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ABSTRACT

I attempt to draw out the existential-spiritual development of T. S. Eliot's poetic personas from J. Alfred Prufrock to the Fisher King to the Hollow Men to, finally, the "agèd eagle" with "seaward flying / Unbroken wings" of *Ash Wednesday*. I assess "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," *The Waste Land*, *The Hollow Men*, and *Ash Wednesday* with the methodology of Søren Kierkegaard's brand of existentialism, focusing especially on the individual's free will in reference to spirituality and religion. I apply Kierkegaard's theory of the three stages of existence necessary for becoming a true self in interpreting these poems and their progressions. I pay special attention to the themes of existential anxiety ("angst") and despair in these works, and how retrospectively they productively propel Eliot toward the successively higher stages of existence, and in turn, more developed poetic personas, culminating in *Ash Wednesday* and even *Four Quartets*.

INDEX WORDS: T. S. Eliot, Søren Kierkegaard, Existentialism, Aestheticism, Modernism

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DEDICATION

My sincerest thanks to my family, whose support has been essential to my academic success from the start.

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1 INTRODUCTION

"Every work of imagination must have a philosophy; and every philosophy must be a work of art."

- T. S. Eliot, *The Sacred Wood* (37).

Much has been made of the spiritual resolution demonstrated in T. S. Eliot's later poetry, especially *Ash-Wednesday* and *Four Quartets*, but this movement was not spontaneous, *ex nihilo*. Strong themes of existential anxiety and despair run throughout Eliot's early works in poetry, and even in his criticism in an oblique, more psychoanalytical sense. The major primary texts I discuss here are Eliot's poems "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" (1915), *The Waste Land* (1922), *The Hollow Men* (1925), and *Ash Wednesday* (1927). Through these three works, I trace the decade-long development of Eliot's spiritual-existential poetics leading up to the resolution of these themes in his 1927 conversion to Anglo-Catholicism and the poems that followed. In examining selections of Eliot's poetry 1915-1927 through the existential-spiritual perspective, I seek to trace the beginning of the spiritual turmoil present in the poetry and its positive progression that eventually led to resolution.[1] Throughout Eliot's poetry 1915-1927, one can successfully map Kierkegaard's theory of the three stages of existence for the individual who becomes a true self: the aesthetic in "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," the ethical at the conclusion of *The Waste Land* and in *The Hollow Men*, and the religious in his poems such as *Ash Wednesday* and onwards.

[1] As Kierkegaard famously said, "Life can be understood only backwards; but it must be lived forwards"; to be sure, I argue that Eliot's progression is intelligible only in retrospect. I do not argue that this progression was either conscious or necessary. Though progression through these "stages of existence" is accomplished in part by a productive angst and/or despair, as Kierkegaard argues, nevertheless there are important distinctions between qualities of one's angst and/or despair. Kierkegaard asserts that "Whoever has learned to be anxious in the right way has learned the ultimate"; in doing so, with this distinction he implies that one may be anxious in a wrong way, or even many wrong ways (*CA* 154).

In his essay on Philip Massinger, Eliot wrote that "great literature is the transformation of a personality into a personal work of art, their lifetime's work, long or short" (*SW* 80). A central premise of this project is that, even perhaps against his conscious efforts of avoiding "personality," Eliot transformed his personality into his lifetime's work of poetry, personal works of art. My project is assuredly a formalist work of analysis of Eliot's poetic personas and stops short of intensive biographical research ending in making speculative conclusions; I do so to avoid the risk of violating academic integrity by (perhaps falsely) purporting to impose a certain narrative upon T. S. Eliot, the man.[2] My work here operates under the assumption that T. S. Eliot's poetic personas and T. S. Eliot the man are not two exactly identical entities, but that there is significant overlap between the two, and my work focuses on the poetic personas. My conclusions about Eliot's poetic personas nonetheless may be extended to judgments about Eliot the man and his personal, real-world spiritual life. These biographical conclusions are not the focus of my work here, however; I seek rather to recognize his works as "the transformation of a personality into a personal work of art" and focus on the enduring personal works of art rather than the temporal, historically distant personality.

The major theoretical works I employ in my analysis of the above texts are *Either/Or* (*Part I* and *Part II*), *The Concept of Anxiety*, and *Stages on Life's Way*, all by the nineteenth-century Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard, who is widely regarded as the father of existentialism. Kierkegaard was among the first to elucidate the human condition in modern existentialist terms, and in these works he pays special attention to the themes of anxiety and despair. Much scholarship has been done on the connection between W. H. Auden and Kierkegaard as Auden was a reader and even something of a scholar of Kierkegaard; Eliot and

[2] Likewise, I make no attempt to defend Eliot's character from the many and well-founded charges of misogyny and anti-Semitism against him throughout the decades.

Kierkegaard, on the other hand, are not quite such an obvious pairing, but it will prove to be a fitting and beneficial connection that significantly contributes to scholarship on both writers.

I argue that Kierkegaard's theory of the stages of existence map perfectly onto Eliot's poetic personas and his poetry 1915-1927. In his 1843 work, *Either/Or,* Kierkegaard asserts that there are three stages of life for the individual in the path of becoming a true self: the aesthetic, the ethical, and the religious. An individual in the aesthetic sphere fixates on arts and the erotic; one in the ethical sphere focuses on duty and law; one in the religious sphere, the highest plane, rests in the absolute. In Eliot's early career – in criticism and poetry alike – we see a concentration on the aesthetic, which in the conclusion of *The Waste Land* (in "What the Thunder Said") moves to the ethical. Finally, realizing the ultimate impotence of mere ethics and rules when divorced from vital, spiritual reality (which is the point of *The Hollow Men*), Eliot and his poetry make a second movement, finding resolution in the religious, the absolute.

The key issues that interest me about these texts by Eliot are, first, the presence of existential anxiety ("angst" – termed originally by Kierkegaard himself) which manifests in spiritual inertia, and second, the progressive poetic movement towards spiritual resolution. In my reading of these three early and middle poems by Eliot, I perceive the presence of angst which progresses to and becomes spiritual inertia and even despair ("The sickness unto death," in Kierkegaard's estimation). The characters of Prufrock and the Hollow Men most poignantly portray this condition: the former through his sublimated desire for inactivity that leads to spiritual inertia, and the latter who exemplify those who fall victim to their own spiritual inertia. If "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" continued and followed Prufrock into the afterlife, we would surely find him with the (other) Hollow Men, residing in a purgatorial desolation on the banks of the Acheron, worthy of neither Heaven nor Hell.

My methodology, in short, is to assess these selections of Eliot's poetry from the perspective of Kierkegaard's brand of existentialism. I opt for the Kierkegaardian existentialism over and against the more popular Sartrean or Camusian variations due to the logical sense of pairing Kierkegaard's religious thought with the arc of Eliot's life and poetry, which reached resolution in his 1927 conversion. Although Eliot was an agnostic (if not an atheist) for much of his early career, his movement towards Christianity is what makes Kierkegaardian existentialism a more profitable lens of analysis than the agnostic/atheistic existentialism of Sartre or Camus. I will employ the theoretical contributions of Sartre and/or Camus when relevant and necessary in examination of certain parts of Eliot's early works. Some of the language employed by Sartre and Camus may become appropriate for my analysis, such as Sartre's conceptions of "bad faith" and "nausea." Nevertheless, Kierkegaard's existentialism remains my paradigmatic theoretical lens of interpretation.

While many scholars have explored existential themes in T. S. Eliot's poetry, this thesis is the first to map Kierkegaard's stages of existence upon his poetic career, and thereby provides a more refined and sustained analysis of existentialist themes in Eliot's poetry than what has been offered before. Few scholars have linked the thought of Eliot with that of Kierkegaard, as it is, admittedly, not a natural or "organic" connection. There is not much of a direct relationship between these two writers; there is no substantial evidence that Eliot read and studied Kierkegaard.[3] Nevertheless, reading Eliot against Kierkegaard is immensely beneficial to the study of both writers, as they well complement each other: Kierkegaard's philosophy to Eliot's poetry, and Eliot's poetry to Kierkegaard's philosophy. Eliot once wrote that "Every work of

[3] However, it might be interesting for someone to explore the readings lists he would have encountered in his classes during his doctoral program in philosophy at Harvard – this is in a similar vein to recent research performed on what reading lists Eliot included on his own literature syllabi.

imagination must have a philosophy; and every philosophy must be a work of art" – Eliot and Kierkegaard as writers fulfill each of these roles respectively.

Eliot's poetry presents an abundance of sublime examples of modern people in existential crises (even going so far as to represent the psyche and consciousness of modern humanity), and furthermore, much of his poetry likewise reflects a persona in existential crises of anxiety over age, death, and the decline of the West. I attempt draw out an existential narratological structure implicit in retrospection of these published works rather than simply contrasting his early agnostic/atheistic poetry with his later religious poetry. Joseph Bottum once presented the criticism that "Part of the problem with Eliot's late use of Christian spirituality to fill the void of modern times is that in his early and middle poems he made the void so large" (25). I intend to pay proper attention to "the void of modern times" represented in his early and middle poems and explicated through the application of Kierkegaard's existentialist philosophy. I argue that this "void of modern times" is represented by Eliot's demonstrations of the failure of the aesthetic life-view and the ethical life-view alike. Finally, my project augments contemporary critical discussions on Eliot's theory of impersonality and its relation to his own works: I demonstrate the development of Eliot's personality as retrospectively evidenced in his poems through the distinct development of his poetic personas or speakers and narrators.

2 THE KIERKEGAARDIAN METHODOLOGY

Søren Kierkegaard is the principal voice within my methodology and secondary sources. Where necessary and relevant, I also incorporate Friedrich Nietzsche, specifically in my discussion of and analysis of *The Waste Land* and its pervasive anxiety over the decline of the West, its ensuing nihilism, and reconstruction of moral values and ethical duties. Kierkegaard's *Either/Or*, *The Concept of Anxiety,* and *Stages on Life's Way* provide the theoretical concepts and language to explicate the existential themes present in Eliot's poetry.[4] Further, they allow us to see a comprehensive Kierkegaardian reading of Eliot's poetry and life. I principally focus on existential concepts of anxiety and despair, reading them in all three of Eliot's works I examine. Anxiety and despair are especially pertinent in my psychological analyses of specific characters because it is from these conditions that an authentic, meaningful faith may eventually be born. Anxiety and despair are, to some degree, the principal themes of Kierkegaard's oeuvre. For Kierkegaard, they are essential to the human experience and central to any individual's existential development of selfhood, just as they are essential to the existential poetics of Eliot's personas.

