THE POWERS OF HORROR IN “THE LOVE SONG OF ST. SEBASTIAN”

AND “THE DEATH OF SAINT NARCISSUS”:

A STUDY OF ABJECION AND JOUISSANCE

IN T. S. ELIOT’S EARLY MARTYR POEMS

A Thesis

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Brendan Michael Johnston

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Department of English
Abstract

of
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The purpose of this essay is to perform a close examination of two of T. S. Eliot’s early, uncollected poems, entitled “The Love Song of St. Sebastian” and “The Death of Saint Narcissus.” One of the problems that arises in an appraisal of these poems is that they rest uneasily alongside his more prominent texts. Their psychosexual, masochistic fixation clashes with the more austere, detached portrayals of sexuality in his later poetry, and the confessional nature of the poems also conflicts with his declared poetics of impersonality that he describes famously in his essays “Tradition and the Individual Talent” and “The Functions of Criticism.” This essay undertakes a psychoanalytic reading of both of these poems, and also explores the persistence of their influence in his later work.

The research includes a number of primary, secondary, and tertiary texts. I have drawn heavily from Eliot’s own writings: his poetry, his essays, and also some of his lectures. His discussion of the differences between “classical mysticism” and
“romantic mysticism” in *The Clark Lectures* is an important touchstone in the explorations of the essay. My psychoanalytic reading is also grounded in the works of Jacques Lacan and Julia Kristeva, as well as the French Surrealist, Georges Bataille. In my second chapter I have made use of the ideas from Lacan’s first and third seminars to explore the symptoms of psychosis and neurosis in Eliot and his early poetic personas, Sebastian and Narcissus. And in my third chapter I use the Kristevan idea of abjection from her work *Powers of Horror* to accentuate the peculiar blend of “torture and delight,” “divine ecstasy and extreme horror” exhibited in Eliot’s sick saints. Also, Laurie MacDiarmid and Donald Childs, are two recent Eliot historians and critics that have figured prominently in triangulating my own reading of Eliot and his writings.

My research has revealed that, as much as Eliot created these saints to be examples of “sick spirituality” and a failed “romantic” mysticism, the unmistakable passion and *jouissance* that arises out of their abjection reveals that Eliot, the doubting neurotic, actually *desires* their psychotic certainty. He revisits the subject of martyrdom for a final time in his later play *The Cocktail Party*. It is here that he gives his final saint, Celia Copplestone, a more orthodox martyrdom, stripped of the blasphemy and narcissism of his earlier saints. While in the play she is the scapegoat and intercessor for the other characters that are trapped in banality the Modern world, more importantly she is Eliot’s own scapegoat. And like Saint Narcissus and
Sebastian, she achieves in her abjected, macabre, eroticized martyrdom the divine ecstasy that Eliot can only desire after but never personally achieve.

______________________________, Committee Chair
Dr. Joshua McKinney

______________________________
Date
DEDICATION

To Dr. Joshua McKinney, Dr. Brad Buchanan, and Dr. David Toise.
Dr. McKinney, for your amazing seminar on Eliot in the spring of 2009. It was the catalyst that inspired this essay.
Dr. Buchanan, for your continual encouragement to pursue the thesis as the culmination of my Masters experience.
And Dr. Toise, for introducing me to the critical theories of Lacan and Kristeva (among many others), and your insistence of the joy and freedom at the endless possibilities in reading texts.
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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

“Obviously, it is not enough for the subject to have selected a part of the text of what there is to say, while thrusting the rest aside, in the hope that with the part, things will hang together. There are always things that don’t hang together. This is an obvious fact, if we don’t begin with the idea that inspires all classical, academic psychology, which is that human beings are, as they say, adapted beings, because they are living, and therefore it must all hang together. You are not a psychoanalyst if you accept this.” Jacques Lacan, Seminar III “The Psychoses”

After nearly a century of critique on the poetry of T. S. Eliot, it is difficult to strike a new channel into Eliot’s œuvre. Far from being uncharted waters, the zones and demarcations of critique and inquiry have shifted and have been ceaselessly re-oriented over the 20th century, yielding a hyper-exhaustive assemblage of critiques as fragmented and cacophonous as *The Waste Land* itself. Unlike many other literary figures of the past, Eliot was certainly well-received and even embraced in his own time—both by academics and the broader poetic culture. His ideas on poetic aesthetic, Modernity, and literary criticism influenced the rising literary movement of the New Critics towards the end of his life; and they have certainly echoed in the close-reading formalism of literary pedagogy that has persisted even up to the present day. With the rise of Deconstruction and the broader Linguistic turn in literary studies, aspects of Eliot’s seminal texts such as *The Waste Land* and *Four Quartets*, have demonstrated, even presaged, the disparity between the signifier and the signified, the undecidability of meaning, the failure of language, “the heap of broken images” (Eliot, *Collected
Poems (CP) 53). However the most recent Social turn in literary criticism has moved decidedly on the attack, both towards his poetics and his personal life, interchangeably using one as the justification to excoriate the other. Social theory had made mincemeat of the austere, erudite, WASPish, exclusionary Modernist and his fascistic cohorts (i.e. Ezra Pound, Wyndam Lewis), and for very good reason. One need only read some of Eliot’s post-conversion, pre-WWII lectures (later furiously suppressed) to realize that Eliot very much professed deep-seated notions of intellectual, cultural, and even racial superiority, not identical but certainly adjacent to many of the Fascistic movements of the time. Many critics have also pointed out his unconscionable treatment of his first wife Vivienne. Their final separation was a result of Eliot consigning her to a mental institution for the remainder of her life. His chauvinism, his cultural elitism cannot be, and has not been overlooked in recent criticism.

But these vitriolic appraisals of Eliot’s personal life and poetic persona, while enlightening and very well-founded, too often dwell on his own faults and inconsistencies as a way to decry the hypocrisy and failure of Modernism. Eliot’s personal and literary transgressions become the scapegoat by which we reify our own new culture of criticism and literary aesthetic. As Laurie MacDiarmid asserts in the introduction to her essay on Eliot’s religious eroticism, perhaps in many ways our attack on Eliot is, at times, a transference of our own contemporary faults and insecurities. As she argues in her introduction,
We demand that authors reflect our most proper politics, or conversely, that the authors we read confirm our political convictions. The “fact” that we continue to write about Eliot in anything but the most scathing terms serves as the preeminent symptom in our own case histories as incipient haters…A reexamination of our own reactions to Eliot’s developing social poetic, may show us much about our own reconstruction of such matters as sexuality, poetics, politics and spirituality. Perhaps as we recoil from what we see as Eliot’s corrosive “conservatism,” we safeguard our own. (xvii-xviii).

To MacDiarmid it would seem that too often Eliot and his “damned Modernism” have become convenient whipping boys; that, in a biblical sense, we are pointing out the mote in Eliot’s eye while ignoring the log in our own. While MacDiarmid’s circumspect reading of Eliot is productive for new-century criticism, this is certainly not to assert that Eliot’s poetic and personal faults were miniscule. Indeed, there is a tremendous tree-trunk of hypocrisy and transgression that overshadows Eliot’s aesthetics and his personal life. And any psychoanalytic reading of Eliot will quickly shatter any image one might have of the austere British poet-critic/Modern sage to reveal instead a neurotic, xenophobic, sexually traumatized, closet-American, failed philosopher. Again, I stress that this is a premise of this thesis not the conclusion.
It is not a purpose of this essay to extend or supplement MacDiarmid’s intrepid cross-cultural critiques of Eliot and his Modernist poetics, but rather to use the tenor of her argument as a touchstone by which to observe Eliot and two of his earliest post-juvenile poems “The Love Song of St. Sebastian” and “The Death of Saint Narcissus.” As MacDiarmid playfully suggests, “it seems to be a truth universally acknowledged that any critic of Eliot must, these days, choose sides. Will you be an apologist or a judge?” (xvii). This essay will attempt a third way; neither seeking to exonerate nor excoriate Eliot, but rather to examine and analyze his early poetic voices as a Lacanian analyst would interrogate an analysand. To quote another Lacanian maxim regarding the subjectivity of the analyst/interpreter/critic:

This of course, is not a recommendation regarding technique, but a perspective on the question of the analyst’s desire for those who could not have any notion of how the analyst must safeguard the imaginary dimension of his nonmastery and the necessary imperfection for the other, is as important a matter to deal with as the deliberate reinforcement in the analyst of his nescience regarding each subject which comes to him for analysis, of an ever renewed ignorance so that no one is considered a “typical case.” (Ecrits 825).

While Eliot is certainly not a typical case, the desire in our reading of Eliot will be to enact moments of analysis that, while informed by Eliot’s cultural climate as well as
our own critical climate, nevertheless resist the moralizing, posturing, or the declaration “this all hangs together,” that Lacanian analysis would most certainly disavow. In other words we do not seek to “trace out and to bind together” (Pound 715) a God’s-eye view of the poet, the talent, and the man, but rather to discover moments where Eliot’s desire is revealed in both of his early martyr poems, each charged with religious passion and uncharacteristic sexual proclivity. For while his proximal relation to sex becomes more visibly and intentionally detached as his poetic career continues, the macabre eroticization of the martyr persists throughout Eliot’s poetic career and even haunts some of his late plays, especially The Cocktail Party.

Lyndall Gordon, Eliot’s most recent biographer, has made it alarmingly clear that Eliot lived a very “imperfect life.” But as her historical findings and MacDiarmid’s critical analysis also admit, the current state of our own culture and indeed our own critical lenses are far from utopian. So it is in this sense that I wish to undertake a criticism of Eliot, at times dwelling on the psychic instability of our poet and his early poetic personas. This will include an extended study of the psychosis of his peculiar saints in his early martyr poems, which I will argue emanates from his own acute neurosis and borderline hysteria. Furthermore, this essay will explore the persistence and influence of Eliot’s own psychic struggles in the evolution of his poetry, in contradistinction to Eliot’s own insistence in his theory and criticism towards a poetics of impersonality and austerity. Again, I wish to stress that Eliot’s
neurosis is far from enigmatic or peculiar. In fact, Freud and Lacan, as well as contemporary psychiatry, would argue that the vast majority of people (i.e. you, me, and Bobbie McGee) suffer from some form of neurosis. Eliot’s case history only happens to be more prominent because of his literary popularity; and the endurance of his texts gives us the means by which to put him on the couch. Indeed, the gradual sublimation of his heretical saints Sebastian and Narcissus into the Anglicanized version of the poet-saint in “The Dry Salvages,” and finally the missionary-martyr, Celia, in The Cocktail Party—this is not a peculiar but rather a textbook example of psychoanalytic repression. So rather than making Eliot a literary martyr, or the scapegoat of a debunked Modernism, a veritable St. Sebastian suffering the arrows of our contemporary sense of post-modern, post-coital, critical elitism—a role the young (and old) Eliot would be too happy to play—this essay rather seeks to examine and analyze Eliot’s early fascination with martyrdom, sick spirituality and abjection, the peculiar blend of suffering and passion (jouissance) that it engenders, and the persistence and transference of these ideas far into his late poetry and plays.

