

# *T. S. Eliot's Aesthetics of Solipsism*

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## **F. H. BRADLEY AND THE INADEQUACY OF METAPHYSICS**

**T**HAT THE IDEALIST MONIST PHILOSOPHY of F. H. Bradley could have influenced T. S. Eliot naturally occurs to the literary critic who discovers both that Eliot's dissertation was titled "Knowledge and Experience in the Philosophy of F. H. Bradley" and that Eliot referenced Bradley in essays as well as in his note to line 411 of *The Waste Land*. Eliot completed his dissertation between 1915 and 1916 before the publication of "Prufrock" in 1917. However, Eliot began composing "Prufrock" in 1911, indicating that he was steeped in the ideas of Bradley during the same period he gave shape to J. Alfred's consciousness.<sup>1</sup> The result has been an ongoing conversation beginning approximately with Hugh Kenner's *The Invisible Poet* in 1959. In 2006 Gregory Brazeal wondered if "the thought processes we see at work . . . [in Bradley] might have also played some role in Eliot's later religious conversion" and if the dissertation and *The Waste Land* reveal "part of the foundation work for an eventual return to belief in God."<sup>2</sup> What I intend to argue is that the answer to this question is, essentially, yes. More precisely, Eliot's conversion emerged from a fear of solipsism that both he and Bradley linked with the absence of transcendent meaning.

Many of those who examine Eliot's relationship to Bradley compare and contrast Eliot's philosophy with Bradley's by examining the dissertation. Donald Childs argues that almost all criticism prior to 1980 turned Eliot into a "second hand Bradley," and post-1980 criticism tended

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<sup>1</sup> Hugh Kenner, "Bradley," in *The Invisible Poet: T. S. Eliot* (London: Methuen, 1965), 44.

<sup>2</sup> Gregory Brazeal, "The Alleged Pragmatism of T. S. Eliot," *Philosophy and Literature* 30, no. 1 (2006): 261.



to reduce Eliot's thought to intimations of poststructuralism.<sup>3</sup> Richard Wollehim stays within the realm of pure philosophy by focusing on "four respects" of Eliot's "supplementation and elaboration" of "the Bradleian metaphysic."<sup>4</sup> Other critics look beyond the dissertation to Eliot's prose and poetry. Anne Bolgan argues that Eliot's depiction of consciousness illustrates Bradley's theory that reality is both ontologically and epistemically relational.<sup>5</sup> In other words, objects exist essentially in relation to one another, and knowledge of reality is grounded on agreements between individuals, not on direct reference to objects. Charles Altieri agrees, arguing that the poetry's treatment of symbols reveals a pragmatist's account of knowledge.<sup>6</sup> Brazeal opposes pragmatic readings, which he finds dominate criticism, arguing instead that the dissertation reveals a Kantian "transcendental strain."<sup>7</sup> Kenner reduces Eliot to Bradley, stating that "Eliot's sense of poetry, of personality, and of history are all congruent with Bradley's philosophy."<sup>8</sup> Jane Mallinson differs from critics like Bolgan and Kenner in that she finds points of disagreement between Eliot and Bradley, but she uses Eliot's dissertation to arrive at a definitive theory of mind held by Eliot that is responsible for his ideas of the impersonal theory of poetry, the objective correlative, and the dissociation of sensibility.<sup>9</sup>

Some critics focus on style as an indicator of Eliot's Bradleian inheritance. Bradley's incoherent, broken realm of appearances takes form in Eliot, according to these critics, as disjointed narrative, fragmented speech, and the substitution of ambiguous or incomplete phrases for propositional, syntactically clear-cut language. James Longenbach, for example, directly connects Eliot's dissertation, which he understands to be fully in agreement with Bradley, to Eliot's poetry by claiming that Eliot attempts to unify discrete points of view, which Bradley referred to as "finite centres," through the use of allusion.<sup>10</sup> Longenbach argues that fragmentation is recognized and unified through style. Kenner argues that Eliot attempts to actually re-create Bradley's "immediate experience" in his poetry through a "blending suavity" of style, "anesthetized syntax," and a "verbalist poetic" that breaks down "assured . . . subjects and predicates."<sup>11</sup> Jewel Spears Brooker makes one of the most explicit attempts to find Bradley in Eliot's poetry in her book *Mastery and Escape: T. S. Eliot and the Dialectic of Modernism*, which includes essays such as "The Structure of Eliot's 'Gerontion': An Interpretation Based on Bradley's Doctrine of the Systematic Nature of Truth."<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Donald J. Childs, "Received Wisdom: The Critical Reception of Eliot's Early Work in Philosophy," in *From Philosophy to Poetry: T. S. Eliot's Study of Knowledge and Experience* (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 3–12.

<sup>4</sup> Richard Wollheim, "Eliot and F. H. Bradley: An Account," in *Eliot in Perspective: A Symposium*, ed. Graham Martin (New York: Humanities, 1970), 173.

<sup>5</sup> Anne C. Bolgan, *What the Thunder Really Said: A Retrospective Essay on the Making of "The Waste Land"* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1973).

<sup>6</sup> Charles Altieri, "Reading Bradley after Reading Laforgue: How Eliot Transformed Symbolist Poetics into a Paradigmatic Modernism," *Modern Language Quarterly* 72, no. 2 (2011): 225–52.

<sup>7</sup> Brazeal, "Alleged Pragmatism of T. S. Eliot," 257.

<sup>8</sup> Kenner, "Bradley," 57.

