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T. S. ELIOT: LOVE IN A WORLD WITHOUT OBJECTS

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ABSTRACT

T. S. Eliot's early triumphs as a poet are inseparable from his sensuous apprehension of everyday objects from the streets and drawing rooms of the cities in which he spent his youth. His graduate work in philosophy at Oxford includes a theoretical analysis of objects, and his early literary criticism includes several discussions of the importance of balancing subjects and objects, notably the formulation of the "objective correlative" in a 1919 essay on *Hamlet*. In 1926, in a series of eight lectures at Cambridge University (the Clark Lectures), he addressed the breakdown of objectivity associated with Descartes and, using the poetry of Dante and Donne, explored the deleterious effect of the Cartesian moment on the poetry of love. My aim in this paper is to demonstrate the essential continuity between art and ideas – that is, between Eliot's poetry and his early work in philosophy.[2]

Keywords: Eliot; objects; objective correlative; Descartes; Donne; Dante.

Between 1909 and 1911, T. S. Eliot wrote four poems that mark the transition from Romanticism to Modernism in English poetry – "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock", "Portrait of a Lady", "Preludes", and "Rhapsody on a Windy Night". One of the keys to his success in these poems was the ability to avoid direct expression of emotion by filtering feeling through objects observed on the streets and in the drawing rooms of the four river cities in which he spent his youth – St. Louis, Boston, Paris, and London. The eye in the text of "Preludes" and "Rhapsody" is focused on objects on the street, such as burnt-out cigarettes and

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[2] This paper originated as a talk for the International Association of University Professors of English (IAUPE) at Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznan, Poland, in July 2019.

scraps of newspapers. In "Prufrock" and "Portrait", it is focused on objects from both outside and inside, from oyster-shells and clocks on the street to coffee spoons and bowls of lilacs in elegant interiors.

Over the next few years, as a graduate student in philosophy at Harvard and Oxford, Eliot studied the nature and reality status of objects. In the fall of 1914, he wrote several seminar papers on the interdependence of subjects and objects and drafted a Ph.D. dissertation that underscored this necessary reciprocity.[3] In 1919, soon after his transition from philosophy to journalism, he highlighted the importance of projecting emotion in art by using what he calls an "objective correlative" – i.e., "a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that *particular* emotion; such that when the external facts … are given, the emotion is immediately evoked" (Eliot's italics; *Prose* 2.125).[4] His position on the importance of objects for poets was formalised in "Hamlet and His Problems" (1919). His preoccupation with objects is also behind his early admiration for T. E. Hulme and the Metaphysical poets.[5]

Eliot's most sustained literary discussion of objects occurs in 1926 in his Clark Lectures at Cambridge. The overall topic is the history of European love poetry from the thirteenth to the twentieth centuries, with emphasis on the seventeenth-century as a turning point precipitated by Descartes when he stated that "what we know is not the world of objects, but our own idea of these objects. … Instead of ideas … as references to an outside world, you have suddenly a new world coming into existence, inside your own mind and therefore … inside your own head" (*Prose* 2.635).[6] This separation of the thinker from the object of thought quickly became part of a broader breakdown in the history of ideas. Having argued that objects have no existence outside the mind, Descartes suggests that since the body is an object like any other, it may be merely a phantom conjured up by the imagination. As he explains in Meditation VI,

> I easily understand … that the imagination could be thus constituted if it is true that body exists; and because I can discover no other convenient mode of explaining it, I conjecture with probability that body does exist; but this is only with probability, and although I examine all things with care, I nevertheless do not find that from this

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3 Eliot's 1914 seminar papers at Merton College include two dealing with objects. His dissertation, submitted in 1916, published in 1964 under the title *Knowledge and Experience in the Philosophy of F. H. Bradley*, contains further analysis of subjects and objects.

4 Quotations from Eliot's prose are from *The Complete Prose of T. S. Eliot: The Critical Edition*. They will be referenced in the text, as above (i.e., *Prose* 2.125).

5 For Eliot's admiration of Hulme's Imagist poems, see "Reflections on *Vers Libre*" (1917). For one of several essays lauding the metaphysical poets, see "The Metaphysical Poets" (1921).

