Modernist Unselfing:
Religious Experience and British Literature, 1900-1945

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ABSTRACT

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This dissertation examines the role of religious experience in British modernist literature, arguing that a strain of modernist writing drew from different religious traditions to conceptualize and model ways of escaping the confines of the self. In distinctive yet strikingly similar ways, these writers draw from these traditions—orthodox and heterodox, eastern and western—not in an attempt to propound traditional theological ideas but to recapture a religious sensibility that extends beyond dogma or creed: a sensibility that can offer means of getting beyond the self’s limited, solipsistic, and myopic perspective. In response to the perceived decline of religion in late 19th- and early 20th-century British culture; the atomizing effects of industrial modernity; and a growing distrust, informed by contemporary psychology, of the limitations of the self and the self’s perspective, the works this dissertation examines achieve a frame of reference beyond the individual point of view through processes and practices I group under the term “unselfing.” Unselfing emerges in these works as a moral and broadly religious imperative, necessary to achieving authentic communion between people and, paradoxically, to achieving a more authentic relationship to the self; at the same time, these works represent unselfing as an endeavor that is necessarily asymptotic, difficult, and always incomplete. They model unselfing in and through literary form, not only conveying but also embodying processes
of unselfing in their formal experimentation. Reading works by D.H. Lawrence, E.M. Forster, Dorothy Richardson, and T.S. Eliot alongside contemporary psychological, philosophical, and anthropological writings of the period, I show how a pervasive and urgent desire to use spiritual practices to escape the self shaped the development of British modernist literature. *Modernist Unselfing* thus challenges prevailing accounts of British modernism, according to which secular artistic innovation absorbed and attained the sacred value formerly located in religion. I argue that, on the contrary, these narrow accounts of secularization and aestheticization have obscured what much of modernist experimentation was actively attempting to capture: a desire, often ethically-minded, to forego self.
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Introduction

In his 1912 essay “The Essence of Religion,” British philosopher Bertrand Russell simultaneously announces the decline of religion and its continued, urgent relevance:

The decay of traditional religious beliefs, bitterly bewailed by upholders of the Churches, welcomed with joy by those who regard the old creeds as mere superstition, is an undeniable fact. Yet when the dogmas have been rejected, the question of the place of religion in life is by no means decided. The dogmas have been valued, not so much on their own account, as because they were believed to facilitate a certain attitude towards the world...a life in the whole, free from the finiteness of self and providing an escape from the tyranny of desire and daily cares. (112)

“The place of religion in life,” for Russell, has little to do with superstitious “creeds” and “traditional religious beliefs.” Rather, religion’s enduring function, outside the bounds of these doctrines and dogmas, is to “facilitate” a particular, liberating “attitude”—an attitude geared expressly towards release from “the finiteness of self.” Later in the essay, Russell argues that the project of liberation from self is religion’s most powerful and valuable offering, stating outright that “the essence of religion...lies in the subordination of the finite part of our life to the infinite part,” a process which requires “a moment of absolute self-surrender, when all personal will seems to cease, and the soul feels itself in passive submission to the universe” (114). Russell’s comments reveal him to be less interested in putting God in the ground than in excavating the ruins of His churches for a means of escaping the self.

Remarks like these might seem odd given Russell’s notorious disavowal of religion in more famous tracts like “Why I Am Not a Christian” (1927), but they are far from anomalous: versions of the sentiments he expresses in “The Essence of Religion” appear again and again in the writings of his contemporaries in a variety of disciplines and across a wide spectrum of belief and affiliation. These figures, while often openly and emphatically disavowing allegiance to institutionalized religion, often voiced in the same breath their interest, nonetheless, in the idea
of a substantially religious orientation: John Middleton Murry writes of “a religious sense” (“The Sign Seekers” 5); T.E. Hulme celebrates “the religious attitude”; Jane Harrison describes “the religious impulse” (Epilegomena 1). The literary figures of this period also display an abiding interest in these concepts: E.M. Forster, like Murry, invokes a “religious sense” (Hill of Devi 106, 220), and D.H. Lawrence refers often to a “religious impulse” (Fantasia of the Unconscious 67). And, like Russell, they envision religion, detached from institutional affiliation, as most valuable for the methods of self-escape it could offer. H.G. Wells, for instance, writes in God the Invisible King (1917) that “the fundamental proposition” of religion is that “salvation is escape from self into the larger being of life” (76). This overarching interest in religion’s capacity for “escape from self” was shared by believers and non-believers alike; throughout Mysticism (1911), one of the period’s most important and influential studies of religious experience, Evelyn Underhill repeatedly locates what she calls “the stripping off of the I, the Me, the Mine, utter renouncement, or ‘self-naughting’” at the fountainhead of religion, calling it “an imperative condition” of union with the divine (425). The turn of the 20th century may have witnessed a decline in allegiance to orthodoxy, but it also witnessed a broad resurgence of attention to the complexities and psychic underpinnings of religious experience. At the same time, the period’s thinkers consistently imagined and recognized the project of escaping the self as a quasi-religious imperative.

Modernist Unselfing explores the literary manifestations of this approach to religion in British literature between 1900 and 1945. This body of work reveals a widespread effort to

1 Elsewhere, Murry claimed, “I am not a Christian, I am not anything, but I have been forced to the conclusion that I am religious” (“To the Unknown God” 60). For an extensive treatment of Murry’s case, see Owen, “‘The Religious Sense’ in a Post-War Secular Age.”

2 My dissertation adopts a broad definition of “religious experience” to include mystical visions and out-of-body experiences as well as participation in the ritual and rites of traditional religions, following in the spirit of William James’ description in his landmark Varieties of Religious Experience (1902): “the belief that there is an unseen order, and that our supreme good lies in harmoniously adjusting ourselves thereto” (53).
recapture a religious sensibility or outlook—in many cases independent of dogma or creed—that hinges on a principle I call “unselfing”: in different registers, the texts this dissertation examines share an aspiration to subordinate self to larger, semi-otherworldly forces in the service of achieving a frame of reference beyond the individual point of view. Despite their differences in temperament, affiliation, and belief, the authors studied in this dissertation—D.H. Lawrence, E.M. Forster, Dorothy Richardson, and T.S. Eliot—present unselfing, whether metaphoric or ontological, temporary or permanent, as an ethical and broadly religious imperative, one with the potential to remedy the alienation and atomization of modern life. Each writer draws from a different religious tradition for developing distinctive processes and strategies for “unselfing”: Lawrence adopts an esoteric approach to reading the self drawn especially from 19th-century occultist writings; Forster draws from the Hindu tradition for metaphysical and ethical practices of self-abstraction; for Richardson, the practice of Quaker concentration offers a means of accessing a more than “momentary” self; Eliot looks to (primarily) Catholic mysticism for purgatorial processes of self-refinement. Taken together, however, their varied approaches to these ideas and processes of unselfing constitute one of the major ways in which modernist literature dealt with the changing role of religion in public and private life over the course of the period. In their serious engagement with religious forms and practices, their works challenge standard accounts of British modernism, according to which secular artistic innovation absorbed and attained the sacred value formerly located in religion, thereby fulfilling Matthew Arnold’s famous prophecy in 1880 that “most of what now passes with us for religion and philosophy will be replaced by poetry” (161-162). This dissertation examines a strain of modernist writing in which, on the contrary, religion and the literary are inextricably intertwined, informing each other in complex and exciting ways.
Lawrence, Forster, Richardson, and Eliot are, in different ways, profoundly attracted to the unselﬁng possibilities of religious experience. Not all of them, however, have been equally recognized for their interest in questions related to religious search. T.S. Eliot—who famously converted to Anglicanism in 1927—has received most attention for his investment in religion, while Lawrence’s persistent recurrence to vitalist, animist modes of living has been only occasionally regarded as substantially religious. Forster and Richardson have much less often been thought of as interested in religion, mostly thanks to established reputations—Forster as staunch liberal humanist and Richardson as modern feminist pioneer—understood to be incompatible with serious or substantially religious efforts. The critical tradition has, to some degree, and with very few exceptions, relegate the religious valences of the writings of Lawrence, Forster, and Richardson to narratives of ambivalence, their various expressions of hostility towards institutionalized religion more than sufﬁcient grounds to exclude them from discussions of religiosity altogether. Yet all three in their lifetimes protested against strictly secular readings of their work and beliefs: Lawrence described himself as a “passionately religious man,” asserting that his novels “must be written from the depths of [his] religious experience” (Collected Letters II: 165); Forster claimed to have “more sense of religion” in 1911 “than in the days of [his] Orthodox Christianity” (qtd. in Copley 112); Richardson referred to herself as “an unorthodox upholder of orthodoxy” (Windows 365). In calling attention to the

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3 Scholarship about A Passage to India, in particular, has been more attenative to the subtleties of Forster’s relationship with religion, especially regarding his encounter with the Hindu tradition. See, for instance, Ganguly, India: Mystic, Complex, and Real and Das, E.M. Forster’s India. Still, narratives about Forster’s engagement with Indian spirituality tend to dismiss it, relegating his interest in its self-abstracting possibilities to narratives of sexual sublimation, according to which Forster displaces his anxieties about queer sexual desire onto religious themes (See Copley, A Spiritual Bloomsbury and Lane, The Ruling Passion: British Colonial Allegory and the Paradox of Homosexual Desire. Certainly, dimensions of Forster’s encounter with different Indian religious traditions bespeak a serious (and often Orientalist) desire for sublimation or escape. As I argue in my second chapter, however, his writings on the subject also reveal a serious engagement with the imaginative possibilities of a religious sensibility—an ideal that, for Forster, has sensual, emotional, and spiritual dimensions.
complexity of their approaches to spiritual and religious questions, I am not arguing that they are clandestinely believers in the traditional sense, but rather that a serious engagement with religious experience animates their thought and writings in ways that exceed the limitations imposed on them by strictly secular accounts of their work. While Eliot is unique among the figures I consider—both because he is a poet and because he ends his career a devout believer—Modernist Unselfing ends with his approach to these questions because his work represents, in some ways, the culmination of the ideas at the core of this project: as I argue in Chapter 4, Eliot’s entire career might be read as a search for an authentic means of unselfing. Setting Lawrence, Forster, and Richardson alongside Eliot shows that interest in the self-abstracting potentialities of a religious sensibility cuts across the spectrum of belief during this period.

In these works, religious structures of thought are not just themes or aesthetic sources; they actively inform the ideas at the core of each literary project. Where these writers diverge is in the kinds of traditions they draw from and the manner in which they draw from them: I have chosen these examples in an attempt not just to capture the striking consistency of their philosophical projects but also the differences between them, which make them an instructive spectrum of modernist encounters with different religious traditions. What they share is a serious attention to capturing and representing processes of unselfing in literary form. Lawrence’s novel The Rainbow (1915) functions according to many of the same ideas that he expresses in his writings about the relationship between the self and religious symbolism. In A Passage to India (1924), Forster’s resistance to teleological narrative, use of syntactic repetition, and experiments in point of view work in service of capturing a spatialized concept of self-abstraction inspired by his understanding of the Hindu tradition. Both the stream-of-consciousness style and architechtonics of Richardson’s thirteen-novel series Pilgrimage (1915-1938) derive from her
particular understanding of the practice of Quaker concentration. Eliot’s late poems, too, formally embody the purgatorial processes of self-refinement they explore thematically: a purgatorial logic inflects their non-linear structure, their deployment of targeted allusions, and their repeated injunctions to re-read them. To my mind, the work of these four authors exhibits both the fullest expression of British modernist engagement with the self-abstracting possibilities of religious experience and the most rigorous attention to exploring those self-abstracting possibilities in literary form. Nonetheless, this project also offers new ways of illuminating other modernist writers whose work is also interested in these questions: figures such as W.B. Yeats, whose devotion to a more overtly supernatural and magical form of spirituality also led him to challenge individualistic models of selfhood in his poetry; Aldous Huxley, whose novels—especially *Eyeless in Gaza* (1936) and *Island* (1962)—are permeated by his interest in Western and Eastern mysticisms, which also form the subject of his non-fiction study, *The Perennial Philosophy* (1945); and even a less canonical figure like May Sinclair, whose experimental novel *Mary Olivier* (1919) engages in religious and philosophical inquiry that culminates in its titular heroine’s recognition that “God was [her] real self” (368).

I use the capacious term “unselfing”\(^4\) to encompass a wide variety of processes that these writers model and contemplate in their literary works, including self-escape, self-abandonment, self-dissolution, and self-abstraction. It is a phenomenon, moreover, for which the modernists themselves had no single word. Forster, for instance, describes a process of “going away” and

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\(^4\) Novelist and philosopher Iris Murdoch is the only writer I know of to actually use the word “unselfing”; in her essay, “The Sovereignty of Good Over Other Concepts” (1970), Murdoch calls “unselfing” the self-abandonment we experience upon observing perfect form in art and nature, the experience of which “keep[s] the attention fixed upon the real situation and…prevent[s] it from returning surreptitiously to the self with consolations of self-pity, resentment, fantasy and despair” (91). For Murdoch, to “unself” is also an ethical imperative, the only route to goodness upon which imperfect humans can rely: “The self, the place where we live, is a place of illusion. Goodness is connected with the attempt to see the unself, to see and to respond to the real world in the light of a virtuous consciousness” (93). I use the term in a similar spirit to Murdoch’s, but perhaps more expansively, to account for its various goals in the modernist period: from the personal goal of enlightenment to the collective goal of harmonious community—and the ways modernists (re)turned to religious experience to find just that.
coming back”; Eliot draws on the language and imagery of Purgatory. The spatial logic of unselfing often fluctuates, sometimes within the work of a single writer: sometimes, unselfing consists in casting off an outer sedimentation of personality, revealing some sort of inner, impersonal essence; at other times, unselfing means expunging self in favor of communion with a universe outside it. While unselfing might suggest an ascetic rejection of embodiment, more often than not, the body emerges in these works as more in tune with the kinds of impersonal intuition and instinct—to use Bergson’s key terms—that these writers were hoping to reclaim. The formal manifestations of unselfing, too, are wide-ranging and diverse: experiments in point of view (e.g. Dorothy Richardson’s alternation between third-person and first-person points of view in Pilgrimage; Forster’s travelogue narrator in A Passage to India; Lawrence’s occasional marginalization of Ursula’s perspective in The Rainbow), self-effacing syntax (e.g. what Lawrence calls “continual, slightly modified repetition” in his foreword to Women in Love; Richardson’s stream of consciousness⁵), tropes of negative space (Forster’s un-narratable caves; Eliot’s insistence on the via negativa in Four Quartets), among other techniques. In every case, nonetheless, these writers present unselfing—whether metaphoric or ontological, temporary or permanent—as a moral and broadly religious imperative, precisely because of the perspective beyond self it permits.

Of course, versions of this yearning for a perspective beyond self have always formed part of various philosophical and religious traditions. The project of experiencing a reality beyond the material world is as old as Plato’s allegory of the cave, a notion that neo-Platonists expanded into a metaphysical framework in which individuals souls strive for union with an all-encompassing One. Spinoza, whose metaphysical system Blavatsky later called “the Vedantic

⁵ As Jenelle Troxell has recently observed, this term—used for the very first time in a literary context to describe Pilgrimage—actually originates in Evelyn Underhill’s Mysticism. See “Shock and ‘Perfect Contemplation’”: Dorothy Richardson’s Mystical Cinematic Consciousness” 60.
Deity pure and simple,” sought a vision of the world *sub specie aeternitatis*—from the perspective of the eternal, a viewpoint that suggests the need for a sense of detached objectivity, one that reveals the essential unity of all things. The modernists inherit ideas of unselfing from these thinkers as well as many others: from Romantics who suggested that this Oneness lies in Nature, and that access to it relies on a form of self-abandonment; from American Transcendentalists like Emerson, for whom a kind of self-emptying is a prerequisite for union with a “Universal Being” or “Over-soul” at the core of personhood; from Schopenhauer, whose distrust of the self—manifest in his idea of the Will as pre-human, amoral, wild—prompted his interest in ascetic religious practices aimed at extinguishing its power. And these religious traditions themselves are, for the modernists, deep and frequent touchstones: they draw from Christian mystics like Meister Eckhart, John of the Cross, and St Teresa of Ávila, for instance, who sought an ecstatic communion with God that explicitly required self-abandonment, an imperative signified by the very etymology of the word “ecstasy,” which means ‘to be or stand outside oneself’; from strains of Buddhist philosophy that emphasize the need to accept the essential emptiness of all things and renounce all material attachments accordingly; from Vedanta Hinduism, which defines self-consciousness as the recognition of the Atman, or divine within, a process that insists on the illusoriness of superficial personality. The modernists’ attempts to recuperate and modernize these religious traditions attest to the extent to which they saw their own concerns reflected in these philosophies.

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6 See, for instance, Emerson’s famous experience, recounted in *Nature* (1836), of becoming a “transparent eyeball”: “There I feel that nothing can befall me in life, --no disgrace, no calamity, (leaving my eyes), which nature cannot repair. Standing on the bare ground, --my head bathed by the blithe air, and uplifted into infinite space, --all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing. I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me...the name of the nearest friend sounds then foreign and accidental” (E&L 10). For recent scholarship on the impersonal dimensions of Emerson’s vision, see Cameron, *Impersonality* and Arsić, *On Leaving: A Reading in Emerson.*
These kinds of questions were central to the self-mythologizing account of modernism offered by the modernists themselves. As D.H. Lawrence declared in his 1919 foreword to *Women in Love*, “We are now in a period of crisis. Every man who is acutely alive is acutely wrestling with his own soul” (486). If the turn of the 20th century witnessed the decline of Christian orthodoxy in British public life—at least in certain elite, intellectual circles— it also witnessed the emergence of a new, modern self: incoherent, fractured, layered, destabilized. Late-nineteenth century psychology had, after all, already done much to destabilize the humanist notion, fundamental to Victorian Christianity in most forms, of a coherent, rational, and essentially good self. Freud’s plumbing of the subconscious provided a compelling account of the self as irrational and egoistic, fundamentally opposed to altruism and community. Forster articulates a version of this problem as late as 1938; reflecting on the challenges to interpersonal intimacy he considered unique to the 20th century, he writes, “Psychology has split and shattered the idea of a ‘Person,’ and has shown that there is something incalculable in each of us, which may at any moment rise to the surface and destroy our normal balance. We don’t know what we are like” (*Two Cheers* 65-66). One response to this cultural anxiety, as Michael Levenson has elucidated in *A Genealogy of Modernism*, was a revival of a latently Nietzschean “egoistic philosophy” that valued the desires of the individual ego at the expense of any and all ethical concerns, a philosophy that profoundly influenced the thinking of modernist figures such as Dora Marsden, Ezra Pound, and even James Joyce. Another response, the response that this dissertation investigates, was a re-attachment to the anti-egoistic possibilities of religion,

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7 In *The Death of Christian Britain*, Callum Brown shows that church attendance in Britain did not demonstrate anywhere near as steady or as radical a decline in the first half of the twentieth-century as is commonly thought. The most profound decline in public worship in England occurred after 1960. See Callum Brown, *The Death of Christian Britain*, 3-6, 161-169, 175-180. As Pericles Lewis observes, during the modernist period, “secularization was still a process being imagined and theorized mainly by elites” (3).

8 See Rabaté, *James Joyce and the Politics of Egoism*. 

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especially unmoored from its institutional anchors. That psychologist William James would define religious experience itself as “the belief that there is an unseen order, and that our supreme good lies in harmoniously adjusting ourselves thereto”—reconciling the self with something outside of it—reveals how, in this “secular age,” spirituality was recast in terms of the ego and its discontents (Varieties 53).

20th century advances in psychology offered new ways of imagining the self, many of which were geared towards addressing religious experience—or, at least, experiences that were traditionally the purview of religion. Since at least the late Victorian period, the emergent popularity of psychology was entangled with questions of religion’s place in public and private life. Carl Jung observed in 1932, for instance, that the “‘psychological’ interest of the present time shows that man expects something from psychic life which he has not received from the outer world: something which our religions, doubtless, ought to contain, but no longer do contain” (“Psychotherapists or the Clergy” 210). By the “‘psychological’ interest of the present time,” Jung meant the widespread interest in plumbing the depths of the self, which had become a psychological rather than theological pursuit; in the essay, he describes a world in which people visit their psychotherapists in the same spirit—and with the same questions—with which they had once visited their parish priests. Even if the self no longer seemed to be the province of religion, it was attended to with religious fervor.

Religious experience was also a frequent subject of social science during the period; Weber, Durkheim, James, and Freud9 all made an effort to explain religion objectively,

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9 Of these, Freud was most aggressively skeptical about the value of religious experience, explicitly positioning many of his theories as alternatives to religious ways of thinking. The Virgilian epigraph to his Interpretation of Dreams (1899) exemplifies this move: “Flectere si nequo superos, Acheronta movebo [If I cannot bend the higher powers, I will move the infernal regions].”
describing it as a social response to inborn human needs. But many of the works that emerged from these allegedly disinterested fields displayed a more than positivistic interest in spiritual matters; as Lewis observes, these studies sought “to explain religion without explaining it away” (44). A strain of social scientific discourse during the modernist period—most obviously embodied by Jung, but also stretching across a number of fields and disciplines—might best be described as a kind of spiritualized psychology. James’ *Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902), far from discounting the possibility of a divine power, actually articulates a vision that combines scientific inquiry with the legitimacy of religious search; at one point, James goes so far as to hypothesize about the existence of a “subconscious self” at the core of every human being, suggesting that, “if there be higher powers able to impress us, they may get access to us only through the subliminal door” (243). Bergson’s philosophy of vitalism was hailed as a “trumpet-call to religion”; his numerous psycho-philosophical publications combine scientific and philosophical inquiry with an emphasis on spiritual life. In the field of anthropology, Jane Harrison intersperses her studies of ancient Greek religion with meditations, at times deeply personal, on the substance and function of religion. At the same time, contemporary studies dedicated to religion itself were saturated with the language of psychology and consciousness. Underhill’s *Mysticism* not only draws explicitly on the work of James and Bergson (as well as lesser-known psychologists of religion like E.D. Starbuck, James Pratt, and George Barton

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10 See Lewis 43-51.
11 The intellectual strain I examine here follows in the tradition of late Victorian psychic investigators like Frederic Myers and Henry Sidgwick, who, as Frank Turner has argued, having “found the Christianity in which they had been reared too limited for their intellects and the scientific naturalism that bid for their allegiance too restrictive...came to dwell between the science that beckoned them and the religion they had forsaken” (*Between Science and Religion* 1).
12 James was also a member of the Society of Psychical Research (1882-), an organization dedicated to exploring psychic or paranormal experiences. On the Society of Psychical Research, see Oppenheim, *The Other World: Spiritualism and Psychical Research in England, 1850-1914* and Owen, *The Place of Enchantment*.
13 Bergson is quoted in 1913 as stating that, “theology and metaphysics must approach each other more and more closely; they must come to employ the same method, ['mystical intuition']. The true metaphysic will be an immediate vision of reality, and the mystical experience is certainly that” (qtd. in “Bergson and Religion” 36).
14 See, for instance, *Alpha and Omega* 184-186.
Cutten), but also describes mystical phenomena in recognizably psychological terms; describing the process of purgation, for instance, Underhill writes, “The abandonment of the old centres of consciousness has permitted movement towards the new” (402). My dissertation locates British modernist writing about religion and consciousness within this freely flowing interdisciplinary conversation about the nuances of religious experience and its attendant implications for human consciousness.

In some ways, the intellectual strain this dissertation examines took up the mantle of Victorian and Edwardian occultism, which also united spiritual search with efforts to expand the bounds of consciousness.¹⁵ In many ways, as Alex Owen has argued, “occultism was constitutive of modern culture at the fin de siècle” (The Place of Enchantment 16). The moderns, after all, continued to be interested in occultist manifestations of religion and of its consciousness-expanding possibilities.¹⁶ Spiritualism, for instance, experienced a revival in the wake of the First World War, as grieving families sought supernatural means of communication with their dead (Winter 54-77). The movement found a major proponent in none other than Sir Arthur Conan Doyle: the creator of the ultra-rationalist Sherlock Holmes enthusiastically attended séances, gave numerous lectures expounding on his experiences of psychical phenomena, and even wrote a book, The Vital Message (1919), in which he called for the reformation of Christianity according to “the facts of spirit communion and the clear knowledge of what lies beyond the

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¹⁵ A version of unselfing, to name just one example, is crystallized in Anna Kingsford and Edward Maitland’s The Perfect Way (1882): “The problem of the ego in man is the problem also of God in the universe. The revelation of one is the revelation of both, and the knowledge of either involves that of the other. Wherefore for man to know himself, is to know God. Self-consciousness is God-consciousness. He who possesses this consciousness, is, in such degree, a Mystic...The aim of all endeavor should be to bring the body into subjection to, and harmony with the spirit, by refining and subliming it, and so heightening its powers as to make it sensitive and responsive to all the motions of the Spirit” (131, 219).

exit-door of death” (*The Vital Message* 17). Katherine Mansfield sought physical and spiritual healing from the occultist “psychological system” offered by the Gurdjieff Institute, founded by spiritual guru and physician-hypnotist Georgei Ivanovitch Gurdijeff, who described the mission of the institution as dedicated to “the perfecting of the I” (qtd. in Owen “‘The Religious Sense’” 167). Broadly occultist ideas like these reached a wider audience through periodicals like A.R. Orage’s *The New Age* (1907-1922), which published articles about spiritualism and mysticism alongside articles about politics, psychology, and economics, and, later, John Middleton Murry and D.H. Lawrence’s popular *The Adelphi* (1923-1955), a literary magazine dedicated to fostering conversations about spiritual and religious issues that received contributions from popular writers like Bennett, Wells, and Orwell (Thomson 77-106). But whereas 19th century occultist philosophies tended to “[hold] to a highly systemized philosophy and world-view,” as Owen has argued, 20th century efforts “tended to focus far more on the spiritual potential and experiential immediacies of the ‘I’” (“The ‘Religious Sense’” 176). These efforts involved societies and institutes less frequently than individual, idiosyncratic encounters with different modes of religious thought and feeling.

Yet the tenor of these individual encounters, more often than not, ran counter to the spirit of individualism, often revealing a deep interest in subverting the category of the individual entirely. This interest in the “perfecting of the I” frequently manifested itself in language and gestures suggesting the desire to efface it. As Mutter suggests, “At the very moment modernists are exploring the depths of consciousness, that consciousness is simultaneously seen by many as ontologically marginal and epiphenomenal” (22). A decidedly anti-anthropocentric strain runs through the works this dissertation examines; in them, the self is repeatedly figured as a myopic prison, escape from it a moral imperative. Modernist interest in processes of unselfing often
reveals broader anxieties in the period about the limitations—perspectival and moral—of human subjectivity.

Many writers of the period addressed this problem by invoking a paradigm in which the self is fundamentally dual, consisting of two layers. This dual self does not divide along traditional Cartesian lines of mind and body but rather along a distinction between inner and outer selves: a social, individualized “outer” self and an “inner” self that is distinct from that outer self and even consubstantial with the divine, or at least a quasi-divine force. Many writers also used the language of “personality” and “impersonality” to express this dual nature of self. Despite the inherent vagueness of these terms for twenty-first-century readers, they emerge with striking frequency and consistency across early twentieth-century writing: “personality” refers to the persona that inhabits the material fabric of rational, conscious, daily life (e.g. the Cartesian ego, Freud’s ego, Bergson’s “intellect”); “impersonality” refers to the irrational, unconscious, and often spiritual forces underlying this rational, autonomous personality—impacting and shaping so much of its activity, yet remaining, most of the time, inaccessible to it.

Critiques of “personality” emerge from more predictable, conservative sources: Lawrence, for instance, who often expressed a desire to “strip [himself] of the trash of personal feelings and ideas” (Apocalypse 76); or T.E. Hulme, who decried “that bastard thing Personality” which “place[s] perfection in humanity” (Speculations 33). But even a liberal humanist like Forster spoke deprecatingly of “personality,” distinguishing between it and an “anonymous

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17 As Underhill observes, the popular paradigm was itself religious in origin, noting that “the twofold character of human personality is implicit in the mystics” (67). This “two fold character of human personality” was also central to occultist philosophy. As Owen explains, “Human consciousness was spiritualized by an occult philosophy that distinguished between a temporal and divine self. So that whereas Theosophists, for example, understood the self as consciousness, they insisted on a clear distinction between the earthly ‘personal Self’ or ‘personal Ego’ (the ‘I’) and a timeless ‘permanent Self’ or ‘Spiritual Ego,’ which is continuously incarnated in human form until finally perfected and released from the wheel of Karma” (The Place of Enchantment 121-122).

18 To be sure, obvious differences exist between these conceptualizations. I yoke them here not only because the thinkers I examine in this section tended to do so as well, but also to highlight what they share in common: an idea of an autonomous, self-aware consciousness rooted exclusively in the material world.
personality” or “general personality” shared in common with “all other deeper personalities” (Two Cheers for Democracy 93). H.G. Wells, too, often expressed his view of “personality” as an obstacle to communitarian efforts to reclaim social cohesion and harmony. While terms like “personality” and “impersonality” are usually thought of in the context of “impersonal” aesthetic theories (as expounded by figures like Pound and Eliot), Modernist Unselfing proposes an alternative trajectory for the appeal of impersonality in the period, in which unselfing is not only a religiously inflected imperative, but also (and perhaps paradoxically) a deeply personal project, less interested in coercion than in self-betterment. That Aldous Huxley, for instance, rejects authoritarian politics in the same breath that he recommends “spiritual training” in service of “a transcendence of personality” in The Perennial Philosophy betrays the extent to which, even if it was entangled with politics, the idea of impersonality was also entangled with religious search.

As these examples suggest, discourses of unselfing often raise a particular paradox, wherein self-denial actually works in service of reinforcement of a profounder, “truer” self.

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19 See a version of this phenomenon, for instance, in Wells’ immensely popular Mr. Britling Sees It Through (1916): “And this double refraction of his mind by which a concentrated and individualised Britling did but present a larger impersonal Britling beneath, carried with it a duplication of his conscience and sense of responsibility. To his personal conscience he was answerable for his private honour and his debts and the Dower House he had made and so on, but to his impersonal conscience he was answerable for the whole world. The world from the latter point of view was his egg...on these black nights, when the personal Mr. Britling would lie awake thinking how unsatisfactorily Mr. Britling was going on, and when the impersonal Mr. Britling would be thinking how unsatisfactorily his universe was going on, the whole mental process had a likeness to some complex piece of orchestral music wherein the organ deplored the melancholy destinies of the race while the piccolo lamented the secret trouble of Mrs. Harrowdean.” In the novel, Mr. Britling ultimately identifies “the impersonal Mr. Britling”—the Mr. Britling who can face the atrocities of war without wishing ill on his enemies—as a divine force underlying the “personalities” of all of mankind: “…it was Hugh, Hugh that he had thought was dead, it was young Heinrich living also, it was himself, it was those others that sought, it was all these and it was more, it was the Master, the Captain of Mankind, it was God, there present with him, and he knew that it was God...God was beside him and within him and about him...It was the crucial moment of Mr. Britling’s life” (438-439).

20 This trajectory applies, to some extent, even to the work of Eliot himself. In Chapter 4, I show the ways his aesthetic theories call for a reactionary return to the collective values of a hallowed, sanctified tradition—as they have been traditionally read—but nonetheless also advocate a fundamentally mystical approach to that tradition.

21 Terminology aside, moreover, versions of this paradigm are virtually everywhere in the period: Middleton Murry, for instance, called for an “aristocracy of the spirit” predicated on the “cultivation of the inner ‘man’” (“The Republic of the Spirit,” 222). In A Room of One’s Own, Woolf distinguishes between “the common life which is the real life and not...the separate lives which we live as individuals.” Like many of the writers at the center of this dissertation, Woolf often expressed a desire for a vision of the world “seen without a self” (The Waves 171). For more on the impersonal dimensions of Virginia Woolf’s work, see Beer, “The Body of the People: Mrs. Dalloway to The Waves,” Virginia Woolf: The Common Ground.
Birkin, the protagonist of Lawrence’s *Women in Love*, encapsulates this paradox: “‘Only there needs the pledge between us, that we will both cast off everything, cast off ourselves even, and cease to be, so that that which is perfectly ourselves can take place in us’” (147). In Richardson’s *Pilgrimage*, likewise, Miriam comes to seek “possession of that self within herself who was more than her momentary self” (IV. 222). For so many thinkers of the period, then, to unself was to expand self rather than merely erase it, to experience a kind of renewal and revitalization unavailable to a conscious mind they believed to be enslaved to the mechanistic forces governing modern life.

Despite an emphasis on paradigms of distance and withdrawal, the phenomenon I call “unselfing” does not entail a rejection of the social; rather, in the works I examine in this dissertation, unselfing often enables particular arrangements of social life. If, as Lewis puts it, “the problem for the modern novel is how to revise some conception of sacred community even in an era of purely private experience” (22), many of these works imagine a religiously-inflected model of unselfing as a way—perhaps, the only way—to authentically engage in meaningful social relationships. In *A Passage to India*, for instance, connections between people—moments of intimacy, of mutual understanding, of authentic empathy—often occur after or because of an act of unselfing: Godbole’s efforts to “love” Mrs. Moore by “plac[ing] himself in the position of the God” (325); Adela’s revelation of Aziz’s innocence after what can only be described as an out-of-body experience; Aziz’s willingness to befriend Mrs. Moore’s son only after “focusing his heart on something more distant than the caves, something beautiful” (349). In *Pilgrimage*, Miriam experiences authentic connection with others only in the silence generated by the

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22 In alluding fairly obviously to Christ’s principle of self-abandonment—e.g. “He that findeth his life shall lose it: and he that loseth his life for my sake shall find it” (Mt 10:39)—Birkin’s injunction also speaks to the enmeshment of religion and discourse about consciousness at the heart of this dissertation.

23 Taylor observes, similarly, “decentering is not the alternative to inwardness; it is its complement” (465).
practice of what she calls “the technique of Quakerism,” in which all parties partake of a process of psycho-spiritual “withdrawal” (IV. 564). The success of the romantic relationships *The Rainbow* chronicles depend entirely on whether characters are able to imagine themselves and others as “symbolic,” or containing an impersonal, semi-divine essence.

Unselfing in these works can also often generate connection on a communal scale. In *The Rainbow*, Ursula only feels connected to her family, past and present—as well as to the broader community of the Marsh Valley—when she has internalized a symbolic logic according to which she is a palimpsestic entity, an individual who *also* represents the impersonal generational saga of her family. As I argue in my first chapter, a different and more insidious model of unselfing operates at the core of Lawrence’s late novel, *The Plumed Serpent* (1925), where participation in a religious collective requires a kind of permanent, absolute self-effacement, “a strange, marginless death of [the] individual self” (417). *A Passage to India* offers a more palatable vision of unselfing in the context of religious ritual, figuring the Hindu ceremony of Gokulashtami as a collective act of self-abstraction that cultivates a spirit of love, trust, and generosity.24

Thus, these works often feature unselfing as a process that generates, or is deeply implicated in, the cultivation of a particular orientation or perspective: towards self, towards others, towards the world. For Forster, effective connection requires the adoption of a disposition that can imagine itself inhabiting the perspectives of others, abstracting from the isolation within its own position. In Richardson’s view, the Quaker method allows its practitioners to be “always centered, operating one’s life...from where everything fell into proportion and clear focus” (IV.

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24 Forster writes, “There was no quarrelling, owing to the nature of the gift, for blessed is the man who confers it on another, he imitates God. And those ‘imitations,’ those ‘substitutions,’ continued to flicker through the assembly for many hours, awaking in each man, according to his capacity, an emotion that he would not have had otherwise” (325).
pending time among the Quakers, Miriam comes to believe that the continued, focused practice of concentration enables the Quaker lifestyle of “minute to minute living in the spirit” (IV. 603). For Lawrence, focused, interactive engagement with religious symbols generates a symbolic outlook that allows the individual to recognize the divinity in every living being; in *The Rainbow*, characters experience liberation and fulfillment through the unselfing that comes from living and thinking symbolically. And the purgatorial processes of unselfing Eliot prescribes in “Ash-Wednesday” and *Four Quartets* are designed explicitly to bring one closer to the experience of an impersonal, divine perspective. While Eliot’s vision is perhaps least manifestly interested in the social, his version of unselfing, too, is designed to effect a perspective that renders the experiences of love and desire more meaningful and less self-interested.

The kinds of orientations produced by unselfing are, however, hard-fought and rarely permanent. In virtually every work I examine, the process of unselfing emerges as difficult, either because it requires immense focus or concentration, because it must be undergone incessantly, or, quite simply, because the imaginative effort it requires is arduous and demanding. Of course, difficulty is a signature characteristic of modernist aesthetics and a signature characteristic of these texts. But the formal difficulty of these texts is also a function of their efforts to model the difficulty of unselfing. Eliot and Richardson illustrate this phenomenon most neatly. Eliot’s late poetry is, to use his own term, “difficult” (*Selected Prose* 65); it relies on antithesis and paradox, it resists linear reading, it alludes to complicated theological doctrines, and even asks to be read as devotional prayer. All of these demands, however, register the difficulty of the purgatorial processes of self-refinement that these poems prescribe. *Pilgrimage* is, likewise, “difficult” on many different scales: not only does it demand

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25 In *The Problem with Pleasure*, Laura Frost offers a useful analysis of the difficulty of modernist aesthetics, positing that it was intertwined with contemporary anxieties about the pleasure of mass consumption.
the sustained attention of its readers for 13 novels, but it is also narrated in what May Sinclair dubbed a “stream of consciousness” style, offering ambiguous, recursive, and often decontextualized prose in place of a straightforward account of events. In both cases, difficulty serves a distinct purpose: both Eliot and Richardson, using entirely different formal strategies, seek to draw their readers into the very difficulty they represent. As I argue in my third chapter, the goal of Richardson’s technique is to immerse the reader in the moment-to-moment experience of Miriam’s consciousness—its ebb and flow, its swellings of ecstatic experience and retreats into her everyday thought processes—as well as in the broader rhythm of her spiritual search: its long swaths of frustration and emptiness, its random interruption by surges of meaning and self-actualization. Making sense of Pilgrimage requires the reader to, in a sense, adopt its Quaker-inflected mode of “living minute to minute in the spirit.” Eliot’s late poetry, similarly, often demands that its readers adopt the logic undergirding the purgatorial processes it describes. In order to make sense of “East Coker,” for instance, the reader must engage the counterintuitive, paradoxical illogic of St. John of the Cross’ Dark Night of the Soul, a long portion of which the poem quotes in full; in deciphering the poem’s injunction to “arrive at what you are not” by “go[ing] through the way in which you are not” (CPP 127), the reader actually performs an interpretive version of the spiritual acrobatics the method calls for. In different ways, all of the works at the core of this dissertation acknowledge the difficulty and necessarily aspirational quality of unselfing. It is difficult, as Professor Godbole finds in A Passage to India, to sympathize with wasps and stones, whatever technologies of unselfing one has at their disposal. Nonetheless, each of these writers, in different ways, sacralizes the effort of trying.

26 In her 1918 review, Sinclair writes, “It is just life going on and on. It is Miriam Henderson’s stream of consciousness going on and on. And in neither is there any grossly discernible beginning or end” (“The Novels of Dorothy Richardson” 59).
In this argument, I follow recent scholarship—such as Callum Brown’s *The Death of Christian Britain* and Charles Taylor’s influential *A Secular Age*—in challenging conventional readings of the modernist period as strictly and emphatically secular,27 or, to quote Max Weber’s famous declaration, thoroughly “disenchanted.”28 Rather than reading secularization as an inevitable consequence of modernity, for example, Taylor suggests that the end of the 19th century gave rise to an “expanding universe of unbelief,” an explosion of possibilities generated by internal shifts within Christianity itself toward an individual-oriented morality. As Gauri Viswanathan has argued, classic narratives of secularization have also neglected the preeminence of religious heterodoxies and other popular “oppositional knowledge systems,” especially in the second half of the 19th century, that continued to resist state-sanctioned, dogmatic religious institutions (469). Standard narratives of secularization fail to account for modes of belief that fall outside the purview of organized religion as it is usually construed—especially non-elite and non-Western perspectives—or, as Weber himself suggested, turn a blind eye to the ways secularization was marked indelibly by the religious structures of thought it sought to abandon and define itself against. For Vincent Pecora, a truly secular cultural criticism is impossible for precisely this reason. As he argues in *Secularization and Cultural Criticism* (2006), the language and discourse of ostensibly secular thought “comes with certain historical and religious strings attached” (2), such that “the society that produces Enlightenment never fully outgrows its desire for religious sources of coherence, solidarity, and historical purpose, and continually translates, or transposes, them into ever more refined and immanent, but also distorted and distorting,

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27 See, for instance, Michael Warner, Jonathan Van Antwerpen, and Craig Calhoun, eds., *Varieties of Secularism in a Secular Age.*
28 The passage comes from Weber’s essay, “Science as a Vocation”: “The fate of our times is characterized by rationalization and intellectualization and, above all, by the disenchantment of the world. Precisely the ultimate and most sublime values have retreated from public life either into the transcendental realm of mystic life or into the brotherliness of direct and personal human relations” (155).
versions of its religious inheritance” (22). Pushing against a strictly unidirectional narrative of “disenchantment,” then, recent scholarship has exposed the processes of secularization to be uneven, tortuous, and always incomplete.

The field of literary studies is perhaps uniquely poised to capture the place of religiosity in a period rife with disavowals of institutional religion. Pecora’s study concludes with a provocation vis a vis modernist literature specifically, offering a mode of criticism that rejects the question of whether an author subscribes to “hidden or private religious belief” by instead “investigating what we might call the revival of desacralized religious dispositions, attitudes, strategies of response, and improvisations, that is, of secularized religious habitus, alongside or rather as an integral part of...spaces intellectually dominated by the disavowal of belief” (160). Viswanathan goes a step further, proposing not only that the study of literature might actually be instrumental to making sense of the processes of secularization, but also that the study of literary forms might “help us rethink religion’s nature in more than the homogenous terms assumed by modern secularism” (“Secularism in the Framework of Heterodoxy” 468).

For the most part, the field of modernist studies has been reluctant to take up this challenge, assuming that, as J. Hillis Miller put it in 1965, “the death of God is the starting point” for the literature of the period (Poets of Reality 2). Typically, accounts of modernism and religion tend to abide by a chiasmus: the modernists use religion’s aesthetic qualities (ritual, prayer, or iconography) as organizing principles for their creative work—Woolf’s “daily miracles” or Joyce’s “epiphanies,” for instance—or, like Arthur Symons’ French Symbolists, for

29 A strain of recent, related scholarship has offered an alternative narrative of “re-enchantment,” exploring the ways a “variety of secular and conscious strategies for re-enchantment, held together by their common aim of filling a God-shaped void” emerged in the wake of the phenomenon of disenchantment Weber describes (Saler and Landy 3). On re-enchantment, see Joshua Landy and Michael Saler, eds., The Re-enchantment of the World: Secular Magic in a Rational Age. On paradigms of “enchanted” and “disenchanted” violence in literary modernism, see Cole, At the Violet Hour: Modernism and Violence in England and Ireland.

30 For a recent and particularly illuminating example of this trend, see Alter, Canon and Creativity.
whom literature is “a kind of religion, with all the duties and responsibilities of the sacred ritual”  
(*The Symbolist Movement in Literature* 9), they make of aesthetics a religion in itself. According to this account, modernist art “usurp[s],” as Frederic Jameson has argued, “all of philosophy’s 
claims to the Absolute” (*The Cultural Turn* 83). Both versions of the story assume that, for the modernists as a whole, no aspect of religious experience was to be taken seriously on its own terms.

But recent scholarship in modernist studies has begun to take these dominant critical narratives to task. Mutter’s *Restless Secularism*, for instance, offers an account of secularization in the modernist period according to which “the central religious problem for modernism is not explicit belief or disbelief in God but the entire fabric of thought and feeling implicit in the religious or secular imaginaries where belief situates itself” (3), demonstrating how modernist literature *itself* is ambivalently aware of the ways allegedly secular discourses (about language, aesthetics, ethics, and the body) remain nonetheless mired in the religious imaginaries they sought to displace.  

Closest to my own work is Lewis’ *Religious Experience and the Modernist Novel*, which explores the ways the modernist novel remains deeply invested in confronting questions related to religious experience; Lewis’ study adopts a comparative, interdisciplinary approach that demonstrates how literary modernism exhibits some of the same concerns expressed by contemporary social scientific discourses. But even Lewis is reluctant to depart from the received narrative that the modernists ultimately reinvest sacred value in secular institutions, maintaining that “it was no longer nature but society that embodied the power once understood as supernatural. Theirs was a social supernaturalism” (4). *Modernist Unselfing* takes a different tack, arguing that modernist authors sought sacred value in and through the processes

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31 As Muller puts it, “writers are ‘trapped’ between attractive religious paradigms for thought and feeling and a secularism that disavows the language and metaphysics that makes these paradigms intelligible” (2).
of unselfing that they encountered in various religious traditions and tried to model in their literary works.

This dissertation also necessarily draws on the large body of critical work dedicated to modernist “impersonality.” Until recently, the term has possessed a notorious reputation in modernist studies, especially in the wake of Maud Ellmann’s *The Poetics of Impersonality*, which yoked Pound’s and Eliot’s calls for an impersonal poetics—one that privileged anonymity and engagement with tradition over the individual consciousness of the poet—to their conservative politics and tendencies toward authoritarianism. But recent scholarship in Modernist studies has reassessed this strictly suspicious attitude towards the term. In *Fictions of Autonomy*, for instance, Andrew Goldstone reads impersonality as a primarily aesthetic principle that, despite its claims to the contrary, engages nonetheless in the social; as he puts it, “the pursuit of autonomy leads modernist writers to take account of, and seek to transform, the social relations of their literary production” (5).

Another strain of reassessment, inspired by Sharon Cameron’s influential philosophical study, *Impersonality*, has explored how the idea of impersonality, vexed and contradictory as it was, extended far beyond the formalist poetics and conservative ideologies of figures like Pound, Eliot, and Wyndham Lewis. According to these scholars, discourses of impersonality during the modernist period, while coopted by different strains of politics eager to diminish the autonomy of the individual in favor of a readily controlled collective, opened up for others—including many of the figures discussed in this dissertation—the possibility of new and radical forms of connection and self-definition, at once a “rejection of modern individualism and a call for a truer sense of the term” (Rives 2). For Rochelle Rives, impersonality is primarily “a theory of engagement,” a “spatial dynamic” that enables forms of connection that radically challenge
authoritarian systems and modes of thought just as often as they uphold them (Modernist Impersonalities 3, 16). And in Optical Impersonality, Christina Walters engages with modernist-era discourses of “optical” science to explore “what more there is to the human subject than the person” (2), demonstrating the ways these discourses shaped a body of literature more open to difference, particularly in terms of race and gender. Walters argues that “by rigorously undoing so many forms of identity, difference, and enclosure, impersonality may offer a new political ecology,” one open to alterity rather than invested in creating a conformist community of “identical interests” (273). Imperatives to personal dissolution can occasion violence, but they can also occasion a radical openness to difference and to transformation. While my own work certainly resembles no rescue effort, I would like to unhitch what I’m calling “unselfing” from earlier associations between impersonality and fascism, in order to investigate its potentially ethical foundations, the unpredictability of its political outcome, and its expansive reach.

Rarely, if ever, have conversations about impersonality and religious experience coincided in modernist studies. In this dissertation, I hope to show how literary modernism’s investment in religious experience is inseparable from the discourse of impersonality that undergirds so many of its most poignant meditations. Considerations of modernist impersonality are, likewise, incomplete without attention to the ways it is so often enmeshed in religious paradigms. In bringing these conversations together, then, I hope to offer readings of some of the most well known texts in the modernist canon in a fresh context. Attending to the ways these British modernist writers weave together novel ways of conceptualizing the self with different ways of imagining the function of religion can enrich our understanding of literary modernism beyond the limiting frameworks often imposed on its study. In these works, ambivalence—even outright hostility—towards forms of religious orthodoxy can coincide nonetheless with
profoundly earnest attention to religious experience; the desire to escape—and, often, to exceed—the boundaries of self does not always imply a perverse asceticism or an insidious politics. To that end, I unite under one rubric the modernists’ distrust of what Woolf called “the damned egotistical self” (Diary 14) with their concurrent search for an authentic form of religious experience, in the hopes of elucidating a hitherto unexplored region of modernist spirituality—as well as the psycho-spiritual grounds upon which many modernists attempted to escape the confines of selfhood.

In Modernist Unselfing, I adopt a literary-historical approach, turning to the cultural history of religion in England—as well as to the tenets of specific religious traditions themselves—as a context for close-reading literary works. Each chapter begins with a discussion of the cultural and institutional climate surrounding one broad topic and culminates in a detailed examination of how major literary figures addressed and reconstituted these problems. These contexts are not always or necessarily offered as narratives of direct influence, but rather as a frame of reference, showing how each writer is participating in a particular culture, or tradition, of writing about religious experience. Just as often, this frame of reference also functions as a control variable, showing the ways these writers complicate—and sometimes even depart significantly—from the work of their peers. My argument hinges equally on close-reading that reveals the ways the ideas and historical trends I discuss earlier in the chapter emerge in the realm of the literary, thematically as well as formally. I begin with D.H. Lawrence’s efforts to revive ancient modes of reading religious symbolism and end with what is perhaps the period’s most orthodox contribution to the modernist canon, T.S. Eliot’s Four Quartets. The same pervasive impulse, I argue, courses through the work of figures as orthodox as Eliot and as heterodox as Lawrence: a desire to harness religion’s power to unself.
As I argue in my first chapter, Lawrence’s version of unselfing emerged from late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century occultist writings that sought to revitalize systems of religious symbolism. Throughout his career, Lawrence sketches a mutually informing relationship between the self and the religious symbol, such that continuous reinterpretation of the symbol not only revivifies the self, but also brings it into contact with something larger and otherworldly: in Lawrence’s work, the self “unselfs” through its encounter with the symbol. Lawrence’s efforts to sketch a meaningful relationship between symbol and self—and the novelistic implications of that relationship—form the basis of my readings of two of his novels, *The Rainbow* and *The Plumed Serpent*. *The Rainbow* operates according to Lawrence’s model of the symbol on multiple scales: the diegesis of the novel is replete with symbols and iconography; characters themselves become, or don’t become, symbolic; even the novel itself moves towards becoming like a symbol in the Lawrencian sense. I conclude with a reading of *The Plumed Serpent*, a later novel in which Lawrence explores a different configuration of self and symbol—one that calls for permanent self-effacement—that is antithetical to the dynamic of mutual reinvention Lawrence theorizes in his earlier work. Taken together, the novels demonstrate the potential richness of Lawrence’s vision of symbolism as well as its ethical pitfalls.

My second chapter focuses on E.M. Forster, who turns to the Hindu tradition in an effort to cultivate practices of imaginative self-abstraction—exercises that move between impartiality and partiality, distance and closeness—that can serve his famous injunction to “only connect.” In Forster’s work, unselfing is about imaginative effort—one must be willing to think in terms of displacement and substitution, putting oneself in “the position” of the other—and about the cultivation of a particular disposition open to these kinds of imaginative experiments. This model of self-abstraction persists and evolves over the course of Forster’s career: in short stories about
intercultural connection that figure the afterlife as an imaginative space where intimacy is possible; in non-fiction writings about the Hindu tradition, where a “religious sense” means a disposition open to self-abstraction. It finds its fullest expression in *A Passage to India*, where Forster envisions a metaphysical and ethical practice of self-abstraction predicated on the adoption of distant, or at least different, vantage points from which the boundaries that separate people—and especially the boundaries of self—temporarily dissolve. The novel adopts this idea as a formal principle primarily through experiments in point of view, moments in which the narrator oscillates between the thoughts and feelings of its central characters and a distanced—and, at times, cosmic—perspective, from which human distinctions and categories disappear. *A Passage to India* complicates Forster’s celebration of personal relationships—especially between members of different faiths and different races—by predicing their success on the adoption of a spatial imaginary, such that the sensuous experience of affection actually depends on the distanced perspective that a kind of spiritualized self-abstraction can offer.

In my third chapter, I turn to Dorothy Richardson’s *Pilgrimage* in the context of her deep and sustained engagement with English Quakers, whose treatment of silent meditation as a route to effective social action appealed to many at the turn of the century (Kennedy). Due to the breadth of its subject matter—*Pilgrimage* is a 13-novel series written in a stream-of-consciousness style—and to the idiosyncratic nature of Richardson’s engagement with Quakerism, this chapter takes a slightly different form, focusing less on cultural context and more on formal innovation than my other chapters. Unselfing occurs most prominently in *Pilgrimage* during the “emotional moments” of its protagonist Miriam, experiences in which she makes contact with “that self within herself who was more than her momentary self” (IV. 222). What Richardson refers to throughout her work as “the Quaker method” (*Quakers* 35)—which
involves repeated efforts to achieve a contemplative affect in the rhythms of everyday life—offers Miriam a way to more readily generate these ecstatic moments and access the perspective she gains when she experiences them. The Quaker technique inflects the series formally, at multiple levels of style and structure: in Richardson’s representations of Quaker concentration; in the stylistic techniques she uses to represent Miriam’s “stream of consciousness”; and, finally, in the series’ organization around “moments” rather than linear chronology. Finally, I argue, the novels replicate the experience of living a life through a constellation of emotional moments at the same time that they offer a new means of representing the individual life through narrative.

My final chapter focuses on T.S. Eliot, whose attraction to the self-effacing possibilities of mystical experience dominates his career, from early poetry about martyrdom to the intense theological meditations at the core of Four Quartets. I explore Eliot’s post-conversion poetry in the context of contemporary psychologies of mysticism, which often expressed anxiety about mysticism’s potential to solidify—rather than dissolving—the ego. I argue that Eliot’s poems ultimately produce a system for avoiding mysticism’s potential for egocentrism through purgatorial processes of self-refinement, processes aimed at reorienting and more closely aligning the human perspective with a divine one. This chapter is unique to my project in a few ways: first, it concerns poetry rather than novels. Moreover, while Lawrence, Forster, and Richardson draw on particular religious traditions for paradigms of unselfing—even as they disavow affiliation with those traditions—Eliot’s post-conversion poetry operates from within a religious tradition, confronting a problem inherent to the project of unselfing itself: the possibility that the effort of self-escape could result in egocentric delusion—and thus, at worst, even further entrapment within the self’s limited perspective. In late poems like “Ash-Wednesday” and Four Quartets, Eliot imagines purgatorial processes as a means of transcending
these limitations; both thematically and formally, the poems enact processes of recollection, recognition, and self-checking. Only through practices like these, in Eliot’s view, can the self be liberated from the solipsism that keeps it from experiencing the love of God, a love that imbues it with an expansive, transformed perspective.

