerk, with one bold stare,  
One of the low on whom assurance sits  
As a silk hat on a Bradford millionaire.<sup>53</sup>

By using the sartorial simile, Eliot mocks the business incredibility of the pretentious clerk. Jon Silkin questions the millionaire's possession of the silk hat: 'The "low" it seems are not permitted assurance; being "low", it is an inappropriate possession, almost as unacceptable as the working-class Bradford nouveau riche who has "only" earned his silk hat with money'.<sup>54</sup> Class stereotypes seem to effect the sense of social disorder and class dissolution after the Great War through the simile, but I think

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<sup>52</sup> Amy McCrory, 'Sports Cartoons in Context: TAD Dorgan and Multi-Genre Cartooning in Early Twentieth-Century Newspapers', *American Periodicals: A Journal of History & Criticism* 18, no. 1 (2008): 62.  
<https://doi.org/10.1353/amp.2008.0001>.

<sup>53</sup> Eliot, *The Waste Land*, 231–34.

<sup>54</sup> Jon Silkin, *The Life of Metrical and Free Verse in Twentieth-Century Poetry* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1997), 92.

the irony arises not because the ‘new money’ does not deserve to own a silk hat but because the origin of his wealth may be unethical. Critics and editors of Eliot’s poems have noted that the modifier ‘Bradford’ insinuates that this nouveau riche might be a war profiteer in the woollen industry.<sup>55</sup> This simile encompasses social and economic disruption as well as spatial mobility after the war: the assurance on a lower-middle-class clerk, a silk hat on a war-profiteering nouveau riche, and a Bradford millionaire in London.<sup>56</sup> All these references are enfolded in the figuration of the clerk, who represents the complex housing market in the post-war capital in the poem.

### **Corset, and the Lack Thereof: Troubling Sexuality**

The discomfort of sojourning in London flats also exerts an impact on Eliot’s perception and description of women’s clothes. Before the Great War, Eliot’s brief sketches of women’s wear, like his writing of men’s clothes, focus on their appropriateness, such as the long gowns of ‘[t]wo ladies of uncertain age’ in ‘Mandarins’ (1910).<sup>57</sup> The struggles or perhaps negligence in following the trend and courtesy during the Great War was captured in ‘Afternoon’ (1914), a poem set in the British Museum, where two ladies appear with ‘The faint perfume of last year’s tailor suits /And the steam from drying rubber overshoes’.<sup>58</sup> When it comes to *The Waste Land*, after experiencing various lodgings and flats with his first wife, Eliot is able to picture the typist’s cramped bedsit, where she cannot discreetly store her lingerie:

Out of the window perilously spread  
Her drying combinations touched by the sun’s last rays,

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<sup>55</sup> Lawrence Rainey, ed., *The Annotated Waste Land with Eliot’s Contemporary Prose*, 2nd ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 109; Ricks and McCue, eds., *Poems*, 1: 666.

<sup>56</sup> Valerie Eliot recalls that ‘my husband told me that his millionaire came from Yorkshire, and did business with Lloyds Bank’ (Quoted in Ricks and McCue, eds., *Poems*, 1: 666).

<sup>57</sup> Eliot, ‘Mandarins’, 2.1.

<sup>58</sup> Eliot, ‘Afternoon’, lines 3-4.

On the divan are piled (at night her bed)  
Stockings, slippers, camisoles, and stays.<sup>59</sup>

The corset is referred to as ‘stays’ to not only rhyme with ‘rays’ but also pun with the temporary residence. The display of the undergarments is not just an indication of the limited living space but also charged with sexual meanings. The combinations are one-piece underbodice worn next to the skin. The drying combinations are open to the public and touched by the sunshine. From the narrator Tiresias’ perspective, the reader takes a voyeuristic view into the room where the ensemble on the divan/bed stands in for the typist’s naked body. The corset on this piece of dual-function furniture indicates the typist has undressed after returning home from work. In the following line in the original draft, the typist reappears in a bright kimono,<sup>60</sup> a subject to which I will return later. The removal of the lingerie under her office wear is further indicated in the draft: ‘And on the divan piled, (at night her bed), /Are stockings, dirty camisoles, and stays’.<sup>61</sup> Dirty camisoles are unavoidable consequences after a day’s work in central London, where office work was concentrated in the post-WWI era, though the plural forms can also suggest that the laundry has not been done every day. The stockings might have just been stripped off from the legs that they covered in public.

The typist’s undergarments on display, indicating undressing, have prototypes in French symbolism. Émile Zola’s novel *Au Bonheur des Dames* (1883) depicts the innocent seduction of ladies’ lingerie displayed in the department store:

Tout le linge de la femme, les dessous blancs qui se cachent, s’étalait dans une suite de salles, classé en divers rayons. Les corsets et les tournures occupaient un comptoir ... Mais, ensuite, le déshabillé galant commençait, un déshabillé qui jonchait les vastes pièces, comme si un groupe de jolies filles s’étaient

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<sup>59</sup> Eliot, *The Waste Land*, 224–27.

<sup>60</sup> Eliot, *The Waste Land: A Facsimile*, 3. 137.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 3. 135–36.

dévêtues de rayon en rayon, jusqu'au satin nu de leur peau. ... Là, les camisoles, les petits corsages, les robes du matin, les peignoirs, de la toile, du nansouk, des dentelles, de longs vêtements blancs ... Et les dessous apparaissaient, tombaient un à un.

(All the women's linen, the white underwear that is hidden, was displayed in a series of rooms categorised into various departments. The corsets and bustles occupied a counter ... But then the gallant undressing began, strewn across the vast rooms, as if a group of pretty girls had stripped themselves from department to department, down to their satin-like bare skin ... There are camisoles, little bodices, morning dresses, dressing-gowns made of linen, nainsook and lace, long white clothes... And the underwear appeared, falling off one by one.)<sup>62</sup>

In this scene, the department store, displaying fine underwear priced for all classes in the age of mass production, is not only a paradise for women, as the novel's title promises, but also for men, for their unprecedented exposure to ladies' undergarments stimulates sexual fantasy. The goods to the former's consumerist delight are under the male gaze in the public space. Eliot is no stranger to Zola's work, acknowledging it as the standard of nineteenth-century novels in his lecture notes.<sup>63</sup> When he was a student at Harvard in 1907/08 and at the Sorbonne in 1910/11, Eliot also discovered French painters such as Édouard Manet,<sup>64</sup> whose (in)famous painting *Nana* (1877), anticipating Zola's namesake novel (1880), presents a courtesan in a blue corset, white

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<sup>62</sup> Émile Zola, *Au Bonheur des Dames* (Paris: Hachette, 1980), 366–67.

<sup>63</sup> Eliot, 'Lecture Notes for English 26', in *The Complete Prose of T. S. Eliot: The Critical Edition*, ed. Ronald Schuchard, vol. 4, *English Lion, 1930–1933*, eds. Jason Harding and Ronald Schuchard (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2015), 759, doi:10.1353/book.43271.

<sup>64</sup> Eliot, 'Gordon Craig's Socratic Dialogues', in *Prose*, vol. 8, *Still and Still Moving, 1954–1965*, eds. Jewel Spears Brooker and Ronald Schuchard (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2019), 47, doi:10.1353/book.67878.

chemise and blue stockings.<sup>65</sup> In this painting, a man in formal attire, with his top hat on, is sitting on a sofa in the corner, watching his half-dressed lover powdering her face.<sup>66</sup> Whereas *Au Bonheur des Dames* showcases the eroticised desire for displayed lingerie, Manet's painting shows Nana in her lingerie, more nude than the naked by its contemporary standard,<sup>67</sup> visited by an intimate guest in her boudoir. In his review of the painting, Huysmans comments on the appeal of Nana's undergarments and continues to elaborate on the allure of stockings in general.<sup>68</sup>

While these writers and the artist have less direct influence on Eliot than Laforgue, their eroticised representations of lingerie find echoes in the scene depicting the typist's lingerie and her expected guest, the clerk in *The Waste Land*. Prior to this poem, Eliot's unpublished verse penned on 25 July 1914, 'Let us go to the masquerade and dance! / I am going as St John among the Rocks / Attired in my underwear and socks...' reads like a playful parody of the fetish for lingerie in late nineteenth-century France.<sup>69</sup> These lines are postscript to 'The Love Song of St. Sebastian' (1914), a poem exploring queer BDSM subjects. Self-tortured and aroused, St Sebastian visits his lover: 'In the darkness toward your bed / And where your gown is white',<sup>70</sup> performing bondage sex by using a towel to 'bend your head beneath my knees'.<sup>71</sup> Eliot queers the heterosexual relationship in this poem by reimagining the religious martyr

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<sup>65</sup> Édouard Manet, *Nana*, 1877, oil on canvas, 154 × 115 cm, Hamburger Kunsthalle, Hamburg, <https://www.hamburger-kunsthalle.de/en/gallery-id-1349>.

<sup>66</sup> Manet, *Nana*.

<sup>67</sup> Valerie Steele, *The Corset: A Cultural History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 114.

<sup>68</sup> J.-K. Huysmans, 'La Nana de Manet', *L'Artiste*, 13 May 1877, accessed 20 January 2024, <http://www.huysmans.org/artcriticism/nana.htm>.

<sup>69</sup> Eliot, *The Letters of T. S. Eliot*, eds. Valerie Eliot and John Haffenden, vol. 1, 1898–1922, eds. Valerie Eliot and Hugh Haughton, rev. ed. (London: Faber & Faber, 2009), 48.

<sup>70</sup> Eliot, 'The Love Song of St. Sebastian', lines 13–14.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

St Sebastian, a gay icon in the late nineteenth century,<sup>72</sup> as the lover of the female addressee ‘you’ – ‘Between your breasts should lie my head’.<sup>73</sup> While the unnamed female character’s white negligee may not have special meanings other than a traditional nightgown, the drawers in another poem, ‘Ballade pour la grosse Lulu’ drafted in 1911 possibly when Eliot was in Paris, are far more exhibitionist and provoking. In the poem ridiculing the American weekly *The Outlook*, Eliot ends each stanza with the refrain: ‘But, My Lulu, “Put on your rough red drawers / And come to the Whore House Ball!”’.<sup>74</sup> Lulu’s drawers are not only in a daring colour, ‘rough red’ in alliteration, but also likely open-crotched. According to the fashion historian Farid Chenoune, women’s drawers were not closed until the outbreak of the Great War.<sup>75</sup> The crotch vent, as Chenoune puts it, was ‘the focus of fin-de-siècle male fantasies’:<sup>76</sup> not only did male audiences stare at showgirls performing high kicks and splits, but male dancers spent more time watching their female counterparts than dancing. In Eliot’s ballad, the invitation of the demimondaine in her risqué drawers to the indecent ball knowingly attracts and disrupts the male gaze, but in requesting (or demanding) her to do so, the speaker exploits her femininity.

Foreshadowed by a sense of vulnerability and precariousness, the exposé of the typist’s undergarments in her lodging is sequenced by a date rape in *The Waste Land*. With his foreplay ‘unreproved, if undesired’,<sup>77</sup> the clerk ‘assaults at once’,<sup>78</sup> turning intimacy into violence. Although violence, in sexual and nonsexual forms, is a central theme of the poem reflecting on

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<sup>72</sup> Eliot and Haughton, eds., *Letters*, 1: 49, note 1; Christopher Ricks, ed., *Inventions of the March Hare: Poems 1909-1917* (London: Faber & Faber, 1996), 267-68.

<sup>73</sup> Eliot, ‘St. Sebastian’, 21.

<sup>74</sup> Eliot, ‘Ballade pour la grosse Lulu’, lines 7–8, 23–24. The variant of the refrain (no commas before and after ‘My Lulu’) recurs in lines 15–16 and 31–32.

<sup>75</sup> Farid Chenoune, *Hidden Underneath: A History of Lingerie* (New York: Assouline, 2005), 25.

<sup>76</sup> Chenoune, *Hidden Underneath*, 22.

<sup>77</sup> Eliot, *The Waste Land*, 238.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 239.

war and post-war trauma across the board, the way Eliot represents women as victims of sexual violence, especially using the cruel phrasing ‘Aroused from dreams of love and pleasant rapes’ to depict the socialite Fresca in the draft,<sup>79</sup> is deeply problematic and has been critiqued by scholars.<sup>80</sup>

As with Fresca’s masochistic dream, the clerk’s arrival and assault are unreal in the sense that they are the narrator’s vision, which begins with: ‘I Tiresias, old man with wrinkled dugs / Perceived the scene, and foretold the rest— / I too awaited the expected guest’.<sup>81</sup> Tiresias foretells the sexual encounter by perceiving the typist’s lingerie and perhaps the implied undressing. In the draft, ‘Knowing the manner of these crawling bugs’, preceding the last line in the citation above, shows sexual disgust instead of pleasure from the perspective of Tiresias,<sup>82</sup> a queer prophet in Greek mythology, as a ‘foresufferer’: ‘And I Tiresias have foresuffered all / Enacted on this same divan or bed’.<sup>83</sup> By using the verb ‘fore-suffer’ to denote suffering beforehand, Eliot seems to converge Tiresias’ foresight with the typist’s suffering to make the supposedly detached prophesy an anticipated bodily experience. The present perfect tense of the verb suggests Tiresias, introduced as an ‘Old man with wrinkled female breasts’ in the poem,<sup>84</sup> relates his past encounters as a woman to his foresight of the sexual assault. The concomitant of his foresight and foresuffering of the typist’s situation exposes rather than endorses sexual violence against women in both prosthetic (under the male gaze) and

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<sup>79</sup> Eliot, *The Waste Land: A Facsimile*, 3. 4.

<sup>80</sup> For example, John Haffenden, ‘Vivien Eliot and the *Waste Land*: The Forgotten Fragments’, *PN Review* 33, no. 5 (May 2007): 18-23, ProQuest; Lyndall Gordon, *Eliot’s Early Years* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 76; Arwa F. Al-Mubaddel, “‘The Typist Home at Teatime’: Vivienne Haigh-Wood Eliot’s Role in Shaping T. S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* (1922)”, in *Thanks for Typing: Remembering Forgotten Women in History*, ed. Juliana Dresvina (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021), 194.

<sup>81</sup> Eliot, *The Waste Land*, 228–30.

<sup>82</sup> Eliot, *The Waste Land: A Facsimile*, 3.143.

<sup>83</sup> Eliot, *The Waste Land*, 243–44.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 219.

behavioural (through the physical contact) forms in this scene.

Stylistically, Eliot's design of centring the typist in the scene and rendering the seer Tiresias and the expected guest (the clerk) out of the frame, respectively in narrative and temporal terms, echoes with what Huysmans identifies as a Japanese style in Manet's *Nana*: 'Comme dans certains tableaux japonais, le monsieur sort du cadre, il est enfoui dans un divan, les jambes croisées, la canne entre les doigts, dans cette attitude de l'homme qui détaille nonchalamment la femme quand lentement elle se harnache'. ('As in certain Japanese paintings, the gentleman comes out of the frame, he is buried in a divan, his legs crossed, the cane between his fingers, in this attitude of the man who nonchalantly examines the woman as she slowly puts on her harness'.)<sup>85</sup> Coincidental with *The Waste Land*, Huysmans later on refers to the man in *Nana*'s room as a 'voyant', a seer,<sup>86</sup> though the overtone of the painting is much less bleak than the typist's story in *The Waste Land*.

The original draft of the poem entails more details about the typist and her room, with references to Japanese-influenced fashion and art:

A bright kimono wraps her as she sprawls  
In nerveless torpor on the window seat;  
A touch of art is given by the false  
Japanese print, purchased in Oxford Street.<sup>87</sup>

By using the attribute 'false', Eliot clearly acknowledges that the typist's japonaiserie, an Oxford Street purchase, was a Western, fashionable item. In a sense, the *japoniste* décor in Eliot's draft reflects his own artistic interest. Eliot's artistic discoveries in his student years were not only Manet and Monet but also Japanese prints.<sup>88</sup> While Carver observes that the character (as well as the poet) are ignorant and unconcerned about the

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<sup>85</sup> Huysmans, 'La *Nana* de Manet'.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

<sup>87</sup> Eliot, *The Waste Land: A Facsimile*, 3. 137–40.

<sup>88</sup> Eliot, 'Socratic Dialogues', 47.

cultural origin or references of the Japanese items in this scene,<sup>89</sup> the roots of the typist's 'false Japanese print' are not in Japan but late nineteenth century Paris, where painters were devoted *japonistes*. The influence of Japanese art is visible in Manet's *Nana*, in which the eponymous courtesan's boudoir is decorated with Japanese wallpaper featuring a crane (though the bird is an auspicious symbol in Japanese culture, its French name 'la grue' is a slang term for 'sex worker'). In Monet's controversial painting, *La Japonaise* (1876), the painter represents his first wife in a red kimono, wearing a blonde wig to differentiate herself from the real Japanese.<sup>90</sup>

In Eliot's draft, the typist's bright kimono reflects the post-WWI revival of the fashion trend pioneered by the French couturier Paul Poiret. In 1903, Poiret named his kimono-style evening coat with Chinese elements 'Confucius', an infusion that points to the Chinese origin of the Japanese costume.<sup>91</sup> In the following decade, Poiret continued and expanded his fashion revolution of orientalising Western clothes. Eliot responded to this trend in a few lines sent to Conrad Aiken on 25 July 1914:

Do you think that the Love Song of St Sebastian part is morbid,  
or forced? Then there will be an Insane Section and another love  
song (of a happier sort) and a recurring piece quite in the French  
style beginning

    'The married girl who lives across the street  
Wraps her soul in orange-coloured robes of Chopinese.' – <sup>92</sup>

In the sense of fashion, the French style refers to the craze for Orientalist design in the 1910s and 1920s fashion world. Chinese (or Eliot's quirky variant: 'Chopinese') elements have been incorporated into Western fashion since the seventeenth century, while the fin-de-siècle welcomed

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<sup>89</sup> Carver, 'Modernist Kimono', 309.

<sup>90</sup> Claude Monet, *La Japonaise (Camille Monet in Japanese Costume)*, 1876, oil on canvas, 231.8 x 142.3 cm, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. <https://collections.mfa.org/objects/33556/la-japonaise-camille-monet-in-japanese-costume>.

<sup>91</sup> Carver, 'Modernist Kimono', 304.

<sup>92</sup> Eliot, *Letters*, 1:48.

fresh inspirations from Japanese clothes typified by kimono.<sup>93</sup> These two cultural sources, with their historical and cultural affiliation, tend to be fused in appropriation. Self-conscious of the sadomasochism veiled by self-flagellation in 'The Love Song of St Sebastian', Eliot penned the corrective section cited above (but never included it in the final text), which is still problematic as it evokes voyeuristic imagination. In this section, the young housewife's domestic life is subject to a neighbour's prying eyes, perhaps on a regular basis as the speaker takes note of the colour and style of her 'robes' in the plural form. The depiction that she 'wraps her soul' in these robes indicates the symbiotic proximity of the cloth and her body, which suggests she wears them as dressing gowns directly in touch with her skin.

Wrapped in her kimono, the typist 'sprawls/ in nerveless torpor' on a window seat (in rhyme with 'Oxford Street'), an exhibitionist gesture reminding of and contrasting with the nervous Prufrock sprawling under women's gaze. The description, 'A bright kimono wraps her as she sprawls', shows that the straight-lined, flowy dressing gown attempts to cover her stretching body. Compared with the restrictive stays and other Western undergarments elsewhere in the room, the kimono seems to free, censor and fetishise her natural body all at once. In this enjambed sentence, the typist is the object, grammatically, and the objectified, sexually. By casting the character as a typist and referring to her by profession, Eliot was aware that he casts the most skilled new woman of his time, who possesses technical skills and intellectual prestige,<sup>94</sup> whose employment in the masculine worlds of business was unaffected when men went back to the workforce after the Great War.<sup>95</sup> As a young, professional, metropolitan woman, Eliot's typist does not get rid of her stays like *la garçonne* (the flapper) or 'bright young things' in the roaring

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<sup>93</sup> Adam Geczy, *Fashion and Orientalism: Dress, Textiles and Culture from the 17th to the 21st Century* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), Berg Fashion Library E-Books.

<sup>94</sup> Katherine Mullin, *Working Girls: Fiction, Sexuality, and Modernity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 19.

<sup>95</sup> Lawrence Rainey, 'Eliot Among the Typists: Writing *The Waste Land*', *Modernism/modernity* 12, no. 1 (2005): 64.

twenties, a trend again initiated by Poiret who claimed he waged war upon corsets before he went to the real war.<sup>96</sup> Instead, the typist is eroticised and exoticised in a private sphere charged with voyeuristic and violent desire.

Eliot deleted the quatrain about the kimono-clad typist following Pound's comments, one of which doubts how the Japonisme and window seat fit in the lodging house, and the other frowns upon the crossover with the character Grishkin in Eliot's 1920 poem 'Whispers of Immortality'.<sup>97</sup> In this poem, Eliot introduces Grishkin as such:

Grishkin is nice: her Russian eye  
Is underlined for emphasis;  
Uncorseted, her friendly bust  
Gives promise of pneumatic bliss.<sup>98</sup>

Ricks and McCue suspect 'Pound may have been confusing this quatrain poem with another: "The silent man in mocha brown | Sprawls at the window-sill and gapes"' in 'Sweeney Among the Nightingales'.<sup>99</sup> However, I do not think there is confusion in Pound's comment as he draws the comparison between the typist's and Grishkin's uncorseted bodies. Even though the sprawling posture may be a shared feature of the typist and Sweeney, these characters are dissimilar. According to Pound, Eliot's Grishkin is based on Serafina Astafieva, the leading ballerina of Ballets Russes.<sup>100</sup> The glamorous Grishkin and the underlying references to Ballets Russes represent an influential movement in art and fashion in the early twentieth century. As with Poiret's ground-breaking initiatives, the sets and costumes for Ballets Russes, alongside their performances,

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<sup>96</sup> Steele, *Corset*, 147.

<sup>97</sup> Pound's marginalia with Valerie Eliot's transcription in Eliot, *The Waste Land: A Facsimile*, 44–45.

<sup>98</sup> Eliot, 'Whispers of Immortality', lines 17–20.

<sup>99</sup> Ricks and McCue, 1: 665; Eliot, 'Sweeney Among the Nightingales', lines 17–18.

<sup>100</sup> Ezra Pound, *Pavannes and Divagations* (New York: New Directions, 1958), 161.

revolutionised the fashion world in the pre-WWI years.<sup>101</sup> Oriental elements are highlighted in the performances set in the East, with Astafieva appearing uncorseted, acting roles such as Cleopatra in the eponymous ballet.<sup>102</sup> In contrast to the ballerina's unconventional public appearance, her avatar, the Grishkin, lounges in her drawing room, where not wearing a corset was hardly a controversial topic. As with his portrait of the typist, another kind of radical female figure, Eliot takes off the edge of the avant-garde dancer when creating her alter ego, domesticating both femmes fatales in the private sphere.

'Uncorsetted', a word indicating the absent item, is given a weighty presence at the beginning of the line, with its two metrical feet further emphasised by the caesura. Grishkin's unconstrained, friendly bust contrasts with the corseted ladies in 'Prufrock's Pervigilium', a passage of the draft of 'Prufrock' composed in 1911: 'Women, spilling out of corsets, stood in entries /Where the draughty gas-jet flickered'.<sup>103</sup> These women are not those talking about Michelangelo in the drawing room, but those Prufrock saw in the narrow, impoverished streets en route. These women's corseted femininity flows over the undergarments that give its hourglass shape. Despite accentuating sexuality, corsets also make women appear unapproachable. In contrast, Grishkin's overpowering sexuality unleashed from the constraint of the corset is parallel to a Brazilian jaguar,<sup>104</sup> drawing upon a long-standing analogy between the sexy and the beastly. Paralleled to a jaguar that '[c]ompels the scampering marmoset' with a feline smell,<sup>105</sup> Grishkin's sexuality is repulsive and destructive but at the same time charismatic and fascinating: 'And even the Abstract Entities / Circumambulate her charm'.<sup>106</sup> The sexy goddess is

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<sup>101</sup> De la Haye and Mendes, *Fashion*, 11.

<sup>102</sup> Ernst Sandau and Hermann Leiser, 'Vaslav Nijinsky and Serafima Astafieva in "Cleopatre"', (photograph, National Portrait Gallery, London, 1912), <https://www.npg.org.uk/collections/search/portrait/mw/206176/Vaslav-Nijinsky-and-Serafima-Astafieva-in-Cleopatre>.

<sup>103</sup> Eliot, 'Prufrock's Pervigilium', *The Poems of T. S. Eliot*, vol. 2, *Practical Cats and Further Verses*, lines 7–8.

<sup>104</sup> Eliot, 'Whispers', 21.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, 29–30.

ranked amongst the immortals such as John Webster and John Donne not because of her performing art but her physical appearance. Even though ballet was so important for Eliot's conceptualisation of aesthetics and forms,<sup>107</sup> the real-life model Astafieva's dancing prowess is omitted in his poetic creation. Placing Grishkin in her maisonnette in a series of quatrain stanzas (originally meaning 'rooms'), Eliot seems to confine her uncorseted femininity and bestial sexuality in a safe place.

## Conclusion

In response to the ongoing conversation about the relationship between modernism and fashion, my reading of Eliot's sartorial imagination in his early poems adds value to our understanding of the poet's formation of his style and place in the literary, artistic and cultural tradition by investigating Eliot's engagement with his contemporary fashion events and the established discourses of clothing. As well as shedding new light on Laforgue's influence on Eliot by analysing men's fashion in written form and how it is deployed to create theatrical effects, my discussion of the representations of lingerie and its implications in the poet's work in dialogue with earlier writers and artists, while revealing the patriarchal effect on fashion, shows Eliot's ambivalent and complex attitudes to gender and sexuality.

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<sup>107</sup> Eliot draws on ballet to rethink the directions for poetry and drama in relation to the impersonality of art in his essays such as 'Modern Tendencies in Poetry', in *Prose*, vol. 2, *The Perfect Critic, 1919-1926*, eds. Anthony Cuda and Ronald Schuchard (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014), 221, 10.1353/book.32768; 'London Letter: July, 1921', 2: 363; 'Four Elizabethan Dramatists: A Preface to an Unwritten Book', 2:506-07.

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# T.S. Eliot's Inheritance of Gain: The Harvard Curriculum of Indian Philosophy

Jolly Das<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

The re-tracings of the significance of T.S. Eliot's acquaintance with Hindu and Buddhist texts and philosophical deliberations have led to fresh understanding of his work. These new interpretations have made his writings relevant to readers, particularly in the present times when Indic approaches to mindfulness have become popular. These re-tracings have made an additional impact to fresh critical analyses, the publication of his letters and his correspondence with Emily Hale, and other significant new information, in addition to his own writings.

Eliot moved towards the belief that in a modern urban materialistic world smitten by the drought of spiritual barrenness, the paradigmatic example of the Incarnation could possibly help mankind to regain spiritual fertility.

Christian philosophy provided the infrastructure for Eliot's personal quest for a revival of spiritual culture, about which he wrote in 1930: 'Now it is only a personal prejudice of mine that I prefer poetry with a clear philosophical pattern... I like a definite and dogmatic philosophy, preferably a Christian and Catholic one, but alternatively that of Epicurus or of the Forest Philosophers of India; and it does not seem to me to obstruct or diminish either the 'poetry' or the pattern.'<sup>2</sup>

This approach formed the keystone of the arch Eliot built as a scaffold for offering spiritual shelter to modern urban humankind lost in the desert of utter materialism and spiritual aridity. Buddhist, Hindu and Upanishadic

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<sup>2</sup> Introduction to G. Wilson Knight's *The Wheel of Fire* (London: Methuen, 1930), xv-xvi.

ideas which he came across as a student of Philosophy at Harvard remained with him for use in his expressions.

The present article will attempt to add to the corpus of writings on the flowing of these streams into the river of ideas which he expressed in his work, thereby enriching the understanding of the readers with information about Eliot's life-long engagement with the Indic ideas with which he first became acquainted as a student during 1913-14, and which occupied important space in his mind, 'the shred of platinum'<sup>3</sup>, to emerge in 'peculiar and unexpected'<sup>4</sup> combinations in his ideas as author and critic, for 'a critic must have a very highly developed sense of fact.'<sup>5</sup>

## Literature Review

In 1987 Cleo McNelly Kearns established that Eliot had a lifelong engagement with Indic traditions which 'gave dimensions to Eliot's work that were subtle and pervasive and that affected the form as well as the matter of his poetry.'<sup>6</sup> With the publication of his letters, in addition to this excellent book, light can be cast on the influence of Indic texts on his critical acumen.

Critical analyses by Indian scholars would naturally emerge in response to Eliot's engagement with Indic writings. In a chapter in commemoration of the centenary of *The Waste Land* (1922), Rosinka Chaudhuri says:

*The Waste Land* had an obvious and immediate connection to India in the words that it used from the Upanishads, and scholars from India or concerned with the Indian connections have not looked past the handful of Sanskrit words, Eliot's own study of the language at Harvard in 1911– 13, and the interpretation of this

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<sup>3</sup> Eliot, *Selected Essays* (London: Faber, 1932. 3<sup>rd</sup> enlarged edition, 1951), 18.

<sup>4</sup> Eliot, *Selected Essays*, 20.

<sup>5</sup> Eliot, *Selected Essays*, 31.

<sup>6</sup> Cleo McNelly Kearns, *T.S. Eliot and Indic Traditions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), viii.

content.<sup>7</sup>

Many more articles, chapters and books could be referred to in support of her argument. One such book is Damayanti Ghosh's, *Indian Thought in T.S. Eliot*.<sup>8</sup> Although Chaudhuri focuses only on *The Waste Land*, her assessment could be applied to other instances of Eliot's use of Indic textual references. Critics have looked at Eliot's purpose and success in using them and have attempted to apprise (presumably) ignorant western readers about their significance.<sup>9</sup>

Additional light can be thrown on the Indic elements in Eliot's work as a poet and critic (as an editor, too) owing to the arrival of further information, including Eliot's letters<sup>10</sup> and the publications by Lyndall Gordon<sup>11</sup> and Robert Crawford.<sup>12</sup>

## The Background

In his letter dated 8 August 1930 to Marquis W. Childs, Eliot wrote:

The earliest personal influence I remember, besides that of my parents, was an Irish nursemaid named Annie Dunne, to whom I was greatly attached. . . . I find that as one gets on in middle life

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<sup>7</sup> 'Beyond the Sanskrit Words: Eliot and the Colonial Construction of Poetic Modernism' – in *The Waste Land after One Hundred Years* ed. Steven Matthews (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2022), 47-69, at 48.

