

The Overwhelming Question:
Refiguring Poetic Failure as Catalyzed Reading in
“The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock”

Andrew Bostick
Senior Thesis
Department of English
Haverford College
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Interpretation today is beginning to discover its own history—not only the limitations of its respective norms but also those factors that could not come to light as long as traditional norms held sway. The most important of these factors is without doubt the reader himself, the addressee of the text. So long as the focal point of interest was the author's intention, or the contemporary, psychological, social, or historical meaning of the text...it scarcely seemed to occur to critics that the text could only have a meaning when it was read.

Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response*, 1978, page 20.

From its very outset, T. S. Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" concerns itself with the question of readership. The poem, which commences with the phrase "Let us go, then, you and I" (Eliot, "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,"¹ 1), immediately engages the reader by envisioning him or her as an integral part of the poem. In a remarkably direct fashion, the inclusive "us" works alongside the literal naming of the poet ("I") and the reader ("you") to capture the reader's attention and draw him into the text. The fact that the line "Let us go" is thrice-repeated in the initial twelve lines of the poem serves to emphasize the reader's presence, positioning him as the central concern of the poem. Critically, the problem of the reader emerges from the insistent presence of the "overwhelming question" that demands the poem's meaning (Eliot, "P," 10). The movement of the poem, that reiterated action word "go," drives the speaker and his companion towards a response to the overwhelming question, towards an understanding of how exactly a poem and a reader are to interact.

Most literary critics have read Prufrock's interaction with his reader as a powerfully depressing and somber meditation on the poet's inability to say anything at all in the modern world. Focusing primarily on the finale—in which Prufrock abdicates the Prince Hamlet role ("No! I am not Prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be...") and the poem's pair perishes in the sea ("Till human voices wake us, and we drown")—the body of Eliot criticism finds a potent sense of isolation and failure in the poem (Eliot, "P," 111; 131). Interpreters from Allan to Unger assert

¹ Hereafter abbreviated as "P."

that the abdication marks the poetic failure of Prufrock, the moment in which he lacks the courage to act by answering the overwhelming question. Similarly, the moment of “drowning” seals that failure, locking the reader and Prufrock in a deathly stasis that no meaning can ever penetrate. Felix Dzwonkoski aptly captures the generally fatalistic sentiment of Prufrock critics when he states: “the development of Eliot’s poetry from ‘The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock’ to the Four Quartets may be seen as a struggle of the will against time. In the early poems, the will is dead, and time is all and all” (Dzwonkoski, 10). In failing to act upon the overwhelming question, Prufrock, in the eyes of Eliot’s former critical readers, exhibits a palpable dearth of “will,” preferring death to a response.

Despite the critical consensus that Prufrock fails, two central elements of Eliot’s poem—namely, Prufrock’s manipulation of temporality and intertextuality—provide the grounds for a reading that challenges the corpus of Eliot criticism. Prufrock’s monologue obsesses over the function of time and its effect on what he desires to say. Reiterating the line “There will be time, there will be time,” Prufrock grapples with time’s contradictory roles: that of creator and effacer of one’s words (Eliot, “P,” 26). His lament, “In a minute there is time, / For decisions and revisions which a minute will reverse,” indicates how Prufrock struggles to say something meaningful in the face of such a ceaseless revisionary process (Eliot, “P,” 47-48). Integrally related to temporality is intertextuality, a poet’s connections to the literary tradition. Eliot’s poem finds itself simultaneously unnerved by the work of countless former writers (“I have known them all already, known them all”) and continually alluding to such texts (Eliot, “P,” 49). The poem presents a stunning array of quotations and allusions to diverse figures from the Christian Gospel’s John the Baptist to Shakespeare’s Prince Hamlet. Both temporality and intertextuality, however, function in a more complicated sense than is at first apparent. Though the body of Eliot

criticism asserts that the poem's temporality violently strips Prufrock of the ability to answer the overwhelming question and that the poem's intertextuality marks its inferiority vis-à-vis the literary tradition, the theme of time and the related strategy of allusion each contain recuperative elements that allow us to reconsider Prufrock's abdication. Prufrock insists on existing in multiple temporal moments and spaces, which can be read as a transcendence of time that implicates the reader in the process of responding to the overwhelming question. In the drive towards that response, the poem's allusions draw on the reader's interpretations to yield potential responses to the question. Time and allusion, then, situate the reader at the heart of the poem's effort to produce meaning, ultimately serving as the foundation on which Prufrock builds his own theory of poetic meaning.

Thus, a decidedly radical re-reading of Prufrock's exploration of time, intertextuality, and readership can offer a powerfully generative understanding of a poem as a catalyst of poetic meaning for the reader, which is exactly what this project asserts. The present argument unfolds in four parts. Section I introduces the great problematic of Eliot's work, "(How) can a poem mean?" By focusing on the presence of metonymized women who continually pose the "overwhelming question" and on the ambiguity of the abdication (is it a liberation or a failure?), the section argues that a potential resolution of the poem's crisis of meaning exists in the moment of Prufrock's abdication. Section II analyzes the speaker's manipulation of temporality and his ability to transcend time in an effort to flee the overwhelming question. This transcendence begins to reposition the problematic of poetic meaning as a problematic of reading in that it implicates the reader in the process of responding to the overwhelming question. Section III translates the discussion of temporality into the time of intertextuality, arguing that Prufrock overcomes the tradition through the use of subversive allusion. Whereas the poem's

temporality positions the reader as central to the poem's pursuit of meaning, its use of allusion reveals how the reader participates in the process by situating textual references as catalytic sites of readerly interpretation. Finally, Section IV locates the poem's resolution of its crisis of meaning in a generative drowning and a discussion of reader-response theory, which reimagines the role a poet plays by figuring it as an "attendant lord" (Eliot, "P," 112). Building on the progress the poem's manipulation of temporality and intertextual makes towards resolving its crisis of meaning, the final section establishes how the poem performs a cogent theory of poetic meaning that revolves around the reader. Thus, in a radical sense, a close re-reading of Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" demonstrates that Prufrock envisions the poet as a catalytic "attendant lord"—as he who drives the reader towards a response to the overwhelming question without requiring an (impossible) formulation of his own.

What is truly remarkable about Eliot's poem, then, is its ability to anticipate, in a poetic form, one of the central questions of literary criticism of the twentieth century. Eliot foresaw the literary debate to which Iser alludes in his canonical reader-response text *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* in 1978. In speaking of literary criticism's "history" and the vast spectrum of theories that explore "the author's intention, or the contemporary, psychological, social, or historical meaning of a text," Iser references the fearsome debate that raged over the course of twentieth century and gave rise to literary movements from New Criticism to Deconstructionism—all of which revolve around their own conceptions of "proper" readership. That very concept, however, was the focus of Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" fully sixty nine years earlier, when he wrote the poem in 1909 and revisited it in 1911. Employing verse, Eliot's poem engages the reader in a reflection on his relation to poetry itself. By refiguring the poet as the "attendant lord" who energizes the reader's pursuit of many

potential answers to the overwhelming question, “Prufrock” anticipates reader-response theory by performing its own readerly theory of poetic meaning.

Section I – The Problematic of Prufrock’s Abdication

Writing about the role played by the English poetic tradition in T. S. Eliot’s development as a poet, Stanley Sultan argues that the “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” achieved “special canonical status” much earlier than 1959 when the poem was famously labeled “The best known English poem since the *Rubaiyat*” (Sultan, 41). From the moment it was first circulated, the poem was hailed as innovative, challenging, perhaps even the harbinger of a new poetic movement. Yet, what is it exactly that makes the poem so excitingly novel? Why, if the poem is as depressing as its critics claim, does the reader emerge from an engagement with the text energized? Why do we continually return to it, giving it special “canonical status”? The answer lies in the poem’s self-reflexive nature. As a poem that meditates on the function of poetry and its relation to the reader, Eliot’s “Prufrock” confronts perhaps the central concern of poetics: (how) can a poem mean? Specifically, the challenge emerges from the poem’s epigraph to Dante’s The Inferno, its evasive poetic strategies of digression and counter-question, and, critically, the moment of Prufrock’s abdication of the Prince Hamlet role. Ultimately, the ambiguous nature of the abdication—in other words, is it a liberation or a failure?—gives rise to the poem’s great problematic in that it challenges one to decide whether or not the moment contains any sense of recuperative value.