For Eliot, God is the goal, but all of the writers at the center of this dissertation, in different ways, pursue processes of unselfing in order to achieve something like that expansive, transformed perspective. These efforts—always efforts, always aspirations—to see and feel beyond the self represent one crucial “variety” of religious experience explored in the early decades of the 20th century. In turning to a religious sensibility for a means of unselfing, these writers sought not only to expand the boundaries of self but also to expand the possibilities of religion. *Modernist Unselfing* explores the ways these concurrent—and inextricable—projects played a pivotal role in shaping the literature of the period.
“We can know the living world only symbolically,” wrote D.H. Lawrence in *Etruscan Places*, his travel writings about Italy (125). As if to allegorize—and perhaps ironize—this dictum, Lawrence’s most famous and frequently anthologized poem, “Snake” (1923), depicts an encounter between man and serpent in which the former seems only capable of understanding the latter through a rigid symbolic framework. The poem takes its cues from Genesis, placing their meeting in an Edenic setting under “the deep, strange-scented shade of the great dark carob-tree” (*Selected Poetry* 134) And yet, as one might expect from the notoriously heterodox Lawrence, “Snake” diverges sharply from the template of its ostensible source material—and even seems to chastise its speaker for assuming that the snake fits a predetermined typological role. Their meeting is mundane: the only action occurs when the speaker throws a stick at the snake (and misses) as it retreats into a hole in the wall. Rather than a smooth-talking serpent, Lawrence’s snake is silent, languid, and regal. It is the human who initiates contact, prompted by a persistent inner monologue—“the voices of [his] accursed human education” (137) an education coded both secular and religious—that tells him to kill the snake and imposes upon it a set of preconceived meanings: poisonous, evil, fallen. The poem suggests that his metaphorical and metonymic apprehension of the snake—his attempt to know the snake symbolically, mediated through the manmade concepts of the Judeo-Christian tradition—not only leads to violence, but precludes him from understanding (let alone emulating) the snake’s more sensual and vitalist relationship to the natural world. Thinking with symbols seems to prevent him from truly relating to a world quaking and quivering with life—a world in flux, resistant to man’s efforts to define it.
And yet, the speaker does not merely turn the snake into the serpent of Eden; it is also “like a guest in quiet,” “like a god,” and “like a king in exile…now due to be crowned again,” before the speaker arrives finally at a conclusive epithet: “one of the lords of life” (135-137). In its attention to the way the speaker continually refuges and reconceptualizes the animal, the poem suggests, of course, that the snake will resist all of the speaker’s efforts to circumscribe it; the poem itself is largely a record of multiple consecutive failures to capture its meaning. Yet the poem also privileges this flurry of hermeneutic activity, suggesting that there is something crucial and generative about it—it is the core of the overall encounter. At the end of the poem, the speaker proclaims that he has “something to expiate: / A pettiness” (137). He ends the poem in a reduced, self-loathing state. But that very self-consciousness shows that he has also grown, changed, through his attempts to pin the snake down: he can now see himself in greater clarity, from a more impersonal vantage point. And the snake has changed, too, absorbing new meanings and resonances that allow it to finally transcend its overdetermined typological valences. The encounter between self and symbol allows both to transform. Through the agonism of meaning-making, the speaker is able to experience a new kind of “fascination” (136), closer to the snake’s own way of relating to nature, and to undergo a process of introspection unthinkable within the bounds set by the “voices of [his] accursed human education.” The snake, meanwhile, transforms from a static, overdetermined symbol into a living one—a shifting palimpsest of meanings, in which its Edenic valences are not abandoned but incorporated and reconfigured. That the poem ends with the language of sin and “expiation” implies further that the speaker’s relationship to something beyond creation—the divine—depends on his ability to perform this kind of reading of creation. Continuous reinterpretation of the symbolic snake not only revivifies the self, but

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32 The title of the collection in which “Snake” is published, *Birds, Beasts, and Flowers* (1923), is itself an allusion to a Victorian hymn, signaling the ways in which Lawrence is consciously engaging with and rewriting Christian orthodoxy.
also brings it into contact with something larger, something otherworldly.

“Snake” offers a condensed allegory of a larger principle at the core of Lawrence’s thought and literary innovation: his conviction that true spiritual life depended on a dynamic, mutually informing relationship between the self and religious symbols. His fiction is littered with countless symbolic references and religious allusions, both familiar and strange. In his non-fiction writings, religious symbolism and theories of the symbol occupy a privileged position: in esoteric meditations like “The Crown” (1915), in which lion and unicorn—representatives of warring religious impulses—vie for power; in literary criticism like his Study of Thomas Hardy (1914), in which he argues that the “religious effort of man” is “to create symbols” (447); in pseudo-anthropological writings like “Him With His Tail In His Mouth” (1926), in which he celebrates the prehistoric impulse to capture in symbol the timeless “spark between man and the living universe” (Phoenix II 432); and in Etruscan Places (1932), which is in many ways a catalogue of the symbols painted on the walls of ancient Etruscan tombs. Throughout his career, Lawrence even adopted his own personal symbolic emblem, the phoenix, connoting his overarching desire for personal and cultural resurrection, rebirth, and regeneration. Across his entire body of work, Lawrence continuously asserted the need for individuals to engage with religious symbols—a broad term that, for Lawrence, included icons, scriptural narratives, and even rituals—through endless processes of reinterpretation.

Like many other modernist writers, and like the other writers at the center of this dissertation, Lawrence formulated his theory of self and symbol partly in response to what he perceived as the stifling effects of industrial modernity and orthodox, institutionalized Christianity—and largely through his engagements with decidedly heterodox sources, such as occultist writings by H.P. Blavatsky. Yet it emerged not just out of his pressing need to
conceptualize a new way of relating to the divine, outside the strictures of an orthodox framework, but also out of a need to conceptualize how the narrow confines of the self—enclosed ever more rigidly by rationalism and materialism—could be escaped. In Lawrence’s approach to unselfing, the self “unselfs” through its encounter with the symbol—by entering into a relationship with the symbol that precipitates a dynamic of mutual reinvention. Religion itself becomes a symbolic enterprise through which self and symbol are always on the verge of a new birth, a new definition.

The category of the symbol—especially as a subset of larger concepts like myth and mythopoeia—has always loomed large in accounts of modernism. The development of literary modernism has been traced, for instance, to the French Symbolist movement: its use of symbols to create an atmosphere of evocation and mystery, to represent the meanings and essences underlying the material world, and especially to capture, in some vague sense, the subjective impressions of the poet. Edmund Wilson, for instance, famously declared French Symbolism the precursor to literary modernism in his landmark *Axel’s Castle* (1931), insisting that the Symbolists’ imperative “to find, to invent, the special language which will alone be capable of expressing [the poet’s] personality and feelings...by a succession of words, of images, which will serve to suggest it to the reader” contained the stirrings of modernist form (658)—its linguistic density, its rejection of realism, and especially its investment in the individual artist’s subjectivity. But these accounts of modernism’s investment in a symbolic worldview treat symbols themselves as primarily aesthetic forms, overlooking other influential contemporary contributions to psychology, comparative religion, and anthropology, many of which not only embraced a symbolic religiosity as a *metaphysical*—rather than secular—alternative to dogmatic Christianity, but also turned to the religious symbol specifically because it seemed to resist the
tendency toward unbounded subjectivity represented by the Symbolists. While the French Symbolists and their modernist descendants turned to symbols as a vehicle for suggestion or evocation, of eliciting an atmosphere or depicting an ineffable mental state, the intellectual strain to which Lawrence belonged viewed the religious symbol as a medium for organizing, bracketing, and even undermining the importance of subjective experience.

One of the principles undergirding Lawrence’s thought is that the self and the symbol are homologous. Both the symbol and the self, in Lawrence’s view, could be constantly reinterpreted; both could—and ought to be—understood esoterically. Both have two layers: a stable outer form whose inner meaning can be changed, reimagined. Reinterpretation of one could lead to reinterpretation of the other: the speaker of “Snake,” for instance, is transformed by his efforts to interpret the snake; he is rendered able, through that experience, to access dimensions of lived experience beyond the limitations imposed on him by his “accursed human education.” The symbol, however, also possesses a communal, collective dimension that the self does not possess, at least at first: the resonances of its transformations across history; the cultures and communities that created it; the networks of interpretive possibilities that exist for it at any given time. In Lawrence’s view, symbolic experience could also lead to unselfing because it could be a form of communal experience. Reinterpreting a symbol is a way not only to add to its universe of meanings—thereby revivifying it—but also to bring the self into contact with something larger.

While Lawrence has remained a rather unpopular figure in the modernist canon since the publication of Kate Millet’s Sexual Politics, which rightly lambasted a shockingly unexamined strain of Lawrence’s work steeped in sexist and patriarchal ideologies, the last twenty years have witnessed a resurgence of interest in Lawrence’s ideas, particularly vis a vis science, technology,
and especially affect and embodiment. Yet mainstream modernist criticism has largely avoided addressing the peculiarities and particularities of Lawrence’s relationship to religion—and especially to occultist philosophies like Theosophy. Of Lawrence’s interest in occultist philosophy, for instance, biographer Mark Kinkead-Weekes writes, “he would develop from these sources a new physical psychology...but it would be in very much his own dialectical form, based on his own experience—and radically opposed to the central [T]heosophost idea of spirituality, and of spiritual development beyond the body. He took what he wanted and left the rest” (389). This account of Lawrence’s relationship to his source materials, widely accepted across scholarship about Lawrence, not only occludes the more systematic and conceptual debts Lawrence owes them, especially his Theosophical forbears, but also, more often than not, works in service of versions of the same, tried and true, argument: Lawrence was ambivalent about, and ultimately dismissive of, the Christian tradition. One of the goals of this chapter is to show that Lawrence’s interest in esoteric religion is at work in broader, more complicated ways—and that his particular understanding of the relationship between self and symbol informs both the thematics and form of his novels.

Lawrence explores the relationship between self and symbol—and the symbol as a means to unselfing—most extensively in his novels. Critiquing modern novels for being “too personal, too human,” Lawrence frequently asserted that the novel should not solely narrate the lives of its individual characters, but rather should chronicle, at the same time, “some unnamed and nameless flame behind them all” (Phoenix II 182). Lawrence’s novels, then, represent efforts to

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33 See Martin, Modernism and the Rhythms of Sympathy; Walters, Optical Impersonality; and Frost, The Problem with Pleasure: Modernism and its Discontents.
34 While the few recent studies that do examine Lawrence’s religiosity have acknowledged the impact of Theosophical ideas on his writing, most scholarship ultimately consigns Theosophy’s influence to Lawrence’s deployment (and, in many cases, redefinition) of central Theosophical symbols: the mundane egg, the rosy cross, the crown, the plumed serpent. See Ferreter, The Glyph and the Gramophone; Wright, D.H. Lawrence and the Bible, and Hyde, The Risen Adam.
balance the self’s “personal” and impersonal dimensions—a balance they achieve often through engagement with religious symbolism, both on thematic and formal levels. These experiments, while similar in spirit, take different shapes over the course of his career. In an earlier work like *The Rainbow* (1915), for instance, Lawrence’s symbolic vision works in service of expanding the psychic and social possibilities open to its protagonists—mostly women—across three generations of a single English family, the Brangwens. A reciprocal dynamic between individual self and religious symbolism is at the heart of the novel, as the way the Brangwens’ interactions with—and efforts to recreate—the Christian tradition are fundamental to their self-preservation amid the encroaching effects of industrialization and urbanization. The novel ends as its final protagonist, Ursula, finally recognizes the inadequacy of all of her previous attempts at self-definition as well as her relationship to the greater rural community of which her family has always been a part, a community whose psychological and economic revitalization she imagines in the novel’s final pages. Ursula’s willingness to read herself and her community symbolically, then—an orientation she has cultivated via a continued practice of reinterpreting religious symbols over the course of the novel—is responsible for enriching both her own sense of autonomy and her fervent desire for radical social change. But in a later novel like *The Plumed Serpent* (1926), published just a decade later, Lawrence takes his vision to a hitherto unthinkable extreme: a reliance on religious symbols, in this novel, entails a revitalization of a collective at the expense of the individual. *The Plumed Serpent*’s protagonist, Kate experiences the diametric opposite of Ursula’s continued experiences of reinvention and revitalization: her narrative is one of struggle against and ultimate succumbing to the self-

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This chapter benefits from renewed critical attention to modernist discourse of impersonality (see “Introduction”), and especially to the “impersonal” aspects of Lawrence’s vision. Members of various intellectual disciplines at the turn of the 20th century seized on the category of the religious symbol as a means to intellectual and spiritual revitalization made possible by accessing the self’s impersonal dimensions.
effacing demands of the cult of Quetzalcoatl, a religious system whose symbols do not call for reinterpretation; despite the cult’s calls for revitalization and rebirth, the meanings of its symbols—and consequently, the possibilities for self-definition it offers—are all too narrowly construed. The novel, then, inverts the logic of Lawrence’s original vision, and exposes the dangers inherent in a system that too readily and un-self-consciously assigns fixed symbolic significance to individual people. While in *The Rainbow*, Lawrence does make a pointed effort to displace the narratives of individual protagonists—Ursula’s story is always both personal and impersonal, her own and not quite her own—*The Plumed Serpent* reveals what occurs when one of these categories supersedes the other.

Lawrence’s theory of the symbol resembles and is deeply invested in the symbolic orientation toward religion and self elaborated by numerous contemporary theorists of various disciplines—many of which were influenced by the popularity of *fin-de-siecle* occultist philosophies like Theosophy—which, like Lawrence, emphasized a mutually reciprocal relationship between self-definition and an esoteric form of religiosity. This chapter begins by sketching the intellectual landscape surrounding the status of religion and its symbols in the early part of the 20th century, specifically by demonstrating the ways in which a symbolic understanding of religion emerged as an antidote to the rigid narratives of modern life put forward by prevailing discourses of materialism and orthodox Christianity. This section focuses, in particular, on three thinkers belonging to three different disciplines—Cambridge Ritualist Jane Harrison, Theosophist Helena Petrovna Blavatsky, and psychotherapist Carl Jung—whose ideas about religious symbolism represent substantial contributions from their respective fields. The extent of Lawrence’s familiarity with their work varies: he claimed to have not read Jung, was familiar with Harrison, and thoroughly immersed in Blavatsky. Despite differences in personality
and institutional affiliation, the thinkers whose work this section explores share a robust belief in the dire need for a symbolic life—in which fulfilled selfhood comes only with an understanding of one’s own significance with relation to a collective, whether psychological, spiritual or both—and in the possibility that religion, symbolically understood, could fulfill that very need.

Lawrence asserts versions of the same conviction, but with a twist: he proposes a symbolic understanding of religion and self that depends on the ability of both to evolve, to “issue to a new germination,” as Ursula imagines at the end of *The Rainbow* (459). While this idea undergirds all of Lawrence’s work, this chapter focuses on *The Rainbow* and *The Plumed Serpent*, two particularly rich examples of Lawrence’s efforts to reclaim and revitalize the power of religious symbolism for modernity. These novels, one early and one late, demonstrate the potential richness of Lawrence’s vision of symbolism as well as its aesthetic and ethical pitfalls.

II. “The Symbolic Life”: Religion and Symbol at the Turn of the Century

Addressing a London audience in 1939, Carl Jung, by then a world-renowned psychotherapist, gave a speech about a crisis he perceived to be both universal and deeply urgent: the loss of what he called “the symbolic life”—a loss closely tied to the failure of religious symbols to speak to people in a relevant, meaningful way.

Now, we have no symbolic life, and we are all badly in need of the symbolic life. Only the symbolic life can express the need of the soul—the daily need of the soul, mind you! And because people have no such thing, they can never step out of this mill—this awful, grinding, banal life in which they are ‘nothing but.’ In the ritual they are near the Godhead; they are even divine. Do we do it? Where do we know that we do it? Nowhere!...These things go pretty deep, and no wonder people get neurotic. Life is too rational, there is no symbolic existence in which I am something else, in which I am fulfilling my role, my role as one of the actors in the divine drama of life. (*Collected Works XVIII* 274)  

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36 Later in his career, Jung would argue that this lack of symbolic life was, in part, to blame for the unprecedented brutality of twentieth-century warfare: “Our times have demonstrated what it means when the gates of the psychic underworld are thrown open. Things whose enormity nobody could have imagined in the idyllic innocence of the
It is important to note that the collective “drama” Jung recommends here is not collectivist—Jung condemned collectivist movements like Naziism, and blamed their appeal on the pervasive sense of existential loneliness and longing he describes here—but rather pertains quite explicitly to the experience of the individual: the individual’s desire to partake of a larger network of meaning, to be part of something both profoundly unconscious and even potentially otherworldly. To participate in a symbolic life, Jung goes on to explain, is to “expres[s] the actual facts of our unconscious life” (275). The idea at the core of his speech is the individual’s innate desire to be read—perhaps, to read oneself—symbolically, as more complex and dynamic than his or her superficial personality would suggest: as autonomous as well as contingent, as rational actor as well as dramatis persona. Jung’s meditation on the loss of a symbolic orientation reflects a cultural anxiety that was widespread and widely discussed in many different contemporary circles and fields of study, especially as it concerned the apparently diminishing relevance of traditional religion in daily life—and what manner of authority, secular or spiritual, would take its place.

New appreciations for and studies of symbolic understandings of religion emerged from anxieties like these, which also tended to target the stultifying effects of narrow and literalist reading praxes characteristic of the Christianity practiced during the period. Nietzsche, for instance, influentially lambasted the historical expansion of Christianity for its emphasis on dogmatic literalism, whose reductive accounts of the world (and especially of human suffering) left little room for the redemptive possibilities of aesthetic interpretation. Nietzsche’s claims resonated for many, as the trappings of an increasingly rigid Christian theology—and the singular mode of exegesis it prescribed—seemed to align with the deindividualizing forces of

The first decade of our century have happened and have turned the world upside down. Ever since, the world has remained in a state of schizophrenia” (Collected Works XVIII 254).
post-industrial modernity. The institutionalization of rigid theology was itself, in Weber’s view, something developed in tandem with the modern disenchantment he famously diagnosed, as it, like materialism, “represents an intellectual rationalization of the possession of sacred value” (153). Versions of this yoking of rationalist materialism and a specifically evangelical, Protestant theology abound in writings of the period.37 Annie Besant, for instance, blamed primarily “Protestant religionists” and their literalist reading practices for the rise of atheism, accusing them of espousing “teachings dishonoring to God and man alike, that represen[t] God as a tyrant, and man as essentially evil, gaining salvation by slavish submission” (27).38 Lawrence himself never tired of comparing his Nonconformist (or Low-Church Protestant) upbringing to the processes of mass production. According to Lawrence’s account, Nonconformity, once the voice of religious dissent and radicalism, deadened religious experience by imposing dogma with the force of heavy machinery: “Not only was the Bible verbally trodden into the consciousness, like innumerable footprints treading a surface hard, but the footprints were always mechanically alike, the interpretation was fixed, so that all real interest was lost” (Apocalypse 59). Lawrence takes this puritanical orthodoxy to task for expounding the gospel of “One God, One Way, One Glory,” but also for preaching the doctrine of one interpretation, one exegetical method (Phoenix II 380). Scientific materialism, according to which there is no God or divine substance beyond the power of unbridled human potential, and Christian orthodoxy, in which there is only one God, and only one way of apprehending Him, aligned, for Lawrence as well as for many of his peers, on a basic level. Both assert the absoluteness of a fundamentally human perspective by

37 For a thorough analysis of the pervasiveness of puritanical evangelicalism in England in this period, see Brown 35-57.
38 Besant echoes Nietzsche here and in her ubermensch-like ideal of religious evolution, according to which “divine men” should hand out different systems to different cultures, each according to his/her capacity; religion, for Besant, should seek “to evolve the moral and intellectual natures, and to aid the spiritual nature to unfold itself. Regarding man as a complex being, they seek to meet him at every point of his constitution, and therefore to bring messages suitable for each…” (3)
suggesting an indexical method of reading, in which the seen world either marks the limits of understanding or points singularly in one dogmatic direction. In privileging the literalist perspective of the rational consciousness, neither system seemed able to account for the world or the self in all of their complexities: physical, psychical, and spiritual. The possibility of turning to an *un*traditional spirituality, one that took into account the irrational, the complexity of psyche and soul, appeared to answer to these concerns.

This turn to thinking about religion in symbolic terms was also, as Pecora has shown, made possible by a cultural shift toward thinking about theology and religion as distinct entities (107). Anthropologist Jane Harrison’s pointed Pauline distinction between theology, “the letter that killeth,” and religion, “the spirit that maketh alive” suggests the extent to which this distinction relied on the different kinds of reading the two modes invited (*Alpha and Omega* 186); while one stops at the letter, the other attends to both the letter and the spirit that enlivens it. If classic medieval exegesis read into scripture literal, typological, tropological (moral), and anagogical (prophetic) meanings, twentieth-century readers could find in biblical stories a narrative of the individual soul’s development, and in the parables, which were themselves esoteric, a veiled prescription for attaining self-knowledge. This move toward reading religion esoterically was crucial to fin de siècle occultism, but not by any means limited to its practitioners. That Katherine Jenner’s *Christian Symbolism* (1910) (Lawrence’s source for the emblem of the phoenix), for instance, adopts an esoteric approach without possessing an allegiance to (or even alluding to) occultist methodologies suggests the pervasiveness of these hermeneutic praxes.  

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39 Jenner writes, for instance, “Christianity, like all other religions that ever have been, is largely made up of symbolism. It is not possible to express spiritual things adequately in words, and therefore even the words used for religious purposes must be largely metaphorical and symbolical, and a certain element of the esoteric and mystical, which so often accompanies the infancy of a religion, was a necessary characteristic of early Christianity. The origin
Concurrent publications on symbolism, ancient and modern, across a wide array of disciplines attest to the widespread contemporary appeal of religion understood symbolically at the turn of the 20th century: Scottish anthropologist James Frazer’s *Totemism and Exogamy* (1910) and classic mythological study, *The Golden Bough* (1890); French sociologist Émile Durkheim’s *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1912); Sigmund Freud’s *Totem and Taboo* (1913); German philosopher Ernst Cassirer’s *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* (1923-29), in which he argues that man is a “symbolic animal.” But beyond these more positivistic, detached, and often (especially in Frazer’s case) patronizing perspectives, according to which the symbolic is antithetical to the more complex systems characteristic of modern civilization, many other thinkers sought genuine spiritual renewal in a symbolic understanding of religion and its symbols, a means of maintaining a religious outlook while deposing of religion’s most problematic, didactic qualities. For them, the religious symbol’s ancient prehistory lent it not only a kind of privileged authority but also a historical, palimpsestic connection to human history, in which an engagement with the symbol is also an engagement with those it has touched across space and time. The ancient world and its dependence on religious symbols seemed to pose a more suitable model for understanding human experience, in which seen, conscious, material experience masks—or is even symbolic of—unseen, subconscious, and immaterial knowledge. Existing in a space between and, crucially, *before* the dominant discourses of scientific materialism and Christian orthodoxy, the religious symbol seemed more able to take into account the irrational aspects of the self, both by providing more complete models of the psyche’s complexity and by providing an outlet for what many perceived to be an inborn need for a collective, symbolic existence.

of this symbolism is not to be defined. No doubt in a great measure the conventions of existing religions were taken over, sometimes in their conventional meanings, sometimes invested with slightly varied or wholly new significances” (*Christian Symbolism* xiii).
A few thinkers at the turn of the century—Jane Harrison, Carl Jung, and Madame Blavatsky among them—staked a further claim that resonates strikingly with Lawrence’s thought: that to understand religious symbolism is key to understanding the dual nature of self, often adopting the contemporary discourse of personality and impersonality, as described in the introduction, to articulate this relationship. The symbol was uniquely poised to serve as a formal model for this duality due to its own makeup: an outer layer (image, icon, or narrative) and an inner meaning. According to this logic, to read the self superficially—in other words, to ignore its impersonal, spiritual dimension—was as reductive as reading a symbol literally; both must be read and understood esoterically. Their treatments of the religious symbol share this fundamental assumption as well as a belief in the real psychological impact of symbols, the enriching possibilities of a symbolic (i.e., ritualistic, collective) life, and an obsession with symbols of resurrection, rebirth, and renewal: Harrison’s Greek rituals of Spring, Blavatsky’s mundane egg, Jung’s mandala and rosy cross, Lawrence’s phoenix and resurrected Christ.

The popularity of these kinds of symbols specifically is no coincidence, as an overarching interest in imbuing an enervated modernity with new vitality was central to efforts to recuperate a symbolic approach to religious experience. This emphasis on life and vitality owes much to the philosophy of vitalism, particularly espoused by perhaps the period’s most vociferous opponent of materialism, Henri Bergson, whose philosophy Harrison called “a trumpet-call to religion.” In his immensely popular *Creative Evolution* (1907), Bergson bases much of his philosophy on a fundamental distinction between intellect and intuition—for him, the two sides of human consciousness. Decrying intellect as useful only for mechanically assessing inorganic matter, Bergson upholds intuition, a form of instinct “that has become disinterested, self-conscious, capable of reflecting upon its object and enlarging it indefinitely,” as the only mode of
consciousness fit for comprehending organic life (176). Whereas the rational intellect imposes a pattern of its own making on reality, intuition is “mind itself...life itself” (268). Only intuition can apprehend and partake of the élan vital, Bergson’s term for the life-force pulsing through and propelling all of creation. Crucially, Bergson also locates spiritual life within the scope of intuition’s understanding, describing God in much the same terms with which he describes the élan vital: “God thus defined, has nothing of the already made; He is unceasing life, action, freedom” (248). Freedom lies, for Bergson (as well as for Lawrence), in a philosophical system that takes into account consciousness in all of its dimensions, a vision that, for Bergson, includes even the body: “All these questions will remain unanswered, a philosophy of intuition will be a negation of science, will be sooner or later swept away by science, if it does not resolve to see the life of the body just where it really is, on the road that leads to the life of the spirit” (270-271). 40 The symbolic systems pursued by Jung, Blavatsky, and (to some extent) Harrison all sought to provide a kind of answer to Bergson’s description of—and call for—a vital system, one that would take into account both the organic and inorganic dimensions of the living world.

It is hardly surprising, given this widespread concern for revitalization and regeneration, that Harrison begins her Epilegomena to the Study of Greek Religion (1921) with the bold statement that “the religious impulse is directed, if I am right, primarily to one end and one only, the conservation and promotion of life” (1). In a departure from the work of her peers in anthropology, the so-called Cambridge Ritualists, Harrison takes seriously throughout her work this religious impulse, often ending her studies of Ancient Greek religions with reflections on

40 Jung too, laments the consequences of exiling the body from conceptions of the spirit: “The body lays claim to equal recognition; like the psyche, it also exerts a fascination. If we are still caught by the old idea of an antithesis between mind and matter, the present state of affairs means an unbearable contradiction; it may even divide us against ourselves. But if we can reconcile ourselves with the mysterious truth that spirit is the living body seen from within, and the body the outer manifestation of the living spirit—the two being really one—then we can understand why it is that the attempt to transcend the present level of consciousness must give its due to the body” (Modern Man in Search of a Soul 224).
Harrison’s distinction between theology and religion maps onto an opposition she draws in descriptions of ancient religions between eikonic, or anthropomorphic, theology-driven religion, and aneikonic, diffuse and mystical, religion, a distinction not unlike Bergson’s binary of intellect and intuition. Harrison expresses her preference for aneikonic religion because it ends in a system of “symbolism” rather than worship directed at an anthropomorphic God. “Aneikonism will not sacrifice or pray or praise,” Harrison writes, “It holds no human traffic with ‘fabulous immortal men.’ It is at once above and below that. At its highest, aneikonic ritual, being monotheistic or pantheistic, aims at union; in a word, it is sacramental, mystical” (204). The sacrament—traditionally an inherently symbolic act, an outward sign of inward grace—is, for Harrison, at odds with the kind of ego-centric God-worship she associates with eikonic theology. Harrison’s terminology itself—aneikonic and eikonic—hinges on a reading of symbolism as open to the fluidity, dynamism, and embodiment that constitutes mystical experience.

Harrison’s preference for the symbolic, ritualistic act (aneikonic) over unidirectional God-worship (eikonic) has aesthetic implications most clearly delineated in Ancient Art and Ritual (1913), where she refers to ritual—according to Harrison, itself “embodied” symbol (173)—as “the bridge between real life and art” (135). Yet the relationship between ritual and modern art that Harrison sketches is not evolutionary or teleological, where religious ritual crumbles so that art can thrive. On the contrary, Harrison recommends an approach to art that reclaims its connection to ritual. Ancient Art and Ritual culminates in an impassioned call for art that remains true to its collective origins, art that, like the aneikonic ritual from which it springs, “releases from self” (where self, for Harrison, is aligned with “ego” and “personality”) (242). Harrison’s

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41 See Alpha and Omega 184-186.
42 Lawrence was familiar with and even approving of Ancient Art and Ritual, even though, characteristically, he dismissed it as “stupidly put” (Letters II 114) and Harrison herself as “a school marmy woman” (Letters II 119).
glowing description of Arnold Bennett’s novels—which, for Harrison, have begun to “recros[s] the ritual bridge back to life (207)—reads strikingly like a description of Lawrence’s The Rainbow:

We are keenly interested in the loves of hero and heroine, but all the time something much bigger is going on, generation after generation rolls by in ceaseless panorama; it is the life not of Edwin and Hilda, it is the life of the Five Towns. After a vision so big, to come back to the ordinary individualistic love-story is like looking through the wrong end of a telescope. (247)

In privileging the generational movement of a family over the dramatization of an individual life, Harrison suggests, the modern novel could gesture toward the universal, expansive, and enlivening world formerly available to humankind in symbolic ritual. The modern novel, then, can only begin to fulfill a human need once it has relinquished its traditional commitment to the individual life in favor of a renewed attention to the life of a collective. “Most of us,” Harrison insists, “breathe more freely in the medium, literally the midway space, of some collective ritual” (206). The modern novel, for Harrison, could inhabit that midway space.

The relevance of the symbol was defended in the field of psychology most vociferously by Carl Jung. The collective consciousness Harrison seeks to reclaim is, for Jung, a collective unconscious, the evidence for which lies in the use of universal symbolic systems across human history. Jung’s collective unconscious, first delineated in Psychology of the Unconscious (1912) (and tellingly renamed Symbols of Transformation at its republication in 1956) is comprised of individual “numinous” units called archetypes, which have the power to shape the perceptions and experiences of all humans; symbols “act as transformers” of these archetypes (Collected Works V 231). Religion, for Jung, enacts this process on a collective scale:

The religious myth is one of man’s greatest and most significant achievements, giving him the security and inner strength not to be crushed by the monstrousness of the universe. Considered from the standpoint of realism, the symbol is not of course an external truth, but it is psychological true, for it acts as and is the bridge to all the best in humanity. (231)
Like Harrison, Jung imagines the symbolic outlook as a bridge—in this case, between amoral, subconscious instinct and potentially moral, conscious action, an almost civilizing impulse that confers an external reality on internal “truth.” As Jung suggests elsewhere, a symbolic action is likewise “true” so long as it, too, is read “psychologically,” a kind of reading that aligns with symbolic thinking itself. The sacrament of baptism, for instance, is “true” not literally but psychologically; it “lifts a man out of his archaic identification with the world and changes him into a being who stands above it. The fact that mankind has risen to the level of this idea is baptism in the deepest sense, for it means the birth of spiritual man who transcends nature” (*Modern Man* 145). The symbolic faculty itself, for Jung, emerges as a kind of instinct, a built-in method for regaining peace and stability, fulfilling the basic psychological and spiritual needs of an individual as well as of a group.

Drawing a mandala, for instance, compensates for “the disorder and confusion of the psychic state” by providing “a central point to which everything is related, or by a concentric arrangement of the disordered multiplicity and of contradictory and irreconcilable elements” (*Mandala Symbolism* 4). Maintaining a characteristically not-so-distant distance from religious belief, Jung describes the yogi’s contemplation of the mandala as a process of recognizing the God within, thus “return[ing] from the illusion of individual existence into the universal totality of the divine state” (73). The mandala, he writes, “though only a symbol of the self as the psychic totality, is as the same time a God-image, for the central point, circle, and quaternity are well-known symbols for the deity” (40). The empirical truth-value of this equivalence between man and God is not as important, for Jung, as its persistent ability, across space and time, to fulfill a psychological need. The unity of the symbol can correct for the disunities of self. Beyond their therapeutic function, according to Jung, symbols also answer to man’s deep-seeded
spiritual need to belong to a whole greater than himself—an idea he articulates most clearly in his 1939 speech.

Most directly relevant to Lawrence’s theorization of religious symbolism is the work of H.P. Blavatsky, whose numerous books and Theosophical treatises he read with gusto over the course of his lifetime.\(^{43}\) Beyond Lawrence’s predictable misgivings about Theosophy’s failure to draw out the physical dimensions of its theology\(^{44}\)—as evidenced most clearly by *Fantasia of the Unconscious*, in which Lawrence lays out his own system of chakras—his metaphysics shares an astonishing amount in common with Blavatsky’s.\(^{45}\) Key features of Lawrence’s theories about civilizational and religious periodicity; the consubstantiality of cosmos, creation, and Creator; and the vitalist energy he calls “the God-quick” expand on and revise crucial tenets of Blavatsky’s *The Secret Doctrine*. His esoteric approach to reading the rituals, icons, and texts of Christianity also emerges most directly from Theosophy, the fundamental goal of which is to elucidate the esoteric knowledge hidden beneath the trappings of orthodox religion. If, for Jung, religious symbols instinctively emerge from a collective unconscious, for Blavatsky (as for Lawrence), modern-day religious symbols are the vestiges of an ancient mystery language, at one point used universally across the world (*The Secret Doctrine* 310). These symbols, Blavatsky insists, must be read esoterically if their meaning is to be recovered. She writes in *The Esoteric Character of the Gospels* (1895): “Hence, the Bible is not “The Word of God,” but contains at best the words of fallible men and imperfect teachers. Yet read esoterically, it does contain, if not

\(^{43}\) See Tindall 124-161 and Ferreter 27-40.

\(^{44}\) See Lawrence’s 1917 letter to David Eder: “Have you read Blavatsky’s *Secret Doctrine*? In many ways a bore, and not quite real. Yet one can glean a marvelous lot from it, enlarge the understanding immensely. Do you know the physical—physiological—interpretations of the esoteric doctrine?—the chakras and dualism in experience? The devils won’t tell one anything, fully. Perhaps they don’t understand themselves—the occultists—what they are talking about, or what their esotericism really means. But, probably, in the physiological interpretation, they do—and won’t tell. Yet one can gather enough. Did you get Pryce’s [sic] *Apocalypse Unsealed*?” (*Letters III* 150).

\(^{45}\) Lawrence also encountered Blavatsky’s ideas via other Theosophical writers, particularly Frederick Carter and James Pryse. For a detailed analysis of Pryse’s physiology *vis a vis* Lawrence’s, see Ferreter 27-31. For more on Lawrence’s relationship with theosophist Frederick Carter, see Ferreter 141-143.
the whole truth, still, ‘nothing but the truth,’ under whatever allegorical garb” (236). Like Harrison and Jung, Blavatsky insists on a fundamental distinction between theology and religion, which for her is a distinction between dogmatism and the hidden truth it obscures.

I have been arguing that a central parallel between religious symbol and self is key to understanding the period’s interest in revitalizing religious symbolism. Blavatsky’s work renders this parallel, in which man and text share a divine core obscured by their surfaces, all the more explicit. The idea of man’s inherent divinity—for Jung, hidden beneath a sedimentation of “consciousness,” or “ego”—is also at the core of Blavatsky’s thought, and indeed, of much of fin de siècle occultism. An overarching commitment to communion with a vital essence beyond “our evanescent personalities” (The Secret Doctrine 237)—for the Theosophists, the material, terrestrial outer layer of self, including the body—is, accordingly, one of Theosophy’s most characteristic gestures. Early in The Secret Doctrine, Blavatsky describes spiritual development as a series of realizations that “we mistook shadows for realities,” asserting that freedom from these “delusions” occurs “only when we shall have reached the absolute Consciousness, and blended our own with it” (The Secret Doctrine 40)—an imperative that applies equally to self and to the symbols she examines. The external trappings of both must be sloughed off in order for engagement with divinity—like Harrison, Blavatsky rejects anthropocentric readings of God,

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46 Owen offers a useful explanation of Blavatsky’s three-tier conception of self: “According to Madame Helena Petrovna Blavatsky, the personal Self or Ego represents merely the temporary personality of a particular human incarnation. It is the Permanent Self, that which survives death to be continuously incarnated, which constitutes ‘the real individuality’, the ‘real’ self. But Madame Blavatsky also spoke of an impersonal and ungendered Higher Self, a third self, and this was a concept which assumed great importance in fin-de-siecle occult circles. The Higher Self was represented in strict Theosophical terms as the universally diffused ‘divine principle’ within every human being and akin to that spark of divinity which signifies ‘the God within us.’ The Theosophical Higher Self, then, is ‘one with the Universal Soul or Mind’ and constitutes an inner manifestation of the ‘Universal Spirit.’ Theosophists knew the importance of reaching an understanding of the Higher Self, and advanced occultists within the Theosophical Society recognized that their goal was experience of ‘the God within’” (The Place of Enchantment 122).

47 This is not to say that Blavatsky did not maintain a reverent attitude toward the body. In “Psychic and Noetic Action” (1890), for instance, she writes: “Verily that body, so desecrated by Materialism and man himself, is the temple of the Holy Grail, the Adytum of the grandest, nay, of all, the mysteries of nature in our solar universe...” (40)
choosing instead fundamentally impersonal terms like “Substance-Principle” or “Cause”—to transpire.

Blavatsky even goes so far as to suggest that the historical degeneration of the ancient esoteric philosophy she sketches throughout her work into increasingly rigid theological systems resulted from petty misunderstandings generated by “personality” on a national scale: “…as systems began to reflect with every age more and more the idiosyncrasies of nations; and as the latter, after separating, settled into distinct groups, each evolving along its own national or tribal groove, the main idea gradually became veiled with the overgrowth of human fancy…” (The Secret Doctrine 424) Blavatsky forecasts throughout The Secret Doctrine the dissolution of the materialist, personality-obsessed era she critiques.48 Anticipating Lawrence at his most apocalyptic, she writes, for instance, “the Earth…casts off, or is supposed to cast off her old skins as the serpent does” (The Secret Doctrine II 47). Nations and civilizations are as transient, for Blavatsky, as the individual “personality”. Everything “under our sun,” from “personality” to continent—“is born, lives, becomes decrepit, and dies” (The Secret Doctrine II 350).

And, according to Blavatsky, is recreated anew in an endless, periodic cycle. Tropes of recurring rebirth and resurrection remain central to Blavatsky’s schema of self as well as to her understanding of ancient religions and their symbols. Central to her writings on resurrection and renewal, for instance, is the symbol of “the mundane egg,” with which Lawrence was particularly obsessed.49 A symbol for both the Universe and “the origin and secret of being”

48 “In “The Esoteric Character of the Gospels,” Blavatsky goes so far as to define this process of devolution—especially the translation of her universal mystery language into derivative vernaculars—as history itself: “This is history. How far that re-writing of, and tampering with, the primitive gnostic fragments which are now become the New Testament, went, may be inferred by reading “Supernatural Religion,” which went through over twenty-three editions, if I mistake not. The host of authorities for it given by the author, is simply appalling. The list of the English and German Bible critics alone seems endless.” (80-81)
49 Blavatsky’s mundane egg itself makes numerous appearances throughout Lawrence’s fiction and non-fiction writings as early as 1915. In “The Crown,” for instance, he writes, “But once we fall into the state of egoism, we cannot change. The ego, the self-conscious ego remains fixed, a final envelope around us. And we are then safe
itself, the egg connotes hope, the promise of resurrection—a feature of its symbolic history from ancient Egyptian mythology to the Christian practice of exchanging Easter Eggs.50 But what the symbol of the egg—and indeed, a large portion of the symbols she considers throughout her writing—also reveals, for Blavatsky, is the essence of life itself as continuous gestation, a process of spiritual development that culminates in continuous reincarnation and rebirth. This principle of periodicity, of cycles of life, is itself central to Theosophical metaphysics on both a microcosmic and macrocosmic scale. According to Blavatsky’s cosmology, the Kosmos is driven by a vital energy called Fohat, a creative force that drives all aspects of life, from the individual’s endless cycling through the wheel of Karma to the evolution of religion; it is “ever mysterious…ever unknown” (The Secret Doctrine II 589), not unlike Bergson’s élan vital or Lawrence’s “God-quick.”51 This principle of endless flux dictates even the means through which the deity—infinite and timeless as it may be—manifests itself in symbol:

The primitive purity of a creed can become soiled; its apostles can degrade and soil it by the inevitable admixture of human element. But its symbolism as the concrete expression of some now lost idea of the founder, will survive for ever [sic]. It may have its meaning changed, nay, even its outward form altered. Like the phoenix of old, it will continue periodically to revive from its ashes. (Collected Writings XIII 300)

The immortality of the symbol, for Blavatsky, depends on its capacity for change. It resists the whims of time and history by retaining an internal purity fundamentally impervious to the efforts of institutionalized religion to fix its meaning. The symbol, like every other essentially living thing, functions according to a principle of endless change, adaptation, and renewal. Lawrence seizes upon this idea of Blavatsky’s perhaps more than any other.

inside the mundane egg of our own self-consciousness and self-esteem...And we can’t be born, we can only rot. That’s how safe we are!” (Phoenix II 396)

50 See The Secret Doctrine I 359-368.

51 Lawrence describes the “God-quick” in “The Crown” as the only “constant” within the flux of time: “It is we who pass away...This is the eternal flux. But the God-quick, which is the constant within the flux, this is neither temporal nor eternal, it is truly timeless” (Phoenix II 411).
As the writings of Harrison, Jung, and Blavatsky suggest, embracing the religious symbol at its least literal opened up the possibility of understanding it at its most literary. Understanding the self symbolically requires a fundamentally literary orientation toward self that resists the imposition of materialist and orthodox certainties. And if both self and symbol, as Blavatsky (and Lawrence) suggest, depend on a principle of endless flux, this reading praxis is also a writing praxis, in which self and symbol can effectively rewrite and reinvent each other according to time and circumstance. In this way especially, the return to religion this chapter describes constitutes not a reactionary regression into traditionalism, but rather a reclaiming of religion as a means of reading and reinventing the self. Redefining the symbol, then, also calls for a recalibration of the function of religion from a focus on moral dictates or salvation in the hereafter to a means of revitalizing the self in the here and now.

III. Lawrence and the Symbol

About himself and the novel that would later become The Rainbow and its sequel, Women in Love, Lawrence writes in 1914, “Primarily I am a passionately religious man, and my novels must be written from the depths of my religious experience…you should see the religious, earnest, suffering man in me first” (Letters II 165). Lawrence’s own description of his religiosity fits the classic narrative of his life. Raised in a poor mining town outside of Nottingham, Lawrence was exposed early to the kind of didactic, puritanical Christianity he would reject, spurring a lifelong quest to define—and proclaim—the nature of his religion. During and following the war, he earnestly pursued his dream of founding a new religious community—which he called Rananim, based on the title of a Hebrew song (Ferreter 11)—as a spiritual refuge from war and the horrors of modernity he believed to be responsible for it. Even after abandoning this fantasy, and in spite of several near-death bouts with illness, Lawrence
continued to construe himself as a virile prophet, ventriloquizing his proclamations through various prophet-figures throughout his novels, most famous among them Mellors of *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* and Birkin of *Women in Love*. In his essays and letters, too, he is as much a “Salvator Mundi and a Sunday-school teacher” as Birkin (*Women in Love* 130). His approach to and treatment of religious experience in these works, as readers of Lawrence have remarked for decades, is often frustratingly obtuse, contradictory, and even troublingly essentialist, particularly when it comes to gender or class. But in the midst of this welter of strange and often disturbing methodology, classism, and misogyny is a genuine effort to revitalize religious experience as well as lived experience, categories he blurs throughout his work.

Lawrence's recuperation of the symbol is at the core of his efforts to carve out a space for—and resurrect the possibility for—religious life for modernity. His profound belief in the large-scale psychological impact of religious symbolism recurs again and again across the numerous essays and meditations he published on the subject over the course of his life in magazines like *Everyman*, *The Adelphi*, and even *Vanity Fair*. Perhaps even more than his contemporaries, Lawrence was obsessed with symbols of resurrection and rejuvenation, the phoenix and the Resurrected Christ in particular. 52 In “The Risen Lord” (1929) for instance, Lawrence urges English churches to reclaim the empowering image of the Resurrected Christ rather than focusing on Christological icons of passivity and sacrifice: “And the Churches, instead of preaching the Risen Lord, go on preaching the Christ-child and Christ Crucified. Now man cannot live without some vision of himself. But still less can he live with a vision that is not true to his inner feeling” (*Phoenix II* 574). Here, Lawrence is suggesting a Nietzschean overthrow of the “slave morality” of subservience, humility, and passivity. But buttressing this

52 Jenner, Lawrence’s source for the phoenix, argues that these symbols are one and the same: “the Phoenix in itself was a recognized emblem of the Resurrection of Christ” (150).
imperative is his greater, fundamental assumption about the power of the symbol, or image, to shape the psyche. The urgency with which Lawrence describes the danger of adhering to a symbolic system that does not accord with “inner feeling” suggests that the relationship between these religious images and “our experience” is both interactive and reflective. Lawrence is calling, then, for more attention to the psychological and spiritual import of these images as well as for a reinvigorated reading of the image of Christ Himself, one better suited to a war-torn generation in need of the spiritual renewal of which he believed religious symbols were capable.

Despite his frequent lambasting of the churches, Lawrence’s call for a redemptive symbolic framework is not limited to a strictly ecclesiastical context. In a letter written to Irish barrister and amateur novelist Gordon Campbell shortly after the outbreak of the war, for instance, Lawrence writes: “Get the greatest truth into your novel, for God’s sake. We need it so badly. Give us the Resurrection after the Crucifixion” (Letters II 247-248). The intense urgency salient in communications like these reveals the extent to which Lawrence viewed a new symbolic vision—that of the resurrection—as crucial to his project of addressing what he perceived to be the problems of modernity.

Critics have typically read Lawrence’s interest in the resurrection as an extension of his interest in the body, his interest in ancient religious symbolism working in service of allegorizing the power of sensual experience to revitalize the modern self. But with equal fervor Lawrence asserts his vision of symbolism as a process of body and spirit in tandem. He articulates versions of this fundamental duality throughout his work, where the first and second terms of each are meant to map onto each other, however forced the alignment: sensual being and spiritual being (“The Two Principles”), blood-consciousness and mental-consciousness (The Plumed Serpent), the sexual motive and the creative motive (“Fantasia of the Unconscious”), “the Original
eternity” and “the Ultimate eternity” (“The Crown”), and the one for which he is perhaps most notorious, man and woman. The “God-quick”—the divine, vitalist energy Lawrence claims modernity is lacking—lies crucially in between these categories; it is the ever-elusive “spark” produced by encounters between these forces, both on the level of culture and on the level of the individual self—precisely what Lawrence strives to capture in “Snake” when he sacralizes the encounter between man and serpent. Lawrence’s lasting fascination with the ancient world, moreover, stems from his view that their symbols were aimed exclusively at capturing that very spark:

How marvelous is the living relationship between man and his object! Be it man or woman, bird, best, flower or rock or rain: the exquisite frail moment of pure conjunction, which, in the fourth dimension, is timeless. An Egyptian hawk, a Chinese painting of a camel, an Assyrian rattlesnake, an early Greek Apollo, a caveman’s paintings of a Prehistoric mammoth, on and on, how perfect the timeless moments between man and the other Pan-creatures of this earth of ours! (Phoenix II 434)

It is this ancient worldview, in which the purpose of religion is to memorialize and contain a sacred, timeless relationship between living things (at least, according to Lawrence), rather than ancient symbols themselves, that Lawrence seeks to reinstitute. The symbol of the Resurrection is, likewise, meant to preserve a relationship—between life and death, flesh and spirit, God and man—rather than enforce or communicate an indexical meaning.

Lawrence insists, moreover, on a reading of the symbol predicated on ongoing process rather than interpretation, on endless transformation rather than fixed meaning. The symbol is, for Lawrence, a palimpsest of experiences—of “timeless connections”—rather than, as it often is for Blavatsky, a container of occluded knowledge. It defies all attempts at intellection and rationalization. In Apocalypse, for instance, Lawrence elaborates on the way symbols function via a generational accumulation of experiences that, in turn, can impart transformational power to the living:
They don’t ‘mean something’. They stand for units of human feeling, human experience. A complex of emotional experience is a symbol. And the power of the symbol is to arouse the deep emotional self, and the dynamic self, beyond comprehension. Many ages of accumulated experience still throb within a symbol. And we throb in response. It takes centuries to create a really significant symbol: even the symbol of the Cross, or of the horse-shoe, or the horns. No man can invent symbols. He can invent an emblem, made up of images: or metaphors: or images: but not symbols. Some images, in the course of many generations of men, become symbols, embedded in the soul and ready to start alive when touched, carried on in the human consciousness for centuries. (49)

Lawrence describes an affective relationship to the religious symbol rather than an intellectual one—in which our response lies in “throbbing” rather than apprehending. Reflecting on this passage in “Nietzsche and St. Paul, Lawrence and John of Patmos,” Deleuze describes Lawrence’s symbol as “a dynamic process that enlarges, deepens, and expands sensible consciousness; it is an ever increasing becoming-conscious, as opposed to the closing of the moral consciousness upon a fixed allegorical idea. It is a method of the Affect, intensive, a cumulative intensity, which merely marks the threshold of a sensation, the awakening of a state of consciousness” (48).53 For Deleuze, allegory connotes a fixed, intellectual relationship between symbol and idea, as opposed to the embodied, dynamic relationality captured in the symbol; allegory is a “fixed idea” whereas symbol is “process,” is “method.” Deleuze seizes upon the affective dimension of this model, but equally crucial to Lawrence’s description is the symbol’s capacity for relationality and historicity, the way it both carries and is carried within generations of people attempting to make connections to the living world.

53 Deleuze actually closes the essay with a call to contemporary philosophy to adopt a symbolic approach—or, at least, a consideration of symbol—not unlike Lawrence’s early in the century: “The collective problem, then, is to institute, find, or recover a maximum of connections. For connections (and disjunctions) are nothing other than the physics of relations, the cosmos. Even disjunction is physical, like two banks that permit the passage of flows, or their alternation. But we, we live at the very most in a “logic” of relations. We turn disjunction into an “either/or.” We turn connection into a relation of cause and effect or a principle of consequence. We abstract a reflection from the physical world of flows, a bloodless double made up of subjects, objects, predicates, and logical relations. In this way we extract the system of judgment. It is not a question of opposing society and nature, the artificial and the natural. Artifices matter little…” (52)
Much like Blavatsky, Lawrence stakes a claim to the legitimacy of his heterodox approach by using orthodox narratives to validate it, finding numerous examples of his exegetical methods in Christian scripture. In characteristically Lawrencian fashion, his exegesis of scriptural narrative tends to result in yet another version of his theory of symbolic reading:

As a matter of fact, never did God or Jesus say that there was one straight way to salvation, for ever and ever. On the contrary, Jesus plainly indicated the changing of the way. And what is more, He indicated the only means to the finding of the right way. The Holy Ghost. The Holy Ghost is within you. And it is a Ghost, forever a Ghost, never a Way or a Word. Jesus is a Way and a Word. God is the Goal. But the Holy Ghost is for ever Ghostly, unrealizable...The Holy Ghost is the dark hound of heaven whose baying we ought to listen to, as he runs ahead into the unknown, tracking the mysterious everlasting departing of the Lord God, who is for ever departing from us. ([Reflections](Reflections) 191)

This passage, wildly confusing even for the most initiated of Christians, entails yet another instantiation of Lawrence’s symbolic method: God stands in for the divine, life-giving forces with which Lawrence seeks communion; Jesus is the symbol through which humans can arrive at that communion. What this passage also makes clear is that Lawrence’s entire system pivots on an internal “Holy Ghost” within self—a kind of inner guide not unlike Blavatsky’s “divine principle within” or Jung’s “divine within.” Lawrence isn’t after a linear process of self-knowledge, where introspection ultimately leads to psychological stability, or where self-purgation leads to permanent communion with the divine. Lawrence’s vision of self, like his vision of the symbol, is in endless flux—incessantly changing shape, endless process; as Daniel Albright has argued, the Lawrencian self consists of “not precisely shapelessness but tentative shape, fluid shape” (239). The same description applies to—and hinges on—Lawrence’s particular understanding of the function of religious symbolism. The symbol and the self are thus mutually-informing: self needs symbol to achieve a vision beyond itself, but the external trappings of symbol have to evolve, as Lawrence’s reading of Jesus in this passage suggests,
along with self. The symbolic system provides a kind of bracketing, an organizational framework for the endless recreation and reinterpretation of both.

Lawrence’s theology entails a psychology as well as a novelistic aesthetic. The kind of scriptural exegesis Lawrence exercises in his reading of the Gospels—an analysis of relationships between Jesus (symbol), God (impersonal, divine forces), and the Holy Spirit (self-consciousness that dictates the relationship between Jesus and God)—is precisely what he prescribes for the modern novel. Crucially, as Lawrence’s comments in *Apocalypse* suggest, it is the author’s prerogative not to *create* symbols but to *use* them in such a way that they both convey and evoke an experience that is intensely physical and spiritual, fleshly and otherworldly. For Lawrence, the aesthetic result of this process is a rejection of the novel’s dwelling on the consciousness of a single protagonist. If, as Lawrence insists in an early letter, “symbolism avoids the I and puts aside the egotist” (*Letters II* 247-248), a similar logic ought to dictate the priorities of the novel, according to which the novelist’s purpose lies in creating and depicting a network of interrelated connections not unlike those contained in a religious symbol. Critiquing modern novels for being “too personal, too human,” for instance, Lawrence suggests, echoing Harrison, that the novel should not narrate the lives of its individual characters, but instead should chronicle “some unnamed and nameless flame behind them all” (*Phoenix II* 419). The novel’s characters, in Lawrence’s view, must be understood as parts of a vast network of ever-changing relationships; in the ideal novel, Lawrence writes, “everything is true in its own relationship, and no further. For the relatedness and interrelatedness of all things flows and changes and trembles like a stream” (*Phoenix II* 422). The novel’s capacity to forge precisely

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54 Elsewhere Lawrence describes this process as one of channeling God, so that the artist himself is also a medium: “I often think one ought to be able to pray, before one works—and then leave it to the Lord…I always feel as if I stood naked for the fire of Almighty God to go through me—and it’s rather an awful feeling. One has to be so terribly religious, to be an artist” (*Letters I* 519).
this kind of network is, for Lawrence, why it is “the highest form of human expression so far attained…it is so incapable of the absolute” (Phoenix II 416). Indeed, that the novel enshrines symbolic relationships rather than indexical, or didactic, meanings guarantees its continued relevance over time. Like the symbol, the novel’s claim to immortality—as well as to ethical value—for Lawrence, lies in its allegorical flexibility, its status as medium.

Lawrence’s novelistic aesthetic and his theory of religious symbolism are also, then, mutually informing. Lawrence’s late novella, The Man Who Died (1929), a novelistic retelling of the Resurrection, demonstrates this principle most directly: religious allegory becomes transformed into something novelistic. Both the symbol and the novel ought to encapsulate narratives of symbolic experience. Lawrence calls for a theological—and narratological—understanding of the symbol, in which the symbol is not an indexical sign but a living record of attempts to bridge the divide between man and the God diffused in the natural world. The symbol offers real connection to the divine, but is nonetheless, like the novel, always hovering between the personal and the impersonal—neither atemporal, nor completely temporal; neither divine, nor completely human. It is the religious symbol’s contingency, after all, that ensures its enduring value. Every symbol is like Christ himself according to Lawrence’s reading, “a Way and a Word”: a way in that it is a path to the divine, a word in that it is a creation of man, an artificial thing not preordained by the divine, that must be remade, reinterpreted, over and over.\(^{55}\)

This capacity for reinterpretation is key to Lawrence’s vision of symbol and novel alike: “But if only one can grasp and know again as a new truth, true for one’s own history, the great vision, the great satisfying conceptions of the world’s greatest periods, it is enough. Because so it is made

\(^{55}\) Cf. Blavatsky: “The primitive purity of a creed can become soiled; its apostles can degrade and soil it by the inevitable admixture of human element. But its symbolism as the concrete expression of some now lost idea of the founder, will survive for ever. It may have its meaning changed, nay, even its outward form altered. Like the phoenix of old, it will continue periodically to revive from its ashes” (Collected Writings: 1890-1891 300).
new” (*Letters II* 247-248). In prescribing this kind of exegesis, Lawrence appears to be calling for a symbolic approach to realism as well as to reality. 56 Lawrence recommends breathing new life into old forms—religious, novelistic, and even psychological—by prioritizing palimpsest and relationality over indexicality, narrative over didacticism.

This project is at the core of the religious revitalization he imagines in his novels, of which *The Rainbow* and *The Plumed Serpent* are two particularly rich examples. Despite substantial differences in form and execution, the fundamental premise underlying these works is the same; in both, Lawrence is trying to find in a symbolic outlook a meaningful framework for thinking about self. In *The Rainbow*, the symbol provides an enlivening organizing principle for self and symbolic life, as well as a model for novelistic form. This principle falls apart in *The Plumed Serpent* under the intense pressure Lawrence places on the symbol’s ability to contain the selves it purports to represent. These texts are united nonetheless by a shared commitment to the symbol as a means of expanding and revitalizing the modern self.

