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# T. S. Eliot and Bob Dylan: Confronting “The Modern Condition” with Faith

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## Abstract

The works of T. S. Eliot and Bob Dylan seem to flow from the same spring – an agonizing sense of the contemporary human condition and the state of society – and several critics have recently begun to observe the similarities between these two writers. Through comparative readings of T. S. Eliot's and Bob Dylan's earlier and later works this project investigates how their religious turn influenced their work. This project argues that the earlier works of Eliot and Dylan share several Modernistic characteristics both in terms of their depiction of the bleak modern reality and in terms of stylistic features. It then goes on to show how their later, distinctly spiritual works, written after their significant religious turn - in contrast to their earlier more cynical and secular works - convey a sense of faith and meaning despite the grinding reality of modern life. A key focus of the project is therefore the extent to which the earlier and later works of Eliot and Dylan reflect different understandings of the essential factor in Modernist writers' portrayal of the twentieth century human condition: alienation. In the earlier works of Eliot and Dylan, the alienation seems to be that of an individual who has been detached from his essential nature and spirituality and is experiencing a sense of powerlessness and despair due to the social and political structures of modern society. Their later works, by contrast, depict individuals experiencing alienation after having embraced religious faith in a society with different beliefs and values.

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## Introduction

This project explores the religious turn in the works of T. S. Eliot and Bob Dylan. The works of both seem to flow from the same spring – an agonizing sense of the contemporary human condition and the state of society – and critics have recently begun to describe the similarities between them. According to Michael Gray, for example, Dylan’s folk-rock songs of the mid-sixties can be compared to the revolutionary effect of Eliot’s “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” when it was first published: “Dylan in the mid-sixties – like Eliot in 1917 – was alone in answering the demands of the times for a new poetry” (71), a “poetry that freely expresses a modern sensibility, the [...] modes of experience of one fully alive in his own age” (qtd. in Gray 71). Eliot’s status as a canonical poet is beyond question. But Bob Dylan has, in recent years, also become a prominent figure for several literary critics. Dylan’s work has been more widely recognised as poetry and a variety of critical studies of Dylan’s lyrics have been published. Perhaps the best-known of these critical works is *Dylan’s Visions of Sin*, by the influential Boston University professor, literary critic and Eliot scholar Christopher Ricks. As David R. Shumway observes of Ricks’ book: “This high-modernist take on Dylan is plausible because Dylan is perceived as an artist and not as a mere performer” (qtd. in Dettmar 117). Possibly, that is the most fruitful take on Dylan in that it certainly clarifies the literary context within which Dylan’s work should be discussed: Modernism. When studying several of Dylan’s lyrics, particularly those from the mid-sixties, such as “Desolation Row”, it quickly becomes apparent that they have much in common with Modernist poetry (Dettmar 116-117).

In this project, I will argue that Dylan’s epic lyric “Desolation Row” and Eliot’s Modernist poem “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” have many similarities in their depiction of the modern human condition and share Modernist stylistic features, such as their use of interior monologue, as well as complex and ambiguous intertextual allusions to convey the sombre essence of their age. I will then go on to show how the escape from the bleak modern reality depicted in these earlier works took, for both of these poets, the form of a religious turn. This I will demonstrate through readings of such later works as “Journey of the Magi” by Eliot and “I Believe in You” by Dylan, with the main focus being on how these two works convey the crux of religious conversion in a secular society, and moreover how they convey a new sense of hope and meaning in modern life compared to their earlier works. The key aim of this project, then, is to examine how Eliot’s and Dylan’s search for faith and turn to Christianity influenced their work. I will argue that their later, distinctly spiritual works – in

contrast to their earlier more cynical and secular works – convey a sense of faith and meaning despite the grinding reality of modern life. A key focus of my project will therefore be the extent to which the earlier and later works of Eliot and Dylan reflect different understandings of the essential factor in Modernist writers’ portrayal of the twentieth century human condition: alienation. In the earlier works of Eliot and Dylan, the alienation seems to be that of an individual who has been detached from his essential nature and spirituality and is experiencing a sense of powerlessness and despair due to the social and political structures of modern society. Their later works, by contrast, depict individuals experiencing alienation after having embraced religious faith in a society with different beliefs and values.

## Background

According to Ástráður Eysteinnsson “there is a rapidly spreading agreement that ‘modernism’ is a legitimate concept broadly signifying a paradigmatic shift, a major revolt, beginning in the mid- and late nineteenth century, against the prevalent literary and aesthetic traditions of the Western World” (2). ‘Modernism’ can in a generic way be described as an extensive cultural movement and it is essential for comprehending twentieth century culture. ‘Modernism’ is also known as the art movement that dominated the world of music, painting, architecture and literature throughout the first half of the twentieth century. The art movement emerged from an aspiration among artists to make sense out of the more and more bewildering world. However, Modernism is a vague concept and any attempt to pinpoint it into a simple phrase will fail. In literature, the general outcome of the paradigmatic literary shift, succinctly, was an aspiration to create experimental and innovative literature as Ezra Pound expressed it, “make it new” (Barry 82). According to Anthony Mellors, “historically, modernism is a byword for the artistic representation of alienation, fragmentation and transience” (qtd. in Davis & Jenkins 493).

The first mentioned concept, ‘alienation’, can have several different meanings. However, its original meaning is ‘estrangement’. Individuals feel detached from “their essential nature and from authentic existence” (Browning & Boucher 12), and are experiencing the world and the society as alien. One of the reasons for this alienation can be said to be a separation from religious beliefs and the ways of God (Browning & Boucher 13). Mellors notes that Modernism can be said to be synonymous “with the experience of various kinds of loss: identity, certainty, community, faith, ‘meaning’” (qtd. in Davis & Jenkins 492-

493). These kinds of loss certainly seem to be a direct result of the loss of religion. However, in a secularised modern society individuals are also, according to Gamble, “alienated from nature, from both the physical world and their own human nature. They experience feelings of estrangement, powerlessness, insecurity and anxiety arising from political and social structures” (Browning & Boucher 13). The personas depicted in Modernist literature – and certainly those depicted in T. S. Eliot’s poetry – are often suffering from this sense of detachment and rootlessness, which could be argued to be the essential factor in Modernist writers’ portrayal of the twentieth century human condition (Thorne 283). However, to understand the significance of the Modernist period, and moreover, to understand from where the bleakness and suffering of the modern man derived, we need to consider Modernist literature from a wider literary and historical perspective.