<sup>8</sup> The outcome of Damayanti Ghosh's doctoral research.

<sup>9</sup> For detailed reference: (a) *Indian Responses to T.S. Eliot: A Bibliographical Guide to Writings in English*. Compiled by L.S. Ramaiah (Calcutta: Writers Workshop, 1988); (b) *Indian Responses to T.S. Eliot: A Bibliographical Supplement*. Compiled by L.S. Ramaiah and Narindar K. Aggarwal. (Calcutta: Writers Workshop, 1996).

<sup>10</sup> For Eliot's letters, volumes 1-9, published by Faber, please see the bibliography.

<sup>11</sup> Lyndall Gordon. *T.S. Eliot: An Imperfect Life* (New York: Norton, 1998); *The Hyacinth Girl: T.S. Eliot's Hidden Muse* (London: Virago, 2022).

<sup>12</sup> Robert Crawford. *Young Eliot: From St. Louis to 'The Waste Land'* (London: Vintage, 2015); *Eliot After 'The Waste Land'* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2022).

the strength of early associations, and the intensity of early impressions, becomes more evident; and many little things long forgotten, recur. The occasions on which my nurse took me with her to the little Catholic Church which then stood on the corner of Locust Street and Jefferson Avenue, when she went to make her devotions.<sup>13</sup>

This minor association of little Tom with Catholicism has been frequently referred to by his biographers. T.S. Matthews writes, ‘For the next sixteen years [since his birth], the whole long life of childhood, he would be absorbing impressions from the family life around him, getting his bearings in a perplexing world’<sup>14</sup> adding that ‘His childhood God was Unitarian, authoritarian, absolute, grandfatherly.’<sup>15</sup> Matthews cautiously puts in that his mother, Charlotte Champe Eliot had no inkling that her son had begun to be interested in the Incarnation, in spite of the fact that their family were earnest practitioners and propagators of Unitarianism<sup>16</sup>. This was because of Eliot’s Irish nurse, ‘the first exciting woman in Tom Eliot’s life.’<sup>17</sup> Gordon says the same thing: ‘his Irish nurse, Annie Dunne who discussed with him, at the age of six, the existence of God, and took him with her to a local Catholic church.

‘. . . I liked it very much.’ He recalled, ‘the lights, the coloured statues and paper flowers, the lived-in atmosphere.’ . . . It recalls the secure intimacy of early days with Annie.’<sup>18</sup> Dunne was the cause for Eliot’s exposure (however little) to Catholicism, which later became the focus of

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<sup>13</sup> T.S. Eliot. *The Letters of T.S. Eliot. Vol. 5: 1930-1931*, ed. Valerie Eliot and John Haffenden (London: Faber, 2014), 281-82.

<sup>14</sup> T.S. Matthews, *Great Tom: Notes Towards the Definition of T.S. Eliot* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), 10.

<sup>15</sup> Matthews, *Great Tom*, 12.

<sup>16</sup> Matthews: ‘It is fairly safe to assume that she [his mother] had no tiniest inkling of the fact, which would have been a most alarming fact, that within this small boy’s brain, ‘the word within a word, unable to speak a word,’ some infinitely gentle, infinitely suffering thing was readying itself to set a tiger among the pigeons’ (*Great Tom*, 15).

<sup>17</sup> Matthews, *Great Tom*, 15.

<sup>18</sup> Gordon, *Imperfect Life*, 6-7.

research on early indications of Eliot's moving away from the faith of his family. In Chapter 1 of Eliot's biography, Gordon points out that 'Bred in a family which belongs at the very heart of Boston Unitarianism, Eliot's fervent nature found no nourishment there, and by the time he enrolled at Harvard he had become indifferent to the Church. The religion taught by William Greenleaf Eliot was strict rather than spiritual. . . . In abandoning Unitarianism, Eliot rebelled against those tepid, unemotional distinctions.'<sup>19</sup> Gordon's rationale is that 'He had in mind the Unitarians' denial of the Trinity as against his own definition of Christianity as a belief in the Incarnation.'<sup>20</sup>

Gordon makes a significant observation about this: 'Eliot's Notebooks and other manuscript poems (published thirty years after his death) show that he began to measure his life by the divine goal as far back as his student days, in 1910 and 1911, and that the turning-point came not when he was baptised in 1927 but in 1914 when he first interested himself in the motives, the ordeals, and the achievements of saints.'<sup>21</sup> This argument is supported by Eliot's frank admission in his letter dated 19 May 1930 to Algar Thorold:

If I for instance had spent my life in Boston instead of London, the mere weight of ancestral tradition, of atmosphere and surroundings, might very likely have operated to keep me an Unitarian, though possibly a more and more devout one. Just as the influence of England probably operates on me who was born in the heart of New England Unitarianism.<sup>22</sup>

Robert Crawford, in his biography, provides a piece of significant information on Jules Laforgue, the French Symbolist poet who had a deep influence on Eliot: 'Steeped in Catholicism, Laforgue had lost his Christian faith, acquiring interests in Buddhism and Indic religion.'<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Gordon, *Imperfect Life*, 18.

<sup>20</sup> Gordon, *Imperfect Life*, 19.

<sup>21</sup> Gordon, *Imperfect Life*, 3.

<sup>22</sup> Eliot, *Letters Vol. 5*, 194.

<sup>23</sup> Crawford, *Young Eliot*, 122.

Drawing upon this, one may infer that Eliot's avid interest in Laforgue may also have been one of the reasons for his taking up courses in Indic philosophy at Harvard. But he is cautious about his level of attainment. Much later, in his letter dated 9 August 1930 to I.A. Richards, Eliot wrote, 'I dare say it is likely to be more profitable than my attempt, so many years ago, at studying Indian metaphysics in Sanskrit. The conclusion I came to then . . . was that . . . the only way I could ever come to understand Indian thought would be to erase not only my own education in European philosophy, but the traditions and mental habits of Europe for two thousand years.'<sup>24</sup> In another letter, two months later, Eliot wrote on 11 October 1930 to Edward Thompson: 'I have taken the liberty – assuming that you remember me as a director of Faber & Faber who happens to be particularly interested in India . . . because what you said to me about India was so congenial to my own prejudices or intuitions: after all, I have had Indian friends, and my interest in India was enough to make me spend two or three years, at one more leisured period, in the study of Sanskrit and Pali.'<sup>25</sup> Read together, these letters clarify his position: his earnest engagement with Hindu and Buddhist philosophy came at a point in his career (he was in his twenties) when he was seeking his spiritual anchor as he moved away from Unitarianism, but he understood that the European tradition of Christianity was to be his centre of adherence and his reading/understanding of the Indic religions would serve the dual purpose of being part of the 'objective correlative'<sup>26</sup> for his creative writing and a knowledge-base for his editorial expertise.

Gordon mentions this 'searcher in Eliot [who] chose to study Eastern religions,'<sup>27</sup> opting for an elementary course in Sanskrit, and a course in

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<sup>24</sup> Eliot, *Letters*, Vol. 5, 284-85.

<sup>25</sup> Eliot, *Letters*, Vol. 5, 339.

<sup>26</sup> Eliot writes about the 'objective correlative' in 'Hamlet and His Problems': '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' (*The Sacred Wood*, 100).

<sup>27</sup> Gordon, *Hyacinth Girl*, 29.

Pali, to be able to learn these languages and explore the Hindu and Buddhist scriptures which were included in the course. ‘He never forgot the Sanskrit he studied in J.R. Lanman’s course in Indic Philosophy, particularly the words of wisdom Lanman tipped into the copy he gave his pupil of *The Twenty-eight Upanishads*: ‘*da datta, damyata, dayadhvam*’ [‘give’, ‘control and ‘sympathise’, with meanings out of the reach of English equivalents].’<sup>28</sup> Crawford provides further information: ‘*Life is pain*’ was simply ‘a matter of fact, not necessarily pessimistic’, Tom jotted in his notes on Eastern philosophy on 3 October 1913’. The next day, he began looking for relevant Indic texts he could buy, and ‘had bought . . . Paul Jakob Deussen’s *Die Sutras des Vedanta*, along with Deussen’s *Sechzig Upanishads des Veda*. . . . he would refer readers to Deussen’s book in his notes to *The Waste Land*.’<sup>29</sup> He mentions it in his letter dated 2 August 1934 to W.B. Yeats:

Our friend Swami Shri Purohit<sup>30</sup> has tackled me lately in the matter of forwarding his designs for the publication of his translations from the Upanishads and other canonical literature. I understand from him that you are acquainted with his translation of the Sankhya Bhasya Karika and the comments of Patanjali, and that you like them. I have myself only examined a translation of the Kena Upanishad, which seems to me excellent but I have not had an opportunity of comparing it with the only good translation<sup>31</sup> I know, which is in German.<sup>32</sup>

And he comments in *After Strange Gods*:

Two years spent in the study of Sanskrit under Charles Lanman, and a year in the maze of Patanjali’s metaphysics under the guidance of James Woods, left me in a state of enlightened mystification. A good half of the effort of understanding what the

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<sup>28</sup> Gordon, *Hyacinth Girl*, 29.

<sup>29</sup> Crawford, *Young Eliot*, 170.

<sup>30</sup> Shri Purohit Swami (1882-1941) was a Hindu philosopher, translator and teacher.

<sup>31</sup> Paul Deussen, *Sechzig Upanishads des Veda* (Leipzig: F.A. Brockhaus, 1897).

<sup>32</sup> Eliot, *Letters*, Vol. 7, 292.

Indian philosophers were after – and their subtleties make most of the great European philosophers look like schoolboys – lay in trying to erase from my mind all the categories and kinds of distinction common to European philosophy from the time of the Greeks.<sup>33</sup>

Crawford writes that Eliot harboured scepticism about desiring a personality at this time. This may have been caused by ‘a study of the Yoga system and Patanjali’s *Sutras*. ‘These *Sutras* contained an examination of what Woods . . . termed ‘sense-of-personality’. But the ultimate aim was to move beyond and even extinguish this in achieving a transcendental ‘higher passionlessness’ or enlightened ‘Isolation’ beyond what the Indic text termed the ‘Rain-cloud of knowable things.’<sup>34</sup> Tom’s intellect ‘was moulded by such ideas.’<sup>35</sup>

His choice of courses after he returned from the Sorbonne made a far-reaching impact on his mind. Matthews points out that:

It was not Russell’s mathematical logic nor Babbitt’s French classics that nourished this tendency, but two years’ study of Sanskrit. That nearly made a Buddhist of him; it left him in ‘a state of enlightened mystification’; it gave him the red rock and the thunder of *The Waste Land*. And in the sutras of Patanjali he discovered that only essential words are necessary, and that a complete sentence structure is not always needed.<sup>36</sup>

Crawford writes that for Indic Philology 4, Eliot read the first eighty-one pages in Part I of Dines Andersen’s *Pali Reader*, which ‘contains ‘The Fire Sermon’ in which the Buddha maintains all things are afflicted with

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<sup>33</sup> Eliot, *After Strange Gods*, (London: Faber, 1934), 40-41.

<sup>34</sup> J.H. Woods, *The Yoga System of Patanjali*. Harvard Oriental Series. Vol. 17. 1914. (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1966), 40-41.

<sup>35</sup> Crawford, *Young Eliot*, 175.

<sup>36</sup> Matthews, *Great Tom*, 35.

burning (in the Pali text the word ‘addita’ is repeated hypnotically).<sup>37</sup>

During his tenure as a student of Philosophy at Harvard, Eliot also had opportunities of listening to invited speakers who discussed the philosophies of Buddhism and the Upanishadic (Brahmo) religion. The Japanese scholar Masaharu Anesaki delivered lectures on Buddhism during 1913-14, and the poet-philosopher-polymath Rabindranath Tagore spoke on the philosophy of his Brahmo faith in early 1913.<sup>38</sup>

While making personal notes on Anesaki’s lectures in the winter of 1913-14, Eliot’s entry ran thus: ‘not only the statement that life was pain but also the notion of the cyclic ‘turning of the wheel’ in Buddhist thought, and that ‘Everything is interrelated.’<sup>39</sup> His extract from Anesaki’s lecture expresses his rumination: ‘does reality exist or not? . . . The views that the world exists, or not; both are false; the truth lies in the middle,<sup>40</sup> transcending both views’<sup>41</sup> Anesaki’s ‘imagistic details’<sup>42</sup> fascinated Eliot as he took notes on the Buddhist approach to the nature of reality. An example would be Anesaki’s explanation, as transcribed by Eliot, of the symbol of the Lotus: ‘. . . the lotus alone is perfect, because it has many flowers and many fruits *at once*. The flowers and fruit are simultaneous. The real entity represented in the fruit, its manifestation in the flower. Mutual relation of final reality and manifestation.’<sup>43</sup> Eliot also transcribed Anesaki’s explanation of *pratityasamutpada* (the causal chain).

When J.H. Woods arranged lectures by Rabindranath Tagore,<sup>44</sup> Eliot attended them in the early part of 1913. Tagore’s topics included ‘The

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<sup>37</sup> Crawford, *Young Eliot*, 25.

<sup>38</sup> Later in the same year, he would be the first Asian Nobel laureate.

<sup>39</sup> Crawford, *Young Eliot*, 175.

<sup>40</sup> This idea becomes central in *The Cocktail Party*. T.S. Eliot, *Complete Poems and Plays* (London: Faber and Faber, 1969), 351-442.

<sup>41</sup> Crawford, *Young Eliot*, 175.

<sup>42</sup> Crawford, *Young Eliot*, 175.

<sup>43</sup> Crawford, *Young Eliot*, 175.

<sup>44</sup> Later published as *Sādhanā: The Realisation of Life*. (Leipzig: Bernhard Tauchnitz, 1921).

Problem of Evil'<sup>45</sup> and 'Man's Relation to the Universe.'<sup>46</sup> Tagore also addressed members of the Harvard Philosophy Club on 18 February 1913 about 'Brahma' (the creator, who was self-born in the lotus flower). Tagore re-visited Harvard, at Professor Woods's invitation, for further lectures in April. Robert Rattray, a Unitarian student who knew Eliot through the Philosophy Club, was 'particularly enthusiastic about the 'famous philosopher-poet of India', and wrote to the *Crimson* on 8 April to 'call attention' to Tagore's significance.'<sup>47</sup> Krishna Dutta and Andrew Robinson mention: 'T.S. Eliot, a student of Woods . . . appears . . . to have maintained an absolute silence about Tagore, though he did agree in 1951 to write a preface to an anthology of 'thoughts for meditation' that included Tagore.'<sup>48</sup> While focusing on Eliot's pertinent silence on Tagore's lecture(s) Dutta and Robinson comment, 'But perhaps Eliot was in some way touched by the man (he did attend one of Tagore's lectures).'<sup>49</sup> Bashabi Fraser mentions in *Rabindranath Tagore* that R.F. Rattray later wrote to Tagore saying that his Harvard lectures could have been the reason for the final words in Eliot's poem *The Waste Land*.<sup>50</sup> However, the loud silence keeps on drawing the attention and speculation of critics.

Irving Babbitt deeply influenced Eliot in the idea of a Christian tradition. Eliot's search for self-realization along the path leading back to the roots of this essentially European tradition emerged from his belief that modern writings in English are rooted in it. Eliot clarifies his understanding of 'tradition' in *After Strange Gods*: 'I have wished to use the word to cover

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<sup>45</sup> Published as *Sādhanā*, Chapter 3, 83-114.

<sup>46</sup> Published as *Sādhanā*, Chapter 1, 'The Relation of the Individual to the Universe,' 15-48.

<sup>47</sup> Crawford, *Young Eliot* 181.

<sup>48</sup> Krishna Dutta and Andrew Robinson. *Rabindranath Tagore: The Myriad-Minded Man* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995), 173.

<sup>49</sup> Dutta and Robinson, *Tagore*, 173.

<sup>50</sup> Bashabi Fraser: 'He gleaned these from his sermons which he had read every Wednesday at the Mandir at Shantiniketan. He also used these themes for the lectures which he was invited to give at Harvard University by the philosopher James Houghton Woods 127 128 to his philosophy class and at the Philosophy Club.' *Rabindranath Tagore* (London: Reaktion Books, 2019), 127-28.

much in our lives that is accounted for by habit, breeding and environment.’<sup>51</sup> These three facets have been brought forth in his writings and discussions from time to time, e.g., in a conversation with Leslie Paul, Eliot said, ‘A people without religion will in the end find that it has nothing to live for. I did touch on this problem a good many years ago in an essay I wrote on the death of a great music-hall artist, Marie Lloyd.’<sup>52</sup>

## The Upanishads

Vedic Rishis considered life as a movement from mortality to immortality, from mixed light and darkness to the splendour of the divine truth whose abode is in the infinite but can be ‘arduously built up. in man’s soul and life through a journey of spiritual quest and an attendant

sacrifice.’<sup>53</sup> According to the Upanishads, which are commentaries on the Vedas, the *Paramatma* (Eternal Spirit) comes to meet the *Jivatma* (spirit of man) with love. This leads to a harmony expressed in a serenity which comes from selflessness and detachment from earthly shackles.

Tagore, whose faith was Brahmoism, the faith propounded by Raja Rammohan Roy (1772-1833) and practised by eminent persons including the Tagore family, found similarities between his faith and Buddhism, and expressed his ideas in *Sadhana*. He writes:

To me the verses of the Upanishads and the teachings of Buddha have ever been things of the spirit, and therefore endowed with boundless vital growth; and I have used them, both in my own life and in my preaching, as being instinct with individual meaning for me, as for others, and awaiting for their confirmation, my own special testimony, which must have its

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<sup>51</sup> Eliot, *After Strange Gods*, 31.

<sup>52</sup> Eliot, *Selected Essays* (London: Faber, 1932. 3<sup>rd</sup> enlarged edition, 1951), 456-459.

<sup>53</sup> Sarkar, ‘The Vedas, Oriental Culture and T.S. Eliot’. *Bulletin of the Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture* 51, no.7 (July, 2000): 316.

value because of its individuality.<sup>54</sup>

He explained that the Upanishads were the theoretical discourses of what Buddhism put into practice; since Brahma represents everything in the Universe, tangible and intangible, one needs to establish a loving relationship with everything. Developing this consciousness is 'Brahmavihara, . . . living and moving and having your joy in the spirit of Brahma.'<sup>55</sup>

Eliot hints at this in his Appendix to *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture* (1948),<sup>56</sup> where he shared his opinion on the literature of Asia saying, 'In the literature of Asia is . . .

profound wisdom and some very difficult metaphysics; . . . Long ago I studied the ancient Indian languages, and while I was chiefly interested at that time in Philosophy, I read a little poetry too; and I know that my own poetry shows the influence of Indian thought and sensibility.'<sup>57</sup>

Almost twenty-seven years after the publication of *The Waste Land*, when asked by Ranjee Shahani in an interview, 'Which Indian books and writers have impressed you most?' Eliot replied, '*The Upanishads* and the *Bhagavad-Gita*.'<sup>58</sup>

On looking at his interest in publishing on Indic texts, one finds that in his letter dated 29 May 1923 to A. Berriedale Keith, Eliot writes, 'The *Criterion* would be very greatly honoured by a contribution from you on some subject in the field of Indian mythology, folklore, or classical literature.'<sup>59</sup> As editor of the *Criterion*, Eliot painstakingly sought very

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<sup>54</sup> Tagore, *Sādhanā*, 9.

<sup>55</sup> Tagore, *Sādhanā*, 42.

<sup>56</sup> T.S. Eliot. 'The Unity of European Culture'. *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture*. (London: Faber, 1948), 110-124.

<sup>57</sup> Eliot, *Notes*, 113.

<sup>58</sup> Ranjee Shahani, 'T.S. Eliot Answers Questions,' *John O'London's Weekly* (London) LVIII no.1369 (19 August 1949): 498.

<sup>59</sup> T.S. Eliot, *The Letters of T.S. Eliot*. vol. 2, 163.

good articles for the journal. He contacted potential authors, particularly those whom he could depend upon. One such scholar was Berriedale Keith to whom Eliot wrote, 'I cannot forbear mentioning that I first heard your name many years ago from my honoured teacher, Professor Charles Rockwell Lanman, of Harvard, when I was beginning the study of Sanskrit with him. I remember that he referred to you as knowing more Sanskrit than any man in England, and mentioned you in the same sentence with Jacobi and Lévy.'<sup>60</sup> His attachment to the value of Indic traditions, also strongly affirmed by Geoffrey Faber<sup>61</sup>, manifests itself in this communication.

Eliot's purpose becomes clear in his letter dated 1 October 1923 to Stanley Rice: 'I am myself, having dabbled in Oriental languages, very keen on the scholarly presentation of the Eastern world to occidental Europe which knows so little about it.'<sup>62</sup> One example of this 'little' knowledge is Conrad Aiken, who reminds one of Eliot's caution, while making a caustic comment:

Why again, Datta, Dayadhvam, Damyata? or Shantih? Do they not say a good deal less for us than 'Give: sympathize: control' or 'Peace'? Of course; but Mr. Eliot replies that he wants them not merely to mean those particular things, but also to mean them in a particular way . . . and in the upshot he gives us only a series of agreeable sounds which might as well have been nonsense.<sup>63</sup>

Eliot's epistolary correspondence expresses the warm respect he

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<sup>60</sup> Eliot, *Letters*, Vol. 2, 163.

<sup>61</sup> Letter dated 11 April 1926 from Geoffrey Faber to The Warden, All Souls College, Oxford: 'He is an unusually well-equipped scholar, at home in Sanskrit, Greek, Latin, and the chief modern languages of Europe, familiar as few men are with their literatures, deeply read in philosophy, and much more than merely well-informed on a great variety of other matters' [*The Letters of T.S. Eliot*. Vol. 3, 139].

<sup>62</sup> Eliot, *Letters*, Vol. 2, 229.

<sup>63</sup> Conrad Aiken. 'An Anatomy of Melancholy'. *New Republic* (7 February 1923): 114-120, at 117.

harboured for Indic scholarship.<sup>64</sup> A fine example would be his letter dated 10 April 1930 to J.H. Woods, his teacher at Harvard, which he began with ‘You will be surprised to hear from an old pupil and faithful student of Patanjali on the following subject,’<sup>65</sup> and ended with ‘Bo Brahmana. Yours sincerely, [T.S. Eliot].’<sup>66</sup> He carried on communication with Indic scholars on an intimate level, as in his letter dated 26 October 1932 to Paul Elmer More, where Eliot wrote, ‘If there be any salvation from such a whirligig of chance and time it is only into the peace of utter escape – ‘*shantih, shantih!*’’,<sup>67</sup> or in that dated 5 September 1927 to Bonamy Dobrée with the salutation ‘My dear Guru,’<sup>68</sup> and another dated 31 January 1934 to Ezra Pound with the greeting ‘Bhagavan Shri Shastri Pandit.’<sup>69</sup>

### The Buddhist Texts

In his letter dated 2 June 1930 to Paul Elmer More Eliot wrote about a personal understanding of religion:

The Buddhist eliminates Hell – for I remember the yarn of the Hellpot Prayer, and I know that even Channa shall be saved – only by eliminating everything positive about Heaven (*uttama parinibbana* being obviously not heaven). . . . To me religion has brought at least the perception of something above morals, and therefore extremely terrifying: it has brought me not happiness, but the sense of something above happiness and therefore more terrifying than ordinary pain and misery; the very dark night and

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<sup>64</sup> Letters: (a) dated 31 October 1934 to Shri Purohit Swami with footnotes (*Letters, Vol. 7, 363-65*); (b) dated 10 July 1936 to W.B. Yeats (*Letters, Vol. 8, 273-74*).

<sup>65</sup> Eliot, *Letters, Vol. 5, 137*.

<sup>66</sup> Which is ‘Salutation to a Brahman or priest’ (*Letters, Vol. 5, 139, n 1*).

<sup>67</sup> Eliot, *Letters Vol. 6, 483*.

<sup>68</sup> Eliot, *Letters Vol. 3, 684*.

<sup>69</sup> Eliot, *Letters Vol. 7, 52*.

the desert.<sup>70</sup>

It is a sort of high detachment which has been emphasised by the Buddha in His Fire Sermon in which He says that the fires of all desires must be extinguished in order to attain salvation in the form of *Nirvana*.

Eliot's letter dated 18 June 1936 to P.S. Richards brings forth the perfect critic in him, a man who has good knowledge of a subject, qualifying him to place it in the right perspective:

I should be delighted and should consider it most appropriate if you would review Irving Babbitt's translation of the *Dhammapada* for the *Criterion*. . . . I think we may assume that any translation by Babbitt would be the best in existence, and rather concentrate on his essay on Buddha and the Occident, which takes up the second half of the volume.<sup>71</sup>

### **Patanjali's *Yoga Sutra***

In a letter dated 22 April 1937 to W.B. Yeats Eliot wrote, 'I am writing to ask about the Swami's Patanjali translation. . . . I should like to do it, and therefore I very much hope to hear that you are having at least a hand in the translation, and that you will also provide an introduction.'<sup>72</sup>

Correspondence between Yeats, Purohit Swami and Eliot continued and the book was finally published by Faber in 1938 as *Aphorisms of Yoga*.<sup>73</sup> The editors of volume 8 of Eliot's letters, have added a footnote to his letter dated 7 May 1937 to W.B. Yeats<sup>74</sup> about the write-up for the blurb for *Aphorisms of Yoga*, which they assume was probably penned by Eliot:

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<sup>70</sup> Eliot, *Letters Vol. 5*, 209-210.

<sup>71</sup> Eliot, *Letters Vol. 8*, 243. The piece came out in *The Criterion* 16 (Oct. 1936).

<sup>72</sup> Eliot, *Letters Vol. 8*, 573.

<sup>73</sup> *Aphorisms of Yōga by Bhagwān Shree Patanjali*. tr. with a commentary by Shree Purohit Swāmi. Introduction by W.B. Yeats (London: Faber, 1938).

<sup>74</sup> Eliot wrote to Yeats, 'I shall write to Shri Purohit Swami as you suggest' (*Letters Vol. 8*, 588).

‘Those who are interested in the philosophy of India already owe a great debt to Shree Purohit Swami and Mr Yeats for their edition of *Ten Upanishads*. They have discerned an unusual combination of talents: an Indian scholar who learned his Sanskrit in the traditional Indian way – not through grammars written by Englishmen or Germans – and for whom therefore it is a living language of thought; and the greatest living poet, himself a student of Indian mysticism.

‘Patanjali was one of the earliest and greatest of Indian philosophers and systematic mystics and after the Upanishads and the Bhagavad-Gita his commentary is the most important text for any reader who would penetrate Indian thought. This translation will be of value to all students of Sanskrit philosophy; and to those who cannot read the original this will be indispensable.’<sup>75</sup>

It is clear that Eliot was promoting, amongst an English-readership, the publication and sale of this work. Therefore, it was quite natural for Eliot to take this opportunity to realise this project for Faber as one of its directors. Yeats, who knew all about Eliot’s Harvard association with Indic studies, wrote in his Introduction to *Aphorisms of Yôga by Bhagwān Shree Patanjali* (1938):

Some years ago I bought *The Yoga-System of Patanjali*, translated and edited by James Horton Woods and published by the Harvard Press. It is the standard edition, final, impeccable in

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<sup>75</sup> The blurb for *Aphorisms of Yoga*, by Bhagwan Shree Patanjali: Done into English from the original Sanskrit, with a commentary where necessary, by Shree Purohit Swami, and an Introduction by W.B. Yeats – in Faber Books Spring 1938, 66 (Letters, Vol. 8, 588). Patanjali’s Yoga was translated by an Indian monk who was well versed in Sanskrit and English, and more importantly, who belonged to the Indic tradition of practising Yoga. It may be mentioned that Eliot’s doubts about faithfulness in translation had already been expressed in his letter dated 16 May 1930 to Laurence Binyon. He writes there, ‘The only attempts at any translation that I have made, suggest to me that it is quite impossible to translate anything’ (Letters, Vol. 5, 181).

scholastic eyes, even in *the eyes of a famous poet and student of Samskrit*, who used it as a dictionary. But then the poet was at his university but lately out of school, had not learned to hate all scholar's cant and class-room slang, nor was he an old man in a hurry.<sup>76</sup> (*Italics mine*)

### **Their Flowing into Ideas Nurtured by Christianity**

Eliot universalised his understanding of Christianity by enriching it with those vital tenets of Hinduism and Buddhism which come very close to Christianity. All three religions expound the practice of control over the physical self in order to enrich the spiritual self, through the method of the constant practice of humility, selfless love and compassion. In 1948, Eliot wrote about his views on Christianity and Hinduism in 'The Three Senses of 'Culture'':

As a society develops, a greater number of degrees and kinds of religious capacity and function—as well as of other capacities and functions—will make their appearance. It is to be noticed that in some religions the differentiation has been so wide that there have resulted in effect two religions—one for the populace and one for the adepts. The evils of 'two nations'<sup>77</sup> in religion are obvious. Christianity has resisted this malady better than Hinduism.<sup>78</sup>

Tagore's influential ideas on nationalism are grounded in his Upanishadic

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<sup>76</sup> Yeats, Introduction, *Aphorisms of Yôga*, 11. The 'famous poet' Yeats mentioned therein was Eliot. Yeats indirectly acknowledges his gratitude and appreciation for Eliot's discernment in the realization of the publication of the book by Faber, just when the Second World War was about to break out.

<sup>77</sup> The 'two-nation' theory, emphasised by Muslim separatist thought endorsed primarily by M.A. Jinnah and the All India Muslim League, was also promoted by the Hindu Mahasabha led by V.D. Savarkar and the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, leading to the (in)famous Partition of 1947. Many individuals and associations were opposed to it.