**“Oneness with the Infinite”: Self and Symbol in *The Rainbow* (1915)**

Whatever else changes over the course of Lawrence’s multigenerational *The Rainbow*, none of its protagonists lives far from a church: the Marsh Farm, the ancestral Brangwen home, rests under the watchful eye of Ilkeston’s church spire (3); Anna and Will Brangwen first reside in a cottage next-door to Cossethay church (78); their daughter, Ursula, moves away from home to teach at St. Philip’s Church School only to move with her parents to a larger house in Beldover, located “in a quiet, new little side-street near the large church” (391). Many of the

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56 Fernihough refers, in similar terms, to Lawrence’s insistence on the materiality of his novels as his dedication to a “fractured organic”: “In asserting its own materiality, art, in Lawrence’s view, whether it be visual or literary, creates a disjunction between itself and the outside world which fractures and complicates the meanings at work within it. In other words, the refusal to claim transparency, or one-to-one correspondence between elements of artwork and world, opens up the way to semantic complexity, making art the site of plural and conflicting meanings” (*D.H. Lawrence: Aesthetics and Ideology* 10).
novel’s most memorable scenes also take place in churches: Tom begins to fall in love with Lydia while watching her in church; Anna experiences a sexual awakening in Cossethay church, the same place she and Will fiercely debate the value of Christian iconography, and where Ursula kisses her lover Anton Skrebensky toward the end of the novel. *The Rainbow*'s most expansive description of a church occurs almost exactly at the center of the novel, when Anna and Will visit Lincoln Cathedral:

Away from time, always outside of time! Between east and west, between dawn and sunset, the church lay like a seed in silence, dark before germination, silenced after death. Containing birth and death, potential with all the noise and transition of life, the cathedral remained hushed, a great, involved seed, whereof the flower would be radiant life inconceivable, but whose beginning and whose end were the circle of silence. Spanned round with the rainbow, the jewelled gloom folded music upon silence, light upon darkness, fecundity upon death, as a seed folds leaf upon leaf and silence upon the root and the flower, hushing up the secret of all between its parts, the death out of which it fell, the life into which it has dropped, the immortality it involves, and the death it will embrace again. Here in the church, “before” and “after” were folded together, all was contained in oneness. (189)

The church is both an ethereal space—entirely outside of linear time, beyond human comprehension—and a living, breathing entity, as alive and “fecund” as a fertilized seed. Lawrence describes the cathedral in much the same language he uses elsewhere to describe God: impersonal, organic, utterly inconceivable. Lincoln Cathedral also adopts many of the characteristics of the Lawrencian symbol: the Gothic structure and its attendant theology provides a temporary relationship to the unchanging, divine power within its walls. But the cathedral does more than provide a single instantiation of Lawrence’s symbolic theory. Anna’s and Will’s vastly different—and, for Lawrence, equally insufficient—approaches to reading the cathedral occupy the majority of the chapter (entitled “The Cathedral”); their oppositional readings have real and lasting consequences for their self-perception and the stability of their
In this scene and throughout the novel, Lawrence sketches a mutually informing relationship between the way characters read religious symbols and the way they live their lives.

*The Rainbow*’s rich investment in ecclesiastical and religious symbolism has been widely commented upon, and with good reason: in addition to its church settings, its narration is suffused with comparisons to Biblical scenes; the characters of *The Rainbow*, from most skeptical to most pious, assume the personae of Moses, David, the Virgin Mary, Old Testament prophets, or even Christ Himself. Building on Suzanne Hyde’s examination of Lawrence’s efforts to rewrite biblical typology, T.R. Wright has recently argued that *The Rainbow* itself constitutes a midrashic, esoteric reading of the Bible—a “counter-Bible,” according to Wright—that draws out the potential of the body latent in Christian allegory, particularly in the Book of Genesis (85). In keeping with the critical consensus, both Hyde and Wright read Lawrence’s engagement with religious symbols as, ultimately, a symptom of his ambivalence about, or efforts to overturn, Christian orthodoxy. Yet relatively little critical attention has been paid to the philosophy that undergirds this ambivalence: Lawrence’s particular understanding of the role religious symbolism plays in organizing, expanding, and living beyond the parameters of self.

*The Rainbow* narrates the increasing difficulty of achieving personal and spiritual fulfillment across three generations of the same family. Lawrence explores this conflict largely through his characters’ approaches to reading Christian scripture and iconography: the more narrow and rigid their readings, the less free they are to reinvent themselves. At the core of every generation’s story is an exegetical crisis vis a vis how to get in touch with the divine—a divine that is, for Lawrence, the essence of life itself, encapsulated by his vitalist description of Lincoln Cathedral. The resolution of this crisis lies, for every generation, in exegesis itself: characters connect to that life force through the reinterpretation and reappropriation—and therefore,

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revitalization—of religious symbolism. *The Rainbow*, more than any other Lawrence novel, also demonstrates how the novel itself can capture this theory of symbolic life. Precisely because a multigenerational novel like *The Rainbow* can contain, in its diegesis, records of different symbolic experiences across time, it can illustrate Lawrence’s conviction that symbols are both alive—in their protean transformability—and palimpsestic.

In the first generation the novel examines, Tom Brangwen and his wife, Lydia, enjoy an intimacy so intense and lasting because they maintain a relationship to the divine that exists outside of the strictures of a rationalizing, materialist worldview. They worship at no altar; rather, they use religion simply as a language through which to understand and articulate their relationship to the divine and to each other. For Lydia, who was raised Roman Catholic,

> the outward form was a matter of indifference…Yet she had some fundamental religion. It was as if she worshipped God as a mystery, never seeking in the least to define what He was. And inside her, the subtle sense of the Great Absolute wherein she had her being was very strong. The English dogma never reached her…Through it all she felt the great Separator who held life in His hands, gleaming, imminent, terrible, the Great Mystery, immediate beyond all telling. She shone and gleamed to the Mystery, Whom she knew through all her senses…” (97).

Lydia’s relationship to God is both immediate and purely affective: her worship consists of “sh[ining] and gleam[ing]”; her God is not anthropomorphic or even theologically inflected but rather a “Great Mystery,” whose presence seems to even permeate her body, both something to worship and “inside her.” Lydia’s relationship to religion, the novel suggests, is possible because before the onset of modernity, it was still possible to preserve this kind of irrational, almost unconscious relationship to the world—one that subordinates self to the workings of larger and more powerful forces without attempting to rationalize them. Tom and Lydia envision sexual union, for instance, as an explicitly sacramental means of self-reinvention; Tom reflects, “It was the entry into another circle of existence, it was the baptism to another, it was the complete
confirmation” (90). The novel suggests that their marriage, too, benefits from this sense of sacredness they preserve in each other, even functioning, as this sacramental language suggests, as a vehicle for connecting to the divine: “They did not think of each other—why should they? Only when she touched him, he knew her instantly, that she was with him, near him, that she was the gateway and the way out, that she was the beyond, and that he was traveling in her through the beyond” (90). Tom and Lydia, in other words, understand each other to contain divinity, and regard their relationship as a means through which to experience that divinity and reinvent themselves through it—a worldview facilitated, rather than dictated, by the kind of unconsciously heterodox religion they practice.

But by the time The Rainbow introduces its second generation of protagonists, Anna (Lydia’s daughter from a prior marriage) and Will Brangwen (Tom’s nephew), the drastic consequences of industrialization, coupled with a totalizing and largely unexamined Christianity, have settled upon the Marsh Farm. This Christianity—bearing a strong resemblance to the evangelical, literalist Protestantism with which Lawrence was raised—dwells in death, sacrifice, and strict adherence to the letter of the law. While Will is relatively content to remain within the strictures of this system, his wife Anna is endlessly frustrated by the limitations it imposes on her autonomy and sense of self. Their frequent arguments about the value of a religious framework occupy the bulk of their narrative: Anna proposes disposing of religion entirely in favor of a devotion to “human knowledge,” while Will insists on adhering to a literal, indexical reading of the Christian tradition (160). Even before they visit Lincoln Cathedral, the tenor of their marriage is dictated by a series of arguments about the value and function of their local church’s iconography. Anna’s materialist interpretation suggests that she completely rejects symbolic thought, though she yearns for the vitality Lawrence believes to be integral to a symbolic system;
by contrast, Will’s orthodox approach depends on a symbolic system that connects man and God, but that system, in its inflexibility, imposes significant limitations on his ability to reinvent himself.

Sitting in the pews of their local church one day, for instance, Anna expresses disgust at its overabundance of images of Christ suffering, Christ crucified, Christ dead, while Will accepts them without reservation:

‘I do think they’re loathsome,’ she cried. "What?’ he said, surprised, abstracted. ‘Those bodies with slits in them, posing to be worshipped.’ ‘You see, it means the Sacraments, the Bread,’ he said, slowly. ‘Does it?’ she cried. ‘Then it’s worse. I don’t want to see your chest slit, nor to eat your dead body, even if you offer it me. Can’t you see it’s horrible?’ ‘It isn’t me, it’s Christ.’ ‘What if it is, it’s you! And it’s horrible, you wallowing in your own dead body, and thinking of eating it in the Sacrament.’ ‘You’ve to take it for what it means.’ ‘It means your human body put up to be slit and killed and then worshipped—what else?’ They lapsed into silence. His soul grew angry and aloof. ‘And I think that Lamb in Church,’ she said, ‘is the biggest joke in the parish—’ She burst into a ‘Pouf’ of ridiculing laughter. ‘It might be, to those that see nothing in it,’ he said. ‘You know it’s the symbol of Christ, of His innocence and sacrifice.’ ‘Whatever it means, it’s a lamb,’ she said. ‘And I like lambs too much to treat them as if they had to mean something… (149-150).

That Anna’s and Will’s argument in this passage is not scaffolded by speech tags creates a dialogue in which their exegetical positions are set up against each other in an almost allegorical system; Anna stands in for the materialist, personality-driven approach while Will, even if he is “not a dogmatist” (160), stands in for a straightforward, however deeply felt, understanding of Christianity. While Will rests easy in his conviction of a correspondence between the bloodied Jesus and the sacrament of the Eucharist, Anna objects to a disconnect between life and representation—between a living lamb and what she perceives to be its sedimentation in a fixed allegorical system. This critique extends to her disgust with the mutilated figure of Christ, whom she, like Lawrence, assumes to be a stand-in for the self. To treat Christ as merely a symbol for sacrifice is, for Anna, to render the symbol—as well as the human whose inner being it is
supposed to reflect—reified, lifeless. Anna desires a religious system that is flexible and “passionately moving,” an ideal she has long since abandoned due to a disconnect between the depth of her religious feeling and the shallow content of church services. But it is due to this lack of symbolic outlet, Lawrence suggests, that Anna “almost against herself, [clings] to the worship of human knowledge” (160). Because the Church’s teachings do not enable her to have transformative religious experiences, she abandons symbolic systems of thought altogether, aligning her, in spite of her Romantic tendencies, with a materialist perspective. Positioning herself against Will’s worship of the sacrament, Anna substitutes a belief in her own ability to assess the world around her materially, through her senses—an approach, for Lawrence, that actually amounts to another form of “worship.”

While this passage seems to suggest that Will’s approach, in its adoption of a symbolic framework, is closer to Lawrence’s ideal, the episode at Lincoln Cathedral elucidates the ways his approach, too, falls short. Entering the cathedral “as a pilgrim arriving at the shrine” (188) Will almost immediately seeks an experience that is distinctly out of body, “away from the horizontal earth” (188); awkward thrusting and straining surround his efforts to surmount self in pursuit of communion with the God he believes to be consubstantial with the cathedral itself: “every jet of him strained and leapt, leapt clear into the darkness above, to the fecundity and the unique mystery, to the touch, the clasp, the consummation, the climax of eternity, the apex of the arch” (190). Lawrence’s syntax, itself under strain, matches Will’s unnatural movements. The accumulation of language in this passage—awkward jerking and leaping toward a Teresian

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58 Anna’s skepticism has a prehistory of similar objections. As a child filled with “strange passion” by the rosary she inherits from her biological father, Anna is frustrated by her inability to reconcile the mystical feeling evoked by the Latin words of the Ave Maria with their English translation; she learns to avoid her rosary “because, moving with curious passion as it did, it meant only these not very significant things” (98). She has a similar response to church services: “But the language meant nothing to her: it seemed false. She hated to hear things expressed, put into words. Whilst the religious feelings were inside her they were passionately moving. In the mouth of the clergyman, they were false, indecent. She tried to read. But again the tedium and the sense of falsity of the spoken word put her off” (99).
ecstasy—ends bluntly in “the apex of the arch,” suggesting that Will’s attempt to commune with
the Infinite can only end in the pointed form of the Gothic vault, which is, precisely in its
pointedness (as opposed to perfect roundedness), only an imperfect approximation of an ideal.
“The altar was barren, its lights gone out. God burned no more in that bush,” as Anna puts it,
reflecting on the cathedral’s inability to award the “freedom…higher than the roof” that she
desires (188-189). That Will’s Hopkinsesque raptures can move his soul only as high as the stone
arch of the cathedral suggests the dangers—and fragility—of an indexical symbolic system. As
an index of rather than a route to the divine, a way of pointing to the divine rather than entering
into relationship with it, Will’s Christianity is temporally-bound, such that any challenge to its
absolute truth constitutes a collapse of his entire symbolic system. It is telling that Will’s reading
of the cathedral—invested in tropes of verticality, stone, and human strain—sounds nothing like
Lawrence’s description of the fecund power within its walls.

The implications of this clash between their exegetical systems arise in the ways Will and
Ana end up ‘reading’ each other in marriage. Anna’s inability to live symbolically makes her
unable to “care for what [Will] represented in himself” (159), while Will can only care for what
he wants her to represent: in his beloved wood carving of Adam and Eve, understood by both of
them to represent their marriage, he portrays Eve as a “marionette” (162)—small, stiff,
automatonic, and much smaller than Adam.59 Left without the enlivening potential of a symbolic
framework that might reconcile their approaches, their marriage devolves into a kind of death-in-
life. Anna casts an “ashen” pallor over Will’s adoration of Christian iconography; both are
“ashenly miserable for some time” (160). Will’s demands for Anna herself to conform to the

59 In contrast, Lawrence writes of Tom and Lydia: “He did not understand her any better, any more precisely, now
that he knew her altogether…But he knew her meaning, without understanding. What she said, what she spoke, this
was a blind gesture on her part. In herself she walked strong and clear, he knew her, he saluted her, was with her”
(91).
“dark, unnatural” quality of the Church’s iconography are similarly deadening; she views them as merely attempts to control her. The ashen resonances of their disconnect—exegetic and relational alike—culminate in one of the novel’s most memorable scenes: Anna’s taunting leads Will to burn and destroy his beloved wooden model of Adam and Eve. Adam is much larger than Eve, she rightfully protests, and their bodies are rigid and lifeless. The scene, at first, might seem to be setting up a typical Lawrencian trope: the phoenix emerges renewed from the ashes; Christ must die in order to be reborn. Yet from these ashes no new wooden carving emerges. Will’s carving is an outdated portrayal of the symbol of Adam and Eve, as its rigidly patriarchal form suggests. But the novel laments, nonetheless, the loss of a symbolic framework for making sense of self and relationships alike. In their inability to adopt a dynamic symbolic framework through which to move and thrive, Anna and Will, as selves and as characters, remain static.

After the burning episode, Anna and Will become trapped within their own modes of self-definition; much like Will’s carving of Adam and Eve, they become fixed exemplars. That they both unconsciously reenact biblical scenes—for instance, Anna’s dancing naked before the moon, an apparent conflation of pagan goddess worship and of King David dancing naked before the Ark—suggests the possibilities for identification and reinvention they reject in favor of stubborn adherence to their established points of view. As characters, they are flat, always subordinated to the positions their frequent arguments elaborate and expose. Anna Brangwen becomes “Anna Victrix,” whose victory over Will emerges as a result of the simultaneously materialist and humanist perspective she represents. Will, a dead ringer for Hardy’s Jude Fawley, lives only within the particularities of the religious universe he so adores, described repeatedly with the same dark and gloomy language with which he apprehends the cathedral. The novel consigns Will and Anna to archetypicality, pulling them back into the realm of myth even as they
squirm out of its fixtures, because their understandings of the symbol—and by extension, self—are so narrow. They fail to adapt, as selves and symbols must adapt, to the changing pace of the world in which they live. Anna and Will are, in this sense, failed symbols; as characters, they become as indexical, fixed, and unmoving as their exegetical practices.

But at the birth of their daughter, Ursula, the novel abruptly changes course, rupturing the allegorical mode under which it has been operating since its opening pages and becoming a bildungsroman that focuses on the personal development of a single protagonist rather than the dialectical opposition between two exegetical avatars. *The Rainbow* proposes, with the birth of Ursula, a new testament with its readers—a new mode of dramatizing the conflict between personal and impersonal understandings of the world. In this sense, *The Rainbow* operates according to Lawrence’s theory of the symbol on the broadest possible level: it leaves behind its generic trappings and attempts to revitalize itself as a new kind of form, starring a new kind of protagonist. This reading explains some of the striking similarities between Ursula’s exegetical mishaps and those of her parents, similarities that might tempt a reader to infer that Lawrence is merely restating the same conflict over again. But Ursula’s narrative of personal development actually absorbs and reconfigures the polarizing exegetical crisis her parents stage, moving through readings of symbol and self that echo aspects of each of her parents’ perspectives. The novel, then, both stages Ursula’s efforts to think and live symbolically and begins itself to operate according to the same symbolic approach she ultimately learns to adopt.

Ursula begins as a mix of both her parents; she is like her father in that she is “all for the ultimate,” longing for soaring religious experiences (256); she is like her mother in that she resents renditions of Jesus “with holes in His hands and feet” (258). But due to her solid grounding in a symbolic framework (or, at least, Lawrence’s version of a symbolic framework),
Ursula is also able to articulate the terms of her disgust with bloody Jesuses beyond the binary of life and death Anna adopts. Ventriloquizing his own distrust of evangelical Nonconformity, Lawrence writes of Ursula: “She was enemy of those who insisted on the humanity of Christ…It was the vulgar mind which would allow nothing extra-human, nothing beyond itself to exist” (255). Imagining Christ as more human than divine, for Ursula, is to engage in “vulgar,” anthropomorphic projection, an approach stemming from egoistic distrust of what lies outside of human knowledge and experience and an unwillingness to consider a perspective according to which the individual human is not the center. Rather than embrace these sanguinary icons, like her father, or reject them outright, like her mother, Ursula remains mystified by a vision of Jesus as yet not depicted in the church: the “beautifully remote” Jesus, the “shadowy Jesus with the Stigmata,” both obviously images of a resurrected, living Christ—the same Christ Lawrence champions in “The Risen Lord” and The Man Who Died (256, 255). Ursula’s Christ is one whose humanity—mind and body—is elevated to the status of divinity. Ursula’s ultimate fantasy—of “the sons of God coming to the daughters of men” (Gen 6:4)—is also a vision of the conflation of divine and terrestrial spheres. Reflecting on this passage over and over every Sunday, Ursula believes herself to be one of these daughters of men, destined for the glory of sensual communion with a divine essence. At least on Sundays, Ursula appears to achieve a relationship to religion that Lawrence might consider ideal, predicated on encounter and interpretation.

Just as soon as she reaches adolescence, however, her “throbbing” engagement with the symbolic world of shadowy Jesuses is challenged by the “week-day world” of “people and trains.”

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60 In an early draft of an essay for The Adelphi, “On Being Religious” (1924), Lawrence writes: “I think that the men who believe in the all-overshadowing God will naturally form a Church of God. That is, I believe in a Church. And I believe in secret doctrine, as against the vulgarity of nonconformity. I believe in an initiated priesthood, and in cycles of esoteric knowledge. I believe in the Church, and in the authority of the Church, and in the power of the priest to grant absolution” (Reflections 385). (Editor Michael Herbert asserts that the fragment comes from an early draft of “On Being Religious” [l[i]]).
and duties and reports” (266). The novel’s free indirect discourse registers this change; just as she begins to read scripture literally—disappointed with the literal impossibility of the Feeding of the Five Thousand, for instance—she begins to adopt individualistic mantras that the novel recounts, making statements like “she herself, Ursula Brangwen, must know how to take the weekday life,” or, justifying her rejection of religion, “that which one cannot experience in daily life is not true for oneself” (263). Yet in repeating these self-centric mantras—which do little more than redirect her existential dilemmas around “self”—Ursula receives no answers. She is plagued by new articulations of the same existential questions her parents lived through, to which neither a literal reading of scripture nor the materialist world of the weekday can provide answers:

How to become oneself, how to know the question and the answer of oneself, when one was merely an unfixed something-nothing, blowing about like the winds of heaven, undefined, unstated. She turned to the visions, which had spoken far-off words that ran along the blood like ripples of an unseen wind, she heard the words again, she denied the vision, for she must be a weekday person, to whom visions were not true, and she demanded only the weekday meaning of the words. (264)

The question remains, as ever, “how to become oneself”—but once Ursula attempts to read her experience through the rationalist lens of “the weekday,” she is rendered totally unable to think outside of it: the passage allows no reconciliation between the world of the “weekday” and Ursula’s affective religious experiences. Living only in the weekday world—much like reading literally the story of the Feeding of the Five Thousand—requires a denial of a whole portion of lived experience, in this passage her blood’s craving for a visionary world beyond the materialist, secular world of the “weekday”.

Soon after, Ursula attempts to make sense of her simultaneous desires for sensual and spiritual fulfillment—hitherto accommodated and organized by the symbolic framework of Christian myth—by attempting to relate to the divine in erotic terms. In a “confusion of pain and
bliss,” this “confused heat of religious yearning” (267), she begins to experience sexualized
desire toward Jesus, hitherto an ethereal figure: “So she craved for the breast of the Son of Man,
to lie there. And she was ashamed in her soul, ashamed. For whereas Christ spoke for the Vision
to answer, she answered from the week-day fact…It was a betrayal, a transference of meaning,
from the vision world, to the matter-of-fact world” (266). Ursula’s humiliation, the novel
suggests, emerges from her sense of betraying—by translating—the substance of her religious
feeling; the Word is, for Ursula, literally made flesh, to disastrous effect. Wright argues that this
episode reveals the ways in which Ursula has begun to accept and relish in “the significance of
the flesh” (105), but the passage itself indicates a disconnect between the affective relationship to
symbol Lawrence describes and the literalized, purely sensual one Ursula experiences. The vital
religious experience Ursula craves cannot, in Lawrence’s view, be accessed via the limited
framework of the day-to-day, the embodied. To become more than “an unfixed something-
thing” requires the conjoined effort of body and mind that Lawrence views as integral to
symbolic experience.

But Ursula’s narrative does not end there. She returns to these questions of self and
symbol, always in tandem, throughout the novel, constantly reliving and reshaping herself
according to her readings of Christian iconography. In returning to and grappling with religious
symbolism, from Jesus to the Genesis trope of the sons of God coming to the daughters of men,
and in recalibrating her self-conception to the mythical visions they encapsulate, Ursula performs
something like the narrative dynamic of Lawrence’s “Snake,” where the speaker’s endless
asymptotic efforts to circumscribe the snake are elevated over any one of the snake’s sedimented
allegorical meanings. As soon as one of these readings becomes stale, she abandons it and finds a
new one; as soon as she finds herself trapped within a fixed self-conception, she attempts to
reinvent herself. After she rejects her own model of Jesus as lover, and the self-conception that comes from it, the narrator describes how “she hated herself, she wanted to trample on herself, destroy herself. How could one become free?” (270) The answer, the novel suggests, is by continuing to evolve and adapt, to be as protean and subject to reshaping as the “unicellular shadow” Ursula later observes through the lens of her microscope (408-409). To keep the symbols but understand the contingency of their interpretations, moving past them as soon as they no longer speak to her, as soon as she feels no connection to them. If Ursula’s *bildungsroman* has a *telos*, it is her recognition of her relationship to all things; the unnatural dichotomy between weekday and Sunday banished, she ultimately adopts a perspective through which all living forms contain God: “In everything she saw she grasped and groped to find the creation of the living God, instead of the old, hard barren form of bygone living” (466). It is in grasping and groping, like the speaker in “Snake,” that Ursula—and the symbols through which she understands herself—is continually revitalized.

Ursula’s narrative encapsulates Lawrence’s symbolic approach in this way and in another: her story of personal development is intertwined with the impersonal saga of the Brangwen family. As Ursula begins to succumb to the monotony of the mechanized “weekday” world, for instance, the narration shifts abruptly to a description of the Brangwens’ experience of the Christian Year. The narrator, no longer sounding anything like Ursula, adopts the same impersonal rhythms he describes, using the passive voice almost exclusively, to recount the consequences of a broken symbolic framework for the collective spirit of the Brangwens. The cyclicality of the Christian Year itself had, until recent decades, preserved for them a sense of swelling momentum, a cultural systole and diastole in which Christ—as ever, a representative for man—transforms from infant to sacrificial victim to risen Lord to ascended God, only to return,
at Christmas, as an infant again. The Brangwen children “lived the year of Christianity, the epic of the soul of mankind…having at least this rhythm of eternity in a ragged, inconsequential life” (270), but even that drama, the narrator laments, “was becoming a mechanical action now…For the Resurrection was shadowy and overcome by the shadow of death, the Ascension was scarce noticed, a mere confirmation of death…” (270) In the midst of Ursula’s narrative, then, Lawrence interjects an impersonal recapitulation of the novel thus far, moving from the bucolic, timeless relationship to the divine experienced by the first Brangwens to the modern version Will and Anna dispute: mechanical, deadening, morose. Lest the reader feel tempted to regard Ursula the way one would read a protagonist in any other novel—as the novel’s asymptotic buildup toward an individuated, self-conscious protagonist might be misread—the novel reaches outside of Ursula’s narrative to demonstrate the ways in which her life remains contingent on these rhythms as well as on these people, even if she is not at the moment aware of it. Ursula is, like Lawrence’s symbol, a palimpsestic entity. She is an individual who also represents the continued generational saga of her family; put another way, she contains the Brangwens that, in turn, contain her.

If the end of the novel provides no other closure, it forges the reunion of Ursula, its modern protagonist, with the impersonal collective she has always also represented. Lawrence hints at this relationship when he interpolates the church year meditation into his narrative of Ursula’s development, but Ursula only becomes fully aware of her affective connection to the people of the Marsh Valley in the novel’s final moments: watching the colliers walk by her window, she “know[s] the old horror of the husk which bound in her and all mankind”; she feels viscerally ill imagining the spread of tenement-style colliery housing that renders the church tower of the novel’s opening once and for all “hideous[ly] obsolet[e]” (458). Ursula’s final
vision, spurred by the appearance of a rainbow, encompasses her life as well as theirs. The rainbow—as natural phenomenon and as symbol—circumscribes both of their imagined revitalizations:

She knew that the sordid people who crept hard-scaled and separate on the face of the world's corruption were living still, that the rainbow was arched in their blood and would quiver to life in their spirit, that they would cast off their horny covering of disintegration, that new, clean, naked bodies would issue to a new germination, to a new growth, rising to the light and the wind and the clean rain of heaven. (458-459)

By the end of the novel, it appears as if Ursula has been detached from her own vision; for the final time, the narration emerges from its usual immersion in her consciousness to describe the paradisiacal rebirth of the colliers without ever returning to her perspective. Lawrence’s apparent marginalization of Ursula’s character in these scenes works, paradoxically, in service of expanding, rather than limiting, what it means to be Ursula Brangwen. This dialectic between personal Ursula and impersonal Brangwens demonstrates most clearly Lawrence’s effort to make the modern novel more than merely “personal”: Ursula Brangwen is an individual as well as a relational entity, capable of meaning beyond the personal, over time. This passage also recapitulates the dynamic of mutual relationship between self and symbol that the novel has been narrating all along: the rainbow emerges out of the Brangwens so that they can become renewed, by becoming themselves a rainbow, “rising to the light and the wind and the clean rain of heaven.” Ursula’s vision, then, is a rebirth into the symbolic that pertains to its family of characters as well as to The Rainbow itself.

The Rainbow is ultimately as multifarious, relational, and subject to formal evolution as the religious symbols Lawrence praises. Indeed, symbol emerges in the novel as an all-encompassing form available on multiple scales: the symbols and iconography within the

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61 The rainbow has been “arching” in the Brangwens since early in the novel, as Hyde points out, when Tom and Lydia form a “human arch of marriage” over Anna (90).
diegesis of the novel; the way characters themselves become (or don’t become) symbolic; the way the novel, in containing these palimpsestic characters and even reinventing itself generically, moves towards becoming like a symbol in the Lawrencian sense. In “Why The Novel Matters” (1925), Lawrence describes the Bible as “a great confused novel. You may say, it is about God. But it is really about man alive. Adam, Eve, Sarai, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Samuel, David, Bathsheba, Ruth, Esther, Solomon, Job, Isaiah, Jesus, Mark, Judas, Paul, Peter: what is it but man alive, from start to finish? Man alive, not mere bits” (Phoenix 535). Wright suggests that The Rainbow is a “counter-Bible” in that it re-inflects Biblical images and stories to suit a modern context. But The Rainbow is not merely a rewriting of the Bible’s symbols but a Bible, according to Lawrence’s definition, in its own right: it is composed of networks of relationships that attest to the ways in which symbols must be rewritten and reinterpreted. But the moral thrust of Lawrence’s bible is neither lex talionis nor brotherly love. It functions, rather, as a record of and a handbook for exploring the self’s interrelatedness—and the role of religion and literature alike in expanding its boundaries.

The Word Made Flesh?: The Plumed Serpent (1926)

Lawrence returns to the idea of revitalizing a religious system a decade later in The Plumed Serpent, which takes as its subject the revival of the ancient Aztec cult of Quetzalcoatl in 1920s Mexico. Early in the novel, protagonist Kate Leslie’s reflection on the mystifying, vertiginous mythos of Quetzalcoatl—posed, throughout the novel, as an enlivening alternative to the stiffly indexical symbolic system inherent to Mexican Catholicism—quickly shades into an imperative that she, too, be reborn: “Ye must be born again. Even the gods must be born again. We must be born again” (59). As Kate’s internal imperative suggests, a synecdochic relationship

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62 Madame Blavatsky imagined the Americas as the site of the next race, or “substance” in The Secret Doctrine (The Secret Doctrine II 444).
between religion and self undergirds *The Plumed Serpent*, as it does *The Rainbow*. In the novel, Lawrence pairs the sexual and spiritual awakening of the middle-aged, European (Irish) Kate with the charismatic Don Ramón Carrasco’s efforts to resurrect the Quetzalcoatl cult, tracing—and even conflating—the parallel development of each. Both are described, for instance, in racial terms: Mexico, like Kate, suffers from “the white man’s present mental-spiritual consciousness,” and both must be revitalized by the “blood-and-vertebrate consciousness” inherent, Lawrence insists, to Mexico’s people (415). Quetzalcoatl appears to be the answer—the “clue word”, as Lawrence puts it—to both (264). Yet this pairing, unlike Ursula’s with the Brangwens in *The Rainbow*, does not result in an expanded vision of selfhood for Kate. On the contrary, the Quetzalcoatl cult’s system of symbolic representation, at its worst, calls for her self-obliteration.

The novel has never been popular among critics, among other reasons for its apparent endorsement of authoritarian and misogynist politics, most visible in Kate’s ultimate relinquishing of her rational consciousness to be enveloped by the dark, sensual wisdom of her new military general husband Don Cipriano, Don Ramón’s second-in-command. Moreover, despite Lawrence’s ostensible anti-colonialist goal of critiquing the devastating effects of Spain’s occupation of Mexico—both in the form of the European capitalist economics that keeps its people destitute and the imposed code of Christian ethics that keeps them servile and complacent—his portrayal of Mexicans themselves is startlingly essentialist, validating and reproducing oppressive stereotypes in dire need, themselves, of overturning. On an aesthetic level, the novel does not garner even muted praise from F.R. Leavis, who found it boring and even claimed to “resent” the repetitiveness of Lawrence’s descriptions of Quetzalcoatl hymns and rituals (57).

Many of these problems, political and aesthetic alike, emerge from Lawrence’s contradictory treatment of religious symbols, foundational to the dynamics of essentialism and
conflation that produce its troubling politics. Partially to blame is a shift in Lawrence’s thinking about the purpose of religion and its symbols. If, in his earlier *Study of Thomas Hardy* (1912), the “religious effort of man” is to create symbols (447)—i.e. to mediate between man and the living cosmos—in “New Mexico” (1922), Lawrence describes the “root meaning of religion” as “sheer naked contact, without an intermediary or mediator” (*Selected Essays* 187).63 By the time he writes *The Plumed Serpent*, in other words, Lawrence has adopted a perspective about religion that appears to deny the need for the mediation inherent to a symbolic system, such that the symbol no longer functions as a vehicle for mutual reinvention. In *The Rainbow*, moreover, there is yet the suggestion that Lawrence is after a balance between personal and impersonal existence, one that maps onto the dual essence of the symbol, able to balance local, outward form and inner, ineffable meaning; participation in religion—and religious experience itself—confers on the Brangwens a symbolic outlook, one that bestows the individual with an understanding of this mapping between self and symbol and enables them to access otherwise inaccessible dimensions of the self. Yet in *The Plumed Serpent* the more expanded self that Lawrence imagines in *The Rainbow*, hitherto composed of these personal and impersonal elements, is fundamentally at odds with meaningful participation in the cult of Quetzalcoatl. Rather than providing the self with a means of organizing its personal and impersonal dimensions, Quetzalcoatl’s symbols do not organize; rather, they demand that self must be wholly effaced.

These more insidious implications of Quetzalcoatl worship emerge gradually over the course of *The Plumed Serpent*. At first, the novel offers a vision of religious symbolism that does not stray too far from the ethos of Lawrence’s earlier work. From the beginning, for instance, the regenerative potential of religious symbolism is a crucial touchstone for Ramón’s revival. Lawrence imbues even the name Quetzalcoatl with creative power. Reading about the revival

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63 Lawrence’s encounter with Native American rituals, described in this essay, provides one reason for this change.
toward the beginning of the novel, for instance, Kate feels that “a different light than the common light seemed to gleam out of the words of even this newspaper paragraph” (58). Shortly afterward, one of Ramon’s followers, Mirabal, tells her,

‘But if you like the word Quetzalcoatl, don’t you think it would be wonderful if he came back again? Ah, the names of the gods! Don't you think the names are like seeds, so full of magic, of the unexplored magic…I say them over and over, like they say Mani padma Om! in Tibet. I believe in the fertility of sound’ (66).

Mirabal describes the Aztec word “Quetzalcoatl” itself in strikingly organic, vital terms, aligning the mere sound of the word with the divine potential he believes it signifies. These early encounters with symbolic manifestations of Quetzalcoatl deeply affect Kate, causing her to undergo a process of psycho-spiritual introspection: “She was forty, and in the rare, lingering dawn of maturity, the flower of her soul was opening…Perhaps this had brought her to Mexico” (59). Lawrence describes the process as a kind of germination, rendering her as much a seed as Mirabal’s “magic[al]” names. In implicitly making this comparison, Lawrence suggests the same analogical and instrumental relationship between symbol and self that he poses in The Rainbow. Kate (and Mexico) is like Quetzalcoatl in that both are in need of revitalization; both are ready and yearning to be “reborn”. Moreover, Kate also needs to engage with the symbolic capacities of Quetzalcoatl in order to grasp this, in order to experience the meaningful, expansive kind of self-knowledge that would allow her to be effectively “regenerated.”

The symbolic system of the Quetzalcoatl cult is also powerful, as Mirabal insinuates, because it is autochthonic, specifically suited to Mexico. The novel is premised on—and takes very seriously—the idea, new to Lawrence’s work, that every culture should adopt the religion (and symbols) most suited to its temperament, or climate. This means, per the novel, that some cultures will be more spiritually or intellectually rigorous, while others will be more sensual and embodied at the expense of that mental rigor. Lawrence articulates similar racial theories
elsewhere during the period: in “The Spirit of Place” (1924), for instance, he argues, “There is some subtle magnetic or vital influence inherent in every specific locality, and it is this influence which keeps the inhabitant stable” (Studies in Classic American Literature II 170). Ramón asserts, similarly, “So if I want Mexicans to learn the name of Quetzalcoatl, it is because I want them to speak with the tongues of their own blood. I wish the Teutonic world would once more think in terms of Thor and Wotan, and the tree Igdrasil…” (248) Blood can speak, in The Plumed Serpent, indicating the especially privileged position of affect and embodiment for the Quetzalcoatl cult, while the Teutonic world still “think[s],” suggesting a fundamental distinction between Lawrence’s sensual vision of Mexico and the coldly intellectual Britons.

Still, and somewhat contradictorily, Ramón insists that these cultures are distinct only in appearance and affect, making frequent recourse to the Tree of Life as a metaphor for the interrelated, organic network of vernacular religions he envisions:

The hibiscus and the thistle and the gentian all flower on the Tree of Life, but in the world they are far apart, and must be…The men and women of the earth are not manufactured goods, to be interchangeable. But the Tree of Life is one tree, as we know when our souls open in the last blossoming…then as blossoms we share one mystery with all blossoms, beyond the knowledge of any leaves and stems and roots: something transcendent. (249)

The Tree of Life—for Blavatsky, a symbol, like the serpent, for the interrelatedness of immortality and knowledge of good and evil—is, in The Plumed Serpent, a symbol for the revitalizing potential both of religious symbolism and of people, a vitality in stark opposition to the deadening power of industrial capitalism, according to which men and women are no more than uniformly “interchangeable” products. Yet Ramón’s description nonetheless ends with a celebration of interchangeability, albeit on a different plane: the religions he describes as flowers on the Tree of Life—at first distinguishable as hibiscuses, thistles, and gentians—become, ultimately, a bouquet of indistinguishable blossoms. If, for many thinkers of the period, all world
religions share an essential base (whether subconsciously or due to a shared, forgotten history), in the novel, this essential sameness is an *end*, rather than an origin point. According to Ramón’s botanical metaphor, religious symbols *end* in sameness but *begin* in difference: they require fertile soil, whose fertility is determined by time and place, if they are to thrive. But even if the temporary appearance of difference is just that—an appearance—the novel insists that an embrace of these differences is absolutely crucial to spiritual vitality. Citing his belief in “One Church of all the world,” Ramón insists, “The final mystery is one mystery...But the manifestations are many...we live by manifestations” (249). Ramon’s description suggests that “manifestations”—a term the character continues to use throughout the novel to denote religions as well as their symbols—are crucial to spiritual vitality, even if they contain the same truth-content; *access* to that universal truth-content at their core depends on whether the manifestation in question is native or alien to the land.

The novel offers the Aztec cult of Quetzalcoatl as a “manifestation” that must replace the manifestation already in play in Mexico: Catholicism. If, in *The Rainbow*, the Church is a “shell” that still speaks “the language of creation” (259) the Catholic churches of *The Plumed Serpent* “giv[e] the impression of cynical barrenness, cynical meaninglessness, an empty, cynical mocking shell” (360). Ramón is emphatic, throughout the novel, about the need for a stale, barren Catholicism to be fully, officially, and even ceremoniously ousted in order to situate Quetzalcoatl at the religious center of the community. After disseminating a hymn calling for the return to Jesus of his “images” at the outset of his revival, for instance, he initiates a ritualistic emptying of the churches, in which a Catholic priest in league with the cult of Quetzalcoatl announces that Jesus and Mary have been called home by “God the Almighty” (281). There is slippage throughout the novel, though, as to precisely why Catholicism is dead: because it is a
foreign European import, unsuited to what Lawrence believes to be the essentially sensual consciousness of the Americas, or because (as The Rainbow would suggest) it has, like any religious system is doomed to, become stagnant and fixed. The novel provides evidence for both readings: the latter reading emerges in hymns where an elderly Jesus and rejuvenated Quetzalcoatl embrace, much like they embraced, according to the novel’s fictional mythology, when the young Jesus took the dying Quetzalcoatl’s place; the former reading emerges where the ousting of Catholicism provides a kind of therapeutic reenactment of the cruel means by which the conquering Spaniards deposed of Aztec idols (the statues are taken from the Church, sent to an island, and burned).  

In either case, The Plumed Serpent proposes the revivification of an entire network of symbols rather than breathing new life into the religion currently in circulation. Jesus is, regardless of why, “a dead god in [Mexico’s] tomb,” Ramón explains; Mexico needs a new “Savior,” a new symbolic register to “drive a new way out to the sun” (136). Symbols must die so that they can be renewed: this has always been necessary, in Lawrence’s view, to counteract their historical tendency toward allegorical one-to-one relationships. The novel introduces the Quetzalcoatl cult as an appealing antidote to Catholicism’s sedimentation because it is (at least at first) so complex, dynamic, and multifarious—aspects of its symbolic register that seduce the attention of Mexicans and Kate alike: “All a confusion of contradictory gleams of meaning, Quetzalcoatl. But why not? Her Irish spirit was weary to death of definite meanings, and a God of one fixed purport” (58). Catholicism is replaced by another religious system, one that provides

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64 As Ferreter has pointed out, this scene constitutes a reversal of the conquering Spaniards’ not-so-ritualistic disposal of the “idols” recounted in Bernal Díaz del Castillo’s True History of the Conquest of New Spain (97).
a more vital connection to Lawrence’s God-stuff, not only because it is native to Mexico, but also, as this passage suggests, because its symbols don’t claim to be definitive.65

But Catholicism doesn’t depart as fully as Ramón—or, perhaps, as Lawrence—would have it. In keeping with Frazer’s reading of Aztec religion in The Golden Bough, many of the cult of Quetzalcoatl’s rituals read as Catholicism stripped down to its most violent and “primitive” qualities (Frazer 586, 704). Ramón continues to take Jesus as a messianic model, and his liturgies, as Wright has argued, contain noticeably Catholic elements and biblical language, even in spite of Ramón’s proclaimed apostasy (204-205). Sounding distinctly like St. Paul, Ramón announces, “For save the Unknown God pours His Spirit over my head…I am not. I am nothing. I am a dead gourd” (341). What seems to emerge at key moments in the novel, then, is that the cult of Quetzalcoatl is the esoteric meaning of Catholicism, the deeper, more intuitive wisdom Catholicism commemorates and contains on an esoteric level. While presenting the cult of Quetzalcoatl as a “manifestation” as superficial as Catholicism—as external, as temporary, as transient—the novel often flirts with the possibility that the cult offers a kind of set-in-stone, definitive truth-value that Lawrence’s original understanding of symbolism pushes against. Even if it operates according to symbols, the cult of Quetzalcoatl doesn’t seem to require or even invite the constant revision and reinterpretation for which Lawrence’s original symbolic perspective calls. In other words, the cult of Quetzalcoatl represents an overturning of an extant religious system, but the dynamic, periodic process of overturning invoked in service of its revival appears to stop with that revival itself.

65 This claim of multifariousness and resistance to definition, at least at first, extends to the practitioners of the cult. For instance, in an early hymn, Quetzalcoatl is called “the Snake I Am”, where the identity of “I” fluctuates between the fulfilled man, whose body, soul and spirit are “whole”, and Quetzalcoatl himself. The “Snake I Am” also suggests, in the hymn, a relationship to presentness: “When the plasm of the body, and the plasm of the soul, and the plasm of the spirit are at one, in the Snake I Am. I am Now.” Whether “Now” signifies the contingency of the Snake—that it exists now, but may not later—or whether the Snake exists in the atemporal dimension of “now,” which is always present, remains unclear.
Accordingly, despite Ramón’s insistence on the value and necessity of living by “manifestations,” as the novel moves forward, the rite and ritual of Quetzalcoatl move out of the realm of the symbolic and into the realm of the literal. This shift from literary—readable, (re)writable—to literal is most obvious in the novel’s treatment of Quetzalcoatl’s dominant symbols: the eponymous plumed serpent—an eagle at the center of an omphalos, the snake with its tail in its mouth—and the morning star, an image that traditionally connotes either Lucifer\textsuperscript{66} or Jesus.\textsuperscript{67} The omphalos, in its very form, embodies recursivity; the morning star connotes simultaneously the essences of good and evil.\textsuperscript{68} Both the serpent and the morning star, then, contain and embody antitheses—and are thus, in a sense, delimited. Even if their meaning is fraught with tension, both symbols point directly to that fraughtness; they function as an index of that tension. They do not contain relationality, in other words, but attempt to depict that relationality itself—becoming, in some sense, as literal as the reading praxis Lawrence typically warns against. The title of the novel itself attests to a different attitude towards interpretation—The Plumed Serpent is, of course, the English translation of its original title, Quetzalcoatl.

Whereas, in The Rainbow, any attempt at translation—of language, symbol, or otherwise—is frowned upon (consider, especially, Ursula’s fraught attempt to translate her Sunday Jesus into weekday terms), the cult of Quetzalcoatl uses its symbols in the orthodox sense: to translate the

\textsuperscript{66} In naming her Theosophical magazine Lucifer, Blavatsky plays on and highlights this discrepancy, emphasizing the value of the term’s esoteric meaning over its literal—localized and direct—translation: light-bearer (i.e. herald of knowledge) versus Satan. See Blavatsky, “What’s in a Name?” (1887) Lucifer, September 1887.
\textsuperscript{67} Rev 22:16
\textsuperscript{68} Blavatsky writes in The Secret Doctrine that the symbol of the snake was once part of a larger glyph, together with the Tree of Life, for “Immortal Being” (406), concluding that not only was “the now dreaded Reptile was regarded as the first beam of light that radiated from the abyss of divine Mystery,” (407) but the serpent itself, for the gnostics, was also a symbol for God: “And this ‘True and Perfect Serpent’ is the seven-lettered God who is now credited with being Jehovah, and Jesus one with him” (410). Lawrence suggests a similar reading in his poem, “The Snake” (1923) wherein the eponymous snake is “one of the lords /of life”, “a king in exile, uncrowned in the underworld, / Now due to be crowned again.” Yet the symbol of the omphalos itself—the snake with its tail in its mouth—does not receive the same treatment. In his essay, “Him With His Tail in His Mouth” (1925), the omphalos is a symbol for the stagnancy generated by attempts to find and articulate absolute knowledge: “…there is no eternal goal. Every attempt to find an eternal goal puts the tail of the serpent into his mouth again, whereby he chokes himself in one more last gasp” (Phoenix II 430).
ineffable into concrete, unidirectional meaning. Whereas in *The Rainbow*, Lawrence sought to reignite a symbolic system by proposing a different means of relating to it, Quetzalcoatl *himself* is the god of relationality; He does not contain, but rather *is* “the spark of contact lingering between her and the man, her woman’s greater self and the greater self of man” (131).

A similar principle of conflation rules all of the written hymns of Quetzalcoatl, distributed, ironically, in the form of what look like “advertisement leaflet[s]” (222). The hymns often begin by expressing an opposition—or delineating a hierarchy—but go on to conflate the opposing terms with which they begin. In one of the later hymns, for instance, Quetzalcoatl is called by an unknown voice—a voice that appears, at least initially, to be a God above even Quetzalcoatl:

I slept the great sleep, and dreamed not. ‘Till a voice was calling: Quetzalcoatl! ‘I said: Who is that? ‘No one answered, but the voice said: Quetzalcoatl! ‘I said: Where art thou? ‘So! he said. I am neither here nor there. I am thyself. Get up. ‘Now all was very heavy upon me, like a tomb-stone of darkness. ‘I said: Am I not old? How shall I roll this stone away? ‘How art thou old, when I am new man? I will roll away the stone. Sit up! ‘I sat up, and the stone went rolling, crashing down the gulfs of space. ‘I said to myself: I am new man. I am younger than the young and older than the old. Lo! I am unfolded on the stem of time like a flower, I am at the midst of the flower of my manhood. (226)

The hymn ultimately conflates speaker and listener; both are, in the end, Quetzalcoatl. As soon as the voice announces its identity as Quetzalcoatl, Quetzalcoatl begins to talk to himself; in yet another rewriting of the Judeo-Christian tradition, according to which God describes himself as “I am that am,” the God-like “voice” in the hymn becomes “I,” such that Quetzalcoatl’s status as “manifestation” of a universal, ineffable mystery is again called into question. Ramón himself, who claims to be both “the First Man of Quetzalcoatl” and “Quetzalcoatl himself” (316), exhibits the same confusion.69 Ramón is required to symbolically adopt the persona of Quetzalcoatl

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69 As Luke Ferreter points out in his study of Lawrence’s religion, one of the most important details Lawrence gleaned from his reading about Mexican religion was the vague lines separating man from God; Ferreter writes,
during religious rituals, even occasionally posing as an idol-like statue at the head of his congregation. But as the line between ritual and daily life becomes increasingly blurred, Ramón’s “will”—a term that Lawrence, throughout his work, usually associates with the mechanical imposition of force—becomes difficult to disassociate from his role: “With his words, Ramón was able to put the power of his heavy, strong will over the people. The crowd began to fuse under his influence” (337). Ramón’s authoritarian tendencies, then, emerge quite explicitly out of the conflation depicted and encouraged by the symbolic form of Quetzalcoatl. As long as he acts under the sign of Quetzalcoatl, he speaks to and on behalf of a collective—a prospect made all the more chilling when, towards the end of the novel, Ramón presides over the execution of his would-be murderers as leader of a ritual sacrifice.

This dynamic—a slippage between religion and what Lawrence in *The Rainbow* called “the week-day world”—occurs again and again throughout the hymn and ritual of Quetzalcoatl. Listening to the beating drum, Kate feels that it “went straight through to the soul, the most ancient and everlasting soul of all men” (126). The drum seems to almost become, rather than approximate, a heartbeat. Similarly, in his travel writings about his time spent in Mexico, Lawrence describes the ceremonial dances he witnesses as “not representing something, not even playing. It is a soft, subtle being something” (*Mornings in Mexico* 110). By extension, Kate’s participation in the ritual—in this “being” something—renders her own “being,” her own heartbeat, utterly irrelevant: “She was not herself, she was gone, and her own desires were gone in the ocean of the great desire” (131). Kate is not able to simultaneously experience her desire and “the great desire”; the rites of Quetzalcoatl do not provide her with a means of balancing or even feeling both. She must, in fact, actively give up her own desire in order to feel the greater,

“distinction between gods and men, especially in the cult of Quetzalcoatl, is not rigorously drawn in Mexican religion” (92).
impersonal desire the ritual calls for. Lawrence also enacts this trade-off between personal and impersonal consciousness on a novelistic level, when the narrator interrupts what are clearly Kate’s reflections about the ritual to assert, “Faith is the Tree of Life itself…We are the Tree with the fruit forever upon it. And we are faith forever. Verbum sat” (127). The Tree of Life, earlier in the novel a symbol for the vast plurality of manifestations available to different peoples—a symbol of growth, life, and movement, as well as the multifariousness of symbolism itself—suddenly represents a very different kind of immortality. Rather than a particular kind of fruit, the practitioners of Quetzalcoatl have become, already halfway through the novel, the immortal tree itself. Perhaps most telling is the Latin assertion “verbum sat”: translated into English, the phrase reads “one word is enough.” Indeed, witnessing the ritual, Kate feels that words cease to matter: “Any verse, any words, no words, the song remained the same: a strong, deep wind rushing from the caverns of the breast, from the everlasting soul!” (127). Already at this point in the novel, the impersonal, “everlasting soul” appears to issue a song more powerful and absolute than the visual and verbal “manifestations” Ramón first suggests are so integral to religion. No interpretation—or reinterpretation—is necessary.

This conflation of fruit and tree, outer form and inner meaning, is not an insight limited to the hypnotic state generated by the ritual. At her most involved in the cult, Kate rejects language itself on a day to day basis, wishing to be so free from “direct, brutal speech” that she is only “addressed in the third person” (321). Rather than recognizing a difference between outer form and inner meaning, between personal and impersonal selfhood, Quetzalcoatl quite explicitly prescribes permanent self-effacement. Reflecting on the demands of the Quetzalcoatl cult toward the end of the novel, Kate recognizes that its “great assertion”—that “the blood is one blood”—means, in practice, “a strange, marginless death of her individual self” (417). The ideal of
balance between personal and impersonal forces Lawrence pursues in *The Rainbow* becomes, in *The Plumed Serpent*, an ideal of “submission absolute…the sheer solid mystery of passivity” (311). This kind of institutionalized submission is a far cry from the kind of self-abandonment any of the Brangwens experience. Of her marriage to Don Cipriano, Kate reflects, for instance, “It was his impersonal presence which enveloped her. She lived in his aura, and he, she knew, lived in hers, with nothing said, and no personal or spiritual intimacy whatever. A mindless communion of the blood” (423). At the beginning of the novel, Kate is entranced by the “confusion of contradictory gleams of meaning of Quetzalcoatl”; by the end of the novel, that meaning has become as static and sedimented as the quality of life the cult’s adherents ultimately adopt. That Kate feels herself, by the end of the novel, to be “absolutely at rest,” likening herself to “creatures that live away below in the unwavering deeps” (421), reveals the extent to which her remaining a disciple of Quetzalcoatl would require adopting a life of stasis that is antithetical to vitality and self reinvention.

As these passages indicate, the novel’s narration itself becomes increasingly unsubtle—even in free indirect discourse meant to capture the perspective of a character, like Kate, who remains skeptical throughout the earlier parts of the novel. The novel maps an inverse relationship, then, between the passivity of Quetzalcoatl’s followers and the autonomy of its increasingly propagandistic narrator. Michael Bell has observed a similar dynamic, pointing to *The Rainbow* as an inverse case: “If the power of *The Rainbow* lies largely in its capacity to express preconscious states in an implicit way, *The Plumed Serpent*, by contrast, asserts doctrinally the importance of the pre-conscious while its actual narrative language, in keeping with its principal personae, is highly self-conscious and explicit” (168). Even if Quetzalcoatl is “lord of two ways,” the religion devoted to his worship appears to point to only one. And even as
it indulges in the seductive, impersonal ritual of the cult of Quetzalcoatl, then, the novel inadvertently exposes the authoritarianism—and violence\textsuperscript{70}—inherent to the conflation of man and symbol for which it calls. “There must be manifestations,” Ramón tells Kate, suggesting the value of a constantly evolving symbolic system, but the logic of conflation his religion actively promotes ultimately undermines the possibility of engaging with, or recreating, symbols and self alike.

This contradiction in terms stagnates even the plot of the novel itself. The entirety of the novel’s action narrates the process of conversion, which means for Kate and Quetzalcoatl’s Mexican followers, simply a giving up and giving in. With the exception of the attack on Ramón, by the end of the novel, it appears that most of its characters have nothing to do, no life to live, beyond awaiting the next hymn, the next ritual. Kate herself, while oscillating between revulsion and wonder at the psychological demands put forth by the cult, becomes less and less a convincingly full-fledged protagonist. The assertive consciousness with which the novel opens is replaced by a passive woman eager to experience the rebirth of her “virginity” in her marriage to Don Cipriano. As Kristy Martin points out, “The Rainbow showed relationships repeating over generations: The Plumed Serpent enfolds repetition into individual lives” (180). This repetition becomes stagnation, as characters and plot alike seem to dissipate between hymns. If, in The Rainbow, the novel is held together by the palimpsestic network of relationships it forges, the members of which are free to grow and evolve independently, The Plumed Serpent is held together largely by the didactic rituals and hymns that forge a kind of impersonal union between the cult’s members—a union that, in their absence, dissipates into longing and detachment. In The Plumed Serpent, as Charles Burack wryly puts it, “mystical novel becomes mystical

\textsuperscript{70} C.f. Cameron: “…when persons are represented in relation to a force that effaces what individuates them, their surrender to that power…is directly linked to violence” (Impersonality 10).
manual” (141). It is, ultimately, difficult to read the *The Plumed Serpent* as anything other than a gospel of authoritarianism, according to which symbols function as a fixed means to a fixed end.

That Lawrence would rescind, a few years later, his allegiance to the leadership politics expressed in *The Plumed Serpent* is by now a critical commonplace. Writing to Witter Bynner a few years after the novel’s publication, he writes,

…and the militant ideal, or the ideal militant seems to me also a cold egg. We’re sort of sick of all forms of militarism and militantism…On the whole I agree with you, the leader-cum-follower relationship is a bore. And the new relationship will be some sort of tenderness, sensitive, between men and men and men and women, not the one up one down, lead on I follow, *ich dien* sort of business. So you see I’m becoming a lamb at last… (*Letters VI* 321)

In the letter, Lawrence appears to adopt a model of tender, interpersonal relationality as a correction to the authoritarian model *The Plumed Serpent* champions. Lawrence also describes himself here as a lamb, perhaps signifying a preference for the kind of symbol he celebrates in *The Rainbow*: one whose meaning extends in a multiplicity of directions, whose substance, at least according to its Judeo-Christian context, is palimpsest—from Abraham’s sacrifice to Paschal Lamb to Lamb of God to the lion-like lamb of *Revelation*—rather than index.

