

PRUFROCK'S STREAM OF CONSCIOUSNESS

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EXPLANATORY NOTE

Where an asterisk (*) appears in the script it denotes a point originally suggested by Dr N. Rosenblood.

I

INTRODUCTION

Much T.S. Eliot criticism of the last decade or so has been moving toward the assertion that, in "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" and The Waste Land, and perhaps in most of his earlier poetry, Eliot's primary aim was an exploration of consciousness. And one critic, at least, has claimed that to achieve this end Eliot adapted the 'stream-of-consciousness' techniques of modern fiction to poetry.

Anne Bolgan, in 1973, claimed that what The Waste Land "aspired to be" was "a neo-epic of the interior life -- an epic, that is, mounted upon le paysage intérieur."¹ And, further, she held that "what Eliot set out to write, and what The Waste Land was generically 'aiming to be' was an extended interior monologue."² Ms Bolgan considers that not only were Eliot's ideas about consciousness born from his study of the philosophy of F.H. Bradley, but that the form in which he explored it conformed to Bradley's dialectical, post-Hegelian

¹
What the Thunder Really Said (Montreal and London: McGill-Queens, 1973), p. 13.

²
Ibid., p. 52.

method. This method enables ideas to be "generated" (italics in original) rather than expounded or reflected upon, she says, since, in the "collision" of two "particles", a "third something" is generated which is greater than the sum of the two particles:

To see anything "in relation", therefore, is not only to see it more clearly, but also to see "more" of it -- the "more" released by the relation itself. When, for example, the poet-protagonist of The Waste Land sees the typist "in relation" to Goldsmith's earlier heroine, he not only sees her in a different light; he sees her as well in a light which illumines what she really is more clearly. As a consequence, his actual experience of her is both widened and deepened at the same time, and so too is his experience of Goldsmith's heroine.³

Hugh Kenner, in 1959, was one of the first to acknowledge Eliot's debt to Bradley, but he pointed out a different effect of that debt:

. . . to produce the quality of [Bradley's concept of] immediate experience, there is exacted of verse a blinding suavity, not an assured rattle of subjects and predicates, nor images standing in explicable analogy to one another . . . [We] have participles and relative clauses related to nothing, the gestures of verbs rather than their commitments, syntax not abolished but anaesthetized . . . What syntax will specify the infusion, into your experience of reading this book now, the place in which you are half-aware of yourself reading it?⁴

The final sentence of this quotation reveals Kenner's belief that Eliot was concerned to render the inclusiveness of con-

³
Anne Bolgan, p. 140.

⁴
The Invisible Poet (New York: Ivan Obolensky, 1959), pp. 49-50.

sciousness; a whole which must include the thing perceived as well as the perceiver, for, as Eliot stated in his doctoral thesis, "In feeling the subject and object are one."⁵ Kenner's use of the word "anaesthetized" is significant, too, when set against his pronouncement that:

What "Prufrock" is, is the name of a possible zone of consciousness . . . ; no more than that; certainly not a person . . . Like the thing you look at when you raise your eyes from this page, he is the center of a field of consciousness, rather yours than his: a focussing of the reader's attention, in a world made up not of cows and stones but of literary 'effects' and memories prompted by words.⁶

That syntax is "anaesthetized" to generate a "field of consciousness" is curiously suggested by the opening lines of "Prufrock":

Let us go then, you and I,
When the evening is spread out against the sky
Like a patient etherised upon a table . . .

Eliot's method of 'anaesthetizing' his syntax will be examined later.

With reference to the final sentence of my first quotation from Kenner, a statement by Aldous Huxley in "The Doors of Perception" comes to mind:

. . . each one of us is potentially Mind at Large. But in so far as we are animals, our business is at all costs to survive. To make biological survival possible, Mind at Large has to be funneled through

⁵
Cited by Hugh Kenner, p. 49.

⁶
Ibid., pp. 40-41.

the reducing valve of the brain and nervous system. What comes out at the other end is a measly trickle of the kind of consciousness which will help us to stay alive on the surface of this particular planet. To formulate and express the contents of this reduced awareness, man has invented and endlessly elaborated those symbol-systems and implicit philosophies which we call languages.⁷

What Huxley is, in fact, describing in his own graphic, philosophical terms is the structure of the human psyche. His "reducing valve" would elsewhere be called the repressing agency of the super-ego, and his "reduced awareness", the consciousness of the ego. William James expressed the same idea thus:

. . . the mind is at every stage a theatre of simultaneous possibilities. Consciousness consists in the comparison of these with each other, the selection of some, and the suppression of the rest by ⁸ the reinforcing and inhibiting agency of attention.

In the early stages of his poetic career, I submit, Eliot was concerned not so much with extending this "reduced awareness" as with representing it in language; (although, as F.O. Matthiessen has pointed out, Eliot always believed, apparently in opposition with Huxley, that "every vital development in language is a development in feeling as well."⁹) Later in his

⁷
in The Nature of Human Consciousness, ed. R.E. Ornstein (San Francisco: Freeman, 1973), p. 168.

⁸
"Stream of Consciousness", in The Nature of Human Consciousness, ed. R.E. Ornstein, p. 165.

⁹
The Achievement of T.S. Eliot (Oxford University, 1958), p. 86.

career Eliot was to explore ways of bypassing this "reducing valve" through mystic experience; but in "Prufrock" and The Waste Land, it seems fairly clear, his concern was with the limits of 'ordinary' consciousness, albeit the spiritual as well as the mundane aspects of it.

Robert Humphrey, in his admirably clear analysis of the 'stream-of-consciousness' genre and its techniques, has said this:

. . . the realm of life with which stream-of-consciousness literature is concerned is mental and spiritual experience -- both the whatness and the howness of it. The whatness includes the categories of mental experiences: sensations, memories, imaginations, conceptions and intuitions. The howness includes the symbolizations, the feelings and the processes of association. It is often impossible to separate the what from the how. Is, for example, memory a part of mental content or is it a mental process? Such fine distinctions, of course, are not the concern of novelists as novelists.¹⁰

"Such fine distinctions", however, are the concern of Eliot as poet, for not only is "Burnt Norton" an attempt to establish, for example, the status of memory in psychic life, but so too in large part are "Prufrock" and The Waste Land. Eliot's approach in representing consciousness in verse then is, broadly speaking, philosophical; his technique for this representation, however, relies heavily upon the principles of psychological free association. Before examining the way in which

such associations are made, several questions should be asked: how can these connections be recognized? how do they work in the medium of poetry? are these connections, broadly speaking, based on logic or on feeling? The answers to these questions should emerge during the course of the thesis. In response to the last of the above questions, Helen Gardner writes: "[The Waste Land] is not a cryptogram . . . No critic can provide [individual readers] with a magic thread to take them through the labyrinth. Its connections are not connections of logic, but connections of feeling, often of violent reactions of feeling."¹¹ And, in substantiation, she quotes Conrad Aiken's declaration that "[we] 'accept' the poem as we would accept a powerful, melancholy tone-poem . . . [Its parts] are not important parts of an important or careful intellectual pattern; but they are important parts of an emotional ensemble."¹² Thus, Gardner decides, "It is in these depths of feeling into which we cannot peer that the true source of The Waste Land lies."¹³ Whether or not we can "peer" into these "depths of feeling" is a question I shall examine later. However, the assumption that the associative pattern in Eliot's verse is based on emot-

¹¹
The Waste Land 1972 (Manchester University, 1972),
 p. 19.