Throughout *The Concept of Anxiety*, Kierkegaard offers several useful definitions of anxiety: it is "freedom's actuality as the possibility of possibility," "entangled freedom," "the dizziness of freedom." Kierkegaard views the actualized human being as a series of syntheses: "Man is a synthesis of the psychical and the physical; however, a synthesis is unthinkable if the two are not united in a third. This third is spirit" (*CA* 43). He continues to write that man "is a

[4] Other significant works by Kierkegaard include *The Sickness unto Death* and *Fear and Trembling*. I do not incorporate them in this project; however, if I were to expand the sections on *The Waste Land* and *The Hollow Men* in the future, *The Sickness unto Death* would be an essential work to draw upon for its discussions and analyses of despair. In the present sections on *The Waste Land* and *The Hollow Men*, I focus on the turn from the aesthetic life-view to the ethical life-view which results from proper despair. Likewise, *Fear and Trembling* is a work best suited for analysis of Eliot's later works wrestling with his newfound faith, especially *Ash Wednesday*.

synthesis of psyche and body, but he is also a synthesis of the temporal and the eternal" (85). Throughout Eliot's early poetry, there is an array of characters of these Kierkegaardian "unsustained syntheses" who, lacking spirit, never meaningfully account for their selves under the stakes of eternity, but only flounder finitely through temporality and mortality. However, analysis of several of Eliot's poetic personas reveals the arc of his personal progression achieved by struggle in anxiety and in freedom.

Anxiety, in Kierkegaard's view, is not an entirely negative condition; likewise, there is much to learn from Eliot's characters and poems of anxiety. In the fifth and final chapter of *The Concept of Anxiety,* Kierkegaard writes, "This is an adventure that every human being must go through—to learn to be anxious in order that he may not perish either by never having been in anxiety ["spiritlessness"] or by succumbing in anxiety" – as Prufrock does. He concludes, "Whoever has learned to be anxious in the right way has learned the ultimate." And indeed, as the trajectory of Eliot's poetry toward spiritual resolution shows, anxiety and despair are even necessary to achieve eventual rest in the absolute.

Temporal anxiety in contact with the eternal produces despair, an expression of the lack of synthesis between the infinite and the finite in an individual. Kierkegaard details his theory of despair throughout *The Sickness unto Death*.[5] Kierkegaard posits that while death is nothing to fear for the Christian, whose hope and security lies in faith in God, despair is the sickness unto death, in which one is improperly aligned with God. Here in despair Kierkegaard addresses the spiritual level of anxiety, rather than the mental-emotional level discussed throughout *The Concept of Anxiety*. Kierkegaard theorizes that all human beings are in despair, only in varying degrees and varying degrees of consciousness.

[5] A reference to John 11:4 when Jesus Christ raises Lazarus from the dead – a point of particular interest given another Lazarus reference in "Prufrock."

Throughout his works, but especially in *Either/Or*, Kierkegaard theorizes that the individual in the path of becoming a fully actualized, true self passes through three stages or spheres of life. First, there is the aesthetic; an individual in this phase fixates on beauty that is nevertheless a form of superficiality and immediacy. An individual in the aesthetic sphere focuses on indulgent experience, seeking to gain self-pleasure by achievement of desires in the sensuous world. One has a certain "zeal" or "zest" for life, enamored with all the possibilities that life presents, intoxicated with passion and immediacy.

Yet Kierkegaard judges the aesthetic life-view to be despair, and therefore untenable for any self-reflective individual. Therefore, an individual in the aesthetic stage may find herself in despair, and by a "leap," enters the ethical sphere. This stage focuses on ethical values and on performing one's duties, and transfigures aspects of the aesthetic to be higher, more meaningful.[6] Finally, an individual may reach the third and final sphere – the religious. For Kierkegaard, this is the highest plane, and here one rests in the absolute. It is here and only here where one may find final resolution – though this resolution is a paradox, characterized by both joy and the necessary objective uncertainty of faith. Kierkegaard most succinctly summarizes the concept in its totality in *Stages on Life's Way*:

> There are three existence-spheres: the esthetic, the ethical, the religious. […] The ethical sphere is only a transition sphere, and therefore its highest expression is repentance as a negative action. The esthetic sphere is the sphere of immediacy, the ethical the sphere of requirement (and this requirement is so infinite that the individual always goes bankrupt), the religious the sphere of fulfillment […] for repentance has specifically created a

[6] The most readily available example of this is how the ethical life-view transforms love: in the aesthetic stage, one may dabble in dating and seduction for one's own entertainment and pleasure, but in the ethical stage, one views love more seriously, and at least considers (if not pursues) marriage and commitment.

> boundless space, and as a consequence the religious contradiction: simultaneously to be out on 70,000 fathoms of water and yet be joyful. (362)

In other words, the aesthetic is the lowest but foundational stage; the ethical is the bridge between the aesthetic and the religious. The religious is reached by repentance within the ethical sphere, and there one finds ultimate fulfillment in the paradox of faith and joy. In the analysis to follow, I will demonstrate the essential movements (from the aesthetic to the ethical, and from the ethical to the religious) displayed at key points in Eliot's poems.

Though these spheres of existence thematically pervade all of Kierkegaard's works, *Either/Or* addresses them most clearly and directly. It is a two-part 1843 work by Kierkegaard, presented as though they are collections of works simply found by the pseudonymous editor, "Victor Eremita" (the penname under which Kierkegaard published the work). The first volume purports to be written by an anonymous young man simply called "the esthete" and referred to as "A"; this first half consists of short essays on aesthetic topics (music, literature, drama, pleasure, courtship and seduction, etc.). The second volume, by an older man named William, a former judge, but referred to as "B," consists of two lengthy letters to "A" discussing topics such as ethical responsibility, critical introspection, civic duties, and marriage. Victor Eremita writes, "A's papers contain a multiplicity of approaches to an esthetic view of life. A coherent esthetic view of life can hardly be presented. B's papers contain an ethical view of life" (*Part I* 13). "A" aka "the esthete" is a figure reminiscent of Prufrock, while "B" aka Judge William is reminiscent of the older, more mature Eliotic poetic personas who, through time and experience, have realized the futility and inadequacy of the aesthetic life-view. However, the religious life-view is not examined and demonstrated in detail but only alluded to in the final section of *Part II*: "Ultimatum: The Upbuilding that Lies in the Thought That in Relation to God We Are Always in

the Wrong." Kierkegaard affords the religious proper explication in *Stages on Life's Way*, published two years later as the sequel to *Either/Or*. Likewise, due to necessary constraints, this project stops short of detailed analyses of Eliot's figures who best exemplify the religious life-view, found in *Four Quartets* especially.

To Kierkegaard, authentic, meaningful faith is not something one can achieve without enduring the spiritual struggles of existential anxiety and despair. That is to say, one may not reach a later stage without having necessarily passed through the preceding stage(s): the religious stage is reached only through the ethical, through the aesthetic. Though not all people reach the final stage of the religious, for Kierkegaard all people reside in one of the three stages. The gravity with which Kierkegaard viewed the journey of faith is necessary to bear in mind in properly understanding and interpreting Eliot's own poetic and biographical movement towards faith. Kierkegaard's conception of faith is most extensively elaborated on in *Fear and Trembling* and is best understood in the context of angst and despair, as explicated in *The Concept of Anxiety* and *The Sickness unto Death*.

3 EXISTENTIAL ANXIETY IN "THE LOVE SONG OF J. ALFRED PRUFROCK": THE AESTHETIC LIFE-VIEW

Here I trace the arc of Eliot's development – from the aesthetic stage to the ethical and finally the religious – beginning with the aesthetic stage. A more thorough analysis of Eliot's aesthetic stage is beyond the scope of this paper (and indeed may broach upon a more psychoanalytical reading of his personality), so I begin with Eliot towards the end of his aesthetic stage, as demonstrated by "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock." Here we see his poetic persona of Prufrock embroiled in an existential angst that nevertheless has a positive function, and though Prufrock does not survive the poem's end, Eliot's later poetic personas demonstrate a significant maturation beyond the angst so clearly displayed here.

"The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" begins with an invitation against the backdrop of one of literature's most memorable physical descriptions of setting; from this we may garner the poem's pervasive tenor of angst:

> Let us go then, you and I
>
> When the evening is spread out against the sky
>
> Like a patient etherized upon a table. (*CP* 3)

As many critics have remarked, this descriptive metaphor says more about the speaker's psyche than about the physical setting itself: it is a rather obvious projection of the inner personality. Prufrock juxtaposes an invitation to a certain kind of journey with this image of paralysis, indicating a not-so-subliminal wish for inactivity, inertia. It is a wish to be released from the duties of life; a hospitalized patient, etherized upon a table, is freed from obligations, decisions, and most significantly, in this poem, *action*.

Kierkegaard would characterize Prufrock as someone who has succumbed to anxiety in their dizziness of freedom. Kierkegaard writes:

> Anxiety may be compared with dizziness. He whose eye happens to look down into the yawning abyss becomes dizzy. […] [The reason] is just as much in his own eye as in the abyss, for suppose he had not looked down. Hence anxiety is the dizziness of freedom, which emerges when the spirit wants to posit the synthesis and freedom looks down into its own possibility, laying hold of finiteness to support itself. Freedom succumbs in this dizziness. (61)

Though aware of the possibilities existentially available to him, Prufrock avoids them. This awareness of his absolute freedom dizzies him, and his freedom succumbs; hence, his invitation in the first line – "Let us go then, you and I" – being coupled with the image of the evening sky described as "like a patient etherized upon a table" which, as George Williamson says, "suggests the desire for inactivity to the point of enforced release from pain" (59). The imperative "Let us go" suggests a sort of escapism as well. Thus, already in his first three lines, we see evidenced in his language a profound desire for relief from the burden of free will. Anthony Cuda writes, "If the tragedy of the poem consists in Prufrock's fear of and failure to risk vulnerability, these lines configure that fear with a precise correlative for paralysis. For Eliot, the etherized patient is a body whose dulled awareness remains but who cannot move to protect itself" (398). Such is the effect of existential anxiety as formulated by Kierkegaard. The rest of the poem abounds with examples of Prufrock's freedom attempting "laying hold of finiteness to support itself."

