

Ellipsis and Aposiopesis in “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock”*

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On October 4, 1923, T. S. Eliot wrote to John Collier, a prospective contributor to *The Criterion*, about a poem Collier had submitted. “This particular type of fragmentary conversation (see p. 4) was invented by Jules Laforgue and done to death by Aldous Huxley,” Eliot noted; he went on to admit that “I have been a sinner myself in the use of broken conversations punctuated by three dots” (*Letters* 241). The “sin” of ellipsis was one to which Eliot succumbed frequently in his early poetry,¹ and his disdain for the three dots suggests that he found them too easy a means of suggestive omission. Poetic economy has of course always depended on the omission of superfluous connectors, allowing the reader to infer the meaning; modern poetry took the process a step further, emphasizing the reader’s construction of meaning, but also often alienating readers who found that they needed more guidance than the new poets were giving them.

I want to approach the most famous ellipsis in modern poetry—the “overwhelming question” which is mentioned twice in “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” and implied throughout, but never formulated—by examining Eliot’s use of local ellipsis throughout the poem. In juxtaposing things, persons, and issues with no clear connectors, Eliot draws attention to Prufrock’s idiosyncratic personality, but also, ingeniously, to the ways in which Prufrock’s mind reflects universal modern anxieties. Taking my cue from Eliot’s own impatience with “three dots,” I shall discuss this form of ellipsis only when necessary

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to make other points. The “dots” generally require little analysis in any case, since they typically indicate pauses rather than actual omissions:

I grow old ... I grow old ...
I shall wear the bottoms of my trousers rolled. (ll. 120-21)²

The five dots between verse paragraphs likewise require little comment. Eliot uses the device just twice in “Prufrock,” and the breaks are no more decisive in changing a scene or topic than the white spaces between any two verse paragraphs in the poem.

All of these different breaks, however, suggest the broader importance of ellipsis in the poem: along with the other forms of this device I shall be discussing, they adumbrate the Grand Ellipsis of the “overwhelming question” and clarify both by implication and exclusion what that question is. The first form of local ellipsis I wish to discuss is that of the missing connector in some of Prufrock’s similes and metaphors.

1. Simile as Ellipsis

When Burns writes, “O, my luv’e’s like a red, red rose,” we know immediately what the simile means; when Prufrock says “the evening is spread out against the sky / Like a patient etherised upon a table” (ll. 2–3), on the other hand, we have to work hard to find the connection. Early reviewers and critics, expecting a visual simile, accused Eliot of writing nonsense³ and failed to see that he was using a Modernist form of the traditional trope that Ruskin defined in *Modern Painters* as pathetic fallacy. It is part of the poem’s brilliance that most of us fail to see the qualities projected onto the landscape until we have finished reading the poem, or, more often, until we have read it many times. The trope of pathetic fallacy is as old as literature itself, but here it is also specifically Modernist in its emphatic *imposition* onto a landscape of qualities that no actual scene could possibly suggest.

After several readings, we can see that the etherized patient perfectly embodies many of Prufrock's most salient characteristics. Both are sick; both are anaesthetized in one way or another to escape pain; both are mentally isolated, one in literal unconsciousness, the other in a dream-like sequence of pictures from the unconscious; both are, for different reasons, passive, radically vulnerable, and unable to communicate ("It is impossible to say just what I mean!" [l. 104]). The initial opacity of this famous simile as such—particularly in the first lines of a poem—is balanced by an almost overdetermined psychological profile.

The various meanings of the etherized-patient image are reinforced when we read other initially cryptic statements that reflect Prufrock's psyche. These often involve animal analogies that suggest something of Prufrock's alienation:

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. (ll. 15-22)

The fog-cat does not at first appear to describe Prufrock at all, nor does Prufrock say it does, but its falling asleep parallels that of the etherized patient and anticipates later images of sleep and death, including the evening that "sleeps so peacefully" (l. 75), the severed head of John the Baptist (l. 82) and the mermaids' victims in the last lines of the poem (l. 131).⁴ The cat image also reflects Prufrock's sense of isolation, which is projected onto the fogbound house as well. Two later animal images, the pinned insect (ll. 57–58) and the pair of ragged claws (ll. 73–74), focus our sense of Prufrock's vulnerability and alienation. Like the opening simile of the patient, all three animal images convey Prufrock's fears and sense of himself in highly indirect ways that make sense only after we have come to know the poem as a whole.

