

Overwhelming Questions: An Answer to Chris Ackerley*

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In his response to my article on “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” Chris Ackerley objects to several points in my discussion of the poem and makes some observations of his own about Eliot’s poetry. The observations, on subjects as diverse as orthography and Eliot’s use of Wagner, have nothing to do with the argument of my article. I shall therefore limit myself to replying to his criticisms.

I shall deal first with what seems to me his principal objection. Ackerley writes that my “insistence that ‘it is always and only Prufrock himself who provides the link’” between Prufrock’s various concerns is “surely implicit in the very notion of the dramatic monologue” and “leads to an assumption that the ‘overwhelming question’ must therefore be Prufrock’s ‘non-metaphysical obsession: women and sex.’ (Lobb 170).” He adds that this is “reductive and unfounded” (237). I agree entirely that the idea is reductive and unfounded, particularly because I neither stated nor assumed any such thing. A few lines above the passage that he cites, I wrote that “the question involves the meaning of life and the existence of God, not simply because the question must be overwhelming, but because the historical and literary figures in the poem—Dante, Michelangelo, St. John the Baptist, Lazarus, Hamlet—are all associated with religious and philosophical themes and narratives” (170). Elsewhere, Ackerley refers

*References: Chris Ackerley, “The ‘complicit we’: A Response to Edward Lobb,” *Connotations* 24.2 (2014/2015): 231-38; and Edward Lobb, “Ellipsis and Aposiopesis in ‘The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,’” *Connotations* 22.2 (2012/2013): 167-86. The full debate is online at: <http://www.connotations.de/debate/ellipsis-in-the-love-song-of-j-alfred-prufrock/>.

with equal inaccuracy to “Lobb’s [...] assertion that the ‘overwhelming question’ concerns ‘the gap between sex and metaphysics’” (234). He might at least be consistent in his misrepresentation of my argument.

Since Prufrock’s personal and sexual insecurities are foregrounded and the overwhelming metaphysical question is repeatedly invoked, although never directly stated, the obvious critical question is why these two things are juxtaposed, and I tried to explain why this strange pairing of sex and metaphysics makes poetic sense and is one of the keys to the poem’s meaning. Ackerley’s idea that the relationship of subjects in a speaker’s mind is “implicit in the very notion of the dramatic monologue”—that is, that the link is always a personal one—is simply not true. In the classic Victorian dramatic monologues of Browning, Tennyson, and Arnold, for example, the relationship of the issues in the poem is more or less obvious; in Browning’s “An Epistle of Kharshish,” to take another poem in which Lazarus plays an important offstage role, the possible resurrection of Lazarus leads quite naturally to considerations of the nature of God. The link between subjects here is not primarily personal, then, but one that most people would make, and even in cases where the link is more obscure, it is rarely bizarre or purely personal. In Prufrock’s case, on the other hand, there is no immediately apparent reason for his simultaneous obsessions with sexual and metaphysical questions, and it is the very oddity of the pairing that causes us to probe more deeply into the omitted links between them. A man who looks at the evening sky and thinks of “a patient etherised upon a table” clearly thinks in highly individual ways.

Ackerley not only ignores my clear statement of the “overwhelming question” but claims that “Lobb’s thesis may be summarized in terms of his insistence that sex and metaphysics are analogous” (235). This at least acknowledges part of what I said but mistakes the extended discussion of one example for my “thesis” and conclusion. If that conclusion was unclear to Ackerley, allow me to re-state it briefly here. Ellipsis and aposiopesis function in “Prufrock” as means of omitting “connections between the tenor and vehicle of a simile or metaphor, between the large subjects of discussion (sex and meta-

physics), and between incompatible aspects of Prufrock himself: male *vs.* female characteristics, the desire for sexual pursuit *vs.* inertia and fear of failure, the need to discuss large metaphysical issues *vs.* the fear of mockery, miscommunication, or solipsism, as well as the vital need to keep all possible conclusions in play" (181-82). The various omissions do justice to the complexity of and conflicts in Prufrock's mind and personality, but they also illustrate what I called "a positive agenda of avoidance" (180). "The failure to conclude either sexually or metaphysically" becomes a source of actual good: "the important thing is to go on talking, keeping alive a sense of the complexities of any issue, forestalling or disrupting consensus, which can become deadening in the intellectual sphere and tyrannical in the political" (180). This refusal to conclude, which is at the furthest remove from deconstructionist "deferral," is Prufrock's and Eliot's way of maintaining at least the possibility of meaning and God in a world of discourse which has largely, to its loss, ceased to take such concepts seriously.

