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Article:

Murray, R. (2022) Things that cling: marine attachments in Eliot. *Journal of Modern Literature*, 45 (3). pp. 21-38. ISSN: 0022-281X

<https://doi.org/10.2979/jmodelite.45.3.03>

This article was published as Murray, Rachel. "Things that Cling: Marine Attachments in Eliot." *Journal of Modern Literature*, vol. 45 no. 3, 2022, p. 21-38. Project MUSE muse.jhu.edu/article/860642. No part of this article may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, transmitted, or distributed, in any form, by any means, electronic, mechanical, photographic, or otherwise, without the prior permission of Indiana University Press. For re- use, please contact the Copyright Clearance Center (www.copyright.com, 508-744-3350). For all other permissions, please visit <http://iupress.org>.

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Things that Cling: Marine Attachments in Eliot

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No fear; I like a good grip; I like to feel something in this slippery world that can hold, man.

—Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick* 522.

He said, Marie, / Marie, hold on tight. And down we went.

—Eliot, *Poems* 55.¹

Abstract:

T. S. Eliot was captivated by marine life forms, particularly creatures that cling. From the “ragged claws” of ancient crustaceans to the firm foothold of the “delicate algae and the sea anemone,” Eliot’s writing is full of creatures whose instinct is to “hold on tight” while the sea tosses them about. Eliot’s marine imagery is bound up with his thinking about the enabling possibilities of attachment—an idea that runs counter to his longstanding critical reputation as a poet of detachment. From his early reading of biological texts to his late critical writing, Eliot’s work demonstrates a recurrent interest in attachment that serves to complicate and enrich our understanding of his aesthetics.

Keywords: T. S. Eliot / marine life / attachment / biology / psychoanalysis

In late February 1915, T. S. Eliot wrote to Conrad Aiken weighing up his plans for the future. The letter marks something of a turning point in the author’s life: having just received word that he has been renominated for a fellowship at Harvard, he wonders whether he should return to academic life at Harvard or settle in London and seek employment. Neither option is remotely appealing, with Eliot expressing dread at the prospect of either returning to the “nausea of factory whistles ... and the college bell,” or remaining in the suffocating atmosphere of wartime England with its “execrable” food and climate. Yet he clearly feels under pressure to choose, writing dejectedly: “I suppose I shall be forced to a decision in a

few days” (LI 95-6). What’s striking about the letter is where Eliot’s thoughts drift as he struggles to make up his mind. After signing off affectionately to his old friend, he added the following remarks to the bottom of the page:

The idea of a submarine world of clear green light—one would be attached to a rock and swayed in two directions—would one be happiest or most wretched at the turn of the tide?
(LI 96)

The separation of these lines from the main body of the text marks the transition that has taken place from real world concerns to a more consoling state of fantasy. Amid this undersea realm, Eliot imagines himself as a kind of seaweed anchored beneath the waves with a rootlike structure known as a holdfast. Here, the author’s position remains uncertain, and yet there is something graceful in this image of wavering; rather than being torn apart by the sensation of being pulled “in two directions,” he simply moves with the flow, swaying back and forth with the rhythm of the turning tide.

The idea of a submarine world allows Eliot to transform his sense of being bound by circumstances into a more enabling condition. Here, he finds a kind of peace in the idea of remaining “attached ... and swayed,” rooted but flowing, mobile yet firmly held. Though the passage is describing a physical movement, the author’s final question—“would one be happiest or most wretched[?]”—suggests that Eliot also desires to be moved in a different sense. To be attached and swayed is to exist in a state of emotional dependence, remaining connected to and under the influence of someone or something else. The former word derives from the Latin *attachiare*, which means to bind someone or something legally, as well as the Old French *atachement*, which describes the sentiment that binds two people together (“attachment, n.” *OED*). As the sociologist Antoine Hennion notes, “attachment signifies a connection, restriction, restraint, and dependence, that reminds us that we are prisoners, confined on all sides by our history and our environment” (113). It is not what we would expect to find in the work of a writer renowned for his emotional and critical distance, who would pride himself in a 1919 letter to his mother

on remaining “isolated and detached” (*LI* 280). This might explain why Eliot’s vision of attachment appears at the bottom of the letter, like a submerged footnote, and why the author avoids possessive and personal pronouns in favour of more abstract statements (“the idea,” “one would”), as though keeping this possibility at arm’s length.

Taking this passage as a starting point, I want to suggest that it reveals an important undercurrent of Eliot’s writing—a submarine subtext, if you will. Here and elsewhere, images of marine life—particularly creatures that grip and cling—tend to surface in connection with the author’s thinking about the surprising virtues of the attached condition. From early on in his writing career, Eliot was captivated by images of marine life, finding himself “moved by fancies that are curled / Around these images, and cling” (16). From the “ragged claws” (7) of ancient crustaceans in his early poems, to the “delicate algae and the sea anemone” (193) that cling to the lines of “The Dry Salvages,” Eliot’s writing is full of creatures whose instinct is to “hold on tight” while the sea tosses them about. This article proposes that Eliot’s various engagements with marine fauna—his literal (or littoral) encounters with sea creatures on the Massachusetts coastline, as well as his study of crabs and other submarine critters in biological texts—helped him to imagine a version of selfhood, as well as an image of the poetic mind, that is not compromised by its emotional dependence on others, or on other forms of life, and is instead strengthened by its affective ties.