In Lawrence’s final work, *Etruscan Places* (1932), the symbol works in service of a vision that, rather than demanding that all creation succumb to a totalizing, indexical symbolic framework—it is Mussollini’s Fascism, in *Etruscan Places*, that wrests “the power to name and unname” from the Italian people (31)—celebrates the divinity in every living being. Describing the symbolic method of the ancient Etruscans, Lawrence insists:

Yet every consciousness, the rage of the lion, and the venom of the snake, is, and therefore is divine. All emerges out of the unbroken circle with its nucleus, the germ, the One, the god, if you like to call it so. And man, with his soul and his personality, emerges in eternal connection with all the rest. The blood-stream is one, and unbroken, yet storming with oppositions and contradictions. The ancients saw, consciously, as children now see unconsciously, the everlasting wonder in things…it was by seeing all things alert in the throb of interrelated passional significance that
the ancients kept the wonder and the delight in life, as well as the dread and the repugnance. (125)

*The Plumed Serpent’s* “mindless communion of the blood” remains, in *Etruscan Places*, a singular “blood-stream,” but that bloodstream is also open to paradox and even dissent, to “oppositions and contradictions”—the very qualities that attract Kate to Quetzalcoatl in the first place. In *Etruscan Places*, the symbolic approach is ultimately geared towards seeing the divine in all life—in “every consciousness” and in every “eternal connection.” It is in the push and pull inherent to those connections across time and space that vitality thrives; it is precisely this push and pull that symbols allow individuals to access.

A symbolic approach to religious experience provided Lawrence with a formal model of psychological and spiritual wholeness, according to which the self “unselfs” through encounter with the religious symbol. This was, after all, a moment in history when the symbol was imagined to be more than an icon or an image: it could be literary, containing narrative; it could be synchronic and diachronic, pointing to its own time and to all time; it could provide a central point around which the complexities of self could converge. For Lawrence, it could do these things as well as contain and forge ever-changing relationships between humans and the vital forces that, for him, are at work around and within them. Lawrence’s novels represent one way in which religion became redirected, during this period, towards reading—and even inscribing—the ever-vertiginous complexities of the self.
Chapter 2:

“Going Away” and Coming Back: E.M. Forster’s Perspectival Imaginings

A year after the publication of *A Passage to India* (1924), Forster wrote a short essay, later published in *Two Cheers for Democracy*, entitled “Anonymity: An Inquiry” (1925). While ostensibly about the mystical qualities of creative inspiration, the essay puts forward a number of bold claims about the nature of selfhood. “The modern critics go too far in their insistence on personality,” Forster insists at one point, advocating instead for a renewed appreciation of the “general,” or “anonymous,” personality that lies beneath it (93). “It has something in common with all other deeper personalities,” he continues, “and the mystic will assert that the common quality is God, and that here, in the obscure recesses of our being, we near the gates of the Divine. It is in any case the force that makes for anonymity” (93). Forster goes on to argue that all great literature possesses an anonymous quality that makes it metamorphic, such that it “transforms the man who reads it towards the condition of the man who wrote” (93). The kind of transhistorical relationship between author and reader called for by reading itself, in Forster’s view, cannot take place without a kind of mutual self-abstraction, according to which the author “forg[ets] his name; while we read him we forget both his name and our own” (93). For Forster, then, anonymity is also a psychic state of fundamental indeterminacy—one where distinctions between author and reader dissolve.

Forster describes a mode of radical empathy—he calls it “imagination” later in the essay—that depends on accessing potentially divine realms beyond and beneath the conscious mind. For Forster, empathy requires “imagining”—thinking and feeling—beyond the boundaries of self. Yet this is also a practice he describes in quasi-religious terms: “Lost in the beauty where
he was lost, we find more than we ever threw away, we reach what seems to be our spiritual home, and remember that it was not the speaker who was in the beginning but the Word” (93).

In putting forward a spiritually-infused vision of imagination, the essay suggests that Forster was thinking seriously in this period about what it might mean to reclaim dimensions of lived experience that usually fall under the purview of religion, and about how these dimensions might complicate his decade-old imperative to “only connect”.

In a letter written just three months after the publication of A Passage to India, Forster not only elaborates on his assertion that interpersonal intimacy entails acts of imaginative self-abstraction, but also figures the novel as an attempt to capture that experience. Confirming the view for which he is perhaps most famous—that personal relationships are “the most real things on the surface of the earth”—Forster describes how “connection,” in the novel, is nonetheless predicated on spiritual movement:

… I have acquired a feeling that people must go away from each other (spiritually) every now and then, and improve themselves if the relationship is to develop or even endure. A Passage to India describes such a going away—a preparatory to the next advance, which I am not capable of describing. It seems to me that individuals progress alternately by loneliness and intimacy, and that legend of the multiplied Krishna (which I got, like so much that is precious to me, by intercourse with Bapu Sahib) serves as a symbol of a state where the two might be combined. The ‘King’s’ view over-simplified people: that I think was its defect. We are more complicated, also richer, than it knew, and affection grows more difficult than it used to be, and also more glorious. (qtd. in Furbank 124)

Forster’s letter spatializes intimacy—asserting that it requires movement—and redefines it as an ongoing and active process, one that must be undertaken “now and again.” The model Forster elaborates here remains insistently spiritual, connoting retreat and temporariness as well as self-improvement and purgatorial preparation. But his description also attests to the ways in which he is consciously drawing this refined idea of “connection” from specifically Hindu sensibilities and tropes, particularly the legend of the multiplied Krishna, which readers of the novel will recall as
the subject of Godbole’s song and a focal point of the Ceremony of the Birth (of Krishna) in the novel’s final section. This chapter argues that Forster’s encounter with the Hindu tradition informs his work by providing metaphysical and ethical practices of self-abstraction—of unselving—that are about movement first and foremost, predicated on the adoption of distant or at least different vantage points from which the boundaries that separate people, especially the boundaries of self, temporarily dissolve. Seen in this light, *A Passage to India* constitutes a series of interrelated experiments in imagination and perspective, efforts that Forster opposes to the boundary enforcing work of colonial administration, orthodox religion, and rationalism alike and their respective efforts to impose narrowly construed guidelines for affect, religiosity, nationhood, and sexuality.

Forster’s particular relationship to Indian spirituality—and to India more broadly—has been read productively as part of an Orientalist tradition that envisioned the “East” as a fantasy-space for sexual expression, a place where, as Edward Said notes, European writers sought “a different type of sexuality, perhaps more libertine and less guilt-ridden” (*Orientalism* 190). Interpretations of Forster’s particular engagement with Indian spiritualities have, for the most part, hued closely to this narrative: the self-abstracting aspects of his thought are read almost exclusively as sublimation of homoerotic desire. Anthony Copley, for instance, writes that Forster’s interest in the Krishna cult allowed him to “legitimize his homosexuality” (*A Spiritual Bloomsbury* 173), suggesting that “a more personalized explanation” for Forster’s interest in Indian mysticism “lies in linking [his] sexual frustration with the transcendent release made possible through the mystical” (114). According to these accounts, Forster was either drawn to these traditions solely for their relative openness to certain kinds of sensuality and embodiment, or he displaced his anxieties about queer sexual desire onto themes of nationality and
transnationalism—engagements that, especially in his romantic liaisons with darker-skinned men, revealed his unwitting “complicity in the erotics of power” (Martin and Piggford *Queer Forster* 14). Along similar lines, Sara Suleri reads Godbole’s song as “a figure for the erotic and colonial disappointment that permeates *A Passage to India*” (*The Rhetoric of English India* 141), suggesting that the Krishna legend to which it refers (mentioned in Forster’s letter) is “synechdochical of the tautological desire that vexes imperial narrative” (141). In focusing exclusively on these dimensions of Forster’s work, however, critics have neglected the many ways in which Forster’s encounter with these self-abstracting spiritualities functioned not only as vessels for sublimation or escape but also as complementary, even fundamental, components of his overarching ideal of interpersonal relationship—an ideal that, for Forster, has sensual, emotional, and spiritual dimensions. That is, it is possible to read homoeroticism in Forster’s work as an outcome of a certain religious sensibility, cross-cultural intimacy a possibility that is, in fact, enabled by Forster’s investment in religious modes of thought.

In this chapter, I argue that Forster was actively thinking about mobilizing a religious sensibility—based, in particular, on his encounter with aspects of the Hindu tradition in India—capable of cultivating ongoing, self-critical practices of imaginative self-abstraction: exercises that move between impartiality and partiality, distance and closeness. Forster’s version of unselfing, then, is spatial and dispositional. The former is always, for Forster, implied by the latter: a disposition open to intimacy or empathy (in Forster’s view, intimacy is always a form of empathy) is a disposition that can imagine itself moving in space, inhabiting the perspectives of others, abstracting from the normative view of its own position. Aspects of this idea emerge throughout much of Forster’s earlier work: in short stories about intercultural connection that figure intimacy as sacred imaginative space; in non-fiction writings about the Hindu tradition,
where a “religious sense” means a disposition open to self-abstraction. *A Passage to India* combines these dimensions in Forster’s most developed effort to represent intimacy capable of transcending barriers both cultural and psychological. An imaginary capable of perspectival movement emerges throughout this body of work as the key component of Forster’s overarching project of “connection.” Indeed, many of the elements of Forster’s style often hailed as examples of modernist experimentation—his resistance to teleological narrative, experiments in point of view, syntactic repetition, preference for the fragment over the coherent whole—emerge in service of capturing this spatialized sensibility.

Tropes of space, scale, and infinitude have always emerged in discussions of modernism, and especially in critical takes of *A Passage to India*, usually through the lens of Postcolonial Studies. Edward Said has famously argued that many of the tropes and features associated with modernism—namely “self-consciousness, discontinuity, self-referentiality, and corrosive irony”—emerge as responses to the pressure exerted on Western culture by the realities of empire. “When you can no longer assume that Britannia will rule the waves forever, you have to reconcile reality as something that can be held together by you the artist, in history rather than in geography,” Said writes. “Spatiality becomes, ironically, the characteristic of an aesthetic rather than of political domination…” (*Culture and Imperialism* 190). Modernism’s preoccupation with infinite space and scale also forms the jumping off-point for Jameson’s famous essay “Modernism and Imperialism,” in which he uses Forster’s *Howards End* to make the point that tropes of infinitude are stand-ins for distant sites of colonial production, invisible to the denizens of the metropolis (in this case, London) that benefit from that labor. Jameson and Said are referring to geographical, or physical space in the novel—the way a kind of open-ended, infinite treatment of physical space in the modernist novel stands in for, attests to, and represents the
insidious and always partially unknowable reach of empire. In *A Passage to India*, imaginative space—or, to put it another way, perspectival scale—has a similarly oppositional relationship to Western modes of knowledge and intellection, including British rationalism, positivism, and Christian moral rectitude. Whereas a spatial aesthetic captures the conceptual distance of empire, in *A Passage to India* an imaginative and projective spatiality shared among both characters and narrator is also the vehicle for closeness.

My treatment of spatiality, distance, and self-abstraction in this chapter is also informed by Amanda Anderson’s examination of 19th century literary efforts to cultivate an attitude of ethically-motivated detachment, which she defines as “an attempt to transcend partiality, interests, and context: it is an aspiration toward universality and objectivity” (*The Powers of Distance* 33). The term “aspirational” is key, for Anderson; as she is careful to specify, these efforts are representative of a “stance” rather than an attitude of certainty or a permanent ontological state of being, often taking the form of a “dialectic between detachment and engagement, between a cultivated distance and a newly informed partiality” (6)—an attitude that resonates strikingly with the dialectical dynamic between loneliness and intimacy, “going away” and coming back, that Forster articulates in his 1924 letter. Forster does not prescribe self-abstraction exclusively as an unequivocal solution to the problems of egoism, or of imperfect sympathy, or of transcending boundaries of species, race, gender, ethnicity, or religious affiliation. The kinds of empathic connection that emerge as a result of these practices are, as the novel itself suggests, aspirational and liable to fail, and often do. But the imaginative sensibility that cultivates and allows for those efforts to transpire emerges, in *A Passage to India*, as a crucial element of authentic connection. It is the aspiration to be, as Godbole puts it, “more than I am myself” that emerges in the novel as a viable ethical alternative to the limited scope of
orthodox religiosity and the paternalistic oppression of colonial administration, a crucial complement to the success of cross-cultural intimacy.

The Forster I describe in this chapter seems miles away from the irreverent, individualist author of “What I Believe” (1938), taken for decades after its publication as an explicitly secularist manifesto. Yet even during his lifetime Forster recoiled against an atheistic perception of his work and ideals. In response to an accusation of atheism in 1911, he answered, “I have more sense of religion now than in the days of my Orthodox Christianity. Do you say that unless one believes in God one has no religious sense?” (qtd. in Copley 112). One of the goals of this chapter is to paint a picture of the other Forster, whose interest in the imaginative possibilities of a religious sensibility—as distinct from religious belief—puts pressure on his reputation as staunch secularist. This chapter seeks to uncover the ways Forster took seriously realms of the unseen, the otherworldly, and the cosmic, and how his pursuit of these undergirds his efforts to “only connect.” While critics have disputed Forster’s famous allegiance to liberal humanism (as early as Frederick Crews in the 1960s, and, more recently, David Medalie1), few have delved into the ways his ambivalence on this point shades into his thinking about religion. Another goal of this chapter is to position Forster’s rather unique approach to questions of self, religiosity, and self-abstraction in the context of other efforts during the period to engage with “Eastern” approaches to these questions. Forster’s commitment to personal relationships—in particular, between members of different faiths and different races—hinges on a spatial imaginary, such that the warm and sensuous immersion of empathy depends on the distancing perspective that a kind of spiritualized self-abstraction affords. The imaginative, aspirational element of these efforts is key, and it is, perhaps, what separates Forster from some of his contemporaries who also engaged seriously with questions of impersonality, detachment, and self-abstraction. Forster’s

approach elucidates a hitherto neglected angle on questions of cosmopolitanism, empire, and sympathy in the literature of the early twentieth-century.

**Self-Abstracting Spiritualities and the Imperial Imaginary**

In 1892, socialist writer and early theorist of homosexuality Edward Carpenter made the following declaration about the antithetical aims of East and West *vis a vis* self:

> The West seeks the individual consciousness— the enriched mind, ready perceptions and memories, individual hopes and fears, ambitions, loves, conquests—the self, the local self, in all its phases and forms—and sorely doubts whether such a thing as an universal consciousness exists. The East seeks the universal consciousness, and in those cases where its quest succeeds individual self and life thin away to a mere film, and are only the shadows cast by the glory revealed beyond. (*From Adam’s Peak to Elephanta* 157)

Carpenter had been traveling in India, and his encounter with the Hindu tradition there—in particular, the modes of consciousness and practices of self-abstraction offered by Hindu spirituality—formed the basis of the utopian world he imagines in works like *On Democracy and Civilization: Its Cause and Cure.* As countercultural a figure as Carpenter was, his fundamental assumption here about East and West—and the Orientalist baggage that came with it—was widely shared by the British public across the political spectrum during Forster’s lifetime: the West meant individuality, and all that it connotes—especially liberal ideals like humanism, rationalism, democracy, and even secularism—while the East remains dreamily indeterminate, looking upward and inward rather than forward. Especially after the First World War, popular and intellectual interest in Eastern spiritualities—for the most part, Tibetan Buddhism and a broadly construed neo-Vedānta Hinduism—was devoted to the Orientalist project of finding a

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2 For more on the mystical dimensions of Carpenter’s work, see Copley and Henderson, “Mysticism as the ‘Tie That Binds’: The Case of Edward Carpenter and Modernism.”

3 The primary works I turn to in this section are responses to different belief systems with distinct traditions. I discuss them together in this section not to suggest any actual fundamental similarities among these religious traditions themselves but rather to make an argument about how Western responses to them during this period were shaped by some of the same preoccupations, anxieties, and concerns, especially *vis a vis* selfhood and self-abstraction.
solution to the “spiritual failures” of the west. The universalist narrative, already by the modernist period, had achieved the status of cliché: at the heart of “secret India,” as bestselling writer Paul Brunton put it in 1934, was an ancient font of spiritual wisdom with the potential to enliven and renew an enervated, war-weary West—a West whose preoccupation with “the local self” had prevented it from reaching the enlightenment outside it. This trope was also taken up by many Indian intellectuals—Gandhi and Vivekananda (1863-1902) among them—seeking to unite the Indian people against colonialism by reworking the very tropes used to subjugate them. Hence Vivekananda’s assertion that “the salvation of Europe depends on a rationalistic religion, and Advaita—non-duality, the Oneness, the idea of the Impersonal God—is the only religion that can have any hold on any intellectual people” (*The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda* 139). In the west, as Viswanathan has shown, “an abstract, theistic philosophical system came to represent Hinduism, while all other popular practices were denounced as idolatrous” (“Colonialism and the Construction of Hinduism” 35). This context is crucial to understanding the intellectual milieu into which Forster was inserting himself and making an imaginative intervention—a milieu obsessed with the individuality-effacing potential of Eastern spirituality, what it could give to the West, and how it might threaten the West’s very foundations.

*A Passage to India* emerged toward the end of a tradition of empire writing that engaged, explicitly and implicitly, with the ‘unselfing’ potential of non-Western spiritualities. In particular, the popular genres of travel writing and adventure fiction frequently featured encounters with belief systems, real and imaginary, in colonial outposts, belief systems whose

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4 See Clarke, *Oriental Enlightenment* 95-103.
5 Paul Brunton was the penname of Raphael Hurst (1898-1981), a British Theosophist famous for his immensely *A Search in Secret India* (1934), an account of his “spiritual odyssey, his journey up and down India to seek out and interview holy people.”
conceptual foundations and practices often featured constructions of consciousness and selfhood at odds with the rational, autonomous “I”. The popular adventure novels of H. Rider Haggard, for instance, often dramatize the colonial encounter as a confrontation between exemplars of Western reason and evidence of an irrational, unseen world, challenging the worldview of their staunchly rational protagonists as well as the very fabric of the novel’s realism. A vaguely determined idea of religiosity swirls in and out of these narratives of contagion, degeneration, and confusion of identity. Even Kipling’s Kim often engages in the boundary-dissolving work of “‘mazement,” wherein the mind is free to wander outside the limits of “what is called personal identity” by repeating one’s name over and over—a practice, Kipling notes, that “a very few white people, but many Asiatics, can throw themselves into” (Kim 233).

But the potentialities of these otherworldly worlds, particularly in terms of self-abstraction and consciousness, remain circumscribed throughout this literature in a few ways, not least of all the eventual triumph of secular, Western, Enlightenment values. Either empiricism is able to explain away, or “disenchant,” the irrational forces it encounters, or the figure associated with those forces—She’s Ayesha, for instance—is revealed to be merely another version of sovereign imperial power itself. Despite its being penned by one of British imperialism’s most infamous apologists, Kim may come closest to taking seriously certain kinds of self-abstraction and ascetic sensibility, but all of Kim’s ‘mazement and devotion to an ascetic Tibetan lama works in service of reaffirming a sovereignty that is always predicated on his

7 First, the eventual appearance of whiteness in the colonial world—in the figure of Ayesha, for instance—serves as a way of containing the perceived metaphysical anarchy of the East; even as she entrances Polly and Vincey with reincarnation, telepathy, and the promise that “salvation lies within”, she insists that “there is no such thing as magic,” and that her powers are only the result of her ability to “master” and control nature (194). The would-be colonizer-protagonists of Kipling’s The Man Who Would Be King reach remote Kafiristan—India is “not big enough” for them—only to find that the people there are not only “hairy and white and fair” but also practice an ancient brand of Freemasonry. Like She, those of Kipling’s short stories that appear to admit the possibility of the fantastical—especially of the unknown realms of self—are more often than not frame narratives, ghost stories and adventures related by characters whose sanity remains in question. It is perhaps no coincidence that Haggard and Kipling were both deeply interested in fin-de-siecle occultism.
identity as a British subject; as Said has argued, Kim “reassert[s] his British priorities well before
the lama comes along to bless them” (Culture and Imperialism 145). The framing of the other-
worldly and the self-abstraction it calls for, in all of these cases, replicates the colonial apparatus:
the possibility of the unseen—and its attendant implications for the individual consciousness—is
displayed, contained, and controlled. If boundaries between consciousnesses, between lives,
between fantasy and realism are dissolved throughout the action of these works—if disbelief and
skepticism are suspended—these boundaries inevitably return as a matter of course. Spiritual
enlightenment is sought, questioned, and usually deemed incompatible with the stable categories
and models of self and community found at home. Even if the early twentieth-century witnessed
an unprecedented interest in psychologies, philosophies, and spiritualities beyond traditional
Western frameworks, 8 much of its literary engagement with them remains, as Said’s famous
characterization of modernist literature suggests, mired in a similarly paradigmatic ambivalence.

Travel writings of the period exhibit the same atmosphere of cultural and spiritual crisis
as well as an increasing ambivalence about the realities and consequences of empire. As Helen
Carr has written, “one of the most pervasive moods in travel writing of the inter-war years is a
certain world-weariness, springing from disillusionment with European civilization and dismay
at its impact on the rest of the world” (“Modernism and Travel 1880-1940” 81). Anxiety—about
identity, individual and national; about the uncertainty of British rule; about the instability of
racial and ethnic categories—is, accordingly, a key feature of travel writing of the modernist
period. Particularly anxiety-provoking for travel writers encountering “Eastern” religiosities
were these same ideas of self-abstraction and divine imminence—or, the idea of an impersonal
divinity diffused and accessible in the world, rather than a personal God at a safe distance in a

Christian heaven. Even J.R. Ackerley’s Hindoo Holiday (1932), a light-hearted, fish-out-of-

8 See Qian, Orientalism and Modernism, and Clarke 95-103.
water-comedy style memoir about the years Ackerley spent as private secretary to the Maharajah of Chhattarpur, devotes a moment of seriousness to a conversation between the two men on the topic of Brahma, “the one eternal, impersonal Essence” (32). In response to the Maharajah’s metaphysical dilemma about the “unknowability” of such a divinity, Ackerley advises him to accept “the most comforting belief,” or “what seems most agreeable” (35)—but even this is related in a tone of resignation, as if Ackerley is aware of the limitations of the point of view he advocates, but can imagine no alternative to it.

Goldsworthy Lowes Dickinson (1862-1932), fellow Bloomsbury Group member as well as Forster’s friend and companion on his first trip to India, relates in his travel writings, entitled *Appearances: Notes of Travel, East and West* (1915), an encounter with the Gospel of 19th century Indian mystic and philosopher Sri Ramakrishna, a copy of which he brought with him upon his visit to the Dakshineswar Kali Temple, where the late Ramakrishna was priest.

Approaching the shrine of Kali, Dickinson recounts feeling “a wave of the repulsion I had felt from the first for the Hindu religion, its symbols, its cult, its architecture, even its philosophy” (30)—yet, upon opening Ramakrishna’s Gospel on the way there, Dickinson admits that “at once [his] attention was arrested (30).” What follows is a bizarre account of seduction and repulsion, a dynamic the text replicates formally by including a series of long quotations from Ramakrishna’s Gospel, almost all of which feature some imperative to self-abstraction, sandwiched between Dickinson’s effusions of fascination and defensive horror. “I rubbed my eyes,” Dickinson recounts. “…Is East East? Is West West? Are there any opposites that exclude one another? Or is this all-comprehensive Hinduism, this universal toleration, this refusal to recognize ultimate antagonisms, this ‘mush,’ in a word, as my friends would dub it—is this, after all, the truest and

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9 That British writing of the early twentieth century featured engagement with Eastern culture as seductive and angryous, alluring and repulsive has been amply demonstrated. See Parry 66, Suleri 146.
profoundest vision?” (34). But an encounter with a Buddhist monk a few chapters later is enough to disabuse Dickinson of his tempered effort to sympathize with a non-Western sensibility:

Thereupon the West stirred in me, and cried "No!" "Desire," it said, "is the heart and essence of the world… Your foundation was false. You thought man wanted rest. He does not. We at least do not, we of the West. We want more labour; we want more stress; we want more passion. Pain we accept, for it stings us into life. Strife we accept, for it hardens us to strength. We believe in action; we believe in desire. And we believe that by them we shall attain." So the West broke out in me; and I looked at [the monk] to see if he was moved…Secure in his Nirvana, he heard or he heard me not. He had attained the life-in-death he sought. But I, I had not attained the life in life. Unhelped by him, I must go my way. The East, perhaps, he had understood. He had not understood the West. (42-43)

Dickinson’s nominal effort to understand the merits of self-abnegation avalanches into an impassioned defense of Western individualism, a veritable call to action in an unexpectedly vociferous, oratorical tone. Sympathy devolves into satire, as Dickinson casts the Buddhist monk as mindlessly pursuing death, simply unable to understand the character-building potential of “passion” and “pain”, while the “West” is figured as a kind of conscience, its intervention a necessary wake-up call from the lure of a philosophy at odds with the ideas Dickinson ultimately venerate with zeal. Dickinson’s conclusion ultimately equates self-abstraction with an irredeemable state of psychic and physical stagnancy that is fundamentally at odds with the individual-centric models of self at the heart of a Western perspective.

Forster’s response to these preoccupations finds more traction in the alternative tradition of Carpenter, whose characterization to the paradigms that I have described opens this section. Like Lawrence, Forster visited Carpenter’s estate at Millthorpe, and his posthumous novel Maurice (1971) has often been read as inspired by the time he spent there with Carpenter and his partner, George Merrill. Carpenter, most famous for his radical socialism and influential theorizations of homosexuality in works like The Intermediate Sex (1908), was also a rigorous theorist of consciousness. Carpenter’s concept of “cosmic consciousness,” in particular,
provides an illuminating context for Forster’s fiction, not least of all because it was directly inspired by Carpenter’s encounter with the Hindu tradition. *Towards Democracy* (1883), Carpenter’s book-length poem, owes as much to his friendship with Walt Whitman as to his extensive reading in Indian literature, particularly the *Bhagavad Gita*. But it wasn’t until his visit to India and Ceylon in 1890 that he began to formulate his idea of “universal” or “cosmic consciousness,” a concept for which he credited Frederic Myers’ idea of the “subliminal consciousness,” his readings in late-Victorian writings about the fourth dimension, and his conversations with an Indian gnani.

In his travel writings, *From Adam’s Peak to Elephanta: Sketches in Ceylon and India* (1892), Carpenter provides extensive accounts of these conversations, stressing throughout the importance of “Non-differentiation,” an imperative communicated to him by the gnani: “On no word did the ‘Grammarian’ insist more strongly than on the word Non-differentiation. You are not even to differentiate yourself in thought from others; you are not to begin to regard yourself as separate from them. Even to talk about helping others is a mistake; it is vitiated by the delusion that you and they are twain.” The process of acquiring cosmic consciousness was, for Carpenter, an evolution from seeing oneself as an individual—with a “special bodily consciousness”—to seeing oneself as “part of and integral with [others]” (176). Rather than inveighing against the asceticism a strict adherence to Hindu principles might require, Carpenter redefines sex as a crucial dimension of his vision, substituting “self-consciousness”—rather than bodily pleasure—as what must be given up.

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10 See Copley, Chapter 1. Copley elucidates that Carpenter’s great divergence from Whitman emerged from fundamental disagreements about the corresponding merits of religiosity and individualism. As Copley puts it, “Whitman…turn[ed] sex into a religion, whereas Carpenter always sought a degree of transcendence,” a religiosity predicated on sex rather than the other way around (15). “In his Vedantist belief in the overlapping identity of atman and brahman, in his concept of a higher self, Carpenter moves well beyond Whitman’s cult of individualism” (22).
The evolution of “bodily consciousness” to cosmic consciousness that Carpenter prescribed for the individual in his travel writings was also part and parcel of his political imperative, meant to be exercised on the level of entire communities. Carpenter’s ultimate goal was a spiritualized socialist society: one that rejected modern individualism and positivistic science in favor of a transcendental democracy guided by eros, the “great leveler” (*The Intermediate Sex* 107), a conviction he articulated, as Sarah Cole has elucidated,\(^\text{11}\) in visions of class-transgressing homoerotic desire. Minus the emphasis on same-sex love, Carpenter’s vision also shares a surprising amount in common with Lawrence’s. Like Lawrence, Carpenter glorified prehistoric civilization as living according to a religion that was not composed of “abstract dogma of Science or Theology, but as a living and ever-present fact” (*Civilization* 45), a venue through which people “instinctively felt and worshipped the great life coming to them through Sex, the great life coming to them from the deeps of Heaven” (*Civilization* 45). Carpenter’s ideal society was to function according to a philosophy of non-differentiation writ large, sex a crucial medium through which union between people could be achieved and individualistic notions of self overcome.

Carpenter diverges from his contemporaries not only in his optimism about the attainability of something like “cosmic consciousness,” but also in his spatialized conception of it: “Space itself, as we know it, may be practically annihilated in the consciousness of a larger space of which it is but the superficials,” he writes, “and a person living in London may not unlikely find that he has a backdoor opening quite simply and unceremoniously out in Bombay” (*From Adam’s Peak* 161). Crucial to Carpenter’s spatialization of consciousness is this move toward contextualization: we need to think about space on a larger scale in order to consider the limitations—both in scale and complexity—of space “as we know it.” What this passage also

\(^{11}\) See Cole 23-50.
suggests is a kind of internationalism predicated on this new understanding of space, a reorientation of perspective meant to eradicate national (and presumably racial) boundaries. Carpenter’s writings, then, do something fairly unique in using an account of travel abroad to legitimate a claim about the fundamental smallness of the distance he traversed. If London “has a backdoor” to India, the possibility of intercultural encounter is an always-already facet of lived experience, one that is simply invisible to those unwilling to step outside the framework of a Western consciousness. Forster never goes so far as to suggest teleportation, but his depictions and descriptions of consciousness appear to draw on Carpenter’s “cosmic” model, especially its spatial dimensions. Forster draws on and complicates these tropes in his own travel writings and accounts of intercultural encounter, much of which reveal his interest in the self-abstracting potentialities of a specifically “religious” sensibility.

“The Hands that Hold the Tray”:

Space and Disposition in Forster’s Non-Fiction Writing, 1911-1921

Forster’s non-fiction writing about India, much of which he produced while composing *A Passage to India* between 1911 and 1921, reflect the intensity of his engagement with Indian religion and philosophy, particularly with regard to questions of religiosity, consciousness, and the coherence of self. Before visiting India for the first time, he had read the *Bhagavad Gita* (in Annie Besant’s translation) and Kalidasa’s *Sakuntula* numerous times each (Copley 146) as well as familiarized himself with a wide range of roughly contemporary texts about Indian art, architecture, and literature (Ganguly 22). Forster was also well-read in Sufi poetry (Ganguly 25), familiar with the Koran, and met the famous Muslim poet Mohammed Iqbal. He later met and reviewed numerous books by Rabindranath Tagore, winner of the 1913 Nobel Prize in Literature.
For the rest of his life, Indian spirituality was to remain a key focal point for his thinking and writing: the subject of numerous book reviews, essays, letters, and broadcast talks, and an enduring focus for his fiction.

Forster’s reflections on Indian spirituality, like those of many of his peers, are marked by concerns about form and formlessness, aesthetic and psychological, that are often ungenerous. In an often commented-upon episode in his collected travel writings, *The Hill of Devi* (1953), for instance, Forster describes the festival of Gokul Ashtami, the same celebration that functions as the focal point of the final third of *A Passage to India*, as “fatuous and in bad taste,” a formless “mess” of noise and color (127). A few pages later, he confesses an aesthetic and intellectual preference for a monotheistic, more iconoclastic Islam; “after all the mess and profusion and confusion of Gokul Ashtami,” he writes, being in a mosque feels like “standing on a mountain” (193). Forster’s censure, as critics have noted, resonates with Fielding’s feelings of relief upon leaving India for Italy, where Western standards for aesthetic form prevail, where “everything st[ands] in the right place” (150). The resonances between Forster and Fielding in moments like these have led many scholars to view Fielding as Forster’s stand-in, his Dickinsonian attraction and repulsion a fictionalized version of Forster’s own clinging to Western aesthetics and its logic of distinction.

Yet Forster’s feelings about the Hindu tradition were to evolve over the course of his life and writings, ultimately revealing, if not a preference, an apparently sincere admiration for a Hindu sensibility. Indeed, even a closer look at Forster’s original critique, troublesome as it is, reveals an attitude less like Fielding’s and more like Ronny and Stella Moore’s, who, as a befuddled Fielding relates to Aziz, “like Hinduism, but take no interest in its forms” (359).

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12 Ganguly provides an extensive catalogue of Forster’s sources and readings throughout this period in *India: Mystic, Complex and Real: A Detailed Study of E.M. Forster's a Passage to India*.

Observing the uplifted faces of worshippers in *The Hill of Devi*, for instance, Forster is most captivated by their facial expressions, which betray that “[the ceremony] touches something very deep in their hearts” (64). The moment reorients religiosity as experience, as way of feeling—and imagining—that has less to do with the object of worship and more to do with the sensibility of the worshipper. Of course, Forster’s representations of Hindu ritual would continue to be tinted by prejudices aesthetic and otherwise—for instance, in infantilizing representations of Krishna worship in *A Passage to India* as itself childlike, involving “practical jokes” that “sacrifice[e] good taste” (324). “Even for those more favorably disposed to India,” as Viswanathan has observed, “[t]he western framework was never far from being a point of reference, even when the object was to critique the doctrinaire aspects of Christianity and uphold the east as a spiritual model for the materialistic west” (“Colonialism and the Construction of Hinduism” 25). Yet it is also in *A Passage to India* that Forster begins to rethink Hindu forms as a vehicle for cultivating the empathic imaginary that is the cornerstone of his ethics. In passages like these, as I explore in my reading of the novel, models, effigies, and practices of “substitution” enable a sensibility capable of the kinds of connection that few of the novel’s major characters are able to experience in social contexts.

*The Hill of Devi*, however, remains profoundly skeptical of those “forms,” focusing instead on a particular disposition Forster imagined to be central to Hindu practice. Indeed, sensibility features more prominently throughout the travelogue than belief or worship.14 *The Hill of Devi* features a number of interactions15 between Forster and the Maharajahs of Dewas

14 Forster also articulated his interest in Islam in terms of disposition and sensibility. In 1922, for instance, he wrote: “Islam is more than a religion…it is an attitude towards life which has produced durable and exquisite civilizations” (“India and the Turk” 844). The Muslim sensibility Forster describes here emerges in *A Passage to India* as a propensity toward hospitality and affection.

15 It bears noting that much of Forster’s own introduction to India occurred not through touristic “passage” but through friendship with the Maharajah of Chhatarpur and romantic entanglement with Syed Ross Masood. “Masood
and Chhatarpur, both of whom expose him to dimensions of Hindu metaphysics that feature union with the divine as well as the possibility of interpersonal intimacy. Indeed, Forster’s account of the whimsical and affectionate Maharajah of Dewas, to whom he served as private secretary, are most admiring when it comes to his religious sensibility. Describing the Maharajah’s ecstasy while meditating on the figure of Krishna, for instance, Forster notes that he “has what one understands by the religious sense and it comes out all through his life” (106). This “religious sense,” for Forster, has very little to do with institutionalized religion: “…he had above all things a living sense of religion which enabled him to transcend the barriers of his creed and to make contact with all the forms of belief and disbelief” (220-221). For Forster, this kind of indeterminacy and elasticity can be problematic—open to confusion and chaos—but it also harbors the possibility of imagination and perspectival experimentation, possibilities that are always, in Forster’s vision, spatialized along a broad scale.

These possibilities are literalized in Forster’s account of a meeting of the Dewas Literary Society, during which his audience was moved by a story narrated in Dostoevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov* (1880), “The Parable of the Onion.” In the story, a woman writhing in Hell is offered another chance at salvation when an angel extends to her an onion—the very same onion she offered a beggar when she was alive. As the onion lifts her into heaven, she begins to bat away the other denizens of Hell attempting to ride on her coattails, crying out “Let go—it’s my onion.” No sooner does she utter the word “my” that the onion stalk breaks and she is condemned to Hell forever. After he told the story, Forster writes, his audience “made everything real and exciting as soon as he began to talk,” Forster writes, and “showed me new horizons and a new civilization and helped me towards the understanding of a continent” (*Two Cheers* 292).

Memorializing him at the end of the collection, Forster asserts that he was “never deaf to the promptings which most of us scarcely hear. His religion was the deepest thing in him. It ought to be studied…He penetrated into rare regions and he was always hoping that others would follow him there” (266). It is in those regions, Forster suggests, where boundaries between subject and object, subject and God, can evaporate, if temporarily.
called out ‘This we understand. This is bhakti.’ The whole meeting became alive—and here’s my point—I realized that there is a natural affinity between the Indian and the Russian outlook. The affinity here was through bhakti, a particular philosophy, a belief that we are all indivisible and bound together through love and that personal ownership impedes.” (qtd. in Creator as Critic 256)

Religion achieves a strange status in recollections like these. It is to be transcended, but it also seems to provide a bridge of understanding and facilitate ways of thinking and feeling beyond the purview of the individual perspective. This emerges both in the diegesis of the Dostoevsky parable—where salvation is premised on a recognition of human interconnectedness—and in Forster’s description of the meeting itself: a shared religious sensibility predicated on something like Carpenter’s idea of non-differentiation enables a moment of shared connection and understanding. Both hinge on a willingness to disimagine the boundaries between people.

As examples like these make clear, Forster’s writings also repeatedly feature Hinduism as a belief system uniquely suited to processes of imagination. Krishna worship—according to Forster, the point on which the “temperaments” of both Maharajahs “converged” (The Hill of Devi 14)—is perhaps the most valuable touchstone in Forster’s efforts to mobilize the Hindu imaginary. First, Krishna—a God as well as a man with human attributes\(^\text{17}\)—provides a personal route to an abstract, impersonal, and diffuse divinity, something otherwise beyond representation. Like the onion in Forster’s account, Krishna is a medium that partakes of realms human and beyond; he can be understood and even identified with as a man. As the Maharajah of Chhatarpur puts it, “I try to meditate on Krishna. I do not know that he is a God, but I love Love

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\(^{17}\) In A Passage to India, the narrator praises the relatability of Krishna’s human characterization, noting that humor (not to mention sensuality) are missing from the Christian tradition’s representations of divinity: “There is fun in heaven. God can play practical jokes upon Himself, draw chairs away from beneath His own posteriors, set His own turbans on fire, and steal His own petticoats when He bathes. By sacrificing good taste, this worship achieved what Christianity has shirked: the inclusion of merriment. All spirit as well as all matter must participate in salvation, and if practical jokes are banned, the circle is incomplete” (318). Although the narrator is ostensibly celebrating “the merriment” that is integral, in his view, to the melding of human and divine experience at the core of the ritual, the tone of the passage nonetheless betrays a patronizing and infantilizing attitude towards Hindu worship—cast here as childlike play that is in opposition to “good taste”—similar to the one put forward by Dickinson and Ackerley in their travel writings.
and Beauty and Wisdom, and I find them in his history. I worship and adore him as a man. If he is divine he will notice me for it and reward me; if he is not, I shall become grass and dust like the others”” (14).  

But the imaginative dimensions of Krishna worship as Forster understood it also require efforts to think according to a logic of displacement and substitution, much in the same way Godbole attempts to place himself both in the position of Mrs. Moore and “in the position of the God” in A Passage to India. Dancing with the milkmaidens as a young cowherd, Krishna is able to multiply himself so that each milkmaiden feels that he is dancing with her alone. He is able to dance with and love each of the milk maidens equally and at the same time; to worship him, therefore, is to aspire to perform a surreal act of empathy analogous to his self-multiplication. This legend embodies, for Forster, the kinds of imaginative work crucial to human connection. The kinds of empathy and love that Forster associates with Krishna worship require the adoption of an orientation where the dimensions of space and time are no object. To meditate on the divine, in a sense, is to be there. Krishna worship, for Forster, enables a sensibility that involves thinking and feeling in almost superhuman ways: it anthropomorphizes the expansive and diffuse nature of the divine, but it also offers a model of empathetic connection that the merely human can aspire to.

Forster’s skepticism about the continuity and coherence of self throughout this body of writing casts all the more doubt on his ostensible commitment to New Liberalism, the dominant lens through which his work has been read, and a philosophy fundamentally at odds with the

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18 Forster makes a similar point in his account of a conversation with a Holy Man: “The present reviewer has been reminded of a picture that a Holy Man once explained to him at Benares. It showed the human frame, strangely partitioned. God was in the brain, the heart was a folded flower. Yoga unfolded the flower, and then the soul could set out on its quest of God. Two roads lay open to it. It could either proceed directly, by the spinal cord, or indirectly through one of the Hindu deities who were dispersed about the body. When asked which road was the best, the Holy Man replied ‘That by the spinal cord is quicker, but those who take it see nothing, hear nothing, feel nothing of the world. Whereas those who proceed through some deity can profit by—’ he pointed to the river, the temples, the sky, and added, ‘That is why I worship Siva.’ But Siva was not the goal.” (“The Gods of India” 338).
Hindu-inspired orientation I have been describing. Medalie has observed that the New Liberalism relied on a definition of “personality” that was stable, legible, and rational (E.M. Forster’s Modernism 32). As Leonard Hobhouse, mouthpiece for the New Liberalism, put it in 1911, “Liberalism is the belief that society can safely be founded on this self-directing power of personality, that it is only on this foundation that a true community can be built, and that so established its foundations are so deep and so wide that there is no limit that we can place to the extent of the building” (Hobhouse 123). But it is “personality” specifically that Forster calls for a retreat from in “Anonymity,” opposing it to forces of creativity, empathy, and spirituality—especially to the spatialized imaginary he explores in his own fiction.

This apparent pessimism about “personality” and its all-too-human incapacities for sustained generosity might seem to conflict with Forster’s admiration of the upturned faces of the Hindu worshippers—which can be taken as a transformation of a genuinely religious moment into a humanist one. But what Forster is exploring throughout his non-fiction writings is a way that religiosity and self can work together: a religious sensibility that accommodates a self that is always unstable, always in flux. In a review of The Gods of India (1914)—a work written by a Wesleyan missionary whose patronizing tone Forster spends most of the review condemning—Forster counters the charge that Hinduism is idolatrous, 19 too fixated on icon-worship, insisting instead that

...the deities may help [the believer], or they may mislead, like the shows of earth; it depends, depends on the step he has taken just before. For outside the ‘trayful of dolls’ are the hands that hold the tray...Nothing is more remarkable than the way in which Hinduism will suddenly dethrone its highest conceptions, nor is anything more natural, because it is athirst for the inconceivable. Whatever can be stated must be temporary. (“The Gods of India” 338)

19 The ubiquity of this critique among Anglo-Indians is a constant source of anxiety for Aziz, who is quick to distance himself from “superstition” and idolatry throughout A Passage to India.
In passages like these, Forster appears to be advocating for an approach to religion not unlike Lawrence’s, one that recognizes the mutual versatility and open-endedness of religious forms—and the people who adhere to them—and allows for both to work together. For Forster, a Hindu sensibility emerges as uniquely suited, once again, to an approach like this because this sense of contingency is built into its very forms. Forster’s interest in a religious sensibility, then, hews close to the understanding of human nature he puts forward in “Anonymity: An Inquiry.” Self may be unstable, but Hinduism is able to accommodate and respond interactively to that instability.

What the Hindu tradition offered Forster, first and foremost, was a way of conceiving and making sense of “the unseen” featured so prominently in his fiction outside the bounds of organized religion; it provided him, too, with models of consciousness that attended to his skepticism about the coherence of self. But it also laid the foundation for Forster’s fictional experiments with spatial perspective as a means of breaking down the boundaries and barriers to intimacy that most preoccupied him. The final two sections of this chapter trace the development of these ideas in Forster’s fiction, first in short stories that feature the afterlife as an imaginative space where intimacy is possible, and finally in *A Passage to India*.

“Two People Pulling Each Other Into Salvation”:

*Imagined Space in “Mr Andrews” (1911) and “The Life to Come” (1922)*

Intimacy and the unseen—the cosmic, the otherworldly, the ultra-conscious—are, in Forster’s fiction, inextricably intertwined. Memorably, the human drama of *A Passage to India* opens as Aziz approaches his friends, Hamidullah and Mahmoud Ali, who are debating “whether or no it is possible to be friends with an Englishman” (7)—but just moments before telling Aziz
so, both men profess to be “dying” or “dead”; Hamidullah whimsically implores Aziz to
“imagine us both as addressing you from another and a happier world” (6), suggesting that the
subject of their conversation is better suited to the afterlife, either because it is impossible for
interracial friendship to occur in this world or because the subject is best viewed from the safe
distance of another dimension. On the surface, Forster seems to be suggesting that real intimacy
between Indians and Englishmen—and, in this case, the homoerotic kinds of relationship that
that intimacy points to—is virtually impossible, feasible only in a world very different from ours.
But Forster is also making the point, here and throughout his fiction, that the possibility of
authentic intimacy—especially across boundaries of race, culture, and ethnicity—requires a
mode of thinking and feeling, or imagining, that verges on inhabiting another dimension. In
Forster’s fiction, a religious sensibility requires imaginatively projecting oneself into another
reality in the here and now.

The short stories Forster composed throughout the decade in which he struggled to write
and revise the manuscript of what would become A Passage to India reflect his repeated efforts
to use traditionally religious modes to represent intimacy between men, many of which
prominently feature some idea of “the life to come.” Forster admitted to his fixation on the
afterlife, asserting in 1930, “Two people pulling each other into salvation is the only theme I find
worthwhile. Not rescuer and rescued, not the alternating performances of good turns, but / It
takes two to make a hero” (Commonplace 55). That he calls this scheme of reciprocal salvation a
“theme,” rather than a plot or narrative arc, is apt given the pessimism with which the stories
treat the idea. These stories, despite their frequent, fantastical efforts to create an imaginary for
the kinds of connection Forster hopes to cultivate, portray intimacy as only fleetingly possible,
usually ending in disappointment or ambivalence. Pan skips across the pages of “The Curate’s
Friend” (1907), in which a pastor experiences renewed commitment to bringing “joy” to his parish after an erotic encounter with a male faun that he can never, ever disclose; in “The Point of It” (1911), a repressed homosexual man is granted access to Heaven, but only after recognizing that “desire is enough” (139). It is no coincidence, then, that some of Forster’s most homoerotic stories are also his most fantastically inflected. For Christopher Lane, Forster’s frequent recourse to tropes of futurity is “convenient for displacing the present difficulty of incorporating homosexuality in psychic and symbolic terms and for demonstrating the conflict and alienation this incorporation would entail for Forster’s narrative” (Lane 155). But Forster’s insistence on futurity in these short stories is also bound up with his efforts to figure an imaginative vantage point outside of time and space, an endeavor for which the trope of the afterlife is uniquely suited, and one that, at this point in his career, Forster hoped a religious sensibility might be able to offer. The stories, in other words, also use the afterlife to express and represent a mode of thinking and feeling that would enable these intimacies to be successfully engaged—even if they also dramatize the tragic consequences of a failure to do so.

Two of Forster’s short stories that feature homoerotic relationships that are also interracial—“Mr. Andrews” (1911) and “The Life to Come” (1922), both written after Forster’s first voyage to India—take up the question of a religious afterlife explicitly, staging cultural encounter as interfaith encounter. Both stories—one early, one late; one optimistic, one pessimistic—are undeniable predecessors of A Passage to India; “The Life to Come” in particular has been read, most notably by Lane, as A Passage to India’s repressed id. But beyond their shared thematic content, these stories also highlight Forster’s investment in experimenting with religious modes of thought and feeling in conjunction with intimacy, modes explicitly outside the province of institutionalized religion, and modes that appear, in these stories,
particularly at odds with strictly individualized constructions of self. If, as Forster suggests in “Anonymity,” a state of self-forgetting, of individuality-effacing, enables a kind of radical empathy, these stories offer fictional elaborations of what that procedure might look like—and, in the case of “The Life to Come,” a pessimistic vision of the implausibility of those efforts in a human context. Of course, these stories are also orientalist fantasies, as Lane and others have argued, wherein Forster displaced his own repressed desires, desires that were often violent and racially insensitive. These fantasies, nonetheless, operate according to a unique model of religious sensibility they seem to revolve around in different ways: religious sensibility as an orientation, both affective and perspectival, that enables interpersonal connection precisely by imagining a place beyond self.

On the surface, “Mr. Andrews” appears to be a scathing satire of religious dogmatism, criticizing religion for being both a vehicle for the narcissistic projection of human desires and a way of siphoning human imagination and energy from the forms of connection toward which they might otherwise be directed. In the story, Mr. Andrews, a Christian Englishman, befriends a Turkish Muslim (whom Forster calls only “the Turk”) during their ascent to Heaven, each looking forward to an explicitly “individual life to come” (141). Chatting amiably as they ascend, both resist the atmospheric pressure of what Forster calls a “world soul,” which strives to “break their thin envelope of personality, to mingle their virtue with its own” (141). In its opening lines, the story sets up an opposition between individuality and a difference-effacing, impersonal, ostensibly divine realm or consciousness, where orthodox religion rests firmly in the court of the former. At one point in the story, Mr. Andrews encounters the gods that occupy Heaven: Buddha, Vishnu, Allah, Jehovah, Elohim, and a number of “little ugly determined gods who were worshipped by a few savages” (143). Contemplating them, he notes that, however
different in appearance—of their differences, the narrator wryly observes, “no aspiration of humanity was unfulfilled”—they seem to function in precisely the same way (144). The power of each god swells according to their only source of “nourishment” (143): the fervor of their followers on earth. There is something insidious, rather than refreshingly pantheistic, about what these gods and the religions they represent share: all maintain power and vitality by milking the imagination and hopes of the humans that worship them, offering in return merely the promise of “personal salvation.” This salvation, as Mr. Andrew quickly realizes, is itself a farce, modeled, like the gods, after human expectations and desires: Mr. Andrews wears a robe and carries a glittering harp, while the Turk is surrounded by beautiful virgins whose beauty intensifies according to his whim. Forster’s vision of “the individual life to come”—the modifier “individual” is crucial here—is a world readily attributable to human desires and concerns, dictated by selfish whims and narcissistic projections.

But the story’s continued focus on the “world soul” as an alternative to this individualized vision of Heaven reveals Forster’s investment in a kind of religiosity beyond the purview of organized religion: the story becomes not just a satire of institutional belief, but an attempt to reclaim spirituality. If Heaven pertains to the scope of the individual, the world soul \(^{20}\) is pure intersubjectivity, aligned not with any religion or individual, but rather with the moment of shared connection on which the entire story hinges. Upon reaching Heaven, rather than requesting entry for himself, each man surprises himself by advocating for the salvation of the other:

[Mr. Andrews] was only conscious of an immense pity, and his own virtues confronted him not at all. He longed to save the man whose hand he held more tightly, who, he thought, was now holding more tightly on to him. And when he reached the Gate of

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\(^{20}\) The concept of a “world soul,” or *anima mundi*—a larger soul or consciousness shared by all living beings—emerges across various philosophical and religious traditions, from Neo-Platonism to the Hindu concept of Brahman.
Heaven, instead of saying, ‘Can I enter?’ as he had intended, he cried out, ‘Cannot he enter?’ And at the same moment the Turk uttered the same cry. For the same spirit was working in each of them. (142)

It is to this spirit that the two men return, ultimately, at the end of the story; their choice to be literally dissolved into the world soul in the story’s final lines is motivated by their desire to partake of the shared consciousness, or “spirit,” they experience in this moment. No longer motivated by a desire to preserve the integrity of their individual selves, as they were at the beginning of their ascent, the men willingly allow themselves to be infiltrated by the world soul: “For a moment they stood hand in hand resisting it. Then they suffered it to break in upon them, and they, and all of the experience they had gained, and all the love and wisdom they had generated, passed into it, and made it better” (145). While ostensibly rejecting creed, the story does not set aside substantially religious experience: the men dissolve not into nothingness, but into a “world soul,” into the vastness of a consciousness that exists within and outside themselves. This world soul, the passage suggests, is also fundamentally homoerotic; Forster figures absorption into it as a kind of penetration that both men, after first “resisting” it, allow it to “break in upon them.” The story’s ending, then, renders absorption into the world soul—a more substantially spiritual and otherworldly space than the superficial Heaven imagined by various strains of orthodox belief—as compatible with and even consubstantial with the successful culmination of homoerotic desire. In the end, the men substitute a narrowly construed idea of salvation for a different kind of “life to come”—one that is both more real and more compatible with the kinds of intimacies forbidden in the here and now.

Radical connection, in “Mr. Andrews,” coalesces with the destruction of self. The story offers an ideal in which both individuals and the atmosphere into which they dissolve become better, change each other, and perhaps even become each other. The story also poses a
dichotomy between repression and penetration, where a willingness to be penetrated by the world-soul also means an openness to intimacy. But it is also in some ways a fantasy of interpenetration, of mingling of selves. This trope seems to have been central to Forster’s vision of intimacy from the beginning. In a diary entry written after the death of his Egyptian lover, Mohommed el Edl, Forster describes a recent dream he had: “…I felt we belonged to each other, you had made me an Egyptian...I shall not belong to you when I die - only be like you” (“MMA” 331). The diary reframes ideal intimacy as a process of becoming ‘like’ each other21: of boundary effacement and/or collapse. But both the diary entry and “Mr. Andrews” are fantasies that take place in extra-conscious, and thus impossible, spaces; both are pervaded by an overwhelming sense that the connection they imagine—despite the “world” in “world soul”—is impossible on Earth.

“The Life to Come” is located, much more than Mr. Andrews, in a terrestrial and specific place, and that colonial setting is arguably to blame for the tragedy that it narrates. Somewhere in central India,22 Christian missionary Paul Pinmay engages in a sexual relationship with Vithobai, the native chieftain he has arrived to convert; when Vithobai expects Pinmay to deliver on his promise of “coming to Christ”—which he now imagines to have a sexual component—Pinmay rejects and humiliates him, promising that their prior intimacy can only again by experienced in “the life to come”. On his deathbed, Vithobai stabs Pinmay through the heart, ostensibly to recover in the afterlife the embodied dimensions of “love” and “Christ” Pinmay has denied him.

21 In “The Story of a Panic” (1904), Eustace renames himself Eustazio after a romantic encounter with Gennaro, an Italian: shedding Englishness and the heterosexual propriety it implies also means becoming Italian, or becoming ‘like’ his lover.
22 While Lane assumes that the story takes place in Africa, Anindyo Roy provides compelling evidence for its setting in India: “It is true that, except for the name “Vithobai,” there is nothing in ‘The Life to Come’ that explicitly locates it in the tribal Bhil and Gond territories of central India… That Forster’s story is anchored in a specific history—with its own discursive genealogy—is made evident through its parallels with the accounts left of these regions by British agents, military officials, and missionaries in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries” (Civility and Empire: Literature and Culture in British India, 1821-1921 128).
Forster wrote the story in 1922—“in indignation”, as he put it in his diary (qtd. in Furbank 115) – as he wrestled with his revisions to *A Passage to India*, but withheld it from publication until after his death due to its explicitly homosexual content. Like *A Passage to India*, the novella features a sonata structure, this time in four acts, each corresponding to a different time of day, though each episode is spread out across a period of ten years. It also features the repetition of “God is Love,” the phrase “Not yet,” and even an echo. More importantly, the novella explores in a much more pessimistic way a constitutive relationship between a religious sensibility, guided by indeterminacy and imagination, and the possibility of connection.

“The Life to Come” stages an opposition between Pinmay’s Christianity and the sensibility Pinmay encounters in Vithobai: unaffiliated, unnamed, endlessly generous and open-minded. While not explicitly religious—it is unclear whether Vithobai or his subjects practice any religion prior to Pinmay’s arrival—Vithobai possesses traits that Forster aligns elsewhere, especially in *A Passage to India*, with Muslim and Hindu characters. Like Aziz, Vithobai is emotionally effusive and affectionate, an affect Forster aligns with a Muslim sensibility in *A Passage to India*; toward the end of the story, he begins to express sentiments not unlike those of Hindu Brahman Professor Godbole, insisting on the fundamental oneness of all human categories and distinctions: “I forgive you, I do not forgive, both are the same. I am good I am evil I am pure I am foul, I am this or that, I am Barnabas, I am Vithobai. What difference does it make now?” (79) But Vithobai is also aligned with a kind of Christianity: his invitation on the day of his baptism—“As it was in your hut let it here be” (72)—echoes the syntax of the “Our Father,” where “hut” and “here” are substituted for “Heaven” and “Earth”; as Vithobai lies dying at the end of the story, he invokes Peter’s denial of Christ during His crucifixion, asking “ ‘Who

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23 In a letter to Siegfred Sassoon, Forster admitted that he first imagined the story as “a purely obscene fancy of a Missionary in difficulty” but that as he continued to write, “the obscenity went and a great deal of sorrow and passion that [he had himself] experienced, took its place” (*Selected Letters* 45).
calls me?”” and “‘Who calls me the third time?’” (80) It is Vithobai who speaks using recognizably scriptural syntax, while Pinmay can only deploy Christian sound bites—like “Come to Christ” and “the life to come”—to manipulate and deceive. Vithobai is aligned, then, with religious tropes that underwrite Christianity as well as any other faith—with the kind of primordial religiosity privileged by “Mr. Andrews” and fundamentally at odds with its institutionalized successors.

