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PRUFROCK AT A CENTURY

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RESUMEN

Este artículo versa sobre la identidad de J. Alfred Prufrock, que enuncia el poema “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” (1915) de T. S. Eliot. El ensayo parte de la naturaleza semántica de los nombres propios, para luego definir la identidad de Prufrock a través de su formulación lírica, socio-histórica y de autor, así como de su formulación de la desesperanza. El ensayo sitúa a Prufrock en el abismo que separa su erudición literaria y pertenencia a la élite angloamericana de su inmanente deseo sexual. En el apartado final del artículo, se postula una variable de la identidad que va más allá de su determinación social.

PALABRAS CLAVE

T. S. Eliot ; Prufrock; nombres propios; identidad; el individuo; determinación social.

ABSTRACT

This essay glosses the identity of J. Alfred Prufrock, the persona who voices T. S. Eliot’s “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” (1915). The essay begins by looking at the nature of proper names, and it then glosses the identity of Prufrock with lyric, socio-historical, and authorial formulation, along with the formulation of impasse and despair. The essay sees Prufrock voice a divide between erudite thought and immanent sexual energy, and it ends by positing a variable in identity beyond social determination.

KEYWORDS

T. S. Eliot; Prufrock; proper names; identity; the individual; social determination.

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A century after the first publication in *Poetry* (1915) of T. S. Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," it's still apposite to ask, Who is Prufrock? To answer this question, I start with a linguistic axiom: proper names in English have reference but lack sense. The proper name *Prufrock* is an open sign that lacks sense and, in reference to a lyric persona, awaits large sorts of formulation.¹

In asking who Prufrock is, I give six answers, each placed under one of four sorts of formulation. These sorts are lyric, socio-historical, and authorial formulation, along with the formulation of impasse and despair. The sorts conduce to the belief that "Prufrock" reveals a male modernist's estrangement from elite Anglo-American society, the estrangement owing to a divide between erudite thought and immanent sexual energy.

1. PRUFROCK THE PROPER NAME

In the chapter "Reference, sense and denotation" of his prodigious *Semantics* (1977), Lyons writes:

"From a grammatical point of view, we may recognize three main kinds of singular definite referring expressions in English: (a) definite noun phrases, (b) proper names and (c) personal pronouns. . . . [I]t is widely, though not universally, accepted that proper names do not have sense. . . . [S]ome names at least can be said quite reasonably to have a symbolic, etymological or translational meaning. But they do not have sense, or some unique and special kind of meaning which distinguishes them as a class from common nouns."²

As a proper name, the singular referring expression *J. Alfred Prufrock* lacks sense and, in reference to a persona who voices a lyric poem, deepens the semantic

1 To distinguish clearly reference to three distinct entities, I adopt the following typographical conventions. Prufrock and J. Alfred Prufrock (in roman type) refer to the lyric persona who voices Eliot's poem. *Prufrock* and *J. Alfred Prufrock* (in italics) refer metalinguistically to the proper names as such. And "Prufrock" (in quotation marks) is an abbreviation for the entire poem, "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock."

2 John Lyons, *Semantics*. 2 vols. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977, 1: pp. 179, 198, 223.

mystery that attaches to proper names. This is so because to absent sense we add specious reference, a point made clear when we compare *Prufrock* to the other proper names in the poem: Michelangelo, Lazarus, and Prince Hamlet. These are identified by historical, biblical, or literary explanation. The only attributes we safely infer about J. Alfred Prufrock are those of being male and, in designation at least, archly Anglo-American. These are important to highlight, for they've often been taken as parts that stand for the modernist whole in English, but the attributes don't go very far in telling us who Prufrock is.

The epigraph Eliot placed between the title "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" and the body of the poem further deepens the semantic mystery. The epigraph, set medially between the title, spoken by Eliot, and the poem, spoken by Prufrock, is taken from canto XXVII of the "Inferno" in Dante's *La Divina commedia* (1314-21).³ Spoken by Guido da Montefeltro, who also is identified by historical and literary explanation, the two stanzas of *terza rima* Eliot placed in the epigraph are:

"S'io credesse che mia risposta fosse
a persona che mai tornasse al mondo,
questa fiamma staria senza più scosse;
ma però che già mai di questo fondo
non tornò vivo alcun, s'ì odo il vero,
senza tema d'infamia ti rispondo."⁴

Palma's English translation of these tercets retains their rhyme and says:

"If I thought my answer were to someone who
might see the world again, then there would be
no more stirrings of this flame. Since it is true
that no one leaves these depths of misery
alive, from all that I have heard reported,
I answer you without fear of infamy."⁵

What the epigraph doesn't make clear is the question Guido is asked in the preceding lines, in response to which he's willing to give an answer, only because

3 Levinas sagely observes about the source of discourse: "In a living dialogue and even in a written monologue of many volumes it is more important to find out who is speaking and why, than merely to know what is said." See Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*. Trans. Alphonso Lingis. Pittsburg: Duquesne University Press, 1969, p. 18.

4 Dante Alighieri, *La Divina commedia*. Torino: Unione Tipografico-Editrice Torinese, 2000, "Inferno," canto XXVII, ll.61-66, p. 248. I cite this canto just below parenthetically by line number.