<sup>78</sup> T.S. Eliot, 'The Three Senses of Culture', *Notes*, 21-34, quotation at 28-29.

beliefs, and he had already explained the connection between the Upanishads and Christian ideas. It is the union of the self (*jivatma*) with the Self (*Paramatma*), which is coincidental with the widening of one's feeling for all creation. This 'feeling' involves giving away the self – a continual spiritual exercise of selflessness. Tagore goes on to say, 'The Upanishad says, Thou shalt gain by giving away, Thou shalt not covet.'<sup>79</sup> This brings the Upanishads close to the Decalogue. This insistence on the continual practice of selflessness, according to Tagore, 'is not only in Buddhism and the Indian religions, but in Christianity too'<sup>80</sup> and he gives the examples of Christ's Death on the Cross and the Buddhist idea of Nirvana (the extinction of the fire of desire) as paradigms of spiritual fulfilment. He justifies himself saying:

Our revelatory men have always been those who have lived the life of self-sacrifice. The higher nature in man always seeks for something which transcends itself and yet is its deepest truth; which claims all its sacrifice, yet makes this sacrifice its own recompense. This is man's *dharma*, man's religion, and man's self is the vessel which is to carry this sacrifice to the altar.<sup>81</sup>

The Sanskrit word 'dharma' is not religion. It is 'the innermost nature, the essence, the implicit truth, of all things. Dharma is the ultimate purpose that is working in our self. When any wrong is done we say that dharma is violated, meaning that the lie has been given to our true nature,'<sup>82</sup> These basic ideas of 'dharma' may be found in many ancient Indic texts, including the *Mahabharata*, of which the Bhagavad Gita is a vital part, although it stands on its own, as a highly philosophical treatise on human action.

Therefore, it may be said that Cleanth Brooks's opinion that 'The poet's task is not only to find new symbols for the central experiences but to reconstitute the old symbols, reclaiming them, redeeming them, setting

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<sup>79</sup> Tagore, *Sādhanā*, 43.

<sup>80</sup> Tagore, *Sādhanā*, 122.

<sup>81</sup> Tagore, *Sādhanā*, 127-28 (Italics mine).

<sup>82</sup> Tagore, *Sādhanā*, 125.

them in contexts which will force us once again to confront their Christian meanings'<sup>83</sup> justifies Eliot's use of ideas from Brahma, Buddhist and Hindu texts to serve as 'objective correlatives' for scaffolding his Christian ideas.

### *The Waste Land*

James G. Frazer's *The Golden Bough* and Jessie L. Weston's *From Ritual to Romance* had a deep influence on Eliot, especially when he wrote *The Waste Land*. The Cambridge anthropologists, led by Frazer, offered the thesis that man progresses from the magical, through the religious, to the scientific thought. They tried to show how Christianity was actually a continuity of primitive rituals and vegetation rites where sacrifices were performed in order to restore the fertility of the land. Carol Smith takes stock of this when she writes that 'The primitive analogies between the fertility of the earth and the fertility of man suggests the unity between human and physical nature at the same time that it provided a connection between the sexual and spiritual fulfilment of man.'<sup>84</sup>

In the third section of the poem, 'The Fire Sermon', the need for spiritual purification is emphasized; by falling back upon the teachings of the Buddha in His Fire-Sermon, Eliot uses the symbol of the fire as enunciated in the Sermon which he came to know about from a reading of H.C. Warren's translation of the *Maha-Vagga*,<sup>85</sup> a central text of early Buddhism. This Sermon, Eliot points out in his notes to *The Waste Land*, corresponds to Christ's Sermon on the Mount. Kearns comments on the use of the fire-symbol in the poem: 'It takes up a trope used throughout the Upanishads and the Vedas and in the Gita, but one that has a particular importance to the Buddhist tradition—a trope of fire that refers both to the pain of worldly experience—[and] to the process of

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<sup>83</sup> Cleanth Brooks, *The Hidden God: Studies in Hemingway, Faulkner, Yeats, Eliot and Warren* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1963), 72-73.

<sup>84</sup> Carol Smith, *T.S. Eliot's Dramatic Theory and Practice* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963), 41.

<sup>85</sup> H.C. Warren. *Buddhism in Translations* (1896. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1986), 351-53.

purification by which that pain can be overcome.’<sup>86</sup> Thus, Eliot uses the fire-symbol as a rhetorical device in order to make his auditors conscious of the attachment to objects of desire—the causes of suffering which can be overcome by a spiritual regeneration.

Eliot uses the symbolically regenerative power of water in the fifth and final section of the poem, ‘What the Thunder Said’. The clear idea is a call for spiritual disciplining, which has been prescribed by mystical writings including those of St. John of the Cross, St. Augustine and the *Bṛhadāranyaka Upanishad* (where selflessness, compassion and control are prescribed). The poem ends with the lines ‘Datta. Dayadhvam. Damyata. / Shantih shantih shantih.’<sup>87</sup> This, according to the *Upanishad*, was the advice of the Thunder, rumbling over Himavanta, to the three kinds of Brahma’s creation. To men he says, ‘Datta’ (give). To the *asuras* or demons he says, ‘Dayadhvam’ (be compassionate). To the gods he says, ‘Damyata’ (control yourselves).<sup>88</sup> These will lead to ‘shantih’ or the ‘peace that passes understanding.’ G. Wilson Knight sums up the theme of *The Waste Land* beautifully when he says that ‘Advance is through desert and fire to religious grace, as rain. The only explicit religious commitment is conveyed by a use of Sanskrit quotations to denote a spiritual mastery.’<sup>89</sup> Ezra Pound’s letter to Eliot dated 24 December 1921, in which he wrote, ‘The thing now runs from April . . . to shantih without [a] break,’<sup>90</sup> expresses his satisfaction with the poem as it stood after the intervention of ‘*il miglior fabbro*’.

After Eliot’s death, Stephen Spender commented that ‘Incidentally, if Eliot’s own views are to be considered, I once heard him say to Chilean poet Gabriela Mistral that at the time when he was writing *The Waste*

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<sup>86</sup> Kearns, *Indic Traditions*, 75-76.

<sup>87</sup> Crawford writes in *Eliot After ‘The Waste Land’*: ‘To most people the poem’s Sanskrit words sound dauntingly remote’, 15.

<sup>88</sup> *Bṛhadāranyaka Upanishad*, tr. Swami Madhavananda (4<sup>th</sup> ed. Calcutta: Advaita Ashram, 1993), 564-67.

<sup>89</sup> G. Wilson Knight, *The Golden Labyrinth* (London: Phoenix House, 1962), 362.

<sup>90</sup> Eliot, *Letters*, Vol. 1, 497.

*Land*, he seriously considered becoming a Buddhist. A Buddhist is as immanent as a Christian in *The Waste Land*.<sup>91</sup> If Spender's words are to be taken seriously, then after about eight years of his Buddhism classes at Harvard, and about five years ahead of his formal entry into Anglicanism, serious consideration of espousing Buddhism was a noteworthy part of Eliot's journey from Unitarianism to Anglo-Catholicism. Crawford concurs, writing, 'Much later he remarked that around the time of its composition he had considered becoming a Buddhist. After studying Japanese Buddhism in Harvard, he had attended a Buddhist society during his Oxford postgraduate year, so this interest was hardly new.'<sup>92</sup> Crawford also mentions a connection between the Upanishads and Buddhism, in order to establish the significance of 'shantih' in the context of section 3 of the poem. He writes, 'For a Buddhist the 'shantih' is the peace that lies in a state beyond all the *samsara* cycles of pain and passion; yet in *The Waste Land* such peace is present less as an achieved condition, more as a maddeningly unattainable possibility.'<sup>93</sup> Thereafter, Crawford adds the connection Eliot wished to establish with Christianity: 'Glossing its meaning in one of the notes he added to bulk out the poem when it became a book, Tom, revealingly, translated 'shantih' into a Christian equivalent. Using a phrase from chapter four of St Paul's letter to the Philippians in the King James Bible, he wrote that 'The Peace which passeth understanding' is our equivalent to the word.'<sup>94</sup>

### ***The Cocktail Party***

This play shows how human suffering can be reduced by the practice of tolerance, love and compassion. His Holiness the fourteenth Dalai Lama explained in a 1981 interview that '[I]t is quite possible that a person who is basically a Christian, who accepts the idea of God, who believes in God, could at the same time incorporate certain Buddhist ideas and techniques into his/her practice. The teachings of love, compassion, and

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<sup>91</sup> Stephen Spender, 'Remembering Eliot,' *Encounter* 24 (April 1965): 3-14.

<sup>92</sup> Crawford, *Eliot After 'The Waste Land'*, 15.

<sup>93</sup> Crawford, *Eliot After 'The Waste Land'*, 15.

<sup>94</sup> Crawford, *Eliot After 'The Waste Land'*, 15.

kindness are present in Christianity and also in Buddhism.<sup>95</sup> These words of the Dalai Lama, explain, in a way, Eliot's own experiences when he came across the teachings of the Buddha. As a child, Eliot had read Edwin Arnold's *The Light of Asia*<sup>96</sup> (1879). It was the Buddhism of the Pali canon which drew Eliot's attention when he read Buddhist literature, both in the original and in the translations by Henry Clarke Warren. He was further exposed to a more sympathetic understanding of Mahayana Buddhism through the teachings of James Woods and the lectures of Masaharu Anesaki at Harvard. Eliot was particularly attracted by the denial of the substantive reality in Buddhism that leads towards *Nirvana*, which involves the extinction of the fires of lust, hatred, infatuation, pride, false belief and all the other passions. Buddhism shows the way towards *Nirvana* with the help of Dependent Origination.<sup>97</sup> In order to be causally effective a thing must enter into a causal sequence becoming a link in a causal chain. Causation is simply the law that the succeeding moment continues the series initiated by the previous one—it is not substantial, but serial. Therefore, every moment is a kind of death, to be succeeded by a new birth. Nothing binds these moments together; it is their very nature to succeed each other in an endless change. If this is the nature of life, then it is truly mysterious, according to Buddhist thought.

The structural pattern of *The Cocktail Party* follows the *Parinirvana Sutra* which expounds the two-fold way of life—the *nivritti-marga*,<sup>98</sup> and the *pravritti-marga*.<sup>99</sup> In His sermons the Buddha spoke of a golden mean between these two ways. For the ascetics, who were expected to lead a

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<sup>95</sup> P.J. Griffiths, *Christianity through Non-Christian Eyes* (New York: Orbis Books, 1994), 167.

<sup>96</sup> E. Arnold, *The Light of Asia* (1879. New Delhi: Srishti, 1999) in which Arnold had depicted the life and character of Gautama, the founder of Buddhism.

<sup>97</sup> *Pratityasamutpada*; this may be described as the 'postulate of morality', according to which, a real thing must be felt; it must affect or be affected by other things.

<sup>98</sup> Path of renunciation, which Eliot calls 'the way of illumination' *Complete Poems and Plays*, 421.

<sup>99</sup> Path of active social life, which Eliot calls 'the common routine' *Complete Poems and Plays*, 417.

life of mortification, he prescribed meditation and self-renunciation. For those who wished to lead a social life and yet sought *Nirvana*, he recommended the 'Noble Eightfold Path'. He also spoke of a middle way between these two which each individual could chalk out in order to reach self-realization, which is the ultimate goal of being. Eliot chose the *Parinirvana Sutra* as the essential platform for this play because it speaks of a middle way, which is a kind of solution for the spiritual crisis which the European civilization was experiencing after the Second World War. In order to show his auditors how the *Sutra* becomes relevant to their own existence in the post-war situation, Eliot created the character of Celia Copplestone who follows the *nivritti-marga*<sup>100</sup> and the characters of Edward and Lavinia Chamberlayne, the couple who follow the *pravritti-marga*.<sup>101</sup>

The superstructure of the quest for self-realization, supported by the ideas of the Incarnation and the symbolic Quest of the Holy Grail<sup>102</sup> rests on this infrastructure. The total effect is that the play is realistic on one hand and symbolic on the other. In an interview with Donald Hall, Eliot talks about *The Cocktail Party*, saying, 'Those two people [Edward and Lavinia] were the centre of the thing when I started and the other characters only developed out of it. The character of Celia, who came to be really the most important character in the play, was originally an appendage to a domestic situation.'<sup>103</sup>

### ***Four Quartets***

In this symphony which Eliot completed as the Second World War raged

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<sup>100</sup> Which comes close to the Contemplative Way in Christian mysticism. Further information may be had from *The Cloud of Unknowing* (By an English Mystic of the Fourteenth Century. Ed. Justin McCann, [London: Burns and Oates, 1924]), a treatise on Christian mysticism.

<sup>101</sup> Which comes close to the Affirmative Way.

<sup>102</sup> J.L. Weston's *The Quest of the Holy Grail* (1913. London: Frank Cass, 1964) is one of the important readings made by Eliot.

<sup>103</sup> D. Hall. 'The Art of Poetry 1: T.S. Eliot, An Interview,' *Paris Review* No. 21 (Spring-Summer 1959): 47-70.

over civilization, he returned to Indic notions of love and compassion. Crawford observes that ‘Over twenty years later, considering past, present and future in ‘Burnt Norton’, Tom returned to the image of the lotus, to ideas of ultimate reality and to hallucination. No other Western poet of his era was more professionally schooled in traditional Indic and Japanese thought.’<sup>104</sup>

The Buddhist idea of the middle path returns in ‘East Coker’<sup>105</sup> (1940):

So here I am, in the middle way, having had twenty years—  
Twenty years largely wasted, the years of *l’entre deux guerres*—  
Trying to learn to use words, and every attempt  
Is a wholly new start, and a different kind of failure  
Because one has only learnt to get the better of words  
For the thing one no longer has to say, or the way in which  
One is no longer disposed to say it. And so each venture  
Is a new beginning, . . .<sup>106</sup>

The poet’s perception is taken directly from the *nishkamakarmayoga* of the Gita in ‘The Dry Salvages’ (1941) where he writes:

And do not think of the fruit of action.  
Fare forward.<sup>107</sup>

This is what Krishna said to Arjuna (who stood perplexed on having to wage a battle against his kin) ‘as when he admonished Arjuna / On the field of battle.’<sup>108</sup> This was the occasion of the sayings of the Gita—

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<sup>104</sup> Crawford, *Young Eliot*, 176.

<sup>105</sup> East Coker harps on *pratityasamutpada*: it begins with ‘In my beginning is my end’ (*Complete Poems and Plays*, 177) and ends with the words ‘In my end is my beginning’ (*Complete Poems and Plays*, 183).

<sup>106</sup> Eliot, *Complete Poems and Plays*, 182.

<sup>107</sup> Eliot, *Complete Poems and Plays*, 188.

<sup>108</sup> Eliot, *Complete Poems and Plays*, 188.

Krishna's words. Tagore explained the teachings of the Gita in *Sādhanā*:

In the Gita we are advised to work disinterestedly, abandoning all lust for the result. Many outsiders conclude from this teaching that the conception of the world as something unreal lies at the root of the so-called disinterestedness preached in India. But the reverse is the truth.<sup>109</sup>

A footnote to Eliot's letter dated 4 January 1941 to John Hayward, refers to Dominic Griffiths' observation: 'Also, Krishna, because he is divine, perceives time in a way that Arjuna cannot. Krishna understands the nature of the true Self, *Atman*, which is unborn and undying and therefore knows that, regardless of the outcome of the battle, Arjuna was born and will die and then reincarnate into another life. Thus, from Krishna's perspective, we must . . . remain mindful that 'the time of death is every moment.'<sup>110</sup>

## Conclusion

Eliot had no intention to sermonise his readers and auditors. He writes: 'What I want is a literature which should be unconsciously, rather than deliberately and defiantly, Christian.'<sup>111</sup> He continually tried to awaken the contemporary readers to an awareness of spiritual fulfilment. In a letter dated 15 June 1928 to A.S. Duncan-Jones, he wrote, 'I have in mind a series of small books . . . somewhat the size of *The Ancient and Modern Library of Theological Literature*, published some years ago by Griffith, Farran, Okeden & Welsh, of which I have Andrewes's *Sermons on the Incarnation*.'<sup>112</sup> He carried on trying to communicate, through his creative

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<sup>109</sup> Tagore, *Sādhanā*, 44.

<sup>110</sup> Dominic Griffiths. 'The Poet as 'Worldmaker': T.S. Eliot and the Religious Imagination' in Francesca Knox and David Lonsdale ed. *Poetry and the Religious Imagination: The Power of the Word* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2015), 161-175, at 172.

<sup>111</sup> Eliot, 'Religion and Literature', *Selected Prose*. Ed. Frank Kermode (London: Faber, 1975), 100.

<sup>112</sup> Eliot, *Letters*, Vol. 4, 183.

work as well as his position in Faber, that there were valuable texts already existent in Indic as well as English religious teachings, reading which could help the modern urban dwellers to find ‘shantih’.

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## Private Investigations: A Law and Literature Approach to T.S. Eliot's plays

Malcolm Harvey

Eliot's lifelong preoccupation with tradition, order and the 'intolerable wrestle / With words and meanings'<sup>1</sup> points to common interests with lawyers. There are frequent references in his plays to legal notions such as trial by jury (276), witnesses (298) and cross-examination (493); two barrister characters (Edward and Charles); and a quasi-judicial hearing in *The Confidential Clerk*. At a deeper level, his much-quoted theory of an 'ideal order' of created works 'which is modified by the introduction of the new (the really new) work of art'<sup>2</sup> is analogous to judicial precedent, where court rulings enter into a dynamic relationship with both previous and subsequent decisions. However, Eliot's creative output has been largely overlooked by the Law and Literature movement: there are studies on his literary criticism and anti-Semitism in his writing, but little discussion of his poetry apart from a short article on *Four Quartets* and passing references in Posner,<sup>3</sup> and no mention of his plays. Eliot's drama has in general attracted considerably less scholarly attention than his poetry: most full-length studies of his plays date back to the 1960s with the exception of a monograph on *The Family Reunion*, a sourcebook and

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<sup>1</sup> T.S. Eliot, *The Complete Poems and Plays* (London: Faber and Faber, 1969), 179. Subsequent references to this work are given parenthetically in the text.

<sup>2</sup> T.S. Eliot, 'Tradition and the Individual Talent,' in *Selected Essays* (London: Faber and Faber, 1951), 15.

<sup>3</sup> Robert Weisberg, 'The Law-Literature Enterprise,' *Yale Journal of Law & the Humanities* 1 (1989): 12-4, <https://digitalcommons.law.yale.edu/vjllh/vol1/iss1/4>; Anthony Julius, *T. S. Eliot, Anti-Semitism, and Literary Form* (London: Thames & Hudson, rev. ed. 2003); Peter Fitzpatrick, 'Law Like Poetry – *Burnt Norton*,' *Liverpool Law Review* 23, no. 3 (2001): 285-8, 23, <http://eprints.bbk.ac.uk/archive/00000485>; and Richard A. Posner, *Law and Literature: A Misunderstood Relation* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1988).

a critical overview by Malamud and, more recently, a published master's dissertation.<sup>4</sup>

Following an overview of the links between law, literature and drama, this article adopts a Law and Literature approach to Eliot's plays, viewing them through the prism of the investigation. Particular weight is given to the influence of classical sources on both structure and subject matter. Finally, it is argued that the value systems of Athenian drama permeate Eliot's work, most notably the role assigned to women.

## 1. Law, literature and drama

The Law and Literature movement is generally traced back to two pioneering articles by eminent US jurists in the early twentieth century. In 1908 Wigmore provided an annotated list of law-related novels which, he claimed, reflected or indeed contributed to legal reforms and provided lawyers with an essential insight into human nature;<sup>5</sup> this ethical approach was to become an enduring feature of Law and Literature studies. In 1925 Cardozo analysed the role of style in judicial opinions, arguing that the voice of authority can speak with 'supreme literary excellence'.<sup>6</sup> The

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<sup>4</sup> D.E. Jones, *The Plays of T. S. Eliot* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1960); Carol H. Smith, *T. S. Eliot's Dramatic Theory and Practice. From Sweeney Agonistes to The Elder Statesman* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963); E. Martin Browne, *The Making of T. S. Eliot's Plays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969); Giles Evans, *Wishwood Revisited. A New Interpretation of T. S. Eliot's The Family Reunion* (Lewes, UK: Book Guild, 1991); Randy Malamud, *T.S. Eliot's Drama: A Research and Production Sourcebook* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1992); Randy Malamud, *Where the Words Are Valid: T. S. Eliot's Communities of Drama* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1994); and John Angell Grant, *Women and Religion in the Drawing Room Plays of T. S. Eliot* (Bethesda: Academica Press, 2017).

<sup>5</sup> John H. Wigmore, 'A List of Legal Novels,' *Illinois Law Review* 2 (1908): 574-93,  
<https://heinonline.org/HOL/LandingPage?handle=hein.journals/illlr2&div=59&id=&page=>

<sup>6</sup> Benjamin Cardozo, 'Law and Literature,' *Yale Law Review* 14 (1925): 699-718,  
<https://digitalcommons.law.yale.edu/ylj/vol48/iss3/9>.

movement gained widespread academic recognition in the 1970s with the publication of a casebook for law students by White,<sup>7</sup> which was adopted in US law faculties for the purposes of both teaching and research. Since then it has spawned numerous conferences, the journal *Law & Literature*, and influential publications by authors such as Weisberg, who uses literary texts to warn lawyers of the dangers of manipulative communication and to stress the need to empathise with the disempowered.<sup>8</sup> Following the pattern set by Wigmore and Cardozo, the two main angles are ‘law in literature’, which examines legal notions and representations in fictional works; and ‘law as literature’, which studies legal texts using the tools of literary analysis.

Greek drama provides a notable illustration of the cross-fertilisation of law and literature;<sup>9</sup> it has even been argued that law played a part in the incipience of tragedy. The French classicist Vernant developed the notion of a ‘tragic moment’ when the birth of tragedy coincided with the emergence of a new legal system. Athens in the 5th century BCE underwent a seismic shift from revenge-based divine justice to human justice founded on the rule of law and a fair trial, and this transition is depicted and questioned by classical dramatists. The tragic hero is caught between the old and the new judicial orders, leading to wrenching and at times impossible choices. For Vernant, this legal conundrum distinguishes tragedy from the heroic tradition which preceded it:

[T]ragedy establishes a distance between itself and the myths of the heroes that inspire it and that it transposes with great freedom. It scrutinizes them. It confronts heroic values and ancient religious

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<sup>7</sup> James Boyd White, *The Legal Imagination* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, abridged ed. 1985).

<sup>8</sup> Richard Weisberg, *Poethics: And Other Strategies of Law and Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992).

<sup>9</sup> See Edward M. Harris, Delfim F. Leão and P.J. Rhodes, eds., *Law and Drama in Ancient Greece* (London: Bloomsbury, 2010).

representations with the new modes of thought that characterize the advent of law within the city-state.<sup>10</sup>

Attic tragedy infuses Eliot's dramatic output on several levels. The most visible example is the use of characters such as the chorus, the messenger and the Eumenides. On a more technical level, Eliot has recourse to *anagnorisis* (discovery) and *peripeteia* (reversal),<sup>11</sup> stichomythia (dialogue in alternating lines) (249), and the *deus ex machina* (Mrs. Guzzard in *The Confidential Clerk*). The plots of all four 'secular' plays are reworkings of classical tragedies which Eliot clearly enjoyed concealing from literary critics, as shown by his revelation that *The Cocktail Party* was based on Euripides's *Alcestis*.<sup>12</sup>

The legal undercurrent present in Athenian drama has also carried through into Eliot's work. Beyond his acknowledged sources, Sophocles's *Oedipus the King* underpins all five plays in terms of both plot (an investigation aimed at elucidating a mystery) and subject-matter (the search for knowledge, in particular self-knowledge). To quote Vernant again, tragedy involves 'an inquiry that is no longer concerned with the law but is focused upon man himself'.<sup>13</sup> In Eliot's plays the enquiry can be quasi-judicial, psychological or spiritual in nature, and these different facets will be considered in turn. In each case *The Family Reunion* will act as a starting-point since it features all three types of investigation.

## 2. Quasi-judicial investigations

Eliot observed that a number of classical plays from *Oedipus the King* to *The Spanish Tragedy* and *Hamlet* have 'an affinity to our contemporary

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<sup>10</sup> Jean-Pierre Vernant and Pierre Vidal-Naquet, *Myth and Tragedy in Ancient Greece*, trans. Janet Lloyd (New York: Zone Books, 1988), 26.

<sup>11</sup> See below, sections 2.1 and 4.1 respectively.

<sup>12</sup> T.S. Eliot, 'Poetry and Drama,' in *On Poetry and Poets* (London: Faber and Faber, 1957), 85.

<sup>13</sup> Vernant and Vidal-Naquet, *Myth and Tragedy*, 32.

detective drama',<sup>14</sup> and he was a lifelong reader of thrillers, especially Sherlock Holmes novels.<sup>15</sup> As Aristodemou puts it, detective fiction celebrates 'the mind's ability to order reality and transform seeming chaos into order'<sup>16</sup> and this description could equally apply to Eliot's work, which seeks to impose order and meaning on an indeterminate, fragmented reality.

*Oedipus the King* provides the template for the detective novel. The protagonist, who was made king of Thebes after saving the city from the Sphinx, opens a 'cold-case' investigation into the murder of his predecessor Laius. In an extraordinary dramatic twist described by Aristotle as *peripeteia* or reversal,<sup>17</sup> Oedipus discovers that he is himself the murderer and that Laius was his father. Since Oedipus married Laius's widow Jocasta on acceding to the throne, he has unwittingly committed both parricide and incest. Oedipus is both the accuser and the accused, the investigator and the culprit.

## 2.1 From suspect to investigator

Following in this tradition, Eliot uses the evidence-based investigation as a dramatic device in two of his plays. In an atmosphere reminiscent of an Agatha Christie novel, the action of *The Family Reunion* takes place in a remote country house in late winter. Following Harry's unsolicited confession that he pushed his wife overboard during a transatlantic voyage, his uncle Charles decides to conduct an 'investigation' (297) to ascertain the truth, with the other relatives acting as 'witnesses' (298). Charles questions Harry's chauffeur Downing, and his testimony appears to corroborate Harry's version of the events. Throughout the voyage, Downing explains, Harry was nervous and tried to prevent his wife from

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<sup>14</sup> T.S. Eliot, 'Seneca in Elizabethan Translation,' in *Selected Essays*, 80-1.

<sup>15</sup> Robert Crawford, *Young Eliot. From St Louis to The Waste Land* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2015), 37 and 271.

<sup>16</sup> Mária Aristodemou, *Law & Literature: Journeys from Her to Eternity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 39.

<sup>17</sup> Aristotle, *Poetics*, trans. Anthony Kenny (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 29-30.

going near the ship's rail (suggesting he feared he might push her over). On the evening of the supposed accident Downing caught sight of Harry staring calmly at the water, presumably after his wife had fallen in, instead of calling for help (300). However, this potentially incriminating line of enquiry is not pursued, although Harry's fascination with murderers (314-5) keeps the audience's suspicions alive.

The next stage of the investigation is conducted by Dr. Warburton during an after-dinner chat with Harry. His purported aim is to ascertain whether Harry really murdered his wife or is suffering from a delusion (296); in his role as family doctor, Warburton also wishes to warn Harry that his mother is extremely frail (320). However, Harry turns the tables during the interview, taking on the role of the interrogator in order to satisfy his 'overwhelming need for explanation' (318). He asks about his father, sensing that the mystery is somehow linked to him, but receives only evasive replies. When mention is made of his parents' separation, Harry seizes on an unprompted, and unconvincing, denial by Warburton of any impropriety and his garbled advice not to broach the subject with his aunt Agatha (319), which suggests that she may hold the key to the mystery. As a result of this role-switching Harry takes over the enquiry: like Oedipus, he narrows the focus of the investigation from an alleged murder to a 'private puzzle' (327) concerning his origins.

In the ensuing interview with Agatha, Harry probes further into his family history. Agatha eventually confesses, albeit in oblique terms, that she had an affair with his father shortly before Harry was born and had to dissuade him from killing Harry's mother Amy (332-3). This revelation leads Harry to conclude that he has unconsciously inherited a sense of guilt arising from his father's attempted murder, and enacted the killing of his own wife in his imagination: 'Perhaps / I only dreamt I pushed her' (333). Following this moment of *anagnorisis* (discovery),<sup>18</sup> Agatha immediately moves Harry's search onto a different plane: this is not the end of the mystery, she warns, but simply 'a clue, hidden in the obvious place' (337) leading to further enquiries of a spiritual nature (see below,

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<sup>18</sup> Aristotle, *Poetics*, 29-30.

section 4.1).

## 2.2 A family reunion

The plot of *The Confidential Clerk* is also based on an investigation into family origins which is resolved by testimony from a key witness. Both Sir Claude and Lady Elizabeth claim that Colby is their illegitimate son from a previous relationship. They summon Mrs. Guzzard, who raised him, in order to settle the matter; their former employee Eggerson, who has legal training (508), acts as ‘a sort of chairman’ (493). They are aware of the quasi-judicial nature of the interview, which they are keen to play down: ‘We mustn’t look like a couple of barristers / Ready to cross-examine a witness’ (493).

However, there is a significant difference compared to *The Family Reunion*. Whereas Harry’s investigation results in him leaving the family for good, this enquiry leads to a true family reunion: before hearing Mrs. Guzzard’s testimony the couple resolve to regard Colby as their son, whatever the outcome (496), and each spouse welcomes the other’s child (Lucasta and B. Kaghan). This can be viewed as part of the evolution, traced by Malamud, from isolation of the hero in the early plays, reflecting the solipsism of Eliot’s youthful poetry, towards ‘communities of drama’ from *The Cocktail Party* onwards.<sup>19</sup> That said, Colby (like his predecessors Harry and Celia) seems destined for a solitary existence, not wishing to marry (491) and possibly ‘reading for orders’ (518) at a later stage.

Unusually for Eliot *The Confidential Clerk* contains little sense of guilt, either criminal or personal,<sup>20</sup> whereas the ‘slow stain’ (294) permeates *The Family Reunion*. However, Harry is a lenient arbiter, especially when compared to his predecessor Oedipus. Sophocles’s hero finds himself

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<sup>19</sup> Malamud, *Where the Words Are Valid*.

<sup>20</sup> In the early drafts Mrs. Guzzard and Lucasta were Sir Claude’s past and present mistresses respectively, but these indiscretions were removed in the final version. See Browne, *Eliot’s Plays*, 252 and 270.

guilty on the basis of strict or absolute liability:<sup>21</sup> he has committed parricide and incest and consequently must be punished, irrespective of intentions or ignorance of fact. Harry, on the other hand, absolves himself on the grounds of a mere hypothesis: his father fantasised about killing his wife but did not carry out the act, so presumably the same applies to him. This peremptory dismissal of the charges sits uneasily with Downing's testimony about Harry's suspicious behaviour before and after the 'accident', for which no explanation is provided. This ambivalence was clearly intended: while writing the play Eliot repeatedly stressed the need to retain the word 'pushed', against the advice of several friends, because it is 'on the borderline where it might have been murder, might have been an accident, or might have been imaginary'.<sup>22</sup> The lingering suspicion is that the psychological investigation, to which we now turn, provides a convenient diversion from possible criminal guilt.