The transition from earlier literary traditions towards Modernism was groundbreaking in literature (Barry 81). Poets such as Gerard Manley Hopkins and Thomas Hardy epitomise the literary transition in the latter part of the nineteenth century. Their poetry praises nature. However, it also expresses major uncertainty and anxiety about late nineteenth century society subsequent to Charles Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species* (1859) (Carter & McRae 179). Darwin’s study came to question many human values for which religion had hitherto provided answers. His work was considered to be a major threat to the moral order in society. For instance, Darwin’s former mentor at the University of Cambridge - Adam Sedgwick - accused Darwin of trying to break the link between the spiritual part of nature and the physical, and hence to alienate man from God. Sedgwick further forewarned what he feared would happen if the “link” was to be broken. In a letter to Darwin, Sedgwick wrote: “humanity, in my mind, would suffer a damage that might brutalize it, and sink the human race into a lower grade of degradation than any into which it has fallen since its written records tell us of its history” (qtd. in Weikart 1). Darwin’s evolutionary study had major impact on perceptions of human life in the latter part of the Victorian era; crises of values and faith grew increasingly prominent in society and the alienation from spiritual faith, and the ways of God, gradually increased in society.

Perhaps, the most representative poetic vision of the age is Matthew Arnold’s ‘On Dover Beach’ (1867), a work which reflects the crisis of faith, and strongly captures the spirit of the age. In the poem, the speaker observes the calmness of the sea from the English coast. However, in the calm, he cannot avoid reflecting on all the agony and all the changes which are occurring and affecting society (Carter & McRae 140). The poem depicts an individual who has been alienated from God; the speaker is recognizing that he can no longer

observe the purity and spirituality of nature, but detects the sombre mood of the new reality hiding in it:

The Sea of Faith

Was once, too, at the full, and round earth's shore  
Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furl'd.  
But now I only hear  
Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar,  
Retreating, to the breath  
Of the night-wind, down the vast edges drear  
And naked shingles of the world. (21-28)

Arnold's poem can be said to be a vision of how bleak and despairing late Victorian poetry - and subsequently Modernist poetry - was to become (Carter & McRae 141). These changes of values and the increasing bewilderment in society came to lay the ground work for Modernism (Carter & McRae 183). However, what came to be Modernist literature was not simply reflecting a fractured society or alienated individuals in its content; modernist literature broke loose from the rigid conventions of Romantic and Victorian literature both in terms of form and content. For the high-Modernist writer T. S. Eliot, the fractured and secular society brimming with injustice, lacking in spirituality and recovering from a world war, could not be depicted with conventional rigid and romanticizing forms. Modernist writers such as Eliot - inspired by French symbolism - used disharmonious forms to represent the fractured and dysfunctional world they saw (Thorne 293). Moreover, the 'realist' novel of the Victorian era, significant for its aspiration to depict 'the real world', and 'the lifelike' (Bennet & Royle 373) was rejected, giving room for young innovative and experimental writers, including T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, James Joyce, Virginia Woolf and Ernest Hemingway. These literary giants are all considered to be 'masters' of the twenty-year-long high Modernist era from 1910 to 1930 (Barry 82).

Form in Modernism is not a fixed concept, nor is it built upon any strict rules that the artist has to follow or which the critics can check the work against. Form is rather an individual result of the work; it is not something without the content of the work. In Modernism, the content and form stand side by side and are equals (Bürger 44). Gray argues that what both Eliot and Dylan have done is "to turn formlessness into form itself" (72).

Dylan, like Eliot, has distanced himself from conventional form to express and make sense out of the formlessness of his contemporary reality (Gray 72).

By breaking free from prevalent rigid traditions and conventions, Modernist writers observed the world from a different perspective. Sara Thorne notes that unlike the Romantic poets, Eliot “attempts to convey the essence of life; and the content represents actual contemporary life rather than an escape from the grinding nature of reality” (281). Existentialism’s impact on Modernism can be seen in the way that the Modernist perceives existence as “something active rather than something passive” (Thorne 243). In other words, existence is an active choice; a choice free from the conventions of society and religion, which according to the existentialist, suppress the real individual choice. However, the concept of a free choice came to influence the Modernist writers in both positive and negative ways. The existentialists argued that humans are born to choose either a passive, semiconscious or a fully conscious state. The conscious state (the choice of the Modernists), however, is the most difficult way of life. Along with the awareness comes an agony and anxiety towards life. The Modernists had an aspiration to depict this bleak realism, which is clear in their curiosity and desire to explore the human condition, humanity’s place and function in the world, as well as humanity’s link to God, or, most frequently, alienation from God. Life is often depicted as meaningless and absurd, and the characters often experience their world as alien. Thorne describes the spirit of Modernist representation of life as such: “man is trapped in the uncontrollable spiralling of time, and the individual is in constant conflict between his own personal needs and the desire to belong” (Thorne 243).

Sigmund Freud’s work in the field of psychology, especially his *Interpretation of Dreams* (1899), as well as his theory of psychoanalysis, had great impact on Modernist literature. Freud’s theory changed the way we perceive ‘the subject’ or ‘the self’. He provided the revolutionary perspective of the human self as complex, unpredictable and uncertain. Considering his theory on the unconscious, Freud argued that the subject (‘I think’) is to a great extent influenced by the unconscious, which is unpredictable and beyond our control or knowledge (Bennet and Royle 153). As Bennet and Royle put it: “I, can never be simply or precisely who or what I think” (154). This theory was startling, since it confronted the notions of human self-control and autonomy; it proposed the humiliating realization that the subject is not only concentrated in itself, but works in relation to the greater whole (Bennet and Royle 154).

