

THE CONCEPT OF EXPERIENCE AS GROUNDING FOR *THE WASTE LAND*

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ABSTRACT

This essay tries to understand one shaping logic by which Anglo-American modernist poets distinguish themselves from their nineteenth century predecessors. Both William James and F.H. Bradley developed ways of thinking that did not divide experience into how subjects process objects. Instead there is, first, experience –an encounter with qualities of events. The mind imposes its interest either in experience, mainly mattering for the person, or for the state of the world it makes present. But for Eliot and the Modernists there was something beyond the person and so a call for impersonality as a potentially fuller, more immediate encounter with the world. Eliot's concerns for immediate experience operate in *The Waste Land* primarily to shape how he treats events and voices. But by the end, he cannot but place interpretation against experience in regards to the Thunder. This prepares for Eliot's separation of humanism from the ways faith requires direct experience.

KEYWORDS: Experience, Subject-Object, impersonality, immediacy vs interpretation, *The Waste Land*.

EL CONCEPTO DE EXPERIENCIA COMO FUNDAMENTO DE *LA TIERRA BALDÍA*

RESUMEN

Este artículo trata de comprender el principio conformador por el que los poetas modernistas angloamericanos tratan de distinguirse de sus predecesores del siglo XIX. Tanto William James como F.H. Bradley desarrollaron formas de pensar que no escindían la experiencia en la forma en que los sujetos procesan los objetos. En su lugar se da lo primero, la experiencia: un encuentro con las cualidades de los acontecimientos. La mente impone su interés en que la experiencia sea principalmente importante para la persona o para el estado del mundo que hace presente. Pero para Eliot y los modernistas existe algo más allá de la persona y, por tanto, se impone la necesidad de la impersonalidad como un encuentro potencialmente más pleno e inmediato con el mundo. Las preocupaciones de Eliot por la experiencia inmediata operan en *La tierra baldía* y dan forma a su tratamiento de los acontecimientos y de las voces. Pero al final no puede dejar de oponer la interpretación a la experiencia en lo que respecta al Trueno. Esto nos prepara para la separación que Eliot establece entre el humanismo y el modo en que la fe requiere la experiencia directa.

PALABRAS CLAVE: experiencia, sujeto-objeto, impersonalidad, inmediatez vs interpretación, *La tierra baldía*.

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Many of us have perhaps forgotten how great *The Waste Land* seemed to sophisticated readers in the 1920's. This forgetting is of course a sign that we have trouble in sharing the response of those readers. Familiarity not only kills but it deadens –which is perhaps worse, since the victim remains a near comatose butt of uncomprehending jokes. But the situation also creates the possibility of criticism as a life-giving practice– a fantasy dear to my heart. I want to show one way we might begin to see the poem as being at least as great as it struck its initial readers.

What criticism may lack now, but was available then, was a fascination with concepts of experience as the fundamental meeting place of mind and world. This fascination stemmed from the possibility that thinking of experience in this way freed the imagination for projecting its basic task as either accurately representing objective conditions in the world, or as stressing how subjective energies try to transform facts into values. I want to return to that intellectual atmosphere. For while we certainly have a great deal of philosophy that is useful when talking about the ideas and ideals of Modernist writing, most of it is not contemporary with the emergence of the revolution that reached its climax with *The Waste Land*. What was contemporary, like the work of Henri Bergson and Edmund Husserl and William James's *Pragmatism* (1907), either tends toward an occasional a glib ease prone to general assertions, or depends on an intense and difficult philosophical concentration on a single process such as intentionality that could not elicit the extended attention of writers. Such work could not suffice for the young Eliot's philosophical ambitions.

There is, however, a different side of James, as represented by his late work *Essays in Radical Empiricism* (1912), which I think at least parallels and explains, if not helps elicit, what is most radical in the thinking of Modernist poets. Eliot is the most articulate proponent of this new domain of discourse, albeit directed more by F.H. Bradley's criticisms of James than by James's writing itself. At stake for him, and maybe for us, was finding for modernist poetry an entirely different model of writing and of emotion from a Romanticism whose theoretical limitations had, by the end of the nineteenth century, become painfully obvious.

