T.S. Eliot’s Christian Poetics and Hegel’s Ideal of Inner Sensuousness

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ABSTRACT

My essay tries to show how and why T.S. Eliot rejected Imagism as a plausible model for a truly Modern poetry—first because it could not capture the intricacy of how self-consciousness haunts all making in art by a contrast between positive assertion and all that cannot be embodied in the perceptual order. That Eliot’s Christianity then addresses this sense of shortcoming becomes important for secular possibilities of poetry because it gives him a way of aligning with Constructivist principles that emphasize the significance of our powers not just to engage objects but to manifest the powers of subjectivity in order to establish what Hegel called an “inner sensuousness”. This inner sensuousness affords the possibility of dwelling imaginatively on positive aspects of self-consciousness because art becomes an invitation to see how making affords new ways of engaging objectivity and conferring meaningfulness on experience. "Ash Wednesday” defines those powers by the kinds of awareness involved in “rejoicing to rejoice” and “striving to strive." And Murder in the Cathedral explores the logic of martyrdom in order to celebrate social relations based on faith in Incarnation that offers the possibility of love replacing the demands of the ego.

Keywords:
T.S. Eliot, Constructivism, Imagism, Ash Wednesday, Murder in the Cathedral, Hegel on inner sensuousness, the powers of self-consciousness
I used to enjoy my own glibness in saying that one important goal of Eliot’s *Four Quartets* was the demonstration that one could speak Christian sentences worthy of attention in an utterly secularized world. Now I see that there was considerable point to my observation. I am working on a book about modernist poets’ resistance to the ways in which Imagism moved from sensuality to epiphany without much sense of the register of feelings made present by the making. From this perspective, Eliot’s modes of defending how Christianity poses a contrast to the natural order take on considerably more power because we can see how much they share with a modernist constructivist aesthetics, sharply opposed to the idealized immediacy that Impressionism shared with Imagism. After a brief setting of the stage, by dwelling on Eliot’s earlier poetry, I propose to study “Ash Wednesday” and then *Murder in the Cathedral*. My focus will be on how these texts elaborate the role of authorial construction in order to emphasize values and human powers that cannot be made present if one concentrates only on narrative or description. Instead, Eliot dramatizes an imaginative life coming to full affective presence by inviting the audience to participate in how the constructed verbal object in fact calls attention to its capacities to develop intricate aspects of self-consciousness.

My thesis is simple: just as modernist painters had to reject Impressionism for its reliance on activating the senses, modernist poets had to reject Imagism and related strategies of direct descriptive presentation because of what W.C. Williams called its “Whistleresque features.” The situation is complicated because neither Impressionism nor Imagism were content with classical forms of materialism, in which the senses shape the mind. These perspectives on the making of art enabled modernist poets and painters to escape rhetorical stances and cultivate attention to how subjectivity actively establishes events by which the world and the psyche modify one another. And they made popular the idea that the medium had to have the power to convey the significance of such events of perception: art had to have a passion for modeling what life could be like. Nonetheless, all the most ambitious young modernists—beginning with Pound, who had best articulated Imagist principles—soon felt that they had to repudiate Imagist poetics in search of more intricate and complex modes of writing, in which self-consciousness about the powers of making were primary. No epiphany based in sensuous experience could realize the full powers of how presentation might work in the arts. Instead, all the arts had to cultivate other ranges of feeling attached to the acts of construction, especially the mental processes involved in elaborating grammatical effects and establishing structural integrity.1

1. The resistance that constructivism offered Impressionism is writ large in the documentary foundations of Modernist art, as is evident in even a cursory read through Harrison, Charles and Wood, Paul, eds. 2003. *Art in Theory 1900-2000: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*. New ed. Oxford: Blackwell. Yet Eliot is obviously a special case of this reaction because his opposition to materialism was so thorough and so obsessive. But while Eliot sees constructivism as ultimately sustaining Christian commitments, the specific paths he sets for constructivist
Aesthetic reasons drove this shift, since the modernists soon came to desire a poetry more complex and intricate and multiple-levelled than Imagism’s versions of epiphany could supply. However, there was another dimension to this struggle, perhaps visible only now when we have learned to read within a New Materialist framework honoring the vitalist dimensions of Impressionist emphases on the act of seeing. Then we can see these critiques as exploring what could not be addressed successfully by any materialism, old or new. All the materialisms we have now lack sufficient respect for how intentionality modifies what we register about phenomena; they do not credit the mind’s capacity to develop systematic relations so that pattern recognition becomes an active aspect of our engagement with the world; and they simply avoid questions about how normativity might involve distinctive features of human intelligence. So once we see this struggle as a crucial aspect of Modernist art, we put ourselves in a position to appreciate—historically and philosophically—Hegel’s distinction in his Lectures on Aesthetics between classical art with its emphasis on representing nature and Romantic art’s primary concern for rendering the feelings basic to constructing objects with their own kinds of active sensuousness.

