Parrot’s Eye:
A Portrait by Manet
and Two by T. S. Eliot

Frances Dickey

T. S. Eliot’s little-known sonnet “On a Portrait” (1909) describes a painting by Édouard Manet from 1866, Woman with a Parrot. The significance of this connection has not been examined, nor has the further association of Manet’s painting with Eliot’s “Portrait of a Lady,” another portrait of a woman with a parrot. These poems examine the peculiar inscrutability that observers of Manet’s portrait have long remarked. Eliot’s poems consider two possible meanings for the blank look on her face: either she is concealing her thoughts from us, or she is mentally absent. While “On a Portrait” considers both possibilities, “Portrait of a Lady” pursues the implications of the second interpretation, suggesting that selfhood or subjectivity is not predicated on a private interiority but on “parroting” the formulae of social interaction. Following Manet, Eliot links flatness—painterly and psychological—with meaningless imitation. All three “portraits” entertain a conception of subjectivity based on reflection and imitation rather than inwardness and originality.

Although Eliot’s connection with Manet has been neglected, recent criticism in general has emphasized the nineteenth-century figures that influenced Eliot early in his career rather than the more historically remote ones (such as Donne and Dante) that he publicly avowed. In a recent article Ronald Bush identifies Eliot’s ties to decadence as one of the primary areas of interest in Eliot studies, particularly with respect to the poet’s sexuality (Ann Ardis, Colleen Lamos, Cassandra Laity). This renewal of attention to Eliot’s nineteenth-century context owes much to
Carol Christ's work on his use of Victorian genres; of special relevance to this essay, she has linked Eliot's representation of women to the nineteenth-century poetic mode of female portraiture as practiced by Tennyson, Browning, Rossetti, and Swinburne. ("Gender" 23). Swinburne is the primary presence in Eliot's Advocate poems from 1908 to January 1909, and this is especially true of "On a Portrait," one of the last poems Eliot wrote before his momentous encounter with Laforgue, which began when he received a copy of Arthur Symons's The Symbolist Movement in Poetry for Christmas in 1908. Eliot's imitation of Swinburne and Tennyson is a stylistic feature of this poem and also very likely the source of some of its thematic anxiety about parrots.

Eliot's primary inspiration for his sonnet, however, was Édouard Manet's Woman with a Parrot rather than a work of literature. According to a letter from Eliot's college friend William Tinckom-Fernandez to Harford Powel Jr. (Powel Sr., presumably his father, had been on the Advocate editorial board at the same time as Eliot), he wrote the poem after seeing a reproduction of Manet's painting in a book on French impressionism (Powel 90). It is not at all surprising that Eliot would have been struck by Manet's work, in view of the apprenticeship to Laforgue, and then to Laforgue's master Baudelaire, that he took up almost immediately after he composed this poem. Baudelaire was also Manet's master, in the sense that the poet's treatment of modern urban life gave the painter much of his subject matter (Reff, Manet and Modern Paris 13)—as also happened with Eliot. What is surprising is that Eliot's appreciation of Manet predated the influence of the French poets on his sensibility. In fact, it may have prepared the way for it.

Many critics now credit Manet as the first modernist painter, although he composed his major canvases in the 1860s and 70s and did not even regard himself as a member of the impressionists; they called him rather their "father." Clement Greenberg influentially claimed that Manet's modernism lay in his rejection of the illusion of depth:

Manet's paintings became the first Modernist ones by virtue of the frankness with which they declared the surfaces on which they were painted.... Flatness, two-dimensionality, was the only condition painting shared with no other art, and so Modernist painting oriented itself to flatness as it did to nothing else.

(194–95)
Fredric Jameson identifies flatness as the preeminent characteristic of postmodernism, in literature and psychology as well as visual art (9). Jameson's analysis, though it overlooks the strong modernist aesthetic of surface (materiality), indicates a new intensification, or perhaps the endpoint, of the 150-year ascendancy of this aesthetic, of which Manet's work marks the beginning.

Michael Fried has explained the apparent flatness of Manet's canvases by placing them in the context of a historical dynamic between the compositional conventions of absorption and theatricality. In a series of books on eighteenth- and nineteenth-century French painting (Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot; Courbet's Realism; and Manet's Modernism), Fried examines the deployment of absorption, a set of compositional techniques by which a painter aims to eliminate the beholder's consciousness of himself as facing the painting. This convention, which is linked to realism, predominated in French painting from the middle of the eighteenth century through the 1860s, when Manet definitively challenged it with what we now identify as his modernist flatness (Manet's Modernism 17). In figure painting, absorption is achieved by representing people engaged in activities that require concentration: reading, writing, praying, listening, studying, thinking, playing, and even sleeping. This device is intended to draw the beholder into the painting and, ideally, to produce inward contemplation similar to the activity depicted. In the eighteenth century, absorption competed with and replaced an older aesthetic of theatricality, in which figures in the painting seemed conscious of being beheld (Courbet's Realism 6–8). Manet moved painting back in the direction of theatricality, preferring frontal poses in which the figure faces the beholder, as in Woman with a Parrot (Manet's Modernism 21, 280–82, passim). Yet, like others of his generation, he continued to resist the theatrical modes of the eighteenth century. He experimented with ways of acknowledging what Fried calls the truth about painting (that the canvas faces its beholder) without making his figures appear conscious of being seen. These experiments in "facingness" and "strikingness" produced the effect of flatness that would lead eventually to abstraction in the twentieth century, but also lead to the peculiar look of absence that Manet's contemporaries always complained about on the faces of his models (344). They seem neither absorbed nor conscious of us.

Though Fried finds Manet categorically opposed to any representation of absorption, Wollheim, Clark, and others describe Manet's figures
in terms that suggest self-absorption without external referent. Eliot too, in wondering what the figure in *Woman with a Parrot* is thinking about, seems to attribute a kind of self-absorption to her. But the lack of any external referent for her absorption renders her look ambiguous. The beholder/speaker of Eliot’s “On a Portrait” works through two possible responses to Manet’s painting: either the woman is absorbed in some thought for which the painting offers no object, or else she is mentally, psychologically absent. “Portrait of a Lady” expands on the second interpretation, as the one that seems to have better satisfied Eliot by the time he began composing it (1910–11). The two possibilities point, as I have said, to two quite different conceptions of subjectivity. The first is the classic Cartesian conception of self that privileges inwardness and, following romanticism, the expression of inwardness through artistic creativity. The second conception, a new one that deeply offended Manet’s first audiences, constitutes the subject out of flat surfaces whose hallmark characteristic is reflection or imitation. Manet’s painting and Eliot’s poems allow for both conceptions, locating these works at the cusp of change. “Portrait of a Lady” takes the additional step, however, of representing the very idea of inwardness as itself an imitation or reflection. The problem of subjectivity raised by Manet arises in this poem not only in the speaker’s anxiety about becoming a parrot but also in his repeated acts of smiling without feeling when called upon by the social situation. Like *Woman with a Parrot,* “Portrait of a Lady” indicates that expression (facial, linguistic, and artistic) may not reveal anything about the interior. Rather, even what we think of as interior may turn out to be an automatic reflection (as by a parrot or a mirror) of what others have already said or done.