<sup>9</sup> Jane Mallinson, "Making the Truth: A Reading of T. S. Eliot's Dissertation and His Early Literary Criticism," *Man and World* 21, no. 4 (1988): 453–68.

<sup>10</sup> James Longenbach, "'Mature Poets Steal': Eliot's Allusive Practice," in *The Cambridge Companion to T. S. Eliot*, ed. Anthony David Moody (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 182.

<sup>11</sup> Kenner, "Bradley," 49–50.

<sup>12</sup> Jewel Spears Brooker, *Mastery and Escape: T. S. Eliot and the Dialectic of Modernism* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1994), 81.

Drawing a Bradley-Eliot Venn diagram can miss the forest for the trees, losing itself in philosophical specificity, instead of attending to broader thematic similarities. As Eliot emphasizes in his early Dante essay, “poetry can be penetrated by a philosophic idea,” but it is felt, seen, and presented as “a matter for inspection,” not argumentation.<sup>13</sup> Rather than explaining Eliot’s literary-critical concepts and poetic style in terms of Bradley, or attempting to enumerate the agreements and disagreements between Eliot and Bradley through a painstakingly analytic approach, I believe it may be more fruitful to understand what attracted Eliot to Bradley in the first place and what kept Bradley in mind enough for Eliot to think of referencing him in *The Waste Land*.

What I propose is that we can read in Eliot’s fascination with Bradley what Eliot’s moral concerns were and use those to substantiate a philosophical reading of Eliot’s early poetry that does not simply map doctrine onto art. In particular, the early poems give us a phenomenology of solipsism from which we can infer two things: (1) the origin of the solipsistic predicament, one that is existential and spiritual, not merely psychological; and (2) what would be required to escape solipsism, namely a solution that must likewise be more than psychological. That solution, needed by Bradley and Eliot, consists of a transcendental function that unifies experience. Whereas Bradley wished to achieve this with his Absolute, Eliot could not accept it, since it attempted to resolve the troubles of metaphysics with metaphysics. Thus, Eliot’s concerns persisted after Bradley, especially his dread of solipsism and the meaninglessness of life that is part and parcel with it, ultimately seeking a solution in religious faith, specifically Anglo-Catholicism and the notion of community.

In other words, Bradley demonstrated a concern for problems that consumed Eliot his whole life and especially his preconversion life. The solution Bradley envisioned to those problems meets similar conditions to a solution Eliot wanted, even if Eliot rejected Bradley’s. Jewel Spears Brooker cites an unpublished letter Eliot wrote to his brother in 1936 in which Eliot “mentions his unsuccessful attempt to turn himself into a philosophy professor and adds that he now understands his graduate studies had been part of a ‘religious preoccupation.’”<sup>14</sup> In his essay “Frances Herbert Bradley,” Eliot praises Bradley for his anti-Utilitarianism, stating that Bradley “replaced a philosophy that was crude and raw and provincial by one which was, in comparison, catholic, civilized, and universal.”<sup>15</sup> Though his conversion came later, Eliot’s attraction to Bradley anticipates it. Understanding what Bradley *meant* to Eliot amounts to analyzing, not any particular argument within Bradley’s *Appearance and Reality* or Eliot’s dissertation, but the concerns that motivated both to write.

Bradley was less of an “influence” than an interest, because Eliot was drawn to him on the basis of an initial similarity in their thought. Bradley provided a means by which Eliot could begin to make his own philosophical troubles transparent to himself—a necessary step before seeking resolution. As Brooker puts it, both Eliot and Bradley possessed a need for “wholeness,” alternatively phrased as a need for a transcendent and permanent truth above the world of mere

<sup>13</sup> Thomas Stearns Eliot, “Dante,” in *The Complete Prose of T. S. Eliot: The Critical Edition*, vol. 2, *The Perfect Critic, 1919–1926*, ed. Anthony Cuda and Ronald Schuchard (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014), 228.

<sup>14</sup> Jewel Spears Brooker, “Enlarging Immediate Experience: Bradley and Dante in Eliot’s Aesthetic,” in *T. S. Eliot, Dante and the Idea of Europe*, ed. Paul Douglass (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars, 2011), 5.

<sup>15</sup> Thomas Stearns Eliot, “Frances Herbert Bradley,” in *The Complete Prose of T. S. Eliot: The Critical Edition*, vol. 3, *Literature, Politics, Belief, 1927–1929*, ed. Frances Dickey, Jennifer Formicelli, and Ronald Schuchard (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2015), 307.

“Appearance,” to use Bradley’s term.<sup>16</sup> This truth can grant life meaning by resolving its apparent fragmentation into unity, in particular one of the worst fragmentations of all—solipsism.

Solipsism, as a condition in which human experiences are self-contained and unknowable to one another, consumed both Bradley and Eliot. Solipsism disturbed them, not because it presents a disappointment to an empiricist interested in cataloging data about mental contents, but because of solipsism’s moral significance. How are people to *care* about each other and live in community if they are cut off from each other’s experiences? Self-containment is one step removed from self-interestedness. Furthermore, how are private experiences to mean anything—that is, be anything other than merely subjective—if they are not united by their common reference to a permanent truth, an eternal Experience? These are the anxieties underlying both Bradley’s and Eliot’s pursuit of philosophy. For both Bradley and Eliot this permanent, unifying truth, which is intuited, not deduced, grounds community and gives life meaning by establishing a permanent reality outside the self that is also in the self.