Through the first stanza, Prufrock outlines his setting – one in which it is doubtful he is a participant. He speaks of the "restless nights in one-night cheap hotels / And sawdust restaurants with oyster shells" but one need not ask if he speaks of these places from his own experience

(*CP* 3). He has observed the women who "come and go / Talking of Michelangelo" but he is far more familiar and comfortable with "The yellow fog" about which he spends eleven lines speaking (*CP* 3). He speaks obsessively of "would it have been worth it after all" and "Would it have been worthwhile", and this is indeed a picture of one terrified by freedom in knowledge of it as "the possibility of possibility." Prufrock is awake to these possibilities, but among such vast possibilities of possibilities, he is left floundering in vain questions of consequentiality.

Throughout *The Concept of Anxiety*, Kierkegaard provides several definitions of his conception of existential anxiety that may clarify one's understanding of Prufrock. Kierkegaard first defines anxiety as "freedom's actuality as the possibility of possibility" (42). Later, he writes that anxiety "is entangled freedom, where freedom is not free in itself but entangled, not by necessity, but in itself" (49). Prufrock is a character defined by entangled freedom: his freedom as he conceives of it and experiences it is entangled in itself as he obsesses over what he will or will not do, ultimately resulting in a paralysis of his will.

In this anxious paralysis of his freedom, Prufrock diminishes to the role of a passive observer. Although he undertakes journeys and visits and exerts his will in minor ways throughout the poem, he clearly prefers to be a nonparticipant – for example, staying aside and merely watching and listening voyeuristically how "In the room the women come and go / Talking of Michelangelo" (*CP* 3, 4: lines 13-14; 35-36). Prufrock comes to admit that he would be better suited as an assistant for someone else, rather than a free agent: he is "an attendant lord," who is "an easy tool, / Deferential, glad to be of use" (*CP* 7). Jamie Giles comments, "What is revealed here is Prufrock not only acknowledging his factual limitations but at times utilizing them as articles of bad faith to justify his hesitancy and ennui" (291). He is no

protagonist Prince Hamlet of any sort: he obliges to join in the projects of others, while declining to participate in the project of himself, of creating his own life through his self-agency.

I assert there is an implicit but distinct connection between the personalities of Guido de Montrefelto, quoted in the epigraph, and Prufrock himself. Unlike other Eliot critics who take his epigraphs (especially those in Latin or Greek, untranslated) as frivolous intellectual posturing, I agree with George Williamson and Jane Worthington, who believe that many of Eliot's epigraphs illuminate the poems. However, my interpretation of the epigraph to "Prufrock" sharply differs from Williamson and Worthington. An English translation of the epigraph, from Canto 27 of Dante's *Inferno,* reads:

> If I but thought that my response were made
> to one perhaps returning to the world,
> this tongue of flame would cease to flicker.
> But since, up from these depths, no one has yet
> returned alive, if what I hear is true,
> I answer you without fear of infamy.

I argue that Prufrock may be best understood as a sort of Guido de Montrefelto. We, the readers, are the Dantean figure and Eliot is the Virgilian figure. We read for our own edification in life. Frederick W. Locke writes, "it is precisely the conjunction in the first verse of Prufrock which should attract our attention: 'Let us go *then*, you and I.' […] *Therefore, as a consequence of something*, is the force of that *then*. It is connective tissue in an argument" (53). I agree with Locke that this first line quite explicitly ties together the epigraph with the poem itself, and reading them as one text, as it were, greatly expands our understanding of Prufrock. He is so paralyzed by fear and anxiety that he never brings himself to sing his love song; the only reason

he delivers this dramatic monologue to us is that he is of absolute surety that we are condemned to this wasteland with him.[7] However, as Locke writes,

> Just as Guido was wrong about Dante, so is Prufrock wrong about his interlocutor, about me. I, *like* Dante, come to this Hell where Prufrock speaks to me and takes me visiting, under *similar* auspices of grace, and I, too, shall return after a while; for in the reader this grace always abounds—to return from the longest voyages, to come back from the lowest depths of Hell. (57-58)

It is only by Prufrock's flaw in judgment that he invites us into his dramatic monologue, just as Guido mistakenly believed that Dante was doomed to eternal damnation.

And yet, Prufrock is no Guido de Montrefelto, just as he is no Michelangelo, Odysseus/Ulysses, Lazarus, John the Baptist, or Hamlet; like the Hollow Men, Prufrock is among the men who will be remembered

> ---- not as lost
> Violent souls, but only
> As the hollow men,
> The stuffed men. (*CP* 79)

Just as he has done nothing great in his life worthy of glory, praise, and honor, so too he has done nothing awful that would make him worthy of Guido's punishment: damnation in the eighth circle of Hell. Though Prufrock is a Guido-like figure, he is not exactly Guido. Like the Hollow Men, Prufrock resides in a purgatorial desolation on the banks of the Acheron, worthy of neither Heaven nor Hell. In his anxiety, he is perpetually existentially and spiritually paralyzed between willing and repenting.

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[7] And, as we will see, it is also due to his absolute surety that we will share his fate, i.e., we will "wake" and "drown" with him as well (*CP* 7 line 131).

Much has been made of the use of the second-person "you" in the poem, but, practically speaking, the "you" functions simply as a crutch for Prufrock in his severe angst. Rather than the interpretation of "you" as Prufrock's amorous, suppressed self (put forth by Williamson among others), I contend that to better understand Prufrock, the second-person address is best understood as literal, that is, the reader. The "you" character has no discernible operative function in the text; its presence is negligible, except as the reference of Prufrock's address. Even then, much of Prufrock's address is only rhetorical, as much for himself as for any audience. So, we may interpret "you" as representing another part of Prufrock, one that displays the conflict and division of his will. However, there is no dialogue in the poem involving the "you" character, only Prufrock's constant escapism into his interior monologue.

The "you" is not a guide like Virgil or Dante – "you" is invited, led, and guided by Prufrock: the poem's first line, "Let us go then, you and I," functions as Prufrock's initiation and invitation to the reader. His second "Let us go" statement reveals his familiarity with the trip he invites us on:

> Let us go, through certain half-deserted streets,
> The muttering retreats
> Of restless nights in one-night cheap hotels
> And sawdust restaurants with oyster-shells;
> Streets that follow like a tedious argument
> Of insidious intent
> To lead you to an overwhelming question…
> Oh, do not ask, 'What is it?'
> Let us go and make our visit. (*CP* 3)

The distinct imagery he recollects implies a familiarity likewise with the unnamed, mysterious "overwhelming question" that these streets lead to. Therefore, it is not unreasonable to suggest that Prufrock knows what the "overwhelming question" is. His reluctance to confront this question is emblematic of his general avoidant character qualities that the poem develops. His third "Let us go" statement is "Let us go and make *our* visit" (line 12; emphasis mine). However, "our" visit is, in truth, his alone. As we see from lines 4-12, this path is familiar to him – not us – and thus is one he has taken a number of times before.

Prufrock, as the most significant early poetic persona of T. S. Eliot, is a character distinctly lacking in spirit, but resides rather comfortably in the aesthetic realm of shallow subjective pleasure. Kierkegaard posits that "Man is a synthesis of the psychical and the physical; however, a synthesis is unthinkable if the two are not united in a third. This third is spirit" (*CA* 43). Prufrock does possess a psyche and a physical body – his psychical life is rich, abundant with literature, and his physical body obviously exists by testament of the women's remarks on his thinning hair and thin arms and legs – but he does not seem to possess much spirit in the Kierkegaardian, existentially significant sense of the word. To be sure, to Kierkegaard, every person possesses spirit, although some more than others. It is by this lack of spirit that Prufrock cannot constitute himself as a healthy and whole being.

Prufrock lacks the essential synthesis between psyche and body, but furthermore lacks another significant synthesis: Kierkegaard writes that "Man […] is a synthesis of psyche and body, but he is also a synthesis of the temporal and the eternal" (*CA* 85). Prufrock is a character of two unsustained syntheses: between psyche and body (as he lacks the synthesis' sustenance of spirit), and between temporal and eternal. The latter is due to the fact that, lost in despair over time and finiteness, he has in turn lost sight of the eternal, the infinite, the absolute. He despairs

over his age by remarking on symptoms of his aging, such as how his hair is growing thin, or his arms and legs have lost musculature (*CP* 4 lines 41, 44). Unfortunate as they are, these are immutable facts of the body's mortality, but Prufrock's despair over them is telling, and betrays his unreconciled relationship with time.

Action and inaction are central themes to the poem, and closer analysis of the characters' action yields insight on Prufrock's angst. Williamson writes of lines 13-14 and 35-36, "This image carries both the inference and a description – a description of place, by Eliot's favorite method of showing something happening there" (67). The repetition of this couplet is significant as well; Giles writes, "the repeated observation 'women come and go / Talking of Michelangelo' indicates this is not a temporary but pathological paralysis" (290). Likewise, "Prufrock remains paralyzed by 'a hundred indecisions' that preclude meaningful action" (290). For Eliot – as well as for any good existentialist – *existence* is *action*: Eliot describes and defines the room by the women's action, their movement, and their speech. In contrast, Prufrock never speaks to anyone in the poem, and never decides on action, his love song ending in drowning – a passive fate.

Though some readers may be hesitant to accept such a stringent Kierkegaardian reading of "Prufrock," this interpretation is fitting and appropriate not only for the psychological character of Prufrock himself but also the material setting of his world. Whereas "subjective anxiety is the anxiety that is posited in the individual and is the consequence of his sin," what Kierkegaard calls "objective anxiety" he defines as the significance and the "effect of sin in nonhuman existence" (*CA* 56, 57). Although "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" at first reading does not seem like a religious poem at all concerned with matters such as sin, the "objective correlatives" of the poem suggest otherwise.[8] The first stanza especially contains rich

[8] A courtesy reminder of Eliot's famous theory in his own words: "The only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding an 'objective correlative'; in other words, a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which

imagery that possesses dismay, loss, and a sense of fallenness – "Let us go then, you and I" may be read as the journey out of Eden following the fall into a terrifying, cursed future.[9] Indeed, after reading the title "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" juxtaposed with the first stanza, the reader gets the sense that in this new modern age, something terrible has happened to both love and songs. Although the "nonhuman existence" Kierkegaard refers to is most probably a name for natural creation, it may be interpreted as the entire physical world of the poem; that is, natural and manmade creations alike.

