

T. S. Eliot's Philosophy, Religion and Values of Old Nihilism in his Poetry.

Dr. Vitthal V. Parab

*Head, Department Of English, K.M.Agrawal College Of Arts,Commerce & Science,
Kalyan(West)- 421301.*

*Recognized Ph.D & M.Phil Guide In English, University Of Mumbai & JJT University, Rajasthan
V.C. Nominee Subject Expert at Interview Panel for Recruitment of Assistant Professors
in University of Mumbai*

*Subject Expert at Maharashtra Public Service Commission, MPSC Head Office,
Kuparej, Mumbai- 400021*

Abstract:

Critics have left the influence of old nihilism on T. S. Eliot's poetry largely unexplored, an idea that necessitates further inspection because it provides a consistent pre-and-post-conversion current that accounts for his propensity to see empty spaces as fruitful. Dispensing with a framework that silos Christian conversion from philosophy, I interrogate images of empty space in Eliot's poetry and show that he views nothingness as generative in *The Hollow Men* and extending to the *Four Quartets*, effectively spanning most of his literary career. To do this, I draw upon my archival research to reconstruct his reading of nihilism before Nietzsche—an “old” nihilism which views nothingness as generative instead of destructive—and argue that engagement with philosophy in this tradition shapes his empty spaces. This view of emptiness aligns with Eliot's search for metaphysical answers in a broken world, a process that ultimately saw him simultaneously profess his faith passionately in front of the Pietà yet continue to exercise the values of old nihilism in his poetry.

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T. S. Eliot's first emotive, public expression of his Christian faith is a familiar anecdote. In the Summer of 1926, while exploring Rome with his wife Vivienne, brother, and sister-in-law, Eliot visited the Basilica of St. Peter, where he fixed his gaze upon Michelangelo's *Pietà* for the first time. It could be said that the vision of the Virgin Mary cradling the body of Christ filled Eliot with an overwhelming spiritual sensation, because what the poet did next shocked his entire family: as soon as he laid eyes on the statue, he immediately fell to his knees (Gordon 192). When Eliot was baptized into the Church of England less than one year later in June 1927, his friends and the contemporary literary scene shared that same astonishment (Gordon 192). As Ben Lockerd highlights, his contemporaries felt disappointed and even betrayed by Eliot's conversion because his “avant-garde poetry” represented the “herald of their modern secular worldview” (1). Virginia Woolf sums up this sentiment in a letter to her sister where she laments, “Poor dear Tom Eliot ... may be called dead to us from this day forward” (Dettmar 363). Though Eliot's conversion may have shocked his friends and colleagues, the philosophical foregrounding of this event, particularly influenced by nihilism, should have framed it as less unexpected.

Both Eliot's faith and his graduate study of philosophy have been the center of substantial inquiry, and a strand of the philosophy that Eliot studied while at Harvard, which we might now understand as pre-Nietzschean or “old” nihilism, enabled him to see creative potential in the empty spaces of modernity. The relationship between the two ostensibly disparate topics of faith and philosophy has received significant critical attention from Lyndall Gordon who, throughout *Eliot's Early Years*, sees the relationship between the 19th-century idealist philosophy that Eliot intensely studied in graduate school and his future religious pronouncements as harmonious

rather than incompatible. Barry Spurr, discussing faith particularly, calls Eliot's conversion in 1927 the "culmination of his intellectual, cultural, artistic, spiritual and personal development to that point" (10). More poignantly situating Eliot's work amidst the debate of nihilism, John Xiros Cooper observes a consistency in the relationship between Eliot's faith and his study of philosophy; this represents an undercurrent that shows Eliot did not see himself as participating in a post-Nietzschean tradition of nihilism (7).