None of this is entirely new; I draw attention to the gap between the elements of simile in the poem to suggest that it is always and only Prufrock himself who provides the link. This is equally true of the apparent disjunction between Prufrock's major preoccupations.

2. The Gap Between Sex and Metaphysics

Most critics remain as silent about the overwhelming question as Prufrock himself.⁵ Perhaps they take our knowledge of it for granted, but I suspect that many of them are afraid of being told "That is not what [he] meant at all" (l. 97). To be clear, however, 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. If Prufrock is talking to himself (a subject of debate we shall return to), he has no need to articulate what he knows he means, and when Eliot speaks to us as readers, he may simply be employing poetic indirection. But I think this Grand Ellipsis, as I have called it, is explicable in thematic terms, and that these are clarified by Prufrock's other, non-metaphysical obsession: women and sex. This is so overtly developed in the poem that I need not discuss it here; what is more interesting from both a technical and thematic point of view is the *juxtaposition* of sex and metaphysics in "Prufrock."

There are no fewer than fifteen questions in this poem,⁶ but the most important, implied throughout, are unstated and can be summarized roughly as "Can I ask a woman for a date?" and "What is the meaning of life?" The disjuncture between the orders of magnitude of the two questions is comic, and suggests that the questions exist in ironic counterpoint: how can Prufrock imagine that he might "disturb the universe" if he cannot even talk to a woman? In dramatic and psychological terms, this is plausible, but there is a thematic reason for the juxtaposition as well, and one that goes to the heart of the poem.

"Prufrock" is a poem of loneliness, and that loneliness exists on both the personal and the metaphysical levels. The two questions are in fact versions of the same problem—a desire to get beyond the prison of the self, whether that loneliness is personal and sexual or cosmic and metaphysical. Pascal wrote of the heavens that "Le silence éternel de ces espaces infinies m'effraie" (Fragment 206), and Prufrock is talking, or declining to talk, about the same fear, the same desire for refuge and solace in the arms of a lover or of God. Sex and metaphysics are analogous in the poem, but while analogies typically clarify, this one remains opaque until we find the missing link between them, and, as with the opening simile, that link is Prufrock's consciousness.⁷

Certainly the poem is filled with images of personal isolation: I have already mentioned the etherized patient, the yellow fog-cat, the fog-bound house cut off visually from the world, the pinned insect, and the "pair of ragged claws" (l. 73). The crab's exoskeleton is echoed in Prufrock's own stiff attire, his "morning coat [and] collar mounting firmly to the chin" (l. 42), formal dress that keeps people at a distance. The image that generalizes Prufrock's situation is particularly interesting:

Shall I say, I have gone at dusk through narrow streets
And watched the smoke that rises from the pipes
Of lonely men in shirt-sleeves, leaning out of windows? ...
(ll. 70-72; Eliot's ellipsis)

This is perhaps the most poignant of Prufrock's images, since radical isolation, one man per lonely bed-sitter, is paired with its contrary, the longing for connection, as the men lean out from buildings into the world like figures in a Stanley Spencer painting.⁸

The longing is obvious in Prufrock himself: why not reach out, then, either to another person or to a God who makes the universe a less cold and frightening place?