One of the first images that may be interpreted as an objective correlative symbol of a Kierkegaardian "objective anxiety" is the "one-night cheap hotels," especially since these are places in which people spend "restless nights" (line 6). Prufrock, as an image of modern man, likely grew up on idealized stories of romance, ending with a "happily ever after"; as an adult, he finds no such ideal. Rather than anything life-long and fulfilling, the modern world presents love without any qualities differentiating it from simple sex, short-lived – "one-night" – and "cheap."[10] The effect of the death of love in the modern world upon Prufrock must not be overlooked; one finds it hard to believe in love or honestly sing a love song under these circumstances where the concept of "love" has become so undermined.[11]

The second image that may be interpreted as a symbol of "objective anxiety" is the "sawdust restaurants with oyster-shells" – rather than a comforting, aromatic place to take a delicious meal, these restaurants are characterized as dirty, disgusting, and altogether

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shall be the formula for that particular emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked" (*Sacred Wood* 58).

[9] See Genesis 3:22-24 and 3:17-19.

[10] There is much to be said of Prufrock's – and Eliot's – complicated relationship to sex (especially considering the poem's original title of "Prufrock among the Women") but is too tangential for my project.

[11] The modern "death of love," as it were, is another of Eliot's anxieties as a writer; he returned to this concept in *The Waste Land* with the relationship between Lil and Albert in "A Game of Chess," the rape scene Tiresias sees in "The Fire Sermon," and the "Datta" section of "What the Thunder Said."

unappealing (*CP* 3). The phrase "sawdust restaurants" concisely juxtaposes food and communion with the grotesque realities of physical bodies and their needs and wastes. Furthermore, the syntax of this line lends itself to the same association with "restless nights": "The muttering retreats / Of restless nights in one-night cheap hotels / And sawdust restaurants with oyster shells" (*CP* 3). Thus, the "restless nights" may contain both the cheap hotels and repulsive restaurants.

The diction of this first stanza likewise contributes to this sense of "objective anxiety." "Half-deserted," "retreats," "restless," "tedious," "insidious," and "overwhelming" all contribute to this opening stanza's total sense of apprehension and unease. Finally, the "yellow fog" and "yellow smoke" that take on cat-like qualities (at least in Prufrock's perception) evoke environmental disgrace and defacement by industrialism (*CP* 4). Here again we discern sin's presence, expressed through Prufrock's own perception of the effects of sin and fallenness on the world, and these effects are related through the poem's objects, setting, and situation.

Eliot's 1925 poem *The Hollow Men* provides textual and spiritual analogies to J. Alfred Prufrock in their expression of what Kierkegaard terms "inclosed reserve." The Hollow Men say,

> In this last of meeting places
>
> We grope together
>
> *And avoid speech*
>
> Gathered on this beach of the tumid river (*CP* 81; emphasis mine)

The first pertinent connection between Prufrock and the Hollow Men is that they are, in "[groping] together," another picture of Kierkegaard's concept of anxiety defined as entangled freedom. Furthermore, the Hollow Men are silent in their doom (ironically, expressly avoiding speech), and Prufrock is doomed by his silence and inexpression. The fifth and final section of

The Hollow Men ends in increasing fragmentation of the lines "For Thine is the Kingdom" and "Life is very long": "For Thine is / Life is / For Thine is the" (*CP* 82). Just as one senses that the Hollow Men could perhaps attain salvation if only they could finish and complete their prayer, so too it seems that Prufrock might be (or might have been) saved if only he could have ever brought himself to "sing" his "love song." However, both Prufrock and the Hollow Men are in a state of what Kierkegaard termed "inclosed reserve," a certain state of being closed up, a refusal to reveal, open up, or to speak.[12]

Ironically, silence dominates "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock"; the poem is, despite its titular claim, about Prufrock's love song left unsung. Kierkegaard writes, "'inclosing reserve' can be used for unfreedom" and continues, "Freedom is always communicating," "unfreedom becomes more and more inclosed and does not want communication" (*CA* 124). He concludes, "Inclosing reserve is precisely muteness. Language, the word, is precisely what saves, what saves the individual from the empty abstraction of inclosing reserve" (*CA* 124). And it is precisely Prufrock's muteness, his refusal to sing his love song, to reach out and extend himself to another human being, that causes his demise. Indeed, as Kierkegaard reminds us, "Anxiety can just as well express itself by muteness as by a scream (*CA* 119). Prajna Pani writes that "by failing to take action" – failing to sing his song, I might add – "he is forced to live a life of futile wants and utter loneliness" (303). Though Prufrock comes to admit that he does not think the mermaids will sing to him, neither did he ever give his song to anyone else. It is a tragic yet befitting fate.

Prufrock experiences a kind of objectification that he feels robs him of his subjectivity as an agent of free will:

[12] For the Hollow Men, it is of course more directly blatant by line 59 which I emphasized above: "and [we] avoid speech" (*CP* 81).

And I have known the eyes already, known them all--

The eyes that fix you in a formulated phrase,

And when I am formulated, sprawling on a pin,

When I am pinned and wriggling on the wall,

Then how should I begin

To spit out all the butt-ends of my days and ways?

And how should I presume? (*CP* 5)

In this stanza (as well as others) we see that Prufrock truly is, in Pani's words, "a man virtually castrated by his own inhibitions" (305). "Castrated" and impotent in his will, Prufrock tries to escape from his existential situation by laying claim to the essentialism of science. Giles writes that he is "trapped in the gaze of the other and reliant on their external definition of himself. In doing so, he exhibits inauthenticity and bad faith […] Prufrock negates his freedom" (289). Furthermore, he locates the other as the center of his referentiality, and in doing so, allows "for his subjectivity to be in the control of others" (289). Whether a wish to be under ether or to be "pinned" and defined by others, Prufrock constantly exhibits escapism from the burden of his own free will and self-agency.

Prufrock cannot bring himself to "dare" to do the most ordinary, human things—namely, converse with a fellow human being and carry out age-old mating rituals. Moreover, he is overwhelmed by the inconsequentiality of his actions and choices anyway. He poses five questions, inquiring into whether his hypothetical future actions will have been "worth it, after all" or "worth while" (*CP* 6). The resolute answer, coming in the next stanza, doubles as an emphatic negation of a proposed identity: "No! I am not Prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be" (*CP* 7). However, for these five questions across two stanzas, there is only one question mark.

From this lack of express signals of genuine questioning, we may deduce that these "questions" were only rhetorical, functioning more so as self-defensive statements.

The surrounding male figures – Guido, Michelangelo, John the Baptist, Hamlet – tower over Prufrock, who is at least subconsciously aware of their stature compared to his own. This self-conscious anxiety of self prevents him from effectively asserting his selfhood and agency. Writing on the individual's phenomenological experience of the abstract philosophy of existentialism, Arthur Little posits, "The effect [of modern society] on the lonely individual is to give him a sense of being unwanted in a crowded world" (466). This is precisely Prufrock's experience in the poem's world; among Guido, Michelangelo, John the Baptist, Hamlet, etc., he has hardly any positive literary place.

Even the form of the poem – a sort of dramatic monologue – ironically undercuts any glimmer of poetic greatness Prufrock shows. The poem's dramatic monologue form evokes poems such as Alfred Lord Tennyson's "Ulysses" or Robert Browning's "My Last Duchess" (both published in 1842), and Prufrock further diminishes by comparison to the epic hero Ulysses and the Duke of Ferrara. He feels that whatever eminence he may have purported to possess is now either slipping away, or already lost: "I have seen the moment of my greatness flicker, / And I have seen the eternal Footman hold my coat, and snicker, / And in short, I was afraid" (*CP* 6). This image succinctly portrays a profound moment in the text, in which a paralyzing self-doubt is instilled in Prufrock of which he will never rid himself. Furthermore, faced with his own mortality and cowering beneath eternity, Prufrock again demonstrates his quality of being, in Kierkegaardian terms, an unsustained synthesis of the temporal and the eternal.

There is much to be said of the form of "Prufrock" itself, especially in contrast and relation to other aforementioned dramatic monologues, and the qualities shared between "Prufrock" and Prufrock. Due to necessary constraints (due to both the length and variety of "Prufrock" and the established focus of this project), it must suffice to say that just as Prufrock is a combination of unsustained syntheses, "Prufrock" is a combination of unsustained forms. The poem displays an abundance of couplets with irregular rhymes spread across unreliable and varied meters. Indeed, Eliot employs the rhymed couplet form to draw one's attention to the unsustained larger form. In contrast, Browning renders heroic couplets in frequent enjambments that distract the reader from obvious notice of the poem's design. This clear formal distance between the dramatic monologue of "Prufrock" and that of "My Last Duchess" again indicates unreconciled tensions and unsustained syntheses, as well as a metatextual hint towards a certain "fallenness."

Rather than any affirmative statements of identity – who he *is* – Prufrock's identity is expressed through negation; that is, who he *is not*. He says, "Though I have seen my head (grown slightly bald) brought in upon a platter, / I am no prophet […]" (*CP* 6). One of two allusions here is to John the Baptist.[13] The second allusion here is to Amos 7:14, in which Amos addresses King Amaziah.[14] Amos explains he was not a prophet, but that God called him to prophesy. However, when Prufrock declares that he is no prophet, we need no convincing to believe him. By extension, we do not have to be told by Prufrock that he is no Michelangelo –

[13] See Matthew 14:1-12 and Mark 6:14-29 for the biblical accounts of John the Baptist's beheading.

[14] Amos 7:14-17: "Then answered Amos, and said to Amaziah, I was no prophet, neither was I a prophet's son; but I was an herdman, and a gatherer of sycomore fruit: And the Lord took me as I followed the flock, and the Lord said unto me, Go, prophesy unto my people Israel. Now therefore hear thou the word of the Lord: Thou sayest, Prophesy not against Israel, and drop not thy word against the house of Isaac. Therefore thus saith the Lord; Thy wife shall be an harlot in the city, and thy sons and thy daughters shall fall by the sword, and thy land shall be divided by line; and thou shalt die in a polluted land: and Israel shall surely go into captivity forth of his land" (KJV).

"the sculptor of heroic figures," succinctly put by Williamson (60) – nor is he in any way like Michelangelo's subjects.