Nietzsche, by deviating from an understanding of nihilism that finds its germination potentially as far back as pre-Socratic Greece, significantly departs from a philosophical concept that existed for centuries.¹ As Cooper argues, Eliot did not believe in such extreme nihilism: his Christianity would not allow him to, but his sense of human prospect conceded that Europe had reached a spiritual nadir akin to nihilism in the war years (126). "Of course," Cooper states, "adherence to Christian metaphysics banishes the philosophical post-Nietzschean nihilism with which all speculative Western philosophy has grappled in our time" (21). However, critical readings have yet to fully consider the influence of nihilism—particularly the tradition of nihilism before Nietzsche—warranting further exploration to elucidate Eliot's work. My examination thus provides a pre-and post-conversion current that accounts for Eliot's propensity to see empty spaces and the generative nothingness they represent as desirable.

Though they never mention the subject by name, Baruch Spinoza and Immanuel Kant posit a generative "old" nihilism, a "previous" tradition that existed before Nietzsche's *Will to Power*. It is the aim of this essay to illustrate Eliot's interactions with the philosophical works of Spinoza and Kant, and to further show that Eliot's faith and philosophy are not mutually exclusive: indeed, they are parallel lines until one of their core ideas—an ordered, generative reality—intersects through the "empty spaces" of old nihilism in Eliot's poetry. Drawing upon my archival research, I reconstruct Eliot's reading of Spinoza and Kant to argue that the philosophers help him establish a concrete system that values generative nothingness. This view of nothingness aligns rather seamlessly with the thought process of a man who sought metaphysical answers in a broken world, a process that ultimately led him to passionately profess his faith in front of the Pietà.

1. Nihilism Before Nietzsche: Eliot Reading Spinoza and Kant

Eliot first studied Spinoza while a graduate student at Harvard and owned an 1895 copy of Spinoza's *Opera Posthuma*. Eliot was especially familiar with the philosopher's work: his early essay "The Development of Leibniz's Monadism" published in *The Monist* in 1916 references Spinoza as a point of comparison, and his review of Wolf's biography of Spinoza in 1927 recurrently showers Spinoza with overwhelming praise. In it, Eliot labels Spinoza "a man of the greatest reticence, but with nothing to conceal—a man of intensely 'private life', but wholly transparent" as well as "a symbolic hero of modern Europe" ("Spinoza" 56). Eliot further declares in his review that "few people have mastered the *Ethics*" ("Spinoza" 56). Eliot's copy of the *Opera*, a book that he likely purchased as a graduate student and perhaps even earlier, contains three different treatises. Among these is the philosopher's magnum opus, the *Ethica* (1677),² in which Spinoza intends to demonstrate the truth about God, nature, and human existence as well as the chief ideologies of humanity, religion and the "good life." Eliot's frequent markings and annotations establish him as an actively engaged reader of Spinoza's philosophy, and he appeared most interested in Parts I and II: "Of God" and "Of the Mind," respectively. These sections contain frequent underlining, blocking, and marginalia, a suggestive pattern that demonstrates what struck Eliot as the essential components of Spinoza's system: God, substance, negation, and existence. Such understanding of the complexity in *Ethica* did not come easily for Eliot, though, as a marginal comment scribbled in near-illegible French on his copy's title page reads "the big difficulty of Spinoza...god."

For Spinoza, God and substance are synonymous. In the *Ethica*, he outlines the existence of a single, infinite substance that possesses limitless attributes as the foundation of all reality: the One Substance. This facet of Spinoza's system must have particularly interested Eliot because the propositions in which Spinoza outlines his theory of substance contain prevalent annotations. For instance, in Ip. 8, Spinoza argues that "every substance is necessarily infinite," but since "we cannot infer the existence of several substances ... it follows that there is only one substance of the same nature" (6). Eliot's note directly below this proposition shows him actively deciphering this riddle; he concludes, "If limited by another substance of the same nature, it would coincide with that substance & therefore not be limited; and it cannot be limited by a subs. of a different nature." Next, Eliot blocks off the following phrase in Ip. 10: "Each attribute of the one substance ["*unius substantiae*"] must be conceived through itself" (9). The idea of a single substance must capture Eliot's attention here because his bracketing is the only marking on the page.

