

“The ivory men make company between us”:
Rethinking Subject and Object Roles in the Poetry of T.S. Eliot

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A thesis
submitted for the degree of

Bachelor of Arts
in English

Oregon State University
2013

Adviser:
Dr. Raymond Malewitz

Acknowledgements

I am deeply grateful for the guidance that my thesis adviser, Dr. Raymond Malewitz, has provided throughout this process. In addition to helping me refine and better articulate my ideas, he has directed me to theorists and texts that have been essential to the development of the thesis. I appreciate the support of Dr. Neil Davison, whose thoughtful commentary on my term paper “Inconsistence of Internal and External Reality in The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” helped shape the ideas that led me to further explore subject and object roles in T.S. Eliot’s poetry. Dr. Davison is also owed gratitude for being the one to suggest that I bring my thesis concept to Dr. Malewitz’s door. Thanks are also due to the School of Writing, Literature and Film at Oregon State University, and the many faculty members who have supported and encouraged me throughout my studies in the department.

I am equally thankful for the family and friends who have tolerated my preoccupation with and enthusiastic discussion of this project for several months. Chris, in particular, has been wonderfully understanding. I would also like to thank my father for advising me to write my thesis on the text that was most meaningful to me.

“The ivory men make company between us”:

Rethinking Subject and Object Roles in the Poetry of T.S. Eliot

I. Bringing objects into the foreground: critical contexts of Eliot’s poetry

While metaphysical turmoil is the essential human problem in T.S. Eliot’s “The Waste Land,” “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” and “Preludes,” traditional criticism of the poems relegates the physical world to a merely rhetorical role. In critic David Ward’s analysis of “The Waste Land,” he considers only the metaphorical value of Eliot’s objects. By relying on the associative context, Ward concentrates on their value as inert, referential symbols. For example, he associates the boudoir in “A Game of Chess” with the temple Moses was instructed to build for the ark of the covenant in Exodus 25. Ward bases this connection on objects that appear in both settings, including a seven-branched candelabra, a golden chair and two golden cherubs, and treats the objects as markers that gesture toward meaning beyond themselves but do not participate in creating experience. In *Conflicts in Consciousness*, David Spurr similarly deemphasizes physical influence in “The Waste Land,” representing the poem as solely based in metaphysical struggle. In his analysis, Spurr pits an “inner Xanadu” state of universal consciousness that accounts for the voices weaving throughout the poem against the metaphysical individual that perceives the physical world and produces everyday experience (Spurr, 23). Again, the physical is all but eliminated. Even Spurr’s concept of the worldly metaphysical experience Eliot presented in “The Waste Land” exists in its own immaterial plane, independent of the objects that participate in its construction.

These critical approaches overlook the active role of physical objects in Eliot’s verse. While the relevance of biblical connotation in “A Game of Chess” is plausible, Ward treats

Eliot's objects as passive symbols that reflect meaning without altering it. By assuming that Eliot's cherubs, candelabra and golden chair are metaphorically comparable to those of Exodus, Ward tries to contain the objects with symbolism. But the verse itself counters this attempt by depicting the objects as active, individual pieces with agency rather than generic symbols:

The Chair she sat in, like a burnished throne,
 Glowed on the marble, where the glass
 Held up by standards wrought with fruited vines
 From which a golden Cupidon peeped out
 (Another hid his eyes behind his wing)
 Doubled the flames of sevenbranched candelabra
 Reflecting light upon the table as
 The glitter of her jewels rose to meet it (79-84).

The objects of the boudoir may reference those in the temple, but the mood Eliot creates with them has almost no connection to that setting. Their state of existence is not the stagnancy of inanimate symbols but one of images at play. The cupidons are not described as frozen representations of angels in praise but are endowed with the ability to peep and hide such that they seem more mischievous than reverent throughout the scene. While the objects of Moses' temple exist to reflect and emphasize holy power, these objects glory in their own extravagance and in each other. The mirror is "held up" by the columns of its frame and actively doubles the light of candelabra's flames, while "the glitter of her jewels" rises "to meet it." Rather than evoking religious meaning, Eliot's use of the same kind of objects that appear in the temple points toward the lack of a spiritual focus to command the objects and infuse them with

symbolism. Because the objects do not defer to a greater metaphysical purpose — a significant departure from the biblical arrangement — meaning is shifted from occurring beyond the objects to within them. These are not decorative objects inserted merely to allude to another scene; they possess as much identity and influence in this section as the woman in the room “enclosed” by them (106).

Like Ward, Spurr does not recognize that Eliot's objects form more than convenient metaphors for metaphysical experiences; they influence and alter those experiences, as well as the characters', the poet's and the reader's understanding of them.¹ By dividing experience in “The Waste Land” into “two main currents in the poem that correspond to a basic division in the poet's consciousness” (Spurr, 23), Spurr moves the physical action from the world of the poem into Eliot's consciousness. This emphasizes Eliot as the creator of all that happens in “The Waste Land” in a manner that suggests all physical experience is the product of consciousness. But Spurr, referring to images from the “The Waste Land” as “the material of the poet's organic inner world” (Spurr, 26), mixes the planes of reality and literary performance. The discrete consciousnesses Eliot presents in “The Waste Land” correlate with objects and sensory experiences within the poem itself. Though Eliot as poet creates both those consciousnesses and their physical surroundings, effective reading of the poem requires entry into his narrative world