For Bradley, solipsism arises only in the realm of “Appearance,” not “Reality.” Bradley defines “Appearance” as the world as it is understood by intellectual concepts: subject, object, causation, substantive, adjective, motion, the thing-in-itself, and so on. While these terms sometimes have practical value, they distort “Reality,” which is given in “immediate experience.” What is striking in Bradley’s writing is the combination of rigorous philosophical arguments with rhapsodic statements like the following: “We seem to touch and have communion with what is beyond the visible world. In various manners we find something higher, which both supports and humbles, both chastens and transports us. And, with certain persons, the intellectual effort to understand the universe is a principal way of experiencing the Deity.”<sup>17</sup> This religious language and antimaterialism demonstrate Bradley’s rejection of accounts of reality that devalue experience and make no room for mystery and faith, impulses Eliot would have approved of.

Bradley did not intend merely to produce an intelligent treatise worthy of citation; rather, he desired to outline the means by which we may transcend the temporal world, which, for him, is a misleading realm of appearances. He desired a humanity unified by its attainment of the permanent reality, which Bradley equated with truth. Bradley also utilizes a Christian vocabulary detached from dogma: we seek “communion” with the invisible, permanent, and transcendent, which “supports,” “humbles,” “chastens,” and “transports” us. Bradley goes even a step further, calling anyone “contemptible” who does not experience the urge to pursue “ultimate truth.”<sup>18</sup> The texture of the prose in *Appearance and Reality* is overlooked in accounts of Bradley’s influence on Eliot. Yet Bradley’s language demonstrates, as much as his logic, what he believed and cared about.

Bradley attacks thought, which he believes ruins “immediate experience” or “feeling” by conceptualizing it. Truth, for Bradley, *is* feeling or experience. Importantly, experience does not mean, for Bradley, *my* experience but is a state prior to it. Experience as *mine* becomes thinkable only after the subject emerges in thought as conceptually distinct from other subjects and objects. Thus, Bradley avoids solipsism through his monism, collapsing subject-subject and subject-object distinctions. He also overcomes solipsism through treating experience as external to the

<sup>16</sup> Brooker, “Enlarging Immediate Experience,” 5.

<sup>17</sup> F. H. Bradley, introduction to *Appearance and Reality: A Metaphysical Essay*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1930), 5.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

self. Only with reference to the universal, unifying Experience that encompasses all selves can my experience *as mine* be distinguished by thought. Nonetheless, thought is a necessary step in a dialectic process starting with “immediate experience” or “feeling,” which contains thought as a potentiality but is not yet thought. After thought emerges and distorts feeling, it must again be reconciled with feeling in a third, higher state—the Absolute. The Absolute is true experience above and beyond immediate experience.

Bradley helped Eliot realize that solipsism amounts to more than a state of loneliness or isolation, though it certainly implies them. Whereas *mere* loneliness and *mere* isolation can be alleviated by the presence of other people, solipsism cannot, since it is an existential condition in which people are radically other in consequence of ontological and epistemological commitments. Psychological solipsism is the natural result of the ontological claim that subjects are radically separate from one another in being and of the epistemological claim that another's experience cannot be known. Bradley also brought into relief for Eliot the inadequacy of discursive thought to both explain reality and give meaning to life.

However, Bradley undermines himself by proposing a purely metaphysical solution even after he displays extreme skepticism toward discursive thought. Consequently, Eliot could not accept Bradley's Absolute, which, after all, attempts to solve the problem of metaphysics with metaphysics. Eliot writes, “The Absolute responds only to an imaginary demand of thought, and satisfies only an imaginary demand of feeling. Pretending to be something that makes ‘finite centres’ cohere, it turns out merely to be the assertion that they do.”<sup>19</sup> Solipsism, or the state in which all individuals' experiences are cut off from each other in “finite centres,” cannot be willed away by the Absolute.

Russell Kirk provides one of the best readings of Bradley's influence on Eliot regarding solipsism. Kirk states that Eliot shared with Bradley a “distrust of abstruse ideas,” taking on Bradley's “defenses against . . . utilitarianism” and Bradley's “glimpse of the Self, as distinguished from ‘personality.’”<sup>20</sup> However, Eliot did more than simply absorb Bradley's ideas. Eliot “felt . . . an isolation from others, . . . a tendency toward solipsism,” and “Bradley did not erect barriers sufficient to wall off the pit of solipsism.”<sup>21</sup> Kirk suggests that Eliot was “already, in his own poems, . . . groping his way toward other means than metaphysics for warding off solipsism: toward faith and moral imagination.”<sup>22</sup> What Kirk hints at only briefly and in general terms, I aim to justify in greater detail through a close reading of those early poems, in particular by focusing on *how* solipsism manifests in the poetry and *why* faith becomes Eliot's solution.

## THE PHENOMENOLOGY OF SOLIPSISM IN THE EARLY POETRY AND THE YEARNING FOR MEANING

Being aware of another's experience, for Eliot and Bradley, does not amount to detecting surface indicators of emotional states or predicting a person's actions—there is an experiential dimension to knowing the other. It must be intuited or felt in a mode of “sensuous thought.” This

<sup>19</sup> Thomas Stearns Eliot, *Knowledge and Experience in the Philosophy of F. H. Bradley* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), 202.

