

The “complicit we”: A Response to Edward Lobb*

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There is, I affirm, the need for a serious (or better, perhaps, a joco-serious) treatise on T. S. Eliot and punctuation and orthography. Such a study might begin by considering what is meant by the “text” of a particular poem, given the not inconsiderable differences between different editions of Eliot’s poems (manuscript and printed texts, American and British editions, visions and revisions); for only after sufficiently heavy planks are laid down should a critic venture without trepidation over these quicksands of interpretation. To take but one example: should the crucial encounter in *The Waste Land* take place in “the hyacinth garden” or “the Hyacinth garden”? Valerie Eliot’s edited facsimile of the manuscript reads “hyacinth” (12-13), but most early printings offer the capitalised form.¹ The capitalisation is not trivial, for it invites consideration of the story of Hyacinth, the youth beloved of Apollo, whose death was passionately bewailed by the god (of Poetry). This might in turn invoke the fate of Eliot’s friend, Jean Verdenal (“mort aux Dardanelles”), to whom he dedicated *Prufrock and Other Observations* (1917), and with whom he associated in various other writings (for example, an essay in *The Criterion* in 1934, “Portrait of a Lady” and *Ash-Wednesday*) such images as the lost lilac and death by water. Eliot’s preference in the later Faber editions for the non-capitalised form might well indicate his desire (for whatever reasons) not to entertain the kinds of homoerotic speculation that

*Reference: Edward Lobb, “Ellipsis and Aposiopesis in ‘The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,’” *Connotations* 22.2 (2012/2013): 167-86.

For the original article as well as all contributions to this debate, please check the *Connotations* website at <<http://www.connotations.de/deblobb0222.htm>>.

arose after John Peter's controversial article in *Essays in Criticism* of July 1952, where the young Canadian critic defined *The Waste Land* as a set of variations upon a theme that was omitted; and ventured as the missing theme the poet's lost love for a young man who has drowned (cf. Peter).

In other words, punctuation and orthographical choice may matter. However, this is controversial material and a less provocative example may make the point more clearly: when Prufrock in his love song (like the "waste land" two words, and unlike *Ash-Wednesday* no hyphen) considers the "overwhelming question" (10) he does not ask: "What is it?" (11). Instead, "we" are invited to accompany him upon his "visit" (12), that is, to be complicit. That failure to ask, whether it be about a trivial concern, a proposal of marriage, and/or the metaphysical "squeez[ing] [of] the universe into a ball" (92), marks Prufrock as one who, when confronted with a moment of truth in which *something* must be asked, finds himself unable to do so. In *The Waste Land*, the roots of which grow out of and clutch deeply into Wagner's music, such a moment is imaged in the Hyacinth (or hyacinth) garden, where the protagonist's inability to speak aligns him with the innocent fool of the Grail Legends (Parsifal, for instance), who fails at the crucial moment to ask the vital question that might bring relief to the barren land (itself a metaphor for a state of mind). Although the Hyacinth Garden scene is framed by scenes from *Tristan und Isolde*, and invokes such motifs as the love-potion, the flower-garden, the wounded hero and the *Liebestod*, Eliot had found in Jessie Weston's *From Ritual to Romance* (1920) an argument that the Waste Land theme was of Indo-Aryan origin and that Wagner's Bayreuth operas, and particularly *Parsifal*, had their roots in this tradition. The more significant, therefore, at the end of the poem, that the protagonist, having crossed the waste land, should now ask: "Shall I at least set my lands in order?" (425). The question mark, indeed the very act of asking such a question, affirms if not the "cure" of the Fisher King then at least the beginnings of an act of faith. The "overwhelming question" is a major theme or motif of Eliot's early poetry (in which the imagery of

one poem deliberately echoes that of others); it finds further expression in the final stanza of Part III of *The Hollow Men* (1925), where the lost souls try to articulate something that at this moment of final truth might effect their salvation, only to find that the impulse towards the asking of a question: "Is it like this [...]" (45) fades into the emptiness of "prayers to broken stone" (51), the utterance lacking a final question mark to testify to what might have been a saving grace.