In order to appreciate why this philosophical work by James and Bradley mattered for modern writers, we first have to hear again Coleridge on the work of genius. Genius becomes the transforming power for suffusing the world of fact with a faith that artists could participate in a human version of Divine activity. This power spreads "the tone, the atmosphere, and with it the depth and height of the ideal world... with feelings as fresh as if all had then sprang forth at the first creative fiat" (Coleridge 2006, 476). By the twentieth century, the darker side of these idealizations had become all too evident –Kant's version of human powers had come to justify a dangerous sense of domination over the object world; Hegel's dialectic had succumbed to the forces of ironic self-paralysis because of the always incomplete work of reflective self-consciousness; and Coleridge's marriage of fact and spirit had entered the divorce proceedings for which the course of Victorian poetry could everywhere provide testimony. In sum, by Tennyson and Swinburne, genius had largely become a dependence on the limitations of situated perspectives and was pronouncedly incapable of seeing beyond the limits of personality.



For James and for Bradley, one had to ground philosophical reflection in principles that avoided the options of putting the real within the subject or treating the subject as an object amidst other objects. Both thinkers conceived the fundamental ontological condition to the working of experience as an event from which ideas about subject and object might be formulated. For James, this transfer of perspective could occur without difficulty, while Bradley saw inevitable confusion as we try to parse out what is involved in experience. Yet both philosophers dealt with the problems of analyzing the nature of experience in ways that make it easy to appreciate how Eliot eventually developed a poetry dependent on these ways of understanding the appeal of concrete presence.

I

Now I should be as concrete as possible on the complex issues opened up by concentrating on the constitutive force of experience. Both James and Bradley were sharply critical of what I will call the fundamental divide in the nineteenth century, that between object-based empiricism and the subject-based heritage of Kant. They, like Whitehead after them, proposed instead that subject and object were interpretive categories for handling a more primary condition of “experience” where both co-existed, held together by immediate feeling. Experience provided an elemental and impersonal or transpersonal condition of activity from which both subject and object could be derived, depending on the interests of the one undergoing the experience.

For the purposes of literary criticism, we can break down James’s argument in his *Essays in Radical Empiricism* into three basic claims about the nature of experience and the role of consciousness as a function rather than an entity.¹ The first is quite important for poetry because of the role of feeling in providing concrete modes of coordination. In James’s view, the fundamental concern for philosophy has to be not “I think” but “I breathe” (James 15), a condition of feeling of the self in the world without depending on so abstract a process as thought or self-reflection from a particular perspective: this concreteness emerges for subjects as “conceptual manifolds” that “are in their first attention mere bits of pure experience” (James 9) made present by feeling. Because the experience is primary and does not derive from anything else, it cannot be explained from outside, for example by categories used for thought. Knowledge always depends on what the mind finds itself involved in:

My thesis is that if we start with the supposition that there is only one primal material in the world, a stuff of which everything is composed, and if we call that stuff “pure experience,” then knowing can be easily explained as a particular sort

¹ William James, *Essays in Radical Empiricism* (Anodos Books, 2019), pp. 5-6. This book was originally published in 1912. I have to cite here Maude Emerson, who about fifteen years ago wrote an excellent Berkeley dissertation on Radical Empiricism, titled *Radical Empiricist Poetics in the New York School and Beyond*. I apologize now for not pursuing her ideas then.



of relation towards one another into which portions of pure experience may enter... One of the terms becomes the subject of the bearer of the knowledge, the knower, the other becomes the object known. (James 15)²

This quotation also introduces the second feature. James is confident that at least two modes of inquiry can work without interfering with each other to explore the experience –as situated object and as situating subject (James 11). The divisions between subject and object fundamental to nineteenth century thought could be derived not from the nature of subjectivity in a world of objects, but from various needs to adapt experience to practice, or in James’s terms, to “conjoin” needs for knowledge with subjective desires.³ The third feature follows logically. Both James and Bradley stress subject positions within experience rather than subjectivities or points of view. This is the great benefit of treating consciousness as a function rather than an entity. If consciousness is not an entity, then it does not need to be grounded in another entity like an ego that offers a specific psychological orientation on the world. Because experience is primary, the person can discover various investments and distributions of the energies of the ego that are unpredictable and gloriously diverse. Subjective states become not a source of meaning, but a mode of inhabiting various kinds of densities with their own shaping influence and structurings of intentionality.⁴ Because these inhabitations are intrinsic to the event, they are in principle available to any subject involved in the event.

