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“The Hollow Men”: A Spiritual Sterility and Journey towards Nothingness

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Eliot was different from either in being a poet who brought into consciousness, and into confrontation with one another, two opposite things: the spiritually negative character of the contemporary world and the spiritually positive character of the past tradition. He was obsessed with time. The past and modern co-exist in his poetry as an imagined present of conflicting symbols to which are attached values of spiritual life or death. Although he had very vivid pictures of the past in his mind, he never saw that past as a nostalgic world into which he could escape from the present. He always saw it as a force still surviving within the present which could be brought into life and action. For Eliot, the past of the tradition meant Europe, the old civilization which reached to parts of America. The rituals of living which yearned for come within the medieval Catholic tradition, though they have roots in ancient Rome and classical Greece. Unlike Ezra Pound, D. H. Lawrence and E. M. Forster, Eliot had no nostalgia for pagan ritual.

There is no strict rules for creating poetry, but still the poem is neither arbitrary nor a deliberate event. This poem celebrates the divine madness, as Plato called it, descends on a moral and then burns out. This poem was written in 1925, the year of religious crisis. This poem can be cited as an example of *pure poetry*. ‘The Hollow Men’ is a celebration of incineration. ‘*Mistah Kurtz – the dead. A penny for the Old Guy*’. Mistah Kurtz saw the visions that were splendid, though he may have been a bad man, a corrupt man, a suffering man. Even when, as in this poem, he is evoking ‘death’s other Kingdom’, he does so in bright images, ‘Sunlight on a broken column’, ‘a tree swinging’; but then, alas, ‘Between the emotion/ And the response/ Falls the Shadow’. What Eliot meant by the Shadow is clear enough and it is not a Shadow that we encounter in his poetry without sorrow.

Eliot’s religious development seems to have passed through three stages, all deriving from a logic implanted in his mind by Maurras, whom he referred to as ‘a kind of Virgil who led us to the doors of the temple’. Those were, first, the idea of civilization in which classicism was distinct from humanism; secondly, the hypothesis of accepting values of religion, though not being able to believe; thirdly, being driven, out of a sense of the necessity of dogma and out of a Dantesque vision of eternity, to believe. ‘The Hollow Men’ is a dramatization of a state of spiritual and emotional sterility in a physical and psychological landscape. Eliot’s stylistic innovations in *The Hollow Men* are the result of his interest in ritual and drama during the composition of the poem. The final form of *The Hollow Men* was influenced by the view Eliot held at this time that ‘the drama was originally ritual’. ‘All art emulates the condition of ritual’, according to Eliot, ‘that is what it comes from and to that it must always return for nourishment. And nothing belongs more properly to the people than rituals’. The epigraph relating to Guy Fawkes highlights this aspect of the poem, since the fate of Guy Fawkes is enacted in popular ritual every year. The choral chants of ‘The Hollow Men’ are stylized in a ritual-like manner. More importantly, Eliot uses the rhythms of popular verse, such as that of the nursery rhyme, in order to parody ritual, and to recreate the effect of mechanical movement which enacts the theme of a spiritually enervated, death-in-life existence monotonously repeating itself.

Eliot's major point of departure for 'The Hollow Men' was Dante's *Vita Nuova*, a collection of lyrics within a prose framework. This work was based on Dante's experiences in relation to his adolescent love for Beatrice. For Eliot, human love 'is only explained and made reasonable by the higher love, or else is simply the coupling of animals.' Eliot has praised the *Vita Nuova* for its 'Catholic philosophy of disillusion', its practical, anti-romantic sense of realities. In 'The Hollow Men' Eliot seeks to follow 'the system of Dante's organization of sensibility', by integrating and transforming adolescent feelings of disillusionment with romantic love into a larger view of life, and by attempting to make a transition from human to divine love. The poem is an interior spiritual journey which dramatizes subtle shifts in the speaker's consciousness. In *The Divine Comedy* it is Beatrice who, for Dante's salvation, descends from Heaven and beseeches Virgil with her prayers and tears to show him the vision of the lost souls in Hell and Purgatory. The hollow men, however, can reach out only tentatively towards an apprehension of the higher love. They do not attain a vision of the divine, as Dante does. They realize the futility of romantic passion and aspire towards a glimpse of the divine, but are unable to attain it because of their inertia and spiritual aridity.