¹ This trend continues in other critical interpretations of Eliot's poems that focus on metaphysical conditions and treat the objects connected to them as wholly symbolic rather than considering their effect on the metaphysical as physical entities. In contemplation of the woman in lines 97-98 of “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” Gabrielle McIntire identifies the problem of “trying to express the ineffable” (McIntire, 89) as a result of the inadequacy of language, but neglects the woman's interaction with a pillow and a shawl as she tries and fails to communicate through objects. Jewel Spears Brooker makes an important distinction about the connection between the physical and metaphysical in Eliot's work when she applies René Girard's assertion that “the ultimate object of desire is metaphysical; that is, the real object is not *having* but *being*, not acquiring an object, but constructing and protecting a self” (Laity, 134) to desire in “The Waste Land.” In her analysis, however, Brooker uses this idea not to examine how characters in “The Waste Land” create metaphysical content with objects but to shift interpretation from subject-object relations to that of a subjective experience that is reflected in objects but not constructed through them.

and interpretation of the way interior and exterior experience interact within that realm independent of their creator. Spurr claims that the hyacinth garden in “The Burial of the Dead” exists in an immaterial, higher plane of consciousness that is disconnected from physical reality but neglects that the physical gift of hyacinths creates identity in the poem: “You gave me hyacinths first a year ago / They called me the hyacinth girl” (35-36). The level of specificity with which Eliot incorporates objects and physical entities into the development of meaning and identity in his poems necessitates reflection on their effect.

One of the most illustrative examples of the richer role objects serve in Eliot’s poetry is the game of chess. In his reflections on Eliot’s game of chess, Ward ignores the objects themselves and focuses on the ideas they might represent. Ward writes that the game of chess “is not simply the complex tactics of sexual conquest, but the even more complex strategies of self-conquest, the search for a meditative harmony of the soul” (94). While his analysis of the unified sexual and individual struggle toward realization is valid, Ward overlooks the value the chess board and pieces add to the passage by demonstrating how subject and object project onto each other. This interpretation has endured; in his 2012 commentary on “The Waste Land,” Paul Claes echoes Ward, calling the game of chess “both a substitute for the game of love and a symbol of a disharmonious marriage” (87). Both critics dismiss the interplay of people, chessboard and pieces as a “substitute” for metaphysical concepts that exist in the absence of objects. But this interpretation distorts the game of chess as Eliot presented it.

Eliot’s image is one of subjects interacting both with objects and with each other, suggesting that objects serve as a medium through which humans communicate. By focusing only on the interaction between individuals, critics assume the object conveys meaning but does

not construct it. In Eliot's poems, however, the very terms of existence are defined by the relationship between subject and object — neither is independently meaningful. The line that followed "And we shall play a game of chess" (137) in Eliot's original draft of Section II of "The Waste Land," published in the facsimile and transcript edited by Valerie Eliot, exemplifies the significance of objects in the poem: "The ivory men make company between us" (19). This extension of the game of chess image underscores the importance of Eliot's objects and necessitates a more thorough consideration of the material in his poetry. The chess pieces, anthropomorphized as "ivory men," participate in the metaphysical interaction of two individuals. By bringing objects into the foreground, the poem illustrates how human relationship to the material has been essential to the construction of meaning and its deterioration. When the chess game's layers of metaphorical connotation, as pointed out by Ward and Claes, are united with this interactive role, Eliot's objects transcend the physical to create and navigate metaphysical experience.

Because critics view Eliot's objects as passive vehicles selected to express ideas that precede and supersede them, analysis of his poetry privileges subjects and metaphysical meaning. One justification of this approach can be found in Jewel Spears Brooker and William Charron's analysis of Eliot's theory of opposites using his interpretation of Immanuel Kant. The authors define Kant's concept of external experiences, as described in Eliot's "Report on the Relation of Kant's Criticism to Agnosticism," as incorporating "(1) the objects of experience...", "(2) sensory appearances..." and "(3) the subsistent categories and assumptions by which objects of experience are arrived at in respect of those appearances." Thus, Brooker and Charron conclude that "it makes no sense to try to determine the nature of objects *outside* the experience

of the subject, for there is no sense in which objects are outside, except spatially or temporally, and this sort of relation is itself within experience” (53).

However, while subjects may be said to create objects through their experience of them, objects remain both subjective and objective by virtue of their communicable nature. It must be acknowledged that objects do possess a quality outside of individual experience because they can be shared, interpreted and interacted with jointly, such as in the way chessmen can exist between two players and create shared meaning. Theorist Jane Bennett interprets this quality as the vibrancy of matter, suggesting it is possible to “equate affect with materiality” (Bennett, xiii). While I do not believe Eliot’s work implies, as Bennett’s does, that metaphysical and material experience are essentially the same, he does position the material form and the immaterial affect as natural partners that act on each other with corresponding, simultaneous force. Because subjective experience is inherently incommunicable in Eliot’s poetry², objects must function beyond the metaphysical to fulfill physical exchange, even as they transcend the physical to achieve metaphysical significance. Objects are not independent of experience, but neither are they limited to it. If experience creates objects, so are objects active in the creation of experience. Accordingly, experience cannot be said to be wholly independent of objects, and thus consideration of the material is necessary to interpret the immaterial.

