

HOLLOW MEN AND FALSE HORSES

By SYDNEY J. KRAUSE

AMONG POEMS that seem temporarily to have been dead-ended by the familiarity which comes from an abundance of explication, T. S. Eliot's "The Hollow Men" is a prime specimen.¹ This fact makes the poem an appropriate focus for testing how well Eliot's poetry bears out his criticism in an area of apparent divergence. Eliot has taken the position that poets do not intend to imprison in their poetry a "meaning" which explanation will liberate.² Yet a poem like "The Hollow Men" is a veritable mosaic of allusions, many of them demanding intricate study. Eliot grudgingly allows the aid of explanation as a "preliminary to understanding," but feels that poems he has once grasped intuitively are least likely to lose their appeal on re-reading (*On Poetry and Poets*, p. 129)—and, ironically, such poems least resemble his own. Much of Eliot's critical theory is built on the axiom that a poem retains its vitality in proportion as it can resist explanation and withhold a conspicuous chunk of unanalyzable content, which lies at the very core of its being.³ And yet allusions would appear to disrupt that privacy.

A thesis about "The Hollow Men" which I wish to illustrate in this essay is that Eliot's poetry hazards a minimum of shrinkage through repeated investigation because a major triumph of his poetic method inheres in an allusiveness that permits his poems to both absorb and resist close attention with greater immunity than poetry less "obscured" by allusion.

Eliot took to heart his injunction that ideally a poet should choose his words as if his use of them involved a consciousness of the entire history of their uses. To read his poems with a full awareness of Eliot's "traditional" mind brings to light many indirect allusions that provide

¹ Introducing Eliot to an audience before whom he was to read his poetry, Lionel Trilling wished the listeners might have had removed, somehow, their intense awareness of Eliot's achievement and all that has been said about it. He recognized the amount of explication done on Eliot's poems and noted that, in their history, "as Mr. Eliot himself has become increasingly aware, the explicatory impulse began to stand in the way of his poems." ("T. S. Eliot Talks About His Poetry," *Columbia University Forum*, II [Fall, 1958], 11 f.)

² *The Use of Poetry and The Use of Criticism* (Cambridge, Mass., 1933), p. 145. At one point Eliot went so far as to assert that if you try to *explain* a poem, "you will probably be getting further and further away" from it. (*On Poetry and Poets* [New York, 1957], p. 108.)

³ ". . . there is, in all great poetry, something which must remain unaccountable, however complete might be our knowledge of the poet, and that . . . is what matters most." (*Ibid.*, p. 124.)

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one of the best means of restoring the glow to dormant coals. This I should like to demonstrate by tracing several facets of the allusion in the phrase "the hollow men," as it reminds us of a passage in *Julius Caesar*.⁴

At the beginning of Act IV of Shakespeare's play (Scene ii) we get our first glimpse of Brutus in exile, following the conspirators' flight from Rome. Reciprocal distrust has been progressively gnawing at Brutus' alliance with Cassius. Now, when his friend Lucilius tells him of a restrained and formal reception he has had from Cassius, Brutus sees evidence of a "hot friend cooling," which provokes his comment that,

When love begins to sicken and decay,
It useth an enforced ceremony.
There are no tricks in plain and simple faith;
But hollow men, like horses hot at hand,
Make gallant show and promise of their mettle;
But when they should endure the bloody spur,
They fall their crests, and, like deceitful jades,
Sink in the trail.

(*Caesar*, IV, ii, 20–27)

It is immediately apparent that one meaning Shakespeare proposed for "hollow men" duplicates the emphasis Eliot has in mind: to wit, hollow men are found empty of sincerity precisely in the measure that they use ceremony to feign it. In the trope of the battle-shy horses there are other elaborations of the condition of Eliot's hollow men. As natural cowards, both horses and men intimate in safety their desire for a kind of action they lack the courage to start when the real occasion would demand it of them. Both are in their separate ways caught by implausible zeal for activity they must know to be quite impossible for themselves. What the lines from *Caesar* mainly do for Eliot's poem is to amplify a neglected aspect of its theme by underscoring the pretentiousness of seemingly worthy intentions that are dissipated when the call for action reveals them to be impotent and fraudulent—as when the hollow men cannot go through with their interrupted prayer, for example. The false horses admirably reflect the yes-and-no dilemmas with which the overly rationalized modern mind has immobilized itself; and this analogue stirs many interesting overtones in Eliot's poem. At the least, it

⁴ One would use them discreetly, but useful here are Eliot's caveats against "assuming that there must be just one interpretation of the poem as a whole, that must be right," and against "assuming that the interpretation of a poem, if valid, is necessarily an account of what the author consciously or unconsciously was trying to do." (*Ibid.*, p. 126.)

raises possibilities of historical projection that prevent the poem from becoming a static—and possibly smug—commentary on the modern world.