In addition to remarking on the One Substance, Eliot's scrawl evidences interest in Spinoza's generative negation. Under the first note to Ip. 8, "every substance is necessarily infinite," Eliot scribbled the phrase "all determination is negation," quotes included (7). This phrase comes directly from Hegel's *Lectures on the Philosophy of History* (1837), a text that Eliot also read in detail while at Harvard, where Hegel paraphrases one of Spinoza's key ideas: his meditation on substance. To claim a thing *is* something is to simultaneously say it is *not* many other things. This negative approach to "determination," often acknowledged as *via negativa*, permeates Eliot's poetry and it enables him to see empty spaces as plentiful. In Spinoza's note to that same proposition, Eliot rather emphatically underlined the phrase "qui negant dari vacuum," translated as "...those who deny that a vacuum can exist" (17). In this note, Spinoza denies that an unredeemable abyss of absolute nothingness, or a "vacuum," can possibly exist. He declares, "...there does not exist a vacuum in nature...but all parts are bound to come together to prevent it, it follows from this that the parts cannot really be distinguished, and that extended substance in so far as it is substance cannot be divided" (17). According to Spinoza, complete nothingness cannot possibly exist; indeed, such a thing is unnatural. Eliot's interpretation of Spinoza's "all determination is negation" maxim reflects a trend in his writing that identifies nothingness as holding the capacity for creation.

Aside from his annotations and reviews, Eliot did not extensively write about Spinoza's philosophy. However, Eliot studied and wrote substantial commentary on another prominent philosopher, Immanuel Kant. Kant's philosophy, metaphysics, ethics, and conception of God offer us, along with Spinoza, a paired understanding of Eliot's philosophical lineage. As a graduate student, Eliot read *The Philosophy of Kant as Contained in Extracts from his Own Writings* (1908) in a seminar with Charles Montague Bakewell. This book contains selections from each of Kant's three *Critiques*—*Pure Reason*, *Practical Reason*, and *Judgment*—and Eliot annotated this text with frequency. In his 1913 papers that he wrote for the seminar, Eliot constructed three pieces that each interrogate and collectively demonstrate his initial considerations of Kant's philosophy. Eliot asserts in his "Report on the Relation of Kant's Criticism to Agnosticism" that "experience is by definition essentially relative; for it is a complex relation so organic that, taken as a whole, no element can be separated or wholly distinguished from the rest" (*Prose* 1.42).

His attention evidently unfolding in his writings, Eliot's idea of an all-encompassing experience indicates fixation with the notion of an equalizing, empty space. Eliot sees Kant's categories as regulators of the natural world's overall organization, and in his "Report on Kantian Categories," he declares that they are "a list of ways of thinking about reality" (Habib 103; *Prose* 1.31). Kant's categories—which include space, time, relation, and quantity—are pure

impressions of human understanding which posit an order and substance to emptiness. Like his reading of Spinoza's nihilism, Eliot also considers Kant's depiction of God as an ultimately negating, ultimate reality:

...we have assurance of God's existence, only by mercilessly plucking him of all the qualities which constitute a God, and reducing him to a mere term; whether God or not, it is all one. And I cannot see that our 'pure practical' knowledge of such a God differs at all from our speculative assumption of noumena 'behind' physical existence.

(Prose 1.52)

Here, Eliot equates Kant's God to a noumenon—a thing that exists independently from human perception. Kant uses "Absolute" and "God" rather synonymously; the Absolute is by definition unknowable, but it nevertheless drives existence. As Manju Jain articulates, Eliot's conclusion concerning Kant's God and Absolute is that the entity exists as a "state of nothingness" (209). This nothingness is a biproduct of Eliot's chief exploration in his reports on Kantian categories, out of which he gains a positive understanding of space ripe for generation.