5 Dante Alighieri, *Inferno*. Trans. Michael Palma. Ed. Giuseppe Mazzotta. New York: Norton, 2008, p. 102. I cite this translation just below parenthetically by page number.

he believes no one in the world will hear it. The question is: “Ora chi se’ ti priego che ne conte: / non esser duro più ch’altri sia stato, / se ’l nome tuo nel mondo tegna fronte” (ll.55-57). In the cited English translation: “Now I pray // to know who you are. Be as free in your replies / as another has been with you, so may your name / remain forever vivid in men’s eyes” (pp. 101-2). Amid an aura of secrecy, what’s at stake is Guido’s identity, “to know who you are,” and so it is with Prufrock, whose name has also remained “vivid in men’s eyes.”

Readers of Eliot know that *Prufrock* was in the name of the Prufrock-Litton Furniture Company in St. Louis, where Eliot was born in 1888 and raised before going to boarding school in New England and then on to Harvard as an undergraduate.⁶ *Alfred* can be glossed etymologically and historically.⁷ And in “the synchronically motivated, as well as diachronically discoverable, interpretation of names,”⁸ *Alfred* may allude to Alfred, Lord Tennyson, the most celebrated poet in Victorian England. But these tidbits of meaning don’t go very far either. In the essay “Hermeneutics, Onomastics and Poetics in English and French Literature” (1977), Grimaud ponders “the peculiar relation of proper names to meaning,” particularly in titles, and draws lines of relation between *J. Alfred Prufrock* and several common nouns, in the poem or not.⁹ Some of these lines of relation are helpful, such as the phonic and trochaic likeness of *Prufrock* and *prophet*, Prufrock being a prophet, I’ll argue later in section five, of impasse. Beyond *prophet*, Grimaud sets *Prufrock* in semantic relation to the common nouns *proof*, *rock*, *prude*, and *frock*, along with the adjectives *prurient* and *prudent*.¹⁰

In asking who Prufrock is, I take *Prufrock* to be an open sign that lacks sense and awaits large sorts of formulation. To structure this essay, I give six answers to the question raised, each answer placed under one sort of formulation. Common to the answers is a single thread of reflection on the reciprocity that joins the individual to his or her social determination. The thread pursues the social determination of individuality, proper names being an inaugural instance of it.

6 For reference to the Prufrock-Litton Furniture Company, see Stephen Stepanchev, “The Origin of J. Alfred Prufrock,” in *Modern Language Notes* 66.6 (1951), pp. 400-401. In what seems to be a spelling error, Stepanchev writes *Litton* as *Littau*.

7 Klein glosses the etymology of *Alfred* as combining the Old English words for “elf” and “counsel.” See Ernest Klein, *A Comprehensive Etymological Dictionary of the English Language*. Amsterdam: Elsevier, 1966, p. 48. As to historical explanation, the name *Alfred* may bring to mind “the Anglo-Saxon king . . . justly called Alfred the Great (871-899),” who “undertook to provide for his people certain books in English” and is thought to be “the founder of English prose.” See Albert C. Baugh and Thomas Cable, *A History of the English Language*. 4th ed. London: Routledge, 1993, pp. 69-70.

8 Lyons, *Semantics*, 1: p. 222.

9 Michel Grimaud, “Hermeneutics, Onomastics and Poetics in English and French Literature,” in *Modern Language Notes* 92.5 (1977), p. 890.

10 Grimaud, “Hermeneutics,” pp. 899-904.

This reflection doesn't seek exclusionary conceptions of the individual and social determination, but rather explores the ways they shade into one another.

2. A VARIABLE IN LYRIC

A first answer sees Prufrock as a variable in a model for lyric poetry in 1910 to 1911, when Eliot wrote the poem.¹¹ This is lyric formulation. The cue in the poem's title to this formulation is "Song." The first answer suits the essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent" (1918), where Eliot avers, in the second of four uses of the adjective *individual*, that "not only the best, but the most individual parts" of a poet's work "may be those in which the dead poets, his ancestors, assert their immortality most vigorously."¹² The poets of the past bequeath the forms in the present that are the models an aspiring poet chooses from.

Social determination here owes to literary tradition and to sensibility. Through quotation or allusion, the dead poets whose shadows are cast in "Prufrock" include Hesiod, the authors of Ecclesiastes and of the Gospels of Mark and John, Dante, Shakespeare, Marvell, Donne, and Laforgue. In a specific model for lyric poetry, the concept of subgenre also lets us see "Prufrock" adapt the dramatic monologue, whose three primary elements are persona, a silent but often pronominally named audience as addressee, and circumstances implied by the poem's context of utterance. Lyric persona is the variable Prufrock fills. Comparison in this regard to Tennyson's "Ulysses" (1842) and to Robert Browning's "Andrea del Sarto" (1853) is revealing, for the poems share a proper name in their titles for the persona who voices them, an axis of address where the *I* speaks to a *you* as its audience, and "monologue's constitutive tension between speakers' psychological complexity and the web of ambient circumstance in which they are enmeshed."¹³ In "Prufrock," the *web of ambient circumstance* in the poem's context of utterance isn't always clear, as we'll see later in section three. Unlike Prufrock, both Ulysses and Andrea del Sarto are identified by literary and historical explanation.