**Woman with a Parrot: Other mind or automaton?**

Manet’s *Woman with a Parrot* depicts the model Victorine Meurent dressed luxuriously in a loose pink peignoir, sniffing a bouquet of violets with a slightly coquettish but also somehow absent half-smile on her face. To her left an African Grey parrot perches insensibly atop his tall vertical stand. Manet took a number of liberties in this painting, which his audiences noted. Even the genre of the work is in question. The painting cannot unambiguously be designated as a portrait since it represents a paid model rather than a paying sitter, and it makes reference by virtue of the parrot to a well-known genre scene of “woman with a parrot” (uppermost in
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*Woman with a Parrot, aka Young Woman of 1866.* Édouard Manet. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of Erwin Davis, 1889 (89.21.3). All rights reserved, the Metropolitan Museum of Art.
Manet's mind may have been an example of this kind that Courbet had famously exhibited that very same year, discussed below. Yet Manet had first represented the front-facing head and shoulders of the same woman in his painting *Victorine Meurent* (1862), the title clearly identifying it as a portrait. Unlike the famous *Olympia* (1863), in which Meurent appears nude as a courtesan, *Woman with a Parrot* (also referred to by the more portraitlike title *Young Woman of 1866*) renders her standing and clothed, as though she were having her official likeness taken. She is dressed not in costume but as a young Parisian woman of fashion might dress at home. While *Olympia*’s frontal gaze (and that of the nude Meurent in *Déjeuner sur l’herbe*, 1863) deliberately affronts the beholder, in this painting her pose remains within the conventions of portraiture, even if her expression does not.5

Manet’s treatment of Meurent’s face, and particularly her expression, did not square with his audience’s expectations. He was perceived to be deliberately disfiguring her: “It is said that this young woman was painted from a model whose head is delicate, graceful, and lively. . . . The head that he gives us is perfectly ugly” (Théophile Gautier, “Le Salon de 1868,” qtd. in Cachin 256); “the accessories prevent one from looking at the face, but that’s no loss” (Marius Chaumelin, qtd. in Cachin 256). Viewers also objected to her enigmatic, almost blank expression, which she shares with her other likenesses in *Victorine Meurent* and *Olympia* as well as *Mlle V . . . in the Costume of an Espada* (1862), *The Street Singer* (1863), and *The Fifer* (1866).6 One contemporary critic noted of this portrait that Manet “doesn’t value a head more than a slipper . . . . The head, although it faces us and is in the same light as the rose-colored material [of her dress], draws no attention: it is lost in the modulation of the colors” (Thoré, 532). Another critic wrote:

> you will find yourself surrounded by personages endowed with all the appearance of reality, [but] at bottom devoid of precisely what constitutes it, I mean expression. Everything there is cold, without accent; nothing is stirred in you . . . .”

(Spuller, qtd. in Fried, *Manet’s Modernism* 284).

Contemporaries found the expressions of these figures “inexplicably blank, opaque, noncommunicating, without psychological interiority of any kind” (Fried, *Manet’s Modernism* 282). Thus these viewers perceived a deficit in Manet’s paintings: the lack of some quality that turns a like-
ness of a body into the likeness of a person. For them, Manet’s figures offered only the exterior appearance of life without the suggestion of an animating interiority.

The question for viewers of Woman with a Parrot, then and now, is whether she has an inaccessible mind and interior, or nothing to access at all. Is she absorbed in her thoughts, or incapable of absorption? While most critics, including Greenberg and Fried, incline to the latter view, the philosopher Richard Wollheim argues that Manet’s figure paintings, and Woman with a Parrot in particular, are about the difficulty of accessing the interior, not about its absence. He describes Manet’s project in Woman with a Parrot in the following terms:

Get the spectator to imagine someone in the represented space, someone who tries, tries hard, tries importunately, and fails, to gain the attention of the figure who is represented as there in the space; get the spectator moreover to imagine this person from the inside so that, this imaginative entry into the picture over, it will then be for him as if he had himself experienced some of the tedium, some of the frustration, some of the sense of rejection, that must attend any attempt to establish contact with the represented figure—and then the content of the picture will be brought home to him with clarity and cogency.

(160)

For Wollheim, the subject of this and Manet’s other figure paintings, including group portraits, is being “locked up in . . . private thought” (149). Wollheim thus sees Meurent’s expression as a kind of absorption that excludes the beholder. To use Fried’s terminology (although Fried strenuously disagrees with Wollheim), Victorine Meurent and Manet’s other figures are absorbed in an activity that has no referent in the painting: their own thoughts. What is disturbing about the painting for Wollheim is that we can’t find out what she is thinking. This anxiety is very different from feeling that she isn’t there. For Eliot, at least, it seems that the painting held both possibilities: Victorine was hiding a secret, or she wasn’t. This ambiguity suggests a radical uncertainty about the status of interiority, for both Manet and Eliot.

Descartes gave rise to modern philosophy by proposing the problematic division between interior and exterior that Manet’s painting questions. The Cartesian revolution placed the individual subject’s mind at the
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center of his or her knowledge, calling into doubt all assumptions that do not proceed from his own thinking (particularly assumptions based on sensory experience, but also on received doctrine). Descartes points out that the cozy interior of his study cannot be distinguished from a dream in his head; there may well be no cozy study at all. Thus he gives precedence to the mental interior over the domestic interior, which becomes part of the exterior realm of sensory experience. Indeed, it is from Descartes that mental interiority acquires its predominant place among attributes of the modern self.8

One of the striking consequences of this move is that it leads Descartes, almost immediately, to wonder about other people’s interiors. Other people are part of the doubtful external world of appearances. In the Second Meditation, Descartes looks out his window and sees men crossing the square. “Yet do I see any more than hats and coats which could conceal automatons? I judge that they are men. And so something which I thought I was seeing with my eyes is in fact grasped solely by the faculty of judgment which is in my mind” (21). Though he dismisses the question quickly, he recognizes a problem already implicit in his epistemology: “Descartes’s sceptic manages to cut off the subject from its object and, thereby, from all other subjects” (Avramides 35). Other people are the example of deceptive appearances par excellence, not only because they conceal themselves in clothing but also, more importantly, because the body hides a mind that is radically different from its outer covering. We know this already from our own case, which Descartes has demonstrated by pointing out that his own body may be an illusion, but not his thoughts.

It is revealing that Descartes can confidently assure himself that the coats and hats clothe men with minds like his own. His response points toward (though it probably did not contain) a standard response to the problem of other minds: analogy with oneself (Avramides 45, 51). The privileging of my own mental interior cuts me off from other subjects, but by applying this same privileging to other people, I can posit that they too must have minds concealed by their bodies. Thus the modern self, which Descartes may have done more than any other individual to create, has necessitated a certain sleight-of-hand with regard to other people. While others are affirmed in general as subjects, the contents of their minds must remain mysterious. If my inner realm of thought is so different from the outer realm of appearances, then by analogy this must be true of other
people as well. The inscrutability of others thus in a way affirms my own interiority. To carry the matter back to Manet, Woman with a Parrot may draw our attention to the sitter’s hard-to-read facial expression in order to underscore precisely the dualism that makes inwardness—as the central attribute of Enlightenment selfhood—possible. On this reading, as exemplified by Wollheim, Manet’s figures do not tell us anything about themselves, but their appearance of private thought need not undermine our own sense of subjectivity. Quite the opposite: these figures then become occasions for our own absorbing reverie (this is what happens, at least initially, to the speaker of “On a Portrait”).

In the competing reading of Woman with a Parrot, as exemplified by Fried, Victorine’s inscrutable look conceals nothing. Descartes’s brief comments on the problem of knowing other people’s minds suggest this alternative without taking it seriously. The diabolical alternative to the existence of other human subjects is the automaton (“Yet do I see any more than hats and coats which could conceal automatons?”). The automaton may be deceptive, but not because his exterior conceals a radically different interior. Rather, an automaton would have no interior at all in the Cartesian sense. Manet and Eliot represent this alternative by the figure of the parrot. Parrots can “speak,” and sometimes they are credited with using language appropriately, yet we do not think they have minds like ours, if at all. Their behavior puts the lie to the idea that language exteriorizes thought, brings the inside into contact with a social world. It is pure imitation without expression.

