

Woolf, T. E. Hulme, William James, and the Unseen

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For how could they know each other? You met every day; then not for six months, or years. It was unsatisfactory, they agreed, how little one knew people. But she said, sitting on the bus going up Shaftesbury Avenue, she felt herself everywhere; not “here, here, here”; and she tapped the back of the seat; but everywhere. She waved her hand, going up Shaftesbury Avenue. She was all that. So that to know her, or any one, one must seek out the people who completed them; even the places. Odd affinities she had with people she had never spoken to, some woman in the street, some man behind a counter — even trees, or barns. It ended in a transcendental theory which, with her horror of death, allowed her to believe, or say that she believed (for all her scepticism), that since our apparitions, the part of us which appears, are so momentary compared with the other, the unseen part of us, which spreads wide, the unseen might survive, be recovered somehow attached to this person or that, or even haunting certain places after death [...] perhaps — perhaps.¹

1. **T**hus one of Clarissa Dalloway’s most expansive speculations, as recalled by Peter Walsh in *Mrs. Dalloway*. Clearly, this “transcendental theory” offers many hooks for a symposium on Woolf and philosophy: appearing to point backwards and forwards to a number of philosophers who came before and after (Plato, Spinoza, perhaps Galen Strawson and Graham Harman), it also points crosswise to some of

1 V. Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway*, 152-153.

Woolf's near contemporaries. A number of readers of Woolf, myself included, have indeed explored this passage in relation to ideas of F. H. Bradley and G. E. Moore, not to mention those philosophically inclined literati Walter Pater and T. S. Eliot. Notably resonant with epistemological, ontological, and ethical inquiries by these writers is the suggestion—recurrent in Woolf's works, but framed especially memorably here—that if our selves are in some sense forged by our perceptions, two people who see the same object might share something of each other. Under this view too, as Peter indicates, we might enjoy a limited survival after bodily death (in the textures of consciousness of those who have seen the same things), so metaphysics and theology enter by this door as well.

2. In the following paper, I take up a rather different matter of philosophy, which is also a matter of literary history, via Clarissa's assertion that "since our apparitions [...] are so momentary compared with the other, the unseen part of us, which spreads wide, the unseen might survive." In using the word "unseen," particularly together with the definite article, Woolf was not simply pointing to the truth that much more is going on, within each of us, than can possibly register phenomenally to those we encounter. She was also deploying a term that had been accruing a wealth of literary, philosophical, and theological associations for some time prior to the publication of *Mrs. Dalloway*. At least since the Renaissance, the word had been associated with a realm of spirit distinct from the world of earthly existence; it seems to have grown particularly popular in the nineteenth century as a term serving to link that which is beyond human apprehension to properly religious concerns.
3. Let me begin with three examples out of the vast number that might be culled from writing since the second quarter of the nineteenth century. The first is from Thomas Carlyle, undoubtedly one of the wellsprings of the practice of putting "the unseen" to the uses we are considering here. In the 1840 lecture that leads off *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History* (1841), Carlyle asserts that the "chief fact" about a man or a nation is his or its religion, where religion means not "the church-creed which he professes" but "the manner [...] in which he feels himself to be spiritually related to the Unseen World".² In 1843's *Past and Present*, Carlyle then writes as follows of the unseen's relation to human making:

On the whole, we do entirely agree with those old Monks, *Laborare est Orare*. In a thousand senses, from one end of it to the other, true Work is Worship. He that works, whatsoever be his work, he bodies forth the form of Things Unseen; a small Poet every Worker is. The idea, were it but of his poor Delf Platter, how much more of his Epic Poem, is as yet "seen," halfseen, only by himself; to all others it is a thing unseen, impossible; to Nature herself it is a thing unseen, a thing which never hitherto was;—very "impossible," for it is as yet a No-thing! The Unseen Powers had need to watch over such a man; he works in and for the Unseen. Alas, if he look to the Seen Powers only, he may as well quit the business; his No-thing will never rightly issue as a Thing, but as a Deceptivity, a Sham-thing,—which it had better not do!³

2 T. Carlyle, *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History*, 3.

3 T. Carlyle, *Past and Present*, 205

4. A second example comes from the second series of *Legends and Lyrics* (1861) by Adelaide Procter, one of the most popular poets of the nineteenth century. In the poem “Unseen,” Procter (who converted to Roman Catholicism in 1851), begins by urging that “[t]here are more things in Heaven and Earth than we / Can dream of, or than nature understands; / We learn not through our poor philosophy / What hidden chords are touched by unseen hands,” and concludes,

But, though a veil of shadow hangs between
That hidden life, and what we see and hear,
Let us revere the power of the Unseen,
And know a world of mystery is near.⁴