11 Dating the composition of "Prufrock," Eliot wrote in 1936: "*J. Alfred Prufrock* was written in 1911, but parts of it date from the preceding year. Most of it was written in the summer of 1911 when I was in Munich." Quoted in Christopher Ricks, preface to T. S. Eliot, *Inventions of the March Hare: Poems 1909-1917*. Ed. Christopher Ricks. London: Faber and Faber, 1996, p. xv.

12 T. S. Eliot, *The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism*. London: Routledge, 1989, p. 48. The four instances of *individual* don't include the essay's title. The first instance appears in the following: "our tendency [is] to insist, when we praise a poet, upon those aspects of his work in which he least resembles anyone else. In these aspects or parts of his work we pretend to find what is individual, what is the peculiar essence of the man" (p. 48). The third and fourth instances are in this prose: "it [the new work] appears to conform [to tradition], and is perhaps individual, or it appears individual, and may conform; but we are hardly likely to find that it is one and not the other" (p. 51).

13 B. Ashton Nichols and Herbert F. Tucker, "Monologue," in Roland Greene (ed.): *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry & Poetics*. 4th ed. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012, p. 898.

Sensibility, in turn, leads to Laforgue, about whom Eliot said in 1928: “The form in which I began to write, in 1908 or 1909, was directly drawn from the study of Laforgue together with the later Elizabethan drama.”¹⁴ Eliot encountered Laforgue in Symons’s *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* (1899), where Laforgue is said to establish, “not only as an imposition, but a conquest, the possibilities for art which come from the sickly modern being, with his clothes, his nerves: the mere fact that he flowers from the soil of his epoch.”¹⁵ This sensibility, when combined with that of Baudelaire, delights in a dandy flâneur, in seedy urban squalor, and in verse noteworthy for its euphony and conceptual leaps. These are evident in Eliot’s stanza quoted just below.

To instance lyric formulation, consider the first stanza of “Prufrock,” which Vendler calls “the Eliotic *incipit*,” where “a hypnotically alluring voice, sure of its own circuits of stylistic movement, invites us,”¹⁶ if we are its pronominally named audience, to set out on an urban journey:

“Let us go then, you and I,
 When the evening is spread out against the sky
 Like a patient etherised upon a table;
 Let us go, through certain half-deserted streets,
 The muttering retreats [5]
 Of restless nights in one-night cheap hotels
 And sawdust restaurants with oyster-shells:
 Streets that follow like a tedious argument
 Of insidious intent
 To lead you to an overwhelming question. . . [10]
 Oh, do not ask, ‘What is it?’
 Let us go and make our visit.”¹⁷

Lyric formulation here stands out in three ways. We note the sure display of lyric address, where the *I* speaks with sprightly confidence to a *you*, who seems to be, in part at least, the reader. Of the seven words in the opening line, all monosyllables, three—*us*, *you*, and *I*—are personal deictics, and the latter two (*you* and *I*) unfold in apposition the reference of the first (*us*). The invitation to set out is underscored by five imperatives—“Let us go then” (l.1), “Let us go” (l.4), “Oh, do not ask” (l.11), “Let us go and make” (l.12)—and persuades many readers to stand up in the discursive space of the poem.

14 Quoted in Hugh Kenner, *The Pound Era*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971, p. 134.

15 Arthur Symons, *The Symbolist Movement in Literature*. New York: E. P. Dutton, 1958, p. 59.

16 Helen Vendler, *Coming of Age as a Poet: Milton, Keats, Eliot, Plath*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003, pp. 107, 108.

17 T. S. Eliot, *Collected Poems: 1909-1962*. New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1970, p. 3. I cite below “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” parenthetically by line number.

Secondly, in *Coming of Age as a Poet* (2003), Vendler hears in the Eliotic *incipit* “an impulsive anapestic step forward,” one suited to the invitation to set out, and says that “[t]his anapestic impulse becomes Prufrock’s rhythmic signature—the symbol of his willingness to make his social ‘visit.’”¹⁸ We hear the anapestic step in “Let us go” (ll.1, 12), “you and I” (l.1), “When the eve[ning]” (l.2), and “Like a pa[tient]” (l.3). Elsewhere in the poem, other rhythmic signatures catch the ear, such as the heptasyllabic “Time for you and time for me” (l.31) and “Shall I part my hair behind? Do I dare to eat a peach?” (l.122), along with the surfacing of iambic pentameters, as in the heroic couplet to end the poem: “By sea-girls wreathed with seaweed red and brown / Till human voices wake us, and we drown” (ll.130-31). In “Prufrock,” metrical regularity is the exception, and its lines range from as few as three to as many as seventeen syllables (ll.45, 105). The verse dexterity Eliot displays is a great technical achievement and a result of the moment in which he wrote.