The poem’s question-and-response framework arises in the epigraph from Dante’s The Inferno. The excerpt captures Dante’s dialogue with Guido da Montrefeltro in the eighth circle of

Hell, wherein Guido decides to respond because he no longer fears shameful repercussions.² The speech unfolds as a reply to Dante's question; Montrefeltro himself describes his words as a "response" and concludes by stating that he will "answer." Beyond the question-response framework it evokes, the truly striking aspect of the epigraph is its rhetoric of "shame." Tightly related to the speaker's fear of repercussions from the world, Montrefeltro's concluding statement, "I answer without fear of being shamed," emphasizes that the act of speaking has the potential to lead to criticism by another voice. "Shame" implies a betrayal of one's own convictions, a breaking of one's bond with another, and exile from society's acceptance. Only through the conditional belief that both figures are forever trapped in Hell's confines does Montrefeltro overcome such shame.

Much like the opposition between the questioner (Dante) and the respondent (Montrefeltro) that arises in the epigraph, "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" conceptualizes its speaker as a figure confronted by the presence and demands of an outside force, namely the other individuals in the poem. Such an outside figure emerges in the very first line of the poem, "Let us go, then, you and I," where the speaker draws the reader into the poem as an audience for his monologue (Eliot, "P," 1). Curiously, the reader functions both as an audience and as the figure that poses the question Prufrock resists. Imagining a transformation of city streets into pestering yet oppressive lines of questioning ("Streets that follow like a tedious argument / Of insidious intent / to lead you to an overwhelming question..."), Prufrock demands that we quell

² The text to which I am referring comes from the Hollander translation of *The Inferno*. The quotation was retrieved online from the Princeton Dante Project. The verbatim translation is as follows:

"If I but thought that my response were made
to one perhaps returning to the world,
this tongue of flame would cease to flicker.
But since, up from these depths, no one has yet
returned alive, if what I hear is true,
I answer without fear of being shamed."

our query: "Oh, do not ask, 'What is it?'" (Eliot, "P," 8-11). Instead, the speaker requires that the reader function as an audience. The concluding line of the first stanza, "Let us go and make our visit," positions the reader as one who must remain in tow as the speaker engages with the other figures in the poem. Here, the reader's role is elemental to the project of the poem. Having effectively silenced the reader's ability to pose the overwhelming question, the speaker demands that we accompany him as witnesses to his engagement with that question. It is our presence that continually reminds the speaker of the poem's self-reflexive nature, of his engagement with the question of how poetry functions and how it might attain meaning.

Beyond the reader, whose questions have been silenced, the shattered bodies of the poem continually pose the overwhelming question; it is their query that plagues Prufrock, demanding an explanation of his poem's meaning. Prufrock's simultaneous resistance to the question and need to answer it arise in the word "overwhelming," connoting a force that "overturns" through "strength of numbers [or] influence."³ The poem's fragmented bodies represent such a force. The first appearance of another figure occurs in the twice-uttered refrain "In the room the women come and go / Talking of Michelangelo" (Eliot, "P," 13-14; 35-36). A veritable dearth of information exists concerning "the women." Names, location, reason for the rhythmic entrance and exit of their visit, and explanation of their interest in Michelangelo are all decidedly absent from the poem. In addition to these anonymous women, the other figures of the poem devolve into metonymized presences. The speaker alludes to the preparation of "a *face* to meet the faces that you meet" (Eliot, "P," 27). Those same individuals possess "*hands* / That lift and drop a question on your plate" (Eliot, "P," 30). In another stanza, body gives way to voice (albeit a frail one) when Prufrock evokes "*voices* dying with a dying fall" (Eliot, "P," 52). More violent are the

³ "overwhelming, adj." OED Online. March 2012. Oxford University Press. 20 March 2012
<<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/135367?rskey=mkzZXb&result=2&isAdvanced=false>>.

“eyes that fix you in formulated phrase” (Eliot, “P,” 56). Perhaps most elusive, however, are the many metonymies of women’s bodies: the “*arms* that are braceleted and white and bare / [But in the lamplight, downed with light brown *hair*],” the “*arms* that lie along a table,” she who “sett[es] a pillow by her *head*,” and the “*skirts* that trail along the floor” (Eliot, “P,” 63-64; 67; 96; 102). As metonymies, these “arms,” “head[s],” and “skirts” function as the placeholder for the whole bodies of the women and, crucially, for the body of critics who pose the devastating question. Like the presence of Dante in the epigraph that evokes a response from da Montrefeltro, the “eyes,” “arms,” and “voices” that weave their way into Prufrock’s monologue represent all the individuals who demand an explanation of the poem’s meaning. Thus, the metonymic nature of the bodies exemplifies the incessant pressure placed upon the speaker by the overwhelming question of his poem’s meaning. By virtue of being fragments of both the whole bodies of the women and the host of critics who pose the question, the metonymies inject the external voices into every aspect of the poem’s quotidian existence. Each “face” met in the street, every “hand” that serves a plate, and all pairs of “eyes” one perceives reiterate the question, which highlights the ever-present nature of the tension placed upon Prufrock by the others. Thus, like his need to engage with the overwhelming question through euphemistic language (i.e., “the overwhelming question” instead of the actual question), Prufrock can only engage the overwhelming body of critics by imagining them as metonymies, as fragments that represent the whole.

Where the parallel between the epigraph and the poem dissolves, however, is in each individual’s ability to reply; though Montrefeltro avoids the shame of revealing his secret because he and Dante are ostensibly confined in Hell, Prufrock weighs the challenge of answering the question. The speaker imagines the tension between his own desires and those of the others as the difference between “the universe” and “a ball:” “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 toward some overwhelming question” (Eliot, “P,” 90-94). The query juxtaposes the unbearable question posed by the others, the “prepar[ed]” face onto which Prufrock pastes a smile, and the universe/ball opposition. On the one hand, Prufrock envisions his thoughts as the “universe”—infinitely expansive, all-encompassing, and far too complex to fully comprehend. On the other hand, he presents the “ball”—a laughably petit and trifling object whose elements are fully contained. Through this opposition, Prufrock portrays the difficulty of answering the question the others pose. Spatially, the challenge of fitting an expansive universe into a contained ball captures the difficulty (perhaps the impossibility) of conveying his response. This tension is what Mowbray Allan calls Eliot’s “fundamental proposition.” Citing a quotation of Eliot’s from *Knowledge and Experience*—“My mind...I must treat as...absolute, in that it is a point of view from which I cannot possibly escape (to which indeed I am bound so closely that the word escape is without meaning)” —Allan argues that the central tension in all of Eliot’s work is the “impenetrability” of another’s mind (Allan, 62; 65). Like the impossibility of reducing a universe into a ball, capturing one’s thoughts and conveying them accurately to another can never occur.

Prufrock’s resistance to the intense pressure of the others emerges through two distinct but intertwined poetic strategies: digression and counter-question. Most straightforward is the poem’s digressive nature—what might be called a presentation of poetic ephemera. On an almost rhythmic basis, the speaker injects tantalizingly rich imagery that does not necessarily serve to advance the “plot” (if such a word can be used) of the poem. The third stanza of the poem marks one such moment. Contemplating a fog that pervades the city’s streets, Prufrock metamorphoses “yellow fog” into an animated creature. The fog’s movement translates into the action words associated with the animal: the “rub[bing]” of its muzzle on the town’s windows, the “lick[ing]”

of its tongue, the “linger[ing]” on the street, the “sudden leap,” and the “curl[ing]” about the house (Eliot, “P,” 15-22). Beyond the stanza’s diction, the enjambment of every line couples with the end-rhymes of “pane” and “drain,” “leap” and “asleep” to swell the stanza forward (Eliot, “P,” 15-16; 18; 20; 22). Numerous other examples of the poem’s “butt-ends” emerge throughout the poem, ranging from the speaker’s fascination with his own aging body to the tantalizing aroma of a young women’s body (Eliot, “P,” 60). Regardless of the moment, however, the effect is similar. Instead of serving to drive the speaker towards that persistent “overwhelming question,” these moments distract both the reader and the others of the poem with the lines’ rich poetic beauty. They are an attempt to shirk the necessity of answering the question by spouting forth seemingly unimportant lines. Thus, these moments serve as tangential elements that exist on the periphery of poetic narrative; they may entertain but in no way move the speaker and his reader towards a response to the overwhelming question.