James seems to me very precise. Where for classical empiricism only sense data is real, radical empiricism is based on taking conjunctive and disjunctive “relations at their face value, holding them to be as real as the terms united by them” (James 37):

On the principles I am defending, a ‘mind’ or ‘personal consciousness’ is the name for a series of experiences run together by certain definite transitions... This is enough for my present point: the common sense notion of minds sharing the same object offers no special logical or epistemological difficulties of its own; it stands or falls with the general possibility of things being in conjunctive relation with other things at all. (James 29)

² See also for James’s criticism of subject and object being treated by philosophy as “discontinuous entities” (p. 20 ff.).

³ “The experience is a member of diverse processes that can be followed away from it along entirely different lines. The one self-identical thing has so many relations to the rest of experience that you can take it in disparate systems of association and treat it as belonging with opposite contexts. In one of these contexts it is your ‘field of consciousness’; in another it is the room in which you sit” (James, 8). Bradley will differ radically on this point because he believes overlapping feelings are involved in each form of inquiry. Innocence is only within the experience, but any kind of unity is lost once one tries to locate either subject or object because interpretation always involves incomplete levels of ideality that accompany the application of concepts.

⁴ “[As] a room, the experience has occupied that spot and had that environment for thirty years. As your field of consciousness, it may never have existed till now. ...In the real world, fire will consume it. In your mind, you can let fire play over it without effect” (James, 8-9).



James's own prose can seem poetic about the power of conjunctive features of language for making visible the concrete density potential in experience. One can think of prepositions as directing the flow of feeling for any mode of agency capable of tracking the relations they enable:

Our concepts and our sensations are confluent; successive states of the same ego and feeling of the same body are confluent. Where the experience is not of conflux, it may be... of contiguousness (nothing between); or of likeness; or of nearness; ... or of in-ness; or of and-ness, which last relation would make of however disjointed a world otherwise, at any rate for that occasion a universe 'of discourse.'" (James 37)

II

It is easy to forget that Hegel was probably the first great modern thinker to ground philosophy in how subject and object come together within the dynamics of experience. It should not be surprising, then, that Bradley also begins there in his bizarre but intelligent effort to correlate pragmatism as an approach to concrete experience with what he considered a necessary Idealism in order to explain how the concepts we use in experience can be stabilized. For my purposes, I need only his account of the nature of experience and how our practical judgments displace us from immediacy into ultimately indeterminate efforts at drawing conclusions. Without access to absolute reason, experience fuses objective and subjective concerns in ways fraught with insuperable problems. T.S. Eliot's dissertation on Bradley posits the difference from James this way:

The only independent reality is immediate experience or feeling... To think of feeling as subjective, as the mere adjective of a subject, is only a common prejudice... 'My' feeling is certainly in a sense mine. But this is because and in so far as I am the feeling, I do not in consequence know (in the sense of understand) my own feeling better than does an outsider... By the failure of any experience to be merely immediate, by its lack of harmony and cohesion, we find ourselves as conscious souls in a world of objects. (Eliot 1964, 31)

It is characteristic of Eliot to leap immediately to how Bradley helps explain why as conscious souls we suffer from a lack of harmony and cohesion. But Bradley also offers a quite generous account of what is involved in immediate experience that stresses the complex distributions of subjective agency in richer ways than James provides. Several critics have expounded Bradley on immediate experience, so I will address only the relevance of the idea as an inspiration for breaking with Romantic and Victorian poetics.⁵ Bradley's denial of the split between subject and object is certainly more attentive to distinctive qualities of experience than what James offers:

⁵ I found Richard Wollheim's *F.H. Bradley* (1969) the most helpful text on Bradley's thought.



The experience will not fall under the head of an object for a subject... In my general feeling at any moment there is more than the objects before me, and no perception of objects will exhaust the sense of a living emotion... We in short have experience in which there is no distinction between my awareness and that of which it is aware. There is an immediate feeling, and knowing and a being in one... It is in the end ruin to divide experience into something on the one hand experienced as an object and on the other hand something not experienced at all. (Bradley 87-88, 411)

Once you try to make an object of either the experience or the subject experiencing, you introduce conceptual elements that involve an abstract domain antithetical to the kinds of integrations experience affords: “We should... not be aware of any distinction between that which is felt and that which feels”; rather “We must ask how immediate experience is able to make a special object of itself” (Bradley 95; 93 cf. 96).

This understanding of the interweaving of subject and object within experience offers a powerful sense of why concreteness can matter in writing, especially since that concreteness is, for Bradley, so easily lost when we begin to interpret experience and have to rely on ideas and ideals. There can be a fullness of attention and investment that is in principle free from the distortions created by the self-consciousness basic to rhetorical performance. Bradley’s term for this subjective agency within experience is “finite centre.” The finite centre is a location of full and intricate feeling that cannot be identified with a self, since a self or identification with a point of view involves interpretation rather than participation. So, there will be divisions and tensions among the conceptual frameworks posited to give the experience significance in social life.