Prufrock rejects any pretense of comparison with a figure such as Prince Hamlet, though their mutual indecision may suggest it, as Williamson notes, and Prufrock may even be aware of this implicit association (65). What follows is a focused analysis of Prufrock's self-definition by what he is *not*, and furthermore a close reading indicating the care with which Eliot constructed the character of Prufrock, a non-entity of sorts. Rather than Hamlet, Prufrock self-identifies with a figure like Polonius: "No! I am not Prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be; / Am an attendant lord […]" (*CP* 7). This is the third and final instance Prufrock himself uses such an exclamation, and its use in *negation* is significant. Likewise significant is the fact that the "I" is cut from the second line here; Prufrock states "I am not Prince Hamlet," but lacks the first-person pronoun in saying what/who he actually *is*. The "I" does not appear throughout the rest of this stanza of explication on what/who he actually *is* (*CP* 7, lines 111-19). This formalist aspect of the poem's grammatological perspective performs a double function: to further accentuate his fragility and weakness of selfhood, and to allow the emphasis to lay on the first line, the statement of identification by negation.

In my existentialist reading of the poem, the operative word of Prufrock's statement in line 111 here is *meant*. The significance of the obvious allusion to Shakespeare distracts the reader, but the word *meant* here may hold the key to a deeper understanding of Prufrock's troubled, dilemmatic consciousness. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, "mean" is defined as "To have one's purpose or intention; to intend" (1.a.), "To design for a particular purpose; to intend or predestine to have a particular future, fate, nature, or use" (3.a.), "To be predestined by fate, providence, God, etc., to exist or occur" (3.c.). Its etymological history

consists of persistent traces of the ideas of intent and signification. The question then becomes, *whose* purpose, intention, and meaning limits and dictates Prufrock's life? As the definitions above point to God either implicitly or explicitly, an omnipotent design, intention, and predestination would seem to be what Prufrock references here. However, this is the poem's first instance of any such theological religiosity, and this is indicative of yet another attempt by Prufrock to deny his free will, by implicitly claiming that his existence is the design of a higher being – though nowhere in the text does he indicate this is his actual, sincere belief.

Eliot's evocation of the tragedy of Hamlet is significant and invites an intertextual discussion of tragedy and its history, as well as its form and future in the modern age. In discussing the modern sense of tragedy, influenced by existentialism, Little writes, "The Greek form of tragedy depended on the assumption that the hero's will was determined by the gods to take decisions to his own undoing. The existential form of tragedy leaves the hero free, but in a world so inhospitable that every possible choice must lead to his undoing" (465). The latter is unmistakably the mode of tragedy in which Eliot writes "Prufrock," as the question of worthwhileness (productivity, meaning, etc.) accompanies each rhetorical contemplation of action. However, fragments of the past sense of tragedy remain within Prufrock's consciousness, and his language betrays these traces when he declares he was not *meant* to be Prince Hamlet.

The existentialist would have strong reproach for Prufrock in his dedication to these sentiments of predestination, predetermined essence, and fixed, prescribed course and meaning of one's life. Jean-Paul Sartre writes that, in existentialist thought,

> There is no human nature because there is no God to have a conception of it. Man simply is. Not that he is simply what he conceives himself to be, but he is what he wills, and as he conceives himself after already existing — as he wills to be after that leap towards

> existence. Man is nothing else but that which he makes of himself. That is the first principle of existentialism. (28)

For Sartre, action is what defines characters, just as in Eliot's poetry action is what defines both characters and settings. However, Prufrock makes no "leap towards existence"; the only action that truly defines him is his inaction, his refusal to confront the project of his life, his willing not to will.

In contrast both with his statement of what he was not meant to be (a Prince Hamlet figure) and his statement on what he is (an attendant lord), Prufrock ventures a statement on what he *ought* to have been. He says, "I should have been a pair of ragged claws / Scuttling across the floors of silent seas" (*CP* 5, lines 73-74). He effectively reduces himself to a single fragment – "a pair of ragged claws" – in a remarkable self-destructive turn. Previously in this poem, an early work from his college years, Eliot established himself as a poet of fragments: fragments of female bodies (eyes, arms, and heads, especially) abound. This dehumanization culminates by turning in on his poetic persona of Prufrock. Some critics have interpreted this vague image in these lines to be that of a lobster, but I argue that a crab is a superior interpretation for understanding Prufrock. For in interpreting this fragment of claws as a crab, this provides greater insight into its movement "Scuttling across the floors of silent seas." Crabs often move laterally rather than consistently forward, and this is emblematic of Prufrock's own action, or rather inaction. His motion is better characterized as hesitant vacillation than straightforward progress and movement; in the end, the crab is perhaps the best possible symbol of Prufrock's character, and it befits the abundance of sea imagery throughout the poem. Likewise, the environment of "silent seas" would suit him, a personality who refuses to speak to any other, let alone sing his love song.

Prufrock copes with his anxiety by the adamant and repeated insistence that "There will be time." Between lines 23 and 48, Prufrock makes some eleven statements on what there will be time for. Within these lines lie references to Hesiod and echoes of Ecclesiastes 3 – arguably the first work of existentialist literature, with perhaps exception to the book of Job. These allusions expand the significance of the themes of age, time, and meaning in each of the works. Yet, however literarily impressive, with each line of insistence that "there will be time," time continues to pass him by: "the tension mounts as the time shortens, reaching a climax when he must 'begin'" (Williamson 61). However, by the poem's end, he realizes how greatly his horizon has diminished, and that there was not so much time for "[his] hundred indecisions" as he once thought (line 32). There is a linguistic progression: Prufrock shifts from speaking of the "hundred indecisions" (in line 32) to speaking of "decisions and revisions" (line 48). However, this development is hollow, it does not actualize in action throughout the time available to him. He finally concedes, "I grow old… I grow old…" (line 120). He fails to convince himself that "There will be time," and by extension, fails to convince his reader and audience. By being and remaining paralyzed in freedom, in the end, Prufrock is a classic example of what Kierkegaard describes as a victim to anxiety.

It is by Prufrock's implication of us that he is able to "go" make the visit at all, and Prufrock continues to implicate us in his own experience, as we see in the poem's ending:

> We have lingered in the chambers of the sea
>
> By sea-girls wreathed with seaweed red and brown
>
> Till human voices wake us, and we drown. (*CP* 7)

These final lines are striking not only in their poignancy, but also in the sudden and unclear change from the "I" pronoun that dominates the preceding five stanzas to the collective

"We"/"Us" pronoun. Remarkably, though the "Us" appears three times earlier in lines 1-12, this is the first instance of "We." It appears some forty lines after the last appearance of the "You" pronoun (line 89). Prufrock attempts to drag us down with him; just as he makes his visit "our" visit, he attempts to implicitly include the reader in his own demise. But he fails in this attempt. Though *he* is awoken, and *he* drowns, we do not; hope remains for us, the readers, just as hope remains for Dante following his descent to Hell in *Inferno*.[15] Prufrock wakes and drowns, we witness his demise, and like Dante, we move onward with this edificatory experience and memory of his fate.

In the crisis of his own existential situation, Prufrock fails. Henry W. Nordmeyer argues that Kierkegaard effectively invented the "'existential situation' […] a situation in which the individual is really forced to take account of the ultimate reality of his own self. […] [Here there is] nothing but the absolute necessity to come to a decision about his own self with the inner certainty that eternity is at stake, an affirmation of his true relation to the infinite" (590). Prufrock never does account for himself existentially under the stakes of eternity, only floundering finitely through temporality and mortality. Williamson writes of the final stanzas that "The watery, floating imagery involves the relaxation of all effort" (65). Prufrock ultimately fails in his own existential situation, for this episode begins with a wish for paralysis and ends with a passive drowning, a surrender of impotent will.

"The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" exemplifies the aesthetic life-view. The question is not whether one will have a life-view, but rather *which* life-view one will have: Judge William writes in *Either/Or* that "Every human being […] has a natural need to formulate a life-view, a

[15] Another possibility exists, though perhaps too much a leap to spend much time and space on here: as I have argued that Prufrock is in a sort of purgatorial wasteland, perhaps this waking by human voices and drowning is a descent to Hell.

conception of the meaning of life and of its purpose" (*Part II* 179). "The person who lives esthetically," he argues, believes "One must enjoy life" (179). Crucially, he continues, "*But the person who says that he wants to enjoy life always posits a condition that either lies outside the individual or is within the individual in such a way that it is not there by virtue of the individual himself*" (180). That is, the conditions for one's satisfaction under the aesthetic life-view lie outside the individual, in external circumstances etc. Such is Prufrock's predicament; as an awkward anti-social individual, he cannot find human connection and meaning outside of himself, yet he cannot confront and deal with his own soul.

What we see in "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" is a demonstration of the titular character's great aesthetic appreciations and sensibilities. Indeed, this poem foreshadows Eliot's position famously decreed in his essay "The Metaphysical Poets": "poets in our civilization, as it exists at present, must be difficult. […] The poet must become more and more comprehensive, more allusive, more indirect, in order to force, to dislocate if necessary, language into his meaning" (*SW* 128). In Prufrock's dramatic monologue we encounter references ranging from Hesiod to Shakespeare, from the Bible to Chaucer. However, Prufrock's rich interior life comes at the expense of a squalid social life. Oriented toward aesthetic desire and self-pleasure, Prufrock is like "A" in *Either/Or* who, by Judge William's estimation, lives in "esthetic-intellectual intoxication" (*Part II* 16). In Prufrock's world, there are no ethics to live by and be guided by, only base naturalistic desire. This explains his treatment of women –misogynistic at best, inhuman at worst: the poem's women are treated not as human beings but are reduced to random, abstracted and perhaps mutilated limbs: "the eyes" (*CP* 5, lines 55, 56) and "the arms […] braceleted and white and bare" etc. (lines 62-67). In the end, Prufrock's own inhuman

treatment of others causes a sort of loss of his own masculinity and manhood: he hears the siren-like singing mermaids of the poem's final stanzas, but they do not sing to him.

At the poem's end, Prufrock drowns. We, the readers, and Eliot, the writer, do not: the mere fact of our survival is cathartic, even perhaps edificatory. Prufrock does not reappear (unlike Sweeney or even the figure of the "Hyacinth girl," Emily Hale); we, the readers, of course, live to read another poem, just as Eliot, the writer, lives to write another poem and then some. From here, Eliot would go on to continued contemplation of the deaths of love and meaning and its implications for Western culture, a meditation which would culminate in *The Waste Land*, in which he searches for and attempts to provide an ethic to give us guidance in the midst of these graveyards.