With a greater knowledge of the human mind and with a major aspiration among the Modernists to express the inner experience of the mind, they found ways to depict the

mysterious and unpredictable thought-stream of the human subject, including one of the main narrative modes of the Modernist period: ‘stream of consciousness’, also known as ‘interior monologue’. Sara Thorne notes that in Modernist literature “the inner life of the mind replaced the conventional focus on external appearance and behaviour” (243). Modernist writers, such as T. S. Eliot, put new focus on subjectivity (the way we see) and strictly neglected the objectivity (the thing we see) (Barry 82). According to Wolfe, in “Prufrock” “Eliot portrays, in dramatic monologue, the alienated, detached and despairing modern self” (20). Wolfe also states that “the alienated self, wavering between dreams of power and bouts of angst, is the subject of most modern art and literature” (19). The psychologist Karen Horney discusses the concept of “alienation from self” in her book *New Ways in Psychoanalysis*: she explains that if a human’s “spontaneous individual self has been stunted, warped or choked, he is said to be in a condition of alienation from himself or alienated from self” (qtd. in Schacht 141).

Due to political and economic instabilities and with an impending world war, high Modernism experienced a decline in the 1930s. However, Peter Berry emphasises a minor resurgence of Modernism in the 1960s. Perhaps it is not so surprising that this resurgence took place in the 1960s. The society of the 1920s, when Modernism had reached its peak, had several similarities to the society of the 1960s. According to Gray, Bob Dylan’s songs of the mid-sixties can be compared to the revolutionary effects of T. S. Eliot’s “Prufrock”. Dylan in the mid-sixties – “like Eliot in 1917 – was alone in answering the demands of the times for a new poetry” (71). Like “Prufrock”, several of Dylan’s mid-sixties lyrics are dramatic monologues, and Gray argues that Dylan’s mid-sixties songs, just like “Prufrock”, “threw away ‘the canons of the poetical’ and made nonsense of the distinction between ‘seriousness’ and ‘levity’ in art” (Gray 71). After the 1960s, however, Modernism seemed to decline, but several of the prevalent structures and conventions, which Modernism tore down, have never since been re-constructed and the aftermaths of Modernism are still prominent today (Barry 82).

The sociologist David Bell suggests that “the life-world [has been] infected by modernism” (qtd. in Brooker 129). Modernist culture has come to dominate and penetrate our way of life, with “the principle of unlimited self-realisation, the demand for authentic self-experience and the subjectivism of a hyperstimulated sensitivity” (Brooker 129). These attitudes towards life are not reconcilable with the discipline of work, conventions or virtues in society, which results in individuals experiencing alienation (Brooker 129). All this is significant for what commonly would be defined as “the modern condition”, that is, the

despairing human condition portrayed in Modernist literature; that of “individuals portrayed as exiles, outsiders in a social vacuum” (Thorne 290) of a sick and bleak society. Eliot depicts this persona in “Prufrock” and Dylan, likewise, in “Desolation Row”. To Bell, the only solution to “the modern condition” is a religious revival: “religious faith tied to a faith of tradition will provide individuals with clearly defined identities and existential security” (Brooker 129). This seems to be a similar solution to that which Eliot, in 1927, and Dylan, in 1979, had figured out when they turned to Christianity for redemption.

## From Prufrock to Magus

T. S. Eliot uses dramatic monologue in his “Prufrock” to expose the inner self of the protagonist. However, his “Prufrock” suggests more than a representation of one individual self; the poem could be argued to be an authentic presentation of a bleak modern self representing a whole society (Thorne 284). For Eliot, the dramatic monologue ceased to be a tool to convey a distinct personality, as it had been for his predecessor, Robert Browning. On the contrary, he used it to invite the reader to experience impersonality (Harding 207). Sara Thorne notes that Eliot’s monologue “has a dual function: it allows [Eliot] to get a direct insight into a character, but simultaneously acts as a mask” (293) behind which the poet can disappear. The monologue takes the reader on a journey – not merely as an observer – but invites the reader into the inner activity and experience of Prufrock’s mind, by subjectively creating the world of the character (Cooper 49). Michael O’Neill states:

[The] major differences in Eliot’s monologues compared with Browning’s include a post-Freudian mistrust of the old stable ego [...] Besides Eliot’s voices are not just individual voices; they speak for and out of a culture, and out of that culture’s id as much as its ego (qtd. in Harding 207).

According to Wolfe “Eliot portrays, in dramatic monologue, the alienated, detached and despairing modern self” (20). In the opening lines of the poem: “Let us go then you and I” (1), two people are introduced: the ‘I’ who is the poem’s speaker, Prufrock, and the more ambiguous ‘you’, who is by several critics assumed to be the reader. However, ‘you’ is also commonly assumed to be Prufrock’s detached and alienated self. According to Samet, Prufrock’s “ego is conscious of the norms of the society and tries to repress his desires” (81).

This interpretation is supported by Smith, who notes that “Prufrock speaks not to the reader but to the two elements of himself, the surface objective-passive-milquetoast who does not dare to eat a peach and the inward subjective-active-ego who would dare if he could get out” (705).

Possibly the most puzzling part about Eliot as an author and theorist is the fact that although his work contradicts almost all literary conventions, it simultaneously embraces the conventional tradition as a valuable meaning carrier to illustrate the sombre essence of his age: “tradition”, Eliot notes, “cannot mean standing still” (qtd. in Davidson 9). Eliot uses tradition to contrast and emphasise the human condition at his time. He uses plenty of literary and biblical intertexts in “Prufrock”; he borrows old literary and biblical figures and quotations, and puts them in a modern context which slightly changes their nuance (Harding 157). Eliot’s use of intertextuality can be seen throughout “Prufrock” such as the reference to Hamlet, who is compared to the failure and inaction of Prufrock: “No! I am not Prince Hamlet, nor was I meant to be” (111). According to Hugh Haughton “the negative allusion records Prufrock’s refusal to cast himself as a contemporary counterpart to the famously indecisive Hamlet” (qtd. in Harding 159). Despite his indecisiveness, unlike the modern anti-hero Prufrock, he dares to take action. Hamlet’s indecisiveness is rather decisive compared to that of Prufrock, who identifies not with the tragic hero himself but with “an attendant lord, one that will do / To swell a progress, start a scene or two, / Advise the prince; no doubt, an easy tool” (113-116). This pinpoints Prufrock’s position in society, his awareness of his incapability and simultaneously his self-regard (Samet 84); He is a man incapable of making decisions and identifies with someone obeying orders or a useful tool for others.