It matters to Bradley, and to Eliot, that imagination takes on reality within these states of experience. “A hard division between the real and the imaginary is not tenable,” because experience engenders both, linked in an immense variety of ways that pull against each other. (Bradley 13-14; cf. 92) We can say then that the real is a much more capacious category than that which can be rendered in objective terms. In one sense, this observation elaborates why interpretation is so problematic. Try restraining yourself to accounts of subjective behavior that rely on only one coherent set of predicates. (That narrow reliance on interpretive categories produces the kind of madness we see being acted out in American politics.) For Bradley, diagnosis involves dwelling in possibilities and trying to avoid the risk of our attention coming to rely on explanations. Because he acknowledges that imaginative materials can take on reality, the interdependence between the fictive and the factual offers at least three modes of permission for imaginative writing to assert the claim to modify audiences’ senses of reality.

First, because the real cannot be identified with objectivity, one has to alter how we think of what kind of truth values we can assign to assertions about the nature of things. Here is where Bradley has his own version of pragmatic measures of usefulness, such as the idea that anything we can measure we have to take as real. But because he ultimately needs concepts –he cannot be content with simply what works– he develops the intriguing notion of “degrees of reality.” Degrees of reality depend on how fully certain assertions can be adapted into the life of



a community. Fantasy has a very low degree of reality because it affects only an individual life. But communities are likely to agree on what is concretely manifest –like the immediate cause of an accident or a thrilling natural phenomenon.⁶ That possibility of community agreement was a constant concern for Eliot, starting from the time he did not convert to Buddhism because there was no Buddhist community at Harvard.

The second and third permissions are closely interconnected. It is crucial to understand how this sense of the primacy of experience resists the solipsism to which it seems bound. The key permission here is the fact that the subject of feeling cannot be identified with the ego. Feeling cannot know itself because it discloses conditions that are at once objective and subjective. And these conditions are prior to the kind of interpretation which might limit the event to a distinctive self who is its possessor and who provides a foundation for claims about solipsism. The third permission is the crucial positive side of the critique of solipsism.

So long as one concentrates on the conditions of experience, there can be no ownership of these subject positions. And without ownership, there is the possibility of the particulars of concrete experience being available to all subjects who can participate in how feeling emerges:

[Immediate] experience ... is a positive non-relational, non-objective whole of feeling. ... My world, of feeling and felt in one, is not to be called 'subjective', nor it is to be identified with myself. That would be a mistake both fundamental and disastrous. Nor is immediate experience to be taken as simply one with any 'subliminal world or any universe of the Unconscious. (Bradley 102)⁷

III

I will argue that Eliot's fascination from graduate school on with concepts of this kind of fusion within experience led to two major breakthroughs in his influential poetics that culminated in *The Waste Land*. First, concreteness must replace efforts by poets to make manifest acts of personal expression that produce a generalizable intelligibility for constructed states. Capturing what solicits feeling within the rendering of experience can afford both novelty and depth for imaginative participation. The second breakthrough is more complex. It involves the logic that led Eliot to his doctrine of impersonality. The complexity arises because what led to that doctrine seems to me more useful and suggestive than the primarily negative

⁶ See especially Chapter V. of *Essays on Truth and Reality*.

⁷ See especially Bradley on the priority of feeling over consciousness, 105. The feeling dimension of immediate experience can be activated to incorporate higher Transcendental modes of unity that combine ideal forms of subject and of object. This is the path to Bradley's Absolute, whose reality Eliot denied but whose dream might inevitably affect recollection on immediate experiences like *The Waste Land's* moment in the hyacinth garden or the experience of Hindu texts.



critique of personality that Eliot gave in the essay “Tradition and the Individual Talent” (1919). What matters for me are the interwoven possibilities of the concepts of “finite centres” and “degrees of reality,” because they have the power to alter substantially how one imagines writing connecting to audiences (Eliot 1964, 124-140). Once one can envision experience defining its own dynamics of feeling, subjectivity becomes not the source of meaning, but a source of intensity based on the agent’s and reader’s capacity to adapt or fail to adapt to what the situation calls for. (Think of “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock.”) By contrast, Romantic demands for significant meaning simply displace what can matter in how experiences unfold into personal expressive contexts. Similarly, the concept of “degrees of reality” matters because high degrees of reality depend not on describing facts so much as coordinating feelings and imaginative projections. Art can construct states of feeling with high degrees of reality by composing conditions of experience that invite rich participation, even in strange and surprising contexts.