Thirdly, phonic echoes, particularly those of rhyme, create a euphony that plays adroitly with sense, as when the opening couplet’s promise of *I* rhyming with *sky* (ll.1, 2) is dashed, the evening being sick, unconscious, and prostrate: “Like a patient etherised upon a table” (l.3). We’re a long way from Wordsworth’s “Lines” (1798), whose speaker raptly sees “steep and lofty cliffs, / That on a wild secluded scene impress / Thoughts of more deep seclusion; and connect / The landscape with the quiet of the sky.”¹⁹ The sickly (Laforquian and Baudelairean) misfit, a dandy flâneur, has ousted the (Wordsworthian) vatic seer. Elsewhere in the opening stanza, four couplet rhymes ring music out of the seedy urban squalor, the last being the mosaic rhyme of *is it* with *visit* (ll.11, 12). We’ll return to lyric euphony later in section five, where we’ll see it as the sole solace Prufrock has for impasse and despair.

In looking for answers to the question Who is Prufrock?, we begin with lyric formulation for a very simple reason. If “Prufrock” weren’t an exemplary lyric, one that marks the poetic art of its moment, nothing about Prufrock would matter. Lyric formulation is his only saving grace.

3. ELEGANT EXHAUSTION

A second sort of formulation also owes to another question. How is it possible that a persona so beset and clownish, even so preposterous, as Prufrock, one “Full of high sentence, but a bit obtuse; / At times, indeed, almost ridiculous— / Almost, at times, the Fool” (ll.117-19), has elicited so much admiration?

¹⁸ Vendler, *Coming*, pp. 111-12.

¹⁹ William Wordsworth, *The Poetical Works of William Wordsworth*. Vol. 2. Ed. E. de Selincourt. Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1944, p. 259.

Beyond lyric euphony, an explanation is that Prufrock reflects the thought of his time and is a striking voice of what that thought produced. This is socio-historical formulation. The crux of this formulation in “Prufrock” and the origin of the present essay are in this stanza:

“And I have known the eyes already, known them all— [55]
 The eyes that fix you in a formulated phrase,
 And when I am formulated, sprawling on a pin,
 When I am pinned and wriggling on the wall,
 Then how should I begin
 To spit out all the butt-ends of my days and ways? [60]
 And how should I presume?” (ll.55-61)

At issue here is the individual’s being fixed and defined (“in a formulated phrase . . . I am formulated” [ll.56-57]), the formulation so complete that “eyes” (ll.55, 56) convey it, rather than language. The lexically twin *formulated* in the stanza explains the adoption in this essay of sorts of formulation. At issue also is the individual’s being pinned down, as manifest by the lexical pair of *pin* and *pinned*: “sprawling on a pin . . . I am pinned and wriggling on the wall” (ll.57-58). This state of being *formulated* and *pinned* is one of self-division, given the divide between the individual’s self-conception and the conception of self assigned by socio-historical determination. Clinching the syntax and the rhyme of *I begin* with *on a pin* and naming its predicament, the lyric *I* asks, “Then how should I begin / To spit out all the butt-ends of my days and ways?” (ll.59-60).²⁰

There’s another expression of socio-historical formulation in the poem: “There will be time, there will be time / To prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet” (ll.26-27). These lines partake of the poem’s motif of the face, recall the lexically twin *eyes* in the stanza just above (“the eyes . . . / The eyes that fix you in a formulated phrase” [ll.55-56]), and bring to mind the etymology of the English *persona*, which derives from the classical Latin *persōna*, meaning “mask, character, role.”²¹ The lines evoke the distinctive human ability to perform social roles, which Erikson sees as the “stagewise instinctual investment in the social process that must do for human adaptation what the instinctive fit into a section of nature will do for an animal species.”²²

In “Prufrock,” the question now germane is, To what socio-historical settings does the poem refer? Or, in the terms of dramatic monologue discussed in section two, What is *the web of ambient circumstance* in which the persona is *enmeshed*?

20 The reference in this stanza to “the butt-ends of my days and ways” (l.60) lexically ties to “The burnt-out ends of smoky days” in Eliot’s “Preludes.” See Eliot, *Collected*, p. 13.

21 *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, <<http://www.oed.com>>, s.v. Accessed 26 June 2015.

22 Erik Erikson, *The Life Cycle Completed: A Review*. New York: Norton, 1982, p. 43.

There are two socio-historical settings in the poem, one exterior, the other interior. The first is the seedy urban squalor to which the opening stanza refers, the “half-deserted streets, / The muttering retreats / Of restless nights in one-night cheap hotels / And sawdust restaurants with oyster-shells” (ll.4-7). These are retreats of prostitution and coarse feeding. The poem later alludes to this first setting when the lyric *I* asks, “Shall I say I have gone at dusk through narrow streets / And watched the smoke that rises from the pipes / Of lonely men in shirt-sleeves, leaning out of windows?” (ll.70-72). It’s important to note that, as regards reference to people in the poem, this setting only refers to these *lonely men*.