<sup>20</sup> Russell Kirk, *Eliot and His Age: T. S. Eliot's Moral Imagination in the Twentieth Century*, 2nd ed. (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2008), 35–36.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

enables moral feeling, something that is deeply problematized in *The Waste Land*, especially in the following lines:

DA

*Dayadhvam*: I have heard the key  
 Turn in the door once and turn once only  
 We think of the key, each in his prison  
 Thinking of the key, each confirms a prison  
 (ll. 410–14)

J. Hillis Miller misinterprets this passage as confirming the “validity of subjectivism.”<sup>23</sup> His misreading derives from Eliot’s footnote at line 411, which quotes from Bradley’s *Appearance and Reality*: “my experience falls within my own circle, a circle closed on the outside”; “every sphere is opaque to the others.” This Miller takes to confirm solipsism. However, Bradley denies solipsism explicitly in *Appearance and Reality*—and Eliot knew that. Solipsism exists only in the realm of Appearance. In Reality subjects and objects are collapsed. Eliot also denies solipsism in his dissertation. Miller’s mistake lies in assuming that the depiction of solipsism amounts to its endorsement. Rather, the treatment of solipsism serves to problematize it. This passage in *The Waste Land* offers a frightening image of solipsism, so that the need for an alternative kind of being can be urged.

The nature of the word “Da” is crucial to understanding how the poem intimates a possibility of nonsolipsistic being. “Da” is a command and, if the allusion to the *Upanishads* is taken seriously, a command from God. Given that God could not command his creatures to do something impossible, unless he were a cruel God, it follows that *Dayadhvam*, or compassion, the antithesis of solipsism, must be possible; compassion and love amount to the transcendence of solipsism. God, as the ultimate transcendent, unifying truth (not Bradley’s Absolute), is the condition for the possibility of love, community, and meaning—that is, escape from solipsism. Bradley’s Absolute constitutes a purely metaphysical solution—that is, the assertion that unity can be had without explaining how. While the Absolute might appear to be a stand-in for God, Bradley’s description of it indicates that it does not bear the same qualities, since he does not posit it as an infinite, transcendent entity outside the subject but attempts to remain within the domains of human thought alone. Despite his mention of the “Deity,” Bradley cannot allow himself to move outside the mind for a solution that will provide the coherence he desires. Thus, Eliot found that Bradley did not extricate himself from the solipsistic problem Bradley so astutely identified. Human thought cannot be a solution to the problems that arise from human thought, for Eliot. For Eliot, the world without God is the solipsistic world. Importantly, God is not personified in this poem. He (It?) is a dislocated voice (and also not necessarily the Christian God at this stage). The poem’s nonpersonification of God is crucial because it allows the voice of God to permeate universally, including within the self. This unity would be disrupted by identifying the voice with an anthropomorphic deity, reducing God to yet another “character” in the world of radically self-contained subjects. By not being reducible to an individual subjectivity, God can unite individual subjectivities. As an infinite, transcendent entity, rather than a merely rational

<sup>23</sup> J. Hillis Miller, “T. S. Eliot,” in *Poets of Reality: Six Twentieth-Century Writers* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1965), 136.



solution (i.e., Bradley's Absolute), God can provide the ground for an experience that contains, without being equivalent to, human experience.

Brooker astutely notes that this section exposes the discursive intellect's ineptitude in dealing with moral problems, since these individuals are pondering their condition but are in no way released from it by doing so. For her, these lines "constitute a highly concentrated statement on solipsism—its origin and perpetuation in discursive thought."<sup>24</sup> This section in *The Waste Land* also illustrates, not simply the failure of discursive thought, but the failure of self-consciousness alone to entail moral depth and action. Prufrock's intense self-consciousness manifests as narcissism, for example. The prisoners' self-consciousness can be opposed to a depiction of consciousness that entails moral progress through reflection and self-scrutiny. One gets a sense, partly through the repetitive and rhythmically punctuated phrases—"We think of the key, each in his prison / Thinking of the key, each confirms a prison"—of an endless and self-reinforcing thought process that is hyper-self-conscious. These are also thoughts that are not manic. The language of the poem has a tone of listless reiteration indicating passivity. The prisoners make no attempts to violently rebel against the prison—instead, it appears to be accepted, yet constitutes an unendurable obsession of these spiritually apathetic people.

Though I've referred to them as "people," the prisoners are not quite people. It's uncertain how they should be grammatically indexed. Possibly, they incorporate the speaker, since the solipsistic scene is introduced by the line "I have heard the key." The "I" eventually turns into "We," suggesting that the prisoners might include more than the speaker, perhaps even the reader. This line starts at "We think of the key," but instead of saying "each in *our* prison," it continues as each in "his" prison. Finally, the "we" is completely lost, and the prisoners are simply "Thinking of the key, each in his prison." They are simply the "they"—the shapeless abstract that stands both for everyone and for no one. The eeriness of the entrapment stems from its abstractness. It is simply a condition, a metaphysical solitude of no particular place and involving no particular person.

The agony experienced by the prisoners is doubled by there *almost* being a social contact. At first the key *is* heard, promising the dissolution of solitude and anticipating the entry of human life. This moment brings to mind a common experience the reader has likely had. You are sitting at home passing hours alone until the overwhelming silence is broken by a sound: the lock clicks and a little wave of delight shudders through you as the person you were waiting for finally arrives. Sometimes, when the time seems right for someone's arrival, you can mistake another sound, or someone else's lock, for the lock on your own door and, in your disappointment, feel your solitude redoubled. This association, evoked by the key and, in particular, the auditory dimension of the lock, which is emphasized in the poem, deepens the resonance of the prisoners' social and spiritual desolation.