But though I have wept and fasted, wept and prayed,
Though I have seen my head (grown slightly bald) brought in upon a platter,
I am no prophet—and here's no great matter;

I have seen the moment of my greatness flicker
 And I have seen the eternal Footman hold my coat, and snicker,
 And in short, I was afraid. (ll. 81-86)

The Footman's snicker immediately precedes and obviously parallels another rebuff, this time by a woman:

Would it have been worth while,
 To have bitten off the matter with a smile,
 To have squeezed the universe into a ball
 To roll it towards some overwhelming question,
 To say: "I am Lazarus, come from the dead,
 Come back to tell you all, I shall tell you all"—
 If one, settling a pillow by her head,
 Should say: "That is not what I meant at all,
 That is not it, at all." (ll. 90-98)

It is in these two imagined scenes that the sexual and the metaphysical, which Prufrock has discussed or implied separately to this point, collide with deliberate awkwardness. Prufrock cannot imagine an encounter at either level that is not marked by embarrassment, specifically through the intrusion of the other element. The "eternal" and presumably cosmic Footman engages in a merely personal, implicitly sexual sneer at Prufrock's appearance⁹; Prufrock then imagines attempting to discuss the afterlife, "That undiscover'd country from whose bourne / No traveler returns"¹⁰ in a clearly erotic setting, and being deflated by a woman with more physical activities in mind. In the first case the cosmic descends bathetically to the sexual, in the second it is subverted by it. The pairing of the two in Prufrock's mind explains his tendency to juxtapose them, and we sense that he feels inadequate in both areas. His failure to connect the two issues except by implication is, like his elusive similes and images, a form of reticence—of ellipsis—at the poem's thematic level. Eliot's treatment of Prufrock's *personal* sexuality in the poem, however, goes even deeper in its exploration of sexual loneliness as a reflection or microcosm of a metaphysical problem.

3. Men, Women ... and Prufrock

Prufrock's obvious insecurities about his appearance—thin arms and legs, probably premature baldness (ll. 40-41, 44, 82, 122)—reflect the anxieties of many men, and are often read as a sense of inadequate masculinity. Prufrock is candid about his insecurities, but most suggestive when he is most indirect, and his gender presentation contributes to the parallel of sex and metaphysics in the poem.

Many commentaries on "Prufrock"¹¹ mention that lines 90-93, cited above, allude to a famous passage in Marvell's "To His Coy Mistress":

Let us roll all our Strength, and all
Our sweetness, up into one Ball:
And tear our Pleasures with rough strife,
Thorough the Iron gates of Life. (ll. 41-44)

The *carpe diem* philosophy of Marvell's speaker is at odds with Prufrock's assurance that "there will be time" (ll. 23, 37), suggesting Prufrock's subliminal awareness of his self-deceptions. More importantly, however, Marvell's sexual image of storming "the Iron gates of Life" is made ironic here in a personally self-deprecating way. If Marvell's speaker anticipates tearing a cannonball through the gates, Prufrock, transferring Marvell's earlier verb, can only imagine *rolling* his cannonball towards the overwhelming question—implying that he is not up to the job—and the response of his would-be mistress suggests that she is far more interested in sex than he is, a witty reversal of the situation in Marvell's poem.

This reversal is not simply of outlooks but implicitly of sexes as traditionally conceived. The woman is sexually frank and aggressive, impatient with mere talk, and therefore "male"; Prufrock is implicitly feminized as he talks at length to no apparent purpose, and senses that his own masculinity is called into question by his appearance and his hesitations; his own image of the merely rolling cannonball is the objective correlative, in Eliot's terms, of his fears.¹² It is tempting to fix on Prufrock's (or Eliot's own) sexual anxieties, but it is more productive, I think, to look at what this reversal of sexual roles does to the

relation of sex and metaphysics in the poem. Prufrock takes on the woman's traditional role of procrastinator and becomes "coy" in both senses: 1) making a show of sexual shyness or modesty, and 2) reluctant to give details, as when we say that someone is coy about his age. Prufrock's sexual coyness is the exact parallel of his metaphysical coyness—his elliptic refusal to state the "overwhelming question," much less discuss it. He refuses to move forward in either area for various reasons, including the possibility of disappointment ("And would it have been worth it, after all"), but the real motive, as he admits, is fear. Although men experience it all the time, fear is traditionally considered unmanly, and Prufrock's admission that he is afraid adds to our sense that his gender identity—not his sexual orientation, but the broader complex of emotional and psychological factors that constitute his sexual nature—is neither masculine nor feminine as customarily defined. This, too, is an ellipsis: despite his hints and suggestions, Prufrock avoids any discussion of his gender identity and moves on, crabwise, to other subjects.