Eliot’s fascination and fetishization of martyrdom arises in various forms throughout the scope of his work: the martyred head of John the Baptist appears on the platter in the “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock”; the role of the martyr is ascribed to the poet-critic through his continual extinction of personality” in Eliot’s seminal essay “Tradition and the Individual Talent” (SE 40); the impotent, dying fisher-king
serves as a kind of intercessor in *The Waste Land*; towards the end of his poetic career, the saint appears again, perhaps in more orthodox form, in “The Dry Salvages.” And finally and most curiously, the martyr makes the first appearance in feminine form¹ in Eliot’s play, *The Cocktail Party*, where the mistress-turned-missionary, Celia, meets a fittingly abject death, crucified next to an ant-hill. However the first and most extensive appearance of martyrs occurs in his early erotic martyr poems, “The Love Song of St. Sebastian” and “The Death of Saint Narcissus.” Both poems were written around the time of Eliot’s voyage to England, “St. Sebastian” just before he left for Oxford in 1914 and “Saint Narcissus” shortly after he arrived in early 1915 (Gordon, *T. S. Eliot: An Imperfect Life*, 39-40).² Although these poems have received a bit more critical attention in the past few years, the lion’s share of the criticism concerns them as far as they pertain to or enlighten Eliot’s more conspicuous poetic efforts. The trouble that arises in an extended analysis of these poems is that they rest uneasily alongside the greater evolution of Eliot’s poetry. Their overt, untempered eroticism and there blasphemous mingling with religious subject matter clash with Eliot’s

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¹ I say curiously only because Eliot makes a strange early reference to feminine martyrdom, in an early letter to Conrad Aiken: “No one ever painted a female Sebastian, did they? So I give this title *faute de mieux*” (*IMH* 267). *The Cocktail Party*, one of his last works, is the first example that I can find of Eliot’s use of a female martyr.

² While “The Death of Saint Narcissus” is included in a collection of his juvenilia, entitled “Poems Written in Early Youth (*PWEY*)” both these poems should be considered post-juvenilia. In fact Eliot even reuses fragments of “Narcissus” in *The Waste Land* (which I will discuss in greater detail in the next chapter). While these poems certainly do not share the aesthetic trademarks of Eliot’s seminal works, they are far more mature efforts than, for example, his early poems of praise to his American alma mater.
detached, more derisive portrayals of sexuality in his more mature poetic efforts.

Eliot’s early biographer, Peter Ackroyd, went as far as to relegate these martyr poems to the “gross sexual indulgence” of his early bawdy verses, the “Columbo and Bolo” poems (52-3). Yet merely to retire these relics of Eliot’s early poetic personas to the pornographic, scatological playfulness of the “Bolo” poems would be a bit of an oversimplification. For it is in these poems that Eliot’s sexualized obsession with martyrdom is most acutely revealed, an obsession that continues to haunt the rest of his work. They reveal Eliot’s early, unusually transparent musings on the idea of martyrdom as it pertains to physical and psychological suffering and joy, to abjection and jouissance, to the tremulous duality of heightened sexuality and extreme horror—ideas that persist, though in more guarded form, far into his later work.
Chapter 2

“A LITTLE BIT THE HERO OF MY VERSE”:

THE NEUROTIC POET’S DESIRE FOR PSYCHOTIC CERTAINTY

O danse mon papillon noir!

Within the circle of my brain
The twisted dance continues.
The patient acolyte of pain,
The strong behind our human sinews,
The singed reveler of the fire
Caught in the horns that toss and toss,
Losing the end of his desire
Desires completion of his loss.
(T.S. Eliot, “The Burnt Dancer,” IMH 62-3, ll. 29-37)

Beyond the obvious fact that these poems are linked by their historical proximity, a side-by-side reading of the poems reveals that these saints are differing portrayals of the same persona in Eliot’s early poetic imagination. The most cosmological indication of their self-sameness is Eliot’s comingling the historical and mythical aspects of his martyrs. At the end of “Saint Narcissus,” Narcissus suffers the fate of the historical Sebastian: “He danced on the hot sand/ Until the arrows came” (PWEY 30, ll. 35-6). And similar to Eliot’s “Narcissus,” the figure in “St. Sebastian” is a narcissistic lover, who strangles his spectral beloved, the woman in white, to fulfill his own religious erotic fantasy.

Eliot had originally intended the poems to be two pieces in an aborted collection of poems entitled, Descent from the Cross. Lyndall Gordon, in her
biography of Eliot’s early years, describes the collection as a sort of case-study of the peculiar spiritual/sensual passion of St. Theresa and St. John of the Cross (Eliot’s Early Years 58-64). David Childs, in his recent book connecting the early philosophies of T. S. Eliot at university with the later development of his poetry, also speculates on Eliot’s enduring preoccupation with martyrdom and sick spirituality. Childs points to a critical insight that Eliot makes in The Clark Lectures (1926) while discussing his dissection of differing forms of mysticism. It is an interesting aside in an extended piece on metaphysical poetry; but if put alongside Eliot’s then unpublished martyr poems, it becomes more of a personal revelation:

Eliot [makes an] equation between narcissism and a particular form of romanticism—romantic mysticism. One of Eliot’s interests in his Clark Lectures (1926) is to distinguish between the classical mysticism of Aristotle, Aquinas, and Dante and the romantic mysticism of St. Theresa and St. John of the Cross—mystics of the sort dismissed in “The Function of Criticism” as palpitating Narcissi [(27)]. According to Eliot, classical mysticism is ontological, properly locating the divine outside the self and attempting through “intellectual preparation” to

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The Clark Lectures were given in 1926 at Trinity College in Cambridge, in which Eliot delivered an early draft of a later paper given at The Turnbull Lectures in 1933. The formal title of Eliot’s lecture at Cambridge was “On the Metaphysical Poetry of the Seventeenth Century with Special Reference to Donne, Crashaw and Cowley”; the revised version given at The Turnbull Lectures was given the simpler title “The Varieties of Metaphysical Poetry.” The essays had fallen out of print but have (relatively) recently been reproduced in a meticulously annotated version (1994) edited by Ronald Schuchard. Although this essay’s focus only touches on Eliot’s curious aside on mysticism, these lectures are ripe for more exploration in relation to Eliot’s life and more famous writings.
practice “the divine contemplation” that achieves “the development and subsumption of emotion and feeling through intellect into the vision of God” ([Eliot, *The Varieties of Metaphysical Poetry* 103-4]). Romantic mysticism, however, seeks and accepts too uncritically the experience of ecstasy as a sign of the divine. As [Eloise] Hay explains, Eliot believed that Romantic mystics like “St. Theresa confused the passion of God with a desire for a human lover” [(Hay 99)]. Romantic mysticism is “psychological,” confusing the logos with the psyche or the self—indeed seeing them as “identical” [(“The Function of Criticism” 28)]. Such an epistemology is “a spiritual haschisch [sic.], a drugging of the emotions” [(*The Varieties of Metaphysical Poetry* 106)]. (Childs 111-2)

Indeed, Eliot’s Sebastian and Narcissus both seem to indulge in this “romantic,” self-epistemic sort of mysticism. Their religious/mystic experience is driven by their passions—passions originating in the sensual rather than the spiritual, both in agony and ecstasy. Both saints suffer from the romantic, psychological “error” of St. Theresa: mistaking physical ecstasy with access to the divine. They are both consoled by a self-projected image they attribute to religious experience. Sebastian has his beloved spectral woman, first adored and worshiped, then violently dispatched. And
Narcissus is sexually captivated by the metamorphosizing images of himself, certain to the point of psychosis in his autistic, insular sense of self-knowledge.

Julia Kristeva, in her book *Tales of Love*, undertakes an extended study of the self-love/ self-knowledge exemplified by the Ovidian Narcissus. Her Lacanian perspective, while more psychoanalytically driven than Eliot might be comfortable with, resounds with a similar critique of the “palpitating Narcissi” that Eliot invokes in “The Function of Criticism.” Kristeva describes Narcissus’s first sight of himself before the mirrored waters:

> Here we are confronted with what we can but call the vertigo of a love with no object other than a mirage. Ovid marvels, fascinated and terrified, at the sight of a twin aspect of the lure that will continue to nourish the West’s psychological and intellectual life for centuries to come. On the one hand there is rapture at the sight of a non-object, simple product of the eye’s mistake; on the other there is the power of the image. [What follows is a quote from Ovid’s *Metamorphosis.*] “What you seek is nowhere...The vision is only shadow, only reflection, lacking any substance. It comes to you, it goes away with you, if you can go away.” (*Tales of Love* 104)

This Kristevan sense of love-vertigo at the sight of reflection/mirage echoes the self-induced romantic mysticism that Eliot deploys in his treatment of St. John of the Cross.
and St. Theresa in *The Clark Lectures*, and which he also imbues in his own ecstatic saints in these early poems. He explores the narcissistic power of the divine images and shadows that his saints project, only to then reveal their final dissipation and implosion. As the speaker declares in “Saint Narcissus,” “I will show you his bloody clothes and limbs/ And the grey shadow in his mouth” (*PWEY* 28, ll. 6-7).

“*The Love Song of St. Sebastian*”

Eliot’s first martyr poem, “The Love Song of St. Sebastian,” was originally written in 1914 but first officially published in 1996, in a quite revealing posthumous collection entitled *Inventions of the March Hare* (*IMH*). The poem’s speaker, unlike the more detached Tiresean observer in “The Death of Saint Narcissus,” is, in fact, the saint himself. However, the reader will quickly notice that this Sebastian differs from the historical martyr. As Lyndall Gordon references in her first biography on Eliot, entitled *Eliot’s Early Years*: “Saint Sebastian’s story has only tenuous links with the real saint, a Roman martyr in the time of Diocletian who, the fable goes, was sentenced to be shot by archers. Although the arrows pierced his flesh, he did not die but was rescued by a woman and nursed in her lodgings” (61). Christopher Ricks further explains that the historical Sebastian was also fated to a second martyrdom,

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4 This amazing collection of Eliot’s early writings including early versions of “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” and the raunchy “Columbo and Bolo” poems, is one of the first less guarded releases of Eliot’s work. And the annotations of Christopher Ricks, the editor, provide both an invaluable historical context as well as cross-textual referencing.
“without rescue…death by mace” (*IMH* 269). Perhaps there is something in this desire on the historical martyr’s part for that religious self-sacrifice; though in this particular poem, it is the woman in white rather than the saint, who is grotesquely put to death.

Eliot’s poem contains two characters, the masochistic saint, who opens the poem wearing a hair shirt with a whip in hand, and his ostensible beloved, shrouded in white and described only by her synecdochic associations, “white feet”, “white gown,” “braided hair” (*IMH* 78, ll. 12, 14, 15). Looking closely at the subjunctive language and conditional register in both stanzas of the poem, this is not merely a fantasy of strangulation; the female figure herself is an apparition, a very lucid hallucination in the mind of this Sebastian, perhaps aroused and awakened by his own self-inflicted pain. As the poem opens, Sebastian lays the monastic/conjugal scene:

I would come with a shirt of hair
I would come with a lamp in the night
And sit at the foot of your stair;
I would flog myself until I bled,
And hour after hour of prayer
And torture and delight
Until my blood should ring the lamp
And glisten in the light
I should arise your neophyte (*IMH* 78, ll. 1-9)
This ritual, invoking the more extreme asceticism of peculiar mystic sects of the early church, seems a necessary step to accessing the divine. Yet in this case the divine is a feminine, sexualized deity, one that Sebastian beseeches as much as a lover as he does a believer. What is curious about the tortuous path of the religious and sexual transcendence in this first stanza is that it does seem to replicate the difficult steps to communication with the divine that the mystic, St. Theresa espoused in her own brand of ascetic spiritualism, “phases of awakening, unworthiness, mortification of the senses, and illumination” (Gordon, *T.S. Eliot: An Imperfect Life* 61). Yet what exactly is this sense of illumination, this image or access to the divine? Kristeva and Lacan, even Eliot to a varying degree, would argue that this is a projection of the self, the extremes of the awakened senses (pain, passion, ecstasy, orgasm) attributed to the channeling of the divine—the eruption of *jouissance* in a Lacanian sense, an example of “romantic mysticism” in an Eliotic sense.