2. "Between" and "The Shadow": A Generative Nothing in *The Hollow Men*

In *T. S. Eliot's Dialectical Imagination*, Jewel Spears Brooker calls *The Hollow Men* "Eliot's *No Exit*," while Robert Crawford relays that any possibility for "Christian hope" within the poem degenerates into "crazy childishness" through the arrival of the "prickly pear" lines in Part V (Brooker 91; Crawford 155). *The Hollow Men*—as Brooker, Crawford, and others have astutely articulated—is read as a bleak poem. It is an ethos that Eliot himself retrospectively perceives in this mid-career poem: a sheer emptiness that he reflects on in a January 1936 letter to his brother, Henry. Eliot muses, "incidentally, I have written one blasphemous poem, 'The Hollow Men': that is blasphemy because it is despair, it stands for the lowest point I ever reached in my sordid domestic affairs" (*Letters* 8 11). Between 1923-1925, Vivienne suffered grave illnesses and Eliot, distressed by personal and professional anxieties, neared a second breakdown that closely preceded his visit to Rome in 1926, where he fell to his knees in St. Peter's Cathedral. However, this is a place where (retrospectively) faith and philosophy indeed intersect. Through reconstructing his interrogation of old nihilism, we can read this poem's empty space as transformative, and, taking his underlining of Spinoza's "vacuum theory" as an indication, Eliot believed to some capacity that absolute emptiness cannot exist. Thus, the emptiness that pervades *The Hollow Men* is neither absolute nor permanent.

As its austere landscape insinuates, the transformative capacity of empty space in *The Hollow Men* is veiled beneath the façade of unconditional vacuity both in person and place. "We are the hollow men / We are the stuffed men," the personae declare in a peculiarly proud chant; they are incomplete entities who compare themselves to effigies "filled with straw" residing in the "dead...cactus land" where the dryness is almost suffocating (56-57). Even when their voices "whisper together," the result is "quiet and meaningless" (56). In the poem's handwritten draft, Eliot squeezed the words "Walking alone" between "In death's other kingdom" and "At the hour when we are," as if the setting demanded another injection of loneliness. The poem's structure, with its staccato lines and stanzas, mirrors the setting's materially and spiritually forsaken atmosphere. Conversely, for Jeffery Howard, the imagery and setting of this poem allow for the "presence of nihilism" as well as "hopeful expectation" on the part of the hollow men (8).

The Personae's posture, outlook, and act of "leaning together" back to back and head to head, as Howard argues, functions as an imitation of the Roman god Janus whose two faces see the past and know the future (9). Their parallel to Janus—the god of transition and new beginnings—imbue the personae with a latent creative capacity that only strengthens when contextualized by Eliot's interactions with old nihilism. The hollow men chant "Here we go round the prickly pear...at five o'clock in the morning" in Part V of the poem, the point at which

Eliot first introduces his concept of “between” (58). The hollow men lack the concept of a green, lush plant filled with nourishing berries, so they sing about the only paradigm of vegetation that they seem to know: a sharp, arid, prickly pear cactus. Interestingly, though, prickly pear cacti produce consumable fruit and strikingly vibrant flowers; the potential for beauty, creation, and satiation therefore exists for the hollow men, but the personae fail to fully comprehend this opportunity. Eliot’s inclusion of “five o’clock in the morning,” the traditional time of Christ’s resurrection, emphasizes the environment’s latent creative possibility. While their dancing in an apocalyptic circle around the cactus could be read as the personae’s ignorance of the Resurrection, this act ushers in the concept of “between”: the hollow men exist somewhere between salvation and barrenness.

Eliot uses “between” to present a hopeful connotation and combat the utter nothingness of the landscape by offering respite through the Shadow. Eliot’s shadowy space in *The Hollow Men* is less opaquely generative and ushers in a betweenness that can foster transformation. The personae state:

Between the idea
And the reality
Between the motion
And the act
Falls the Shadow (58)

A shadow, while a body of uncertainty, personifies betweenness; one is cast only when an object stands between a light source and a surface. Though a place of obscurity and partial darkness, a shadow also represents a trace, or an indistinct-but-referential image or idea: a thing that is evolving. The shadow serves as a third space amid two related but different concepts that defines a missing catalyst. This catalyst will turn an “idea” into “reality” and usher the “potency” into “existence.” To further elucidate meaning, Eliot locates an additional place the “shadow” can possibly be, in a stanza that pits Platonic and Aristotelian considerations of essence and existence against one another: “Between the potency / And the existence / Between the essence / And the descent” (59). Plato declares that essence is the ideal and can be expressed in less perfect terms on our plane. Aristotle, however, responds that matter only has potency until form gives it essence, an idea that opens the possibility for something to generate from nothing. Kant takes this idea one step further in Section VI of his *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781) and states that existence is not a property:

Everywhere around us we observe a chain of causes and effects, of means and ends, of death and birth; and, as nothing has entered of itself into the condition in which we find it, we are constantly referred to some other thing, which itself suggests the same inquiry regarding its cause, and thus the universe must sink into the abyss of nothingness, unless we admit that, besides this infinite chain of contingencies, there exists something that is primal and self-subsistent—something which, as the cause of this phenomenal world, secures its continuance and preservation. (348)

It is toward this Kantian “something,” represented by the murky, nondescript image of a “shadow,” that Eliot is moving in *The Hollow Men*: a “something” that incorporates essence, existence, and potency that resists the abyss of absolute nothingness. The italicized “*For Thine is the Kingdom*” that concludes the stanza, while a clear allusion to the Lord’s Prayer, also shows a narrative voice pointing to that “space between” as the answer to two competing ideas in the stanza; that is, the “shadow” is the personae’s “kingdom.”

Despite relegating the personae to a suspended state of existence through the shadow,

Eliot's consistent marking of passages in the *Ethica* that discuss the infiniteness of substance suggests that the land of the hollow men is not an empty, permanent vacuum. When coupled with his underlining of "qui negant dari vacuum," we see a setting primed for change. Eliot's interest in Spinoza's "vacuum" statement is particularly relevant for *The Hollow Men*; it shows the poet's disinclination to accept absolute nothingness. In an innovative investigation of Spinozan vacancy, Jonathan Bennett renders Spinoza's assertion that "there cannot be vacuum" as follows:

Suppose there are three contiguous cubic bodies—A, B, and C—of which the middle one, B, is annihilated while every other body in the universe, including A and C, is held still...The annihilation of a body B was just a thinning out...in that region of space, that the 'something' lying between A and C after the annihilation of B is the very same 'something' that lay there before B was annihilated. (396)

Here, Bennett makes a significant observation: that for Spinoza, true annihilation is impossible, thus prohibiting the conceivable existence of a completely empty space. Annihilation can render a change in the form of a body, but such an act does not eradicate it absolutely; rather, it exposes a vessel in transition.

Within the contour of the temporary, transitory state of the poem, Eliot follows Spinozan logic in fashioning emptiness in *The Hollow Men*: to say what the poem's personae and their environment *are*, he first needs to say what they *are not*. In the poem's second stanza, Eliot describes literally hollow, incomplete entities: "Shape without form, shade without color, / Paralyzed force, gesture without motion," lines which also serve to illustrate the land itself. Even the hollow men's gestural plea, the "supplication of a dead man's hand," evaporates "under the twinkling of a fading star." The hollow men inhabit a plane of flat, one-dimensional "shape" rather than the three-dimensional composition of "form." They are themselves examples of inherited properties, elaborations of a concept in transition but not the thing itself, much like a reflection or shadow. They see in "shades," but not the more potent "color," and the small "gesture" rather than the large "motion" characterizes the movement that the hollow men perceive. However, "shape," "shade," and "gesture" all scrape together a forward potential: the three repetitions of "without" do not indicate "without the possibility of meaning;" but instead insinuate only that meaning has yet to bloom.

In this yet-meaningfully undefined space, the hollow men abandon their incomplete, broken prayer recital rather abruptly, indicating a movement toward resolution instead of a glaring failure. Here, prayer operates as another indication of an emptying out, and a signal that forecasts a building-up. As the personae attempt to perform the Lord's Prayer, rather than becoming stronger and ending as a completed undertaking, the prayer manifests as fragments that diminish in physical line length as well as finished content:

For Thine is the Kingdom

For Thine is

Life is

For Thine is the (59)

Eliot structures these lines in a way that shows the hollow men dissecting the meaning of the completed line of prayer, struggling to comprehend it. The fragments diminish in dimension until only the idea of "Life is" remains, as if that is the query that needs to be answered. The next fragment then begins to swell in length and content; while the idea is still incomplete at the stanza's close, it gestures toward the desire to build upon its forward-progress. Eliot signifies this through the lack of punctuation at the stanza's close.

