

THE SELF BEYOND ITSELF:
THE POETICS OF DISINTEGRATION IN "PRUFROCK"
AND "GERONTION" ¹

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In "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock. " Eliot presents the reader with a human predicament: that the modern era has brought with it the disintegration of culture, society and consequently the individual personality.² Modern man cannot come to terms with either society or himself. Eliot presents Prufrock the speaking persona of the poem as a deformed product of sterile modern times. The symptoms of a disintegrated society are all at work in Prufrock's personality, which has been split despite and against himself. He cannot realize himself either sexually or culturally : Eliot implies that the cannot nourish and get nourished by his cultural roots.³

Prufrock with his fragmented personality, languishes for a love, which as he himself observes, proves to be formidable. Since he is confined in the abyss of his own consciousness

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reality is merely some kind of emotional experience for him.⁴ He is corporeally vis-a-vis the world but psychologically ostracized. Therefore, Prufrock lets his thoughts and sentiments drift off incoherently, a sign of his split personality. The external world he so sardonically depicts reflects Prufrock's inner world deprived of spiritual serenity. He is leading what Kierkegaard calls an "alienated existence."⁵

As he cannot get involved in a dialogue with the external world, only through the dramatic monologue can Prufrock whisper his intention: "Let us go then, you and I (1)." With the "them" in the very first line Eliot presents Prufrock's dilemma as comparable to Guido's in the epigraph from Dante's *Inferno*. The link between Guido and Prufrock is that they are both tormented by their desire to act and to wriggle out of their quandaries, and that they face a similar failure in the end. While Guido has at least the courage to open up to Dante, Prufrock is too complacent and too inert to make that effort. He is simply content with his doppelgänger-confidante in the penumbra of his consciousness.⁶ The person, that is, whom Prufrock addresses by "us" and "you" in the poem is but the doppelgänger-confidante of Prufrock himself. By inviting his doppelgänger to collaboration he wants to stand united. The sensational but inert Prufrock is aware of his fragmentation, and desires to piece himself together so that he can achieve his invitation, that of fulfilling his desire. However, as Hay puts it: "The self without system (is) pointed in every direction to the annihilation of self, since every particular becomes meaningless alone."⁷ Affirmed on and on in the poem is that Prufrock is lost.⁸

According to Eliot the mature poet should be impersonal, and not impose his emotions on the poem. The text is supposed to elicit from readers some "structural emotions" through the formal arrangement of the poem's images each of which will serve in the text as an "objective correlative," a particular human emotion.⁹

Setting out from his formula and enlarging it, one could make the analogy that the objective correlative in the text is Guido's and Prufrock's plight. Both of them are in turn meant to evoke a sense of personal disintegration symbolic of the modern Western man. Consequently the former's plight correlates to (and initiates the reader into) the latter's. The structure of the poem though seemingly incohesive is tightly woven and reflects the persona's state of mind. In "Prufrock" as a matter of fact, there is no "sequence of events in time or sequence of reminiscences." ¹⁰

If Prufrock succeeds in anything, he does so in finding a correlation between his own internal world and the external, which mirrors the former devoid of a sound structure and stability. As Prufrock dramatizes himself, he lets his stream of consciousness ransack the objects and images that are correlated to his inertia and ennui. He presents the reader with a still ambience in the very first lines, immediately associating the evening with an etherized patient, both of which are passive and unproductive. Prufrock can only hint at his barren state of mind by resorting to those images; he is as deprived of movement as the evening and the anesthetized patient. Unable to assert himself, "he is weily conscious of his own self-consciousness and of the way in which his life is limited by what he is." ¹¹ Hence, it is not surprising that Prufrock wants to visit a place, the whereabouts of which he is unable to disclose:

When the evening is spread out against the sky
Like a patient etherized upon a table;
Let us go, through half-deserted streets,
The muttering retreats
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...
Oh, do not ask, 'What is it?'
Let us go and make our visit. (2-12)

Prufrock murmurs his first twelve lines with anxiety and exhaustion. Furthermore it is with a tantalizing impulse that he starts his reticent monologue. "Let us go." He repeats the invitation for the second time in the fourth line. Then, he repeats it for the third time in the twelfth line. When the reader has eavesdropped upon his words as far as the twelfth, he readily concludes that in the beginning is the end of Prufrock's intention. He keeps repeating himself but cannot have his doppelganger lead him to his goal- a proof of his passivity which harbingers his ultimate failure when "human voices wake us, and we drown (131)."