5. My third example comes from a moment in *Erewhon*, Samuel Butler’s utopian fiction of 1872, at which the narrator reflects as follows on certain customs prevailing in the strange society he encounters:

6. It seems as though the need for some law over and above, and sometimes even conflicting with, the law of the land, must spring from something that lies deep down in man’s nature [...] . When man had grown to the perception that [...] the world and all that it contains, including man, is at the same time both seen and unseen, he felt the need of two rules of life, one for the seen, and the other for the unseen side of things. For the laws affecting the seen world he claimed the sanction of seen powers; for the unseen (of which he knows nothing save that it exists and is powerful) he appealed to the unseen power (of which, again, he knows nothing save that it exists and is powerful) to which he gives the name of God.⁵

7. Carlyle insists that human beings should fuse the seen and the unseen when they make things; Procter bids us reverence an unseen from which we are never far removed; Butler suggests that human beings notionally separate seen and unseen when they evolve rules to live by. Taken together, these passages speak volubly to nineteenth-century negotiations with faith and doubt, knowledge and experience, theory and practice, humanity and divinity. What matters most for us here, however, is that “unseen” as these authors wield it points to a realm of unapprehended powers separated but thinly from the one we inhabit, a dimension not distant but perhaps intensely close, and veiled to our sight not because inherently unseeable but because our sight is weak. At the extraordinary close of “The Sensitive Plant” (1820), Shelley had written in a more platonic register,

For love, and beauty, and delight,
There is no death nor change: their might
Exceeds our organs, which endure
No light, being themselves obscure.

8. This conviction of the weakness of the human apparatus, which would be reinforced as much by science as by theology over the rest of the nineteenth century, is embedded in “the unseen,” as it is not in “the invis-

4 A. Procter, *Legends and Lyrics*, 275.

5 S. Butler, *Erewhon*, 122-123.

ible,” though few of the post-Carlylean users of the word seem interested in associating this weakness with human *moral* failing.

9. That Woolf came across the passages from Carlyle, Procter, and Butler at one point or another is very likely: *Past and Present* and *Erewhon* were too canonical, so to speak, not to form a part of her reading, and the library of Leonard and Virginia Woolf contained a copy of Procter’s *Legends and Lyrics*, second series.⁶ That Woolf was familiar with the broad sense of “the unseen” these quotations exhibit is, in any case, beyond question, since she demonstrates such familiarity in two essays appearing *The Second Common Reader*. One, “*Aurora Leigh*,” is, as its title suggests, a reconsideration of Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s long poem seventy-five years after its publication. Woolf devotes a good deal of her essay (which first appeared in the *Yale Review* in 1931) to the plot of the poem’s first book, at one point recounting how Aurora is sent to live with an aunt who offers little nourishment for the young woman’s restless intellect. “For,” as Woolf summarizes,

the aunt liked a woman to be womanly. Of an evening she did cross-stitch and, owing to some mistake in her choice of silk, once embroidered a shepherdess with pink eyes. Under this torture of women’s education, the passionate Aurora exclaimed, certain women have died; others pine; a few who have, as Aurora had, “relations with the unseen,” survive and walk demurely, and are civil to their cousins and listen to the vicar and pour out tea. Aurora herself was blessed with a little room. It was green-papered, had a green carpet and there were green curtains to the bed, as if to match the insipid greenery of the English countryside.⁷

10. The relevant passage from Browning runs as follows:

she owned
She liked a woman to be womanly,
And English women, she thanked God and sighed,
(Some people always sigh in thanking God)
Were models to the universe. And last
I learnt cross-stitch, because she did not like
To see me wear the night with empty hands,
A-doing nothing. So, my shepherdess
Was something after all, (the pastoral saints

6 J. King and M. Miletic-Vejzovik, *The Library of Leonard and Virginia Woolf*, 182.

7 V Woolf, “*Aurora Leigh*,” *The Common Reader 2*, 204-205. We may wonder whether there is not a shadow of Aurora’s dull green room in *Mrs. Dalloway* itself. Browning describes the room thus: “I had a little chamber in the house, As green as any privet-hedge a bird Might choose to build in, though the nest itself Could show but dead-brown sticks and straws; the walls Were green, the carpet was pure green, the straight Small bed was curtained greenly, and the folds Hung green about the window, which let in The out-door world with all its greenery.”

In Woolf’s novel, one of Clarissa’s lowest moments of the day, one in which she feels most keenly a fundamental poverty in existence, is associated with a domestic covering in green and a small bed:

“Like a nun withdrawing, or a child exploring a tower, she went upstairs, paused at the window, came to the bathroom. There was the green linoleum and a tap dripping. There was an emptiness about the heart of life; an attic room. [...] The sheets were clean, tight stretched in a broad white band from side to side. Narrower and narrower would her bed be.”