I was thus intrigued by Edward Lobb's declaration at the outset of his "Ellipsis and Aposiopesis" that he wished to "approach the most famous ellipsis in modern poetry," the "overwhelming question" in "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" (Lobb 167) by considering the "broken conversations punctuated by three dots" (*Letters* 241; cf. Lobb 167). Hence my disappointment when Lobb quickly concludes (see 168) that the "dots" generally require little analysis, since they typically indicate pauses rather than omissions. Instead, he proposes to adumbrate "the Grand Ellipsis" of the "overwhelming question" (personally, I would have called it, with intended echoes of Celestine V, "the great refusal"); and to do so by discussing "the missing connector" in some of Prufrock's similes and metaphors. This is not necessarily a bad thing to do, but I have some reservations about how, in this article, it has been done.

My first reservation can be dismissed, as Eliot dismissed *The Waste Land*, as simply a rhythmical grumble: I intensely dislike the use of what I (frequently) call the curse of the "complicit we"; that is, the kind of approach to the purpose that treats the reader as "mon semblable,—mon frère!" (76) and walks him (or her) down the garden-path to look at (let "us" say) "the evening [...] spread out against the sky" (2). We (here I use the dual deliberately) might expect a glorious sunset, but find instead "a patient etherised upon a table" (3). I (here I revert to the singular) have no great objection when my companion tells me (Lobb 168) that this is a Modernist form of the traditional trope that Ruskin defined in *Modern Painters* as pathetic fallacy; but I resist being told that after several readings "we can see" that the etherised patient "embodies many of Prufrock's most salient charac-

teristics" (169). This is not because the insight is wrong but rather that it is self-evident (I would be disappointed if any reasonable student could not see this after one reading). What matters is the quality of the perception; and rather than "see" the simile in terms of Lobb's "dream-like sequence of pictures from the unconscious" (169) I might prefer to interpret it as a visual simile (a sunset) but one rendered as the interiorisation of an image, saying nothing about the sky yet everything about the protagonist's numbed state of mind; and in that image (I would further contend) an entire school of Romanticism is undone.

Although I stress the "etherised" emotions rather than the "unconscious" as such, this is not essentially different from what Lobb is saying; my objection is rhetorical, that his "we can see" assumes that I will look at the simile and scene as he does, through his words, when I prefer my own. This is not always the case: I like the way (later in the article) in which he develops Marvell's image of rolling up his strength and sweetness into one Ball, to tear its pleasures through the Iron Gates of Life (see 173). Here, the ironic self-deprecation, the sense of sexual inadequacy and a fear of failure are poignantly dramatised in a magnificent conceit; but 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." This echoes Lobb's earlier assertion that the "overwhelming question" concerns "the gap between sex and metaphysics" (170), and it anticipates his subsequent conclusion: "We have seen how sex and metaphysics are linked in Prufrock's mind" (174). In my reading of the poem, this places the wrong emphasis on matters that are infinitely more subtle than this.

My problem is not simply that the use of the "complicit we" bullies or cajoles or persuades me into acceptance, but equally the sense that this is not quite what the poem means at all, no, "[t]hat is not it, at all" (98). Lobb's use of the first person plural is the more inappropriate, I feel, given the opening line of the poem: "Let us go then, you and I." The English language has a curious rhetorical emphasis arising from

the way that the verb "to be" takes either a nominative complement or an accusative object: "It is I" as opposed to "It is me" (as the case may be); here, given that "you and I" is in apposition to "Let us go then," the line is not simple assertion but rather dramatises a tension between the self as subject and that self perceiving itself as object. That tension, and with it the deconstruction of "us" into its components of "you and me" (or "you and I"), is felt throughout the poem.

The opening lines of the poem are not, strictly speaking, the sentiment I cited above but the epigraph from Dante's *Inferno* (XXVII.61-66), the words of Guido da Montrefelto, trapped for fraudulent counsel within a living flame that trembles even as he speaks; the voice of one who speaks only on the assumption that what is said will never be heard in the world above. Prufrock's confession, thus, is not so much heard as overheard (this is a critical commonplace). Or, to place this in terms of the poetic genre that it assumes, the love song is a dramatic monologue, in the tradition of Browning to be sure, but interiorised in the best Modernist manner (and with much of the auditory imagination orchestrated by Wagner and Stravinsky). While "you and I" may on some level (Dante to Virgil, perhaps) implicate the protagonist with his reader, the one who overhears, the key to the images and analogies that the poem presents lies within Prufrock's consciousness, which "flicker[s]" (84) like the eternal flames that consume Guido.