Prufrock, although he does not highly regard the female dilettantes in the poem, is himself a flamboyant aesthete. He is the aesthetic man who, in order to evade commitment to duty and responsibility, tries to lose himself in sensual and intellectual experience. Nevertheless, unable to pull himself together and to assert himself he takes refuge in a superficial and self-created reality he tries to enjoy the fruits of life without becoming involved in living. The more he yearns to disentangle himself from passivity, the more he is haunted by despair at the meaninglessness of his life.¹² Although he has a recourse to sex, he cannot manage even to fulfill this desire of his.

As Williamson explicates, "the yellow fog" symbolizes both the sterility of Prufrock, and the contemporary infertile ambience that surrounds him.¹³ Thus, Prufrock, an inscrutable persona, also loses the second round of thought with his doppelganger. It is as if the naturalistic "milieu" has penetrated Prufrock's actions. Epitomized in the wrecked personality of Prufrock is a human plight. He is living in a world where as Nietzsche had proclaimed earlier, God is dead and women have almost reversed the history of male dominance. The women in the poem are elusive to the already doomed spirit of Prufrock. He has been sundered from his God, his cultural roots, and now from the

objects of his desire. He envisages them in such a way that for Prufrock the female is not only too dangerous to touch, she is also incapable of understanding. As A.L. Johnson puts it, the female functions as an "amalgam of invitation and repulsion" and propels Prufrock into various forms of "distancing" flight into his consciousness and underwater silence.¹⁴ Prufrock's indetermination and spiritual chaos are beyond redemption. Since he is not in rapport with either his doppelganger or the external world, he gets into motion his psychological defense mechanism and wants to escape from his anguish. However, attempting to enshroud his paradox, he appears to be more pitiable than ever before:

There will be time, there will be time
To prepare a face to meet the faces that you
meet;
There will be time to murder and create,
And time for all the works and days of hands
That lift and drop a question on your plate;
Time for you and time for me,
And for a hundred visions and revisions,
Before the taking of a toast and tea. (26-34)

The intention Prufrock has in the quotation above is that of compensating psychologically for his never-progressing nature. Although he made his invitation verbally, he has failed to carry it out. Therefore, he readily tends to retrogress into the burrow of his consciousness. He pretends to be putting off his further move with determination: his use of the auxiliary verb "will" refers to an act of both the future and of determined nature. On the surface he assures himself that he will later or sooner realize himself and his wish materialize which however as is understood later is not the case "in short I was afraid (86)." Moreover it is not without rhyme or reason that Prufrock alludes to Hesiod's poem. Since he cannot come to cope with his sterility he tries to motivate himself through the remembrance of the historic works

and personages. This is to say that Prufrock rationalizes his failure. The poetical persona in Hesiod's poem advises his lazy brother to work to produce something valuable on his farm instead of idling his time away and squandering what he has inherited from his father; Prufrock wants to feel in the shoes of that persona, advising his doppelganger to progress.

Prufrock's mind obsessively and frequently rambles to the women who come in the room and go "talking of Michelangelo" because being a successful and prolific painter, the latter has survived the centuries by his works and still attracts the women's attention. The women in the poem can, if perhaps for the purpose of flaunting their artistic appreciation, talk about his works with admiration. On the other hand, Prufrock, a man of the present century, has nothing by which to attract them. He cannot even constitute a harmonious relation between his spirit and body. Neither can he yet give up clinging like barnacles to the self-delusion that "there will be time" to achieve the things he wants to. Therefore one cannot really expect Prufrock to overcome his dilemma. A person who hesitates even before taking his toast and tea, Prufrock is doomed to fail: "it is impossible to say just what I mean!"