Be praised for't) leaning lovelorn with pink eyes
To match her shoes, when I mistook the silks;
Her head uncrushed by that round weight of hat
So strangely similar to the tortoise-shell
Which slew the tragic poet.

[...]

Certain of your feebler souls
Go out in such a process; many pine
To a sick, inodorous light; my own endured:
I had relations in the Unseen, and drew
The elemental nutriment and heat
From nature, as earth feels the sun at nights,
Or as a babe sucks surely in the dark,
I kept the life, thrust on me, on the outside
Of the inner life, with all its ample room
For heart and lungs, for will and intellect,
Inviolable by conventions. God,
I thank thee for that grace of thine!⁸

11. Aurora says not that she has relations *with* the Unseen but rather that she has relations *in* the Unseen; altering the phrasing, Woolf maintains the sense of Browning's line but loses some of the wit of the original, since Browning seems to be drawing a contrast between the aunt, who is after all a relation in the Seen, and the invisible powers that help Aurora's soul to endure.
12. The unseen receives another important mention in *Aurora Leigh*, after Aurora's cousin Romney Leigh has proposed marriage in chivalrously condescending terms in book 2. Since as a woman Aurora will be incapable of producing the very best literary art, and will thus fail to meet her own standards, Romney tells her, she will do best to abandon her dream of becoming a poet and instead marry him, assisting in his practical work of social reform. Aurora takes the occasion not only to decline Romney's offer and protest his views of women's capacities but also to insist that while social reform work may be noble, it cannot itself sufficiently elevate humankind:

Wipe out earth's furrows of the Thine and Mine,
And leave one green, for men to play at bowls;
With innings for them all! . . . what then, indeed,
If mortals were not greater by the head
Than any of their prosperities? what then,
Unless the artist keep up open roads
Betwixt the seen and unseen,—bursting through
The best of your conventions with his best.
The unspeakable, imaginable best
God bids him speak, to prove what lies beyond
Both speech and imagination? A starved man
Exceeds a fat beast: we'll not barter, sir,
The beautiful for barley.⁹

13. In this passage, as in Carlyle, meaningful poiesis requires some commerce with the unseen, whatever precisely the unseen may be. Sharing

8 E. Browning, *Aurora Leigh*, 19-20.

9 *Ibid.*, 52.

with Romney a quite Carlylean conviction of the centrality of work to worthwhile existence (“I, too, have my vocation,—work to do [...] Most serious work, most necessary work”),¹⁰ Aurora would surely agree with the author of *Past and Present* that the maker “works in and for the Unseen,” and that if “he look to the Seen Powers only, he may as well quit the business.”

14. What did Woolf think about Aurora’s, or Browning’s, views on these matters? In a moment, we will visit a passage in which Woolf implies general accord with the principle that the artist should keep open the roads between the seen and the unseen. Here, though, we need to notice that Woolf distances herself from Browning’s take in at least two ways. First, there are the quotation marks around “relations with the unseen,” by means of which Woolf does not merely indicate citation but places herself at a certain remove from Aurora’s quaint convictions. The suggestion is that while intellectually starved nineteenth-century ladies might have relied upon relations with the unseen, especially where young and under the thumb of philistine aunts, such relations would be of more doubtful value to a modern woman possessing freer scope for the exercise of her intelligence. The arch punctuation is much in line with the temper of the essay as a whole, in which Woolf at once lauds Browning’s energy and talent and regrets the limitations her early social lot imposed upon her.
15. Indeed the second way Woolf distances herself from Browning’s version of the unseen is bound up with the essay’s larger claim that the poet’s circumstances did not align perfectly with her gifts. For Woolf, Browning is at her best when confidently rendering the social canvas, but because she spent so much of her life away from vital society, she was driven to write a more intellectual poem than suited her:

What damage had her life done her as a poet? A great deal, we cannot deny. For it is clear [...] that the mind which found its natural expression in this swift and chaotic poem about real men and women was not the mind to profit by solitude. A lyrical, a scholarly, a fastidious mind might have used seclusion and solitude to perfect its powers. [...] But the mind of Elizabeth Barrett was lively and secular and satirical. She was no scholar.¹¹

16. Browning excelled in representing the social world, in other words; representing what emerges in solitude, including reverberations of the unseen, was not her *métier*. And thus there would be an irony, for Woolf, in Browning’s brief for keeping roads open between seen and unseen. Yes, Woolf might say, but Browning’s unseen is not an unseen we may care to hear much about.
17. The other reference to the unseen in *The Second Common Reader* falls, as it happens, in a piece on Browning’s rival for the title of most celebrated Victorian woman poet (Adelaide Procter’s popularity notwithstanding). Sketching Christina Rossetti’s biography in “I Am Christina Rossetti,” first

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 52.