6 Quotations from *The Clark Lectures: Lectures on the Metaphysical Poetry of the Seventeenth Century*, are from *The Complete Prose of T. S. Eliot.*

> distinct idea of corporeal nature, which I have in my imagination, I can derive any argument from which there will necessarily be deduced the existence of the body.
> (qtd. in Eliot, *Prose* 2.635)[7]

In tracing the effect of this dismissal of the object on love poetry, Eliot focuses chiefly on Dante and Donne, promising to write later of Donne's successors, especially Laforgue. The chasm separating Dante and Donne, he maintains, is parallel to that separating Aquinas and Descartes. Aquinas and Dante believed in the reality of objects; Descartes and Donne allowed the mind to swallow not only the body but the external world. The question that Eliot asks in the eight Clark lectures is what happens to love poetry, and to love itself, in a world without objects. What happens when the subject is self-contained and self-sufficient, when ideas refer not to meanings outside the self, but to a world inside one's head?

Eliot's Clark lectures have two epigraphs, and taken together, they encapsulate his argument by juxtaposing lines of love poetry from the periods before and after Descartes. The first epigraph is from Dante's *Vita Nuova*, composed at the end of the thirteenth century, and the second is from an anonymous popular song, composed in the early twentieth.

> Madonna, lo fine del mio amore fu già il saluto di questa donna, forse de cui voi intendete; ed in quello dimorava la beatitudine, ch'e il fine di tutti li miei desiri.[8]

> I want someone to treat me rough.
> Give me a cabman.
>
> (*Prose* 2. 609)

The "end and aim" of the poet of the V*ita Nuova* is to achieve happiness by contemplating "the beauty and dignity of the object by stating the effect of that beauty and dignity upon the lover in contemplation" (*Prose* 2.655). In contrast, the aim of the contemporary singer is to achieve ecstasy through exploitation of the senses. The first balances the subject (the lover) and object (a beautiful woman who exists outside the lover). The second focuses entirely on the self.

Eliot's methodology is inductive, moving from particulars to generalisations (facts to interpretations). In the opening lecture, he chides those who "evolve from [their] insides" a theory and then search for works that embody it. Far better, he says, is beginning with the "material in hand" (*Prose* 2.612). He says that he

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7 Eliot quotes Meditation VI in French (*Oeuvres choisies de Descartes*. Paris: Garnier, 1865) and appends a note with the translation by Haldane and Ross (*Prose* 2.645 n7).

8 *La Vita Nuova* XVIII. "Ladies, the end and aim of my Love was but the salutation of that lady of whom I conceive that ye are speaking; wherein alone I found that beatitude which is the goal of desire", translated by Dante Gabriel Rossetti (*Prose* 2.623, n1). When Eliot includes Italian in a poem, as here, I retain it in the text and include a translation in a note.

will begin "with particular poems", chosen to illuminate the connection between poetry and philosophy (*Prose* 2.623). Eliot concentrates on poems of love and ecstasy, because love by definition deals with subjects and objects and ecstasy refers to a euphoric state in which subjects and objects are transcended. For the Cartesian moment, Eliot uses Donne's "The Extasie" (ca. 1602), and for the pre-Cartesian, the *Vita Nuova* (1292–1294).

Donne, Eliot suggests in "Donne in Our Time" (1931), was a major harbinger of Descartes (*Prose* 4.373). He anticipates the philosopher in two important ways – first, by emphasizing the primacy of intellect, and second, by assuming the disjunction between soul and body. In support of the first, Eliot maintains that exhibit number one is Donne's language. His conceits are farfetched and intellectual (which is why Samuel Johnson refers to them as "metaphysical").[9] In "The Extasie", Donne announces his topic in the title and plays on its literal meaning ("standing outside of") to posit the fusion of souls that have exited from their bodies. The opening stanza of "The Extasie" begins with such a conceit.