In the first stanza of “St. Sebastian,” the female apparition is not only associated with the attributes of a sexual lover, but also with the aura of a mother or even a Madonna figure. Though the overarching movement of the poem is charged with strong erotic undertones, the overt imagery adorning the lover in the first stanza is religious and matronly. As a sexual troubadour, Sebastian does “sit at the foot of [her] stair” (*IMH* 78, l. 3) and follow her “in the darkness toward [her] bed” (*IMH* 78, l. 13). But the attributes and the devotion that the saint ascribes to this vision of
femininity is more as a goddess-figure than as a lover. He arises her “neophyte” “after hour on hour of prayer/ And torture and delight” (*IMH* 78, ll. 5-6). And when Sebastian does finally enter the woman’s bed, he arrives more as a grown child, seeking consolation rather than consummation:

> You would take me in without shame
>
> Because I should be dead
>
> And when the morning came
>
> Between your breasts should lie my head (*IMH* 78, ll. 19-22)

Notice in these lines the lifeless and dependant nature of Sebastian’s passion. There is no shame in their coupling because there is no real sexual threat. As Sebastian himself declares, he has already suffered his “little death”; his self-administered flagellations and stifling shirts have rendered him impotent in any role as a real lover. As Tony Pinkney argues in his book on the role of women in Eliot’s poetry, “the death between the lady’s breasts in the first section should alert us that it is the infant-mother, rather than a sexual relationship that is at issue here” (74). In a Lacanian sense, Sebastian seems to be seeking a return to that prenatal and infantile paradise that is the connection to the mother: “in adult life the maternal imago is the operative force beneath every philosophical, religious, or political quest” (Lee 14). Yet I would not go as far as Pinkney to assert the absence of a sexual relationship is at hand here. While there is certainly an aspect of the return to the connection to the mother, the primordial
jouissance, in the death of Sebastian on the woman’s breast, the derivation of this moment is achieved through highly auto-erotic means, sexual/spiritual readiness awakened in the masochism of self-inflicted violence. Yet whether the reader interprets the female image as a lover, deity, or mother-figure, she is nonetheless an image in the martyr’s fantasy, an apparition subjunctive and self-composed, perversely conjured by the Theresean steps of “awakening, unworthiness, mortification of the senses, and illumination” (Gordon, T.S. Eliot: An Imperfect Life 61). David Childs, in his book on T. S. Eliot’s sexuality and mysticism, also highlights this spiritual decadence and perversion: “The first stanza thus traces the descent of these Christian practices from the crucifixion, but it does so against a background of sexuality that reveals their decline into sexual perversion” (87). However, in defense of Tony Pinkney’s own particular argument, the only overtly sexual thing done by the saint towards the image of the woman in the first stanza is the ominous extinguishing of the lamp, “And then put out the light” (IMH 78, l. 10), an unusual, if somewhat affected, allusion to the jealous Moor’s last words to Desdemona in the Shakespearean tragedy Othello, and an early hint to the more aggressive actions of the saint in the second stanza of the poem.

In fact, all the more overtly eroticized associations are reserved for the eye-raising strangulation in the second stanza of the poem. Very much in the spirit of Robert Browning’s “Porphyria’s Lover,” the saint’s masochistic devotion in the first
stanza takes a sharp turn into a disquieting blend of sadism, perfect felicity, and borderline necrophilia. I quote the second stanza in full:

I would come with a towel in my hand
And bend your head beneath my knees;
Your ears curl back in a certain way
Like no one’s else\(^5\) in all the world
When all the world shall melt into the sun,
Melt or freeze.
I should remember how your ears were curled
I should for a moment linger
And follow the curve with my finger
And your head beneath my knees—
I think that at last you would understand.
There would be nothing more to say.
You would love me because I should have strangled you
And because of my infamy;
And I should love you more because I had mangled you
And because you were no longer beautiful
To anyone but me (IMH 78-9, ll. 22-38)

\(^5\) “[C]ompare TSE to Aiken, 30 Sept. 1914: ‘The thing is to be able to look at one’s life as if it were somebody’s else—(I much prefer to say somebody else’s) (Letters 1 58-9)” (IMH 272).
In a shocking reversal, the feminine deity becomes the object of sadistic, erotic violence, a Porphyria or Desdemona, first worshipped and fetishized, then suddenly slaughtered and sacrificed. This macabre scene is perhaps only slightly alleviated by the conditional and subjunctive calibration of the language: the “woulds” and “shoulds” suggesting the dreamlike or desirous nature of the spectacle. While this perhaps distances the saint (and perhaps more importantly Eliot) from the realism of this sado-masochistic moment, it also reifies the spectral nature of this unhallowed vision. This woman that appears before Sebastian is as much a projection or reflection of himself as Narcissus’s image at the pool, a projection as specular (mirror-like) as it is spectral (ghost-like).

In fact the appearance of a feminine figure at all in Eliot’s rendition of the saint’s passion is a divergence from the explicitly homoerotic focus that many of the nineteenth century’s interpretations of Sebastian’s have enjoyed.6 As Richard Kaye suggests in an essay linking “Saint Sebastian” to the homosexual cult surrounding the historical saint:

A tonally restrained, misogynistic frenzy replaces the exultant homoerotic feeling so typical of earlier verses devoted to Sebastian; in

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6 In fact Eliot is quick to point out, in a letter to Conrad Aiken, that his Sebastian diverges from the homo-erotic mystique of the recent Sebastian derivations. As Eliot protests, perhaps too much, “Only there is nothing homosexual about this [poem]—rather an important difference perhaps—but no one ever painted a female Sebastian did they?” (IMH 267). Christopher Ricks in a note on this letter also points to the prevalence of homosexual Sebastian cults in Eliot’s day: “Homosexuals had a particular cult of Saint Sebastian. The combination of nudity and phallic arrows was irresistible” (IMH 267).
Eliot’s poem, the woman who is addressed but never speaks is terrifying because her erotic appeal becomes overwhelming, and finally the inspiration for ferocity on the “neophyte” speaker’s part. Sebastian’s silent lover does not simply embody the archetypally female, she represents female sexuality in its imagined potential to induce murderous psychotic disorder in the male. (120)

Indeed, it is a bit of an understatement to assert that there is a good deal of psychotic abnormality occurring in Sebastian’s relation to the female presence here. Yet I would assert that this “murderous psychosis” is directed at a feminized projection of himself rather than any real outside object of his desire. In other words it is autoeroticism rather than homoeroticism or even sadism that is at issue here.

An even closer reading reveals that much of the violent imagery in the latter half of the poem can be as easily associated with masturbation as with the strangulation of the feminine figure. This overt description of the ostensible strangulation of the lover can be read as something akin to the violence and shame of self-arousal, the narcissistic libido directed toward its own ego (Freud, “On Narcissism” 88). Notice how easily the first two lines of the second stanza could be taken for some kind of ritual for masturbatory preparation, “I would come with a towel in hand/ And bend your head beneath my knees” (ll. 22-3); and in the later line “follow the curve with my finger” (ll. 30) mimics the motion of phallic self-pleasure.
While I have not come across any critic that shares this “self-serving” reading of the “St. Sebastian” poem, Laurie MacDiarmid does make the argument that the apocalyptic imagery in the center or the section does seem to refer to orgasm or ejaculation: “The world’s melting or freezing seems to hint at sexual satisfaction or pleasure. In both stanzas, Eliot substitutes a literal death, by suffocation and then strangling, for the petit morte of orgasm” (16). Indeed there is something of the indescribable sensual eruption of the orgasm in the “apocalyptic” moving from frozen rigidity to steamy dissolution. Tom Matthews makes similar reference to the overt auto-erotic aspect in Eliot’s sister poem “The Death of Saint Narcissus.” MacDiarmid references his interpretation in an end note: “Matthews uses the poem, particularly the image of the caught fish—’slippery white belly held tight in his own fingers, / Writhing in his own clutch’ and the fact that Eliot’s Narcissus is ‘stifled and soothed by his own rhythm’—as evidence Eliot masturbated in his adolescence and felt excessive guilt about it” (qtd. in MacDiarmid 157). I mention this quote merely to accentuate the marked similarities between the two poems. Notice towards the end of “St. Sebastian” the sense of post-coital release and the strong possibility that the misogynistic fantasy of strangulation could really be just a “little death,” authored and post scripted by the wandering saint. In this reading, the Sebastian’s sense of nostalgia and loss, “because you were no longer beautiful to anyone but me,” could be seen as a narcissistic reflection on the post-coital flaccidity and lack of the engorged
phallus. As Richard Kaye asserts, “the concluding lines…describe a saint whose absolute and terrifying devotion collapses the distinction between love of the female other and an all-consuming self-love” (120). The woman in white is a projection of Sebastian’s own narcissistic enthrallment. David Childs reads this violent devotion as the fruit of a failed internally procured mysticism: “On the one hand an elaborate compliment to the beloved, it is on the other the disastrous end of a false romantic mysticism descended almost as far as possible from the Cross” (T.S. Eliot: Mystic, Son, Lover 88).

“The Death of St. Narcissus”

Regardless of whether the reader interprets the strangled feminine figure as real, surreal, or a completely imagined figure, the implication of the last four words, “to anyone but me,” reveals the fundamentally narcissistic drive of the saint that becomes much more transparent in Eliot’s revision of the poem into “The Death of Saint Narcissus” (MacDiarmid 11). This poem was ultimately treated less self-consciously by Eliot. Unlike “Sebastian,” “Narcissus” was actually intended for publication in the magazine Poetry in 1915, and it is unclear whether Eliot or the publisher decided to withdraw it (PWEY 38). Another variation of the poem appears among the original drafts of The Waste Land, only to be struck out by the revising pen
of Eliot or perhaps Pound.  

It was finally published in 1967, just two years after Eliot’s death, in a collection of his juvenilia entitled, *Poems Written in Early Youth* (*PWEY* 28-30). “Sebastian,” on the other hand, was suppressed almost twenty years longer till its appearance in *Inventions of the March Hare* in 1997. It is interesting to speculate on why “Narcissus” was “leaked” before “Sebastian”; and looking at the structure and form of the later poem, “Narcissus” certainly shares more of a kinship with the High Modernist poetic style of “Prufrock” and even more directly, *The Waste Land*. Eliot actually reuses the opening stanza of the poem as a fragment in “Burial of the Dead”: “Come in under the shadow of this grey rock” (*PWEY* 28, l. 1) becomes “Come in under the shadow of this red rock” (*CP* 56, l. 26), and “I will show you his bloody clothes and limbs” (*PWEY* 28, l. 6-7) becomes “I will show you fear in a handful of dust” (*CP* 54, l. 30).

In this second martyr poem, Sebastian returns again in the guise of Ovid’s Narcissus, first lingering by the mirrored-pool, but in the final stanza suffering the death of the historical St. Sebastian. While in many ways certain images in the poems are even more aberrant and unnatural than in “Sebastian,” the exploits of Eliot’s Narcissus are described in the third person rather than the first, perhaps making Eliot (and later his estate) more comfortable with the more detached structure of its narrative. Eliot’s speaker in this poem offsets the perverse auto-eroticism and

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7 See *The Waste Land: A Facsimile and Transcript* pp. 90-97, which contains two original drafts of the poem.
destructive narcissism through detached observation and Tiresian exhortations. The
narrator’s depiction of the short life-history and passion of Narcissus is bookended by
a gory warning to the reader. As he declares at the end of the first stanza, “I will show
you his bloody cloth and limbs/ And the grey shadow of his lips (PWEY ll. 6-7). And
in the seventh and final stanza, the image is revisited: “Now he is green, dry, and
stained/ With the shadow in his mouth” (PWEY 30, ll. 38-9). Rather than placing the
saint in the midst of his “infamy” as in Sebastian, Eliot’s speaker looks over the saint’s
passion a bit more circumspectly. For all the glorious and empathetic language
describing Narcissus’s erotic self-contemplation and his final passionate surrender of
his body to the arrows, the poem reveals the abject fruits of his martyrdom, bloody
limbs and shadows.