This inner sensuousness becomes visible in lyric because of how the modes of presenting language in specific works carry investments that seem driven by caring more for what language can do as a power one possesses than for how one could exercise capacities to make poetry attune itself to the intensities of perception. Valuing the manner of sentences involves respect for what individuals can make of grammar. And this mode of valuing proves inseparable from treating the making of art as itself the primary mode of sensuality, as if there were a sensuality embedded in how mind contributes shapes for experience. Con-

values seem to me to illuminate secular possibilities for appreciating the expressive power of individual wills and the ways that attention to logic can inform a self-consciously anti-naturalist poetics. The new materialism stresses the active rather than the receptive senses basic to Locke and to Hobbes. But, I think it still fundamentally excludes the kind of sense involved in the self-awareness that derives from the deployment of grammar and the manipulation of framing systems like logic and math and, arguably, the work formal structures afford. 2

2. Here I will rely on a Wittgensteinian critique of the new materialism because Wittgenstein makes crucial distinctions that cannot be formulated within the frameworks provided by current versions of materialism. While Wittgenstein’s observations clearly pertain to human experience, they resist causal explanations. His view is that we can only accept causal explanations when there are clear paths by which those explanations overcome doubt. But there are many aspects of human experience where doubt is not applicable. Instead of seeking accurate description of underlying forces we have to be content with attuning ourselves to what people display. Analogously, the role of display explains why “seeing as” establishes quite different conditions of uptake from claims about direct seeing. When someone offers a statement that one can see x as y, we typically do not try to verify what some express; we try to attune ourselves to how desire and affect get displayed. Finally, Wittgenstein was fascinated by aspects of subjective life that could not appear in any kind of objective formulation, but had to be offered as efforts at attunement between agents. This is why he deeply suspected the authority of ethics—which can only judge agents by putting them into general categories.

I cite this reasoning here for two reasons. First, it demonstrates that one does not need to be an idealist in order to be dissatisfied with contemporary versions of materialism. One can be committed to naturalism without being committed to how we can account now for the physical world. And, second, this Wittgensteinian concept of the roles of display and of personal confession make clear why Eliot turned to drama as his vehicle for elaborating how Christianity reconfigures how imagination can populate public space. Intimate self-reflection based on one’s sense of one’s own capacity to wield and structure grammatical resources in “Ash Wednesday” provides the foundation for a very different model of expression that celebrates how that confessional dimension can be extended to the social world.
centrating on that mode of sensuality not only has the capacity of providing a language for the self-reflexive aspects of Modernist writing, but also puts us in a position of recognizing why important contemporary poets like Geoffrey O’Brien, Timothy Donnelly, Aaron Kunin, Jennifer Moxley, and Lisa Robertson often refuse all the trappings of imagist aesthetics, including the epiphanic drive to conclude poems with striking synthetic images.

Let me cite three passages from the first volume of Hegel’s Lectures on Fine Art (1975) in order to give a feel for how Hegel approaches this contrast in modes of sensuousness, so that you can see how close he is to constructivist aesthetics:

Spirit does not stop at the mere apprehension of the external world by sight and hearing; it makes it into an object for its inner being which then is itself driven, once again in the form of sensuousness, to realize itself in things, and relates itself to them as desire.

(36)

These sensuous shapes and sounds appear in art not merely for the sakes of themselves and their immediate shape, but with the aim, in this shape, of affording satisfaction to the higher spiritual interests, since they have the power to call forth from all the depths of consciousness a sound and an echo in the spirit. In this way the sensuous aspect of art is spiritualized, since the spirit appears in art as made sensuous.

(39)

[In Goethe’s “Wiederfinden”] love is transferred wholly into the imagination, its movement, happiness, and bliss. In … similar productions of this kind we have before us no subjective longing, no being in love, no desire, but a pure delight in the topics, an inexhaustible self-yielding of imagination, a harmless play … and, with all this, a depth of feeling and a cheerfulness of the inwardly self-moving heart which through the serenity of the outward shape lift the soul high above all painful entanglements in the restrictions of the real world.