Diametrically opposed to the first, the second setting is an elite *soirée dansante*. At this evening party, only women appear. The early version of “Prufrock” in Eliot’s notebook underscores this in its parenthetical subtitle, later excised: “(Prufrock among the Women).”²³ A rosary of references points to the *soirée*, especially to its *room, women, toast, tea, and music*:

“In the room the women come and go
Talking of Michelangelo” (ll.13-14, 35-36);

“Before the taking of a toast and tea” (l.34);

“I know the voices dying with a dying fall
Beneath the music from a farther room” (ll.52-53);

“Should I, after tea and cakes and ices,
Have the strength to force the moment to its crisis?” (ll.79-80);

“After the cups, the marmalade, the tea,
Among the porcelain, among some talk of you and me” (ll.88-89);

“After the novels, after the teacups, after the skirts that trail
along the floor—” (l.102).

“Prufrock” plays with the persona’s exact relation to this second setting, and we don’t always know whether the invitation to “go and make our visit” (l.12) in the Eliotic *incipit* is to or from the *soirée*. The ambiguity is most evident in these lines: “And indeed there will be time / To wonder, ‘Do I dare?’ and, ‘Do I dare?’ / Time to turn back and descend the stair” (ll.37-39). We infer here that the *I* has set out to the *soirée* and may turn back before entering it. After repeated readings, my sense is that the persona is at the *soirée* throughout the poem and ponders going

²³ T. S. Eliot, *Inventions of the March Hare: Poems 1909-1917*. Ed. Christopher Ricks. London: Faber and Faber, 1996, p. 39.

to the seedy urban squalor of the first setting. My sense also is that the lyric's axis of address is wholly inside the persona: the *I* and *you* in "Let us go then, you and I" (l.1) coincide in self-address all the way to poem end, where "human voices" at the *soirée* "wake us, and we drown" (l.131).

In light of these two social settings, we see that both have to do with sexual and/or amorous coupling. The first is like the one where Stephen Dedalus raptly experiences sexual initiation in part II of Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916), a novel contemporary with "Prufrock." The second is designed to regulate amorous coupling in elite society through the polite discourse of courtship and socially observed dancing. The cue in Eliot's title to these two settings is "Love," just as "Song" is the cue to lyric formulation. At issue in both settings is the urge of the flesh for erotic contact and penetration, whatever their nature. In 1910 to 1911, when Eliot wrote the poem, at issue also was "an all-powerful sexual energy (Eros) denied by human consciousness, repressed by the dominant morality, and ignored by science."²⁴

With socio-historical formulation in view, it's now possible to venture three further answers to the question of who Prufrock is. First, Prufrock is a dandy flâneur. We see this facet of his being in two instances of self-description, one at the *soirée*: "My morning coat, my collar mounting firmly to the chin, / My necktie rich and modest, but asserted by a simple pin" (ll.42-43); and "I shall wear white flannel trousers, and walk upon the beach" (l.123). Secondly, Prufrock is an erudite thinker, one who adopts "modernity of image and diction and voice while allowing these to be 'thickened' by the implicit historicity and communal worth of literary allusions."²⁵ Without blinking, and with marked lyric euphony, Prufrock names his *formulated* and *pinned* state of self-division. His thought evinces propositional argument, as in the *incipit*'s "tedious argument / Of insidious intent / To lead you to an overwhelming question" (ll.8-10). Lexis of argument elsewhere stands out in three references to premises at stanza end: "So how should I presume?" (l.54); "And how should I presume?" (l.61); "And should I then presume? / And how should I begin?" (ll.68-69). Prufrock's thought also makes erudite allusions, such as those to amorous coupling in Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* (1601-1602; ll.52-53), Marvell's "To His Coy Mistress" (c.1652; ll.92-93), and Donne's "Song: Goe and catche a falling starre" (1633; ll.124-31).

And thirdly, Prufrock is a comic anti-hero. This explains the admiration that such a beset and clownish, even so preposterous, a persona has elicited. "Prufrock" arose on the eve of the Great War (1914-1918), and the poem was twice published during it, first in *Poetry* (1915) and then in the volume *Prufrock and Other Observations* (1917). From the volume title we infer that "Prufrock"

²⁴ Erikson, *The Life Cycle*, p. 26.

²⁵ Vendler, *Coming*, p. 102.

is its primary observation. During and after the Great War, most all knew that what had once been thought exalted and heroic was now exhausted. Consider Blunden's poem "1916 seen from 1921" (1922), whose speaker, a combatant returned to England, begins,

"Tired with dull grief, grown old before my day,
I sit in solitude and only hear
Long silent laughters, murmurings of dismay,
The lost intensities of hope and fear,"

only to name after a desolate estrangement: "I / Dead as the men I loved, wait while life drags // Its wounded length from those sad streets of war / Into green places here, that were my own. . . ." ²⁶

Prufrock presages the exhaustion of heroic ideals during and after the Great War. We see the anti-hero in the poem's lexis of daring, evident above in the quoted "'Do I dare?' and, 'Do I dare?' / Time to turn back and descend the stair" (ll.38-39), in the grandiloquent "Do I dare / Disturb the universe?" (ll.45-46), and in "Do I dare to eat a peach?" (l.122). Daring here reaches a bathetic limit. We see the anti-hero in his awareness of decline, shame, and fear: "I have seen the moment of my greatness flicker, / And I have seen the eternal Footman hold my coat, and snicker, / And in short, I was afraid" (ll.84-86). And we see the anti-hero in the allusion to Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (c.1602):

"No! I am not Prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be;
Am an attendant lord, one that will do
To swell a progress, start a scene or two,
Advise the prince; no doubt, an easy tool,
Deferential, glad to be of use,
Politick, cautious, and meticulous. . ." (ll.111-16).