Yet in their peculiar passion, Eliot’s Narcissus and Sebastian share a
remarkable similarity of persona. In the final stanza of “The Death of Saint
Narcissus,” which actually describes the historical martyrdom of St. Sebastian, the
death of the saint is described in erotic detail:

So he became a dancer to God
Because his flesh was in love with the burning arrows
He danced on the hot sand
Until the arrows came.
As he embraced them his white skin surrendered itself to
the redness of blood, and satisfied him. (PWEY 30, ll. 33-7)

Here the dying Narcissus seems to take on associations with the strangled feminine figure in “St. Sebastian”; his sweet surrender to the phallic arrows evokes the image of the receptive lover, “satisfied” in the ecstasy of erotic violence. In fact, in The Waste Land Facsimile variation of the poem, the burning arrows are described as “penetrant arrows,” more directly invoking the sexual nature of Narcissus’s martyrdom. As Sebastian projects onto his strangled lover, “You should love me because I should have strangled you” (IMH 79, l. 34), so the feminine Narcissus embraces the destruction and sacrifice of his own perfect body to the burning arrows. And again, this imagery evokes the passion of St. Theresa and St. John of the Cross, whose supplication to God entails a sexual surrender.

The French surrealist and sexual historian, Georges Bataille, in his book Death and Sensuality, describes the erotic nature of St. Theresa’s passion in detail. He elaborates on her famous story of her being pierced by a “Golden spear” in the height of her reverie: “the pain was so sharp that it made [her] utter several moans” (224-5). He goes on to describe a similar, more contemporary experience in one of his friend’s psychiatric patients as she knelt before a church altar: “She had felt such unearthly bliss that she felt God had descended upon her. It was only later when he had given herself to a man that she realized that this decent from God into her had been a violent venereal orgasm” (225). Clearly, Eliot’s Narcissus and Sebastian both substitute
intense venereal sensation for the mystic, religious experience, their respective passions arising out of extended, sexualized, painfully masochistic experiences.

The connection between the two saints is even more apparent if one looks at the previous stanza which evokes the strange sense of Narcissus’s duality as the masculine violator and the violated female. Here Eliot’s St. Narcissus also takes on aspects of Ovid’s metamorphosizing youth, presenting the shape-shifting saint at first as tree branches auto-erotically twining within themselves (PWYE 29, ll. 21-23), then as both the writhing fish and the hand that clutches it (29, ll. 24-7), and then, most disturbingly, as the dual image of a girl and the old man that sexually violates her:

Then he had been a young girl
Caught in the woods by a drunken old man
Knowing in the end the taste of his own whiteness
The horror of his own smoothness
And he felt drunken and old (30, ll. 29-32)

Here Eliot’s religiously and sexually perverse imagery reaches its height, in the image of the old Narcissus’s incestuous rape of a younger feminine version of himself. Although slightly different than the seduction and strangulation of the feminine figure in “Sebastian,” the portraits of Sebastian and Narcissus entwine in the seduction and final destruction of their own images of themselves. As Narcissus enacts a strange unnatural violence upon himself, so Sebastian erotically strangles and subdues his own
erotic fantasy. The violent sexuality of these scenes highlights the “infamy of these fallen saints, reveling in and empowered by their own blasphemy, narcissism, and perversion. Indeed, the sexual perversion of seeking their own images as love-objects is at the heart of Freud’s description of clinical narcissism, “of a person who treats his own body in the same way the body of a sexual object is normally treated” (“On Narcissism” 73).

Eliot makes a curiously revealing argument about blasphemy in his earnest, but later furiously suppressed, post-conversion essay, “After Strange Gods (ASG),” delivered in 1929: “No one can possibly blaspheme in any sense except that in which a parrot may be said to curse, unless he profoundly believes in what he profanes;…blasphemy requires both literary genius and profound faith, joined in a mind in a peculiar and unusual state of spiritual sickness” (56). While here, as in The Clark Lectures, Eliot is not making overt reference to these early martyr poems—as he had no intention at this point in his literary career of ever having them published—one must admit that this mingling of “spiritual sickness” with “profound faith” waxes into strange forms in the “Sebastian” and “Narcissus” poems. Much of the uncanny spiritual power of these poems arises from the obvious, irrefutable “passion” that arises from these saints, a failed passion—but a passion nonetheless—that resembles the dance of the burnt moth in another of Eliot’s sophomore poems, “The Burnt Dancer”: “The patient acolyte of pain,/…Losing the end of his desire/ Desires
completion of his loss” (*IMH* ll. 32, 36-7). This *papillon noir* strikes an interesting chord with Georges Bataille’s analogy of the “lucid drone” when describing the temptation of priests and saints: “If it seems paradoxical to compare the temptation of a man in holy orders with the nuptial and disastrous flight of the drone, death is nonetheless the end of both, and I might call the religious in his temptation a lucid drone, one knows that death will follow the satisfying of his desire” (*Death and Sensuality* 234). Perhaps the greatest blasphemy or infamy of these saints lies in their deliberate refusal for love objects outside of themselves, the unnatural passion and coital delight that arises from their psychotic rejection of the world, and which culminates in the rejection and final abjection of their own body and flesh.

And as much as Eliot might have intended these martyr poems to be gory warnings of narcissistic, romantic mysticism, he does admit in a letter to Conrad Aiken in 1914 that he consciously empathizes with their passion: “I have studied S. Sebastians—why would anyone paint a beautiful youth and stick him full of pins (or arrows) unless he felt himself a little the hero of my verse?” (qtd. in *IMH* 267). While this short aside is not enough to merit a comparison with Milton’s own sympathy for the devil, it is interesting to pursue a more fulsome understanding of our poet’s own psychology in comparison with that of his saints.
As I have already mentioned in the introduction, a number of criticisms and biographical studies have drawn attention to Eliot’s personal life and his own psychological state, especially around the time he was composing *The Waste Land*. Eliot confessed in many of his letters from the early 1920s that he was suffering from very acute psychological and religious disturbances. Indeed, Eliot’s most famous work is itself a case-study in poetic neurosis and cultural hysteria. One is reminded of the oft-cited passage in “The Game of Chess,” where many critics argue that Eliot reveals his own marital dysfunction:

‘My nerves are bad tonight. 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.’ (*CP* 57, ll. 111-4)

Here we have what many conventional critics have deduced as a Vivienne Eliot pester ing and stifling the beleaguered Eliot. Yet many recent critics such as Shannon McRae and Laurie MacDiarmid, as well as Eliot’s most recent biographer, Lyndall Gordon, have asserted to varying degrees that Vivienne Eliot’s hysteria was rather a projection of Eliot’s own psycho-sexual struggles. Laurie MacDiarmid draws attention to the film, *Tom and Viv* (1994), and how its revisionist take on Eliot’s relationship with his first wife highlights the important aspects of his own repression. One
speculation she refers to argues that “we should read Eliot as a representative of repressive medical, religious, and academic establishments and should diagnose his treatment of Vivienne as the projection of his own hysteria onto another” (127).

Shannon McRae, in her essay “Glowed into Words,” gives a focused feminist reading of Eliot’s seminal text, tracing the influence of Vivienne Eliot upon the production of *The Waste Land*, drawing special attention to the similarities between Eliot’s own psychological sickness and that of his wife. She asserts that

Eliot’s illness uncannily mirrored his wife’s. He too was initially diagnosed with having a “nervous disorder.” The specialist pronounced his condition serious and forbade him any mental exertion whatsoever (*Letters* 473). This same ‘rest cure,’ originally prescribed for hysterical women, inspired Charlotte Perkins Gilman to write “The Yellow Wallpaper.” Understandably, Eliot sought a second opinion, and preferred the diagnosis he received while under psychiatric treatment in Lausanne: “aboulie” or “lack of will,” an emotional derangement which had been a lifelong affliction” (486). The term as it was used then strongly implies a complete lack of sexual desire, but during the most severe period of his affliction, Eliot also lacked the will to write. (196)

Lyndall Gordon, in her biography, also makes mention of this “aboulie” that Eliot preferred to be diagnosed with; but she refers to it more specifically as “the disease of
doubt” (89). Regardless of whether Eliot’s depression in the early 1920s was brought about by doubt or lack of will, it is clear that he suffered from notable aspects of neurosis. Gordon, herself, goes on to interpret the aboulie as an important catalyst in the generation of *The Waste Land*, as well as tracing the illness back to the production of the early poems, among them the poems of our focus, “Saint Narcissus” and “St. Sebastian.” And Shannon McRae echoes Gordon’s assertion, as well as arguing that during this time Eliot was consciously aware of the poetically productive nature of his spiritual and psychological maladies:

> Whatever unhappiness their [Tom and Vivienne’s] illnesses may have contributed to the marriage, the resultant state of mind was conducive to poetry. In *The Waste Land* as in many of Eliot’s early poems, knowledge originates in agony, and poetic voice from desperate and generally failed attempts to speak to it. Desire is both the cause and end of suffering. Although, Eliot certainly could not have sought the misery he suffered, early in his career he conceived of self-loss as intrinsic to poetic development. (198)

From here McRae goes on to develop a sharp reappraisal of Eliot’s assertions of the “extinction of personality in “Tradition and the Individual Talent” as well as his argument for the “difficulty of Modern poetry” in “The Metaphysical Poets.” She argues that New Criticism and the winds of later literary criticism, perhaps out of a
sense of their own self-importance, too often place these famous dictums in the wrong context. For at this point in Eliot’s career, he was a fledgling poet not an influential critic. In these essays he is espousing a strangely masochistic theory of poetry and poetic inspiration, rather than an austere trans-historical method for reading poetry (198-9). In other words, the essays are more concerned with a theory of creative writing rather than a theory of literary appreciation. As McRae argues, “It requires that he [the poet] undergo the arduous task of acquiring his craft through intense, sustained mental effort, and implies moreover that the goal of this effort is to become something other than himself” (199).

Indeed, in “St. Sebastian” and “Saint Narcissus” we see Eliot’s early attempts at poetic necromancy, seeking to channel voices outside of himself, or to perhaps purge or exorcize deep-seated voices emanating from within. And while the aborted collection of poems, Descent from the Cross, was overtly meant to be a critique of diseased forms of spirituality, one must also take into account that revealing letter to Conrad Aiken, where Eliot admits to feeling “a little bit the hero of my verse.” Indeed, Eliot certainly looked at his own poetic project in flagellistic terms of self-denial and self-extinction. Eloise Hay in her book T. S. Eliot’s Negative Way, does well to highlight Eliot’s duality of purpose in the production of Descent from the Cross: “These two poems about the saints form images of sick spirituality suggesting that Eliot was dealing with an ‘actuality’ (as he says poetry must) that deeply probed and
criticized Christian spirituality while releasing (the word he used) certain strains in his
own deeper psychology” (80). In this light, if we return to Eliot’s critique of romantic
mysticism in The Clark Lectures as fundamentally narcissistic and self-derived, it
would appear that Eliot was apparently smoking a bit of what he termed that “spiritual
haschisch” [sic.], and that this experimentation was highly productive for his poetry in
the early 1920s.

In focusing now on Eliot’s psycho-sexual struggles, both in his personal life
and his poetry, I would like to return to my earlier claim that it is a tenable assertion to
say that Eliot suffered from some aspect of what psychoanalysis and even modern-day
clinical psychiatry would term “neurosis.” And again I might appeal to MacDiarmid’s
assertion that to lambast Eliot’s neurosis and repression would be a bit of a “pot-
kettle-black,” as psychoanalysis asserts that the vast majority of humanity suffers from
some sort of neurosis. What I am arguing is that while Eliot is attempting to defrock
these “palpitating Narcissi,” his neurotic mind simultaneously desires their certainty
and their religious jouissance. Lacan asserts that the neurotic’s desire is for a certainty
he can never achieve. Bruce Fink in his clinical introduction to Lacanian
psychoanalysis gives a very explicit differentiation between the two psychic disorders:

Certainty is a characteristic of psychosis, whereas doubt is not. The
psychotic is not convinced necessarily of the “reality” of what
he sees and hears, but of the fact that it means something, and this
meaning involves him or her. While the psychotic may agree that what he or she heard or saw was not audible or visible to others (Seminar III, 87)—in other words, that it was not part of a socially shared reality—this may make it all the more special to him or her: he or she has been chosen among all others to hear or see it, or it concerns only him or her...There is no room for error or misinterpretation: the meaning of the experience is self-evident.