Alongside the strategy of digression, counter-question emerges as the second strategy of Prufrockian evasion. In the poem’s fifteen stanzas that precede the critical volta in stanza sixteen (“No! I am not Prince Hamlet”), Prufrock poses eleven questions, all of which highlight the difficulty he faces in conveying a response. Fundamentally, the queries revolve around the feasibility and repercussions of attempting to convey to another the answer to the overwhelming question. His questions of “Do I dare / Disturb the universe?” and “how should I presume?” imply that a great effort and cost exist in replying (Eliot, “P,” 45-46; 61). On the one hand, the image of “disturb[ing]” the universe conveys the idea that nothing less than cosmic concord might be upset by answering the question. The repercussion is the de-stabilization of Prufrock’s mental universe. On the other hand, the word “presume” (to do without adequate permission) implies that Prufrock might not have the authority to convey his thoughts. Even if he had

permission or the cost was not too great, two other questions ask if Prufrock has the power or skill to respond. “Should I, after tea and cakes and ices, / Have the strength to force the moment to its crisis?” calls into question Prufrock’s ability, in the sense that he may not have the resolve (“strength”) to reply (Eliot, “P,” 80). “Crisis” also offers further evidence that a response would indeed be a painful experience. Finally, the query “And how should I begin?” highlights the most basic lack Prufrock exhibits: direction. Provided with the authority, the means, and the resolve, he might not even know where to begin when articulating a response. The effect, then, of Prufrock’s counter-question strategy is two-fold. Most simply, the questions emphasize the difficulty Prufrock faces in responding to the overwhelming question. They highlight all the missing elements that Prufrock would need in order to respond. Additionally, the questions serve as another form of diversion. In place of a concrete response, the others of the poem are presented with a myriad of questions that, in turn, generate more queries rather than the response they so ardently seek.

Despite Prufrock’s employment of evasive poetic strategies, the great problematic of the poem ultimately emerges from his stalwart declaration “No! I am not Prince Hamlet...” (Eliot, “P,” 111). In direct opposition to the digressive poem that unfolds in the first fifteen stanzas, the volta of stanza sixteen marks a change in both sentence structure and philosophy. Grammatically, the interrogative gives way to the declarative. Questioning sentences like “Do I dare disturb the universe?” fall prey to the powerful, cogent declaration “No! I am not Prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be.” The grammatical shift, however, marks a more important glissement in Prufrock’s philosophy. Whereas the speaker was once plagued by the oppressive need to respond to the “overwhelming question” posed by the poem’s others, Prufrock’s decision to place himself in opposition to Prince Hamlet absolves him of that responsibility. Eliot’s own interpretation of

Hamlet reveals how Prufrock differs from the dramatic figure: "Hamlet (the man) is dominated by an emotion which is inexpressible, because it is in excess of the facts as they appear" (Eliot, "Hamlet and His Problems," 48). Stricken with the guilt of his mother's infidelity and overwhelmed by his failure to assuage that emotion, Prince Hamlet confronts his own overwhelming existential question yet is unable to resolve it. Though Prufrock also struggles with the inability to *express* a response to the overwhelming question, his abdication indicates that responding is not his role. Essentially, Prufrock's declaration implies two critical conclusions: that he cannot answer the overwhelming question (in his case, the meaning of his poem) and that the task was never his. Instead, Prufrock defines his role as a supportive one. Casting himself as an "attendant lord," as one who "advises the prince," Prufrock relegates himself to an auxiliary, supportive role (Eliot, "P," 112; 114).

Prufrock's opposition to the Hamletian role gives rise to the great problematic of the poem: (how) can a poem mean? In other words, in relegating himself to the level of "attendant lord," does Prufrock utterly fail as a poet (thereby sapping the poem of any meaning beyond meaning's failure), or does some form of recuperative value lie in the act? The poem's critical reception asserts the former. Evoking Eliot's own critical essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent," Sultan exemplifies this normative interpretation in asserting that Prufrock's abdication epitomizes the poem's "melancholy of inadequacy." He draws upon Eliot's own assertion that innovation is merely the "development" of the tradition to argue that Prufrock's sense of "inadequacy" stems from the Romantic thematic of a "failed aspiration" (Sultan, 44). Though the poem strives to generate some sort of meaning, such an aspiration is doomed. Furthermore, failure is echoed in Kathleen Sherflick's innovative reading of the prophetic allusions in which she reads "I am no Prophet" as an allusion to Amos, a minor prophet of humble origins. She

asserts that Prufrock “has no excuse for his inaction when he compares himself to Amos... he has to accept the humiliation of his *failed courage*” (Sherflick, 43, my italics). Prufrock’s abdication implies not only a failure of epic proportions but a total lack of “courage” to do what could feasibly be done. Sultan and Sherflick, then, demonstrate the way in which Prufrock’s abdication is commonly read: as a moment of weakness and cowardice wherein the poem fails to generate any meaning.

And yet, Prufrock’s abdication is not without the potential for recuperative value. The moment of his transition from prophet to attendant lord does not necessarily connote an utter artistic failure of the sort Eliot imagined when he wrote “Hamlet and His Problems.” As Allan discusses in his examination of Eliot’s critical work, one might argue that, while Eliot’s critical writing is “Romantic” in the sense that it expresses one’s inescapable subjectivity, his poetic work “*is an effort to escape from that [critical] theory*” (Allan, 173). In other words, although Eliot’s work as a literary critic explores the limitations of human subjectivity—the challenge of conveying one’s innermost thoughts to another—his poetic work nonetheless strives to overcome the barriers of subjectivity. In this sense, one might read Prufrock’s abdication as an effort to overcome the limits of his subjectivity, to resolve the challenge of compressing the universe into a ball, to generate some sort of meaning. Given that such a reading so powerfully opposes the work of critics who perceive the declaration “No! I am not Prince Hamlet” as a failure, a true tension arises in the ambiguity of the poem’s conclusion.

How then might one negotiate a resolution to the challenging question of the abdication evoked in the poem? A closer examination of the poem’s manipulation of time and intertextuality gives rise to a better understanding of Prufrock’s problematic and the powerful performance of poetic meaning that emerges from its tension.

Section II – Prufrock’s Transcendence of Time

While the great problematic of Eliot’s “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” arises from the ambiguity of Prufrock’s abdication, the complications of time drive Prufrock towards a resolution. Temporality is central to the digressive mode, wherein the poem wanders from topic to topic, and it flows through many of the counter-questions Prufrock raises in response to the incessant pressure of the overwhelming question. Indeed, time functions as the complex and confounding presence in Prufrock’s existence that leads him to the moment of abdication; it is the obstacle that prevents him from replying. Unsurprisingly, time as the root of Prufrock’s poetic failure is a topic that arises frequently in the critical field. From Gish to Dzwonkowski, the poem’s readers have typically located Prufrock’s failure in his inability to confront the ravaging presence of time. Temporality, however, need not lead to such a depressing outcome. When read radically as an attempt to transcend the bounds of time, the elements of temporality in Eliot’s poem create a generative space for readership, implicating the reader in the process of resolving the overwhelming question. Specifically, Prufrock envisions time as both chronological and spatial in an effort to escape the relentless posing of the question. By existing in multiple moments and spaces, Prufrock’s poem positions itself as transcending time to generate the space for re-reading and multiple answers to the overwhelming question. Thus, the act of overcoming the bounds of temporality (for Prufrock and the reader) emerges as the first recuperative element in Prufrock’s poem that begins to resolve the poem’s crisis of meaning.

The poem’s exploration of temporality first arises out of the wording of Prufrock’s powerful counter-question: “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 toward some overwhelming

question” (Eliot, “P,” 90-93). Whereas the universe/ball opposition serves to illustrate the challenge of answering the question, the words “worth while” reveal the economic implications of the act. The presence of the space between the two words, the gap that effectively severs “worthwhile” into its component parts, emphasizes that time must be intertwined with value in the face of the question’s “overwhelming” demand. As “while” refers to a measure of time, the question and challenge of temporality injects itself into the problematic of the overwhelming question as precisely the question of time’s value. Not only does the difficulty of compressing the universe into a ball inhibit the answering of the question; time thwarts the speaker’s response. The question of time’s worth ultimately implies that answering the question functions in a similar fashion to an open economy. Whereas a closed economy of poetic meaning implies a fixed, pre-determined meaning that the speaker can readily recite, the open economy of Prufrock’s monologue reveals that answering the question requires a hefty input or cost. In other words, the speaker’s reluctance to respond to the overwhelming question stems from both the challenge and personal cost of doing so. Yet, how exactly does time unfold in the poem?