¹¹ V. Woolf, “Aurora Leigh”, 207

published in 1930, Woolf observes that at an early age, “something dark and hard, like a kernel, had already formed in the center of Rossetti’s being.”¹² What was this dark, hard thing?

It was religion, of course. Even when she was quite a girl her lifelong absorption in the relation of the soul with God had taken possession of her. Her sixty-four years might seem outwardly spent in Hallam Street and Endsleigh Gardens and Torrington Square, but in reality she dwelt in some curious region where the spirit strives towards an unseen God—in her case, a dark God, a harsh God—a God who decreed that all the pleasures of the world were hateful to Him.¹³

18. The casual reader might wonder why Woolf bothers with the word “unseen” in this passage. Since there is no reason to think that God should have been more directly apprehensible to Rossetti than to other believers, the adjective would seem gratuitous, except perhaps as it adds a certain faint shading to the characterization of Rossetti’s faith. Having glanced at Butler, Procter, Carlyle, and Browning, however, we can see that “unseen” gestures toward a set of accreted connotations pertaining to powers beyond our ken but close at hand, and to the possibility that religious feeling begins where conviction of knowledge leave off. As in her précis of *Aurora Leigh*, further, Woolf seems to invoke the unseen here in order to mark the distance between her own beliefs and those of her subject. Rossetti’s pleasure-hating God, like Aurora Leigh’s relations in the unseen, may be an object of interest for Woolf, but that deity is certainly not an object of shared veneration.

19. This point is important for us not least because Woolf’s use of “unseen” in the Rossetti piece relates closely to another appearance of the word in *Mrs. Dalloway*. Early in the novel, Rezia Smith remembers Dr. Holmes’s instruction to encourage her husband Septimus to engage with the life around him; in Regent’s Park, accordingly, she begs him three times to attend to a group of boys off to play cricket. Septimus hears the imperative, but does not understand that it comes from his wife, or indeed from any source in the seen world:

“Look,” she implored him, pointing at a little troop of boys carrying cricket stumps, and one shuffled, spun round on his heel and shuffled, as if he were acting a clown at the music hall.

“Look,” she implored him, for Dr. Holmes had told her to make him notice real things, go to a music hall, play cricket — that was the very game, Dr. Holmes said, a nice out-of-door game, the very game for her husband.

“Look,” she repeated.

Look the unseen bade him, the voice which now communicated with him who was the greatest of mankind, Septimus, lately taken from life to death, the Lord who had come to renew society, who lay like a coverlet, a snow blanket smitten only by the sun, for ever unwasted, suffering for ever, the scapegoat, the

12 V. Woolf, “I am Christina Rossetti”, *The Second Common Reader*, 239.

13 *Ibid.*

eternal sufferer, but he did not want it, he moaned, putting from him with a wave of his hand that eternal suffering, that eternal loneliness.¹⁴

20. Like Rossetti, Septimus hears the commands of an invisible power that singles him out for devotion; and like Rossetti, Septimus is a person whose approach to divinity Woolf cannot share. Woolf is not unsympathetic to Septimus's plight, of course—his madness is famously based on her own—but from the point of view of her atheism, Septimus is as delusional, strictly speaking, as Rossetti was. There is no unseen God who hates pleasure, no unseen power that calls Septimus to renew society.
21. If this is so, however, how are we to evaluate Clarissa Dalloway's speculation on "the unseen part of us, which spreads wide"? For help with this question, we might turn to one final passage from an essay in which Woolf discusses another writer. In "The Novels of E. M. Forster," first published in *The Atlantic* in 1927, Woolf writes of her friend and fellow novelist,

But his vision is of a peculiar kind and his message of an elusive nature. He has not great interest in institutions. [...] His concern is with the private life; his message is addressed to the soul. "It is the private life that holds out the mirror to infinity; personal intercourse, and that alone, that ever hints at a personality beyond our daily vision." Our business is not to build in brick and mortar, but to draw together the seen and the unseen. We must learn to build the "rainbow bridge that should connect the prose in us with the passion. Without it we are meaningless fragments, half monks, half beasts." This belief that it is the private life that matters, that it is the soul that is eternal, runs through all his writing.¹⁵