But before pursuing parallels, it would be well to consider whether the lines from *Caesar* ought to be regarded as a *source* for “The Hollow Men.” Eliot has failed to convince several readers that, as he reported in a letter to the London *Times*, his title for “The Hollow Men” was derived from a combination of William Morris’ “The Hollow Land” with Rudyard Kipling’s “The Broken Men.”⁵ According to Grover Smith, who did a very exhaustive job on Eliot’s sources, this “sounds so ingenious and improbable that the explanation might be a joke.”⁶ George Williamson thinks it is “easier to believe” that the title came from the passage in *Caesar*. After quoting it, he says, “If these are not Eliot’s ‘hollow men,’ they are close enough to raise questions in the mind.”⁷

It seems quite clear that *Caesar* was rather fresh in Eliot’s mind in 1924, when he was actively writing parts of “The Hollow Men,” for in his introduction to Paul Valéry’s *Le Serpent* of that year Eliot took notice of Brutus’s Second Act soliloquy, which begins,

Between the acting of a dreadful thing
And the first motion, all the interim is
Like a phantasma, or a hideous dream.
(*Caesar*, II, i, 63–65)

The passage was brought to mind by a line in Valéry’s “Le Cimetière Marin”—“Entre le vide et l’événement pur,”⁸ which evidently became a source for part of Section V in “The Hollow Men” (Smith, p. 102.):

Between the idea
And the reality
Between the motion
And the act
Falls the Shadow.

Since while he was writing “The Hollow Men” Eliot was reminded of his own thoughts in other works he knew—in passages from Dante, Conrad, and Valéry—and since he was also reminded of Brutus’ Second Act soliloquy, there is more than an outside chance that Eliot

⁵ Dowson’s Poems,” *Times Literary Supplement* (Jan. 10, 1935), p. 21.

⁶ *T. S. Eliot’s Poetry and Plays* (Chicago, 1956), p. 101.

⁷ *A Reader’s Guide to T. S. Eliot* (New York, 1953), pp. 154 f.

⁸ *Le Serpent*, tr. Mark Wardle (London, 1924), p. 10. Brutus’s soliloquy has been adduced as a direct source for Part V of “The Hollow Men.” (Paul Fussel, “A Note on ‘The Hollow Men,’” *Modern Language Notes*, LXV [April, 1950], pp. 254 f.)

also wanted his title to involve another passage from *Caesar* that contained ideas appropriate to those of his poem. Surely Eliot could not have been unaware that his title appeared in the lines from *Caesar*. Whether he wanted to tie that reference to his poem is hardly relevant, for even if he were unaware of the analogue it would remain a public consideration. Be that as it may, it is plainly absurd to adduce the lines from *Caesar* as any kind of a source for "The Hollow Men"; but even if they were a source that fact could contribute nothing to what I wish to say about the relationship between them and the poem.

Considered alongside Brutus' condemnation of hollow men, Eliot's criticism of them assumes a sharper edge. Both the false horses and the hollow men want vainly to seem better than they are; it is a psychological need. For Eliot's hollow men this appears in various ways. It would seem that they might *like* to be remembered as "lost violent souls," even in denying they will be so remembered. The condition of "lost violent souls"—like that of Conrad's Kurtz and Guy Fawkes—is a sort of ideal; otherwise, why should the hollow men make the comparison at all? On the same reasoning, they might like to think their world will end with a bang—perhaps in a clash of arms, which would be flattering. They have to keep repeating *This is the way the world ends* as if saddened to have to accept its ending with a whimper, an abortive prayer, which they will only keep trying to finish, and as in *Caesar*, "Sink in the trial." Admittedly, this line of analysis argues the matter rather closely, but it sets up and integrates with situations where the psychology is a little less concealed.

