

## J. Hillis Miller: On "The Hollow Men"

In "The Hollow Men" all the richness and complexity of culture which gives "The Waste Land" such thickness of texture disappears. The poem takes place in a twilight realm of disembodied men and forces. The complexity of relations making up the subjective realm in Eliot's ideal descriptions of it is replaced by the vagueness and impalpability of "Shape without form, shade without colour, / Paralysed force, gesture without motion" (CP, 79). The hollow men are walking corpses ("Mistah Kurtz - he dead"), and their emptiness is the vacuity of pure mind detached from any reality. They are cut off from one another. Their voices are whispers, "quiet and meaningless" (CP, 79). Groping together, they "avoid speech" (CP, 81). They are detached from nature, and live in a place which is devoid of any spiritual presence, a "dead land," a "cactus land," a "valley of dying stars," hollow like the men themselves (CP, 80, 81). The eyes of the hollow men are not only averted from one another, but from those other eyes, the returning look from the divine place which those who cross "with direct eyes" to "death's other Kingdom" will encounter. There are no eyes in the hollow valley, and the empty men are bereft of God. Even within their own hollowness detachment is the law. The "Shadow" which falls between idea and reality, conception and creation, emotion and response, desire and spasm, potency and existence (CP, 81, 82), is the paralysis which seizes men who live in a completely subjective world. Mind had seemed the medium which binds all things together in the unity of an organic culture. Now it is revealed to be the Shadow which isolates things from one another, reduces them to abstraction, and makes movement, feeling, and creativity impossible. "The Hollow Men" is an eloquent analysis of the vacuity of subjective idealism, and the state of the hollow men appears in Eliot's later work as the "distraction, delusion, escape into dream, pretence" (CPP, 210) of the unenlightened people in his plays, each one of whom is a "fugitive from reality" (ES, 70), or as that horrid form of hell described in *Murder in the Cathedral*, the hell of "the Void," of "emptiness, absence, separation from God" in "the empty land/Which is no land," where "there are no objects, no tones,/No colours, no forms to distract, to divert the soul/From seeing itself, foully united forever, nothing with nothing" (CPP, 210).

If "The Hollow Men" shows where idealism leads, it offers a fleeting glimpse of a way out of emptiness. Though nature, other people, and God have an almost entirely negative existence in the poem, they do exist as something outside the hollow men. The poem places the "stuffed men" in the context of an external world, God's world. Their state is defined as that of the trimmers in the third canto of the *Inferno*, those wretched souls, "gathered on this beach of the tumid river," who lived without blame or praise, and, like the neutral angels, were neither rebellious nor faithful to God, but lived for themselves. Far better to be one of the "lost/Violent souls" (CP, 79), for they were at least capable of damnation, as Baudelaire, in Eliot's essay, "walked secure in this high vocation, that he was capable of a damnation denied to the politicians and newspaper editors of Paris" (SE, 344). To recognize the possibility of damnation is in a way to become capable of it, and therefore capable of the salvation which is denied to the trimmers. The trimmers in Dante have no hope of another death, but Eliot's hollow men understand dimly that if they endure the death which is prelude to rebirth they have some hope of salvation. Though Eliot's language is deliberately ambiguous, it implies that the sightless eyes of the hollow men may see again, and confront the divine eyes which

are "The hope only/Of empty men" and will reappear as "the perpetual star/Multifoliate rose" of heaven itself (CP, 81). The idealists of "The Hollow Men" have stepped out of themselves into the barrenness of an external world, and the fragments of the Lord's prayer ("For Thine is/. . . For Thine is the" [CP, 82]) which they mutter at the end of the poem are moving appeals to a God who may be infinitely distant, but who is independent of their minds and therefore may have power to save them.

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