22. Adapting to her own purposes two lines from *Howards End*, Woolf here makes Forster the representative of a view that the path to whatever lies beyond sensory apprehension somehow runs through interpersonal exchange. The unseen in this description is almost directly antithetical to the unseen of Septimus, Rossetti, and Browning, since instead of soliciting a turning away from other people, it presses for connection with them. Septimus's unseen diverts his attention from Rezia and boys off to play cricket; Rossetti's unseen God tells her that the world's pleasures are hateful; Aurora Leigh's relations in the unseen furnish a desperately needed counterforce to her narrow-minded kinswoman in the seen world. Not so the unseen of Forster, which is an infinity whose mirror is private life, "a personality beyond our daily vision" hinted at by human intercourse in the world we have.
23. With the passages from *Mrs. Dalloway* and from Woolf's essays on Browning, Rossetti, and Forster before us, then, we can recognize that Woolf presents two rather different species of unseen, one of which she rejects and one of which she finds more sympathetic. The first unseen is characterized by a certain remove from the human and works against intersubjective engagement; the second is marked by continuity with the human and associated with moments of connection between people. This

14 V. Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway*, 25.

15 V. Woolf, « The Novels of E.M. Forster », *The Atlantic*.

second unseen would seem to be not only that of Forster, as Woolf represents him, but also that of Clarissa Dalloway, who imagines “the unseen part of us” persisting in the souls or minds of others.

24. And indeed the idea of such a feeling on Clarissa’s part is supported by the one appearance of the word “unseen” in *Mrs. Dalloway* that we have not yet considered. Peering into shop windows, near the beginning of the book, Clarissa thinks:

But often now this body she wore (she stopped to look at a Dutch picture), this body, with all its capacities, seemed nothing—nothing at all. She had the oddest sense of being herself invisible; unseen; unknown; there being no more marrying, no more having of children now, but only this astonishing and rather solemn progress with the rest of them, up Bond Street, this being Mrs. Dalloway; not even Clarissa any more; this being Mrs. Richard Dalloway.¹⁶

25. Clarissa’s morning thought here notably converges with the “transcendental theory” that Peter will recall later in the day. In this case, Clarissa does not explicitly imagine being recovered by the living after death, but she does conceive of another kind of dissolution of self that unites her with her fellows. Here, the trajectory of a life-narrative still open to major developments such as marriage and childbirth is replaced by another kind of progress, one that moves forward ritually rather than teleologically, even as one kind of relation to other people is replaced by another that in a sense brings them even closer. Clarissa imagines herself no longer perceptible to those around her but rendered at one with them in the same collectivity, less individuated than she had been before, even if not wholly absorbed within the mass. To be unseen, here, is not to reside in another dimension, however near, but to be yet more immanent to the world of other people than might be possible if one remains visible.

26. Woolf’s inclination toward an unseen of human connection rather than radical alterity is further confirmed by the famous passage in “A Sketch of the Past” where she describes how in writing she feels “a great delight to put the severed parts together”:

From this I reach what I might call a philosophy; at any rate it is a constant idea of mine; that behind the cotton wool is hidden a pattern; that we—I mean all human beings—are connected with this; that the whole world is a work of art; that we are parts of the work of art. *Hamlet* or a Beethoven quartet is the truth about this vast mass that we call the world. But there is no Shakespeare, there is no Beethoven; certainly and emphatically there is no God; we are the words; we are the music; we are the thing itself. And I see this when I have a shock.¹⁷

27. Though the word “unseen” does not appear here, this passage is perhaps as decided a statement about her own “relations with the unseen” as any Woolf ever tendered. There is, she says, a pattern in things that may be hinted at by individual works of art, but this normally unnoted pattern is

16 V. Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway*, 9.

17 V. Woolf, *Moments of Being*, 72.

not to be understood in wholly transcendental terms: radically immanent, this is a pattern within the total work of art we call the world. And this pattern does not stand apart from human beings. On the contrary, it is *of* people. “[W]e are the thing itself.”

28. Readers of Woolf have no doubt been moved by this credo since its publication; one does not need critical commentary to appreciate the economy with which it articulates a cosmology or the magnetism of the vision it imparts. Nonetheless, it seems to me that to grasp the full boldness of this statement, we need to recognize how it affirms a point of view Woolf had begun to develop years earlier (certainly by the time she was writing *Mrs. Dalloway*) and how this point of view amounted to a position in a certain debate among early twentieth-century intellectuals. This was a debate not only about the truth of religious belief as such, but also, more subtly, about the proposition that if there are things in the world that lie beyond our apprehension, there must be powers at work that can in no wise be compassed by the human. It seems to me that Woolf rejects this reasoning with quite breathtaking firmness. “Time Passes” and many of her other fictions show that Woolf was profoundly drawn to the idea of natural world that exists apart from human experience, a world barren of (or freed from) the impositions of human seeing. But she was *not* compelled, on the whole, by the thought of supernatural orders characterized by a radical discontinuity with humanity—not attracted to visions of supersensible powers whose kinship to people might be limited to some vague likeness of volition, let alone to absolutes persisting uninflected by human need.

