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The “wholeness” of T.S. Eliot: A Review of *T. S. Eliot’s Dialectical Imagination*

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Jewel Spears Brooker. *T.S. Eliot’s Dialectical Imagination*. Johns Hopkins UP, 2018. 215 pp. \$43.94 hardcover.

Thanks to advances in biographical scholarship, Jewel Spears Brooker’s T.S. Eliot’s Dialectical Imagination employs Eliot’s dialectics as an analytical tool to re-assess Eliot’s oeuvre from a holistic perspective, thereby providing a fresh approach to interpreting Eliot’s philosophical inclination for “wholeness.” This book innovatively tackles topics that have not been discussed fully, such as Eliot’s attitudes toward science and scientific methods, his epistemology, and his ventures into mysticism. It represents cutting-edge research on key issues emerging from the now thriving Eliot studies.

Keywords: T.S. Eliot / wholeness / dialecticism / poetics

Since Harold Bloom excluded T.S. Eliot from “The Western Canon,” the first decade of the new millennium has witnessed a decline in Eliot studies given his previous “literary dictatorship” (Schwartz 119–137). With the publication of Eliot’s complete prose, the annotation of his complete poems, and the ongoing publication of his letters, Eliot studies have moved once again to the forefront of literary studies. Jewel Spears Brooker’s *T.S. Eliot’s Dialectical Imagination* is a significant monograph among recent pioneer studies, providing a fresh view of issues surrounding a holistic and systematic account of Eliot.

In the conclusion of *Knowledge and Experience*, Eliot writes: “the only real truth is the whole truth” (*Prose* 1.163). To further clarify the meaning of “wholeness,” he

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explains it as "an attempt to bind together all points of view in one" (*Prose* 1.163). Early in 1914, when Eliot was a philosophy student at Harvard, he had begun to reflect on the significance of "wholeness" when building up a general system of thought. He highlights the necessity of synthesizing in the process of making a judgement, arguing that theories are only justifiable in the terms of the systems they are built upon. One reason for the failure of philosophical insights is not that they venture too far, but that they venture alone (*Prose* 1.187–189). From this time forward, "wholeness" became not only a fundamental part of the intellectual framework of Eliot's most popular concepts, such as "tradition," "impersonality," and "dissociation of sensibility," but also a device for criticizing the works of other writers. In his review of F.H. Bradley's *Principles of Logic* for example, Eliot urges that Bradley's works be viewed in a synthesized way and assumes them to be unified without "mere fixity" (*Prose* 3.311). Certain questions arise: if Eliot is himself an advocate of "wholeness," is it possible to infer that this method is relevant to his own works? Is there a specific system underpinning his fragmented, seemingly chaotic and polyphonic poetic texts?

Despite extensive discussions on this issue, no concrete conclusion has been reached. Academic arguments are divided owing to Eliot's obvious ambivalence and inconsistency both in his works and life. On the one hand, Eliot truly has a philosophical inclination to combine different perspectives into one unified whole. Proponents argue that Eliot's "wholeness" is coherent with his philosophical pursuits and is an important clue to interpret his oeuvre, which should be viewed as a whole. Eliot's concern with wholeness, they stress, stems from nineteenth-century traditions both in philosophy and poetry. Longenbach, for instance, states that Eliot is an inheritor of the Coleridgean Romantic ideal that embodies "the whole truth" (131–132). Similarly, Maddrey clarifies humanistic influence, especially from Irving Babbitt, which leads to Eliot's shared and universal idea (20–21). More critics maintain that Eliot's wholeness is a critical reflection on the Hegelian and post-Hegelian Idealistic Absolute, especially Bradley's concept of the ultimate synthesis of all diversity (Longenbach 134; Brooker, "Structure" 314). In summary, critics who incline to view Eliot's work and thought as a whole support the following positions: (1) Eliot's poetic wholeness as characterized in *The Waste Land*, *Four Quartets*, and other works (Longenbach 137, Patterson 169); (2) Eliot's long-lasting philosophical pursuits of wholeness influenced by nineteenth-century tradition (Maddrey 20–22, Assmann 19); and (3) certain common ground for consistently evaluating Eliot's development, such as his continuing religious thought (Cunningham 211).