Warring with/in himself to assert his identity Prufrock's consciousness slips into many spiritual flights with his realization that he is in need of some psychological support.¹⁵ Therefore to rationalize his fiasco, he depicts to himself other famous personages of similar character:

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,
Politic, cautious, and meticulous
Full of high sentence, but a bit obtuse:
At times, indeed, almost, ridiculous (111-8)

Prufrock's allusion to Hamlet marks another phase of his ego. That Prufrock alludes to him is perfectly suited to his own dilemma. The former's hesitance to realize himself is identical with the latter's much-discussed procrastination to ferret out the real cause of his father's death and to take revenge on the assassin, Claudius. Hamlet's fragmentation of personality comes to a fulfillment: he avenges his father though at the cost of a concatenation of murders including his own.¹⁶ One can, in Hamlet's case, scrutinize how the (sanely) mad protagonist conveys the intricate relationship between the psychic requirements and the social and cultural milieu in which these are expressed. Despite his temporary procrastination and fragmented character,¹⁷ Hamlet manages to attain his goal. However, Prufrock is not Hamlet, 'nor was meant to be." He cannot, unlike Hamlet, overcome his indetermination: his self-effacement turns into a momentary disillusionment and back again into ironical self-flagellation and self-pity.¹⁸ " I grow old I grow old.../ I shall wear the bottoms of my trousers rolled."

That Prufrock's mawkish and evasive nature is shattered is delineated in the last ten lines of the poem. As the recurrent images of and references to the sea (e.g., "silent seas." "mermaids." "seagirls") crop up more and more, Prufrock's self-evasion becomes more marked. His psychic paralysis culminates when he realizes that even the mermaids will not do him a favor by singing to him; thus, all his source of inspiration fades away.¹⁹ He has never really been a religious man: he cannot expect Christ to restore him to a potent life, as was Lazarus restored to his in the epigraph from Dante.²⁰

Eliot further diagnoses the dilemma of Western cultural aridity and disintegration in "Gerontion." The very first line of the poem sets the reader in a hell-like atmosphere. The old man, symbolic of lack of youth and energy, is trying to survive "in a dry month." The passivity of the speaking persona is so grave

that he is incapable even of reading. Juxtaposed for contrast are the boy and the old man. Although one might be tempted to think that his juxtaposition would intellectually nourish the old man and his "dry hair", his decrepit age will not enable him to revitalize his intellectual and spiritual faculties because there is no reference to the continuity of the generations. The poem's end is the same as its beginning : the man is still" in a dry season."

Like Prufrock, Gerontion is a man of divided self: his personality being torn asunder, he cannot tessellate it into a harmonious whole. The house in which he lives conforms to his character and is a simple but powerful symbol of Western civilization. It is a "decayed" house because it does not have the grandeur of the architecture of antiquity, nor is it suitable for Gerontion to feel secure in. He does not feel at home in his lodging because the landlord is a Jew "spawned" somewhere in the world. When he depicts the house, Gerontion ostensibly has in mind the architectural masterpieces of the ancient Greeks and the Romans and the following Christian are not even comparable to his present residence. Ironically enough, Gerontion, though he must have known that Western civilization has been nurtured by the four fountainheads, Judaeo-Christian and Graeco-Roman, cannot put up with the Jewish element in the foundation of the house. Ignoring the Jewish heritage and yet not realizing his own sterile personality, Gerontion would have liked to take refuge in Christ. Nevertheless this possible ray of hope falls through as well since he cannot find the material concrete indications of God's presence in the world.²¹

In his soliloquy which echoes the Gospels lies Gerontion's desperate desire to call for God. When the Pharisees and the Gentiles had asked to see some signs as to his prophethood, Jesus was able to convince them through his miracles. Especially the Jews had tormented Jesus a lot. Therefore, Gerontion's allusions to Christ implies two things: first , as

Jesus is Messiah, he is the only "Son of God" who can put the straying "son of man" back in the right path; second, Gerontion, it, seems, wants to pit Christ against Yahweh who has always kept vigil over the Jewish, as the Old Testament recurrently puts forth. Thus that his lodging house belongs to a Jew and that Christ is "unable to speak a word" are the facts which account for Gerontion's despair and torment him.