29. In this, Woolf runs counter to a line of thinking that was quite important to the development of early high modernism and that might have come to her attention through, among other vehicles, T. S. Eliot. As Ronald Schuchard and other scholars have amply demonstrated, an important influence on Eliot was the poet, critic, and non-professional philosopher T. E. Hulme, who furnished Eliot the terms for a purportedly classical strike against Romanticism even as he furnished Wyndham Lewis a rationale for preferring hard abstraction over soft mimeticism. Concerned to combat what he saw as the mistaken view (ascendant since the Renaissance) that the human is the measure of all things, Hulme would insist, in a series of meditations published under the title “A Notebook” in the *New Age* from December 1915 to February 1916, that

there is an absolute, and not a relative, difference between humanism [...] and the religious spirit. The *divine* is not *life* at its intensest. It contains in a way an almost *anti-vital* element. [...] The difference is seen perhaps most obviously in art. At the Renaissance, there were many pictures with religious subjects, but no religious art in the proper sense of the word. All the emotions expressed are perfectly human ones. Those who choose to think that religious emotion is only the highest form of the emotions that fall inside the humanist ideology, may call this religious art, but they will be wrong. When the intensity of the religious attitude finds proper expression in art, then you get a very different result. Such expression springs not from a delight in life but from a feeling for certain absolute values, which are entirely independent of vital things. The disgust with the

trivial and accidental characteristics of living shapes, the searching after an austerity, a monumental stability and permanence, a perfection and rigidity, which vital things can never have, leads to the use of forms which can almost be called *geometrical*.¹⁸

30. From the latter part of this quotation there is a fairly direct line to Lewis's polemics on behalf of a rigid and external art as against a Bergsonian and fluid one; more relevant for us here is Hulme's desire "to hold the real nature of the *absolute discontinuity* between vital and religious things constantly before the mind and thus to clearly separate those things, which are in reality separate."¹⁹ In a 1924 comment for the *Criterion*, Eliot would call Hulme

the forerunner of a new attitude of mind, which should be the twentieth-century mind, if the twentieth century is to have a mind of its own. Hulme is classical, reactionary, and revolutionary; he is the antipodes of the eclectic, tolerant, and democratic mind of the end of the last century.²⁰

31. The *Criterion* comment was occasioned by the posthumous publication of a collection of Hulme's writings under the title *Speculations*, which included "A Notebook" retitled as "Humanism and the Religious Attitude." And Eliot clearly meant the words here quoted as praise—just as he meant praise when, five years later in "Second Thoughts on Humanism," he wrote that Hulme "found out for himself that there is an *absolute* to which Man can *never* attain"²¹ or when, in his introduction to a 1931 edition of Pascal's *Pensées*, he noted that an "important modern theory of discontinuity, suggested partly by Pascal, is sketched in the collected fragments of *Speculations* by T. E. Hulme."²²

32. To be sure, it was not only Hulme who helped bring these ideas before Eliot; no less influential were Eliot's Harvard teacher Irving Babbitt and French reactionaries such as Charles Maurras who, in Schuchard's words, "provided a common reading ground for Eliot and Hulme" in the early 1910s (Schuchard 54). Hulme's formulations have the virtue, though, of framing especially starkly, and from within an English intellectual milieu, the opposition between "humanism and the religious attitude" that would ground Eliot's conversion in 1927 and his writings on religion and society thereafter. In the 1930s, Eliot would not stress the chasm between the human and the absolute as dramatically as Hulme had, but his sense of this division clearly informs his elaboration of the necessary role of the Church in human affairs. In a February 1937 broadcast called "Church, Community, and State," which he published as the appendix to *The Idea of a Christian Society* (1939), for example, Eliot would insist that "between the Church and the World there is no permanent *modus-vivendi* possible." For

18 T. E. Hulme, « A Notebook », 426.

19 *Ibid.*, 427.

20 T. S. Eliot, « A Commentary », 231.

21 Quoted in R. Schuchard, *Eliot's Dark Angel*, 68.

22 T. S. Eliot, *Essays*, 167.

because Christian morals are based on fixed beliefs which cannot change they also are essentially unchanging: while the beliefs and in consequence the morality of the secular world can change from individual to individual, or from generation to generation, or from nation to nation.²³

33. “What is right,” Eliot adds a few pages further on, “enters the realm of what is *expedient* and is contingent upon place and time, the degree of culture, the temperament of a people. But the Church can say what is always and everywhere *wrong*. And without this firm assurance of first principles which it is the business of the Church to repeat in and out of season, the World will constantly confuse the *right* with the *expedient*.”²⁴