We have seen how sex and metaphysics are linked in Prufrock's mind and can infer some of the reasons for his fear of women. He has explained his fear of raising metaphysical questions, however, only in sexual terms; would it not be possible for him to raise those questions in a non-erotic setting with the right woman or a male friend? Prufrock himself seems to forestall this possibility when he first brings up the "overwhelming question":

Oh, do not ask "What is it?"
Let us go and make our visit. (ll. 11-12)

We never learn whether Prufrock is speaking to another person or to himself. As mentioned earlier, if he is talking to himself, he does not need to articulate the question; in this case, short-circuiting the inquiry may simply be a way of avoiding another round of fruitless introspection about (in the words of "Ash-Wednesday I") "These matters that with myself I too much discuss / Too much explain" (ll. 28–29). If he really is talking to someone else, however, a different

explanation seems plausible. Prufrock is reluctant to bring up ultimate questions in a hostile or mocking environment, to feel the desperate unfashionableness, the *uncoolness*, of bringing up meaning or God in an emphatically secular atmosphere. If "Prufrock" is, as I have suggested, a poem about kinds of loneliness, it is also a poem, *the* poem, of awkwardness and embarrassment, and not just in the erotic sphere.

The fact that the erotic is always there suggests that Prufrock's anxiety about bringing up the overwhelming question is not simply personal and psychological—the fear of being thought foolish, credulous, unsophisticated—but philosophical and even corporeal: his fears about his own body's inadequacies are analogous to his anxieties about language and the possibility of expressing meaning, and this constitutes yet another link between sex and metaphysics in the poem. I would also like to suggest that Prufrock's positioning of himself as effectively androgynous¹³ is not simply an excuse for avoiding sexual pursuit but also, as with the analogous figure of Tiresias in *The Waste Land*, a way of encompassing contraries and avoiding definition. The importance of this will become clearer when we look at Prufrock's need to avoid both coitus and intellectual commitment.

4. Avoiding Conclusion

Prufrock's fear of mockery haunts both the sexual and metaphysical levels of the poem, and that fear is his major reason for not beginning a serious metaphysical conversation under any circumstances. He also has more purely intellectual reasons to hesitate before broaching the "overwhelming question," including miscommunication ("That is not what I meant at all," l. 97), and oversimplification ("It is impossible to say just what I mean!" l. 100). The poem's images of isolation, discussed in section 1, suggest not only Prufrock's loneliness but also the extreme difficulty of real communication at the best of times, and even the fear of actual solipsism.

Again and again in Eliot's early poetry we find individuals isolated in lonely rooms. The predicament of "lonely men in shirt-sleeves,

leaning out of windows" (l. 72) recurs in many of the early poems. We hear of "all the hands / That are raiding dingy shades / In a thousand furnished rooms" ("Preludes" II), of "female smells in shuttered rooms" ("Rhapsody on a Windy Night"), of Mr. Silvero, "who walked all night in the next room" ("Gerontion"). It is clear that these closed rooms are images not only of loneliness but of limited, self-enclosed, or even solipsistic consciousness,¹⁴ and the essential gloss on all of them is the image of the prison in Part V of *The Waste Land*:

I have heard the key
Turn in the door and turn once only
We think of the key, each in his prison
Thinking of the key, each confirms a prison. (ll. 413-416)¹⁵

This fear of solipsism lies behind one of the poem's most famous couplets:

In the room the women come and go
Talking of Michelangelo. (ll. 13-14, 35-36)

We assume that their conversation is silly and trivial, although Prufrock says nothing to suggest that this is the case. Perhaps we come to this conclusion because of the bathetic and comic rhyme; certainly our feeling is reinforced, consciously or subconsciously, by the poem's recurrent images of personal isolation and failed communication, as in Prufrock's and the woman's cross-purposes.