Prufrock’s temporality emerges from the speaker’s incantatory refrain “There will be time,” which suggests that time simultaneously and paradoxically provides both the space for revision and the quality of effacement that undercuts effective communication. The poem’s melodic repetition of the phrase “There will be time, there will be time” both declares and mimes the persistent flow of time (Eliot, “P,” 23; 26; 28; 37). The future tense of “There will be” highlights how the continual passing of time allows for the ceaseless revisionary process that the poem imagines: the “hundred visions and revisions” that can occur in the space of a moment (Eliot, “P,” 33). Yet the word “There” also suggests a geography of time. Not only does time continually drive forward, giving one the opportunity to revise, but time’s “there,” a point

towards which one moves, suggests how time opens up supplementary space for thought. The geographic point “there” represents the space towards which the ever-expanding universe of Prufrock’s mind flows (as opposed to the contradiction of the “ball,” which forces *the* response to the overwhelming question). In addition to creating the moment and space for revision, however, time serves as a destructive presence. Arguing that “In a minute there is time / For decisions and revisions which a minute will reverse,” Prufrock reveals the erosive quality of time (Eliot, “P,” 48). The continual chronological movement forward and the geographic movement towards “There” abandon and annul—even as they make possible—the “hundred visions and revisions” the former moment created. It is with this troubling characteristic of time in mind that Prufrock rhymes “visions and revisions” with “indecisions” (Eliot, “P,” 32). Faced with the capacity of time to generate the moment and space for proliferate revisions, Prufrock descends into indecisions because of the impossibility of *maintaining* a position. Time makes possible and erases all in a moment’s passing.

Critics who have explored temporality in “Prufrock” most frequently discuss the poem’s invocation of these two types of time as a form of resistance to the theories of temporality that Henri Bergson developed in his treatise Time and Free Will. Grounding his discussion of time in the differing “psychic states” of the human mind, Bergson presents a double vision of time: fallacious time perceived as a “discrete” series of moments and actual time as a “homogenous” continuum. Though time is generally seen as a series of distinct moments, Bergson argues that such an approach to temporality is inherently flawed because one’s psychic states never separate from one another. Instead, a more accurate conception of time exists in the “pure duration... the form which the succession of our conscious states assumes when our ego lets itself live” (Bergson, 100). Nancy Gish applies Bergson’s discussion of temporality to Eliot’s poem.

Resisting Bergson's condemnation of time as a "discrete" series of moments, Prufrock, in Gish's reading, envisions time as both chronological (akin to Bergson's "pure duration") and geographical (Bergson's "discrete" moments). As Gish cogently states, "Prufrock, like the other characters in the 1917 poems, is confined and isolated by time" (Gish, 10). Caught between time's dual nature as creator and effacer of the potential for revision, Prufrock laments his stasis and fails to break free of time's bounds.

The dual nature of Prufrock's temporality plays a powerful role in the moment of his abdication in that it serves as the primary obstacle to a response to the overwhelming question. Faced with the infinitely expansive geography and chronology of time as well as its quality of effacement, Prufrock cannot even begin to answer the overwhelming question. Time provides too great an opportunity for revision and too eroding a presence to state and maintain a response. In short, time's ravaging presence actively prevents Prufrock from replying. With time serving as both a creator and destroyer of one's meaning, Prufrock's stalwart refusal to answer the overwhelming question concretizes his inability to counter the effects of temporalized intention but also carves out the potential for his theory of poetic meaning. The contrast of the two figures in the abdication reveals how Prufrock succeeds where Hamlet fails. To use Eliot's own vocabulary, Hamlet's failure arises from the play's lack of an "objective correlative" (Eliot, "Hamlet and His Problems," 48). Without a series of events or moments potent enough to capture Hamlet's anguish, the play becomes an "artistic failure" in the sense that it cannot resolve the problems it poses. Prufrock, however, succeeds in resolving the tensions implicit in his poem. In placing himself in opposition to Prince Hamlet, Prufrock relegates himself to the role of "attendant lord," to the position of one who serves another. He guides the other's progress and starts the scene in their mind without having to dictate the conclusion of the act.

Time's integral role in the moment of abdication re-invokes the great problematic of the poem, providing a generative area of discussion that many critics have visited in the past. When studying the temporality of Eliot's early poems, the great majority of Eliot critics argue that temporality contributes to the belief that Prufrock's abdication marks his poetic failure. Focusing primarily on the liberating role irony plays in Eliot's poem, Isaiah Smithson declares that "Because humans are temporal, each is limited to a particular past and a particular future; this singular time—identity—is often felt as a trap" (Smithson, 41). Though he finds that irony serves to diminish the implications of failure Prufrock feels in choosing not to respond, temporality functions as a "trap" that challenges Prufrock's ability to speak. David Hirsch comes to a similar conclusion through an innovative reading of the phrase "There will be time to murder and create [time]" (Eliot, "P," 28). In inserting "time" into the phrase as the object, Hirsch theorizes that Eliot's poetry—specifically, his later work like "The Waste Land" and "The Four Quartets"—has the potential to transcend time by "acting upon it, rather than merely existing in it." Prufrock, however, experiences no such transcendence; he functions solely as "the victim of time, never the victor over it" (Hirsch, 610-611). Ultimately, Dzwonkowski most succinctly captures the belief that Prufrock's engagement with time hastens his poetic failure: "For J. Alfred Prufrock and the other characters and voices in the early poems, life may be seen as a constant, only partly conscious struggle with time, a struggle hopelessly one-sided and predictably disastrous to man" (Dzwonkowski, 12). Thus, vis-à-vis the great problematic of the poem, the consensus of Eliot critics appears to be that Prufrock's poem cannot actually mean anything. Time functions as both Prufrock's obsession and the force that plagues him throughout the poem. It drives him towards an abdication devoid of any recuperative value—one that marks his total failure as a poet.

And yet, could the consensus be missing a critical aspect of Prufrock's abdication? Is it possible that the transcendence Hirsch locates in Eliot's later poems emerges in Prufrock's verse? The answer represents the first key to unlocking a type of recuperative value in Eliot's poem. In short, Prufrock's very ability to transcend time by existing in many moments and places gives rise to a reading in which Prufrock's abdication represents much more than an artistic failure.

Ultimately, Prufrock's own objective correlative and his very theory of meaning arise out of a critical quality of the poem, its timelessness. Prufrock's monologue commences with movement; he commands the reader to share his "progress" through the city streets: "Let us go, then, you and I." Yet the movement the poem exhibits, like most elements in Prufrock's speech act, fundamentally relates to time. Considering the spatial and chronological forms Prufrockian time takes, one can see that the movement of the poem, the insistence of "Let us go," marks a movement through time. It is through this movement that the poem performs its timelessness, its ability to exist in many different moments and spaces. In a chronological sense, the poem enacts a number of moments. The present exists in the incessant "com[ing] and go[ing]" of the women "talking of Michelangelo" (Eliot, "P," 13-14). The past echoes out of the refrain "I have known them all already, known them all" alongside the explosion of "coffee spoons" and the "butt-ends of [Prufrock's] days and ways" (Eliot, "P," 49; 51; 60). The future arises out of the incantatory "There will be time" in which the speaker imagines all that lays ahead (Eliot, "P," 26). And, most curiously, a counterfactual time—what would have happened had another choice been made—comes to life in the conditional statements Prufrock makes: "I should have been a ragged pair of claws" and "would it have been worth it..." (Eliot, "P," 74; 88). Conversely, in a geographic sense, the poem exists in a number of different spaces: the room where women discuss Michelangelo, the bottom of the sea, the beach, the afternoon tea, the city streets, etc.

Thus, in opposition to the expansive and erosive qualities of time, the poem seeks to transcend chronology and location. Imagining multiple moments and various places, the poem, like Prufrock, avoids the overwhelming question, choosing *to be* rather than *to mean*. Moving through all times and places, the poem exhibits timelessness, transcending the boundaries that limit Prufrock's ability to answer the overwhelming question.

Prufrock's transcendence of time effectively punctures the strict linearity of oppressive chronological time, generating the potential for a more nuanced interpretation of his abdication. The poem's ambiguity of space and time functions as what Heidrun Friese would call a "moment" as "rupture." Thinking about a literary instant—or an "augenblick," literally "the glance of an eye"—as the space that pierces and destroys the homogenous continuum of chronological time, Friese states that "The moment is the decisive caesura, which bids its farewell to the irrevocable past and opens up towards that which is to come, to the not-yet of the future" (Friese, 2; 74). In dividing the past from the present, the "moment" generates a space for future potential, for the "not-yet" that will follow. Prufrock's transcendence of time functions as a similar "decisive caesura." Against the erosive pressure time places on his ability to speak, Prufrock's existence in multiple spaces and times effectively generates future potential. Vis-à-vis the moment of his abdication, such future potential casts a new light on his role as an "attendant lord."

