T. S. Eliot
Prufrock and Other Observations

by Peter Cash

English Association Longer Poem Bookmarks
No 6
For T. E. Hulme (1883-1917)
educated at Newcastle High School in Staffordshire 1894-1902

T. S. Eliot (1888-1965)
PRUFROCK and OTHER OBSERVATIONS (1917)

by
Peter Cash

BIBLIOGRAPHY
T. S. Eliot, Selected Poems, Faber 1954.
F. R. Leavis, New Bearings in English Poetry, 1932.

FURTHER READING
Matthew Arnold, Dover Beach, 1867.
Ezra Pound, Hugh Selwyn Mauberley, 1920.
James Joyce, Ulysses, 1922.

SCOPE OF TOPIC
Between May 1889, when Tennyson wrote Crossing the Bar, and June 1911, when T. S. Eliot finalised The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock, only twenty-two years elapse – and yet something, something rather more than the name of the century, has changed utterly. Both Queen Victoria (22nd January 1901) and Edward VII (6th May 1910) have died, but the Great War is not yet ravaging Europe – or even threatening to. E. M. Forster (Howards End, 1910) has written his criticism of Edwardian materialism, but James Joyce has yet to start Ulysses.

At the same time, Pablo Ruiz has adopted his mother’s surname and painted Les Demoiselles d’Avignon (1907) and Igor Stravinsky has premiered The Firebird (1910). T. S. Eliot, an American from St Louis Missouri, has left Harvard and travelled to Paris and London where he has read French and English poetry and continued to write his own. The French poets whom he read were Charles Baudelaire (1821-1867) and Jules Laforgue (1860-1887). The English poets were three poets of the 1890s: John Davidson, Ernest Dowson and Arthur Symons whose anthology The Symbolist Movement in Literature (1899) had earlier inspired his interest in Laforgue. Dowson’s poem To Cynara provided both Cole Porter and Margaret Mitchell with unforgettable phrases. Laforgue is pictured in Renoir’s The Luncheon of the Boating Party (1881).

Written under these influences, Eliot’s own poems broke radically with the conventional notion of ‘poetical’ work – as perpetuated by Tennyson’s poetry throughout the nineteenth century. Leavis sets the agenda for us: Prufrock and Other Observations “constitutes an important event in the history of English poetry”; what is more, The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock “represents a complete break with the nineteenth-century tradition and a new start .... for it defies the traditional canon of seriousness.” Because Eliot was a shy individual, his genius for
rejecting Parnassian poetry and writing in his own vein required encouragement – which came forcibly from a fellow American already living in London: Ezra Pound (1885-1972). To Harriet Monroe, the editor of *Poetry*, a magazine based in Chicago, Pound wrote:

He has actually trained himself and modernised himself on his own.

30th September, 1914.

As Eliot’s champion and mentor, Pound arranged for the first publication of *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* in *Poetry* in June 1915. Pound, too, was the driving force behind the publication in pamphlet form of Eliot’s first collection *Prufrock and Other Observations* in July 1917. It is to his collaborator Pound (*il migliore fabbro* = ‘the better craftsman’) that Eliot famously dedicates *The Waste Land* in 1922.

Peter Ackroyd explains that "Prufrock, Portrait of a Lady and to a lesser extent the Preludes were originally fragments, composed at scattered intervals over a relatively long period": eg. begun in Massachusetts in 1910, *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* itself was completed in Munich in 1911. For this reason, the date on which the collection *Prufrock and Other Observations* was published in England – 1917 – is somewhat misleading. In this Bookmark, one aim is to examine the ways in which T. S. Eliot’s first collection of poems came to be written between 1909 and 1915, then published in 1917. One other aim is to account for F. R. Leavis’ perception (never seriously challenged) that Eliot "made a new start, and established new bearings" [in English poetry].

Today, poems from T. S. Eliot’s first collection are most readily available in his Selected Poems, an edition which Faber first published in 1954; it is this paperback which A-Level teachers tend to use in schools. Selected, however, are only the first four of the twelve poems from *Prufrock and Other Observations*; omitted are most of the ‘observations’. In all, there are eight additional ‘observations’, seven of them satirical.

Four short ‘observations’ – *Morning at the Window*, *The Boston Evening Transcript*, *Aunt Helen, Cousin Nancy* – are satires of Bostonians. Even at second glance, it is not entirely clear why *Morning at the Window* – which spares a thought for ‘the damp souls of housemaids’ – is not *Prelude V*. According to Peter Ackroyd, these ‘Bostonian poems’ are marked by ‘a melancholy flippancy’. In *Aunt Helen*, Miss Helen Slingsby is a ‘maiden aunt’, a starched stereotype of the Victorian age. In this thirteen-line poem, Eliot’s observation is of the tension is between the repressiveness of Aunt Helen’s household whilst she was alive and its lasciviousness as soon as she is dead: specifically, the footman making free with ‘the second housemaid’ on her dining-table! The death marks the break between the bourgeois respectability of one age and the sexual freedom of another.

A prose-poem, *Hysteria* is an observation of a woman who cannot stop laughing. Especially since he is with her in a tea-room, a public place, her male companion is alarmed at such hysteries: in one image, he fears that he will be swallowed ‘in the dark caverns of her throat’. On her sedate companion, as on ‘an elderly waiter’, the effect of her uncontrollable laughter is destabilising. The final sentence explains why: what has unsettled him/them is not so much the helpless laughter as ‘the shaking of her breasts’ which it has brought about. Here, as elsewhere, the fear is of female sexuality let loose.

Even *Mr Apollinax* features a colourful figure who strikes a fear into his conventional hosts. Mr Apollinax himself is an academic visiting the United States: at Professor Channing-Cheetah’s house, he ‘laughed like an irresponsible foetus’. The startling simile alerts us to the kind of impact which ‘his laughter’ made – laughter again – on American colleagues who did not know what to make of him: ‘But after all what did he mean?’ Eliot portrays him as literally tinkling their teacups and metaphorically ruffling their feathers: ie. disturbing bourgeois composure with both his intellectual and his sexual energy.
By contrast, *La Figlia Che Piange* ("The Girl Who Weeps") is not a satirical poem, but a serious lyric in which an aloof narrator reflects in tranquillity upon a parting between two lovers which was such sweet sorrow. At the same as he bears witness to the girl’s distress and pities her, he is pleased that she threw down her flowers and wept – and thereby inspired his poem. The poem records a response to an observation – of ‘a gesture and a pose’ – and is distinguished by both its complexity and its honesty. Furthermore, it testifies to the impersonality of the artist. Prompted by this poem, Peter Ackroyd writes: “When the poet seems most himself, he is an actor watching his own performance.” He proceeds to conclude that “it would be unhelpful and indeed impossible to locate the true voice of Thomas Stearns Eliot except as a principle of literary organisation.”

**THE LOVE SONG OF J. ALFRED PRUFROCK**

F. R. Leavis (*New Bearings in English Poetry*, 1932) believed that “poetry matters because of the kind of poet who is more alive than other people, more alive in his own age”; this kind of poet is “at the most conscious point of the race in his time”. According to Leavis, “all we can fairly ask of the poet is that he shall show himself to have been fully alive in our time”; the evidence of this live awareness “will be in the very texture of his poetry”. Given these critical axioms, Leavis’ reaction to *The Love Song* is no surprise:

> We have here, in short, poetry that expresses freely a modern sensibility, the ways of feeling, the modes of experience of one fully alive in his own age.

This is some claim: after all, who is the speaker of this dramatic monologue? As we can hear from the oxymoronic title, he is no hero, no mover-and-shaker, poised at the centre of events, but a young man with such a comical moniker that he sounds a highly unlikely singer of a ‘love song’. As a mask for the hesitant poet himself, J. Alfred Prufrock is immediately recognisable. Peter Ackroyd explains:

> Although, as he explained to Aiken, he was invaded by sexual longings in Paris, his own inhibitions were such that he could not, or would not, act upon them …  
> Letter to Conrad Aiken  31st December, 1914.

> His sexual instincts were, as he said, nervous in origin because they were implicated in his fear of ridicule and associated with feelings of guilt and self-disgust. Even by late 1914, in his twenty-sixth year, he was still referring to himself as a virgin …  
> Ibid.

> London [Gordon Square, December 1914] certainly came as a relief: although he was invaded by the same sexuality which had affected him in Paris, he was still unable to conquer that anxious reserve which had consigned him to a virginal existence.