(611)

It is crucial here to see that Hegel does not oppose mind to the life of the senses. That would simply involve invoking an old idealism with which to combat a new materialism. My colleague Dan Blanton helped me to see that Hegel instead contrasts two kinds of sensation, two modes of directly experiencing states of being that the world can afford. And Hegel’s concreteness about inner sense then provides a superb context for thinking about how Mondrian’s balances, or Malevich’s feeling as non-being, or Stevens’ “mind of winter”, or Moore’s concern for grammatical self-consciousness establish means of inquiring what worldliness imagination can bring to bear within the work. They all thought that the most dynamic concreteness available for poetry and for painting derives from the full force of making at work in elaborating possible relationships that might hold for practical life.
I think Stevens and Moore are probably the American poets who best realize how the feels of thinking and of making modify our understanding of the roles poetry can play in activating fully intricate and subtle sensibilities. But I choose to talk about later Eliot for three reasons: 1) He treats more fully than any other modernists those aspects of felt making that involve attention to how grammatical forms can exemplify the sheer power of language to elicit self-consciousness and modify our sense of our own capacities to value modes of expression. Eliot is especially fine in using as models of self-consciousness the intricate self-reflexive aspects of the deictics “here,” and “this” ; 2) He most fully understood the difference between the perspectivism that readily accompanies the cult of dynamic sensation and the impersonality that makes possible a fully constructivist mode of writing that focuses on the power to play perspectives against each other for some form of more comprehensive self-reflection, and 3) Eliot most fully theorizes what might be involved in the difference between inner sense and outer sense because his theological orientation was based on a sharp contrast between the order of nature and a metaphysical version of the order of making. Eliot’s incarnate God suffers death in order to demonstrate that religious reality occupies a different plane from the practical orientations necessary to survive in the market place. The redeemer’s death and rebirth makes possible an order of love rather than one reflecting the priority of egoistic demand, of grace rather than of greed, and of the capacity to treat all of life as potentially sacramental rather than emblems of fate and mortality.

Eliot thought that such reversals of human possibility dwarfed anything a secular art could establish, so he came to blame the arts for leasing modern culture down subjectivist paths. Yet Eliot also saw that Modernist constructivism offered similar reversals of the order of nature because it emphasized the powers of making to embody a life consistently repudiating human attachments oriented toward the senses. Art can offer the constructivist form of the logic by which theology opens a separate plane of existence. Participation in states of self-standing inner coherence becomes a primary mode of feeling in constructivist art. More concretely, to understand what is involved in “striving to strive,” or rejoicing because “the fire and the rose are one,” establishes poetry as resisting natural states of satisfaction in favor of how states of consciousness alter and adapt what sensation affords.3

Let us begin our story with how early Eliot seemed unwilling or unable to be satisfied with images based on objective features fundamental to perceptual experience. Eliot did share with Pound the idea that “the presentation’ of an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time” gives “that sense of sudden liberation … which we experience in the presence of the greatest works of art” (Pound 1960, 4). It mattered to him that the new poetry could oppose “presentation” to “representation” and thus project a writing that did not labor to picture the real, but rather to enact it in the process of laboring to restore a sense of value to immediate experience—an immense achievement in a society haunted by

3. Perhaps we can align Wittgenstein with Hegel in elaborating three aspects of why the writers were so wary of materialist perspectives. These perspectives seemed incapable of fully honoring how display differs from description, how Wittgenstein’s version of “seeing as” differs from seeing, and how his critique of morality as a domain of generalizations brings out dimensions of the personal that have to enacted rather than based on any narrative or argument. I think Eliot’s Christian work dramatizes in an especially sharp fashion possible powers that demonstrate these Wittgensteinian features at the core of human experience.
gaps between what could count as fact and what mattered for individual sensibilities. But his obsessive self-consciousness could never be satisfied by these ideals. No mode of relating to objects in the world could satisfy the intricate ways self-consciousness both over-determined the world by projecting imaginary demands, and found the world a continual source of lack in relation to those demands. Eliot would require what Stevens in “The Rock” called “a cure of the ground,” capable of transforming our sense of how objectivity might sustain the needs basic to how subjectivity is constituted.