As the examples above suggest, I am mystified throughout Ackerley's response by his apparent unwillingness to pay attention to what I actually wrote. In addition, he frequently makes disparaging remarks about points in my article without indicating in any way why he finds them unsatisfactory. He writes of my analysis of the Marvell reference, for example, that "having presented this image, Lobb's conclusion rings hollow: that the response of Prufrock's 'would-be mistress' (unlike Marvell's) suggests that 'she is far more interested in sex than he is'" (234). This was not in fact my "conclusion;" it was one part of a developing argument about Prufrock's gender identity. But exactly how does it ring hollow? Ackerley does not say. Again, after mentioning the parallel of sex and metaphysics, which I discussed at some length, he tells us that: "In my reading of the poem, this places the wrong emphasis on matters that are infinitely more subtle than this" (234). "Infinitely more subtle" would seem to allow for extensive development, but this lofty assertion is not followed by any reading at all, much less an infinitely subtle one. A third example: when Ackerley accuses me of "privileging the universal over the particulars that generate it" (237), I look in vain for any evidence to support this

curt pronouncement. I make no apologies for bringing up the “overwhelming question”—if that is what Ackerley means by the universal—because it is central to the poem, and part of my project in the article was to show precisely how such a question is reflected in Prufrock’s other, more personal concerns, his “particulars.” I could produce further examples of Ackerley’s dismissiveness, but these are enough to make the point. Everything I wrote was solidly grounded in the words and details of the poem; Chris Ackerley is welcome to disagree with anything I said, but to do so without countervailing evidence or an alternative account of the point in question is easy, arbitrary, and entirely unhelpful.

“I intensely dislike the use of what I (frequently) call the curse of the ‘complicit we,’” writes Ackerley; “that is, the kind of approach to the purpose that treats the reader as ‘mon semblable, mon frère’ and walks him (or her) down the garden path to look at (let ‘us’ say) ‘the evening [...] spread out against the sky’” (233). He finds that “the use of the ‘complicit we’ bullies or cajoles or persuades [him] into acceptance.” This objection is important enough to Ackerley to provide the title of his response, but I find it odd that he feels bullied by a convention as transparent as this one. To write criticism without using “we” or “I” or “the reader” is to imply truth claims unmediated by the actual experience of readers, which is central to critical discussion. But then, the use of “I,” except when unavoidable, brings problems of its own. When Ackerley and I began writing criticism several decades ago, the use of “I” in criticism was considered not only egotistical but also trivializing: it suggested that your observations were merely personal. The inclusive “we,” in contrast, evoked the “common reader” dear to critics from Dr. Johnson to Virginia Woolf. With the rise of political correctness and the need of some scholars to confess their “subject positions,” often at great and anxious length, the “I” returned with a voluble vengeance; those of us who continue to avoid it believe that it is still possible to articulate a view of a poem or novel which would be shared by most intelligent readers once the evidence has been put before them. Chris Ackerley believes this himself, or he

would not bother to write articles of his own. His dislike of the communal “we” therefore strikes me as pointless at best.

“The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” remains the most important long poem in English of the twentieth century. Prufrock’s anxieties are deeply and vividly personal but also imply a larger frame of metaphysical discourse, and the poem conveys this without becoming discursive or “ruminative,” Eliot’s descriptor for the overt discussion of ideas in Browning and Tennyson. A century after the poem’s first appearance, its evocation of individual and cosmic loneliness remains moving, disturbing, and contemporary. The gaps, omissions, and discontinuities of the poem suggest the increasing incoherence of modern consciousness, and my discussion of ellipsis and aposiopesis was an attempt to demonstrate the centrality of these tropes to the poem’s technique and themes. What I called the Grand Ellipsis in the poem is the unstated but omnipresent “overwhelming question” itself. The grand ellipsis in Ackerley’s response to my article, the thing omitted, is any real engagement with what I wrote.

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