One difference, of course, between this incident of personal life and the moment in the poem is that, in the poem, there is no promise that anyone will ever arrive to enter the prison. The prisoner's solitude is made even more absolute because it isn't the anticipatory solitude of the person waiting for a family member or friend. Anticipatory solitude constitutes a psychological state that still implies *Mitsein* (Being-with), to borrow a term from Heidegger. It is *Mitsein* that the prisoners do not have. Another difference between the person sitting at home and the prisoners here is that the former is waiting on something in particular to happen and the latter

<sup>24</sup> Jewel Spears Brooker, *Mastery and Escape: T. S. Eliot and the Dialectic of Modernism* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1994), 202.

are waiting to see if something *at all* will happen. Waiting for someone offers a kind of pleasure because one can revel in the certain negation of loneliness. The prisoners are denied this since their waiting involves an indefinite anxiety with no promise that the desire for companionship will be fulfilled. No *one* in particular is awaited by the prisoners. The person awaiting those (s)he loves, as Heidegger would agree, is with other people even when those loved ones are not there. Eliot's characters, on the other hand, are capable of being without people even when they are with them. The human connection has no existential reality for the prisoners. To state that the prisoners are simply "lonely" would be to literalize and psychologize an existential problem.

While this section of *The Waste Land* gives an abstract depiction of solipsism through an image, there are also more concrete depictions of consciousness in the early poems that illustrate solipsism. One manner in which Prufrock's solipsism manifests can be identified by his asocial social encounters. He moves through a reality that consists of no particular settings or conversations. In fact, no scene can be distinguished from another because there is no content or meaning in each to distinguish it. Instead, Prufrock glides passively through the abstracted, average world of *das man*. Prufrock even personifies *das man* in his speech. Such utterances as "Oh" and "then" or phrases like "make a visit" are the content of average speech; they are the meaningless tags and preformed phrases regurgitated by Prufrock as he speaks in a weary, drawn-out cadence.

As Childs notes, Prufrock has a desire to be etherized to avoid "the pain that is a consequence of social interaction."<sup>25</sup> Prufrock hopes to preempt any questions from an interlocutor that would force greater conscious reflection on the purpose or meaning of what they are doing: "Oh, do not ask, 'What is it?' Let us go and make our visit," he says.<sup>26</sup> Why and where they are going does not matter. This world is marked only by empty rituals such as the "taking of a toast and tea." Prufrock can say, "I have known them all already, known them all— / Have known the evenings, mornings, afternoons," because they really are all indistinguishable, just as the people he encounters are indistinguishable. Importantly, being in a solipsistic state does not mean that one is an *individual*. Other people in Prufrock's world are only figures of a social reality that one responds to in scripted ways. In the phrase "After the novels, after the teacups, after the skirts that / trail along the floor—" Prufrock indifferently levels objects and people. He is not even perceiving women, but skirts—the external emblems of their social roles and status. He also treats novels as social objects rather than as works of art with meaning. The skirts, teacups, and novels are all related for Prufrock in that they establish class and cultural capital within polite society.

People *are* their gestures, their clothing, and the parts of their bodies in Prufrock's gaze. Interiority is so radically inaccessible to him that he hardly can conceive of it. People are described as "one" or "they." A person is a "one, settling a pillow or throwing off a shawl," or "Arms that lie along a table, or wrap about a shawl." Women are "Arms that are braceleted and white and bare / (But in the lamplight, downed with light brown hair!)." He reduces people to objects or fragments of objects, often applying superficial criticism. A statement made in one of Eliot's early essays on solipsism is quite apposite: "If one centre took notice of the other, it could do so only as an object in its own world."<sup>27</sup>

<sup>25</sup> Donald J. Childs, "Etherised upon a Table: T. S. Eliot's Dissertation and Its Metaphorical Operations," *Journal of Modern Literature* 18, no. 4 (1993): 382.

<sup>26</sup> All the following quotations of Eliot's poetry are taken from Thomas Stearns Eliot, *Collected Poems, 1909–1935* (London: Faber and Faber, 1974).

<sup>27</sup> Thomas Stearns Eliot, "Finite Centres and Points of View," in *The Complete Prose of T. S. Eliot: The Critical Edition*, vol. 1, *Apprentice Years, 1905–1918*, ed. Jewel Spears Brooker and Ronald Schuchard (Baltimore: Johns



Since Prufrock perceives others as objects, being unable to have any intersubjective relation with them, he fears people, especially their gazes, since they will be likewise objectifying and scrutinizing him. Others will evaluate him based on what he looks like, how he is dressed, and so on. "And I have known the eyes already, known them all—," Prufrock says neurotically, "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 . . ." This sentence, like many others, trails on as an indication of Prufrock's own irresolution, anxiety, and entrapment. Like an insect in a collection, Prufrock is an object in the other's gaze. This gaze matters enormously to him precisely because it is all that social reality consists of. He is desperate to wrest himself from the objectifying, reductive power of well-formulated sardonic remarks—the kind that populate the social occasions of a Balzac novel.

For Prufrock, there are no people, only eyes and faces. Consequently, he engages in a kind of self-reflection that amounts to tormenting narcissism, as opposed to meaningful or productive introspection. He obsesses over how he is perceived by other minds as they look out from their solipsistic bell jars. He fears that his growing bald spot will be recognized: "(They will say: 'How his hair is growing thin!')." He worries over what his clothing and body signify in social space: "My morning coat, my collar mounting firmly to the chin, / My necktie rich and modest, but asserted by a simple pin— / (They will say: 'But how his arms and legs are thin!')." Again, we can see the characterization of other people as the average "they," a "they" whose shallow judgments Prufrock fears.