If Prufrock is ‘fully alive in our time’/’fully alive in his own age’, then it must be by the social predicament of an American in Paris that the age is being defined. What *The Love Song* details are the “personal embarrassments, disillusionments, and distresses of a sophisticated young man” (Leavis) of the early 1900s – educated, refined and altogether too cautious to relate directly to the women of his own class (or, indeed, of other classes) with whom he finds himself surrounded. What Leavis means is that these personal distresses are reflected ‘in the very texture’ of Eliot’s poetry, reflected in ways unthinkable only twenty-two years earlier. They are most clearly audible in his rhyme-patterns, in his rhythms and in “the nature of the imagery”:

> 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
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.

In the room the women come and go
Talking of Michelangelo.

As soon as exact recurrences of accent and sound threaten to establish themselves, Eliot breaks up the pattern of couplets with a couple of blank words (‘table’ and ‘question’) which cancel each other out. L. G. Salinger (Pelican Guide, No 7) confirms that, in Eliot’s view, “the most interesting verse .... was that which constantly approached a fixed pattern without quite settling into it” and he refers to his “fluid metre”. By means of this metre, Eliot charts the stream of Prufrock’s consciousness. Sydney Bolt confirms that Eliot admired the craftsmanship of the Jacobean dramatists who “departed from the strict norm of iambic pentameter to energise their verse with the rhythms of spoken English” and that he consciously followed their examples: eg. Webster, Middleton. By such flexible means, the poet can monitor the movement of a modern mind engaged in the act of thinking.

F. R. Leavis was well aware of Eliot’s method of composition and would not have quarrelled with Ackroyd’s perception that “he had an extraordinary gift of synthesis so that what seems to be one poetic persona, or one melodic shape, is in fact the result of compression and the selective rendering of otherwise disparate materials”. It may be that J. Alfred Prufrock remains ‘one poetic persona’; it may also be that The Waste Land, a choir of poetic personae, is more obviously ‘the result of compression’; at the same time, The Love Song, more than most exegeses suppose, results from ‘the selective rendering of otherwise disparate materials’. This method of composition matters when we come to consider what the setting is.

Even more than the verse-form of The Love Song, it is Eliot’s style which makes the break with Parnassian/Victorian convention: struck immediately by the imagery, Leavis notices that “the canons of the poetical are forgotten; the poet assumes the right to make use of any materials that seem to him significant”. With that image of the patient anaesthetised on an operating table, Modern Poetry – if not Modernism itself – begins. For one thing, the simile does not tell us where Prufrock is; it does not even start to escort us through the narrative. Although the description – ‘certain half-deserted streets’ on which trade ‘one-night cheap hotels’ and ‘sawdust restaurants’ – might be of the Soho area of London, Prufrock is not in England. In October 1910, Eliot had travelled to Europe and gone to live in the Sorbonne area of Paris: 9 Rue de l’Universite. He had admired Baudelaire’s use of metropolitan imagery and had also acquired a copy of Charles-Louis Philippe’s novel Bubu de Montparnasse (1901) which is set in that red-light district of the city. If not for himself, then from these sources (and from Ezra Pound and T. E. Hulme) he had learned that ‘any materials’ – even the images of such a squalid quarter – were ‘materials’ for the twentieth-century poet. It is at this point that Eliot’s protagonist becomes “an urban wanderer” (Ackroyd) who prowls the bars, the night-clubs and the streets of Paris, wondering – specifically – how to go about losing his virginity.

In this setting, ‘the overwhelming question’ [= the question which overwhelms every other aspect of Prufrock’s thinking] is how to proposition a woman. Prufrock has alternatives: either one of the prostitutes who walks the streets of Montparnasse or a woman of his own station who frequents the Parisian salon. Given the setting, he may be planning to hook up with a girl who stands in a restaurant doorway; on the other hand, he may be pacing the streets, rehearsing in his head how he will ask a young lady to marry him (which Eliot
himself, suddenly and disastrously, did on 26th June 1915). In both cases, the streets 'follow like a tedious argument' precisely because Prufrock is having an argument with himself which he cannot bring to an end; in both cases, it is a matter of plucking up the courage.

The second alternative is suggested by 'the room' where 'the women come and go', talking about the works of a great painter and sculptor. The salon was a society gathering which flourished in Parisian high society throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries: hosted by a wealthy and cultivated woman, it aimed to foster the art of conversation, thereby amusing and informing its participants in equal measures. Once the salonnières had gathered under a hostess' roof, it was incumbent upon them to engage in polite, civil and honest talk; appropriate topics of conversation varied from art to music, from literature to politics. Among the society hostesses still active at the turn of the century were Winnaireta Singer, Princess Edmond de Polignac (1865-1943) and Élisabeth, Comtesse Greffulhe (1860-1952). The lesbian Princess de Polignac was a patron of piano music by Stravinsky and Erik Satie; by contrast, Comtesse Greffulhe was a celebrated beauty who ran the salons of Faubourg Saint-Germain which patronised ballet dancers and painters. It is not necessary to reason that Prufrock's discomfort in this polite society is simply that of an American abroad, for the refined gatherings were not at all unlike the soirees in Boston Massachusetts where Eliot (studying Philosophy at Harvard University) had already found himself uneasy in female company. Prufrock's thoughts may indeed be Eliot's own thoughts of returning home and proposing to Emily Hale (to whom he wrote 1000+ letters, none of which the Eliot estate will yet release to the public). NB. Eliot's original, working title was Prufrock among the Women.

Joseph Margolis (Interpretations, 1965) confirms that Prufrock is in a quandary. He writes that he "is divided against himself": that is, isolated "from the society of the salon as well as from the workmen's quarter of the city" and that he is "a spectator of both worlds who cannot participate fully and cordially in either". Prufrock cannot decide upon a mode of living which will be congenial to him; he cannot identify a culture in which he, both a sensitive and a sexual being, can be at ease with himself. Margolis adds:

We are face to face with a human being of considerable intelligence and humility who is attempting to decide in a serious way the significance of his own life.

Ultimately, 'the overwhelming question', the question which overwhelms him, is: who am I? As he walks, Prufrock ('Let us go then, you and I') talks to himself; he can be heard asking an alter ego to accompany him on his quest. In short, Prufrock is an isolated individual in his early twenties who has not yet arrived at a secure sense of identity. Cf. Edwin Arlington Robinson Mr Flood's Party.

It will therefore be useful to hold in mind two kinds of continuity: first, the narrative continuity of Prufrock's route; second, the flow of his awareness as he walks it. It looks as if – for the next verse-paragraph – Eliot has chosen a description of a fog which might easily engulf Montparnasse on an October evening. In fact, he has selected a description of the fog in his home city of St Louis Missouri; actually, this conceit is one which he made earlier. Given that the poem is not unlike a collage, strict topography does not matter. Imaginatively, the famous metaphor which he extends (a radical break from Victorian orthodoxy, a startling innovation for 1910-1917) is highly effective:

The yellow fog that rubs its back upon the window-panes The yellow smoke that rubs its muzzle on the window-panes, Licked its tongue into the corners of the evening, Lingered upon the pools that stand in drains, Let fall upon its back the soot that falls from chimneys Slipped by the terrace, made a sudden leap, And, seeing that it was a soft October night, Curled once about the house and fell asleep.
The image of the feline fog, with its allegorical correspondence between fog and furry creature, is an emblem of J. Alfred Prufrock’s confusion. It implies the state of post-adolescent uncertainty in which he tours the nocturnal streets. NB. The fog is yellow because this was the colour of the polluted water of the Mississippi River as it ran through Eliot’s native city of St Louis (which, in 1904, staged the Olympic Games and the World Fair simultaneously).

L. G. Salingar (Pelican Guide, No 6) tells us that “much of the best of subsequent poetry, of Pound and Eliot in particular, owes a considerable debt to Browning’s experiments in conversational verse and his ironic-confidential monologues”. Whereas Laforgue is ironical at the expense of his own romantic feelings, Eliot – like Browning – is ironical at the expense of his speaker, his anti-hero. As F. R. Leavis remarks, Prufrock’s attitude is “self-ironical, self-distrustful”:

And indeed there will be time
For the yellow smoke that slides along the street
Rubbing its back upon the window-panes;
There will be time, there will be time
To prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet ...

Throughout his monologue, he is ironical at the expense of his own procrastination: here, he repeats himself in a calm and soothing tone which mocks his own chronic reluctance. Acutely self-aware, Prufrock knows how much time he is taking to acquire any sexual experience: ie. that there will be plenty of time ‘for the yellow smoke’ to cloud the street before he gets round to approaching either the prostitute in the doorway or the prim girl across the tea table. Salingar confirms that “Eliot’s Prufrock volume belongs to Boston and Paris.” There duly follows the part of this verse-paragraph where the focus switches from the back streets of Paris to the drawing rooms of New England:

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.