The poem's images of isolation and self-enclosure suggest that Prufrock's ultimate fear is that all of his thoughts may be mere solipsistic projections.¹⁶ That this is a real possibility in his own mind is implied by his lurid and obviously extreme imagining of victimization and death—the pinned insect, St. John the Baptist, the mermaids' victims in the last lines of the poem. His solution in both the sexual and metaphysical domains is to procrastinate: "And indeed there will be time" (ll. 23, 37).¹⁷

The references to Marvell and *Hamlet* make clear that procrastination is not a good choice, but delay has its advantages. It would have

been tempting twenty-five years ago to call this deferral and to make Prufrock and Eliot into proto-deconstructionists, aware of the terrible gap between signifier and signified. This has been seriously argued, with good evidence both from Eliot's philosophical and critical writings and from the poems¹⁸; when Prufrock says, "It is impossible to say just what I mean" (l. 104), he may mean exactly that in purely linguistic terms. In an essay on Eliot's early poetry, J. C. C. Mays claims that Eliot's starting-point "takes breakdown for granted" and "supposes that will cannot obtain its object and that theme and technique cannot be reconciled in any meaningful way" (110). Mays wisely refrains from invoking an anachronistic deconstruction, and it is clear that Eliot was influenced by far older traditions of skepticism about language. His reading in the work of Nagarjuna, so ably analyzed by Cleo McNelly Kearns, suggested that reality can best be described by a complex system of double negation (not this, not that, not *not*-this, not *not*-that), and Christian apophatic theology asserted that "any attempt to specify the characteristics or mode of being of the divine is not simply inadequate, which would be a truism, but essentially misleading and even false, because divinity is so far beyond the categories of human understanding as to make them a hindrance rather than a help to its apprehension" (Kearns, *T.S. Eliot* 135, 131).¹⁹

Indian linguistic philosophy, apophatic theology, and deconstruction may only be more sophisticated versions of Addie Bundren's claim in Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* "that words are no good; that words don't ever fit even what they are trying to say at" (115). If "Prufrock" merely drew attention to the shortcomings of language, however, it would not be one of the central poems of the twentieth century. It remains vital because it dramatizes eloquently several aspects of modernity. The most important of these is the modern sense of intellectual incoherence, the fear that all the great systems which made sense of the world, from religion to Newtonian physics, can no longer command our adherence. That Eliot "takes breakdown for granted" is apparent not only in the form of his early poetry but also in the actual inability of many of his speakers to think in any consequential way at all. When Gerontion describes himself as "A dull

head among windy spaces," we have gone beyond the shortcomings of language or personal indecisiveness—Hamlet's "resolution [...] sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought" (3.1.84-85)—and are back in the world of Pascal's eternal silence of the infinite spaces; similarly, when one of the Thames-Daughters in *The Waste Land* confesses "I can connect / Nothing with nothing" (ll. 301-02), personal crisis becomes general. This breakdown of thought leads, naturally, to inaction, and the general passivity of Eliot's early personae reflects a pervasive modern sense of bafflement and paralysis which we recognize in Ford's Dowell (in *The Good Soldier*), Kafka's Josef K., and the sometimes literally immobile protagonists in Beckett. That Eliot had experienced this sort of breakdown personally confirms Mays's statement that Eliot "translated the sad accidents of his own life into poetry in a way that miraculously contained the exultation and despair of a generation" (110-11).

Eliot as the pathologist of modern life is not news; I mention these truisms only to emphasize that ellipsis and avoidance occur in "Prufrock" not simply because language is an unstable medium, an idea Eliot returned to obsessively in his poetry (most notably in *Four Quartets*), but because of a far deeper problem. I also want to suggest that Prufrock's deferral of both sex and the overwhelming question—the coyness mentioned earlier—has a more positive significance. It is impossible to say what he means in part because that meaning *must not* be stated. And this takes us back, as everything in this paper seems to do, to sex.