Like Prufrock, Gerontion is devoid of the urge and stamina to procrusteanize his split personality into unity. As his despair weighs heavier, Gerontion develops his doppelgänger-confidante as someone to turn to. With Eliot this kind of doubling device is more convenient than obsessional. It does not present escape: "It permits exploration."²² Eventually, Gerontion infers that "we have not reached conclusion." As Prufrock consoles himself by the quasi-postponement of his visit, he finds consolation in the following:

I would meet you upon this honestly.
I that was near your heart was removed therefrom (...)
I have lost my sight, smell, hearing and touch
How should I use them for your closer contact? ²³

Gerontion, in conclusion, is the epitome of a spiritual *cul de sac* like Prufrock. He has reached a considerable level of knowledge though at the cost of his present sterility as George puts it, but he is incapable of curing his disintegrated personality.²⁴ Smith emphasizes similar aspects of Gerontion and thinks that the latter will not be able to make an effort to redeem his loss and transmogrify the course of history.²⁵ The unflinching honesty of Gerontion's "confession redeems it from utter hopelessness."²⁶ He does not attempt the anti-climatic, quasi-heroism of Prufrock : hence when at the end of the poem he realizes his dilemma, he does not ultimately "drown" like him. Nonetheless, the poem's mood is very pessimistic and its subject matter contains elements that are full of hysterical laughters and

tongue-in-cheek remarks. As a matter of fact, Gerontion has been unable to improve his plight; nor has he ever achieved anything like Prufrock except for iteratively and obsessively concluding that he is still "an old man driven by the Trades," with "Thoughts of a dry brain in a dry season."

NOTES

1. For the quotations from "Prufrock" and "Gerontion," we have referred to Ellmann and R. O' Clair, eds. *The Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry* (1973. New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company. 1988) 242-5 and 248-90. respectively.
2. Eliot has embodied his ideas in his poetry (as well as his plays). Although this is not meant to say that his poetry is the literary epitome of a conservative writer-critic whining about the going-ons of the world, in both "Prufrock" and "Gerontion" he certainly diagnoses "the disintegration of Christendom the decay of common belief and a common culture." (Eliot's words qtd. in Northop Frye *T.S.Eliot* (1963). New York: Oliver & Body. 1972)
3. Eliot has developed three different but related senses of culture. According to him religion is an dispensable element in one's culture. While on the one hand Eliot asserts that both the masses and the elite should claim their cultural heritage, on the other he distinguishes them in that the latter should have the leading impulse and the cultural consciousness. For more information see his articles "The Three Senses of Culture" and "The Class and the Elite" in *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture* (1943. London: Faber and Faber, 1972) 24: 37