We can get a sharp sense of how even very early Eliot could not reconcile himself to Imagist ideals if we briefly compare Eliot’s “Opera,” written in 1909 when he was a graduate student at Harvard, to Amy Lowell’s “The Pike,” a poem completely at home within Imagist ideals. Eliot’s first ten lines present the speaker at an opera performance fascinated by how the singers fling themselves at the “last limits of self-expression.” Then the speaker turns to look at himself looking, a common feature in Eliot’s work:

We have the tragic. Oh No!
Life departs with a feeble smile
Into the indifferent.
These emotional experiences
Do not hold good at all,
And I feel like the ghost of youth
At the undertaker’s ball.

(Eliot 1996, 17)

Personal crisis becomes social and historical because traditions like our understanding of the tragic “do not hold good at all.” Efforts claiming to be pursuing arts of self-expression seem now empty rhetoric, as if performances served primarily as pathetic bids for unwarranted attention. So the speaker seems bound to respond with an equally theatrical and equally empty set of figures, as if the only way to respond to disappointment were not just to describe it but to embody it in his own art. Poetry becomes the sad reminder of the insuperable gulf between imagination and objectivity.

Compare the tone here with “The Pike,” or with almost any lyric of the time by Aldington or even HD:

Out from under the reeds
Came the olive-green light,
And orange flashed up
Through the sun-thickened water.
So the fish passed across the pool,
Green and copper,
A darkness and a gleam,
And the blurred reflections of the willows on the opposite bank
Received it.

(Lowell (1914) 2017, 23)
Here there is no overt self-expression and no art intended to define a failed social order. The poet is content to present sensations, as if the sensations themselves could constitute a sufficient mode of intricate self-conscious capable of thriving independently of any social order. Lowell seems to seek forms of lyric satisfaction that can simply bypass how Eliot’s consciousness seems doomed to express its dissatisfied difference from what it observes. There are levels of communication and belonging between the world of the pike and the world of the willows that provide a satisfying alternative to Eliot’s hopelessly isolating chain of self-reflections. Poetry and living well prove compatible arts.

Eliot’s alienated self-consciousness simply could not be reconciled to the world, however intensely perceived. He needed to find a home in more capacious levels of what consciousness might provide. This is why Eliot seems so closely allied to the projects of modernist non-iconic painters, even though he seemed not to be very interested in such painting, except as it bore on the work of Wyndham Lewis. In his view, Imagist poetics did not fully realize the possibilities latent in its presentational aesthetic because, while it satisfied a concern for active perception, it seemed incapable of dramatizing what became present in the process of the work’s ways of engaging the senses.

We might begin fleshing out this aspect of Eliot by recognizing how his philosophical and symbolist interest in impersonality led him toward much the same imaginative imperatives as the painters were articulating. Critics rarely pay attention to the positive aspects of how Eliot on impersonality stresses the force of the medium: “the poet has, not a personality to express, but a particular medium …, in which experiences and impressions combine in peculiar and unexpected ways” (Eliot 1950, 9). And this medium is saturated in history, so even the subjectivity of the artist had to submit to the internal relations established by constructive intelligence. These internal relations, freed from reference to an expressive self, could be seen as making claims on the real based on how they amalgamated thought and feeling in order to give a second-order texture to the work. This texture involved the sense of form as a feeling for the mind’s powers to impose orders reflecting its own deepest needs. So, art’s worldliness had to be intimately connected to its aesthetic complexity. Poetry is not natural speech but speech constructed for its capacity to produce intense experience, by virtue of the poet’s capacities as a maker to give mental processes their own mode of sensuality. And this sensuality can be considered available to all readers because its dimensions are properties of the object and not fantasies of the subject.

But, even then, even with a full picture of how the mind can be satisfied by reflecting on its own constructive activity, Eliot could not be satisfied. These satisfactions might compensate for the disappointments of actual existence, but they only intensified the distance between mind and a livable sense of reality. Sheer constructivism in art was like a shadow game, with the mind seeking satisfactions that in fact only alienated it further from anything that might connect with the actual world and the lives of other people. Eliot’s The Waste Land could, for example, find in an impersonal approach to the dilemmas of modern culture a brilliant solution to the stress on perspectivist ideals of imaginative activity that doomed a culture to subjective substitutes for objective reality.4 The constructive activity

4. Once Eliot turns from perspective, it is the poem itself that defines available versions of a real beyond perspectivic. But The Waste Land sets the consciousness of the poem against the consciousness of living cultural agents.
in this poem raises the possibility that by layering perspectives in an intense composition poetry might engage more fundamental sources of suffering, and so also be able to stage what it might take to find means of collectively finding relief from that suffering. Here both sympathy and possible relief depend on learning to hear what is expressed in the mélange of voices constituting this collectivity. The poet as gatherer of voices becomes also the figure capable of producing a level of virtual hearing where one can treat the sufferings as related symptoms of some desire recuperable only in this virtual space.

