

Sterility and  
communion in t.s.  
eliot and gerard  
manley hopkins



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Twenty some years after the death of Gerard Manley Hopkins, T. S. Eliot began where Hopkins had left off. In one of his earliest poems, “ The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock”, Eliot picked up the hopelessness – hopelessness motivated by a sense of isolation – that had pervaded Hopkins later poetry. Both poets battled with their faith in their own importance. Both poets felt at a distance from the world, and as a result felt ineffectual and impotent to impact the world around them. This hopelessness is reflected in their jagged images and verse. With Eliot it is particularly pronounced in his early poem “ The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock”, while the same hopelessness is seen in Hopkins’ later poetry; the so called “ terrible sonnets”. But, fortunately, for the poets, these times of hopelessness were not unending. Eliot escaped the hopelessness in his later life, as is particularly evident in The Four Quartets. Hopkins only dealt with the hopelessness in his later life, and in his earlier poetry such as “ The Windhover” and “ The Grandeur of God”, Hopkins is in great communion with the world. The period of skepticism was tempered by a time of great hope for each poet, a period that stemmed from their sense of communion with the world around them. From the beginning of his beginning)” The Love Song of J . Alfred Prufrock” – Eliot is at odd with the worlds around him. He contrasts himself with his surroundings in the first lines of “ The Love Song of J . Alfred Prufrock”: Let us go then, you and I When the evening is spread out against the sky Like a patient etherized upon a table; Let us go, through certain half-deserted streets, The muttering retreats Of restless nights in one-night cheap hotels (1-6) The opening two lines put the sky into motion; has it expand outwards. But in the third line, in contrast to this quick development and movement of his surroundings, Eliot is ‘ etherized upon a table.’ He is ‘ etherized’, motionless, in contrast to the <https://assignbuster.com/sterility-and-communion-in-ts-eliot-and-gerard-manley-hopkins/>

expanding sky. After the third line Eliot immediately returns to the movement of the world around him: the retreats that mutter, and the nights that restlessly move. This stanza aptly captures the sense that Eliot is paralyzed in the face of the quickly moving world, a sense that pervades the rest of the poem. The people around him are part of the speedy surroundings from which he is isolated. The contrast between himself, and the people around him is apparent when he tries to put into words the apparent thoughts of those around him: And indeed there will be time To wonder, ' Do I dare?' and, ' Do I dare?" Time to turn back and descend the stair, With a bald spot in the middle of my hair-(They will say: ' How his hair is growing thin!') My morning coat, my collar mounting firmly to the chin, My necktie rich and modest, but asserted by a simple pin-(They will say: ' But how his arms and legs are thin!') (37-44) Eliot imagines the people quickly thinking and judging him, and Eliot's recreation of these people's thoughts grows ever more intense from the four foot first line to the eight foot last lines. This quickly growing space between line breaks serves as a clear direction for crescendo. In the beginning of this stanza he mentions that there will be time to wonder, to ask questions such as ' Do I dare?' But there does not appear to be time for thinking in the midst of the racing thoughts of the world around him. This suspicion is confirmed when Eliot demonstrates the speed of his own thinking in the next lines where, in 2 pondering 3 beat lines he wonders: Do I dare Disturb the universe? (45-6) This point when he does come to ' wonder' brings the verse to a skidding halt. His ruminations all come as a sharp decrescendo from his perception of the flow of the thoughts and movement in the world around him. The speed of his own thinking in relation to the world around him (the first part of this stanza) marks his