It makes sense that Eliot’s thinking about attachment would tend to coalesce around the shoreline: many of the attachment devices seen in the natural world (such as hooks, claws, and adhesive feet) have evolved in response to life at sea, in which survival can often depend on an organism’s ability to withstand the forces that would otherwise tear it asunder (Gorb 1558). As the writer and marine biologist Rachel Carson observes in her study *The Edge of the Sea* (1955), some creatures have even turned the force of the waves to their advantage: from the “smoothly sloping cone” of the limpet shell, Carson notes, “the surf rolls away harmlessly; indeed, the blows of falling water only ... strengthen its grip on the rock” (16). Marine organisms are clinging forms of life par excellence: even pelagic animals such as cephalopods have developed organs to attach themselves to others.

So far, however, readers have tended to associate Eliot's marine imagery with states of fluidity, disintegration, and decline—a falling apart rather than a holding together. Jonathan Greenberg, for instance, reads the “ragged claws” that “scuttl[e] across the floors of silent seas” (7) as a “figure for Prufrock’s melancholic vulnerability,” arguing that Eliot’s “synecdoche . . . bestows on the hapless creature a suggestion of injury or castration, an uncanny evocation of severed appendages moving mechanically in silence and darkness” (“A Lobster is Being Eaten”). Daniel Albright, meanwhile, argues that the author’s “canon of undersea fauna” (227) represents a form of a “phylogenetic vertigo” (232) in which the human subject “has lost every sort of boundary, even the boundary of its species, and is rapidly decomposing into lower, less structured modes of life” (231).² My sense, however, is that Eliot’s marine imagery is not only marked by a fear of evolutionary and psychic regression, which involves the return to a more primitive, more fluid state of being (what Albright terms “the Jellyfish Within,” 226), but also by an awareness of what has been lost to the human subject along the path of development. The presence of these clinging creatures not only signifies a fear of degenerating into a less evolved state—though we do see this in poems such as “Burbank with a Baedeker” (1920) in the “lustreless protrusive eye” that stares out from the “protozoic slime” (34). Rather, they represent a way of being that no longer holds, yet which may stand a chance of being regained.

Creaturely Attachments

Eliot’s tendency to adopt a position of intellectual and emotional detachment is most often associated with his essay “Tradition and the Individual Talent” (1919), which insists on the separation between the “man who suffers” and the “mind which creates.” In it, Eliot famously likens the mind of the poet to a “catalyst” that remains “unaffected” by the chemical reaction it produces (*CP2* 109), acting on the material it holds, while not being acted on by it—remaining, in short, *unswayed*, unmoved to states of happiness or wretchedness. Eliot would later distance himself from this critical stance and as some readers have pointed out his desire to “escape from feeling” is rooted in strong personal feelings: “only those who have personality and emotions,” he goes on to explain, “know what it means to want to escape

from these things” (CP2 109).³ Yet the author’s reputation as a poet of impersonality has held fast over the years, with his work becoming something of a touchstone for a modernist aesthetic of coldness, arch-irony, and indifference.⁴

In a 1917 letter to Mary Hutchinson, however, Eliot expresses his theory of impersonality in slightly different terms:

I like to feel that a writer is perfectly cool and detached, regarding other people’s feelings or his own, like a God who has got beyond them; or a person who has dived very deep and comes up holding firmly some hitherto unseen submarine creature. But this sort of cold detachment is so *very* rare. (LI 220; original emphasis)

At first glance, this somewhat chilly passage is typical of what we have come to expect from Eliot: the hints of omniscience (“like a God”) coupled with the scientific disinterest of the diver exemplify the kind of “cold detachment” that we tend to associate with his critical writing. On closer inspection, however, the passage is couched in strangely emotional terms (“I like to feel...”), and in the final moments Eliot appears to backtrack from his initial position (“but this sort of cold detachment is so *very* rare”).

Crucially, moreover, in the effort to convey a “perfectly ... detached” outlook, Eliot reaches for an image that looks a lot like its opposite: the submarine creature may have been torn away from the depths in which it resides, but it is now “firmly” attached to the person who comes up with it. The tactile force of this analogy might cause us to wonder whether this creature may be equipped with a “firm” grip of its own, calling to mind the unsettling cnidarian presence that “stretche[s] out its tentacles” in an early draft of “Prufrock.”⁵ It also recalls the author’s description, in a late essay, of the “unknown dark *psychic material*” that looms up from the depths of the unconscious mind: “the octopus or angel with which the poet struggles” (CP7 828; original emphasis). Returning to this earlier account of impersonality, then, helps to focus our attention on something that has remained hitherto unseen in the author’s work, which

his marine imagery helps to bring into view; namely, that Eliot's gestures of detachment are met with a countervailing impulse towards attachment.

What do we mean when we speak of attachment? The term is often connected to the work of the mid-twentieth century developmental psychologists John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth, who use it to describe the close emotional bond between an infant and its primary caregiver that provides support and protection in early life. Drawing on the work of ethological and evolutionary theorists, Bowlby and Ainsworth argue that the attachment between parent and child is both biologically useful, in that it ensures the survival of the offspring (and thus the species), and psychologically beneficial, in that it provides a feeling of safety—a “secure base” (Ainsworth 774) from which the infant can safely explore. This affective bond is central to the infant's emotional development, laying the foundations of their personality and providing the blueprint for all subsequent relationships. “Attachment,” writes Bowlby, is “the hub around which a person's life revolves, not only when he is an infant or toddler ... but through his adolescence and his years of maturity and into old age” (*Attachment and Loss*, 442).