Such ambiguity and uncertainty are decidedly absent in the poem's final stanza, as the hollow men chant "*This is the way the world ends* / *Not with a bang but a whimper*" (59).

Their repeating of “This *is* the way the world ends” (my emphasis added on “is”) appears almost like a foretelling: in perhaps their only deliberate action, the hollow men not only predict the obliteration of their domain but indicate the temporality of that end. Here, obliteration does not terminate with an abrupt, harsh “bang” but rather a quiet, soft, prolonged “whimper.” The end of the personae’s world thus subverts the expected idea of what an “end” is, and how such an event happens. Rather than quick and boisterous, the connotation of “whimper” slows and extends that ending process in a way that invites transition and transformation. As Howard observes, the poem’s ending is an “unexpected and almost silent precursor to a spiritual beginning at which [the personae] may arrive only by breaching the barrier of despair and death” (11). There is no doubt that the personae’s world ends, but the infiniteness of substance ensures that vacuity is not the result of this culmination. The visage of Janus returns, signaling a transformation and new beginning beyond the end.

3. The Plentitude of Vacancy: The *Four Quartets*

The personal and spiritual struggles that Eliot suffered while writing *The Hollow Men* did not evaporate after his conversion. As Gordon points out, Eliot’s words in the second section of “East Coker”—that humanity exists “On the edge of a grimpen, where is no secure foothold”—veiled an all too familiar sentiment for the poet. Between his separation from Vivienne in 1933 and the tribulation of a “nation under fire” in the advent of the second World War, a sinking into a metaphorical, abysmal Grimpen Mire seemed a real peril for Eliot (Gordon 338). However, as Cooper points out, the *Four Quartets* show Eliot’s response to a nihilistic threat that Herbert Read claimed had all but entirely engulfed the mindset of the time (Read 69). The resolution that Eliot presents in the *Four Quartets* contains his most visceral poetic image of an illuminative empty space: the “still point.”

To arrive at the still point, Eliot implies that the subject must move outside of “here”: a location that he calls a “place of disaffection” (120). Eliot’s distinctive engagement with nihilism connects strongly to the philosophy’s generative tradition since the abyss fails to absolutely obstruct the subject’s possibility of reaching the still point. For Cooper, this “place of disaffection” is Eliot’s “abyss,” and in it, one can find a personal “relationship to or attitude toward nihilism” (132). In forming the still point, Eliot borrows from his reading of Spinoza and Kant to cast the emptiness that comprises it as simultaneously a metaphysical space and a process of negation. After undergoing a voiding of all attribute, the subject attains that space of absolute but generative negativity, and in doing so, it will be remade.

To say that the still point is a “negative space” is to say that it is characterized by absence: a definite location that is completely removed from time and place. In this space, the subject participates in a purified reality that delivers illumination and thus, the still point affords the subject a more “perfect” existence. Though Eliot only mentions this space verbatim four times, the still point haunts the entirety of the *Four Quartets*: it appears in various iterations from the collective descent into darkness that begins the third section of “East Coker” to the “condition of complete simplicity” that ends “Little Gidding.” Eliot first introduces the still point in the second section of “Burnt Norton,” where he efforts to elucidate its relationship with kinesis:

At the still point of the turning world. Neither flesh nor fleshless;
Neither from nor towards; at the still point, there the dance is,
But neither arrest nor movement. And do not call it fixity,
Where past and future are gathered. Neither movement from nor towards,
Neither ascent nor decline. (119)

The still point poses somewhat of a conundrum; namely, how can we define a space that is belonging to the world, but simultaneously separate from it, and both concurrently moving and still? For this task, Eliot again applies the Hegelian rendering of Spinoza's axiom on the infinity of substance: "All determination is negation." As he does in *The Hollow Men*, Eliot must establish what the still point is *not* so that he may ascertain what it *is*. The repetition of "neither from nor towards" shows the cancellation of motion without a complete immobilization: an unmotion that through "dance," as Susan Jones highlights, evokes a vision of the sublime (31). Eliot uses "the dance" as a symbol for the "unmoving motion of the timeless" without relegating the still point to a state of true motionlessness, which Staffan Bergsten argues would indicate a version of death (90). The opposing concepts, "flesh" and "fleshless"; "arrest" and "movement"; "ascent" and "decline" all negate each other to form a space that combines "past and "present."