Ultimately, Prufrock's rupturing of chronological time opens up a space for multiple poetic meanings, for the process of re-reading by the speaker's companion. In his journey through time, Prufrock has a companion. The opening line, "Let us go, then, you and I," implicates the reader as a central figure in the poem. Considering the reader's presence, we must ask what effect Prufrock's transcendence of time has on the reading process. Quite simply, the speaker's transcendence of time generates the opportunity for multiple (re)readings of the poem,

allowing a multiplicity of meanings to emerge. This potential for multiple engagements with the poem represents the “not-yet” (the engagements that will come) that emerges from Friese’s concept of “rupture” in time (Friese, 2). By severing the linear, chronological march of time towards a conclusion, Prufrock’s transcendence of time challenges the consensus opinion that the conclusion of the poem, the moment of drowning, marks the failure of his poetic effort. The transcendence of time thereby implicates the reader and his continual re-reading of the poem as the site of meaning. As the “attendant lord,” Prufrock works to overcome the quality of effacement that plagues the poem and, in doing so, places the responsibility of answering the overwhelming question in the reader’s hands. In short, the puncture of time engenders a reading process that changes with each readerly visit to the text.

Prufrock’s transcendence of time, therefore, marks the first moment where the problematic of the poem begins to be resolved. By overcoming the binding constraints of time, Prufrock opens up the potential for a truly innovative theory of poetic meaning in that the moment of abdication becomes a liberation into time, not a failure. This liberation implicates the reader in the process of answering the overwhelming question. It allows the reader to escape the chronological temporality that insists on his discovery of a pre-determined meaning at the conclusion of the poem, offering up instead the potential for many different meanings. Discerning how those meanings arise, however, requires a discussion of the poem’s rigorously intertextual nature.

Section III - Performing Barthes’ “Glissement:” Prufrock’s Subversive Allusions

Prufrock’s intense focus on time as a simultaneously chronological and spatial entity provides a means of escaping the oppressive pursuit of the overwhelming question. By virtue of

existing in multiple moments and spaces, the poem effectively evades the metonymized others who demand a response and generates the space for the reader's engagement with the overwhelming question through re-reading. Yet, Prufrock's poetic flight unfolds as more than a mere escape into the depths of time and space; the speaker employs constant references to both evade and engage the overwhelming question. In practice, the poem incessantly alludes to the quotidian world and to a myriad of literary texts, which represent its intra- and inter-textuality, respectively. Simultaneously, the speaker exhibits an intense fear of belatedness, of failing to match the poetic masterpieces that precede his poem. An exploration of this concurrent fear of previous writers and continual reference to their works reveals that literary allusions in particular function as the evocative space in which the reader commences the interpretive process made possible by the poem's temporality—the second step towards unraveling the denouement of the poem's great problematic. Ultimately, through his recurrent intertextual references to the external literary world, Prufrock dissolves the chronological ordering between texts and the boundaries that demarcate them. The poem thereby relinquishes the need for authorial control and presents allusion as the primary mechanism through which the poem guides the reader towards a response to the overwhelming question.

The poem's continual return to the possibility of vision and revision highlights its keen but frustrated sense of intertextual time. Prufrock exhibits an acute fear of finding expression too late, of being incapable of saying anything great. The speaker's intense anxiety of belatedness emerges from his insistence on the existence of time for "decisions and revisions which a minute will reverse" (Eliot, "P," 48). In a paradoxical sense, time simultaneously grants one the opportunity to (re)write (a "hundred visions and revisions") and remorselessly effaces ("reverse[s]") one's work. Yet, the concept of "revision" encapsulates more than one's personal effort to make a statement that resists time's ravaging presence. Revision invokes the ceaseless

process by which writers draw upon, recreate, and destroy texts that come before. The revisionary process highlights what André Topia calls “vertical reading” in his essay “The Matrix and the Echo: Intertextuality in *Ulysses*,” an approach to reading or writing in which one seeks to establish a chronological ordering and a hierarchy of texts (Topia, 106). Those that come before take on a “paternal” role; conversely, the text that “revis[es]” its predecessor must necessarily be “filial,” lesser, a faulty echo of that which came before. Prufrock’s awareness of such a textual hierarchy drives the poem’s tonal gloominess. Prufrock’s insistence that he has “known them [previous texts] all already, known them all” and his fearful question “And how should I presume?” work together to emphasize his fear of filiation (Eliot, “P,” 49; 54). The root of that fear, ultimately, lies in his resistance to intertextual time—the presence of previous writers and texts, whom one can never truly emulate or match.

Despite his fear of those that have come before, Prufrock incessantly refers to foreign figures and texts, highlighting his simultaneous reliance on and inability to control the tropes that exist outside the poetic world he creates. Or, more precisely, Prufrock’s text emerges as a patchwork of references to both quotidian life (a form of intra-textuality) and the vast universe of literary texts that circulate through his poem (a form of inter-textuality). The quotidian lies in the ephemera of daily life that pervades the poem. Continual invocations of “toast and tea,” “a bald spot in the middle of my hair,” “coffee spoons,” “cakes and ices,” and so on summon elements of Prufrock’s daily routine (Eliot, “P,” 33; 40; 52; 79). Such moments are what Leonard Unger calls “reference[s] to a text that [are] not specific” to distinguish them from specifically literary references (Unger, 274). Discussing the reiterated trope of newspapers in many of Eliot’s earlier poems, Unger argues that “references to newspapers are references to institutions social and historical” (Unger, 277); in other words, the invocations of the quotidian situate the poem in a very precise cultural context, which in Prufrock’s case, translates into early-twentieth-century,

aristocratic British society where life revolves around social gatherings. These quotidian moments, however, function as more than a socio-historical marker. The primary effect of the intra-textual moments is the production of the poem's digressive mode. The continual references to daily life—which generate echoes within the poem that evoke repeated moments from Prufrock's daily life—serve as the mechanism used by the speaker to generate his digressive evasions of the overwhelming question. Intra-textual repetition of “neckties rich and modest” and “the sunsets” actively distract the speaker and his companion from the overwhelming question that haunts the poem (Eliot, “P,” 42; 101). They defer the confrontation of the question to the one moment where Prufrock responds, his abdication.

In contrast to the digressive nature of the intra-textual quotidian elements of the poem, Prufrock's literary references, the poem's intertextual moments, are of greater interest vis-à-vis the poem's problematic precisely because they drive the poem *towards* its response to the overwhelming question. References to “Michelangelo,” biblical prophets, “Prince Hamlet,” “the Fool,” and Marvell's “To His Coy Mistress” (among other weighty western texts) weave their way through the poem despite Prufrock's utter fear of his inability to perfectly revise. Functioning as intertextual chains that link Prufrock's poems to the very texts he fears following, the references together raise the question, “Why exactly does Prufrock so unremittingly refer to other texts, and how do those references function in his own poem?” A partial answer to at least the second question lies in the anxiety Prufrock feels about writing after those to which he refers. The topic is one that Eloise Knowlton's discussion of quotation, Joyce, Joyceans, and the Rhetoric of Citation, helps crystallize more precisely. Focusing on the evolution of the quotation through literary history, Knowlton argues that Modernist texts like Eliot's employ references as a means of enacting “separ[ation] [and] discord;” the connection forged between two texts serves to drive a wedge between them, to destabilize each text in a struggle for authorial control. A

literary reference serves as a point of intense “friction” between two texts, as the moment where one text seeks to assert control over another (Knowlton, 18-22). It is this “friction” that engenders the gloominess and isolation that Prufrock conveys in the poem. His anxiety arises out of the power struggle between his poem and its references—a struggle that intensifies the difficulty of responding to the overwhelming question.