In *Modernism, Memory and Desire: T. S. Eliot and Virginia Woolf*, Gabrielle McIntire notes that in Eliot's early poetry, "male-female relations are distressingly *undesirable*. Yet, although they are usually more disquieting than attractive, verging on gothic rather than enchanting, Eliot diligently returns to female figures in every single poem in the *Prufrock* volume" (90). McIntire suggests that "the female body stands in as a metaphor for memory and history in ways that anticipate this figuration in 'Gerontion,'" and I agree with her, but I want to go in a rather different direction with her observation about the undesirability of desire. If sex and metaphysics are analogous, then coitus or

climax is analogous to the resolution or conclusion of a discussion or argument. If Prufrock fears sexual failure, he also fears intellectual failure (mockery, miscommunication, oversimplification, actual solipsism) and prefers not to try.

And it is here that my second subject, aposiopesis, becomes vitally important as a strategy of pseudo-engagement and real delay. If ellipsis in "Prufrock" is, as I have argued, a form of reticence about things Prufrock takes for granted or is reluctant to discuss, then aposiopesis, the trope of breaking-off, suggests unwillingness or inability to continue in the face of a more immediate threat, that of consecutive thought that might actually lead to a conclusion. If desire is undesirable, as McIntire says, so is thinking, and Prufrock has developed ploys to circumvent it, or at least the kind of discourse that usually represents it. These ploys are all forms of aposiopesis in one way or another in that they break off a potential discussion, and the means employed range from forthright deflection ("Oh, do not ask 'What is it?,'" l. 11) to abrupt changes of topic and scene (from a roomful of women to the yellow fog, from an imagined erotic encounter to thoughts about Hamlet and Polonius) to the displacement of discussion by the many rhetorical but nevertheless real questions in the poem. The technique, "as if a magic lantern threw the nerves in patterns on a screen" (l. 105), famously avoids sequence in favour of collage or bricolage; it also remains faithful to the vagaries of modern consciousness. I do not intend to examine the mechanics of aposiopesis, which are fairly straightforward in all the poem's discontinuities, but to place the trope in the context of Prufrock's coyness and procrastination, and Eliot's early poetry and thought, as concisely as possible, and to suggest why the avoidance of conclusions is desirable not only for Prufrock but for Eliot.²⁰

If we look again at "Gerontion," for example, we find the same conjunction of physical anxieties (this time the result of real rather than anticipated age), sexual obsession, and metaphysical speculation. The central verse paragraph of the poem, as McIntire has shown, is an extended double-entendre on the themes of sexual consummation and

epistemology (see McIntire 44).²¹ In the next verse paragraph, Gerontion confesses to failure in both areas:

The tiger springs in the new year. Us he devours. Think at last
 We have not reached conclusion, when I
 Stiffen in a rented house. Think at last
 I have not made this show purposelessly
 And it is not by any concitation
 Of the backward devils. (ll. 48-53)

The stiffening is finally *rigor mortis*, but in the short term it is both the stiffness of old age and of tumescence, and the failure to conclude either sexually or metaphysically is a source of *relief* for Gerontion. In a “new year” of “juvescence” and restored vitality, “Christ the tiger”—from Blake *via* Henry James’s “Beast in the Jungle”—would make his leap and, like Rilke confronted with the torso of Apollo, Gerontion would have to change his life.²² This is also part of Prufrock’s dilemma. Like the inhabitants of *The Waste Land*, Gerontion would prefer not to alter his present life even as he sees its sterility, but he insists rightly that his talk is not futile, and I want to suggest that the inconclusiveness of both Prufrock and Gerontion is not simply an enactment of ellipsis by means of aposiopesis, but a *positive* agenda of avoidance facilitated by aposiopesis.