4. Bradley's concept of reality had a great impact on Eliot. See H. Kenner. *The Invisible Poet: T.S. Eliot* (London : W.H. Allen. 1960) 48. Inspired by the philosophy of Bradley, on whom he had written a dissertation, Eliot thought that there is inevitably a dualism in time and space. The subject as the knowing and the object as the known are thus split in time and space. It is consequently impossible for one to attain the ultimate reality because everything is present only in appearance and every level of consciousness has only a relative access to truth. For more information on Eliot's concept of reality see his *Knowledge and Experience in the Philosophy of Bradley* (London: Faber and Faber 1964) 112. Eliot's philosophical ideas have some affiliations with Bergsonian philosophy too. See Paul Douglas. *Bergson, Eliot & American Literature* (Kentucky: U of Kentucky P. 1986) 17-26.
5. We are using the Kierkegaardian term here quoted in R.W. Horton. ed. *Backgrounds of American Literary Thought* (New York: Appleton Century Cruft. 1967) 461.
6. By "doppelganger" we are referring to a case of split personality otherwise called "alter ego," "double", and by "confidante" we are alluding to the confidante in the neo-classical French theatre in whom a character can confide since Prufrock always tends to slip into his own consciousness.
7. Eloise Knapp Hay. *T.S. Eliot's Negative Way* (Cambridge and London: Harward U.P. 1982) 16.
8. Raymond Tschumi, *Thought in Twentieth Century Poetry* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul. 1947) 129.
9. See T.S. Eliot's "Tradition and the Individual Talent" in R.C. Davis and L. Finke. eds. *Literary Criticism and Theory : The Greeks to the Present* (New York - London: Logman. 1989) 590-1.

10. A.G. George. *T.S. Eliot : His Mind and Art* (1962. New York. Asia Publishing House. 1969) 130.
11. F.O. Matthiessen *The Achievement of T.S. Eliot* (New York: Oxford U P. 1959) 53.
12. Kierkegaard groups human beings in terms of their existential status: the aesthetic and religious. Prufrock falls into the first category : he accordingly cannot lead a "genuine existence." For more information on the existential categories see Soren Kierkegaard. *Either/Or*. trans. W. Lawrie (New York: Doubleday. 1959). quoted in Cahill Andrey. *T.S. Eliot and the Human Predicament* (Petermaritzburg. South Africa : U of Natal P. 1967) 2-3.
13. George Williamson. "Prufrock and Other Observations." *Reader's Guide to T.S. Eliot* (London : Thomas and Hudson. 1967) 57-8.
14. Anthony L. Johnson. *Sign and Structure in the Poetry of T.S. Eliot* (Italy: Editor Technio Scientifia, 1976) 24.
15. Ashok Kumar Jha. *Oriental Influences in T.S. Eliot* (Allahabad : Kitab Mahal 1988) 67.
16. Hamlet's procrastination is part of his determined and planned nature. As Lucas writes of him, Hamlet is "the typical man of thought who cannot act: too much brain, too little will." (see F.L. Lucas. *Literature and Psychology* (London Toronto Melbourne : Cassel & Co., 1951) 54.) Feder describes Hamlet's dilemma as an expression of "the true self, explicit revaluations of reason or sanity that exclude the traditional forms of logic order and judgement occurring generally in psychic and social alienation." (Lihan Feder, *Madness in Literature* (Princeton: Princeton UP. 1980) 98.

17. "... why looke you now how unworthy a thing you make of me: you would play upon me: and there is much Musicke/Excellent Musicke in this little Organ... (3.2.39)." Hamlet's words are from the facsimile of the 1703 edition of Shakespeare's *The Tragedy of Hamlet* (London: Lornmarket, 1969). Hamlet's words refer to his psychological dilemma caused by the whereabouts of his father's sudden death and personality split.
18. Concerning the aging anxiety of Prufrock see E.J.H. Green. *T.S. Eliot et la France* (Paris: Editions Contemporaries, n.d.) 44.
19. See Franco Moretti, *Interpretazioni di Eliot* (Rome: Savelli, 1975) 119.
20. Barbara Rupp. *Der Begriff der gesellschaftlichen Repräsentanz am Beispiel der Lyric Thomas Stearns Eliots und Ortshestimmung innerhalb der Geshichte der ecriture'* (Frankfurt: Europäische Hochschulschriften, 1973) 113.
21. Rupp 120.
22. Ronald Tamplin. *A Preface to Eliot* (London & New York: Longman. 1988) 58.
23. Compare this to Prufrock's line: "How should I presume?"
24. George 138.
25. G. Smith *T.S. Eliot's Poetry and Plays* (Chicago: Chicago UP. 1956) 59-63.
26. G. Williamson 113.