In contrast, what dominates the clinical picture in the case of neurosis is doubt. Doubt is the very hallmark of neurosis. The neurotic is unsure: maybe the person was there, maybe not; the meaning has something to do with the person, but perhaps he or she is misinterpreting it. (84)

The “overwhelming question” of neurosis, “What am I?” (Fink, The Lacanian Subject 121), clearly haunts the reveries of Eliot’s later poetic voice in “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” as well as the “vacant shuttles” of Gerontion’s mind in “a dry season.” But these early saints seem to suffer from a very different psychological diagnosis. Whereas Prufrock, Gerontion, and Eliot are all plagued by doubt and insecurity in their sense of identity or “self-knowledge,” Sebastian and Narcissus are rather imbued with an errant imaginary certainty. They are completely absorbed in
their self-constructed fantasies, in Sebastian’s case, the spectral woman-goddess, and in Narcissus’s case, the Protean images of himself.

A notable aspect of the psychotic reveries of Eliot’s Narcissus is the way Eliot addresses the specular nature of the saint’s self-knowledge. Unlike Ovid’s Narcissus, who in the original myth is unaware that the image in the water is in fact his own, Eliot’s Narcissus is “struck down” by this knowledge of himself (29, ll. 16). As he is described in the second stanza of the poem:

He walked once between the sea and the high cliffs
When the wind made him aware of his limbs smoothly passing each other
And of his arms crossed over his breast.
When he walked over the meadows
He was stifled and soothed by his own rhythm.
By the river
His eyes were aware of the pointed corners of his eyes
And his hands where aware of the pointed tips of his fingers.

(*PWEY* 28, ll. 7-15)

It is this stanza of the poem that most closely “mirrors” the lines of Ovid. Notice the peculiarly truncated line, “By the river.” This is the most overtly specular moment in the poem, where Saint Narcissus mimics the self-contemplation of the beautiful boy of
classical myth, reveling in his “ancient” and “new beauty” (ll. 26-7). Notice how the internal repetition in lines fourteen and fifteen highlight the insular aesthetic of self-awareness as “stifling” as it is “soothing.” His focus on the “points,” “tips,” and “corners” of his body displays a meditative concentration worthy of a Buddhist monk, following his own curves and lines to their apex and vanishing points. His arms crossed over the breast in the first portion of the stanza doubles both as a saintly, religious pose of supplication to a higher power as well a strangely apt portrait of auto-eroticism made sacrosanct. Also, the fact that his arms are busy about his breast refocuses the meaning of the preceding line; his awareness of “his limbs smoothly passing each other” is then limited to the cadence of the limbs of his lower torso, and suggests a pleasure in the self-arousal of another “limb” created by “his own rhythm.”

Robert Samuels suggests that “psychosis is defined by the loss of Symbolic reality that places the subject in the primitive Real where he is dominated by his autoerotic and autistic instincts” (64). Clearly Narcissus by the river is completely enraptured by his own existence apart from the social order: “Struck down by such knowledge/ He could not live in men’s ways but became a dancer before God” (ll. 16-7). Eliot’s Narcissus, like his Sebastian, finds satisfaction in an hallucinatory image of

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8 Bruce Fink in *An Introduction to Lacanian Psychoanalysis* draws attention to the autoerotic, “voluptuous” nature of psychosis: “Thus, when the patient speaks, as does Schreber, of the ‘voluptuousness’ of his body, of the indescribable ecstasy or ‘electric sensation [he feels] in [his] whole body’ (as one of my patients describes it), or of the unbearable shooting pains he feels (for which no biological cause can be found), the therapist can feel confident of uncovered a likely indicator of psychosis” (97).
himself. As Samuels elaborates on this symptom of psychosis, “For in this psychotic, hallucinatory state, the subject perceives in this Real this lost object and there is a form of satisfaction that lacks nothing” (68). For the psychotic there is not sense of desire for there is no sense of lack. Narcissus and his image of himself is entirely self-composed and self-contained, his imaginary certainty sustained by his refusal to “live in men’s ways,” to enter the symbolic and social order. In this sense Narcissus, the psychotic, enacts what Eliot, the neurotic, desires. Eliot’s aboulie, the disease of doubt, is a desire or wistfulness for the certainty that psychosis engenders. While Eliot ultimately believes the saint’s state of spiritual sickness is ultimately narcissistic and inward bending, nonetheless he nods to the glory and satisfaction of the “burning arrows” when he acknowledges that he feels “a little bit the hero of my verse,” as well as referring to the whole collection, Descent from the Cross as a faute de mieux, “for lack of something better.” Indeed, for the neurotic Eliot this sense of certainty and jouissance is an impossibility. For as Lacan stresses numerous times in his seminars, “desire,” the great symptom of neurosis, never leads to jouissance, but rather delays and perpetually hinders it.

But let us return to the specular nature of Eliot’s Narcissus and the Lacanian relation of the mirror image to self-knowledge. Julia Kristeva, in her book Tales of Love, points out the curious lack of true self-knowledge that Ovid’s Narcissus exhibits: “In this instance the error lies in failing to see that the reflection is none but
the self; Narcissus after all is guilty of being unaware of himself as the source of the reflection. Let us accept that charge, which indicts Narcissus as being guilty of not knowing himself: he who loves a reflection without knowing that it is his own does not in fact know himself” (107). Here Kristeva points out the irony that the classical Narcissus was not in a clinical sense an actual narcissist. But using the Lacanian idea of specularity and even looking at Kristeva’s later work, Strangers to Ourselves, it becomes apparent that strict narcissism is impossible, as our perception of the image in the mirror as the “self” is far from a truly mimetic reflection. 9 Later in this work, Kristeva focuses on Freud’s speculation on the heimlich (“familiar”) and the unheimlich (“unfamiliar”), and how the meaning of the word “heimlich” itself is imbedded with the strangeness of the unheimlich: “Thus in the very word Heimlich, the familiar and the intimate are reversed into their opposites, brought together with the contrary meaning of uncanny strangeness harbored in unheilmich” (182-3). 10 Eliot’s “Narcissus” poem perhaps most clearly enacts this uncanny strangeness, the non-mimetic, shifting images in the mirror/pool/river, the dual lure and aversion to the double, the uncomfortable alterity of the specular image. The saint is enamored and falls in love with his image in the pool, but in the later scene with the old man and the

9 As Lacan argues in Seminar I, “After all the real is obviously right here, on this side of the mirror. But what is beyond it? First of all, there is, as we have already seen, the primitive imaginary of the specular dialectic with the other” (148).

10 It is interesting to note that one of the epigraphs Kristeva uses to open “Strangers to Ourselves” is the same quote Eliot uses—ripped from Baudelaire—to end “The Burial of the Dead”: You Hypocrite lecteur!—mon semblable,—mon frère.”
young girl, he becomes nauseated and averse to the profound and profane depths of his self knowledge, ultimately embracing the arrows that bring his annihilation.

But returning to Lacan, this “specular dialect” that arrests Narcissus is what the psychoanalyst terms *captation*, another of the many neologisms of French psychoanalysis. Like Derrida’s *differance* (an interpolation of the verbs “to differ” and “to defer”), *captation* dually takes on the meaning of the verbs “to captivate” and “to capture” (*Écrits* 18). Eliot’s Narcissus, like Ovid’s, is both seduced and held captive by his reflection in the water. From *The Metamorphosis*:

> Why try to catch an always fleeting image
> Poor credulous youngster? What you seek is nowhere
> And if you turn away, you will take it with you
> The boy you love. The vision is only shadow,
> Only reflection, lacking any substance.
> It comes to you, it stays with you, it goes
> Away with you, if you can go away. (“Book III,” ll. 438-445)

Notice how this passage from Ovid, mirrors Lacan’s description of the lure of the impossible object in his essay, “The Subversion of the Subject and the Dialect of Desire”: “It is to this object that cannot be grasped in the mirror that the specular image lends its clothes. A substance caught in the net of shadow, and which, robbed of
its shadow-swelling volume, holds out once again the tired lure of the shadow as if it were substance” (*Ecrits* 818).

Indeed the strange reflections or aliases that Eliot’s Narcissus sees in the river are far from mimetic doubles, but rather peculiar shadows born of his psychotic *captation* in the insular Imaginary. The images of himself as a fish, a tree, a young girl, an old man, are a kind of self-knowledge completely wrapped up in the imaginary rather than the symbolic order: “First *he was sure* that he had been a tree…/ Then *he knew* he had been a fish,…Then *he had been* a young girl” (emphasis mine). Notice the rising sense of certainty as he refers to his access to these hallucinations, moving from a strong sense of self-confidence (“he was sure”) to an unwavering psychotic certainty (“he had been”). Here our Saint Narcissus is seeing visions in the desert. But these visions are psychic, internal constructions rather than social ones. In fact, Eliot’s Narcissus viscerally abjures the thought of social order and symbolic constructs:

Struck down by such knowledge

He could not live in men’s ways, but became a dancer before God

If he walked in city streets

He seemed to tread on faces, convulsive thighs and knees

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11 As Lacan articulates in his third seminar, *The Psychoses*: “The delusional, as he climbs the scale of delusions, becomes increasingly sure of things he regards as more and more unreal….The delusional articulates them with an abundance, a richness, that is precisely one of the most essential clinical features which, while one of the most massive, must nevertheless not be neglected” (77).
So he came out under the rock

The knowledge that he is “struck down by” is an incestual, specular, autistic knowledge of himself; and whether or not his banishment or exile is self-imposed, it is clear that Narcissus would believe this were the case. And his certainty in his self-knowledge diagnoses him as a psychotic, for it is by the specular, Imaginary “I,” rather than in the social, Symbolic “I,” that he defines his psychic identity (Lacan, *Ecrits* 78).

Compare the psychosis of Eliot’s saints with the neurosis some of his later poetic voices. These saints, however misguided, are imbued with a psychotic certainty that would be impossible for a Prufrock for example. While we might agree with Prufrock’s that he is “no Prince Hamlet,” he nonetheless shares with the famous Dane that dithery mind, neurotic, obsessive, unsure how to act and what to believe. As Prufrock haltingly declares:

Do I dare

Disturb the universe?

In a minute there is time

For decisions and revisions which a minute will reverse (*CP* 4)

Sebastian and Narcissus certainly have no problem disturbing the universe, as their universes are self-composed and imaginary. Whether dancing on the hot sand, or

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12 A close reading of the poem, ignoring the narrative emphases of the speaker, would bring the reader to question how Narcissus found himself under the grey rock, and furthermore who exactly would be sending him to his happy death with the burning arrows.
worshipping and then dispatching their beloved, they construct their worlds; they are not constructed by them. Bruce Fink in *The Lacanian Subject* refers to the “victory” of psychosis, how it resists the primordial signifier, the “nom-du-pere” that generates neurosis (49-50). The endless “decisions and revisions” of the neurotic split subject are curiously absent in the self-consuming passions of Eliot’s saints.