Finally, if we understand Eliot’s commitments to impersonality as stemming largely from his understanding of the nature of experience, we can see creative uses of this principle that are a far cry from common critical understandings of this belief as a mode of self-defense. (Ellman 1988) For Eliot, the less a particular subjectivity or personality intervenes by interpreting a particular state, the more that state becomes capable of defining possibilities for any subjective life. (Of course, Eliot did not have to choose as emotionally loaded term as “impersonality.” But I think he did so as a way of thumbing his nose at Romantic values, at the importance of perspective in the novel and in painting, at his own psychic needs, and as a means of bringing the work poets do closer to the rhetoric of science.) For working out the implications of Bradley’s thinking on finite centres, I prefer the term “transpersonality,” because it suggests the active status of the invitation to feel in terms of what is experienced rather than in terms of the needs of the ego.

Even Eliot’s graduate school writings express considerable interest in the possibility of the James-Bradley view of experience replacing nineteenth century oppositions between subject and object. He speaks of feeling, not sensation, as the true immediacy of experience (Eliot 2014, 172). And he provides an interesting twist to this immediacy by elaborating a mistrust of explanation more radical even than Bradley’s. Eliot insists that we enter an intellectual morass whenever we depart from description (Eliot 2014, 123 ff).

The payoff for this faith in concreteness consists largely in how rarely his poems up through *The Waste Land* indulge in anything but evocative presentations of situations or direct statements of feelings that we interpret at our peril. But oddly, Eliot only brought his thinking on impersonality and experience fully into his art when he faced the challenge of writing a poem with the intended social scope of *The Waste Land*. Consider the simple power of the opening of that poem:

April is the cruelest month, breeding
Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing
Memory and desire, stirring
Dull roots with spring rain.



Winter kept us warm, covering
Earth in forgetful snow, feeding
A little life with dried tubers. (Eliot 2015, 55)

We could of course dwell on an anthropological reading that emphasizes how the poem composes a ritual space where societies imagine seeking the possibility of relief from the conditions of a land that has lost its fertility. Indeed, the first line virtually demands that we attend to that dimension of experience in the poem. But I want to use the following lines to take up a concern for the nature of direct experience prior to acts of interpretation that sets up what I see as the fundamental problem with any interpretive structure –that it puts subjective concerns where it thinks it can claim objectivity, while remaining ignorant of how objective conditions are shaping what we take as subjective.

Notice here the way the details engage in active relations that seem to warrant the impersonal generalization and prevent its being taken as a subjective statement rather than itself being an aspect embedded in the conditions of experience. Two grammatical features establish this structure of concrete relations. First there is a series of abstract nouns –“memory,” “desire,” “winter,” “spring”– that are immediately paralleled to other concrete nouns and conditions of physical action. The main effect I think is to have the abstract conditions embedded in the experience in the same way that Bradley and James see that feeling operates. Each kind of noun interprets and establishes reality for the other: in one direction there is the concrete April landscape; in the other there is the placing of these details in something approaching a timeless space of internal relations, specifying a scene of cruel unsatisfying vitality. Here the object becomes suffused by the subjectivities who invest meaning in it, while those subjectivities become at least partially objects because they are so thoroughly spoken for by the painful situation that elicits the plural first person pronoun “us.”

Then there is the marvelous chain of participles concluding five of the seven lines (with the other two concluding words stressing material conditions). These participles present a great deal of activity within what would be otherwise a dead spatial scene. That vitality then paradoxically embodies the cruelty of April, because it displays a potential that the prevailing voice can only resent. That vitality is not anchored in any human agency. It is the description itself that in effect causes the situation to be both effective and affective. Here the participial verbs also function as adjectives, as properties of what makes a kind of action take on an aura of timeless presence. Concrete experience stretches out to include abstract states, which have a much more secure home in the landscape than they would in any kind of appeal to interpretation rather than direct evocation.⁸

⁸ It is worth noticing that at the end of this first stanza Eliot extends the dynamics of merging abstract and concrete by heaping together pronouns for all three ways of regarding persons. It is as if the experience being rendered requires sounding the full range of pronoun positions: the “I” of a speaker cannot speak for the culture in the same way that a collection of modes of address can. Then the range of voices –from Marie’s cries to the imposing authority of the opening of the



It is as if cruelty were not a judgment, but simply a part of describing what confronts the adventurers passing through this waste land. Later in the poem, this condition of agency being driven by quasi-objective forces will pervade most of the individual scenes, quintessentially in the condition of the young man carbuncular and the participants in the game of chess.

