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A Companion to
T. S. Eliot

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Prufox and Other Observations: A Walking Tour
Frances Dickey

Publication and Reception

The 1917 publication of Prufox and Other Observations marked the beginning of an era in modern poetry. Surprisingly, however, most of the poems collected in this volume had been written at least six years before. Eliot began “Portrait of a Lady” and “Preludes” in 1910, completing them the following year along with “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufox” and “Rhapsody on a Windy Night” during his study abroad in Paris and Munich. “La Figlia che Piange” followed shortly afterward. Not until 1915 did Eliot venture to publish these poems separately in periodicals; two years later the Egoist Press brought out his first book. The core poems of the Prufox volume thus predate Eliot’s graduate training in philosophy, the tragic wartime death of his Paris friend Jean Verdenal (to whom he later dedicated the book), and his unhappy marriage to Vivien Haigh-Wood; they are the work of a 23-year-old. More importantly, these poems also belong to a very different world than the one that received them. They were written before or at the same time as many of the defining moments of Anglo-American modernism, such as the first Post-Impressionist Exhibition in London (1910), visits to London by Futurist F. T. Marinetti (1910 and 1912), the launching of Imagism (1912), the publication of Freud in English (1913), and, most importantly, the outbreak of World War I (1914). Prufox and Other Observations appears now so quintessentially modern not because it bears the stamp of these upheavals but because it profoundly shaped literary modernism. Many aspects of the book actually reflect a nineteenth-century context, including its literary frame of reference, its anxiety about urbanization and prostitution, and its philosophical rather than Freudian approach to psychology.

The poems of Prufox had to await the founding of literary journals prepared to publish avant-garde work in English: “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufox” appeared in 1915 in Poetry magazine (in existence since 1912), quickly followed by “Preludes” and “Rhapsody” in Blast (established 1914), and “Portrait of a Lady” in Alfred Kreymborg’s Others (established 1913). The publication of the collected volume was modest, consisting of 500 copies, secretly subsidized by Ezra Pound. Pound conducted a blistering defense of the work in response to an unfavorable review comparing Eliot’s poems to the behavior of a drunken slave (Brooker 4–6). Most reviewers, however, including Marianne Moore, Conrad Aiken, May Sinclair, and Babette Deutsch, called attention to the quality and importance of the poems, even while recoiling from Eliot’s depiction of human nature (1–17). The title poem established Eliot’s reputation as a poet and is now among the most familiar works of modernism and perhaps of American poetry altogether.

Background and Major Sources

The background to Prufox and Other Observations consists of everything that the precocious Tom Eliot read before and during his creative burst of 1910–11. Jules Laforgue’s influence is paramount as the source from which Eliot received Symbolism and introduced it into American poetry. Eliot had read Arthur Symons’s The Symbolist Movement in Literature in the winter of 1908–09, and many of Symons’s quotations from Laforgue appear in barely disguised form in the early Prufox poems, such as “Enfin, si, par un soir, elle meurt dans mes livres” ("At last, if one evening she dies among my books") (Symons 110), transposed to “and what if she should die some afternoon” in “Portrait” (CPP 11). Even passages from Symons’s prose echo in the poems, as when “In Laforgue, sentiment is squeezed out of the world before one begins to play at ball with it” (109) becomes “to have squeezed the universe into a ball” in “Prufox” (CPP 6). Prufox traces his lineage to Laforgue’s debonair and flippant "Pierrot" (a version of the stock character of the foolish romantic found in pantomime and commedia dell’arte). From Laforgue Eliot learned an attitude of ironic detachment, the technique of free verse, and a method of endowing apparently unpoesic modern objects with significance. Eliot’s “objective correlative” (proposed in “Hamlet and His Problems,” 1919 [SE 124–25]) essentially theorizes the symbolist technique that he first encountered in Laforgue and tried out in “Prufox.”