The automaton or parrot poses a particular challenge to the romantic model of self, in which feeling, expression, and originality are paramount. The romantic self extends and intensifies the interior space that Descartes had identified while reorienting this space around nature and feeling rather than reason. The act of expression that gives access to this space also shapes and gives meaning to it, whether through the look of the face, through language, or (above all) through art. To this model of the self, originality is crucial: “If nature is an intrinsic source, then each of us has to follow what is within; and this may be without precedent. We should not hope to find our models without” (Taylor 376). It is this romantic model of the self that is most threatened by the possibility of automatic or imitative—nonexpressive—behavior. So although flatness and copying might seem to refer to completely different features (of a painting or of behavior generally), they are linked under the romantic model of
interiority that both Manet and Eliot question: they are both antithetical
to interiority, betraying a fatal failure or absence of the “inner voice.”

If the inscrutable expression presented in Woman with a Parrot either
affirms interiority by emphasizing her self-absorption or repudiates
romantic subjectivity by expressing nothing, the painting offers contra-
dictory evidence about how to decide the issue. In Woman with a Parrot
Manet responds to a number of previous paintings, in particular an identi-
cally titled work by Gustave Courbet exhibited in 1866, the same year as
Manet’s. Paradoxically, Manet’s response to these paintings indicates both
that the woman in his portrait has something to conceal and that (to a
degree) he is concerned with issues of copying and reflection. It is thus
not so surprising that Eliot responded to the portrait in two different
ways.

No scholarly study of the woman-with-a-parrot genre scene exists.
Most examples, though, represent the parrot as the object of the woman’s
absorption. Two seventeenth-century paintings that Manet can be pre-
sumed to have known through engravings in his copy of Charles Blanc’s

*Woman with a Parrot*. Gustave Courbet. 1866. The Metropolitan Museum of
Art, H. O. Havemeyer Collection, Bequest of Mrs. H. O. Havemeyer, 1929
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_Histoire des peintres_ (Reff, “Manet”) show a woman feeding her parrot (by Frans van Mieris and Gaspard Netchser, both titled _Woman with a Parrot_). In two nineteenth-century French works (Delacroix, 1827, and Courbet) she plays with her parrot. Several English examples (which Manet was unlikely to have seen) represent the woman communicating or sharing a moment of reverie with her bird (George Morland’s eighteenth-century work _The Disconsolate_ and two portraits of Elizabeth Siddal by Walter Deverell, _The Pet_ and _The Grey Parrot_, both 1852). In all these scenes, the parrot provides an opportunity to showcase either the woman’s tenderness or her flirtatiousness; she appears engaged in an interpersonal exchange with a pet who stands in for a person (the beholder is invited to take one position or the other). Indeed, in the nineteenth century parrots were considered appropriate pets for women, especially lonely ones, as an outlet for their emotions. As a genre, the scene refers to a capacity for sympathy and affection (attributed specifically to women) that presumably comes from within, even though the inside cannot be shown. When he depicts the woman and the parrot standing apart from each other and showing no interest in each other, Manet takes a rather radical turn. Their lack of engagement contributes to our impression of her as uncommunicative.

Delacroix and Courbet make use of the parrot to display the woman at her most accessible. Both depict a naked woman outstretched on a piece of drapery in a vaguely Middle Eastern setting (Delacroix indicates this by the woman’s headdress and her slightly narrowed eyes, Courbet by an oriental carpet hanging in the background). The woman dangles her hand down (Delacroix) or reaches up (Courbet) to touch the parrot; in the first instance she appears to be teasing him idly, while in the second, his location and outstretched wings give the bird a more masterful appearance. Both women seem to treat the parrot as a stand-in for an erotic companion. The women show all—to their pets and to us. Indeed, it is the project of Courbet’s realism to suggest that full access is possible, even (or especially) across the distance that separates us from this orientalized nude.

By contrast, Manet shows his woman fully clothed, staring back at the viewer rather than dallying with her parrot. Everything that is eroticized and in motion in Courbet’s work has been covered up and stilled. Yet certain details in the painting still suggest erotic potential, for example the slightly coquettish gesture of her right hand, which holds a bouquet of violets. Perhaps she has received these as a recent gift from a gentleman.
The gesture of her other hand emphasizes that possibility, touching the cord from which a man’s monocle hangs. Contemporaries would have immediately recognized the implication of the monocle, an accessory worn almost exclusively by men, while women conventionally carried lorgnettes (Hadler 122). At the foot of the parrot’s stand, a half-peeled orange reminds us that outer coverings can be removed to reveal what is underneath. Thus Courbet’s air of intimacy between woman and parrot, and woman and viewer, has not entirely been blanked out but rather interiorized. What was the woman’s exterior (her dalliance with the parrot, her exposed body) has become her interior—the secrets of her life (whose monocle?) and of her concealed body. Still deeper lie the secret thoughts suggested by her mysterious expression.

At the same time that Manet appears to be thematizing the distinction between interior and exterior, and emphasizing the hiddenness of the inside, he also draws our attention to the surface of the painting. Seeing here brings us not interior depth but painted surface. An eyeglass is intended to improve vision, but in this picture it serves only as decoration. The nosegay of violets and the half-peeled orange are not only accessories, they also self-referentially name their own colors (in French as well as English) (Armstrong 166). This reflective—as opposed to representational—aspect of the painting is intensified in the figure of the parrot. By choosing the talkative African Grey rather than the brightly hued macaw depicted by Delacroix and Courbet, Manet draws attention to the parrot’s facility at copying language. Visually, the bird “parrots” the figure of the woman by repeating on a smaller scale the tints and strokes that make up her appearance (Armstrong 168). Copying, in this painting, is the opposite of giving access. As a portrait, it copies Victorine Meurent by concentrating on her surface. As a genre scene, it reflects and revises the woman with a parrot of Delacroix and Courbet while doing away with the illusion of access to a reality behind the surface of the canvas.

In emphasizing both concealment and surface, Manet reinforces the sense that the woman portrayed is somehow beyond our reach. But he does not provide an answer to the question of where she is: is she inside the mind that does not reveal itself to us, or is she absent altogether? It is primarily the parrot that opens up the latter possibility. For Eliot too, the parrot is the site of anxieties about the possible flatness of both self and other people. Eliot wonders, is the parrot like the woman, or unlike her? They share their inscrutability, but not necessarily for the same
reasons. In “On a Portrait,” Eliot preserves the possibility of an interior space of private thought and imagination, a space the speaker attributes to the woman and takes up himself as a consequence of viewing her. In “Portrait of a Lady,” the woman is represented as herself a mindless parrot, a role that, again, rubs off on the speaker, when he feels he must “cry like a parrot.” Manet has made both interpretations available to Eliot.

The parrot’s I: “On a portrait”

Sometime in the winter of 1908–09, T. S. Eliot, then a junior at Harvard, saw a reproduction of Manet’s Woman with a Parrot. This painting became the subject of a sonnet, “On a Portrait,” that was published in the Harvard Advocate in January 1909:

Among a crowd of tenuous dreams, unknown
To us of restless brain and weary feet,
Forever hurrying, up and down the street,
She stands at evening in the room alone.

Not like a tranquil goddess carved of stone
But evanescent, as if one should meet
A pensive lamia in some wood-retreat,
An immaterial fancy of one’s own.

No meditations glad or ominous
Disturb her lips, or move the slender hands;
Her dark eyes keep their secrets hid from us,
Beyond the circle of our thought she stands.

The parrot on his bar, a silent spy,
Regards her with a patient curious eye.