One clarifying point that must be made, however, is that Prufrock’s intertextual references occur without quotations, making them allusions and requiring a more precise discussion. Seen through the lens of William Irwin’s analysis of allusion, Prufrock’s intertextual references appear to be a self-defeating literary technique in the sense that they complicate the act of answering the overwhelming question of the poem’s meaning. For Irwin, an allusion necessitates a holistic understanding of the external text (Irwin, 289). In short, correctly interpreting the allusion depends critically on an awareness of the author’s intent. Thus, if Prufrock’s allusions function in an Irwinian sense, the challenge of responding to the overwhelming question becomes especially great because it requires Prufrock’s poem to convey the authorially validated meaning of its referenced texts. Consider, for example, the ironic allusion to Lazarus: “I am Lazarus, come from the dead, / Come back to tell you all, I shall tell you all” (Eliot, “P,” 94-95). The allusion presents two distinct challenges for the speaker. Most simply, Prufrock’s response to the overwhelming question must convey why he ironically compares himself to Lazarus. Yet, a second challenge emerges in the sense that the figure Lazarus originally exists in the Bible—a second text whose meaning Prufrock must incorporate into his response. In other words, to fully comprehend how Lazarus functions in Prufrock’s poem, one must understand how John interpreted Lazarus in writing the Gospel. Considering Prufrock’s multiple attempts to evade a response to the overwhelming question, the presence of allusions in his poem, at least from Irwin’s perspective, greatly complicates his challenge. Given that he can

hardly state what it is he means, how could Prufrock begin to perfectly recount what the numerous other authors in his text intended? Thus, beyond the friction that arises from the references' continual reminder of Prufrock's textual filiation, the allusions appear to further complicate the speaker's ability to respond to the overwhelming question. The allusions seem to function as obstacles that lead to Prufrock's inaction at the conclusion of the poem.

Prufrock's stalwart abdication of the need to answer the overwhelming question, however, demonstrates how the poem's allusions operate in a much less determined fashion than those theorized by Irwin. The major turning point of Prufrock's poem lies in the powerfully declarative statement "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..." wherein Prufrock's invocation of an opposition to Hamlet relieves the excessive burden of the overwhelming question (Eliot, "P," 111-113). In the context of allusion, Prufrock's abdication once again raises the specter of the references that stud the poem: if Prufrock refuses to operate as Irwin's theory suggests, how do his allusions function and why are they present? An answer lies in the theories of allusion advanced by two other critics: Allan Pascao and Ziva Ben-Porat. In response to Irwin's focus on authorial intent, Pascao envisions allusions functioning in the same fashion as botanical grafting. Just as grafting unites two separate organisms to create a new one, literary allusion draws on elements of both texts to create an innovative "metaphorical relationship" independent of both texts. Critically, the notion of authorial intent has no bearing on the metaphorical relationship; regardless of whether one understands exactly what the author intended, the new metaphorical relationship marks the work of an allusion (Pascao, 12). Ben-Porat presents an even more radical interpretation of allusion. Applying a semiotic approach that seeks to map the relationship between the two texts, she theorizes allusion as opening up an unlimited series of connections between two texts. Initially, one recognizes the element of a text that refers externally, the

“marker,” and alters one’s interpretation of the textual element vis-à-vis the external text. Then, in the most powerful realization of the allusion, one “activate[s] the evoked text... as a whole, in an attempt to form maximum intertextual connections.” In other words, the mere presence of the marker allows one to draw connections between any elements of the two texts, opening up a vast and generative congruency between the two (Ben-Porat, 110-111). Both Pascao and Ben-Porat, then, envision a much more open-ended process than Irwin. They interpret an allusion as a facilitator of a number of different interpretations—each of which depends on an individual’s reading.

In the context of Pascao’s and Ben-Porat’s theories of allusion, Prufrock’s textual references take on the form of catalytic sites of interpretation for the reader. Rather than serving as containers of a concrete, reproducible meaning originally intended by the author, Prufrock’s allusions work to generate an individual’s readings of exterior texts, thereby enhancing his understanding of the poem. Take, for example, the allusion to Michelangelo: “In the room the women come and go, / Talking of Michelangelo” (Eliot, “P,” 13-14). The allusion, which ostensibly refers to Michelangelo di Lodovico Buonarroti Simoni, invites a number of connections to be drawn between Michelangelo’s work and Prufrock’s poem. The reader might imagine the painter’s production of the Sistine Chapel in Rome and envision Prufrock as a similar portrayer of a creative process; whereas Michelangelo painted God’s creation of the world, Prufrock performs a poem’s creation of meaning. Or, the reader might imagine Michelangelo’s David, consider the statue’s nudity, and ask whether or not the poem’s arms that are “braceleted and white and bare” are fragments of eroticized bodies (Eliot, “P,” 63). Regardless of the connection drawn, the example serves to illustrate how Prufrock’s allusions play the catalytic role envisioned by Ben-Porat in the fourth step of her semiotic theory. In placing a “marker” like Michelangelo or Prince Hamlet in the text, Prufrock’s allusions perform

the work of an “attendant lord.” They generate meaningful connections across intertextual space for each reader who recognizes the allusion and, in doing so, proliferate answers to the overwhelming question that Prufrock refuses to answer. Thus, far from complicating his engagement with the overwhelming question, Prufrock’s allusions represent perhaps the most generative elements of the poem in the sense that they invoke a multiplicity of connections between texts. Crucially, this multiplicity of potential connections relies upon the work of the reader, who is guided by the allusion. By linking two literary texts together, the allusion requires the reader to draw on past readings and encourages him to interpret both texts anew.

Functioning as evocative sites of interpretation, the literary allusions Prufrock employs integrally tie his poem to the literary tradition that he follows, which is the central focus of Herbert Grabes’ work on allusion in the early Eliot poems:

Quotation and allusion facilitate a considerable broadening of the dimension of a text, in that they incorporate additional levels of reality and textual relationships into the structure of the poem. In its ability to evoke a far greater complex of meanings than the same quantum of ‘straightforward’ text, a quotation or phrase functioning as an allusion creates an uncommon density of significance and is an economical mode of presentation, a kind of poetic shorthand. (Grabes, 147)

Grabes eloquently describes how an allusion becomes a site of catalytic activity. In drawing a connection to another text, the allusion layers “additional levels of...textual relationships” that carry many more potential meanings. “[D]ensity” implies a veritable core of potential interpretations that fuse and explode out of the allusion’s weaving of multiple texts together. The ultimate point of the allusion, however, is that it ties the poet to the tradition Eliot discusses in “Tradition and the Individual Talent.” Much like Unger’s suggestion that non-literary references situate a poem in a unique socio-historical context, Grabes argues that an allusion places a text in conversation with the corpus of texts that precede one’s own work. Functioning as “a kind of poetic shorthand,” as an abbreviation of the entire universe of a previous text, the allusion allows

the poet to economically maintain a connection to the “tradition” while generating his own innovative material. Another formulation of Grabes point is that Prufrock’s textual references function as the second level of metonymy in the poem. Whereas the shattered bodies of the women in the poem take the place of the body of critical voices, Prufrock’s allusions function as fragments of the literary texts he references. Yet, the references go beyond representing individual texts. The allusions encapsulate the entire “tradition” that Eliot seeks to honor, the entire corpus he fears following. Ultimately, seen as either “poetic shorthand” or textual metonymy, the effect is the same: Prufrock’s allusions provide powerfully evocative moments that the reader must interpret.

Though Grabes’ analysis of the allusion is perhaps the most thoughtful and cogent piece of criticism on the topic, the literary allusions of Prufrock’s poem go beyond drawing a connection to Eliot’s revered “tradition.” In fact, the allusions work to subvert it. Given its intense focus on intertextuality, Prufrock’s poem performs the “glissement” from “work” to “text” famously theorized by Roland Barthes. Writing that “The logic that governs the Text is not comprehensive (seeking to define “what the work means”) but metonymic; and the activity of associations, contiguities, and cross-references coincides with a liberation of symbolic energy,” Barthes argues that the literary text functions as a placeholder (a metonym) for all its potential meanings, as a fragment of the whole of its “symbolic energy.” A text is a living entity that draws on its connections to other pieces of literature and its readers, instead of comprehensively containing a singular “mean[ing]” (Barthes, 76). Thus, by relinquishing the need for authorial control (literally refusing to answer the overwhelming question) and by offering up his text as a series of catalytic loci that the reader must interpret, Prufrock allows his text to become the “activity, [the] production” that Barthes discusses (Barthes, 75). The text becomes the site of interpretation for the reader as opposed to the work, the container of the author’s pre-determined

meaning. Such a move repositions Prufrock's poem vis-à-vis the external texts to which it alludes. In direct opposition to Topia's "vertical" relationship that necessarily subjugates Prufrock's text and injects extreme anxiety into its opening stanzas, the poem's abdication places it alongside the texts to which it alludes. A new, "horizontal" relationship emerges in which the reader works both forward and backwards. The reader's interpretation of the predecessor in light of the contemporary text works to alter the elder (Topia, 106). As a result, the intertextual boundaries that once demarcated texts fall away. The chronological ordering as well as the spatial boundaries that divide them break down, giving way to Michelangelos and Hamlets that must be (re)interpreted by the reader with Prufrock in mind. Thus, the literary allusions that Prufrock presents function in a far more complicated fashion than the economical nod to the tradition Grabes theorizes. By dissolving the rigid patriarchy in which a contemporary text follows the superior texts of the tradition, Prufrock's allusions subvert the former in the sense that his text generates new potential for those that came before.