In an instance of similar construction, Eliot frames the sentence "neither plentitude nor vacancy" between nine symmetrical, complete lines, both before and after. When Eliot states "neither plentitude nor vacancy," he does not mean to reject either concept. Rather, through this double-negation of two opposing concepts, he accepts a version of both that draws directly from a Spinozan interpretation of the principle of plentitude. Succinctly, the principle of plentitude—named as such by historian of ideas Arthur Lovejoy—asserts that the universe contains all possible forms of ideas, and Lovejoy upholds Spinoza as articulating its most categorical iteration (155). Eliot's use of "nor" to connect "plentitude" with "vacancy" indicates a simultaneity between these ideas that both contradicts and complements. In this way, the line reflects Spinoza's argument that perfection, which he uses synonymously with existence, requires both plentitude and "parsimony" (Newlands 19). The philosopher first introduces his principle of plentitude—albeit implicitly—in the second proposition of the *Ethics*, Part I: "Two substances having different attributes have nothing in common with one another" (4). In other words, substance can be understood without reference to anything else. More significantly, however, is Eliot's engagement with Ip 15 and Ip 26 in his copy of the *Ethica*, which read, "Whatever is, is in God, and nothing can either be or be conceived without God"—a phrase that Eliot bracketed—and "A thing which has been determined to any action was necessarily so determined by God, and that which has not been determined by God cannot determine itself to action," respectively (14; 26). These propositions together show an interplay between plentitude and parsimony that, as Samuel Newlands points out, demonstrates Spinoza's dedication to iterations of both "maximal parsimony" and "maximal plentitude" (19). While Ip 26 looks to be unmarked, it appears uncoincidental that Eliot's treatment of "plentitude and vacancy" exudes these Spinozan characteristics: features that theologian John Caird calls "the colorless blank [which] becomes at a stroke filled up with rich and varied content" (144).

Though not necessarily explicit, Eliot actively engages with "substance" in his meditation on the still point. Philosophically, substance refers to an entity that exists independently of and from other objects, and similarly, the still point resides apart from time and space. Indeed, a subject must endure a metaphysical voiding to reach it:

Descend lower, descend only
Into the world of perpetual solitude,
World not world, but that which is not world,
Internal darkness, deprivation
And destitution of all property (120)

For Eliot, a removal of attributes from the human condition will—perhaps paradoxically—simultaneously yield absolute positivity: a limitlessness of attributes that closely resembles the qualities of Spinoza's One Substance. Eliot's notes in the *Ethica* give us a clearer indication of

the One Substance's influence on the infinitely negative, infinitely generative attributes of the still point. First, in Ip. 8, Eliot underlined the following phrase:

...now it pertains to the nature of substance to exist, [the One Substance's] definition must involve necessary existence, and consequently from its definition alone its existence must be concluded. But from its definition...the existence of more substances than one cannot be deduced. It follows, therefore, from this definition necessarily that there cannot be two substances possessing the same nature. (9)

Furthermore, in Ip 10, Eliot bracketed the following phrase: "Each particular attribute of the substance must be conceived through itself" (9). The One Substance thus has many attributes that extend from it and collapse back into it; this entity is thus a type of "still point," a single space with many attributes. If all things flow back into the One Substance and it is the only substance that truly exists, then it is the highest form of reality. While not a direct transcription, Eliot uses Spinoza's One Substance to imagine the still point as his highest reality, reached through total negation that is bound by neither time nor flesh.