And yet, without a sense of the object that Imagism had proposed, the problems of always basing one’s engagement in the world on voices rather than on perceptions come to a climax in how the prophetic voice of the final section seeks to find at least some communal ground for shared suffering:

He who was living is now dead
We who were living are now dying
With a little patience
Here is no water but only rock
Rock and no water and the sandy road …
If there were water we would stop and drink
Amongst the rock one cannot stop or think.

( CP 66)

But who is this “we”? What kind of substance or social reality can we attribute to it? It seems to me that this “we” is intricately divided between a literal and a metaphoric landscape, occupying a space where the inner life is strangely transparent in its desperate fusion with its environment. That fusion, however, forces the voice to ask repeatedly where can life-giving water be found? Even in this final section the poem cannot provide a satisfactory response, probably because there is no direct answer possible to such abstract questions.

It seems that the only alternative this disposition of energies can explore is simply to address the sense of lack that haunts the entire poem. Echoes of Christ at Emmaeus give the possibility that the shadows of “Opera” might provide an alternative to any quest for an underlying reality. The only hope for possessing what can be real seems to inhere in the unreal:

Who is the third who walks always beside you?
When I count, there are only you and I together
But when I look ahead up the white road
There is always another one walking beside you.

( CP 67)

Eliot’s conversion is largely a matter of aligning the consciousness of the poem as public statement with the consciousness of a living agent shaped by openness to grace (and in Murder in the Cathedral, to the logic of martyrdom). With grace, spirit as inner sensuousness can stand for something in public because the work of poetry becomes identical to the processes of self-gathering that make an individual capable of acting to define his or her faith.
Here Eliot manages to cast the other one walking beside you as capable of evoking or exemplifying all the common suffering that the poem has made present. This is the audience for whom the god died, an audience now hopeful of attaching to his resurrected form within the mind’s constructive activity. Yet no amount of religious sources can bring redemption to this society because they are simply unwilling to honor any demands that might induce change of the people’s destructive but trusted forms of habitual behavior. There is a mind here taking form that feels it has to take some kind of responsibility for this cultural situation, in part by developing dense internal relationships capable at every instant of having the metaphoric hover within what the voices express. But glimpses of a real provided by that hovering are all that the secular world offers: it takes great art to convince us that we have no hopes of spiritual greatness.

II

I now turn to two concrete texts that bear witness to how Eliot’s Christianity allowed him to take Constructivist principles beyond the working of minds to an appreciation of their capacity to dwell in different senses of reality. First I want to exhibit, through close attention to “Ash Wednesday,” how Eliot’s Christianity transforms his poetics and mounts a direct challenge to the pathos embodied in his *Waste Land*. Instead of impersonality demanding the weaving of voices, Eliot, after his conversion, sees that impersonality can also allow an individual self-consciousness to hear the implications of one’s rejoicing to rejoice. Then I want to elaborate how Eliot’s *Murder in the Cathedral* brings out social dimensions of this Christian version of Constructivist aesthetics. I have to reserve for a later essay how *Four Quartets* tries to ground Christian sociality in the felt textures of an immediate objectivity enhanced by belief in the Incarnation. This grounding provides Eliot’s richest framework for speaking plausible Christian sentences addressed in part to the secular world.

“Ash Wednesday” presents itself as performing three basic tasks. The first has to be taken quite literally: “Consequently I rejoice, having to construct something / Upon which to rejoice” (CP 85). Such a construction has to honor modern art’s resistance to empiricism by composing a set of forces that establish the primacy of internal relations so that work has a concreteness marked by inner sensuousness rather than registering impressions that carry the kind of force they carry in the empirical order. And the proof of this power will be the capacity of the poem to establish cogent meaning and dramatic intellectual force by weaving together elements that are themselves not the usual materials of empirical experience. These elements involve reworkings of the structural resources grammar provides that take form as pieces of a logical system derived from the paradoxical premises that ground Christian doctrine. “Because I know I shall not know” (CP 85) I can hope to attend to the “Word within/ The world and for the world” which makes the light shine in the darkness.