We have also to recognize how the various voices that the landscape seems to produce distinguish the kind of experience the poem makes present. Even these casual voices will not submit fully to either subjective or objective framings. There is only the concreteness of experience expanding to include multiple finite centres, rather than either personal feelings or the development of character. At first the voices seem simply personal expressions. But we eventually realize how thoroughly they are pervaded by the alienated angst fundamental to Eliot's images of social life.

As we come to appreciate the pathos of these voices, we might notice that each of the sections in Part I is dominated by a distinctive voice. And even the prophetic voice seems to enjoy itself too much to be taken absolutely seriously. I suspect that this organization of Part I, then, may be an indication of how to read the rest of the poem as primarily the experience not of subjective states, but of voices that weave subjective intensities into what we also must treat as objects caused in part by social conditions. Eliot's thinking about the nature of experience allows him a directly social focus on finite centres organized by speaking. Even the allusions then, become voices that culture preserves and cannot stop interpreting, even if it cannot break through a self-protective irony that simultaneously registers pain while protecting against a deeper sense of absolute loss.

IV

I do not have the time to trace the ways that Eliot gradually worked out what he could do with his understanding of Bradley. Suffice it to say that his first volume moves between poems like "Preludes" and "Rhapsody on a Windy Night" that primarily present sequences of images providing transpersonal emblems of a world gone wrong contrasted with what we might call the expressions of Bradleyan subjects like "Prufrock" and "La Figlia Che Piange." These latter poems try to fuse states of immediate feeling with the deeply problematic efforts of speakers to interpret what they feel. They do present experience, but the focus is on particular characters enacting the difficulty of building ideas of self on feelings of awakened agency. For there seems to be no object capable of standing for a self without subjective shaping, and no subjective shaping without the distorting influence of objective historical

second stanza— repeat this sense of range, not by describing situations but by making various kinds of feeling present as aspects of the ways April is experienced by means of utterances.

forces.⁹ And the most I can say about *Poems 1920* is that the poems so doggedly pursue impersonality that they largely ignore the need for the qualities of experience that can make readers care about finite centers.

Imagine Eliot's own surprise (and confusion) when he started collecting into one poem moments of "thick" experience constituting aspects of subjective agency that he realized could not be subsumed into ideas or ideals of self-hood. Tiresias may be the speaker of *The Waste Land*, since he does not have a fixed personality, but speaks out of genders fused together in a way that only present and do not interpret. But given his lack of personality, I think we are asked to see the poem primarily as presenting voices establishing states of feeling that engage subjectivity while repelling any effort to interpret those states in psychological terms derived from how we project selves as subjective agents. It is not that the poem does not invite the fleshing out of psychological states. But it wishes that fleshing out to emerge by more intensely inhabiting the projected condition rather than interpreting it for how it affects one's understanding of oneself. We get the presences of shifting finite centers, for which the ideology of personal expression is patently inadequate, as is the cultivation of sensitive artifice. Pursuing the idea of finite centres allows an exploration of complex modes of agency that become potentially available to anyone participating in the poem. Then it becomes possible for an author to take up the epic enterprise of defining and of sharing a culture's emotional pain, suffering, and hopes for relief. One might say the poem walks the psyche back to the states of need that are not deluded. Yet that authorial lucidity makes the figures of agency all the more helpless in the accomplishment of any intentions that might find actionable values in their shared situation. These speaking voices are trapped in a situation where the lucidity that they still possess does no good, because the mind is so caught up in its own constructions that it cannot engage any possibilities that the real might offer.¹⁰

The first three parts of this walking back develop an increasing fascination with how those voices both engage reality and manifest a kind of denial of what might be painful but also liberating in that reality. All this doubleness changes drastically in the fourth section, with its direct encounter with death. Here, the calm acceptance may be what all the characters need but are evading. Perhaps the first step in transforming the waste land is to become fully aware, at every moment, that life is a brief candle, lighting the fact that nothing we accomplish is likely to endure.