The dissolution of intertextual time, then, works alongside Prufrock's transcendence of time to advance the resolution of the poem's great problematic. Whereas the transcendence of time creates the moment, the rupture, in which the text can be re-read, Prufrock's intertextual allusions require readerly participation in the production of meaning. In other words, if the poem's temporality generates the space for the poem *to mean*, the poem's allusions begin to represent *how* the poem ultimately means. Only in the finale of the poem, however, do the full implications of Prufrock's theory of poetic meaning and a clearer understanding of the reader's role emerge.

Section IV – Drowning as Prufrock’s and the Reader’s Liberation

Prufrock’s exploration of temporality and intertextuality make great progress in the process of resolving the poem’s great problematic, “(How) can a poem mean?” Through its rupture of chronological time, the poem generates the potential for many meanings by engaging the reader in the pursuit of the overwhelming question’s answer. Building upon temporality’s potential for meaning, the poem’s subversive employment of allusion engages the reader by requiring his interpretation and undermines the rigid tradition Prufrock fears. In other words, the lens of chronological, spatial, and intertextual time reveals that Prufrock’s abdication represents a far more productive moment than the sense of failure and stasis that traditional readings assume. Only in the finale⁴ of the poem, however, does Prufrock demonstrate precisely *how* the poem can mean. In essence, Prufrock envisions his poem as a provocative set of images, allusions, and rhyme that energize the reader’s thoughts alongside the poem’s assertions. Such a formulation emerges from a re-reading of the poem’s final line, “Till human voices wake us, and we drown,” in which the act of drowning becomes a generative moment of union between the reader and the speaker (Eliot, “P,” 131). Thus, imagining the poem as a the vehicle that invigorates the thoughts of the reader in a cooperative process that generates poetic meaning, Eliot’s “Prufrock” anticipates and performs a theory of poetic meaning that reader-response theory mirrored over sixty years after the poem’s completion.

The finale of the poem presents a powerful tension in that Prufrock’s abdication and his ultimate drowning have traditionally been read as the moment of the speaker’s irreducible poetic failure. Essentially, we must ask: when Prufrock compares himself to an “attendant lord,” does he do so as a capitulation or a victory vis-à-vis those who pose the overwhelming question (Eliot, “P,” 112)? In the final line of the poem, is the act of drowning a strangling of the poet’s voice or

⁴ To clarify, I define the finale as the lines from “No! I am not Prince Hamlet” through the poem’s end.

a moment of liberation? Each moment has been read by most Eliot scholars as the instance where Prufrock fails to act; however, a critical distinction (and a more recuperative reading) lies in the phrase “At times, indeed, almost ridiculous— / Almost, at times, the Fool” (Eliot, “P,” 118-119). Although the words “ridiculous” and the comparison to Shakespeare’s “Fool” highlight the speaker’s awareness of the ostensibly abject nature of his role reversal, the word “Almost” tempers the statement. Close to but not exactly “ridiculous” or occupying some space between Prince Hamlet and the Fool, Prufrock is not quite what he seems. His employment of the word “almost” carves out the potential for his role to be more productive than it might first appear—an idea that emerges from the ambiguity of the words “wake” and “drown.”

When reconsidering the meaning of the words “wake” and “drown,” one can reposition the final line of Prufrock’s poem as the moment in which his theory of poetic meaning subverts a reading of Prufrock as a poetic failure. With the liminality of “almost” placing Prufrock somewhere between Hamlet and the Fool, an alternative meaning of the word “wake” gives rise to a subversive move by the speaker (Eliot, “P,” 131). In addition to the reverie-shattering sense of “wake” (as in “awaken”), the word also invokes the funereal ceremony in which relatives gather to mourn the loss of another. The act of “wak[ing]” suggests a sense of loss, despair, and, critically, pity for the individual who has gone. Here, the sense of pity positions the “human voices” (which are still reminiscent of the challenging others in the poem) as mocking the speaker, as believing that the transition from Hamlet to lord is indeed pathetic. In response to this condescension, Prufrock envisions a death that unites him with the sea itself: “drown[ing]” (Eliot, “P,” 131). In opposition to the awakening sense of “wake” that extracts Prufrock from the reverie, the act of “drown[ing]” denotes complete submersion in the sea itself. It envisions a perpetual “linger[ing] in the chambers of the sea,” a complete union with the sea free of temporal bounds

(Eliot, "P," 129). As expansive as the very "universe" that Prufrock refuses to "squeeze" into a "ball," the sea functions as the metaphorical space into which Prufrock flees. Geographically and temporally, the transition captures Prufrock's transcendence of the boundaries imposed by the overwhelming question, his unification with the irreducible expanse of his thoughts. Thus, while the words "wake" and "drown" at first appear to concretize Prufrock's capitulation, the final line can be read as an ultimate act of liberation where Prufrock dissolves into the universe of pure consciousness.

And yet, Prufrock does not do so alone; the final line's inclusive "we" suggests that the reader, too, unites with the Prufrockian "sea"—an act that indicates how Prufrock's performance of poetic meaning anticipates the critical work of several prominent reader-response critics. If the statement "Till human voices wake us, and we drown" can be read as a liberation on Prufrock's behalf, the inclusiveness of the "we" provokes the question "What does it mean for the reader to 'drown'?" Positioned as similar to yet entirely different from the onerous presence of the disembodied fragments in the poem, the reader functions as the silent companion who desires an answer to Prufrock's overwhelming question but dares not ask. The response that he receives is a journey, not a formulation. With the "chambers of the sea" functioning as a geographic metaphor for the expansive universe that Prufrock resists reducing, the act of drowning places the reader alongside Prufrock in the liberating flight into the depths of the sea. In such a reading, the "chambers" of the sea function in the communal sense of the word (Eliot, "P," 129); though "chamber" as a singular residence gives credence to the traditional reading of Prufrock as failure, it also connotes a shared space (as in legislative chamber) wherein the speaker and the reader might engage.⁵ Therefore, far from being a moment of termination or conclusion, the shared

⁵ "chamber, n." OED Online. March 2012. Oxford University Press. 3 April 2012
<<http://www.oed.com/viewdictionaryentry/Entry/30330>>.

drowning frees both figures from the pressured confines of the overwhelming question, pooling the thoughts and possibilities of each in a generative exchange that transcends a mere distillation of what the poem actually “means.” The act of drowning effectively fuses the mental universes of both the reader and Prufrock, allowing an interchange far more complex than a mere question-and-response framework. Thus, while Prufrock cannot provide an answer to the overwhelming question, he can, as an “attendant lord,” transport the reader into the realm of potential where a response (not necessarily *the* definitive response) can be found.

In form as well as content, the finale of Prufrock’s poem performs the theory of poetic meaning that emerges from the drowning. Prufrock’s transition into the role of attendant lord can be captured in the alteration of the poem’s prosodic elements in the finale. Whereas the great majority of the poem preceding the finale unfolds as extensive stanzas with irregular end-rhyme, the finale devolves into a highly provocative series of short stanzas tightly bound with rhyme. Each stanza functions as a poetic snapshot that generates more questions than answers. In stating “I grow old...I grow old... / I shall wear the bottoms of my trousers rolled,” for example, Prufrock rushes the reader forward with internal and end-rhyme without fully exploring his obsession with his body (Eliot, “P,” 120-121). Thus, the rhyme scheme and the abbreviated nature of the stanzas create an astounding number of unresolved images—moments where the reader must work to generate a coherent understanding of what has occurred. Although the stanzas provide a guiding framework through end-rhyme that ties together rich images like the “beach” and the “mermaids singing, each to each,” the open-ended images that arise challenge the reader to incorporate elements of his own existence (Eliot, “P,” 123-124). As seen in the rhyme and brevity of the finale, then, the poem ceases its attempt to elude the overwhelming question and functions strictly as the catalytic “attendant lord.”