In the room the women come and go
Talking of Michelangelo.

If Prufrock is ‘a modern sensibility’, then it is because he is without any absolute values by which to live; he misses the “positives and assurances” of the Victorian age “that have vanished” (Leavis). For him, it proves difficult to achieve a secure sense of personal identity because, in the ‘modern’ world, all values are related to particular societies. Both on Paris’s streets and in Boston’s mansions, the emphasis is upon diplomatic appearances: upon ‘preparing a face to meet the faces that you meet’. In both environments, it is necessary to be acceptable at face value: in order to make personal/social progress, he must have the self-confidence either to go up to a prostitute or to engage in conversation: eg. on the subject of Michelangelo. If he is shrewd, then he will take ‘the women’ of the salon on their own terms rather than overwhelm them with questions of a more philosophical nature. Here, then, is the predicament for the man sophisticated enough to ask ‘the overwhelming question’ in 1910: because no terms by which a sophisticate can arrive at a self-respecting sense of identity can be seen, his alternatives are the relative terms of societies [= the brothel, the salon] which are either unsophisticated or unreal to him. As a consequence, he is obliged to find his own way along the foggy street. As much as the yellow fog, it is its directionlessness/its endlessness that imbues Prufrock’s lonely walk with its nightmare quality.

Of The Love Song, Hugh Kenner writes that “it was genius that separated the speaker of the monologue from the writer of the poem by the solitary device of affixing an unforgettable title” and that this device rules out the need for the writer “to keep fending off his protagonist with facile irony”. By means of his quixotic title, Eliot contrives to free himself from personal responsibility for the sentiments expressed in the poem and makes it that much more difficult
for critics to write as if it is Eliot himself who dithers and fails to find an answer to 'the overwhelming question'. Audrey Cahill, however, considers that "the whole of T. S. Eliot's poetry is an ingenious and inventive attempt to find striking, though devious ways to express personal feelings in impersonal terms" and thereby encourages us not to be fooled by the cunning device of the title ....

"Self-aware but also filled with self-doubt, evincing a kind of narcissistic vulnerability, Eliot was always concerned with the correct appearance, the correct manner through which to project himself": although Peter Ackroyd is here describing 23-year-old T. S. Eliot, he is also describing J. A. Prufrock. In the next verse-paragraph, Eliot shows exactly how worried Prufrock is by his appearance in the eyes of other people. Here Prufrock is in the very act of preparing his face in order to meet theirs:

And indeed there will be time  
To wonder, 'Do I dare?' and, 'Do I dare?'  
Time to turn back and descend the stair  
With a bald spot in the middle of my hair –  
(They will say: 'How his hair is growing thin!')  
My morning coat, my collar mounting firmly to the chin,  
My necktie rich and modest, but asserted by a simple pin ...  
(They will say: 'But how his arms and legs are thin!')

Prufrock examines his own indecisiveness, his chronic tendency to reach a decision only to revise/reverse it 'a minute' later. He dramatises his self-absorption. The parallelisms (syntactical and graphological) between the two lines in parentheses highlight his preoccupation with what 'they' will think of him: that is, of his baldness, his skinniness and his taste in clothes [= coat, collar and tie-pin]. Like Dickens, like Ibsen, Eliot finds in sartorial fastidiousness an image for a character who is self-conscious to the point of paranoia. As far as Prufrock is concerned, he is to be defined exclusively in terms of his external characteristics. He exists only in terms of others' perceptions and opinions of him.

From the next three verse-paragraphs, those that conclude the first movement of the poem, it is clear that Prufrock's mind is on the Boston tea parties at which he felt himself marginalised and growing old before his time; it is that 'universe' which he trembles to 'disturb' by asking any sort of question. Peter Ackroyd confirms that, for the stifling atmosphere of Boston in 1910, "the routines of bourgeois life – the flannel suits, the cakes and tea, the outings, the circumspect conversations" were responsible. Over the next twenty-one lines, which the three paragraphs occupy, Eliot uses a first person pronoun thirteen times ('I' x 11, 'me' x 2) in order to stress how deeply concerned Prufrock is with his fitness for such a circle. Famously, two other statements – two which further revise the poetical canon for the twentieth century – use the possessive adjective 'my' to express a self-recrimination:

I have measured out my life with coffee spoons ....

Then how should I begin  
To spit out all the butt-ends of my days and ways?

At the same time as he reproaches himself for spending his 'days' drinking coffee and smoking cigarettes, Prufrock despairs of ever being able to break the pattern. He can't even 'begin' to do that for fear of being observed 'by the eyes that fix you in a formulated phrase' and then pigeon-holed: that is, exposed for the timid tarrier and time-waster that he is. Even though the discoveries of Victorian science have made it difficult for the modern man to cling to a spiritual absolute, they have not made it impossible. In Dover Beach, Matthew Arnold ('Ah love, let us be true/To one another') suggests that there is an alternative to religion; in his final stanza, he holds out the possibility that post-Darwinian man can make of personal relationship a spiritual absolute which will sustain him in this materialistic world. In theory,
Prufrock is eager to pursue this humanist alternative; in practice, 'the women' who 'come and go' scare him. The ninth verse-paragraph of the poem, the passage which concludes the first movement, identifies his difficulty:

And I have known the arms already, known them all —
Arms that are bracelated and white and bare
(But in the lamplight, downed with light brown hair!)
Is it perfume from a dress
That makes me so digress?
Arms that lie along a table, or wrap about a shawl.

For these lines, the situation is an evening on which he is gathered in close proximity to beautiful women whose physical allure – in particular, that of their naked ‘arms’, mentioned three times – is much too much for him. Visual, tactile and olfactory sensations overwhelm him and cause him to ‘digress’: that is, deflect him from his purpose of proposing marriage to such a fragrant creature. In the brief second movement of the poem, Prufrock finds for himself a self-disgusted metonym – ‘a pair of ragged claws/Scuttling across the floors of silent seas’ – which sums up his lack of progress and advertises his suitability for complete and utter effacement from the surface of the world. Like a crab, Prufrock’s personal development moves not forwards, but sideways.

In the third movement of the poem, Prufrock reflects upon his social experience in Boston and starts to rationalise his inaction. What if one afternoon – ‘after tea and cakes and ices’ – he should find it within himself ‘to force the moment to its crisis’: that is, pop the question to Emily Hale? He confesses that he had his opportunity, but that, ‘in short’, he was afraid. On reflection, that, perhaps, was for the best because Emily may well have said no. Would his enormous effort to overcome his diffidence ‘have been worth it’

If one, settling a pillow by her head,
Should say: ‘That is not what I meant at all.
That is not it, at all.’

Suppose that he had misread the signs and that she was not prepared to give up for him her life of leisurely afternoons and sparkling evenings? In the next verse-paragraph, Prufrock – as if to convince himself that he was wise to dither – re-emphasises the risk:

And would it have been worth it, after all,
Would it have been worth while,
After the sunsets and the dooryards and the sprinkled streets,
After the novels, after the teacups, after the skirts that trail along the floor —
And this, and so much more? —

In that case, he would only have incurred further damage to his self-esteem – and, in any case, it has become clear that he cannot rely for a sense of identity upon his relation to another person. Eliot constructs these paragraphs upon a common speech-pattern: after all this, would it have been worthwhile? The anaphora has an ironic effect which hinges on the recognition that, if ‘all this’ (‘and so much more’) is no more than the trivia which he lists, then ‘this’/‘it’ cannot be worth much. For the values which he has in mind, Prufrock has enlisted the aid of the things – from both environments of his acquaintance – which come most readily into his consciousness: on the one hand, there are comatose ‘sunsets’, ‘dooryards’ and ‘sprinkled streets’; on the other, there are ‘novels’ and ‘teacups’ and the long ‘skirts’ of the era. By this ironic juxtaposition, Eliot lowers into bathos the relative value out of which Prufrock had been longing to make an absolute by which to live. Prufrock’s problem is that, having rejected this ‘way of feeling’, he is no nearer finding another:

It is impossible to say just what I mean!
But as if a magic lantern threw the nerves in patterns on a screen:
Would it have been worth while
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.'

With an exclamation of frustration, he abandons the 'impossible' search for meaning: once again, it has resulted only in a vivid image of confusion, not unlike a kaleidoscope projected 'on a screen'. The systematic repetitions are almost rhapsodic; they usher him both to the grateful conclusion that a rejected proposal would have solved nothing and to a modest, even pusillanimous re-appraisal of his prospects. Love of humility becomes his excuse for a failure of nerve.