This little-known work was not reprinted in Eliot’s Complete Poems and Plays but rather in the slim 1967 volume Poems Written in Early Youth (rather misleadingly titled, since they date through 1910, when he was already working on drafts of “Prufrock” and “Portrait of a Lady”). “On a Portrait” thus stands outside Eliot’s carefully shaped canon and has accordingly received minimal critical attention. For Mayer, the poem represents Eliot’s first Lafortguian experiments, following less than a
month after his receipt of *The Symbolist Movement* (46–48), but although the poem has many sources, I would argue that Laforgue is not among them. After “On a Portrait” Eliot published no more until the following semester, when the markedly Laforguian “Nocturne” (November 1909), “Humouresque,” and “Spleen” (January 1910) appeared in the *Advocate*. During this pause he clearly began to practice the techniques of dramatic speaking that mark all his collected poetry from the early period up through *The Waste Land*. “On a Portrait,” however, lacks a dramatized speaker and distinctly echoes Keats, Swinburne, and Tennyson. Manet’s painting about copying is not really a surprising choice for Eliot, given his own artistic issues of apprenticeship at the time. His treatment of Manet revolves around the two interpretations of the painting discussed above: the woman as inscrutable “lamia” whose private look absorbs the poet and opens up the possibilities of his imagination, or else the woman—and correspondingly the poet—as parrot, foreclosing the possibility of both inwardness and originality.

“On a Portrait” describes Manet’s painting as seen by someone drawn to imagine the woman portrayed. He finds himself first absorbed—and thereby relieved of his “weary” self-consciousness—but then baffled by her inscrutable look. End rhymes in the first stanza identify the woman as both “unknown” and “alone”—physically, in her room, and mentally, because her thoughts and “dreams” cannot be known by the speaker. Does the grammatically ambiguous adjective “unknown” refer to her “tenuous dreams” or to “she,” standing alone in her room while the speaker and his companions rush by in the street below? Both, for while Victorine Meurent is literally unknown to the speaker as a viewer of the painting and also unknown to the imagined passers-by who don’t have access to her private rooms, her dreams are also by necessity unknown. Her expression reveals nothing about her thoughts except that she has them.

The unusual expression “circle of our thought” suggests both the woman’s inscrutability and her absorption in thought. The viewer attributes a world of interior thought to her, which both excludes him and yet also implies an analogous interiority in himself. The expression is echoed in Eliot’s 1914 notebook poem “The Burnt Dancer” (as “circle of my brain”) and generally points forward to his consistent attention to problems of perspective in “Prufrock,” “Portrait of a Lady,” his dissertation on F. H. Bradley, and *The Waste Land*. Indeed, “circle of our thought” is not so far from the expression “finite centers” that he uses in *Knowledge*
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and Experience to describe the problem of perspective and the difficulty of making contact with any reality outside one’s own mind. “How do we yoke our divers worlds to draw together?” Eliot asks in this work:

How can we issue from the circle described about each point of view? and since I can know no point of view but my own, how can I know that there are other points of view, or admitting their existence, how can I take account of them? (141)

“Circle of thought,” “finite center,” and “point of view” all imply a horizon, however broad, that bounds the mind and cuts it off from others. The terms also imply an interior center where self and meaning reside.

Perhaps more significantly, the expression “circle of our thought” also points back to Walter Pater’s Studies in the History of the Renaissance (1873). Carol Christ has compellingly argued that Pater formulated the problem of epistemological isolation not only for Tennyson and Browning but also for the modernist writers of dramatic monologues, especially Eliot (Victorian 30). In the famous passage from his conclusion, Pater remarks that

Experience, already reduced to a group of impressions, is ringed round for each one of us by that thick wall of personality through which no real voice has ever pierced on its way to us, or from us to that which we can only conjecture to be without. Every one of those impressions is the impression of the individual in his isolation, each mind keeping as a solitary prisoner its own dream of a world. (218)

Pater’s language of a self “ringed” by a “thick wall” echoes and emphasizes his use of the common philosophical expression “circle of ideas” in the preface:

Art and poetry, philosophy and the religious life, and that other life of refined pleasure and action in the conspicuous places of the world, are each of them confined to its own circle of ideas, and those who prosecute either of them are generally little curious of the thoughts of others. (74)

The idea of confinement within one’s own point of view is, of course, a familiar one in modernism. What makes Eliot’s use of the term “circle of thought” special in this context is that he applies it to someone else, and
particularly to a painted likeness of a person. Thus his primary topic here is not the self’s isolation but rather an act of imaginary identification with the woman in Manet’s painting. Like her, he too is lost in thought—about her. And here the connection with Pater becomes more apparent, for The Renaissance essentially gives instruction on what paintings to look at and how to look at them in order to achieve precisely this effect of absorption. “Impressions” may isolate us from one another, but they also constitute the “dream” that is interiority.

For Pater, Leonardo da Vinci’s greatness and his modernity lie in his investigation of interiors: his “art of going deep, of tracking the sources of expression to their subllest retreats, the power of an intimate presence in the things he handled” (137). By “expression” Pater means particularly “the smiling of women” (138) whose significance Leonardo moodily sought “too far below that outside of things in which art really begins and ends” (142). In other words, Pater locates in Leonardo’s portraits the modern discovery of psychological inwardness. Yet where the painter sought inwardness in his sitter’s “unfathomable smile, always with a touch of something sinister in it” (149), we are to find it by looking at his painting. Eliot is thus following Pater’s instruction to the letter when he selects for the subject of his sonnet a portrait of a woman with an unfathomable smile. The purpose of this smile, as Pater’s text amply demonstrates, is to generate “strange thoughts and fantastic reveries and exquisite passions” in the viewer’s imagination (150). Eliot’s description of the woman in the painting as a lamia (Pater describes La Gioconda as a kind of vampire) suggests precisely this effect of her smile.

The reverie Eliot’s speaker attributes to the woman temporarily releases him from his “restless brain” into a space of his own reverie, as if she were an “immortal fancy of one’s own.” The word fancy is a key point of reference for the romantic conceptions embedded in Eliot’s poem. “Fancy” picks up the “dreams” of the opening line and claims them as the poet’s own, but where other people’s dreams are essentially inaccessible, his own dreams are the site of imagination. In the romantic construction of the poet, creative imagination is the defining (and elevating) faculty of the self. Indeed, the “lamia” of the previous line is, in Keats’s poem, a creature of the imagination who is able to generate a self-sustaining world of aesthetic and erotic pleasure not only for herself but for others as well—for everyone except the killjoy philosopher Apollonius, with his “perceant eye.” A capacious inner world of imagination opens up for the
poet as a consequence of his encounter with a look that he interprets as concealing a “circle of thought” inaccessible to him. Her inscrutability enables his own interiority, from which the sonnet issues.

Yet, as I began by saying, the poem offers two interpretations of her look, and the difference between them can be located in the phrase “An immaterial fancy of one’s own.” Imagination may not equate with fancy; drawing a distinction important to romantic poetics, Coleridge contrasted the two faculties. He defined fancy, as opposed to the organic creativity of the imagination, as a mechanical process of recall and repetition, a “mirrorment . . . repeating simply, or by transposition” (199). Fancy may thus be “immaterial” in two senses: issuing from the disembodied inner world (literally not made of matter), but also not important because mechanical, lacking originality. Even Keats’s lamia finds her inventions are illusions.