Eliot’s own concept of metaphysical experience is rooted in the material. In his essay “Hamlet,” Eliot argues:

The only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding an ‘objective correlative’; in other words, a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be

² See my explanation of philosopher F.H. Bradley’s impact on Eliot’s work and his concept of impenetrable spheres of consciousness later in this essay.

the formula of that *particular* emotion ... The artistic ‘inevitability’ lies in this complete adequacy of the external to the emotion... (*Selected Prose of T.S. Eliot*, 48)

Eliot’s insistence on the importance of the “complete adequacy of the external to the emotion” necessitates consideration of physical and external conditions as active elements in the development of metaphysical experience³. Though Eliot’s critique of *Hamlet* may seem to suggest that the objective correlative is a secondary component that articulates a preexisting metaphysical condition, it is important to realize that Eliot is making a meta-statement about how reality is represented in literature. The objective correlative is necessary in the play because, to Eliot, it is inherent in life. What may be inserted by the author becomes part of the audience’s initial experience and can thus simulate how experience occurs naturally. Though the material correlation is perhaps defined last by the creator, Eliot supposes that it is an expression of something that is present throughout the formation of the idea. Eliot clarifies the relationship between idea and material in his essay “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” where he likens the act of creating poetry to a chemical reaction in which the poet’s mind serves as a catalyst:

When the two gases previously mentioned are mixed in the presence of a filament of platinum, they form sulphurous acid. This combination takes place only if the platinum is present; nevertheless the newly formed acid contains no trace of platinum, and the platinum itself is apparently unaffected: has remained inert, neutral, and unchanged. The

³ The consideration of content from Eliot’s essays may appear to exhibit the problems of the intentional fallacy. However, distinction must be made between applying an author’s reflections on a particular piece of their own work in critical analysis and the use of the author’s critical frame of thinking to determine how a text should be approached. In his prose, Eliot is not commenting on or making an example of any of his poems but presenting his understanding of the construction of metaphysical experience in literature. This offers insight to the theoretical structures that may be present in any of Eliot’s poems and does not stray into the fallacious territory of adopting Eliot’s interpretation of his own work. Thus, to use his concept of the objective correlative to access a text is more similar to analyzing a Marxist’s work through a Marxist lens than to applying an author’s explanation of his work in its interpretation.

mind of the poet is the shred of platinum. ...the more perfect the artist...the more perfectly will the mind digest and transmute the passions which are its material. (*Selected Prose of T.S. Eliot*, 40)

This analogy suggests that the gases representing emotions and images must combine with the more physically stable piece of platinum that is the poet's mind to create a complete idea. The end result is composed only of the metaphysical ideas yet could not have formed without the unchanged catalyst. Eliot's model of the catalytic reaction illustrates how the objective correlative functions to give meaning to metaphysical content. Though not necessarily present in the affect produced, the object is necessary to its creation; the gaseous emotions are given sensible meaning through their contact with the physical catalyst. The mind itself must "digest and transmute the passions" because they are its "material." With this assertion, Eliot suggests both an objective and a subjective correlative that give each other meaning and context. In Eliot's poetry, neither the physical nor the metaphysical precedes the other because neither can be perceived without the other. Therefore the two should be presented in literature as they occur in life: as two actant forces (in Bruno Latour's sense of the term⁴) operating in concert. The directionless existence in Eliot's poems should thus be understood as the result of a flawed relationship between the metaphysical and physical; each must participate in the decline because Eliot considers both to be equal partners in the construction of experience. To extend Eliot's analogy, the catalyst has been rendered ineffectual or absent such that the reaction cannot create the intended product. The emptiness of Eliot's modern world is therefore not a mere symptom of

⁴ Latour's actant refers to both human and non-human actors, suggesting that physical and metaphysical entities both participate in networks of insistance and resistance (Harman, 14).

interior distress but a consequence of the failure of human interaction with the external to produce meaning adequate to metaphysical experience.

Eliot develops a distinct model of physical and metaphysical exchange by identifying the objective correlative as essential to meaningful experience. This model can be applied to his poems to interpret them through a theoretical frame not usually associated with his work. To trace Eliot's conception of how these elements lead to the loss of meaning presented in his poetry, it is necessary to consider the relationship between subjects and objects throughout the poems. By consulting the poems themselves as well as theoretical sources, it is possible to form a more comprehensive understanding of how Eliot uses subject-object relationships to develop the complexities of meaning found in "The Waste Land," "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" and "Preludes."