It is entirely appropriate that Prufrock – a comical para-rhyme for Petrarch, aka Francesco Petrarca (1304-1374) who conceived the love sonnet – should compose a 'love song'. It is entirely in character that, at the start of the fourth/final movement, this singer of a comical song should be back where he started. He has tried to avoid taking the easy way out of his predicament and failed; he has moved away from the unsatisfactory position at which 'the overwhelming question' was left unanswered only to return to it. It is in this crab-like fashion that Prufrock's dramatic monologue moves. All too readily, he accepts that he is a cardboard character not cut out to answer the big questions of human existence. He had better leave that to someone else:

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.

Throughout this verse-paragraph, Eliot extends a Shakespearean metaphor for the reticent kind of fellow that Prufrock has always been. He is a born deuteragonist: not the kind of man who could ever decide to kill a king, he is perfectly content to play Horatio and be told that there are 'more things in heaven and earth' than he could ever dream of. The adjectives which he applies to himself – 'deferential', 'cautious', 'ridiculous' – are self-deprecating to a fault. Hamlet? Henry V? King Lear? He'd rather play 'the Fool'. In the end, Prufrock's modest stillness in the face of life's challenges is nothing more than a complacency which borders on emotional/moral cowardice. He runs away.

Duly convinced that he will not otherwise be able to stay sane, Prufrock consigns himself to a lonely anonymity. His final vision is of a young man old: already, he prepares a face to meet the faces that he will meet in old age. For a young man, it takes a disturbing effort of will:

I am old .... I grow old ....
I shall wear the bottoms of my trousers rolled.

Shall I part my hair behind? Do I dare to eat a peach?
I shall wear white flannel trousers and walk upon the beach.
I have heard the mermaids singing, each to each.

Here, the declarative statements imagine for him a dotage in which he will feel confident and at ease; the interrogative statements toy with the simple pleasures of a life from which all burdens of personal responsibility have been lifted: how should he wear his hair? dare he eat an exotic fruit? Such self-questioning is both playful and pitiful: after wrestling with a question of 'overwhelming' importance, it is a luxury for him to be able to ask trivial questions which are not unanswerable. From a man of advancing years, observers now would expect a feeble reaction and he is temperamentally equipped to give it to them: ultimately, he depicts a dream-world (where mermaids sing) in which a man, in his second childhood, might well wish to immerse himself.
It is also entirely appropriate that the conclusion of Prufrock’s Love Song should take the form of a Petrarchan sestet and that its language (including the masculine rhymes) should accord with nineteenth-century poetical convention. Here, Prufrock’s song changes key:

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  
Till human voices wake us, and we drown.

Eliot effects this change by a striking overhaul of his diction: in this sestet, he chooses his lexical items from an altogether different, albeit familiar register. Audrey Cahill confirms that these lines conform “to the traditional idea of the intrinsically poetic” and are in the idiom of Romantic poetry, still in vogue in 1910. Eliot resorts to this language in order to create that dream-world into which late Romantics longed to escape: cf. W. B. Yeats, The Secret Rose (1897) and The Wind among the Reeds (1899). In effect, he parodies that worn-out tradition, disingenuously offering its fanciful attractions as solutions to the problems of the modern worrier. The conclusion of The Love Song, then, is pessimistic in that Prufrock finds no answer to the question by which he was overwhelmed: who am I? He abdicates from his responsibility to forge for himself a stable identity in the Western world and settles instead for a la-la land beside the sea-side where he can take refuge from the existential anxieties of that world. In John Crowe Ransom’s words, “he returns to his mermaids, and that is the moral end of him”.

One final word must be said about Prufrock’s last-minute change of pronoun: in the final tercet, it changes from first person singular to first person plural. One interpretation is that this sudden use of ‘we’ is nothing more than a reversion to the person in which The Love Song began: ‘Let us go then ...’ Another is that, after forty uses of the first person singular, Eliot is finally endeavouring to implicate his entire milieu in Prufrock’s predicament and to suggest that ‘our’ best option remains a form of withdrawal, each into his own world. Immersed in that dreamy element, submerged, ‘we’ stay – holding our breaths, as it were – until one day, finally, inevitably, we awake to the fact that we are mortal creatures without an attitude (religious or otherwise) to support us in the face of death: ‘Till human voices wake us, and we drown’. Prufrocks all, we await our fate.

**PORTRAIT OF A LADY**

For a complete understanding of this poem, a reader requires a fore-ground knowledge both of its title and of its epigraph. His title Eliot borrows from Henry James’ novel Portrait of a Lady (1881) in which Isobel Archer, an American living in Europe, finds herself married to Gilbert Osmond, a worthless dilettante who fails to appreciate or understand her. His epigraph he takes from Christopher Marlowe’s play The Jew of Malta (1590) in which Barabas (in Act IV Scene 1) excuses his insensitive treatment of a woman on the immoral grounds that it took place elsewhere (‘another country’) and that in any case the woman ‘is dead’.

The speaker of Eliot’s poem is a Gilbert Osmond figure who is prepared to entertain Barabas’ excuse for his indifferent, unfeeling treatment of a woman. Certainly, there is about him something of the dilettante: eg. he attends concerts, reads ‘the comics and the sporting page’. It is tempting to suppose that he is a gigolo – but probably inaccurate. According to Peter Ackroyd, the eponymous ‘lady’ is Adeleine Moffat, a grande dame of Boston society on whom both Conrad Aiken (1889-1973) and Eliot frequently paid social calls. Such a biographical detail sheds important light upon the problematic relationship between the ‘lady’
and her visitor, a man who appears to be both her social inferior and very much her junior. It suggests that, although the relationship is a platonic affair between like minds, she has conceived an unconsummated affection for him and consequently suffers the pangs of an unrequited love.

I

Eliot assigns each part of the poem to a separate month/season of the year. **Part I** is set on ‘a December afternoon’ on which the male speaker has arranged to attend a Chopin concert with the Lady and afterwards escort her home. Upon arrival, he discovers that she has created in her room ‘an atmosphere of Juliet’s tomb’: an atmosphere which reflects her gloom about their relationship. It is when the Lady (someone apparently much older than Eliot’s speaker) begins to talk that we can hear why the man – even if he is not her toy boy – may not be staunchly enthusiastic about his relationship with her. She has a tendency to gush:

So intimate, this Chopin, that I think his soul
Should be resurrected only among friends.

She sounds pretentious; both her sentiments (about Chopin’s soul) and the rhythms of her speech reveal that she sees herself as a sensitive person qualified to express her opinions on high-brow art: in this case, classical music.

The Lady’s second speech elaborates in gushing tones on her attitude to friends: ‘how much they mean to me, my friends’. It becomes clear that, on this topic, she is indulging in wishful thinking: in telling the man that she has found in him ‘a friend’ who possesses ‘those qualities upon which friendship lives’, she sounds anxious, insecure in her relationship with him, by no means certain that he is a friend upon whom she can rely. In spelling out that her life without his friendship would be a nightmare, she is embarking upon the process of emotional blackmail which will come to dominate her subsequent exchanges with him.

It seems that the whining sound of her voice begins to merge in his ears with the sound of the music to which they have recently been listening; the pleading note in her voice merges with the ‘windings of the violins’. As a result, he develops a headache; the pressure of his guilt (‘a dull tom-tom’) begins to pound in his head.

He suggests (‘Let us take the air’) that they go for a walk. The details of this walk – ‘Admire the monuments’, ‘correct our watches by the public clocks’ – clearly indicate that their relationship has sunk into a state of terminal ennui. The tedium of the time which they spend together is further shown by the length of time it takes them (‘half an hour’) to drink up. One has a mental picture of them sitting at a street café, gazing idly and hopelessly into space.

II

Eliot assigns **Part II** to the month of April; the reference to Spring, borrowed from Rupert Brooke, indicates the passage of time: ‘Now that the lilacs are in bloom ...’ In this verse-paragraph, Eliot depicts the Lady in a state of nervous anxiety, twisting one of the lilacs ‘in her fingers while she talks’. Her talk itself has a familiar tempo. She is to be heard holding forth on the subject of the man’s youth; according to her, he, unlike her, holds life in his hands. The precise focus of this recrimination is that he, being young, is indifferent to her plight: to be exact, he ‘has no remorse’ about the way in which he is treating her. He smiles, she alleges, because he is insensitive to her vulnerability. The young man’s voice then breaks in to confirm this analysis:

I smile, of course,
And go on drinking tea.
The plain description of his actions is ironic at the expense of her unhappiness. As predicted, he continues to go through the motions of paying court to her because he cannot appreciate her painful ‘situation’.