The hollow men are at once empty and stuffed—empty of the right substance and filled with the wrong one. Actually, they are not men at all, but merely straw effigies, which are made to be burned in mockery. But how does one regard effigies that do not deserve burning? Our narrator, who emerges in the first line of the second section, speaks first of eyes he dares not meet, even indirectly in dreams in an existence that is unreal in the first place; but he is quite removed from any chance of meeting those eyes, and he *has* no eyes with which to meet others. The man he represents is absent and yet the straw man does as well. It is in keeping with this basic falsity that throughout the poem velleities should take the place of resolution.

The poem is fairly riddled with such ironies which, hanging just below the surface, are easily nudged into realization if one has in mind the stress Brutus places on pretentiousness and self-deceit. We notice that in singing their own lamentation piece the hollow men have an exaggerated self-esteem. Furthermore, the lament makes us wonder what could lead them to expect that they should have anything better. It is

in their state of proven depravity, as they wait on the shore of the “tumid river,” that the hollow men utter their baseless hope for the reappearance of the eyes,

As the perpetual star
Multifoliate rose
Of death’s twilight kingdom.

This, after they had earlier shunned the “eyes.” How can they now presume the “eyes” may bring back their sight and hence their faith? Theirs is the *only* position from which a hope cannot legitimately arise. Eliot deliberately has the hollow men contradict themselves, as they seek an intercessory protection from the possibility of “that final meeting / In the twilight kingdom,” which as a means towards redemption they would also desire! If they hope they may gain Hell upon death, they are gravely muddled, for everything points to their remaining in a permanent limbo, a mere prolongation of their death-in-life on slightly altered terms.

The poem seems to end on a note of temporary candor. The hollow men, at their wits’ end, whirl aimlessly around the cactus; forward or backward movement has been given up. Before desire can begin to form the event that realizes its goal, the shadow of paralysis intervenes. The last coupling of impulses with impending actions—“Between the essence / And the descent”—is significantly different from the others. It means that the irrevocable shadow also falls between real life and the real death that must precede it. In this final departure from what seems an unexpected bit of candor the hollow men revert to form. Can they think, at the point they have reached, that real death is a choice still open to them?

The hollow men suffer because of their spiritual numbness, but, like children, what they seek for relief is just what they can never have. When they would have to live up to the responsibilities of faith, they shrink—“Let me be no nearer”—as Shakespeare’s horses do when the spurs urge them to make good on their “gallant show.”

They ask that, “Those who have crossed / With direct eyes, to death’s other Kingdom” remember them, only to add—“if at all.” When they seek the “eyes” another time, in the process of predicating their desire, the desire discovers for them that theirs is “The hope only / Of empty men.”⁹ Although they realize their hopes are empty, this does not, as it

⁹ The view that the hollow men suffer from their pretentiousness does not introduce a novel interpretation of the poem. Elizabeth Drew has remarked the implicit pretentiousness of the hope expressed in these lines: “. . . it is only empty men who put their hopes so high, omitting any action towards climbing

should, prevent them from uttering them all the same. They *do* know what they are doing. Do they believe the gesture will get them credit for the hope?

The apparently earnest, but forced, effort at prayer suggested in the opening and closing lines of the poem is again reminiscent of the pretense of false horses, in the sense that the hollow men not only cannot go through with the ritual, but they have to settle for the abandoned effort as proof enough of a determination to go through with it. Another instance of "enforced ceremony" occurs with the nursery rhyme. It does more than symbolize frustration; it is an apt introduction to the prayer because helpless travesty is the correct idiom for hollow men. As Brutus put it, "There are no tricks in plain and simple faith." Ceremonies become doubly complicated in proportion as men lose the feeling of what it means to believe with a simple faith.

The defection of the hollow men becomes clearer if we consider for a moment what the terms are on which ideally that redemption which they alternatively crave and reject can be sought. In the poem, "Eyes That Last I Saw In Tears," published with parts of "The Hollow Men" and obviously to be taken in conjunction with it, Eliot has "eyes of decision" approaching from death's other Kingdom (real death), which shall not be seen again unless they,

A little while outlast the tears,
And hold us in derision.

Exposure to ridicule, though harsh, may do more than lamentation to help hollow men; it may cure them of their pretenses.

The recognition of sin as Sin, the acceptance of damnation and the notion that one must descend to ascend, the recognition of real death and judgment as requisites of rebirth, while in the world one strives to be patient and achieve stillness to material desires—these ideals appearing in so much of Eliot's work suggest certain avenues towards Grace and Salvation.