II. Thing theory and the objective correlative

Exploring subject-object relationships as they are portrayed and commented on in Eliot's poetry requires a basic grasp of object-oriented philosophy. Though Eliot's work predates thing theory, his ideas connect to those of theorists who examine a longstanding connection between subjects and objects. In *A Sense of Things*, thing theorist Bill Brown addresses the cultural and personal fascination with objects that has shaped how the physical is represented in literature. Brown examines the way humans "use objects to make meaning, to make or remake ourselves, to organize our anxieties and affections, to sublimate our fears and shape our fantasies" (4). The modern phenomenon of mass production has placed a plethora of objects in people's homes, routines and thoughts, but Brown suggests that there is a specific allure in objects, in addition to their abundance, that makes them so integral a part of human life. Humans, Brown writes, are

constantly looking for “the idea in the thing” (an expression derived from William Carlos Williams’ “Paterson”), an elusive concept that is both “everywhere and nowhere” (*A Sense of Things*, 7). The idea that makes an individual’s relationship to a thing meaningful fulfills the same role as Eliot’s objective correlative; in both, the subject relies on a particular objective condition to shape, organize and contain their consciousness. Humans use objects to produce meaning based on the ideas perceived in them. Yet the ideas that create this meaning are provided by the person interpreting the purpose of an object, rendering the object itself a subjective extension of one’s own ideas. Thus, two elements are present in the material: the object as it is perceived and the “Thing in excess of the object” (*A Sense of Things*, 42), the materiality that exceeds the subject’s expectations and attention. The thing is the object, and yet more, or as Brown describes, “all at once, *the thing seems to name the object, even as it names some thing else*” (*Things*, 5). Brown illustrates this concept using the example of the royal seal in Mark Twain’s *The Prince and the Pauper*. When two physically identical boys inadvertently switch places, leaving the pauper in the royal palace and the prince in Offal Court, none can differentiate between the two. The death of the king leads to a coronation ceremony in which the pauper is nearly crowned before the prince steps in. Though the prince claims to be the genuine heir and the pauper admits the truth, their physical similarity prevents the court from believing their claims. To determine which of the two boys should be named king, their metaphysical difference must be established. This is done through their interaction with the Great Seal of England; the boy who can give the location of the seal will be named king. While it is the pauper who remembers where the seal itself is and must help the prince recall its location, he understands it not as an object endowed with enormous significance to the kingdom but one that

can be used to crack nuts. The seal itself has a dual identity as royal symbol and physical thing. It is the meaning the prince is able to associate with the seal that produces the proper king. In this way, “the thing really names less an object than a particular subject-object relation” (*Things*, 4). While the subject produces the meaning, or objecthood, of the object, the thing also produces meaning in the subject — just as the prince gives the seal meaning, the seal produces his identity as the true heir. The two project onto each other such that objects take on a metaphysical quality in their interaction with subjects, while subjects themselves use objects to define the immaterial, trying to shape intangible identity through physical objects that can be seen, shared and manipulated.

Under these circumstances, objects become a medium of communication by a means that is especially relevant given philosopher F.H. Bradley’s influence on Eliot’s work. Bradley conceived the individual human consciousness as an impenetrable sphere such that “every sphere is opaque to the others which surround it” (Bradley, 346), a representation that is particularly active in “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock.” The impossibility of expressing meaning across consciousnesses necessitates an alternative form of communication. For Eliot, as for thing theorists, objects take up that burden. The complication lies in how subjects make objects speak for them, a process that, as described by Friedrich Nietzsche, erases unique meaning and further reduces perception of self as well as surroundings. In “On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense,” Nietzsche writes that to understand nature, “we produce these representations in and from ourselves with the same necessity with which the spider spins” (87). Creating a web of physical meaning that is suited to human understanding results in “metaphors which correspond in no way to the original entities” (83). According to Nietzsche, man can accept this model “only by

forgetting that he himself is an *artistically creating* subject,” when “He forgets that the original perceptual metaphors are metaphors and takes them to be the things themselves” (86). Eliot’s individuals suffer symptoms of the fate Nietzsche predicts for the man whose perception wanders outside of these constraints: “his ‘self consciousness’ would be immediately destroyed ... For between two absolutely different spheres, as between subject and object, there is no causality, no correctness, and no expression” (86).

In application to Eliot’s poetry, thing theory must be considered alongside Eliot’s concept of the objective correlative. As the substance is infused with the subject — and is thus reduced to the object as the subject perceives it — the physical is rendered subjective such that there can be no objective correlative. In objects, subjects see something of self, while the thing itself recedes from view and “exists only as absence” (*A Sense of Things*, 50), meaningful to the human mind only when it is not present or suitably functional to reflect the ideas associated with it. A mirror is not meaningful as a thing until it is broken, or too dirty to reflect the subject. When it operates as is expected, the image perceived in the glass — most often the reflection of the subject — is all that is distinguishable. In the way a mirror provides a physical reflection that renders the thing itself invisible, all physical objects produce metaphysical reflections of the subject that distract from their own form and meaning. Thus the objective circumstances that Eliot argues should correlate to metaphysical experience are inaccessible as all physical entities — including material objects, natural surroundings and the human body itself — have been obscured by the subjective. This is evident in the subjugation of physical experience and interaction by interior conflict and reflection in “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock.” Defining objects in terms of

subjects conceals the objective meaning itself and, by extension, skews the perception of the subject such that meaningful experience cannot be identified.

This model of subject-object relationships elucidates new meaning in “The Waste Land,” “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” and “Preludes,” poems that consistently return to conflict and confusion between the material and the immaterial. To address the interactions between subjects and objects within the poems and their connection to meaning in Eliot’s work, three significant themes should be considered: the conflation of subject and object, the object’s role as a symbol for metaphysical content, and the function of the body as an object that contains the subject. The three poems discussed each contribute to these themes and, taken together, clarify the essential function of objects in the ideas Eliot communicates.