Furthermore, Eliot’s influence by the Italian poet Dante Alighieri is prominent in the epigraph of “Prufrock”, which is a direct quotation borrowed from Dante’s *Inferno* in its original language - Italian. Translated into English it reads:

If I thought my answer were to one who ever could return to the world, this flame should shake no more; but since none ever did return alive from this depth, if what I hear be true, without fear of infamy I answer thee (qtd. in Eliot 376).

This disturbing vision sets the frame of the poem and makes the reader ready for Prufrock’s agonising journey through his individual inferno (Thorne 285). The epigraph simultaneously conveys the psychological mood of Prufrock; he is - like Guido (the speaker in *Inferno*) – stranded in hell and sees no way out of his social agony and alienation from society.

Eliot seems to suggest that twentieth century life is nothing like an inspiring dream, but rather a bleak and despairing reality, like some sort of hell on earth. An important fact which illustrates this is Eliot's description of nature and the ominous urban landscape, particularly his description of the evening sky, in comparison to, for instance, the Romantic poet William Wordsworth's description of "the natural world as the real home of God, as the fountain at which weary human beings could refresh themselves" (Childs).

Eliot was highly inspired by French Symbolists "who believed it was impossible to use conventional language to convey sensations as we actually experience them" (Thorne 279). Inspired by this, Eliot argued that the poet needs to find strategies to convey emotions in an impersonal way. According to Eliot, the only way to depict emotions in art is, "by finding an 'object correlative'; in other words, a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that *particular* emotion" (qtd. in Thorne 282). "Prufrock", particularly, is a stunning example of impersonal poetry that is relying on the use of object correlative. In the poem, Eliot depicts the emotions of the poem's subject - Mr. Prufrock, with imagery that evokes these emotions. Sara Thorne notes that:

[Eliot's] images become an object correlative for his disillusion – his subject is the human condition, but it is explored indirectly through the physical images that he chooses. Emotion is replaced with a sequence of images that depersonalise the message and give it a concrete visual life (289).

Eliot seems to use urban images to express a sense of detachment in the modern world. The symbols or images which Eliot uses as object correlatives could be argued to be images of the way in which he observes contemporary life. For instance, his urban imagery, such as "half deserted streets" (4), "one-night cheap hotels" (6), and "sawdust restaurants" (7), represent his disillusionment with the disorder and corruption of modern life (Samet 84). Moreover, Eliot uses nature as a fruitful source to convey the human condition. Eliot's imagery is often alarming and makes a great impression on the reader. For instance, there is the simile "like a patient etherised upon a table" (3) which intensively represents Prufrock's passivity and incapacity to act in the following events (Thorne 289), and sets the psychological mood of Prufrock. Similarly, "The yellow fog that rubs its back upon the windows-panes, / The yellow smoke that rubs its muzzle on the window panes" (15-16) seems to convey the uncertainty and detachment of Prufrock. Sara Thorne notes that the image of fog "become symbolic for the inertia Eliot sees around him in a spiritually empty society" (290). Furthermore, Eliot

uses the simile “streets that follow like a tedious argument” (8), which seems to convey an ominous atmosphere where even the streets are personified as more active than the incapable modern man; the streets are leading him to “an overwhelming question” (10) that he struggles with throughout the poem (Thorne 290). The emotion-evoking imagery in combination with the intertextual allusions result in a bleak portrayal of Eliot’s contemporary society’s condition.

Prufrock’s inability to communicate is a running thread throughout the poem; it is seen again, for instance, in “That is not what I meant at all” (97). These lines highlight Prufrock’s detachment from the people around him. Prufrock is a modern man who has not only failed in establishing a relationship with a woman – but simultaneously he has failed to establish a relationship with his entire society and world (Thorne 284). Sara Thorne notes that

The ironic tone of the title immediately establishes the context for failure: the love song is never sung and Prufrock fails to live up to the grandeur of his title. The imagery is used as a means of representing the triviality of Prufrock’s life and his lack of self-esteem – both are symbolic not just of Prufrock and his society, but of twentieth-century and its inhabitants (288).

Eliot seems to have been familiar with the experience of feeling alien in society. In an interview with Eleanor Honkley he said: “I don’t think that I should ever feel at home in England [...] I should always, I think, be aware of a certain sense of confinement in England, and repression” (qtd. in Hardings 259). This repression and social alienation could be argued to be portrayed in “Prufrock”. Lines, such as: “In the room the women come and go / Talking of Michelangelo” (13-14), suggest the shallowness and hypocrisy of Prufrock’s social surroundings; the women talk about art because it is fashionable, but they seem to lack understanding of it and its creator. Moreover, Prufrock’s awareness of how superficial people in the modern world are, with their hypocrisy, seems to make him intensively timid about his own appearance. The fact that Prufrock needs “to prepare a face to meet the faces” (27) suggests both that Prufrock is hiding behind a false social ‘mask’ and that everyone around him is doing the same; it is a society of hypocrisy (Samet 82).

Prufrock’s social anxiety is prominent: he repeatedly asks himself when entering the social event: ““Do I dare?””(38). Furthermore, he fears the opinion of others which is clear when he thinks: “(They will say: ‘How his hair is growing thin’)”, “(They will say: ‘How his arms and legs are thin’)”, and they will “fix you in a formulated phrase” (41, 44, 56).

Moreover, Sara Thorne notes that “social expectation dictates the kind of clothes worn” (284). Prufrock is dressing fashionably with his “necktie rich and modest” (43), and its “simple pin” (43) to conform to the expectations of others.