Whenever the Lady opens her mouth to speak, she sounds self-conscious and precious. In these four lines, she waxes lyrical about her ‘buried life’: that is, her previous life in Paris before she met the man. The purpose of her next statement is to reassure this man that the age-gap between them is not a problem: reclusive though she may have been, the Lady – now that she has met in him a kindred spirit – finds that the world is ‘wonderful and youthful, after all’.

In order to record the young man’s reaction to her assessment of their situation, Eliot finds a simile in keeping with her interest in music. This simile –

The voice returns like the insistent out-of-tune
Of a broken violin of an August afternoon –

– suggests that her harsh tone grates on his nerves, alienating his sympathies; so tuneless is her voice that he wants to stop listening to it. Particularly off-putting are her sentiments, not least because they ascribe to him feelings which he does not have. Three times the Lady pronounces herself ‘sure’ of his feelings; from his silent response, it is clear that she is not entitled to any such certainty. In fact, she is whistling in the dark, trying to provoke a measure of reciprocation, which is not forthcoming.

When a welcome response is not forthcoming, the Lady embarks upon an analysis of the young man’s character, which reveals a clever understanding of his motives: unlike her, he is ‘invulnerable’ and, after having ‘prevailed’, after having made an emotional conquest of her, he can walk away and put their relationship down to experience (‘many a one has failed’). The Lady’s speech-style is ‘insistent’ because its cadences are repetitive:

But what have I, but what have I, my friend,
To give you, what can you receive from me?

In this couplet of iambic pentameter, we can hear how her rhetorical cadences express her forlorn hope that their relationship will prosper. Her own answer to her three questions – that he will want only the platonic ‘friendship’ – sounds a self-pitying note, especially with her description of herself as ‘one about to reach her journey’s end’. She portrays herself as an abandoned, post-menopausal figure, fit for nothing but to ‘sit here serving tea to friends’. As he prepares to leave, she strikes this stoical pose, trying to seem noble in the face of a heart-breaking adversity.

At this point, the voice of her visitor resumes. Outside, he begins to assess the situation which he has left behind him and admit to his ‘cowardly’ and indolent character. Without wasting another thought on the Lady, he is able to pass his day ‘in the park’, idly reading the gossip-columns of the newspapers (‘An English countess goes upon the stage’). For the most part, he remains ‘self-possessed’; he loses his composure only when a street-piano perhaps plays a Chopin Prelude or ‘the smell of hyacinths’ reminds him of the ‘lilacs in her room’. Otherwise, he forgets her on the basis that out of sight is out of mind. Rupert Brooke’s famous poem of 1912 The Old Vicarage, Grantchester begins: ‘Just now the lilac is in bloom ...’

III

Part III Eliot assigns to an ‘October night’. On this ‘soft October night’, the young man is paying a return-visit to the Lady’s apartment; he is feeling ‘ill at ease’ because he is about to tell her that he is leaving Boston and ‘going abroad’. Implicit in his announcement (which she has been dreading) is the realisation that they will never see each other again; he will not be ‘coming back’ because he will find ‘so much to learn’ elsewhere. When she puts this scenario to him, his reaction –
My smile falls heavily among the bric-à-brac– is to confess in body-language (‘my smile’) that she had read him right: that is, she has found out his selfish motives and has correctly predicted that he is deserting her. Mortified, the Lady makes a tentative suggestion: “Perhaps you can write to me.” In effect, she is admitting defeat, but clutching at a straw, imploring him implicitly to maintain some kind of contact with her. In order to preserve some vestige of her female identity, she is anxious not to lose her male friend altogether. His ‘self-possession flares up’ because he can suddenly see a way in which he can atone for his harsh treatment of her. If he writes her letters, then he will make himself feel better, but still be able to keep her at a distance. The Lady struggles to retain her composure. Her reflection upon the failure of their relationship –

wondering frequently of late ....

Why we have not developed into friends

– seeks to place it in a philosophical context; her dignified tone (‘frequently of late’) conceals her hurt and attempts to put her failure down to experience. This noble attempt to make light of her pain makes an immediate impact upon him: ‘My self-possession gutters’. It is as if he has become morally squeamish at the damage which he has done. Her final lines –

You will write, at any rate.
Perhaps it is not too late.
I shall sit here, serving tea to friends

– suggest that her stoicism has transcended self-pity and conveys a degree of resignation to loneliness which he can only admire.

In the final verse-paragraph, the young visitor realises how disconcerted he is. In a banal series of rhymes, he can be heard trying to come to terms with his guilt, suddenly facing up to the possible consequences of his heartless actions. He has second thoughts:

Well! and what if she should die some afternoon ....

He envisages himself one October afternoon ‘sitting pen in hand’, writing to her – only in vain because she will actually have died of her broken heart. Would she not, then, he asks himself, have achieved a moral victory over him: ‘Would she not have the advantage, after all?’ Even if her victory was pyrrhic, it would saddle him with the lasting disadvantage that he would feel responsible for her premature death. In these circumstances, he begins to suffer a powerful remorse for ever having ‘smiled’ and gone on ‘drinking tea (Line 50). In other words, he is concerned that he will have to live for evermore with a recollection of his moral complacency.

PRELUDES

One of the ways in which Eliot breaks with the pastoral tradition of Romantic and Georgian poetry is in the background to the action: for instance, both The Love Song (‘at dusk through narrow streets’) and Portrait of a Lady (‘by the public clocks’) are set against urban backdrops. In Preludes, the background itself becomes the focal point of the action; indeed, in all four of these poems, the urban background moves into the foreground. Characteristically, this is a desolate background/foreground. Peter Ackroyd explains that Eliot, inspired by James Thomson’s poem City of Dreadful Night, is writing “a poetry of urban romance in which the gratification that the poetic protagonist derives from his own gloom is matched by the significance which he attaches to the quotidian detail of contemporary urban life.”
For piano, the Polish composer Frederic Chopin (1810-1849) wrote 24 Preludes (Opus 28) which were published in 1839. Significantly, Franz Liszt thought that Chopin’s Preludes were “poetic preludes, analogous to those of a great contemporary poet.” From Eliot’s point of view, the analogy was specifically to be found in both the brevity and the informality of Chopin’s pieces.

**Prelude I**
At first glance, Prelude I is purely descriptive verse. What is radical about this description is that Eliot chooses to compose it of images entirely outside the Romantic/Georgian register and never before used in English poetry; furthermore, these images of a ‘winter evening’ in an unnamed city are images of both a literal/physical and a metaphorical/spiritual desolation. Eliot began these poems when he was studying at Harvard University: although the city would pass for London in 1917, it is actually Boston Massachusetts in 1910. Peter Ackroyd reports that Eliot’s early poetic jottings are “concerned with scenes of urban squalor and dilapidation” and notes that that they “attempt to recreate the observations of a solitary wanderer through dilapidated streets”. He adds that one drafted poem entitled ‘Caprices in North Cambridge’ eventually became Prelude I.

In Prelude I, Eliot’s urban landscape is unpeopled/unpopulated; instead, the emphasis is placed upon the sense-impressions which accrue to a particular street: ‘smell of steaks’, ‘smoky days’. In addition to these olfactory images, Eliot records that a ‘cab-horse steams and stamps’ (an auditory image) and that there follows ‘the lighting of the lamps’ (a visual image). For this reason, it is possible to argue that Eliot is drawing his inspiration not only from Chopin’s Preludes, but also from Impressionist art: by his profiling/sketching of this squalid environment, he is trying to suggest something of the moral/spiritual condition of New England in 1910.

In short, Eliot’s strategy is to imply a state of moral/spiritual decline; by means of his adjective-noun combinations – ‘withered leaves’, ‘vacant lots’, ‘broken blinds’ – he seeks to convey the decrepitude of the city. A state of post-Victorian decline is cumulatively suggested by eight such usages, each of which conspires to create an overall impression of forlorn emptiness.

**Prelude II**
Another of Eliot’s early drafts, originally entitled ‘Preludes in Roxbury’, became Prelude II. In Prelude II, Eliot describes the morning after. In this case, it is not an evening, but a morning which ‘comes to consciousness’ after (as it were) being ‘etherised upon a table’; in this formulation, it is an urban morning which is being personified, waking up after a rough night (‘faint stale smells of beer’).