III. Subject and objects: a vanishing distinction

In “Preludes” Eliot demonstrates that subject and object are not only connected but that each is defined in terms of its relationship to the other to the extent that the two become almost indistinguishable. By describing a repetitive working-class lifestyle and urban landscape, Eliot emphasizes how individuals are conflated with the acts and eventually the objects that define their lives. As the subject becomes part of the object, such as in the image of the “muddy feet that press / to early coffee-stands” (17-18), in which people are condensed into a physical extension of the street, the object is infused with the subject. Throughout the first two stanzas of “Preludes” the subject is present only in a hybrid object-subject form in which the action primarily belongs to the object. This changes when the poem declares “you tossed a blanket from the bed” (24); here, the subject acts back on the object, but is not independent of it. Instead, the person described is immobilized between bed and ceiling, and the spiritual content of the

individual is literally projected onto the physical surroundings: “The thousand sordid images / Of which your soul was constituted; / They flickered against the ceiling” (27-29). The soul — that which is most specific to the subject — replaces the surface of the object, emphasizing the union between subject and object that is illustrated throughout the poem and suggesting that the object as a distinct entity no longer exists. The “flickering” instability of the relationship, however, indicates that this arrangement is neither sustainable nor sufficient to support the subjective identity. This idea is developed further in the fourth stanza’s image of a man’s “soul stretched tight across the skies / That fade behind a city block” (39-40). The soul “stretched tight” appears as unequal to enveloping the physical world as the ceiling is to containing the soul. In these two parallel images, Eliot suggests that though they are often exchanged, subject and object are not equivalent — neither can truly contain the other. In “Preludes,” subjective identity merges with physical entities, its existence defined as much by the breadth of the sky or the expanse of the street where it is “trampled by insistent feet” (41) as by its human state. This union alters both the conditions of interior existence and the effects of the exterior such that human spiritual and sensory experiences are limited by the connotations exchanged between subject and object. The “blackened street / Impatient to assume the world” (46-47) can no longer be perceived in its base physical form, yet neither can it function as subject. It bears the weight of a collective, subjective “conscience” (46) and exists in terms that are defined by the subject who has “such a vision of the street / as the street hardly understands” (33-34). When the street prepares to “assume the world,” it takes on not only the physical weight of bodies but the metaphysical burden of a perception it cannot reciprocate. The “fancies that are curled / Around these images, and

cling” (48-49) imbue visions of the material with subjectivity such that it is not possible to determine where object ends and subject begins.

The boundaries between subject and object are similarly blurred in “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock.” In the poem’s opening, the “half-deserted streets” and “muttering retreats” Prufrock proposes to guide the reader through can be understood to represent either the physical streets of Prufrock’s reality or his own mental space likened to those streets (4-5). Regardless of the interpretation favored, the opening image is a striking convergence of metaphysical and physical characteristics. If the reader assumes a physical location, the depiction of “Streets that follow like a tedious argument / Of insidious intent” (8-9) and the image of the evening “spread out against the sky / Like a patient etherized upon a table” (2-3) suggest resemblance between the physical and that which is human in content and shape. Conversely, if one views Prufrock’s journey as one that takes place solely in his mind, the “half-deserted streets,” “one-night cheap hotels” and “sawdust-restaurants with oyster-shells” serve as physical markers that organize thought (4...6-7). By transforming the human mind into a field that can be expressed through a physical framework, Eliot foreshadows Brown’s assertion that the tale “of being possessed by possessions...is a tale not just of thinking of things but also of trying to render thought thing-like” (*A Sense of Things*, 5). Brown extends his analysis of this captivation to the way humans form object-based methods of historiography and anthropology, attempts that merge the subjective and the objective in a manner similar to Eliot’s Prufrock. This tendency is evidenced in the poem by Prufrock’s melding of conceptual and physical space as well as the proclamation “I have measured out my life with coffee spoons” (51), which implies subjective experience is made comprehensible by its relation to tangible objects. The same connection is made in “The

Waste Land” in several instances when the physical evokes the metaphysical or endows it with communicable substance. While the previous images from “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” illustrate the metaphysical being projected onto the physical and translated through material comparisons, when “the human engine waits / Like a taxi throbbing waiting” (216-217) in “The Waste Land,” the physical form is used to represent that which is incommunicable in the subject. As the object serves as a stand-in for the human soul, object and subject are fully merged, the taxi enveloped by spiritual force and the soul thrumming with mechanistic energy. The physical and metaphysical become increasingly connected and interchangeable, forcing the material object to represent the immaterial subject in an arrangement that complicates the meaning of both.