At the same time, the words fancy and especially lamia clearly refer to a body of romantic precedents that shape the language and thoughts of the poem. The use of lamia suggests that the poet’s ideas—more fancy than imagination—derive from Keats’s poem. Its place in Eliot’s poem doubly encodes anxiety about originality, for it was not even his idea to use this word: according to Powel, Eliot’s friend Frederic Schenk suggested “pensive lamia” in place of “young chimera” (88). Although “young chimera” better captures the now-you-see-her, now-you-don’t quality of Manet’s young woman, Eliot likely recognized lamia as an appropriate choice because of the saturation of his vocabulary in Keats’s. The words dream, wood, lip, eye, alone, hand, thought, and silent, for example, each appear four or more times in “Lamia” (342–59). All the end words in Eliot’s first two quatrains also appear in “Lamia,” with the exception of “own” in line 8.

As a reference to someone else’s conception of the imagination, lamia highlights the fact that the poem itself sets out to copy Manet’s painting by describing it. Indeed, though the poet claims the figure of Victorine Meurent as “a fancy of one’s own,” she came to him in exactly the opposite way, from a book of pictures. The poem also copies more than just Manet’s painting. Much of the poem derives from late romantic and Victorian sources besides Keats and Pater, including Tennyson’s “The Lotos Eaters” (1833), Swinburne’s “The Garden of Proserpine” (1866), James Thomson’s “City of Dreadful Night” (1874), and less easily pinpointed influences from Lionel Johnson, Ernest Dowson, and other fin-de-siècle figures. For example, “The Garden of Proserpine,” with its delay of the
same subject and verb ("she stands"), appears to provide the model for Eliot's first stanza (noted in Powel 90):

Pale, beyond porch and portal,
Crowned with calm leaves, she stands
Who gathers all things mortal
With cold immortal hands; (Swinburne 131)

Eliot's lamia, moreover, shares Proserpine's stillness, in contrast to Keats's lamia, who dashes all over Greece in her quest for Lycius. Following Swinburne, Eliot empties out the romantic energies represented by the terms lamia and fancy, and in their place we get the word stand, which evokes both Proserpine's pose and the parrot's perch in Manet's painting. Stand is thus a multilayered word for Eliot, but it does not imply depth. Rather, it sets up a chain of reflections, literary and visual, that leads, if anywhere, to the figure of the parrot who sits atop the stand and closes Eliot's poem.

This stilling and ultimate disappearance of romantic energies can be seen by comparing Eliot's, Swinburne's, and Keats's use of dreams. For Keats, dreaming is a powerful activity that can give rise to a satisfying reality: "It was no dream," comments the speaker of "Lamia," "or say a dream it was, / Real are the dreams of Gods, and smoothly pass / Their pleasures in a long immortal dream" (345). But Eliot's adjective "tenuous" undercuts the reality of Keats's dreams, just as "immaterial" depletes the force of "fancy." Eliot again follows Swinburne in this negation of the power of dreams. "The Garden of Prosperpine" begins:

Here, where the world is quiet;
Here, where all trouble seems
Dead winds' and spent waves' riot
In doubtful dreams of dreams; (130)

Similarly, in Tennyson's "The Lotos Eaters," dreaming is a drug-induced state that substitutes for worldly action: "How sweet it were . . . / With half-shut eyes ever to seem / Falling asleep in a half-dream!" (434). For Swinburne and Tennyson, dreaming is pleasurable because it is disconnected from reality. It is a region into which the lotos eaters desire to escape, as an alternative to the travel that has wearied them ("all things have rest, why should we toil alone?" [432] they complain, much like Eliot's "us of restless brain and weary feet"). Imagination and the interior where it
Parrot's Eye: A Portrait by Manet and Two by T. S. Eliot

arises are thus not entirely cancelled out by Swinburne or Eliot, but rather rendered impotent, "immaterial" in a world of hurrying feet.

The treatment of dreaming bears directly on the status of interiority that is at stake in the parrot portraits of Manet and Eliot. On the one hand, the "tenuous dreams" that open "On a Portrait" refer to a space of interior reverie inhabited by the woman, and although the privacy of her dreams excludes him, his own dreams about her are stirred. On the other hand, dreaming is not a significant or efficacious activity, as it is in Keats. Indeed, the poet seems anxious that his dreams will turn out not even to be his "own," but only faint copies of other people's. For Descartes, the possibility that the exterior world may be a dream provides a rationale for turning inward; for Swinburne and Eliot, the doubtfulness of dreams calls into question the whole project of interiority. Or rather, in their treatment of dreaming, these later writers reconfigure interiority as a series of reflections instead of a source of originality. Interestingly, Wollheim identifies the various cluttered or blank backgrounds of Manet's single-figure portraits, especially in the Victorine Meurent series, as producing the effect of the nocturnal dream (163). The striking fact of these backgrounds is their flatness, their lack of depth perspective. The background in Woman with a Parrot thus seems to correspond to a weakening and flattening of dreamspace in "On a Portrait."

The vanishing quality of interiority is emphasized in Eliot's important word "evanescent," which also describes Manet's evocative yet indistinct brushwork in the rose gown, the rough ébauché (sketchy or unfinished) look that contributes to the painting's lack of depth (and shows the similarity in technique between Manet and the impressionists). Just as Manet's rough brushwork calls attention to the dress as paint rather than representation, the speaker in the poem finds the woman disappearing the more he looks at her.

The introduction of the parrot in the closing couplet indicates a change in the poet's conception of both seeing and speaking. His gaze is replaced by the parrot's: "The parrot on his bar, a silent spy, / Regards her with a patient curious eye." Like the poet, the parrot is a "spy" on a private scene, but what can it tell us? If it could speak, it would only repeat things that other people have said. Indeed, the poem itself is a kind of "parrot's eye," the poet looking at a painting and repeating what he sees (thereby associating his active speaking with the passivity of looking). The parrot's "eye" thus punningly merges with the poet's I. What would
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a parrot's I be? The romantic lyric I—expressing the unique inwardness of the poet—implies a conception of self that parroting would seem to cancel. That the pronoun I never appears in Eliot's poem except by implication in this pun indicates a disappearance of the speaker that exceeds the woman's evanescence. If the romantic self is predicated on expression of original thoughts and feeling, what kind of self can a poet have if he only repeats and imitates?

"On a Portrait" begins as an exercise in absorption, whereby the poet forgets himself in contemplation of an aesthetic object and enters his own interior terrain, from which the poem issues. Yet the object of his absorption raises doubts about whether there is any inner space to enter—hers or his own. Ultimately, the figure of the parrot returns him to the painting's surface and to the imitative rather than expressive quality of his thoughts or interior speech. Not only does he copy the painting by describing it, but his many echoes of Pater, Swinburne, Keats, Tennyson, and others mark the poem as an apprentice work, derivative of the style of the previous generation. The poem's anxiety about originality derives both from Eliot's own position as a fledgling poet and from a more generalized doubt about the viability of the fin-de-siècle lyric, on which this sonnet is modeled. Evanescent describes both the thematics of literary decadence and its historical condition in 1909. But, especially in view of Eliot's subsequent work, the poem also expresses doubt about the viability of a conception of poetry identified with originality itself, and about the interior to which an original utterance is supposed to give access.