This form of religiosity, like the “world soul,” is privileged in spatial terms throughout the story. “The Life to Come,” for instance, opens in a setting that is indeterminate and largely unknowable, poetic rather than prosaic:

Love had been born somewhere in the forest, of what quality only the future could decide. Trivial or immortal, it had been born to two human bodies as a midnight cry. Impossible to tell whence the cry had come, so dark was the forest. Or into what worlds it would echo, so vast was the forest. Love had been born for good or evil, for a long life or a short. (65)

Love, rather than the individuals who experience it, is the subject of the sentence; like the “world soul,” it is unalloyed, unattached—something greater, more powerful, and more alive than either of the individuals to whom it is born. As the story goes on, we learn that this scene of lovemaking with which it opens has occurred in a hut outside Vithobai’s village, a space that is both “remote” and “lovely…lovable.” Poetic repetition attends the telling of their intimacy—“All had fallen into the stream, all were carried away by the song. Darkness and beauty, darkness and beauty” (65-66)—as binaries are playfully dissolved into the all-encompassing, all-inclusive space carved out by the “Love” that initiates the novella’s action, a “Love” echoed by the hut’s description as “lovely…lovable.” Pinmay’s recollections of it follow the same repetitive, rhythmic pattern: he is haunted by an insistent memory of “the hut, the hut” (77). In the hut, the boundaries that separate Vithobai from Pinmay are all but invisible: Vithobai’s “pagan limbs”
are indistinguishable from Pinmay’s “golden ruffled hair” (65)—until lamplight directs Pinmay’s attention to an open Bible, cast aside on the floor. The fantasy is ruptured, the boundaries between the two men roar back into contrast, and Pinmay begins to pray. By the end of his prayer, which begins as a plea for mercy, Pinmay has begged God for Vithobai’s damnation.

After the conversion of Vithobai and his tribe, the story’s narration becomes austere and realist, in stark contrast to its imagistic, fragmented opening. The formlessness of Pinmay and Vithobai’s early encounter is replaced by the binary, highly rational logic of bureaucracy. The change, Forster suggests, occurs due to Pinmay’s efforts to repress his own illicit desires. In the hut, desirousness and an ecstatic embrace of “the life to come” coincide—but Pinmay’s repression results in an erasure of both, as he devolves from rogue expounder of Gospel teaching to coldly detached practitioner of “native psychology.” Forster writes, “He who had ignored the subject of native psychology now became an expert therein, and often spoke more like a disillusioned official than a missionary” (70). Pinmay arrives in the village an evangelist; his efforts to repress his desire for Vithobai render him a “disillusioned official.”24 The “Christianity” of the valley, Forster observes wryly, “could produce catechists and organizers, but never a saint” (77). Pinmay’s new articulation of Christianity demands officialism and determinacy, and its consequences are widespread and extensive: at Pinmay’s urging, Vithobai is baptized Barnabas—the name of the biblical Paul’s companion—only to witness the proliferation of labor exploitation, disease, and pollution over what remains of his kingdom. This newly colonized space offers no opportunities for imagination or intimacy; by the end of the

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24 This shift in Pinmay’s attitude is particularly interesting given longstanding tensions between colonial administrators and British missionaries, whose aims and relationships to Indian subjects (and especially to Indian converts) were often at odds. As Viswanathan has shown, British administrators feared that Christian proselytization could jeopardize efforts to consolidate colonial control of India, and thus typically kept their distance from missionary efforts, opting instead for “strategies of cooptation.” See especially “Colonialism and the Construction of Hinduism” 26, 33-34 and Outside the Fold 92-93.
story, the boundary-effacing logic of the hut has devolved into a social environment not unlike the one Forster describes in *A Passage to India*; as Mr. Turton informs Fielding decisively, “‘I have never known anything but disaster result when English people and Indian people attempt to be intimate socially. Intercourse, yes. Courtesy, by all means. Intimacy—never, never’” (164).

The novella’s enigmatically violent ending—in which the dying Vithobai stabs Pinmay in the heart—has been read as “redemptive” (Levine 87) and as a racist image of “desire run amok” (Lane 169), Forster’s ultimate succumbing to a prevailing ideology that associated a failure to repress homosexual desire with barbarism and colonial insubordination. But neither of these readings attends to the novella’s subtle engagement with different modes of consciousness and models of religiosity. Once again, for instance, the story finds Forster satirizing the promises of an “individual” afterlife, an ending that, as Lane notes, suggests the narrative’s “failure to differentiate Paul’s spiraling projection from its own” (167). It is possible to read the ending as Forster’s ironic demonstration that Vithobai’s conversion is complete, indeed—he, too, succumbs to an idea of the afterlife as a space of Old Testament punishment, law, and repression. Even so, though, Pinmay’s murder also precipitates a generic shift from realism to fantasy, as, after mounting Pinmay’s corpse, Vithobai “swoop[s] like a falcon from the parapet in pursuit of the terrified shade,” leaving “all disease and humiliation behind him” (111-112). The afterlife is, once again, reworked as a space of consciousness, a space where barriers are dissolved, where repression has no purchase.

As unsettling as the novella’s ending is, then, it also constitutes a return, however nightmarish, to the difference-effacing, distanced vision of the hut. It is Vithobai’s difference-effacing perspective that soars over the valley. There is an insistent push, throughout the novella, towards the adoption of a perspective that achieves these heights: wide, broad, and as inclusive
as Vithobai’s. By the end of the story, Vithobai achieves something like the God’s-eye view with which the story begins, and that is even subtly aligned with an ironized personification of divinity itself: “Yes, God saw and God sees. Go down into the depths of the woods and He beholds you, throw His Holy Book into the stream, and you destroy only print and paper, not the Word. Sooner or later, God calls every deed to the light” (68). Pinmay’s “deed” is indeed called to light, as he suffers the consequences not of an illicit sexual act but of his real imaginative and moral failings.

The intimate spaces envisioned by these stories are subjunctive and projected. Even in “The Life to Come,” the hut is figured as an impossibly otherworldly space, detached from the real world in space and time. Outside of these spaces, connection is all but impossible—either due to the inherent divisions between individuals manifested in organized religion or due to the social pressure of a colonial setting predicated on division, prejudice, and subjugation. But these spaces, nonetheless, continue to stand in for the sensibility they represent and capture—a sensibility that could enable the kinds of connection that the plot of a story like “The Life to Come” ultimately forecloses. And even if, as “The Life to Come” reveals, Forster is ultimately unable to imagine a place for intercultural intimacy in a colonial context, its refrains of “the hut, the hut”—and the boundary-effacing ethos those refrains connote—begin to sound something like Godbole’s counterpoint of “Come, Come,” offering an alternative imaginary to the barrier-enforcing work of colonial administration.

**Imitations and Substitutions: Perspectival Imagination in *A Passage to India***

Forster opens the final section of *A Passage to India*, “Temple,” with the meditation of a Hindu Brahman, Professor Godbole. For reasons Godbole does not know, Mrs. Moore has, “with
increasing vividness,” suddenly entered his mind. Experiencing what the narrator has just called “strange feelings” cultivated by participation in the Ceremony of the Birth (or Gokul Ashtami, the alternate name for the festival Forster uses in his non-fiction writings), Godbole attempts a radical feat of imagination:

He was a Brahman, she Christian, but it made no difference, it made no difference whether she was a trick of his memory or a telepathic appeal. It was his duty, as it was his desire, to place himself in the position of the God and to love her, and to place himself in her position and to say to the God, “Come, come, come, come.” This was all he could do. How inadequate! But each according to his own capacities, and he knew that his own were small. “One old Englishwoman and one little, little wasp,” he thought, as he stepped out of the temple into the grey of a pouring wet morning. “It does not seem much, still it is more than I am myself.” (325-326)

The spiritual practice Godbole engages in here seeks to capture a perspective beyond self that allows him to feel—and even to love—beyond his own psychological and emotional “capacities”. The kind of intimacy he aspires to in this passage, in other words, exists beyond the purview of ordinary human consciousness, and requires effort. Godbole’s construal of empathy as simultaneously a kind of duty, a kind of work, and a kind of travel—a way of “plac[ing] himself” in the “position” of both her and God—allows him to surmount the potential obstacles to this empathy, including the fact that he and she do not belong to the same religion, and the possibility that her appearance in his mind is mere coincidence, rather than a divine missive.

Critical scholarship about A Passage to India is divided about the viability of reading the novel through Godbole’s vision. In his psychoanalytic study of A Passage to India, The Cave and the Mountain, Wilfred Stone insists, “It is the Godbole vision we must understand if we are to understand the book” (334), and many others have agreed.25 Other critics, however, point to Godbole’s infamous failure to grasp the real-world consequences of Aziz’s arrest—as well as his failure to sympathize with the stones (321)—as evidence for the limits of Forster’s

25 James McConkey, for instance, argues that Godbole is “the Forsterian voice itself” (The Novels of E.M. Forster 160)
endorsement of Godbole’s spiritual vision. These accounts often posit Fielding, the skeptical
humanist, as a more likely Forsterian substitute, for better and for worse.\textsuperscript{26} While a small number
of recent critics have argued for readings of Forster’s work according to rubrics that do not plot
belief and unbelief against each other—Craig Bradshaw Woelfel’s reading of \textit{A Passage to India}
according to Charles Taylor’s notion of “cross pressures,” for instance\textsuperscript{27}—the critical consensus
remains largely invested in visions of the novel that dismiss its discussions of religious
experience outright or attempt to reclaim it as a straightforward, unambiguous defense of
Hinduism. But it is the spiritual sensibility that Godbole expresses, rather than Godbole himself
or his religious affiliation with Hinduism, that the novel takes seriously as an ethical practice.

If an idiosyncratic approach to space and spatiality is a crucial component of Forster’s
understanding of the Hindu tradition, in \textit{A Passage to India}, Forster figures space as
consciousness unavailable to the waking mind, or to the mind enslaved to dogmatisms enshrined
by “the echoing contradictory world” (126). As Gillian Beer has argued, “So far as \textit{A Passage to
India} is ideological, it is an ideology which manifests itself as space—the space between
cultures, the space beyond the human, the space which can never be sufficiently filled by
aspiration of encounter” (46). In imbuing his work with a sense of infinitude, such that even his
narrators cannot adequately describe, express, or articulate the scope of that infinitude—the un-
narratable Marabar caves, the “unattainable Friend” (124), the distance beyond the stars and sky,
“that farther distance, through beyond color” (5) to which the narrator alludes in the novel’s
opening pages—Forster is also formulating an ethics of imagination: one that refuses to take for
granted the total knowability of the world and the perspectives that inhabit it or, by extension, the

\textsuperscript{26} Despite reading Forster’s attitude toward Hinduism as ultimately sympathetic, for instance, G.K. Das nonetheless
reads Forster as Fielding: “Fielding’s new insight is Forster’s own…” (\textit{E.M. Forster’s India} 109)

\textsuperscript{27} See Craig Bradshaw Woelfel, “Stopping at the Stone: Rethinking Belief (and Non-Belief) in Modernism Via \textit{A
Passage to India}.”
exceptionality of one person’s perspective; one that is open to the multiplicity of possibilities beyond the limitations of self, or of religion, or of empire. In the novel as well as in Forster’s description, self-abstraction requires believing that there are spaces inaccessible to the waking consciousness, and that attempting to access them has ethical value.

While Forster privileges a spatialized sensibility in his short stories, that sensibility is nonetheless powerless to cultivate sustained connection except in otherworldly spaces: the hut, the “world soul.” In A Passage to India, Forster not only insists more rigorously on the projective quality of imaginary space—as in Godbole’s “positioning”—but also introduces a temporal and practical element to the equation, suggesting that access to this space is a matter of process more than teleology, of practice rather than permanent state, of disposition rather than belief. Godbole’s song, after all, also figures self-abstraction as spatial practice: he does not just imagine he is God or Mrs. Moore, or even think critically about what it might be like to be God or Mrs. Moore. The narrative voice is forceful, here and elsewhere, about the terms of this kind of empathetic imagining: he places himself in their positions and acts from within those positions. The precise terms of his effort to accomplish something that is explicitly inhuman—beyond his “capacities”—are quite human indeed: the language of movement in space. This spatialized imagination is at the heart of the tradition of Krishna worship to which Godbole’s song—the “legend of the multiplied Krishna” Forster describes in his 1924 letter—alludes. In the Bhagvata Purana, Ganguly notes, Krishna loves the milkmaidens equally, and stands at the center of their dance, equidistant from each of them. Krishna is also able to multiply himself so that each of the milkmaidens feels that he is dancing with her only; each milkmaiden is able to access an impersonal divine reality through a personal interaction with Krishna. It is only when they become possessive—desiring, as Godbole explains in A Passage to India, that he “come to
me only”—that Krishna disappears. What the legend encapsulates, for Forster, is a way of relating to the divine and to others via feats of imagination. Spatiality functions as a conceptual apparatus for describing something the novel renders virtually impossible, given the limitations of the ordinary human consciousness and its capacities for empathy. In *A Passage to India*, Forster’s figurations of space acquire an element of movement and mobility as yet unexplored in his earlier fiction.

In *A Passage to India*, connections between people—moments of intimacy, of mutual understanding, of authentic empathy—often occur because of an act of perspectival imagining: Godbole’s efforts to “love” Mrs. Moore; Adela’s revelation of Aziz’s innocence; Aziz’s willingness to befriend Mrs. Moore’s son only after “focusing his heart on something more distant than the caves, something beautiful”—in this case, the distant chanting of “Radhakrishna” (349). As Lauren Goodlad observes in *The Victorian Geopolitical Aesthetic*, “Although ethics are, for Forster, about the relation to otherness, and though no disaffected relation can be ethical, his novel suggests that for care to be ethical it must also be informed by *view*” (232). According to Goodlad, Forster’s idea of *view* is “multi-sensory, dialogical, performative, and lived” (232). For Forster, an ethics predicated on “view” is always on the move, and thus always embodied. It is not the detached view from above, necessarily, so much as recurring movement between perspectives. The moments listed above, likewise, hinge on a character’s willingness to engage in an imaginative practice that involves imagining a point of view different from one’s own, experiments in perspective that operate according to a grammar of movement or transportation, particularly in terms of how movement affects point of view: whether this means seeing self from a distance, disimagining boundaries between people, focusing attention on something other than self, or attempting to inhabit the mindset of another person. All of these different methods
and modes of self-abstraction emerge in the novel as viable ethical practices crucial to the possibility of intimacy.

Self-abstraction and spatial experimentation provide the impetus for connection throughout the novel just as the novel itself engages in formal feats of spatial distancing. *A Passage to India* is a text that is always formally invested in the ethical potentialities of a perspectival imagination. For instance, the narrator oscillates between the distant tone of a travelogue writer and the closeness of free indirect discourse; Forster claimed that the novel attempts to “get inside” all of his characters, rather than just one of them (qtd. in Furbank 106). But its most vivid and complex experiments in perspective occur on the level of space—in other words, in the forms of distance and closeness that attend the distinct spaces at the center of each section of the novel: “Mosque,” “Caves,” and “Temple.” The Marabar Caves in particular provide not only the novel’s most enigmatic space—an ethical and narrative lacuna that lies (literally) at its center—but also the novel’s most vivid illustration of the link between spatial imagination and solipsism.

Critics have read the Marabar Caves in innumerable ways: as a validation—or condemnation—of negative theology; as a nihilistic confirmation of the emptiness at the heart of all human enterprises; as “an embodiment of religious experience itself” (Woelfel 40); as a kind of primordial id for the entire human race. Within a postcolonial framework, Suleri has read the caves as, like the novel’s Indian landscape, “that presexual space upon which the participants in the great game of colonial intimacy can recognize their postsexuality” (Suleri 146). What actually occurs in the caves is perhaps the novel’s most compelling instantiation of why intimacy

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28 The terms Forster himself used to describe the cave episode in a 1924 letter to G.L. Dickinson reflect his commitment to an ethics of uncertainty and indeterminacy: “In the cave it is *either* a man, or the supernatural, *or* an illusion. And even if I know! My writing mind therefore is a blur here—*i.e.* I will it to remain a blur, and to be uncertain, as I am of many facts in daily life” (qtd. in Furbank 124-125).
and connection might require self-abstraction in the first place. Adela enters the cave after Aziz while thinking about love and marriage, specifically the deficit in her own feelings for her fiancé, Ronny Heaslop. Equally significant, though, is the way she filters and projects this anxiety: “Probably this man had several wives—Mohammedans always insist on their full four, according to Mrs. Turton,” Adela thinks to herself. At once, her ungenerous thought becomes an inconsiderate, careless question: “‘Have you one wife or more than one?’” (169). Forster’s narration makes it clear that the terms of her question are dictated by Mrs. Turton’s way of thinking rather than her own. Rather than engage with an open heart, she has fallen back on the unimaginative, narrow, and typifying vision of Mrs. Turton and the Anglo-Indians—one shaped not only by bigotry and racial superiority but also by the hysterical character of the post-Mutiny atmosphere (Bratlinger 223). This is a vision of nationalism and exclusion, one that distinguishes “English crime” (187) from “oriental pathology” (243), that operates according to an imperative to read, as Mr. McBryde recommends, “the mutiny records…rather than the Bhagavad Gita” (187) as an aid for cross-cultural relationship.

The novel suggests that such a shift in Adela’s disposition was practically inevitable: Aziz’s friends had warned him early on, after all, that she would betray him, and the eventuality of Adela’s succumbing to the disposition of the Anglo-Indians is a sentiment shared by most of the novel’s characters, including Fielding and even Adela herself. On the way to the caves, for instance, she agonizes over the possibility that she will become as “ungenerous and snobby” as Mrs. Turton and Mrs. Callendar, insisting that she is not strong enough to “resist [her] environment and avoid becoming like them” (161). This idea, expressed here in quasi-biological language, is voiced later by the narrator, who similarly observes the difficulty of sympathy: “The soul is tired in a moment, and in fear of losing the little she does understand, she retreats to the
permanent lines which habit or chance have dictated…” (275). It is an inescapable fact of human nature, the novel insists, to “retreat” to the familiar—in this case, to a stereotyping vision, one that separates and divides. And, of course, to one that maintains fictions of individual or group exceptionalism and focuses on constructions of identity that, by definition, require exclusion and the erection of barriers. One of the novel’s signature preoccupations, then, is how to forge connections between people whose capacities for sympathy are so limited—so hopelessly subject to their social environments and prone to parsing the world via processes of framing and exclusion.

Underlying this typifying imperial gaze, then, are the limitations of human subjectivity itself. The caves, whatever their symbolic meaning, are a space that defies rational quantification, a space where space itself implodes, a space of endless refraction. They echo and they reflect; “the walls of the circular chamber have been most marvelously polished” (137), such that striking a match does no more than cast an image of the same match on the wall opposite. They are a repository for projection—for narrative—but contain no legible narrative of their own; as the narrator observes, “Nothing, nothing attaches to them, and their reputation—for they have one—does not depend upon human speech” (137). The truth at the center of Adela’s memory is, likewise, a non-event, a nothingness that surpasses her English friends’ drive to plunder it for empirical fact. In Adela’s case, the caves reflect back the point of view she has just internalized: an essentialist view of Indian men as sexually voracious—which is itself, as “The Life to Come” suggests, a projection of colonial desire. Even Mrs. Moore, who has advocated for “good will and good will and good will,” is met in the caves with the limitations of her own sympathy: “Less attention should be paid to my future daughter-in-law and more to me, there is
no sorrow like my sorrow,” she thinks to herself (231). The caves ultimately return a nightmare vision of human solipsism.

Neither religion nor secularism is able to offer respite from the reality that the caves represent. Orthodox religion, especially, is as tyrannical as the colonial authority that continues, in the novel, to wield some version of Christianity as a moral bludgeon. Just as in “Mr. Andrews,” colonial power and religious orthodoxy converge: the Collector is “like a god in a shrine” (180), and his English comrades-in-arms “like to pose as gods.” Mrs. Moore never stops believing in ghosts, but she does lose faith in Christianity, precisely because, as the novel makes abundantly clear, religious orthodoxy lends itself to the same kinds of absolutism, certainty, and boundary-enforcement as the colonial administration that rules India based on these principles.

Ronny Heaslop’s religion, after all, is never subject to change or evolution. The novel’s description of the extent of his religious belief reminds us of how the logics of empire and Christianity closely adhere: “Ronny’s religion was of the sterilized Public School brand, which never goes bad, even in the tropics. Wherever he entered, mosque, cave, or temple, he retained the spiritual outlook of the Fifth Form, and condemned as ‘weakening’ any attempt to understand them” (286). The novel suggests that Ronny’s version of institutionalized Christianity and colonial administration are deeply compatible, as both rely on stasis, exclusion, and certainty at odds with the fluid imaginative faculties crucial to authentic interpersonal engagement. Any sensibility ingrained in a rigid system becomes inflexible and deadened, “for where there is officialism every human relationship suffers” (235). This is true, in the novel, even for Hinduism: Godbole’s inability to help Aziz and to transpose his sympathies into ethical action—insisting, for instance, that “‘suffering is merely a matter for the individual’” (197)—suggests
that even the belief systems most suited to generosity and sympathy, once hardened into institutions and dogmas, are powerless to effect living change.

A certain brand of superficially tolerant secularism—one that, according to Fielding, is practiced by “educated thoughtful people” in “the West” (120)—emerges in the novel as just as limiting an imaginative framework as religion. It may perhaps be confounding to readers of Forster that “the sanctity of personal relationships” is a phrase uttered in the novel not by one of its more sympathetic protagonists but rather by Ronny Heaslop (65).29 Along similar lines, Fielding believes the world to be “a globe of men who are trying to reach one another and can best do so by the help of good will plus culture and intelligence” (65). Like Ronny, Fielding articulates a moral imperative that seems superficially similar to the moral imperative of Forster’s novel as a whole. And yet, he articulates this imperative from a philosophical vantage point steeped in imperialistic paternalism. He insists, for instance, on mutual friendship with Aziz even as he mocks the idea of Indian self-rule in the novel’s final pages.30 Part of the problem, the novel suggests, stems from the boundary-sustaining work of Fielding’s hyper-rational, unsentimental, and fundamentally humanistic disposition: “This reflection about an echo lay at the verge of Fielding’s mind. He could never develop it. It belonged to the universe he had missed or rejected. And the mosque missed it too. Like himself, those shallow arcades provided but a limited asylum” (307). In this passage, Forster likens Fielding—a human being—to the stone arches of a mosque, a comparison that recalls Lawrence’s likening of Will Brangwen to stone Gothic arches in The Rainbow. Due to his strict adherence to the letter of Christian

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29 Read in light of Forster’s 1924 letter (with which this chapter opens), it can be surmised that Forster has purposely put his own earlier point of view in the mouth of the ultimate representative of colonial administration and close-mindedness.

30 In her reading of Where Angels Fear to Tread, Goodlad argues that Forster’s fiction “captures the British tendency to internalize a self-universalizing Anglocentrism” (218), where an ideal of cosmopolitanism hinges on universal adoption of British ideals, affects, and codes of behavior and where difference is overcome, not by a mutual act of self-abstraction, but rather by the eclipse of one culture by another.
doctrine, Will cannot ever achieve the flexible dynamism of a rainbow—an arch that is, by contrast, natural, flexible, and institutionally unaffiliated. Because Fielding stubbornly chooses to operate from within the framework of Western subjectivity, likewise, he is as rigidly self-contained as a stone building, and thus unable to access a point of view outside that frame of reference. Moreover, the passage—in which the “shallow arcades” of a mosque offer just as “limited” a vantage point as Fielding “himself”—makes it clear that the novel’s skepticism of religious orthodoxy is, in fact, a skepticism of *all* forms of orthodoxy, even secular ones. The target of the novel’s critique is the inflexible perspective that undergirds all forms of dogmatism.

Fielding’s half-hearted reconciliation with Adela after Aziz’s trial, in which the similarities between their worldviews forge a temporary bond between them, puts forward a similar point:

> When they agreed, ‘I want to go on living a bit,’ or ‘I don’t believe in God,’ the words were followed by a curious backwash as though the universe has displaced itself to fill up a tiny void, or as though they had seen their own gestures from an immense height—dwarfs talking, shaking hands and assuring each other that they stood on the same footing of insight. They did not think they were wrong, because as soon as honest people think they are wrong instability sets up. Not for them was an infinite goal behind the stars, and they never sought it. But wistfulness descended on them now, as on other occasions; the shadow of the shadow of a dream fell over their clear-cut interests, and objects never seen again seemed messages from another world. (294)

Spatial extremes dominate this passage: not only distant and near but also “tiny” and massive, finite and “infinite”. The scale invoked by the narrator here, consonant with the novel’s many appeals to infinite space, eclipses the narrowness of the delineated, defined, “clear-cut” Western perspective Fielding describes. Passages like these, abundant throughout the novel, displace the perspective of the novel’s characters in favor of an unidentifiable perspective that is above and beyond them, undercutting their declarations of autonomy and rational knowledge. What the narrator does in this passage—recognize the inadequacy of a human perspective by appealing to
a broader scale, maintaining an attitude of openness to other modes of knowledge—also sounds strikingly like what Godbole does when he attempts to empathize with Mrs. Moore. Both achieve something like a heightened, boundary-transcending imagination.

In *A Passage to India*, after all, what you’re looking at matters less than the position from which you’re looking. Forster’s preoccupation with geographical perspective is most obvious in his constant references to the Indian landscape—in particular, how it is perceived by various characters in the novel at different points and under different circumstances: romantic, foreboding; unwelcoming, inviting; infinite, finite. Numerous episodes and revelations in the novel also hinge on the particularities and contingencies of geographical perspective: Aziz and Ralph manage to glimpse the image of the Rajah—visible only from one specific location—due to Ralph’s intuitive navigation (352); Adela becomes aware of Ronny’s character flaws far away from England, where she knew him well; Mrs. Moore recognizes the follies of touristic travel—what Aziz later calls the “pose of ‘seeing India’” (343)—only as she watches the coastline of India recede. The novel even begins by calling attention to the limitations of geographical point of view: the city of Chandrapore “presents nothing extraordinary,” the narrator remarks unceremoniously, cataloguing its “ineffective” temples, “mean” streets, and “filthy” alleys (1); even the Ganges “happens not to be holy” in Chandrapore. But a paragraph later, the narrator describes a very different Chandrapore—one viewed from the elevated height of the “second rise”: “...viewed hence Chandrapore appears to be a totally different place. It is a city of gardens. It is no city, but a forest sparsely scattered with huts. It is a tropical pleasaunce washed by a noble river” (2). A shift in perspective enables a shift in disposition, as the coldly detached travelogue narrator begins to wax lyrical about the same locale he has just dismissed.
These moments in the text forge a link between geographic distance and ethical, or empathetic, disposition that is crucial to Forster’s overarching project. Fielding, for instance, insists on “start[ing]” from a point of view from which Aziz is innocent (196). Even despite his aforementioned allegiances to strictly rational knowledge, Fielding recognizes that an empathetic disposition—or lack thereof—can (and will) dictate the verdict in Aziz’s trial. If empathy in *A Passage to India* is always about dispositional positioning, positioning is also a consequence of empathy. Fielding can plausibly imagine Aziz as standing outside that cave because he has already believed—in ways the Anglo-Indian community refuses to—that Aziz is innocent.

Forster’s description of the Birth Ceremony, described much more generously in the novel than in *The Hill of Devi* (a dispositional shift enabled, perhaps, by his own distance from the material\(^{31}\)), is a celebration not of Hinduism as a religion but rather of precisely this imaginative capability. Forster’s representation of the ritual, of course, continues to be double-edged: the narrator’s depiction of Krishna worship as childlike play is undoubtedly patronizing, casting worshippers as returning to an infantile state of unadulterated “merriment” and “innocence” (324). But in other ways the novel pushes even harder than his earlier work against contemporary censures of Hinduism—in particular, as idolatrous—by redefining the role of those idols themselves—as vessels and venues for enlarging the scope of human sympathies and for working in tandem with them. The logic of the rituals catalogued in this section of the novel relies entirely on practices of imaginative substitution. It depends, for instance, on models and effigies: the model of the village of Gokul (322); the silk baby (323); Dahi Handi (324-325);

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\(^{31}\) In a “Note on *A Passage to India*,” Forster writes, “I began this novel before my 1921 visit, and took out the opening chapters with me, with the intention of continuing them. But as soon as they were confronted with the country they purported to describe, they seemed to wilt and go dead and I could do nothing with them. I used to look at them of an evening in my room at Dewas, and felt only distaste and despair. The gap between India remembered and India experienced was too wide. When I got back to England the gap narrowed, and I was able to resume” (*The Hill of Devi* 238).
the “fondling of Shri Krishna under the similitude of a child” (324-325); where different children in the crowd are imagined to be Krishna for a brief moment and are treated accordingly; the palanquin of Krishna (352). The narrative voice, up to this point maintaining distinctions between signifier and signified—stating, for instance, that “the model was on a wooden tray about a yard square; it was of clay, and was gaily blue and white with streamers and paint” (322)—blends the two at the moment of the Birth, relating the ceremony in terms that suggest he has internalized its intended meaning:

…and in the rosy dust and incense, and clanging and shouts, Infinite Love took upon itself the form of SHRI KRISHNA, and saved the world. All sorrow was annihilated, not only for Indians, but for foreigners, birds, caves, railways, and the stars; all became joy, all laughter; there had never been disease nor doubt, misunderstanding, cruelty, fear. (323)

The shift is perspectival and dispositional: rather than adopting a detached anthropological or strictly rational point of view, the narrator adopts an orientation according to which, in some meaningful sense, Infinite Love has become Krishna; all sorrow has been annihilated. This shift bespeaks that the narrator has internalized what the novel has been suggesting its characters do all along: to think and feel in ways that elude rational thought; that transcend, like the Maharajah of Chhatarpur in ecstasy, categories of belief and disbelief themselves.

These feats of imagination also generate an overarching atmosphere of love, trust, and unconditional compassion. Imagining that a child is Krishna, for instance, enables physical affection in the form of “stroking” and kindness in “happy words,” acts that are ostensibly much less frequently or heartily performed outside this context. As these practices take place, Forster writes,

There was no quarrelling, owing to the nature of the gift, for blessed is the man who confers it on another, he imitates God. And those ‘imitations,’ those ‘substitutions,’ continued to flicker through the assembly for many hours, awaking in each man, according to his capacity, an emotion that he would not have had otherwise. (325)
According to Ganguly, what the worshippers experience in these moments is *bhakti*—the very same practice to which Forster alludes in his account of the Dewas literary society. Ganguly explains that *bhakti* enables not only the experience of “divine reality” but also the “highest good” (196), citing the words of Krishna in the *Bhagavata Purana*: “love and devotion that make one forgetful of everything else, love that unites the lover with me” (qtd. in Ganguly 196). *Bhakti* emerges by name once more in the novel, when Aziz is sharing some of his poems with friends in the novel’s final pages: “In one poem—the only one funny old Godbole liked—he had skipped over the mother-land (whom he did not truly love) and gone straight to internationality. ‘Ah, this is bhakti; ah, my young friend, that is different and very good…’” (329). That Forster links internationality and *bhakti* suggests that the novel is offering the possibility of a new mode of international community built on the self-abstracting and imaginary capacities of its individual members—a riposte, perhaps, to Fielding’s ideas of internationalism, which presuppose the superiority of England, its values, and its modes of connection.

The ritual is also figured as a collective act of self-abstraction. Joined in worship, Forster writes,

> the assembly was in a tender, happy state unknown to an English crowd, it seethed like a beneficent potion. When the villagers broke cordon for a glimpse of the silver image, a most beautiful and radiant expression came onto their faces, a beauty in which there was nothing personal, for it caused them all to resemble one another during the moment of its indwelling, and only when it was withdrawn did they revert to individual clods…” (318)

This moment recalls Forster’s description of the same part of the ceremony in *The Hill of Devi*, where he sees in the worshippers’ faces that it “touches something deep in their hearts.” Forster imbues the fictionalized representation, however, with a spirit of generosity noticeably absent from his travelogue. This community-scale self-abstraction cultivates a spirit of generosity, almost approximating Carpenter’s ideal of non-differentiation—albeit on a more locally social
(as opposed to widely political) scale. This moment also seems to correct for another scene earlier in the novel, when the Anglo-Indians are united not by a desire to dissolve boundaries but rather by a desire to thicken them. As news of Adela’s assault spreads, we are told, the English are “white” and “fanatical,” wearing “the expression that all English faces were to wear at Chandrapore” (180); later, “the Europeans were putting aside their normal personalities and sinking themselves in their community. Pity, wrath, heroism, filled them, but the power of putting two and two together was annihilated” (183). The like-mindedness they experience here recalls Adela’s inability to resist the social pressure of the Anglo-Indians’ typifying vision; it is her ventriloquizing of Mrs. Turton’s perspective writ large. The moment of temporary union the worshippers share, on the contrary, puts forward an alternative form of intimacy, and also offers a form of impersonal community that does not demand or require authoritarian control. Their union is predicated on a logic according to which all boundaries and distinctions must dissolve. It is also, quite meaningfully, predicated on temporariness.

The novel’s insistence on the momentariness and elusiveness of the ceremony and its effects might lead readers to read it as yet another failed solution to the problem of human connection. As the festival ends, for instance, the narrator relates: “The singing went on even longer…ragged edges of religion…unsatisfactory and undramatic tangles…‘God is love.’ Looking back at the great blur of the last twenty-four hours, no man could say where was the emotional centre of it, any more than he could locate the heart of a cloud” (354-355). The moments of unity and transformation the narrator had just described in affirmative, indicative terms have, only pages later, ultimately dissolved into fragments. But the novel’s representation of the fragmentariness of that unity does not constitute a Dickinson-like rejection of its

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32 Much of Forster’s oeuvre privileges an ability to manage the fragmentariness of human experience. In Howards End, for instance, Margaret’s injunction to “only connect” is accompanied by an exhortation to “live in fragments no
effectiveness, where Western structures of thought and feeling are ultimately reasserted. Rather, temporariness and fragmentariness are consistent with the novel’s overarching perspectival logic. Adela’s revelation of Aziz’s innocence is, after all, described in strikingly similar terms: “She tried to remember what she had felt in court, but could not; the vision disappeared whenever she wished to interpret it” (267). In this sense, Forster’s “flickers” of empathy are not unlike Woolf’s “moments of being,” momentary glimpses of a hidden reality, a transcendental vision of human interconnectedness; in both cases, momentariness is a function of the limitations of human consciousness rather than a sign of failure. *A Passage to India* offers a vision, then, that finds generosity in indeterminacy, potential in temporariness. It is a dispositional openness to these moments that the novel ultimately sacralizes, and that the “substitutions” and “imitations” at the heart of the Ceremony of the Birth are constructed to facilitate. It is perhaps no coincidence that the novel’s title—an allusion to a poem by Walt Whitman—appears within the novel in a description of the ceremony’s culmination, the *Visarjana*: “Thus was He thrown year after year, and were others thrown…scapegoats, husks, emblems of passage; a passage not easy, not now, not here, not to be apprehended except when it is unattainable: the God to be thrown was an emblem of that” (353). Forster’s description invokes a cyclical, rather than unidirectional, idea of “passage”—gesturing not toward models of forward progress, but rather toward modes of continual regeneration. The novel, like the ceremony, insists on continuity through discontinuity: the repetition of practices whose outcomes cannot be known. After all, as Godbole notes, Krishna may never come. But the novel urges a sensibility that embraces indeterminacy and is open to the fallibility of the enterprise.

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In an early essay about the “Hymn before Action” (1912), Forster uses the word “passage” to refer to death, describing it as “neglibile…merely a passage leading back through birth to this” (*Arbinger Harvest* 328).
A Passage to India endorses no religion but rather “flickers,” “substitutions,” and “imitations”—moments of intimacy catalyzed by modes of imagining. Perhaps no character in the novel is temperamentally more equipped to put this idea into practice than Mrs. Moore. Mrs. Moore appears to superficially subscribe to the paternalistic fiction put forth by Ronny and Fielding, calling early in the novel for “good will and good will and more good will” (53). But what separates Mrs. Moore from Fielding, Heaslop, and Adela, all of whom appear to share a belief in this essential credo, is her insistence on an important caveat—its fallibility. As she puts it, “The sincere if impotent desire wins His blessing…I think everyone fails” (53). As numerous critics have observed, Mrs. Moore is linked throughout the novel to Godbole: both are able to sympathize with a wasp; she enters his consciousness seemingly at random when he attempts to empathize with her in the scene that opens this section. But their connection is more than symbolic, stemming also from a shared fundamental disposition. Both are described throughout the novel as exerting effort explicitly in pursuit of understanding the point of view of another; both acknowledge the inadequacies of their emotional capabilities; both view union with the divine—for Mrs. Moore, a “sense of unity, of kinship with the heavenly bodies”—as essential to meaningful connection, insisting on God’s omnipresence as a prerogative for engaging in love (53). Mrs. Moore is also, like Godbole, able to tolerate apparent contradictions. Looking at the Ganges, for instance, she sighs, “‘What a terrible river! What a wonderful river!’” (31) After a disagreement with Ronny about it, Mrs. Moore retires to her room to “reconsider[r]” her encounter with Aziz in the mosque “in light of her son’s comment…to see whose impression was correct” (34). Her openness to “truth of mood” (76) over other modes of knowledge—she concludes that Aziz’ “essential life” is “slain” by Ronny’s unwillingness to consider his
character outside the bounds of stereotype—bespeaks her willingness to adopt the kind of sensibility Forster suggests is essential to connection.

While a certain kind of temperament facilitates perspectival imaginings, they also occur in the novel in moments of altered consciousness, provoked by physical exhaustion or illness, and sometimes even by poetry, natural beauty, or changes in scenery. Exhaustion, for instance, facilitates Fielding’s ability to step outside of his usual, “sane” frame of reference and entertain the idea that “we exist not in ourselves, but in terms of each others’ minds,” a notion that is at odds with his temperament and ideological orientation (277-278). Adela's recognition of Aziz’s innocence also relies on a moment of perspectival imagining: “The fatal day recurrent in every detail, but now she was of it and not of it at the same time...She saw herself in one [cave], and she was also outside of it, watching its entrance, for Aziz to pass in. She failed to locate him” (253-254). Adela’s great moment of self-abstraction features the same language of spatial movement as Godbole’s efforts to sympathize with Mrs. Moore, as her memory becomes a space to be explored and acted within. It is also significant that Adela extracts herself from the colonial venue of the courtroom, a space prone to the same kinds of binary modes of thought and feeling that prompted her accusation in the first place. Importantly, Adela’s out-of-body experience is also preceded by her encounter with the (not unproblematically aestheticized) punkah-wallah, whose “aloofness” causes her to reflect on “the narrowness of her sufferings,” and on the imperialist ethos underlying the particularities of the “brand of opinions” and “suburban Jehovah” to which she and the other Anglo-Indians subscribe (242). This encounter—which immediately precedes Adela’s entry into the courtroom—functions almost as a reversal of the moment preceding her entry into the caves, in which her consciousness is flooded by Mrs. Turton’s sensibility. Here, instead, a reflection on the “narrowness” of her sufferings functions as
a counterpoint to the “narrowness” of the perspective with which she entered the caves. Adela’s experience of self-abstraction in the courtroom, then, appears to restore her to something like her pre-Mrs. Turton open-mindedness. Taken together, these acts of perspectival imagining highlight the value of imaginative exercises that are also self-checking, that take into account the limitations of a subjective, human perspective that is liable to absorb—and become absorbed by—its social environment.

After the trial, Aziz remains, with good reason, skeptical about the possibility of intimacy with English people. Yet even he experiences “flickers” of connection generated by perspectival imaginings in the novel’s final section—for instance, when he shakes hands with Mrs. Moore’s son, Ralph, just as the song of Radhakrishna becomes audible: “‘I must go back now,’ good night,’ said Aziz, and held out his hand, completely forgetting that they were not friends, and focusing his heart on something more distant than the caves, something beautiful.” (349). This moment of closeness between the two hinges on Aziz’s gravitating toward a song that is far away; the temporary psychic distance he experiences enables the exchange. Even if Aziz is perplexed by the possibility that “Mau [could] be purged from suspicion and self-seeking” (341) during the Ceremony of the Birth, focusing on the mantra of Radhakrishna enables him to do precisely that. What occurs in this moment, moreover, functions according to the same logic of “substitution” that makes up the ceremony. Subsumed in the mantra, Aziz transcends his rage—however rightfully felt—and experiences a moment of interpersonal connection. Like Adela’s courtroom vision, Aziz’s handshake restores him, in terms of disposition, to the self that first befriended Mrs. Moore. It is no coincidence that, during this scene, the worshippers are chanting “Radhakrishna,” the name given to Krishna and his beloved Radha when they have been inseparably united. The idea of “Radhakrishna” itself, then, represents a state of simultaneous
divine and personal connection—a state unlike what is occurring to Aziz as he listens to the song. It also represents an unending process of intersubjectivity, an idea central to “Mr. Andrews” as well as to Forster’s fantasies of “becoming like” his lover, Mohommed el Edl. Something like that experience of intersubjectivity ensues immediately thereafter, as the lines between Ralph, Mrs. Moore, and Aziz suddenly blur: after their handshake, Aziz, almost in spite of himself, repeats the very sentiment he expressed to Mrs. Moore at their first meeting—that Ralph is, like Aziz, “an Oriental” because he can intuit “whether a stranger is [his] friend” (349). The moment throws Aziz into a crisis, as he reflects on the ways he has become vulnerable—in returning to a disposition of open, unchecked affection—to reproducing the same “cycle” of abuse and suffering he has only narrowly just escaped, and from which, the novel suggests, he is unlikely to easily (or ever fully) recover. “Those words,” Aziz reflects, “he had said them to Mrs. Moore in the beginning of the cycle, from which, after so much suffering, he had got free. Never be friends with the English! Mosque, caves, mosque, caves. And here he was starting again” (349).

The novel echoes Aziz’s anxiety in its tripartite structure: Mosque, Caves, Temple. “Mosque” is named for Aziz’s encounter with Mrs. Moore in a mosque in the novel’s opening pages, an encounter that leaves both feeling as though their differences—racial, political, social—could be “bridged” simply through mutual good will. Mrs. Moore has, in Aziz’s view, “secretly understood [his] heart” (17); Mrs. Moore, for her part, believes it is possible, upon their voyage to the Marabar Caves, that “[w]e shall all be Moslems together now”—a sentiment that causes “all the love for her [Aziz] had felt at the mosque” to “wel[l] up again” (145). It is no coincidence that this encounter takes place in an Islamic space: in his writings, Forster (like many of his contemporaries) aligns Islam with the more familiar monotheism of Christianity, not
least of all due to its reliance, especially when compared with the Hindu tradition, on the coherence and stability of the self. In an essay on the poet Muhammad Iqbal, for instance, Forster refers to Islam’s “doctrine[s] of hardness”—that is, a coherent conception of a stable world—“and of the Self”: “We must fortify our personalities...Renunciation of the Self is a form of cowardice, and therefore a crime” (Two Cheers 296-7). Aziz’s encounter with Mrs. Moore represents an attitude toward personal connection that presupposes the coherence of the self: in order for a “heart” to be “understood,” it must be a stable, reliable, and fundamentally good entity. The “Caves” section, thematically as well as formally, interrupts the simplicity of the terms of their relationship by revealing the self to be none of those things. To attempt to understand the heart of another person, the novel suggests, is a more complex and harrowing exercise than either of them imagine it to be, especially in a colonial context. “Mosque” and “Temple,” then, are meant to signify particular dispositions and sensibilities more than a theological alignment with the doctrines of either Islam or Hinduism: “Mosque” stands in for a vision of personal connection that rests on the stability of personality, while “Temple” is aligned with a sensibility that recognizes its instability. Read in this light, the novel’s final section, “Temple,” represents an effort to account for these difficulties: rather than romanticizing the possibility of sustained, authentic connection (“Mosque”), or jettisoning that possibility completely (“Caves”), the perspectival imagination that dominates “Temple” works in service of the ideal that underlies Aziz and Mrs. Moore’s first encounter—which has also been, at this point, significantly damaged and called into question—by enshrining attempts to generate “flickers” of intimacy through processes of self-abstraction.

The novel’s structure, then, actually enacts the process of self-checking it prescribes, where “Mosque” connotes an initial desire for personal connection, “Caves” connotes the
limitations and fundamental unknowability of self (and the harrowing social consequences of both), and “Temple” connotes an approach to connection that takes into account the self’s failures and proposes alternative techniques for connection with those failures in mind. The novel’s structure models, on a formal level, something like Martha Nussbaum’s idea of “critical compassion,” a philosophical solution she proposes in response to what she perceives to be the human incapacity to effectively—and selflessly—imagine the suffering of others. “All we can do is trust our imaginations, and then criticize them,” Nussbaum advises, “and then trust them again. Perhaps out of this dialectic between criticism and trust something like understanding may eventually grow” (“Compassion and Terror” 26). In the terms set out by Forster’s 1924 letter, the novel’s structure also operates according to a principle of “go[ing] away” and coming back, a progression of “loneliness and intimacy” (qtd. in Furbank 124)—where bridging the gap between loneliness and intimacy, ironically, requires the deployment of processes of psychic distancing.

On a smaller scale, this dynamic finds its final expression in the last communication between Aziz and Adela, a few pages before the novel’s conclusion: “Something—not a sight, but a sound—flitted past him, and caused him to re-read his letter to Miss Quested. Hadn’t he wanted to say something else to her? Taking out his pen, he added: ‘For my own part, I shall henceforth connect you with the name that is very sacred in my mind, namely, Mrs. Moore’” (359). Aziz’s amendment to the letter does not signify an expression of forgiveness—not should it—but it does signal an effort to “connect” that is predicated on mediation: he cannot “connect” with her directly, but constellating her name and identity with Mrs. Moore’s enables him to express kindness and generosity, sentiments he is otherwise reluctant to express—and which she surely does not deserve—under the circumstances. Ganguly argues that, by the end of the novel, Aziz gravitates from a more orthodox understanding of Islam to one inflected by the spirit of
Sūfi mysticism (especially as expressed by Persian mystic poets like Hafez, Kabir, and especially Rūmī) (127), which, like Forster’s understanding of the Hindu sensibility, also relies on a logic of simultaneous personal and divine connection through processes of substitution. That a similar approach to religious experience is an essential part of Sūfi mysticism only further suggests the unboundedness of the religious sensibility that the novel tries to impart; the processes of self-abstraction central to that sensibility transcend religious affiliation. Aziz’s promise to “connect” Adela’s name with the “sacred” name of Mrs. Moore at the end of the novel bespeaks the same spirit as Godbole’s “positioning” at the opening of “Temple.” In different ways and in different contexts—Aziz’s decision to extend kindness to Adela, under the circumstances, surely requires more effort than Godbole’s attempt to “love” Mrs. Moore (326)—both endeavors recur to a spatial imagination that allow the imaginer to achieve a perspective beyond self; as Godbole reflects, “‘It does not seem much, still it is more than I am myself’” (326).

Of course, the moment is fleeting. Aziz completes the letter and embarks on his last outing with Fielding, where their conversation takes a political turn that verges on mutual hostility: Fielding mocks Aziz’s ideas of Indian nationalism until Aziz passionately voices his hatred for the English, insisting that he and Fielding cannot be friends until “‘every blasted Englishman’” has been “‘drive[n]...into the sea’” (361). In response to Fielding’s desire to be friends “now,” all of India, as Forster has construed it, reacts violently in opposition: their horses “swerv[e] apart”, the earth “send[s] up rocks”, structures colonial and Indian alike join living birds and carrion in declaring that they don’t “want” their friendship to continue (362). The novel concludes by adopting a perspective farther away than any the narrator has spoken from thus far: “...they said in their hundred voices ‘No, not yet,’ and the sky said ‘No, not there’” (362). It is no coincidence, of course, that so many of the structures named in this final passage—the jail, the
palace, the Guest House—are artifacts of colonization; as Bratlinger has argued, “the entire history of British imperialism in India stands in the way of their mutual desire to remain friends” (223). The political and cultural context circumscribing Aziz and Fielding’s relationship is as prohibitive as the close-mindedness of Fielding’s attitude toward Aziz’s call for Indian independence.

But the novel’s famously enigmatic final lines—“‘No, not yet,’...‘No, not there’”—also create a mood that is distinctly purgatorial: they evoke a condition of forestalled desire, in which the possibility of communion is deferred but not quite foreclosed. Just as it privileges “flickers” of intimacy, *A Passage to India* urges a disposition of open, attentive waiting—waiting for the intimacy that national, spiritual, and social barriers seem to render impossible. The line resonates with Forster’s idea that the novel as a whole is a “spiritual going away...preparatory to the next advance,” as he puts it in his 1924 letter; it also resonates with the narrator’s meditation on the conclusion of the Ceremony of the Birth—which, like Forster’s short stories, invokes the trope of the afterlife: “The revelation was over, but its effect lasted, and its effect was to make men feel that the revelation had not yet come. Hope existed despite fulfillment, as it will be in heaven” (340). Most of all, though, it resonates with the purgatorial logic of Forster’s earlier stories, in which intimacy and the afterlife are always inextricably intertwined. As in those stories, the afterlife here—the imagined but forestalled futurity—is less a temporal or spiritual telos than an imaginative vantage point outside time and space, where true connection can happen because the barriers between self and other have been dissolved. As ever more barriers are erected between Aziz and Fielding, the novel poses a final invitation to its readers to contextualize its human action on an otherworldly scale, to recognize the kinds of unimaginative division behind which its protagonists have unwittingly retreated, and the obstacles this retreat poses to the intimacy
they both desire. The novel’s final act of abstraction, in other words, does what Fielding and Aziz have failed, in this scene, to do: it mobilizes a perspectival imagination, one that is fundamentally at odds with the determined, typifying mindset that threatens to undermine efforts to connect. It is possible to read the novel’s final lines as invitational rather than dismissive. Even if humans cannot, as Forster has suggested, rely on an unchecked human consciousness alone for a reliable source of intimacy, it remains a human choice to maintain an open-ended, open-minded orientation towards “connection.”

34 As Said has argued, the novel ultimately offers a vision according to which it is possible “for one to feel affection for and even intimacy with some Indians and India generally” but this vision does not carve out a space for Indian nationalism without British intervention; “these are the prerogatives of a novel that,” as Said puts it, “deals with personal, not official or national, histories” (Culture and Imperialism 205, 204). In casting Aziz and Fielding as equal failures in this moment, Forster neglects to fully account for the way in which Aziz has every right to want “‘every blasted Englishman...drive[n]...into the sea’”; the obstacles to his sympathy are systemic and structural, whereas the obstacles to Fielding’s sympathy are western obtuseness and imperial paternalism.
Chapter 3:

“Minute to Minute Living in the Spirit”: Dorothy Richardson’s Quaker Aesthetic

Unselfing is at the core of Pilgrimage (1915-1967), Dorothy Richardson’s semi-autobiographical, thirteen-novel sequence narrating the coming of age of Miriam Henderson, its protagonist. The novels narrate Miriam’s life chronologically, beginning with her move to Germany to teach English in Pointed Roofs (1915) and ending with her decision to write an autobiographical novel in March Moonlight (1967). But they frequently interrupt this chronological narrative to focus on atemporal, ecstatic episodes in Miriam’s consciousness: “great emotional moments” (IV. 282) that Richardson frames as moments of both self-escape and self-encounter. One of the first of these moments occurs in Backwater (1916), the second novel in the series: ascending a staircase, Miriam experiences a moment of stillness that gives way to an blissful experience of self-dislocation:

For a second, life seemed to cease in her and the staircase to be swept from under her feet...‘I’m alive’...her impalpable body, sweeping it away, leaving her there shouting without it...I’m alive...I’m alive. Then with a thump her heart went on again and her feet carried her body, warm and happy and elastic, easily on up the solid stairs. She tried once or twice deliberately to bring back the breathless moment standing still on a stair. Each time something of it returned. ‘It’s me, me; this is me being alive,’ she murmured with a feeling under her like the sudden drop of a lift. But her thoughts distracted her. (I. 245)

At first glance, Miriam’s experience seems to conform to the conventions of a traditional out-of-body experience, one that affirms a mind-body dualism: her body is swept away; she is left “shouting without it.” But body and spirit, in this passage, are enmeshed. Miriam’s body becomes “impalpable”—ghostly; at the same time, her apparent spiritual reckoning is embodied, appearing to facilitate blood-flow throughout her body: her heart “thump[s]”; her body becomes

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1 March Moonlight (1967), the final installment of the series, was published posthumously; Richardson worked on it intermittently between 1938 and her death in 1957 (Fromm 308, 310).
“warm” and “elastic.” Most tellingly, the memory of her “breathless moment” is definitively visceral—she experiences a moment of “standing still” as the violent lurch of an elevator.

The nuances of Richardson’s language suggest a more complicated set of distinctions: not between spirit and body, but between Miriam and something that wells up within Miriam—a force so powerful that it is able to penetrate even the otherwise third-person narration of the passage, asserting “I’m alive” outside the bounds of quotation marks. The statement that ultimately affirms identity in this passage—“it’s me, me”—identifies “it” with “me,” suggesting that Miriam’s experience of self-estrangement is at once a supreme moment of self-recognition. The passage, then, describes Miriam’s communion with another facet of Miriam that is also Miriam, an ecstatic, living self that is distinct from, yet consubstantial with, the Miriam who is “distracted” by thoughts at the conclusion.

This “breathless moment” on the staircase is only the first of countless other such “emotional moments” Richardson narrates throughout the series. In these “emotional moments,” Miriam rapturously communes with an essence that is, as she puts it elsewhere, both herself and not herself: “It’s something. It isn’t me. It’s something I am, somehow” (I.151). Much of Pilgrimage is occupied with the question of how to “make [the moments] stay” (I. 246), how to live in a way that remains perpetually open to them, how to make this congress with her other self last. The answer, for Miriam as well as for Richardson, lies in British Quakerism. The language Richardson uses to describe Miriam’s ecstatic experience of these emotional moments is strikingly similar to the language she uses to describe the Quaker practice of “concentration,” a highly-focused method of mystical contemplation, the goal of which is making contact with the semi-divine consciousness—otherwise known as “The Inner Light”—that the Quakers believed to be at the core of all human beings. Concentration, Richardson writes, “allows our ‘real self’—
our larger and deeper being, to which so many names have been given—to flow up and flood the whole field of the surface intelligence” (*Quakers* 34). This description might function as an explanation of what occurs to Miriam during the “breathless moment on the stair.” Throughout her writings, Richardson adapts the principle underlying Quaker concentration into a lifestyle, or approach—throughout her fiction and non-fiction, she calls it “the technique of Quakerism,” or “The Quaker method”—designed to make precisely the kinds of interior experience generated by Miriam’s “emotional moments” more readily accessible. The Quaker technique appears in *Dimple Hill* as a practical solution to the question Miriam has pursued throughout the series: how to live according to the ecstasy she feels in these “emotional moments,” how to engage with daily life through the perspective she gains from them.

Richardson’s lasting fascination with the Quakers began with a three-year stay (1908-1911) on a Quaker farm in Sussex. So foundational was the experience that immediately following her visit, Richardson wrote two books about Quakerism—*Quakers, Past and Present* (1914) and *Gleanings from the Works of George Fox* (1914)—and, simultaneously, began to write the novel that would become *Pointed Roofs* (1915), the first installment of *Pilgrimage*. Throughout her writings on the Quakers, Richardson praises Quaker practice for many of the same characteristics and pursuits that characterize Miriam’s spiritual search in *Pilgrimage*: the same mysticism-inflected striving toward an inner life, the same resulting ecstasy and refreshment, the same high regard for silence and distrust of language. Like Richardson, Miriam lives in a Quaker community in Sussex in the final novels of the series, ultimately recognizing much of what she has been struggling to explain about her own life and ideas—in particular, her recurring experiences of these “emotional moments”—in Quaker belief and practice. It is among the Quakers that Miriam begins to successfully initiate these moments at will and retain their
effects as she moves through the world; and it is among the Quakers that she first decides to put pen to paper to begin recording her impressions—just as Richardson began to write *Pilgrimage* following her own sojourn in Sussex. Thus the series’ plot and composition history form a kind of perfect circle: the narrative of *Pilgrimage* concludes just after Miriam returns to London to begin to write her own novel(s). Miriam’s novel becomes a stand-in for *Pilgrimage*, inviting readers to consider that what they have just read has been shaped by a Quaker sensibility all along.