¹²
Ibid.

¹³
Ibid., p. 17.

ion rather than on intellect is far from controversial, for Eliot has himself remarked that poetry "has a function of its own, a function 'not intellectual, but emotional'" ¹⁴ And hence, "the concern of the poet is never with thought so much as with finding 'the emotional equivalent of thought'." ¹⁵

Before conducting any study of 'connective feeling' in Eliot's verse, it would perhaps be wise first to establish the reasons for supposing that Eliot, during the early stages of his career, was employing 'stream-of-consciousness' techniques for his own ends. Thus an analysis of associative patterns will be placed in its larger context.

Robert Humphrey cites four "basic techniques" ¹⁶ developed by stream-of-consciousness writers for representing psychic life in fiction: "direct interior monologue, indirect interior monologue, omniscient description, and soliloquy." ¹⁷

The essential difference between the first of these and the other three is that in direct interior monologue there is no apparent intervention from the author, and no auditor is assumed. ¹⁸ The difference between the first two and the second

¹⁴
F.O. Matthieson, p. 110.

¹⁵
Ibid., p. 56.

¹⁶
Robert Humphrey, p. 23.

¹⁷
Ibid.

¹⁸
Ibid., p. 25.

two resides in the fact that the former are twentieth-century innovations, developed specifically to serve in the representation of consciousness in fiction, while the latter are more conventional techniques especially adapted to the ends of stream-of-consciousness writing.

It becomes immediately apparent that the whole of "Prufrock" conforms to the ideal of direct interior monologue (rather than to that of soliloquy) formulated by Humphrey:

Interior monologue is, then, the technique used in fiction for representing the psychic content and processes of character, partly or entirely unuttered, just as these processes exist at various levels of conscious control before they are formulated for deliberate speech.

Particularly it should be noted that it is a technique of representing psychic content and processes at various levels of conscious control; that is, of representing consciousness. It should be emphasized that it may deal with consciousness, however, at any level . . . and that it is concerned with the contents and the processes of consciousness, not just with one of these. It should be noted also that it is partly or entirely unuttered, for it represents the content of consciousness in its inchoate stage before it is formulated for deliberate speech. This is the differentia which separates interior monologue completely from dramatic monologue and stage soliloquy . . .

[Direct interior monologue as distinct from indirect interior monologue] presents consciousness directly to the reader with negligible author interference; that is, there is either a complete or near-complete disappearance of the author from the page, with his guiding "he said"s and "he thought"s and with his explanatory comments. It should be emphasized that there is no auditor assumed; that is, the character is not speaking to anyone within the fictional scene; nor is the character speaking, in effect, to the reader (as the speaker of a stage monologue is, for example). In short, the monologue is represented as

being completely candid, as if there were no reader. This lengthy quotation, enumerating the distinctive features of the direct interior monologue, should justify its inclusion here, since it places "Prufrock" beyond doubt within the category defined. The poem presents the contents and processes of its protagonist's mind, with its private associative network revealed but not explained. We are conscious as readers that our presence is not taken into account by Prufrock. And the monologue does express varying levels of consciousness: for example, the opening line -- "Let us go then, you and I" -- shows operation of the will, and is consequently an example of thought near the 'surface' of consciousness; while the line "I have heard the mermaids singing, each to each" (124) discloses a private symbol, and is thus making use of an archetype in the 'collective unconscious'.

Besides the four primary techniques of stream-of-consciousness literature listed above, Humphrey names a set of subsidiary techniques which he classifies under the heading of "'cinematic' devices".²⁰ As we shall see later, Eliot also put certain of these to use in "Prufrock". We must first, however, examine the ways in which The Waste Land, also, can be thought of as belonging to the 'stream-of-consciousness

19
Robert Humphrey, pp. 24-25.

20
Ibid., p. 49.

genre'.

To call The Waste Land a stream-of-consciousness poem, we should first have to be able to identify a presiding consciousness through which the stream can flow. Anne Bolgan makes this claim:

[T]he juxtaposition in The Waste Land of the individual frames which make up the first two sections of the poem . . . constitute a series of particulars which . . . can be justified psychologically only as the data of consciousness . . . , for the indispensable formal requirement of the poem as a whole is . . . a consciousness which either presides over it or else moves progressively through it -- a consciousness in which these fragments of psychic experience inhere or can come together. That consciousness we have attributed to the persona of the poem's poet-protagonist.²¹

Thus, "the sense of one voice speaking"²² required of an extended interior monologue is, she says, to be found not in Tiresias, but in the persona which she terms the "poet-protagonist". She identifies three tonalities to the voice of this persona: the observer ("The river's tent is broken . . ."), the lyric voice ("By the waters of Lemn I sat down and wept . . ."), and "the significant self-in-becoming or Quester Hero"²³ ("what have we given?").

One could claim, perhaps, that The Waste Land belongs

²¹
Anne Bolgan, pp. 46-47.

²²
Ibid., p. 31.

²³
Ibid., p. 50.

even more firmly in the stream-of-consciousness tradition than does "Prufrock"; since, referring to Mr Humphrey's sch-²⁴ema, the poem uses all four of his "basic techniques" : direct interior monologue (the Song of the Thames Daughters), indirect interior monologue (the thoughts of the typist), omniscient descriptions (the words of Madame Sosostriis), and soliloquy (the words of Marie). Anne Bolgan believes, however, that The Waste Land failed to achieve a true stream-of-consciousness form:

The scenic and the psychic cannot easily accommodate to one another and these scenes -- brilliant and memorable as they are -- resist the psychic interiorization required by the form of an extended interior monologue which the larger portion of the poem reveals that it was 'aiming to be'.²⁵

However, the deduction that The Waste Land was "aiming to be" a stream-of-consciousness poem should not be lightly dismissed. Soon after its first publication, Conrad Aiken wrote:

I think that the poem must be taken . . . as a series of sharp, discrete, slightly related perceptions and feelings, dramatically and lyrically presented, and violently juxtaposed (for effect of dissonance), so as to give us the impression of an intensely modern, intensely literary consciousness which perceives itself not to be a unit but a chance correlation or conglomerate of mutually discolorative fragments.²⁶

24

Robert Humphrey, p. 23.

25

Anne Bolgan, p. 54.

26

"An Anatomy of Melancholy", in T.S. Eliot: The Man and his Work ed. A. Tate (New York: Delacorte, 1966), p. 201.

In the thirties Maud Bodkin commented upon the poem's lack of plot:

Since there is no story, no dramatic situation, to bind associations together, the words within the haunting rhythm must play their part unaided, holding attention while the forces of feeling and attendant imagery negotiate in the antechambers of the mind.²⁷

Humphrey holds that "the stream-of-consciousness writer is not usually concerned with plot of action in the ordinary sense; he is concerned with psychic processes and not physical actions."²⁸ Just as plot in traditional fiction is used to create a form for a work, however, so does the stream-of-consciousness writer, Humphrey explains, employ strict "formal patterns"²⁹ for the same ends. The Waste Land uses several of the patterns Humphrey lists: for example, "Previously established literary patterns" (the Grail legend); "Symbolic structures" (the rebirth theme); and "Formal scenic arrangements"³⁰ (the voice of the thunder).

Perhaps the most interesting and suggestive of the 'stream-of-consciousness techniques' employed by Eliot in

²⁷ Archetypal Patterns in Poetry (Oxford University, 1934), p. 309.