"Portrait of a Lady" also reflects anxieties about originality, but it represents a significant advance on the problems raised in "On a Portrait." Particularly, Eliot has seized on the problem of imitation and subsumed it into a larger thematic of theatricality, where the theatrical is defined as a kind of automatic behavior that does not express internal feeling. Whether Eliot's theatricality—which could be said to dominate his career from this point on—parallels that of Manet is probably too large a subject for this paper. In the following discussion of "Portrait of a Lady," one of Eliot's most elusive poems, I focus expressly on the relationship between interiority and parroting as the completion of Eliot's reading of Manet.
Parrot's cry: "Portrait of a Lady"

"Portrait of a Lady" reverses the situation of "On a Portrait." Manet's silent, enigmatic woman comes to life and speaks her mind to her male beholder, who retreats into a silent monologue of his own. The woman's "secrets" turn out to be a disappointing concatenation of Victorian clichés, mainly derived from Matthew Arnold's "The Buried Life" (1852), a poem about trying to access interiority. Though she expresses confidence in her own "buried life," it looks more like copying or reflection than interiority. In contrast, the male speaker emphasizes the content of his thoughts, and through his resistance to the lady he builds up a sense of his own inwardness ("inside my brain"). We hear only his thoughts and only her speech; he is all inwardness and she is all surface. As I will suggest, however, the male speaker's inwardness is artificially sustained and finally collapses into a form of reflection or parroting (both a mirror and a parrot appear in section 3). His language and his face express feelings that are not his own: he smiles as called upon to do so by the woman and, through her, Matthew Arnold.20

In section 3, after the lady confronts him over the failure of their friendship, the speaker thinks desperately to himself:

And I must borrow every changing shape
To find expression . . . dance, dance
Like a dancing bear,
Cry like a parrot, chatter like an ape.
Let us take the air, in a tobacco trance.  (11)

Like the dancing bear and chattering ape, the parrot imitates or "borrows" human behavior, and the speaker's recourse to copying reflects the pressure the lady has placed on him to conform to a certain role of friend that she has in mind. She has tried to set the stage for his performance as parrot, his mouthing the words of others, as is evident from the opening lines: "You have the scene arrange itself—as it will seem to do. . . . An atmosphere of Juliet's tomb" (8). The automatic, nonexpressive quality of performance is emphasized in several March Hare poems that feature the figure of the marionette. "Convictions," which dates from the same time as the first drafts of "Portrait of a Lady," begins, "Among my marionettes I find / The enthusiasm is intense! / They see the outlines of their stage / Conceived upon a scale immense . . ." (March Hare 11). As Ricks notes,
the figure of the marionette appears in the book that introduced Eliot to modern poetry, Arthur Symons’s *The Symbolist Movement*:

> Are we not all puppets, in a theatre of marionettes, in which the parts we play, the dresses we wear, the very emotion whose dominance gives its express form to our faces, have all been chosen for us . . . ? And as our parts have been chosen for us, our motions controlled from behind the curtain, so the words we seem to speak are but spoken through us, and we do but utter fragments of some elaborate invention . . .

(Symons 154)

In “Portrait,” automatic speech is particularly exemplified by the street piano that, “mechanical and tired, / Reiterates some worn-out common song / With the smell of hyacinths across the garden / Recalling things that other people have desired” (10). Here Eliot revises the romantic conception of lyric as the expression of individual feeling (desire) in an antiromantic direction by describing “song” as the expression of someone else’s feeling. The expression is mechanical both in the way it is reproduced on the street piano and in the way it reproduces (or “recalls”) feeling in the speaker.

In “Portrait of a Lady,” the lady explicitly privileges interior feeling and its sincere expression, but the language she uses is all borrowed from Arnold’s “The Buried Life.” In this poem, Arnold stretches romantic interiority to its breaking point. The speaker tries to reach his own “hidden self” by making contact with his beloved, who has been conducting a merry “war of mocking words” with him. He enjoins her, “Yes, yes, we know that we can jest, / We know, we know that we can smile!” (286). But, he pleads with her, “hush awhile / And turn those limpid eyes on mine, / And let me read there, love! thy inmost soul.” Arnold opposes superficial smiling, an expression of the mouth, to sincere tears that come from inside the eyes (tears being an important resource of nineteenth-century sentimentality). On this basis the speaker attempts to break through barriers erected both socially and psychologically in order to access the “buried life” in himself and his beloved. This buried life is variously described as the “inmost soul,” the “buried stream,” his “genuine self,” our “true, original course,” the “soul’s subterranean depths,” and a “lost pulse of feeling” (286–91).

Eliot’s lady most closely imitates Arnold when she tries to make contact with her male companion. Like Arnold, she asks him not just to smile:
"Youth is cruel, and has no remorse / And smiles at situations which it cannot see" (9). When she reaches metaphorically for his hand—"I am always sure that you understand / My feelings, always sure that you feel, / Sure that across the gulf you reach your hand"—she echoes Arnold’s assurance that

Only—but this is rare—
When a beloved hand is laid in ours [...] A bolt is shot back somewhere in our breast, And a lost pulse of feeling stirs again. The eye sinks inward, and the heart lies plain, And what we mean, we say, and what we would, we know. (290)

At every point in Eliot’s poem, of course, the male interlocutor resists the lady’s cues to perform the role of the Arnoldian lover and withholds his “hidden self.” He reaches for his hat instead of her hand. Instead of shedding the tears that Arnold asks for, he “smile[s], of course / And go[es] on drinking tea” (9). Nonetheless, her reliance on Arnold becomes ever more explicit:

Yet with these April sunsets, that somehow recall My buried life, and Paris in the Spring, I feel immeasurably at peace, and find the world To be wonderful and youthful, after all. (9)

The lady’s references to Arnold—her orientation within a romantic–Arnoldian framework—establish a paradoxical relationship to interiority. She asserts her belief in an interior space of sincere feeling that can be accessed through the privileged relationship of two lovers or “friends.” Yet she can only express her own feelings through the quotation of Victorian clichés, a practice that places her in the alternative framework of theatrical, mechanical, or automatic speech.

The male speaker resists being scripted into this trap. He fakes a smile rather than trying to be sincere, and whenever possible tries to prevent her from knowing him. Inside the privacy of his “brain” another self emerges that is out of keeping with the “ariettes” (9) of her performance.22

Inside my brain a dull tom–tom begins Absurdly hammering a prelude of its own, Capricious monotone That is at least one definite “false note.”
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This important passage has been much noted for Eliot’s use of “primitive” subject matter. The “tom-tom” is at once the poet’s name (Tom), the sound of his thudding heart, the discordant modernist music of his rebellion against Victorian convention, and the signature of the other, an echo of a “savage” ritual whose cultural meaning is inaccessible to the modern speaker. The drumbeat appears to be a true expression of self rather than the ultracivilized “attenuated tones of violins” in which the lady wishes to ensnare him. But perhaps more importantly, it expresses a private self to which she does not have access. As long as he maintains this secret “monotone,” it proves that there is more to him than his half-hearted role-playing.

Eliot’s “dull tom-tom” ironically echoes Arnold’s “lost pulse of feeling,” but irony only partially conceals the structural similarity of the two sounds, each of which suggests an analogy between heartbeat and musical or metrical rhythm. The very terms that denote the place of private expression inside his brain echo the cliché he is trying to avoid: his “capricious monotone” picks up Arnold’s “capricious play” (288). He seems to acknowledge the superficiality of his sense of ostensible inwardness when, leaving the woman, he submits with relief to the mechanical rhythms of convention.

—Let us take the air, in a tobacco trance,
Admire the monuments,
Discuss the late events,
Correct our watches by the public clocks.
Then sit for half an hour and drink our bocks. (9)

Only in the woman’s presence does he feel, or even need, that sense of inwardness on which he so strenuously insists.

The appearance of the parrot in section 3 directly parallels the “dull tom-tom” passage by virtue of their shared refrain, “Let us take the air, in a tobacco trance.” The parrot’s imitative or automatic speech would seem to oppose the authentic note of the “dull tom-tom.” Yet, strangely, the “borrowed” cry of the parrot and the speaker’s “capricious monotone” have more in common with each other than with most other sounds in the poem. As Eliot represents them, the figure of the savage is like the figure of the parrot: both are non-European others, and both make sounds that can’t be interpreted.