Recent studies of Eliot’s philosophical position in the 1910s suggest that he saw all binaries as human constructions, necessarily relational within an ambivalent whole.²³ Any “conclusion,” then, shuts down alternate possibilities that may have merit and partial truth; 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. If neither “Prufrock” nor “Gerontion” shows us that discussion, it is because Eliot dramatizes the situation, not the prosaic details; he famously disliked any poetry of ideas, and dismissed Browning and Tennyson, who “ruminated” on the same great philosophical and religious issues that Eliot’s speakers so pointedly avoid (cf. Eliot, “The Metaphysical Poets” 288). When Eliot praised Henry James’s

mind for being "so fine that no idea could violate it" ("In Memory of Henry James" 2), he meant what he said; he also observed that poetry should not embody a philosophy but replace it (see "The Possibility of a Poetic Drama" 68). This does not mean, of course, that poetry should be free of ideas, but that they must be expressed in image or situation rather than discursively, or at least framed indirectly and tentatively and with due regard to the possibility of error and the subjectivity of the speaker. (This leads to what some see, wrongly, as elephantine discriminations in *Four Quartets*.) If "Prufrock" is a poem of fragments and of erotic embarrassment, a poem of longing for escape from sexual and cosmic loneliness, it is also a poem haunted by the fear of conclusion, and this is perhaps the true significance of Prufrock's scenarios of being pinned, beheaded, or drowned. The alternative is to hold in suspension various possibilities, just as Prufrock contains within himself both genders, and the strategy of aposiopesis is vital in accomplishing this end.

As with the opening simile and the pairing of sex and metaphysics, we have another dyad which is held together only by Prufrock's consciousness. Prufrock wants both to address *and* to avoid answering the overwhelming question, and this results in paralysis. Eliot's early poetry is obviously not optimistic, but it is bracing in its clear-sightedness, and it is positive in that it keeps hope alive; if nothing is certain or concluded, nothing can be ruled out, including God and meaning. The way out of the intellectual impasse of inconclusiveness was Eliot's subject after *The Waste Land*; it involved, among other things, a recognition of the futility of thought and, depending on your point of view, self-surrender and humility or (to the cynical) giving up. It is, in any case, beyond the scope of this paper.

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In "Prufrock," then, what I have called the Grand Ellipsis—Prufrock's inability or refusal to articulate the overwhelming question—is adumbrated in the smaller ellipses of the poem that omit connections between the tenor and vehicle of a simile or metaphor, between the large subjects of discussion (sex and metaphysics), and between in-

compatible 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. The missing connectors in each case are Prufrock's mind and personality, in which disparate and often contrary elements co-exist as they do in the work of the Metaphysical poets Eliot admired. Instead of connections, we have elision and complexity within Prufrock himself: his gender identity embraces opposites, and possibly incompatible ideas co-exist in the space before conclusion because he is unwilling to sacrifice any of them quite yet.

Despite his preoccupation with sex, Prufrock manages to avoid coitus not only because he doesn't get the girl, but also because *all* forms of coming-together are deliberately and in one sense fortunately and creatively absent from all the elements of the poem that I have been discussing. This frustration of coitus (I would like to call it *interruptus*, but in fact it never begins) is facilitated by Prufrock's and Eliot's use of ellipsis and aposiopesis, omission and abrupt change of topic, which draws attention not only to the gaps in Prufrock's monologue but to the breakdown of the *sensus communis*, of systems, and of coherent consciousness itself in the modern world: "On Margate Sands. / I can connect / Nothing with nothing."

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NOTES

¹See, e.g., "Mr. Apollinax," "Hysteria," and "Portrait of a Lady."

²Eliot, *Complete Poems and Plays 1909-1950* 7. All further references to "Prufrock" and other Eliot poems are to this edition and will be given simply as line references.

³For examples, see Grant.

⁴Prufrock's statement that "I have heard the mermaids singing, each to each" (l. 124) may well refer to a passage in R. L. Stevenson's essay "Crabbed Age and Youth" (1877): "We sail in leaky bottoms and on great and perilous waters; and to take a cue from the dolorous old naval ballad, we have heard the mermaidens singing, and know that we shall never see dry land any more. Old and young, we are all on our last cruise" (56). Prufrock is certainly concerned (probably prematurely) with the coming of age; his reference to the mermaids also acts as an effective final image of his fear of "fatal" women.

⁵Neither Grover Smith nor Martin Scofield, for example, attempt to define it.