Prufrock’s critical thinking about the hypocrisy of modern life is prominent in his distaste for the infinite tea drinking and meaningless chit-chat; something Prufrock knows too well. He states that he has “known the evenings, mornings, afternoons, / I have measured out my life with coffee spoons; / I know the voices dying with a dying fall” (50-52). Schneider summarises Prufrock’s social world by saying that: “certainly trivialities abound: proper neckties, artistic small talk, and the rest. That is the kind of society in which Prufrock moves, and, obviously, there is boredom in the empty fullness of its life” (qtd. Samet 82). Considering what has been discussed above, it seems that Prufrock is alienated from himself; his awareness of his society’s norms and simultaneously his fear of being “formulated, sprawling on a pin” (57) make him repress his “spontaneous individual self”; which is his actual “feelings, wishes [and] opinions” (Schacht 141) - to avoid communication or, more precisely - “the overwhelming question” (92).

This section has shown that Prufrock experiences displacement in and estrangement from his society, and that his alienation from both the physical world and from his own self is prominent throughout the poem. Initially, his divided self is illustrated in an interior monologue which gives us a view inside Prufrock’s inner struggles between his consciousness of the norms of his society and his own needs. Prufrock’s detachment from his world is prominent in how he experiences the urban landscape and nature as haunting or even sick. Moreover, his detachment is clear from his insecurity and anxiety in the meaningless and shallow social world presented, where he “prepares a face to meet the faces” (27). Prufrock is in disguise to hide his true self from the seemingly judgemental public. Alienation in the modern society is according to Gamble: “[Individuals] experience feelings of estrangement, powerlessness, insecurity and anxiety arising from political and social structures” (Browning and Boucher 13). The modern condition that Gamble explains seems to be reflected in the portrait of Prufrock and his society.

In the final part of the poem, Prufrock hears “the mermaids singing, each to each” (124). However, he does not assume that they will sing to him. Still, he disappears into the romantic vision of the lovely mermaids and the sea, until “human voices wake us, and we drown” (131). The “human voices”, seem to be modern society intruding with its meaninglessness and “overwhelming question”; the verb *drown* functions a symbol for how suffocating modern reality is for Prufrock (Thorne 284). According to Thorne “escape is

offered through a fantasy world that can momentarily replace the harsh reality of twentieth-century life” (286). In other words, the agonizing internal journey of suppressed desires framed by the epigraph from Dante’s *Inferno* is here temporarily broken by a liberating spiritual vision (Davis & Jenkins 189). According to John X. Cooper, the poem represents the lack of, and the longing for a spiritual rise above the despair in modern society, he notes that:

The sympathy we are asked to feel is not for the existential agonies of “modern man” hoping to have a heart-to-heart conversation in a world of chit-chat, but something more important than that. The poem silently laments the absence of an external or historical measure or standard for human agency, a criterion embodied in institutions (such as a church) that gives individual identities not only metaphysical density but meaning as well (55).

What Cooper suggests is that the alienation from God in modern society has resulted in individuals with “Prufrock’s condition” or “the modern condition”; that is: people experiencing rootlessness, identity crises, and detachment from nature and the norms of society.

From the time of his early poems Eliot repeatedly explored the psychological theme of inner despair and the longing for spirituality. Gradually, however, he began to turn to Christian faith, in search of inner peace in the modern chaotic world (Cooper 51). Eliot’s formal commitment to Christianity came in 1927, when he was baptised into the Anglo-Catholic Church of England. Eliot’s new spiritual approach was visible in his poetry immediately after his Christian turn – for instance, in “Journey of the Magi” (1927).

Like in “Prufrock”, dramatic monologue is used in “Journey of the Magi” to convey the inner mind of the Magus. Dramatic monologue has often also been said to function as a ‘mask’ for Eliot; he can “externalise an aspect of himself and represent a particular way of looking at experience without becoming subjective” (Thorne 293). Undeniably, the poem seems to deal with aspects of Eliot’s own life at the time, such as the issues of life-alteration when turning to spiritual faith, particularly social issues. However, Eliot did not abandoned the exercise of impersonality in his poetry, and never publicly admitted his work to be autobiographical (Cooper 81-82).

In the poem, we get to follow critical moments of the Magi’s journey. The poem is constructed in three stanzas which each recollect different parts of the journey several years after it has taken place; it is narrated from the perspective of the now old Magus back in his

hometown. The pilgrimage of the poem is aiming for its destination – Bethlehem – in order to be present at the birth of Christ. However, Eliot offers a more modern, realistic and demystifying version of the traditional pleasant Christmas tale. In his modernised version of the biblical story, the camels are ailing and weatherworn; the camel men escape to seek alcohol and sex; the civilisations they pass are hostile; and painful romantic memories of “silken girls” (10) on the terraces from their kingdoms are haunting the Magi (Leitch 36). Moreover, the journey is difficult due to harsh weather; it is “just the worst time of the year/For a Journey, and such a long journey” (2-3). By the end of this grim initial stanza the Magi prefer “to travel all night” (17), while they hear seemingly hostile “voices singing/that this was all folly” (19, 20). According to Leitch, the hostile voices illustrate “that the rest of the world fails to understand or be aware of the New Life at Bethlehem. Lusting, profiteering and drinking continue unabated. The Incarnation for Eliot is obscured by a world of sin and self-seeking.” (36-37). The Magi seem to be refugees from sinful living in hope to reach spirituality and redemption. Their journey seems to symbolise a transition from the old world of sin to the uncertain new world of salvation. There is a running thread of doubt about the meaning of their spiritual journey even among the Magi themselves throughout the poem, a thread which gets increasingly prominent.