The critical work done by reader-response critics Wolfgang Iser, Hans-Robert Jauss, and Hans-Georg Gadamer provides a rich vocabulary that clarifies the innovative poetic theory Prufrock envisions in his poem. Gadamer generated much of reader-response theory in arguing that the work of reading requires two participants, the text and the reader. Stating that “The text brings an object into language, but that it achieves this is ultimately the work of the interpreter. Both have a share in it,” Gadamer envisions reading as an interchange through language between the equally important text and reader (Gadamer, 350). Iser echoes Gadamer’s reflection on the importance of the reader’s close adherence to the text but further suggests that reading draws upon more than just the text’s linguistic patterns. Describing the moments where a text fails to provide a crucial detail as “gaps” or “blanks,” he argues that “the structured blanks of the text stimulate the process of ideation to be performed by the reader on the terms set by the text” (Iser, 169). In essence, the moments where a text lacks complete clarity simultaneously permit and require the reader to draw on thoughts, experiences, and beliefs external to the text. It is Jauss, however, who most keenly explores the sources on which the reader draws to fill Iser’s theorized textual “blanks.” Commencing with the belief that a text is dynamic in the sense that it is continually (re)interpreted, Jauss theorizes that a reader’s context and background—what he calls a “horizon of expectations”—affect how the reader approaches the text (Jauss, 21). The social sphere in which one lives and interacts with other humans provides the belief structure that allows a reader to make choices about what the text’s linguistic code may mean. Thus, the reader-response school effectively imagines reading as a series of interpretive acts that draw upon one’s experiences to generate poetic meaning. The text provides both the generative material and critical gaps that draw upon elements of the reader’s own world.

Applied to the recuperative reading of drowning, the vocabulary of the reader-response school demonstrates how powerfully innovative Prufrock's theory of poetic meaning truly is. In strong opposition to interpretive schools in which one conceptualizes the poem as a container of a pre-determined meaning sought by the reader, Prufrock, like Gadamer, portrays the reader as an "interpreter" (Gadamer, 350). The poetic speaker functions as the figure who generates the linguistic material and directs the reader towards potential interpretations; as a figure "Full of high sentence, but a bit obtuse," Prufrock employs language that provides extremely generative material but no simple meaning (Eliot, "P," 114; 118). The ultimate act of contriving a response to the overwhelming question belongs to the reader. It is he who must take the place of Prince Hamlet, John the Baptist, and Lazarus to pose the challenging existential questions suggested by the text. Thus, the shared moment of drowning marks what Jauss would call the "fusion" of the reader's "horizon of expectations" and Prufrock's poetic "universe." (Jauss, 19; Eliot, "P," 46). Whereas both figures find themselves incapable of posing and answering any formulation of the overwhelming question alone, together they drive towards a response.

The finale's employment of the beach as a highly suggestive locus that draws on the reader's "horizon of expectations" to generate answers to the overwhelming question most powerfully conceptualizes how Prufrock perceives the creation of poetic meaning. The fusion between the reader's thoughts and the poem's material functions on both an intra- and inter-textual level. Within the poem, the insistence of the finale on the "sea" and its "waves" invokes the earlier moment where Prufrock exclaims "I should have been a pair of ragged claws, / Scuttling across the floors of silent seas" (Eliot, "P," 73-74). The connection between the "silent seas" and the "sea" of the finale explores the very nature of the sea Prufrock envisions. The reader must work through how the "silen[ce]" of the first seas relates to the elusive and distant

“chambers of the sea” to which Prufrock fuses himself in the poem’s final line. Outside the poem, the continual focus on the beach as a liminal space between human land and the expansive “sea” calls upon any number of intertextual connections. The reader might remember Walt Whitman’s own suggestive finale to “Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking” when he states “The sea whisper’d me” (Whitman, 192). Conversely, thinking through the intense focus on the beach as a space that separates the known land from the unknown sea, one might be drawn to Herman Melville’s Moby-Dick, for Melville’s shifting conception of the sea simultaneously resonates with and challenges Prufrock’s: “For as this *appalling ocean* surrounds the *verdant land*, so in the soul of man there lies one insular Tahiti, full of peace and joy, but encompassed by all the horrors of the half known life” (Melville, 225). Regardless of the connection drawn, the sea serves as a powerful geographic locus onto which the reader maps his “horizon of expectations.” Drawing upon elements of one’s reading of earlier portions of the poem, other texts in dialogue with Prufrock, and one’s own experiences (perhaps personal memories of the shore), the reader fuses his own context with the text’s suggestive language to generate a reading of Prufrock’s finale.

Thus, the poem’s finale illustrates how Prufrock transcends the quotidian “butt ends” that work as digressions throughout the great majority of the poem, and, in doing so, performs an innovative theory of poetic meaning. Shrugging off the need to respond to the overwhelming question in favor of a multi-faceted, catalytic role, Prufrock employs the geography of the beach to map his role as a poet. With the sea representing the universe of his thoughts, the land functioning as the bastion of fixed human thinking, and the beach as the liminal space between the two, Prufrock artfully insists that he cannot reduce the sea in the same way that he cannot “squeeze[] the universe into a ball” (Eliot, “P,” 92). He cannot answer the overwhelming

question by translating the expansive sea into a concrete meaning. Instead, he positions himself as the link between the land and the sea, as the walker of the liminal space. In doing so, he functions as a poetic Charon crossing the River Styx. Prufrock cannot tell the reader what lies in the distant “chambers of the sea” (Eliot, “P,” 129). Rather, he can merely transport him there in a generative drowning that may very well alter the very world in which they reside.

In a return to the beginning, Prufrock’s statement “Let us go, then, you and I” could be said to mark the (re)commencement of the reading process (Eliot, “P,” 1). With the “you and I” insisting that the question of readership marks the central thematic of the poem, the “then” serves as a curious temporal marker. Its presence, squeezed into the phrase as an appositive, implies the presence of something that came before. The word serves as a transition, ushering the reader and the speaker forward from an interaction that presumably occurred before the poem began. Although one might (reductively) argue that the “then” allows Prufrock to begin where Dante’s epigraph ceases, the “then” actually suggests that the reading process occurs in a circular, recursive fashion. As the movement of the continual insistence on “go” implies, the poem unfolds as a dramatic happening, as an instance in which Prufrock powerfully reimagines how the poet and the reader connect. Yet that instance exists only as long as the reader and the speaker interact, which demands a continual revisiting of the poem. The “then” powerfully insists that our “visit” with Prufrock is one of many in a chain of interactions that emerge with each reading.

Reading as a recursive process, then, makes clear the point of this project: to resituate Prufrock as a powerfully catalytic poet figure whose verse guides the progress of the reader

towards an answer to the overwhelming question. If the poem revolves around the great problematic of “(How) can a poem mean?” posed by the abdication, Prufrock’s exploration of temporality and intertextuality allow him to assert that a poem can mean. By transcending time and by subverting the tradition, Prufrock insinuates that his abdication marks a more recuperative moment than traditionally thought in the sense that both empower the reader. It is the finale, however, where Prufrock anticipates the sort of cooperative reading process envisioned decades later by critics like Iser, Jauss, and Gadamer. Prufrock insists that a poem ultimately means by serving as a set of provocative loci, as a series of generative images and blanks that stimulate the reader’s mind and produce meaning. The process, therefore, must be recursive. With each reading marking a new interpretation based on either a different reader or a different reading by the same reader, the “then” of the initial line envisions the existence of countless readers through time for which the poem plays the role of the “attendant lord.”

Critically, although the poem’s theory of poetic meaning necessitates the participation of the reader, it demands a rigorously close attention to the text itself. This need for intense attention to the text emerges from the poem’s insistence on the plurality of the word “us” (Eliot, “Prufrock, 1). In direct opposition to a singular poetic process of Prufrock’s or a wholly subjective interpretation by the reader, the poem envisions the creation of poetic meaning as a cooperative process. As Iser eloquently explains in the reader-response theory that mirrors Prufrock’s poetic assertions, “the structured blanks of the text stimulate the process of ideation to be performed by the reader on the terms set by the text” (Iser, 169). Of utmost importance is the clause “on the terms set by the text,” which insists that a Prufrockian or reader-response reading must be enacted within the bounds set by the text even though it relies upon the reader. Iser’s words serve as a warning against the common desire to map subjective views onto the poem

itself. Thus, the inclusiveness of Prufrock's "us" demands an interactive and mutually beneficial reading process that simultaneously liberates the speaker from the sense of failure he experiences vis-à-vis the overwhelming question and empowers the reader in the generation of poetic meaning. In short, Prufrock's "love song" functions as an ode to the reader, his partner in the creation of poetic meaning.

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