Second, the “word unheard” must become manifest by the play between the continuing capacity to deploy human language and the realization that his capacity must be understood differently—must be recognized as a power rather than a series of functional events characterizing the dynamics of experience. This means the words of the poem must make sense or compose ways of making sense which depend on the capacity of those resources
in language to pull against the practical uses typically devoted to pursuing empirical satisfactions in the world as given to ordinary experience.

Third, the emotional achievement of the poem is to produce a state where cry turns into prayer by the same logic through which the word becomes audible. The audible word can be responsive to those imaginations that focus upon the pains of bringing peace to the twists and turns of frustrated consciousness. So the more intense the awareness of suffering, the more replete the mode of address that is possible, especially since the address is itself based on faith in the capacity of language to sound the unheard word. Perhaps it need not be said that this model holds for any kind of cry, so long as the cry elaborates audible dimensions of the word, which seem absurd or irrelevant in the domain of practical experience. Art has deep parallels with religion because both call upon the transformative powers of constructive imagination and the capacities for attention that these transformations establish.

So, as we turn to the concrete poem, we have first to establish how Eliot builds on the inadequacies of both empirical consciousness as it records events and self-consciousness as it tries to find identity in the sequence of those events. For later Eliot, secular self-consciousness is an essentially Pyrrhic phenomenon because it has no object in the empirical world and so always asks for something more—something more precise or more intense so that it can give mind relief from its own processes of quest and questioning. The opening of the poem beautifully captures the “this and that” feature of the terrifying mobility visible in our ways of making demands on the world:

Because I do not hope to turn again
Because I do not hope
Because I do not hope to turn
Desiring this man’s gift and that man’s scope
I no longer strive to strive for such things.

(EP 85)

One must strive not to strive because only self-reflection in this negative form can overcome a temptation that challenges not just practical life but the shape of willing at the core of that sense of life.

Self-consciousness must find ways of submitting to other, richer modes of consciousness that make manifest discrete spiritual activity rather than states of secular striving. One can, for example, turn to modes of language that provide ways of hearing something not heard when one strives for particular objects—like the rhythms of one’s saying or the possible inner truth of paradox. What matters here is that the self exhibits the ability to recognize the endless process that confronts it if one wants a level of satisfaction compatible with the nature of striving. Striving imagines that an empirical object can satisfy desires that turn out to be based on capacities to live a life in accord with the structure of meanings that have been valid for a culture rather than of objective conditions. For Eliot the kinds of intensities we need cannot be achieved by dreaming that there is a concrete object which self-consciousness can intend without constant disappointment.
“Strive to strive” is the first instance of the poem’s asking us to hear language’s capacity for self-reflexive functioning where the object simply is the force of a way of functioning. Other doublings follow immediately, like “I know that I shall not know” and “Teach us to care and not to care.” Such doublings establish the way that the poem takes up the fundamental affective project of much modernist art: “Consequently I rejoice, having to construct something upon which to rejoice” (CP 85).

That construction takes the form of a spiritual journey, first enacted as a concrete vision of the single Rose (in poem II), then tested by the qualities of self-consciousness that this vision can sponsor.

This vision is not the end but the beginning because it sets the task of self-consciousness to align with the condition of spiritual possibility. This is where the ascent has to take place. Here “here” becomes a crucial player in the poem’s redeployment of reference away from the empirical order:

Where shall the word be found, where will the word
Resound? Not here, there is not enough silence
Not on the sea or on the islands, not
On the mainland, in the desert of the rain land
For those who walk in the darkness …
The right time and the right place are not here
No place of grace for those who avoid the face
No time to rejoice for those who walk among the noise and deny the voice

(CP 92)

“Here” is beautifully doubled. “Here” cannot be fully experienced because there is not enough silence. But at the same time the poem projects as “here” in the speaking what this silence might be like. It would be the place where such sounds fully resound as carving out their own place. The silence might be found here paradoxically in how the poem uses language.

The place of grace becomes fully present when “this” takes over the deictic functioning in the final poem of the sequence. This “this” is one aspect of a complex adventure based on a shift from the opening “Because I do not hope” sequence to a sequence based on “Although I do not hope.” The first sequence had defined the conflict as demonstrating why the agent should cease striving to strive. This last sequence tries to envision an after-the-fact condition where one can recuperate the graces of living by maintaining a tension between respect for the God in nature and recognizing also the humility that turns acceptance into prayer, and doubling into a mode of gratitude rather than ironic consciousness:

Blessed 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 is 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.