In Prelude II, the urban scene is reminiscent of the sordid quarter of Paris through which Prufrock trudged. In this incarnation, certain ‘half-deserted streets’ become ‘saw-dust trampled streets’ along which ‘muddy feet’ are sloshing towards ‘coffee-stands’; here, clearly, are early-morning customers who measure out their lives in coffee spoons. These patrons of the coffee-stands Eliot presents as typical Bostonians: enslaved to a drab routine, they are shown as half-awake, even half-alive: that is, physically alive, if not mentally/spiritually alive. In Prelude II, Eliot uses two forms of synecdoche: ‘muddy feet’ and ‘all the hands’ (‘raising dingy shades’) of the people who inhabit Boston’s bed-sit land. Of course, the function of the synecdoche is to de-personalise the actions which are being performed – as one might expect by people who are not fully conscious, only half-alive. By means of this dramatic device, Eliot is able to suggest the kind of half-life being lived behind ‘dingy shades/in a thousand furnished rooms’ throughout the capital. In Preludes, T. S. Eliot is not so much the poet of ‘urban romance’ as the poet of urban dinginess.
**Prelude III**

Peter Ackroyd explains that *Prelude III* derives from an untitled sketch which Eliot dated ‘July 1911’ and headed with an epigraph from Philippe’s novel *Bubu de Montparnasse*. Written in the second person, *Prelude III* takes the form of a direct address to an unidentified individual, typical of the ‘thousand’ individuals who dwell in Boston’s/Paris’ bed-sit land.

All we learn of this individual is that she is female and that she is lying awake in the hour before dawn, a ‘thousand sordid images’ running through her mind. In this Prelude, Eliot’s aim is to give us ‘a vision of the street’ on which this restless young woman lives: when dawn breaks, she can hear ‘the sparrows in the gutters’, but little else. On rising, she has to sit for a moment ‘along the bed’s edge’ in order to collect her thoughts in readiness for the day ahead. It is clear that she is a troubled ‘soul’ because she is depicted either as uncurling papers from her hair or assuming some sort of foetal position (‘clasped the yellow soles of feet’) in order to comfort herself in her loneliness. Here, then, is an impression of the dinginess of the street where she lives, an idea which is urged upon us by Eliot’s description of her feet as ‘yellow’ and her hands as ‘soiled’. Here, it is difficult not to think of Leonard and Jackie Bast in E. M. Forster’s *Howards End* (1910).

**Prelude IV**

*Prelude IV* assumes immediate familiarity with another inhabitant of this urban environment: this time, Eliot interests himself in the spiritual condition of a male white-collar worker whose ‘soul’ is being ‘stretched tight’ by his experience of city life. In *Preludes*, Eliot is particularly interested in the welfare of the socio-economic group which migrated to the city at the turn of the century in order to service the banks and the insurance companies which were recruiting there. In this Prelude, Eliot’s office-worker/clerk is another anonymous individual/another nobody-in-particular who ekes out an existence in squalid obscurity; once again, the urban environment is populated by shadowy figures who are identified only by means of synecdoche: ‘insistent feet’, ‘short square fingers’ and ‘eyes’.

Once again, the background against which these de-personalised figures move is desolate and drab: whereas in *Prelude I* ‘newspapers from vacant lots’ blew about people’s ‘feet’ at ‘six o’clock’, in *Prelude IV* ‘evening newspapers’ are ‘trampled by insistent feet at four and five and six o’clock’. These are the ‘images’ by which Eliot characterises the ‘blackened street’ on which these office-workers live. Consequently, Eliot is moved to express in his own voice a deep compassion for these directionless, soulless people, each of whom he regards as

some infinitely gentle
Infinitely suffering thing.

He expresses a profound sympathy for human beings who – like the poor man whom Good King Wenceslas encountered ‘gathering fuel’ – live their lives ‘in vacant lots’: that is, ‘lots’ which are both physically and spiritually vacant.

**RHAPSODY ON A WINDY NIGHT**

In this poem, Eliot’s aim is to conduct us through the streets of a gas-lit city ‘on a windy night’. As the speaker of the poem (presumably, Eliot himself) proceeds homewards, he records for us the sense-impressions which signpost him on his eerie way. It would seem that each of these impressions occurs at a distinct hour of the clock; this being so, it makes sense to imagine that each of the recorded times, set out on the page like a stage-direction, represents an actual chime of a clock somewhere along his route.

Eliot’s rhapsody (an ironic description of such a dishevelled progress) records a lonely walk which is in many ways reminiscent of J. Alfred Prufrock’s walk through such a city. Along this
walk, as along Prufrock’s own ramble, sense-impressions return uninvited upon the speaker’s consciousness; here, as in that other poem, the sensations which stream through his mind are of dilapidation, dereliction and desolation. It is a recognisable desolation: not only physical, but also moral/emotional/spiritual.

The poem makes a propitious start: in the first verse, it is apparent that ‘the reaches of the street’ are bathed in a flattering moonlight with the result that the walker can easily forget how dark and dismal they really are (‘dissolve the floors of memory’). But he has not gone very far before he is reminded – ‘midnight shakes the memory’ – of his gloomy surroundings by the hollow/ominous sound of his own footsteps.

In the second verse, he encounters a prostitute who is eyeing him up from an open doorway. By the light of the moon, by the light of the gas-lamp, he catches sight of this un-corseted woman in a suggestive pose and is promptly reminded of ‘a crowd of twisted things’. To be precise, he is confused by this tawdry image; ‘twisted’ in his mind are the perceptions of a seductive female who could comfort him in his loneliness and a whore who would cost him his self-respect.

In the third verse, Eliot recycles the creature-imagery (cat, crab) of Prufrock’s love song in order to make familiar points. First, this street-walking man resembles an alley-cat in that he belongs in the gutter: that is, he is in the moral gutter for having entertained a liaison with a more traditional street-walker. Second, he borrows from Charles Baudelaire the image of a street-urchin at whose level he has begun to exist and in whose eyes he can see nothing but a vacant lot; in fact, the street itself is nothing but a ‘vacant lot’. Third, he supplies us with an image of self-denigration; he sees himself as an indecisive crab (‘a pair of claws’) scuttling along the windy street observed by prurient eyes.

In the fourth verse, Eliot borrows from Jules Laforgue in order to remind us that the moon ‘ne garde aucune rancune’; literally, that the moon shines without any ill-feeling; metaphorically, that the moon can paint the windy street in a favourable and misleading light. The reason is that ‘the moon has lost her memory’; she seems to have forgotten that ‘a washed-out small-pox cracks her face’. In this verse, Eliot personifies the moon after the manner of a woman suffering from amnesia. Only slowly does she manage to reacquaint herself with the loneliness (‘she is alone’) and the drabness of the street over which she has cast her enchanting light; only slowly do the olfactory sensations of street-life begin again to impact upon her awareness and – perhaps as the day breaks – re-establish themselves in her consciousness. All of five smells are mentioned: ‘old nocturnal’, ‘chestnuts’, ‘female’, ‘cigarettes’ and ‘cocktail’. At the same time, it is of course Eliot’s speaker/walker who is again becoming aware of this malodorous environment/becoming conscious of his own mood of disenchantment.

Eliot’s speaker completes his walk at ‘four o’ clock’ – by which time he has found his way back to his own door. He has ‘the key’ to the life that awaits him inside: inevitably and ironically, this key is not to a spiritual haven, but to a dingy bed-sit in which the ‘little’ lamp spreads only a ring of light and his ascent of the stair (‘Mount’) remains doggedly literal. In this ‘rhapsody’, Eliot is the poet of metropolitan bed-sitter-land in which thousands of lonely souls are to be imagined as eking out perfunctory, sordid existences. The final straw, the last kick of fate, ‘the last twist of the knife’ for the weary protagonist here, is that his bed-sit destination –

Put your shoes at the door, sleep, prepare for life

– is also his destiny in life. His sole ambition at the end of the day is just to get some ‘sleep’ so that he has the energy to endure another day just like it.
FOUR APPENDICES

(1) GERONTION (1920)

For this dramatic monologue, Eliot’s epigraph from Shakespeare’s Measure for Measure (Act III Scene 1) is designed to alert us to the fact that Gerontion is sitting alone and going back over all the cultural influences which have informed and shaped his identity; he is to be imagined ‘dreaming of both’ his youth and his old age. By the Greek title of this poem, Eliot announces that it is to be about ‘a little old man’. In actual fact, the speaker of this poem is to be

an old man in a dry month,
Being read to by a boy, waiting for rain.