Eliot’s poem climaxes, like Arnold’s, in a moment of recognition:
This is as I had reckoned [. . .]
I feel like one who smiles, and turning shall remark
Suddenly, his expression in a glass.
My self-possession gutters; we are really in the dark.  (11)

Rather than coming face to face with the beloved and thereby with the subterranea true self (Arnold) or even with the abominable primitive self (as Conrad’s Kurtz does), this speaker encounters himself simply as a reflection. The darkness of the moment derives as much from the collapse of his elaborate construction of opposed interior and exterior selves as it does from the collapse of the fiction of his friendship with the lady. For indeed his sense of having a private interior depends on her failure to understand him, and the collapse is brought on by her correct recognition that he is not her friend. He sees himself, suddenly, as if from the outside, and rather than emphasizing the difference between inside and outside, this experience reveals him as nothing but a surface onto which are copied (or mirrored) the appropriate facial expressions. He describes his feelings (supposedly the source of his inwardness) as a smile seen in the mirror—an expression faked and then reflected. If the inscrutable smile of Manet’s woman first gave the poet an occasion for absorption and poetic reverie, it has now been applied to his own face as a sign of the flatness that he experiences, as it were, from the inside.

As has often been noted, “Portrait of a Lady” is more a portrait of the male speaker than of the lady. The poem is also far less painterly or ekphrastic (still less imagistic) than it is theatrical. Eliot seems not to have any paintings in mind; rather, the poem marks his definitive transition to the dramatic mode that will define his literary production (as well as his critical interests) for most of his subsequent career. As I have been arguing here, however, the one portrait that we know Eliot to have carefully looked at—Manet’s Woman with a Parrot—actually prepares this transition. Eliot’s conception of subjectivity emerges in this poem as both flat and theatrical (or dramatic), terms that are entirely consistent with Manet’s portrayal of Victorine Meurent. Over time, these features more and more dominate Eliot’s representation of character. In the late plays The Confidential Clerk and The Elder Statesman, which mark the completion of this trajectory, his dramatis personae lack interiority except to the extent that they are conscious of themselves as playing prescribed roles. The difference between these plays and “Portrait of a Lady” is that the male
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speaker of “Portrait” still tries to make himself believe in an interior space from which selfhood and originality arise. Thus, what makes the poem modern is not what makes its speaker appear to have depth. For Eliot as for Manet, the nineteenth century’s encounter with modernity produces an unintelligible facial look that denies itself as expression of anything. In “Portrait of a Lady” the evanescent inner life already being questioned by Manet and Arnold looks back out at us before vanishing entirely.

Notes

1. The Manet connection was first noted by Harford Powel Jr. in his unpublished Brown University master’s thesis of 1954. It is picked up by John Soldo in The Tempering of T. S. Eliot (1983) but not discussed. Eliot composed only two other clearly ekphrastic poems, “The Love Song of St. Sebastian” (most likely based on Mantegna’s St. Sebastian) and “La Figlia Che Piange,” the latter identified as a “picture poem” in the tradition of Keats and Rossetti by Derek Roper. He argues that the pose of the woman in “La Figlia” can be seen in portraits by Sargent, Whistler, and Tissot (Roper 223).

2. This book, which Fernandez specified as English, might have been Camille Mauclair’s popular work The Great French Painters and the Evolution of French Painting from 1830 to the Present Day (translated from the French and published in London by Duckworth in 1903), in which a reproduction of Manet’s painting appears (without any discussion) in a chapter on orientalism in painting. A larger reproduction appears in a chapter on Manet in the 1908 volume of the Masters in Art series (Boston: Bates and Guild), followed a few pages later by Olympia. Neither of these could really be described as a book on impressionism, but sections of each are devoted to impressionist painters. Both reproductions are black and white.

3. Among Manet’s interpreters, T. J. Clark offers the most substantial alternative to Fried’s explanation of these expressions. Focusing on Olympia and Bar aux Folies Bergère, Clark claims that the women for hire represented in these paintings look back at us with consciousness of their commodified condition, which they passively resist:

   The look which results is a special one: public, outward, “blasé” in Simmel’s sense, impassive, not bored, not tired, not disdainful, not quite focused on anything. Expression is its enemy, the mistake it concentrates on avoiding at all costs; for to express oneself would be to have one’s class be legible. (253)
Clark’s analysis works powerfully for these two paintings in particular but, as Fried points out, is less convincing for the figures who can’t be construed as prostitutes yet share the same look, such as those in the two philosopher canvases. Nonetheless, the formal analysis of Manet’s antiabsorptive technique does not rule out “actual social circumstances” (254) as an additional causation; surely changes of style are determined by both the history of the medium and the social context.

4. Though explanations differ, critics agree that the practice of portraiture changed precipitously after 1850, particularly in France—whether as a consequence of the newly available technique of photography, the exhaustion of traditional conventions of portraiture and the evolution toward art for art’s sake, or changes in the patronage system (McPherson 8, Loyrette 202). Historically, a sitter of social importance would commission a painter to represent him with the symbols of his status or profession. Portrait painting of this kind was considered to be low in the hierarchy of genres, but supported the painter financially (Woodall 5). Beginning in the 1860s, painters who could afford to (Manet and Degas both enjoyed independent income) increasingly selected friends, family members, or models as sitters, thereby conferring status on them through the portrait rather than the reverse (7). This step enabled the painter to experiment with the genre, whose boundaries became increasingly blurred.

5. For Fried, the woman’s gesture of holding the flowers up to her face, which draws our attention there, particularly marks the painting as portraitlike (Manet’s Modernism 334).

6. A similar look appears in many of Manet’s other single-figure portraits: The Absinthe Drinker (1858–59), Madame Brunet (1860), La Prune (1877), and most famously in his last major work, Bar aux Folies-Bergère (1882).

7. Linda Nochlin, for example, claims that the identities of Manet’s figures were constructed “solely on the basis of form on surface. Notions of ‘depth’ and ‘profundity’ were foreign to his way of thinking” (66).

8. Charles Taylor’s history of the Western model of selfhood predicated on inwardness credits Descartes with the discovery of rationality as an internal property, from which both reality and goodness are derived (156 et passim). In this essay I have also drawn on Roy Porter’s anthology, especially Peter Burke’s “Representations of the Self from Petrarch to Descartes” (17–28).

9. See M. H. Abrams, chapter 4, on the centrality of expression (rather than mimesis) in romantic poetic theory.
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10. Here is an example of this view:

If she [the single woman] misses the near and dear ties, the exclusive protection and tender care which her married sister may (or may not) have found in marriage, she can yet find many objects besides dogs, cats and parrots...round which to twine the loving tendrils that stretch from her heart, anxious to find something round which to cling tenderly. (Temple Bar [1861] 2.58. Qtd. in Shefer 438)

11. Sargent's 1890 portrait of a young girl (Beatrice) standing next to an enormous birdcage containing a parrot seems to follow Manet's antiabsorptive arrangement. Both Renoir (Woman with a Parrot and Rapha Maitre, 1871) and Berthe Morisot (Young Girl with Parrot, 1873) executed absorptive versions of the woman-with-a-parrot scene.

12. Hadler includes a telling caricature of the painting from 1868, showing the woman's eyes enlarged and darkened to large black spots, matched by an enlarged eye in the parrot and a grossly exaggerated monocle in her hand (122). The caricature suggests the contemporary perception of the painting as being about seeing and as emphasizing the lack of contact between viewer and subject.

13. One of the striking features of Manet's work, which I have not discussed here and which Eliot could not be expected to have known anything about, is "the literalness and obviousness with which he often quoted earlier paintings" (Fried, Manet's Modernism 24). His contemporaries interpreted this practice as either outright copying (lack of originality) or parody (lack of respect). Interestingly, in Histoire des peintres, Blanc comments on Gaspard Netscher—in lines of text directly below the engraving of Netscher's Woman with a Parrot—"An artist without personality would have done what they all do: he would have copied his master and retraced the same types in a weakened imitation." (11:3). Manet and Eliot obviously both struggled with the relationship between allusion and imitation.