Many critics have argued the superiority of Eliot's early works (broadly defined as 1915-1925) over his later works (1925-1940s).[16] Joseph Bottum's criticism is that "Part of the problem with Eliot's late use of Christian spirituality to fill the void of modern times is that in his early and middle poems he made the void so large" (25). It is undeniable that the pictures of modern man's spiritual anxiety and ensuing nihilism he depicts in poems such as "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" and *The Waste Land* are supremely compelling. However, Kierkegaard would encourage us to not dismiss anxiety as an altogether negative condition, and likewise we have much to learn about anxiety from Prufrock's case. In the fifth and final chapter of *The Concept of Anxiety*, Kierkegaard writes, "This is an adventure that every human being must go through—to learn to be anxious in order that he may not perish either by never having been in anxiety ["spiritlessness"] or by succumbing in anxiety" – as Prufrock does (155). He concludes,

[16] This is partly because of his turn from poetry to drama in the early 1920s. The immediate critical acclaim of his poetry overshadowed his work in drama, except for the attention of a few critics, such as Randy Malamud; see *T. S. Eliot's Drama: A Research and Production Sourcebook* (1992), and *Where the Words are Valid: T. S. Eliot's Communities of Drama* (1994).

"Whoever has learned to be anxious in the right way has learned the ultimate" (155). With the ultimate set before us, and with the sobering knowledge that what lies ahead is not a mere "visit" but the task of a lifetime, both Eliot and Kierkegaard teach us invaluably edifying lessons on life and the existential experience of anxiety. Let us go then, you and I.

4 THE AESTHETIC ABYSS OF *THE WASTE LAND*: THE ANSWERS OF THE ETHICAL LIFE-VIEW

I turn now to Eliot's masterpiece, *The Waste Land*, the poem which William Carlos Williams once said had "wiped out our world as if an atom bomb had been dropped upon it."[17] *The Waste Land*, if nothing else, is an astounding portrayal – in no fewer than 434 lines –of the abysmal loss of meaning in the modern world. Judge William categorically concludes in *Either/Or* that "either a person has to live esthetically or he has to live ethically" (*Part II* 168). Eliot explores and dismisses the aesthetic life in "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock." The aesthetic life-view is wholly out of the question for many people by the time he began writing *The Waste Land* in 1919 in the wake of World War I's incalculable suffering and death as well as the Spanish flu pandemic, compounded for Eliot by his own crises of physical and mental health as well as his failing marriage with Vivienne.[18] "This is no time for artists," writes Hesse in his 1919 essay "*The Brothers Karamazov* or The Downfall of Europe" (referenced in *The Waste Land*'s footnotes), "that time has bloomed itself away" (16). The collective consciousness, as it were, of the poem's multitude of various speakers, would seem to find significant relatability with the esthete "A" of Kierkegaard's *Either/Or* when he voices such honest utterances as this: "How sterile my soul and my mind are, and yet constantly tormented by empty voluptuous and excruciating labor pains! Will the tongue ligament of my spirit never be loosened; will I always jabber?" (*Part I* 24). And indeed, Eliot would seem to personally concur with this sentiment: "Various critics have done me the honour to interpret the poem in terms of criticism of the

[17] Coincidentally, Kierkegaard's *Either/Or* received a relatively identical compliment upon its own release: Johan Ludvig Heiberg, a leading critic of Kierkegaard's day, wrote, "like a lightning bolt out of a clear sky, a monster of a book has suddenly plunged down into our reading public" (qtd. in xvii).

[18] The relationship between T. S. Eliot and Vivienne is beyond the scope of this paper; for some discussion on their relationship (especially in relation to his works *The Waste Land* and *The Hollow Men*), see Bellour 435-36.

contemporary world, have considered it, indeed, as an important bit of social criticism. To me it was only the relief of a personal and wholly insignificant grouse against life; it is just a piece of rhythmical grumbling" (qtd. in Unger 158).[19] Thus, I read *The Waste Land* as being, in many ways, a poem about the inadequacy and failure of the aesthetic as a viable personal life-view in the modern world. Where "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" only depicts the inadequacy of the aesthetic life-view, *The Waste Land* attempts to locate and present a possible solution: the ethical life-view. To focus on how the conclusion of *The Waste Land* aligns with Kierkegaard's ideas of the ethical life-view as the next step in development beyond the aesthetic stage, and to keep from oversimplifying its staggering, complex totality, I will address only the poem's final 34 lines.

The aesthetic life-view (unconsciously in despair) resonates through much of *The Waste Land*, and throughout "Prufrock," but self-realization occurs in only the former. Judge William explains the necessary relationship between despair and the aesthetic life-view: "every esthetic view of life is despair, and everyone who lives esthetically is in despair, whether he knows it or not. But when one knows this […] then a higher form of existence is an imperative requirement" (*Part II* 192). This despair over the loss of meaning pervasively infuses *The Waste Land*. Pictures of life persisting in decay significantly connects *The Waste Land* with *Either/Or*; much of the poem's material echoes what William writes to his friend the aesthete:

> Our age reminds one very much of the disintegration of the Greek state; everything continues, and yet there is no one who believes in it. The invisible spiritual bond that gives it validity has vanished, and thus the whole age is simultaneously comic and tragic, tragic because it is perishing, comic because it continues. (*Part II* 19)

[19] Quoted on the epigraph-page of *The Waste Land: A Facsimile and Transcript of the Original Drafts Including the Annotations of Ezra Pound,* ed. Valerie Eliot (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1972).

The Waste Land depicts the disintegration of many once-strong, once-fundamental Western institutions, from churches and religious ceremonies to the marriage union. Such was the effect of the rise of modern nihilism; Hesse writes in "*The Brothers Karamazov* or The Downfall of Europe":

> that Asiatic Ideal that I find in Dostoevsky, the effect of which will be, as I see it, to overwhelm Europe [is] the rejection of every strongly-held Ethic and Moral in favour of a comprehensive laissez-faire. This is the new and dangerous faith, that Elder Zossima announced, the faith lived by Alyosha and Dmitri, a faith which was brought into clearer expression by Ivan Karamazov. (1)

For Hesse and Eliot alike – and many another thinker of this time – the crisis of modern Western civilization was the abandonment of traditional morality and ethics. The result of this, of course, is what Dostoevsky himself proclaimed in *The Brothers Karamazov*: "If there is no God, everything is permitted." Friedrich Nietzsche exactly 40 years before publication of *The Waste Land* had pronounced "the death of God" in his "Parable of the Madman":

> God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him. […] This tremendous event is still on its way, still wandering; it has not yet reached the ears of men. Lightning and thunder require time; deeds, though done, still require time to be seen and heard. This deed is still more distant from them than the most distant stars—and yet they have done it themselves. (181-82)

Faced with such nihilism as well as personal struggles including a failing marriage and a nervous breakdown, the answer Eliot finds and provides is "*Datta*" (*CP* 68, line 402), "*Dayadhvam*" (line 412), and "*Damyata*" (line 419): "Give, sympathize, control" – an answer that Kierkegaard would term the ethical.

Following the presentation of "*Datta*," "*Dayadhvam*," and "*Damyata*" through the thunder speaking, the poem concludes by returning once more to the dying Fisher King's perspective:

I sat upon the shore

Fishing, with the arid plain behind me

Shall I at least set my lands in order? (*CP* 69)

From here, in Patrick Eichholz's words, "The passage appears to progress more by chance than by artistic control" (270):

London Bridge is falling down falling down falling down

Poi s'ascose nel foco che gli affina

Quando fiam uti chelidon—O swallow swallow

Le Prince d'Aquitaine à la tour abolie

These fragments I have shored against my ruins

Why then Ile fit you. Hieronymo's mad againe.

Datta. Dayadhvam. Damyata.

Shantih shantih shantih (*CP* 69)

The poem concludes in an obvious tension: the Fisher King echoes the mortal predicament of King Hezekiah in Isaiah 38 which would in turn indicate the fate of the land;[20] what follows then are references to the nursery rhyme of London in fateful disarray, Dante's *Purgatorio*, a 4th century Latin love poem, a French sonnet, an Elizabethan tragedy, and finally a Upanishad

[20] Isaiah 38:1: "In those days was Hezekiah sick unto death. And Isaiah the prophet the son of Amoz came unto him, and said unto him, Thus saith the Lord, Set thine house in order: for thou shalt die, and not live." King Hezekiah prays, and God grants him 15 more years of life.

ending and even a verse of Scripture.[21] Though the poem at its end reaches for and purports to provide a transcendent peace, any such hope is attenuated by the muddied miscellaneous references.[22]

The answer at the end of *The Waste Land* is not the religious life-view, for it is impossible even to solidly ground the poem's conclusion in any one religion; the religious sources referenced are simply more Eliotic literary references, and even those are scattered among (other) literary fragments. Rather, the answer found is the guidelines of "Give, sympathize, control" – the ethical, clearly separated from the religious. The poem locates and presents an answer, but it does not achieve a transcendent truth or answer; Eichholz writes,

> the desire for transcendence is overwhelmed by the exasperating multiplicity of connections that, in a fallen world, proliferate beyond any stabilizing referents. The frantic collecting and combining of fragments finally only reveals the unbridgeable gulf between the human and the divine, between the materiality of art and any transcendent significance. (287)

Here in *The Waste Land* Eliot achieves what Kierkegaard terms "a poet-existence"; "a human sacrifice" in Judge William's words:

> the poet-existence as such lies in the darkness that is the result of a despair that was not carried through, the result of the soul's continuing to quake in despair and of the spirit's

[21] There is a peculiar textual variation in the final footnote to "Shantih shantih shantih": this line was originally given the following footnote in its 1922 Boni and Liveright edition: "Shantih. Repeated as here, a formal ending to an Upanishad. 'The Peace which passeth understanding' is a feeble translation of the content of this word." In 1932, Eliot revised the footnote to this: "Shantih. Repeated as here, a formal ending to an Upanishad. 'The Peace which passeth understanding' is our equivalent to this word." This latter version is by far the more popular one in both publication history as well as scholarship. See McVey for an intensive textual study on this matter.

[22] Often cited as an allusion to Philippians 4:7: "And the peace of God, which passeth all understanding, shall keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus."