Eliot had already read widely before he came to Laforgue. In later years he tended to downplay his debts to Victorian poetry, making this frame of reference more difficult for us to see. His most important poetic inheritance, however, may have been the Victorian dramatic monologue (see Langbaum; Christ). Symbolist poetry tends to minimize characterization to achieve a universal or generalized speaker. By contrast, Victorian poets drew on contemporary advances in the novel to transform the romantic lyric “I” into a vehicle for exploring the individual and his or her relation to society and convention. “Prufox” and “Portrait” inherit this project, particularly from Robert Browning’s Men and Women (1855). Like Prufox, the Browning speaker distinguishes himself as belonging to a particular time and place, and his historical specificity is often combined with personal peculiarity or social isolation.
Eliot's poetic speakers differ from Browning's and Laforgue's, however, in the greater intensity of their introspection. Three figures in particular contributed to Eliot's knowledge of and interest in the new field of psychology: Harvard philosophy professor William James, who had published the first American textbook on psychology in 1890; his novelist brother Henry James; and the French philosopher Henri Bergson. Debts to Henry James's fiction can be found throughout the Prufrock poems, from the title of "Portrait of a Lady" to the narrative device of indecision and missed opportunities. Eliot's use of interior monologue in "Prufrock" and "Portrait" reflects James's narrative technique and his attention to consciousness as the site of meaningful action. The Jameses shared their interest in consciousness, and particularly the idea of "flow" (i.e., "stream of consciousness," a term coined by William) with Bergson, whose lectures and books deeply, if temporarily, influenced Eliot in 1911. William James and Bergson had mutually influenced each other for 20 years, and in 1909 James had hailed the younger philosopher for helping him to see that "reality, life, experience, concreteness, immediacy, use what word you will, excels our logic, overflows, and surrounds it" (725). Bergson's distinction between pure experience—as flow or duration—and measured or "extended" experience underlies much of the Prufrock volume.

Another important aspect of Eliot's background was city life, experienced both in person and in his reading. Raised in downtown St. Louis and educated in Cambridge, Eliot was an inveterate urbanite, drawn to wandering the streets of working-class districts in Boston and Paris. While in Paris, Eliot read three novels of Fyodor Dostoevsky, including Crime and Punishment, in which the narrative orientation around the protagonist's fevered consciousness dovetails with description of the modern city. Dostoevsky represents urban life as having an unhealthy effect on the mind, whose aimless thoughts and attraction to dark passages resemble the protagonist's nighttime wandering through poor neighborhoods (he sets off on such a walk at the opening of the novel, just as Prufrock does). The novels of Charles Dickens, and more directly James Thomson's poem "The City of Dreadful Night" and John Davidson's "Thirty Bob a Week" also contributed to Eliot's vision of the city (Crawford 35–60). Their London is the literary substratum for "Prufrock," "Preludes," "Rhapsody," and "Morning at the Window," over which is laid the Paris of Baudelaire, Laforgue, and Charles-Louis Philippe (author of Babu de Montparnasse [1901], which opens with an evening stroll in a red-light district of Paris, and of Marie Donnadiel [1904]). The nineteenth-century city that Eliot encountered in life and in his reading was at once a center of fashion and culture—represented by the leisure, strolling dandy—and a cesspool of poverty and exploitation resting, at the bottom of the social hierarchy, on the sale of sex by destitute girls. Eliot's concern with the city reflects a squallid social reality that seemed at the time to expose an awful crime at the heart of human nature.

Finally, Eliot drew on the standard texts of a nineteenth-century education, including the Homeric epics, Virgil's Aeneid, Dante's Divine Comedy, the plays of Shakespeare and other Renaissance works, and the Bible. Eliot's epigraphs, which were mostly added later, perhaps overstate the importance of these monumental sources. Allusions can often be traced through a more contemporary work; for example, the line "to have squeezed the universe into a ball" may echo Andrew Marvell's "Let us roll all our strength, and all/Our sweetness, up into one ball" (in "To His Coy Mistress" [51]), but it also has a closer source in Symons. Even Hamlet was mediated for Eliot by Laforgue's humorous fictional depiction of the character. The exception to this mediation is Dante, whom Eliot read early and often.