Lacan refers to this psychotic sense of certainty and the passion that it engenders in his interpretation of Freud’s case study President Schreber, a man certain that he was the wife of God. Lacan describes his psychosis in detail:

> According to this conception, which moreover, gives him a certain mastery over his psychosis, he is the female correspondent of God. Henceforth, everything becomes understandable, everything works out…His relationship with God, as he conveys it to us is rich and complex, and yet we cannot fail to be struck by the fact that the text includes no indication of the slightest presence, the slightest fervor, the slightest real communication, that would give us the idea that there really is a relationship between two beings.” (*The Psychoses* 77)

Here Lacan’s harsh rejection of Schreber’s delusion does seem reminiscent of the speaker’s bookended warnings to the reader in “Narcissus.” Enveloping Narcissus’s beautiful dance before God, we see the abject image of bloody cloths, limbs, and the shadow, suggesting the ultimately vacuous, self-derived nature of the saint’s passion.
In both poems, Eliot means the reader to perceive the flawed self-knowledge of these charlatans—though interestingly both saints seem unaware of their own blasphemies. Fink describes these psychotic symptoms in his introduction to Lacanian psychoanalysis: “the psychotic…reiterates again and again, the same phrases; repetition replaces explanation” (101). Here we see Sebastian’s ritualized, masochistic asceticism and the “stifling” and “soothing” rhythms of Narcissus as the internal revolutions of psychosis, socially vacuous but internally coherent and powerful.

Again this reminds us of Eliot’s critique of St. Theresa and St. John of the Cross in *The Clark Lectures*: “Romantic mysticism is ‘psychological,’ confusing the logos with the psyche or self—indeed seeing them as ‘identical’ (Childs 112). Isn’t this definition of romantic mysticism that Eliot espouses in his lectures and performs in the love song of these saints nearly identical to the structure of psychosis in Lacanian thought? And again I would argue that while Eliot has no direct historical contact with the French psychoanalyst and his theories, his martyr poems nonetheless enact a certainty and jouissance, that however flawed is nevertheless quite compelling. The passion and ecstasy of these “palpitating Narcissi” of Eliot’s early work perform

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13 Lacan himself references St. John of the Cross in molding his description of Schreber’s psychosis. His treatment for the saint is much more reverential than Eliot’s: “Without resorting to a comparison with a great mystic, which would be out of place in relation to a text like this, open nevertheless St John. of the Cross at any page you like, if this text appeals to you. He too, in the experience of the ascent of the soul, presents himself in an attitude of receiving and offering and even speaks to the soul’s nuptials with the divine presence.” Curiously, Lacan goes on to defend the saint’s experience as an authentically religious, which is much more than Eliot does.
“the psychotic imaginary state” that “perceives in the Real this lost object and…a form of satisfaction that lacks nothing” (Samuels 68).

Returning to Eliot’s own dithering appraisal in his letter to Conrad Aiken, while he intends these martyrs to be seen as failed mystics, he, in the same breath, equivocates as to the level of admiration that he holds for them: “Does it all seem very labored and conscious? The S. Sebastian title I feel almost sure of; I have studied S. Sebastians—why should anyone paint a beautiful youth and stick him full of pins (or arrows) unless he felt a little as the hero of my verse?” (IMH 267). Indeed, the purpose thus far in this essay has been to ask Eliot this very question. While it is abundantly clear from his biographies and his letters that his own psychic diagnosis is that of acute neurosis, he clearly empathizes if not sympathizes with the psychotic certainty of his saints. Indeed, as I will explore in the next chapter, there is a passion, an undeniable jouissance that exudes from these saints even in their ultimate abjection—that in a Kristevan sense, their abjection is the cause of their jouissance. And while the outside gaze of the reader shows the implosion and utter dissipation that is a product of their self-contained erotic divinations, this sense of ego-extinction and mortification before the divine persists far into Eliot’s later work. Indeed Eliot’s neurotic desire for the certainty and satisfaction of psychosis is certainly brooding in Eliot’s post conversion poems, *Four Quartets*, and even more explicitly towards the end of his life in his play, *The Cocktail Party*. 
Chapter 3

“FEAR IN A HANDBULK OF DUST”:

THE POWERS OF HORROR IN T. S. ELIOT’S EARLY POETRY
AND THE PERSISTENCE OF ABJECTION
IN HIS LATER WRITINGS

“My purpose is to illustrate a fundamental connection between religious ecstasy and eroticism—and in particular sadism. From the most unspeakable to the most elevated….What I suddenly saw, and what imprisoned me in anguish—but which at the same time delivered me from it—was the identity of these perfect contraries, divine ecstasy and its opposite, extreme horror.” Georges Bataille, The Tears of Eros

Abjection in “St. Sebastian” and “Saint Narcissus”

Eliot’s early martyr poems are case studies in this Bataillen dualistic theory of divine ecstasy and extreme horror. For all the overt eroticism and sensuous imagery that arise from these poems, the end of these martyrs is horrific, macabre, and abject. We behold the bloody cloths and limbs of Narcissus and observe Sebastian’s necrophilial passion for his strangled paramour. Their saint like-asceticism mixed with erotic sadomasochism reveals a lack of any real outside object of desire. As Lacan declares of psychotic autoeroticism, the psychotic has no connection to desire, but rather he/she dwells in a state of narcissistic jouissance (Fink, An Introduction to Lacanian Psychoanalysis 96-7). In being both the subject and the object of their passion, they become abject. In using this idea of abjection, I am invoking the theories of the French feminist and semiologist, Julia Kristeva, herself a pupil of Lacan.
Kristeva defines abjection as that “which disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite” \textit{(Powers of Horror 4)}. Indeed, what could be more borderline than the strange commingling of divine ecstasy and profound horror? In both poems there is a profound sense of this in-between-ness. Narcissus is both sexual provocateur and sexual receptionist, his own seducer and the object of his seduction. And Sebastian’s passion oscillates between his own mortification and surrender to his fantasy in the first portion to his sudden shift into sexual violence in the poem’s second act. This slippery dance between the subject and the object relegates these saints to the in-between realm “on the edge of non-existence and hallucination,” to the “sublime alienation” that comprises abjection \textit{(Powers of Horror 2, 9)}.

Perhaps the most flagrant example of abjection in Eliot’s work is Tiresias in \textit{The Waste Land}. Eliot describes the Greek seer as a “non-character” in his own notes to poem; and in the poem itself, Tiresias is portrayed “throbbing” liminally “between two lives” (Ellman 184). David Childs also points out the connection that Lillian Feder makes between Ovid’s use of Tiresias and Narcissus in \textit{The Metamorphosis}:

Observing that Tiresias’s first prophecy concerns Narcissus—Tiresias tells Liriope that her son will live a long life so long as he does not come to know himself—Lillian Feder suggests that ‘There is no doubt that, though Eliot does not quote from Ovid’s description of Narcissus,
it was as important to him as that of Tiresias…Indeed Tiresias’ warning against self-knowledge seems to be a motivating force within many of Eliot’s mythical personae in his early poetry.’ (Childs 107)

Indeed, the speaker in “The Death of Saint Narcissus” is certainly a nascent example of Eliot’s use of Tiresias in his later text. As I have mentioned in the previous chapter, Narcissus’s bloody cloth and limbs later become “fear in a handful of dust” in the later poem. While he is certainly not a psychoanalyst, Eliot’s fascination with the powers and dangers of self-knowledge does mirror the investigations of Freud, Lacan, and Kristeva. For Eliot’s Narcissus and Sebastian, their self-knowledge gives them a euphoric sense of power and vision, yet at the same time hastens their dissolution. Kristeva takes time to describe this warring and dithering nature of abjection:

If it be true that the abject simultaneously beseeches and pulverizes the subject, one can understand that it is experienced at the peak of its strength when that subject weary of the fruitless attempts to identify with something on the outside, finds the impossible within; when it finds that the impossible constitutes its very being, that is none other than abject….Such are the pangs and delights of masochism.

(Powers of Horror 5)

Here Kristeva describes the corporeal power of abjection. And indeed these peculiar saints are physically as well as psychically abject. Their unusual paradise is a delight
in their own self-abasement and destruction. Kristeva, herself, draws the connection of abjection to the peculiarities of mystic Christian spirituality: “Mystical Christendom turned this abjection of self into the ultimate proof of humility before God, witness Elizabeth of Hungary who ‘though a great princess, delighted in nothing so much as abasing herself’” (5). Both Eliot poems vividly depict the physical abjection of the saints. In “St. Sebastian” the martyr revels in the destruction and weakening of his own body: “I would flog myself until I bled,…Until my blood should ring the lamp/ And glisten in the light/…Because I should be dead” (IMH 78, ll. 4, 7-8, 19). Sebastian takes delight in his physical mortification and abjection because he knows it will lead to a spiritual arousal and delight. Again we are reminded of the passion of St. Theresa and St. John of the Cross, and the strange ascetic steps to spiritual transcendence. Even as Sebastian turns on his fantasy in the second portion of the poem, he revels in its disappearance, dissipation, and death: “And I should love you more because I had mangled you/ And because you were no longer beautiful to anyone but me” (IMH ll. 36-38). As Kristeva posits, the most obvious embodiment of abjection is the putrification of the corpse: “The corpse, seen without God and outside of science, is the utmost of abjection. It is death infecting life” (Powers of Horror 4). Indeed nothing smacks of the physical manifestation of abjection as much as the corrupting body of the once beautiful Narcissus: “I will show you his bloody cloth and limbs/ And the grey shadow on his lips” (PWYEY ll. 6-7).
The spiritual/psychic aspect of abjection is perhaps more subtly defined, yet I would argue that it is curiously evoked by Eliot himself in his controversial post-conversion essay, “After Strange Gods” where Eliot proposes that the power of blasphemy lies in the simultaneous belief in what the author blasphemes in a profound state of “spiritual sickness” (56). So also does Kristeva make a similar argument in the establishment of abjection as perversion or aberration: “The abject is perverse because it neither gives up nor assumes a prohibition, a rule or a law; but turns them aside, misleads, corrupts….An unshakeable adherence to Prohibition and Law is necessary if that perverse interspace of abjection is to be hemmed in and thrust aside” (Powers of Horror 15-16). This misattribution of narcissistic self-knowledge with some sort of cosmic revelation strikes a resounding chord with Eliot’s distinction between romantic and classical mysticism in The Clark Lectures as well as with those “palpitating Narcissi” in his essay “The Function of Criticism.” Indeed much of the power and passion of these saints rests in their aberrance from the order they both affirm and deny. As MacDiarmid suggests of Eliot’s depiction of Narcissus as a “dancer before God,” his infamy is that he places himself before God (23). He invokes the ancestral transgression of the first commandment: “You shall have no other gods before me.” His blasphemy, his spiritual aberrance, is given obscene power precisely because it both recognizes and subverts the power and glory of his god. Likewise, the sacrifice and strangulation of the female fantasy in “Sebastian” upholds the infamy of abjection
as well. Sebastian justifies his transgression by positing that the destroyed image will love him because of his “infamy.” The power of Sebastian’s passion lies in the extremity of his abomination. He beseeches and worships and makes himself abject, “hideous,” in the sight of his own religious and sexual fantasy, and then in a rapid sea change, strangles and eliminates the very thing he sought to worship.