> inability to achieve its true transfiguration […] Therefore, a poet-existence as such is an unhappy existence; it is higher than the finite and yet is not the infinite. (*Part II* 210)

And indeed, Eliot rises above the finite in his attempts to find and provide an answer to counteract the demise of Western society as he sees it, yet fails to reach the infinite, the religious. "Eliot," Joshua Boyd writes, "leaves the reader of *The Waste Land* in a sort of liminal space—the space between the death of spirituality and spiritual revitalization" (32). This very "liminal space" is continued three years later in the purgatorial desolation of *The Hollow Men,* where the validity of "Give, control, sympathize"—the ethical—is tested.

5 SPIRITUAL INERTIA AND DESPAIR IN *THE HOLLOW MEN*: THE FAILURE OF THE ETHICAL

"Prufrock" details the inadequacy of the aesthetic life-view; *The Waste Land* depicts the failures of the aesthetic life-view and attempts to locate and present a possible solution in the ethical life-view. In a direct continuation of *The Waste Land*, Eliot tests and rejects the ethical in *The Hollow Men*. I read *The Hollow Men* as a "Part VI," as it were, to *The Waste Land*, following "Part V: What the Thunder Said." I align myself with Everett A. Gillis (among many other Eliot critics) in agreement that "*The Hollow Men*, rather than embodying any affirmative note, however meager, is to be considered merely as an extension of Eliot's earlier poem—that is, as it were, a *Waste Land* in little" (475). There is significant textual evidence that Eliot's own authorial conception of these texts held them in close relationship; this is found in epigraphical studies of the works. Eliot considered an excerpt from *Heart of Darkness* as a possible epigraph for *The Waste Land*: "Did he live his life again in every detail of desire, temptation, and surrender during that supreme moment of complete knowledge? He cried in a whisper at some image, at some vision—he cried out twice, a cry that was no more than a breath: 'The horror! The horror!'" Pound dissuaded Eliot against this epigraph. Instead, as the epigraph for *The Hollow Men*, Eliot uses the report of the death depicted in the above excerpt: "'Mistah Kurtz—he dead.'" One therefore must not imagine the distance between *The Waste Land* and *The Hollow Men* to be too great.

The Hollow Men are people like J. Alfred Prufrock, people who populate the polis of the waste land: aesthetes like "A" who Judge William writes to and of:

> And this is what is sad when one contemplates human life, that so many live out their lives in quiet lostness; they outlive themselves, not in the sense that life's content

> successively unfolds and is now possessed in this unfolding, but they live, as it were, away from themselves and vanish like shadows. Their immortal souls are blown away […] They do not live esthetically, but neither has the ethical become manifest to them in its wholeness; nor have they actually rejected it, and therefore they are not sinning either, except insofar as it is a sin to be neither one thing nor the other. (*Part II* 168-69)

And indeed, Prufrock, the Hollow Men, and the waste land's populace truly reside neither in the aesthetic nor in the ethical: for, as Judge William writes, "The person who lives esthetically sees only possibilities everywhere; for him these make up the content of future time, whereas the person who lives ethically sees tasks everywhere" (*Part II* 251). Prufrock, the Hollow Men, and the waste land's citizens view the world neither in terms of passionate possibility like the true aesthete, "A," who says, "If I were to wish for something, I would wish not for wealth or power but the passion of possibility, for the eye, eternally young, eternally ardent, that sees possibility everywhere. Pleasure disappoints; possibility does not. And what wine is so sparkling, so fragrant, so intoxicating!" (*Part I* 41).[23] Likewise, these figures do not live truly ethically, seeing life in terms of meaningful tasks, duties, and actions.

The habitation of the Hollow Men is a waste land that can provide only ethical guidelines emptied of spiritual vitality, as the poem's imagery makes clear in Section III:

> This is the dead land
> This is cactus land
> Here *the stone images*
> Are raised, here they receive
> The supplication of a dead man's hand

[23] Prufrock feigns an aesthetic excitement for possibility, but with his "hundred indecisions" and "hundred visions and revisions," we know that does not and will not "dare to disturb the universe."

Under the twinkle of a fading star. (*CP* 80; emphasis mine)

This stanza's central "stone images" are best understood as makeshift idols, raised and given worship. They reappear, failed and exposed, in the following stanza: "Lips that would kiss / Form prayers to *broken stone*" (emphasis mine; lines 50-51). Though more readily understood as idols, this "broken stone" may even be tablets representing the Ten Commandments of the Old Covenant in Christian theology, which Moses shattered.[24] If the latter, as I venture, this suggests the impotence of ethical guidelines divorced from the transcendent reality – let alone the person of God Himself – from which they originate. In other words, the crucial element of the sustaining spiritual vitality is not realized.

The fifth and final section of *The Hollow Men* begins with a sardonic parody of a nursery rhyme:

Here we go round the prickly pear

Prickly pear prickly pear

Here we go round the prickly pear

At five o'clock in the morning. (*CP* 81)

Gillis writes, "If the hollow men should engage in a formal worship service, it is implied, a childish chant would be the most logical choice for their ritual since they have no more apprehension of the meaning of spiritual reality than do young children, who likewise have no experiential knowledge of good or evil" (474). Here the Hollow Men evidence the clear commonality they share with the souls of Dante's *Inferno* and *Purgatorio*: they are all empty, "totally empty of any real spiritual validity" (Gillis 464).

[24] Exodus 32:15-20.

Though the conclusion of *The Waste Land* half-purports to offer an ethical solution to modern man's spiritual desolation and nihilistic meaninglessness, ultimately the ethical fails in *The Hollow Men*. To "Give, sympathize, control" is not enough. Thus, the poem ends in mere fragments of an unfinishable prayer, only despair:

For Thine is

Life is

For Thine is the

This is the way the world ends

This is the way the world ends

This is the way the world ends

Not with a bang but a whimper. (*CP* 82)

Eliot reflects on *The Hollow Men* in a January 1936 letter to his brother, Henry. Eliot muses, "incidentally, I have written one blasphemous poem, 'The Hollow Men': that is blasphemy because it is despair, it stands for the lowest point I ever reached in my sordid domestic affairs" (*Letters 8* 11, qtd. in Balavage 39). And yet, Prufrock's angst is strangely productive: by its demonstrated inadequacy, in edification it propels Eliot (and in some sense we, the readers) beyond the aesthetic. Likewise, Eliot's despair through the Hollow Men is productive: by writing it, Eliot apparently experienced a sort of catharsis that catapulted him from its "blasphemy."

"Despair!" is the imperative command from Judge William to his friend the esthete in *Either/Or*: "I shout it to you not as a consolation, not as a state in which you are to remain, but as an act that takes all the power and earnestness and concentration of the soul. […] any human being who has not tasted the bitterness of despair has fallen short of the meaning of life" (*Part II*

208). He urges, “despair with all your soul and all your mind” (209). To despair *productively*, then, is the secret to transcending both the aesthetic and then the ethical: “the true point of departure for finding the absolute is not doubt but despair” (213). Judge William’s conclusion is that “to despair is a person’s true salvation” (221). However, one cannot help but wonder if the Hollow Men have the capacity to *truly, productively* despair. Such hypothetical questions are meaningless extra-textual considerations that can never be answered; the more pressing and essential question is whether Eliot himself and we, the readers, have the capacity for this mode of despair necessary to reach the highest stage of existence: the religious.

6 CONCLUSION (*ASH WEDNESDAY*): THE RELIGIOUS LIFE-VIEW

In a confounding twist, Judge William writes to his friend the esthete that the aesthetic, the ethical, and the religious are not altogether oppositional spheres, but are allied, and are contained together in each successive stage, contained altogether in the final stage of the religious:

> If you cannot manage to see the esthetic, the ethical, and the religious as the three great allies, if you do not know how to preserve the unity of the different manifestations everything gains in these different spheres, then life is without meaning and one must completely agree with your pet theory that of everything it can be said: Do it, or do not do it—you will regret it either way. (*Part II* 147)

And indeed, as Spurr writes, Eliot's conversion in 1927 was the "culmination of his intellectual, cultural, artistic, spiritual and personal development to that point" (10). Leila Bellour writes, "His moments of illness were necessary for him as a means to reflect on himself and to concentrate on his self-definition. His experience of breakdown, fragmentation and self-division was a preliminary step that would empower him to create himself anew" (430). The spiritual resolution achieved in the triumphant *Four Quartets* was reached through the angst of Prufrock and the despair of the polis in *The Waste Land* and of the Hollow Men.

For all the demonstrated limitations of the aesthetic life-view, there yet remains something to be said about the positive function of beauty in Eliot's movement from angst to despair to resolution. As Boyd argues, there is, akin to the Dantean formula in the *Divine Comedy*, a "similar pursuit of beauty from 'negative to positive' or from 'depravity's despair [to] the beatific vision' in Eliot's poetry" (24). It is in this way that "Prufrock" and *The Waste Land* demonstrate the movement from the aesthetic to the ethical. Boyd writes,

> Those living in Eliot's era responded to the loss of faith in various ways. Some pined for earlier days. Some drowned in despair. Some acknowledged life's absurdity and did the best they could. Eliot, in contrast, seeks to awaken men and women to the presence of beauty in the world. Eliot's response to the cultural crisis, then, is a renewed attempt to reconnect with beauty, for in his readers' yearning for beauty lies the capacity for spiritual yearning, as one may see through the beauty of immanent reality a higher reality and transcendent beauty. This may describe Eliot's own turn after his conversion to Anglo-Catholicism in 1927. (25)

Part of Eliot's quest in these early (at least, pre-1927) poems is to search for and locate the Platonic-like "form" of beauty; such a transcendent beauty satisfies the aesthetic desire and impulse as well as the higher, spiritual yearning. In Section 822 of *Will to Power*, Nietzsche wrote that "We have art lest we perish of the truth." Eliot's sense of aesthetics differs sharply from this pessimistic view: in Boyd's account, "His post-conversion poetry, most poignantly the *Four Quartets*, offers not merely a palliative encounter with transcendent beauty but an authentic spiritual experience" (25). And to be sure, there is certainly a strong sense of ethical duties and tasks among his later (1927 and later) poetry. It is in this way that Eliot demonstrated the alliance between the aesthetic, ethical, and religious spheres through his matured post-conversion poetry.