IV. Eliot’s object as a symbol for metaphysical content

As the ideas of object and subject are conflated in Eliot’s poems, objects take on a variety of metaphysical roles. In “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” the object becomes a more effective medium of communication than the language of individuals who are too conflicted to truly speak. Prufrock is overwhelmed by an assault of sensory experiences, from the endless stream of “evenings, mornings, afternoons” (50-51) to the “tea and cakes and ices” (79) that he shares with a woman, such that the physical has subdued his ability to “force the moment to its crisis” (80) and take control of his own expression. Rather, physical entities such as Prufrock’s attire seem to be in conversation with the external world, communicating messages through material context without the willful participation of the subject. When Prufrock presents “My morning coat, my collar mounting firmly to the chin, / My necktie rich and modest, but asserted by a simple pin,” it evokes a response: “[They will say: ‘But how his arms and legs are

thin!']” (42-44). Consumed by the sensory to the point of desensitization, Prufrock cannot communicate metaphysical messages without physical symbols. By interacting with and manipulating objects throughout the poem, Prufrock attempts to represent himself through increasingly ludicrous means. By the poem’s end, he agonizes over small but sensational changes he might make to his appearance and habits — “I shall wear the bottoms of my trousers rolled. / Shall I part my hair behind? Do I dare to eat a peach?” (121-123) — but while the material communicates more effectively than Prufrock, it fails to reflect the interior. For Prufrock, the physical must represent the metaphysical, yet it cannot do so in a meaningful way. This plight is shared by Prufrock’s would-be female companion who he imagines

settling a pillow or throwing off a shawl

And turning toward the window, should say:

“That is not it at all,

That is not what I meant, at all.” (107-110)

The interaction with a pillow or shawl suddenly becomes full of significance, but it is not the right kind of significance — Prufrock believes the woman would feel that even her actions, defined by objects, would be misunderstood. The act of adjusting a pillow serves as a form of demonstrative communication that could express an invitation, an indication or an emotion, but the woman encounters the realization that an object cannot articulate what she experiences. Though objects seem to be the only viable option for subjects attempting to reveal themselves, objects alone are not sufficient to depict the immaterial meaning the individual most desires to make intelligible.

Brown suggests that when objects are endowed with meaning they cannot suitably contain, the result is inevitable: “objects always mediate identity, and always fail” (*A Sense of Things*, 49). As objects absorb interchangeable identities based on subjective perception, their ability to signify meaning is eliminated even as the subject relies on it most heavily. In Eliot’s poetry, objects fall short of conveying metaphysical meaning and subjects cannot perceive them without projected images. The chess game in “The Waste Land” can facilitate communication on a material plane because the significance of the objects has been limited to one purpose that both players can access. The movement of a piece, in the context of the chess game, has a defined meaning that the shawl and pillow in “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” lack. But though “the ivory men make company” (*Facsimile*, 19) between two individuals, these objects are effectual only within the game — the pieces cannot create an enduring connection, nor can they convey meaning great enough to offer metaphysical resolution. They can, however, serve as a medium through which subjects can make contact that, while not entirely satisfying, rests on the capacity of objects to facilitate the passage of meaning from one subject to another. This conversation, composed of gestures via objects rather than language, is made possible by the shareable nature of objects. The physical forms themselves are communicable, but the ideas they represent are mangled in translation. In spite of these limitations, objects are continually used to frame metaphysical content. The physical pieces of the room in “A Game of Chess” are infused with the subject and together their physical forms and the woman’s energy simulate meaning. The objects of the room give the woman a space in which she can comprehend herself, yet her anxious questions and use of “The hot water at ten,” “a closed car at four” and “a game of chess” to define her existence suggest that she understands nothing more than her own perception of

objects (135-137). The material defines her experience of reality. When the woman begins a conversation with an unnamed partner whose words are presented as if in response to hers but lack the quotation marks that enclose her statements, the possibility that she is not speaking to another person must be considered:

“What is that noise?”

The wind under the door.

“What is that noise now? What is the wind doing?”

Nothing again nothing.

“Do

You know nothing? Do you see nothing? Do you remember

Nothing?”

I remember

Those are pearls that were his eyes.

“Are you alive, or not? Is there nothing in your head?” (117-126)

The frantic questions the woman asks, in particular those of the last line quoted here, suggest she is engaged in an anxious interior conversation, but the questions themselves are addressed to the objects that define her existence as well as to herself. Because the concepts of self and material are conflated, she questions the vitality of the objects that surround her as much as she questions her own. The answer finally produced in “I remember / Those are pearls that were his eyes” returns to the material, focusing on the detail of objects that offer meaningful identity. In the facsimile, the voiceless response reveals Eliot’s association even more plainly: “I remember / The hyacinth garden. Those are pearls that were his eyes, yes!” (*Facsimile*, 19). The woman in

the boudoir begs for some knowable reality, and is continually redirected to the physical by her own consciousness. The use of objects to frame spiritual content results in the subject questioning their own potency as well as that of objects, ultimately unsure which, if either, is real. Thus, she demands personality and intention from objects, that she might believe it in herself:

“My nerves are bad to-night. Yes, bad. Stay with me.

Speak to me. Why do you never speak? Speak.

What are you thinking of? What thinking? What?

I never know what you are thinking. Think.” (111-114)

Eliot expresses the woman’s impulse to contain the metaphysical using objects as one that is inherent to the subjective experience. Though the reader is not invited into her consciousness as in “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” Eliot presents the objects of the boudoir such that they might surround the imagination of the reader as they do the section’s subject. The result of this arrangement of objects is that they hush “the room enclosed” (106). In this image, Eliot illustrates how subjects use objects to outline the metaphysical. Though walls, framed paintings and ceiling patterns are wholly physical entities, they unite to contain more than physical space. The collaboration of objects creates an enclosed area that can be, like the boudoir, full of significance beyond the material. To capture a metaphysical concept, one arranges objects. By this process, the physical is again made to speak for the metaphysical regardless of whether it can successfully articulate its meaning. Despite human reliance on material expression to facilitate awareness and interpretation of the immaterial, Eliot maintains

that physical compositions only reflect spiritual content while the subject exists to project and perceive it. The human presence, he contends, is

not to be found in our obituaries
Or in memories draped by the beneficent spider
Or under seals broken by the lean solicitor
In our empty rooms (406-409).