In this case, then, Eliot’s speaker is not to be a persona for himself, but (as soon becomes apparent) an ageing citizen of Europe who sits in ‘a decayed house’ and reflects upon the life that he has lived on this continent: as Peter Ackroyd notes, he is not a man who joined in “the martial and creative activities of his contemporaries”. Of course, it is not only Gerontion’s house which is decayed; his condemned house is a metaphor for the cultural and spiritual decadence of the time in which he lives. If Gerontion is virtually destitute, then this destitution is not only physical, but also cultural and moral and spiritual; spiritually dry/exhausted/desiccated, he is ‘waiting for rain’.

Gerontion, then, is European Man: that is, representative of every man who has lived through this particular period of European history and absorbed all its cultural and social influences. It is significant that Gerontion is an un-heroic figure: for instance, he was not ‘at the hot gates’; he had no opportunity to distinguish himself in military service as his Greek counterpart did at Thermopylae. His is an un-heroic age with the result that he has been obliged to live a peripatetic existence, ending up ‘in a rented house’ in a run-down area (‘iron, mards’) of a major city. At the end of his life, Gerontion (‘a dull head among windy spaces’, ‘an old man in a draughty house’) finds himself wandering about a vacant lot; indeed, the woman who ‘keeps the kitchen, makes tea’ in this poem is a close relation of the ancient women who in Prelude IV gather fuel. Eliot’s aim, then, is to give us an indelible impression of the physical and spiritual dereliction in which European citizens (c. 1920) live their lives.

“After such knowledge, what forgiveness?” Gerontion answers this theological/rhetorical question in his own way. Having realised that ‘history has many cunning passages, contrived corridors’, he can no longer make any reliable sense of his own experience; in other words, he cannot with any confidence put constructions on the chain of events which – like the Trades winds – have driven him ‘to a sleepy corner’. All he knows is that he has lost his five senses (‘sight, smell, hearing, taste and touch’) and can no longer communicate with his fellow citizens:

How should I use them for your closer contact?

His final image of himself is of a ‘gull against the wind’: that is, of a creature which has been dashed to pieces by the circumstances/forces ranged against it. In short, Gerontion’s final image of himself is of a lonely victim of circumstances who can do nothing more constructive than reflect aridly upon his undistinguished career: eg. his past relations with Mr Silvero. For this reason, he describes his own reflections as if they are

Tenants of the house,
Thoughts of a dry brain in a dry season.

In the end, it is Gerontion’s head which is the decayed house of which dry, dull thoughts are the only tenants. The point of the poem is to enforce the pessimistic conclusion that European/Western life is not worth living.
THE HOLLOW MEN (1925)

For this poem, the epigraph ‘Mistah Kurtz – he dead’ is taken from Joseph Conrad’s novel entitled Heart of Darkness (1902). The central character of this novel is ‘Mistah Kurtz’: for the purposes of Eliot’s poem, we need to know that Mr Kurtz is a civilised European who travels to the Central African country of Congo (Zaire/DRC) and discovers in himself a ‘heart of darkness’. Put another way, Kurtz travels to the centre of the Dark Continent, to the literal heart of a dark jungle, there to discover that he has his own dark heart: that is, that he is without an innate sense of morality. It is in this sense that Kurtz is a ‘hollow man’: looking deep within himself, he ultimately discovers a moral emptiness, an ethical void.

Eliot’s second epigraph (‘A penny for the Old Guy’) reinforces this point; here, his vision is of a modern world/civilisation entirely populated by ‘hollow men’: that is, ‘stuffed men’ who – in their moral/spiritual destitution – resemble nothing so much as the scarecrow-like Guy Fawkes, thrown on bonfires every 5th November. Given his spiritual decrepitude, modern man – in Eliot’s view – is nothing better/finer than an effigy of the man whom God made in his own image.

Part I
The rhythm of the free verse is that of a chant: that is, a ‘meaningless’ incantation which men might utter when they are ‘walking round in a ring’. The deliberate echoes of The Waste Land are audible everywhere: when ‘the hollow men’ speak in their own voices, they announce that they are ‘dried voices’ which ‘whisper together’. Significantly, the similes which Eliot finds for their voices are two of the dominant similes of The Waste Land: ‘wind’ and ‘rats’ feet’. It is clear that ‘the hollow men’, as they chant, are moving along ‘rats’ alley’.

The hollow men make an ironic reference to ‘death’s other kingdom’: by this phrase, they mean some form of after-life, but – more significantly – seek to imply that the ‘kingdom’ in which they are currently living is equally a form of death. To coin another phrase, it is a ‘dead land’.

Part II
In Part II, Eliot re-defines ‘death’s other kingdom’ as ‘death’s dream kingdom’ in which there is both ‘sunlight’ and ‘starlight’. The hollow man expresses a wish to ‘be no nearer’ to that kingdom than he is at present; he confesses a preference for such ‘deliberate disguises’ as an effigy wears: eg. Guy Fawkes, a scarecrow. Eliot’s point is that the modern, hollow man prefers to live an irreligious existence. He wants this desolate ‘field’, ‘Not that final meeting/In the twilight kingdom’.

Part III
It is almost as if The Hollow Men is constructed out of lines and phrases which Eliot could not fit into The Waste Land: for instance, both the ‘dead land’ and the ‘stone images’ (‘a heap of broken images’) read like fragments from the earlier poem. In Part III, the hollow man/men ask[s] if it is ‘like this in death’s other kingdom’: so limited is their vision that they can imagine an after-life only as an area of ‘stony rubbish’ or as a ‘brown land’ which the wind crosses, unheard.

Part IV
In Part IV, Eliot seems once again to be describing ‘the waste land’; his repeated use of the adverb ‘here’ is designed to pinpoint ironically the no-man’s land across which the hollow men move, chanting in unison. For this land, Eliot finds three metonyms:
In this valley of dying stars
In this hollow valley
This broken jaw of our lost kingdoms.

There is a sense in which The Hollow Men is an exercise in vocabulary: throughout the poem, Eliot recycles adjectives and nouns until they make up a verbal pattern – for instance, three ‘brokens’ and four ‘stars’. The fourth metonym to begin with a demonstrative adjective (‘this last of meeting places’) signifies that the hollow men have huddled blindly ‘together’ for security ‘on this beach of the tumid river’: in this formation, these blind men (that is, men without religious/spiritual vision) resemble both ‘the crowd’ that ‘flowed over London Bridge’ and the typist and the clerk groping their way along the bank of the River Thames towards ‘a public bar in Lower Thames Street’. Eliot’s phrase ‘the hope only/of empty men’ invites us to re-arrange the words and entertain the idea that ‘the only hope of empty men’ is to find a religious/spiritual meaning in life and enter ‘death’s twilight kingdom’.

**Part V**

Part V begins with Eliot’s version of ‘Here we go round the mulberry bush’. Clearly, the men have not vacated the waste land for another kingdom, for here they are once again ‘walking round in a ring’, chanting a meaningless nursery rhyme. Here, Eliot diagnoses the inert state of modern man. His ailment is that some force (‘the shadow’) seems always to prevent him putting theory into practice:

Between the conception ....

Falls the shadow.

Eliot’s use of syntactical parallelism illustrates the recurrence of modern man’s problem: namely, his inaction. He seems condemned to ‘walk round in a ring’, inanely chanting to himself. Alongside this drab/mundane/sordid existence there exists the possibility of a religious redemption; for this reason, Eliot sets out/places fragments from the Lord’s Prayer (‘for Thine is the Kingdom’) literally alongside the inane chant of the hollow men. Eliot’s point – reinforced by his italic typography – is that ‘Life is very long’ if there is no religious/spiritual point to it. The famous ending of the poem is therefore pessimistic:

This is the way the world ends.
Not with a bang but a whimper.

It strongly suggests that human civilisation is moving not towards a triumphant conclusion (‘a bang’) but towards a feeble anti-climax (‘whimper’).