²⁸ Robert Humphrey, p. 86.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

both "Prufrock" and The Waste Land, however, is that of montage. This technique is one of those designated by Humphrey as "'cinematic'".³¹ He describes montage as "a class of devices which are used to show interrelation or association of ideas, such as a rapid succession of images or the superimposition of image on image by related ones."³² Montage, he continues, "[has] to do with transcending or modifying arbitrary and conventional time and space barriers."³³ It is especially suited to stream-of-consciousness fiction, he contends, because "the quality of consciousness itself demands a movement that is not rigid clock progression."³⁴ Eliot uses both time- and space-montage in the two poems in question.

In The Waste Land time-montage is created by setting a modern scene against its historic counterpart. As Professor Matthieson has pointed out, this reveals "the similarity that often lies beneath contrasting appearances and . . . the essential equivalence of seemingly different experiences."³⁵

³¹ Robert Humphrey, p. 49.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid., pp. 49-50.

³⁴ Ibid., p. 50.

³⁵ F.O. Matthieson, p. 35.

It also, however, does something far more complex, as Anne Bolgan explains:

The technique is simply one of lifting a phrase -- a particle of literary experience, together with the meaning which surrounds it in the previous context -- and then resetting that phrase in a new and different context which collides with it in a new and explosively generative way that is creative of enlarged awareness or perception on the one side and, correlatively, of deeper feeling on the other.³⁶

This method she terms dialectical, since the juxtaposition of two separate "shots" creates a "third something" -- a "new whole" which is "qualitatively different" from the sum of the two independent "shots".³⁷ One of her supportive examples, that of the typist and Goldsmith's heroine, was quoted on page two above. The idea that two such "shots or "particles", as she also calls them, should "collide" in an "explosively generative way" seems to have been culled from Eisenstein's contention that "montage is an idea that arises from the collision of independent shots -- shots even opposite to one another: the 'dramatic principle'".³⁸ Thus Eliot cross-cuts from scene to scene, time to time, in order that the "poet-protagonist" may simultaneously perceive and interpret.

³⁶
Anne Bolgan, p. 76.

³⁷
Ibid., pp. 57-61.

³⁸
Cited in Anne Bolgan, p. 57.

In her book Anne Bolgan undertakes to prove that "it was Eliot's desire, as it had been the desire of the major romantic poets before him, to write the epic poem of his time",³⁹ and thus, she concludes:

For Eliot, the stream of consciousness with its inherent linear thrust was merely part of the material of his art and the direct interior monologue was one of the techniques he developed for handling it.⁴⁰

Bolgan sees the movement of the poem as being generated from a collision of linear and non-linear principles:

If the direct interior monologue may be said to have presented Eliot with the most adequate vehicle possible for delineating 'the life of a soul' . . . yet that life as Bradley had taught him to read it involves a methodology within which 'the epic principle' (the linear, narrative and historicist) and 'the dramatic principle' (the nonlinear, dialectical and self-regenerative) come together.⁴¹

More specifically she explains: "If the mythical titles and modern texts everywhere run parallel to one another throughout the linear course of the poem, it is nonetheless the constant collision of their analogical planes which generates the poet-protagonist's ever-widening perception of the nature of the contemporary waste land and of its inhabitants . . ." ⁴²

³⁹
Anne Bolgan, p. 95.

⁴⁰
Ibid., p. 96.

⁴¹
Ibid.

⁴²
Ibid., p. 75.

Hence, although "The Waste Land derives its linear thrust from the 'continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity' . . . yet it must always be remembered that the broadening perceptions generated by that running parallelism are generated dialectically and, therefore, in a nonlinear fashion."⁴³

This critic, then, views the entire pattern of The Waste Land as strung with these creative, dialectical tensions. She approaches the work by way of the philosophy of F.H. Bradley and his dialectical theories. Her enquiries into the movement of the poem are, however, though convincing, not exhaustive. Let us take one final remark of hers as the starting point of another line of enquiry:

Eliot's concern . . . , consonant with his own reticence, was merely to reveal the actual texture of consciousness as that flows fluid and unbound before us.⁴⁴

Rather than attempting to bind consciousness into a dialectical system, then, it would perhaps be fruitful to examine the movement of The Waste Land by reference to the principles of free association, if Eliot's concern was indeed "merely to reveal the texture of consciousness"; for, as Humphrey has pointed out:

The chief technique in controlling the movement of

⁴³
Anne Bolgan, p. 73.

⁴⁴
Ibid., p. 96.

stream of consciousness in fiction has been an application of the principles of psychological free association . . . Three factors control the association: first, the memory, which is its basis; second, the senses, which guide it; and third, the imagination which determines its elasticity.⁴⁵

Now a great deal of Eliot's poetry is concerned with the status of memory in experience. Consider, for example, the opening lines of The Waste Land:

April is the cruellest month, breeding
Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing
Memory and desire, stirring
Dull roots with spring rain.

Hugh Kenner remarks of this opening:

The Waste Land's initial firm show of business dissolves on inspection into a throbbing of participles attached to a furtive copula: an indeterminate breeding, mixing, stirring, covering, feeding, that invisibly smothers Chaucer's Aprille with the vibrations of the Sibyl's "I want to die".⁴⁶

The poem, beginning in the epigraph with a memory of the Sibyl's yearning for death, moves through an association in contrast to thoughts of rebirth through a remembrance of Chaucer's Prologue, which, influenced by the waning memory of the Sibyl, becomes transmuted into thoughts of a new kind of death -- death-in-life. If we now consider this first eighteen-line section in its entirety, we shall see how the faculty of memory lies beneath each remark in the associative network, influencing the direction of thought; how, further, the senses and

⁴⁵
Robert Humphrey, p. 43.

⁴⁶
Hugh Kenner, p. 50.

the imagination immediately begin to weave their impressions over this basic structure. Marie, the protagonist of this psychic sketch, in common perhaps with the "poet-protagonist", is not able to remove the past to a distance, to allow the memory to enter into a free relation with the present.⁴⁷ The philosopher, Friedrich Kummel, remarks:

Memory alone is able to subdue and integrate the past into a free sense of the present; repression, by reinforcing the antagonistic power of the past, causes the engulfing of the present by the past.⁴⁸

Marie, like a good many of the 'characters' in the protagonist's psyche, cannot come to grips with the independent status of memory, and is thus "engulfed" by it. This is, if anything, even more true of Prufrock. Both poems are representations of consciousnesses wandering through the paths of memory by leaps and associations, and attempting to accord memory its true place in the present.

This of course is not the only basis upon which connections are made in Eliot's poetry, but it is a fundamental one. As Kenner remarks: "It follows from Bradley's denial of any separation 'of feeling from the felt, or the desired from the desire, or of what is thought from thinking' . . . that we cannot conceive of a past indifferent to us; obversely,

47

"Time as Succession and the Problem of Duration", in The Voices of Time (New York: George Braziller, 1966), p. 51.

48

Ibid., p. 52.

that all we know of the past is part of our experience now."⁴⁹

Thus, he notes, in Eliot's poetry "[s]ubject matter . . . is absorbed into states of feeling".⁵⁰ It is to the subject of these "states of feeling" in "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" that I now wish to turn.

⁴⁹
Hugh Kenner, pp. 57-58.

⁵⁰
Ibid., p. 64.