The absolutely alien quality of other minds is epitomized in the poem's frustrated communication: "'This is not what I meant at all. / That is not it, at all,'" speaks an unnamed woman, presumably to Prufrock. Yet one wonders if they have anything to talk about. Devoid of a rich interior world or, at the very least, unconscious of their deeper selves, they find it impossible to communicate. They fail to transcend their solipsism to a level of shared experience and meaning. Importantly, Prufrock is distressed by the possibility that his actions and words have no meaning. He asks repeatedly, "And would it have been worth it, after all, / Would it have been worth while?" He recognizes to some extent that he has no telos guiding his life. He longs for another mode of being, though he cannot conceptualize it. "I have measured out my life with coffee spoons," he says, aware that his existence is temporary and moving linearly toward death. The statement also reveals his recognition that he has not lived *for* anything, which is to say that he hasn't lived at all. His life cannot even be distinguished from the banal bourgeois milieu he participates in. If Prufrock is really to live—that is, to live *for* and live *with*—it cannot be through a linear, measured movement toward nonbeing through a cycle of self-perpetuating social rituals as purposeless as they are pleasureless. Though they are social events, they do not constitute community but gather individuals together in mutual alienation.

Victoria Patea delineates Eliot's desire for transcendent truth when she argues that he rejects an emerging postmodern sensibility in which the "whole world is . . . a solipsist game of appearances." Eliot insists instead on "absolute value and universality."<sup>28</sup> Patea highlights the fact that, for Eliot, solipsism results when individuals are not unified through a higher meaning, a reference to something outside themselves. She argues that this concern underlies Eliot's love of

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Hopkins University Press, 2014), 3.

<sup>28</sup> Victoria Patea, "Eliot, Dante and the Poetics of Unified Sensibility," in Douglass, *T. S. Eliot, Dante and the Idea of Europe*, 24.

tradition. Perceptive as this statement is, it does not emphasize the spiritual unification Eliot desired. Consider, for example the following lines in “Prufrock”: “In the room the women come and go / Talking of Michelangelo.” While the women fail to access any transcendent meaning, they still agree on a cultural tradition. To have common, respected cultural references is not sufficient, though it may be necessary, for tradition. Importantly, the women’s failure itself legitimizes transcendent meaning. In order for it to be tragic that meaning has been missed, the meaning must have been there in the first place. Thus, the poem gestures toward an alternative kind of being, one that escapes solipsism through access to higher meaning. These representations of hollow sociality also demonstrate that solipsism does not equate with isolation. Solipsism’s fundamental cause is the absence of transcendent meaning that can bind individuals together through community and grant a telos to life. This is not a psychological problem but a spiritual one, though it has psychological ramifications.

Elisabeth Däumer remarks that “The Hollow Men” is a “transitional poem” that looks “backward to *The Waste Land* and forward to the explicitly spiritual.” The hollow men have a “longing for a passion so transcendent that it will lift them from the broken valley of death’s dream kingdom.”<sup>29</sup> Däumer’s comment is perspicacious because she recognizes that it is not simply an *event* that the hollow men await but an internal change. The “Multifoliate rose” is not a future miracle or purely external cause that will rescue them from their situation. It is the transcendent “passion,” a state of mind both psychological and spiritual, that they long for. This immediately raises the question: how can they long for a state of mind that they are not actually in? How can they know what it is, without being able to inhabit it? They intuit only negatively what a transcendent unity with others would be. It would be what solipsism was *not*.

The solipsism they experience is expressed most clearly in how the hollow men interpret eye contact. Craig Raine notes that there is an “absolute lack” of eye contact in the poem.<sup>30</sup> Elisabeth Däumer argues that the hollow men’s simultaneous fear and longing to meet eyes is a “clue to the emotional and spiritual state of the hollow men,” but she does not explicate what that state is.<sup>31</sup> There are “Eyes I dare not meet in dreams / In death’s dream kingdom,” speaks one of the hollow men. He longs to be in death’s dream kingdom, where “These do not appear; / There, the eyes are / Sunlight on a broken column.” He further expresses his fear of human contact when he says, “Let me be no nearer / In death’s dream kingdom.” Nearer to whom? He cannot even name anyone, nor does he fear anyone in particular. It is the gaze itself he fears. The speaker longs to be hidden from the eyes, hoping that there will be no gazes but only light and objects. In fact, he even longs for his own subjectivity to dissolve into abstraction, stating, “Let me also wear / Such deliberate disguises / Rat’s coat, crowskin, crossed staves / In a field / Behaving as the wind behaves / No nearer—.” He longs to become the scarecrow of the wasteland and to emulate the wind. In his effort to avoid human contact, he seeks disguise, if not complete invisibility. Even among themselves the hollow men do not relate: “We grope together / And avoid speech.” They have, as Russell Kirk aptly puts it, “collectivity that is not community.”<sup>32</sup>

<sup>29</sup> Elisabeth Däumer, “The Enigma of ‘The Hollow Men,’” in *A Companion to T. S. Eliot*, ed. David Chinitz (Chichester, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 168, 169.

<sup>30</sup> Craig Raine, *T. S. Eliot* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 21.

<sup>31</sup> Däumer, “The Enigma of ‘The Hollow Men,’” 169.

<sup>32</sup> Kirk, *Eliot and His Age*, 108.