On the other hand, the idea of Eliot's wholeness must contend with a critical consensus about Eliot's self-division, which represents two aspects: first, the gap between Eliot's critical claims and poetic realizations; second, his discontinuity in self-identities and changing beliefs, especially his mid-life religious conversion (Brooker, "Dialectic and Impersonality" 129–130). The imbalance between his criticism and literary creation has long been a key point attacked by other critics. René Wellek notes some inner contradictions in Eliot's criticism and

his works, including his unstable views on the relation of poetry and prose, his double standard for “history” and “time” and so on. Wellek also asserts that those contradictions would “weaken the impact of his achievement as a literary critic” (408–443). The issue of Eliot’s recantations had been recognized even earlier, by contemporaries such as Virginia Woolf, Ezra Pound and I. A. Richards, who all comment on his “reversals and recantations” (Richards 28). Among all his reversals, Eliot’s paper on Milton in 1948 is widely acclaimed as a classic example for his recurring recantation. William York Tindall highlights Eliot’s changing views on Milton and subsequently takes *Four Quartets* as an example to illustrate his ideological instability which also affects his literary creation (436–437). F.R. Leavis also views this issue in his “Mr. Eliot and Milton” (1–31). Eliot’s other recantations have also been discussed, including his changing philosophical pursuits (such as his view on Bergson), his inconsistent judgements of other writers, his religious conversion, and so on.

Brooker has long been an advocate for viewing Eliot’s literary development as a whole. In a previous essay, she claims that Eliot’s belief in systematic wholes is represented both in his criticism and poetry, which is significant for understanding Eliot’s poetic creation (“Structure” 319). Having benefitted from recent biographical advances in Eliot studies, Brooker in her new book successfully puts forward a fresh hypothesis to solve the puzzle of Eliot’s “wholeness.” Rather than avoiding the “principal difficulty” of stumbling on the works of other scholars as mentioned before, Brooker points out that Eliot’s very self-division offers a key with which one can address the mystery of his wholeness (2). This self-division, so often dramatized in Eliot’s poetry, can be traced to a spiritual struggle with dualism. Her examples include the dissociation between intellect and feeling in “First Debate between the Body and Soul” (1910) and “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” (1911), the distinction between facts and interpretations in “Sweeney among the Nightingales” (1919) and *The Waste Land* (1922), and the disjunction between reality and idea in “The Hollow Men” (1925). Based on Eliot’s reflection on the dualism of Kant, Bergson, Bradley, and other idealistic philosophers, Brooker sees Eliot’s self-division as deeply rooted in the philosophical dilemma of how to overcome the dualism of object and subject. Brooker believes that Eliot absorbs the principles of dialecticism and relativism as a way to overcome the dualism (3). Eliot’s final goal in his quest for wholeness is “the unification of sensibility and intelligence,” which is the basis of his dialectical imagination (115). Brooker employs Eliot’s philosophical principles of dialectic as an analytical track to trace an overarching pattern in Eliot’s life, which yields a genetic paradigm that she uses to evaluate Eliot’s wholeness. Interestingly, it is Brooker’s focus on Eliot’s self-division that allows her to view Eliot’s wholeness from an opposite point of view; she then discovers hidden threads underlying the apparently fragmented surfaces of Eliot’s poetic imagination.

In her analysis of Eliot’s self-division, Brooker considers Eliot’s works in different life stages as an organic whole. She divides his literary career into three phases, each of which connects dialectically with gradual developments in his

intellectual and spiritual life. Chapters 1, 2, and 3 focus on the first phase, covering Eliot's early poetry between 1909 and 1911. During this period, binary thinking prevails in Eliot's poems. The second phase, dating from the end of WWI to the mid-1920s, is discussed in Chapters 4 to 7. Brooker points out that during this period, Eliot's philosophical inclination gradually changes from unitary dialectic to a coexistence of idealism and relativism; consequently, his poetry and criticism tends toward "depersonalization" (3). The remaining four chapters cover the third phase, from the late 1920s to the early 1940s. Brooker remarks that this period is one of "transcendence"; Eliot finally adopts a triadic thinking that reformulates the former binary and relativistic thinking. It offers a theological solution for Eliot's conundrum of dualisms (3). Brooker's argument develops systematically on two tracks: one discusses Eliot's underlying impulse for dialectic, which is analytical; the second presents a retrospective of Eliot's oeuvre, which is chronological. By chronologically illuminating Eliot's philosophical quest, Brooker establishes a credible hypothesis that accounts for Eliot's wholeness.

This perspective of wholeness provides a fresh standpoint for re-evaluating Eliot's spiritual development. Brooker sketches the contours of Eliot's philosophical and spiritual development and provides credible explanations for long-lasting critical questions. For instance, she offers a convincing interpretation for controversial turning points in Eliot's spiritual life: his frustration with philosophy and subsequent devotion to literature in the end of 1910s and his conversion to Christianity in 1927. Eliot's conversion has led to enduring academic disputes since the first generation of Eliot's reviewers including Conrad Aiken, Paul Elmer More, and W.H. Auden (2). From the perspective of wholeness, Brooker sees Eliot's spiritual development as an organic whole and insists on the continuity of his intellectual life. In Chapter 3, Brooker analyzes Eliot's failure to find a theoretical solution from modern philosophy to overcome dualism, which led him to turn away from philosophy and choose literature. Brooker does not regard this "watershed moment" as a sudden change in Eliot's life, but attributes it to Eliot's frustration with modern philosophy (56–57). Brooker regards Eliot's religious conversion not as a dramatic spiritual transformation but as the natural outcome of a philosophical and spiritual quest. His religious preoccupation is seen as "an underground stream" that continuously influences Eliot's literary creation (118–119).