### 3. Psychological investigations

Memory is a recurring motif in Eliot's work. The opening section of *The Waste Land* evokes 'memory and desire' (61) leading to the epiphany with the hyacinth girl, and in *Four Quartets* memory becomes a means of achieving inner peace, 'liberation / From the future as well as the past' (195). In the plays, memory is used to conduct an investigation into the character's true nature in order to attain a similar sense of liberation.

#### 3.1 Back to the womb

In *The Family Reunion* this investigation takes the form of assisted self-analysis. Harry delves into his past in two crucial interviews: first with his distant cousin Mary and later with Agatha, both of whom stir memory and desire. Harry questions Mary about their childhood in the hope of

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<sup>21</sup> Posner, *Law and Literature*, 35-6.

<sup>22</sup> 'To Frank Morley,' in T.S. Eliot, *The Letters of T.S. Eliot, Volume 8: 1936-1938*, ed. Valerie Eliot and John Haffenden (London: Faber and Faber, 2019), 802; cf. 832-3, 846.

triggering his own memories, which begin to return (306-7). Although Harry is technically the ‘patient’ he takes the lead role: as in the subsequent interview with Dr. Warburton, the object of the investigation is also the subject. Mary suggests that Harry’s guilt is psychological rather than criminal, linked not to external events but to some inner factor to which he alone holds the key: ‘What you need to alter is something inside you’ (308). The solution, she believes, is to attach himself to loving rather than loathing (309): it is the nearest she comes to declaring her feelings for him and leads to a lyrical scene denoting a heightened state of consciousness. The evocation of the painful rites of spring raises hopes of renewal, and Harry appears receptive to Mary’s offer of affection: ‘You bring me news / Of a door that opens at the end of a corridor, / Sunlight and singing’ (310). However, this potential love scene is abruptly ended by the terrifying appearance of the Eumenides; the spell is broken and Harry reverts to his obnoxious persona (312). At this point the Eumenides seem to be vengeful Furies denying Harry any chance of happiness, but he later realises that they are warning him not to stop here: human love is not the endpoint of his investigation.

In the scene with Agatha, Harry takes the enquiry back to the intrauterine stage. He senses that the Eumenides are pointing to a proverbial skeleton in the family cupboard: ‘The shadow of something behind our meagre childhood, / Some origin of wretchedness’ (331). Agatha eventually admits that she had an affair with his father, who made clumsy attempts to kill Amy while Harry was still in the womb (see above, 2.1). Harry concludes that his sense of guilt stems not from his own actions but from transgenerational factors causing him to re-enact his father’s wish-fulfillment fantasies (333). Through this process of discovery Harry is symbolically reborn, released from a hereditary burden.

### **3.2 From loathing to a kind of loving**

In *The Cocktail Party* the investigation is conducted with the help of a professional counsellor, Sir Henry Harcourt-Reilly, who appears to be

part-psychiatrist, part-guru.<sup>23</sup> He helps several characters to discover their true vocation in life, beginning with Edward and Lavinia. In the opening scene Edward engages in conversation with him once the other guests have left, finding it easier to talk to a stranger (359) and unaware of his profession. Having previously offered lame excuses for Lavinia's absence, Edward admits that she has left him. Reilly begins his investigation using the language of a lawyer cross-examining a witness ('I put it to you...', 'I suggest...') as Edward, who is himself a barrister, is quick to point out (361). However, this is not a criminal enquiry: like Oedipus, Edward is about to embark on a journey of self-discovery which will lead, Reilly tells him, '[t]o finding out / What you really are. What you really feel' (363). In particular, Edward needs to decide whether he wants Lavinia to return or whether to cement his relationship with his lover Celia. Like the king of Thebes, he soon realises that by launching an investigation he has set a trap for himself (375), and his journey of introspection results in a similarly unflattering, if less devastating, discovery of his true nature: whereas Oedipus finds he has committed regicide, parricide and incest, Edward becomes aware of his mediocrity and lack of willpower (381).

Their next encounter is in the consulting room. As in their first interview Reilly uses the language of a criminal investigator, talking of 'collecting information' from 'outside sources' (presumably Julia and Alex) and explaining that he 'made enquiries' (121). His tone is more reminiscent of a police interrogator than a psychiatrist: just before the interview with Edward he talks of the need to 'lower his resistance' (400); he prevents him from leaving (401) and brusquely interrupts him when he mentions his childhood (402-3). In a dig at Edward's profession, he criticises him for being unprepared for the interview:

you have been making up your case  
So to speak, as you went along. A barrister  
Ought to know his brief before he enters the court. (405)

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<sup>23</sup> The precise nature of his profession is not made clear, apart from the fact that he is a doctor (378, 397).

He then springs a surprise on Edward by arranging a confrontation with Lavinia, exposing gaps in each party's testimony, particularly their failure to disclose their respective – and inconclusive – love affairs. The bleak conclusion of his investigation is that their shortcomings make them ideally suited for one another: 'A man who finds himself incapable of loving / And a woman who finds that no man can love her' (410). In *The Family Reunion* loveless marriage is portrayed as a transgenerational curse resulting in murderous impulses; in *The Cocktail Party* it becomes 'the bond which holds you together'. This may be a somewhat jaded view of married life (making 'the best of a bad job', as Edward puts it) but they have at least followed Mary's advice to prefer loving to loathing, and Lavinia echoes Mary's words (410). Whereas in *The Family Reunion* the marital link is broken, in *The Cocktail Party* it is restored: Reilly in effect encourages Edward and Lavinia to renew their marriage vows, which they seal in Act Three not with a ring but with a child.

Domestic harmony may be a satisfactory outcome for Eliot's secondary characters but not for the main protagonists, all of whom need to embark on a spiritual quest.

#### 4. Spiritual investigations

In addition to its criminal and psychological meanings, guilt can have a spiritual dimension. In Athenian tragedy murder is viewed as a *miasma* (pollution) affecting the entire city, comparable to a contagious disease:<sup>24</sup> for instance, in *Oedipus the King* the oracle reveals that a plague is afflicting Thebes because the killer of Laius is still at large. To cleanse the city, the guilt of the community must be transferred onto a *pharmakos* (human scapegoat) who is exiled or sacrificed. In Eliot's plays the *pharmakos* takes the form of a saint in the making.

Eliot's enduring fascination with saints is already apparent in poems written in his mid-twenties. The protagonist of 'The Death of Saint Narcissus' is set apart from other humans, like the future saints in the

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<sup>24</sup> Edith Hall, *Greek Tragedy: Suffering Under the Sun* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 302-3.

plays: ‘He could not live men’s ways, but became a dancer before God’ (605). However, he is too preoccupied with his own physicality to achieve spiritual communion, instead seeking an eroticised martyrdom ‘[b]ecause his flesh was in love with the burning arrows’ (606). Eliot’s plays stress the need to endure a private purgatory in order to achieve the spiritual detachment that eludes Narcissus. This dark night of the soul is dramatised as a spiritual investigation involving a historical saint in *Murder in the Cathedral*, and fictional saints in the ensuing works.

#### 4.1 Sin and expiation

In *The Family Reunion*, as soon as Harry has exonerated himself of the murder charge Agatha shifts the scope of the investigation from the criminal to the spiritual plane: ‘What we have written is not a story of detection, / Of crime and punishment, but of sin and expiation’ (333). The play contains a number of references to collective guilt, expressed in terms such as ‘contaminating presences’ (331) and ‘contagion’ (335), which are evocative of *miasma*. Like the *pharmakos*, Harry knows that there is ‘only one way out of defilement’, namely exile (337); and like Oedipus he is burdened with the misdeeds of his forefathers: ‘A curse comes to being / As a child is formed’ (336).

Ancient Greek notions of pollution and a curse are interwoven with Christian concepts of sin and redemption. After *Murder in the Cathedral* Eliot declined Bishop Bell’s invitation to continue in the vein of overtly ‘religious drama’, preferring to write for a secular audience,<sup>25</sup> and as a result the religious elements are muted in *The Family Reunion*. The explicit references to Christianity in the early drafts have been removed<sup>26</sup> but several allusions remain. In his first appearance on stage Harry makes an oblique reference to original sin: ‘It is not my conscience, / Not my mind, that is diseased, but the world I have to live in’ (295). He later reiterates this notion and stresses his sense of powerlessness:

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<sup>25</sup> ‘To George Bell,’ in T.S. Eliot, *The Letters of T.S. Eliot, Volume 7: 1934-1935*, ed. Valerie Eliot and John Haffenden (London: Faber and Faber, 2017), 700.

<sup>26</sup> See Browne, *Eliot’s Plays*, 123.

[My life] begins to seem just part of some huge disaster,  
Some monstrous mistake and aberration  
Of all men, of the world, which I cannot put in order. (326)

The religious undercurrent is more apparent in the scene with Agatha, who suggests that Harry's vocation is to expiate not just his own sins but those of his ancestors:

It is possible  
You are the consciousness of your unhappy family,  
Its bird sent flying through the purgatorial flame. (333)

The *miasma* of Attic tragedy has been replaced by the Christian fire of purgatory, which was to feature in 'Little Gidding' (196). The Eumenides appear again in a different guise: they are no longer 'sleepless hunters' (311) but leaders guiding Harry on his journey of redemption (336). In a case of *peripeteia* Harry is transformed from the hunted into the hunter: 'my business is not to run away, but to pursue, / Not to avoid being found, but to seek' (338). His 'election' involves exile to a distant land and a life of self-abnegation (339) in atonement for his sins (real or imagined) and those of his forebears.

## 4.2. Sin and tonic

*The Cocktail Party* marks a similar shift from a psychological to a spiritual investigation in Act Two, when the appointment with Edward and Lavinia is followed by an interview with Celia. Like Harry, she senses that her suffering is part of some collective malady, 'something wrong [...] With the world itself' (413) which it is her duty to put right. The religious references are even more discreet than in *The Family Reunion* but are nonetheless present: shortly before Celia arrives Reilly talks of 'the saints – such as those who go / To the sanatorium' (410), although it is not immediately apparent that he is referring to her; and Celia talks of 'a sense of sin' (414) for which she must 'atone' (416).

Reilly sets out two possible modes of living: settling for a conventional

relationship in which two people coexist without truly understanding one another (417); or pursuing the path of ‘compassion’ (416) in the etymological sense of suffering with, or on behalf of, others. Having failed to find fulfilment in human love Celia now aspires for a different kind of ‘ecstasy’, endowing terms of physical passion with a spiritual meaning:

a vibration of delight  
Without desire, for desire is fulfilled  
In the delight of loving. (417)

Like all the ‘chosen ones’ in Eliot’s plays Celia opts for an ascetic existence, forgoing (or sublimating) human love in order to attain spiritual plenitude. The next we hear of her is two years later, when Alex recounts her story in the manner of a messenger in Greek tragedy. Celia left England to perform voluntary nursing work in a remote African village which had been afflicted by a plague; following an insurrection she was kidnapped and killed. The Christian references become more explicit: the ‘very austere’ (433) nursing order which Celia joined is akin to a religious order; and Celia, who was one of three sisters, was crucified (434). The parallel with Christ could hardly be clearer.<sup>27</sup>

### 4.3 Visitors

The spiritual journey towards greater self-knowledge frequently involves a series of encounters with visitors, who act as catalysts. *Oedipus the King* again provides the template: the protagonist gradually pieces together the mystery by calling witnesses (Tiresias, the old herdsman), but it is an unexpected visitor (the messenger from Corinth) who reveals the secret of Oedipus’s origins. Eliot may also have been influenced by the advice of J.B. Priestley regarding *The Family Reunion*, who suggested that in place

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<sup>27</sup> For a detailed account of the Christian imagery in this play see Denis Donoghue, ‘*The Cocktail Party*,’ in *T.S. Eliot: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Hugh Kenner (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1962), 173-86.

of the Eumenides he could have ‘made them *people*, sinister folk that Harry saw everywhere and who called on him the moment he arrived home.’<sup>28</sup> Eliot uses this device to comic effect in Act One of *The Cocktail Party*, where Edward is constantly importuned by unwelcome visitors, and more seriously in *The Elder Statesman*.

Lord Claverton initially complains about no longer receiving visitors (531) but subsequently receives three unexpected visitors who, like the ‘three together’ (316) in *The Family Reunion*, recall guilty secrets from his past. His former friend Gomez taunts him with a hit-and-run incident during their student days, which Claverton did not report to the police because there were two ‘girls’ in the car (540). The second encounter is with his former fiancée Mrs. Carghill, who has never forgiven him for breaking off their engagement (551). The final meeting is with his son Michael, who acts as a mirror for his own misdeeds since Claverton lives in fear that Michael too will run someone over (555).

The effect of these visits is to make Claverton realise that ‘Those who flee from their past will always lose the race’ (561); like Harry, he resolves instead to confront these ‘spectres from [his] past’ (569). He recounts his past failings to his daughter Monica, feeling emboldened to confess to the one person he has loved (568). In a distant echo of Agatha’s words quoted above (4.1), Claverton explains that the law is not an adequate framework to judge his failings:

I heard what you said about guilty secrets.  
There are many things not crimes, Monica,  
Beyond anything of which the law takes cognisance (568).

Spiritual guilt, he claims, is harder to confess than criminal guilt ‘[f]or the crime is in relation to the law / And the sin is in relation to the sinner’ (573). Monica implicitly forgives him, saying that she now loves the man he is, not the man she thought he was (581). Through the power of confession and forgiveness, Claverton experiences ‘the peace that ensues

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<sup>28</sup> ‘To J.B. Priestley’ in T.S. Eliot, *The Letters of T.S. Eliot, Volume 9: 1939-1941*, ed. Valerie Eliot and John Haffenden (London: Faber and Faber, 2021), 142n.

upon contrition' (581) and retires to die beneath a beech tree. The play re-enacts Sophocles's final work *Oedipus at Colonus*, in which the protagonist receives a number of visitors, including his estranged son Polyneices, before finally moving offstage to die in the sacred grove of the Eumenides.<sup>29</sup> The Oedipal cycle in Eliot's plays is complete.

#### 4.4. Martyrs and witnesses

The most sustained encounter with visitors occurs in *Murder in the Cathedral*, which focuses on Thomas's preparation for martyrdom. This abstract notion is dramatised through visits from four Tempters who can be viewed as inner voices, 'objectified facets of his own consciousness'.<sup>30</sup> The first three Tempters, who respectively advocate reconciliation with the King, regaining temporal power through the chancellorship and forming an alliance with the barons, are dismissed with increasing difficulty and some regret, but were expected. The Fourth Tempter, who 'always precede[s] expectation' (252), is the most insidious, encouraging Thomas to seek martyrdom in order to achieve eternal glory. Thomas admits he has entertained such thoughts (254) and accuses his final visitor of 'tempting with [his] own desires' (255).

The temptation scene is essentially a series of flashbacks (a device first employed in *Oedipus the King*), using the past to elucidate the present as in a detective novel. However, what is being 'detected' here is not the culprit but a potentially impure intention. As Gordon puts it, the audience is called upon to become 'a sleuth of the inner life'.<sup>31</sup> After a period of quiet reflection Thomas declares that he has resolved this conflict by submitting to the will of God (258-9), and by the time he delivers the Christmas sermon he speaks with the detachment of a future saint (261-2). The spiritual investigation thus appears to have concluded half-way

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<sup>29</sup> For more parallels between the two plays see Jones, *Plays*, 180-2; Smith, *Dramatic Theory*, 228-31.

<sup>30</sup> John Peter, 'Murder in the Cathedral,' in *T.S. Eliot: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Hugh Kenner, 158.

<sup>31</sup> Lyndall Gordon, *The Imperfect Life of T.S. Eliot* (London: Virago, rev. ed. 2012), 271.

through the play.

The central issue of motivation is kept alive in Part II by the Knights, who are expected but unwelcome visitors. In the confrontation with Thomas they adopt the tone of prosecutors (267), and after the murder they abruptly switch from dramatic verse to address the audience in twentieth-century rhetorical prose. Spectators normally expect to be passive witnesses to the events on stage but in this play they are enrolled as participants, acting first as the congregation during the Christmas sermon and now as jurors. Referring to the ‘long-established principle of Trial by Jury’ (276), the Knights attempt to shift the blame from themselves to their victim:

I think, with these facts before you, you will unhesitatingly render a verdict of Suicide while of Unsound Mind. (279)

Although on one level the Knights’ arguments are absurd, it is not easy for the audience to decide whether Thomas ultimately avoids the temptation of actively pursuing martyrdom. Shortly before being murdered he claims to represent a higher legal order, ‘the Law of God above the Law of Man’ (274), and he taunts the Knights with the power his status as martyr will afford him: ‘if you kill me, I shall rise from my tomb / To submit my cause before God’s throne’ (269), words which could have been uttered by the Fourth Tempter. Given the introspective nature of this case (we are judging not an act but a state of mind), it is tempting to conclude that the jury is still out.

The chorus are also transformed from witnesses into participants as the play progresses. They initially complain about being dragged into the conflict against their will: ‘We are forced to bear witness’ (239). For them, a witness is passive: ‘For us, the poor, there is no action, / But only to wait and to witness’ (240).<sup>32</sup> However, they come to realise that action and suffering are part of the same pattern, as Thomas points out somewhat cryptically in his opening speech (245). The Greek term *μάρτυρ*

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<sup>32</sup> Agatha echoes this notion: ‘You and I, Mary, / Are only watchers and waiters: not the easiest rôle’ (305).

[*martur*] originally referred to a witness in a court of law,<sup>33</sup> and the roles of martyr and witness converge in the play. The chorus participate in the martyrdom both through their awareness of collective sin which the martyr must expiate, and through their sense of suffering with Thomas. 'This is your share of the eternal burden' (271), he tells them, and the terror and nausea which they experience as Thomas faces death is described in graphic terms (269-70). They 'have consented' to the martyrdom (270) and when they declare that 'the blood of the martyrs and the agony of the saints / Is upon our heads' (282), this presumably includes the audience. Collective spiritual guilt, unlike individual criminal guilt, does not pertain to a specific act but is inherent in the human condition.

Just as the audience is invited to rule on Thomas's inner motives, so the reader is entitled to judge attitudes held by his creator, in particular the misogyny evident in Eliot's poetry and plays.

## 5. Saints among the women

The role allotted to female characters in this spiritual quest is encapsulated in the quotation from St. John of the Cross, placed as an epigraph to *Sweeney Agonistes*:

Hence the soul cannot be possessed of the divine union, until it has divested itself of the love of created beings. (115)

In Eliot's world, the aspiring saint needs to transcend the temptations of the flesh in order to achieve spiritual 'ecstasy' and any female who stands in his way must be eliminated, metaphorically or sometimes literally. The crudest expression of this occurs in *Sweeney Agonistes*, where the protagonist talks admiringly of femicide, presented as a normal male impulse: 'Any man has to, needs to, wants to / Once in a lifetime, do a girl in' (124). Liberation from the material world, which is reduced to '[b]irth, and copulation and death' (122), requires the sacrifice of a

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<sup>33</sup> As pointed out by Helen Gardner, *The Art of T. S. Eliot* (London: Faber and Faber, 1949), 133.

female, and the brothel-keeper Doris senses that she will be the next victim.<sup>34</sup>

## 5.1 Murder of the object of desire

The women in the full-length plays are afforded a higher social status than the ‘good-time girls’ of Sweeney’s world but they meet with a similar fate. In *The Family Reunion*, even if we accept that Harry did not kill his wife, he certainly fantasised about doing so, and his uncle Charles is understanding of such urges: ‘Nobody knows what he’s likely to do / Until there’s somebody he wants to get rid of’ (297).<sup>35</sup> In his correspondence Eliot talks of her in terms of ‘pollution’,<sup>36</sup> which is evocative of *miasma*. Neither Harry nor any other family member expresses any regret about her death; indeed, the uncles and aunts consider it ‘a blessed relief’ (289). Harry’s wife is not even afforded the luxury of a name, and is described as possessive, unstable and an alcoholic (299-300). Amy’s description of her barely acknowledges that she ever existed:

A restless shivering painted shadow  
In life, she is less than a shadow in death. (290)

It is difficult not to link this figure to Vivienne Haigh-Wood,<sup>37</sup> although similarly unflattering female portraits can be found in poems which Eliot wrote in his early twenties. In ‘Conversation Galante’ the woman is described as ‘the eternal enemy of the absolute’ (33), and the stereotypes

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<sup>34</sup> In an early version of the play Sweeney shoots Mrs. Porter who, similarly to Harry’s wife, returns from the dead to haunt him (Gordon, *Imperfect Life*, 198).

<sup>35</sup> For more analogies between the two plays see Peter Lowe, “Doing a Girl In’: Re-Reading the Asceticism of T.S. Eliot’s *The Family Reunion*,” *Religion & Literature* 38, no. 4 (2006): 63-85, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40060038>.

<sup>36</sup> ‘At the beginning of the play [Harry] is aware of the past only as *pollution*, and he does not dissociate the pollution of his wife’s life from that of her death’. ‘To E. Martin Browne,’ *Letters Vol. 8*, 846-7.

<sup>37</sup> See Carole Seymour-Jones, *Painted Shadow. A Life of Vivienne Eliot* (London: Constable, 2001).

in other poems range from the deadly temptress in ‘Circe’s Palace’ to the vacuous but intimidating society hostesses in ‘The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock’ and ‘Portrait of a Lady’. The most disturbing example is ‘The Love Song of St. Sebastian’, a sadomasochistic fantasy culminating in the eroticised murder of the lover, who conforms to the trope of the consenting victim:

You would love me because I should have strangled you  
And because of my infamy;  
And I should love you the more because I mangled you.<sup>38</sup>

The same trivialisation of femicide is found in *The Oresteia*, which provided the springboard for *The Family Reunion*. In both works an innocent virgin is sacrificed – literally in the case of Iphigenia, and symbolically in the case of Mary. A letter written by Eliot makes it clear that Mary, like Harry’s late wife, is part of the impurity which needs to be purged:

The point of Mary, in relation to Harry, was meant to be this. The effect of his married life upon him [...] has given him a horror of women as of unclean creatures.<sup>39</sup>

Both women are discarded once they have served their purpose. Iphigenia, whose sacrifice sparked off the revenge killings, is not mentioned once during the trial in the concluding part of *The Oresteia*; and after helping Harry to initiate his process of self-discovery, Mary fades into the background. Several close friends including Emily Hale, on whom the character was clearly based, encouraged Eliot to give Mary greater prominence, but he in fact toned down her assertiveness in the final scene compared to the original draft<sup>40</sup> and gave her the chilling

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<sup>38</sup> T.S. Eliot, ‘The Love Song of St. Sebastian,’ in *Inventions of the March Hare. Poems 1909-1917*, ed. Christopher Ricks (London: Faber and Faber, 1996), 78-9.

<sup>39</sup> ‘To E. Martin Browne,’ *Letters Vol. 8*, 845.

<sup>40</sup> ‘From E. Martin Browne,’ *Letters Vol. 8*, 837-8; Gordon, *Imperfect Life*, 543-4; John Whittier-Ferguson, ‘I would meet you upon this honestly. The repudiation of Mary in *The Family Reunion*,’ *The T. S. Eliot Studies Annual* 4, no. 1 (2022):

pronouncement: 'It takes so many years / To learn that one is dead!' (343). In the brutal world of Eliot's drawing-room, a woman who has become an object of desire must be removed to allow the man to pursue his spiritual vocation through 'desiccation of the world of sense' (174).

Unlike Mary, Celia in *The Cocktail Party* is not an innocent virgin and this young socialite pays a heavy price for her desires (or perhaps her desirability to men). When she resolves to follow her calling, it is made clear that she too must abandon human love in favour of spiritual love, with some regret:

I couldn't give anyone the kind of love  
– I wish I could – which belongs to that life. (418)

Eliot had been criticised for being too vague about Harry's future, and commented during the writing of *The Cocktail Party* that 'I don't want to leave [Celia] in the air like Harry'.<sup>41</sup> There is certainly no ambiguity about the manner of her death, which is described in gruesome detail. Alex's investigators found only traces of her body; it is implied that the 'natives' devoured her once-sensuous flesh (434).<sup>42</sup> In the face of this horrific violence Reilly retains his composure, explaining to the guests that Celia has fulfilled her destiny. Just as Harry finds himself innocent of the charge of murder, so Reilly twice absolves Edward and Lavinia of any sense of guilt regarding Celia. At the end of the consultation he tells them that 'With the future of the others you are not concerned' (411), and he reiterates this advice after the news of Celia's death: 'You must try to detach yourself from what you still feel / As your responsibility' (438).

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218-25. The draft version of an excerpt from Part II Scene III is reproduced in Browne, *Eliot's Plays*, 138-43.

<sup>41</sup> Browne, *Eliot's Plays*, 173.

<sup>42</sup> This fantasy first appears in *Sweeney Agonistes*: 'You'll be my little seven stone missionary! / I'll gobble you up. I'll be the cannibal' (121). This reference to cannibalism has been linked to ancient vegetation rituals enacting the death, dismemberment and regeneration of a god, which at the time the play was written had recently been identified as the basis of Greek drama. See Smith, *Dramatic Theory*, 41-75.

After this moment of solemnity, the light-hearted banter resumes and another cocktail party can begin, with Lavinia present this time. Celia, who had been a disruptive force in their marriage, has been sacrificed, making way for their new-found domestic harmony.

On receiving a copy of the play Emily Hale, aware that the character was based partly on her, wrote to Eliot complaining about the ‘extremely *personal* element [...] of our own experiences’ and expressing dismay that he could ‘so brutally destroy Celia’.<sup>43</sup> Eliot replied coolly: ‘I see no trace of myself, or of you, or of anybody else, in the characters.’<sup>44</sup> It is difficult to believe this claim about a play begun shortly after the death of his first wife and his subsequent decision not to marry Hale, particularly given that Celia and Hale were rejected in similar terms.<sup>45</sup>

## 5.2 Murder of the mother

The preceding pages have argued that *Oedipus the King* underlies both the structure and meaning of Eliot’s drama, in particular the search for self-knowledge. In an intriguing take on the Oedipus myth, Aristodemou argues that this quest has the effect of eclipsing the mother:

the journey back to oneself and the desire to know oneself is a male attempt to perceive oneself as self-made and self-created in an attempt to repress the debt owed to the mother.<sup>46</sup>

The fascination of critics and psychoanalysts with parricide in *Oedipus the King* has obscured matricide in *The Oresteia*, seen by Aristodemou as the true founding myth of Western culture in which the rule of law is built

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<sup>43</sup> The Eliot-Hale Letters, 08/08/1949, <https://tseliot.com/the-eliot-hale-letters/letters/11080>.

<sup>44</sup> The Eliot-Hale Letters, 31/08/1949, <https://tseliot.com/the-eliot-hale-letters/letters/11081>.

<sup>45</sup> See Lyndall Gordon, *The Hyacinth Girl. T.S. Eliot’s Hidden Muse* (London: Virago, 2022), 289-314.

<sup>46</sup> Aristodemou, *Law & Literature*, 54.

on the cornerstone of the murdered mother.<sup>47</sup> In *The Oresteia* the mother-figure is Clytemnestra; in *The Family Reunion* it is Amy. She has ruled over Wishwood following the departure of her husband just as Clytemnestra ruled over Argos after Agamemnon left to fight the Trojan War. In common with her Greek counterpart, Amy is killed by her firstborn upon his return home; the difference is that she has committed no crime to justify such a fate.

Amy dies several times as a mother. Agatha tells Harry that she prevented his father from murdering Amy when she was pregnant with him, in order to save the child she considered to be her own (333); she thus saved Amy's life but symbolically deprived her of motherhood. When Agatha is berated by Amy for taking first her husband and now her son, she retorts: 'What did I take? nothing that you ever had' (340), denying Amy her status as both wife and mother.<sup>48</sup> Harry precipitates Amy's actual death, albeit without bloodshed, by suddenly announcing that he is leaving home despite being warned by the family doctor that his mother is frail and that a sudden shock could prove fatal (320). He does not appear on stage following her death, and will presumably pursue his vocation regardless. Amy's death did not feature in the original synopsis of the play<sup>49</sup> but was added later on, presumably because her removal was considered a necessary stage in Harry's spiritual regeneration: his mother, like his wife, embodies a clinging form of love, particularly in her determination to make him head of the household, from which he needs to be liberated. As in *The Oresteia*, the matriarchy of the earth mother is superseded by a higher patriarchal order:<sup>50</sup> the chthonian Furies give way to the

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<sup>47</sup> Aristodemou, *Law & Literature*, 44.

<sup>48</sup> Apollo goes further in *The Oresteia*, claiming that the mother is not a true parent but merely a vessel nurturing the seed planted by the father, and citing his half-sister Athena as evidence that '[t]he father can father forth without a mother'. Aeschylus, *The Oresteia*, trans. Robert Fagles (New York: Penguin, 1977), 260-1.

<sup>49</sup> See Browne, *Eliot's Plays*, 91-3.

<sup>50</sup> Cf. Martha C. Carpentier, 'Orestes in the Drawing Room: Aeschylean Parallels in T. S. Eliot's *The Family Reunion*,' *Twentieth Century Literature* 35, no. 1 (1989): 19-24, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/441773>.

Olympians Apollo and Athena, while Amy (who literally and metaphorically tries to bring Harry down to earth) is sacrificed so that the hero can pursue a more elevated, male-centred destiny.

## Conclusion

This article has sought to demonstrate that a Law and Literature approach can enhance our understanding of Eliot's dramatic work. This is most apparent in his use of devices such as the investigation, which informs the structure of all five plays (sections 2, 3 and 4), and the unusual technique of enlisting the audience as jurors (4.4). The recurrence of judicial concepts can be attributed in part to the influence of Greek tragedy, in which the heroes constantly wrestle with legal dilemmas (1). The ethical preoccupation inherent in the Law and Literature movement is particularly relevant to Eliot's plays: a judicial approach to Harry's self-investigation reveals that the preemptory dismissal of the charges against him is a potential miscarriage of justice (2.2); and Claverton's assertion of the superiority of moral law over criminal law obscures the fact that in his youth he evaded prosecution for failing to stop after an accident (4.3). Comparisons with Eliot's classical sources, notably *The Oresteia*, raise similar concerns about the trivialisation of femicide since both Aeschylus and Eliot posit a new, male-dominated order predicated on the murder of women (5.2).