Yet for as much as Eliot might be describing these saints as errant, fallen heretics, propounding a diseased form of mysticism and exhibiting a profound spiritual sickness, these poems resound with a perverse but visceral passion in the saints’ suffering and abjection. This is because at the core of utter abjection is a strange sense of orgasmic delight, or what Kristeva describes in Lacanian terms as that peculiar and powerful *jouissance*, the intense and perverse delight that moves beyond the limits of pleasure, beyond the structural/symbolic/linguistic limitations of desire and lack. The saint’s totality of abjection, their surrender and embrace of pain, death and dissipation, moves them beyond the realm of desire back into the realm of painful and indescribable passion, the return of the Imaginary into the radical, impossible Real. As Kristeva argues, “it follows that jouissance alone causes the abject to exist as such. One does not know it, one does not desire it, one joys in it [on en jouit]. Violently and painfully. A passion” (9). In a strict Lacanian sense, the pain and totality of abjection is a condition of acute psychosis, the path which brings the person outside the bounds of language, brings the abjected figure outside the limits of semiotics and
symbol to the awful and primordial location of existence apart from language. It is
aligned with that “victory of psychosis” since it is a rejection of the
primordial/phallic/paternal signifier, the reverse castration of the symbolic, a refusal of
the *nom du père*. As Lacan asserts in *Seminar I*:

In psychosis, the barrier between mother and child offered by that name
is not erected in a solid enough fashion. The father figure does not
succeed in limiting the child’s access to the mother; the signifier is not
able to neutralize the child’s jouissance, and that jouissance irrupts into
his or her life, overwhelming and invading him or her. Different forms
of psychosis are related to the different ways in which jouissance
breaks into the patient. (74)

Here Lacan argues that for the psychotic the castration effect of language does not
hold sway, and that the individual is arrested in a peculiar auto-erotic state that while
not perhaps actually preserving or returning to the primordial connection to the
mother, nevertheless, resists the mastery of the *nom-du-père* that creates desire and
lack. Kristeva uses this term “abjection” to help define and expand on this decentered
moment of power: “The abject confronts us, on the other hand, and this time within
our personal archeology, with our earliest attempts to release the hold of maternal
entity even before ex-isting outside of her, thanks to the autonomy of language. It is a
violent, clumsy breaking away, with the constant risk of falling back into a power that
is securing as it is stifling” (13). One is immediately reminded of the autistic, auto-eroticism of Eliot’s Narcissus, both “soothed” and “stifled” by his own rhythm. As the self-made pariah, he avoids the social “I,” and creates a self-constructed “I,” endlessly captated in his circular Imaginary musings.

The end of “Saint Narcissus” enacts a perfect example of an abject death. Narcissus takes delight in his surrender to the destruction of his white flesh by the arrows; he revels in his body being turned “inside-out” because, in this totality of pain, he experiences the horrific delight of untethering himself from the world of language. He partakes in the unbridled, painful freedom of a new word decentered and haunting. As Elaine Scarry explains in her book on the nature of pain, “Pain begins by being ‘not oneself’ and ends by eliminating all the is ‘not itself’…it eventually occupies the entire body and spills out into the realm beyond the body, takes over all that is inside and outside, makes the two obscenely indistinguishable, and systematically destroys anything like language or world extension that is alien to itself and threatening to its claims” (55). This is the reason for Sebastian’s delight in his torture and self-abasement, his erotic jouissance in the strangulation of his fantasy. The obscene power of these poems lies in the saints’ eager participation in their own abjection and suffering. Much like the papillon noir of “The Burnt Dancer,” “losing the object of their desire, they delight in the completion and totality of their failure and loss.
While these may be Eliot’s early warnings against romantic mysticism and self-knowledge as failed narcissism, this abjected view of martyrdom, while certainly never arising in such a “hair-raising” (MacDiarmid) and sado-masochistic fashion persists and is nurtured far into Eliot’s oeuvre. We remember the devouring leopards feeding on the speaker’s legs in “Ash Wednesday.” Even as late in his career as *Four Quartets*, he resurrects this idea of passion and transcendent knowledge that arises from a surrender to pain and self-denial. In “The Dry Salvages” he champions ascetic abjection as “the occupation of the saint”: “a lifetime’s death in love,/Ardour and selflessness and self-surrender” (*CP V. 21-22*). While this self surrender and abasement is perhaps stripped of its more blasphemous and erotic manifestations, I would argue that these lines firmly echo that sense of spiritual and sensual *jouissance* that erupts from the self-abasement of Narcissus and Sebastian. Here Eliot has moved his preoccupation with martyrdom from the carnal and visceral aspects of physical and sexual abjection to the more abstract and orthodox ideal caught up in the structure of Christianity. For after all, the way to spiritual transcendence in the Christian religion is in spiritual mortification, death, and reawakening. “If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow me” (*King James Bible*, Luke 9.23). This verse gives strong credence to the methods of spiritual awakening propounded by St. Theresa and St. John. This is the abjection intrinsic to Christianity. The very core of the religion turns on the abjection and suffering of the physical body
of Christ. The hope that arises from his resurrection hangs with him in his abject death on the cross. Christ’s last words were “Eli Eli lamma lamma sabathani [My God, My God why hast thou forsaken me?]” (Matthew 27.46). In a seeming paradox, Christ the man arises as God through his complete separation and estrangement from God. In sundering himself from the God-head he simultaneously asserts himself into a new realm of power and self-knowledge. As Kristeva describes the two-sided aspect of abjection: “The time of abjection is double: a time of oblivion and thunder, of veiled infinity and the moment where revelation bursts forth” (9). So too does Eliot’s re-fashioned saint in “The Dry Salvages,” in the very manner of Christ, give up everything that he might gain the whole world, an understanding outside the limits of time and language, that sacred, impossible intersection. Yet, returning to Eliot’s earlier martyr poems, the abjection encountered in the rotting bones of Narcissus and the strangled passions of Sebastian is much less abstracted, much more viscerally apparent and abhorrent.

The Cocktail Party

Eliot’s last and his most extended appraisal of martyrdom occurs not in his poetry or criticism, but in one of his later plays, The Cocktail Party, first performed in 1949 and published in 1950. As its title suggests, the play is structured around two cocktail parties in the first and final act, as well as an extended scene of psychiatric
treatment/pastoral counseling in the second act. The central characters in the play, Edward and Lavina Chamberlayne, are a couple experiencing marital troubles and a bourgeois sense of modern ennui. Yet by far the most compelling character is the mistress-turned-missionary, Celia Copplestone, a modern day example of an Eliotic martyr. Every one of the characters in the play suffers from some form of existential crisis; and the plot turns on the involvement of “The Uninvited Guest,” who (true to his name) in the first act is the catalyst that separates, reforms, and reunites the characters in the final act of the play. Very much the mouthpiece for Eliot, in the second act he is revealed to be Sir Henry Harcourt-Reilly, a guidance counselor giving religious/psychological advice to the estranged couple and later to Celia Copplestone. Through his abstracted counseling, the Chamberlaynes decide to renew their commitment to each other and suffer through the drudgery of the cosmopolitan life. Celia, on the other hand, chooses to forsake the meaninglessness of the social order and pursue a saintly life as a missionary-aid in deep Africa. The specifics of her choice are described much more abstractly and cryptically in her conversation with Reilly in the counseling session in Act II:

REILLY: There is another way, if you have the courage.

The first I could describe in familiar terms

Because you have seen it, as we have all seen it,

Illustrated, more or less, in the lives of those around us.
The second is unknown, and so requires faith—
The kind of faith that issues from despair.
The destination cannot be described;
You will know very little until you get there;
Your journey will be blind. But the way leads towards possession
Of what you have sought for in the wrong place.

CELIA: That sounds like what I want. But what is my duty?

REILLY: Whichever way you choose will prescribe its own duty.

CELIA: Which way is better?

REILLY: Neither way is better.

Both ways are necessary. It is also necessary
To make a choice between them.

CELIA: Then I choose the second.

REILLY: It is a terrifying journey.

CELIA: I am not frightened

But glad. I suppose it is a lonely way?

REILLY:

No lonelier than the other. But those who take the other
Can forget their loneliness. You will not forget yours.
Each way means loneliness—and communion.
Both ways avoid the final desolation
Of solitude in a phantasmal world
Of imagination, shuffling memories and desires (141-2)

Here Eliot, as clear as he has ever been, outlines a sense of choice that the modern subject is to make in this world. As in much of his early work, “mixing memory and desire,” and the phantasmal world of “broken images” seems the lot of the Modern man. Yet Eliot here seems to return to that rejection of the social order that he described in his Saint Narcissus, who “unable to live in men’s ways/ became a dancer before God.” Here Celia seems to perform this same sort of repudiation. Yet in this case Eliot seems much more optimistic in this “Christian” spirituality, though, prima fásca, it is not much different than the romantic mysticism and the “spiritual haschisch” [sic.] of his early “palpitating Narcissi.” Notice how he describes her final goal as a kind of “possession” and her faith the kind of faith that “issues out of despair” In an early review of the play, Eliot’s old poetic rival William Carlos Williams gives what Charles Andrews describes as “the standard reading of the play”: “There are two ways out—and it was very kind of Mr. Eliot to have provided them—the way of the Chamberlaynes and Celia’s way (qtd. in Grant 601)” (qtd. in Andrews 143).

From a Lacanian perspective, these dual paths parallel the psychological diagnoses of neurosis and psychosis. The Chamberlaynes (and Eliot himself) are
firmly constructed in the first choice, caught up, trapped in the social order of language and lack, the world of memory and desire. Like the Fisher King at the end of *The Waste Land*, they rest in the Pyrrhic victory of setting their lands in order, in remaining in the social order, in making “the best of a bad job” (*The Cocktail Party* 126). As Reilly explains to the Chamberlaynes: “The best of a bad job is all any of us can make of it—Except of course the saints” (126). And as he later explains, the Chamberlaynes, Eliot’s “adjusted” neurotics,

may remember

The vision they have had, but they cease to regret it,

Maintain themselves by the common routine,

Learn to avoid excessive expectation,

Become tolerant of themselves and others (139)

William Barrett, an American philosopher also makes a psychoanalytic reading of the dual choice—as well as of Eliot, “the last great product of the Puritan mind”—when he describes Reilly’s counseling of the Chamberlaynes: “No doubt resignation is necessary to get through life at all, and Freud himself stated that the aim of analytic therapy was to enable the neurotic to bear the sufferings of human life” (qtd. in Grant 610).

On the other hand, Eliot’s saints, Celia and Narcissus, seek out “the shadow of the red rock,” rejecting society and social constructs, listening for the still, small voice
in the desert. They renounce a life in the world for an ascetic life anticipating their final death and destruction. In an alternate version of “The Death of Saint Narcissus,” Eliot makes a curious distinction between Narcissus’s path and those of the rest of the world; these lines are crossed out in original manuscript but are still quite legible: “We each have the sort of life we want, but his/ life went straight to the death he wanted” (Facsimile 93). This is exactly the sort of choice that Miss Copplestone makes in the second act of The Cocktail Party. And the third act reveals that she meets a death as abject and macabre as any of Eliot’s early saints. She is crucified next to an anthill by the natives she sought to comfort and convert. In this third act, the final cocktail party of the play, the characters discuss at some length the fate and “passion” of this modern saint. Lavina Chamberlayne is shocked at the grisly and meaningless nature of Celia’s death; and she expresses the shock that the reader shares, when Reilly insists that she died “happy.”14 He describes her mindset, very much as the early Eliot describes the mind frame of his Saint Narcissus:

The only question

Then was, what sort of death? I could not know;

Because it was for her to choose the way of life

To lead to death, and, without knowing the end

Yet choose the form of death. We know the death she chose.

I did not know that she would die in this way;

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14 Part of the outrage at this assertion being that Reilly was the direct catalyst that drove her to this end.
She did not know. So all that I could do

Was to direct her in the way of preparation.

That way which she accepted, led to this death.

And if that is not a happy death,

What death is happy? (183-84)

Such a curious word to describe a crucifixion next to an anthill in front of a collection of people one has served selflessly for two years. But it is a word, nonetheless, that further unites Celia, Sebastian, and Narcissus with psychotic *jouissance*, a passion beyond desire found in the peculiar fruits of abjection. We remember Narcissus’s Sebastian-like death: “because his flesh was in love with the burning arrows/ his white skin surrendered itself to the redness of blood, and satisfied him.” His happiness, his uncontrolled *jouissance* bursts forth in the midst of his great suffering. Indeed there is an extended dialogue on the aspects and meaning of Celia’s suffering, speculating on the nature of pain and passion, joy and suffering, torture and delight, for the saint in the desert:

EDWARD: Do you mean that having chosen this form of death

She did not suffer as ordinary people suffer?