A developed analysis of the religious life-view and "the absolute" as it eventually fully materialized in Eliot's post-conversion poetry (especially *Four Quartets*) is beyond the scope of this thesis project. Therefore, unfortunately but necessarily, analysis of the nascent presence of the religious in his poetry (especially *Ash Wednesday*) must be relegated to a brief reading in conclusion. However, this is incidentally fitting, as in Kierkegaard's *Either/Or, Part I* is dedicated to a demonstration of the aesthetic life-view, while *Part II* is dedicated to an exposition

of the ethical life-view, bridging on the religious. Properly speaking, though, the religious is merely glanced upon through the final section, "Ultimatum" – a brief sermon with the subtitle "The Upbuilding that Lies in the Thought That in Relation to God We Are Always in the Wrong." The religious is rightly explicated in the sequel to *Either/Or*, *Stages on Life's Way*, published two years later. Likewise, *Ash Wednesday* – widely regarded as Eliot's "conversion poem" – cannot be categorized wholly as a poem written of the religious life-view, as the work reeks of the despair faced in *The Hollow Men*. Like the Hollow Men, the speaker of *Ash Wednesday* is found in a Dantean purgatory; the difference, however, is this speaker's ascension, mostly in sections III through VI.

For its famous reputation as Eliot's "conversion poem," there is much to be said of the hopelessness and suffering throughout *Ash Wednesday*, especially early sections. "Because I do not hope" is the anaphora echoing throughout the first section, beginning with the opening stanza:

> Because I do not hope to turn again
>
> Because I do not hope
>
> Because I do not hope to turn (*CP* 85)

Hopelessness is even iterated once as "Because I *cannot* hope":

> Because I cannot hope to turn again
>
> Consequently I rejoice, having to construct something
>
> Upon which to rejoice (*CP* 85)

And to be sure, hopelessness in the superlative sense is not merely a *lack* of hope but the *inability* to hope; such are the depths of suffering here. However, from the first section to the sixth, final section, "*Because* I do not hope" is transformed to "*Although* I do not hope":

Although I do not hope to turn again

Although I do not hope

Although I do not hope to turn (*CP* 94)

Remarkably, the speaker's existential situation is no longer determined by their hopelessness; rather, faith has triumphed, even despite their hopelessness. In this way, the speaker inhabits a paradox: he does not, and cannot, hope, but he nevertheless has hope through faith. He is like Abraham in Kierkegaard's reading of Genesis 22 (in which God tests Abraham by commanding him to sacrifice his son, Isaac) from *Fear and Trembling*. Kierkegaard writes of Abraham, "He believed on the strength of the absurd, for all human calculation had long since been suspended" (*FT* 65). Like Abraham, the speaker in *Ash Wednesday* reaches the limits of human reasoning, and faced with hopelessness in purely human terms, proceeds only by a leap of faith. Yet the "leap of faith" is not a singular momentary motion, but rather is characteristic of one's movement in faith; Kierkegaard continues, "The movement of faith must be made continually on the strength of the absurd" (*FT* 67). Likewise, the speaker in *Ash Wednesday* proceeds tentatively across each of the poem's six sections, undertaking in faith the hopeless path of exile.

In the end, by undertaking the long road of exile and persevering with faith even amidst hopelessness, the speaker of *Ash Wednesday* is a religious hero of sorts, and furthermore achieves hope. Kierkegaard writes in *Stages on Life's Way* that "The esthetic hero is great by *conquering*, the religious hero by *suffering*" (345). Indeed, what have Eliot's poetic personas – from Prufrock to the Fisher King to the Hollow Men – done, if not *suffered* through angst, despair, and hopelessness? The speaker of *Ash Wednesday* is a religious hero not only for his suffering, however, but furthermore for his evident rejuvenation and new life. "Why should the agèd eagle stretch its wings?" he questions at the poem's opening stanza amid his hopelessness,

and goes on to say, "these wings are no longer wings to fly / But merely vans to beat the air" (*CP* 85, 86). But at the poem's final section he says:

> From the wide window towards the granite shore
> The white sails still fly seaward, seaward flying
> Unbroken wings. (*CP* 94)

Just as "Because I do not hope" is transformed to "Although I do not hope," so too the speaker's principal self-metaphor has been remarkably transformed; paradoxically, though he does not and cannot hope, he *has* hope.

There exist several noteworthy connections between the speaker of *Ash Wednesday* and Eliot's other aforementioned poetic personas. Ironically, "the agèd eagle" wondering why it should stretch its wings is no analogous stretch from J. Alfred Prufrock agonizing over "Would it have been worth it, after all / Would it have been worth while" (*CP* 6). But whereas Prufrock fails in his existential situation, the speaker of *Ash Wednesday* triumphs by perseverance and faith. Like the souls in Dante's *Divine Comedy,* in the second section he undergoes purgatorial sufferings (determined appropriately for one's sins) to cleanse and purify him for Heaven:

> Lady, three white leopards sat under a juniper-tree
> In the cool of the day, having fed to satiety
> On my legs my heart my liver and that which had been
> contained
> In the hollow round of my skull […] (*CP* 87)

After the leopards' feedings all that remain are his bones, stripped of his flesh – commonly understood in Christian orthodoxy as a symbol for sinfulness and sinful desire. Furthermore, at the third section's end, he climbs a series of stairs, signifying (again in Dantean fashion) a

successful purgation and in turn, an ascension to Heaven – successes the Hollow Men assuredly did not achieve. And whereas the Hollow Men fall into increasing fragmentation, unable to speak a prayer, the speaker of *Ash Wednesday* concludes with a stirring prayer to the Virgin Mary: "Blessèd sister, holy mother, spirit of the fountain, spirit / of the garden […]" (*CP* 95).

These resolutions to *Ash Wednesday*'s speaker are significant not only contrast to Eliot's previous poetic personas, but furthermore as a demonstration of Eliot's consciousness of their shortcomings and failures. For by revisiting these similar spiritual struggles between characters and rewriting different endings for their different situations each time, Eliot displays a zeal for achieving spiritual absolution resolution. Read as an arc, at no point in the present selection of poems does Eliot give up on these existential struggles, and I would argue this is his chief virtue as an artist. Kierkegaard writes in *Stages on Life's Way* that "the religious consists precisely in being religiously, infinitely concerned about oneself […], in being infinitely concerned about oneself and consequently not deeming oneself finished, which is negative and perdition" (370). In *Ash Wednesday,* the speaker persists up to the end – "although" he does not hope – by faith, believing on the strength of the absurd.

As I have argued, Prufrock the character certainly perishes at the end of "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" in a passive fate of drowning, and The Hollow Men's doom is faced with "but a whimper"; the conclusion of *Ash Wednesday* is altogether qualitatively different from these previous poems. As Kierkegaard writes in *Stages of Life's Way*, the religious is "the sphere of fulfillment," and "repentance has specifically created a boundless space, and as a consequence the religious contradiction: simultaneously to be out on 70,000 fathoms of water and yet be joyful" (362). Though it is uncertain whether the speaker has definitively reached the religious and "the sphere of fulfillment" at the poem's end, he evidently reaches out for it:

Blessèd sister, holy mother, spirit of the fountain, spirit of

the garden,

Suffer us not to mock ourselves with falsehood

Teach us to care and not to care

Teach us to sit still

Even among these rocks,

Our peace in His will

And even among these rocks

Sister, mother

And spirit of the river, spirit of the sea,

Suffer me not to be separated

And let my cry come unto Thee. (*CP* 95)

Accordingly, the speaker here remains suspended among elements of the previous waste land ("these rocks"), but consciously pursues peace and joy through his prayer.

The landscapes of *The Waste Land* and *Ash Wednesday* are not wholly different. However, water is a significant addition. The speaker of *The Waste Land* laments:

If there were water

And no rock

If there were rock

And also water

And water

A spring

A pool among the rock

If there were the sound of water only… (*CP* 66-67)

The rocks from the waste land remain in *Ash Wednesday*, but they are made bearable by the presence of water – that is, the spiritual life and sustenance provided by the Virgin Mary and God. And indeed, neither Eliot nor Kierkegaard undermine the difficulty of faith; Kierkegaard writes in *Stages on Life's Way*:

> Spiritual existence, especially the religious, is not easy; the believer continually lies out on the deep, has 70,000 fathoms of water beneath him. However long he lies out there, this still does not mean that he will gradually end up lying and relaxing onshore. He can become more calm, more experienced, find a confidence that loves jest and a cheerful temperament—but until the very last he lies out on 70,000 fathoms of water. (338)

In this way, one may read the prayer of Section VI of *Ash Wednesday* as a holy submission to the task of remaining over 70,000 fathoms of the deep. The metaphors are somewhat inverted; whereas Kierkegaard conceptualizes the struggles of faith as a sailor suspended over the depths of the ocean, Eliot conceptualizes it as living among barrenness and harsh material reality, especially a desert. As Rogan Jacobson notes, deserts abound in *The Waste Land* and *The Hollow Men* which Eliot uses "to denote impotence and spiritual death" (14). In *Ash Wednesday*, to contrast, the desert operates in a different capacity: "This time," Jacobson writes, "the desert is a place of religious testing, potent with spiritual growth." That is to say, the waste land is not annihilated, but is transcended through the religious.

T. S. Eliot wrote that "great literature is the transformation of a personality into a personal work of art, their lifetime's work, long or short" (*SW* 80). Eliot's theory of impersonality in poetry seems rather at odds with this statement, even more so with the present

study. And yet, as I have shown – and as many biographical scholars of Eliot have concluded in their own critical works – Eliot did indeed, albeit retrospectively, transform his own personality into his lifetime's labors of personal works of art. And perhaps this is some of the appeal of Eliot's poetry: it is no significant stretch to see Eliot in J. Alfred Prufrock, in the husband bickering with his wife in "A Game of Chess," of *The Waste Land*, and the Fisher King figure more generally. From this study on the dynamic personality apparent in retrospection of the arc of Eliot's works 1915-1927, one may conclude that Eliot after all did not achieve his ideal of "impersonality of art." Yet his artistic success lay in the indirect pursuit of personality through the objective correlatives, from the "attendant lord" J. Alfred Prufrock ("Deferential, […] Politic, cautious, and meticulous; Full of high sentence, but a bit obtuse; / At times, indeed, almost ridiculous") to the "agèd eagle" with "seaward flying / Unbroken wings" of *Ash Wednesday* (*CP* 85, 94).

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