In the second stanza the staple of Christ is near, light and spirituality is introduced in form of lively nature imagery. They arrive in the vegetated “temperate valley” (21) “with a running stream and a water-mill beating the darkness” (23), “trees” (24), “vine-leaves” (26) – all suggest life and blooming in contrast to the “dead of winter” (5) of the previous stanza. In this stanza, there are several biblical allusions which are important, although, ambiguous meaning carriers, including: “Three trees on the low sky” (24), which according to Vincent B. Leitch, “remind us of the three crosses on Calvary, while men ‘dicing for pieces of silver’ (27) recall the soldiers casting lots for Christ’s garment and bring to mind Christ’s betrayal for silver” (37). Furthermore, the “white horse” (25) can be interpreted as a biblical symbol for the white horse of Zechariah, who had the responsibility to declare the arrival of Christ; the white horse is galloping away, since the declaration has been completed (Timmermann). These biblical allusions seem - in contrast to the harsh nature imagery of the first stanza – to be carrying symbolic meaning. The allusions could be said to be a summary of critical events from the life of Christ. However, here they evoke the feelings of birth and life. According to Leitch “the clusters of images about the death of Christ are not consciously drawn since the speaker, un-aware of the significance of much that he reports, cannot know of Christ’s betrayal and crucifixion” (37). The Magus observes the arrival of Christ, but he does

not understand the significance of this birth, he says “It was (you may say) satisfactory” (31). This is, another example of the running thread of uncertainty and doubt of the Magus; he is in a state between the old world of limited understanding and the new world of Incarnation.

In the last stanza, the Magus considers the puzzling experience he has had, and the agonizing return home – in the present tense. Cooper notes that:

The greatness of the poem lies in its capturing something of the alienated state in which the Magus now finds himself as a result of his radical transformation. The Birth establishes a whole new order of meaning for one’s life (82).

The experience of the Nativity of Christ changes the Magus drastically. He begins the last stanza by stating that he “would do it again” (32). However, he finishes it with: “I should be glad of another death” (43). There is a longing for some kind of death, perhaps a death that might reveal the truth behind the uncertain, although transforming, experience they have had and that might resurrect them into the new dispensation. The death could also be argued to be a death that will give an end to the painful and alienated state that the Magi have to endure when they return home. The despair of the troubled Magus in search for answers is prominent, still caught between the new and the old world, puzzled about the meaning of it all, he asks: “were we led all that way for/Birth or Death?” (35, 36). He asserts that “there was a birth, certainly” (36); however, the bewildered Magus also says that the “Birth was/Hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our death” (38, 39). The Incarnation, for the Magi, is experienced as death since they are “no longer at peace...in the old dispensation/with an alien people clutching their gods” (41-42). They have returned to their kingdoms transformed after seeing Christ and are now alienated from their people who are still living in the old ways, and praising their old gods (Leitch 37-38) The Magi’s experience of alienation seems to reflect that of Eliot when he turned to Christian faith in an increasingly secular and modern society (Cooper 82). Although the Magi have found spiritual meaningfulness, they do not seem to be in a state of redemption. Perhaps it reflects the crux of Eliot’s own religious turn; religion seems to have offered him some sort of uncertain meaning. However, it also left him alienated from his old life and contemporary society. According to Leitch “the symbolic journey of the Magi serves as a bridge between the secular and the religious phases of Eliot’s developing consciousness” (38); it can be said to reflect the spiritual dilemma with which Eliot was dealing - caught between secular modernity and religious faith.

## From “Desolation Row” to “I Believe in You”

According to F. R. Leavis, Eliot’s poetry is “poetry that freely expresses a modern sensibility, the [...] modes of experience of one fully alive in his own age” (qtd. in Gray 71). This comment is, according to Gray, just as accurate when talking about Dylan’s work of the mid-sixties. Dylan’s songs of the mid-sixties, particularly his “Desolation Row” (1965) arguably portray what Dylan himself has called ‘The Insanity Factory’; that is, the absurdity and chaos of contemporary American society. According to Gamble “Desolation Row” “probes deeply into the disoriented world of modern America” (Browning & Boucher 5). The influence of Dylan’s observation of his contemporary world is prominent in “Desolation Row” and his observations have been translated into sets of ambiguous images, evocative of emotions or particular moods (Boucher 184). His way of poetic expression seems strikingly similar to Eliot’s ‘objective correlative’, and it results in a similar impersonal poetry as that of Eliot. Dylan, like Eliot, uses different kinds of images to evoke emotions rather than literally expressing emotions. In “Desolation Row”, Dylan embraces Modernist subjectivity. His perspective is completely obligated to the subjective rather than the objective (Dettmar 106).

In dramatic monologue form, we get to follow one individual’s inner perspective on what is happening on Desolation Row. The Browning-esque monologue gives the reader a unique and conscious truth about the bleak modern world. According to Gray it “is like watching a film shot entirely from one camera angle” (67), and the angle certainly seems to capture the essence of the time. Compared to several of Dylan’s earlier political lyrics, like “Masters of War”, which has a focused personal anger concerning a specific issue, “Desolation Row” is a more general “political analysis of American society” (Gray 134-135). There is no solution offered to the dilemma of the modern world and nor any critique of it. The text rather develops an alternative perspective on Dylan’s contemporary society; it is the highly conscious and subjective way in which society is portrayed that seems to be the significance of the lyric. According to Barry Kittleston, the significance of Dylan’s poetry is that it “is born of a painful awareness of the tragedy that underlies the contemporary human condition” (qtd in Dettmar 106). The ‘awareness’ that Kittleston identifies seems to be epitomised in “Desolation Row”.

Dylan’s engagement with his contemporary society could be seen already in his earliest, so-called protest songs. However, when he wrote “Desolation Row” his critique of contemporary society had reached new heights; what he saw was the twentieth century

with its aggressive consumerism and market imperialism, its militarism and nationalism, and its deep racial and social conflicts [...] the growing dislocation occasioned by the assassination of President Kennedy, the 2race riots and, above all the Vietnam War transformed his attitudes from one of wanting a moral reform and the cleansing of his society to one of despairing that this society was reformable at all (Boucher and Browning 25).