Tiresias, blind like the hollow men and similarly enervated, gets various intimations of the opportunities for real life arising from death. However, the sublime horror at the brief moment of actual death—brilliantly captured by Conrad at the death of Kurtz—is not easily met. Certainly, hollow men are utterly incapable of the awesome descent.

The narrator of "Ash Wednesday" is somewhat advanced from the state of the hollow men. He has his fight with "the devil of the stairs

the mount of purgatory which must precede it." (*T. S. Eliot: The Design of His Poetry* [New York, 1949], p. 97.)

who wears / The deceitful face of hope and of despair.” His ordeal is to learn to maintain his quest for salvation even though his belief in its availability may falter. This ideal, derived from St. John of the Cross, is made clearer in “The Four Quartets”:

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 light, and the stillness
the dancing.

(“East Coker,” III, 23–28)

Man learns to face judgment and prepares to make himself worthy of Grace when he realizes,

The only hope, or else despair
Lies in the choice of pyre or pyre—
To be redeemed from fire by fire.
.
We only live, only suspire
Consumed by either fire or fire.
What we call the beginning is often the end
And to make an end is to make a beginning.
The end is where we start from.

(“Little Gidding,” IV, 5–7, 13 f.; V, 1–3)

From this it can be seen by how much the empty-hearted aspiration of the hollow men exceeds any real inclination towards its fulfillment. They have reached a desperation point that Eliot described so well in relation to a type of sadness he noted in romantic poetry, which is due he claimed not alone to “the exploitation of the fact that no human relations are adequate to human desires, but also to the disbelief in any further object for human desires than that which, being human, fails to satisfy them.”¹⁰

I think it can be safely said that the hollow men are the least pitiable characters in all of Eliot’s poetry. Prufrock, Gerontion, and Edward Chamberlayne may share their weaknesses, their bewilderments, and all that goes with the desiccation of soul, but at least those men have some genuine humility, and they have the virtue of being fundamentally more

¹⁰ “Baudelaire,” *Selected Essays* (London, 1932), p. 390.

honest with themselves. Gerontion, for example, conscious of his worthlessness, cries,

I have lost my passion: why should I need to keep it
Since what is kept must be adulterated?

Noting that the “figurative straw dummies of the poem suffer both physically and spiritually,” Grover Smith finds nothing in the poem to indicate why they deserve punishment: “How they themselves have erred, the poem does not demonstrate.” (P. 105) My analysis, directly opposing this view,¹¹ deals almost entirely with the demonstration of the hollow men’s errors. Eliot’s form further clarifies this matter. The poem is a dramatic monologue framed by a choral chant with which the grouped effigies whispering together introduce and close the poem. Thus, by what they think and do, as well as by what they fail to do, the hollow men adequately reveal how they err. We have seen something of their pretenses, of their continuing to hope after they have already given themselves up to hopelessness. In elucidation of another dilemma Eliot has said (about the suffering of Francesca da Rimini), “it is a part of damnation to experience desires that can no longer be gratified.”¹² The evidence of cowardice of the kind displayed by Shakespeare’s false horses is also strongly against the hollow men. The cowardly horses will not recognize their own cowardice (we can assume they have quailed more than once), and perhaps that is the greatest cowardice. Assuredly, an understanding of one’s inner motives and a recognition of their sinful falsity is a minimum requisite for spiritual repossession. Since the hollow men cannot shed their duplicity, their corruptness is greatly compounded. They are sorry only for themselves, a fact which hardly suggests persons ready for atonement. Perhaps this is a severe judgment; nevertheless, it is deserved, for the hollow men are at least partially self-damned.

If, put in this way, Eliot’s analysis of the modern temper becomes a narrow denigration, this is only because, by dwelling on an isolated part of the poem, one inevitably magnifies it. At least one countervailing

¹¹ Quite obviously, my analysis would also clash with the view recently advanced that “the words ‘the hope only / Of empty men’ ought to be taken in a sense that makes emptiness a condition of hope.” (Friedrich W. Strothmann and Lawrence V. Ryan, “Hope For T. S. Eliot’s ‘Empty Men,’” *PMLA*, LXXIII, Sept., 1958, 426–432.) Though Strothmann and Ryan’s point is very capably argued, it does not seem plausible that the last section of the poem can be taken as the utterance of men emptied of all desire and humbly ready to quiet their wills. (It is more than a quibble to differentiate empty for *emptied* men.) And the entire temperament of the hollow men seems to me wholly too remote from that of St. John of the Cross, whose abnegation and strength of spirit are comparable to nothing one can find among Eliot’s hollow men.