34. In the context of statements such as these, the notation that Woolf was broadly speaking a humanist appears as something rather more than a banality. Insofar as she aligned herself with the position she attributes to Forster, which holds that “the private life [...] holds out the mirror to infinity” and that “personal intercourse, and that alone, [...] ever hints at a personality beyond our daily vision,” Woolf ranged herself against precisely the kind of metaphysics that Hulme espoused and that Eliot adopted in imagining a new Christian order. Commenting on Eliot after his conversion in a well known 1927 letter to Vanessa Bell, Woolf wrote:

Then I have had a most shameful and distressing interview with poor dear Tom Eliot, who may be called dead to us all from this day forward. He has become an Anglo-Catholic, believes in God and immortality, and goes to church. I was really shocked. A corpse would seem to me more credible than he is. I mean, there’s something obscene in a living person sitting by the fire and believing in God.²⁵

35. For some this will read as a textbook instance of liberal intolerance. Yet the tone of this brief passage suggests a dismay on Woolf’s part that neither gossipy dismissal nor Stephen-milieu wagon-circling can quite exorcise, as well as a serious conviction that what stands against the there of religious belief as such is the here of human interchange. We might notice, in this regard, how Woolf’s rhetoric triply separates the new Eliot from the immediate and vital (he may be called dead to us; he seems less credible than a corpse; belief in God is obscene in a living person by the domestic hearth), as if in a kind of *contrapasso* for his own preference of the inhuman distant over the human immediate. For Forster, as described by Woolf, the “draw[ing] together [of] the seen and the unseen” derives from a conviction of the priority of private life and personal intercourse; between this view and the position of Hulme or Eliot there would seem to be, chez Woolf, no permanent *modus-vivendi* possible.

36. I would like to close my own situating of Woolf among the philosophers by noting that if her take on the unseen is sharply at odds with Hulme’s, it meets in interesting ways that of another turn-of-the-century commentator on what Hulme calls “the religious attitude,” William James.

²³ T. S. Eliot, *Christianity*, 72.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 76.

²⁵ V. Woolf, *Letters*: 3, 457-58.

Woolf had nothing explicit to say about James in her writing (as she had nothing explicit to say about Hulme), and though by dint of his coinage of the term “stream of consciousness” James’s name often appears in treatments of Woolf’s novelistic techniques, scholars have for the most part refrained from examining continuities between the two.²⁶ We might begin to explore this neglected terrain by noticing that in his most extensive attempt to understand religious belief, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (first published in 1902), James has a great deal to say about the unseen, even going so far as to define religion with reference to it. The third of the lectures composing the volume begins,

Were one asked to characterize the life of religion in the broadest and most general terms possible, one might say that it consists of the belief that there is an unseen order, and that our supreme good lies in harmoniously adjusting ourselves thereto. This belief and this adjustment are the religious attitude in the soul. I wish during this hour to call your attention to some of the psychological peculiarities of such an attitude as this, or belief in an object which we cannot see.²⁷

37. In the pages immediately following, James will then develop this point about the power over us enjoyed by things not sharply outlined in the mind: “The sentiment of reality can indeed attach itself so strongly to our object of belief that our whole life is polarized through and through, so to speak, by its sense of the existence of the thing believed in, and yet that thing, for purpose of definite description, can hardly be said to be present to our mind at all”;²⁸ “the absence of definite sensible images is positively insisted on by the mystical authorities in all religions as the *sine qua non* of a successful orison, or contemplation of the higher divine truths.”²⁹ From here, James will consider how religious experience looks in relation to other mental phenomena of high interest to modern psychology—how first-person testimony to conversion and mystical intuition, for example, seems to converge with post-hypnotic suggestion and other forms of behavior falling under the general heading of what Frederic Myers, the founder of the Society for Psychical Research, names “automatism.”³⁰ James attests that “the most important step forward” in psychology since he first started studying “that science” lay in

the discovery, first made in 1886, that, in certain subjects at least, there is not only the consciousness of the ordinary field, with its usual centre and margin, but an addition thereto in the shape of a set of memories, thoughts, and feelings which are extra-marginal and outside of the primary consciousness altogether, but yet must be classed as conscious facts of some sort, able to reveal their presence by unmistakable signs.³¹

26 A modest exception may be found in Bryony Randall’s recent juxtaposition of Woolf and James in *Modernism, Daily Time, and Everyday Life*.

27 W. James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 51.

28 *Ibid.*, 53

29 *Ibid.*, 52.

30 *Ibid.*, 191.

31 *Ibid.*, 190.