This emphasis on the spiritual dimensions of Richardson’s vision represents a departure from the standard reading of her work as secular manifesto for modern living. Feminist readings of the 1970s and 1980s—especially Richardson scholar Gillian Hanscombe’s *The Art of Life: Dorothy Richardson and the Development of Feminist Consciousness*, which reintroduced Richardson to mainstream literary criticism—focused on Richardson’s groundbreaking efforts to represent and write from within a specifically feminist consciousness.² Miriam’s gradual embrace of a feminist consciousness and perspective is, of course, of fundamental importance to the project of *Pilgrimage*. Miriam begins identifying with men and proclaiming her hatred for other women in the early books of the series; by the series’ end, she has actively distanced herself from the repressive ideologies and overbearing attentions of men, embracing instead a number of deep and lasting friendships with women: her sisters, Eleanor Dear, Selena Holland, Alma Wilson, and Amabel. One of the culminations of Miriam’s coming-of-age is her recognition that women possess a predilection for empathy—what Richardson elsewhere calls the woman’s “gift of imaginative sympathy” (“Women and the Future” [1924])—crucial to personal relationships. The novels also make it clear that this faculty is crucial to the kinds of

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² Like Woolf, Richardson resisted affiliation with Feminism, both for herself and for her protagonist. In a 1935 letter, for instance, Richardson complained that “a wood-lore” could see that Miriam Henderson isn’t “a feminist” (*Windows* 299).
spiritual experiences she pursues throughout the series. And yet, with the exception of Jenelle Troxell’s recent uncovering of the mystical underpinnings of Richardson’s film criticism, most scholars have ignored the spiritual dimensions of Richardson’s work. Allison Pease, for instance, has recently argued that Miriam’s “pilgrimage” is, at bottom, “a quest to circumvent boredom and instead achieve self-realization” (85), while Laura Marcus has read Miriam’s “emotional moments” as products of Richardson’s readings in contemporary thought on sleep and dreaming.4

Critics who take Richardson’s interest in Quakerism seriously tend to ultimately dismiss it, usually on the grounds that Richardson—and Miriam—leave Sussex for London in the end, choosing not to become official members of the Quaker community. Eva Tucker suggests, for instance, that Miriam “finds [that] her personal history makes her incompatible with Quakerism,” adding the caveat that, “nevertheless, it was her time with the Quaker family that strengthened her inner resources” (151). Biographer Gloria Fromm sounds the same note, asserting that Richardson’s “chief concern [in Sussex] seems to have been, in plain terms, to pull herself together” (Fromm 60). One of the goals of this chapter is to move past prior readings of Pilgrimage, most of which presume an exclusively secular and ultimately materialist context for Richardson’s work, and reclaim the definitively spiritual context in which Richardson was actually putting forward many of her most radical ideas and stylistic innovations. Richardson’s cultivation of a modern, feminine consciousness in Pilgrimage cannot be understood without attendance to the ways that consciousness is inflected with the spirit of Quaker practice.

Richardson’s impressive and ambitious project is, without a doubt, one of the greatest testaments to the spiritual intensity and focus of modernist writing. Calling herself “an

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3 See Troxell, “Shock and ‘Perfect Contemplation’: Dorothy Richardson’s Mystical Cinematic Consciousness.”
4 See Pease, Modernism, Feminism, and The Culture of Boredom 78-99 and Marcus, Dreams of Modernity 201-220.
unorthodox upholder of orthodoxy” (*Windows* 365), Richardson was fundamentally interested in questions related to religion and spirituality, disillusioned early with organized religion but nonetheless insistently committed to finding ways to incorporate spirituality into daily life. In a 1943 letter, Richardson writes, “But the world as a whole...is learning a larger awareness. Is growing, in the exact sense of the word, religious...The most charming feature of the moment is the stampede of the intellectuals into one or another of the creeds & ‘mysticisms,’ all making, by different routes, for the same bourne” (*Windows* 462-463). Richardson’s engagement with British Quakerism is at the heart of the project of *Pilgrimage*, informing both its thematic content and formal innovation. What Richardson refers to throughout her work as “The Quaker Method” (*Quakers* 35), or “the technique of Quakerism” (IV. 564)—which involves repeated efforts to achieve a contemplative affect in the rhythms of everyday life—inflects the series formally, at multiple levels of style and structure. Richardson aspires to a Quaker aesthetic in her representations of Quaker concentration; in the stylistic techniques she uses to represent Miriam’s “stream of consciousness”; and, finally, in the series’ organization around “moments” rather than linear chronology. Richardson not only narrates her protagonist and avatar, Miriam, ultimately embracing Quaker principles; she also narrates Miriam’s process of arriving at the conclusions about silence and language that undergird her own project. All the while, the project itself reflects those conclusions in its formal structure.

This chapter begins by contextualizing Richardson’s engagement with British Quakerism in its cultural and historical context in order to explore her conception of the synchronic experience of Quaker concentration, using Richardson’s non-fiction writings about Quaker concentration to elucidate the way concentration works in *Pilgrimage*. The next section examines the way Richardson’s distinctive stream of consciousness style is informed by Quaker
principles, arguing that in many ways, stream of consciousness is Quaker consciousness. The chapter concludes with a meditation on the architechtonics of the series, the way its length and breadth speak to a diachronic feature of Quaker thought. The novels replicate the experience of living a life punctuated by emotional moments at the same time that they propose a new way of conceiving of the individual life through narrative.

II. “The Quaker Method”: Quakerism at the Turn of the 20th Century

The British Society of Friends experienced a renaissance in the last decades of the 19th century, attracting new and more liberal-minded followers as its base expanded. This resurgence came at the end of a period dominated by a Calvinist Evangelicalism that had pervaded most aspects of mid-Victorian life. The Quakers were no exception: many Quakers in the 19th century embraced traditionally Evangelical tenets—especially the idea that salvation could be achieved exclusively through Christ’s atonement and the imperative to adhere to the literal word of Scripture—as dogmas more fundamental to their belief system than any tenet recognizably or distinctly Quaker (Cantor 26, Spencer 136). This evangelical turn rendered 19th century British Quakerism increasingly “doctrinally rigid and insular” (Cantor 26-27), a grim prospect for a religious tradition marked throughout its history by its resistance to dogmatism; as Cantor explains, Quakerism was founded on the belief that “no doctrine, theory, or belief can be taken as manifestly true, and even the assumptions of Quakerism have repeatedly been challenged in order to advance the search for Truth” (Cantor 28).

But the dawn of the 20th century was accompanied by renewed interest in the foundations and fundamentals of Quakerism, especially The Inner Light (the “spark” of divinity within every individual person, what founder George Fox called “the presence of Christ in the heart”);

commitment to community and social action (referred to by early 20th century Quakers as “the social gospel” [Frost 81]);

equality among the sexes; and the sanctity of silence. Quaker reformer Rufus Jones, in particular, pioneered the movement to reorient the Quaker mission according to the original principles set out by Fox, hoping to steer followers away from the pervasive influence of a Calvinist, puritanical Protestantism that threatened to erase the radical spirit with which Quakerism was founded (Kennedy 161). Jones was also eager to establish continental Christian mysticism—especially as expressed by figures like early modern German mystic Jacob Boehme—as the fountainhead of Fox’s ideas (Kennedy 161). As George Newman, a friend of Jones, put it, the “modern interpretation of the very meaning and universality of the spirit of the Quaker Faith” is “as one of the dynamic forms of mystical religion, the religion of life...” (qtd. in Vining 237-238). To posit Quakerism as an essentially mystical religion was, in Jones’ view, to reject outright the notion of scriptural superiority in favor of experiential knowledge of the divine.

It was also to suggest Quakerism’s openness to contemporary psychological and scientific innovation, much of which confirmed the authenticity of mystical experience in psychological terms (Kennedy 161). Caroline Stephen, aunt of Virginia Woolf and perhaps Quakerism’s most famous recruit, frequently alludes to recent findings in psychological research throughout her meditation on The Inner Light, Light Arising: Thoughts on the Central Radiance (1908). Describing herself as, first and foremost, a “rational mystic,” Stephens goes on to describe her commitment to developing the faculty of “spiritual perception” and to attending to

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6 Quakerism was not the only Christian sect with a renewed commitment to social action in this period. See Seth Koven, Matchgirl and the Heiress and “The ‘Sticky Sediment’ of Daily Life: Radical Domesticity, Revolutionary Christianity, and the Problem of Wealth in Britain from the 1880s to the 1930s.”

7 Later, the First World War would bring Quakerism to the fore of public feeling about violence and pacifism, garnering even more recruits. See Kennedy 312-420.

8 As Stephen explains, “I wish distinctly to make the claim of reasonableness for the mystical position, although it may imply the existence of something beyond reason; or rather I claim it with the more confidence on that very account, for I believe that Reason itself points in the same direction — that is to something beyond itself” (3).
“revelations” of the “Light” within (4). Much of Quakerism’s appeal, as Stephens’ example makes abundantly clear, lay in its combination of *actio* and *contemplatio*, its offering of transcendent spiritual experience and a simultaneously rational and practical approach to the world, both in terms of its commitment to social action and its modern attitude toward contemporary science.

Richardson, like her protagonist, Miriam, spent three years (1908-1911) on a Quaker farm in Sussex just before beginning the novel that would become *Pilgrimage*. The experience was illuminating. “That was a central experience I can never forget,” Richardson wrote to her friend John Cowper Powys in February of 1939, “an astonishing revelation” (*Windows* 368). Richardson also wrote two books about Quakers during the early compositional phases of *Pilgrimage*: *Gleanings From the Work of George Fox* (1914), an anthology of Fox’s writings, and *Quakers Past and Present* (1914), a celebratory history of the Quakers that highlights its mystical foundations. Drawing on the work of William James and Evelyn Underhill alongside the writings of 19th century Quaker reformers like Jones and William Brathwaithe, Richardson’s account of Quaker life is, even more than Stephen’s, invested in using contemporary science to explain mystical practice. Richardson writes of Quaker concentration, for instance:

> [The Quaker] method has invariably included what—again borrowing from psychology—we must call the deliberate control of all external stimuli, a swimming, so to say, against the whole tide of the surface intelligence, and this in no negative sense, no mere sinking into a state of undifferentiated consciousness, but rather, as we have seen with Fox, a setting forth to seek something already found—something whose presence is in some way independent of the normal thinking and acting creature, something which has already proclaimed itself in moments of heightened consciousness. (*Quakers* 35)

This passage, like Miriam’s “breathless moment on the stair” in *Backwater*, suggests a distinction between an outer self—here, “the surface intelligence”—and a kind of inner self, a “something” that is both “independent” and “already found.” Richardson frames the Quaker
technique not as a passive retreat but as an active encounter of self with self. Like many of her peers, Richardson subscribed to the notion that the self was complex and multi-faceted, yet capable of being broken down into two parts: a “momentary,” superficial self and another, more impersonal self linked to a broad, spiritual presence immanent in the world and in other people. But in Richardson’s view, Quaker concentration offers an even more radical conception of the self, undoing these distinctions in the first place to reveal that these selves are, seen in the right light, one and the same. The ultimate goal of repeated efforts at Quaker concentration is to inhabit a state of mind where such categories do not apply. The element of recurrence is also key. For Richardson, contemplation is procedural, practical, and “deliberate”—or “developmental,” as Stephens puts it. It is, as Richardson concludes, “the most practical thing in the world” (Quakers 22)—meant to be practiced over and over, to be developed and honed, to be inhabited and applied in everyday life.

This emphasis on the relevance of concentration to the “everyday” was and is a distinct cornerstone of Quaker thought and practice, inflecting spiritual as well as social life. First, Quaker concentration is both an individual and communal activity. The typical Quaker Meeting—also referred to as “Unprogrammed Worship”—is an informal, unscripted gathering in which members of a Quaker community gather together to sit in silence, “waiting together for the Spirit’s direction” (Johns 261). What occurs in these meetings, in other words, is Quaker concentration on a communal scale. According to Richardson, Fox envisioned the Quaker Meeting as a bulwark against the fallibility of individual subjectivity. For Fox, Richardson explains, “[T]he spirit in one man must be tested by the spirit in many men. The individual must read his inward state in the light of the social spiritual group.” The result, she concludes, is a “sort of spiritual democracy” (Quakers 88).

__9__ Miriam comes to seek “possession of that self within herself who was more than her momentary self” (IV. 222).
Second, the substance of the revelation experienced in Quaker concentration—that this Inner Light is also myself, that this spiritual presence inside me is also me, and shouldn’t be separated from me—also cultivates in individuals a desire to live as if that boundary, and all such man-made boundaries, don’t exist. This philosophy extends to the rejection of a liturgical calendar: Quakers do not observe holy holidays or seasons; Quakers also reject the notion of designated sacred spaces, assembling in “meeting houses” rather than churches or sanctuaries. As Johns observes, “By relocating sacrality to internal spaces they opened the entire world to being an appropriate place for worship” (Johns 266). The impersonal, boundary-effacing ethos at the core of Quaker concentration, then, is a principle that undergirds every aspect of Quaker life.

Third, the Quaker approach also enables particular arrangements of social life. For the Quakers, Richardson writes, “the world is home and home is the world, because, in other words, the inner is able without obstruction to flow out and realize itself in the outer” (Quakers 79-80). Where “inner” and “outer,” in Richardson’s descriptions of Quaker concentration, stand for inner and outer selves, here, in her descriptions of Quaker society, they stand for inner and outer worlds, where inner refers to domestic life—the household unit—and outer refers to the world of work and community. According to Richardson’s equation between home and world, domestic life is actually “realize[d],” or fulfilled, in the world. Just as the experience of concentration is an encounter rather than a retreat, Quaker life stands in defiance of a monastic ideal. For the Quaker, “all life [is] sacramental” (Frost 81). This collapsed distinction between the domestic sphere and the world outside also facilitates equality among the sexes, one of Quakerism’s most central tenets. As Mack notes, “a primary tenet of early Quakerism was that the hierarchical character of gender relationships, indeed of all social relationships, was a product of human sinfulness, an outcome of the original Fall from Grace” (39). Richardson praises this dimension
of Quaker life throughout her account, emphasizing the Quakers’ commitment to cultivating an
environment in which women can thrive as individuals. “A woman born into a Quaker family,”
Richardson writes, “comes…into an atmosphere where her natural sense of a direct relationship
to life, her instinctive individual aspiration and sense of responsibility, instead of being either
cancelled or left dormant, or thwarted and trained to run, so to say, indirectly, is immediately
confirmed and fostered…” (Quakers 78) If Quaker concentration is meant to be an everyday
practice, the everyday is also meant to be seen through the transcendental point of view acquired
during concentration. It is from such a point of view that the Quaker practitioner can envision the
boundaries between the sexes, and between people, dissolving.

III. Pilgrimage and Quaker Concentration

Pilgrimage dramatizes Miriam’s pursuit for this point of view, a psychospiritual search
that culminates in her exposure to Quaker life. While Miriam does encounter Quakers in some of
the earlier novels—she sees Quaker women crossing the street, for instance, in Backwater, the
second novel in the series—it is in the later novels, particularly in Dimple Hill, that Quakers
become Pilgrimage’s explicit subject. Miriam has retired to the countryside of Sussex to recover
from a nervous breakdown precipitated by a bout of influenza and her affair with Hypo Wilson
(a character based on H.G. Wells), whose child she had just miscarried;\(^{10}\) her longtime friend,
Michael Shatov, has recommended that she stay at a farm run by the Quaker Roscorla family.\(^{11}\)
Miriam is immediately entranced by the “spiritual rhythm” of the Roscorlas’ routine (IV. 470).
Over the course of the series, Miriam has been attempting to gain distance—both psychological

\(^{10}\) Miriam’s affair with Hypo Wilson is modeled on Richardson’s affair with H.G. Wells, a relationship that also
ended shortly after Richardson miscarried his child. See Fromm 23-55.
\(^{11}\) For a more thorough elucidation of parallels between Miriam’s sojourn with the Roscorlas and Richardson’s with
the Penroses, see Tucker, “Dorothy Richardson and the Quakers” 145-152.
and spiritual—from the fabric of her everyday life, attempting to permanently inhabit the kind of transcendental outlook she achieves in “moments of illumination,” the same sense of freedom, wonder, and ineffable “presence of God” (I. 458). What she discovers in the Quaker community is a lifestyle almost designed to achieve the very same outlook.

Most obviously, this outlook is acquired through the continuous practice of concentration, the focal point of Richardson’s account in *Quakers: Past and Present*, which Miriam eagerly attempts to experience shortly after arriving in Sussex. The first step is an attempt to clear the mind in utter silence. One must be “still in mind as well as in body,” Miriam reminds herself as she embarks on a deliberate attempt to “concentrate” during a Quaker Meeting (IV. 498):

> Bidding her mind be still, she felt herself once more at work, in company, upon an all-important enterprise. This time her breathing was steady and regular and the labour of journeying, down through the layers of her surface being, a familiar process. Down and down through a series of circles each wider than the last, each opening with the indrawing of a breath whose outward flow pressed her downwards towards the next, nearer to the living centre. (IV. 498)

While Richardson describes the visceral experience of “concentration” using language of rushing water that “flow[s] up and flood[s]” in *Quakers, Pilgrimage* deploys language of downward movement, of exploring untold depths through a series of increasingly wider circles. Richardson’s imagery is perhaps peculiar, given that rippling suggests movement away from, rather than towards, a center. But the paradoxical dimension of the process is key to its project of combining self-distancing with self-orientation. In the passage, Miriam’s increasingly wider circles approach a center—and instill, accordingly, a sense of centeredness. The Quakers are able, according to Miriam, to be “always centered, operating one’s life...from where everything fell into proportion and clear focus” (IV. 498). Spending time among the Quakers, Miriam comes
to believe that the continued, focused practice of concentration enables the Quaker lifestyle of “minute to minute living in the spirit.” Among the Quakers, praxis generates perspective.

Many of Miriam’s most salient observations and revelations about Quaker life emerge from her ongoing theorization of a relationship between “distance” and “enchantment,” the way continuous withdrawal from self enables a perspective that imbues daily life with spiritual meaning and purpose. Living among the Quakers, Miriam is reminded of Sundays during her childhood, when the kinds of “emotional moments” she pursues throughout her life were more readily accessible. The heightened emotional state Sundays cultivated for Miriam, despite her skepticism of religion—its interruption of the workweek, its designation as a day for setting aside day-to-day life for communal experience and individual meditation—has since evaded her, especially “in [her] most agnostic days in London...when spending Sunday with people who skate[d] over its surface improvising means of passing the time” (IV. 491). Miriam’s complaints echo those of Ursula in *The Rainbow*, who similarly bemoans the spiritual emptiness of the “weekday world” and yearns for the otherworldly ambience of childhood “Sundays” (*The Rainbow* 266). Miriam’s theorization of those Sundays as “enchanted” also bears a distinct resemblance to Weber’s ideas of enchantment and disenchantment: the way the historical processes of modernity have culminated in the rejection of an enchanted worldview, offering in its place a distinctly disenchanted—i.e. highly rationalized, secular—perspective of the world and all its processes. Miriam has become immersed in a culture of resolute disenchantment, embodied most obviously by the character of her friend and lover Hypo Wilson, that has left her grasping for an intelligible mode of thinking about and communicating her psychospiritual search. Remembering, among the Quakers, the more “enchanted” Sundays of her childhood, when “all the different beauties were most apparent and most deeply bathed in unattainable
light” (IV. 491), prompts her to revisit her ideas about the interrelationship between spiritual distance and enchantment:

Distance does not lend enchantment. It shows where it is. In the thing seen, as well as in the eye of the beholder. And I realized one of the Quaker secrets. Living always remote, drawn away into the depths of the spirit, they see, all the time, freshly. A Perpetual Sunday. (IV. 491)

While in Richardson’s view, the typical week confines spirituality to a single day, Quakerism diffuses the spiritual retreat of Sunday into every day of the week, a mentality aligned with its emphasis on boundary dissolution. If the world, for a Quaker, is always already enchanted—“[d]istance does not lend enchantment. It shows where it is”—Quaker practices of spiritual distancing are designed to train the self to recognize that enchantment. As a whole, the passage also draws on the complexity and unreliability of perception—a hallmark dimension of modernist thought and writing and one celebrated by many of Richardson’s peers—in order to displace perception’s primacy. The viewer does not “enchant” what she sees by simply looking; on the contrary, the world and the viewer are enchanted by default. Lest the effort of concentration be construed as a kind of enchantment in and of itself, then, Richardson insists that concentration is a recalibration of perspective rather than a celebration of its subjectivity.

Quakers are able to see the world as it truly is, “bathed in unattainable light,” because they maintain distance from their superficial impressions of it, and remain committed to “bathing” in the Inner Light at their center.12

Richardson’s ideas about distance and enchantment recur throughout her writings. As Troxell has pointed out, they are essential to her writings on silent cinema in Close-Up, where

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12 C.f. Cantor: “For Quakers, all experience is illuminated, as it were, by this Inner Light. Thus, when a flower is observed, perception is not restricted to seeing the physical properties of the flower, such as its shape and colour, but the observer also appreciates its beauty, and is thereby led to a consciousness of its Creator. The connection between observed object and the Creator/Designer is forged by the Inner Light, thus raising the experience of a physical object to a more spiritual plane” (235-236).
she asserts, “[D]istance is enchantment. It is a perpetual focus. And escape from the obstructive, chronic discontent we are considering the state of deadness to the habitual . . . is possible only to those who by nature or by grace have the faculty of ceaseless withdrawal to the distance at which it may be focused” (“Narcissus” 183). In Close Up, Richardson suggests that distance—which, according to her cinematic analogy, means a wide-angle shot that would seem to obscure the particular—is, in fact, “perpetual focus,” accessible only to those who are psychologically equipped to practice “ceaseless withdrawal.” As Troxell argues, Richardson is working against contemporary film criticism, which scorned female film spectatorship as passively “absorptive,” holding the “distanced, objective perspective” of the male gaze in a higher intellectual regard (Troxell 58). According to Troxell, Richardson imagines silent film as enabling a mode of spectatorship predicated on absorptive contemplation as a means to a kind of distanced perspective. This model of spectatorship is, undeniably, predicated on a Quaker principle, where “concentration” enables a shift in point of view. In Pilgrimage, Richardson not only deems this idea explicitly Quaker, but reworks it as a lifestyle: a lifestyle of focused self-exploration that effects a distanced perspective. Living in touch with one’s “center” generates an ever-wider—and ever more enchanted, divinity-imbued—perspective on one’s life and on the world.

But what does this divinity-imbued perspective feel like? And what is the substance of the ever-elusive “center” at the core of Richardson’s version of Quaker thought? Most often, Richardson describes both in terms of joy. For instance, Miriam wonders, at one point, “if the last deepest level of her being was joy” (III. 321), suggesting implicitly that the “truest” version of herself is pure emotion—and that, because that self is also divine, divinity is itself tantamount to euphoria. Accessing this divine ecstasy permits Miriam to reflect on the “miraculousness of there being anything, anywhere,” a refrain that persists throughout all thirteen volumes and that
often occurs to Miriam during her “emotional moments.” Miriam’s sense of “miraculousness” or “astonishingness” (I.421, IV. 333) also emerges in moments of silent communion with other people. Richardson writes, “It’s finding the same world in another person that moves you to your roots...Your sense of the world and of the astonishingness of there being anything anywhere...is confirmed when you find the same world and the same accepted astonishment in someone else” (IV. 333).

Quaker concentration is, after all, both an individual activity and a non-verbal communal activity. After a silence in which the Roscorlas bow their heads before the meal, Miriam observes, “Everyone had emerged from the silence luminous. Given back to themselves renewed, freshly available, they were in no hurry, since still their happiness held them, to break the silence within which it had been born” (IV. 470). The use of the word “luminous” is no accident, of course, as presumably each of the dinner attendants has made contact with the Inner Light, the Quaker term for the divine entity at the core of every person, consubstantial with the “living centre” at the core of every person. At times, Miriam wonders if “concentration” is in fact most effective when it is practiced collectively, reflecting often on the scriptural refrain “where two or more are gathered, there am I—in the midst of them” (IV. 333, 498) and repeatedly pursuing silent companionship with Richard and Rachel Mary Roscorla. “When we are together,” Miriam thinks of sitting in silence with Rachel Mary, “we are conscious mainly of each other, of something unchanging and trustworthy far away within the personal depths. Such a moment, with man or woman, is a spiritual experience, moving body and soul” (IV. 516). In moments like these, Miriam seems to glimpse a version of the “spiritual democracy” Richardson

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13 Miriam reflects on this imperative often in the series. In Clear Horizon, for instance, she wonders, “Wherever two of three are gathered together”—by anything whatsoever—there, in the midst of them, is something that is themselves and more than themselves” (IV. 333).
describes in *Quakers*, where a communal experience of concentration is more “trustworthy” precisely *because* it is even less “personal.”

Miriam has the opposite experience in her encounters with Hypo Wilson, who determinedly, and often aggressively, challenges her spiritual search throughout the series. In a moment earlier in the series that portends the deterioration of their relationship, Miriam exclaims, “‘Yes. There is [an unseen world]. We can move, see, hear, feel somehow beyond our immediate selves. We can. We do’” (IV. 228). Encountering Wilson, of all people, shortly after returning to London from Sussex, she rebuffs his patronizing request to “‘have a *look* at your Quakers,’” snapping, “‘You wouldn’t see them. Coming deliberately down with a prepared spy-glass, you wouldn’t see them’” (IV. 549). Miriam’s turn to a spy-glass metaphor is telling: like Quaker concentration, a spyglass is another method for looking from a distance. But while Quaker concentration affords a panoramic perspective, the spy-glass—an instrument of science—offers myopic vision, limited to the tiny fraction of the world seen through its tiny lens. Secondly, the odd phrase “coming down with a spyglass” contrasts with the language of downward movement that recurrently appears in descriptions of Quaker concentration. As Miriam’s language makes clear, Wilson’s resolutely materialist and scientific point of view is antithetical to the kind of perspective she is trying to cultivate.

What Miriam gains from her stay with the Quakers is a reliable method for accessing her inner self—that “something unchanging and trustworthy far within the personal depths”—and for perceiving the world through its lens. Miriam has, after all, sought a praxis for achieving this kind of perspective throughout the series. In *Interim* (1919), for instance, Miriam fantasizes about the idea of a state of mind generated by constant prayer, disappointed by its apparent unfeasibility: “a state of mind that came from the state of prayer. But then one would need
always to be in a state of prayer” (II. 357). But Quaker concentration allows her to achieve something like that state of mind, one in which the world remains visible in all its “miraculousness” and “enchantment.” In adapting concentration into a disposition—a personal method that generates a perspective—Richardson offers a vision of Quakerism that is mobile.¹⁴ At the height of her fascination with the Quaker lifestyle in *Dimple Hill*, Miriam wonders, “Why should it be only Quakers who employed, in public as well as privately, this method of approach to reality?” (IV. 498) This approach to the world is, crucially, not at odds with the noise and rush and crowds of London, where she has experienced emotional moments up to this point just as easily as she has alone outside. Quakerism is thus not an answer to Miriam’s existential questions but rather an approach to thinking with and through them. For Richardson, it also offered a whole new way of thinking about language and communication.

**IV. “Life Going On and On”: Stream Of Consciousness as Quaker Consciousness**

That *Pilgrimage*’s style aspired to spiritual ends was recognized immediately by novelist May Sinclair, who famously dubbed its fluid, impressionistic technique as “stream of consciousness”—a term Richardson would later refer to as a cumbersome “millstone” (*Windows* 454)—in a 1918 review. Sinclair writes, “It is just life going on and on. It is Miriam Henderson’s stream of consciousness going on and on. And in neither is there any grossly discernible beginning or end” (“The Novels of Dorothy Richardson” 59). Yet it is precisely Richardson’s refusal to offer a straightforward account of the events of Miriam’s life, or direct commentary on Miriam’s experiences, that Sinclair celebrates. For Sinclair, *Pilgrimage*’s most radical innovation

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¹⁴ In *Quakers*, Richardson expresses a similar perspective, expressing her desire—and belief—that Quakerism is itself on its way to becoming “an order of lay mystics, held together externally by the sane and simple discipline laid down by Fox, and guarded thus from the dangers to which mysticism is perennially open; an order of men and women wiling corporately to fulfill, while living in the daily life of the world, the conditions of revelation, and admitting to membership only those similarly willing; a “free” group of mystics ready to pay the price, ready to travel along the way trodden by all their predecessors, by all who have truly yearned for the uncreated Light” (93).
was its commitment to representing Miriam’s disposition at the expense of plot: “Nothing happens, everything that really matters is happening...what really matters is a state of mind, the interest or ecstasy with which we close with life.” Sinclair recognized that at the heart of Richardson’s project was her decision to forego descriptive language in favor of impressionistic representations of Miriam’s consciousness.

Richardson is most famous as the first writer to pioneer the stream of consciousness method in English. As Troxell has shown, Sinclair took the term not from William James’ Principles of Psychology (1890), as critics had believed for decades, but from Evelyn Underhill’s Mysticism (1911), a text with which Sinclair and Richardson were deeply familiar (61). Underhill uses the term in her critique of the Freudian “unconscious,” suggesting that the mystic’s faculty of contemplation, which “permit[s] the inflow of a larger spiritual life, the perception of a higher reality,” is better suited than psychoanalysis to the task of integrating transcendental insight back into the “stream of consciousness.” Sinclair’s use of Underhill’s terminology, then, projects the psychological process of that “inflow”—a term that resonates with Richardson’s vision of Quaker concentration as “rushing” and “streaming”—onto a stylistic technique. In this section, I argue that the formal qualities of Richardson’s prose—its indirection, its referential ambiguity, its syntactic messiness—emerge from her Quaker-inspired convictions. The philosophy of language she elaborates over the course of Pilgrimage—largely through Miriam’s story—explains Richardson’s decision to adopt these stylistic techniques. Miriam’s search for a means of communication that avoids the strictures of language reveals the Quaker underpinnings of Richardson’s stylistic choices.

Pilgrimage is, as its readers then and now have complained, difficult to read. The relatively straightforward narration characteristic of Pointed Roofs, the first novel of the series, is

15 Although published in 1915, Pointed Roofs was completed in 1913, the same year Proust published Swann’s Way.
in short supply as the series draws on; interruptions of Miriam’s thoughts gradually become the standard rather than the interruption. Already in 1920, after the publications of The Tunnel (1919) and Interim (1919), Alfred A. Knopf complained about Richardson’s “obstructive reputation for unreadable prose” (qtd. in Fromm 119). Richardson’s prose registers the increasing preeminence of Miriam’s consciousness by becoming less and less direct, more and more self-referential. Days and weeks elapse without warning; novels begin in a different setting. The death of Miriam’s mother—an event modeled after Richardson’s own mother’s suicide—is almost missable, implied by the final lines of Honeycomb (1917), where Miriam’s reflections about her mother’s efforts to eat food on her deathbed devolve into an allusion to a description of Hell in Mark 9:48: “Go on eating food, till the end of my life. Plates of food like these plates of food. . . . I am in eternity . . . where their worm dieth not and their fire is not quenched” (I. 489). Richardson’s syntax is fluid, ambiguous, and recursive; at times the language struggles to keep up with Miriam’s meandering, wandering thought process. Dashes and ellipses take the place of periods; pronouns detach from their referents, as Richardson’s typically third-person omniscient narration occasionally lapses into Miriam’s first-person thoughts and back again, often for no apparent reason. Quotation marks all but disappear in some of the later novels. Proust’s madeleine moment—perception of the present intertwined with memory—is fractalized in a million different directions in Pilgrimage, as Miriam’s encounters with friends, family, and even familiar images trigger references both familiar and obscure to even the most attentive reader. Yet all of this confusion serves a distinct purpose. If the subject of Pilgrimage is Miriam’s all-consuming, endless efforts to encounter her own “self”, Richardson’s narration seeks to implicate its readers in that same search. As Pease puts it, “In Richardson’s Pilgrimage, form and content are one” (79).
Nowhere is this comingling of form and content clearer than when Richardson attempts to represent Miriam’s frenzied experience of walking around London. Miriam’s first visit to London in *Honeycomb*, for instance, is rendered in a series of short paragraphs that aspire to a kind of lyric detachment, appearing like image poems inserted into the middle of the narrative:

Flags of pavement flowing-smooth clean grey squares and oblongs, faintly polished, shaping and drawing away-sliding into each other...I am part of the dense smooth clean paving stone...sunlit; gleaming under dark winter rain; shining under warm sunlit rain, sending up a fresh stony smell...always there...dark and light...dawn, stealing...

Life streamed up from the close dense stone. With every footstep she felt she could fly.

The little dignified high-built cut-through street, with its sudden walled-in church, swept round and opened its brightness and a clamour of central sounds ringing harshly up into the sky.

The pavement of heaven.

To walk along the radiant pavement of sunlit Regent Street, forever. (I. 417)

Miriam’s newly peripatetic lifestyle generates, for her, a different mode of perception—and, by extension, a different mode of expression. The bells ringing in the third paragraph, for instance, actually *interrupt* Miriam’s reflections about the pavement in paragraphs one and two, resuming in paragraph four with the simple phrase, “The pavement of heaven.” The narration also slips from third-person to first-person—and back again—as an accumulation of descriptors related to Miriam’s perception of Regent Street gives way to Miriam’s declaration that “I am part of the dense smooth clean paving stone.” This reflection, in turn, gives way to another assertion, that “life” itself “stream[s] up from the close dense stone,” a thought that is separated from Miriam’s previous one by a paragraph break, but that follows from her intuitive sense that she is inseparable from the pavement. The passage culminates in what appears to be a wistful daydream. In passages like these, Richardson’s commitment to representing the “stream” of
Miriam’s consciousness—its movement from perception to memory to longing—is abundantly clear. Of particular importance is Miriam’s persistent sense that she is intermingling with her environment, her feeling of inseparability from the stone, which resonates with the blurring of self and other that characterizes Quaker contemplation.

Miriam experiences a similar series of revelations when she moves to London permanently in *The Tunnel* (1919), this time at the even more accelerated speed of a hansom cab:

Floating about in a hansom in the West End, in the season, was like nothing else in the world. It changed you, your feelings, manner, bearing, everything. It made you part of a wonderful exclusive difficult triumphant life, a streak of it, going in and out. It cut you off from all personal difficulties, made you drop your personality and lifted you right out into the freedom of a throng of happy people, a great sunlit tide, singing, all the same laughing song, wave after wave, advancing, in open sunlight...Nothing personal could matter so long as you were there and kept there, day and night. Everyone was invisible and visionless, united in the spectacle, gilding and hiding the underworld in a brilliant embroidery...continuously. (II.155)

Here Miriam’s feeling of interconnectedness with her environment is even more extreme, such that riding in a hansom cab “in the season”—when London is most crowded with people—actually has a significant impact on her affect. The experience of being among so many strangers at once actually propels Miriam into a separate, higher, and, significantly, happier reality, one that consists of purely communal joy. Miriam’s sense of interrelatedness within this happier reality is reflected in the text’s slippage between grammatical persons, this time from third person to second person.

Richardson uses stylistic techniques here that Virginia Woolf would use later. Her use of imagery of embroidery to express human unity, for instance, echoes Woolf’s “moments of being,” or sudden, fleeting recognitions of the “pattern” underlying “the cotton wool” of daily life (72). Richardson’s account of Miriam’s wandering also resonates with the opening scene of *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), published six years later, in which Clarissa’s walk through the noisy,
crowded streets of London culminates in her famous profession of love for “life; London; this moment of June” (Woolf 4). More importantly, though, both Woolf and Richardson construed their efforts to represent the fluidity of human psychology as a form of resistance to the overtly masculine realism so characteristic of the work of their male contemporaries, the materialist “Edwardians” of Woolf’s famous essay, “Mr. Bennet and Mrs. Brown” (1924). Richardson herself once referred to Pilgrimage as “a feminine equivalent of the current masculine realism” (qtd. in Gender of Modernism 430). Woolf, too, read Pilgrimage along these lines, remarking in a review of Revolving Lights (1923) that Richardson had “invented, or ...developed and applied to her own uses, a sentence which we might call the psychological sentence of the feminine gender” (Contemporary Writers 124-125). Both were also eager to assert the failures of this “masculine realism” not only in terms of its excessive focus on externalities but also in terms of its egoism. Within Pilgrimage, Miriam articulates her disdain for male writing along these lines, implicitly articulating a connection between materialist realism and the insistent imposition of the male author’s presence on the reader: “Bang, bang, bang, on they go, these men’s books, like an L.C.C. tram, yet unable to make you forget them, the authors, for a moment” (IV. 239).

Richardson envisioned her own project, by contrast, as an attempt at authorial self-effacement: in the ideal “literary work,” the author ought to be “out of sight and hearing; present, if we seek him, only in the attitude towards reality...” (qtd. in Kunitz 562). For Richardson as well as for Woolf, implicating consciousness into the narration of the novel—suggesting its inseparability from what it perceives—is an essentially feminist project. It is also, as Forster similarly argues in “Anonymity: An Inquiry,”16 a crucial form of unselfing on the authorial level.

16 See 192.
Richardson’s stream of consciousness also connects to her fundamental distrust of language, a sensibility arguably rooted in her deep immersion in Quaker thought. In *Light Arising*, for instance, Caroline Stephen insists that language is an obstacle to truth, arguing that “the absence of words” is necessary to cultivating a disposition of “inward stillness, which is at once the condition and the result of any true acquaintance with God” (57). Miriam is the voice of Richardson’s similar antipathy. “All statements are lies” (II. 306), Miriam proclaims in *Interim*. “Why would people insist upon talking about things—when nothing can ever be communicated?” Failures of verbal communication abound throughout *Pilgrimage*, most notably in Miriam’s repeated, unsuccessful attempts to articulate the substance of her “emotional moments” to her loved ones. Describing an emotional moment in which she feels “clear of earth” (IV. 279) in *Clear Horizon*, Miriam is disappointed to find that Michael and Amabel “had taken ‘up in the clouds’ metaphorically” (IV. 283). It is only in moments of silent encounter that Miriam feels truly understood by her peers; it is only in silence that anything like the feeling of the “brilliant embroidery” she imagines in the London passage can be approximated.

This distrust of language is a touchstone throughout her spiritual search, where over and over again her efforts to cultivate a spiritual life are frustrated by its limitations: the word of scripture, the letter of dogma, the expression of pastors and parsons. In *The Tunnel*, Miriam reflects, “Language is the only way of expressing anything and it dims everything. So the Bible is not true; it is a culture. Religion is wrong in making word-dogmas out of it...It clings to words which get more and more wrong...” (II. 99).17 Throughout the series, Miriam reserves her strongest judgment for sermons, whose limiting readings of the Bible enrage and distract her, the

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17 Early twentieth-century Quaker reforms expressed strikingly similar concerns, often advocating for a view of the Bible that “reveal[ed] [its] fallible, human qualities” and that “restor[ed]” it to “its proper relationship to the Light”; viewed this way, engagement with the Bible could lead to a “moral perspective,” as one reformer put it, rather than an “infallible creed” (Kennedy 164-165).
one exception being her memory of a church service wherein the parson advised his congregation “to cease attending to him as soon as anything he said should rouse a response, or a train of thought, and to spend the remainder of the time in private meditation” (IV. 346-347).

Given the intensity of her antipathy toward language, it is unsurprising that Miriam finds herself unable to write over the course of the series.

Despite their embrace of silence, however, the Quakers actually offer Miriam a means of using language toward spiritual ends. Miriam’s memory of the contemplative parson becomes a faint template of a later, more formative experience among the Quakers, Richard Roscorla’s reading aloud of Psalm 65:

The deep, vibratory monotone, simple, childlike, free form unfelt, tiresomely elucidatory expressiveness, leaving the words to speak themselves, was the very sound of the Old Testament, the wistful sound of Hebrew piety, trustfully patient within a shadow pierced only here and there by a ray of light ahead. It gave the reading a power independent of the meaning of the read words which presently sank away, leaving only the breathing spirit of their inspiration, sending the heaven down and down into the depths within themselves, kindred to the depths within themselves, kindred to the depths whence it came, till the emotion creating this scripture became current and the forms seated in the golden lamplight fellows of those who had brought it forth, sharers of its majesty, a heritage bringing both humility and pride. (IV. 474)

Here, language actually functions as a catalyst for “concentration,” but only when it is detached from its semantic trappings, when “the meaning of the read words...[sinks] away.” Richard, the reader, effaces himself so that his voice functions as a conduit of “inspiration,” a move that enables that “inspiration” to actually enter his listeners such that they become “kindred” to it, the boundaries between them and “the emotion creating [the] scripture” dissolved. The spirit animating the passage becomes “current” both in the sense that it is made new and available to the listeners in the here and now, but also in the sense that it becomes fluid, capable of movement and of offering refreshment. The process in almost every way mimics Miriam’s experience of concentration at the Quaker Meeting just pages earlier, even adopting the same
language of movement “down and down into the depths.” Richardson not only narrativizes the Quaker technique here, but also tries to approximate it with her own language, the repetition of “kindred to the depths” adopting a kind of mantric quality, the listeners transfigured into “forms seated in the golden lamplight,” an image that recalls descriptions of revered Hebrew patriarchs. By communing with the spirit animating the text, the listeners are fundamentally altered; the moment of impersonal communion facilitates personal transformation: “Every one, now, was...separated, freed, each a self with its own dignity” (IV. 475). By allowing themselves to be penetrated by the “breathing spirit” of the text, the listeners are able to perceive reality—and themselves—in a different way.

This principle is also at work in Miriam’s idea that language—even the accent with which language is spoken—shapes one’s perception of reality. Insisting on language as key to understanding the worldview of another person, Miriam explains to Hypo that a language is a “technique...born of a spiritual condition” or “state of mind” (IV. 164), itself generated by material conditions as varied as climate or class (e.g. nobility, aspirational gentility, or poverty). “But the condition and the technique are so closely akin that you can actually make discoveries about the state of mind by experimentally adopting the technique,” Miriam explains (IV. 164). “It is, up to a point...true, that if you speak in a certain way you will feel correspondingly.” Miriam’s idea bears a striking resemblance to the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis of linguistic relativity, attributed to the work of Edward Sapir and Benjamin Lee Whorf in the 1930s: the idea that language affects mental processes and cognition, and that even the architecture of a language—whether it is read from left to right or right to left, whether it is linear or nonlinear—can affect the way meaning is generated and processed. Whorf writes, for instance, that grammar “…is not merely a reproducing instrument for voicing ideas but rather is itself the shaper of ideas, the
program and guide for the individual’s mental activity, for his analysis of impressions, for his
synthesis of his mental stock in trade” (Whorf 212). Miriam’s idea of “adopting the technique”
reverse-engineers a version of the same idea: by speaking the way someone else speaks, one
might be able to think the way someone else thinks. Thus the text’s constant deprecation of
language is balanced by an insistence that the way people use language offers insight into their
consciousness. Miriam arrives at this idea right before her encounter with the Quakers; their
practice confirms it.

This alternative attitude toward language also explains Miriam’s choice to set her life
down—in language—immediately after spending time with the Quakers. First, she adopts the
Quaker technique in order to bypass her personal objections to the limitations of language:

To write is to forsake life. Every time I know this, in advance. Yet whenever
something comes that sets the tips of my fingers tingling to record it, I forget the
price; eagerly face the strange journey down and down to the centre of being. And
the scene of labour, when again I am back in it, alone, has become a sacred place.
(IV. 609)

To set words down in language, for Miriam, is still to corrupt the substance of her thought. But
the sacrifice is worth the benefit, as she is not only able to preserve the substance of her
“emotional moments,” but also able, through concentrated effort, to embark on something like
“concentration.” Richardson makes Miriam’s equation of writing with concentration even
clearer a few pages later: “Travel, while I write, down to the centre where everything is seen in
perspective; serenely” (IV. 619). That Richardson explicitly aligns Quaker concentration with
the act of writing—the two seem to enable each other, in this passage—casts doubt on prior
readings of Pilgrimage that suggest that Miriam’s trajectory tracks her move, as Jean Radford
puts it, “from a religious vocation to writing” (Radford 32-33). Elisabeth Bronfen makes a

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18 Miriam attempts to articulate the identity of her friend, Eleanor Dear along similar lines: “To call an Eleanor an
adventuress does not describe her. You can only describe her by the original contents of her mind. Her own images;
what she sees and thinks” (III. 285). To truly know someone is to know not what they think but the way they think.
similar point, suggesting that Miriam’s choice to write is implicitly an abandonment of the Quakers and their lifestyle: “Miriam learns that she cannot belong exclusively to this Quaker world...because it demands that she should turn her back not only on her other world but especially on the scene of her own aesthetic creation” (60-61). Yet Miriam herself is quick to define Quakerism as a belief system amenable to mobile praxis rather than as a religion to which she must profess an affiliation, celebrating it as “the technique of Quakerism” even after she leaves Dimple Hill in March Moonlight (IV. 564). Miriam’s deployment of Quaker principles as a strategy for writing, then, represents the epitome of Quakerism’s flexibility, its availability as a method.

As Miriam’s experience of the Psalm 63 reading further suggests, the Quaker approach also offered Richardson a way of thinking about language as a means to empathic imagination, a means of inhabiting the inner world of another. In “About Punctuation” (1924), for instance, Richardson describes reading as a collaborative effort between writer and reader that requires the attention of multiple senses:

> It is at this point that [the reader] begins to be aware of the charm that has been sacrificed by the systematic separation of phrases. He finds himself *listening*. Reading through the ear as well as through the eye...in the slow, attentive reading demanded by unpunctuated texts, the faculty of hearing has its chance, is enhanced until the text speaks itself. And it is of this enhancement that the strange lost charm is born... (990)

Richardson’s description suggests that when the reader engages with the text, the text itself “speaks,” much the same way the “wistful sound of Hebrew piety” (IV. 474) speaks to Miriam and the Roscorlas as they listen to Richard’s reading. Richardson’s philosophy of readership resounds with Quaker concentration as well as with Underhill’s writings about mysticism: “We know a thing only by uniting with it; by an interpenetration of it and ourselves. It gives itself to
us, just insofar as we give ourselves to it” *(Practical Mysticism* 11). For Richardson as well as for Underhill, the burden of communication is as much on the reader as it is on the writer.

Richardson’s stream of consciousness style, both in its effort-inducing difficulty and in its attempt to capture Miriam’s consciousness in real time, demands that her reader “listen” in much the same way. In replicating Miriam’s thought process, Richardson proposes an unprecedented intimacy with her readers, inviting them to give way to the rhythms of the text, to disimagine the boundaries between it and them. Even if Quakerism confirms Richardson’s distrust of language, it also offers her a way to use language to facilitate a form of communion that is utterly nonverbal in nature.

V. “Minute to Minute” Living: The Structure of *Pilgrimage* and the Individual Life

After its innovative use of stream of consciousness, the aspect of *Pilgrimage* most frequently remarked upon is its astonishing breadth and length. Left unfinished at the time of her death in 1957, each of *Pilgrimage’s* thirteen novels takes up a new chapter of Miriam’s young adulthood; *March Moonlight* (1967) the series’ final installment, takes place in 1912, the same year Richardson began writing *Pointed Roofs*, the novel that begins *Pilgrimage*. Beyond its fairly consistent faithfulness to Richardson’s own autobiography, however, the series rejects all other organizational rubrics. Despite British modernism’s reputation for difficulty and non-linearity, Richardson’s refusal to organize the series according to a discernible structure is fairly unique among other modernist works in English typically discussed alongside *Pilgrimage*. In *Ulysses* (1922), for instance, Joyce deploys the episodic structure of *The Odyssey* as well as that of the 24-hour day. Woolf, too, uses the structure of a single day in *Mrs. Dalloway*, punctuating her narrative with references to church bells that announce the progression of time, a move that also allows her to pivot to different characters’ points of view: Clarissa hears the bells; so does Peter
Walsh. But *Pilgrimage* offers no such episodic or chronological framework to its readers, forgoing even direct references to the passing of the nineteen years that elapse between *Pointed Roofs* and *March Moonlight*. As Sinclair notes in her review, *Pilgrimage* simply goes “on and on.”

The critical history of *Pilgrimage* is, in large part, a series of attempts to account for its unique and extensive form—in particular, its refusal to offer closure. “Richardson’s art is afraid of an ending,” writes Elaine Showalter, suggesting that Richardson’s resistance to closure bespeaks a cowardice that jeopardizes her Feminist credentials (*A Literature of Their Own* 261). But for Allison Pease, the difficulty of Richardson’s project—of its frustratingly obtuse syntax as well as its length—is part and parcel of Richardson’s radical goal of bestowing agency on the reader: “Richardson’s aesthetic ideals co-opt boredom as the means to their reader-oriented ends. Accustomed to narrative conventions that organize and prioritize their values, the reader of *Pilgrimage* must plow through the perceived monotony and unending details to discover what he or she values in the text” (*Modernism, Feminism, and The Culture of Boredom* 81). Yet despite the esoteric nature of the text, Richardson is fairly insistent on the primacy of Miriam’s “emotional moments” to her story, interjecting them over and over throughout the series. *Pilgrimage* is organized less according to the protocols of linear narrative and more according to the rapturous moments of self-encounter that punctuate it. In *The Tunnel*, Miriam refers to her own life as being composed of a pattern of these moments: “If you are free, you are alive. Today, because I am free I am the same person I was when I was there, but much stronger and happier because I know it. As long as I can sometimes feel like this nothing has mattered. Life is a chain of happy moments that cannot die” (II. 215).
Pilgrimage itself reads as a “chain” of Miriam’s “emotional moments”: they instill the series with narrative coherence and unity at the same time that they provide unparalleled insight into Miriam’s deepest feelings. Most recently, Pease has called them “the leitmotif of Pilgrimage...the series of ecstatic moments of self-realization in which Miriam encounters what she thinks of as her true self, reuniting with itself, in time,” reading them in relation to what she argues is Miriam’s underlying quest to avoid the boredom that characterizes the social structures of the masculine world Miriam rejects (99). I will argue in this section that Richardson’s investment in the Quaker technique accounts for the series’ structure, which proceeds according to “moments” rather than to a straightforward narrative of growth and resolution.\(^{19}\) Even if Miriam only recognizes her “emotional moments” in the practice of Quaker concentration towards the end of the series, Richardson uses Quaker concentration as a model for imagining and describing them from the very beginning. Finally, Richardson’s investment in the idea of concentration as a recursive praxis is modeled in each and every one of Miriam’s “emotional moments”—her repeated efforts to return to her “other self”—as well as in the trajectory of the text, which ends in March Moonlight with the reunion of Miriam, Richardson’s avatar, with Richardson herself.

The series is, in some sense, also held together by its title: Pilgrimage. The title certainly suggests that Miriam’s coming-of-age is the culmination of a long, taxing journey. But the title also implies that Richardson is structuring her narrative according to the paradigm of a religious quest: it invokes shrines and relics, spiritual as well as physical difficulty, notional faith colliding with its physical manifestation. The concept of pilgrimage is philosophically loaded: it bears

\(^{19}\) Similarly, in Revolving Lights, Miriam remarks upon her how her own life is organized around these moments: “The impulses of expansive moments always make things happen. Or the moments come when something is about to happen? How can people talk about coincidence? How not be struck by the inside pattern of life? It is so obvious that everything is arranged...” (III. 282).
connotations of transformation, purification, and community. It is predicated on the reunion of a faithful community across space and time, countless individual stories coalescing in service of one grand narrative. Indeed, the idea of pilgrimage suggests the common relevance of its end-goal, a universal answer to the multiplicity of questions pilgrims carry with them there. This set of ideas resonates acutely with the Quaker lifestyle as Richardson imagined it—a lifestyle based on effort and difficulty, and directed toward the erasure of boundaries between individual and community.

The concept of pilgrimage also implies a yoking together of spatial or geographic travel with internal spiritual search. In *Image and Pilgrimage* (1978), the foundational work of anthropological pilgrimage studies, Frank and Edith Turner assert that “Pilgrimage may be thought of as extroverted mysticism, just as mysticism is introverted pilgrimage. The pilgrim traverses a mystical way; the mystic sets forth on an interior spiritual pilgrimage” (33-34). Richardson herself makes a similar point in her writings, using the word “pilgrimage” in connection with Quaker concentration: “Silence, bodily and mental, is necessarily the first step in this direction. There is no other way of entering upon the difficult enterprise of transcending the rhythms of sense, and this, and nothing else, has been invariably the first step taken by the mystic upon his pilgrimage” (*Quakers* 93-94). Here, Richardson suggests that Quaker concentration is itself a pilgrimage, a journey inward rather than across space; she reframes geographical distance as distance within self. In *Pilgrimage*, Richardson condenses these ideas into the story of one person whose contact with her own self—a self that is, as Richardson suggests, connected with all other selves—represents the culmination of her “pilgrimage.” But if the series is oriented around moments rather than oriented toward a traditional *telos*, then Richardson’s series also re-envisions the idea of pilgrimage itself. Miriam’s psycho-spiritual
pilgrimage is not linear, but recursive; it is not a journey toward transcendental insight but an asymptotic series of endeavors to grasp that insight. The “emotional moments” around which Pilgrimage orients itself constitute various smaller pilgrimages, moments in which Miriam visits the holy shrine at her own core.

These moments are, first and foremost, deeply visceral experiences: Miriam is “flung,” “crushed,” or “plunged.” The immediate result is her immersion in a separate reality. Sometimes, she is cast back into her own memories: in Backwater, for instance, she is standing on the cliffs of Brighton as a child, hearing the waves crash against the shore, feeling the sand under her feet (I. 316). In other moments, she seems to hover over the future: in Honeycomb, she is “carried...over the passage into new experience...suspended over the new circumstances in rapid contemplation” (I. 351). Finally, some moments propel her into hitherto unknown spaces, usually featuring bursts of light and gardens of roses. At one point, for instance, Miriam witnesses, “garden beyond garden of roses, sunlit, brighter and brighter” (I. 405). In the midst of her “emotional moments,” Miriam feels that all of these spaces, real and notional, are “all one same stuff” (III. 283); her experience of these moments collapses her sense of time and space. But their real payoff, for Miriam, is the ability they bestow upon her to make contact with that “something” that is and “is more than” herself. Richardson describes this encounter as, at first, self-alienating; for instance, in Dawn’s Left Hand, Miriam is overcome by what is “at once the inmost essence of her being and yet not herself,” something that “in some unaccustomed words, was addressing the self she knew, making her both speaker and listener, making her, to herself, as strange and as mysterious as...the darkness behind the glowing fire” (IV. 281). Self is, at first, stranger to self. Yet the encounter also dissolves the boundaries between Miriam’s two selves: she becomes both “speaker and listener.” This melding is, to her, an experience of perfect joy.
and happiness, as her belief that the “deepest level of her being was joy” (III. 321) suggests. When she inevitably returns to her day-to-day existence, she feels empowered, eager to claim both selves as central components of who she is. “I am myself,” she concludes, after an “emotional moment” in Backwater (I. 286).

Richardson’s most extensive description of one of Miriam’s moments occurs at the opening of Clear Horizon. Like all of her “emotional moments,” this one materializes in stillness, silence. Miriam is quietly recalling a moment in which, as she witnessed a “little manageress” deliver coffee to a man at a restaurant, she wondered if the waitress ever contemplated the “panorama” of her own life. The thought prompts another “wordless thought”—never revealed to the reader—which, in turn, triggers a “lifting tide of emotion” (IV. 279). Suddenly, Miriam feels she has been lifted into the sky:

With a single up-swinging movement, she was clear of earth and hanging, suspended and motionless, high in the sky, looking...into a far-off pearly blue distance, that held her eyes, seeming to be in motion within itself: an intense crystalline vibration that seemed to be aware of being enchantedly observed, and even to be amused and to be saying, ‘Yes, this is my reality.’ (IV. 279)

The passage generates a contrast between stillness and motion that it ultimately collapses: Miriam is confronted with “motion within itself.” “Distance” appears to be almost animate: it makes eye-contact with her, somehow “aware” of being “enchantedly observed”—language that recalls Miriam’s (and Richardson’s) theorizations of the enchantment visible from a distance—and even speaks to Miriam in a tone of certainty and affirmation. Finally, Richardson conveys Miriam’s experience in declarative, indicative sentences—never framing it within the context of a “vision,” and thus distinct from her experience of reality, or suggesting that it is anything but real: as far as the novel is concerned, Miriam is, in point of fact, “clear of earth.”
Inwardly countering her friends’ objections to the reality of her experience, Miriam reflects:

But it was the world of hard fact she had just visited. Feeling there, in the very midst of joy and wonder, not surprise but an everyday steadiness and clarity beyond anything she had yet experienced...What was it about those vibrating particles of light that had made them seem so familiar and reassuring? Why had they brought, at some point in that endless brief moment, the certainty that ages hence they would once more be there, only all about her instead of far away...The rapture and the rapturous certainty. Joy, wonder, recognition. No excitement, because no barrier...Movement that is perfect rest. (IV. 282)

Even after Miriam’s emotional moment has concluded, it continues to inform her reality:

Miriam’s affective experience is on par with “the world of hard fact,” such that Miriam is unable—or unwilling—to distinguish between the two. If, during the moment itself, Miriam is immersed in pure joy, here she reflects on the sense of security and certainty that joy bestows upon her. The passage concludes by dissolving into an accumulation of unattached words and phrases—joy, wonder, recognition—that suggests a logical progression from the emotional experience of joy to “recognition.” As the phrase “rapturous certainty” suggests by yoking together an affective response and an epistemic condition, there is nothing unreal about her previous flight; instead, the rapturous joy she felt dissolves into her experience of the real afterward. Miriam sees the world through the lens of her transcendental experience rather than the other way around: the vision she achieves becomes more real than the world inhabited by her friends. As Richardson’s vision of the Quaker method dictates, Miriam comes away from her experience with the ability to see the everyday through the lens of her transcendent experience.