> Where, like a pillow on a bed,
> A pregnant bank swel'd up, to rest
> The violets reclining head,
> Sat we two, one anothers best.
>
> (qtd. in *Prose* 2.655)[10]

The mise-en-scène is clear enough – two lovers sitting on a river bank. Eliot claims that the poem "begins with one of the most hideous mixed figures of speech in the language". The simile comparing the bank to a pillow (and why, he asks "on a bed"?) "does neither dignify nor elucidate", and moreover, "the simile comes into sharp collision with a metaphor – the bank is pregnant". As a representation of "extasie", the bank should be motionless, but as Eliot notes, it "swells up" (and why?) "to provide a pillow for the drooping head of the violet" (*Prose* 2.655–56). Eliot objects to conceit after conceit, claiming that such bizarre figures obscure what Donne is trying to say about ecstasy. Regarding the famous image – "Our eye-beames twisted, and did thred / Our eyes, upon one double string" – Eliot says: "threading of the eyes like buttons on a double thread, one thread proceeding from each eye to the other, … fails to render the sense of losing oneself in an ecstasy of gazing into the eyes of a loved person; [moreover], it … aggravates the difficulty of finding out what it is all about" (*Prose* 2.656). Pointing to "that over-emphasis,

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9 Johnson, "Life of Cowley". In *The Lives of the Poets*, 11. "Of wit, … [the Metaphysical Poets] have more than enough. The most heterogeneous ideas are yoked by violence together; nature and art are ransacked for illustrations, comparisons, and allusions; their learning instructs, and their subtlety surprises; but the reader ... though he sometimes admires, is seldom pleased".

10 Quotations of Donne and Crashaw are as given in Eliot's *Clark Lectures*.

that strain to impress more than to state", Eliot adds a further point about Donne's conceits, one he was to repeat a few years later – "Donne was more interested in *ideas* as objects than in the *truth* of ideas" (Eliot's italics; *Prose* 4.373). He entertains ideas, without any indication that he believes them. His method involves "playing upon an idea, arresting it and turning it about for examination" (*Prose* 2.657). In the love poems, even when focused on sex, Donne shows more interest in the ingenuity of his thoughts than in the beloved other.

The second way in which Donne anticipates Descartes is his insistence on "a distinction, a disjunction, between soul and body" (*Prose* 2.658). Our bodies, Donne says, "are ours, though they are not wee. We are / The intelligences, they the spheare" (ll. 51–52). The main "idea" in "The Extasie" – "the union, the fusion and identification of souls in sexual love" (*Prose* 2.616) – requires this separation. The poem is divided into three movements. In the first (ll. 1–28), the scene is set, and although there are two bodies sitting by the river, there is only one soul. In the second (ll. 29–48), the effect of this fusion is revealed. The "new soule" – "interinanimated" by love – is stronger, "abler" than separate, embodied, souls; in a particularly sentimental touch, Donne suggests that the fusion mitigates loneliness.

> When love, with one another so
> Interinanimates two soules,
> That abler soule, which thence doth flow,
> Defects of lonelinesse controules.
>
> (*Prose* 2.657)

In the third movement, the lovers reanimate their bodies so that their love can be perceived by others.

> So must pure lovers soules descend
> T' affections, and to faculties,
> Which sense may reach and apprehend,
> Else a great Prince in prison lies.
> To our bodies turne wee then, that so
> Weake men on love reveal'd may looke;
> Loves mysteries in soules doe grow,
> But yet the body is his booke.
>
> (*Prose* 2.658)

The body in this drama is a prop that exists only as a means to an end. Eliot concludes that Donne's "conception of the ecstasy of union between two souls is not only philosophically crude but emotionally limiting" (*Prose* 2.659). Such word-games, moreover, especially in love poems, suggest a lack of seriousness by a poet "of profound and subtle intellect, for whom thought has lost its primary

value" (*Prose* 2.699). Dante, in contrast, understood the "good of the intellect" and placed those who had lost that good in the vestibule of Hell (*Inferno* III.16–18). This poem by Donne, Eliot argues, represents a defining moment in the "disintegration of the intellect". Some have associated Donne's ideas in "The Extasie" with Plato, but Eliot counters that "the separation of soul and body in this way is a modern conception". Neither Plato nor Aquinas would have accepted the idea that "two souls of separate bodies could form one" (*Prose* 2.659).