"The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock"

Let us go then, you and I,
When the evening is spread out against the sky
Like a patient etherized upon a table (CPP 3)

These opening lines are at once famously memorable and utterly enigmatic. To whom does Prufrock speak? Himself or someone else? He sets out on a journey, but the destination remains vague, as does the "overwhelming question" that he never asks (3). Most enigmatic of all, the image of the etherized patient hovers over the entire poem as an emblem of Prufrock's numbness and his inability to take action. It exemplifies his profound confusion between tenors and vehicles in his metaphors; his vehicles (the "patient") point inexorably back to his emotions rather than outward to describe the world (the "sky"). This confusion is a linguistic symptom of Prufrock's indecisive negotiation between, on one hand, the outdoor urban space of male companionship and anonymity, and, on the other, the feminine indoor space of social convention (at the "table" where tea is served, and where he feels he is being cut open). This spatial division also corresponds to the problematic boundaries of Prufrock's selfhood, between the interior of his thoughts and emotions and the exterior world of things and other people.

Eliot situates Prufrock's utterance at the crepuscular or twilight hour, a favorite time of day for French Symbolists and British fin-de-siècle poets, signifying the transition to nighttime and the demi-monde, and suggesting personal or historical decline. The month of October is an analogous time on the calendar. Prufrock's departure for the city streets as the sun is setting indicates the meeting of realms that are ordinarily kept apart: bourgeois and underworld, work and private life, waking and dreaming. His entrance into the "underworld" opens a journey initiated by the progression of verb tenses. Beginning with a future orientation ("Let us go") and "there will be time" (CPP 3–4), Prufrock shifts into the present tense ("the afternoon, the evening, sleeps so peacefully") (3), and then shows hesitation in the conditional "should I" that tests out the possibility of an action (6). A moment of crisis comes and goes, indicated by Prufrock's transition to the past conditional ("would it have been worth while?") (6). This progression tells the story of a missed opportunity that is nowhere explicitly narrated but constitutes the action of the poem.
As he progresses in time, Prufrock also moves through space, conducting his journey or quest through city streets and a series of "rooms." As his mind looks forward anxiously to an indoor destination presided over by women — "In the room the women come and go / Talking of Michelangelo" — his feet take him by urban venues that these women would have been sure to avoid fastidiously (CPP 4). The strict nineteenth-century distinction between marriagable girls and sexually available ones is mapped out in the poem between genteel reception rooms and "one-night cheap hotels," and accounts for some of the poem's barely controlled panic (3). After outdoor mortifications ("pools that stand in drains" [4]) and indoor ones, Prufrock's final crisis takes place in the inner sanctum of feminine domesticity and convention: "After the cups, the marmalade, the tea, / Among the porcelain, among some talk of you and me" (6). Yet, the poem ends in a space outside the parameters set by the opening lines, on the beach and "in the chambers of the sea" (7).

Prufrock's journey, with its succession of challenges culminating in a test of courage that becomes a crisis of identity, traces the outline of the quest narrative that Eliot later mined explicitly for The Waste Land. As indicated by the epigraph from the Inferno (which replaced an earlier quotation from the Purgatorio), Eliot has a Dantean model in mind, with echoes of Homer in the singing mermaids (Manganiello 18-25). Paralleling this narrative is the looser romantic frame of an encounter with nature, which reconnects the isolated speaker with other people and the divine in a moment of epiphany. Prufrock's experience, however, subverts or disappoints the expectations built into both of these patterns: at the moment of the crisis, rather than taking heroic action, he backs down, says nothing; nor does his walk produce any transcendental insight or knowledge except that he is merely a "Fool" (CPP 7). Eliot deploys the Laforguine technique of deflated expectations, but not for humorous ends: Prufrock has nothing to fall back on to reassure him of his own and the world's solidity, which may explain why we find him drowning at the end of the poem.