Likewise, their speech is not communication. "Our dried voices, when / We whisper together," they say, "Are quiet and meaningless." Their voices are "meaningless" because they do not have anything above themselves that would bridge the gap between their minds and enable genuine communication. The hollow men consist of discrete selves whose speech represents instances of self-expression emanating from a solipsistic container. They have "voices," not even words, since "words" would imply participation in at least a community of language with shared meanings. The term "voices" in this line emphasizes how localized their speech is to themselves. When humanity consists only of each person's voice expressing itself, no communication can occur, since communication requires shared meaning, meaning that transcends the sphere of the private ego. This is not to say that private experience is worthless, only that it must be understood in relation to universal experience, which makes it meaningful, relevant, and intelligible to other beings. Universal experience consists not merely in the totality of all individual experiences (this would not provide a solution to solipsism) but in a shared sense of what is common to all individual experience, that is, an individual experience as an instance or piece of human experience at large. Such an insistence on continuity and permanence of experience provides one motivation for the valorization of tradition.

The brokenness of the hollow men's psychological condition is reflected in the brokenness of their environment. The archaic nature of the twilight wasteland in which they are trapped emphasizes their solipsism. There is only the hint of human presence in the "voices" in "the wind's singing." Yet they signify nothing to the hollow men. The voices painfully gesture toward the possibility of meaningful speech that has been lost. The vast distance across space—the voices are "More distant and more solemn / Than a fading star"—and across time in the form of archaic ruins further emphasizes the condition of solipsism and gives it cosmic significance. The landscape visualizes solipsism in Dantean image. This landscape, a never-ending twilight, a static death, both reassures the hollow men and is the source of their despair. "This is the dead land," they admit. "This is the cactus land," but it is also a land they fear to leave because it would require crossing with "direct eyes" to escape: "Those who have crossed / With direct eyes, to death's other Kingdom / Remember us—if at all—not as lost." They acknowledge a transformative experience that they cannot undergo because they do not allow themselves to cross with the eyes.

Eyes are problematic for the hollow men, just as they are for Prufrock. However, in "The Hollow Men" eyes are even more abstracted from a concrete person than they are in "Prufrock." They also signify a possible human connection, even love, misread by the hollow men as the harsh, judging drawing-room looks Prufrock is subjected to. The gaze inspires dread in the hollow men because they assume that behind the gaze is a consciousness that disrupts their subject position, turning them into objects. They, as objects, are capable of being evaluated by that other consciousness and are helpless to influence its judgments. Thus, the gaze troubles the hollow men's solipsism by reminding each one that his consciousness, or subjectivity, does not exhaust experience; it is, in fact, one perspective or "finite centre." At the same time, this realization does not bring two subjects closer but emphasizes their distance from each other. Eye contact wakens the hollow men to their solipsism *as* solipsism.

While the gaze for the hollow men and Prufrock appears to reinforce solipsism, this is peculiar to the spiritually diseased state these characters are in and is not inherent to the gaze itself. They dread meeting "with direct eyes" because they can understand the gaze only as objectification, never as intimacy or mutual recognition. To understand eyes as intimacy one cannot be in a

state of solipsism, since intimacy entails that the other subject can be fused with and is knowable. That subject must be knowable as a person and not as an object in the solipsistic subject's world in order for the gaze to cease being dreadful. In the realm of "Prufrock" and "The Hollow Men," however, there are only alien Others.

It is because the hollow men and Prufrock can gaze at others only as objects that they conceive of the gaze as likewise objectifying them and evaluating them by the same terms. Their neurosis consists in the obsessive awareness that they are being reduced, but they nonetheless cannot recover the personhood from which they are being reduced. They wish for a nonsolipsistic state that they can conceive of only negatively. This is not to say that they are incapable of distinguishing between objects and sentient entities. If that were the case, then the gaze would signify nothing. Rather, the hollow men and Prufrock do not truly *know* other subjects. Instead they infer in others a subjectivity that is alien, but able to examine them. The term "other" proves useful to emphasize the manner in which subjectivity is perceived in the state of solipsism: whereas a "someone" has the kind of subjectivity recognized as personhood, the "other" is a dehumanized subjectivity—a pair of eyes attached to no one. When the hollow men and Prufrock think of others, the emphasis is still on themselves; another's subjectivity is perceived as an aspect of self.

The fact that this phenomenon is peculiar to adult consciousness lends significance to the presence of children in this poem (children are a running motif throughout Eliot's poetry). Unlike adults, young children are not unsettled by prolonged eye contact, even from a stranger. They continue to boldly stare after their gaze has been met. Likewise, the look of a baby or young child doesn't discomfort an adult as the look of another adult would. Early childhood consciousness does not yet have a conceptual grasp on subject and object. Like Bradley's "immediate experience," the child's consciousness has not yet been affected by a dualistic split.

The children's song in "The Hollow Men," a modified version of the English nursery rhyme "Mulberry Bush," nostalgically recalls the preanalytic world-immersion of childhood consciousness. This stands in contrast to the consciousness of the hollow men, one that is acutely aware of the gaze's significance for solipsism. The unified, ebullient voices of children singing and holding hands in circular dance around the imagined mulberry bush recalls a time prior to the division of subjects from one another and prior to the division of subjectivity from its environment. Yet the children's rhyme has been corrupted. Instead of the mulberry bush, they dance around "the prickly pear," an image out of the "cactus land" inhabited by the hollow men. Though the children's preconceptual consciousness saves them from the hollow men's condition, it does not represent a solution to solipsism. A child's consciousness simply does not meet the preconditions necessary for solipsism to be a problem. This does not mean that children have achieved the meaningful unity the hollow men desire, however. The solipsistic problem still exists, though children have yet to develop to a stage in which they can recognize it. Children are not enlightened. Rather, their world is preproblematic, existentially speaking (they, of course, still have problems in the sense of wants and needs).