II

PRUFROCK: THE CONNECTIVE TISSUE

Before I begin this study of the emotional network in "Prufrock", two comments must be made. Firstly, looking again at Anne Bolgan's comment that "Eliot's concern . . . , consonant with his own reticence, was merely to reveal the actual texture of consciousness as that flows fluid and unbound before us . . ." ¹, a basic flaw in her use of terminology can be discerned. For Freud held that "psychical energy exists in two forms, one freely mobile and the other, by contrast, bound". And it is bound energy which is characteristic of the ego or the perception-consciousness system. Consciousness, far from "flowing fluid and unbound before us" is constantly checked and controlled. The human ego is on the alert at all times against forces which may cause conflicts to arise, and, in order to master these forces, has at its disposal a vast number of defensive techniques. It is in the id, or the unconscious, that energy is freely mobile, as can be seen from our own experience in dreaming, in which one idea or image can readily symbolize

¹ Anne Bolgan, p. 96.

another. In conscious, rational thought, however, images, ideas and words have relatively constant value and meaning.² In fact, Freud maintained that it was possible for thought to occur at all only if small quantities of energy were displaced.³

When I begin tracing the progress of Prufrock's thoughts and feelings in the poem, it will be in the light of these ideas that I shall proceed. But a second oversimplification must first be recorded. Robert Humphrey claimed that three factors controlled "psychological free association"⁴ -- the memory, the senses and the imagination. Here again the vast network of defensive measures which the ego makes use of has been ignored. Since some, perhaps all, of the defences play a part in normal development,⁵ we are far from

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The above comments are taken from Charles Rycroft's definitions of free and bound energy in A Critical Dictionary of Psychoanalysis (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972), p. 43.

3

Jean LaPlanche and J.-B. Pontalis, The Language of Psychoanalysis, tr. by Donald Nicholson-Smith (Hogarth, 1973), p. 173.

"Displacement" is described by Rycroft thus: "The process by which energy . . . is transferred from one mental image to another . . ., the process by which the individual shifts interest from one object or an activity to another in such a way that the latter becomes an equivalent or a substitute for the other." (A Critical Dictionary, p. 35.)

4

Robert Humphrey, p. 43.

5

Charles Rycroft, A Critical Dictionary, p. 28.

assuming right from the start that Prufrock's character is in any way neurotic.

Let us go, then, into an examination of the connective tissue in "Prufrock". As Hugh Kenner says, "'Prufrock' begins somewhere in its own epigraph, and uncoils through adverbial clauses of dubious specificity past imperatives of uncertain cogency to a 'do not ask'."⁶ As does The Waste Land,⁷ the poem opens with an "initial firm show of business"⁸ -- Let us go then, you and I" (my emphasis) -- which "dissolves on inspection"⁹ into indecision and fear. This "firm show" seems to be a response to the message of the epigraph from Dante:

If I thought my answer was given to someone who could ever come back to the world, this flame would cease trembling; but since, if what I hear is true, no-one ever came back alive from this depth, I answer you without fear of infamy.¹⁰

The predominant feeling of the passage -- fear -- reaches its

⁶
Hugh Kenner, p. 50.

⁷
Ibid.

⁸
All quotations from "Prufrock" are taken from Select-
ed Poems: T.S. Eliot (London: Faber, 1961), pp. 11-16.

⁹
Hugh Kenner, p. 50.

¹⁰
This translation is taken from Jonathan Raban's The Society of the Poem (London: Harrap, 1971), p. 12.

climax in the line "Oh, do not ask, 'What is it?'" (11), but is nevertheless built up from the third line. After the purposeful opening (which gives us our first hint Prufrock regards only one side of himself the real "me" and the other side as the detached and objective "you"), Prufrock breaks into a description of the evening:

When the evening is spread out against the sky
Like a patient etherised upon a table . . . (2-3)

The second of these lines distorts an apparently emotionless image into a much more portentous and emotion-charged one. And we realize that, by the very fact of observing his surroundings, Prufrock loses his hold upon his 'purpose'. For he is thus laying his mind open to the danger of expressing what he sees in terms of his own emotions. The evening is thus suddenly personified as a patient engulfed by ether. The use of "table" (3) in this context prefigures the later association of tables with cannibalism. The patient is probably visualized, therefore, as being devoured by the ether. The fear generated by this almost surreal image suggests that Prufrock has put himself in the place of the patient/evening.

As though sensing the danger of developing the image further, Prufrock attempts to avoid it by repeating, less firmly this time, "Let us go" (4). But immediately his 'purpose' becomes undermined by the melancholy observation, "through certain half-deserted streets" (4). And again the melancholy image distorts into an infinitely more distressing

one. The streets, we discover, are "muttering retreats" (5) for "restless nights" (6) (my emphases):

Let us go, through certain half-deserted streets,
 The muttering retreats
 Of restless night in one-night cheap hotels
 And sawdust restaurants with oyster-shells . . .
 (4-7)

In this 'anaesthetized' syntax it characteristically becomes the nights which are active: they are spending rather than being spent. The nights and the restaurants, syntactically, are the ones in retreat, although it is Prufrock's identity, fused with these 'objects', which is really in retreat. But, by vivifying these inanimate phenomena, Prufrock betrays his feeling of being at their mercy. At this point the picture, which had been merely rather sordid and vaguely worrying, takes a new focus:

Streets that follow like a tedious argument
 Of insidious intent
 To lead you to an overwhelming question . . . (8-10)

Now the threat of this landscape, which had been only latent, surfaces. The tedious argument of the streets suddenly holds "insidious intent" (9). And this intent to Prufrock seems inexorable; it leads inescapably to the "overwhelming question" (10). The fact that this question is "overwhelming" reveals Prufrock's inability either to resist or to cope with it. Prufrock's fears and anxieties are exposed. And, of course, the ego protects itself against this assault; the section thus ends as it began -- with a defensive purposefulness: "Oh, do not ask, 'What is it? / Let us go and make our

visit." (11-12)

This firm direction holds dangers in itself, however. The remembrance of his 'purpose' -- the visit -- introduces the reason for his 'going'. The two-line refrain which follows is set apart from the rest of his thoughts:

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

Here the picture of the women moving to and fro, talking of 'Culture', illustrates Anne Bolgan's point about seeing something "in relation". Since the women are seen "in relation" to Michelangelo, Prufrock sees them not only "more clearly" but also "in a different light".¹¹ The incongruity of their conversation, or rather its ironic appropriateness, reveals the horror these women hold for Prufrock. In two lines we catch a glimpse of the glibness and complacency of parlour-room conversation, from which Prufrock feels excluded, and of which at the same time he is so scornful.

Reviewing these opening lines, we can see how four factors (rather than Humphrey's "three") "control the association".¹² For, although the memory, the senses and the imagination do guide the direction of Prufrock's thought-stream, the demands of the ego's defensive system must first be met. Thus we may say that it is the defensive system

¹¹
Anne Bolgan, p. 40.

¹²
Robert Humphrey, p. 43.

which determines ultimately the direction of the thought-stream, leading it into new channels when the threat to the ego's equilibrium becomes acute. However, an examination of the three other influences is pertinent. For, although Prufrock seems not to be remembering specific scenes or episodes, the memory of streets, nights, hotels and restaurants such as these is the sine qua non for his trains of thought. The senses of sight (streets, hotels, restaurants), smell (ether, sawdust), sound (muttering, argument), and even taste (oyster-shells) are clearly a guiding force, though it must be noted that these are probably imagined. It is the imagination which, second only to the defences, is the moving force of the whole sequence. In fact, because of the hallucinatory nature of the landscape, a case could be made in support of the idea that the sequence is phantasy.