Prufrock's quest to establish his identity and make contact with his fellow has a philosophical underpinning, explained by Eliot's "temporary conversion to Bergsonism" in 1910–11 (IMH 411). "When the evening is spread out against the sky" corresponds quite exactly to Bergson's 1889 account of "spreading time out in space" in Time and Free Will (133). Bergson distinguished between pure time, or duration, experienced as continuous and in flux, versus clock time, which imposes a quantitative framework on something essentially unquantifiable (Childs 68-73). Selfhood, too, may be either "pure" and undifferentiated, or "spread out" and subdivided according to the demands of social convention. Bergson argued that language itself accomplishes this division: "Little by little... our unconscious states are made into objects or things; they break off not only from one another, but from ourselves" (Time 138). His objections to the spatialization of time and selfhood account for Eliot's negative images of clock time — "I have measured out my life with coffee spoons" (5) — and sociality: "there will be time / To prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet" (4); "When I am pinned and wriggling on the wall" (5); "as if a magic lantern threw the nerves in patterns on a screen" (6). In each of these images, the spatial "spreading out" of experience seems unnatural and even violent. Prufrock's discomfort with the passage of time (it seems to move both too quickly and too slowly for him) and with social situations thus reflects what Bergson viewed as a fundamental human predicament: the dissonance between the flow of experience and the fixed conventions of language, measurement, and social roles.

One of the most striking stylistic and perceptual characteristics of the poem is fragmentation, a phenomenon predicted by Bergson as a consequence of extension in space. Time, self, other people, and visual scenes are broken up into "a hundred visions and revisions": "I have known the eyes already, known them all... / I have known the arms already... / Arms that lie along a table, or wrap about a shawl" (CPP 5). Prufrock is incapable of seeing a whole person. Even his beloved is seen only as disconnected body parts. The fragmentation of his vision is reflected in the incompleteness of his speech; his thoughts begin with "and" and end with ellipses.

Prufrock's difficulty seeing other people and his tendency to make the external world into a symbol of his own state of mind suggest solipsism or, less radically, self-absorption. He, not the evening, is "like a patient etherized upon a table"; his own thinking, not the streets, is "a redious argument / Of insidious intent" (CPP 3); Childs 68). Prufrock internalizes everything as a metaphor, again in a way that Bergson explains: "Consciousness... substitutes the symbol for the reality, or perceives the reality only through the symbol" (Time 128). The case of Prufrock's pin shows how this process works: "My morning coat, my collar mounting firmly to the chin, / My necktie rich and modest, but asserted by a simple pin" (CPP 4). Prufrock adorns himself with a little ornament intended to mark him as a dandy, at home in the sophisticated world of the drawing room. Yet soon the pin pieces him: "when I am formulated, sprawling on a pin" (5). This line transforms the pin from an object in the external world to a metaphor for his (interior) feelings. The pin, of course, is a particularly apt symbol for internalization, because it is a material object that enters the body with violence.

To call Prufrock a solipsist, however, would be too simple, for the example of the pin demonstrates his extreme sensitivity to the pressure of other people, even if he can't perceive them fully. As he puts on the pin, signifying his submission to the social codes that govern his appearance in the drawing room, he sees himself alternately as he would like to be seen and as he fears he will be judged: "[They will say: 'How his hair is growing thin!']" (4). This nervous alternation of points of view dramatizes Prufrock's fundamental bifurcation into at least two selves, as hinted by his opening address to "you and I." Whereas Bergson diagnoses a "true" self that persists in dreams and memory, overlaid by a second "social" self, both of Prufrock's selves here seem social. Soon these multiply into a series of possible roles: a crab ("I should have been a pair of ragged claws"), John the Baptist ("I have seen my head [grown slightly bald] brought in upon a platter"), Lazarus ("I am Lazarus, come from the dead"), and finally Polonius ("an attendant lord... / Almost, at times, the Fool") (5-7). Although his consideration of these roles is primarily negative ("I should have
been," "I am no prophet," "No! I am not Prince Hamlet" [73], their proliferation suggests a model of identity based on role-playing, rather than on a core self that precedes and underlies social convention.

The "Hamlet" passage (CPP 7) was one of the earliest portions that Eliot wrote, and he insisted on retaining it against Pound's advice, which suggests that the link between Hamlet and Prufrock was central to his conception of the poem. Hamlet is like Prufrock in experiencing "a hundred indecisions" (4), but unlike him in finally taking violent and decisive action. The primary similarity between them is that each plays multiple roles within a single drama, and keenly perceives the performative aspect of life. Prufrock's "performativity"—to use a term Eliot would not have recognized—raises questions about free will as an aspect of subjectivity: do we choose our actions or does convention choose them for us? Perhaps by not acting at all Prufrock is attempting to exert negative agency, refusing to enter into the prescribed role of "lover."