Bowlby's ideas about attachment were influenced by the work of Sigmund Freud, who emphasized the importance of the mother-child bond to the formation of the ego.⁶ In *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1905), Freud proposed that the infant develops a powerful libidinal tie to its mother during breastfeeding; “all love relations,” he writes, “are on the model of, and a continuation of, their relation as sucklings to their nursing mother” (88). Freud would develop this idea further in *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1930), arguing that the infant at the breast experiences an “oceanic feeling,” a “feeling of an indissoluble connection, of belonging inseparably to the external world as a whole” (9). The concept of “oceanic feeling,” was suggested to Freud by the French mystic Romain Rolland, who used it to describe a religious feeling, “a sensation of ‘eternity’, a feeling of something limitless, unbounded—as it were, ‘oceanic’” (8).⁷ Significantly, however, Freud modifies Rolland's definition of oceanic feeling to describe a sensation of being bound to the external world: “If I have understood my friend aright, he means the same thing as that consolation offered by an original and somewhat unconventional writer to his hero: ‘Out of this world we cannot fall’” (9).

Freud's account of oceanic feeling is key, because it suggests that the sensation of being attached to and dependent on someone else is paradoxically liberating, granting the subject a feeling of connectedness to the external world "as a whole." This "early stage in ego-feeling" (20), Freud notes, only lasts for as long as the infant does not "distinguish his ego from the external world as the source of the sensations flowing in upon him:"

Originally the ego includes everything, later it detaches itself from the external world. The ego-feeling we are aware of now is thus only a shrunken vestige of a far more extensive feeling—a feeling which embraced the universe and expressed an inseparable connection of the ego with the external world. (13)

Oceanic feeling comes of being unable to ascertain where the self ends and the world begins, undermining the efforts of the ego to "keep itself sharply outlined and delimited" (10). Yet Freud describes this dissolution of boundaries in surprisingly positive terms, likening it to the exhilarating feeling of being in love, in which, "against all of the evidence of his senses, the man in love declares that he and his beloved are one and is prepared to behave as if it were a fact" (10-11). Significantly, moreover, Freud suggests that the adult psyche cannot banish this primary ego-feeling from itself entirely; instead, it "co-exists like a sort of counterpart with the narrower and more sharply demarcated ego-feeling of maturity" (14). Oceanic feeling, then, describes a curious psychic phenomenon in which vestiges of an original feeling of connectedness survive beneath the development of the self as an autonomous entity.

Freud's account of oceanic feeling is consistent with the residual status of attachment in Eliot, which tends to surface intermittently in his writing alongside a more sharply demarcated aesthetic of detachment. There is, however, little evidence to suggest that Eliot's thinking about attachment was directly influenced by Freud, and as critics have noted, his attitude towards psychoanalysis was far from all-embracing: in a 1922 "London Letter" for *The Dial*, he dismissed it as a "dubious and contentious branch of science" (CP2 412), and in 1928 he wrote a scathing review of *The Future of an Illusion* (1927)

for *The Criterion*, in which he accused Freud of “verbal vagueness” and an “inability to reason” (CP3 551). Nonetheless, Freud’s description of oceanic feeling resonates with Eliot’s exploration of attachment as a kind of submerged psychological feature that clings to the underside of the modern subject’s autonomous self-image.

Further insight into this psychic phenomenon can be found in Helmut Lethen’s study of the culture of distance that characterized Germany society, as well as parts of the European avant-garde, in the aftermath of the First World War. Focusing on figures such as Helmuth Plessner, Bertolt Brecht, and Ernst Jünger, Lethen identifies the formation of a “cool persona” (33) in the writing of this period. This “code of conduct” (17), the features of which include emotional detachment, autonomy, and the denial of psychological depth, was designed to help the “armoured ego” (a concept borrowed from Freud) to defend itself against the traumatic effects of the conflict, as well as the resulting social and political turmoil of the 1920s (15). Yet beneath this detached persona, Lethen argues, lies something like the opposite phenomenon—the image of the creature—who is “subject to blind fate” and whose “bodily existence dictates its perceptual and behavioral range.” For Lethen, this creaturely self-image represents everything that the modern subject has sought to conceal about and from itself—its embodied status, its emotional dependence, its physical and psychological frailty. In the image of the creature, he writes, “the cool persona’s central ambition to become a self-conscious agent of history deteriorates into its opposite” (20).

Significantly, however, Lethen suggests that by threatening to disrupt and potentially destroy the “heroic image of the self-confident subject” (20) the creature takes on a redemptive function in the literature of this period. In the work of the German writer Leonhard Franck, he argues, the presence of soldiers who have been disfigured by the effects of the First World War and thus rendered creaturely in the eyes of others threatens to unmask the cool persona: “From a man robbed of the traditional means of expression Franck fashions the container for a revolutionary “storm of emotion” that ... raises a rebellion against war” (197). In Eliot too, the presence of creaturely life—particularly marine creatures—represents a kind of “reverse image” of modern consciousness, exposing the underside of the autonomous ego.