Eliot's epigraph relates the hollow men of the poem with that *Heart of Darkness* and with the stuffed Guy Fawkes. Yet there is a distinction between Guy Fawkes and Kurtz, the 'lost/Violent souls' who at least exercised a choice, and the apathetic protagonists of the poem who are perceived as mere effigies. In "Heart of Darkness" as in the *Commedia*, the feminine symbol, a prototype of the eyes in "The Hollow Men," charts the quester's pilgrimage into the region of pain; Kurtz's descent is irretraceable. But Dante's leads finally upward to his vision, beyond the eyes, beyond even the celestial spheres. "The Hollow Men" would re-express the affirmative way by abjuring lust, the false centre, the "prickly pear" of Part V, circled in a whirling or whirlpool motion, and by declaring the speaker's hope for the eyes. But attainment of the vision, according to "The Hollow Men," is remote indeed. The agony of "Lips that would kiss," the unalleviated "anguish of the marrow / The age of the skeleton," lacerates the heart with proximate desire. People who have died and gone over to eternity – death's other kingdom – look back towards the world of the hollow men, and think how negative and meaningless it is. "Lost violent souls" like Kurtz and Fawkes, are better off than the hollow men. They could decide on a course of action and act firmly and courageously. No doubt, their actions took a wrong direction, but action and decision, even though wrong, are to be preferred to the useless life of inaction of the hollow men. No doubt, Kurtz and Fawkes have gone to hell, but even then they are better off than the hollow men who wait for ever in a realm of 'nothingness', rejected both by Heaven and Hell. They are like the *nothing men* of Dante whose souls stay for ever in limbo- a sort of nowhere, a realm of nothingness- where they are excluded from the scheme of Divine Providence. Theirs is a pointless drifting through life, achieving nothing, signifying nothing. "In *The Hollow Men* the speakers are *nothing men*; they cannot face the eyes of those who have crossed into Paradise, having chosen Good, and they are not thought of as lost violent souls, who have chosen Evil, but at least have chosen." (T. S. Pearce). If at all, they are thought of as effigies stuffed with straw waiting for the consuming fire.

The poem is narrated by one of the 'Hollow Men'. In the first section of the poem, the Hollow Men are leaning together almost like lifeless beings. The description of them 'leaning together' with their heads 'filled with straw' makes them appear as feeble and lifeless as scarecrows. They cannot even stand or think or function on their own. The place they inhabit, as well as themselves, is described as 'dry' ('our dried voices'; 'in our dry cellar'). The meaningless lives they lead are evident here, with reference to their 'dried voices' that are

'quiet and meaningless' when they 'whisper together'. They exist in a place between Heaven and Hell, not yet having crossed over the River Styx to make it into either place. The people who have crossed over remember them only as 'the Hollow Men; the stuffed men'. There is some suggestion here that it is preferable to be a 'lost violent soul' than a 'hollow' and 'stuffed' man. The Hollow Men were too timid and cowardly to commit the violent acts ('not as lost violent souls') that would have brought them to Hell ('death's other Kingdom'). In the second section, a hollow man describes how he fears the 'eyes' of people who made it to 'death's dream kingdom,' be it Heaven or Hell. The Hollow Men live in a fragmented, meaningless world of broken images and symbols where the 'eyes' are presented as disembodied. The third section of the poem describes the setting as barren and filled with 'cactus' and 'stone images'. The Hollow Men cannot even act out their desires ('Lips that would kiss') in this spiritually and physically desolate land, and instead are left to say prayers 'to broken stones', making their prayers meaningless. Their 'lips', too, are presented as disembodied and fragmented. In the third and fourth sections, the narrator is now in death's 'other' kingdom, and speaks from there (note that it is not 'there' any more, but 'here'). The author uses the word cactus to describe the land, making the land seem 'dry', like the voices in Section I. It is lacking in life, like the 'stone images'. In the fourth section, the hollow man from Section II continues to describe this desolate place, in which there are no 'eyes.' The Hollow Men are afraid to look at others, or to be looked at. The 'fading star' now becomes the 'dying star'. The 'star', like the 'multifoliate rose', symbolises Heaven, and thus their hope for salvation from this state of suffering. Their 'hope' is dying out. The darkness increases as the 'shadow' emerges. The Hollow Men are gathered on the 'beach of the tumid river' to get to 'death's other kingdom'; this being either Heaven or Hell. The Hollow Men exist in a limbo between Heaven and Hell. The fifth and last section begins with the nursery rhyme *Here we go round the mulberry bush*, except that instead of a mulberry bush, the children are circling a prickly-pear cactus plant. These lines suggest the Hollow Men's frustration. In the final lines, the Mulberry Bush rhyme turns into a musical rhyme about the end of the world. Here too we expect the world to end with a noisy explosion, but for the Hollow Men it ends with a mere 'whimper', quiet and meaningless. The narrator believes that the end for the Hollow Men will come not with an apocalyptic catastrophe but as a result of men who allow themselves to decay and become 'hollow.'

The moral and spiritual condition of the hollow men corresponds to that of the souls described in the *Inferno iii*. These are the souls of those who lived without blame and without praise; they never actively chose between good and evil, and therefore were never spiritually alive. They are mixed with those angles who were neither rebellious nor faithful to God at the time of Satan's revolt, but were themselves, and are therefore rejected by both heaven and hell, so that even the wicked have some glory over them. *The Hollow Men* explores this boundary situation in its images of finality or extremity and in a thematic structure comprising two different states of being. The persona of *The Hollow Men* has arrived, intellectually and imagistically, at the outer limit of one world only to find that its "deliberate disguises" conceal a finite lack of possibility: between the potency and existence "Falls the Shadow."

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