The performative aspect of "Prufrock" also raises the issue of genre: is the poem dramatic or lyric? Eliot's title indicates it is a "love song," placing it in the category of lyric, the predominant form of English romantic poetry. The romantic lyric aspires to a universal voice, avoiding historical and geographic identifiers that would mark the speaker as a specific individual in time, and preferring metaphors over narrative as a method of development. The rest of the title, however, denotes a particular person with the unique name of "J. Alfred Prufrock" (the last name has been traced to a St. Louis tailor; it also reflects the poet's undergraduate signature, T. Stearns Eliot). Prufrock may call his utterance a song, but he speaks in dramatic monologue, and his alienation is a feature of this genre. His isolated condition persists up to the last 12 lines of the poem, where rhyme and alliteration push his speech towards lyric as he listens to the mermaids singing. The final six lines squarely enter the realm of song, adopting the inclusive pronoun "we" for the first time. This "we" offers a brief transcendence from personal isolation to social communion, though "human voices" then immediately cause the speaker to "drown" (7). Eliot's closing gesture toward lyric partly explains the mysterious satisfaction that readers of "Prufrock" experience, despite the speaker's manifest failure to achieve any of his own goals.

"Portrait of a Lady," "Conversation Galante," and "La Figlia che Piange"

Along with "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," these poems were written, as Eliot affirmed, "under the sign of Laforgue" ("sous le signe de Laforgue" [IMH 407]). The four Laforguian poems particularly make use of dramatic speech and take a man's encounter with a woman as their core subject matter. Two painting genres also shape "Portrait," "Conversation," and "La Figlia": the portrait, and the eighteenth-century "conversation galante" scene depicting a man and woman in amorous dialogue (Roper, IMH 191). The shared basis of painting and drama, as foregrounded in these poems, is the act of posing. Like "Prufrock," these poems raise questions about our relation to convention: are our interactions, and even our feelings, scripted by social forms?

Eliot draws our attention to the dramatic element of "Portrait" at once: "Among the smoke and fog of a December afternoon / You have the scene arrange itself— as it will seem to do— / With 'I have saved this afternoon for you'" (CPP 8). These lines introduce a complex speaking situation and power dynamic. Though the poem has the appearance of a dialogue between a man and a woman, in fact it is the interior monologue of a man, in which he repeats or hears the woman's half of their conversation; although he addresses her as "you," we hear only what he thinks and not what he says to her. Thus he is in some sense her "stage manager," casting the woman in a particular role for his own or our benefit. He begins, however, by accusing her of trying to arrange him in the role of Romeo to her Juliet. As he silently resists her efforts, the speaker portrays her as an ageing socialite and patroness whose desires have been shaped by Victorian sentimentality, particularly Matthew Arnold's poem "The Buried Life" (1852). Most of her utterances can be traced back to this work, which articulates the idea of a "buried" interiority only accessible through intimate or romantic friendship. For his part, he makes her belief in intimacy look ridiculous: he reaches for his hat as she claims that "I am always sure that you understand . . . / Sure that across the gulf you reach your hand" (CPP 9). He, too, has an idea of interiority, but it's quite different from hers: "Inside my brain a dull tom-tom begins / Absolutely hammering a prelude of its own . . . " (9). Their struggle takes place along at least three different axes: along gender lines (as in "Conversation Galante"); between generations, with modernity defining itself by mocking the Victorian; and geographically, between the center of culture and its periphery. Though Eliot became associated with the "establishment," he began his career as a provincial outsider, a disadvantage he struggled self-consciously to overcome. "Portrait," began in January 1910, dates from that early period.