Then the quite different summary voice of the last section attempts to construct an expansive experience, lending everything that we have heard an

⁹ My recent work has been largely driven by Hegel's vision of subjective expression as getting the subjective "I" to equal the forces that make that "I" an object within history. These Bradleyan poems reverse that equation: the objective forces make actual subjective states confused and mystified.

¹⁰ Similar observations led Edmund Wilson, in a review published the year after the poem came out, to conclude "Sometimes we feel that he is speaking not only for personal distress, but for the starvation of an entire civilization" (Wilson, 1922). This passage testifies to the experience of most contemporary readers who came to care for the poem: by eliminating the expressive ego Eliot could try to shape conditions of response that involved an entire civilization.



immediate urgency. This voice calls for the representatives of the culture to directly face their spiritual poverty. But the prevailing social conditions make it unlikely that society will profit from this opportunity. This final section thus ultimately settles for what critics mostly take as the merely formal “Shantih shantih shantih” (Eliot 2015, 719) that concludes this effort.

The best way to thicken how this conflict between the immediacy of experience and our needs for mediating interpretation becomes affectively charged –and so becomes a condition of intense experience– is to turn to two well-known passages in the final section that pretty much summarize the emotional density and complexity of the experience produced by the poem. In both, the psyche recognizes its needs and even the shifts in behavior that might bring relief from the conditions of the waste land. But the responses offered within the poem cannot produce the actions required to address the demands of the situation because the responses are bound to distort what is directly given. The first is the Shackleton scene echoing Christ at Emmaus:

Who is the third who walks always beside you?
When I count, there are only you and I together
But when I look ahead up the white road
There is always another one walking beside you
Gliding, wrapt in a brown mantle, hooded
I do not know whether a man or a woman
–But who is that on the other side of you? (Eliot 2015, 69)

There seem to be two primary aspects to this experience –the mode of awareness by which the subject senses another presence who cannot be seen, and the moment of questioning by which it tries to negotiate the situation. Ultimately it is the question that matters. For the passage develops a sense of a shadowy presence that could, if it manifested, complete the scene. But something blocks that manifestation. One possible response to the passage is that the two agents involved lack the faith necessary to allow this force sufficient presence. Here the sheer unfulfilled possibility is what completes the reality of the scene. Under the conditions of this culture, there can be only what Bradley would call the imaginary dimension necessary for the existence of the scene at all. Yet at the same time, there is also a level of the poem that introduces another kind of faith, a faith that reading itself can produce an involvement in the scene that itself reaches out to all the suffering that has been present in the poem. There is something in the observer, and by implication the reader, that recognizes a shadowy presence promising a more complete mode of being.¹¹ In that light, the passage opens up the various figures of literal quest that complete the poem –now explicitly an adventure of trying to see beneath speech to some kind

¹¹ I suspect that many of us create versions of this third always beside us when we project someone hearing our inauthentic voices and manifesting the capacity of making judgments that we do not want to heed.



of basic need that may be the full shareable felt content of this experience. Perhaps this shadowy presence is in effect the potential within direct experience for hearing the pain of all these voices, so that individuals can begin to seek changes capable of making this voice intelligible and effective. The psyche is on the verge of knowing both what it cannot know, and that what it cannot know is necessary for its peace. The poem replaces the subject by the shadow of a more expansive center of feeling that one comes to sense as real, but only because one cannot bridge the gap that generates the figure in the first place.

The second situation is even more important, because the relation between direct experience and interpretation is so directly staged by the Thunder speaking—in ways that will confirm Eliot's sense that faith is not something we can reason to, but which requires a willed relation to something intensely immediate. In the thunder speaking, there is a form of power that might lead to life-giving rain. But that sense of potential vitality cannot be engaged adequately by consciousness trying to interpret that experience. Again Bradley's confusion of subject and object come into play. Just think again of how we feel we have to look elsewhere to understand the real positions involved in what the voices are doing. The difference between pure experience and its interpretations suggest that the Hindu words have to be heard, but not interpreted in terms of our mental categories. This demand for a distinctive form of hearing of the Word probably exists for any kind of religion involving belief in a divine being: we have to become attuned to a level of existence capable of modifying our psyches without destroying the appeal by interpreting it in the languages of everyday life.

Within this perspective it is heartbreaking to hear each of the three responses to the Hindu words translated as "Give," "Sympathize," and "Control." The sequence is well known, so I do not have to quote it. What is less well known is the nature of experience that hearing produces.