Eliot extends his argument about the deleterious effect of Cartesian dualism by looking at Richard Crashaw, whose poems were published in the same decade as the *Meditations*. He argues that Donne and Crashaw represent two different ways in which Descartes's attitude toward the object was realised in poetry. In Donne, the object disappears into the mind; in Crashaw, it disappears into the body. As "Donne is a voluptuary of thought"; Crashaw is a "voluptuary of religious emotion". "As with Donne the thought is split up into thoughts, each inspected and tasted, so with Crashaw the emotion is split up into emotions; instead of one emotion, … you have emotion piled on emotion, as a man drinks when he is afraid of becoming sober" (*Prose* 2.709). Eliot illustrates Crashaw's approach to the object by looking at "The Tear", a poem about the Virgin Mary. In a vivid example of the displacement of intellect by feeling, Crashaw addresses the tear falling from Mary's eye.

> Faire drop, why quak'st thou so?
> Cause thou streight must lay thy head
> In the dust? O no,
> The dust shall never be thy bed;
> A pillow for thee will I bring,
> Stuft with down of Angels wing.
>
> (qtd. in *Prose* 2.711)

Eliot says that Crashaw's apostrophe to the Virgin's tear represents a break between sense and thought. Donne "supplied a bank as a pillow for the drooping head of a violet; but Crashaw supplies a pillow, stuffed with … down from moulting angels … for the *head* – of a tear. One cannot conceive the state of mind of a writer who could pen such monstrosities" (Eliot's italics; *Prose* 2.711). With this comparison, Eliot returns to Donne. Both his intellectual ecstasy and Crashaw's emotional high are specious. Each in its own way represents the Cartesian moment in the history of poetry, a moment marked by an attitude towards the object that disfigures the poems in which it appears.

Using Donne's "Extasie" as a reference point, Eliot moves to a reading of the *Vita Nuova*, an autobiographical work in which love poems are connected by prose commentaries that give them shape and meaning. The poems were composed in late adolescence; the prose was added a decade or so later. Instead

of dividing himself into a soul and body, as Donne does, Dante doubles himself, as in the *Divine Comedy*, into a "then" and "now". Using the poems composed in his youth and what he finds in his "Book of Memory", he resurrects the young lover who is living through the experiences captured in the poems (the "then") and who does not understand them or know how they will turn out in the end. Using the prose composed in the present (the "now"), he presents himself as a mature man looking back and making sense of his experience. The break in time by which the self is doubled is crucial to understanding the *Vita Nuova*, for it enables Dante to hold the subject and object together without fusing them, as Donne does in the "Extasie". The poems composed in adolescence are subjective; the prose added in maturity encloses that subjectivity within a frame that is essentially objective. The ensuing dialectic binds the poetry and prose into a single unified work of art.

The background for the passage that Eliot quotes from the *Vita Nuova* is that Dante, at age nine, saw Beatrice and was smitten by her beauty; at age eighteen, he saw her again and she greeted him. This greeting, which has the quality of a miracle, leads to a vivid dream and to states of ecstasy. To conceal his obsession with Beatrice, Dante uses a "screen" lady, and is so fervent in this charade that his behaviour generates a scandal. When he sees Beatrice again, she refuses to greet him. Devastated by this rebuke, he attempts to regain her recognition.

> I come to see you hoping to be healed;
> But if I raise my eyes to look at you
> A trembling starts at once within my heart
> And drives life out and stops my pulses' beat.
>
> (*Vita Nuova* XVI, trans. Musa)[11]

A certain gentle lady finds his behaviour puzzling and asks him a crucial question. "To what end lovest thou this lady, seeing that canst not support her presence?" His response is the passage Eliot uses for his first epigraph, quoted earlier. He explains that henceforth his happiness will not be contingent on her salutation, but rather on the poems that he plans to write in praise of her.