Like "Prufrock," "Portrait" moves between contrasting outdoor and indoor locations, beginning in the Lady's "darkened room" (CPP 8), then passing outside briefly for a masculine interlude: "Let us take the air, in a tobacco trance . . . / Then sit for half an hour and drink our boccos" (9). This is in December (section I); the speaker sees her next in the spring (section II), when again he escapes her company for a more masculine outdoor activity: "You will see me any morning in the park / Reading the comics and the sporting page" (10). At this point he hears "a street piano, mechanical and tired . . . / Recalling things that other people have desired. / Are these ideas right or wrong?" (10). This is the "overwhelming question" of "Portrait," to which the speaker returns at the end: "Not knowing what to feel or if I understand / Or whether wise or foolish, tardy or too soon . . . " (11). While the Lady has Arnold's "The Buried Life" to tell her what to feel, the speaker has no such guide, and he wonders whether feelings themselves might be a matter of acting or "arranging." His crisis occurs in section III, in October (almost a year after their first meeting) when she finally realizes that his feelings do not "relate" to hers. The confrontation reduces him to "a dancing
bear.” Ultimately, the question of what to feel becomes one of performance: “Would she not have the advantage, after all? / . . . And should I have the right to smile?” (11). Their relationship resolves into a struggle between poses competing to be the more “successful.”

“Conversation Galante,” based on Laforgue’s “Autre complainte de Lord Pierrot,” takes a lighter approach to the conflicts of wars between a man and a woman. Eliot has borrowed Laforgue’s dialogue form (with the last line of each stanza devoted to a response), but reversed the genders of the speakers, so that the male “I” is the more voluble and romantic, while the woman delivers deflating one-line replies. This poem, written in 1909, shows Laforgue’s raw influence in the flipant tone of the interlocutors, their tongue-in-cheek discussion of the moon (“It may be Prester John’s balloon”), reference to the “absolute,” and humorously unpoetic polysyllabic rhymes, such as “vacuity” and “refer to me” (CPP 19).

“La Figlia che Piange,” Italian for “the girl who weeps,” departs from the ironic tone of the other poems of the volume, suggesting an autobiographical incident to some readers, although the presumed date of composition, late in 1911, would rule out any reference to Eliot’s graduate-school flame Emily Hale. The speaker is not dramatized as a character (as in the other Laforgue poems), but rather as a director of a scene. Derek Roper associates the poem with the late Victorian portrait genre depicting a woman in a garden, and identifies the speaker as an interpretor of such a painting, who feels sympathy for her and constructs a simple narrative of betray to explain her expression (227). Placed at the end of the Prufrock volume, “La Figlia” parallels “Prufrock” by coming to rest in the past conditional: “And I wonder how they should have been together! / I should have lost a gesture and a pose” (CPP 20). Thus the volume’s loose narrative of romantic disengagement, as well as its thematic question of whether feelings are spontaneous or staged, are brought to a close in a fitfully inconclusive way.

“Preludes,” “Rhapsody on a Windy Night,” and “Morning at the Window”

These city poems form a group with similar works found in Inventions of the March Hare, such as the “First Caprice in North Cambridge,” “Fourth Caprice in Montparnasse,” and “Interlude in London,” titles that reveal the varied origins of Eliot’s urban landscape. The prelude and rhapsody, along with the caprice and interlude, refer to musical forms: single-movement works that each explore a mood or musical problem, played either in a series or singly. Frédéric Chopin’s piano compositions in these forms were widely performed in the nineteenth century, as suggested by the Lady in “Portrait.” Eliot’s musical allusion indicates that the focus of each poem is a state of mind, atmosphere, or impression rather than a determinate event or character.

The title of “Preludes” additionally points to a thematic concern with waiting and expectation: the “you” of section III waits, the cab horse “steams and stamps” (I), the

“conscience of the blackened street” is “impatient” (IV), and even the times of day are described as if preparing themselves for something (“the winter evening settles down,” “the morning comes to consciousness”) (CPP 12–13). But waiting for what? Laforgue’s pessimistic “Preludes Autobiographiques,” which undoubtedly provided another model for Eliot’s poem, describes the future as an “éternulité” (Laforgue 20). The four preludes cycle through transitional times of day: evening and morning rush hours (sections I and II), nighttime before dawn (III), and back to evening rush hour. The passage of time appears futile and without goal, an idea that the closing lines also imply: “The worlds revolve like ancient women / Gathering fuel in vacant lots” (CPP 13). Bergson’s influence clearly underlies this negative representation of time, measured out and reduced to a meaningless, mechanical repetition. Similarly, “His soul stretched tight across the skies” (13) literalizes the Bergsonian idea of extension, and echoes the opening of “Prufrock” (completed three months before Prelude IV). As in “Prufrock,” fragmentation is pervasive: the day is divided into hours, persons into hands, feet, eyes, and “short square fingers stuffing pipes” (13); the city into a “thousand furnished rooms” (12); and the point of view disorientingly shifts from “you” (section I), to “one” (II), to another “you” in III, and then in IV quickly moves from “His soul,” to “I,” and back to “you.” “Preludes” achieves one of the most condensed and sensuously apprehended representations of fragmentation in modern literature, without clearly attributing a cause.