14. Besides Mayer and Powel, Germer (37–38) and Soldo (100–01) also discuss the poem briefly. Paul Murphy reads "Circe's Palace" and "On a Portrait" in the context of Freud, as wish fulfillment dreams.

15. Eliot's copy of this book, the original 1873 edition, is in the Hayward Bequest at King's College, Cambridge. In a note affixed to the volume, Eliot has written: "The notes in pencil, on the margin of the Conclusion, were made by me, comparing the text with the later edition. This volume was bought for me by my mother at a sale of surplus books of the Mercantile Library, St. Louis, U.S.A., for 10 cents." This note does not indicate when Eliot acquired
the book, and it is possible that he did not have it when he wrote this sonnet, but even then his familiarity with Pater’s preface and conclusion cannot be ruled out. Soldo also suggests that “On a Portrait” reflects Pater’s treatment of La Gioconda (100). Mauclair’s Great French Painters (or wherever Eliot saw the Manet) may well not have been the first work of art criticism he read.

16. In crediting da Vinci with the discovery of inwardness, Pater is following both Robert Browning and the Swiss historian Jacob Burckhardt (The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy, 1860), who located the emergence of individuality in the Renaissance.

17. The first draft is not part of the Eliot archive at the Houghton Library at Harvard, and Powel cites no source for this information. Likely he learned it from Harford Powel Sr.

18. Of about 50 nouns, verbs, and adjectives in “On a Portrait,” 28 appear in “Lamia”; in addition to those listed above, the words unknown, brain, streets, evening, fancy, goddess, secret, curious, hurry, feet, dark, and hid appear two to three times in Keats’s poem.

19. The word weary, which appears in Tennyson’s poem as well as in Pater’s description of La Gioconda, pervades the poetic language of the late nineteenth century. It appears, for example, in Thomson’s “City of Dreadful Night”: “The City is of Night, but not of Sleep; / There sweet sleep is not for the weary brain” (180). Crawford details Eliot’s discovery of Thomson at the age of sixteen (36). Mayer traces weary to Arthur Symons’s description of Laforgue’s subject matter: “the restlessness of modern life, the haste to escape from whatever weighs too heavily on the liberty of the moment, that capricious liberty which demands only room enough to hurry itself weary” [Symons 60, qtd. in Mayer 47]. Though the poem was published just before Eliot began reading Laforgue seriously, Symons’s text may well have stirred recollections of both “The Lotos Eaters” and “City of Dreadful Night”; the source of weary is obviously overdetermined.

20. The general instability of the male speaker’s subjectivity has been examined in a number of studies, including Gray 13–36, Mayer 110–16, and Schwartz 191–93. Schwartz diagnoses this instability in the terms of the “half-objects” that Eliot would employ in Knowledge and Experience:

The young man has tried to maintain an external rather than internal point of view. . . But as [the lady] gradually wears away his defenses, the young man becomes aware of a subject/object split within himself. The man no longer has full control over his mask. (193)
Yet, as Childs has noted, the philosophical discourse in which Eliot learned to articulate and manage his skepticism is not the one where he first encountered it; “Portrait” and “Prufrock” were composed before reading Bradley (Childs 73–84).

The influence of Bergson provides a more likely explanation for the conflicts that seem inherent in the speaker of “Portrait” — particularly Bergson’s distinction between an “outer” or “social” self shaped by things and environment, and an inchoate, inexpressible “inner and individual existence” (130). The Bergsonian divide has been particularly noted in Prufrock by Gray and Childs, among others:

Whereas the second self is a creature of words . . . the first self is not verbal; thus Prufrock’s mounting frustration as the masks that constitute his practical self continually fall away only to leave him on the verge of the tongue-tied pure self: “It is impossible to say just what I mean!” (Childs 70–71)

Childs also notes the appearance of the “pure self” in “Portrait of a Lady” as prompted by images and smells that release nonverbal memories. Yet the relative slighting of “Portrait” for “Prufrock” in the critical literature may also have to do with the difficulty of fitting this elusive poem to the conceptual frameworks that have worked well in other cases. For one thing, Eliot wrote section 2 of “Portrait” in February 1910, while he was still at Harvard; section 1 followed in November (Eliot now in Paris), and section 3 a year later (Ricks xxxix). The portion of the poem most engaged with Matthew Arnold, then, predates the influence of Bergson. As would happen again with Bradley, Bergsonism provided a handy language for talking about selfhood and interiority, but in fact “The Buried Life” together with Manet’s Woman with a Parrot provide an adequate set of tools for understanding “Portrait of a Lady.”

I do not discuss here the influence of Robert Browning or Henry James, whose works clearly bear on “Portrait of a Lady,” Browning for his innovative use of dramatic monologue and James for his psychological study in the novel whose title Eliot likely borrowed. Eliot’s “portrait” could be seen, for example, as a rebuttal of James’s ethical distinction between persons and artworks in Portrait of a Lady. While the flatness of portraits signals their status as commodities, the psychological depth of persons is intrinsic to their status as free moral agents, according to James. In contrast, Eliot calls into question both psychological depth and freedom of agency by analogizing persons and portraits.

21. Though following Eliot’s connection with Manet on the point of marionettes would take us too far afield, it is worth noting two etchings by Manet that represent Edmond Duranty’s théâtre de polichinelle, a commedia dell’arte puppet theater established in the Tuileries in 1861. According to Fried, Manet
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thought of these theatrical scenes as capturing “essential aspects of his art” (Manet's Modernism 53). In general, the theatrical aspect of “Portrait of a Lady” is in marked contrast to the more absorptive character of “On a Portrait,” not only through the references to performance but also in the basic shift from lyric to dramatic speech. Indeed, this difference may constitute Eliot's chief achievement in “Portrait of a Lady” in terms of originality.

22. Her “ariettes” allude to the “airs and floating echoes” of the buried life in Arnold’s poem (290).

23. Crawford notes: “Salvation is to be sought in a return to the jungle. It is the tom-tom that convinces the reader that the young man is, potentially at least, capable of being saved from the genteel hell in which he is immured” (77).

24. Rawson links the “dull tom-tom” to sounds that Marlow recalls in Heart of Darkness: “The monotonous beating of a big drum filled the air with muffled shocks and a lingering vibration,” and “the beat of the drum, regular and muffled like the beating of a heart” (qtd. in Rawson 107). The note of pure savagery is supposed to be the note of pure authenticity: Kurtz’s behavior reveals the horror latent in every civilized heart, a horror as intrinsic as the actual heartbeat of life.

25. The primitive, for Eliot, concerns a state of mind that is inaccessible to Europeans, a case that challenges our assumptions about what we can know of other people. In a paper written for Josiah Royce’s philosophy seminar in 1913–14, Eliot argues, as summarized in Harry Costello’s notes, “How can we be sure we are correctly interpreting the mental life of a savage when the savage could not verify our interpretation if we could present it to him, because he could not understand it?” (85). The record of this seminar suggests that the case of the savage was one that Eliot raised on his own initiative, on two separate occasions, as a counterexample to Royce’s theory of interpretation by community (worked out in The Problem of Christianity, 1913). The philosophical virtue of the savage, for Eliot, is as an example of a mind whose contents we could not possibly imagine.

26. Thanks to John Irwin for pointing out to me that this “us” and “our” cannot refer to the speaker and the lady, since in 1910 a well-bred older woman would never smoke and drink beer in public, let alone with a man to whom she was not married.

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