Miriam’s emotional moments are also linked to one another, as Miriam often reflects on past moments as she experiences new moments in the present. Miriam’s “clear of earth” moment prompts her to recall an earlier moment of transcendental insight triggered by an encounter with her elderly grandmother, whom she had never met before:
‘And we stood, I seven years old and she sixty-five, though I didn’t know this at the time, looking at each other. And I saw that I was looking at someone exactly my own age. And it delighted me so much to see someone thinking and feeling exactly as I did, and beaming the fact at me and waiting for me to take it in, and being no older at the end of life than I was myself, that I went on upstairs, knowing, after the look that had reached me through her smile, that there was no need to speak, and feeling eager to experience what I should have called, if I had had the words, the enrichment that had overtaken my lonely world through this recognition of identity.’ (IV. 333)

In this passage, Miriam appears to encounter the substance of her inner self in a person who is essentially a stranger to her. Yet she is able to “recognize” herself in her and to experience the refreshment derived from accessing the other self with which she usually makes contact in her emotional moments. That this memory recurs within Miriam’s emotional moment in the present—contained within it, as it were—suggests that Miriam’s emotional moments are essentially palimpsestic. Each triggers vivid memories of earlier ones, such that the past is brought into the present. In The Tunnel, for instance, Miriam reflects, “...there had been moments like that, years ago, in gardens, by seas and cliffs. Her mind wandered back amongst these; calling up each one with perfect freshness. They were all the same. In each one she had felt exactly the same; outside life, untouched by anything, free...” (II. 213) Each moment allows her to traverse her interior landscape, to recall earlier moments and experience them anew, at once, as the same essential moment diffused across time and space. Likewise, Richardson’s narration of these moments also brings the past into the present, recalling the language and imagery of previous moments throughout the series: colorful gardens, piercing lights, wide-open skies, crashing waves.

While Miriam’s character grows and evolves inconsistently and inconclusively—she goes from despising women to seeking refuge in female community; from having very little political consciousness, to allegiance with socialism, to abandoning socialism altogether—the moments around which the series is oriented, by the text’s own admission, do not change in
substance or intensity: “They were all the same.” Miriam’s conviction that she has made contact with “something [that] isn’t me. It’s something I am, somehow” (I. 151) in Pointed Roofs (1915) recurs virtually unchanged in Dawn’s Left Hand (1931), where she desires to be “fully possessed by that something within her that was more than herself” (IV. 219). Thus, even if her interpretations of those moments do evolve and change over the course of the series—first she regards them with childlike wonder; after encountering the Quakers, she develops a more firmly articulated commitment to facilitating them as spiritual practice—the moments themselves retain the same characteristics. The emotions she feels in these moments remain stable as well: “joy, wonder, recognition.” The moments don’t change, nor does the immediate insight they offer. But Miriam does change—in relation to them. Richardson’s novels adopt a kind of orbital relationship to these moments and to what they entail. Miriam’s lifestyle changes; she lives in different places; she makes different friends; her politics change. Yet she is perpetually bound to these moments, and continues willing herself to produce and analyze them.

As these moments accumulate over the course of her life, each provides a portal to the others; she develops a relationship to past versions of herself, past ways of being and thinking. But she also stages repeated encounters with an inner self that remains the same; the encounters shape and re-orient Miriam’s outer, “momentary” self to the same, unchanging internal compass. Richardson’s structuring of the series around these repeated encounters invites the reader to take part in the tides of Miriam’s emotional life. If the goal of Richardson’s stream of consciousness technique is to immerse the reader in the moment-to-moment experience of Miriam’s consciousness, then the novel’s overarching periodic architecture—its ebb and flow, its swellings of ecstatic experience and retreats into Miriam’s everyday thought processes—immerse the reader in the broader rhythm of her spiritual search: its long swathes of frustration and emptiness,
its random interruption by surges of meaning and self-actualization. If Quaker concentration is, for Richardson, a synchronic representation of the Quaker method, the whole of Pilgrimage captures the Quaker method diachronically—the way human life ought to be punctuated by moments of concentration, the way one’s perspective ought to change in relation to those moments.

In its length and breadth the series also attempts to convey the “distance” imbued by repeated efforts at Quaker concentration. Miriam returns to her theorization of distance and enchantment, for instance, in connection with her decision to write her autobiographical novel in the series’ final novel, March Moonlight: “Every distance a clear perspective. Why say distance lends enchantment? Each vista demands, for portrayal, absence from current life, contemplation, a long journey” (IV. 656). Earlier in the series, Miriam considers the way “distance”—or, spiritual withdrawal into one’s inner self—opens one’s perspective up to the enchantment inherent in the world as it is. Here, Richardson suggests that the relative distance Miriam has achieved from her own life—both by time and by exiling herself to write—is paramount to the process of conveying it properly. In order to recount the narrative of her life, Miriam must be willing to contemplate it, a process Richardson refers to as “a long journey.” Richardson articulates a version of this idea in a 1944 letter, where age functions as a similar kind of distance: “The whole of it ceasing to be a chronological sequence, composes itself after the manner of a picture, with things in their true proportions and relationships. Many are completely transformed” (qtd. in Bowler 92). Miriam has, of course, experienced her life in a chronological, linear fashion, but she is only able to convey it in its “true proportion”—the same language Richardson uses to describe the point of view achieved during Quaker concentration (IV. 498)—when she has achieved temporal and spiritual distance from it. The structural form of
Pilgrimage, then, approximates Miriam’s idea of “distance” in a way that both mimics the kind of perspicacity offered by Quaker concentration and allows for thinking about consciousness—and indeed, about the individual life—in a new light.

The result, as Richardson suggests through the form of her own project, is the narration of a life that does not offer framing or explanation, that does not offer a traditional resolution or operate according to the rules of a bildungsroman. Of course, the modernist bildungsroman never abided by the rules of its 19th century predecessors. As Jed Esty has argued, temporal “compression and expansion” are characteristic of British modernist bildungsromans where “characterization does not unfold in biographical time but in proleptic fits and retroactive starts, ephiphanic bursts and impressionistic mental inventories, in accidents, in obliquity, in sudden lyric death and in languid semiconscious delay” (Unseasonable Youth 2). Certainly Esty’s description fits Richardson’s narrative of Miriam’s coming-of-age, its unfolding within a distended temporal frame, its simultaneous narration of developmental growth and recursivity. Even her “interior spiritual pilgrimage,” to use the Turners’ term, is framed as a return, as an encounter with something that “has already proclaimed itself.” Richardson frames this developmental return not as frustration but as fulfillment. In Deadlock (1921), Miriam reflects,

The years that had passed were a single short interval leading to the restoration of that first moment. Everything they contained centered there, her passage through them, the desperate graspings and droppings, had been a coming back...Everything would be an everlastingly various joyful coming back. (III. 135)

The process of development Richardson narrates is less linear than centripetal: moving closer and closer to a pre-existing center with ever-increasing focus and intensity. The way forward is the way back—but it is also the way back over and over again. Miriam’s pilgrimage cannot be regressive, for it is, above all, a circular process.
Crucial to Richardson’s account of Miriam’s sojourn in Sussex is that none of the ideas she encounters there are particularly new. In an emotional moment in *Deadlock*, for instance, Miriam concludes, “Silence is reality...Life does show, seen from far off, pouring down into stillness” (III.188). In *Revolving Lights* (1923), Miriam reflects, “Being in the silence was being in something alive and positive; at the centre of existence; being there with others made the sense of it stronger than when it was experienced alone” (IV. 327). Even the moment of spiritual communion with Rachel Mary in the kitchen strongly resembles an earlier encounter with her friend Selena Holland, where “their prolonged silence was speaking” (IV. 430). The conclusions Miriam comes to at her most self-assured, and with the most clarity, over the course of hundreds and hundreds of pages seem to form almost the foundation of the Quaker lifestyle she encounters in Sussex. In a sense, Miriam’s encounter with Quaker principles operates according to the same logic as Richardson’s theorization of concentration in *Quakers, Past and Present*: an encounter with “something which has already proclaimed itself in moments of heightened consciousness” (*Quakers* 35). Thus Richardson frames Miriam’s encounter with the Quakers at the end of the series as the capstone to the kinds of observations—by this point, solidified into convictions—that Miriam has been making all along. What Quakerism offers Miriam—and what it has already offered Richardson—is both a vocabulary for articulating what she has felt all along and a praxis for adhering to it more fully. It also shapes the semi-autobiographical narrative of *Pilgrimage*, begun shortly after Richardson encountered these techniques herself.

Finally, the whole of *Pilgrimage* might also be read as one extensive aesthetic dramatization of Quaker concentration. If Miriam’s writing process requires her adoption of a method like Quaker concentration—Richardson describes it as “the strange journey down and down to the centre of being.” (IV. 609)—Richardson’s process, the inspiration for Miriam’s,
follows a similar method. *Pilgrimage* narrates a series of endeavors to reunite with self on a micro-level. Richardson’s choice to end the novel with no developmental resolution, but rather with Miriam’s choice to begin writing *Pointed Roofs*, suggests that the series itself might also capture a coming to self—Richardson’s own—on a macro-level. Thus what Richardson calls the “Quaker method” works in *Pilgrimage* as an all-encompassing principle that fractalizes into numerous paradigms across various scopes: it is a praxis for reuniting with self, a lifestyle of “minute to minute living in the spirit,” a means of rethinking the contours of the individual life, and an aesthetic that operates on the level of the sentence and at the level of the series as a whole.
Chapter 4:

“Redeemed from Fire by Fire”: T.S. Eliot’s Purgatorial Poetics

When T.S. Eliot sent Ezra Pound his manuscript of *The Waste Land* in 1922, he also sent him a draft of a much shorter poem, written eight years earlier, entitled “The Death of Saint Narcissus” (1914).¹ The poems bear no apparent resemblance to each other beyond a few shared lines: for instance, “The Death of Saint Narcissus” begins by beckoning the reader under the shadow of a rock, promising to offer the reader “a shadow different from either / Your shadow sprawling over the sand at daybreak, or / Your shadow leaping behind the fire against the red rock” (PEY 28).² But in “Saint Narcissus,” the poet’s promise yields not “fear in a handful of dust,” but rather bloody relics: “I will show you his bloody cloth and limbs / And the gray shadow on his lips” (PEY 28). The rest of the poem consists of a short, bizarre hagiography, combining Ovidian source material and the obscure story of the historical Saint Narcissus—who retired to the wilderness after accusations of a “detestable” crime (Baring-Gould 702)—into a parody of ascetic experience. Saint Narcissus retreats from the city limits to become “a dancer to God” because he has become enamored with his own body, entranced by the feeling of “his limbs smoothly passing each other,” “the pointed corners of his eyes,” and “pointed tips of his fingers” (PEY 28). Delusion succeeds delusion: alone outside the city, Narcissus first imagines

¹ While Pound did not recommend it for publication in 1922, “The Death of Saint Narcissus” was eventually published after Eliot’s death in a 1967 collection of his early poetry entitled *Poems Written in Early Youth*. Two drafts of the poem can also be found in the facsimile and transcription of *The Waste Land* edited by Valerie Eliot.
² This and all subsequent lines from this poem quoted from T.S. Eliot, *Poems Written in Early Youth*. The recycled lines in *The Waste Land* read:
   There is shadow under this red rock,
   (Come in under the shadow of this red rock),
   And I will show you something different from either
   Your shadow at morning striding behind you
   Or your shadow at evening rising to meet you;
   I will show you fear in a handful of dust.
himself as a tree whose roots and branches are able to touch; next, as a coupling of man and fish, “writhing in his own clutch” (PEY 29); finally, he believes he is at once a drunken old man and young girl, his desire for his own flesh figured as hideous rape. While this final imagined transformation appears to generate a modicum of self-awareness—Narcissus feels “drunken and old,” having experienced “the horror of his own smoothness” (PEY 30)—the hint of insight is fleeting: Narcissus, “in love with the burning arrows” (PEY 30), dances until the arrows penetrate him, relishing the feeling of his own blood dripping over his body: “As he embraced them his white skin surrendered itself to the / redness of blood, and satisfied him” (PEY 30). The poem closes with the image it promises at its inception: Narcissus dies “[w]ith the shadow in his mouth” (PEY 30).

The poem reads as a satire of religious experience from start to finish, presenting Narcissus’ ascetic “surrender” as a product of narcissism rather than genuine devotion: faced with the potential for sublime experience as he walks “between the sea and the high cliffs” and “over meadows,” Narcissus is “soothed and stifled by his own rhythm” (PEY 28). The alliteration of “soothed and stifled” emphasizes the rhythmic tranquility of the natural world he forgoes in favor of the pleasure he derives from his own body. It also encapsulates one of the dualities Eliot is trying to describe: Narcissus’ own rhythm is lulling, but also self-interruptive. The poem concludes with a step-by-step descent into a hellish sexual landscape that mocks the spiritual discipline characteristic of the ascetic lifestyle, replacing immediate experience of the divine with a disgusting image of self-defilement. Narcissus’ frenzied dancing does nothing to bring him closer to a divine essence outside of him; rather, he becomes increasingly erotically entangled with himself. In this sense, “The Death of Saint Narcissus” is a parable about the fine line between sensual and divine ecstasy, asceticism and solipsism, delusion and authentic
spiritual experience. Much like his classical namesake, who mistakes his own reflection for the body of another person, Narcissus mistakes what is merely his own “shadow”\(^3\) for experience of God. That the poem aligns its persistent imagery of shadow with the reader’s self—such that “your shadow sprawling over the sand at daybreak” and “your shadow leaping behind the fire” (PEY 28, emphasis mine) become linked, by the end of the poem, to “the shadow in [Narcissus’] mouth” (PEY 30)—heightens its urgently cautionary dimensions, suggesting that something about Narcissus’ folly is universal, relevant to even the non-initiated. As for the status of ascetic practice itself, the poem suggests skepticism about whether it could ever be other than redirected sexual desire—and about whether it could ever lead to a happier ending.

Other poems of the period—like “The Love Song of Saint Sebastian” or “The Burnt Dancer,” both written, like “Saint Narcissus,” in 1914\(^4\)—also explore the fine line between sexual desire and spiritual longing. In “Saint Sebastian,” a sadomasochistic dramatic monologue told from the perspective of the titular saint, Sebastian professes his eagerness to engage in all manner of “torture and delight”—to flog himself, wear a hair shirt, pray incessantly while covered in blood—all “to follow where you lead” (Inventions 78); whether the poem’s addressee is God or a romantic interest remains purposely ambiguous until the last stanza, when Sebastian expresses his desire to strangle his human lover. “The Burning Dancer” compares a moth flying around a flame to a dancer “caught in the circle of desire,” using imagery inflected with the language of asceticism (the dancer “expiates his heedless flight” and is a “patient acolyte of pain”) to convey the moth’s sensuality (Inventions 62-63). By the end of the poem, it becomes apparent that the dance at its core is within the speaker’s mind: “Within the circle of my brain /

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\(^3\) Eliot’s use of “shadow” rather than “reflection” recalls Ovid’s original Latin: Narcissus “corpus putat esse, quod unda est” [“he thinks that a body which is a shadow”] (Metamorphoses III 417).

\(^4\) These poems remained unpublished until 1998, when they were published in a collection of Eliot’s prose and poetry entitled Inventions of the March Hare [(1998). According to Donald Childs, in 1914, Eliot was planning to include these poems in a poetry sequence entitled “Descent from the Cross” (Childs 84-85).
The twisted dance continues” (Inventions 62). Taken together, the poems dramatize the blurred lines between self-mortification, sexual pleasure, and spiritual discipline. They also betray an overwhelming anxiety about the potential for sexual energy to be channeled into spiritual frenzy—a process that Eliot was, as biographers and critics alike have observed, both doubtful about and deeply attracted to during this period.⁵

It’s tempting to read these poems as categorically dismissive—incisive satirical commentaries on the problems inherent to ascetic practice, or even to religious experience at all. Certainly, the poems echo contemporary critiques, by now familiar enough to be clichés, of ecstatic religious experience as the province of irrationalism, masochism, and warped sexual repression. Eliot’s Saint Narcissus and Saint Sebastian seem right at home with the historical Saint Sebastian, his naked body suggestively penetrated by arrows, or with Saint Teresa of Avila, whose likeness Bernini famously captured “in ecstasy” as she is penetrated by an angel’s lance. It is impossible, the poems seem to suggest, to separate delusion from authentic spiritual search—impossible to entirely extricate self and its vicissitudes from the mystic process.

But the poems express a problem particular to the period and central to Eliot’s thinking, a problem that would haunt him for the rest of his career: how to “unself” in pursuit of spiritual transcendence—how to deploy ascetic technologies in pursuit of a union with God—without indulging solipsism, erotic or otherwise. This chapter argues that Eliot’s late poetry explores a system for avoiding mysticism’s potential for egocentricity through purgatorial processes of self-refinement. Influenced by his engagement with contemporary psychologies of mysticism as well as the writings of medieval and early-modern figures (mystics, theologians, and religious poets,

⁵ Schuchard exemplifies this trend, writing of the poems, “More than any biography could, these and other early poems show the young poet and student of philosophy trying to represent and control in his art the intensity of his internal conflicts, able to create poems but unable to sublimate passions” (13). See Schuchard, Eliot’s Dark Angel: Intersections of Life and Art; Kaye, “‘A Splendid Readiness for Death’: T.S. Eliot, the Homosexual Cult of St. Sebastian, and World War I” 107-34; Miller, T.S. Eliot: the Making of an American Poet, 1888-1922 249.
especially Dante), Eliot’s version of purgation is predicated on gradual, stepwise, and procedural efforts to escape the bounds of selfhood—to reorient and more closely align the human perspective with a divine one. In keeping with Eliot’s well-known preferences for thought over feeling, or intellect over emotion, Eliot’s idea of purgation starkly opposes flights of emotional excess. Rather than sublimating ecstasy as a vehicle for encountering God, Eliot eschews—or, rather, defers—pleasure altogether: “East Coker,” for instance, maintains, “You must go by a way wherein there is no ecstasy” (CPP 127). In the context of Eliot’s later career, then, Saint Narcissus’ decision to become “a dancer to God / Because his flesh was in love with the burning arrows” reads as a cardinal error: first, because it is motivated by and expressed through carnal desire; second, because the vision of ascetic mysticism the poem expresses is concerned with mortification of the body in the first place. One of the arguments of this chapter is that Eliot ultimately re-envisions the goal of ascetic practice as a purgatorial mortification of the self—its perspective, outlook, and sensibilities—rather than a mortification of the body.

Throughout his poetry and non-fiction writings, before and especially after his 1927 conversion to “Anglo-Catholicism,” Eliot demonstrates a keen interest in the purgatorial: the theological concept of Purgatory, heavily inflected by Dante’s portrayal in The Divine Comedy; classically purgatorial imagery like fire and burning; and purgatorial dynamics: directed pain, contrition, deferment, and waiting. These dynamics are famously at the heart of The Waste Land: its pairing of St. Augustine and Buddha’s Fire Sermon, “two representatives of eastern and western asceticism,” in “The Fire Sermon”; its preoccupation with fire and burning more generally; its frequent allusions to Dante’s Purgatorio; its placement of “Death by Water,” a symbolic, purifying “death” at the center of the poem. Purgation also figures in the poem in less obvious ways, particularly in “What The Thunder Said”: read in light of Eliot’s interest in
purgation as a fundamental reorientation of the individual perspective, the poem’s attention to the radical isolation of human experience—and, in particular, the possibility of escape offered by the disciplined, self-interrogation of the *Brihadāranyaka Upanishad*[^6]—can also be read as purgatorial. But Eliot’s most confident and interesting elaborations of the purgatorial principle occur in his post-conversion poems, which extensively meditate on, and also dramatize, what it means to achieve religious transcendence according to purgatorial principles without defaulting to erotic experience. Purgation in these poems is a thematic preoccupation but also a formal principle, inflecting the poems’ non-linear structure, their deployment of targeted allusions, and their repeated injunctions to re-read them.

Of course, Eliot’s investment in this set of topics has significant, unsettling autobiographical dimensions, as Eliot himself was the first to admit: in a 1928 letter to P.E. More, for instance, Eliot wrote, “I am one of those whom the sense of void tends to drive towards asceticism or sensuality, and only Christianity helps to reconcile me to life which is otherwise disgusting” (qtd. in Childs 112). Private letters and other writings, as numerous critics have pointed out, reveal the extent of Eliot’s self-loathing and disgust with the flesh, often invoking his “puritan New England heritage” (Childs 168) and the breakdown of his marriage to Vivienne Haigh-Wood, when he even took a vow of celibacy (Gordon 292). Yet Eliot’s post-conversion poetry nonetheless persistently offers an alternative narrative for the ascetic impulse—ways it could be transformative; ways it could offer psychic liberation; ways it could achieve a more expansive, un-self-interested perspective.

[^6]: The episode from *Brihadāranyaka Upanishad* Eliot alludes to here is known as “The Three Great Disciples”: in the story, the Creator God, Prajāpati gives his disciples the enigmatic instruction, “DA,” a syllable each of his disciples interprets as a different imperative: first, as “dāmyata” (or, “control yourselves”); second, as “datta” (or, “give”); third, as “dayadhvam” (or, “have compassion”). In each case, Prajāpati confirms that the disciples have heard correctly (*The Upanishads* 321-322). The episode, then, encapsulates an idea central to Eliot’s thinking about purgation: it plays on the fundamental disconnect between divine and human experience while simultaneously offering a means of living faithfully through overcoming natural human failures.
There has never been a shortage of scholarship dedicated to the theological and religious dimensions of Eliot’s poetic career. The majority of these studies are mostly—and usefully—devoted to exploring Eliot’s sources: Helen Gardner’s *The Composition of Four Quartets*, Paul Murray’s *T.S. Eliot and Mysticism: The Secret History of Four Quartets*, Donald Childs’ *T.S. Eliot: Mystic, Son, and Lover*, Lyndall Gordon’s biography, *T.S. Eliot: An Imperfect Life*. Most recently, in *Theological Modernism*, Anthony Domestico has explored the ways Eliot’s theological orientation in *Four Quartets* is inflected with the spirit of influential Protestant theologian Karl Barth. While these studies make frequent references to the purgatorial valences and dimensions of Eliot’s poetry, they tend to relegate them to specific images and allusions; their significance becomes ultimately intertextual. Sebastian Knowles offers the most extended treatment of Eliot’s use of purgatorial imagery in *A Purgatorial Flame*, reading *Four Quartets* as a modern, wartime reinterpretation of Dante’s *Divine Comedy*. While Eliot’s obsession with Dante is crucial to his development of a purgatorial poetics, Dante, in fact, also feeds into Eliot’s idiosyncratic notion of purgatorial experience. While my readings of Eliot’s poetry undoubtedly draw on his engagement with the work of familiar figures like Dante, I read these references as components of a larger project of imagining and modeling purgatorial self-refinement that animates his later poetry. A focused, rigorous exploration of Eliot’s interest in ascetic mysticism will show his turn to its purgatorial dimensions, and the way both manifest in the themes and formal features of his poetry.

Eliot’s poetry is purgatorial in three, interrelated ways: first, it is stratified, tiered, disciplined, and procedural. Second, it is dedicated to stepping outside human impulses and systems—chronological time, reason, language—but then returning to them in light of broader, usually theological, frameworks. Eliot’s purgatorial poetry is, accordingly, always centered on
processes of revision and rereading. Third, it is predicated on a principle of deferment: the rewards for the difficulty of these processes are rarely, if ever, available in the here and now. The purgatorial, for Eliot, is a principle that always implies a process, a process that is ongoing, self-critical, and with no fixed endpoint. Eliot’s version of unselfing differs significantly, then, from the models of unselfing imagined by other figures this study examines. For them, unselfing is a procedure that can be used to achieve various ends that run counter to orthodox religiosity: for Lawrence, it is a means of getting in touch with semi-divine forces within the self; for Forster, it is a means of achieving empathy; for Richardson, it is a means of experiencing a deeper level of consciousness on a sustained, moment-to-moment basis. But for Eliot, unselfing is inextricable from orthodox Christianity. Moreover, the problem he attempts to solve is inherent, for him, to the project of unselfing itself. If, for Lawrence, Forster, and Richardson, a religiously-inflected model of unselfing offers escape from the perils of egoism, for Eliot, it is unselfing itself that contains the potential for egoism. Unselfing is, in Eliot’s view, an activity that can be undertaken correctly or disastrously wrong.

My chapter begins by placing Eliot in the context of other early 20th century thinkers interested in mystical phenomena, turning first to earlier writers who rejected its authenticity on the grounds of its alleged liability to lapse into eroticized solipsism, and then to those who, like Eliot, turn to purgatorial processes as a means of short-circuiting this very problem; this section culminates in an extended elucidation of the influential work of Evelyn Underhill, paying special attention to the aspects of her work most interested in purgation. Next, I turn to Eliot’s non-fiction writings about mystical experience, showing how Eliot’s unique approach to mystical phenomena shaped his poetry as well as his aesthetic philosophy: purgatorial principles are, for instance, at the core of a pronouncement like, “The emotion of art is impersonal. And the poet
cannot reach this impersonality without surrendering himself wholly to the work to be done” (Selected Prose 44). The chapter concludes with extended readings of Eliot’s two most important post-conversion works: “Ash-Wednesday” (1930) and Four Quartets (1943). While certainly purgatorial elements characterize Eliot’s poetry prior to his conversion, these poems constitute Eliot’s clearest and most rigorous dramatizations of the purgatorial process, representing unselfing as a means of approximating a divine perspective—on time; on desire; and, in Four Quartets, on love—in the here and now.

II. Christian Mysticism at the Turn of the Century: Critics and Defenders

The figure of the mystic was a popular subject of debate in Eliot’s time among psychologists, philosophers, theologians, and anthropologists, both as a target of popular critique and an object of intense fascination. The first decade of the 20th century saw the publication of numerous influential texts dedicated to the study of religious experience and/or mysticism, many of which Eliot was familiar with: William Inge’s Christian Mysticism (1899), William James’ Varieties of Religious Experience (1902), Baron von Hügel’s Catherine of Genoa (1908), Evelyn Underhill’s Mysticism (1911). Eliot’s student notes from Harvard, transcriptions of the texts he was reading between 1908 and 1914, attest to the depth of his interest in mysticism and the psychology of religious experience. The texts range in tone and approach: while some seek to undermine mysticism (Nordau’s Degeneration [1892], Janet’s Neuroses et idées fixes [1898] and Obsessions et psychathénie [1903]), the majority of the works Eliot engaged with take mystic experience seriously, representing it as an authentic phenomenon and using the discourse of psychology to unpack and explain it. Eliot also supplemented these readings with intense study of medieval and early modern mystics like St. Teresa, Julian of Norwich, Madame Guyon,

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Walter Hilton, St. John of the Cross, Jacob Böhme, and St. Bernard (Gordon 60), many of whom feature largely in the two studies in which he was most interested: William Inge’s *Studies of English Mystics* (1906) and Evelyn Underhill’s classic *Mysticism* (1911), from which Eliot allegedly took “copious” notes (Gordon 538).

Following what Holbrook Jackson has referred to as “the beginning of the revival of mysticism” in the 1890s (Jackson 31)—and the obsession with mystical phenomena that accompanied the First World War—8—the cultural and intellectual scene of early 20th century Britain was consumed with talk of “mysticism,” so much so that most of the 20th century texts listed above begin by seeking to define the term against the proliferation of connotations and definitions it was already associated with.9 Across the board, the sticking point in the majority of these studies—even those that look on mysticism favorably—is its allegedly sensual undertones, particularly with regard to ascetic practice and ecstatic experience. In almost every case, the specter of eroticism threatens to undermine the legitimacy of the religious project.

After all, the pathologization of mysticism as a particularly potent—and explicitly sexual—variety of hysteria at the hands of 19th century medical discourse had, after all, thoroughly invaded the popular imagination by the time Eliot wrote “The Death of Saint Narcissus.”10 19th-century psychologists like Jean-Martin Charcot, along with his disciple, Pierre Janet, advanced the theory that mystical experience was a form of hysteria throughout his popular writings and influential case studies, referring to St. Francis of Assisi and St. Teresa of

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8 See Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning*.
9 Evelyn Underhill, for instance, writes in her introduction to *Practical Mysticism* (1915), “The inquirer will learn that mysticism is a philosophy, an illusion, a kind of religion, a disease; that it means having visions, performing conjuring tricks, leading an idle, dreamy, and selfish life, neglecting one’s business, wallowing in vague spiritual emotions, and being “in tune with the infinite.” He will discover that it emancipates him from all dogmas—sometimes from all morality—and at the same time that it is very superstitious. One expert tells him that it is simply “Catholic piety,” another that Walt Whitman was a typical mystic; a third assures him that all mysticism comes from the East....” (Underhill 2).
10 For more on the pathologization of mystical experience in the 19th century, see Mazzoni, *Saint Hysteria*. 
Avila, for instance, as “undeniable hysterics” (*La foi qui guérit* 117). For Freud, an early devotee of Charcot, any form of altered religious experience was neurosis at best, clinical masochism—or even nymphomania—at worst (Glucklich 85). As Mazzoni argues in *Saint Hysteria*, accusations of sexual pathology, particularly among the religious, were also often disproportionally gendered. Not only were the vast majority of so-called 19th century “hysterical” patients women, but retrospective diagnoses of historical personages—like Saint Teresa, whom Freud and Breuer referred to offhand as “the patron saint of hysteria” in their introduction to *Studies on Hysteria* (1895) (232)—also tended to disproportionally target women. Saint Teresa in particular, as Mazzoni puts it, has “traditionally been the ‘privileged’ target of the hysteria-mysticism interpretive tug-of-war” due to both the erotic undertones of her writings and her well-known suffering from chronic pain (37). It is no coincidence that Saint Sebastian, perhaps the other most famous icon of ascetic mysticism, has been traditionally read, especially by the Decadents, as a queer figure, his ecstatic religious experience inseparable from his body’s penetration by phallic arrows. By the time Eliot wrote poems like “The Death of Saint Narcissus” and “The Love Song of Saint Sebastian,” mysticism and sexual pathology were bound together so tightly that it was impossible to imagine an iteration of mysticism bereft of erotic contamination.

Mysticism is even one of Max Nordau’s major targets in *Degeneration* (1892), meriting its own volume in his study. Like Charcot (and criminologist Cesar Lombroso, whose work inspired the study), Nordau is quick to attribute mysticism and ecstasy to misplaced sexual

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11 In his landmark study *Decadence and Catholicism*, Ellis Hanson refers to Saint Sebastian as “the classic pincushion of homoerotic art” (338).

12 Eliot was so troubled by these associations that he felt compelled to defend “The Love Song of Saint Sebastian” from notional charges of homoeroticism in a letter to Conrad Aiken in 1914: “There’s nothing homosexual about this—rather an important difference perhaps—but no one ever painted a female Sebastian, did they?” (*LTSE* 44) For more on Eliot’s early fascination with Saint Sebastian, see Gordon 90-91.
feelings: “The circumstance that the only normal organic sensation known to us which resembles that of ecstasy is the sexual feeling, explains the fact that ecstatics connect their ecstatic presentations by way of association with the idea of love, and describe ecstasy itself as a kind of supernatural act of love, as a union of an ineffably high and pure sort with God or the Blessed Virgin” (64). But Nordau also expands his criticism beyond the problem of misdirected erotic energy, treating sexual frenzy as a subset of a larger, more urgent problem. For Nordau, the mystic is liable to channel sexual feeling into religious experience precisely due to a perceptual disorder: “This condition of [the mystic’s] mind is always connected with strong emotional excitement,” Nordau writes (45), going on to define mysticism proper as “this state of mind, in which a man is straining to see, thinks he sees, but does not see...in which a man fancies that he perceives inexplicable relations between distinct phenomena and ambiguous formless shadows” (57). Given the popularity of this reading of mystic experience—as the product of a deluded mind, a mind predisposed to project its own fantasies on the external world—it is unsurprising that Eliot dubs his erotically tortured saint after the Western tradition’s most famous solipsist, “Narcissus.” According to this reading, religious feeling could be nothing but sublimated sensuality, self-denial nothing but a deeper—and fundamentally pathological—immersion in self. The mystic cannot escape their own distorted view of the world, doomed to interpret everything they see through the lens of their disordered psyche—a psyche that must be, as the psychoanalytic reading goes, unable to get beyond whatever repressed sexual urges belie the ecstasy they claim to experience.

The trope of the sexually repressed mystic was a tired meme by the time William James delivered the lectures that compose his classic study, *Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902). In his first lecture, James mocks “...the fashion, quite common nowadays among certain writers,
of criticising the religious emotions by showing a connection between them and the sexual
life...For the hysterical nun, starving for natural life, Christ is but an imaginary substitute for a
more earthly object of affection” (10). James’ study is, in large part, a recuperation of religious
experience and a defense of the religious outlook from accusations of irrationality or
unhealthiness. Later in the same lecture, James returns to the same idea, claiming that these
criticisms of mysticism are founded on a fundamental misunderstanding of the nature of
religious experience itself: “It seems to me that few conceptions are less instructive than this re-
interpretation of religion as perverted sexuality...the effects are infinitely wider than the alleged
causes, and for the most part opposite in nature...The plain truth is that to interpret religion one
must in the end look at the immediate content of the religious consciousness...Everything about
the two things [religion and sex] differs, objects, moods, faculties concerned, and acts impelled
to” (11-12). Citing a huge body of trans-historical evidence, both first-hand accounts of religious
experiences and the psychological studies of religion from which he takes his cues, James
ultimately comes to a number of conclusions favorable to mysticism: that religion’s positive
effects on the individual and society outweigh its negative repercussions, that a purely empirical
standard for measuring the value of religion takes into account only one portion of human
consciousness, that religious experience takes place in and emanates from the subconscious
mind, 13 and that different religions are suited to different temperaments. Yet even James
expresses a degree of skepticism about the self-indulgent dimensions of ascetic practice, despite
celebrating its psychological benefits:

13 James actually embraced Freud’s theory of the subconscious as a means of elucidating how mystical experience
and “states,” might function: “But just as our primary wide-awake consciousness throws open our senses to the
touch of things material, so it is logically conceivable that if there be higher spiritual agencies that can directly touch
us, the psychological condition of their doing so might be our possession of a subconscious region which alone
should yield access to them” (242).
asceticism must, I believe, be acknowledged to go with the profounder way of handling the gift of existence...[we must] discover some outlet for it of which the fruits in the way of privation and hardship might be objectively useful. The older monastic asceticism occupied itself with pathetic futilities, or terminated in the mere egotism of the individual, increasing his own perfection. (365)

Here James acknowledges and legitimizes a deep-rooted psychological cause for engaging in deprivation and self-denial, for willingly undergoing suffering for a larger, spiritual purpose. But even for James, ascetic practice runs the risk of devolving into “mere egotism”: unproductive, antisocial retreat into self. Even beyond its erotic undertones, then, the larger problem with mysticism—from the perspective of its most vocal detractors and even some of its defenders—was its tendency towards a solipsistic imaginary, its liability to become entrapped within its own self-serving world.

Evelyn Underhill’s *Mysticism* (1911)\(^\text{14}\) represents an even more significant departure from the period’s generally skeptical treatment of mystical phenomena. Like James, Underhill rejects the idea that religious ecstasy stems from merely erotic impulses, dismissing it whenever it is tangentially relevant to her overarching discussion. As Joy Dixon has pointed out, it is surprising how infrequently Underhill addresses this stereotype, given its prevalence in the period (“‘Dark Ecstasies’” 652). Of the concept of “Spiritual Marriage” deployed by St. Catherine or St. Teresa, for instance, Underhill remarks, almost offhand, “They mean by it no rapturous satisfactions, no dubious spiritualizing of earthly ecstasies, but a life-long bond ‘that shall never be lost of broken’” (428). Failures to read accounts of mystic experience as “symbolic”—the way one would read or appreciate music or poetry—account for “many regrettable and some ludicrous misconceptions,” Underhill argues (80). Carefully researched and

\(^{14}\) Childs notes that not only are Eliot’s notes on Underhill’s book more extensive than on any of the other books on his list, but they are also of a different nature: in his notes on Underhill, Eliot is particularly attentive to the “precise stages and substages of the mystical experiences that she detailed” (34). Moreover, Eliot went on to befriend Underhill in the 1930s: not only did they exchange letters and meet in person in 1935, but Eliot also regularly asked her to contribute book reviews to *The Criterion* (196).
in dialogue with contemporary psychological research, Underhill’s study is confidently and unapologetically defensive in nature: not only does Underhill define mysticism from the outset as “the expression of the innate tendency of the human spirit towards complete harmony with the transcendental order” (xxi), a process that represents “the highest form of human consciousness” (xxii), but her study actually culminates in a roadmap for mystical experience itself, what Underhill calls “The Mystic Way,” outlining each of its stages and supplementing them with extensive quotations from the writings of Christian mystics like Teresa of Avila, John of the Cross, Margery Kempe, Francis of Assisi, and Ignatius of Loyola, as well as mystics hailing from other religious traditions: ‘Attar, Al Ghazzali, Jāmī, Hafiz, and Rābi’a, among others. Despite their differences, all of these figures, for the purposes of Underhill’s study, adopt a remarkably similar template for approaching union with the divine. All, for instance, oscillate between states of pleasure and states of pain (168). This oscillation is mirrored in the five broad stages Underhill proposes for understanding the “Mystic Way”: Awakening, Purgation, Illumination, Surrender, and, finally, Union.

What most distinguishes Underhill’s Mysticism from its predecessors is its treatment of the ascetic impulse. Asceticism emerges most extensively in her discussion of the two stages of the Mystic Way concerned with purgative principles: Stage 2 (Purgation), and Stage 4 (Surrender). Purgation, or what Underhill calls “the purification of the self,” represents a crucial prerequisite to undergoing mystical experience—and, indeed, any kind of authentic religious experience. But for Underhill, Purgation is much less about physical torment or depravation—neither of which receive more than passing attention in her study—and more about a fundamental reorientation of perspective. It is no coincidence that Underhill often refers to the

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15 Where Purgation is capitalized, I am referring specifically to Underhill’s specific iteration of the second stage of the Mystic Way.
process of Purgation as a process of self-knowledge, treating the two concepts throughout as if they were interchangeable. Describing the normal condition of human consciousness prior to undergoing Purgation, Underhill writes:

> We see a sham world because we live a sham life. We do not know ourselves; hence we do not know the true character of our senses and instincts...That world, which we have distorted by identifying it with our own self-regarding arrangements of its elements, has got to reassert for us the character of reality, of God. (199)

The natural condition of human consciousness is, for Underhill, unselfconscious solipsism; delusion is its natural consequence. Declarations like these read almost like direct rebuttals of the criticisms of figures like Nordau, who decried mystical experiences as merely the projection of personal feelings and delusions onto the external world. Here, Underhill reframes the dynamic Nordau describes as the ordinary condition of human perception. Underhill’s statements here are, of course, Neoplatonic—a religiously-inflected version of Plato’s Cave—but they also resonate strongly with the work of philosophical idealist F.H. Bradley, the subject of Eliot’s doctoral dissertation, for whom the project of transcending the fundamental solipsism of human perception was a constant preoccupation. The key terms of Bradley’s seminal work—Appearance and Reality—map readily onto Underhill’s construction: Appearance—or, human perception of Reality—can never encounter Reality as it truly is. Underhill operates on a similar premise, suggesting that one of the main projects of mysticism is transcending the limits of human perception in order to see the “real” nature of reality—a reality that is, for her, consubstantial with God. In a direct rebuttal to skeptics of mystical experience, then, Underhill

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16 Eliot was interested precisely in this dimension of Bradley’s work. In a chapter of his dissertation dedicated to “Solipsism” in Bradley, for instance, Eliot writes, “The point of view (or finite centre) has for its object one consistent world, and accordingly no finite centre can be self-sufficient, for the life of a soul does not consist in the contemplation of one consistent world but in the painful task of unifying (to a greater or less extent) jarring and incompatible ones, and passing, when possible, from two or more discordant viewpoints to a higher which shall somehow include and transmute them” (147-8).
asserts that it is the mystic whose vision is unclouded—the mystic who is committed, above all, to seeing the external world clearly.

Accordingly, the process of Purgation does not, for Underhill, entail a rejection of the world; its goal is to see the world differently, more correctly. Underhill dismissively contrasts “the unfortunate story” of the Curé d’Ars, “who refused to smell a rose for fear of sin” (206) with the lifestyle of St. Francis, who “preached to the flowers” and found in nature reminders of God’s love and “Eternal Sweetness” (215). Another anecdote about St. Francis is, for Underhill, more indicative of the ultimate goal of Purgation: Francis’ repeated visits to lepers, whose “sight and smell disgusted him,” evolved into a desire to live among and serve them, such that his senses no longer impaired his compassion. As the title of her second study of mysticism, Practical Mysticism (1914), suggests, Underhill was eager to convey that mysticism, while “wholly transcendental and spiritual,” nonetheless dictates a way of living in the world altruistically and responsibly. “True mysticism is active and practical,” she writes. “Though [the true mystic] does not, as his enemies declare, neglect his duty to the many, his heart is always set upon the changeless One” (81). The two, in fact, emerge across Underhill’s work as intertwined. In its most authentic form, then, Purgation is not a rejection of the world, but a rejection of a way of perceiving the world. The process, undergone in good faith, ought to result not in self-absorption or egoism but rather in love and charity.

For Underhill, the object of mortification is not the body but the self. The term mortification appears in her work almost exclusively with reference to the imperative need to check the self’s natural impulse to desire, control, and own anything and everything it sees. “The object of mortification,” Underhill writes, “is to kill that old self, break up his egoistic attachments and cravings, in order that the higher centre, the ‘new man,’ may live and breathe”
(217); a few pages later, she insists that “the death of selfhood in its narrow individualistic sense is, then, the primary object of mortification” (221). This mortification of the self is taken up most directly in Stage 4 of the Mystic Way, Surrender. If Stage 2, Purgation, is primarily about reorienting perception, Surrender is about reorienting self entirely: “For [Surrender],” Underhill writes, “a new and more drastic purgation is needed—not of the organs of perception, but of the very shrine of self: that ‘heart’ which is the seat of personality” (388). Again, Underhill links the problem of self to the problem of desire, such that the desire even for spiritual illumination must be abolished: *desire itself* must be wholly annihilated. The result is a kind of spiritual death—a deprivation of the senses that requires even deprivation of God: “The mystic motto, *I am nothing, I have nothing, I desire nothing*, must now express not only the detachment of the senses, but the whole being’s surrender to the All” (400).

The prospect is harrowing, but Underhill insists that this self-annihilation is, at its core, crucial to the process of transformation: from old self to new self, from a self limited by solipsism and narrowly-defined desire to a self that is liberated, expansive, and one with God. Rephrasing the sentiment in psychological terms, Underhill remarks that “the abandonment of the old centres of consciousness has permitted movement towards the new” (402). While acknowledging its ineffability, Underhill describes the final stage of The Mystic Way as a state of peace, equilibrium, and incredible vitality. At this stage, the “self, though intact, is wholly penetrated—as a sponge by the sea—by the Ocean of Life and Love to which he has attained” (417). The apparent paradox of being wholly intact but also wholly penetrated by oceanic diffuseness only underscores the difficulty of achieving this state. But the image of a porous sponge also underscores the paramount importance of unselfing—a process achievable only through purgation—to the Mystic Way. “All the mystics agree that the stripping off of the I, the
Me, the Mine, utter renouncement, or ‘self-naughting’—self-abandonment to the direction of a larger Will—is an imperative condition of the attainment of the unitive life,” she writes (425).

Eliot turned to purgatorial processes like the ones Underhill describes as a means of short-circuiting the erotically charged solipsism that characterized his early poetry. Eliot’s method owes much to Underhill’s writings: her sense that the ascetic impulse, properly understood, ought to be directed towards self and perception rather than bodily mortification; her tiered and procedural approach to mysticism; her insistence on purgatorial processes as crucial to mystical experience on various levels and at various junctures. The next section explores how Eliot developed his own model for mystical practice, a model that inflects his aesthetic theories as well as his late poetry.

III. Mysticism and Poetics

In 1926, Eliot delivered a series of talks at Cambridge as part of the Clark Lectures series entitled “The Varieties of Metaphysical Poetry.” The lectures focus on the so-called “Metaphysical” poets of the 17th-century (Donne, Crashaw, Herbert, Cowley), a subject of Eliot’s frequent critical attention, but they also contain a series of focused assertions on the nature of mysticism. At one point, for instance, Eliot draws a distinction between what he terms “classical mysticism” and “romantic mysticism.” Classical mysticism, for Eliot, is “ontological,” characterized by “the development and subsumption of emotion and feeling through intellect into the vision of God” (Varieties 103-104). Romantic mysticism, on the other hand, collapses the boundaries of self and the divine, skipping the intervening—and, for Eliot, necessary—steps of intellection and contemplation. Eliot criticizes St. Teresa of Avila in particular for her tendency to “substitute divine love for human love, and for the former to take on the characteristics of the latter” (166):
Into the psychological implications I do not care to go...and it would be necessary to
defend the memory of a great saint against calumny or degradation. I only point out the
literary consequences of this substitution. In contrast, Dante and his contemporaries were
quite aware that human love and divine love were different, and that one could not be
*substituted* for the other without distortion of the human nature. Their effort was to
enlarge the boundary of human love so as to make it a stage in the progress toward the
divine. (166).

Eliot’s comments reflect his usual biases—intellect over intuition, thought over feeling, tradition
over diffuse sentimentality. But here, Eliot is particularly preoccupied with processes of
substitution, redirection, and replacement—activities fundamentally at odds with the
“development[al],” progressive, staged model adopted by the classical mystics he admires.
Eliot’s critique of St. Teresa’s “substitut[ion]” of “divine love for human love” is, in effect, a
restatement of both Saint Narcissus’ dilemma and the familiar critiques leveled against mystical
experience: confusion of sexual desire for immediate experience of God. Here and elsewhere,
Eliot insists that human and divine love are fundamentally, ontologically distinct, such that to
attempt to close the gap through mere feeling would be tantamount to pure delusion. By contrast,
the “progress” of “enlarg[ing]” human love requires immense effort and deliberate concentration.
It requires structured attention to process as well as the elimination of immediacy and frenzy.
Eliot’s ideal model of mysticism, then, prioritizes progressive, stepwise movement over instant
sublimation. Like Underhill’s Mystic Way, it also calls for intervening, purgatorial processes that
involve the reorientation and refinement of human feeling. It is also directed at the larger project
of using human experience—here, “human love”—to approach the divine while maintaining
strict boundaries between the two.

Eliot’s thinking on this topic echoes contemporary critiques of philosophical
“romanticism” made by contemporaries like George Santayana, Irving Babbit, and especially
British poet T.E. Hulme, often credited as the “father of Imagism.” Hulme himself distinguished
between classicism and romanticism in terms remarkably similar to Eliot’s. In “Humanism and the Religious Attitude,” for instance, Hulme writes, “Romanticism...confuses both human and divine things, by not clearly separating them” (201). For Hulme, the difference between so-called romantic and classical temperaments boils down to an argument about human nature: romanticists believe that man is essentially good; classicists believe that man is “limited,” dependent on tradition and social structure for moral steering. Left unchecked, the romantic perspective is liable to delusions of grandeur: human instinctual belief in God, according to Hulme, becomes redirected into belief that “man is God,” and thus “infinite” (“Romanticism and Classicism” 71). The result, in Hulme’s view, is poetry that is excessive, emotional, full of flourishes. Classical poetry, by contrast, is restrained, precise, and conscious always of its limitations. Eliot’s Clark lectures make a version of the same point: the metaphysical poets are superior due to their tendency to remain restrained, and their ability to maintain a certain distance between thought and emotion.

But while many of his peers were eager to categorize mysticism as merely another exuberant facet of the romanticism they railed against, Eliot sought to recuperate it by differentiating between mysticisms. According to Eliot, the romantic mystic deserved, to some extent, the accusations to which mysticism was liable: in refusing to distinguish between human and divine, the romantic mystic elevates the human without first purging it of its perceptual flaws. This problem entails formal implications that Eliot is all-too-willing to subject to withering literary critique. At another point in his Clark Lectures, for instance, he read aloud from The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius of Loyola (1548)—which, among other things, demand that their reader literally imagine themselves as witnessing episodes in Christ’s life through highly imagistic and visual descriptions—in order to dismiss its reliance on
emotionality, pointedly asking the audience: “Is this not a spiritual haschisch [sic], a drugging of
the emotions, rather than, as with Richard of St. Victor, an intellectual preparation for spiritual
contemplation?” (106) By contrast, the classical mystic, as Eliot’s comments suggest, is
occupied with a different, and higher, task entirely: spiritual preparation—preparation that
entails, by definition, the kinds of unselfing Eliot would have encountered in Underhill’s writing.
If the romantic mystic’s relationship to God is thus “personal” at its core, located in and
articulated through self, the classical mystic’s relationship to the divine aspires to be ultimately
impersonal. For Eliot, to imaginatively project oneself into the scene of Christ’s crucifixion
defeats the purpose of mysticism entirely.17

Like Lawrence, Eliot eschews the possibility of a personal connection to God. For
instance, in “The Function of Criticism” (1923), Eliot takes issue with John Middleton Murry’s
announcement that “‘the man who truly interrogates himself will ultimately hear the voice of
God’” (Selected Prose 71). Eliot immediately draws an unfavorable distinction between
Middleton Murray and Catholic theology, claiming that “the Catholic did not believe that God
and himself were identical” (71). He refers to those who do subscribe to Middleton Murray’s
“inner voice,” by contrast, as “palpitating Narcissi.” Here Eliot aligns the figure of Narcissus,
again, not only with perverted attempts at self-knowledge but also with the failure to recognize
that God lies outside—rather than inside—the self. Classical mysticism takes this assumption as
its premise, operating by stages that aim at progressive depersonalization. Eliot’s comments on

17 As Schuchard has argued, Eliot was to undergo a change of heart about Ignatius of Loyola following his Clark
Lectures, a shift noticeable in many of the statements he made defending mysticism in the 1930s (163). In “Religion
Without Humanism” (1930), for instance, Eliot expresses his frustration about the modern tendency to elide
mysticism with emotional excess and exuberance, using Ignatius as an example of the type of mystic to be taken
seriously:

There is much chatter about mysticism: for the modern world the word means some spattering indulgence
of emotion, instead of the most terrible concentration and askesis. But it takes perhaps a lifetime merely to
realize that men like the forest sages, and the desert sages, and finally the Victorines and John of the Cross
and (in his fashion) Ignatius really mean what they say. Only those have the right to talk of discipline who
have looked into the abyss. (110)
the ideal trajectory of religious poetry nearly 20 years later would recapitulate this idea as an aesthetic principle: “The probable direction of religious poetry in the immediate future is towards something more impersonal...It will be much more interested in the dogma and the doctrine; in religious thought, rather than purely personal religious feeling” (qtd. in Domestico 41). 18

Eliot’s comments on contemplative mysticism also echo some of his most famous and early articulations of his poetics, suggesting that his early readings of Underhill et al. informed his religious convictions as well as his aesthetic practice. He insists repeatedly that poetry be “difficult” (Selected Prose 65), that it avoid indulgence in sentimentality, that it prioritize “impersonal” expression over “personal” feeling. In “Tradition and the Individual Talent” (1919), he famously advocates for the poet’s “continual surrender of himself as he is at the moment to something which is more valuable,” arguing that “the progress of an artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality” (Selected Prose 40). The “continual” process Eliot calls for bears a strong resemblance to Underhill’s description of purgation: just as the mystic must surrender his self-serving perception of the world, the poet must surrender the idea of himself as a “personality” whose poetry should express “personal” feeling. But whereas Underhill advocates the individual’s surrender to a higher, God-centered reality, Eliot advocates here for the individual artist’s surrender to “tradition”—the poetry of the past. As Eliot goes on to explain, the poet must become a depersonalized medium—“a catalyst” (41)—through which emotions, not necessarily his own, as well as relationships between past and present enact themselves. In “The Function of Criticism” (1923), Eliot makes a version of the same point: “There is...something outside of the artist to which he owes allegiance, a

18 Comments like these also anticipate Eliot’s social criticism of the 1930s and 1940s: in “The Idea of a Christian Society” (1939), Eliot suggests, likewise, that British cultural and political systems should adopt a “unified religious-social code of behavior” (27). Strikingly, Eliot insists that this society would not demand belief or piety from its members; rather, the society itself would offer a moral framework derived from Christian ideals (27). Eliot is frustratingly opaque about what “Christian” would mean in any of these contexts.
devotion to which he must surrender and sacrifice himself in order to earn and to obtain his unique position” (Selected Prose 68). As Donald Childs has observed, the language of “devotion” here further underscores the extent to which these statements “origin[ate]” in his study of mysticism (Childs 39). In all of these cases, Eliot insists that the poet undergo purgatorial processes much like those at the crux of authentic mystical experience, as Eliot and Underhill alike understood it—processes that require an orientation towards forces and collectives beyond the self.

In these essays, Eliot also insists that this “surrender” occur through processes of historical retrospection. In “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” for instance, he calls for the poet’s adoption of “a historical sense,” a perspective that recognizes the interdependency of present and past. The past possesses a kind of “ideal order” (38), Eliot writes, that must be recognized by poets living in the present; the living poets’ contribution to that tradition reorients that order, renewing and enlivening it. Even this paradigm emerges first in Underhill’s writing:

> Each mystic, original though he be, yet owes much to the inherited acquirement of his spiritual ancestors. These ancestors form his tradition, are the classic examples on which his education is based; and from them he takes the language which they have sought out and constructed as a means of telling their adventures to the world...From his own experiences he adds to this store; and hands on an enriched tradition of the transcendental life to the next spiritual genius evolved by the race. (Mysticism 454)

Underhill’s formulation here sounds almost exactly like Eliot’s in “Tradition and the Individual Talent”: the experience of every new mystic is tied irrevocably to the mystical tradition from which she springs; likewise, the mystic “enriche[s]” that same tradition by contributing to it. But Eliot’s version differs, crucially, in its emphasis on the immense effort and attention required by the process: he insists, repeatedly, that his “historical sense” can only be “obtain[ed] by great labor” (Selected Prose 38); writing poetry with a historical sense, likewise, requires the most
There is something purgatorial, in other words, about Eliot’s articulation of what it might mean to possess an organic relationship to tradition.

There is also something necessarily artificial about it: it requires the imposition of a framework that does not conform to the natural progression of time. The same mechanic lies at the core of his assertion, in “Ulysses, Order, and Myth” (1923), that writers ought to adopt a “mythical method,” using older, traditional genres and frameworks as a means of “controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history” (Selected Prose 177-8). Eliot’s call for the artist’s self-abnegation is, likewise, rooted in a logic of control, order, and imposition: his deployment of a chemical metaphor in “Tradition and the Individual Talent” to explain the refining process—“The mind of the poet is the shred of platinum” (41)—only underscores its artificiality. But this artificiality is, for Eliot, the very stuff of the purgatorial method. There is nothing natural about discipline; there is nothing intuitive about concentration. These procedures must be undergone willingly, as Eliot would have gleaned from his readings in the mystical tradition, in order to reach a perspective that transcends human time and perspective. Certainly, Eliot’s aesthetic theories call for a reactionary return to the collective values of a hallowed, sanctified tradition—as they have been traditionally read—but they also advocate a fundamentally mystical and purgatorial approach to that tradition, to poetry, and even to time itself.