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isolation from the furiously moving world. This isolation is heightened by the animation and activity of everything around him. The universe is “squeezed . . . into a ball to roll”(92) and a lantern “threw the nerves in patterns on a screen” (105). In the most memorable personification, yellow fog “rubs its back upon the windowpanes,” and “licked its tongue into the corners of the evening” (15-6). The flux and activity of everything around him acts to paralyze Eliot. This is explained in the stanza that where Eliot begins by mentioning that “[I] Have known the evenings, mornings, afternoons” (50) (By stating these three long time spans so quickly, and in the past tense, Eliot elucidates how quickly the time is flying past.) He gives the speeding times of day, eyes, and says, “I have known the eyes already, known them all - / The eyes that fix you in a formulated phrase” (55-6). The paralysis into which the quickly moving time formulates him is never more vividly captured than when he says that the capturing eye has made him like a quieted butterfly in a preservative case, “sprawling on a pin” (57). The movement of the world around him has rendered Eliot impotent because the activity and flux of the world makes his own decisions worthless. Eliot’s desire to have some impact on his surroundings is apparent when he slowly asks whether he will “dare to disturb the universe”. But, the activity of his surroundings quickly sweeps over his question. He is unable to make this decision because, as he explains, “in a minute there is time/ For decisions and revisions which a minute will reverse” (47-8). His decisions are futile because of the understanding that any decision that he makes can easily be reversed in the next moment. This futility is reflected by his constant repetition of words and phrases. In “A Game of Chess” from *The Wasteland* Eliot talks about a place “where the dead men lost their bones,” (116) a <https://assignbuster.com/sterility-and-communion-in-ts-eliot-and-gerard-manley-hopkins/>

place where not even death is dead enough, because then the dead lose even their physical claim to life (i. e. their bones). This description is a response to the words of a woman who chatters away: ““ My nerves are bad to-night. Yes, Bad. Stay with me./ ‘ Speak to me. Why do you never speak. Speak./ ‘ What are you thinking of? What thinking? What?”(111-3). Eliot’s description of the place as deader than dead immediately follows this woman’s short monologue. The description is a reaction to the lifelessness of the woman’s words. She says nothing, and repeats this nothing over and over again. Her inability to say anything is an inability to create, i. e. sterility. Eliot obliquely uses the same technique in “ Prufrock” to define his own sterility. In the same way that the woman in “ A Game of Chess” repeats the same questions over and over, when he imagines himself asking a question he thinks that he will ask, ““ Do I dare?’ and, Do I dare?” (38). Later, in three consecutive stanzas he begins by asking “ For I have known them all already, known them all)” (49) (with slight differences in each stanza) and closes each stanza by asking “ So how should I presume” (54) (with slight changes). This technique is particularly effective in “ Prufrock” because his own inability to say anything new is contrasted to the constant barrage of new images in his surroundings. In the body of each of these stanzas Eliot describes a different aspect of the world around him, while he is still and asking the same question over and over again. In the last stanzas of “ Prufrock” Eliot elucidates and qualifies the depths of his isolation and impotence. Through a theatrical metaphor he returns to the question of whether he will “ disturb the universe”. He acknowledges he is “ not Prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be” (111); recognizing that he is no lead player, but, as consolation, he tells himself that he can at least be an ‘ attendant

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lord' that will help to 'swell the progress' (113). Upon further consideration, though, even this thought of impact on the world around him is stripped as he says that he would probably be 'almost ridiculous' and in the last line resigns to the fact that he would probably only be 'the Fool' (119). At this point he has realized the fallacy of his self-aggrandizing idea that he could impact the world. But he then comes to question whether he even has power over his own life. He begins by granting that, I grow old . . . I grow old . . . I shall wear the bottoms of my trousers rolled. (120-1) thereby allowing himself the power to decide to 'roll his trousers'. But even this momentary glimpse of confidence is shattered when in the next line he asks: Shall I part my hair behind? Do I dare to eat a peach? (122) At this point he wonders if he does have the power to do such benign things as rolling his trousers, and eating peaches. In these 3 stanzas he has taken himself from a consideration of himself on the grandest scale, as Hamlet, to himself on the most pitiful scale. At the end he questions even his power to impact himself. His impotence grows ever more personal, and therefore ever more complete. By the end he has come to see the scale at which he is isolated from his surroundings, and resignedly laments: I have heard the mermaids singing, each to each. I do not think that they will sing to me. (124-5) He closes the poem with this slow realization of the sad truth of his situation: that he is not part of his surroundings. He is, to take the argument back to the beginning, a patient on the table, aware that life is going on around him, but unable to take part in that life. While Eliot's early poetry, such as "Prufrock", concludes with this somber tone of depression, Hopkins, in his early poetry, harps on the joy that the world around him brings. In the sonnet "Spring", Hopkins discusses a few marvels of the natural world. He mentions the thrush's eggs and a