The section following seems to have little connection with the two-line portrait which precedes it: "In the room the women come and go / Talking of Michelangelo. (13-14). Yet it is surely significant that its subject or "state of feeling"¹³ is fog:

The yellow fog that rubs its back upon the window-panes,
The yellow smoke that rubs its muzzle on the window-panes

¹³
Hugh Kenner, p. 64.

Licked its tongue into the corners of the evening,
 Lingered upon the pools that stand in drains . . .
 (15-18)

The probable association is with the 'fog' of the women's thoughts; and, since fog engulfs, the implication is that the women also threaten Prufrock with engulfment.* That this is so is possibly substantiated by Prufrock's inability to let his mind dwell upon the women's image. Their danger, it would seem is too pressing. We know at any rate, from the two-line interjection (13-14) that they are at least part of the cause of the fear in the first twelve lines. Hence it seems plausible that their image should be projected¹⁴ onto the next psychic scene. It may not be over-ingenious, in fact, to see a connection between the women and the personification of fog as a cat. It would perhaps be apposite to note here William James's remark that "no state of the brain can be supposed instantly to die away. If a new state comes, the inertia of the old state will still be there and modify the result accordingly."¹⁵ Hence each new thought is never quite disconnected from the previous one, for, as the new

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"Projection" is "the process by which specific impulses, wishes, aspects of the self, or internal objects are imagined to be located in some object external to oneself." (Charles Rycroft, A Critical Dictionary, pp. 125-126.)

15

William James, "Stream of Consciousness", in The Nature of Human Consciousness, ed. R.E. Ornstein (San Francisco: Freeman, 1973), p. 162.

thought arises, "'the traces and echoes' of the ideas aroused still linger"¹⁶. The link between the two-line refrain and the opening of the 'fog' sequence thus becomes less obscure:

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

The yellow fog that rubs its back upon the window-
panes . . . (13-15)

In this intensely physical and vivid description of a fog as cat, the first hint is given of Prufrock's repulsion by physical immediacy, and, since we have tied the image to the women, especially by female intimacy. The third line of the passage, with its further delineation of the 'cat', is suggestive, in the image of the tongue exploring its territory, of the pervasiveness of the women's chatter in Prufrock's imagination. At some level of consciousness the women's talk is connected with unhealthiness, and the far-reaching tongue is pictured lingering "upon the pools that stand in drains" (18) (my emphasis). (This association adumbrates, perhaps, the castration anxieties that Prufrock reveals more overtly later on.^{*}) At this point the associations made between the 'cat' and the women become more threatening, as the links made in the pre-conscious system rise too near the surface. (For it is significant that Prufrock is able to think about the women only by making them the undercurrent

¹⁶
Maud Bodkin, p. 31.

to another reverie.) Thus, shying away from the repellent image he has formed, Prufrock makes a "sudden leap" (20) and transforms the 'alley cat' into a harmless house pet:

And seeing that it was a soft October night,
Curled once about the house and fell asleep. (21-22)

The next line also constitutes a "sudden leap", although its introduction of the general subject of time is probably precipitated by the penultimate line of the last section: "And seeing that it was a soft October night" (21) (my emphasis). Also, since Prufrock is now, presumably, physically approaching the tea party, the question of whether there is time for retreat may well be in his mind. Considering, then, the time between October and December (middle age and old age), Prufrock now tries to integrate his feelings about the cat/fog/women into a larger context:

And indeed there will be time
For the yellow smoke that slides along the street . . .
(23-24)

But yet again some irrepressible impulse insists upon his lingering over the physical image: "Rubbing its back upon the window-panes . . ." (25). And, to escape the potentially "overwhelming" image, he chants the reassuring, abstract phrase, "There will be time, there will be time" (26). Now the particular problem of the cat/woman becomes more generalized: "To prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet" (27). Prufrock is clearly attempting to bolster his confidence before entering the "room" where the women "come and

go". But here, instead of a woman's or a cat's face, we have, generally, "faces". It is for this reason that the ego allows the problem to be stated a little more directly. But it is significant that Prufrock still attaches the problem to a universal "you", thus defensively projecting his problems onto a wider sphere. And, since a generalized statement usually defuses the threat of a particularized one, the next five lines swing between the general and the particular:

There will be time to murder and create,
 And time for all the works and days of hands
 That lift and drop a question on your plate;
 Time for you and time for me,
 And time yet for a hundred indecisions . . . (28-32)

After his admission of anxiety in the lines, "there will be time / To prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet" (26-27), Prufrock buffers himself with the stock cliché, "There will be time to murder and create" (28). The less all-embracing, but still general, assertion which follows -- "And time for all the works and days of hands" (29) -- appears at first to be merely a restatement of the previous line; but, with its completion in the next line -- "That list and drop a question on your plate" (30) -- it suddenly, and retroactively, takes on new significance. The line reveals that, whatever evasive action he takes, Prufrock cannot steer his thought away from the fears that are haunting him, the fear of engulfment, annihilation, or murder by others. For, although Prufrock again expresses his thought in the

form of a universal "you", the meaning is clear: all the works and days of hands (attached to the strangling or embracing arms) exist simply to drop a question on his plate. And Prufrock, it seems, is helpless against this 'persecution'.

In reaction against this potentially distressing line of thought, Prufrock returns to a bland, essentially meaningless, phrase -- "Time for you and time for me" (31) -- which does, however, recall the "you and I" of the opening line. This time the repetition conveys a vague tedium which adumbrates the imminent decline into safe and sexless banality. As if in response to this tedium, as though, that is, Prufrock is on the verge of recognizing the weight of time upon him rather than its promise, his next thought makes a curious, but characteristic, reversal.¹⁷ Time holds for him not the possibility of a hundred decisions, but, rather, a hundred indecisions. Then, in reaction to the negative charge that generates, the next line begins with a weak attempt at grandeur -- "a hundred visions" -- which is immediately undercut by the bathetic addition -- "and revisions" (33). The addition of two letters to "visions" invests the

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"Reversal" is "a defence mechanism which exploits the possibility of reversal", "so that sadism can change into masochism, voyeurism into exhibitionism, etc., the reversal being usually, though not always, from active to passive." (Charles Rycroft, A Critical Dictionary, p. 143.)

whole line with absurdity. But this, of course, is Prufrock's intention; by thus qualifying each proposition he can avoid committing himself in any way. He cannot grant himself even a moment of decisiveness or dignity; for, if he deflates himself, we infer, there is little chance that others will surprise him with a like gesture. The concluding line of the section -- "Before the taking of a toast and tea" (34) -- seems to follow from his realization of what all his grandiose thoughts have been preparing him for: a tea party at which the main topic of conversation is Michelangelo.