Of course, a literary journal is not a court of law; the verdict on such matters lies ultimately with the reader. Just as the audience-jury is left to rule on Thomas's inner motivations and Harry's possible culpability, so it is for each reader to determine to what extent Eliot's ideology and private life should cloud their assessment of his achievements as a poet-playwright. In the interest of a fair trial, the defendant shall have the last word:

For what is done, not to be done again  
May the judgement not be too heavy upon us (90).

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## How Ralph Ellison Integrated T.S. Eliot

John Matthew Steinhafel

‘All novels of a given historical moment form an argument over the nature of reality and are, to an extent, criticisms each of the other.’<sup>1</sup>

Ralph Ellison

Among the books in Ellison’s personal library, archived at the Library of Congress, is a copy of T.S. Eliot’s *Selected Essays, 1917-1932*.<sup>2</sup> The first essay in the volume is ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent.’ The only part of the essay marked in Ellison’s copy is the following:

That this development, refinement perhaps, complication certainly, is not, from the point of view of the artist, any improvement. Perhaps not even an improvement from the point of view of the psychologist or not to the extent which we imagine; perhaps only in the end based upon a complication in economics and machinery. *But the difference between the present and the past is that the conscious present is an awareness of the past in a way and to an extent which the past’s awareness of itself cannot show.*<sup>3</sup>

In pencil, Ellison drew a vertical line in the margin running the length of the entire passage. In blue ink, he underlined the portion in italics. The fact that the passage bears marks in both pencil and ink suggests multiple readings, most likely at different points in time. That is, Ellison appears to have *returned* to the essay and the passage. And yet, even without this evidence, it is readily apparent that Ellison read and reread Eliot’s seminal essay, for Eliot’s view of tradition is something Ellison works and

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<sup>1</sup> Ralph Ellison, ‘The World and the Jug,’ in *The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison*, ed. John F. Callahan (New York: Modern Library, 1995), 165.

<sup>2</sup> T.S. Eliot, *Selected Essays, 1917-1932* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1938).

<sup>3</sup> Eliot, *Selected Essays*, 6, emphasis mine.

reworks throughout his own essays.<sup>4</sup>

It is no stretch to say that Ellison writes out of what Eliot calls ‘the historical sense,’ that is, ‘not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order.’<sup>5</sup> As with that of Eliot, Ellison’s view of tradition, of time itself, is fundamentally dynamic. Eliot had written:

What happens when a new work of art is created is something that happens simultaneously to all the works of art which preceded it. The existing monuments form an ideal order among themselves, which is modified by the introduction of the new (the really new) work of art among them. The existing order is complete before the new work arrives; for order to persist after the supervention of novelty, the *whole* existing order must be, if ever so slightly, altered; and so the relations, proportions, values of each work of art toward the whole are readjusted; and this is conformity between the old and the new. Whoever has approved this idea of order, of the form of European, of English literature will not find it preposterous that the past should be altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past. And the poet who is aware of this will be aware of great difficulties and responsibilities.<sup>6</sup>

With the conviction that literature forms a living tradition, Ellison conceives of narrative fiction as a means by which to examine standard

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<sup>4</sup> This is seen, for instance, in this article’s epigraph, from Ellison’s ‘The World and the Jug,’ in *The Collected Essays*, 155-88. Ellison reworks the themes from Eliot’s seminal essay sundry times across *The Collected Essays*.

<sup>5</sup> Eliot, ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent,’ in *The Complete Prose of T.S. Eliot, The Critical Edition, Vol. 2: The Perfect Critic, 1919-1926*, eds. Anthony Cuda and Ronald Schuchard (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 2014), 106. All citations of the essay henceforth refer to the pagination of *Complete Prose 2*.

<sup>6</sup> Eliot, ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent,’ *Complete Prose 2*, 106-7.

readings of canonical works, that is, as an alternative forum for the practice of literary criticism and interpretation. He does this primarily through the complex use of allusion.

This is, in fact, the main claim of Alan Nadel's 1988 *Invisible Criticism: Ralph Ellison and the American Canon*. Aside from being a seminal work of Ellison studies, Nadel's monograph is noteworthy in that it advances perhaps the most comprehensive theory of literary allusion to date. He builds upon the work of Ezra Pound, James Joyce, Northrop Frye, and Harold Bloom, among others, to develop an account of allusion and its implications for understanding the dynamism of literary tradition. A complete account of Nadel's study is beyond the scope of this project; however, suffice it to say that the leading figure in his discussion of allusion is none other than T.S. Eliot, and the foremost source, 'Tradition and the Individual Talent.' Referring to the opening lines of *Four Quartets*, Nadel goes as far as to say, 'this understanding of time [as dynamic] is fundamental to modernism.'<sup>7</sup> Nadel's assertion that this view is, in fact, fundamental to modernism should come as no surprise, for this view inheres in the technique of allusion, which conceives of narrative form as open, existing simultaneously with all other works that make up a tradition. One effect of this simultaneity is reinterpretation. Nadel explains:

Because allusions require reinterpreting tradition in light of the new work, their effect on the reader's understanding is similar to the effect of reading a piece of literary criticism. In regard to the alluded-to work, allusions do on a semiconscious level what criticism does on a conscious level and what literature does on an unconscious level: alter our sense of tradition.<sup>8</sup>

In what follows, I examine how Ellison's use of allusion in *Invisible Man*

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<sup>7</sup> Alan Nadel, *Invisible Criticism: Ralph Ellison and the American Canon* (Iowa City, IA: University of Iowa Press, 1988), 35.

<sup>8</sup> Nadel, *Invisible Criticism*, xii.

‘function[s] as a covert form of literary criticism.’<sup>9</sup> Before an analysis of the use of allusion in *Invisible Man* can take place, however, a more robust account of allusion’s literary-critical potential is in order.

First, we shall begin with a basic definition of allusion. In *A Poet’s Glossary*, Edward Hirsch defines allusion as ‘a passing or indirect reference to something implied but not stated.’<sup>10</sup> He elaborates, ‘The writer refers to something recognizable—a historical fact or fictional character, a specific place, a particular event or series of events, a religious or mythological story, a literary or artistic work.’<sup>11</sup> We are chiefly concerned here with the last item, a literary or artistic work. And yet, because Ellison takes part in both written literary traditions and vernacular or folk traditions, we shall take note to include instances of the latter in our concept of allusion. In its most basic sense, then, an allusion is a direct or tacit reference to another work in a tradition. Borrowing the language of Nadel, we shall label the alluding work ‘the primary,’ and the alluded-to work, ‘the referent.’ With this preliminary definition now in hand, we shall examine allusion more closely to gain a deeper understanding of how exactly the technique functions in the dynamism of tradition.

To offer insight into the way allusion works, Nadel considers the experience of allusion as it occurs within the minds of readers: upon detecting what we suspect is an allusion, we call to mind both the primary and the referent, and then we try to seek out a relationship between the two: ‘at the moment of glimpsing [the allusion], we do not know the relationship, our imagination is lured by potentials.’<sup>12</sup> In the process, the allusion ‘impel[s] a reconsideration of the alluded-to [work].’<sup>13</sup> Nadel elaborates:

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<sup>9</sup> Nadel, *Invisible Criticism*, 45.

<sup>10</sup> Edward Hirsch, *A Poet’s Glossary* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2014), 20.

<sup>11</sup> Hirsch, *A Poet’s Glossary*, 20.

<sup>12</sup> Nadel, *Invisible Criticism*, 45.

<sup>13</sup> Nadel, *Invisible Criticism*, 45.

Because readers have no idea of an allusion's limitations, they must readjust—at least in the form of a tentative hypothesis—their understanding of that which had been alluded to, and they must readjust as well their sense of all relevant associations to accommodate their hypothesis. To some extent all allusions, therefore, function as a covert form of literary criticism. Although some authors minimize and others exploit an allusion's literary-critical potential, the potential is inherent in all allusions because it arises from the readers' experience of understanding the self-referential world of literature.<sup>14</sup>

For Nadel, then, 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' raises an implicit question: 'What happens to the meaning of a work when we apply a new framework to it, a new framework necessitated by a new work?'<sup>15</sup> He suggests that the juxtaposition created by allusion—the simultaneous activation of primary and referent—asks readers to consider how the two are similar, yet the literary-critical subtext ultimately arises from the differences between the two, for the primary and the referent never relate in a perfect, one-to-one manner: 'The new context for the old, therefore, as Eliot sees, forces us to see the differences in both and defer our understanding of the present until we alter our understanding of the past.'<sup>16</sup> It is precisely this dynamism that underlies the relationship between a new work and the tradition as a whole. As Nadel concludes, allusions 'make the hidden dynamic in literature—the flux of rearrangement—more vivid, in the same way that literary criticism attempts to.'<sup>17</sup>

In light of this understanding of allusion, Nadel reads the various literary-critical subtexts of *Invisible Man* to show that Ellison skeptically interrogates American literary history, in particular the then-standard readings of canonical nineteenth century works. For instance, Nadel maps how Ellison alludes to Lewis Mumford's *The Golden Day*—which

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<sup>14</sup> Nadel, *Invisible Criticism*, 45.

<sup>15</sup> Nadel, *Invisible Criticism*, 41.

<sup>16</sup> Nadel, *Invisible Criticism*, 42.

<sup>17</sup> Nadel, *Invisible Criticism*, 57.

study's treatment of nineteenth century American literature renders insignificant the Civil War—to examine the 'typical whitewashing' of nineteenth century literature common in the first half of the twentieth century.<sup>18</sup> Additionally, Nadel traces Ellison's allusions to Herman Melville's *Benito Cereno* and *The Confidence Man*, Ralph Waldo Emerson's *Essays*, and Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Nadel ultimately shows that through the complex use of allusion Ellison participates in contemporary critical discussions by offering reinterpretations of the alluded-to works—readings at odds with standard critical consensus. *Invisible Criticism*, as Nadel himself explains, 'puts in a slightly different historical context the generally accepted idea that *Invisible Man* contains strong social commentary that systematically exposes the way American institutions have erased a people. Within this context of social criticism lies a body of literary criticism that both flows out of the social criticism and contributes to it.'<sup>19</sup> And yet, it is not merely nineteenth century American literature that Ellison alludes to in *Invisible Man*. In this article, I offer an original case in point for Ellison's use of allusion as literary-critical subtext. In a turn of fate, Ellison likewise critically engages the very predecessor whose revelatory view of tradition inspired his complex use of allusion: T.S. Eliot.

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As is the case with any writer's reception of a literary giant, there are the things we know, and there are the things we don't know. This is certainly true for Ellison's reception of Eliot. We know, for instance, that Ellison met Eliot once and only once. In July of 1956, Ellison was in London attending the PEN congress, which ran from the ninth through the twelfth. On the evening of the twelfth, he met Eliot at the closing banquet, at the Savoy Hotel. Writing that September to Albert Murray about the PEN congress and his travels in London, Ellison said, 'I was... impressed by some of the writers I met, especially by Eliot, with whom we [Ralph and Fanny] shared the guest of honor table the night of the closing banquet. I talked with him very briefly however because he was just recovering from

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<sup>18</sup> Nadel, *Invisible Criticism*, 94.

<sup>19</sup> Nadel, *Invisible Criticism*, 105.

a heart attack.’<sup>20</sup> Unfortunately, we know nothing of the substance of their conversation that evening.

We also know that at some point between its publication in 1939 and the publication of *Invisible Man* in 1952, Ellison read Eliot’s ‘verse play with a contemporary setting,’ *The Family Reunion*.<sup>21</sup> As far as my own research has been able to surmise, there exists no documentary evidence that attests to the circumstances of Ellison’s encounter with the play. Neither Rampersad, nor Ellison’s first biographer, Lawrence Jackson, make any mention of it. Moreover, curiously absent from Ellison’s personal library is a copy of the play predating the publication of *Invisible Man*. In fact, the only copy of the play we have record of Ellison’s actually having owned is that which appears in the 1958 edition of *The Complete Poems and Plays, 1909-1950*. Printed years after *Invisible Man* had already been published, Ellison’s copy has no marginalia of any kind. It is of no help in illumining why or when or how Ellison first encountered the play. The precise details surrounding Ellison’s reception of Eliot’s play thus remain lost to time—that is, at least for now.

Nevertheless, we can be certain that Ellison read the play very closely while drafting *Invisible Man*, for he opens his novel with a quotation from it presented in epigraph, not to mention he alludes to it sundry times throughout. Indeed, Ellison opens *Invisible Man* with two epigraphs:

‘You are saved,’ cried Captain Delano, more and more astonished and pained; ‘you are saved: what has cast such a shadow upon you?’

Herman Melville, *Benito Cereno*

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<sup>20</sup> Ellison, Letter to Albert Murray, 15 Sept. 1956, in Ellison and Murray, *Trading Twelves: The Selected Letters of Ralph Ellison and Albert Murray*, eds. Albert Murray and John F. Callahan (New York: Vintage, 2001), 144.

<sup>21</sup> It is also possible that Ellison might have attended a performance of *The Family Reunion*. For instance, on November 29, 1947, *The New York Times* published a review of a local production at the Cherry Lane Theatre. See L.F., ‘T.S. Eliot’s ‘Family Reunion’ in Cherry Lane,’ *New York Times*, Nov. 29, 1947.

HARRY: I tell you, it is not me you are looking at,  
Not me you are grinning at, not me your confidential looks  
Incriminate, but that other person, if person,  
You thought I was: let your necrophily  
Feed upon that carcass....

T.S. Eliot, *Family Reunion*<sup>22</sup>

The Melville epigraph is the subject of much critical discussion; it is beyond the scope of this study to offer a full discussion of it here.<sup>23</sup> With regard to it, we shall limit ourselves to the following two points: first, the question is being asked by the American Captain Delano, and tellingly, Ellison elides Cereno's response; Cereno explains that 'the negro' is what casts a shadow upon him.<sup>24</sup> Second, Melville uses shadows as part of a larger system of motifs associating blackness and darkness with the limits of perception. Here, in the alluded-to moment, racial blackness is equated to literal blackness. In short, the shadow signifies the blinding effects of race. Although *The Family Reunion* is not concerned with race, it uses a similar system of motifs. Eliot likewise associates shadows, blackness, and darkness with the very same problematic of perception operant in

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<sup>22</sup> Ellison, *Invisible Man* (1952; reprint, New York: Vintage International, 1995), n.p.

<sup>23</sup> For more on the influence of Melville on Ellison, see Bradley Ray King, 'Ralph Ellison's Melville Masks,' *REAL* 30, no. 1 (2014): 127-48. See also Stuart E. Omans, 'The Variations of a Masked Leader: A Study of the Literary Relationship of Ralph Ellison and Herman Melville,' *South Atlantic Bulletin* 40, no. 2 (1975): 15-23. See also Elizabeth Schultz, 'The Illumination of Darkness: Affinities between *Moby-Dick* and *Invisible Man*,' *CLA Journal* 32, no. 2 (1988): 170-200. See also Valeria Bonita Gray, *Invisible Man's Literary Heritage: Benito Cereno and Moby-Dick* (Amsterdam, NL: Rodopi, 1978). See also Michael LeBlanc, 'The Color of Confidence: Racial Con Games and the Logic of Gold,' *Cultural Critique* 72 (2009): 1-46. Bradley Ray King's work most closely resembles my own, as he argues that Ellison found in Melville 'the opportunity to engage a critical discourse on literary 'blackness' and enrich it by integrating political valences of slavery, racial exploitation, and the failures of American democracy' (134).

<sup>24</sup> Herman Melville, *Benito Cereno*, in *The Piazza Tales* (New York: Dix & Edwards, 1856), 268.

race: the mind's need to project outward into the gap that arises from the split between the subject and the object of perception.<sup>25</sup> Perception, then, is a central theme in all three works, and all three use the shadow to symbolize the blindness that inevitably results from projection. In light of this basic treatment of the epigraphs, we shall develop further our account of Eliot's significance to the novel.

Throughout his life, Ellison repeatedly pointed to Eliot as a major influence.<sup>26</sup> Accordingly, Ellison studies has worked to explicate this connection; however, the bulk of this scholarship either traces Eliot's influence on Ellison's essays or maps allusions to Eliot's poetry.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Eliot and subject-object dualism is much too rich a topic to account for here in full. It is the subject of much scholarship and criticism. See, for instance, April Pierce, 'T.S. Eliot, Phenomenologist,' *T.S. Eliot Studies Annual* 1, no. 1 (2017): 114-30. See also Christina Hauck, 'Not One, Not Two: Eliot and Buddhism' in *A Companion to T.S. Eliot*, ed. David E. Chinitz (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 40-53. See also Jewel Spears Brooker, 'Yes and No: Eliot and Western Philosophy,' in *A Companion to T.S. Eliot*, ed. David E. Chinitz (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 53-65.

<sup>26</sup> See Ellison, 'The World and the Jug,' in *The Collected Essays*, 187. See also Ellison, 'Hidden Name Complex Fate,' in *The Collected Essays*, 202.

<sup>27</sup> Steven Helming, 'T.S. Eliot and Ralph Ellison: Insiders, Outsiders, and Cultural Authority,' *The Southern Review* (Autumn 1989): 841-58; William Lyne, 'The Signifying Modernist: Ralph Ellison and the Limits of Double Consciousness,' *PMLA* 107, no. 2 (March 1992): 318-30; Sandra Adell 'The Big E(llison)'s Texts and Intertexts: Eliot, Burke, and the Underground Man,' *CLA Journal* 37, no. 4 (1994): 377-401; and Alan Nadel, *Invisible Criticism*, each explore the presence of Eliot within Ellison's critical imagination. Jane Gottschalk, 'Sophisticated Jokes: The Use of American Authors in *Invisible Man*,' *Renascence* 30, no. 1 (Autumn 1977): 69-77, notes allusions to *The Waste Land* and *Ash Wednesday* in addition to a shared interest in myth and ritual. Leonard J. Deutsch, 'The *Waste Land* in Ellison's *Invisible Man*,' *Notes on Contemporary Literature* 7, no. 4 (September 1977): 5-6, explores allusions to *The Waste Land*. William Lyne also notes allusions to *The Waste Land*. Dennis Welch and Allison Greer, 'Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*: Secularizing the Fortunate Fall and Apocalypse,' *African American Review* 46, no. 2-3 (Summer/Fall 2013): 363-80, note allusions to *The Waste Land* and *Four Quartets* as well as a shared interest in myth and ritual. Mary Ellen Williams

Ellison's repeated allusions to *The Family Reunion* remain almost entirely unexamined.<sup>28</sup> Recovering a significant literary-critical subtext in *Invisible Man*, I argue that Ellison's attraction to the play is the result of his reading Eliot's motifs of shadows and darkness in terms of Melville. That is, Ellison discovered within the play a ready made system of motifs that could be made to speak to race—a tradition of writing about shadows and darkness that stretches as far back perhaps as Plato's famous cave and that runs through the nineteenth century all the way up to modernist

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Walsh, 'Invisible Man: Ralph Ellison's Wasteland,' *CLA Journal* 28, no. 2 (1984): 150-58, offers a more sustained analysis exploring allusions to *The Waste Land*. Alan Nadel notes allusions to *The Waste Land* and *Four Quartets* and acknowledges Eliot's influence on Ellison's conception of time.

<sup>28</sup> The Eliot epigraph is mentioned in Ellison scholarship almost exclusively in passing, as brief commentary on shared thematic concerns: Jane Gottschalk, 'Sophisticated Jokes,' notes 'seeing' (72); John Stark, 'Ellison's Black Odyssey,' *Negro American Literature Forum* 7, no. 2 (1973): 60-63, notes 'identity' (60); Edward M. Griffin, 'Notes from a Clean, Well-Lighted Place: Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*,' *Twentieth Century Literature* 15, no. 3 (October 1969): 129-44, acknowledges 'similarities' but does not elaborate (144); Russell G. Fischer, 'Invisible Man as History,' believes it alludes to 'perception' and 'invisibility' (339); Jennifer DeVere Brody, 'The Blackness of Blackness... Reading the Typography of *Invisible Man*,' *Theatre Journal* 57, no. 4 (December 2005): 679-98, typographically analyzes it, noting its use of ellipsis as performing the 'not me' thematic (695); Thomas A. Volger, 'Invisible Man: Somebody's Protest Novel,' *Iowa Review* 1, no. 2 (1970): 64-82, believes it 'suggests the discovery of [Invisible's] invisibility' but does not comment further (65); Loretta Johnson, 'History in Ralph Ellison's *Juneteenth*,' *Studies in American Fiction* 32, no. 1 (Spring 2004): 81-99, notes an analog of the Furies in *Juneteenth*. She also traces allusions to Eliot's poetry and acknowledges Eliot's influence on Ellison's conception of history. She does not, however, offer a sustained analysis of *Invisible Man* in terms of *The Family Reunion*. Finally, Thomas R. Whitaker, 'Spokesman for Invisibility,' in *Speaking for You: The Vision of Ralph Ellison*, ed. Kimberly W. Benston (Washington, DC: Howard University Press, 1990), 386-402, understands the epigraphs by way of each work's ending: Melville's, with Cereno's death; Eliot's, with Harry's leaving Wishwood. Whitaker argues, 'Between those two epigraphs... [*Invisible Man*] will run its course' (400). Various others mention it but do not proffer an explanation for it.

literary practice.<sup>29</sup> I want to suggest that Ellison read Eliot's motifs within this larger inquiry into the nature of perception, a line of inquiry which, because more fundamental, could be made to speak to the particularities of race and at the same time expand it from the particular to the universal, part of a larger phenomenon at the heart of what it means to be human.<sup>30</sup> Writing as he was amid Jim Crow, Ellison experienced anxiety over whether his novel would be considered a work of American literature or merely a work of 'Negro' literature. He much preferred the former, and the felt need to make race universal underwrites his idiosyncratic reading of Eliot's play.

It is worth noting here, prior to the outset of close reading, that shadows appear elsewhere in Eliot's work, for example in 'The Hollow Men.' In this poem, the shadow similarly signifies the problematic of perception—the fundamental gap between the subject and the object:<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Regardless of issues of translation, the use of shadow imagery—and of imagery of darkness and light—spans the Western philosophical tradition to such an extent as to hardly require further discussion here. Prominent sites of such imagery include The Book of Genesis, René Descartes, Immanuel Kant, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Carl Jung, to name just a handful.

<sup>30</sup> Because of the inherent constraints of this study, I am forced to examine some similarities at the expense of others; however, further overlap between *Invisible Man* and *The Family Reunion* appears in themes of time/history, performance, somnambulism, ventriloquism, myth, ritual, Edenic imagery, original sin, and accusations of mental illness. When comparing the two, it becomes clear that the play was a rich source for Ellison's novel.

<sup>31</sup> See Commentary to 'The Hollow Men' in Eliot, *The Poems of T.S. Eliot, Vol. 1, Collected and Uncollected Poems*, eds. Christopher Ricks and Jim McCue (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 2015), 711-727. As Ricks and McCue note, Eliot's philosophical project in 'The Hollow Men,' as evidenced in the below lines, has been interpreted variously in terms of F.H. Bradley, Henri Bergson, and Paul Valéry (723). Ricks and McCue also note that lines V.21-V.22 suggest Platonism (723-24). But if the poem is first viewed through the lens of the Conrad epigraph, as I would argue it ought to be, then the notion of asserting the presence of any one philosophical framework over and above any other appears shortsighted; Eliot proves less concerned with a single philosophical framework than with the need for the subject to select among various interpretive

Between the idea  
And the reality  
Between the motion  
And the act  
Falls the Shadow....<sup>32</sup>

It is no coincidence that these lines served as inspiration for the title of Ellison's first collection of essays, *Shadow and Act* (1964), for, in various ways, all of Ellison's work and thought examines this same basic problematic—the perceptual implications of subject-object dualism. Although the perceptual implications of subject-object dualism certainly inhere in a dynamic sense of time—that is, time functions as both a *subjective* experience and an *objective* fact—and although, as we have already seen, Eliot and Ellison share this dynamic sense of time, in what follows I am primarily concerned with showing that Eliot and Ellison prove equally interested in examining how the perceptual implications of subject-object dualism engender concepts of self and other.<sup>33</sup> For Eliot, the issue is one of metaphysics; that is, the perceptual implications of subject-object dualism function within a context of the divine. For Ellison, the issue is one of culture and individual psychology; that is, Ellison's interest lies in examining how the construct of race exploits the perceptual gap between subject and object. Without further ado, let us examine Eliot's play more closely.

*The Family Reunion* incorporates elements of Greek tragedy but casts

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frames. That is, as suggested by the Conrad epigraph, the subject doing the perceiving is as integral a phenomenon as the object being perceived.

<sup>32</sup> Eliot, 'The Hollow Men,' in *The Poems of T.S. Eliot, Vol. 1, Collected and Uncollected Poems*, eds. Christopher Ricks and Jim McCue (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2015), V.5-9, 83.

<sup>33</sup> If, as Nadel suggests, a view of time as dynamic is fundamental to modernism, then I would clarify by adding that this view of time is, in fact, part of modernism's larger preoccupation with the perceptual implications of subject-object dualism. It should also be noted that this preoccupation is, to some extent, not merely one of modernism but one of modernity writ large, i.e., post-Enlightenment Europe and its colonies.

them in a Christian context. In the vein of a 1930s drawing-room drama, the setting is Wishwood, a family estate in the north of England. The occasion is a birthday party for Amy, Dowager Lady Monchensey. At the opening of the play, Amy and a handful of relatives are sitting in the drawing room awaiting the arrival of Amy's three sons. In particular, they await the return of the firstborn and present Lord Monchensey, Harry, who has been away for eight years. Through expository dialogue we learn that Harry's wife has recently died at sea. Because he fantasized killing her, he feels guilty and believes he 'pushed her over.'<sup>34</sup> Echoing the House of Atreus in the *Oresteia*, upon which Eliot based his play, Harry's family suffers a generational curse: Harry's father plotted to kill Amy while she was pregnant with Harry, but Harry's Aunt, Agatha, interceded. Harry's father then abandoned the family, leaving Amy to manage Wishwood. The curse remains a well-protected family secret, of which Harry is unaware. As in the *Oresteia*, there are supernatural beings, the Eumenides. They pursue Harry in the aftermath of his wife's death, and Harry believes his guilt motivates their pursuit. Upon his arrival at Wishwood, he senses they are nearby. In the second scene of each act, he has a pivotal conversation about the past, and then the Eumenides suddenly appear to him. The play's rising action takes the form of Harry's growing awareness of the Eumenides, and of their meaning. As we come to discover over the course of the play, reckoning with the family curse enhances his perception. In seeing the past clearly, he grows in his understanding of the Eumenides and of himself.

As this summary suggests, Eliot's thematic inquiry into the perceptual implications of subject-object dualism takes the form of the supernatural Eumenides.<sup>35</sup> The play refers to them variously as 'spectres,' 'shadows,'

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<sup>34</sup> Eliot, *The Family Reunion*, in *The Complete Poems and Plays of T.S. Eliot* (London, UK: Faber & Faber, 1969), 1.1.338, 294. All citations herein of *The Family Reunion* refer to the pagination of *The Complete Poems and Plays*. The act, scene, and line have been included for ease of reference with other editions. This information precedes the page number and follows the format, act.scene.first line[-last line].

<sup>35</sup> As the work of Randy Malamud makes clear, Eliot's conception of the Eumenides altered slightly as a result of the play's movement from the page to

‘ghosts,’ ‘phantoms,’ and the like, developing the problematic through motifs of darkness.<sup>36</sup> When the Eumenides first appear, Harry is still convinced he is to blame for his wife’s death. Because he wished her dead, and because she is dead, he assumes he is responsible. Despite no actual evidence of a causal action on his behalf, Harry believes his desires have become externalized, manifesting in her death. As a result, he suffers guilt, which leads him to believe the Eumenides are spirits of vengeance. In short, he unconsciously fills the gap arising from the split between the subject and the object of perception, between self and other. He projects his internal experience outward onto others. As a result, he mistakes his own imaginings for actual reality. Significantly, this works in the other direction as well. In fact, his current situation is the opposite of his earlier predicament. We learn that before his wife died, Harry saw himself as little more than a projection in the minds of others, most recently his wife.<sup>37</sup> This denial of self is what led him to fantasize her death.

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the stage. See Malamud, ‘Eliot’s 1930s Plays: *The Rock*, *Murder in the Cathedral*, and *The Family Reunion*,’ in *A Companion to T.S. Eliot*, ed. David E. Chinitz, (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 239-51. Malamud notes, ‘The Eumenides, [Eliot] acknowledged, did not fit well into the drama; he suggested that in future productions they might be understood as being visible only to certain characters and not to the audience’ (249). While we have no reason to suspect that Ellison’s knowledge of the play extended beyond the page to any stage productions, the fact that Eliot later wished to portray the Eumenides as invisible to the audience yet visible to certain characters further highlights the play’s thematic inquiry into the subjective dimensions of perception. Ellison’s own reading of the play seems to have already assumed such a schema of (in)visibility. For more on the development and execution of the Eumenides in the play’s movement from page to stage, see also Giles Evans, ‘A Matter of Performance,’ in *Wishwood Revisited: A New Interpretation of T.S. Eliot’s The Family Reunion* (Lewes, UK: Book Guild, 1991), 132-170. As Evans explains, various effects of lighting were also used, most notably in the Michael Elliot production (see *Wishwood Revisited*, 149).

<sup>36</sup> See Eliot, *The Family Reunion*. Instances include, but are not limited to, ‘spectres,’ 1.1.135, 289; ‘ghosts,’ 1.1.333, 294; and 2.2.225, 336; ‘shadows,’ 1.2.115, 306; and 2.2.179-180, 334; ‘phantoms,’ 2.2.177, 334.

<sup>37</sup> See Eliot, *The Family Reunion*, 1.1.164-178, 289-90. See also note 40.