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peartree, and in the end asks, "What is all this juice and all this joy?" (9). With the 'and' Hopkins paratactically places the juices or beauty of nature as parallel and simultaneous with his own joy. And Hopkins sees beauty everywhere; as he mentions in "God's Grandeur", "nature is never spent" (9). He is most interested in the dappled beauty of nature. In his discussion of the topic in his poem "Pied Beauty", he says, "Glory be to God for dappled things." In the beginning of this poem Hopkins lays down some specific images that reflect this quality: For skies of couple-colour as a brindled cow; For rose-moles all in stipple upon trout that swim; Fresh-firecoal chestnut-falls; finches wings; (2-4) These descriptions of the speckled trout and chestnut leaves provide examples of such dappled beauty. By using the word 'dappled' Hopkins draws attention to the irregularity of the coloration of each of these objects. The sprung rhythm that Hopkins uses in most of his early poems discussing nature, is a fitting poetic form for recreating the 'dappled' coloring of nature. Sprung rhythm brings the stress down irregularly. Each stress can be seen as a glint of light in the midst of the darker moments of slack around them. When the stresses are irregular the aural sensation becomes more like the irregularity of the coloring of nature. As Hopkins explains in the preface to these poems, "Two licenses are natural to Sprung Rhythm. The one is rests, as in music . . . The other is hangers or outrides, that is one, two or three slack syllables." Because of all these irregularities the reader must focus particular attention on the sonic details of the poem. Hopkins' placement of the sonic elements of his poem as equal to the textual elements is displayed in the first line of "As Kingfishers Catch Fire". There he says, "As kingfishers catch fire, dragonflies draw flame;" (1). The textual simile mirrors the brightness of the bird to the

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brightness of the insect. But in this line Hopkins also creates a sonic simile, as the two hard k sounds in the first clause are mirrored in the two hard d sounds in the second clause. The sonic metaphor can be seen as merely amplifying the textual metaphor, but it seems that the textual metaphor can just as easily be seen as amplifying the sonic metaphor. In this double metaphor Hopkins' places great weight on the auditory element of his poem. This is in accordance with his use of sprung rhythm, which he said " is the rhythm of all but the most monotonously regular music, so that in words of choruses and refrains and in songs written closely to music it arises." In this introduction Hopkins discusses only the auditory value of sprung rhythm, and does not once mention the value of sprung rhythm for more accurately capturing a textual detail. The particular concern that Hopkins displayed for the auditory part of his poems is reflected in the double metaphor. His line breaks show Hopkins' willingness to subordinate the textual details to the aural atmosphere created. From " The Windhover": I caught this morning morning's minion, king-dom of daylight's dauphin, dapple-dawn-drawn Falcon, in his ridingOf the rolling level underneath him steady air, and stridingHigh there, how he rung upon the rein of a wimpling wingIn his ecstasy! No line break until this fifth line provides a break. Hopkins carries phrases over the line breaks, in the second line even breaking up a single word over a line break. This elimination of the tradition point of rest gives the verse an added fluidity. The first line break is especially apparent in its singular concern for sound. By breaking up the word ' kingdom' Hopkins dulls the immediate textual impact of the word. But the vowel sound of ' king' amplifies the vowel sound of ' minion', and the placing of the syllable ' dom' in the second line contributes to the alliteration there. In his willingness to