The ritualistic "toast and tea" is a self-evident stimulus for the two-line refrain which follows: "In the room the women come and go / Talking of Michelangelo" (35-36). The appearance of the women takes exactly the same, ritualistic form, and, here as before, Prufrock does not allow his mind to dwell upon them. He moves on instead to his previous theme, but this time, understandably, with a more perceptible undercurrent of sexual anxiety. In its attempt to escape from the resurgence of the women into consciousness, Prufrock's mind repeats a phrase which we remember from the previous stanza:

And indeed there will be time
To wonder, 'Do I dare?' and 'Do I dare?' (37-38)

But, as Prufrock has shown us in the 'fog' sequence, his evasive action has very little success. Hence the 'daring' of the above line becomes linked to the women also. This time the

universal 'you' has been replaced by a personal "I", but the courage of that "I" is immediately undermined by the second "'Do I dare?'". For the hesitation revealed makes the question merely rhetorical; again Prufrock allows himself no opportunity for commitment. Now, in order to justify the implicit denial of his question, Prufrock, reminded by the theme of time, ponders his own time of life, and sets in motion another downward spiral: "Time to turn back and descend the stair" (39) (my emphasis). Leonard Unger claims that "the stairs serve as the occasion or point of reference for a particular experience of awareness -- . . . a self-awareness."¹⁸ The stairs, in other words, act as the scene for the stares of other people.* (Unger maintains, in fact, that it is "the mind, or the awareness, for which all the other images exist."¹⁹) Prufrock's impulse to retrace his steps is immediately checked, therefore, by the vision of himself descending the stairs. The sight, he believes, would 'prove' his indignity to others:

Time to turn back and descend the stair,
 With a bald spot in the middle of my hair --
 (They will say: 'How his hair is growing thin!')
 My morning coat, my collar mounting firmly to the chin,
 My necktie rich and modest, but asserted by a simple pin --

18

Leonard Unger, "T.S. Eliot's Images of Awareness", in T.S. Eliot: The Man and his Work ed. A Tate, (New York: Delacorte, 1966), p. 207.

19

Ibid., p. 204.

(They will say: 'But how his arms and legs are thin!')
(39-44)

The stairs, then, being the setting for "a troubled encounter between a man and a woman"²⁰, are of pivotal importance in this scene. In his own eyes, Prufrock has already 'descended' into paltriness, sexlessness and absurdity. The impulse to "turn back" prompts a distressing appraisal of himself as subject and object of exterior inspection. And, although he tries to accord himself a measure of dignity here, in the face of imagined ridicule, it is through 'their' eyes that Prufrock sees himself most forcefully: "With a bald spot in the middle of my hair -- / (They will say: 'How his hair is growing thin!')" (40-41). Here the undercurrent of sexual anxiety mentioned earlier comes to light in Prufrock's concern over his glabrousness. It is the words "turn back" which prompt this vision of himself literally from the rear, and it is that vision which prompts the more inclusive one which follows:

My morning coat, my collar mounting firmly to the chin,
My necktie rich and modest, but asserted by a simple
pin --
(They will say: 'But how his arms and legs are thin!')
(42-44)

The diction of these lines is suggestive of Prufrock's later visualization of himself as a frail-legged insect. The 'objectivity' is gained, of course, by reason of his feelings

all already, known them all -- / Have known the evenings, mornings, afternoons" (49-50). Here the repetition gives a new perspective on time -- its tedium and repetitiveness. Prufrock seems to be on much safer ground, but with the line "I have measured out my life with coffee spoons" (51) a note of despair steals in. The image reveals Prufrock's fear of being meted out as food, and as a particular kind of food -- sugar. He apparently feels that he is being turned into sugar by and for the consumption of the all-female gathering*. This fear gives rise to an "invasion of awareness"²² of the reason for his presence at the tea party. Ironically, he is reminded of a phrase from the beginning of Twelfth Night: "If music be the food of love, play on" (I, i, 1):

I know the voices dying with a dying fall
Beneath the music from a farther room.
So how should I presume? (52-54)

Since he is the "food of love", Prufrock asks, then how could he begin? Such rationalizations are designed to justify his fear of action.

Since the rationalization is not sufficient to sustain the defence, however, Prufrock seeks to strengthen it by mulling over the reasons for his enchainment in self. He begins, as before, with a declarative chant, which radiates boredom (as before), but also, this time, the conviction that

he knows all that there is to know, and that the sum of that knowledge emerges as imprisonment:

And I have known the eyes already, known them all --
The eyes that fix you in a formulated phrase . . .
(55-56)

In the reassurance that there are no new paths of knowledge to be explored, there is comfort for the ego. The futility of trying is 'proven'. Continuing with his complaint, Prufrock sees imprisoning words in others' eyes. In fact, the phrase is so constructed that it seems to be the eyes which form the words and not the mouth. Thus, it would seem, Prufrock is afraid even to name that devouring part of the body, the mouth*. These words pinion him because they limit and define; and this 'formulation' so terrifies Prufrock that he identifies with a speared insect, fatally wounded, as it were, at the core:

And when I am formulated, sprawling on a pin,
When I am pinned and wriggling on the wall . . .
(57-58)

The fear conveyed by the image is unmistakable: Prufrock sees himself castrated by a spear-like tongue*. It also, however, suggests another light in which Prufrock views himself. He views his role as that of a 'fly on the wall', listening, but, preferably, unseen. But noticed and 'exposed', then how could he begin, he asks, "To spit out all the butt-ends of my days and ways?" That he could not do so, as a fly on the wall, is ignored. The voyeur does not participate in what he sees. The logic crumbles in the desperate 'ifs and butts'

of his thoughts. This is not to say that Prufrock's fear is imagined: it is pressingly real, as his characterization of his possible contribution as "butt-ends" reveals. By thus debasing the value of what he could say, Prufrock discloses his need to use any and all means to protect himself. The coarseness and violence of the image -- "To spit out all the butt-ends . . ." (60) (my emphasis) -- perhaps precipitates the rather mild "And how should I presume?" (61)

The element of sexual fear which ran as a strong undercurrent through this last stanza becomes much more overt in the next. Now, in place of the "eyes", Prufrock turns his thoughts to "arms"; in other words, from a consideration of the soul Prufrock turns to a consideration of the body (represented by the 'white' and 'black' of his imagery). At first the arms are described merely as passive objects: "Arms that are braceleted and white and bare" (63). Passivity is thus equated with goodness -- "white" -- and vulnerability -- "bare". Eventually, however, the arms assume a curious independence of movement: "Arms that lie along a table or wrap around a shawl" (67). In this image the arms have become enclosed in a kind of soft armour. What happens in the interim to effect this transformation? First comes the revelation that the arms are not, in fact, "bare" (that is to say, vulnerable); rather, they are "downed with light brown hair" (64). Hair is strongly associated with sexual potency and thus aggression; and there is a further association with the previous

cat image (since cats have fur^{*}). Thus, since Prufrock is "bald" (that is to say, impotent), this "hair" poses a threat. There is also a suggestion, in the "braceleted" of the previous line and the "hair" of this line, of the phrase in Donne's poem "The Relic": "A bracelet of bright hair about the bone" (6). Now, if the line carries the sexual connotations that it seems to, this would be sufficient to distort the 'good', pure image into the 'bad', sexual one^{*}. In the lines, "Is it perfume from a dress / That makes me so digress?" (65-66), Leonard Unger perceives "a female presence which is repulsive in its physical immediacy."²³ The "physical immediacy" of the arms constitutes an unwelcome invasion of awareness to Prufrock. The sanctity of selfhood is polluted by too close a physical presence. Hence, the arms assume a chilling independence of movement. When, later, the arms "[throw] off a shawl" (107) as an accompaniment to the words, "That is not it at all" (109), they take on a frank hostility to Prufrock. Here the section ends with the two phrases used in the previous stanza, brought together as final 'proof':

And how should I presume?
And how should I begin? (68-69)

The five lines which follow express what Prufrock has earlier termed "the butt-ends of [his] days and ways" (60):

Shall I say, I have gone at dusk through narrow streets

²³

Leonard Unger, p. 224.