Lobb's thesis may be summarised in terms of his insistence that sex and metaphysics are analogous (see 171), the "missing link" between them being Prufrock's consciousness. My problem with this is that it is too reductive, and that the analogies he therefore perceives fail to do justice to the flickering quality of Prufrock's mind and, perhaps surprisingly, to the dramatic nature of his experience, as that is represented in the poem. "It is," to quote the protagonist, "impossible to say just what I mean" (104) in a few lines only, but I here assume the validity (for this poetic discourse, at least) of Ezra Pound's sense of the Image (and hence of Eliot's objective correlative) as an equation for human emotions, and then acknowledge Lobb's principle of aposio-

peis as but one aspect of many (metaphor, ambiguity, irony) that the mind deploys in its use of language to move from the particular (or token) to the universal (or type). Take, for example, the “question” that is said to be the goal of the visit, and as listed earlier: trivial pursuit, marriage proposal, or metaphysical *angst*; the latter arises out of the former, even if “we” are not entirely sure what the former is, precisely. Lobb’s “missing connector” is nothing esoteric, but rather a principle implicit in the everyday use of language, including that most familiar of analytical paradigms: *tenor, vehicle, ground*, as applied to one who “ha[s] measured out [his] life with coffee spoons” (51). Life as tenor, coffee spoons as vehicle, and the ground as ... well, uncertain, an aposiopesis if you please, something not given but which must be postulated, and “you and I” will almost certainly postulate something different (the irreverent might think of coffee grounds). Even so, “we” will respond to the image, if at all, in terms of a shared cultural understanding: of triviality (coffee mornings as futile); of the pathetic (insignificant spoons); and in that way “we” will share (through the image) Prufrock’s understanding of his life as a futile and trivial social ritual measured out this way. This, indeed, entails the complicit we, and the critical use of the pronoun should respect this understanding.

Prufrock’s problem is not a lack of imagination or understanding; it is not that he is inadequate but rather that he is conscious of being so. He has a hypersensitive awareness of himself that translates into agonies of decisions and indecisions, of visions and re-visions (the hyphen is intentional). His images, like his “morning coat” (42) and “necktie” (43), are both “rich and modest” (43). And they are incessant, pouring out of a sensitive mind beset by self-doubt and apprehension. Yet there is one moment when Prufrock does not express himself in metaphor or visionary language; after the “eternal Footman hold[s] [his] coat” and (horrible word) “snicker[s]” (85), what follows is not a metaphor but (as even Wittgenstein might have agreed) an axiomatic, atomistic statement: “in short, I was afraid” (86). Dramatically, this is the catastrophe, in the literal sense of a turning point: no

matter whether Prufrock's "visit" (12) is real or metaphorical, this moment of truth marks the point at which he can "go" (1) no further.

Lobb might (or might not) disagree, but his insistence that "it is always and only Prufrock himself who provides the link" (as is surely implicit in the very notion of the dramatic monologue) leads to an assumption that the "overwhelming question" must therefore be Prufrock's "non-metaphysical obsession: women and sex" (Lobb 170). This is both reductive and unfounded, and arises from an unsatisfactory appreciation of both the dramatic and Imagistic qualities of the poem—these made (for me) more annoying by the use of the pronoun "we" that assumes my complicity. His interpretation, as I read his article, arises in part from his privileging of the universal over the particulars that generate it, as in the particularity of Prufrock's imagery ("How his hair is growing thin"; 41) that leads to his fear of rejection ("That is not it, at all"; 98) and thence to universal terror and *le grand peut-être* ("Do I dare / Disturb the universe?"; 45-46). Sexual anxiety is part of this, but only one tremor (among many) of a more profound consciousness of inadequacy. To privilege "the gap between sex and metaphysics" (Lobb 170) as the grand ellipsis that essentially explains the poem is to substitute (as does the complicit "we") the abstraction of the universal for the experience of the particular, and thus evade the critical (in both senses of the word) appreciation of the poem's dramatic power.

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NOTE

¹All references, unless otherwise indicated, refer to the *Complete Poems and Plays of T. S. Eliot* (published by Faber & Faber).

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