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dull the textual impact in the interest of the sonic impact Hopkins shows his willingness to subordinate the textual meaning of the word to the fluidity and lyrical quality of the poem. Through meter, word choice, and line breaks Hopkins places more emphasis on the lyrical and auditory quality of the poem, and takes emphasis off of the textual meaning of words. As Eliot found 40 years later, the most effective way to capture divisiveness in nature is to present jagged points. When Eliot wanted to convey his isolation from the world he poetically phrased himself as a jagged element, at odds with the quickly moving world around him. The jaggedness of Eliot's early poetry reflects that all is not at peace in the world. This shifts the emphasis away from the specific and places it on the more holistic quality of sonic fluidity, and thereby avoids any saliency, or jaggedness. It should be noted that Hopkins found the same activity and animation of the world around him that Eliot did in his early poetry. While in "Prufrock" this motion of the world was the very cause of Eliot's isolation, Hopkins relies upon the constant movement for the fluidity of his prose. But these happy days did not remain for Hopkins. In his later life he moved into a period where he wrote the so called 'terrible-sonnets'. After the dappled colors of his early poems, in sonnet 67 he says he has seen "the fell of dark" (1). His acute vision, that brought the dappled beauty of the world is gone, and in its stead, in sonnet 69 he casts "for comfort I can no more get/ By groping round my comfortless, than blind/ Eyes in their dark can day or this can find" (5-7). Gone with this light is the aural fluidity of his early poems. In one of the most dark poems, "Carrion Comfort", instead of the sonorous alliteration of the earlier poetry, there are hard clashing words. The first words are, "Not, I'll not." The short vowel sound of 'not', and the hard consonants on either side <https://assignbuster.com/sterility-and-communion-in-ts-eliot-and-gerard-manley-hopkins/>

of the 'o', are at odds with the long vowel sound of 'I'll'. These first words set up the almost cacophonous aural experience that "Carrion Comfort" is. The poem goes on: Not, I'll not, carrion comfort, Despair, not feast on thee, Not untwist, - slack they may be these last strands of man (1-2) Each phrase seems an independent phrase at odds with those surrounding. The phrase 'carrion comfort' has little sonic similarity to the phrase 'not feast on thee'. The alliteration that littered the early poetry, and that took the emphasis off of specific words is gone. Instead Hopkins places extreme emphasis on specific words. The word 'Despair', which is so significant in describing this new state, is set off from the surrounding verse with commas. The word 'Despair' is also emphasized by its lack of auditory similarity with the words around it. Hopkins de-emphasizes words in his early poetry is especially apparent when considered next to this later poetry where specific words - not the sonic elements - are the core of the poem. To emphasize words in these later poems he often repeats especially telling words. In sonnet 67 the following lines show this technique: And my lament/Is cries countless, cries like dead letters sent/To dearest him that lives alas! away. The repetition of 'cries' gives a very specific sense of Hopkins' emotional state. In this excerpt Hopkins once again sets apart a significant word: 'away' is removed by placing punctuation marks on either side of it. This particular point of emphasis brings Hopkins feelings in line with what Eliot was feeling in his particularly despairing poems. Hopkins, as a Jesuit priest, had found communion with the world through God in his early poetry. In "Hurrahing in Harvest", he had said, "I walk, I lift up heart, eyes,/ Down all that glory in the heavens to glean our Saviour". Whereas he found a connection with God, and hence with the world in his early poetry, in sonnet 67, one of the ' <https://assignbuster.com/sterility-and-communion-in-ts-eliot-and-gerard-manley-hopkins/>

terrible sonnets' he emphasizes that God is 'away'. He moves even closer to Eliot when, in sonnet 66 he moans that "To seem the stranger lies my lot, my life/ Among strangers. Father and mother dear, Brothers and sisters are in Christ not mood" This sense of isolation brings him to the point where, in sonnet 74 he calls himself 'time's eunuch'. This direct use of the idea of sterility brings Hopkins into almost perfect alignment with the Eliot who was 'formulated', and 'sprawling on a pin'; so ineffectual that he cannot even decide whether he will eat a peach. But while Hopkins climbed onto the etherizing table in his later life, Eliot, in his own later life, climbed off the table to partake in the world. The Four Quartets represent the apex of his new hopeful view that is in accordance with Hopkins' early poetry. Eliot's seascape in "The Dry Salvage", one of The Four Quartets, demonstrates his new, more fluid and integrated view of the world: the sea is all about us; The sea is the land's edge also This new image of the land merging with the shore should be contrasted to that coast presented in "Sweeney Erect," one of his earlier poems. There he said, Paint me a cavernous waste shore Cast in the unstilled Cyclades, Paint me the bold anfractuons rocks Faced by the snarled and yelping seas. In this earlier vision the sea and the land are wildly separated and violently at odds with each other. This is a sharp contrast to the border that exists in the "The Dry Salvage"; a border which has really ceased to be a border at all. In his earlier poems he saw insurmountable borders between everything) particularly between himself and the rest of the world. The revised view of a border that Eliot displays in "The Dry Salvages" is reflective of his changing perception of his isolation from the world. In the later poems Eliot does away with the jagged line breaks and constantly fluctuating meter that bespoke of Eliot's division from the world in "