And watched the smoke that rises from the pipes
 Of lonely men in shirt-sleeves, leaning out of
 windows? . . .
 I should have been a pair of ragged claws
 Scuttling across the floors of silent seas. (70-74)

The first three lines, in response to the questions which formed the climax to the last stanza, offer a cameo of what Prufrock considers his 'real experience'. It begins with the rhetorical "Shall I say . . .?" (to which the answer is an obvious negative). For his is an experience, he feels, which cannot be communicated, at least not to the women of the parlour-room. For 'their' experience is confined to those rooms, while his is typified by "narrow streets" where "smoke . . . rises from the pipes / Of lonely men in shirt-sleeves, leaning out of windows" (70-72). These "lonely men in shirt-sleeves" are, says Kenner, "Prufrock's image of lyrical self-sufficiency, his proof (supposing he mentions them to the lady) of his having crossed some frontier beyond her experience".²⁴

As Prufrock imagines this scene, he recalls the 'reality' of the opening scene in the monologue. And, because his 'real' experience is outside the parlour room, the resulting isolation becomes part of his 'real' experience too. This isolation is betrayed in his characterization of the men as "lonely", for it is his own feelings of loneliness which are projected onto those "men". Then, as if realizing

what he has done, Prufrock admits: "I should have been a pair of ragged claws / Scuttling across the floors of silent seas" (73-74). Kenner comments: Prufrock "suddenly imagines how, from the [lonely men's] elevation, he would look scuttling by in the streets: like a crab at the bottom of a pool . . . -- not even a full crab, just the claws and the scuttle."²⁵ In characteristic fashion, the second line debases the wish expressed in the first. The wish seems to be not only to escape the noisy rooms 'they' inhabit to a noiseless, more primitive existence, but also to escape his own endless and obsessional discussion with self, the effort to maintain equilibrium.

Influenced by the seductiveness of the "silent seas" conjured by his imagination, Prufrock, returning his attention to the scene around him, views it more amiably: "And the afternoon, the evening, sleeps so peacefully!" (75) But again Prufrock cannot resist a "digression", and begins to dramatize the evening as a cat:

Smoothed by long fingers,
Asleep . . . tired . . . or it malingers,
Stretched on the floor, here beside you and me. (75-77)

With the introduction of the cat imagery and its associations -- the "long", grasping "fingers" (attached to those worryingly active "arms") -- a third, 'voyeuristic', element is introduced. The cat/evening forms a third with the man and the

woman, creating a species of ménage à trois*. This imagery and its associations cause the picture to distort slightly and Prufrock is again reminded of his distress: "Should I, after tea and cakes and ices, / Have the strength to force the moment to its crisis?" (79-80) The enervation of the cat/woman/evening begins to sap his own energy. But, although he does not belong in this soft, female, feline lifestyle -- his is one of discipline, he feels -- his own necessarily comes to nothing:

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 -- . . . (81-83)

The movement of this section is easily discerned: for a moment Prufrock feels lulled by his reverie in the quiet of the afternoon; then the woman invades his thoughts in the guise of a cat; her presence reminds him that his comfort is only temporary, for he finds the environment debilitating; he prefers the physical debilitation and spiritual strengthening of fasting and prayer; but even this is ultimately futile -- greatness is beyond his grasp.

The line "I have seen my head (grown slightly bald) brought in upon a platter" (82) suggests another significant reversal. Earlier, as we have seen, Prufrock has personified his surroundings and 'objectified' himself; that is, he has viewed himself from the outside as an inanimate

nal" -- inevitable and inescapable. He feels mocked by the real or imagined "snicker" with its suggestion of profanity and prurience. Prufrock's climactic admission -- this is the only time he specifically admits his fear -- is affirmed in a manner which implies that this is all that needs to be said, as in fact it is, fear being perhaps the most comprehensive of emotions.

The section following takes up the thread from the previous passage: "should I . . . / Have the strength to force the moment to its crisis?" (79-80) Since all his thoughts revolve around this potential "crisis", he must keep returning to and 'worrying' it. Having secured a justification for his lack of courage in the prophet/Footman sequence, Prufrock turns his attention to a new line of justification:

And would it have been worth it, after all,
 After the cups, the marmalade, the tea,
 Among the porcelain, among some talk of you and me,
 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 . . .
 (87-93)

In considering the danger of misunderstanding and the resultant wastage of effort, Prufrock builds up a picture of the practical impossibility of reaching his "crisis" (which we assume to be ostensibly a proposal of marriage). First he repeats the tedious ritual of the afternoon -- "the cups,

the marmalade, the tea" (88) -- then introduces a new element: the china is brittle, the talk is brittle, and the "crisis" he speaks of would do violence to the setting. The incongruity of this violence is accentuated in the image of the teeth snapping into a smile: "To have bitten off the matter with a smile" (91). And would it be worth while, Prufrock asks himself, to break the "porcelain" if the act of violence could effect nothing? To "[squeeze] the universe into a ball" (92) would entail creating the illusion of purpose and direction where neither exists. The allusion to Marvell's "To his Coy Mistress" in this line has an ironic aptness, since the unswervable drive in that poem is here translated into meandering fluctuations of feeling. In Prufrock's mind the projected scene takes on an almost surreal quality, culminating in the form of his "overwhelming question":

To say: 'I am Lazarus, come from the dead,
Come back to tell you all, I shall tell you all' --
(94-95)

Even to himself Prufrock cannot phrase his "question" as a question. And, though it starts with brave panache, his purpose soon falters with the repetition "'Come back to tell you all, I shall tell you all'" (95). Further, the fact that these lines will never be uttered implies that Prufrock will never, in fact, "come from the dead". He has driven himself into the inanimate in his images and allotted the outside world his portion of animacy. But in this

cushioned atmosphere, Prufrock is sure, his hearer is buffered against all assaults. Thus any attack is pointless:

If one, settling a pillow by her head,
Should say: 'That is not what I meant at all.
That is not it, at all.' (96-98)

Frightened by the impenetrable complacency of his 'hearers', Prufrock sees rejection as inevitable. That this rejection may be of a sexual nature is suggested by Prufrock's use of the word "pillow" when 'cushion' would be more appropriate.* In the imagined scene, his repetition betrays uncertainty, while hers conveys a frightening, unshakeable certainty.

With his thoughts travelling over familiar ways, Prufrock begins his recapitulation, reviewing the images which symbolize his 'two worlds':

After the sunsets and the dooryards and the
sprinkled streets,
After the novels, after the teacups, after the
skirts that trail along the floor -- . . .
(100-101)

And, seeing no possibility of reconciling his 'two worlds' (spirit and flesh), Prufrock exclaims: "And this, and so much more" (103). There is a whole sector of his experience which can never be assimilated, or at least not if he surrenders to one 'world' at the expense of the other. But, even to himself, Prufrock is unable to formulate his feelings, and thus bring them under control -- "It is impossible to say just what I mean!" (104) -- except suggestively in images: "But as if a magic lantern threw the nerves in patterns on a screen" (105). In this image Prufrock again displays his

ability to see himself exposed for objective view; and such exposure, he feels, is inevitable in the buffered and claustrophobic world of the women:

Would it have been worth while
 If one, settling a pillow or throwing off a shawl,
 And turning toward the window, should say
 'That is not it at all
 That is not what I meant at all'. (105-109)

The lady's words irrevocably exclude Prufrock from entering her world.