Prufrock rivals Polonius, but he isn't the Prince. As an anti-hero, an erudite thinker, and a dandy flâneur walking through "the sunsets and the dooryards and the sprinkled streets" (l.101), Prufrock is a voice of elegant exhaustion.

4. LYRIC VENTRILOQUISM

A fifth answer sees Prufrock as a surrogate for the young Eliot, who engages in an act of lyric ventriloquism. This is authorial formulation. Eliot speaks in a voice we're duped into hearing come from a persona, but in the end know belongs to the author. Two scholars argue for this surrogacy: Vendler in *Coming of Age as*

²⁶ Edmund Blunden, *Poems: 1914-1930*. London: Cobden & Sanderson, 1930, p. 163.

a Poet and Ricks in his preface and annotations to *Inventions of the March Hare* (1996).

Vendler's chapter "T. S. Eliot: *Inventing Prufrock*" develops a clear case for Prufrock as a "lyric surrogate" for Eliot.²⁷ Vendler's premises are that young poets seek "a coherent and well-managed idiosyncratic style voiced in memorable lines," and that in strong poets this search leads to a first distinctive poem, one "continuous, at least in part, with . . . the poet's later work."²⁸ In Eliot, this poem is "Prufrock," whose persona voices the "central psychological dilemmas" the young Eliot faced.²⁹

These dilemmas involve issues discussed above, such as "a Puritanical suspicion of sex combined with romantic sexual longing; a high sense of the historical tradition of poetry together with a conviction that poetry must belong to its contemporary moment; an intense analytic intellectuality combined with a desire for drama (even melodrama); . . . and a New England propriety struggling with a withering irony."³⁰ The irony scorches all it touches, especially Prufrock himself. The irony is perhaps most evident, as we'll see later in section five, in the Eliotic *incipit*, whose alluring call to "go and make our visit" (l.12) ends in going nowhere. Above all, and in ways germane to sexual and/or amorous coupling, the "code of speech of Eliot's upper-class Protestant milieu was almost inhumanly restrained in what it allowed by way of permissible conversation between the sexes. . . . [N]owhere is he [Eliot] more completely an aesthetic prisoner of his class than in the realm of sexuality."³¹

Ricks's preface and annotations to *Inventions of the March Hare*, Eliot's early notebook of poems, also make the case for authorial formulation in "Prufrock." Eliot described the notebook in a 1922 letter to John Quinn as "one which I started in 1909 and in which I entered all my work at that time as I wrote it, so that it is the only original manuscript barring of course rough scraps and notes, which were destroyed at the time, in existence."³² Ricks describes the notebook as "a fresh start, one which was to issue, in 1917, in *Prufrock and Other Observations*."³³

The case for Prufrock as a lyric surrogate for Eliot is strongest in "Prufrock's Pervigilium," a passage of 38 lines in "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," as written in *Inventions*, that Eliot largely excised when he published the poem in 1915. Traces of excision take the form of ellipses at the end of line 72 and between lines 74 and 75 in "Prufrock," as it appears in *Collected Poems: 1909-1962*. Two

27 Vendler, *Coming*, p. 87.

28 Vendler, *Coming*, p. 2

29 Vendler, *Coming*, p. 6.

30 Vendler, *Coming*, pp. 83-84.

31 Vendler, *Coming*, pp. 85-86, 96

32 Quoted in Ricks, preface to Eliot, *Inventions*, pp. xi-xii.

33 Ricks, preface to Eliot, *Inventions*, p. xii.

fragments of “Prufrock’s Pervigilium” were kept in the poem as published. These uncanceled fragments are: “Shall I say, I have gone at dusk through narrow streets / And seen the smoke which rises from the pipes / Of lonely men in shirtsleeves, leaning out of windows” (ll.70-72); and “I should have been a pair of ragged claws / Scuttling across the floors of silent seas” (ll.73-74).³⁴

The first fragment develops the setting of seedy urban squalor, to which the dandy flâneur is drawn, and in which only *lonely men* appear. The second fragment is pivotal to “Prufrock,” for it introduces a third setting distinct from the seedy urban squalor and the *soirée dansante*. This setting is the sea, named in “the floors of silent seas” (l.74). These *floors* are later tied lexically to the *soirée*, where the evening “Stretched *on the floor*, here beside you and me [emphasis added]” (l.78), and where “the skirts . . . trail *along the floor* [emphasis added]” (l.102). All other references to the sea occur at poem end, where Prufrock says he’ll walk along the beach. We find here “the chambers of the sea” (l.129) and note that, like the *soirée*, the sea is a setting where only women appear, now as fabled “mermaids” (l.124) and “sea-girls” (l.130):

“I shall wear white flannel trousers, and walk upon the beach.
I have heard the mermaids singing, each to each.