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Prufrock". In the beginning of ' Marina', a poem that led to the hopefulness of The Four Quartets, Eliot returns to the ' anfractuous' meter seen in " Prufrock": Those who sharpen the tooth of the dog, meaning Death Those who glitter with the glory of the hummingbird, meaning Death Those who sit in the sty of contentment, meaning Death Those who suffer the ecstasy of the animals, meaning Death Are becoming unsubstantial, reduced by a wind, A breath of pine, and the woodsong fog By this grace dissolved in place In the beginning of this stanza the arresting line breaks and repetition of words recalls the topics of sterility, and isolation of his earlier poems. In ' Marina' he uses this anfractuous form to discuss death, an idea akin to those gloomy ideas discussed in his early poetry. But Eliot quickly moves on, and, in much more regular meter, says that all that was in this stanza of anfractuous images and meter - the essence of his early poetry - is ' becoming unsubstantial'. Fresh images of life - ' the breath of pine' and the ' grace' of this natural scene - renders the anfractuous meter and gloomy images unsubstantial. He rarely uses jagged meter in The Four Quartets, but when he does, whereas in " The Love Song of J . Alfred Prufrock" it was used to display his isolation from the world, in ' The Dry Salvage' he uses it to reinforce the communion of the world: The more delicate algae and the sea anemone. It tosses up our losses, the torn seine, The shattered lobsterpot, the broken oar And the gear of foreign dead men. The sea has many voices, Many gods and many voices. The salt is on the briar rose, The fog is in the fir trees. The sea howl And the sea yelp In " Prufrock" Eliot used such quick changes in meter to place elements at odd with each other. His own slow question " Do I dare/ Disturb the universe?" was in contrast to the racing lines that came before because he was at odds with the people described <https://assignbuster.com/sterility-and-communion-in-ts-eliot-and-gerard-manley-hopkins/>

before. In this excerpt from the “ Dry Salvages”, however, the metrical change is used to emphasize how the salt and the fog and the howl are all really one; are part of the ‘ many voices’. The term ‘ many voices’ harks back to the ‘ lobsterpot’ and the ‘ broken oar’, and calls forward to the salt and the fog, thereby placing all of these elements in a unified category. By placing the salt and the fog metrically apart Eliot allows the reader to connect these elements to the elements that came before. It is vital to also notice his revised use of fog in the two passages mentioned so far. In the first passage Eliot speaks of the ‘ woodsong fog,’ while in the second passage he remarks that the ‘ fog is in the fir trees’. In both of these two poems the fog is mentioned in passing, as a static element of the landscape, not an active part itself. The fog ‘ is’ here, whereas in “ Prufrock” the fog “ rubs its back upon the windowpanes,” and “ licked its tongue into the corners of the evening.” Both Eliot’s revised use of the word ‘ fog’ and his revised use of jagged meter are indicative of the calm and peace that has settled over Eliot’s later poetry. This shift to calm brings him to comment on the communion of the world numerous times in The Four Quartets. In the closing moments of the dry salvages he celebrates a world where music is “ heard so deeply/ That it is not heard at all, but you are the music/ While the music lasts.” This startlingly beautiful image could just as easily be describing Hopkins early poetry where the world is taken into the mind, and there transfigured into music, as Hopkins had mentioned in his preface. This complete union is elaborated upon when Eliot remarks that, “ Here the impossible union/ Of spheres of existence is actual.”