Eliot requires a total voiding of the subject so that it may participate in the still point, and to show this, he utilizes Kant's mode of the reduction of the subject to complete emptiness. Kantian philosophical discourse, as Conor Cunningham puts it, is "predicated on the disappearance of the world" and requires a "vanishing" to take place so that Kant can "say something about the truth" (74). Kant's formulation of nihilism takes a rational approach as defined in his three *Critiques: The Critique of Pure Reason* (1781), *The Critique of Practical Reason* (1788), and *The Critique of Judgment* (1790). Perhaps fittingly, nihilism enters the discussion through an act of disappearance. For Žižek, the Kantian subject becomes "a non-substantial void" where Kant "asserts that the transcendental subject is unknowable, empty" (124). This fading of the subject is an arduous undertaking and the process requires an epistemological regression, so to speak, to complete it. In the first *Critique*, Kant wants to stake a claim about the truth, and in doing so, he reduces the world to mere appearance. As Cunningham suggests, the world must dissolve before the Kantian subject can make any assumptions, to "say" anything. The second *Critique* steals nature away from the subject to examine "the good life" without any phenomenal intrusion, and thus the subject has lost the ability to "do" anything. Finally, in the third *Critique*, the subject's world loses all "visible objects," and so it can no longer "see" anything (Cunningham 74-75).

Having read each of the *Critiques*, Eliot's endeavor resembles Kant's own; Eliot, too, was interested in arriving at an ultimate "truth" about the divine, time, and the universe. This pursuit is clear in "Little Gidding," where the speaker aims to reach a veracity through "...detachment / From self and from things and from persons" and "indifference" that will unlock "not less of love but expanding / Of love beyond desire, and so liberation / From the future as well as the past" (142). To reach this detachment, the speaker moves through stages of Kantian vanishing. He continues his journey toward the void of the still point and begins the process of shedding the extra clamor, the "attachment to self and to things and to persons," that inhibit him from attaining absolute positivity. For the speaker, though, the movement toward the still point perhaps takes Kant's idea of vanishing one step further where the world of appearances itself will dissipate in the form of a disappearing of human history:

History may be servitude,
History may be freedom. See, now they vanish,
The faces and places, with the self which, as it could, loved them,
To become renewed, transfigured, in another pattern. (142)

People, places, and concepts "vanish" and are "renewed" at this point in the poem. Their "vanishing" is a negation that aims to rejuvenate and "renew," and like Kant's nihilism, is necessary to reveal an authentic state. The subject disappears along with everything it knows,

and an embrace of that disappearance reveals a reconfigured reality. Through the “emptying out” of Kantian vanishing, Eliot finally approaches the “still point,” the ultimately empty, and simultaneously, ultimately positive reality.

The *Four Quartets*, like *The Hollow Men*, end with an image of comprehensive annihilation. However, the speaker of the *Quartets* reaches a conclusion that eludes the hollow men: that through annihilation, a reduction to silence and the absolute nihil, the process of recreation can begin within that consequential void. Eliot concludes “Little Gidding” with a nothingness that forecasts “A condition of complete simplicity / (Costing not less than everything),” which rather directly specifies that to reach the “still point” of simplicity, modern society must first undergo an unqualified voiding of worldly desire (145). Indeed, Eliot’s use of “simplicity” conjures imaginings of a lack or an absence, or even a stripping away of excess in an endeavor to empty the void and prepare it for cultivation. As J. H. Miller argues, the “infinite plenitude” of “the instant of intense experience” is affirmed through certain images that occur at the “culminating passages of Eliot’s poetry” (189). The two contrasting ideas that Miller highlights collapse into the “still point” of an always-existent present from which collective humanity has purged futility, disarray, and total emptiness itself—concepts which Eliot manages, at length, to assimilate. Eliot’s reading and interaction with “old” nihilism functions in much the same way as his dedication to Christianity: useful, in that old nihilism removes the burden of post-Nietzschean nihilism (and subsequently futility, disarray, and total emptiness), yielding that Eliot’s philosophy and religion are not mutually exclusive.

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¹ For further reading on this tradition of nihilism, see Michael Allen Gillespie, *Nihilism Before Nietzsche*, U of Chicago P, 1995 and Cunningham, Conor, *Genealogy of Nihilism: Philosophies of Nothing and the Difference of Theology*, Routledge, 2002.

² Eliot’s copy of the *Opera* is written in Latin. All English translations, including pagination, are taken from the following edition: Spinoza, Benedictus. *Ethics*. Translated by W. H. White, Ware, 2001.

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