I do not think that they will sing to me. [125]

I have seen them riding seaward on the waves
Combing the white hair of the waves blown back
When the wind blows the water white and black.

We have lingered in the chambers of the sea
By sea-girls wreathed with seaweed red and brown [130]
Till human voices wake us, and we drown.” (ll.123-31)

By introducing the sea, the second fragment of “Prufrock’s Pervigilium” ties to the poem’s end, where the title’s “Song” echoes (“the mermaids singing, each to each” [l.124]; “I do not think that they will sing to me” [l.125]). Donne’s line “Teach me to hear Mermaides singing” underpins the end, whose modern context mocks it.³⁵

Ricks’s annotation of the second fragment—“I should have been a pair of ragged claws / Scuttling across the floors of silent seas” (ll.73-74)—is revealing: “compare Darwin’s *Descent of Man*, a passage (marked by TSE in his copy) on

³⁴ Eliot, *Inventions*, pp. 43-44.

³⁵ John Donne, *The Elegies and The Songs and Sonnets*. Ed. Helen Gardner. Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1965, p. 29.

the 'sexual characters' of crabs: 'The development of these hook-like processes has probably followed from those females who were most securely held during the act of reproduction, having left the largest number of offspring.'³⁶ Thus "the sudden arrival of a crab's claws in his [Eliot's] social poem" has a clear sexual explanation.³⁷ Another authorial explanation, proper to the poem's setting of seedy urban squalor, appears in a 1914 letter that Eliot, 26 years old, wrote to Conrad Aiken: "I have been going through one of those nervous sexual attacks which I suffer from when alone in a city. . . . One walks about the street with one's desires, and one's refinement rises up like a wall whenever opportunity approaches. I should be better off, I sometimes think, if I had disposed of my virginity and shyness several years ago: and indeed I still think sometimes that it would be well to do so before marriage."³⁸

These textual and contextual clues point to Prufrock as a lyric surrogate for Eliot. Prufrock's surrogacy looms even larger in the passages of "Prufrock's Pervigilium" that Eliot excised. Here women do appear in the seedy urban squalor: "women took the air, standing in entries— / Women, spilling out of corsets, stood in entries."³⁹ Were there any doubt as to where they are: "I have gone at night through narrow streets, / Where evil houses leaning all together / Pointed a ribald finger at me in the darkness / Whispering all together."⁴⁰ Madness is thrice evoked: "the midnight turned and writhed in fever"; "I fumbled to the window to experience the world / And to hear my Madness singing"; "I have heard my Madness chatter before day."⁴¹ When lyric ventriloquism voices more of the poet than of the persona thought speaking, portions of text must go. Prufrock's surrogacy is clear in what Eliot kept in the poem, and in what he cancelled.

5. THE NULLITY OF GOING NOWHERE

"Prufrock" begins with an alluring call to "go and make our visit" (l.12), and it ends with a death, when "human voices" at the *soirée* "wake us, and we drown" (l.131). The call leads nowhere, if Prufrock stays at the *soirée* throughout the poem, and the death occurs when he wakes from his reverie. Both motion and discursive exchange, then, end in a nullity of going nowhere. To the question Who is Prufrock?, a sixth and last answer is that he is a prophet of impasse. This is the formulation of impasse and despair.

36 Ricks, notes to Eliot, *Inventions*, p. 187.

37 Ricks, notes to Eliot, *Inventions*, p. 188.

38 Quoted in Eliot, *Inventions*, p. 179.

39 Eliot, *Inventions*, p. 43.

40 Eliot, *Inventions*, p. 43.

41 Eliot, *Inventions*, pp. 43-44.

Several passages in the poem evoke impasse. Being fixed “in a formulated phrase, / And when . . . formulated . . . pinned and wriggling on the wall” (ll.56-58) is a primary instance. The “overwhelming question” (ll.10, 93) Prufrock asks but doesn’t name entails a cul-de-sac. And a mesmerizing incantatory pattern foregrounds impasse, when the lines

“Time for you and time for me,
And time yet for a hundred indecisions,
And for a hundred visions and revisions,
Before the taking of a toast and tea” (ll.31-34)

echo later in these lines: “In a minute there is time / For decisions and revisions which a minute will reverse” (ll.47-48). These hundreds of “indecisions” and “visions and revisions,” along with the “decisions and revisions” made and unmade in “a minute,” circle in a spiral of self-cancelling reversals.

Impasse stands out in Prufrock’s not knowing how to begin (ll.59, 69) or what to say. The two converge in the “I am formulated” passage when he asks, “Then how should I begin / To spit out all the butt-ends of my days and ways?” (ll.59-60). *To spit out* here is a verb of inchoate speech. Not knowing what to say arises in the lines that begin “Shall I say . . .” (l.70) and “Would it have been worth while . . . / To say. . .” (ll.90, 94), and similar doubt infuses the thirteen other instances in the poem of interrogative self-address, such as “Is it perfume from a dress / That makes me so digress?” (ll.65-66).