When the consciousness of a subject who associates meaning with particular objects ceases to exist, Eliot's objects return to a state where the only symbol produced is their materiality — until another subject repurposes and absorbs them afresh.

V. The human body as a container for subjectivity

The substitution of the material for the immaterial is represented throughout “Preludes,” “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” and “The Waste Land,” but perhaps the most comprehensive example is in the epigraph that crowns “The Waste Land.” Eliot quotes from the *Satyricon*, heading his poem with the image of the Cumaean Sibyl⁵. The significance of this image is perhaps not apparent in the quote itself, but in the context. The Sibyl was granted eternal life by Apollo, but neglected to ask for eternal youth (Ovid, 329). Her body withered away and when, in the *Satyricon* passage Eliot quotes, she is asked what she wants and replies, “I want to die,” she speaks from the jar that holds her shrunken remains together (Petronius, 67). The Sibyl illustrates the physical union of subject and object such that the immaterial self cannot exist without the frame of the material. The Sibyl predicts that eventually all that will remain of her is a voice within the jar, and she is thus reduced to a communicative impulse that is still

⁵ Eliot's translation for the epigraph that is printed in Greek and Latin above the poem reads: “I saw with my own eyes the Sibyl at Cumae hanging in a cage, and when the boys said to her: ‘Sibyl, what do you want?’ she answered: ‘I want to die’” (*Facsimile*, 126).

mutated by physical objects. The plea for death that Eliot chose to inscribe before the text of “The Waste Land” asserts that to lack any identity independent of the physical is an unendurable condition of existence, as is suggested on a less literal level throughout the poem.

The dramatic image of the Sibyl’s relationship with the jar is fitting because Eliot’s poems do not merely express a dysfunctional relationship between subjects and objects but between body and self⁶. The Cumaean Sibyl represents a painful misappropriation of subject, body and object. If the subject is connected to the metaphysical realm and the object to the physical, the body might hold an intermediary position as a product of nature that is inherently connected to the subject. However, the image of the Sibyl suggests that the body, like subject and object, suffers from misuse. In the same way that subjective perception utilizes objects to enclose the metaphysical concept of a room, so does the body serve to contain the evasive and intangible idea of the soul. Therefore the body functions as an object representing metaphysical meaning because the subject cannot understand even its most intimate workings without a physical surrogate. Eliot strengthens this connection in “The Burial of the Dead,” using images of water, sediment and shadow to communicate meaning. In this complex interaction of images, “There is shadow under this red rock” (25) but the rigid stone produces “no sound of water” (24). The shadow is created by a physical entity yet lacks the tangible qualities of a rock or a body. Water, as it is referenced in “What the Thunder Said,” is necessary to achieve a more significant form of meaning and counter the sterility of dry rock and thunder: “If there were water we should stop and drink / Amongst the rock one cannot stop or think” (335-336.) As water seems to connote

⁶ Note that this distinction differs from Latour’s definition of subjective actants. Latour’s actant encompasses all of the particular features of an entity, physical and metaphysical, as one concrete whole (Harman, 14). An individual is, in Latour’s terms, an actant that consists of both immaterial identity and physical form. In this analysis, the subject as actant does express a relation of physical and spiritual qualities. However, I address metaphysical identity and physical form as connected but distinct concepts.

spiritual realization and cognition, the images of rock and dust accentuate the material nature of the physical form. The speaker's offer to "show you fear in a handful of dust" (30) recalls the biblical description of the creation of man in which "the Lord God formed the man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being" (*The Holy Bible: New International Version*, Genesis 2.7). Eliot reminds the reader that human existence is little more than animation of the material — and yet, with the presence of shadow and the concept of water, perhaps something more lives in that dust. The idea of "something different from either / Your shadow at morning striding behind you / Or your shadow at evening rising to meet you" (27-29) emphasizes the necessity of the physical form to the shadow's creation and the existence of a unique presence caught between the two. In the mind of the subject, the soul attains conceivable existence only through its connection to the body, and is thus dependent on a physical source in the same way the shadow relies on the rock or the body that strides. Following the implications of Eliot's image, the existing relationship between physical and metaphysical concepts cannot create meaning because it is based on the need for the material to produce an expressible form of immaterial content. This, Eliot insists, is not possible because "the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief, / And the dry stone no sound of water" (23-24). Without meaning that coexists with rather than relies on physical context, the spiritual as it can be defined by the material amounts to nothing more than "A heap of broken images" (22).

Eliot delivers this essential point in the beginning of "The Waste Land" and illustrates the idea in images throughout the poem as well as in "Preludes" and "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock." In all three poems, the body is dismembered in a series of synecdochic images that

focus on the interaction of a particular body part with an object. In “Preludes,” “One thinks of all the hands / That are raising dingy shades / In a thousand furnished rooms” (21-23), an image of the subject that relies solely on the interaction of the body with the material. This model is repeated in “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” where the body in connection with objects is substituted for all that is immaterial about a woman. “Arms that are braceleted and white and bare / [But in the lamplight, downed with light brown hair] / ... Arms that lie along a table, or wrap about a shawl” (63-64, 67) are made meaningful only by the complementary effect of objects. By associating the body more closely with the material than with the individual, Eliot demonstrates its role as an object that contains the subject.