38. And “this discovery of a consciousness existing beyond the field, or subliminally, as Mr. Myers terms it, casts light on many phenomena of religious biography.”³²

39. Should the unseen then be understood only as a product of the play of human psychology? Not exactly—unless psychology be taken in an extremely capacious sense. In the conclusion to *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, James summarizes his findings by noting that all religions are characterized, first, by a sense that “there is *something wrong about us* as we naturally stand” and, second, by a sense that “*we are saved from the wrongness* by making proper connexion with the higher powers.”³³ In religious experience, the individual recognizes a higher, better part of himself free from this sense of wrong, and

*becomes conscious that this higher part is coterminous and continuous with a more of the same quality, which is operative in the universe outside of him, and which he can keep in working touch with, and in a fashion get on board of and save himself when all his lower being has gone to pieces in the wreck.)*³⁴

40. The unseen is not bounded by the human individual, according to James; it is a *more*. Yet this *more* is continuous with the higher part of the human self and is of the same quality as that part of the self.

41. Having so speculated, James will then return to science’s growing assurance that there is a “subconscious self” and propose,

as a hypothesis, that whatever it may be on its *farther* side, the “more” with which in religious experience we feel ourselves connected is on its *hither* side the subconscious continuation of our conscious life.³⁵

42. Moreover, this “unseen region [...] is not merely ideal.” Communing with it produces effects upon “our finite personality” leading to changes in conduct, and since “that which produces effects within another reality must be termed a reality itself,” we have “no philosophic excuse for calling the unseen or mystical world unreal.”³⁶ For James, then, religion

in her fullest exercise of function, is not a mere illumination of facts already elsewhere given, not a mere passion, like love, which views things in a rosier light. It is indeed that, as we have seen abundantly. But it is something more, namely, a postulator of new *facts* as well. The world interpreted religiously is not the materialistic world over again, with an altered expression; it must have, over and above the altered expression, a *natural constitution* different at some point from that which a materialistic world would have. It must be such that different events can be expected in it, different conduct must be required.³⁷

43. In one sense, then, James’s vision aligns closely with Hulme’s. To possess a proper meaning, religion must imply genuine alterity: interpreting

32 *Ibid.*, 190.

33 *Ibid.*, 400.

34 *Ibid.*, 400.

35 *Ibid.*, 403.

36 *Ibid.*, 406.

37 *Ibid.*, 407-408.

the world in the light of the unseen means believing that the cosmos contains more than materialism allows. At the same time, however, James is unwilling to sever this sphere from the human and the vital as Hulme does: in the brief postscript that follows the concluding chapter, James suggests that in “prayerful communion,” we find “something ideal, which in one sense is part of ourselves and in another sense is not ourselves” exerting an influence.³⁸ For Hulme, the “*divine* is not *life* at its intensest” but contains “an almost *anti-vital* element”; for James, there is always a continuity between the *more* and the mind, a kind of modulation from one to the other through the subconscious. In a *TLS* piece of 1929, Eliot would describe Hulme’s theory as asserting “in effect that there is a gap between psychology and ethics; and that any so-called reconciliation between religion and science is nugatory, because there are no common differences to be reconciled.”³⁹ James’s position is precisely antithetical: as G. William Barnard puts it succinctly, “James is convinced that the opposition between psychology and theology can be overcome via the mediation of the concept of the subliminal self.”⁴⁰

44. To say so much is to say a little more than that James resembles Woolf in not resembling Hulme. There are vast differences between Woolf’s and James’s points of view, of course: for Woolf, “certainly and emphatically there is no God,” whereas James will hesitantly open the door to God; for Woolf, what is “behind the cotton wool” of daily life “is a pattern” rather than the pragmatically efficacious force that compels James’s attention. Yet the two writers are joined by a conviction of the unseen’s connectedness to the human—a conviction that seems implicit too in Carlyle’s, Procter’s, and Browning’s deployment of “the unseen” to stress the proximity of the alterity that concerns them. It may be partly because of this suggestion of proximity that Hulme and Eliot avoid the word “unseen” itself, in spite of its evident utility in gesturing to the human imperfection that both writers put at the center of their philosophical and social thinking. In any case, the contrasting light of Hulme illuminates for us how the scattered discourse of the unseen, instantiated in writers such as Carlyle, Procter, Browning, and James, might have helped Woolf to conceive of a beyond that would not relinquish the world of flesh-and-blood men and women—to reach toward a supersensible indissolubly connected to the operations of psychology and the experience of perception. For James, quoting Myers, the unseen is continuous with the “part of the Self unmanifested.” Or as Woolf would frame matters, a couple of decades later: “our apparitions, the part of us which appears, are [...] momentary compared with the other, the unseen part of us, which spreads wide.”⁴¹

38 *Ibid.*, 411-412.

39 Quoted in Schuchard, *Eliot's Dark Angel*, 68.

40 W. Barnard, *Exploring Unseen Worlds*, 186.

41 V. Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway*, 153.

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