This cry takes on the dual functions of the deictics. In one aspect, the cry is the utterance of pain and dependency reminding that, before Christ, we are all infants. But, a second proleptic sense of cry emerges because of the connection to “come.” This version of cry is profoundly sexual, profoundly the product of all the natural force that, at best, the speaker holds as dangerous distractions. In this cry, the statement of need and pain is inseparable from the hope for redemption. Expressing that hope after this sequence is sufficient to activate the entire sentence as both cry and prayer, both the expression of complete humility and the articulation of the ecstasy that can emerge when that humility enables us to merge with God’s will. Indeed the poem’s syntactic doublings make us realize that the whole sequence can be read outside of time as the simultaneous logic of death and rebirth that characterizes how faith and the art of construction can be one and the same. Construction can prove itself guided by spirit seeking to find its own resting place, adequate to the fundamental relation between its needs and its powers.

III

I think criticism is insufficiently aware of how Murder in the Cathedral extends these experiments in lyric: here Eliot’s concern is less with the construction of sentences dramatizing the potential work of self-consciousness than testing how the logic of inner sensuousness might make possible a distinctive relationship to social space. In effect Eliot treats theatrical making as a mode by which inner sensuousness defines its relevance to an outside world, just as the making of architectural models provided a sense of public reality for constructivist logic in Malevich’s work.

Perhaps the most striking break from naturalistic logic in Eliot’s play is his putting the human climax in the first part of the play. Yet, that climax has to precede the unfolding of the story because a sense of how the logic of martyrdom replaces a logic based on outer sense is required to understand Thomas Beckett’s definitive action as clarifying everything that touches upon his situation. From the start of his play Eliot insists that Christian logic demonstrated the power of the idea that one could play the orders constructed by imagination against the orders imposed by the physical world: the Christian God was born during the depths of winter and sacrificed in the spring, while nature is beginning to produce a totally satisfying material world. And, more complexly, Christianity could idealize temptation as the necessary logical means for bringing out the aspects of personal coherence that follow from these imaginative reversals. Temptation makes active how the inner life can
take form. Without the constant presence of temptation, sainthood and martyrdom are only abstractions: such unworldly conditions must define themselves in the actual world by the power and scope of their aligning with the will of God that makes it possible for characters to clarify their refusing the authority of outer sense. In fact the ultimate worldly effect of this turn to inner states is the capacity of those characters to elaborate possibilities of community overcoming the typical unstable collection of willful “I”s that populate the public sphere.

This possibility of turning against outer sense gets concretely defined in Thomas’s long sermon after the temptation scene clarifying the logic of martyrdom before we even see the motives of those who are threatening his life:

A martyrdom is always the design of God, for His love of men, to warn them and to lead them, to bring them back to His ways. It is never the design of man; for the true martyr is he who has become the instrument of God, who has lost his will in the will of God, and who no longer desires anything for himself, not even the glory of being a martyr.

(57)

What speaks for the martyr, and as the martyr, is not his empirical self but the self justified in the logic of what he is doing. This is theologized Kantian morality realized in the flesh as pure public life because it offers a purified private will capable of fully entering speech.

More generally, we can say that this insistence on inner sense allows to see two reasons why concentrating on resisting temptation offers a crucial analogue to constructivist aesthetics: 1) There is a dynamic process of the refusal of everything pertaining to the appeals of outer sense in figures like Malevich and Mondrian and even perhaps Stein. The making subject finds its fullness inchoate in the activity of refusal. For understanding why the work must refuse the authority honored in public life allows the artist to produce objects not bound by practical sense but capable of expressing the import of the capacity to negate on a large scale. Then the negative can change to a positive by virtue of how the manner of expression anchors the subject in what the refusal makes possible as a fuller version of its own powers. Meaning comes to saturate sense in the same way that the feeling for how meanings can be constructed comes to dominate over feelings shaped by perceptive experience—as in Hegel’s reading of Goethe. The coherence of Thomas’s presence replaces other forms of public authority.