As the play's metatheatrical elements suggest, in the world of *The Family Reunion* people are either directors or performers. Those who are awake, or living consciously, are the directors; those who are asleep, or dead-in-life, are the performers, unthinkingly playing the parts others cast them in.<sup>38</sup> Most recently, Harry's wife was the director of their lives.<sup>39</sup> Before that it had been Amy who effected the 'design.'<sup>40</sup> With Harry's wife no longer around to pull the strings, Amy plots to swoop in and take the reins. Accordingly, she insists that all those gathered play their part in the plot:

Harry is to take command at Wishwood  
And I hope we can contrive his future happiness.  
Do not discuss his absence. Please behave only  
As if nothing had happened in the last eight years.<sup>41</sup>

To better control the present and the future, Amy weaves her own version of the past. Instead of confronting harsh realities, she spins narratives in which unsought events bear little or no significance, understanding that her interpretations have the power to influence how others act. Although Agatha has gone along with Amy's schemes before, she takes a different approach upon Harry's return. After Harry first senses the Eumenides at Wishwood, Agatha says to Harry, 'There is more to understand: hold fast

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<sup>38</sup> See Eliot, *The Family Reunion*. For instance, 2.2.166-171, 334.

<sup>39</sup> See Eliot, *The Family Reunion*, 1.1.490-510, 299.

<sup>40</sup> See Eliot, *The Family Reunion*, 1.2.130-137, 306. It is worth noting that Amy's directorial role on the family stage informs the backstory, in particular Amy's decision to raise Mary. Amy brought Mary, the daughter of her deceased cousin, to Wishwood as a child because she planned for Mary and Harry to eventually marry. But Harry thwarted this plan by marrying another woman, his late wife. In the process, Harry effectively transferred the role of director of his life from his mother to his wife. His wife, we learn, prevented them from ever returning to Wishwood, most likely because she understood that returning to Wishwood would forfeit control of their lives to Amy. When she dies at sea, Amy is delighted, having wished for such an outcome all along. Amy hopes Harry, now a widower, will fulfill the original plan by taking over the family estate.

<sup>41</sup> Eliot, *The Family Reunion*, 1.1.183-186, 290.

to that / As the way to freedom.’<sup>42</sup> As Agatha will later reveal, Harry’s path forward lies in gaining full knowledge of the past—of the family curse.

Just before the first appearance of the Eumenides, Harry converses with Mary.<sup>43</sup> Mary reminds him that their childhood at Wishwood was far from the idyllic memory that Harry has, that his perception of the past—and therefore of the present—is largely an illusion. This, Mary suggests, explains his current condition:

Although I remember you better than you think,  
And what is the real you. I haven’t much experience,  
But I see something now which doesn’t come from tutors,  
Or from books, or from thinking, or from observation:  
Something which I did not know I knew.  
Even if, as you say, Wishwood is a cheat,  
Your family a delusion—then it’s *all* a delusion,  
Everything you feel—I don’t mean what you think,  
But what you feel. You attach yourself to loathing  
As others do to loving: an infatuation  
That’s wrong, a good that’s misdirected. You deceive yourself  
Like the man convinced that he is paralysed  
Or like the man who believes that he is blind  
When he still sees the sunlight. I know that this is true.<sup>44</sup>

As Mary suggests, although Amy’s scheming has shaped Harry’s delusions, Harry participates in those delusions willingly. Amy merely casts him in the role that best fulfills her designs, but it is he who plays

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<sup>42</sup> Eliot, *The Family Reunion*, 1.1.387-388, 296.

<sup>43</sup> There is some debate among commentators as to how many times the Eumenides actually appear at Wishwood. My count is based not on Harry’s dialogue but on the stage directions. That is, I have chosen to count the appearance only if the text of the play denotes that the Eumenides are to appear on stage before the audience.

<sup>44</sup> Eliot, *The Family Reunion*, 1.2.224-237, 309.

the part. Following this exchange, and while Mary is still present, Harry sees the Eumenides. At this point, he is still convinced he is to blame for his wife's death, but as he confronts the Eumenides, his perception of them begins to shift.

If only for a brief time, Harry has been living now without someone else directing his life; however, he has not yet become the director of his own life. Thus, he no longer identifies with who he was before. And yet, he is equally uncertain of who is now. When the Eumenides appear, Harry explains to them, 'When I knew her, I was not the same person. / I was not any person.'<sup>45</sup> His speech includes the passage Ellison quotes in epigraph:

I tell you, it is not me you are looking at,  
Not me you are grinning at, not me your confidential looks  
Incriminate, but that other person, if person,  
You thought I was: let your necrophily  
Feed upon that carcase....<sup>46</sup>

Here we witness Harry slowly awakening from his dead-in-life state, what he refers to elsewhere as 'automatism.'<sup>47</sup> Now, in the aftermath of his wife's death, he is no longer the one whom others 'conspired to invent.'<sup>48</sup> But without a clear understanding of how to direct his life, he continues to suffer misperception. Misinterpreting the Eumenides, he assumes they too wish to pursue him. Harry's journey is one that, through reckoning with the past, eventually leads to a heightened perception of self and others.

Like Eliot's description of the Eumenides, Ellison describes race in terms of shadows and darkness. Moreover, Ellison characterizes race as something supernatural, a forceful presence that is variously haunting,

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<sup>45</sup> Eliot, *The Family Reunion*, 1.2.316-317, 311.

<sup>46</sup> Eliot, *The Family Reunion*, 1.2.321-325, 311.

<sup>47</sup> Eliot, *The Family Reunion*, 1.1.327, 294.

<sup>48</sup> Eliot, *The Family Reunion*, 1.1.284, 293.

baffling, and hypnotic.<sup>49</sup> Just as Harry must reckon with the past to see the Eumenides clearly, so too must Invisible reckon with the past to see race clearly. The opening of the novel offers a case in point, a compelling moment of allusion to the epigraph, and thus, more broadly, to Eliot's play. Here, in the prologue, Invisible recounts a time when his sheer presence frightened a white pedestrian. While walking on the sidewalk late one night, Invisible accidentally collides with the pedestrian. Analogous to Harry misperceiving the Eumenides, the pedestrian misperceives Invisible. Ellison effectively reworks the scene from *The Family Reunion*, inverting it by rendering it from the perspective of the Eumenides instead of Harry. Casting the interaction between Harry (the white pedestrian) and the Eumenides (Invisible) from the perspective of the Eumenides (Invisible), *Invisible Man* inscribes a literary-critical subtext that racializes the Eumenides of *The Family Reunion*.<sup>50</sup> Ellison's allusions to *The Family Reunion* thus recast the problematic in terms of race, in the process suggesting that the construct of race warps reality by distorting the perception of both person seen and person seeing through it. In short, race in *Invisible Man* functions as a paranormal phenomenon, one characters repeatedly misinterpret because of its embeddedness within the more fundamental subject-object dualism. A closer look at the sidewalk collision suggests how this works. Invisible narrates the scene as follows:

One night I accidentally bumped into a man, and perhaps because of the near darkness he saw me and called me an insulting name. I sprang at him, seized his coat lapels and demanded that he

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<sup>49</sup> The blackness/darkness motif and its Eumenides-like effect recurs throughout *Invisible Man*. Prominent examples include Invisible's descriptions of the boxers at the Battle Royal, Norton's reaction to Trueblood's story, and Invisible's meeting Lucious Brockway, to name a few. At times, Ellison inverts and/or subverts the pattern. For example, it is Brockway's potential *absence* (not presence) that produces the haunting effect of a 'curse' for the boss (216). Similarly, the white Brother Jack first appears as a 'figure in black' whose pursuit of Invisible is a source of confusion (285). The Eumenides archetype also informs Norton's idea of the students being his 'fate' / 'destiny' (40-41).

<sup>50</sup> See note 35.

apologize. He was a tall blond man and as my face came close to his he looked insolently out of his blue eyes and cursed me, his breath hot in my face as he struggled.<sup>51</sup>

Of course, Invisible's description recalls Jim Crow sidewalk etiquette and bumptious contact laws, which demanded that black pedestrians yield to white pedestrians. No matter the circumstances, a Jim Crow context would interpret a collision such as this as being the fault of the black pedestrian, in this case Invisible. Moreover, a collision such as this would have most certainly put the black person's life at risk. It is within this context, a context of race, that Invisible initially interprets the incident. He suspects that the white pedestrian will himself misinterpret the collision by interpreting it in the manner of Jim Crow, which, ultimately, is to interpret Invisible's blackness as an existential threat. Thus, Invisible takes the white pedestrian's use of 'an insulting name' to be the effect of black bodily contact with the white pedestrian, 'the near darkness.'<sup>52</sup> As Invisible intimates in the reflections that frame the collision, Jim Crow sidewalk etiquette and bumptious contact laws effectively rendered black persons invisible. Invoking the language of Eliot, Invisible refers to himself as a 'phantom.'<sup>53</sup> Alluding to Harry's speech to the Eumenides, he questions whether he is a person: 'You often doubt if you really exist. You wonder whether you aren't simply a phantom in other people's minds... You ache with the need to convince yourself that you do exist in the real world.'<sup>54</sup> There is a problem with this account of events, however: the collision takes place not in a Jim Crow setting but on the streets of New York City, as indicated by Invisible's reference to the *Daily News*.<sup>55</sup> A Jim Crow context, therefore, is not a valid interpretive frame for *this* sidewalk collision, at least not in actuality.<sup>56</sup> Invisible himself comes to see this.

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<sup>51</sup> Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 4.

<sup>52</sup> Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 4.

<sup>53</sup> Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 4, 5.

<sup>54</sup> Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 4.

<sup>55</sup> Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 5.

<sup>56</sup> Whether it is a valid interpretive frame in the context of Invisible's psychology is, of course, a separate matter.

Before proceeding any further, it is worth reminding that ‘the end is in the beginning’; that is, Invisible has already achieved a higher order of understanding by the time of the sidewalk collision.<sup>57</sup> He is thus able to transcend the perceptual limits of his subjectivity and recognize that the white pedestrian suffers his own imperception.<sup>58</sup> As Invisible explains, he stops attacking the white pedestrian because suddenly ‘it occurred to me that the man had not *seen* me, actually.’<sup>59</sup> Like Eliot’s Harry, the white pedestrian, ‘as far as he knew, was in the midst of a walking nightmare!’ Having just awoken from this nightmare himself, Invisible recognizes the white pedestrian’s somnambulistic state for what it is—unselfconscious automatism. It occurs to Invisible that, in this particular instance, he has ascribed to race that which was actually the effect of a more fundamental subject-object split. The white pedestrian did *not* interpret the collision in terms of Invisible’s race, in a Jim Crow manner.

In fact, the white pedestrian never even saw Invisible’s race because he never even saw Invisible. The white pedestrian’s ‘insulting name’ is thus not the effect of Invisible’s black body but rather the effect of his body, which materializes and collides with the pedestrian in literal—not racial—darkness. ‘Near darkness,’ then, is a sliding signifier in the prologue. The phrase initially suggests that Invisible’s racialized body is the cause of fright in the white pedestrian, but as Invisible increasingly recognizes the actuality of events, the sense of the phrase slides so that ‘near darkness’ comes to signify not black bodily proximity but a literal lack of light.<sup>60</sup> Paradoxically, as the signifier slides toward this most literal of senses, it simultaneously takes on a deeper, more symbolic meaning: ‘near darkness’ also comes to signify a state of unenlightenment, or ignorance. As revealed by the polysemous ‘near darkness,’ Ellison codes the language of the prologue in such a way as to craft an experience of race’s baffling and hypnotic qualities. As readers, we initially believe we know what is happening, but, like Invisible, we

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<sup>57</sup> Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 6.

<sup>58</sup> Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 4.

<sup>59</sup> Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 4.

<sup>60</sup> Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 4.

soon find that our sense of what is happening is mere projection, and that what is actually happening is something else entirely.

As in the phrase ‘near darkness,’ this is also seen in the ambiguity of the ‘insulting name.’<sup>61</sup> It is significant, we might assume, that immediately upon learning that the pedestrian calls Invisible ‘an insulting name’ we learn that the pedestrian is white, or coded as white: ‘He was a tall blond man, and as my face came close to his he looked insolently out of his blue eyes and cursed me.’<sup>62</sup> Viewing the collision in a context of Jim Crow sidewalk etiquette and bumptious contact laws, we might also reasonably assume that the ‘insulting name’ is none other than the racial slur ‘nigger.’ And yet, it is not, for, significantly, Invisible does not indicate its use here as he does elsewhere in the novel. Not to mention, Invisible has just warned us of the need to both see and see beyond race:

Nor is my invisibility exactly a matter of a biochemical accident to my epidermis. That invisibility to which I refer occurs because of a peculiar disposition of the eyes of those with whom I come in contact. A matter of the construction of their *inner* eyes, those eyes with which they look through their physical eyes upon reality.<sup>63</sup>

Stated differently, race is a construct that exploits the more basic subject-object dualism. In the ambiguity of the ‘insulting name,’ then, Ellison suggests the Eumenides-like effect of race. As soon as we learn Invisible is black and the pedestrian is white, we are likely to fall into a trance wherein we can no longer see any other details about the incident. The effect of this is that we *automatically* interpret the incident and the insult in this, a racial context. Like Invisible, we too are momentarily hypnotized by race. As a result, we neglect to recognize race as functioning within a more fundamental subject-object dualism.

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<sup>61</sup> Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 4.

<sup>62</sup> Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 4.

<sup>63</sup> Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 3.

As Invisible suggests at the end of the prologue, this, the *automatic* interpretation, is how he views the sidewalk collision *before* his transformation of character, before his writing of the narrative and his achieving a higher order of understanding:

Responsibility rests upon recognition, and recognition is a form of agreement. Take the man whom I almost killed: Who was responsible for that near murder—I? I don't think so, and I refuse it. I won't buy it. You can't give it to me. *He* bumped *me*, *he* insulted *me*. Shouldn't he, for his own personal safety, have recognized my hysteria, my 'danger potential'? He, let us say, was lost in a dream world. But didn't *he* control that dream world—which, alas, is only too real!—and didn't *he* rule me out of it? And if he had yelled for a policeman, wouldn't *I* have been taken for the offending one? Yes, yes, yes! Let me agree with you, I was the irresponsible one; for I should have used my knife to protect the higher interests of society. Some day that kind of foolishness will cause us tragic trouble. All dreamers and sleepwalkers must pay the price, and even the invisible victim is responsible for the fate of all. But I shirked that responsibility; I became too snarled in the incompatible notions that buzzed within my brain. I was a coward...<sup>64</sup>

Foreshadowing the chaos that ensues as a result of Invisible's Rhinehartism—that 'some day that kind of foolishness will cause... tragic trouble'—Ellison tips his hand and suggests this is, in fact, a cynic's perspective of the sidewalk collision. Indeed, Invisible *is* irresponsible, but not for the reasons he articulates here. The reasons he articulates here are characteristic of the kind of thinking that ultimately leads to the Harlem riot, for it is the same shortsightedness that underlies the perspective of Ras the Destroyer, and it is the same shortsightedness that underlies Invisible's accelerationist plot to destroy the Brotherhood. Invisible is irresponsible here simply because he has not yet learned to accept the burden of navigating the perceptual implications of subject-

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<sup>64</sup> Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 14.

object dualism. It is *this* responsibility with which he wrestles before the writing of his narrative.

That the failure to see race as a perceptual implication of subject-object dualism is an imperception is exactly what Ellison suggests by having Invisible say that the pedestrian ‘cursed’ him. This ‘curse’ is the hypnotic quality—and the true relevance—of the pedestrian’s whiteness.<sup>65</sup> For it is the myth of whiteness which casts the spell of race. In the coded language of the prologue, then, Ellison makes us suffer the enchantment of race alongside Invisible. For both Harry and Invisible, recognizing the fundamental problematic—the perceptual implications of subject-object dualism—produces a state of enlightenment that allows the perceiver to see beyond the self—or, in Invisible’s case, beyond the racialized self.<sup>66</sup> Recognition of the fundamental gap between subject and object enables the perceiver to ascribe to an object of perception a complex subjectivity comparable to one’s own. Thus, Invisible is—eventually—able to distinguish between true racial prejudice and ordinary self-absorption. Similarly, Harry comes to realize that the Eumenides are not chasing but guiding him.

Upon discovery of the family curse, Harry recognizes he was not responsible for his wife’s death. As in the prologue of *Invisible Man*, the language here is somnambulistic: ‘Perhaps my life has only been a dream / Dreamt through me by the minds of others. Perhaps / I only dreamt I pushed her.’<sup>67</sup> The last line, which is enjambed, visually suggests certainty despite the contingency of the language. Harry is correct, but he

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<sup>65</sup> Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 4.

<sup>66</sup> To be clear, Ellison’s allusions to *The Family Reunion* function variously throughout the novel. Casting the interaction between Harry (the white pedestrian) and the Eumenides (Invisible) from the perspective of the Eumenides (Invisible), *Invisible Man* inscribes a literary-critical subtext that racializes the Eumenides of *The Family Reunion*; at the same time, however, Ellison sets up a parallel between Harry and Invisible as protagonists, both suffering from imperception. See also note 49.

<sup>67</sup> Eliot, *The Family Reunion*, 2.2.126-128, 333.

is cautious in trusting his newfound ability to perceive things clearly. Upon accepting the ‘burden’ of the past, his interiority comes into alignment with external reality.<sup>68</sup> Tellingly, Agatha characterizes the past—and therefore the present and the future—by describing its possibilities:

It is possible that you have not known what sin  
You shall expiate, or whose, or why. It is certain  
That the knowledge of it must precede the expiation.  
It is possible that sin may strain and struggle  
In its dark instinctive birth, to come to consciousness  
And so find expurgation. It is possible  
You are the consciousness of your unhappy family,  
Its bird sent flying through the purgatorial flame.  
Indeed it is possible. You may learn hereafter,  
Moving alone through flames of ice, chosen  
To resolve the enchantment under which we suffer.<sup>69</sup>

The Eumenides appear once more, and Harry sees them now for the first time outside of his own self-absorption: ‘This time, you are real, this time, you are *outside* me / and just endurable.’<sup>70</sup> Harry now understands the true meaning of the Eumenides: ‘You followed me here, where I thought I should escape you— / No! you were already here before I arrived. / Now I see at last that I am following you...’<sup>71</sup> With this, Harry leaves Wishwood, for now his ‘business is not to run away, but to pursue, / Not to avoid being found, but to seek.’<sup>72</sup> The Eumenides, he sees, are ‘bright angels.’<sup>73</sup> The Eumenides will presumably continue to guide Harry indefinitely. Significantly, the journeys of both Harry and Invisible end in brightness, that is, enlightenment, or the absence of shadows. Brightness, for Harry, is located in the Eumenides; for Invisible, brightness is to be

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<sup>68</sup> Eliot, *The Family Reunion*, 2.2.159-160, 334.

<sup>69</sup> Eliot, *The Family Reunion*, 2.2.131-141, 333.

<sup>70</sup> Eliot, *The Family Reunion*, 2.2.233-234, 336. Emphasis mine.

<sup>71</sup> Eliot, *The Family Reunion*, 2.2.236-238, 336.

<sup>72</sup> Eliot, *The Family Reunion*, 2.2.313-314, 338.

<sup>73</sup> Eliot, *The Family Reunion*, 2.2.345, 339.

found in his underground hideout.

At the end of the novel, Invisible escapes into subterranean hibernation. As he explains, his hideout is ‘full of light. Yes, *full* of light.’<sup>74</sup> The sheer brightness that results from Invisible’s 1,369 lights dispels all shadows.<sup>75</sup> Like Harry, he too has reached a higher order of understanding: ‘I’m invisible, not blind.’<sup>76</sup> He gains insight into the meaning of his grandfather’s last words, which have functioned for him as his own family ‘curse.’<sup>77</sup> In keeping with the rest of the narrative, Ellison here has Invisible describe his insights through motifs of shadows, blackness, and darkness:

One of the greatest spectacles in the world is the spectacle of the whites busy escaping blackness and becoming blacker every day, and the blacks striving toward whiteness, becoming quite dull and gray. None of us seems to know who he is or where he’s going.<sup>78</sup>

As Invisible suggests, race cast as something akin to the Eumenides distorts the humanity of all who are subject to its purview, a purview which results from the fundamental division between subject and object. Resolving its hold on perception, then, is both an individual and a collective task. Yet, resolving its hold on perception will not eradicate the division, for as Invisible comes to accept, the subject-object split is fundamental to humanity: ‘Now I know men are different and that all life is divided and that only in division is there true health.’<sup>79</sup> Invisible suggests that subjectivity, the ‘inner eyes,’ cannot rely on its own conception of what exists externally.<sup>80</sup> In the end, subjects alone do not

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<sup>74</sup> Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 6.

<sup>75</sup> See Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 7, for where Invisible gives this exact number.

<sup>76</sup> Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 576.

<sup>77</sup> Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 17, 33-34.

<sup>78</sup> Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 577.

<sup>79</sup> Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 576.

<sup>80</sup> Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 3.

suffice. The self needs the other. He thus feels compelled to come out of hibernation: ‘In going underground, I whipped it all except the mind, the *mind*.’<sup>81</sup> In the artificial brightness of his basement hideout, external shadows may no longer exist, but the mind continues to project its own. In this, Invisible recognizes ‘the darkness of lightness.’<sup>82</sup>

Conversely, external sources of reality alone cannot account for, nor dignify, what exists internally. The self cannot exist only as defined by the other. This objectification is what drove Invisible into hiding in the first place: ‘Up above there’s an increasing passion to make men conform to a pattern.’<sup>83</sup> Only in navigating the perceptual implications of subject-object dualism does one come into full contact with the reality of self, others, and the world. This entails a process of ongoing adjustment, of being a ‘thinker-tinker’.<sup>84</sup>

The mind that has conceived a plan of living [subjective experience] must never lose sight of the chaos against which that pattern was conceived [objective reality]. That goes for societies as well as for individuals. Thus, having tried to give pattern to the chaos which lives within the pattern of your certainties, I must come out, I must emerge. And there’s still conflict within me.<sup>85</sup>

Here, Invisible adopts the direct address, implicating the reader in casting him as a shadowy presence akin to the Eumenides. Yet, he is not so naïve as to think that he is entirely inculpable. He admits he is ‘implicated and partially responsible.’<sup>86</sup> Like Harry, he mistook the role others cast him in for his actual identity, which remains fundamentally undefined. Although Invisible has now achieved a higher order of understanding, he recognizes that the process of ongoing adjustment, of living in division, is burdensome. In fact, it is so difficult that, in the end, Invisible still

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<sup>81</sup> Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 580.

<sup>82</sup> Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 6.

<sup>83</sup> Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 576.

<sup>84</sup> Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 7.

<sup>85</sup> Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 580-81.

<sup>86</sup> Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 579.

struggles to tell whether he is projecting his own subjectivity upon others: ‘Who knows but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak *for* you?’<sup>87</sup> In addition to warning about the warping effects of subjectivity, here *Invisible* challenges the reader of his memoir to likewise remain wary of exclusively external accounts of reality—including even those that come from him.

With this reading of *Invisible Man*—and its allusions to *The Family Reunion*—we shall now go a step further by examining the ways in which Ellison takes issue with Eliot’s play. Given that the literary-critical subtext arises from the differences between the primary and the referent, it is necessary to attend to the ways in which Ellison’s novel complicates Eliot’s play, for therein lies the primary’s critical evaluation of the referent. At the end of *The Family Reunion*, Amy dies, John becomes landlord, and Harry leaves home; so too do Mary and Agatha: each family member goes his or her separate way. With this, the dismembering of Wishwood, the play concludes. Ellison no doubt took issue with this ending, for as I now want to suggest, Ellison in his reading superimposed an American context onto the play.

For Ellison, Wishwood is America, and the family curse, or original sin, is the myth of race, which negates the ideals set forth in the nation’s founding documents.<sup>88</sup> As we have seen, this parallel is drawn in *Invisible*

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<sup>87</sup> Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 581. Emphasis mine.

<sup>88</sup> Ellison returns time and again in *The Collected Essays* to the significance of America’s founding documents in reading its literature. See, for instance, Ellison, ‘Brave Words for a Startling Occasion,’ in *The Collected Essays*, 151-54. Here Ellison lauds nineteenth century novelists for taking ‘much greater responsibility for the condition of democracy,’ asserting, ‘their works were imaginative projections of the conflicts within the human heart which arose when the sacred principles of the Constitution and the Bill of Rights clashed with the practical exigencies of human greed and fear, hate and love’ (152-153). It is also worth noting that I am not the first to suggest that Ellison’s allusions to works not by or about Americans nevertheless function in Ellison’s work in an American context. See, for instance, Patrice D. Rankine, *Ulysses in Black: Ralph Ellison, Classicism, and African American Literature* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2006). In his readings of Ellison’s work, Rankine traces how

*Man* in the ‘curse’ of the grandfather’s last words.<sup>89</sup> Immediately after explaining that his grandparents had been slaves, who ‘about eighty-five years ago... were told that they were free, united with others of our country in everything pertaining to the common good, and in everything social, separate like the fingers of the hand,’ *Invisible* gives an account of his grandfather’s deathbed advice:

But my grandfather is the one. He was an odd guy, my grandfather, and I am told I take after him. It was he who caused the trouble. On his deathbed he called my father to him and said, ‘Son, after I’m gone I want you to keep up the good fight. I never told you, but our life is a war and I have been a traitor all my born days, a spy in the enemy’s country ever since I gave up my gun back in the Reconstruction. Live with your head in the lion’s mouth. I want you to overcome ‘em with yeses, undermine ‘em with grins, agree ‘em to death and destruction, let ‘em swoller you till they vomit or bust wide open.’ They thought the old man had gone out of his mind. He had been the meekest of men. The younger children were rushed from the room, *the shades drawn* and the flame of the lamp turned so low that it sputtered on the wick like the old man’s breathing. ‘Learn it to the youngsters,’ he whispered fiercely; then he died.<sup>90</sup>

Significantly, *Invisible* goes on to explain, ‘my folks were more alarmed over his last words than over his dying. It was as though he had not died

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Ellison alludes to classical works as a means by which to understand American race relations. For instance, Rankine shows that *Invisible Man* alludes to Odysseus in the Cyclops’s cave as an image for racial oppression in twentieth-century America.

<sup>89</sup> Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 17.

<sup>90</sup> Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 16. Emphasis mine. Here *Invisible*’s grandfather dispels the myth of race and effectively undermines essentialism by highlighting its performativity. Unsettled by this prospect, however, *Invisible*’s family dismisses the insight and suppresses it. As a result, essentialism is reified—the ‘shades’ are ‘drawn.’ Ellison here makes explicit that the recurrent shadows and darkness are a direct result of the ‘curse’ of the grandfather’s last words.

at all, his words caused so much anxiety. I was warned emphatically to forget what he had said and, indeed, this is the first time it has been mentioned outside the family circle.<sup>91</sup> Like Harry, Invisible's journey is one that, through reckoning with the past, eventually leads to a heightened perception of self and others. Harry's journey to enlightenment requires his knowledge of the family curse, which then allows him to discover the meaning of the Eumenides; analogously, Invisible's journey to enlightenment requires his making sense of his grandfather's last words, which then allows him to discover the meaning of race. But the two differ drastically in their prognosis of the family estate, which in Eliot's play is Wishwood and in Ellison's novel is America. For further evidence, we turn to the epilogue.

At the end of the novel, Invisible is finally able to make sense of his grandfather's last words, which moment, because of its inherent complexity, must be cited here in full:

Could he have meant hell, he *must* have meant the principle, that we were to affirm the principle on which the country was built and not the men, or at least not the men who did the violence. Did he mean say 'yes' because he knew that the principle was greater than the men, greater than the numbers and the vicious power and all the methods used to corrupt its name? Did he mean to affirm the principle, which they themselves had dreamed into being out of the chaos and darkness of the feudal past, and which they had violated and compromised to the point of absurdity even in their own corrupt minds? Or did he mean that we had to take the responsibility for all of it, for the men as well as the principle, because we were the heirs who must use the principle because no other fitted our needs? Not for the power or for vindication, but because we, with the given circumstance of our origin, could only thus find transcendence? Was it that we of all, we, most of all, had to affirm the principle, the plan in whose name we had been brutalized and sacrificed—not because we would always be weak

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<sup>91</sup> Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 16.

nor because we were afraid or opportunistic, but because we were older than they, in the sense of what it took to live in the world with others and because they had exhausted in us, some—not much, but some—of the human greed and smallness, yes, and the fear and superstition that had kept them running. (Oh, yes, they're running too, running all over themselves.) Or was it, did he mean that we should affirm the principle because we, through no fault of our own, were linked to all the others in the loud, clamoring semi-visible world, that world seen only as a fertile field for exploitation by Jack and his kind, and with condescension by Norton and his, who were tired of being the mere pawns in the futile game of 'making history'? Had he seen that for these too we had to say 'yes' to the principle, lest they turn upon us to destroy both it and us?<sup>92</sup>

The principle to which Invisible refers is that pronounced in the Declaration of Independence, that all men are created equal; however, he is also referring to race.

Effectively, Invisible here condemns racial essentialism while at the same celebrating the lived experiences of race. This paradox is what he has in mind in saying, 'I condemn and affirm, say no and say yes.'<sup>93</sup> He says no to the essence and yes to the lived experience. Recognizing that there is nothing natural about race, that it is a social construct with no biological essence, Invisible realizes its existence is instead based in lived experience. Although race may not actually be real, he still lives in a society that perceives it as real, and so despite not being *biologically* black, for there is no such thing, Invisible is *experientially* black. As a result, he takes part in a robust culture and history based in this shared experience: he is, in fact, 'the bearer of something precious.'<sup>94</sup> So while Invisible condemns racial essentialism as nothing more than 'fear and superstition,' he affirms the *principle*, the lived experiences of race.

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<sup>92</sup> Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 574-575.

<sup>93</sup> Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 579.

<sup>94</sup> Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 441.

Invoked here is a sense of *principle* as ‘a basis of conduct or practice.’<sup>95</sup> As he also suggests, in the experience of being racialized lies crucial knowledge of ‘what it [takes] to live in the world with others.’<sup>96</sup> In the end, he realizes that his race was not pursuing but guiding him. In the lived experiences of black Americans, Ellison suggests, exists a model for American citizenship.<sup>97</sup> In short, Ellison adumbrates the *performativity* of race. This is, in fact, his intention in adopting the metatheatrical qualities of *The Family Reunion*—to depict the performativity of racial identity, and ultimately of identity itself.