Together, Freud and Lethen's accounts are helpful for thinking about how attachment in Eliot, insofar as it resembles a negative image of the modern psyche, might also take on a positive function, putting the subject back in touch with aspects of the self, as well as with parts of the world, that have slipped out of reach.

Most Securely Held: Early Eliot

The survival of oceanic feeling in the adult psyche, writes Freud, might strike readers as curious: why, after all, should such a "primitive type" of feeling be "preserved alongside the transformations that have developed out of it?" And yet, as he goes on to explain, "there is nothing unusual in such a phenomenon:"

Where animals are concerned we hold the view that the most highly developed have arisen from the lowest. Yet we still find all the simple forms alive to-day. The great saurians are extinct and has made way for the mammals, but a typical representative of them, the crocodile, is still living among us. (14-15)

Freud's sense of oceanic feeling as a kind of evolutionary throwback—an earlier, less developed state of being—helps to account for the connection between Eliot's thinking about attachment and his interest in "simple forms" of marine life. It is also consistent with Eliot's recourse to biology in search of ways of describing the inner workings of the human psyche.

Like Freud, Eliot was influenced by evolutionary biology, in which, as Robert Crawford notes, "humanity was linked continually to the life of lower organisms" (*The Savage and the City* 66). Many of the "theorists of biological adaptation" that Eliot was reading about in 1916—including Lamarck, Darwin, and Weismann (*CPI* 415)—developed their most significant evolutionary theories from the study of marine invertebrates, which were thought by many to hold the key to the origins of life. Darwin's *The Descent of Man* (1871), which Eliot owned and annotated, concludes that humankind's earliest

ancestor must have been “an aquatic animal ... more like the larvae of the existing marine Ascidians [sea squirts] than any other known form” (679).⁸

As Rebecca Stott notes, Darwin’s theory prompted some to speculate that human society was at risk of moving backwards as well as forwards. In 1880, the marine biologist-cum-social theorist E. Ray Lankester published *Degeneration: A Chapter in Darwinism*, which warns its readers:

It is well to remember that we are subject to the general laws of evolution, and are as likely to degenerate as to progress ... Possibly we are all drifting, tending to the condition of intellectual Barnacles or Ascidians” (60).⁹

Lankester singles out these organisms, in part, because their life cycles were seen to illustrate the “downward course” of evolution: beginning life as an active, free-swimming larva, the barnacle and the sea squirt develop into sessile organisms over the course of their lifetime, “turn[ing] back from the upward path and becom[ing] at last a merely vegetative excrescence on a rock” (Wells 249). Yet as well as functioning as symbols of degeneracy, marine invertebrates were also responsible for many of the intellectual developments that took place in the late nineteenth century. In 1913, the biologist Jakob von Uexküll reflected that some of “the greatest strides in fertilization and gestation studies of the last twenty years” could be attributed “almost exclusively to sea creatures” (Uexküll, qtd by Wessely, 44). One of the scientists who contributed to these studies was a young Sigmund Freud, who spent the summer of 1876 examining the reproductive processes of eels in the Marine Biology Laboratory at Trieste. In a letter from this period written with hands “stained by the white and red blood of the sea creatures,” Freud remarks: “all I can think about are the big questions, the ones that go hand in hand with testicles and ovaries—the universal, pivotal questions” (qtd by Jarvis, “Slippery Truth”). Freud’s remarks might cause us to wonder whether some of the pivotal questions posed by psychoanalysis can be traced back, in some sense at least, to the study of marine organisms.

Eliot was aware of at least some of these scientific developments. In 1918, he reviewed an essay by the British-Irish marine biologist Ernest MacBride, which states that much of the recent pioneering work in embryology, neurobiology, and genetics was being carried out on “sea-squirts, molluscs, thread-worms, starfish, sea-urchins, and comb-bearers” in newly established marine laboratories (“Study of Heredity I” 28). MacBride suggests that marine organisms were favoured by biologists during this period because it was much easier to observe the reproductive process at work than in the higher mammals: “it is not difficult to watch the process of fertilization under a microscope,” he writes, “if a sea-urchin egg be placed in a drop of sea water and some spermatozoa added” (“Study of Heredity I,” 8). This explanation may help to explain the appeal of marine life to Eliot, with the biological attachments of crabs and sea anemones making visible a process that cannot be directly observed in humans.

The study of marine life also reached Eliot through other channels. In a 1935 review, he recalled the influence of a scientific paper on the “adaptation of the flatfish” on members of the philosophy department at Harvard where he was based as a graduate student, which “made a considerable stir” (*CP5* 250) when it was published in 1912.¹⁰ In the early 1930s, Eliot developed a close friendship with Geoffrey Tandy, a marine biologist and Natural History Museum curator who specialized in algae. At the time that he and Eliot became acquainted, Tandy was conducting scientific research into Sargasso seaweeds which have managed to “lose their organs of attachment” (“Expedition to the Tortugas” 11).¹¹ Eliot’s own reading of biological texts suggests a shared interest in the attachment devices of marine organisms, as well as an anxiety regarding their potential loss in humans. In his copy of Darwin’s *The Descent of Man*, Eliot has marked out a section of the text detailing the sexual characteristics of a kind of crab:

Certain species of *Melita* are distinguished from all other amphipods by the females having “the coxal lamellae of the penultimate pair of feet produced into hook-like processes, of which the males lay hold with the hands of the first pair.” The development of these hook-

like processes has probably followed from those females which were the most securely held during the act of reproduction, having left the largest number of offspring. (309, 389n73)

The crabs' union is marked by violence, with the phrase "the males lay hold" recalling an earlier definition of attachment: "to seize physically, with hands, claws, etc." ("attach, v." *OED*). Yet it is possible to detect a more positive image of attachment in the sentence that follows, with Darwin describing how the most productive unions between the Melita crabs are those in which the females are "most securely held" during reproduction. Holding on tight, and being securely held, is here presented as a generative activity: the firmer the grip, the greater the chance of survival.