Coinciding in the same poem with Eliot’s abstract critique of Western metaphysics is his densely detailed, morbidly sensitive recording of urban life, presumably based on experience as well as his reading of Philippe’s Buha of Montparnasse, the unvarnished narrative of a prostitute who contracts syphilis. The only character who emerges clearly from the fragmented impressions of “Preludes” is the “you” of section III, her gender indicated by the curling papers in her hair and by her passive, sexualized pose (“You lay on your back, and waited” [CPP 12]). Her patient, but by no means heroic suffering, as well as her location in a “furnished room,” are reminiscent of many passages in Buha (“there was the unmade bed where the two bodies had left their impress of brownish sweat upon the worn sheets—this bed of hotel rooms, where the bodies are dirty and the souls as well” (49)). Like Philippe, Eliot treats the exploitation of women as a gritty reality, and simultaneously as a moral problem for the “conscience.” (The speaker may be implicating himself in the situation by describing her in this intimate way.) “Preludes” does not distinguish between the metaphorical and the social causes of alienation; both contribute to the same “vision of the street” (CPP 13). “Morning at the Window” (1914) conveys a similar vision, though perhaps with less sympathy for the “damp souls of housemaids,” who are seen from above rather than at eye level (16).

“Rhapsody on a Windy Night” may represent the culmination of Eliot’s Bergsonism, or else his repudiation of it, but either way is considered his most explicit engagement with the French philosopher (Childe 50–51). Bergson’s distinction between pure and practical memory informs the opening action, in which
The street lamp operates as the selective, practical process of recollection, while the moon sheds light on all the heterogeneous contents of unconscious memory ("a crowd of twisted things") [CPP 14]. Though the moon prevails temporarily, the lamplight of selective memory reasserts itself at the end when the speaker catches sight of his house number, which draws him back into practical life. "The last twist of the knife" (16) likely refers to Bergson's account of how the practical memory "presents nothing thicker than the edge of a blade to actual experience, into which it ... penetrates" (Mater 130). The negative tone of the poem, however, is difficult to interpret, whether as frustration with Bergson or with the difficulty of accessing pure memory. Like "Preludes," "Rhapsody" revolves around the ambiguous figure of the prostitute, treated with a mix of revulsion and sympathy: she is an image picked out by the lamp on the city street, then she becomes the moon ("A washed-out smallpox cracks her face / Her hand twists a paper rose, / That smells of dust and eau de Cologne"), and she leaves behind "female smells in shuttered rooms" that are part of the speaker's pure "reminiscence" (CPP 15).

In terms of the structure of Prufrock and Other Observations, "Rhapsody" reaches farthest into the surreal "spaces of the dark," into memory and irrationality (CPP 14). Picking up Prufrock's foray through "muttering retreats," "Rhapsody" brings the protagonist (or antitheta) of the volume to an empty street at midnight, lit by lamps that actually "sputter" and "mutter" (15). This is the journey into consciousness. In the other narrative of the volume, concluded with "La Figlia che Piange," the protagonist anxiously negotiates interpersonal relationships and social codes of behavior.