2) There is a direct presence of will involved in this saturating of sense—the saint’s actions are sustained by a range of inner processes that get manifested as pure self-determination taking the form of refusing the instincts of a natural self. In fact, it is not a major exaggeration to claim that martyrdom best defines for a public the difference Christianity makes in understanding values. The martyr is necessarily an intricate blend of private struggles against the subjective will so that there can be an absolutely public staging of commitment. And, for the writer, there is no better definition of inner sensuousness than the combination of making something and willing what is made because of what can satisfy the demands of an imagination situated at moments of historical crisis. Affirmation becomes
embedded in the activity because the activity is defined solely in terms of how behavior can be determined by the capacity to define how the self manages to resist temptation.5

Once we see how someone can overcome intricate temptations, the motives of the other characters stand out in their blind and self-serving precarity, devoid of any sense of true social responsibility.6 And once we see Beckett’s act of willing not to honor will in its secular, egoistic forms, we are also in a position to appreciate how the four knights that speak after his choice of martyrdom in fact sound exactly like the four tempters who defined sanctity by their inability to grasp its active principle. How can the political order change when the knights in the name of protecting the state read their own dark and concealed motives into their victim:

And when he had deliberately exasperated us beyond human endurance he still could have easily escaped; he could have kept himself from us long enough to allow our righteous anger to cool. That was just what he did not wish to happen; he insisted while we were still inflamed with wrath, that the doors should be opened. … With these facts before you, you will unhesitatingly render a verdict of suicide while of Unsound Mind. It is the only charitable version you can give…

(88)

The knights are not wrong in their observations—materialists are likely to give keen descriptions. But their accuracy in the one dimension blinds them to every nuance of motive or openness to different possible sets of those motives. Eliot has the first priest issue a devastating analysis of their actual behavior:

You still shall tramp and tread one endless round
Of thought to justify your action to yourselves,
Weaving a fiction which unravels as you weave,
Pacing forever in the hell of make-believe
Which never is belief: this is your fate on earth.

(89)

5. Indeed the difficulty of objectifying how grace stabilizes will is nowhere more evident than in the major weakness of Eliot’s play, the impossibility of giving reasons why Thomas can successfully resist the fourth tempter. This power can only arise from grace, and although the presence of grace can be exemplified, the moment when it takes hold cannot be exhibited by secular means. All we can see is that the person has changed; we can see the effects of the grace but not of its working on the mind in the first place.

6. One might say that although several critics of the play deeply appreciate how Eliot builds community, they have just to assert the importance of community rather than elaborating the logic by which one can accept that there is a human power to deny our impulses toward individual gratification. For stressing community I want to cite especially Smith, Carol H. 1977. T.S. Eliot’s Dramatic Theory and Practice: From Sweeney Agonistes to the Elder Statesman. New York: Gordian Press, and Malamud, Randy. 1994. Where the Words are Valid: T.S Eliot’s Communities of Drama. Westport Conn.: Greenwood Press.
Had we not seen what Thomas was capable of, we might not so readily accept the priest’s analysis. But now we have a model for reading the secular order because Thomas became sufficiently transparent to himself as he defines himself against its imperatives.

And that model is effective, at least in the play. Not only can the priests make accurate judgments of the knights, they also manage to appreciate what it means to substitute a “we” grounded in the will of god for the “I” of the compulsive ego.

What “we” can mean as agents cohering in faith is established by Beckett’s decision, and by the play’s rendering of that decision’s effect on the chorus. The community itself is defined as capable of saying “we” because it has no separate “I” not already defined by communal values driving the martyr. Such a “we” is a denial of the law of nature because natural being for humans seems capable of only saying “I.” The natural being’s will is for distinctive self-hood; the saint’s will is defined by the work of grace. Spirit is made evident by the will to conform to the logic whereby religion divides itself from natural being. So there can be no effective secular argument for religion, or for art. In both of these domains, the imagination can only display its differences from the empirical order and inspire audiences to live in accord with how those differences make present the appeals of inner sensuousness.

Accepting those differences becomes an inviting possibility because art comes to define theater as establishing a distinctive mode of reality—established primarily by ecstatic yet simple cadences binding the will of the maker to the celebration of the will of the parishioners:

We praise Thee, O God, for they glory displayed in all the creatures of the earth,

… Forgive us, O Lord, we acknowledge ourselves as type of the common man

… We acknowledge our trespass, our weakness, our fault; we acknowledge

That the sin of the world is upon our heads; that the blood of the martyrs and the agony of the saints

Is upon our heads.

Lord, have mercy upon us.

Christ, have mercy upon us.

Lord, have mercy upon us.

Blessed Thomas, pray for us.

(90-92)

To follow constructivist logic may be to create the ideal sense of collectivity.
REFERENCES