This perspective not only enables Brooker to reassess Eliot's philosophical tendencies throughout his life; it forms the foundation of her innovative interpretation of Eliot's literary criticism. Brooker also sees Eliot's literary criticism as a continuous process, exploring how his philosophical inclinations influenced his production of literary criticism. In Chapter 5, "Individual Works and Organic Wholes," she maintains that Eliot's signature literary theories, like "Tradition and the Individual Talent," can be traced back to an initial inclination towards idealism. She summarizes four basic idealistic principles that Eliot encountered in his graduate work, and highlights the significant role of these idealistic principles in framing the foundations of Eliot's literary doctrines, such as "tradition," "historical sense," and "impersonality" (76–89). She also meditates on Eliot's analyses of

seventeenth-century poetry. Eliot's criticism of Donne and Andrewes, which led directly to the "dissociation of sensibility" idea, is an extension of a long-standing philosophical quest to conquer the dualism of subject and object (114–115).

Brooker's focus on Eliot's wholeness also helps her to successfully connect Eliot's poetic works into a dynamic and interactive system, in which different pieces interpret and annotate each other. She argues that most of Eliot's early poetry presents a tendency toward intertextuality, sharing the recurring theme of self-division and parallel literary techniques of *dédoublement*, from the 1910s with "First Debate between the Body and Soul" to "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" and "Rhapsody on a Windy Night," all of which contribute to a multiplex network of meaning (22–27, 34–39). Similar intertextual analysis also appears in Brooker's discussion of "Sweeney among the Nightingales," "Ash-Wednesday," and other poems (71–73).

What distinguishes Brooker's research is her holistic concern about Eliot's philosophical thought. She is not only interested in the individual philosophical ideas but also pays attention to how those philosophical ideas develop with his conversion. Tracing the specific philosophical sources that influenced Eliot, she sheds light on how they shaped his creative mind. When discussing Eliot's early poetry between 1909 and 1911, Brooker highlights the binary thinking hidden behind his spiritual struggle with dualism. Eliot rejects Bergson's "in-between image" and Bradley's "Absolute" as solutions for overcoming dualism, while he accepts the general principle of Bradley's dialectic epistemology (41–55). Eliot's poems are adduced as further proof of his "binary thinking." The true "debate" in "The Debate between Body and Soul" is the conflict between idealism/soul and materialism/body (21). The main problem for Prufrock in "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" is his self, divided between object and subject (24). When Brooker analyzes Eliot's writings from the late 1920s to the early 1940s, she emphasizes that Eliot's mindset during this period is triadic thinking, which reformulates a former binary and relativistic thinking to conquer dualism (3).

This book poses significant questions that have not been fully discussed in previous Eliot studies. For instance, Brooker's discussions of Eliot's preference for dialectics highlights his attitude about science and the scientific method. Eliot scholars generally accept that the breakthroughs of the natural and social sciences at the beginning of the twentieth century had a direct impact on Eliot's philosophical studies, but they disagree about how this happened and on what scale. Brooker argues that although Eliot believed that "No 'scientific' definition of religion is possible," scientific principles kept reappearing in his literary criticism—also providing a paradigm for his famous pieces, including *The Waste Land* (61). During Eliot's Harvard years, he was engaged in mainstream Harvard philosophical debates, especially in relation to the controversy of science versus religion. In one of his graduate essays, "The Interpretation of Primitive Ritual," Eliot opposed contemporary sociologists' reliance on deductive methods to base arguments on "interpretation," whereas he advocated an inductive method beginning with "fact" (62). Brooker points out that Eliot's discussion of "interpretation"

and "fact" influenced his poetic writing. The parataxis of images in *The Waste Land* is an echo of the scientific principle of "the inductive method," which put forward a new and modernist poetic form (65–71). Other meaningful topics that Brooker introduces in this book include Eliot's epistemology and its influence on his poetry (120), his interest in theodicy, which is associated with Eliot's reflections on mysticism (166–181), and so on.

Based on recent biographical advance and continuing endeavor within this field, *T.S. Eliot's Dialectical Imagination* provides a fresh and systematic Eliot, reassesses some fundamental issues in Eliot studies, and more importantly, opens up new areas of interpretation regarding Eliot's concern with wholeness, his attitudes toward science and scientific methods, and his ventures into mysticism and epistemology.

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