⁶One is quoted ("What is it?" [l. 11]) and two take up a verse paragraph each, beginning in each case with "And would it have been worth it, after all" (ll. 87, 99) and concluding without a question mark. Many of the questions are addressed by Prufrock to himself and deal with his timidity: "Do I dare?" (l. 38, twice), "Do I dare / Disturb the universe?" (ll. 45-46), "And how should I presume?" (l. 61), "Shall I say, I have gone at dusk through narrow streets (l. 70).

⁷The linking of sex and metaphysics has a long history, and Eliot was well aware of the sexualized language of Christian mystics, Bernini's extraordinary depiction of St. Teresa, and Donne's fantasy of violence and rape at the hands of his "three-person'd God. "

⁸Stanley Spencer (1891-1959) was Eliot's contemporary, and his great themes—religion and human sexuality—mirror those of Eliot's early poetry.

⁹The "eternal Footman" may have been suggested by John Bunyan's *The Heavenly Footman*, particularly since the metaphysical theme is explicit in Bunyan's text: "They that will have heaven, must run for it" (6). Bunyan also emphasizes the need for immediate action, which Prufrock resists, most obviously in his distortion of Marvell's "To His Coy Mistress," discussed later. But Bunyan's footman is a runner, and Eliot's is obviously a servant, perhaps an angelic one in the courts of Heaven, but still capable, Prufrock imagines, of a sneer.

¹⁰See Shakespeare, *Hamlet* 3.1.79-80.

¹¹See, e.g., Scofield 60.

¹²See Eliot, "Hamlet" 145.

¹³Christopher Ricks notes "the suggestive contrariety between splitting the name [...] at *pru* and *frock*, as against splitting it as *proof* and *rock*" (2). Ricks's discussion of the resonances of words and lines in "Prufrock" and the expectations they create is always alert to the prejudices created by sex and gender; see esp. 12-20.

¹⁴I have discussed this more fully in two articles, listed below.

¹⁵Eliot's footnote to these lines cites a passage from F. H. Bradley's *Appearance and Reality*: "My external sensations are no less private to myself than are my thoughts or my feelings. In either case my experience falls within my own circle, a circle closed on the outside; and, with all its elements alike, every sphere is opaque to the others which surround it. [...] In brief, regarded as an existence which appears in a soul, the whole world for each is peculiar and private to that soul" (Bradley 306). Critics' frequent use of this as a gloss is understandable, but Eliot's relationship to Bradley is complicated, as Childs among others has shown, and it is important to remember that Eliot disliked intensely interpretations of poetry that translated it into philosophy; see "In Memory of Henry James" 2. My own discussion of solipsism may err in the same philosophical direction, but I am trying to analyze the issue in poetic rather than philosophical terms.

¹⁶The classic account of solipsistic fear in literature is that of A. D. Nuttall, listed below.

¹⁷While solipsism is not fatal, its consequences—radical intellectual as well as personal isolation—represent the extreme of the loneliness Prufrock already feels, and thus constitute a kind of death. In this regard, the epigraph from Dante's *Inferno* is important here. Guido da Montefeltro will speak only because he is certain that Dante is damned too, and thus cannot return to tell Montefeltro's story to the world. The narrative is enclosed, Montefeltro thinks—though we are in fact reading it; similarly, we overhear what may only be Prufrock's internal and self-referential monologue.

¹⁸See, e.g., Davidson Brooker and Bentley provide a subtler and more detailed analysis which generally avoids technical vocabularies.

¹⁹See also Kearns, "Negative Theology and Literary Discourse in *Four Quartets*."

²⁰I am deeply indebted to Jeffrey Perl's work on Eliot and skepticism; what follows is not an attempt to reprise his arguments but to place his conclusions in the context of my own argument about ellipsis and aposiopesis in "Prufrock."

²¹McIntire focuses on Eliot's use of the female body, and argues her case persuasively; I see no conflict between this and my belief that Gerontion and Prufrock see their own bodies as metonymical images of linguistic inadequacy, particularly as both are implicitly feminized.

²²"You must change your life." ["Du mußt dein Leben ändern," l. 14]

²³On Eliot's complex relation to Bradley, see Riquelme and Childs *inter alia*.

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