¹² “Dante,” *The Sacred Wood* (London, 1934), p. 166.

factor must be mentioned to avoid a possible reduction of the poem to a two-dimensional platitude. Granting that the hollow men fail to inspire any warm feelings, one nevertheless finds various qualifying influences in the poem which somewhat blunt the condemnation and make our reaction to them more mixed, and basically tensional.

Since the hollow men have been born into "the dead land," which faith has departed, their fate is as much imposed by an inheritance, as it is self-imposed. For them as for everyone the truth applies that,

All our knowledge brings us nearer to our ignorance,
All our ignorance brings us nearer to death,
But nearness to death no nearer to God.

.
The cycles of Heaven in twenty centuries
Bring us farther from God and nearer to the Dust.
(*The Rock*, I, 11–13, 16 f.)

After all, the hollow men reflect a society, a segment of history. Theirs is the common malaise of modern men, insofar as they are a prey to the times, and their problem is not entirely recent. It dates back at least as far as the Renaissance; nor were the ages favored with an all-encompassing religious faith lacking in hollow men. Certainly, Dante had a place for them.

In this life only the Saints can prevail absolutely against the prevailing state of hollowness. In despising the hollow men—if that is what the poem involves—we have to hate a part of ourselves and the inescapable ambiguousness of worldly existence to which no man is immune. It is reasonable to suppose that in writing "The Hollow Men" Eliot himself felt this matter personally. He wanted to awaken a perception of the unresolvable tensions in which all spiritual and physical activity are gripped, mostly in their contention with each other.

One explanation of the tantalizing despair of the hollow men is that they apprehend, if ever so remotely, the gleam of a symbol of redemption, only to see it fade forever, and they both want it and want it gone. If this is not a heartbreaking experience, even for the hollow men, it must be something very close to it. The narrator fears meeting the "eyes" in his dreams, where he catches a glimpse of the richness of faith in images of light, warmth, fertility, and of the freedom of spirit which is won through control. From all of this he must withdraw, wishing all the same that things were otherwise. There are moments when he wakes alone "trembling with tenderness," only to be deceived. His spirit has long since been sapped by those diffuse, nugatory urges, which are so easily melted. The hollow men are too taken up with themselves to have

much self-knowledge. For this, they are both better off and worse off, and either state ironically implies the other. Even their pretentiousness is understandable. They know their desires cannot be consummated, and yet something very natural to fallible human nature will not allow them to relinquish their yearnings.

Appropriate here is William K. Wimsatt's summary of the concept of "poetic tension." He says that "the poet does not write even a moderately good poem about sheer control or about sheer indifference"; rather, he "seems always likely to be engaged either in some division or mixture of sympathy or in expressing some kind of doubt or hesitation or inquiry about the actual prevalence of some value in a given part of the natural world." This is simply to ask that one regard "the human condition" as "intrinsically a material and mixed condition, where faith and love of God and fellow-man can scarcely occur except in a milieu and medium that is full of the possibility of their opposites."¹³

In various ways "The Hollow Men" impresses readers with the idea that the condition affecting the hollow men will always be inimical to their own peace.

To summarize—the hollow men are conscious of their deprived existence—they are conscious of little else—and they are pained by its barrenness. Naturally, they want to resuscitate themselves, but they are powerless to mount the effort for it. There is simply no way for them honestly to regain their faith. So they must live on amidst their bewildering contradictions. They would do well to accept the scarecrow's role for which alone they are suited, which they both need and do not want. But they cannot easily accept such a role—no one could. What can they do without doing wrong? As the hollow men act out the drama of their frustrations, they engage in some pathetic pretenses, which display an important consequence of their hollowness.

This set of ideas is latent in the central implications of the poem, but we become more acutely aware of its presence when we see how Eliot's poem echoes Brutus' sentiments as to what happens, "When love begins to sicken and decay." In recognizing pretentious cowardice as the basic symptom of the ensuing disease, we get an important feature of Eliot's evaluation of modernity in "The Hollow Men."

¹³ "Poetic Tension: A Summary," *The New Scholasticism*, XXXII (Jan., 1958), pp. 85, 87.

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