Eliot may have been drawn to Darwin's account of these "hook-like processes" because it describes a mechanism that he saw as lacking in modern relationships. The subjects of his early poetry frequently lament their inability to form secure attachments to others, and the absence of these intimate bonds (to recall Freud) is often expressed as a kind of prehensile weakness, not to mention sexual sterility. We see this in the wasted limbs of lonely figures such as Prufrock ("how his arms and legs are thin!" 6), who finds solace in the memory of enveloping female arms which "wrap about a shawl" (7). "I should have been a pair of ragged claws," he reflects wistfully after recalling the succession of female arms "braceleted and white and bare" (7)—claws worn ragged, perhaps, through use. As Paul Fussell notes, Eliot's early poetry is full of "interrupted, abortive, or vacant gestures" (194) by withered "blue-nailed phthisic" hands (35) with "feebly clutching fingers" (Fussell 195). With this loss of physical purchase comes an inability to anchor oneself in the world or to form lasting bonds with others. Eliot's subjects would love to "lay hold" on the females, but instead their words and actions are slippery, their movements unstable; like the rust that incrusts the broken spring in "Rhapsody on a Windy Night" (1915) they can only "cling to the form that the strength has left" (19).

Eliot's interest in the attachment devices of marine organisms may also have been influenced by his reading of MacBride's "Study of Heredity," which outlines recent research on inherited characteristics in sea creatures such as barnacles, sea-urchins, and shore crabs. Reviewing the text in the *International*

Journal of Ethics in 1918, Eliot wrote of its “exceptional importance” and quoted the author’s main conclusions, including the following passage:

Exercise of the functions tends to enlarge the organs by which these functions are carried out, and this exercise continued through generations slowly modifies the structure of the stock, till eventually the resulting change can show itself in the young before the exercise has been begun. Conversely persistent disuse of function tends slowly to atrophy the organs by which they are carried on, till eventually these organs are only developed in a reduced form. (MacBride qtd by Eliot, *CPI* 663)

MacBride is promoting a Lamarckian theory of inheritance, which adheres to the basic principle: use it or lose it. Ironically, this was already something of an outdated concept at the time Eliot was writing, having fallen into disuse in the late nineteenth century as a result of Weismann’s germ plasm theory (Childs 5). MacBride’s reappraisal of this concept may have been of symbolic use to Eliot, though, due to its emphasis on the privations involved in evolutionary development. At one point, MacBride states that the development of new functions often occurs at the expense of existing ones, arguing that evolution always involves “the *loss* of something characteristic of the species from which the new strain derived” (“Study of Heredity IV” 329; original emphasis). This perspective may help to shed light on the waning powers of prehension exhibited by the subjects of Eliot’s early poems, as well as his interest in the “hook-like processes” of Darwin’s crustaceans. Seemingly, for Eliot, the lasting presence of these attachment devices in marine organisms calls attention to their slow atrophy in humans, surviving in his writing only in a reduced (or shrunken) form in the images of withered hands and clutching fingers.

MacBride’s study also contains an intriguing line of argument about the restoration of certain “valuable features” (351) in an organism. Describing a recent experiment on a type of crustacean, which when placed in artificial conditions produced offspring with deformed carapaces, MacBride notes that this mutation ceased to occur when these “abnormal individuals” were returned to their natural habitat,

explaining: “if the original environment be restored, then the nature of the groups circulating in the blood which the hereditary substance attaches to itself will become again what it was before, and this will tend to undo the effects of the former environmental change” (336-37). Here, the restoration of prior environmental conditions results in a productive evolutionary reversion: a return to form. It is important not to gloss over the disturbing implications of MacBride’s application of theories of biological heredity to human populations, nor to overlook Eliot’s tacit endorsement of his deeply troubling views.¹²

MacBride’s “Study of Heredity” was published in *The Eugenics Review*, the journal of the Galton Institute, which sought to improve the genetic quality of the human population with recourse to biological theories of heredity and natural selection. Yet while MacBride’s “Study” is typical of the eugenic misuse of biological knowledge in the service of racist and white supremacist ideas, it also helps to account for Eliot’s representation of the sea in his early writing as an “original environment” capable of undoing the injurious effects of modernity and restoring certain “valuable features” to the modern subject.¹³

We see this in the way that the feeble gestures of figures such as Prufrock are held in opposition to the firm grip exhibited by submarine creatures, whose surprising tenacity becomes a source of envy for weary human subjects. In “Rhapsody on a Windy Night,” a lone speaker stalks the night-time streets, contemplating a series of female figures that remain out of reach in distant doorways and shuttered rooms. Into this grim reality, with “all its clear relations / Its divisions and precisions,” come waves of recollection, resembling small “twisted things” (18) brought in on the tides of memory:

I have seen eyes in the street
Trying to peer through lighted shutters,
And a crab one afternoon in a pool,
An old crab with barnacles on his back,
Gripped the end of a stick which I held him. (19)

In the figure of the crab, Eliot presents a double image of prehension—the claws grip the stick, the barnacles grip the shell. The speaker’s act of holding is somewhat weak by comparison, a dynamic that stems from the proximity of the word “held” to the stronger verb “gripped,” as well as from the unusual syntax of the passage, which relegates the human subject to a subclause (pun intended). Indeed, there is something decidedly odd about the phrase “which I held him” that appears to stem from the absence of a preposition, such as *with* which I held him, or which I held *out to* him. Eliot’s omission of this element elides the relation between subject and object, speaker and crab, resulting in an uncertain dynamic of attachment: who is holding who here? Reading this passage alongside Darwin’s “most securely held” crabs, though, as well as Freud’s account of “oceanic feeling,” the ambiguity of the phrase “which I held him” could be interpreted as a partially submerged desire to be held *by* the crab; though the speaker initiates contact with the stick (a surrogate attachment of sorts), it is he who is gripped by its “hook-like processes.” Even without the Darwinian (and Freudian) sexual subtext, the image appears highly charged; in contrast to the failed moments of contact that surround it, this moment of connection is perhaps the closest that Eliot’s speaker gets to physical and emotional intimacy.

The scientific study of marine life was evidently fertile terrain for writers and thinkers at the turn of the twentieth century, as well as a particular source of interest for Eliot as he grappled with the detrimental effects of modern society on human relationships. In his early poems, Eliot’s marine imagery is tied to an anxiety about the modern subject’s inability to form lasting emotional attachments “to self and to things and to persons” (205). Yet in his later writing, marine life begins to take on a more affirmative role, helping the author to recognize the value of remaining attached to certain images—images which though seemingly inconsequential or slight, exert a curious hold over the imagination.

Depths of Feeling: *The Use of Poetry*

In the autumn of 1932, Eliot returned to the United States for the first time since 1915 to take up the Charles Eliot Norton professorship at Harvard. In the months that followed he delivered a series of lectures, *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism* (1932-33), which, as the title suggests, sets out to

examine the “use” of poetry and criticism, “what it does or ought to do” (*CP4* 580). The lectures did not achieve the prominence as his earlier critical essays, with early reviewers finding them dull, pedantic, and unilluminating.¹⁴ Eliot initially seemed to share this assessment, confessing to a friend shortly afterwards that the lectures contained nothing new and were not prepared “under the most favourable of circumstances” (qtd in Liebman, 199). Returning to this material in later years, however, Eliot discovered that his perspective had changed. In a “Preface” to the 1964 edition of the lectures, he writes: “after re-reading them twice, I found to my surprise that I was still prepared to accept them as a statement of my critical position,” adding that he hoped that “these lectures may be taken instead of ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’ by some anthologist of the future” (*CP4* 575).

Eliot did not specify which part of the lectures would be best selected, but I think we can gain an important sense of his critical position, and how it differs from his earlier aesthetic stance, from the following passage, which occurs midway through the fourth lecture on “Wordsworth and Coleridge”:

Coleridge’s taste, at one period of life, led him first to read voraciously in a certain type of book, and then to select and store up certain kinds of imagery from those books. And I should say that the mind of any poet would be magnetized in its own way, to select automatically, in his reading (from picture papers and cheap novels, indeed, as well as serious books) ... the material—an image, a phrase, a word—which may be of use to him later. And this selection probably runs through the whole of his sensitive life. There might be the experience of a child of ten, a small boy peering through sea-water in a rock-pool, and finding a sea-anemone for the first time: the simple experience (not so simple, for an exceptional child, as it looks) might lie dormant in his mind for twenty years, and re-appear transformed in some verse-context charged with great imaginative pressure. (*CP4* 632)

In the image of the sea anemone, we might recall Eliot’s analogy of the diver emerging from the depths “holding firmly some hitherto unseen submarine creature,” as well as the memory of the crab gripping the

stick in “Rhapsody.” Yet here it is far more unclear who, or what, is doing the holding. Though the initial activity of “peering” and “finding” is attributed to the child, by the end of the passage, it is the material, rather than the mind, that plays the active role. Significantly, moreover, while the earlier analogy ends in failure (“But this sort of cold detachment is so very rare”), Eliot seems to be suggesting that being bound to certain images is highly productive, with the material becoming “charged” over time with “great imaginative pressure.”

Although he makes some attempt to distance himself from this biographical material, referring to himself obliquely as “a child of ten, a small boy,” Eliot is likely recalling an encounter from his childhood summers spent on the coast at Cape Ann, Massachusetts, where he collected specimens of seaweed and peered into rockpools (*Young Eliot* 34), and where, as Lyndall Gordon notes, “his imagination fastened, too, on the still pool and the light filled water” (33).¹⁵ At the time that he wrote the lecture, Eliot was the closest that he had been to the shoreline of his youth since 1915.¹⁶ Evidently the author felt the pull of the sea during his visit: the archives at Harvard contain a photograph of Eliot and a colleague in bathing suits at the edge of the Massachusetts coast, surrounded by tangles of seaweed (*L6*, Fig. 13). But while it may be in keeping with the author’s surroundings, the memory of the sea anemone also seems strangely out of place here: the sudden upsurge of this personal material in the middle of an academic lecture appears incongruous, not least because it throws up an image of Eliot seldom seen, as a small boy.