REILLY: Not at all what I mean. Rather the contrary.

I’d say that she suffered all that we should suffer

In fear and pain and loathing—all these together—
And the reluctance of the body to become a thing.

I’d say she suffered more, because more conscious

Than the rest of us. She paid the highest price

In suffering. That is part of the design.

Curiously, Reilly, in defending his role in sending Celia to her death, “doubles down” by asserting that Celia’s suffering was hyper-conscious rather than somehow assuaged or muted by a divine intervention. This “fear, pain, and loathing” rests uneasily alongside his earlier declaration of her “happy death.” But it does seem very much in concert with Bataille’s assertion of the peculiar mingling of “divine ecstasy and extreme horror,” and Julia Kristeva’s own assertion of the corporeal power spilling into the spiritual power of abjection: “The time of abjection is double: a time of oblivion and thunder, of veiled infinity and the moment when revelation bursts forth…[It is a] sublime alienation, a forfeited existence” (9). We think again of Eliot’s occupation for his revised saint in “Dry Salvages”:

    to apprehend

    The point of intersection of the timeless

    With time, is an occupation for the saint

    No occupation either, but something given

    And taken, in a lifetime’s death in love,

    Ardour and selflessness and self-surrender (CP 198)
In this play Eliot returns to his macabre fascinations with suffering and martyrdom, but in this case, affirms their orthodoxy. He strongly empathizes, even tries to remotely share in Celia’s suffering. As Reilly declares in a high-minded mysticism that descends into scatological realism:

But such experience can only be hinted at
In myths and images. To speak about it
We talk of darkness, labyrinths, Minotaur terrors,
But that world does not take the place of this one.
Do you imagine that the Saint in the desert
With spiritual evil always at his shoulder
Suffered any less from hunger, damp, exposure,
Bowel trouble, and fear of lions,
Cold of night and heat of the day, than we should? (184-5)

This speech is given towards the very end of the play, and it is the final great meditation on the experience of martyrdom before returning back to the banality of cocktails and party preparations. Here Eliot’s mystical reverie waxes into a feverous frenzy of poetic language that most fervently empathizes, seeks even to partake in, the abjection of this new saint in the desert, both in the high abjection of darkness and labyrinths and in the low abjection of frequent and infrequent bowel movements. Yet while Sebastian and Narcissus are meant to be seen as failed mystics, as examples of
“sick spirituality,” Celia, by nature of her supposed orthodoxy, is Eliot’s perfect saint, the fulfillment of what he (we) cannot achieve personally. Yet I fail to see any profound difference between the passion of Celia and the early heretical saints. She abjures the world, and seeks solace in a suicidal preparation for a masochistic death. An early Eliot might consider her passion as “romantic” and self-derived as the passion of St. Theresa and St. John of the Cross. While she is portrayed more dovingly and less overtly narcissistically than Narcissus and Sebastian, doesn’t Eliot assert in The Clark Lectures that this sort of mysticism confuses “and accepts too uncritically the experience of ecstasy as a sign of the divine” (111-2). Again, Reilly asserts that she died “happy” because this was the type of death she desired, but her more orthodoxy labeled ecstasy is no proof of the divine, according to Eliot’s earlier assertions. And we are given the description of her “happy” death by Reilly/Eliot and not from Saint Celia herself. Perhaps, we miss the differentiation between Celia and those “palpitating Narcissi” because this reader does not share Eliot’s then devoutly Anglican beliefs, beliefs which have evolved from the faute de mieux [for lack of something better] that were present in his composition of the early martyr poems of 1914-5, beliefs that not only uncritically accept Celia’s passion but admire, desire, and require it. As William Carlos Williams asserts in his review of the play, “without Celia and her heroism (a strange new note in Mr. Eliot’s poems) the day-to-day solution by homely honesty [i.e. the Chamberlaynes and perhaps more importantly Tom and his
second wife, Valerie Eliot] could not have emerged” (qtd. in Grant 60-2). In this sense 
Celia takes on the role of the scapegoat/martyr/intercessor, like the effigies of St. 
Sebastian in late Medieval churches. Rene Girard talks in detail of this “scapegoat 
mechanism” in his essay on historical scapegoats:

All of these themes can be found in the worship of Saint Sebastian and 
form a part of the representation of persecution. They are generated by 
a much weaker version of the scapegoat mechanism. Saint Sebastian is 
thought to protect one against the plague because he is covered with 
arrows, and arrows seem to have the same significance as they had for 
the Greeks and no doubt for the Aztecs: they imply the sun’s rays or 
pestilence. Epidemics are frequently portrayed as a rain of arrows 
hurled at men by the Eternal Father and even Christ. There is affinity 
between Saint Sebastian and the arrows, or rather the pestilence; the 
faithful hope that his presence in the churches with attract the 
wandering arrows to him and spare them. Saint Sebastian is offered as 
the preferred target for the malady; he is brandished like the serpent of 
brass in front of the Hebrews. (Girard 60-1)

In The Cocktail Party, the reason for Celia’s martyrdom is not unlike the use of 
Sebastian statues in Girard’s brief history. The natives crucified her in a failed attempt 
to thwart a pestilence that was killing their tribe. In fact, Alexander Gibbs, one of the
minor characters in the play, points out her hallowed place in the memory of the natives. As he asserts to deflect the barbarity of her slaughter as well as the endurance of her saintliness, “there’s one detail which is rather interesting. And rather touching, too. We found that the natives, after we’d re-occupied the village had erected a sort of shrine for Celia…they seemed to think that by propagating Celia, / They might insure themselves against further misfortune” (181). Returning to Williams’s argument, it would seem that Celia fills the role of scapegoat/pariah not merely for those pagans in deep Africa, but much more importantly for the Chamberlaynes and the other characters tethered to the social order, for whom this sort of saintly martyrdom is impossible. And returning to my own argument, Celia, is most importantly and most selfishly the scapegoat for the neurotic Eliot, who imagines and desires and continually revises examples of the certainty and joy of psychosis, but cannot personally achieve it. Eliot has created another suffering saint in Miss Celia Copplestone. And, as with Sebastian and Narcissus, “her sufferings are dwelt on, are indeed gloated over” (E. M. Forrester, qtd in Grant 603) as a stand-in to assuage his own sense of lack and desire. Much like the saint in “The Dry Salvages,” Eliot has created another saint that achieves the impossible intersection with the divine, the suffering, passion, and certainty that he cannot himself capture. Like the Chamberlynes, he can only admire, speculate and fetishize from a distance, reveling, “gloating” in her suffering, as medieval Christianity revels and fetishizes in the death
and passion of Christ and his martyrs, setting them apart as scapegoats and
intercessors who perform and fulfill the certainty in suffering and joy that they can
only desire and memorialize. As Barrett asserts in his review of the play:

> Here we must remember that Eliot, the last great product of the Puritan
> mind, has never shown in his poetry any real belief in the possibility of
> human love. The moment of love is presented always as the moment of
> withdrawal and renunciation, the awful daring of a moment’s surrender,
> one of ‘the things that other people have desired’; and consequently the
> beauty of the world is never present in the fullness of joy, but always
> with that painful clutch as at something taken away, lost, uncapturable.
> (qtd. in Grant 610)

Here we see Lacan’s endless cycle of desire, haunting the neurotic Eliot. Desire that
he performs in endless “visions and revisions that a minute can reverse” (CP). While
Eliot’s Celia is the most successful and admirable of his martyrs, she nevertheless still
performs the steps to ecstasy that move Narcissus and Sebastian. As Eliot
distinguishes between romantic and classical mysticism, romantic mysticism is
“psychological” and classical mysticism is “ontological.” Whether or not Celia’s route
to divine illumination through mortification and abjection is ultimately ontological, it
is described in profoundly psychological reveries. In David Childs’ concluding
assessment of *The Clark Lectures*, he draws attention to Eliot’s own personal stake in
his demarcations of mystical experience: “The Clark Lectures thus initiate a confidential investigation into the nature of Eliot’s own mystical experiences. Try as he will, he cannot escape the suspicion that for all his classical impulses there remains always in his mystical moments an element of romanticism” (T. S. Eliot: Mystic, Son, and Lover 185).
CONCLUSION

Justitia mosse il mio alto fattore

Mi fece la divina potestate

La somma sapienza e il primo amore

O lord, have patience

Pardon these derelictions—

I shall convince these romantic irritations

By my classical convictions (IMH 83)

In seeking to examine Eliot’s early poems and his late play, I have come to a point where I realize that my analysis inevitably falls short of the mark. For in the very moment that I invoke Lacanian knowledge-construction in my epigraph to the introduction, I could not hope to spar with Eliot’s assertions of his classical, ontological convictions. In the first place the Lacanian subject is not a whole entity, but rather a split subject. As Lacan asserts, “there are always things that don’t hang together. This is an obvious fact, if we don’t begin with the idea that inspires all classical, academic psychology, which is that human beings are, as they say, adapted beings, because they are living, and therefore it must all hang together. You are not a

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15 “Epigraph (or superscription): compare TSE, “Dante” (1929, SE, pp. 244-5):

We cannot understand the inscription at Hell Gate:

Guistizia mosse il mio alto Fattore;

decemi la divina Potestate,

là somma Sapienza e il primo Amore.

Justice moved my high Maker, what made me were the divine Power, the supreme Wisdom, and the primal Love.

Until we have ascended to highest Heaven and returned.” (IMH 281, Ricks’ note)
psychoanalyst if you accept this” (The Psychoses, 82). In Eliot’s defense, he would never claim to be a psychoanalyst. But in this early poem by which I epigraph my conclusion, Eliot asserts very inverse of Lacan’s declaration—that rather than limiting or resigning oneself to the phenomenological world of romantic irritations, one must seek out the way back to the classical ontology, a unified subject under God. In Eliot’s Clark Lectures he makes a sharp distinction between the romantic mysticism of St. Theresa and St. John of the Cross and the classical mysticism of Aquinas, Dante, and covertly Eliot’s own poetics. However, Lacan would assert that those “classical convictions” Eliot clings to—high-minded and lofty as they may seem—are unfortunately just another, more insidious eruption of those “romantic irritations” that Eliot cannot bear.

Yet those lines Eliot invokes from Dante’s Inferno, perhaps the most seminal lines in the classical canon, are indeed arresting and haunting: “Justice moved my maker, what made me were the divine Power, supreme Wisdom, and the primordial Love.” They speak to of a supreme order, a perfect ontology; and in Four Quartets, Eliot speaks most eloquently to these moments of divine perception, “concentration without elimination” at “the still point of the turning world.” But I would argue that his poetics speaks to these aspirations and convictions, but they do not fulfill them.

As I have reiterated throughout this essay, it has never been my purpose to excoriate Eliot or his poetic and religious philosophies. While he has demonstrated
acute neurosis, misogynistic behavior, and xenophobia, both in his personal life and in his poetry, all we can really make of the poet, the talent, and the man is what he has left us in the text. This essay merely argues that for as much as Eliot privileges the classical mysticism that he ascribes to Dante, Aquinas, and indirectly his own poetry, he nevertheless continues—from his earliest poems to the end of his career—to explore the passion, the inexplicable *jouissance* that arises out of the abjection and self-abasement of “romantic” mysticism. I have argued that the “torture and delight” of his saint Sebastian, Narcissus’s sweet surrender to the “penetrant” arrows, and the “happy” eyes of Celia at the moment of her death, are within our limited analytical gaze much more akin to the erotic, internal passions of St. Theresa and St. John of the Cross than to any external/eternal ontology of Aristotle, Dante, or Aquinas. As Eliot declares through his mouthpiece Reilly towards the end of *The Cocktail Party*, “such experience can only be hinted at/ In myths and images.” I think both Eliot and Lacan would concede this point.
Works Cited