As we have seen, Ellison reads *The Family Reunion*’s thematic inquiry into the perceptual implications of subject-object dualism by imbuing it with the added dimension of race. Which is to say, Ellison adopts Eliot’s theme but adapts it for a racial context. In short, he examines the fundamental paradox of race, in the process examining the ways in which race exploits the gap between subject and object. The crucial difference between the primary and the referent of allusion in this instance is the difference between the real and the unreal. Harry knows the Eumenides are real; moreover, in the world of the play they are actually real. Harry alone recognizes this; everybody else considers the Eumenides to be unreal. For *Invisible*, it is the other way around: *Invisible* knows race is unreal; moreover, in the world of the novel, as in our world, it is actually unreal. *Invisible* alone recognizes this; everybody else considers race to be real. Enlightenment for *Invisible* is thus far more ironic. Harry’s enlightenment liberates him from the physical world. He effectively transcends subject-object dualism by achieving access to the metaphysical Eumenides. *Invisible* is not so blessed. For *Invisible*, enlightenment merely reifies the fundamental problematic. A new, different kind of suffering accompanies his heightening of perception. He comes to the

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<sup>95</sup> Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 574; *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. ‘principle, n., sense II.4.a,’ September 2023. <<https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/1949044471>>.

<sup>96</sup> Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 574.

<sup>97</sup> For more on this view in Ellison, see Ellison’s testimony before the 1966 U.S. Senate subcommittee examining the ‘Federal Role in Urban Problems.’ Reprinted in ‘Harlem’s America: From the U.S. Senate Investigation of the Crisis in Our Cities,’ *New Leader* 49, no. 19 (September 26, 1966): 2-35.

tragic realization that he still bears responsibility for bridging the gap between self and other; however, he has nonetheless gained crucial knowledge. Eliot and Ellison thus respond to the problematic differently. Eliot's religiosity resulted in greater faith in the possibility of transcending selfhood. For Ellison, there was no metaphysical escape hatch. If we are to consider *Invisible Man* an American *Family Reunion*, as I argue we ought to, then, for Ellison, the unity of the national family depended upon each member accepting the burden of the problematic for himself, and it depended also upon each member recognizing all other members as subjects in their own right, for each and every citizen 'has a socially responsible role to play.'<sup>98</sup>

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In the early eighties, Alan Nadel sent Ellison a copy of the manuscript for *Invisible Criticism*. Ellison responded enthusiastically to Nadel's study. That Ellison read *The Family Reunion* in terms of race and that he went on to use his idiosyncratic reading as a blueprint for *Invisible Man* is implicitly confirmed by Ellison in his correspondence with Nadel. Ellison writes, 'I am especially pleased that you've pointed to the several ways in which I've attempted to 'integrate' (and consciously 'Afro-Americanize') our literature, whether by initiating dialogues with certain master-works of its pluralistic tradition or by using them as models.'<sup>99</sup> Characteristically, Ellison refers to these allusive, integrative techniques as 'tinkering.'<sup>100</sup> He then goes on to express that, prior to Nadel's study, he 'felt fairly secure' in his 'amusement over critics who had no nose for the sources and objects of [his] manipulations.'<sup>101</sup> He implies that this critical anosmia is the result of an obstinate racial essentialism on the part

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<sup>98</sup> Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 581.

<sup>99</sup> Ellison, Letter to Alan Nadel, 27 Jan. 1984, in *The Selected Letters of Ralph Ellison*, eds. John F. Callahan and Marc C. Conner (New York: Random House, 2019), 816.

<sup>100</sup> Ellison, Letter to Alan Nadel, 27 Jan. 1984, in *The Selected Letters of Ralph Ellison*, 816.

<sup>101</sup> Ellison, Letter to Alan Nadel, 27 Jan. 1984, in *The Selected Letters of Ralph Ellison*, 817.

of critics and scholars:

Sometimes it was as though I'd written an invisible text. Or as though they assumed my work couldn't possibly have any connection whatsoever with what others had written. And it wasn't that I hadn't cued them with Captain Delano and Eliot's Harry and laid down a trail of other signs and clues.... But I refer mainly to my many debts to Joyce and Melville, Mark Twain and Eliot, not to mention the violence I've done them.<sup>102</sup>

If, as I argue, the white pedestrian with whom Invisible collides on the sidewalk is Harry, then part of 'the violence' Ellison does to Eliot is to have Invisible physically assault Eliot's character. Of course, in speaking of doing 'violence,' it is more likely Ellison has in mind the idea that allusion functions as a form of criticism.

In light of our discussion of Eliot's wide-ranging significance to Ellison, it should come as no surprise that Ellison pointed to his reading of *The Waste Land* as an undergraduate as the event that marked his 'real transition to writing.'<sup>103</sup> He elaborated, '*The Waste Land* seized my mind. I was intrigued by its power to move me while eluding my understanding. Somehow its rhythms were often closer to those of jazz than were those of the Negro poets, and even though I could not understand then, its range of allusion was as mixed and varied as that of Louis Armstrong.'<sup>104</sup> From this, Nadel draws the following conclusion: 'From Eliot... Ellison learned the art of bricolage, the construction of a cultural moment through the reassembly of the however fragmentary bits of that moment's artifacts and traditions (an art for which the blues had already laid the groundwork).'<sup>105</sup> Similarly, Nadel contends that *The Family Reunion*

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<sup>102</sup> Ellison, Letter to Alan Nadel, 27 Jan. 1984, in *The Selected Letters of Ralph Ellison*, 817.

<sup>103</sup> Ellison, 'Hidden Name and Complex Fate,' in *The Collected Essays*, 202.

<sup>104</sup> Ellison, 'Hidden Name and Complex Fate,' in *The Collected Essays*, 203.

<sup>105</sup> Nadel, 'Integrated Literary Tradition,' 146.

epigraph, in part, ‘acknowledges Eliot’s technique of updating Greek tragedy by employing modernist poetics.’<sup>106</sup> Indeed, what Eliot dubs the ‘mythic method,’ I would add, is analogous to what Ellison later describes as the ‘vernacular’ process.<sup>107</sup> As we have seen in our analysis of *Invisible Man*’s allusions to *The Family Reunion*, for Ellison narrative fiction is a means by which to examine standard readings of literature—an alternative forum for the practice of literary criticism and interpretation.

By way of conclusion, it is worth attending to a detail in the description of Invisible’s underground hideout, for doing so suggests Ellison’s motive for juxtaposing the two epigraphs as such. Invisible says, ‘I live rent-free in a building rented strictly to whites, in a section of the basement that was shut off and forgotten during the nineteenth century, which I discovered when I was trying to escape in the night from Ras the Destroyer.’<sup>108</sup> This, I want to suggest, is an apt description of Ellison’s vision of literary tradition. In his 1946 ‘Twentieth-Century Fiction and the Black Mask of Humanity,’ Ellison articulates a position on nineteenth century literature that was highly original in the forties: that writers such as Twain, Emerson, Thoreau, Whitman, and Melville imbued ‘the Negro’ with profound significance, in the process developing within their work a moral dimension that spoke directly to the social and political contexts of their times. Ellison writes, ‘This conception of the Negro as a symbol of Man—the reversal of what he represents in most contemporary thought—was organic to nineteenth century literature.’<sup>109</sup> Here he takes issue with modernists like Hemingway, who sought ‘technical perfection rather than moral insight,’ and he celebrates Faulkner, who was ‘actually seeking out

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<sup>106</sup> Nadel, ‘Integrated Literary Tradition,’ 146.

<sup>107</sup> For the ‘mythic method,’ see Eliot, ‘*Ulysses*, Order, and Myth,’ in *The Complete Prose of T.S. Eliot, The Critical Edition, Vol. 2: The Perfect Critic, 1919-1926*, 476-81. For the ‘vernacular’ process, see Ellison, ‘The Little Man at Cheehaw Station,’ in *The Collected Essays*, 512-19.

<sup>108</sup> Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 6.

<sup>109</sup> Ellison, ‘Twentieth-Century Fiction and the Black Mask of Humanity,’ in *The Collected Essays*, 88.

the nature of man.’<sup>110</sup> While writing *Invisible Man*, Ellison was clearly interested in wedding the moral imperatives of nineteenth century literature with the technical achievements of modernism. Invisible’s descent into the basement of a whites-only space therefore reflects a recovery of that part of tradition that had been ‘shut off and forgotten’ by contemporary writers, namely the moral dimensions of race. In racializing the Eumenides of *The Family Reunion*, then, Ellison attempts to restore to modernist aesthetics the moral imperatives of nineteenth century literature. That is, he aims to integrate T.S. Eliot. In short, *Invisible Man* recovers from Melville what it applies to Eliot, imagining *The Family Reunion* through the moral consciousness of *Benito Cereno*, that is, through the narrative conventions by which ‘humanity masked its face with blackness.’<sup>111</sup>

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<sup>110</sup> Ellison, ‘Twentieth-Century Fiction and the Black Mask of Humanity,’ in *The Collected Essays*, 93, 98.

<sup>111</sup> Ellison, ‘Twentieth-Century Fiction and the Black Mask of Humanity,’ in *The Collected Essays*, 99.

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## The moment in the rose-garden

David Ashton

On the weekend of 6-8<sup>th</sup> September 1935, T.S. Eliot and Emily Hale were spending time together at Stamford House in the Cotswold village of Chipping Campden, close to Broadway in Gloucestershire.<sup>112</sup> At some point during their stay, it seems they strayed into the gardens of Burnt Norton, a (then) deserted 17<sup>th</sup> century manor house, about a mile outside the village.<sup>113</sup> Although unoccupied at the time, the gardens were still being maintained. There are two ‘pools’ at Burnt Norton, one semi-circular and the other rectangular. The word ‘pool’ however, is a misnomer, since due to the poor original construction, neither one ever actually held water.

In the event, it was here by the pools that Eliot had a fleeting, but real encounter – what we might call a glimpse of the timeless or eternal - that was to prove the defining moment in the genesis of *Four Quartets*. It included the miraculous appearance of water in the dry pools, whose ‘surface glittered out of heart of light’. Eliot nowhere attempts to describe this event in any detail, but in a letter to Hale on 10<sup>th</sup> September he writes, ‘Our being in the rose-garden at Burnt Norton is one of the *permanent* moments for me...’. (my italics).<sup>114</sup>

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<sup>112</sup> Lyndall Gordon, *The Hyacinth Girl*, (London: Virago Press, 2022), 207; Frances Dickey, ‘May the Record Speak: The Correspondence of T. S. Eliot and Emily Hale’. *Twentieth-Century Literature* 66 (4) (2020): 431–462.

<sup>113</sup> The precise date of the visit is unknown. Frances Dickey believes it was in 1935 but could have been either July or September. Lyndall Gordon thinks it was probably the W/E of 6-8<sup>th</sup> September 1935, because the only specific reference to Burnt Norton comes in Eliot’s letter to Hale of 10<sup>th</sup> September 1935 - just 2-days after their weekend at Stamford House - which implies a recent visit to the garden. And of course, they may have visited Burnt Norton in both July *and* September.

<sup>114</sup> The Eliot-Hale Letters. 10<sup>th</sup> September 1935: <https://tseliot.com/the-eliot-hale-letters/letters/1411>.

The experience changed him.

Eliot gives poetic expression to this experience, in the opening movement of 'Burnt Norton', the first of *Four Quartets*:

Dry the pool, dry concrete, brown edged,  
And the pool was filled with water out of sunlight,  
And the lotos rose, quietly, quietly,  
The surface glittered out of heart of light,  
And they were behind us, reflected in the pool.  
Then a cloud passed, and the pool was empty.

Many commentators<sup>115</sup> claim that the appearance of the water was a kind of *hallucination* - part of some sort of mystic or religious ecstatic experience. This may be true, but there is an alternative explanation.

Hallucinations are perceptions devoid of any external stimulus and are therefore entirely subjective. Illusions, on the other hand, are *misinterpretations* or *distortions* of a correct sensory input (think of a stick half-submerged in water, appearing bent due to the light refraction). In Eliot's case, I think he may have experienced an optical illusion. Why?

Because when I visited Burnt Norton – on a day with bright, intermittent sunshine - from certain vantage points, the empty pool looked uncannily as though it was full of water. This is because the patterning or dappling effect of the overhanging branches of the trees and moss on the sides of the pool, appeared (from some angles) as tiny ripples on a lake. My wife who was with me had the same experience. One might say, that like us, Eliot was actually experiencing a sort of *mirage*. And just as in a mirage, the surface of the 'pool' also appeared to 'glitter' or shimmer – an effect produced by the scattering of light rays that the Japanese refer to as

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<sup>115</sup> E.g. N.D. Hargrove, 'T. S. Eliot's "Burnt Norton": Past, Present, and Future', *Complutense Journal of English Studies*, 22 (2014): 51-67; Harry Blamires, *Word Unheard: A guide through Eliot's Four Quartets* (Abingdon: Routledge Library Editions, 2016), 13-15.

*Komorebi*. We also observed that when a cloud temporarily obscured the sun, the illusion immediately disappeared – exactly as Eliot says in the last line here. The fact that when the sun disappeared, so did the ‘water’, surely confirms that this was an optical *illusion*, since a hallucination does not need sunshine. And perhaps the ‘reflections’ in the pool were part of that optical illusion.

So, what we find in these six remarkable lines – which have been called ‘as close to perfection as poetry has reached in [the twentieth] century’<sup>116</sup> – may be an expression of Eliot’s rich creative imagery, or equally, of a genuine spiritual encounter, a timeless moment in which the poet felt himself claimed by a unique presence beyond words.

The somewhat less dramatic alternative, as I suggest, is that the moment in the rose garden was initiated by unique features of the landscape at Burnt Norton, with its alternating shadow and light, giving the illusion of water in the pool. For ordinary mortals, this is recognised for what it is – an illusion - and no more. But in the hands of a poetic-chemist like Eliot, it becomes transmuted into language of a sublime and luminous intensity.

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<sup>116</sup> Martin Schofield, *T.S. Eliot: The Poems* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 204-5.



## The Real Object: Making Sense of Renunciation in *Four Quartets*

Adil Khan

### I

In this article, I examine the nature of renunciation in *Four Quartets* in reference to Jacques Lacan's concept of the Real. I argue that the *via negativa* of the *Quartets* assumes a paradoxical position, when looked at in reference to the notion of the Lacanian Real, in the sense that on the one hand the subject renounces the object of desire, however on the other hand, he embraces it through the very act of renunciation. I further argue that the Lacanian proclamation that the Real identity of the object is not limited to the image, or the apprehensible nature of the object, is equivalent to Eliot's assertion in 'Little Gidding' that renunciation does not result in the loss of the object but the expansion of it in a beyond. Considering this, we can interpret the concept of renunciation in the *Quartets* as the mechanism to establish a greater intimacy with the (Real) object. By rendering the object in a void (a synonymous term for the Lacanian Real), it takes the place of the Real object of desire and becomes, so to speak, impossible to lose. Renunciation in the *Quartets*, therefore, not only becomes the reason for the object to assert itself more fully, but it also enables the object to become part of the vacant space of the Real where it becomes neither representable nor losable. In reference to the Lacanian claim that desire 'unfolds in the realm of the nonsensical,' the *Quartets* connect with the nonsensical through the forceful elimination of the sensical forms of reality and replace them with the hollow of their existence.<sup>1</sup> I have taken this approach on the basis that it can potentially redefine the meaning of renunciation in *Four Quartets*.

Jacques Lacan (1901-1981) was a French psychoanalyst, often credited with re-reading or re-interpreting Freudian psychoanalysis. His re-reading of Freudian thought becomes a case in which, in the words of Malcolm

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<sup>1</sup> Jacques Lacan, *Seminar VI: Desire and Its Interpretation*, ed. J. A. Miller, trans. Bruce Fink (London: Polity Press, 2019), 359.

Bowie, the ‘disciple [...] races ahead of his master.’<sup>2</sup> Lacan’s role in Freud’s theories is vital in two ways. Firstly, Lacan does not read Freud in the conventional sense of ‘how dare he mean this?’ or ‘I get perfectly well what Freud means.’ His return to Freud both complicates Freudian ideas and leads up to his own contributions in psychoanalysis. Lacan distances his theoretical concepts from Freudian notions of ego, superego and id to form his own conceptual triad, the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real. By conceptualising the Imaginary and the Symbolic, Lacan relocates the central notion of human psycho-social development away from the child’s own psychic apparatus to an ‘other’ which does not have a fixed name or existence. Therefore, in Lacanian theory, the desiring subject is inevitably linked to a lack of being, a void, every time he/she tries to access the object of desire. The subject cannot access the desire object because desire does not have an object as such; objects are only the signifiers of desire. In a sense, put succinctly, Lacan broadens the horizons of psychoanalysis to accommodate such non-human agencies as language and structuralist linguistics, which were not available to Freud when he founded his theories.

As outlined above, the desiring subject, in Lacanian theory, cannot get access to the desire object. However, the pursuit of the desired object is one of the fundamental characteristics of Eliot’s poetry. This pursuit is more obvious in the early poems than anywhere else. Taking the example of the most prominent early poem, ‘The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock’, we can identify at least four different versions of the desired object. The first is associated with the human body with which Prufrock has an overwhelming desire of furthering intimacy. This tendency in ‘Prufrock’ is supported by the narrator’s consciousness of his female audience, of which he can only speak from a distance but whom he cannot directly address. The second is the desire of knowledge. The speaker has already acquired some knowledge, as suggested by such phrases as ‘I have known the evenings’ and ‘I have known the eyes.’ Yet, there are questions the speaker wants answers for. Questions such as ‘how should I presume?’ and ‘how should I begin?’. Thirdly, in ‘Prufrock’ there is an urge for an apprehension of a sense of time. The poem in fact moves in time from

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<sup>2</sup> Malcolm Bowie, *Lacan* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), 7.

Prufrock presumably being a young man to his death. We hear Prufrock lamenting about growing old until he drowns in the sea. The fourth version of the desire object, which directly emanates from his desire to keep hold of time, is his desire for life. Life must have been very dear to him as he is desperate to live a moment of fulfilment throughout the poem.

These are exactly the themes which reappear in *Four Quartets*. There is no specific arrangement of ideas in the *Quartets*, however, if we single out four such ideas in the *Quartets*, we are met with similar ideas as found in 'Prufrock', with a changed orientation and negative outlook, nonetheless. In 'Burnt Norton', unlike in 'Prufrock', 'Love is [...] / Timeless, and undesiring.' The sense of direction is now '[e]mptying the sensual with deprivation' and '[c]leansing affection from the temporal' instead of hearkening to the sense of possession in a world of time. In the same vein, the sense of meaning in the *Quartets* is neither desirable nor achievable. It is what 'Burnt Norton' calls a 'perpetual possibility.' Speaking of time, there was a clear sense of time in 'Prufrock', however, the *Quartets* progress to a concept of time as, in the words of Nancy Gish, 'not an eternal present but eternity within the present.'<sup>3</sup> One final such juxtaposition is found in the distinction of life and death. Prufrock clung on to life as much as possible; however, as soon as 'Little Gidding' begins, there is no 'smell of living thing.'

On face value, such dynamics of desire in the poem suggest that the purpose of the negative orientation is the renunciation of the desire object. However, I will argue that such dynamics are instead aimed at the Realisation of the desire object. Realisation, which directly emanates from the Lacanian Real, is the condition when a certain thing is entered into the order of the (Lacanian) Real from where it is impossible to be lost. The Real in Lacan is the impossible-to-be-represented aspect of a thing from which the thing gets its own representation. In *Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, Lacan explains his notion of the Real through the concrete example of a vase. A vase, he says, is 'an object made to represent the existence of the

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<sup>3</sup> Nancy Gish, *Time in the Poetry of T. S. Eliot: A Study in Structure and Theme* (London: The Macmillan Press, 1981), 96.

emptiness at the centre.’<sup>4</sup> The ‘real’ of the thing, the vase, is at the centre which is ‘*nihil*, as nothing.’<sup>5</sup> The ‘emptiness as represented in representation presents itself as a *nihil*, as nothing.’<sup>6</sup>

The implications of Lacan’s analogy are numerous. Firstly, as Lacan himself acknowledges and uses the analogy for its purpose, the Real object, the empty space around which the potter has shaped the vase with clay, is impossible to represent. Secondly, and this is a direct consequence of Lacan’s analogy of the vase, while the apprehension or representation of the Real is impossible, its presence is of much significance in the apprehension of a thing such as the vase. Although not representable, the Real, or the void in the middle of the vase, gives the thing its own representation. Similarly, *Four Quartets* render their (Real) desire object as an impossible object. This is done by creating a void around the centre of the object so that the object loses its own representability. However, the void created around it becomes the true representation of that object. Therefore, the object is made redundant in such a way that in the sense of the surface value it no longer exists. However, in the sense of the Lacanian Real, it becomes invincible, impossible to lose, exerting immense influence as a result. In the next larger section of the article, I will highlight the ways the object, in its many manifestations, is stripped of its concreteness/physicality and in the final section of the article I will argue that the idea of renunciation in the poem amounts to, paradoxically, making the (Real) object central and more influential.

## II

The pattern that runs through all the *Quartets* is a pattern of negative thinking. This tendency has been acknowledged by numerous other commentators.<sup>7</sup> My contention is that each of the poems creates a void at

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<sup>4</sup> Jacques Lacan, *Ethics of the Psychoanalysis: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book VII*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Dennis Porter (New York: Norton & Company, 1997), 121.

<sup>5</sup> Lacan, *Ethics*, 121.

<sup>6</sup> Lacan, *Ethics*, 121.

<sup>7</sup> Fayek M. Ishak, *The Mystical Philosophy of T. S. Eliot* (New Have, CT: College and University Press, 1970); Nancy Gish, *Time in the Poetry of T. S. Eliot* (London: Macmillan, 1981); Eloise Knapp Hay, *T. S. Eliot’s Negative Way*

the heart of its subject matter. As already noted above, what we see is an elimination of what can be mentally or physically apprehended. The '[d]esiccation of the world of sense', the renunciation of the world of time, the eradication of the sense of understanding and the extermination of the worldly life are four of the fundamental aspects of the *Quartets*. I should also emphasise here that the purpose of the renunciation does not seem to be the affirmation of anything else. *Four Quartets* do not unequivocally uphold anything else in place of what is renounced. The mission of 'Burnt Norton' is descending lower '[i]nto the world of perpetual solitude,' and the complete annihilation of anything representing a world of senses. This is done by the extermination of what can be represented and apprehended:

Internal darkness, deprivation  
And destitution of all property,  
Desiccation of the world of sense,  
Evacuation of the world of fancy,  
Inoperancy of the world of spirit.

It can be perceived that what is being renounced is the physical property of the object, not necessarily the Real object as such, considering the notion of the hollow at the centre of things in the Lacanian sense. What the speaker is after is '[i]nternal darkness' achieved by renouncing the 'world of sense.' Earlier on, this conviction was expressed in terms of the 'inner freedom from practical desire' and the 'release from action and suffering,' 'release from the inner' and 'outer compulsion.' On the one hand, this is a significant statement to make particularly in the context of Eliot's early poems where Eliot's speaker had been suffering from the agitations of the 'practical desire.' Now the fundamental problem of the sensuous longing, what he terms the 'practical desire,' seems to be largely solved. However, the solution proposed is the deprivation of the world of sense, not necessarily the indulgence in another world. The freedom from the sensuousness has released the speaker from the action and suffering

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(Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982); Paul Murray, *T. S. Eliot and Mysticism* (London: Macmillan, 1991); Jewel Spears Brooker, *T. S. Eliot's Dialectical Imagination* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2018).

brought by inner and outer compulsions. Notwithstanding the long-sought-after freedom, he is 'yet surrounded / By a grace of sense, a white light still and moving.' We will reckon that the white light and the grace of sense as equal to a transcendent experience involving a different sense of approaching the already present object (perhaps the apprehension of the hollow of the object in its absence), which is not necessarily a replacement of the object other than a change of its perception. The effect on the consciousness of the speaker is '*Erhebung* without motion, concentration / Without elimination,' an act in which 'both the new world / And the old made explicit, understood.' In consequence 'the completion of its partial ecstasy,' and the 'The resolution of its partial horror' have taken place. The poem indeed concentrates on an object, but it, as quoted above, concentrates on it '[w]ithout elimination.' Can we then ask, 'is the apparent renunciation of the object the strategy for the stronger 'concentration' on it?'. This line of enquiry is justifiable in reference to the Lacanian theory where the stronger concentration of the object is indeed in its hollowness.

Even though 'Burnt Norton' takes on a course of renunciation of what can be apprehended, it does not appear to move on to a different object as the cause of its desire. This tendency makes us question the poem's primary motivation. This makes us suspect that it is the transformed vision of the same object or objects which have been the cause of desire in Eliot's earlier poems. We may postulate, after Lacan, that what Eliot had apprehended was the void in the Real object of desire, which is not exactly the goal but the inevitable condition of desire. In the early poetry, Eliot's subjects do not seem to be willing to accept this condition of the desire object, however, in *Four Quartets*, the void of the object asserts itself in such a way that the material object is eliminated only to be more powerful in its absence. Moreover, this is perhaps one reason that, even if we witness dramatic transformation of Eliot's poetic style and themes, the object surrounding the sense of desire is most probably the same. This is perhaps also the reason that a constant consciousness of a past encounter with a lady in a garden is an integral part of much of his poetry including *Four Quartets*. Therefore, we can make such generalisations as that in contrast to the typical sensuous longing in the early poetry, the late poems intertwine emotions, feelings, and ideas into an occasion where the desire

object, such as the lady in question, loses its bodily integrity and becomes a void in a timeless moment in the rose garden. The aim, as noted in ‘Little Gidding,’ is liberation from the conventional sense of desire as found in early poems:

liberation—not less of love but expanding  
Of love beyond desire, and so liberation  
From the future as well as the past.

The aim however is not to relinquish the sense of desire but rise above it in a transcendent passion. ‘Our obligation,’ Eliot had written, ‘certainly, is to love—to love without desire [...] — or I might say to love beyond desire—for such love is not effected by the mere quenching of desire.’<sup>8</sup>

All the *Quartets* are unified in their tendency to create a void around the object. I will discuss this tendency in the sphere of love, meaning, time, and worldly life. In ‘Burnt Norton’, the speaker differentiates between love ‘caught in the aspect of time’ and love free from temporality. The idea of love forwarded by the *Quartets* is void of all material aspects. Love, which is the object cause and end of the movement of desire, is ‘unmoving,’ ‘timeless,’ and unlimited:

Desire itself is movement  
Not in itself desirable;  
Love is itself unmoving,  
Only the cause and end of movement,  
Timeless, and undesiring.

However, when the unfavourable element of time enters it, it reduces its capacity, trapping it into a form of limitation: ‘Except in the aspect of time / Caught in the form of limitation.’ These lines are part of the larger context of the theme of renunciation. Renunciation as we have seen so far is only of the material aspect of the object, not, in the Lacanian sense, of

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<sup>8</sup> *The Complete Prose of T. S. Eliot*, ed. Iman Javadi, Ronald Schuchard, and Jayme Stayer, vol. 5 (London: Faber and Faber, 2007), 170.

the hollow it incorporates in its being. The idea of desire in 'Burnt Norton' is in its continuous 'movement' for a timeless, unmoving, and unchanging love as the object cause of desire. The statement is in direct contrast to Eliot's early poetry where the movement of desire has been crippled by the changing and moving object of desire. As a result, 'Burnt Norton' argues that temporal love is limited and incomplete, caught between 'un-being and being.' The motivation of purging love of temporality, an act which will subject it to exist in the hollow of the Real, has come from the knowledge that love caught in the aspect of time is torment in any form. The knowledge in 'Ash Wednesday' that love is the cause of torment in both satisfied and unsatisfied forms informs the speaker's decision of renunciation. However, the removal of the aspect of time makes love 'most nearly itself / When here and now cease to matter.' This statement is in congruity with the release from what 'Burnt Norton' terms as the 'practical desire.' When the desire's practicality is subordinated, what remains is a spiritual bond with the desire object which must be outside of any space-time. The sense of space-timelessness is equated with a Real sense of love, again negating its physical existence in the sense as we know it; '[I]ove is most nearly itself' as a result of negating the validity of space-time.

However, the void the poem wants to create is not just around love and desire. In 'East Coker' the speaker advises that 'Old men ought to be explorers / Here or there does not matter.' The sense of theorising desire in these lines again asserts the hollow around the object of desire. On the one hand, the coupling of old men with 'ought to be explorers' suggests that exploration should never stop, not even in one's old age. On the other hand, it implies that such an exploration is unlikely to bear any fruits. The speaker knows that they will neither cease from exploration nor arrive anywhere else other than the place they had started from. Regardless of that, '[w]e must be still and still moving / Into another intensity' because that will pave the way for a 'further union, a deeper communion' in 'the dark cold and the empty desolation.' Such a journey is required for

the fight to recover what has been lost  
And found and lost again and again: and now, under conditions  
That seem unpropitious. But perhaps neither gain nor loss.  
For us, there is only the trying. The rest is not our business.

By emphasising the journey, the speaker acknowledges that the ultimate object of desire is the impossible, inaccessible object. The 'fight to recover' and the 'loss and gain' give the sense of a certain game, where the bond between the subject and the desire object is maintained by a continuous flux of loss and gain. The game exemplifies the fight to recover the impossible object of desire. The object is impossible for the subject in the sense that he never fully recovers it; it must be lost every time an effort is made to recover it. Consequently, it can be opined, as 'East Coker' does, that the relation between the subject and the object must be maintained by an element of a constant endeavour to recover it. However, at a certain time, the object itself becomes 'unpropitious' and the negative sense around it becomes an integral part of its consciousness. The Real object for the subject becomes a hollow, a non-representable object. The object itself becomes part of a vacant space in the Real order of things. As a result, it becomes more powerful in the sense that it keeps the subject in the loop of desire, which is suggested by the notion that the subject never stops from exploration despite the knowledge that exploration will never lead to the object.