The situation is pure dialogue: a possible disposition is offered for all finite centres disposed to hear. But interpretation interferes with the hearing, so the states of agency rendered in the poem cannot honor this version of the Word. Here the actionable depends on judgments about need and possibility that finally cannot accept the authority of the pure command, however pressing that demand may be. The poem is brilliant in its interplay between the concrete experience of foreign expressions and the necessity of interpretations that are doomed to failure, largely because our culture cannot simply listen and heed. We have the material resources to translate Hindu wisdom, but not the public roles for the ego necessary to apply that wisdom. Instead we produce something fundamentally different and deferring: we produce escapist self-consciousness about conditions displacing what it should honor.

Each response to the thunder's command presents a different form of subjective agency as its way of experiencing what it has heard. All of the pronoun positions fail to engender the appropriate action, albeit for diverse reasons, largely because each turns to the past in order to interpret the present. This dependency guarantees a failure of listening. The response to "Datta" is collective and reflective. The initial reaction is to ask a question, perhaps a self-justifying one that does not reject the command: "What have we given" (Eliot 2015, 70). Instead it claims to have



already taken this radical step in order to exist at all. But this “we” seems satisfied in its previous efforts, so it ultimately ignores any new sense of urgency. The second response, to “Dayadvam,” roots the “we” in an “I” that absorbs the command into a painfully lucid and paralyzed self-consciousness. A “broken Coriolanus” must speak for us all. Finally, the past tense is most powerful and most painful in response to “Damyata,” because it can generate in direct response only a contrast between concrete memory and the pathos of the future subjunctive, now without at all directly engaging the content of the command. No wonder the poem subsequently collapses into a frenzy of possible subject positions, not all “fit” for the experience the poem puts us through. The degrees of reality produced by the final utterances are sadly low—a measure of cultural knowledge in ruins.

V

I want to call upon an essay by Michael Levenson in order to contextualize my excitement about Eliot’s artistry in constructing the emotional stances on which *The Waste Land* is built. I think the shape of Eliot’s career virtually demands that we ask what proved deeply unsatisfying to him in the thinking that made this poem possible. Levenson too sees the poem as modernist poetry’s most heroic effort to overcome perspectivism by making the poem itself the locus of a real experience beyond perspective. But he also elaborates the price of this emphasis on refusing to interpret finite centres as aspects of particular persons. Levenson grounds this critique in Eliot’s essay “Second Thoughts on Humanism” (1929). In retrospect, we can see that Eliot seemed in *The Waste Land* to have exhausted several features of humanism. Learning is carried by quotations that seem to be alienating presences in a modern World where they evoke ideals which no longer resonate in our culture. And the variety of cultures seems more an exercise in frustrated universalism than any guidance that might lead out of the waste land. Speaking of professional humanists in his essay, Eliot complained that the only system of morals that they can elaborate seems to be founded on nothing but itself” (Eliot 1950, 432). Humanism’s only full commitment is to cultivation and coverage of many cultures, hoping thereby to make up in breadth what it lacks in compelling particular values (Eliot 1950, 435). Ironically, that commitment makes humanism almost inseparable from positivism, since neither mode of thinking can rank cultures or modes of action. Their only criteria have to reside in a cultivated desire for variety. All that Humanism can ask is “is this particular philosophy or religion civilized or not” (Eliot 1950, 436). This kind of position is “more likely to end in respectability than in perfection” (Eliot 1950, 435). Such thinking—which *The Waste Land* both embodies and criticizes—“operates by taste” so that it is “fundamentally critical rather than constructive” (Eliot 1950, 436). Where religious culture sought a depth and conviction within religious life that made a full sense of individual experience possible, the humanist identification with the many must replace the possibility of a truth that fully mobilizes the individual’s sense of commitment to a source of value.



In short, Eliot seems to change course in thinking about the importance of individual subjectivity. The individual comes to matter not for its power of expression but for its capacity to undergo the kinds of sustained experiences that open it to the possibility of faith and guidance. These subjective states will still be opposed to interpretation. What matters is not who the self is, but how it can find a ground that resists the value of diversity and cultivation, and instead offers the possibility of total commitment. With grace, the person takes on an inner sensuousness that processes experience for its manifestations of the affects that bind a person to what commitment makes possible. And then the work of poetry, at least in “Ash Wednesday,” becomes identical to the processes of self-gathering that make an individual capable of acting to define his or her faith. The cruelest month interpreted by faith offers the most feasible possibilities of finding those sources of value within experience that depend on the discipline to be a certain kind of individual.

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