There seems to be prominent sense of powerlessness, hopelessness and despairing political and social alienation throughout “Desolation Row”. The stanzas of the lyric are loaded with sinister imageries and allusions, and with them comes a sense of impending calamity. Moreover, no solution or end to the madness is ever presented, as Dylan takes us further and further into the bleakness of modern society (Gray 136). It begins with the statement that “They are selling postcards of the hanging/ They are painting the passports brown” (1, 2), and with the image of a tied up “blind commissioner” (5); a restless riot squad that is going to blast into action any second; and a departing ambulance. The introduction is followed by these symbolic lines:

Now the moon is almost hidden  
The stars are beginning to hide  
The fortune-telling lady  
Has even taken all her things inside... (25-28)

With this alarming imagery, Dylan is taking us deeper into the gloom of the contemporary reality represented; the withdrawing moon and stars, and the fortune-telling lady who is packing up to escape after witnessing the future, convey a strong feeling that it is already too late, stressing the hopelessness and powerlessness of the individual (Gray 136). According to Gamble, “one striking characteristic of Dylan’s view of alienation has been his constant warnings in his songs and public utterances of a coming apocalypse” (Boucher and Browning 25). This is certainly prominent in “Desolation Row”. Another important example of an evocative symbol for the cataclysm is: “the Titanic sails at dawn” (49). The reference to the Titanic can be seen both as a “representation of man’s hubris” (qtd. in Ricks 29) and simultaneously as a signal of impending tragedy. Furthermore, Gray suggests that it is a symbol for the refusal to admit that the end is near; on the Titanic “the Palm court orchestra

kept playing and the people in the ballroom danced obliviously on” (137). People on the Titanic were in denial about the coming catastrophe and the same could be argued about the characters in “Desolation Row”.

Dylan, like Eliot, uses biblical and literary allusions to convey the essence of his age. According to Spargo and Ream, Dylan is “cognizant of a rift between himself and a world in which he participates only with grave reservations, as though he might envision some place other to stand than in contemporary America” (Dettmar 93). His borrowed characters could be said to function as stand-ins for Dylan’s own alienated perspective. Perhaps, the absurdity of Dylan’s contemporary time could only be expressed through borrowed characters from different times. Like Eliot, Dylan portrays the bleakness of modern reality by using intertextual allusions with old traditional meaning in the new and absurd context of chaotic modernity. Leighton Grist notes that Dylan, like Modernist writers, “seeks to mitigate what they perceived to be the depredations and chaos of modernity through the evocation of a larger cultural and trans-historical order” (Banauch 115). When studying “Desolation Row” it rapidly becomes apparent that Dylan’s lyrics share many characteristics with much Modernist poetry. According to David R. Shumway, “like modernist poets and novelists, Dylan relied on primitive artistic forms as a source of authenticity” (Dettmar 117). “Desolation Row” is, like Eliot’s poetry, packed with allusions, including literary ones, such as Romeo, Ophelia, Casanova, Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot, among others, and also biblical ones, such as Cain and Abel and The Good Samaritan. However, several of these allusions are ambiguous, and perhaps even impossible to fully comprehend. According to Dylan himself, he tried to convey experience rather than meaning; as he puts it: “the point is not understanding what I write but feeling it” (qtd. in Boucher 185). According to Gray:

“Desolation Row” [...] emphasises the complexity of the subject matter, in the first place by a sustained reversal of norms within the song: the beauty parlour is filled with big hairy US Marines and it is the riot squad that needs putting down. Casanova, the sophisticate, is being spoon-fed; Romeo is moaning. The song is a striking and sinister parade – and we come to see the chaos with clarity, come to see in the parade a barrage of folk heroes in careful disarray: Participants, victims and agents of a disordered, sick society (135).

There is also a difficulty in the text of distinguishing between good and bad; for instance the lines “Everybody is making love / Or else expecting rain” (31, 32), seems to suggest an

essential aspect of desolation: the portrayal of good and bad as equivalent; there is no clear contradiction or balance, namely no liveliness, just a numbness (Punter 152). Furthermore, we are immediately after the dark stanza of the withdrawing moon and stars, we are introduced to the Good Samaritan who is “getting ready for the show” (34). It certainly seems odd that he is preparing for something that seems pleasant in the darkness that was introduced in the previous stanza. Again, Dylan seems to draw attention to the blindness of the characters, about which Gray comments that “it is a part of the lethal unawareness against which Dylan speaks out” (137). Possibly, that is what Dylan offers; a different perspective on society which illuminates a new awareness – an awareness of the sickness of contemporary society. Any attempt at freethinking is violently repressed in the following stanza:

Now at midnight all the agents  
And the superhuman crew  
Come out and round up everyone  
That knows more than they do  
Then they bring them to the factory  
Where the heart-attack machine  
Is strapped across their shoulders  
And then the kerosene  
Is brought down from the castles  
By insurance men who go  
Check to see that nobody is escaping  
To Desolation Row (85-96)

There is a prominent, enforced authoritarian control of the individual mind; the “crew” is practising cruel political enforcement with “the heart-attack machine” on “everyone that knows more than they do” – the freethinkers. Simultaneously it suggests enforcement impossible to disobey. According to Gray, “Dylan urges upon us a new sense of the powerlessness of the individual” (138). Another literary allusion is used in this stanza, which makes the devastation even more prominent - the allusion to Kafka’s *The Castle* (1926). Dylan’s “castles” (93), where the insurance men get the kerosene, arguably allude to Kafka’s novel, which depicts the alienation of the suppressed protagonist ‘K’ in the village controlled by people from the castle; the powerlessness of the individual that Gray suggests becomes an even more distinct vision through the Kafkean allusion (Gray 139). Interestingly enough, by

the end of the poem Dylan seems also to allude Eliot's "Prufrock": "Between the windows of the sea/Where lovely mermaids flow/And nobody has to think too much/About Desolation Row" (105-108). There are strong parallels in the imagery, which contrasts the grinding reality of the entire poem - the sea of the mermaids seems to offer an escape from the bleak modern reality, similarly to how it does in "Prufrock" (Gray 74).