This approach—historical retrospection through the imposition of difficult, meticulous, disciplined processes—also lies at the core of Eliot’s late religious poems. These purgatorial processes work against the impulse to project personal feeling on what are, for Eliot, the essentially “impersonal” projects of poetry and mystical experience. In “Ash-Wednesday,” purgation entails reading the individual life using models of penitence and contrition that
confront the vicissitudes of specific sins, paradoxically, by eliding their specificity. *Four Quartets* develops this concept, adding to it purgatorial practices of devotion that resist logic and sense. Both poems propose procedural methods for unselfing that require a backward, retrospective orientation; both, in different ways, offer this work of retrospection as a means of approaching a divine perspective. The poetry registers these ideas by becoming more “difficult” itself: by using antithesis and paradox, by resisting linear reading, by alluding to complicated theological doctrines, even by asking to be read as devotional prayer. Purgatorial principles thus define both the theological content and the poetics of Eliot’s late religious poems: they function by offering larger frames through which they—and the individual lives they invoke—might be rendered legible: prayer; theology; and, ultimately, providential visions of a divine temporality.

IV. Purgatorial Recontextualization and “Ash-Wednesday”

Eliot’s poem most apparently dedicated to purgation, “Ash-Wednesday” (1930) takes its name, not coincidentally, from the day of the church year most aligned with purgatorial principles: Ash Wednesday is the first day of Lent, a 40-day season of the Christian liturgical calendar dedicated to atonement and self-denial. Eliot’s first major poem after his 1927 conversion, “Ash-Wednesday,” true to its Lenten inspiration, routinely figures and reenacts processes of contrition and penitence. The poem evokes a barren landscape of bones, rocks, and drought, a vision only occasionally punctuated by transcendental imagery of fountains and gardens. On the level of imagery and theological content, the poem describes purgation as a process of constant retrospection—constant turning back to past sins. At the same time, it aspires to something like this purgative retrospection on the level of form. Processes of recontextualization occur at multiple levels of the poem: in its play with the concept of
“turning”; in its typological use of allusions; and in the ways it recasts itself, at multiple junctures, as prayer. In many different ways and at many different points, the poem asks its reader to see a previous line or a previous stanza—or even the poem as a whole—in light of some sort of newly revealed, yet also always anterior, context. These recontextualizations are fundamentally purgatorial: they involve a gradual ascent to understanding through recollection, recognition, and self-checking.

The poem’s motif of turning is usually attributed to medieval troubadour (and friend of Dante) Guido Cavalcanti’s lyric, “Perch’io non spero di tornar già mai” (“Because I do not hope to turn again”). But as Mark Jones has recently argued, the “turning” motif is also indebted to an Ash Wednesday sermon given in 1619 by Lancelot Andrewes, an early-modern English bishop whose work was pivotal to Eliot’s conversion. The sermon is an exegesis of Joel 2:12-13, a passage often invoked in Lenten contexts:

12 “Now, therefore,” says the LORD,
“Turn to Me with all your heart,
With fasting, with weeping, and with mourning.”
13 So rend your heart, and not your garments;
Return to the LORD your God,
For He is gracious and merciful,
Slow to anger, and of great kindness;
And He relents from doing harm.

For Andrewes, the passage operates according to the principle of a circle composed of two turns, a first “turn” and a “return.” The two require different affects and spiritual orientations:

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19 See Jones, “The Voice of Lancelot Andrewes in Eliot’s “Ash-Wednesday.”
20 Eliot was obsessed with the thought and theology of Lancelot Andrewes. Not only is he the subject of one of Eliot’s essays (“Lancelot Andrewes” [1926]), but he also lends his name to Eliot’s first post-conversion essay collection, For Lancelot Andrewes (1928), the preface to which contains Eliot’s famous declaration of Anglo-Catholicism. Andrewes’ 1622 Christmas Day sermon also furnishes the first line of “Journey of the Magi” (1927). For more on Eliot’s engagement with Andrewes’ thought, see Matthews, T.S. Eliot and Early Modern Literature 140-146.
21 As Jones has argued, Andrewes’ sermon itself operates according to the same principle, beginning with a consideration of the word nunc or “now,” with which the Joel passage begins, and ending with a reconsideration of the very same word (158-159).
Andrewes’ sermon construes repentance, then, as a process built on desire (for God) first and contrition second. That contrition also involves recognizing a third “turn” in the past, a “turn” away from God—“our sins wherein we have turned from God”—that is only recognizable after completing the first two “turns.” The first turn enables the second; these enable recognizing the third. It is impossible, Andrewes suggests, to effectively take stock of one’s sin—the ways in which one had “turned from God”—without that process of examination having first been framed by a yearning for closeness to God.

Eliot’s “Ash-Wednesday” opens with wordplay on “turn” that, at first, refuses any tidy, legible explanation: “Because I do not hope to turn again / Because I do not hope / Because I do not hope to turn” (CPP 60). Here, the significance of the word “turn” remains unclear—do these lines express futility? An emotional state where turning is a desirable, yet hopeless pursuit? That the second line repeats, then truncates the first—“Because I do not hope”—further suggests that hopelessness is the tenor of the stanza. The third line is also a truncated version of the first line, but makes it only slightly past the second line: “Because I do not hope to turn.” Taken together, the poem’s opening lines play on the way repetition of what it essentially the same phrase changes the meaning of each line as well as of the whole stanza: the second line’s straightforward assertion of “I do not hope” clarifies and retroactively changes the tone of the first line, while the third line’s “I do not hope to turn” suggests that “turning” is itself the problem, rather than the prospect of doing so “again.” The tone is hopelessness, the mood one of breathless indecision, in which it is impossible to utter complete phrases or sentences. In this

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22 This and all subsequent quotations of Eliot’s poetry come from T.S. Eliot: Complete Works and Plays 1909-1950.
sense, the opening of “Ash-Wednesday” seems to belong to the world of “The Hollow Men,” which also uses truncation to stall and undercut the devotional material to which it alludes—for instance, in its treatment of the doxology (“For thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory, forever and ever”): “For Thine is/ Life is/ For thine is the” (CPP 59). Devoid of a broader context, then, the meaning of the poem’s opening remains unclear; unlike The Waste Land, “Ash-Wednesday” does not offer encyclopedic footnotes. Meaning, in these opening lines, is utterly decontextualized, relative, and recursive.

But just two stanzas later, the poem enters a very different kind of atmosphere, one of certitude and objectivity: “Because I know that time is always time / And place is always place/ And what is actual is actual only for one time / And only for one place” (CPP 60). These lines are not truncated, nor do their meanings seem to change relative to one another; rather, they reject the self-referential, recursive world of the poem’s opening. The poem then returns to “turning” within this context, altering what it means to “turn” completely:

Because I cannot hope to turn again
Consequently I rejoice, having to construct something
Upon which to rejoice

And pray to God to have mercy upon us
And pray that I may forget
These matters that with myself I too much discuss
Too much explain
Because I do not hope to turn again
Let these words answer
For what is done, not to be done again
May the judgment not be too heavy upon us (CPP 60-61)

23 As Ramazani has argued, Eliot’s pre-conversion poetry “summons and makes use of the ritual energies of prayer, but his skepticism dialogism, and multiperspectivism take the speaker outside the ritual act of attempted communion with the divine. Poetry is broken prayer, stuttered adoration, would-be thanksgiving. It is the echo of a half-enacted ritual, with multiple reverberations. It is too caught up in shifting discourses and stammering signifiers to transcend itself in fusion with God” (148).
It has become clearer, by this point, what the poet is turning away from and what kind of hope motivates that turning. By the time “Because I do not hope to turn again” reappears, here, its resignation occurs in the explicit context of penitence. Thus the poem begins in a world of decontextualized recursivity, moves into a space of certitude and fixity, and finally returns to the very ideas with which it began, this time armed with an entirely new perspective. The world of recursivity and false starts that it invokes at its outset has become, by the end of Part I, unstable and unreliable. This world is also, as this passage suggests, a world of self-referentiality and self-involvement, dominated by “matters that with myself I too much discuss”: the line’s collision of “myself” and “I” heightens the poem’s insistence on the inherent recursiveness of a life lived outside of the structured context offered by “time” and “place.” It is rendered meaningful only within a larger spiritual and theological context—a principle the poem models formally by withholding the religious significance of its opening for three stanzas. F.R. Leavis has referred to this dynamic of withholding and revelation as a “frame-effect,” arguing that the poem’s alternation between destabilization and stabilization launches it into “a special order of experience, dedicated to spiritual exercises” (89). If the poem is, as Leavis hints at here, meant to be read as a kind of spiritual exercise, the aim of that exercise is to engage the reader in a process of self-checking, a process predicated on the gradual revelation of divine contexts whose scope exceeds and contains the individual life. The poem, then, conceptually and formally operates according to the logic of the Hermeneutic Circle: an understanding of the whole is necessary to understand the part, but understanding the whole also requires understanding its component parts—a principle that dominates all of the poem’s subsequent efforts to recontextualize the individual life.
“Ash-Wednesday”’s repeated revision of its status as poem by interpolating lines from ritual Christian prayer also partakes of this logic of recontextualization. The first section, for instance, concludes with the double repetition of the last line of the Hail Mary:

Pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death.
Pray for us now and at the hour of our death. (CPP 61)

This time, the repeated line is not truncated, but merely elides one word, “sinners.” These lines suggest that, in contemplating sin, in imagining oneself as a sinner, the element of sin itself disappears from the line: “us sinners” becomes, simply, “us.” In a final turn, the interpolation of the final lines of the Hail Mary also reframes the five stanzas that have come before, suggesting that they were a kind of prayer all along. This sudden transformation of poetry into prayer recurs multiple times throughout the poem, almost always at the end of a section: section III closes with lines from the Eucharistic prayer, spoken at every Mass (“Lord, I am not worthy /but speak the word only” [CPP 63]), and section IV closes with a line from the Salve Regina (“And after this our exile” [CPP 64]), a Marian hymn that also serves as the final prayer of the Rosary. Section VI—and thus “Ash-Wednesday” as a whole—closes with a prayerful entreaty from Psalms: “And let my cry come unto Thee” (CPP 67). While “Ash-Wednesday” is not the first of Eliot’s poems to embed ritual prayer—The Waste Land, for instance, contains Augustine’s prayers alongside Buddha’s in “The Fire Sermon,” and the poem famously closes with a Sanskrit prayer for peace—it is, perhaps, the first of his poems to endorse and make use of the ritual energies of prayer unironically. As Ramazani has observed, Eliot’s post-conversion poetry “may well be presumed to deliver full-throated devotional speech and to return poetry to genuine prayer as part of the ritualism that he thought nourished all art” (148). To recast the poem as a prayer—especially as it occurs at multiple junctures throughout “Ash-Wednesday”—necessarily reorients
the reader’s experience of reading, forcing her to reconsider what has come before in light of its affiliation with a different genre.

Another way the poem dramatizes the purgatorial process of recontextualization is through its allusions. In *The Waste Land*, allusions form an intentional cacophony of voices, meaningful when taken on their own, but often undercut and endlessly complicated by one another. In “Ash-Wednesday”, allusions function almost typologically: they reframe and contextualize, both in the context of a tradition composed of other penitents—like Ezekiel, Arnaut Daniel, or Dante—and in the context of the limitations of the individual human life. These allusions reorient the poet and the reader, urging towards a divine perspective and using the perspective gleaned from that act to turn back again to the realm of human experience.

One extended allusion to Dante’s *Purgatorio* highlights this dynamic most clearly: in sections III and IV, Eliot invokes the staired scaffolding of Mount Purgatory in *Purgatorio*, culminating in an explicit reference to Dante’s encounter with Occitan troubadour poet Arnaut Daniel in the terrace of the Lustful.24 In *Purgatorio*, Arnaut speaks to Dante—in Provençal—from within a burning flame:

‘*lei sui Arnaut, que plor e vau cantan;*  
*consiros vei la passada floor,*  
*e vei jausen lo jorn, qu’esper, denan.*  
*Ara vos prec, per aquella valor*  
*Que vos guida al som de l’escalina,*  
*Sovegna vos a temps de ma dolor.*’  
Poi s’ascose nel focho che gli affina.

[‘I am Arnaut, who weeps and goes singing. I see in thought all past folly. And I see with joy the day for which I hope, before me. And so I pray you, by that Virtue which leads you to the topmost of the of the stair—be mindful in due time of my pain’. Then dived he back into the fire which refines them.]

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24 Part III of “Ash-Wednesday” was published separately in 1929 under the title, “*Al som de l’escalina,*** a direct quote from *Purgatorio* 26.
Eliot returns to this episode obsessively throughout his work: it occupies a singular position in his poetry, not only providing one of The Waste Land’s final lines (“Poi s’ascose nel focho che gli affina” [CPP 50]) but also lending the title to an earlier collection of Eliot’s poetry, Ara Vos Prec (1920).²⁵ In “Ash-Wednesday,” the scene furnishes both a setting and a line: “Sovegna Vos” [“Be mindful.”] (CPP 64). Dante’s encounter with Arnaut is germane to Eliot’s thinking about purgation on multiple levels: Arnaut is, of course, himself in Purgatory—purging himself of the sin of lust—but he is also a poet of erotic love. In The Divine Comedy, Arnaut is representative of one of Dante pilgrim’s major psychospiritual obstacles: correcting an over-attachment to earthly, erotic love in favor of coming closer to divine love; recognizing that the former is a mere foretaste of the latter, rather than an end in and of itself. Dante’s own process of recontextualization is encoded in this episode: his task is to recontextualize his human love for another human being, Beatrice, within the context of God’s love.²⁶ The encounter with Arnaut Daniel in Purgatorio 26 marks a significant step in this direction, not only because Dante pilgrim encounters a fellow poet further along the same journey, but also because the content of his speech encapsulates the purgatorial process that The Divine Comedy advocates as a whole.²⁷ Arnaut has turned away from burning with lust towards purgatorial burning, a pain he nonetheless enjoys because it is productive and transformative: it is a fire that refines rather than consumes. From within his purgatorial flame, Arnaut weeps and sings; he looks back at “past folly” and looks forward with hope.

²⁵ Eliot even dedicated The Waste Land to Ezra Pound using a quotation from this scene, referring to Pound in the same terms Guido Guinizzelli, another Italian poet Dante encounters in this scene, uses to refer to Arnaut Daniel in Purgatorio: “il miglior fabbro” [“the better craftsman”].

²⁶ It is also encoded elsewhere in “Ash-Wednesday”; for instance, in Section II, where the “torment” of “love unsatisfied” “terminates” in the rose garden, an allusion to Dante’s representation of Heaven, where what Eliot refers to as “the greater torment / Of love satisfied” is resolved.

²⁷ Purgatorio itself dramatizes this process most explicitly, as Dante encounters Beatrice—his beloved, whose death prior to the opening of the poem has nearly driven him to suicide—in the final cantos of the poem; Beatrice, in turn, admonishes him for placing her above God, warning him that human love is no substitute for divine love.
Arnaut’s final request—that Dante pilgrim “be mindful in due time” of his pain—is, likewise, twofold: on the surface, he is asking Dante pilgrim to pray for him upon his return to Earth (as, according to Catholic theology, prayers for the souls in Purgatory speed along their ascent to Heaven). But his request is also a suggestion of introspection—a suggestion that Dante remember Arnaut’s pain in the context of his own pain. In “Ash-Wednesday,” Eliot truncates the line to “Sovegna Vos,” or “Be mindful” (CPP 64). Eliot’s treatment of the line both renders it a command and detaches it from the specificity of Arnaut’s individual pain. Eliot uses the Arnaut episode, then, to inform and reinforce the poem’s obsession with purgatorial refinement but also to depersonalize its significance; by truncating the line, the poem effaces the specificity of Arnaut’s particular pain in order to render it secondary to an impersonal principle: “Be mindful.”

The poem offers the Arnaut episode, then, as valuable intertext for the reader’s own process of purgation, only to subsequently strip it of personal significance—all in service of urging the reader to contextualize her own pain within the framework the episode offered in the first place. Through this allusion to Dante (and to Arnaut via Dante), Eliot contextualizes his poem within a larger tradition of poets thinking through purgation; at the same time, he suggests that purgation ultimately requires moving beyond the specificity of individual sin and suffering. In other words, the allusion itself performs a version of its own message, functioning both as a means of recontextualizing the poet’s project and effacing the individuality of that project.

The poem doubles down on this paradigm just a few lines later in a lyric interlude about anthropomorphized “years”:

The new years walk, restoring
Through a bright cloud of tears, the years, restoring
With a new verse the ancient rhyme. Redeem
The time. Redeem
The unread vision in the higher dream...(CPP 64)
The new years move forward in time, as they must. But they do so through “a cloud of tears”—through a fog of contrition and retrospection that nonetheless “redeems” the past by giving “new verse” to “the ancient rhyme.” The passage recalls “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” where the past’s effect on the present is equal to the present’s power to reimagine and thus transform the past; here, the principle reemerges in the theological context of sin and redemption. The passage further suggests that this redemption of the past consists precisely in its depersonalization: the “years” (which have been linked to the individual life through anthropomorphism) become an “ancient rhyme,” a tradition or ritual—or, for that matter, a kind of poetry—that exceeds and elides the personal. At every juncture, then, “Ash-Wednesday” asserts that the individual life is legible only within increasingly larger and more universalizing contexts: prayer, ritual, tradition, theology, the divine itself. These contexts also, paradoxically, result in the elision of the particularities of that individual life.

The poem’s typographical play between “word” and “Word” in Section V also offers the idea that the individual human life is only legible within larger theological contexts—in this case, the context of God’s providential plan:

If the lost word is lost, if the spent word is spent
If the unheard, unspoken
Word is unspoken, unheard;
Still is the unspoken word, the Word unheard,
The Word without a word, the Word within
The world and for the world;
And the light shone in darkness and
Against the Word the unstilled world still whirled
About the centre of the silent Word. (CPP 65)

The stanza alludes to the opening of the Gospel of John (John 1:1-14), which famously casts God as logos, or “the Word.” In “Ash-Wednesday,” Eliot plays with the way all words—here, meant to be understood as discrete units of language as well as representative of individual human
lives—are both contingent on and lesser versions of the Word; in theological terms, the word, like any human being, is created “in the image of” the Word, or God. In perhaps the most clear-cut example of the Hermeneutic Circle-like principle with which the poem opens, these lines suggest that the individual word is illegible, meaningless, if not “spoken” or “heard” within the broader context of the Word; the Word is, likewise, incomprehensible without a thorough understanding of the individual word. The stanza’s endlessly perplexing, nested wordplay dramatizes the sheer difficulty of recognizing the interdependence of humans and God: the recognition is itself procedural, step-wise, and predicated on multiple ‘turns.’ The individual cannot understand God without first undergoing the rigorous purgatorial processes the poem prescribes; this very process also depends, in large part, on an initial yearning for and recognition of God. The legibility of God and the legibility of the individual, in other words, are enmeshed and interdependent.

The stanza concludes with a vision of a world—presumably, a secular world—that does not acknowledge its dependence on a divine framework, a turn mirrored by the poem’s shift in diction from Word/word to play on the phonetically similar homonyms “world” and “whirled.” The lines “Against the Word the unstilled world still whirled / About the centre of the silent Word” align an “unstilled world” with “whirled,” representing the temporal, human world as both always already in constant, agitated movement and unselfconsciously destined to revolve, or “whirl,” about “the centre of the silent Word.” The poem, then, invokes a scientific fact—the planet both rotates about its own axis and revolves around the axis of the sun—in order to put forward a theological thesis: humans are drawn to and revolve around the divine whether or not they recognize it as such. For Eliot, the Word is an inescapable fact as solid, stable, and certain as Section I’s assertion that “time is always time / And place is always place.” The lines also
suggests that movement is unavoidable, even a natural condition: the “world” will continue to
“whirl” and be “unstill” by virtue of its separation from God. Read in this context, the action of
“turning” that dominates the poem emerges as a means of imposing order and control on
movement that is inevitable; the alternative to “turning” is not standing still, but “whirling”—an
action that connotes frenzy, anguish, and lack of control. Movement, in “Ash-Wednesday”, then,
emerges in two completely opposed ways: unselfconscious whirling and the targeted,
disciplined, and purgatorial action of “turning.” Purgatorial “turning” organizes and offers a
framework for “whirling” much the same way that the Word offers a context for individual
words. This passage highlights the great lengths to which the poem goes to invoke a stifling
vision of the human condition, a vision with very few options for human agency: we are trapped
in this conundrum, Eliot suggests, and miserably condemned to whirl, whether or not we even
recognize the conundrum itself. Suffering is inevitable—in the context of Lent, sin is
inevitable—but purgatorial processes offer a means of putting that suffering to a redemptive end.

“Ash-Wednesday” ultimately juxtaposes all of this difficult, apparently ceaseless activity
on the part of the faithful individual—this constant ‘turning’ towards, away, inward, outward—
with the transcendent stillness and silence of God: “Still is the unspoken word” (CPP 65).
Paradoxically, the end of purgative movement is actually something like God’s stillness, the
experience of being coextensive with God. This stillness is balance, perfect harmony. The
reunion of word and Word engenders a condition of speechlessness and tranquility not unlike
Underhill’s description of the fifth stage of the Mystic Way, Union, as the blissful serenity of a
sponge suffused with the ocean. But “Ash-Wednesday” goes to great pains to assert that this
condition is purely asymptotic: it is an unachievable goal that can only be neared through
approximation. “Teach us to care and not to care / Teach us to sit still,” the poem repeats twice,
once towards the end of Section I and once just before its conclusion in Section V (CPP 61, 67). The poem highlights the goal of stillness but represents a world where the only stillness available in the temporal realm is in momentary apprehension of the divine perspective in and through a human perspective: through rigorous self-examination, through introspection moderated by contrition, through prayer. The temporal realm is not to be escaped, in other words: it is to be reframed and reimagined. These fleeting moments of stillness are generated by process, relapse immediately into process, and depend in every way on process.

As a whole, “Ash-Wednesday” dramatizes two alternatives: a life lived in self-involved recursivity—one in which the individual cannot help but “whirl” in place—versus a life lived according to processes of recontextualization, in which the individual chooses to “turn” with direction, expending great effort to see his or her own life in a larger context. The difficulty of this process lies in its imperative to discipline and self-confrontation as well as in its endlessness. The line “Although I do not hope to turn again” (CPP 67), which marks the final instance of “turning” in the poem, remains an indefinite, inconclusive statement: purgatorial “turning” is a constant process, as the poem’s obsessive returns to “turning” suggests. The process is asymptotic, moving towards God—“the centre of the silent Word” (CPP 65)—without ever fully arriving. The process is also dynamic, necessarily adjusting itself in order to respond to and recontextualize every new incident—or every new sin, as the Lenten context would have it. The season of Lent itself embodies these characteristics, functioning as yet another context through which the individual life can be reoriented and reshaped: not only does the liturgical season fulfill a ritual function, but it also repeats, year after year. Ash Wednesday—as a day on the liturgical calendar—offers a fixed, universalizing context through which to examine the individual’s personal, particular sins and habits. In “Ash-Wednesday,” Eliot offers the
purgatorial prospect of recontextualization as a means of confronting those imperfections and
aspiring—while never fully succeeding—to move past them.

V. Redeeming Desire: Purgatorial Processes and *Four Quartets*

*Four Quartets* was recognized as an expression of Christian mysticism almost
immediately by its original audience. In 1943, the poet Robert Lowell, an open critic of Eliot’s
post-conversion poetry, celebrated *Four Quartets* as “probably the most powerful religious poem
of the twentieth century, and certainly the most remarkable and ambitious expression of Catholic
mysticism in English” (qtd. in Clarke 128). In the decades since its publication, *Four Quartets*
has been read as an expression of English nationalism, a largely conservative expression of
Christian doctrine, and everything in between.  

It is a mystical poem as well as a war poem,
written and published during the Blitz and throughout World War II, events that were widely felt
and imagined as apocalyptic. Eliot’s most locally-centered and nationalist poem is thus also his
most theological and doctrinal poem: explicit references to England and Englishness brush up
against austere invocations of lofty theological concepts like the Incarnation.  

In both its
attention to a specific historical moment and to a specific religious context, *Four Quartets*, like
“Ash-Wednesday,” depicts a fallen world where transcendence is available only fleetingly. As
Domestico puts it, *Four Quartets* “explores not a world charged with the grandeur of God, but a
fallen world only occasionally and violently intersected by transcendence” (42).

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28 Most recently, Sharon Cameron has read the poem as an attempt to represent a totalizing vision of impersonality,
where voices and feelings emerge detached from any one speaker—an attempt that, in Cameron’s view, fails. See
Cameron 144-179.

29 The poem also occasionally makes use of mystic imagery from other traditions: in particular, the image of the
lotus in “Burnt Norton” and the direct reference to Krishna in “Dry Salvages.” For an extended treatment of Eliot’s
engagement with non-Western religious traditions in *Four Quartets*, see Kearns, *T. S. Eliot and Indic Traditions: a
Study in Poetry and Belief*. 

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*Four Quartets*’ obsession with Purgatory is abundantly clear. Recognizably purgatorial language and imagery permeates *Four Quartets* from start to finish: “Burnt Norton” commands insistently that the reader “[d]escend lower, descend only” into a “World not world” that entails “destitution of all property, / Dessication of the world of sense, / Evacuation of the world of fancy,” and “Inoperancy of the world of spirit” (CPP 120-121). “East Coker” quotes John of the Cross’ *Ascent of Mount Carmel* directly and extensively, proposing “the way of dispossession / in order to arrive at what you are not” (CPP 127). “The Dry Salvages” similarly allegorizes a purgatorial journey by suggesting that “the way up is the way down, the way forward is the way back” (CPP 134). “Little Gidding,” the final poem of the series, represents a veritable purgatorial grand finale, combining all of these motifs with numerous references to purgatorial burning: “that refining fire / Where you must move in measure” (CPP 142); the redemption promised in “the choice of pyre or pyre”; “the intolerable shirt of flame” (CPP 144). In many ways, *Four Quartets* represents the fullest expression of Eliot’s efforts to compose poetry that is, in its form and content, purgatorial: targeted at the refinement of self while also replicating that refinement in its form.

*Four Quartets* goes beyond “Ash-Wednesday” in combining purgative recontextualization—its processes of retrospection, recognition, and self-checking—with a sense of teleology, expanding its scope beyond the narrower purview of contextualizing and reframing the individual life. If “Ash-Wednesday” proposes that a life can be understood properly only by and through constant “turning”—backward at one’s own history as well as toward God—*Four Quartets* offers the idea that this backward-looking orientation offers, nonetheless, a telos: if “the way forward is the way back,” the way back offers, in a sense, a way forward. Recast in the

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30 Recently, Knowles has read *Four Quartets* as an extended recapitulation of Dante’s *Purgatorio* that responds directly to the Blitz. As Knowles puts it, “Eliot sees the flames of London burning as the fire without, the contemporary and external equivalent of Dante’s inner ordeal by fire” (109).
language of Evelyn Underhill’s formulation of The Mystic Way, “Ash-Wednesday” is occupied with Stage 2, Purgation—the various forms of discipline required to purge the self of its ordinarily self-centered, myopic desires based on the limitations of the personal point of view—while *Four Quartets* is occupied with Stage 4, Surrender—Purgation writ large, The Dark Night of The Soul. *Four Quartets*, then, combines the recontextualizing dimension of purgation with a sense of temporal direction: it offers a new way of thinking about time itself.

*Four Quartets* also returns more rigorously to the anxiety about erotic desire that characterizes Eliot’s early poetry, ultimately attempting to resolve it by rereading it according to purgatorial principles. In a meaningful sense, then, *Four Quartets* represents Eliot’s attempt to rewrite his own canon, addressing two of the main projects of his career as a religious poet: the poem invokes a system for managing the problem of erotic desire that also offers the possibility of escaping the limited temporal scope of the individual life. At one point in the poem, Eliot suggests, somewhat cryptically, that the two projects are one and the same: “This is the use of memory: / For liberation—not less of love but expanding / Of love beyond desire, and so liberation / From the future as well as the past” (CPP 142). The poem promises that “Expan[sion] / of love beyond desire”—a construction that recalls Eliot’s description of the process of mysticism as “enlarg[ing] the boundary of human love so as to make it a stage in the progress toward the divine” in his Clark lectures (166)—actually means “liberation” from time. Eliot attempts to resolve the ambiguity between erotic desire and religious experience—the ambiguity that first emerges in poems like “The Death of Saint Narcissus” and “The Love Song of Saint Sebastian”—in the Dantesque idea that desire is a catalyst for experiencing divine Love. Eliot still rejects the coterminousness of erotic desire and mystical experience propounded by his so-called “romantic” mystics; he does not imagine desire as an immediate, direct way to subsume
the individual self and achieve unity with God. More than “Ash-Wednesday,” however, *Four Quartets* suggests that desire plays a part in the mystical process, insofar as the process requires a recognition of desire: looking back on one’s life, through memory, to form a coherent narrative of the ways one’s momentary erotic desires were pointing towards something beyond them. *Four Quartets* attempts to conceptualize and model a way of making sense of erotic desires while looking and living past them.

The recontextualization at play in “Ash-Wednesday” emerges first, in *Four Quartets*, through a different formal paradigm: the process of representing human life as art—as dance, as music, as an art object—in order to render it legible, coherent, and capable of containing meaning. This model asserts itself first in “Burnt Norton,” where the poet meditates on the idea of imagining moments in time as a pattern—rather than as a linear chronology—and invokes a “Chinese jar”:

Only by the form, the pattern,  
Can words or music reach  
The stillness, as a Chinese jar still  
Moves perpetually in its stillness (CPP 121)

The image of the Chinese jar recalls Keats’ Grecian urn, and with it the idea that art can capture fleeting moments and make them somehow permanent. The jar offers the possibility, then, of arranging ephemeral moments into a pattern that renders them permanent, stable, and legible. At various junctures, the poem envisions human life in similar terms: as a constellation of moments resolved into a meaningful pattern. Envisioned these ways, the individual life can be understood as more than a string of unrelated chronological incidents—“the waste sad time / Stretching before and after” with which “Burnt Norton” closes. *Four Quartets* repeatedly juxtaposes and stages these alternatives: life experienced in straightforward, linear time—invoked by images like “strained time-ridden faces / Distracted from distraction by distraction” (CPP 120)—or life
imagined as a formal, aestheticized pattern. The pattern is an artificial imposition; these images of self-aestheticization suggest that purgation involves deliberate efforts not just to look back on one’s life retrospectively, but also to craft it into a deliberate shape.

*Four Quartets* also links this work of self-aestheticization to participation in tradition and community life. Dance, for instance, appears in *East Coker*, where the poem is interrupted by a “rustic” folk dance described in Middle English. Here, dance seems to suggest nostalgia for a parochial, community-oriented, simple way of life. This way of life, the poem suggests, also offers a deeper connection to the natural world and its cyclical processes: the dancers are “keeping time, / Keeping the rhythm in their dancing/As in their living in the living seasons” (CPP 124). Eliot’s vision here recalls Lawrence’s depiction of the simultaneously seasonal and liturgical calendar of the Brangwens in *The Rainbow*; in both cases, living in conjunction with the seasons is also about rendering individual lives meaningful and coherent by tying them to natural cycles and communal rituals. As Esty has argued, the scene also plays on ideas of time and timelessness, specificity and universality: the scene “evokes a specific place and time, but treats it as a zone of anthropological timelessness where the rhythms of music and the seasons replace the timeworn “ruined houses” motif of the opening section” (*A Shrinking Island* 144). But Eliot takes this vision of dance a step further by aligning dance explicitly to the restoring, “refining fire” of Dante’s *Purgatorio* in “Little Gidding”: “From wrong to wrong the exasperated spirit / Proceeds, unless restored by that refining fire / Where you must move in measure, like a dancer” (CPP 142). The line recalls the similarly “exasperated” movement of “whirling” in “Ash-Wednesday”: movement is inevitable much in the same way that time is inevitable. Given these limitations, the “spirit” can only move from “wrong to wrong”—from “distraction from distraction by distraction” (CPP 120). But “refining fire” imposes structure on movement such
that it becomes dance, becomes art. Through dance, the “spirit’s” movement is no longer futile nor “exasperated”: it becomes targeted, directed, structured, patterned.

Yet, as the image of the Chinese jar “mov[ing] perpetually in its stillness” suggests, the poem also cautions against relying on any fixed pattern—aesthetic or otherwise—to make sense of an individual human life, or even time itself. In “East Coker,” for instance, Eliot insists, “The knowledge imposes a pattern, and falsifies, / For the pattern is new in every moment / And every moment is a new and shocking / Valuation of all we have been” (CPP 125). The pattern, however stable and fixed it may seem from a distance, is always moving, always reorienting itself: “The detail of the pattern is movement” (CPP 122). The way the constant effort of turning and reorienting in “Ash-Wednesday” represents an asymptotic approach to divine stillness—“the still point of the turning world”—emerges here in a different model: every new “moment” in time forces a reevaluation and reframing of the pattern itself. The paradigm suggests a chain whose structure changes ontologically every time a new link is added to it. It also recalls Eliot’s vision of the poet’s relationship to tradition in “Tradition and the Individual Talent”: the entire tradition changes when a new poem is added to it. The poet must compose poetry with an understanding of its dependence on the poetic tradition that precedes it while also recognizing that tradition is a living, breathing entity, and thus subject to change. In both cases—the “moments” that compose an individual human life and the poems that compose a tradition—Eliot insists that reevaluation and reorientation ought to be constant, and constantly changing, processes.

In “The Dry Salvages,” Eliot targets “superficial notions of evolution” and other hubristic narratives of progress as similarly flawed efforts to impose fixed patterns on time:

The past has another pattern, and ceases to be mere sequence—
Or even development: the latter a partial fallacy
Encouraged by superficial notions of evolution,
Which becomes, in the popular mind, a means of disowning the past. (CPP 133)

For Eliot, “superficial notions of evolution” and other progressivist narratives treat the past as distant, unchangeable, and primitive: the modern orientation towards the past is “the backward half-look / Over the shoulder, towards the primitive terror.” These theories are not only problematic because they represent an imposed, anthropocentric fiction, but also because they are, in Eliot’s view, fundamentally ideological, motivated by a forward-thinking, progress-oriented worldview—perhaps the same worldview that has resulted in the waste, litter, and “drifting wreckage” that populates the landscape the “The Dry Salvages” has just described. The poem proposes, instead, another kind of “backward” look: one shaped and motivated by experiences of “sudden illumination,” an approach that “restores the experience / In a different form” (CPP 133).

The present, as “Ash-Wednesday” suggested, has the power to transform the past by reimagining it, reorienting it, reading it typologically. In *Four Quartets*, the impetus to that transformation lies in ephemeral, epiphanic moments: moments of ineffable vision, transcendence, and meaning. History, Eliot concludes in “Little Gidding,” is more accurately described as “a pattern / of timeless moments” (CPP 144).

The poem itself adopts this principle formally: random moments of epiphanic insight punctuate imagistic fragments and descriptions of urban despair. These moments put forward aphoristic announcements of philosophical insight—for instance, declarations like “This is the use of memory: / For liberation—not less of love but expanding / Of love beyond desire, and so liberation / From the future as well as the past” (CPP 142)—but they also often jolt the reader’s experience of reading the poem linearly,

31 The vision of history expressed here is both general and particular to England. As Esty argues in *A Shrinking Island*, one way Eliot escapes the prison of egoistic solipsism in *Four Quartets* is by offering in its place “a more powerful and more binding model of national tradition (11), emphasizing “the roots of universalism in the collective life of a representative people rather than in the psychic contours of a representative person” (14).
offering revisitations and rereadings of ideas, motifs, and images found earlier in the poem. In other words, the purgatorial efforts it recommends its readers undertake—the constant exhortation to reframe and reorganize the imagined narrative of one’s individual life in light of spiritual and theological insights—is replicated by its formal structure, which strives to enact a similar dynamic. Movement forward—toward meaning, toward resolution, toward union with God—requires constant retrospection.

The backward-looking orientation *Four Quartets* proposes, then, offers a telos. Put another way, looking toward and organizing one’s own past is a way of opening up an alternate future; temporal retrospection not only reveals but also brings one closer to the telos of divine (i.e. atemporal) time. This is precisely the paradoxical principle explored in the mystical theology of St. John of the Cross, whose work receives more airtime in *Four Quartets* than in any other of Eliot’s poems.³² “East Coker” quotes a significant portion of St. John’s *The Ascent of Mount Carmel* (1618), a commentary on St. John’s earlier work, *Dark Night of the Soul* that evolves into a prescriptive narration of the soul’s ascent to union with God, which takes place necessarily through descent:

To arrive where you are, to get from where you are not,
You must go by a way wherein there is no ecstasy.
In order to arrive at what you do not know
You must go by a way which is the way of ignorance.
In order to possess what you do not possess
You must go by the way of dispossession.
In order to arrive at what you are not
You must go through the way in which you are not.
And what you do not know is the only thing you know
And what you own is what you do not own
And where you are is where you are not. (CPP 127)

³² Eliot had formerly lumped St. John with St. Teresa of Avila as excessively “romantic” mystics—due, one might surmise, to his frequent recourse, in works like *The Spiritual Canticle* and *The Living Flame of Love* to erotic imagery to describe union with God—but in *Four Quartets* he emerges as the most impassioned and straightforward voice for purgatorial processes.
The notion of the “dark night of the soul” is often misunderstood as referring merely to an extraordinary experience of spiritual crisis. But in St. John of the Cross’ writings, it refers, rather, to deliberate, conscious attempts to undergo purgative processes—first, of the senses; second, of the spirit; each “night” represents a different “purgation” or “purification” on the road to union with God (118). As the passage suggests, the process is procedural and structured: it requires discipline, effort, and commitment. Eliot’s spatial layout of the quotation on the page (replicated above) reflects the way these efforts are both subordinate to and supportive of their ultimate goals: “You must go through the way in which you are not” seems to figuratively uphold “In order to arrive at what you are not.” The process is also predicated, by definition, on counterintuitive, paradoxical logic: up is down; down is up. John of the Cross’ language represents a calculated effort to jam the system of ordinary human logic and language, perhaps even to cause it to break down. The illogic of the passage itself mimics the spiritual acrobatics the method calls for: in order to transcend human perceptual limitations, one must reject the foundations of human reason. Eliot offers John of the Cross’ method here, unironically, as a model for prayer and discipline built on difficulty, antithesis, and paradox.

One of the key paradoxes of St. John’s method is that it combines waiting and stillness with active movement and spiritual effort. Just before quoting from The Ascent of Mount Carmel, Eliot puts forward ideas about patience and waiting that are central to St. John’s project:  

I said to my soul, be still, and wait without hope  
For hope would be hope for the wrong thing; wait without love,  
For love would be love of the wrong thing; there is yet faith  
But the faith and the love and the hope are all in the waiting.  
Wait without thought, for you are not ready for thought:  
So the darkness shall be the light, and the stillness the dancing.

33 The layout might also be an homage to the scalar imagery through which John of the Cross articulates the original: not only does The Ascent of Mount Carmel use the dominating analogy of a soul ascending a metaphorical mountain, but St. John also famously composed innovative diagrams detailing his method.
34 See Ascent of Mount Carmel, Vol. 2, Ch. 6.
The passage aligns the temporal process of waiting with the experience of purgation: waiting, in a sense, means to purge the spirit of hope, love, and even thought. But to wait without these things, the passage suggests, is actually to possess them more completely: faith, hope, and love exist “in the waiting” in more profound ways than they ever could outside of it. Likewise, stillness, just as in the image of the Chinese jar in “Burnt Norton,” does not mean the absence of movement; it offers a new way of conceiving of and structuring movement. Waiting, then—perhaps one of the signature characteristics of the concept of Purgatory itself—is a crucial dimension to the backward-looking orientation of the poem. Both waiting and “backward-looking” stall and push against a life viewed simply from beginning to end; both put forward alternative trajectories that nonetheless look forward to something greater: a meaningful life, one lived in union with God.

“East Coker” captures these temporal implications formally, using the phrase “In my beginning is my end” as its opening and constant refrain, only to invert it at the end of the poem: “In my end is my beginning.” The initial statement is both linear and chronological on a typographic level—the word “beginning” comes before the word “end”—as well as a deterministic statement of futility. If the beginning contains the end, everything in between is, to some extent, futile, unchangeable, and meaningless: the very first line of Four Quartets articulates a similar problem: “If all time is eternally present / All time is unredeemable” (CPP 117). But the last line of “East Coker”—which occurs, crucially, after the extensive intervention of the philosophy of St. John of the Cross—inverts the phrase: “In my end is my beginning” (CPP 129). The inversion transforms the phrase into a statement of transformative revival. It not only connotes Christian ideas of death and resurrection, but also embodies John’s idea of negation as a means of achieving affirmative transformation. Taken with its original articulation,
“in my beginning is my end,” the phrase also constitutes a full-circle turn that recalls Lancelot Andrewes’ “turning” motif. Bookended by these two statements—“in my beginning is my end” and “in my end is my beginning”—“East Coker” itself adopts the movement this inversion suggests: it begins with a statement of nihilistic despair and ends with a statement that retroactively rewrites that opening in a spirit of hope.

In its most significant departure from “Ash-Wednesday,” *Four Quartets* repeatedly links the solipsistic experience of linear, chronological time with the experience of entrapment in a desiring body. This collision occurs most frequently in the last poem of the series, “Little Gidding,” but is hinted at first in “Burnt Norton”:

Desire itself is movement
Not in itself desirable;
Love is itself unmoving,
Only the cause and end of movement,
Timeless, and undesiring
Except in the aspect of time
Caught in the form of limitation
Between un-being and being. (CPP 122)

The passage makes a series of statements about the relationship between Love and desire, time and timelessness, movement and stillness—and above all, a distinction: desire exists in time; Love is timeless. Love—which here, as in the Clark lectures, refers not just to love itself but to God’s love—is the cause of desire and is mediated through desire. But desire is an inferior imitation, or shadow, of Love; as the poem concludes later, “Love is most nearly itself / When here and now cease to matter” (CPP 129). And yet, desire might also be an access-point for Love: the poem here suggests that Love can only be understood by humans—who are trapped in time—*in terms of* desire; the enmeshment of love and desire, then, functions similarly to “Ash-Wednesday”’s play on word and Word. The distinction between desire and love is also crucial to Underhill, who distinguishes between them along similar lines: “It is not love but lust—the
possessive case, the very food of selfhood—which poisons the relation between the self and the external world and ‘immediately fatigues’ the soul” (Mysticism 206). The formulation is, of course, familiar: lust—or desire—must be extinguished precisely because it is “possessive” and self-centered; love, by contrast, is fundamentally selfless, not least because in its most authentic form it is able to transgress boundaries between human and divine spheres. Here, Eliot imagines transcending the narrow, self-centered experience of desire as a process that requires recognition of desire as such: selfish and self-centered without reference to a broader context, but somehow meaningful, productive even, when recognized as an imperfect vestige of Love in an imperfect world—as an incomplete, fragmentary piece of a larger story.

The passage also plays on the poem’s motif of movement. Here, Love is itself unmoving, but it causes movement. Desire’s relationship to movement is more complicated, expressed here in a chiastic paradox: “Desire itself is movement / Not in itself desirable.” Desire’s movement, the poem insists, is recursive, turned in on itself, unless it undergoes purgatorial processes that enable one to recognize its relationship to Love—much in the same way that “from wrong to wrong the exasperated spirit / Proceeds, unless restored by that refining fire / Where you must move in measure, like a dancer” (CPP 142). The passage offers Love, by contrast, in a parallel structure that refuses chiasm: it is both “unmoving” and “movement.” Love’s relationship to movement is also an important Dantesque touchstone: the final lines of Paradiso describe Dante’s encounter with the essence of Love itself, a still, unmoving force that nonetheless propels all of creation, including Dante, to movement: “ma già volgeva il mio disio e ’l velle,/ si come rota ch’igualmente è mossa, / l’amor che move il sole e l’altre stelle.” [“but my desire and will were moved already—like / a wheel revolving uniformly—by/ the Love that moves the sun and the other stars”]. The passage, then, recapitulates the Dantesque narrative recalled by Arnaut
Daniel’s intervention in “Ash-Wednesday”: Dante ultimately realizes that his temporal experience of love for Beatrice was a vehicle through which he might recognize the eternally satisfying Love of God. As Donald Childs observes, part of Eliot’s investment in Dante lies in his desire “to remind the modern world of Dante’s effortless awareness of the spiritual dimension of sexual activity” (168). What the poem makes clear is that desire—usually represented throughout Eliot’s poetry as an inconvenient, tortured obstacle to be overcome—is not, for Eliot, anathema to spiritual search. “Redeem the time,” Eliot insists in “Ash-Wednesday” (CPP 64). *Four Quartets* hints at the possibility that even desire can be redeemed, too—and that the redemption of desire can be a way of redeeming time.

*Four Quartets*’ imagery of burning and fire makes a version of the same point, offering purgatorial imagery of burning—“the fire that refines”—as an alternative to the burning of lust. This arc occurs first in *The Waste Land*: “The Fire Sermon” pairs Augustine’s “To Carthage then I came”—taken from a description of Augustine’s tortured experience of lust in *Confessions*—with the burning flames of Buddha’s Fire Sermon; the poem returns to imagery of burning in its final stanza, quoting, once again, the final lines of Dante’s encounter with Arnaut Daniel in *Purgatorio*: “Poi s’ascose nel focho che gli affina” [“Then dived he back into the fire which refines them”] (CPP 46, 50). In *Four Quartets*, Eliot repurposes this arc—from burning that is simultaneously infernal and lustful to burning that refines—as an ever-present, almost apocalyptic “choice”:

The only hope, or else despair  
Lies in the choice of pyre or pyre  
To be redeemed from fire by fire.

Who then devised the torment? Love.

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35 The references to fire here possess a heightened urgency given the historical context of the Blitz and the veritable firestorms it caused across England. Eliot himself volunteered as a watchman during the Blitz while composing “Little Gidding.” For Eliot’s experience of composing “Little Gidding” during the Blitz, see Gordon 374-376.
Love is the unfamiliar Name
Behind the hands that wove
The intolerable shirt of flame
Which human power cannot remove.
We can only live, only suspir
Consumed by either fire or fire. (CPP 144)

In pairing fire with fire, the poem most directly brings the afterworld states of Hell and Purgatory to Earth. The choice is, of course, an obvious one: the fire that refines is preferable to the eternal flames of Hell. But the passage represents them as fundamentally similar alternatives, framing the dilemma as one exacerbated by a problem of language. The spiritual conundrum is, simultaneously, a semantic conundrum: the choice between “fire and fire,” between “pyre or pyre” is tautological, circular. Language offers the same word for experiences that lead to vastly different outcomes. As Esty has observed, “It is as if the poem wishes to suggest that dialectical thinking represents the best human approximation of divine thinking, but remains naturally limited by its lack of transcendental concepts” (A Shrinking Island 140). The semantic ambiguity dramatizes Eliot’s convictions about the limitations of the human perspective, according to which fundamentally different things can seem and feel the same: torment is torment; suffering is suffering. These alternatives might be resolved on a divine plane, but the poem places the reader in a fundamentally human position, where language is unable to make sense of the difference. But the poem also leaves open the possibility of overcoming that obstacle by inserting Love at the center of the passage. Love makes sense of “the torment,” even “devise[s]” it—an idea the poem puts forward explicitly by putting it at the structural center of the meditation. The passage formally enacts Love’s relationship to the torment of earthly burning, then, in two ways: at the center of the passage, it functions as a relational fulcrum, an axis, a

36 As Murray has observed (74), a similar dynamic is at play in Burnt Norton, where Eliot deploys language strongly resembling St. John of the Cross’ methodology to describe the spiritual emptiness of the secular world he rejects: “Dessication of the world of sense, / Evacuation of the world of fancy, / Inoperancy of the world of spirit” (CPP 120-121).
“still point” around which the different igneous dilemmas revolve. But it also represents a linear process resembling the way the purgatorial process ought to work in time, where Love interrupts and intercedes in the choice of “pyre or pyre.” The passage introduces the alternatives of “pyre or pyre,” hints that that one kind of fire can redeem the other, offers Love as the source and operator underlying the entire process, and then returns to a statement that would otherwise read as hopeless and futile: “We can only live, only suspire / Consumed by either fire or fire.”

This passage also finds Eliot reimagining the benefits of ascetic practice in a purgatorial framework: the passage invokes the image of the penitent’s hair shirt for the first time since “The Love Song of Saint Sebastian,” composed nearly 30 years before, in which Sebastian seductively offers to wear “a shirt of hair” (Inventions 78). But in Four Quartets, the hair shirt is not bound together by hair but rather by fire, an “intolerable shirt of flame,” a “torment” that is “woven” not by a human being but by God. Unlike Sebastian’s hair shirt, this one is also irremovably and irrevocably imposed by God: “human power cannot remove” it. The “torment” referred to here is not an act of self-mortification to be sought after; it is the experience of living itself. But the poem suggests here that that experience, reimagined through a purgatorial framework, becomes meaningful. Across his career, Eliot has imagined religious experience as plagued by erotic sublimation, a problem escapable only through purgatorial processes aimed, in part, at filtering desire out of spiritual longing. Four Quartets does not contradict or retract this idea, but it does suggest that the human experience of desire itself can nonetheless be part of the purgative process by offering a tiny glimpse of what divine Love might be like.

Four Quartets’ turn in “Little Gidding” to the theology of Julian of Norwich, an early English mystic, cements this idea’s centrality to the poem. Relatively unknown prior to the 20th century, Julian was reintroduced to British culture when her medieval anchorhold was destroyed
during the German bombing of Norwich on June 27, 1942—an event that, as Barbara Newman as argued, may have brought her writings to Eliot’s attention in the first place. Eliot alludes three times in “Little Gidding” to the same controversial episode in Julian’s major work, *Revelations of Divine Love*: a compendium of 16 “revelations,” or encounters with the divine accompanied by Julian’s interpretations and reflections. In *Four Quartets*, Eliot quotes what is perhaps her most famous and controversial revelation, her 13th, wherein Julian laments the existence of sin—as she does repeatedly throughout the text—and begs God to explain why it was allowed to enter the world in the first place. Jesus replies: “Sin is befitting, but all shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well” (74). Sin is “befitting”—Eliot uses the original Middle English, “behovely”: it is suitable, appropriate, necessary. The idea rests on the same premise as the paradoxical doctrine of *felix culpa*, or “happy fault,” coined by Augustine and most famously celebrated in Milton’s *Paradise Lost*: the Fall of Man—and subsequent introduction of sin into the world—is not only necessary but fortunate, as it paved the way for God’s redemption of man through the figure of Jesus. As Augustine explains in *Enchiridion*: “For God judged it better to bring good out of evil than not to permit any evil to exist” (E VIII. 27).

But Julian one-ups *felix culpa*, concluding that sin is a cause of suffering that has no purpose nor even an existence beyond its role in bringing us closer to God:

But I did not see sin, for I believe it has no kind of substance nor share of being, nor could it be recognized except by the suffering it causes. And, as it seems to me, this suffering is something that exists for a while, because it purges us and makes us know ourselves and ask for mercy, for the Passion of our Lord is a comfort to us against all this, and that is his blessed will. And because of the tender love which our good Lord has for all who shall be saved, he comforts us readily and sweetly, meaning this, ‘It is true that

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37 As Newman has shown, allusions to her writings emerge only in the very latest drafts of Little Gidding, composed after August 1942. The widespread popularity of Julian’s writings since then, however, is often attributed to Eliot’s allusions to her in *Four Quartets* (451).
sin is cause of all this suffering, but all shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well.’ These words were said very tenderly, indicating no kind of blame for me or anyone who will be saved. (75)

Sin and suffering, for Julian, serve a purely purgatorial purpose: they catalyze self-knowledge and cause the faithful to recognize, ask for, and receive the comforting mercy of God. Without fully dissolving the mystery of sin—it is merely “true” that “sin is cause of all this suffering”—the passage offers a particular optics through which to read the suffering sin causes. Julian’s revelation, then, offers a perspectival method close to Eliot’s, one predicated on re-envisioning one’s own suffering in purgatorial terms: as a means of self-refinement leading to a redemptive end. The passage also features Julian repeating and reinterpreting Jesus’ initial response through the lens of God’s “tender love”: sin causes suffering, “but all shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well.” The triple repetition formally replicates the conceptual process of this recognition through its interruptive conjunctions: first, a negating, exclusionary “but,” and two affirmative, inclusive “and”s. The “but” connotes halting and doubt; the “and” resolves that doubt, almost soothing it through its rhythmic repetition and additional reassuring stipulation, “all manner of thing.”

Eliot not only preserves the repetition of “all shall be well,” but also repeats the phrase three separate times in “Little Gidding”: twice in part III and once in part V, where it constitutes the poem’s final line. Its first two appearances emerge after its earlier discussion of desire expanding into love, a purgatorial process that results in transformation:

...See, now they vanish,  
The faces and places, with the self which, as it could, loved them,  
To become renewed, transfigured, in another pattern.  
Sin is Behovely, but  
All shall be well, and  
All manner of thing shall be well. (CPP 142-143)
The purgatorial process of reaching love through desire—for Eliot, a difficult and stepwise rather than immediate and sublimating process—results in the elision of individual particularities: people, places, even the self. This transformation of self, in fact, enables love—the new self can love; the old self could only desire. In pairing Julian’s vision with his discussion of desire’s relationship to love, Eliot implicitly aligns desire with Julian’s vision of sin and suffering: they are all “[b]ehovely,” as they lead to a greater, more profound good—a good, crucially, inaccessible without having first experienced them. The quotation occurs again at the end of the section with an added line of Eliot’s own invention: “And all shall be well and / All manner of thing shall be well / By the purification of the motive / in the ground of our beseeching” (CPP 143, emphasis mine). Newman has read Eliot’s interpolation of this line to signify his reluctance to embrace the all-affirming nature of Julian’s theology. But the added line merely highlights the purgatorial dimension of the idea present in Julian’s original formulation: “all shall be well” because of, and through, the purgatorial process of experiencing and reframing one’s own suffering. Finally, in turning to figures like Julian of Norwich and John of the Cross—members of poetic traditions that allow for self-denial to coexist with an idea of God that is comforting and loving—Eliot seems to be more willing in *Four Quartets* than in any of his earlier works to imagine that purgation and love, even embodied love, not only coexist but entail one another. This turn signals the ultimate transformation of the anxieties that undergird “The Death of Saint Narcissus,” where asceticism could only lead to egoism, as well as a tonal shift from the coldly

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38 Newman writes, “Given all that we know of Eliot—his moods of self-disgust and self-loathing, his distaste for a thoroughly fallen world, his convictions about original sin and hell—it is impossible that he should have embraced Julian’s theological vision. Yet she alone offered the assurance of a Christian hope not merely willed but profoundly felt, at the high level of abstraction he preferred. By slipping a single line about ‘the purification of the motive’ between two of hers, he supplied a corrective that made her theology more ethically convincing and his own more graciously affirming” (Newman 460).
detached and intellectual representation of classical mysticism Eliot offers in his Clark Lectures. In *Four Quartets*, purgative fire finally seems to offer some degree of warmth and consolation.

Taken as a whole, then, *Four Quartets* offers Love as the ultimate counter-narrative to human chronology. Love furnishes the means through which desires can be seen clearly, re-envisioned as stepping stones—stages of a higher, atemporal, and crucially nonlinear process. As a cosmic machinery operating above and beyond the human, it also offers the distant promises of salvation and redemption. The poem concludes:

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And all shall be well and
All manner of thing shall be well
When the tongues of flames are in-folded
Into the crowned knot of fire
And the fire and the rose are one. (CPP 145)
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In this passage, the purgatorial imagery of fire and flames is reworked and assimilated into a beatific vision, suggesting one last time that purgation is crucial to the redemptive experience of salvation. But while the poem’s religious narrative culminates in a paradisiacal vision, it is also clear about its immediate inaccessibility. The passage pivots on the words “shall” and “[w]hen,” suggesting that this salvation is deferred; it remains remote, belonging to a realm distant from “here and now” (CPP 129). As Eliot states explicitly in “The Dry Salvages,” “to apprehend / The point of intersection of the timeless / With time, is an occupation for the saint” (CPP 136). “For most of us,” the poem continues, “there is only the unattended / Moment, the moment in and out of time” (CPP 136). The moment, in and of itself, is “unattended”—but Eliot’s purgatorial method rigorously attempts to “attend” it: to concentrate on it, to recontextualize it, to constellate it into a pattern that is itself always subject to change. Human and divine realms are, as ever for Eliot, distinct: there is no immanence, only transcendence. Yet his purgatorial poetry ultimately suggests, nonetheless, that human love *can* be “enlarged” into divine love—however
incoherently and incompletely—through purgation: disciplined processes of recognition that confront the particularity of individual experience, the vicissitudes of self, in order to effectively escape it.
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