A hint is given, though, of an alternative significance for the gaze. The hollow men ask, "Is it like this in death's other kingdom / Waking alone / At the hour when we are / Trembling with tenderness / Lips that would kiss / Form prayers to broken stone." They cannot conceive of this other kingdom; they can only ask if it would be the same as their solipsistic state or if it would be the opposite. Nevertheless, they are dissatisfied with their isolation. Love appears as an example of disparate subjectivities that have been unified. However, the hollow men fail to love, since the

lips form prayers merely to “broken stone,” which recalls the broken column in death’s dream kingdom. Additionally, when the hollow men state, “The eyes are not here / There are no eyes here / In this valley of dying stars,” the fear of eyes transitions into a despair that there are no eyes. All is “Sightless, unless / The eyes reappear / As the perpetual star / Multifoliate rose,” which is “The hope only / Of empty men.” The eyes now present a possible salvation. The “perpetual star” of the rose contrasts with the “dying stars” from earlier in the poem. To be able to meet the eyes is one and the same with the Multifoliate rose, a reality that transcends solipsism and the death associated with it, exchanging it for a permanent, unifying, and transcendent meaning.

As Brooker notes, Bradley urges a necessary movement through the conceptual stage away from immediate experience so that the third “transcendent” stage can be attained, in which truth and unity are really achieved. Truth and unity only *seem* to be achieved in immediate experience. However, Brooker does not address solipsism and focuses exclusively on Bradley’s and Eliot’s rejection of dualism.<sup>33</sup> The potential for fragmentation within immediate experience, once it is subjected to the intellect, makes it unable to achieve knowledge of reality, for Bradley. Eliot’s poem gestures toward a need for a third stage, just as Bradley sought a third stage, that will bring meaning and unity, but for Eliot, it is not the Absolute. It is the “Multifoliate rose” hoped for by the hollow men. Raine reads this section of the poem as well as the prayer at the end as a disingenuous gesture on the hollow men’s part.<sup>34</sup> This raises a question as to who the hollow men need to fool and why. Raine astutely reads the critique of solipsism but downplays the possibility of escaping it that the poem offers. The rose image is charged with a religious significance outside the hollow men both because of the rose’s Christian symbolic value and also through the allusion to Dante’s *Paradiso*.

For Däumer, Eliot rejects dualism and symbolizes it in the shadow that resides between binary divisions.<sup>35</sup> The shadow falls “Between the idea / And the reality / Between the motion / And the act,” and so on. This obsession with betweenness—the gaps between subject and object, as well as the gap between subject and subject—reveals a desire for wholeness in its anxiety over division. Interestingly, it is the Lord’s Prayer that interrupts the ruminations on gaps, promising to bridge them, not with another rationalistic solution, but by overstepping the language of pure philosophy that appears in the binaries. This is represented even by the positioning of the words on the opposite side of the page. However, the hollow men are unable to reach this stage, though it exists, as evinced by their incomplete prayer. They trail off with “For thine is / Life is / For Thine is the,” indicating that they recognize that to live requires spiritual meaning but that they cannot achieve it. Their world ends in a “whimper” devoid of all significance and spiritual energy rather than a “bang,” which would at least have apocalyptic momentousness.

Clearly, both Bradley and Eliot were intensely troubled by dualism and solipsism, seeing the two as related. For Bradley, dualism amounts to solipsism by radically dividing subject from object and subject from other subjects. Like Bradley, Eliot desired a transcendent truth that could rescue the solipsistic subject from the meaningless, fragmented wasteland. For Bradley, that urge ends in, paradoxically, a rational concept: namely, the Absolute. For Eliot, the solution does not come in the early poetry, but it is desired and its possibility is intimated.

<sup>33</sup> Brooker, “F. H. Bradley’s Doctrine of Experience.”

<sup>34</sup> Raine, *T. S. Eliot*, 21.

<sup>35</sup> Däumer, “The Enigma of ‘The Hollow Men,’” 176.

Both Eliot and Bradley shared a vital belief that reality and truth are experiential, understood not merely in terms of discursive intellect but through feeling. Similarly, minds do not really *know* one another and overcome solipsism through an empirical process, such as the one positivism offers, but through an experiential contact. Such a belief underlies Eliot's statement in his 1929 essay "Dante" that "the experience of a poem is the experience both of a moment and of a lifetime. It is very much like our intenser experiences of other human beings. . . . There is a first or an early moment . . . of shock and surprise, even terror, . . . a moment which . . . would become destitute of significance if it did not survive in a larger whole of experience."<sup>36</sup> Reading these words with Bradley in mind deepens their meaning: the poem, like a human being, resonates for its ability to participate in a transcendent reality or the larger whole of universal experience that unites seemingly disparate subjects, even if that contact may be at first difficult. It is in this sense that the poet is impersonal.

In Eliot's early poetry the radically fragmented, solipsistic world portrayed does not argue for nihilism but condemns it. We are not meant to despair but to reflect. Even when we are presented with characters incapable of escaping their own solipsism, it is through them that we understand solipsism's phenomenology so that it can be problematized and the need for overcoming it urged. Escape can occur only when divided selves have a common reference point—a transcendent, unifying meaning that is accessed experientially. A

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<sup>36</sup> Thomas Stearns Eliot, "Dante," in Dickey, Formicelli, and Schuchard, *Complete Prose of T. S. Eliot, 1927–1929*, 711.