The appearance of the sea anemone makes sense, however, if we think of this “simple experience” as a kind of oceanic feeling of attachment between self and world that persists within the author’s psyche, resurfacing from time to time in both his criticism and his poetry. As Christopher Ricks has previously noted, Eliot revisited this early encounter with the sea anemone again and again over the course of his writing: it first appeared in his doctoral dissertation on the British philosopher F. H. Bradley nearly twenty years earlier, where Eliot uses it to illustrate how the mind attaches concepts to objects in the surrounding world: “The sea-anemone which accepts or rejects a proffered morsel is thereby relating an idea to the sea anemone’s world” (*CPI* 257). The creature would later resurface in *Murder in the Cathedral* (1935), when the Chorus imagine themselves circling back through earlier stages of life: “I

have lain on the floor of the sea and breathed with the breathing of the sea anemone, swallowed with ingurgitation of the sponge,” (53-4) as well as in “The Dry Salvages” (1941), where it features alongside the “more delicate algae” (193) in a coastal pool. What was it about the sea anemone that so stuck with Eliot? Ricks suggests that it was the creature’s “intuition of digestion which tentacularly caught Eliot,” arguing that the sea anemone’s alimentary processes—its acceptance and rejection of proffered morsels—resonated with Eliot’s impression of how the imagination digests memory into art (*Eliot and Prejudice* 278). The concept of digestion is pertinent to Eliot’s understanding of how the poetic mind can be sustained for long periods by the same material, as well as how it is energized by its encounters with nonhuman life. Yet it also implies a form of mastery: to digest an object is to break it down so that it can be absorbed by the body; the object gets used up in the process. My sense is that the encounter with the sea anemone retains its hold over Eliot as something that his mind cannot fully metabolize, functioning instead as a kind of sticking point in his imagination that gains an affective charge by virtue of its refusal to submit to the workings of the intellect.

Eliot’s reflection on his attachment to “certain kinds of imagery” is also part of a deeper consideration about how poetry—or poetic thinking—can help us to regain access to a feeling of “indissoluble connectedness” with the surrounding world. The persistence of such images suggests a failure to fully detach and wrest oneself free of an “early stage of ego-feeling,” and yet, for Eliot, the mind of the poet is sustained by such lingering attachments. In the concluding lecture in the series, he wonders:

Why, for all of us, out of all that we have heard, seen, felt, in a lifetime, do certain images recur, charged with emotion, rather than others? The song of one bird, the leap of one fish, at a particular place and time ... such memories may have symbolic value, but of what we cannot tell, for they come to represent the depths of feeling into which we cannot peer. (*CP4* 688)

The memory of the sea anemone resurfaces implicitly in Eliot's image of peering into the depths, as well as through his repetition of the verb "charged." Here too, Eliot seems to be suggesting that such images gain "symbolic value" by virtue of their resistance to critical interpretation: because they cannot be detached and held firmly by the mind they are able to take on an added emotional significance, accruing a powerful affective charge that can be channeled into verse, and granting the poet access to "depths of feeling" that would otherwise remain out of reach.

The process of affective accretion at work here is reminiscent of a behaviour exhibited by another sessile creature that Eliot may have peered at in the still pools of Cape Ann—the oyster—which gets a bit of grit in its shell, can't get rid of it, and builds up a pearl around it.¹⁷ Eliot would even draw this comparison in his notes to the concluding lecture of *The Use of Poetry*, quoting A. E. Housman in "confirmation" of his own experience:

I think that the production of poetry, in its first stage, is less an active than a passive and involuntary process; and if I were obliged, not to define poetry, but to name the class of things to which it belongs, I should call it a secretion; whether a natural secretion, like turpentine in the fir, or a morbid secretion, like the pearl in the oyster. (*CP4* 693 n1)

The oyster and the sea anemone both belong to a "class of things" that Eliot associates with the production of poetry: mental passivity, involuntary processes of selection, and the accumulation of value around seemingly useless material. Here and elsewhere, marine life seems to provide confirmation to Eliot of the productiveness of this sensation of being bound to certain images, and of what the mind can make out of what it cannot let go.

Perhaps the best way of understanding the feeling that surrounds Eliot's marine imagery is what Kevin Brazil, in an article on queer happiness, calls "the good kind of clingy; lingering on that which sticks us to things; a form in which the self is created by its openness to others" ("What Ever Happened to Queer Happiness"). Brazil first experienced this sensation of good clinginess when he read the following

seemingly illogical statement by the novelist Andrea Lawlor: “I feel that every good thing that has happened in my life has come from being queer.” Brazil *knows* this cannot be true (many of his loved ones, he notes, are “gloriously, definitionally straight”), and yet he *feels* it to be. “Maybe I was failing as a reader, a listener, a looker,” he writes, but “that line stuck with me” (“Queer Happiness”). Brazil’s distinction suggests that attending to the things that cling can reveal surprising and seemingly counterintuitive emotional truths; it is also useful for thinking about how the sensation of feeling attached to something can feel like a failure to read or interpret it critically. Eliot’s reflections on the sea anemone also communicates a sensation of being caught in the grip of an uncertain image and of feeling one’s critical powers fail; and yet like Brazil he recognizes the potential for this sense of powerlessness to give way to something powerfully affirming. By tracing the presence of Eliot’s marine attachments from his early poems to his later works, we too may be gripped by the presence of something difficult to read, yet quietly compelling in its tenacity. And like Eliot, we may be struck by the feeling that our attachments run deeper than we know.