Eliot's argument regarding the love poetry of the thirteenth and the seventeenth centuries includes two main points, both of which highlight the contrast between Dante and his successors, namely, Donne and Crashaw. The first is that both the subject and the object are real in Dante's love poetry; the second is that both subject and object are essential in the progress of the soul toward God. The early twentieth-century critic Remy de Gourmont and others had argued that Beatrice was not a real woman, but an ideal, essentially a figment of Dante's imagination. Eliot rejects this argument as part of the post-Cartesian

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[11] When quoting Dante as part of my analysis, as here, I use a translation.

tendency to deny the reality of the object (Prose 2.650). He insists that Beatrice was a young Florentine woman who was adored by Dante. Moreover, he maintains that Dante's memory of his childhood experience rings true.

> The *Vita Nuova* is to my thinking a record of actual experiences reshaped into a particular form. … The emotions … which Dante records as experienced at the age of nine, are not at all incredible; they are possible at an even earlier age, though I do not assert that a young person of nine would be able to formulate them consciously in those words.
>
> (*Prose* 2.650)

Eliot claims that the *Vita Nuova* is an objective work, comparable to "a scientific monograph, the record of experiments upon sentiment" (*Prose* 2.669). The objectivity, as suggested above, is achieved by doubling the self through the dialectic of the "then" and the "now". One of many passages that emphasize this dialectic occurs in *Vita Nuova* III. Dante writes a sonnet about the dream precipitated by Beatrice's greeting and sends it to his poet friends, including Guido Calvacanti, for commentary. They are bewildered, leading Dante to say: "The true interpretation of the dream I described was not perceived by anyone, *then*, but *now* it is very clear to even the least sophisticated" (italics added; *Vita Nuova* III, trans. Musa).

Dante's greatness, however, does not derive from his objectivity alone, but also from his ability to maintain an equilibrium between the subject and the object. In Dante, one finds

> a system of thought and feeling; every part of the system felt and thought in its place, and the whole system felt and thought; and you cannot say that it is primarily 'intellectual' or primarily 'emotional,' for the thought and the emotion are reverse sides of the same thing. In Donne you get a sequence of thoughts which are felt; in Crashaw … a sequence of feelings which are thought. In neither do you find a perfect balance.
>
> (*Prose* 2.718)

Dante was not only the most objective of poets; he was also the most subjective. In Eliot's reading, "the inner life of Dante was not only more extensive, but had heights of feeling unknown to [Donne]" (*Prose* 2.655). His view that Beatrice was a real woman did not prevent him from concurring in the common view that she is an ideal figure in an allegory of love, representing that beauty and beatitude which is the "aim" of love and that ultimate peace which is the "end" of love. As Charles Singleton (1949: 20) has shown by close attention to Dante's figurative language and his trinitarian numerology in the *Vita Nuova*, Beatrice is both a Florentine lady and a figure for Christ.[12]

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[12] It is now clear that Eliot's Dantean Lady in *Ash-Wednesday* was Emily Hale. The poet's love

Eliot's comparative analysis of thirteenth- and seventeenth-century poetry and philosophy led to a reformulation of one of his signature concepts, the "dissociation of sensibility". The problem of the unification of thought and feeling had been on his mind for years. In a 1921 review of Herbert Grierson's anthology of metaphysical poetry, he claimed that in the seventeenth century "a dissociation of sensibility set in from which we have never recovered" (*Prose* 2.380). In a comparison of seventeenth- and nineteenth-century poets, he argued that the earlier poets had a "unified sensibility", which enabled them to balance the subjective and objective aspects of human experience. His highest praise was reserved for Donne, to whom "a thought … was an experience; it modified his sensibility" (*Prose* 2.380). Nineteenth-century poets, by contrast, failed to integrate thought and feeling. Tennyson and Browning thought and felt, but unlike Donne, they did not "feel their thoughts as immediately as the odour of a rose" (*Prose* 2.380). In the Clark Lectures, Eliot reconsiders this position; instead of comparing Donne to Tennyson and Browning, he compares him to Dante. This shift of perspective results in a reversal of his evaluation of the seventeenth-century poets, who are now seen as representing the breakdown in the mind of Europe. Dante is the poet of the "unified sensibility", Donne the poet of dissociation, and Laforgue the poet of disintegration.

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for Hale, long suggested by Lyndall Gordon, was confirmed in 2020 by the release of his letters to her.

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