For Dylan, as for Eliot, religion played a major role early on in his career, and religious and biblical references are frequent in his works from the 60s and 70s (Dettmar 95). However, it was not until 1979, when Dylan turned to evangelical Christianity, that his religious faith was fully expressed, initially in his album *Slow Train Coming* (1979) (Boucher 214). According to Dettmar, this album "reflects the energy of a man who believes he has truth or God, or both, on his side" (97). In the song "I Believe in You", there is a strong sense of fortitude to ride out the alienated state which the speaker has to endure after turning to religious faith in the modern secular society.

They ask me how I feel  
And if my love is real  
And how I know I'll make it through  
And they, look at me and frown  
They'd like to drive me from this town  
They don't want me around  
'Cause I believe in you (1-7)

For Christopher Ricks, "I Believe in You" is a psalm, and he explains "as always in Psalms, the unrighteous are the enemy. *You* though, are my enemy's enemy, thank the Lord" (344). The unrighteous "They" represent a kind of 'other' which cannot understand the speaker's Belief in "You", which quite evidently represents God (Ricks 344). In another of Dylan's Christian songs, "Solid Rock", he writes "For me He was rejected by a world that He created" (6). Here, Dylan seems to suggest that the secular world's betrayal of its creator – the creator in whom the speaker of "I Believe in You" believes – leads him to be questioned by and exiled from his secularized surroundings. In other words, alienated by his believes in a similar way as the Magus at the end of Eliot's poem. However, there is also a strong sense of fortitude that gradually increases throughout the song, and which seems largely absent from Eliot's Magus. In the first stanza above, "they" ask him how he feels, and in the second stanza the speaker replies "I don't feel alone/ 'Cause I believe in you". The fortitude of the speaker is

prominent: he knows that he will “make it through” (Ricks 346). Further on in the lyric, the hostile ‘they’ cease to decide the terms and the song takes a turn towards an almost pure expression of the strong faith the speaker experiences; no matter what challenges the speaker faces, his fortitude and faith help him through (Ricks 346-347):

I believe in you even through the tears and the laughter  
I believe in you even though we be apart  
I believe in you even on the morning after  
Oh, when the dawn is nearing  
Oh, when the night is disappearing  
Oh, this feeling is still here in my heart

According to John Hughes, Dylan’s lyrics that followed his religious turn convey plenty of agony and fear, he states that

[Dylan] is a refugee from his former life, and his words are all the time imbued with visceral reverberations of sadness, longing, distress, abjection, regret, need and a desperate kind of hope. Faith impels him to pursue service and salvation, but his fervour is driven and shadowed by fears of temptation and back-sliding (212).

The fears of temptation and back-sliding which Hughes notes are prominent in lines such as “Don’t let me drift too far/Keep me where you are/ Where I will always be renewed” (25-27), as well as further on in the last stanza: “Don’t let me change my heart/Keep me set apart/From all the plans they do pursue” (34-36). Here is the speaker’s concern about going back to his old ways, and by the plans of the unrighteous prominent.

To Dylan, Christ certainly seemed to be the answer to all problems in modern society. Dylan said in an interview in 1980 that:

I’m totally convinced people need Jesus. Look at the junkies and the winos and the troubled people. It’s all a sickness which can be healed in an instant. The powers that be won’t let that happen. The powers that be say it has to be healed politically (Cott 284).

Dylan's perspective on his contemporary society had certainly not softened after his turn to Christian faith. However, what had changed compared to the mid-sixties was that he now believed that there was a solution for crises which he saw. Boucher notes that the songs of Dylan's Christian period "are certainly more prescriptive than his earlier songs in that they offer not only a diagnoses of the problem but also an answer" (219).

## Conclusion

Eliot's poetry and Dylan's lyrics share Modernist traits including their use of interior/dramatic monologue, as well as disturbing, evocative imagery and frequent intertextual allusions. Both also use the concept of time to draw attention to the condition of their contemporary societies; their bleak portraits of modern life are contrasted with evocative intertexts from earlier times and traditions. Dylan, like Eliot, offers a unique perspective on the human condition and on modern society. This unique stand-point and vision suggests alienation; there is in both of their works a sense that others are living in denial or in an unconscious state, while the poet's perspective offers a conscious truth about the bleak modern world. Moreover, the alienation of the speaker of their earlier works seem to be that of an individual who has been detached from his essential nature and spirituality, and is experiencing a sense of powerlessness and despair due to the social and political structures of modern society.

Their later works, conversely, deal to a greater extent with inner needs and the struggle for faith. The individuals need not to let themselves be repressed by their surroundings. There is a solid ground for the individual's search for salvation in their later works. The imagery, themes and allusions are more prominently religious compared to their earlier works, and both poets portray the strong contrasts between the old life and the birth of the new spiritual life. In their later works, the alienation seems to be that of the individual who has gone through life-altering spiritual experiences – but is still living in a society where no-one identifies with that spiritual faith. However, despite this painful state of exile, the speakers of their later works have experienced meaning and spiritual purpose, which conveys a sense of hope. It is noteworthy that Dylan's later lyric conveys a clearer and perhaps less puzzling sense of belief and fortitude than that of Eliot's "Magi". Eliot's "Magi" deals to a greater extent with the progress of making sense out of the puzzling religious faith, in addition to this, the fortitude seems largely absent from Eliot's Magus.

In the Judeo-Christian tradition, alienation from God is considered significant of the modern human condition. According to this view of things, modern society is fractured due to modern man's alienation from God. There has been a debate about whether there is any possibility for mankind to be redeemed and to reunite with the ways of God. For more secular doctrines, however, considering the future state of mankind, the answer seems clear: "True human emancipation mean[s] that alienation could be overcome" (Boucher & Browning 14). According to Mellors, Modernism is synonymous "with the experience of various kinds of loss: identity, certainty, community, faith, 'meaning'" (Davis & Jenkins 492-493), that is, with alienation. Both T. S. Eliot and Bob Dylan seem to have been aware of these kinds of loss. However, when they confront the modern condition of loss and detachment from religious faith, of alienation, they still seem to experience some sense of loss: that of being outsiders in their societies on account of their religious beliefs. Religion certainly seemed to give them some sort of meaning, but it did not offer them complete redemption.

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