Notes

¹ Further references to this edition will be cited parenthetically.

² See also Kennedy, 124-27.

³ See Asher, 50-53; Cuda, 3-7; Ellmann, 36-44.

⁴ In a recent article on “modernism’s contemporary affects,” for instance, Alys Moody presents Eliot as the forerunner of the “contemporary novel of detachment,” which simultaneously embodies and critiques the “posture of the indifferent aesthete” (“Indifferent and Detached”).

⁵ This tentacular image features in a cancelled section of the poem called “Prufrock’s Pervigilium,” in which the speaker senses the approach of a shadowy night-time presence: “crawling among the papers on the table / It leapt to the floor ... / And darted stealthily across the wall / Flattened itself upon the ceiling overhead / Stretched out its tentacles, prepared to leap” (*Inventions of the March Hare* 43). The diver’s firm hold also recalls that of the subject of “The Death of Saint Narcissus” (1915), who recognizes in the body of the fish “writhing in his clutch” an earlier version of himself “held tight in his own fingers,” his “ancient beauty | Caught fast in the pink tips of his new beauty” (270).

⁶ See Bowlby, “The Nature of the Child’s Tie to the Mother,” 351-53.

⁷ For Freud and Rolland’s correspondence on “oceanic feeling,” see Parsons, 35-52.

⁸ Eliot owned the 1913 edition of Darwin’s *Descent of Man* published by John Murray, but as Ricks and McCue note, he might have read the book before that (see *Poems* 389 n73.)

⁹ Stott, “Through a Glass Darkly,” 320-21. See also Wells, “Zoological Retrogression” (1891), which contains a light-hearted comparison between the lifecycle of a sea-squirt and the development of a young gentleman.

¹⁰ Written by the American philosopher Walter B. Pitkin, the paper outlines the findings of a recent study undertaken at Woods Hole Marine Biological Laboratory on the ability of the flatfish to mimic the colour and pattern of the ground beneath it. Pitkin is particularly struck by the discovery that the flatfish notices but does not adapt its bodily appearance to the colour and pattern of objects seen overhead, focusing its attention only on “the sea

bottom on which it rests.” This discovery, Pitkin concludes, is “laden with implications about the nature of organic adjustments, percepts, and the perceiving process,” and is thus “important to all philosophers who are endeavouring to construct a new worldview,” 682-3. Pitkin’s paper was published in 1911, but Eliot and his contemporaries likely read an extended version of his argument in *The New Realism* (1912), 396-434.

¹¹ Eliot and Tandy were principally drinking buddies, but in 1935 Eliot was attempting to commission a popular study of the ocean by Tandy for Faber. The book never materialized, but Eliot read and commented on draft sections, including a “chapter on eels” (L7 595). A faint outline of the text can be found in the Geoffrey Tandy papers at the Natural History Museum. Proposed chapters include: “What we mean by living and not living,” “The Ocean (minute animals),” “The Bottom of the Sea,” and “The Tide Range,” Geoffrey Tandy Papers, Natural History Museum Library and Archives, DF/BOT/421/1/7.

¹² In his review of the “Study,” Eliot states that MacBride “draws two conclusions of social importance,” which include the “sterilization and segregation” of the “defective element of the population ... for the benefit of society” (663-4). For more on Eliot and eugenics see Childs.

¹³ That Eliot made this connection is indicated by his quotation of another of MacBride’s conclusions: “In all cases where a large number of a given species are raised under artificial conditions a certain number of monsters will be produced ... This is true both of insects raised on banana-peel and human beings raised in a large city,” (MacBride, qtd by Eliot *CPI* 663).

¹⁴ See Liebman, *The Turning Point*, 215, n11.

¹⁵ Eliot’s memory of the sea anemone may have resurfaced while reading John Livingston Lowes’s *The Road to Xanadu: A Study of the Ways of the Imagination* (1927) in preparation for the lecture. In it, Lowes uncovers references in Coleridge’s notebooks to a “farrago of marine phenomena” (56) from his reading of scientific texts and travel writing that go on to populate the “slimy sea” (Coleridge 433) of “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner,” including glossy water-snakes, opaline jellyfish and phosphorescent fish. As well as resonating with his own scientific reading, Lowes’s study may help to explain the link that Eliot makes between Coleridge’s reading of “a certain type of book” and his own experience of “finding a sea-anemone for the first time.” At one point, Lowes likens the imagination to a tentacular being “germinating and expanding ... in the obscure depths of a pool” (57).

¹⁶ Eliot’s lodgings at Harvard were located only forty miles or so from Cape Ann.

¹⁷ I am grateful to Caroline Hovanec for suggesting this oyster analogy.

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