(3) **JOURNEY OF THE MAGI** (1927)

Written in free verse, this poem records Eliot’s conversion to Christianity. It is a dramatic monologue in which he adopts the persona of one of the Three Wise Men who followed the star towards the stable in which Jesus was born; whether the speaker of this monologue is Melchior, Caspar or Balthazar Eliot does not say; whether he brought gold, frankincense or myrrh does not matter. What matters is the difficulty which he encountered:

“A cold coming we had of it.
Just the worst time of year
For a journey, and such a long journey:
The ways deep and the weather sharp,
The very dead of winter.”
By the quotation-marks, Eliot acknowledges that he could not resist borrowing from a sermon of Lancelot Andrewes (1555-1626) because its adjectives (‘cold’, ‘worst’, ‘long’, ‘deep’, ‘sharp’) can in this context be both literal and metaphorical. In short, the ‘journey of the magi’ is allegorical: literally, Eliot’s magus is journeying with difficulty towards Bethlehem; metaphorically, he is journeying with difficulty towards a spiritual salvation. Because the literal journey of the magi may be imagined as being both arduous and wearisome, it becomes an emblem of Eliot’s equally arduous and wearisome journey towards religious conviction:

> Then the camel men cursing and grumbling
> And running away, and wanting their liquor and women,
> And the night-fires going out, and the lack of shelters,
> And the cities hostile and the towns unfriendly
> And the villages dirty and charging high prices:
> A hard coming we had of it.

On the one hand, Eliot’s repetitive use of ‘and’ (ten times in these six lines) relentlessly piles up his impressions of the testing road towards religious certainty; on the other, it creates for the magus speaking such a querulous character that there is no wonder that ‘the camel men’ ran away from him! In other words, Eliot implies that the journey of the magi is one of fractious tedium; by the same token, he suggests that the religious life is one of recurring hardship.

It is clear that Eliot’s magus had to give up a former life of materialistic pleasure (‘the silken girls bringing sherbet’) in order to impose a moral/spiritual discipline upon life. If we pursue his allegory, then we shall discover that his journey passes through a transitional phase:

> Then at dawn we came down to a temperate valley,
> Wet, below the snow-line, smelling of vegetation,
> With a running stream and a water-mill beating the darkness,
> And three trees on the low sky.

For the relief that flows through a human soul after conversion to Christianity, Eliot’s fertile and ‘temperate’ valley is an extended metaphor; what is more, other details of this scene – ‘three trees on the low sky’ and ‘six hands at an open door dicing for pieces of silver’ – are proleptic ironies at the expense of a traveller who, at the time of Christ’s Nativity, is given reassuring evidence of his eventual Crucifixion – by which of course all souls were saved.

From the final verse-paragraph, it becomes clear that Eliot’s magus is speaking at least thirty-three years after he and his fellow magi made their journey. Writing of Matthew Arnold’s poetry, Eliot said famously:

> But the essential advantage for a poet is not to have a beautiful world with which to deal: it is to be able to see beneath both beauty and ugliness; to see the boredom, the horror and the glory.

The glib rejoinder to this generalisation is that Eliot, in his own poetry, sees in plenty both ‘the boredom’ and ‘the horror’ of the world, but has considerable difficulty in locating any ‘glory’. What is indeed significant about the final movement of this poem is that the magus speaking steadfastly refuses to glory in his attainment of the Christian position. Audrey Cahill (in her T. S. Eliot and the Human Predicament, 1967) confirms this view:

> Obviously the poem is not simply about the journey of the magi, but is an allegory of a Christian conversion of a particularly arduous kind, involving a clear perception of the discipline and rigour of the new way of life, with very little awareness of accompanying joy.
Changing person from ‘we’ to ‘I’ with a dramatic abruptness, the magus confesses that his exchange of a hedonistic life-style (those ‘silken girls’ bringing a good deal more than ‘sherbet’) for a more ascetic way of living has been something of an endurance-test:

were we led all that way for
Birth or Death? There was a birth, certainly,
We had evidence and no doubt. I had seen birth and death,
But had thought they were different; this Birth was
Hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our death.

The journey of the magi has been both a physical and a spiritual Outward Bound course; in both senses, it has been ‘hard’ and heavy going. In retrospect, with the wisdom of hindsight, Eliot’s magus begins to count the personal cost of his twin-journeys: according to his logic, Christ’s birth (‘Birth’) resulted in the death of his former self, the loss of his previous identity. He recalls how, after having returned to his pagan kingdom, to its summer palaces, he was ‘no longer at ease’ pursuing a sybaritic life-style; he found that he could no longer live ‘in the old dispensation’ among people who, because they still worshipped false gods, had become ‘alien’ to him. Having borne witness first to the death of the old order that came with Christ’s Birth and second to Christ’s Death itself, he would now ‘be glad of another death’: that is, his own. In conclusion, we can only assume that he would ‘be glad’ of this third death because he has grown tired of living according to Christian values: far from being a glorious enterprise, it has proved such a painful business that he wants to be relieved by his own physical death from any more of its boring trials and horrific tribulations. Heaven can no longer wait.

(4) MARINA (1930)

In 1928, T. S. Eliot wrote a preface for a book of essays (For Lancelot Andrewes) in which he declared that he was a “classicist in literature, royalist in politics, and Anglo-Catholic in religion”. In 1930, Eliot, under the title Ash-Wednesday, published a sequence of difficult/obscure poems in which he celebrated his conversion to Anglo-Catholicism. Marina is a further celebration of the fact that Eliot had at last been able to find an answer to ‘the overwhelming question’: that is, he had ceased trying to find an answer rationally and had instead made a leap of faith. Finally, he had ‘constructed something upon which to rejoice’ (Ash-Wednesday, Part I).

The theme of Marina is restoration: for Helen Gardner, "the theme of restoration is perfectly translated into the terms of the myth". The myth in question is that upon which Shakespeare builds his late romance Pericles (1610); according to this myth, Pericles – who speaks the monologue in Eliot’s poem – loses his daughter Marina at sea, but years later, after a storm in the course of another sea-voyage, finds her again. In short, Marina is both taken from him and restored to him by the sea: hence, her Latin name. In Eliot’s poem, Marina (according to F. R. Leavis) “becomes the symbol for the new realisation striven after”. By this symbol, it becomes possible for Eliot to realise his spiritual aim: like Pericles, to regain a sense of personal identity, regain peace of mind, regain grace. By the realisation of this grace, the forms of material life (“the sty of contentment”, “the ecstasy of animals”) with which he had become preoccupied

Are become unsubstantial, reduced by a wind,
A breath of pine and the woodsong fog.

Eliot is making an anti-materialistic statement of immense power. In this fresh state of mind, no material or spiritual malaise can affect him. Audrey Cahill writes that Marina constitutes “a beatific experience”. In the heady conditions that this experience creates, moral values seem to the poet as eternal as the elements.
As F. R. Leavis explains, the restoration of grace "is associated with the approach of a ship to granite islands". Presumably, Eliot intends us to feel that his ship of faith will shortly be anchored in a haven where it will be permanently secure. Eliot’s faith will put him in an unshakable position. It is truly significant that he ‘made’ this ship himself. In this ship is the result of his effort in Ash Wednesday to ‘construct something upon which to rejoice’; it represents the method that has enabled him to write verse of such a positive nature; it is his new way of thinking.

Eliot rejoices that this ship carries him to an unassailable position. In this position, he is free from the lurid attractions of the material world which had previously claimed him:

This form, this face, this life
Living to live in a world of time beyond me; let me
Resign my life for this life, my speech for that unspoken,
The awakened, lips parted, the hope, the new ships.

Here, writes Cahill, is "a complex fusion of images to communicate the experience for which any one metaphor is inadequate. That something like an awakening has occurred suggests that the speaker finds himself in touch with a realm which has always been there, but to which he has been blind.” Eliot has cast himself in the role of Periclean man. He thought that this ‘realm’ was dead in the same way that Pericles thought that Marina was dead; his dramatic discovery to the contrary rejuvenates him and stimulates him to ‘resign’ his life in the material world for a new life in that ‘world of time beyond’ him.

Eliot rejoices in the new creativity of mind which has enabled him to accomplish this feat. He is ecstatic that he has been able to affirm a secure sense of personal identity. It does not matter that the words which explain how he achieved it must remain ‘unspoken’, for he has awoken to the fact that ratiocination is ultimately inadequate.

Peter Cash was Head of English Studies at Newcastle-under-Lyme School in Staffordshire 1985-2009. He is an Emeritus Fellow of the English Association.

---

**Prufrock and Other Observations** by Peter Cash is Number 6 in the Bookmark Longer Poems series, published by

The English Association
University of Leicester
Leicester LE1 7RH
UK

Tel: 0116 229 7622
Fax: 0116 229 7623
Email: engassoc@le.ac.uk

Potential authors are invited to contact the following at the address above:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Series Editor</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ian Brinton</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Shakespeare Bookmarks</th>
<th>Primary Bookmarks</th>
<th>Secondary Bookmarks</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kerri Corcoran-Martin</td>
<td>Louise Ellis-Barrett</td>
<td>Ian Brinton</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

© English Association and Peter Cash, 2011