And impasse is clear when discursive exchange at the *soirée* goes nowhere, and in lieu of amorous proposal, “The Love Song” shows mute expression and misconstrual. These are evident in a pattern made by the phrases “what I mean” and “what I meant.” In an iambic hexameter, mute expression infuses Prufrock’s exclamation, “It is impossible to say just what I mean!” (l.104). Framing this exclamation, misconstrual guides two instances of speech assigned to women at the *soirée*. The first: “If one, settling a pillow by her head, / Should say: ‘That is not what I meant at all. / That is not it, at all’” (ll.96-98). The second, resonant in its rhyme of *shawl* with *all*:

“If one, settling a pillow or throwing off a shawl,
And turning toward the window, should say:
‘That is not it at all,
That is not what I meant, at all.’” (ll.107-10)

These are the “human voices” (l.131) that wake Prufrock from reverie, given the one other instance of “voices” in the poem: “I know the voices dying with a dying fall / Beneath the music from a farther room” (ll.52-53).

Prufrock's impasse thus leads to the formulation of despair. This takes two shapes. It informs the motif of illness, "as if a magic lantern threw the nerves in patterns on a screen" (l.106). One such pattern is "the evening . . . spread out against the sky / Like a patient etherised upon a table" (ll.2-3). Secondly, despair informs Prufrock's thought on time and aging, as in this expression of ennui: "For I have known them all already, known them all- / Have known the evenings, mornings, afternoons, / I have measured out my life in coffee spoons" (ll.49-51). One day in life, one coffee spoon. Or, anticipating his stroll along the beach: "I grow old . . . I grow old . . . / I shall wear the bottoms of my trousers rolled" (ll.120-21). The wisdom of age.

In self-definition, Prufrock says, "I am no prophet—and here's no great matter" (l.83), but Anglo-American literary history has thought otherwise. We should question this grandeur, if only to reaffirm it, and also to recognize others, different in kind. If Prufrock is a prophet, he is one of impasse. He voices a despair of self-division, a nullity of self-cancelling forces. He's neither accurately formulated by social determination, nor is he able to formulate himself accurately alone. He's estranged from elite society, the estrangement owing to a divide between erudite thought and immanent sexual energy. Prufrock's only solace is the beauty of his song, a lyric euphony that hides the face of despair.

6. WHAT PASSES SHOW

Three observations are germane in conclusion. First, proper names are inaugural instances of social determination. You are called X, and so it is. Thus begins an often precarious adventure. Levinas notes in "From the Like to the Same," the first of his conclusions to *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority* (1961): "The identity of the individual does not consist in being like to itself, and in letting itself be identified *from the outside* by the finger that points to it; it consists in being the *same*—in being oneself, in identifying oneself from within."⁴² Identity arises when I see my attributes are the same as those others give me when they call my name.

A century ago, Eliot's poem called into being *J. Alfred Prufrock*, an open sign that lacks both sense and reference. This openness lets us wonder who Prufrock is. To see Prufrock as a variable in a model for lyric poetry from 1910 to 1911, as a dandy flâneur, an erudite thinker, and a comic anti-hero, as a surrogate for the young Eliot, and as a prophet of impasse is to gloss that proper name with lyric, socio-historical, and authorial formulation, along with the formulation of impasse and despair.

⁴² Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p. 289.

Secondly, the first five answers to the question Who is Prufrock? are historically informed, while the sixth is transhistorical. Anyone who's known the impasse of self-division can know the poem. This has to do with the nature of reading—like walking in the path an *I* has left behind. Interpretation seeks to know where we have been. And this has to do, as Collingwood puts it, with “the idea of knowledge as directed to an object relative to the knower’s own point of view.”⁴³

Thirdly, the reflection here on the individual and social determination extends to a passage in Donoghue’s *The Practice of Reading* (1998):

“It is now widely if not universally believed that, far from being autonomous even ideally, each of us is socially constituted. . . . [E]ach of us is a consequence of extraneous and contingent forces. A claim for one’s autonomy, however modestly expressed, is rarely allowed. . . .

I believe that the purpose of reading literature is to exercise or incite one’s imagination; specifically, one’s ability to imagine being different. Such an imagining was one of Hopkins’s preoccupations in his journals and spiritual exercises: What must it be to be different? He meant: What is it to be oneself and therefore not someone else?”⁴⁴

To imagine being different so as to be oneself poses a problem for the social determination of individuality. There’s a variable in the equation for the individual that isn’t explained by large, or even small, sorts of social formulation. Beyond the dialectic of embrace or renunciation, and stemming from the quirkiness of language itself, this variable makes Eliot’s poem possible. It’s what allows Hamlet to say, “But I have that within which passes show, / These but the trappings and the suits of woe.”⁴⁵ And it’s what lets Yeats say, “She sings as the moon sings: / ‘I am I, am I; / The greater grows my light / The further that I fly.’”⁴⁶

43 R. G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History*. Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1993, p. 60.

44 Denis Donoghue, *The Practice of Reading*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998, p. 56.

45 Shakespeare, *Hamlet*. Ed. Harold Jenkins. The Arden Shakespeare. London: Routledge, 1982, I.ii.85-86.

46 W. B. Yeats, *The Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats*. Ed. Richard J. Finneran. New York: Macmillan, 1989, p. 287.