Similarly, the problem of knowledge in the *Quartets* can also be made sense of in light of the Lacanian notion of the Real. By the time of writing the *Quartets*, Eliot had become more conscious of the problem of knowing, what I would like to call an intellectual lack-consciousness. The problem of knowledge has always been one of the fundamental elements of Eliot's poetry. As early as 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock', the speaker had failed to properly 'communicate his vision, his understanding,' of the knowledge gained from his 'journey through 'certain half- deserted streets, / The muttering retreats / Of restless nights

in one- night cheap hotels / And sawdust restaurants with oyster- shells.’<sup>9</sup> However, by the time of writing the *Quartets* he had come to understand differently. His role had transformed from ‘the voice of the Magister to that of the humble Christian.’<sup>10</sup> As Douglas Atkins has noted, he had once ‘prided himself in knowing but has come, by the time of *Four Quartets*, to understand differently: for example, ‘what you do not know is the only thing you know.’<sup>11</sup> This sense of aporia, which perhaps kept Eliot from adopting a fundamentalist approach to religious beliefs, is found on many occasions in the *Quartets*. The *Quartets* famously begin with the ‘perpetual possibility’ of meaning surrounded by abstraction and speculation. The ‘perpetual possibility’ is analogous to an endless drive towards meaning, which can be considered equal to the sense of keeping a permanent relation to the hollowness of the thing of knowledge. The poem tells us about the struggle with words and meanings. The meaning is so much evanescent that an assigned meaning of an experience restores the experience in a different form. The knowledge gained from experience has a limited value. It ‘imposes a pattern’ but then ‘it falsifies’ because the ‘pattern is new in every moment’ and ‘every moment is a new and shocking / Valuation of all we have been.’ The ‘moments of agony’ are however ‘permanent / With such permanence as time has.’ The result is not a resolution of the struggle but ‘Leaving one still with the intolerable wrestle / With words and meanings.’ There is only a ‘flicker’ over the ‘time-ridden’ faces which are ‘filled with fancy’ but ‘empty of meaning.’ The whole experience fails to mean anything. ‘The Dry Salvages’ sums it up well: ‘We had the experience but missed the meaning.’

The consequence of creating a void around the desire object, whether in the intellectual or human sense, leaves it in a moment of timelessness. Therefore, it has been argued that ‘the timeless moment is the idea behind

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<sup>9</sup> G. Douglas Atkins, *Reading T. S. Eliot: Four Quartets and the Journey Towards Understanding* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 63.

<sup>10</sup> Atkins, *Reading T. S. Eliot*, 63.

<sup>11</sup> Atkins, *Reading T. S. Eliot*, 63.

the entire work.’<sup>12</sup> It can be observed that the poem on many instances weaves its many thematic values into a structure of timelessness. The move, as a result, will render time void of the usual distinction between past, present, and future. Although ‘Burnt Norton’ sees time as either past, future, or present, the present is mainly used as a reflection of the other two, creating a hollow around its own self-identity and making it exist in timeless moment. The main concern here is to comprehend the past and make sense of the future, even if that is achieved at the expense of the present moment. Similarly, ‘East Coker’ grapples with a sense of history and sees it mainly as a pattern of undefinable timeless moments. ‘The Dry Salvages’ views time in relation to natural phenomena as an agent of destruction and preservation. However, it again stresses over the vast stretches of time past and time future and considers them neither comprehensible nor having a ‘destination.’ ‘Little Gidding’ aims towards a meaning of the timeless moments and concludes that time is ‘not an eternal present but eternity within the present.’<sup>13</sup>

The placement of the desire object in a state of timelessness, what Eliot calls the ‘cleansing [of] affection from the temporal’ is an attempt to cut it from the symbolic order and enter it in the order of the Lacanian Real. Just as the religious consciousness is a drive for a timeless otherworldly bliss, the *Quartets* preach for a timeless *jouissance* in pursuit of the desire object or remaining in a state of being in desire. The poem’s advice to ‘travellers’ is to ‘Fare forward’ without freeing themselves from the past. ‘You are not those who saw the harbour / Receding, or those who will disembark;’ and ‘do not think of the fruit of action,’ ‘Fare Forward.’ This in the words of Glenn Hughes is to ‘portray human being as ontologically situated in between world and transcendence, time and timeless,’ and they ‘explore the challenges, dangers, and the hopes for fulfilment in the drama of human existence from that perspective.’<sup>14</sup> There is however a negative certainty which calls for a timeless experience: ‘but this thing is

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<sup>12</sup> Gish, *Time*, 96.

<sup>13</sup> Gish, *Time*, 96.

<sup>14</sup> Glenn Hughes, *A More Beautiful Question: The spiritual in Poetry and Art* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2011), 89.

sure, / That time is no healer: the patient is no longer here.’ The poem reiterates the negative consciousness by saying that ‘For most of us, there is only the unattended / Moment, the moment in and out of time.’ There is the sense of acceptance of the void implicated in the belief that ‘For us there is only the trying. The rest is not our business.’ The conclusion drawn is the reassurance that human consciousness is suspended in a timeless presence and an irrefutable void of meaninglessness (‘And what you thought you came for / Is only a shell, a husk of meaning’).

Until ‘Dry Salvages’, the *Quartets* explore the idea of timelessness through time, while being wholly in the world of physical sense. What we see in the first three *Quartets* is the renunciation of the object of desire. What ‘Little Gidding’ embarks on to achieve is putting the subject in the same spaceless, timeless dimension where there is nothing other than ‘frost and fire.’ There is the ‘windless cold’ and the ‘heart’s heat,’ but there is no wind, except the ‘pentecostal fire / In the dark time of the year.’ ‘There is no earth smell’ or the sign (smell) of any living thing. The scene is earth-less, spaceless, and lifeless. Although there is no sign of life, this is the springtime, whose existence is outside of ‘time’s covenant,’ in other words, in a timeless world. We cannot witness the presence of the human body other than the ‘soul’ whose sap quivers ‘[b]etween melting and freezing.’ Along with human death, ‘Little Gidding’ combines the death of all the primary pillars of the *Quartets*. Echoing Heraclitus, the speaker announces the deaths in the exact order in which they are part of the structure of the poem.<sup>15</sup> Firstly, we witness the death of the air, along with the death of hope and despair, then of the earth, water and fire. The human body is replaced by a ‘compound ghost.’ The vacuum created by the termination of all the physical properties is completed by timelessness and spacelessness. In the timeless moment, England is ‘nowhere,’ and the meeting of two ‘face[s] still forming’ is in ‘concord’ to ‘meeting nowhere, no before and after.’

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<sup>15</sup> ‘Fire lives in the death of earth, air lives in the death of fire, water lives in the death of air, and earth in the death of water’, Heraclitus, qtd in Gish, *Time*, 113.

All these details point to the possibility that the subject is placed beyond a worldly space-time. So, what 'Little Gidding' achieves is that it places the subject in the same void where the object is already placed. The first thing the subject asserts after renouncing its own identity in space-time is a confirmatory monologue surrounding the idea of the impossibility of meaning in the experience of the world. In 'Burnt Norton', it was supposed to be an abstraction of 'perpetual possibility'; in 'East Coker', it was an 'intolerable wrestle / With words and meanings.' In 'The Dry Salvages', it was '[w]e had the experience but missed the meaning,' where any approach to unify the experience with its meaning would result in a failure. 'Little Gidding' reiterates this notion. After establishing that the speaker is speaking from out of the boundaries of the world in time, 'Little Gidding' warns those who are yet to make the journey that they will be met by meaninglessness and purposelessness once they 'came this way.' Irrespective of the routes and time, irrespective of whether they 'came at night like a broken king' or 'by day not knowing what they came for,' it will always be the same. He assures them that 'what [we] thought [we] came for [...] becomes a husk of meaning' from which 'the purpose breaks [...] when it is fulfilled.' He continues that either we do not have a purpose, or the purpose always alters itself in its fulfilment. Therefore, the speaker instructs those who have not yet made the journey to 'put off / Sense and notion' as they would not be there to 'verify' anything or 'inform [their] curiosity' about anything. What the speaker supposes them to believe is a negative value which is not different from the dislocation of meaning from experience deliberated in the previous three poems of the *Quartets*.

A couple of deliberations can be made in response to these lines. Firstly, it can be argued that the problem of meaning and making sense of the experience will not be resolved even in a timeless world. This is the Real experience in the *Quartets*. The void that is characteristic of the human condition in time is also true in a timeless setting. Secondly, the notion that 'Little Gidding' promises a union with the timeless divine is weakened by the assertion that a sense of meaning is not only missing in the world of time but also in the timeless world. Consequently, these lines

may negate the Christian doctrine of meaning in afterlife. The negation is directed at the fundamental principle of the doctrine stating that the timeless world to follow will be meaningful. The speaker after having the first-hand experience of that world does not seem to uphold such a notion and instead emphasises ‘what [we] thought [we] came for / Is only a shell, a husk of meaning.’

### III

We might now ask what purpose is to be served in renunciation, and how renunciation of the object becomes a reason for the (Real) object to become central in the poem. As to why renunciation is necessary, the justification the poem suggests is the horror of ‘re-enactment’: the ‘rending pain of re-enactment’ and the consciousness of things ‘ill done and done to other’s harm.’ Such reminiscences call for a state of distance between the subject and the object. However, the most interesting aspect of the matter is the paradoxical situation where the object distanced, in other words, represented in a void, takes the characteristics of a representable object. For example, consider these lines: ‘In that open field / If you do not come too close, if you do not come too close, / On a summer midnight, you can hear the music.’ The element of distance which, by definition, negates the representability of audible music, is the very element to make it representable in the poem. This paradoxical situation is utilised in the other contradictory statements such as the recognition that ‘[i]n order to possess what you do not possess / You must go by the way of dispossession.’ The idea seems to be the conscious choice to place the object in a vacant space from where it becomes inaccessible through the ordinary senses. Alternatively, the nexus between the subject and the object would be established by the use of memory and transcendence. This is done for the sake of conquering time and remembering the moment in the rose garden, which requires a state of a-conscious existence because

To be conscious is not to be in time  
But only in time can the moment in the rose-garden,  
[...]

Be remembered; involved with past and future.  
Only through time time is conquered.

These lines from ‘Burnt Norton’ communicate the wish for a liberated non-conscious existence in a timeless moment. ‘Little Gidding’ authenticates this notion of timeless relationship with the object through memory which is not exactly the liberation from love: ‘This is the use of memory: / For liberation—not less of love but expanding / Of love beyond desire, and so liberation / From the future as well as the past’ in a timeless moment.

Here we have arrived at an interesting situation where the concept of renunciation itself is challenged. In the conventional sense, renunciation of something involves the disavowal of that thing. However, as the above lines in ‘Little Gidding’ unequivocally proclaim, renunciation will not result in the ‘less of [that thing]’ but in the expansion of it ‘beyond desire’ in a timeless moment. Here we have a situation where the object is portrayed to be more than its apprehension. According to Lacan, this additional feature of the thing is the ‘hollow the image [of the thing] leaves empty.’<sup>16</sup> It is important to remind the reader that the Lacanian view of the Real thing is distinct from the Kantian concept of the thing in itself, the noumenal world. According to Lacan, ‘it is not in this [Kantian] dialectic between the surface and that which is beyond that things are suspended.’<sup>17</sup> For Lacan, it ‘is something that establishes a fracture, a bipartition, a splitting of the being to which the being accommodates itself.’<sup>18</sup> In this sense, the Lacanian Real is indistinguishable from the thing which accommodates itself within it, in contrast to the Kantian distinction of the phenomenal and the noumenal, the world of sense and that which is beyond it.

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<sup>16</sup> Lacan, *Seminar VII*, 196.

<sup>17</sup> Jacques Lacan, *Seminar XI: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, ed. Jacques-Allain Miller, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Norton, 1998), 106.

<sup>18</sup> Lacan, *Seminar XI*, 106.

From this characteristic of the thing, it can be inferred that the idea of renunciation of the thing involves a double consequence in which the thing is entered into the ‘hollow [of its] image’ from where it is free to expand beyond its given physicality. Therefore, it is pertinent to say that the act of renunciation is employed as a support for the thing to attain its full capacity, expanding beyond its own limitation as the thing. In this sense, the act of renunciation of the thing is an act of affirming the validity of the thing beyond any measure. From this perspective, the *via negativa* of the *Quartets* assumes a paradoxical act which not only renounces the thing but also embraces it through the very act of renunciation. This paradoxical position is made possible by the Lacanian proclamation that the Real identity of the thing is somehow not limited to the physical image or the apprehensible aspect of the thing. Lacan argues in this respect that the real of the thing in psychoanalysis ‘is no doubt not to be taken in the sense in which we normally understand it, which implies objectivity.’<sup>19</sup> In *Seminar VI*, Lacan argued that there are two sets of reality. In ‘one form of reality we could locate behaviourism,’ the substance of subject’s lived experience; however, there is another form of reality which ‘goes beyond the subject’s lived experience.’<sup>20</sup>

This other form of reality is distinct from the reality of the objects of knowledge (the reality in the conventional sense) and is supported in the phantasy, which is ‘the locus of reference by means of which desire will learn to situate itself.’<sup>21</sup> This unequivocally means that for the subject the representation of the thing in phantasy, which is the non-representable void of the thing, is the complete object of desire. The negative value of the object, which is obtained by the renunciation of the physical object is

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<sup>19</sup> Jacques Lacan, *Seminar III: The Psychoses*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Russell Grigg (New York: Norton, 1997), 186.

<sup>20</sup> Lacan, *Seminar VI*, 263.

<sup>21</sup> Jacques Lacan, *Seminar IV: The Object Relation*, ed. J. A. Miller, trans. by A. R. Price (London: Polity Press, 2020), lecture, 12 Nov 1959.

paradoxically ‘the most complete form of the object.’<sup>22</sup> The phantasmatic nature in the subject-object relations validates the Lacanian claim ‘that the history of desire is organised in the form of a discourse that unfolds in the realm of the nonsensical.’<sup>23</sup> The *Quartets* in a sense aim to connect with the ‘nonsensical’ through the forceful elimination of the sensical forms of reality and replacing them with the ‘hollow’ of their non-existence. This is a clear deviation from the early career poetry in Eliot’s *oeuvre* where, largely, the recovering of the concrete thing from its nonsensical position was at its forefront.

Why would the *Quartets* employ such a mechanism to (apparently) dislocate the subject from the object of its desire? I will consider such a mechanism to have the very opposite aim. The apparent displacement-force of the *Quartets* is in fact a sustainability measure to connect the subject and the object in the loop of desire. Desire, as Lacan insists, ‘is sustained in a confrontational relationship to subject barred from the object.’<sup>24</sup> Here, in this ‘confrontational relationship’ what sustains desire is what both Freud and Lacan term as *das Ding* (the Thing). The Thing is that reality ‘which commands and regulates’ the dynamics of desire.<sup>25</sup> It is, according to Lacan, ‘a universal maxim,’ whose features are present in ‘that which is the most lacking in a relationship to the individual.’ The reason it is called the Thing is because it has a transcendent value which remains forever lost. The objects we see and encounter in ordinary reality are in fact used as representations of the Thing. Lacan argues that in the ‘place of the object [the Thing] that cannot be found again is the object that one always finds again in reality.’<sup>26</sup>

Here we have reason to think why the *Quartets* abstain from the search of the desire-object. The conscious pursuit of the object, something which

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<sup>22</sup> Lacan, *Seminar VI*, 370.

<sup>23</sup> Lacan, *Seminar VI*, 359.

<sup>24</sup> Lacan, *Seminar VI*, 366.

<sup>25</sup> Lacan, *Seminar VII*, 55.

<sup>26</sup> Lacan, *Seminar, VII*, 70.

we repeatedly see in Eliot's early poetry, will only remove the Thing farther away and replaces it with objects of apparent reality, which are not the Real objects of desire in Lacanian theory. Therefore, the *Quartets* engage with the Thing, which 'is at the center' of the poem's dynamics 'only in the sense that it is excluded.'<sup>27</sup> The Thing in reality 'has to be posited as exterior, as the prehistoric Other that it is impossible to forget.'<sup>28</sup> This notion of the Thing in the *Quartets* enters the object in the transcendental void where it assumes the role of an impossible representation while at the same time representing that representational impossibility. The remainder which is the object *a* in Lacanian terminology is the representation of the void, with which the subject keeps hold of its confrontational relationship with the inaccessible desire object. This transformed vision of subject object relations relates to the Lacanian notion that the real thing 'is essentially the Other thing.'<sup>29</sup> The idea that the Thing only reinforces its loss through the things the subject always finds in everyday reality is true in Eliot's earlier poetry in the sense that the subject has always failed to portray the Thing as the point of interest. The *Quartets* differ from them both in that they develop a consciousness of the Thing as a possible object to attach with and work to realise that vision. Therefore, the movement of the *Quartets* is opposite to that of Eliot's other poems.

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<sup>27</sup> Lacan, *Seminar VII*, 71.

<sup>28</sup> Lacan, *Seminar VII*, 71.

<sup>29</sup> Qtd. in Lorenzo Chiesa, *Subjectivity and Otherness: A Philosophical Reading of Lacan* (Cambridge, M: The MIT Press, 2007), 135. This phrase is excluded in Dennis Porter's translation of *Seminar VII*.

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## Extended Book Review

Christopher Southgate

Lyndall Gordon, *The Hyacinth Girl: T.S. Eliot's Hidden Muse* (London: Virago, 2022), Cloth, 496pp, 978-0-349-01211-7.

This much-anticipated book is the fruit of Lyndall Gordon's reading of T.S. Eliot's letters to Emily Hale from 1930 onwards, which were embargoed at Princeton until January 2020, with Hale's own papers. These invaluable materials are now publicly available on-line at [tseliot.com](http://tseliot.com), thanks to the editorial work of John Haffenden.

The book traces the histories of Eliot and Emily from his childhood through their meeting and early love, through his fraught marriage to Vivienne Haigh-Wood, during which 'Eliot kept Emily in mind as a secret listener' (88), to the high-points of their relationship in the 1930s. Then it explores how Emily's hopes of marriage, suddenly revived by Vivienne's death, were dashed in ways she found it hard to understand, and how the friendship eventually foundered on disputes over the fate of their correspondence, and ended with the surprise of his second marriage. Throughout her account Gordon wants to see Emily Hale as equal partner in the relationship, a skilled actor and teacher, and a person of great qualities, including impressive resilience in the face of repeated problems with her jobs at various American colleges.

The book is presented as a general trade hardback. Slightly disconcertingly there are no end-note numbers to connect quotations and references in the text to the 43 pages of notes. The reader is left to guess whether a particular claim or quotation will be substantiated with a note. That said, there is an excellent bibliography, and an extensive index.

Much of Gordon's argument will be familiar those who have read her earlier studies, gathered and updated as *T.S. Eliot: An Imperfect Life* and

*The Imperfect Life of T.S. Eliot*.<sup>1</sup> But the letters enrich and develop her analysis in important ways. So for example Gordon's reading of *Ash Wednesday* in terms of Emily Hale as 'Lady' is greatly enhanced by the hugely significant handwritten letter of Oct 3 1930 in which Eliot writes 'there is no need to explain Ash Wednesday to you. No-one else will ever understand it'. But, as so often with Eliot, mystery remains. Why was that poem dedicated (at first at least) to Vivienne Eliot? Gordon herself does not seem to know.

Interestingly, Gordon's championing of Emily Hale does not imply a denigration of Vivienne. Indeed Gordon follows, by implication, Eliot's own assessment in his 'statement', completed in 1963 with instructions that it be opened when the Hale letters were unsealed, that 'Vivienne nearly was the death of *me*, but she kept the poet in me alive'.<sup>2</sup> Gordon is clear that Vivienne committed herself to Eliot for the sake of the poetry, having recognised his genius. So perhaps this dedication in 1930 was some recognition of that, even though the muse of the poem was Hale.

Gordon is enabled, from the side of the correspondence available to us, to flesh out Emily's own journey through the 1930s. As might be expected, the letters provide Gordon with further insights into the biographical events immediately leading up to the composition of 'Burnt Norton'. She chronicles intimate meetings between Eliot and Emily in September-October 1935, and the letters Eliot sends as a result. In the extraordinary letter of Sept 30 1935, for Gordon 'the finest of the love-letters' (209), Eliot shows that he and Emily are already in dialogue about the risk he may idealise her. He writes: 'You cannot say that I see in you the things that you do not see, instead of seeing the real human: because I see them all.' Emily is not idealised, and yet 'one man's life and work has been formed about [her]'. This remarkable letter is one of the many refutations

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<sup>1</sup> Lyndall Gordon, *Eliot's Early Years* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978); *Eliot's New Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989); *T.S. Eliot: An Imperfect Life* (London: Vintage, 1998); *The Imperfect Life of T.S. Eliot* (London: Virago, 2012).

<sup>2</sup> Italics in original. The statement, and Emily's introduction to the letters, are also available at [tseliot.com](http://tseliot.com).

the letters provide of Eliot's (to me deplorable) assertion in his statement that their relationship in the 1930s was based on 'hallucination', and was 'the love of a ghost for a ghost'. His expression of love is both passionate and nuanced, both physical and spiritual.

And yet, paradoxically, this is the time when Eliot is filing away memories in a very intensive way and transmuting them into a poem about the evanescence of moments of inspiration and insight. 'Human kind/cannot bear very much reality' Eliot claims at the end of the first section of 'Burnt Norton' (recycling one of his most important lines from *Murder in the Cathedral*). Gordon celebrates, as her closing word on Emily Hale, the third last line of 'Burnt Norton', writing:

The very movement of [Eliot's] poetry is the glimpse of 'reality' followed by the 'waste sad time' before and after. When his wary character ventures 'among the women' the gift for vision fades. But then Emily enters to quicken the poetic moment. 'Quick now...' He tests it on the pulse, moment by moment, and seals it in words. She has her part to play in the sequence which culminates in faith. His part is to make it his own, to take on the ancestral journey in his own time and renew it for generations to come... 'here, now, always'. (397)

But 'Burnt Norton' does not end with that 'always' but with these two lines: 'Ridiculous the waste sad time/Stretching before and after.' There is a disjunction between the experience of closeness evinced in the letters of this time and the poem that results. Gordon accounts for the turn to the solitary and impersonal in Sections II-V of 'Burnt Norton' in terms of 'Eliot's sense of wrong in relation to his wife' (226). Gordon goes on to quote the letter of Jan 13 1936, in which Eliot tells Emily that 'Burnt Norton' 'is I think a new kind of love poem, and it is written for you, and it is fearfully obscure'. Yet the opening section of the poem, drawing as everyone now agrees on Eliot and Emily's visit to the garden at Burnt Norton (now dated to early September 1935), is already a wistful account of lost opportunity, of 'the door we did not open/Into the rose-garden'. A curious kind of love poem indeed.

Incidentally Gordon reads the ‘they’ that move with the ‘we’ ‘in a formal pattern’ later in that section as the former selves of the protagonists (226). The ‘they’ of this section is very enigmatic, and this is an attractive reading. But it is perhaps worth observing that Helen Gardner reads ‘they’ as referring to parental figures who oversee the ‘first world’ of childhood,<sup>3</sup> and other interpretations are also available..

I found convincing Gordon’s list of some of the issues that separated Eliot and Emily – ‘strict versus lenient faith; the permanence of marriage versus divorce; and Eliot’s belief in the superiority of the ‘unnatural’ over the natural’ (339). And Gordon shows how Emily’s eminently plausible, but (as it turned out) disastrously timed approach to the preservation of their letters during late 1956 served as a pretext for the further distancing Eliot effected while preparing to propose to Valerie Fletcher.

On strict versus lenient faith, most contemporary Anglican readers would I think side with Emily’s ‘My whole nature cries out against limiting attendance at the communion table’ (quoted on 287). Gordon calls this, tellingly, an outburst ‘like lava forcing its way through layers of habitual restraint’ (287). The contrast with Eliot’s stiff, dry exposition of the formal Anglican rulings of the time, in his letter of Sept 26 1946, is very marked. It is as though he requires Emily to remain exactly in place, keeping all the rules Eliot has decided to observe for himself, just as in a different way Mary Trevelyan (from whom he kept the secret of Emily for many years) had to remain in a particular and limited role in his life. (Gordon’s treatment of Mary echoes, on a narrower canvas, the fine work done by Erica Wagner in her study *Mary and Mr Eliot*.<sup>4</sup>)

Gordon’s work continues to divide critics. A reviewer of *Eliot’s Early Life* complained that the book was subject to ‘the psychological and

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<sup>3</sup> Helen Gardner, *The Composition of Four Quartets* (London: Faber and Faber, 1978), 83.

<sup>4</sup> Erica Wagner, *Mary and Mr Eliot: a sort of love story* (London: Faber and Faber, 2022).

biographical distortions of much recent criticism'.<sup>5</sup> Well, that boat has surely sailed. Sufficient has emerged about Eliot's biography, for all his own concealments and the tigerish protectiveness of his second wife, to make clear that details of his life do illuminate the work. Nor can anyone sustain the view promoted by Valerie Eliot that 'this theory of Tom's great love for [Emily] was all rubbish'.<sup>6</sup> Hale was ignored in the biographies by Ackroyd and Raine.<sup>7</sup> But Lyndall Gordon has done an invaluable job of bringing to prominence the centrality of the relationship.

Eliot's own insistence on impersonality, the detachment of poems from their biographical context, was embraced by the post-war literary establishment. As Frank Kermode notes, the early essay 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' remained influential, and suited the New Criticism well.' However as Kermode contended,

we have moved on from there, not just because we like gossip better than professorial personality purges, but because many people have come to think that the impersonality business was nonsense anyway.<sup>8</sup>

So biography is readmitted to the apparatus of literary criticism. But it is Gordon's very intimate array of personal inferences, and her highly coloured prose style, that have so irritated some critics. Alan Jenkins, in best TLS style, responded to *Eliot's New Life* with this: 'Gordon's

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<sup>5</sup> Gary T. Davenport, 'Review of *Eliot's Early Years*', *South Atlantic Quarterly* 77(2) (1978): 256-7, at 257.

<sup>6</sup> Interviewed by Blake Morrison for *The Independent on Sunday*, April 24, 1994.

<sup>7</sup> Peter Ackroyd, *T.S. Eliot* (London: Abacus, 1985); Craig Raine, *T.S. Eliot* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

<sup>8</sup> Frank Kermode, 'Feast of St Thomas', *London Review of Books* 10 (17) 1988: 3f.

researches have uncovered some mildly interesting material, but it is brought to bear far too directly to be really illuminating.’<sup>9</sup>

And Kermode continued his review:

Even if we may doubt that Hale was his Urania or his Beatrice it seems clear that they were rather close. But I’m bound to say that there is something disturbing about Gordon’s handling of all this. Her religious attitude to the facts, a sort of muckraking sublimity, affects her prose as well as her argument, and the whole pseudo-allegorical and hagiographical enterprise is vaguely disgusting, though I ought to add that it might seem just right to readers of different disposition.<sup>10</sup>

Kathleen Verduin identifies in this ‘a residual desire to protect the master’ in the older generation of critics. But for her, ‘Gordon’s contribution... lies precisely in her compassionate acceptance of the man behind the mask.’<sup>11</sup>

I have always greatly valued Gordon’s work, especially her handling of the Hale story and of Eliot’s spiritual search. At the same time I draw back from her implication that what the later Eliot aspired to was sainthood. That would show a lack of spiritual awareness and self-examination that would be most implausible in someone so diligent in his Christian observance. Indeed in that great passage in Section V of ‘The Dry Salvages’ he seems to distance himself explicitly from ‘the occupation of a saint’. Rather the authorial voice of *Four Quartets* seems to me to be that of wisdom teacher, much in dialogue with that most

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<sup>9</sup> Alan Jenkins, ‘The uses of suffering’, *Times Literary Supplement* 23 September 1988, 5-6, at 6.

<sup>10</sup> Kermode, ‘Feast’.

<sup>11</sup> Kathleen Verduin, Review of *Eliot’s New Life, Religion and Literature* 21 (2) (Summer 1989): 91-99.

idiosyncratic and acerbic voice in the biblical wisdom tradition, that of the author of Ecclesiastes.

At the heart of the controversy over Gordon's work on Eliot is the question – do we interrogate the artist's life to shed light on the artist's work, or does the work act as a catalyst for interrogating, prying into, the life? The worst case, it seems to me, is where a theory developed about the life from preliminary analysis of the evidence available comes to form a paradigm that restricts subsequent ability to allow the work to perturb and enlarge our understanding. We need, therefore, the agnosticism so wisely articulated by Denis Donoghue in reviewing *Eliot's New Life*:

It is a consequence of her risky method that [Gordon] identifies the historical T. S. Eliot with the imagined J. Alfred Prufrock and concludes that "Prufrock finds no woman in the Boston of 1911 in whom he can confide." The poem mentions neither Boston nor 1911. Similarly, there is no reason to identify Eliot with the described and imagined state of being which in a certain poem is called Gerontion. Nor is Emily Hale Eliot's Marina in the gorgeous poem of that name, or the fictive woman someone leaves in "La Figlia Che Piange."

Poems are made of words: why those rather than other words, and why in that sequence, there is no secure way of knowing. What Lyndall Gordon's emphasized concern with pattern helps us to see, however, is that Eliot's greatest poetry is provoked by a sense of the extreme reaches of experience, abysmal or sublime. He is not especially good with the middling ways of life.<sup>12</sup>

My own impression, much as I value Gordon's approach, is that its relentlessly biographical method can be in danger of underestimating the power of the process of making poetry in itself. So to return to 'Burnt Norton', that extraordinary poem was written quickly, in a matter of

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<sup>12</sup> Denis Donoghue, 'The Temptation of St Tom', *New York Times Book Review* 16 October 1988, 1.

weeks. The very momentum of its writing, I suggest, carries Eliot to places he may not have expected to go. The poem itself is a character in the biographical story, to a greater extent than Gordon's method allows.

Armed with the Hale letters, we can take issue with Donoghue's guess of thirty-five years ago that 'If Eliot was ever in love with Emily Hale, it was in some ethereal and spectral sense, a love beyond desire.'<sup>13</sup> And armed with the letters, Gordon has been able to refine and nuance her analysis of Emily as the Beatrice-figure, used by Eliot as part of his search for a Vita Nuova. It has also become clear the extent to which he used, and then discarded, Mary Trevelyan and John Hayward.

But Gordon says something very striking in her Epilogue: 'There is, though, one indisputable fact: Emily Hale chose to stay with Eliot. She would not want our pity' (396). Perhaps Emily did come to value her association with greatness more than she valued Eliot's poems themselves (another of Eliot's charges in his statement), but she had given of herself with great and sacrificial generosity, and has a lasting place in our understanding of 20th Century poetry, a place that Lyndall Gordon fought to assert, and which this book celebrates in a very rewarding way.

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<sup>13</sup> Donoghue, 'The Temptation', 1.

## Contributors

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