The body is of particular significance in the relationship between subject and object because the subject is bound to the body by more than context. Because there is an intimate connection between the physical and metaphysical elements that together express an individual, the objectification of the body results in a decline of the spirit. In Eliot’s poems, objects and subjects lack the distinct definitions necessary to meaningful collaboration between metaphysical experience and an appropriate objective correlative. In “Preludes” and “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” Eliot does little to offer any resolution of this difficulty. The final section of “The Waste Land,” however, presents a harmonization of body, subject and object to counter the perversion of the Cumaean Sibyl image.

Damyata: The boat responded

Gaily, to the hand expert with sail and oar

The sea was calm, your heart would have responded

Gaily, when invited, beating obedient

To controlling hands (418-422).

In this closing image, Eliot's concept of *damyata* closes the trio of give, sympathize, control (*Facsimile*, 148) and is expressed through the collaboration of object and body with the metaphysical characteristics of expertise and control. The hand is, unlike previous images of arms and hands, linked not to the object, but to the metaphysical intention that drives it. Neither the boat nor the physical heart contains or represents the subject; both yield to that which engages them without either influencing the subject or being altered themselves. This means of connecting without conflating represents Nietzsche's assertion that "between two absolutely different spheres, as between subject and object, there is no causality, no correctness, and no expression, except perhaps an aesthetic one" (86). Subject and object reach an equal plane as actants that do not absorb or project meaning in excess of self. With this image, Eliot suggests that only through the formation of a human consciousness that does not assume precedence over physical concepts but invites them to share in the creation of experience can the individual have a productive correlation to the material world. Eliot imagines an interaction between subject and object in which neither subsumes the other and the two together create meaningful experience, a relationship approximated in one of the poem's last remarks: "These fragments I have shored against my ruins" (430). A partnership of actants, in which identity is as concrete as objects and material is both dynamic and intentional, Eliot suggests, allows one to support metaphysical identity through physical reality without constructing one from the other. It is by this path that man might reach "*Shantih*" (433), the state Eliot interprets as "the Peace which passeth understanding" (*Facsimile*, 149).

VI. Interpreting Eliot's concepts in a modernist context

Entering into the theoretical perspective of object-oriented philosophy allows one to observe how objects are used to create, organize and contain identity in Eliot's poems and in modern life. This insight is constructive to understanding how the tendency of objects to "always mediate identity, and always fail" (*A Sense of Things*, 49) functions in modern literature. Eliot's physical objects are distorted by the projection of subjective identity, such as in "Preludes," to the extent that subject and object are almost indistinguishable, though objects can never truly absorb and convey the metaphysical meaning subjects perceive in them. Despite the fact that physical entities are ultimately unsuited to bear this meaning in excess of form, Eliot illustrates how objects are nonetheless used to represent metaphysical content through communication and serve as markers of identity in "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" and "The Waste Land." While human fascination with and co-optation of objective meaning is presented as an inherent impulse connected to modern existence, Eliot suggests in "The Waste Land" that the perversion of the relationship between body, object and subject can be countered with a consciousness that treats subjects and objects as correlative, actant forces in the construction of experience. The crucial difference Eliot indicates is that one must understand materiality as complementary to metaphysical meaning rather than rely on physical context to create or describe the subject.

The model of subject-object relations that can be derived from Eliot's poetry is significant to criticism and interpretation of Eliot's work as well as that of other modernist authors. By investigating the relationship between perceived objects and subjective identity, Eliot calls into question our understanding of ourselves and the factors, both metaphysical and material, that construct reality. Eliot's use of the individual consciousness and physical objects in "Preludes," "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" and "The Waste Land" contributes to theoretical

discussions continued by Martin Heidegger, Latour, Brown and others. In particular, his ideas about spiritual and material reality as conceived by man offer commentary on the modern question of reality that remains a compelling point of study for contemporary theorists. A worthwhile course of further study should more closely examine the development of object-oriented philosophy in the work of theorists including Heidegger and Latour to better evaluate its application to modernist literature. Many texts of the modern period are particularly suited to this line of inquiry given the rise of commodified objects and the decline of a universal reality and identity in the early twentieth century, conditions that intersect in the frenzy of production and destruction that marked the world-war era. In particular, I believe the work of authors including Mark Twain, D.H. Lawrence and Virginia Woolf should be considered to develop a more complete understanding of subjectivity and materiality in twentieth-century literature. As in *The Prince and the Pauper*, in other of his stories Twain explores subject-object relations and how objects — or merely the idea of them — can have both metaphysical and physical effects as actants. Lawrence and Woolf go even further in novels including *Sons and Lovers* and *To the Lighthouse*, attending to how physical appearances, symbols and interactions create metaphysical content and influence characters' perceptions and actions. Studying the exchange of meaning and power between subjects, objects and concepts in these and other texts offers valuable insight to the modern consciousness and how individuals and societies interpret interior and exterior experience as structures that define reality.

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