The short poems that fill out the rest of the Prufrock volume were written in England in 1915, after Eliot's departure from graduate school, and they reflect his reaction to polite Cambridge (Massachusetts) society. They correspond in style to the satirical portraits that Ezra Pound - now Eliot's close collaborator - was writing for Lustra (1916). The object of their critique is social, rather than metaphysical or personal, but they share with the other poems of Prufrock a resentment or resistance to convention. In each satire, the disorderly, subterranean energies of modernity and sexuality rise up against genteel New England culture: "evening" and "appetites" in "The Boston Evening Transcript" (CPP 16), the dalliance of the housemaid and footman in "Aunt Helen," smoking and "modern dances" in "Cousin Nancy" (17), and the Dionysian, priapic Mr. Apollinaris, who forever upsets the hegemony of teacups in the house of Harvard "Professor Channing-Cheetah" (18). Mr. Apollinaris is based on the British analytic philosopher Bertrand Russell, who visited Harvard in 1914 and may have been instrumental in dispelling Eliot's Bergsonism.

Apollinaris's laughing "like an irresponsible poet" (CPP 18) connects him with the laughter in "Hysteric," but while Apollinaris's vitality merely threatens propriety, this prose poem represents sexuality as consuming and terrifying. Hysteric was a common diagnosis of women in the late nineteenth century for nervous anxiety thought to be brought on by sexual dissatisfaction. (Since there was no corresponding diagnosis for men experiencing emotional distress, the term "shell shock" was coined in World War I to describe symptoms of trauma, a condition explored in The Waste Land.) Here, the male speaker becomes "involved" in the woman's literally hysterical laughter - her mouth looks to him like a devouring womb or vagina - until it seems that he himself is suffering from hysteria (19). This work offers a medical or psychoanalytic, rather than philosophical, explanation of the perceptual fragmentation that is everywhere in the poems of Prufrock. "Hysteric" also identifies sexuality, rather than social convention, as the primary challenge to the integrity of the self. Between "Conversation Galante" of 1909 and "Hysteric" of 1915, each representing a conversation between a man and a woman, Eliot's first book "observes" the changing meaning of "love" from the end of the Victorian era to the beginning of the modern, Freudian, postwar world.

Notes

1 See T. S. Eliot and the Symbolist City and Yes and No: Eliot and Western Philosophy.
2 The reference to the tom-tom has particularly interested critics for the way it seems to align the speaker's mentality with "primitive" cultures, a subject of artistic and anthropological interest at the turn of the century. See Mind, Myth, and Culture: Eliot and Anthropology.
3 On this resentment, see also Dissimulating Quatrains.

References and Further Reading


Disambivalent Quatrains

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Eliot’s career is often assumed to fall into two phases. The break between these is said, for convenience, to occur with Eliot’s announcement that he was “classicist in literature, royalist in politics, and anglo-catholic in religion” (FLA vii), though it is understood that the transition – his conversion from one sort of Eliot to another – could not have been so abrupt. While sensitive to the dissonance in Eliot’s writing, we tend to assume that his discordant tones are sounded not simultaneously but in succession. His career, however, does not divide comfortably into phases – and certainly, an agnostic, materialist, avant-garde phase was not followed by its inverse. His conversion was an expression, one among many, of unresolved ambivalence. At different times he responded in different ways, but his ambivalence was constant and consistent. He appears to have wanted, sometimes desperately, to feel “concentrated in purpose” (CPP 62). Occasionally, temporarily, he would succeed. But he was liable, even after 1927, to turn and turn again. “Because I do not hope to turn again” is the first line of his post-conversion poem Ash-Wednesday (60).

A better way of understanding Eliot’s ambivalence is to read his prose in the context of his poetry, and his poetry in the context of his prose. It is a teacherly commonplace that when, for example, Eliot was most insistent in his critical essays on maintaining classical standards in verse, his own verse was at its most romantic. This syndrome of Eliot’s is regarded by many as a ploy. He was not called Old Possum for nothing: Ezra Pound, who gave him the name, meant that his staid demeanor was an act. But the contradictions between Eliot’s poetry and prose are less a question of camouflage (or protective coloring) than they are of his enduring need to have things both ways. Of this need Eliot was not unaware. Wavering line by line, Ash-Wednesday solicits grace for ambivalent converts – those “who chose thee and oppose thee, / Those who are torn on the horn between season and season, time and time” (CPP 65). Eliot learned to live with his ambivalence, and eventually, in the interplay of voices of Four Quartets, its poles or terms appear untraumatically together on the page.