The transitions in this stanza are born from the emotion of panic. Still mentally and emotionally reeling from the horrifying 'proposal' scene, Prufrock here becomes uncharacteristically inarticulate. To steady himself he begins with a familiar chant:

And would it have been worth it, after all,
 Would it have been worth while . . . (99-100)

Then, holding on to the steady rhythm, Prufrock begins to enumerate the 'evidence' which forbids his imagined action:

After the sunsets and the dooryards and the
 sprinkled streets,
 After the novels, after the teacups, after the
 skirts that trail along the floor -- . . .
 (100-101)

At this point the rhythm breaks down into two desperate ejaculations:

And this, and so much more? --
 It is impossible to say just what I mean! (103-104)

Prufrock is trying to synthesize the feelings aroused by the imagined scenario, and they burst into flame in this terrifying image: "But as if a magic lantern threw the nerves in

patterns on a screen" (105). The lantern is "magic" because it represents an uncontrollable, mysterious external force; and the force is not only hostile but irresistible. Such exposure through action is unbearable to Prufrock. Thus, he concludes, the unbearable cannot be borne, especially if the attempt would be met with rejection.

The final section opens with a bold éclat: "No! I am not Prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be" (111). Attempting to break free of the stifling 'roomscape' and its hostile forces, Prufrock rallies with a declaration of certainty equal to the woman's. But since, in his admitting that he is not Prince Hamlet, there is a certain irony, the certainty itself is a negative one. Hamlet after all, though indecisive, did reach his "crisis" (and since that "crisis" was a murder there is a suggestion that Prufrock wishes to murder also -- to prevent his being 'murdered'*). But, because Prufrock is saying that he is not Hamlet (that he will not murder), the eventual downward movement from the opening éclat becomes ineluctable. Comforting himself with the rationalization "nor was meant to be" (111), Prufrock initiates a more positive resistance, and investigates what he was meant to be:

Am an attendant lord, one that will do
 To swell a progress, start a scene or two,
 Advise the prince; no doubt an easy tool,
 Deferential, glad to be of use,
 Politic, cautious and meticulous;
 Full of high sentence, but a bit obtuse;
 At times, indeed, almost ridiculous --
 Almost, at times, the Fool. (112-119)

The sexual imagery of these lines, in the words "swell", "tool", "full", implies that Prufrock wishes to be relieved of the responsibility both "to murder and create" (28) (my emphasis). For he sees his role as the 'third', the observer or voyeur; in short, the Polonius figure. To be jolted out of this role by the mysterious force of the "magic lantern" is a danger too great to entertain. Referring to the quotation, we can easily detect the downward motion which undercuts, in characteristic Prufrock fashion, even this lowly role. After making his positive affirmation, Prufrock again makes the mistake of 'objectifying' himself: "one that will do / To swell a progress . . . / . . . an easy tool" (112-113) (my emphases). His function, he says, is 'adviser to the prince'; what he is doing, in fact, is placing himself in the position of the Footman whom he found to terrifying. For, in this position of safety -- at the foot of the social ladder* -- he would be valued, but would be relieved too of that all-crippling responsibility. Prufrock then reflects upon the qualities that would be his with a slight self-sneer: "Deferential, glad to be of use, / Politic, cautious and meticulous" (115-116). At this point, however, the qualities listed become even less elevated: "Full of high sentence, but a bit obtuse; / At times, indeed, almost ridiculous -- / Almost, at times, the Fool" (117-119). The rapid decline effected by each successive phrase is reflected in

the ridiculous, 'nursery' rhyme scheme. Prufrock, it would seem, cannot envisage himself even as an attendant lord with impunity. He must 'deflate' himself into an old and absurd Polonius figure.

At this low level the ego mourns: "I grow old . . . / I shall wear the bottoms of my trousers rolled" (120-121). The picture is that of "the Fool" in the previous line. Age becomes equated in Prufrock's mind with absurdity. Now Prufrock's 'daring' is reduced to such questions as "Shall I part my hair behind? Do I dare to eat a peach?" (122). The exigencies of old age not only sap away the confidence to the point at which even eating in public becomes an ordeal, but also turn any attempt at grandeur or potency -- even such a modest one as this -- into farce. This, at any rate, is what Prufrock's words communicate, though even here there emerges the suspicion that, in reassuring himself that indignity is unavoidable, there is comfort for Prufrock's ego.

The final nine lines constitute a series of postures of indignity and failure. All are single impressions, but the connecting logic is quite apparent. The fact that the first four lines all begin with "I" reveals that Prufrock is at last focussing fiercely on himself alone -- not in rooms but on 'the edge of the world'. Picturing himself as an old man in rolled-up trousers, walking the beach and hearing the mermaids just beyond his reach, Prufrock underscores the sense of his own absurdity: he has heard the mermaids singing, but

is convinced that they do not call to him. At the second mention of the mermaids, Prufrock allows his mind to play over their image:

I have seen them riding seaward on the waves
Combing the white hair of the waves blown back
When the wind blows the water white and black. (126-128)

The ethereal mermaids, though far from the image of the sensual cat, still pose a threat, however, since the implication is that they are the sirens of the Odyssey. The allusion here is to Donne's "Song" and to the line "Teach me to hear mermaids singing" (5). In "Prufrock" the line reads: "I have heard the mermaids singing, each to each" (124). The Norton Anthology adds a note to Donne's line: "Identified with the sirens whose song only the wily Odysseus survived."²⁶

The freedom and energy of the sea in the above-quoted three lines are a haunting contrast to the constriction and torpor of the 'roomscape'. But imposed upon this freedom is the domestic image of "combing" (127). The mermaids are true mermaids no longer in Prufrock's mind (if they ever were), and surface as the women. They are visualized resisting the freedom of the wind and the sea, constraining and taming the waves. Hence the sea is no longer completely "white" (good, pure) but "white and black" (128) (my emphasis): it has been corrupted by the world of the body. Now the brave "I" of the first four lines becomes an evasive "we". And Prufrock conc-

cludes that the "chambers of the sea" (129), representing the private, silent world of the psyche, will always be invaded by "human voices" (now revealed to be the mermaids) and "we drown" (131).

III

PRUFROCK: THE THEMES

In the last chapter I plotted the course of Prufrock's thoughts and emotions along the lines of conventional literary criticism, with very few incursions, that is, into the very different discipline of psychoanalysis. Since I hope to have established that Eliot's concern in the poem was to represent the workings of an individual psyche, it seems to me that it should prove enlightening to take up, from the line-by-line analysis of the previous chapter, certain themes which emerged there and to attempt another perspective using psychoanalytic knowledge. We may then come to a more precise understanding of the preoccupations of the poem's eponymous hero which have thus far eluded us.

First, however, it should prove helpful to record and consider what the literary critic Hugh Kenner has to say on this subject. Nowhere does Kenner specifically postulate the theme of "Prufrock", but he does say this:

The theme of Portrait of a Lady, as of most of the early poems, is self-sufficiency threatened . . . [I]t is supposed to be propped up by the very social rituals which provide, in the poem, the occasion for its being undermined. The Eliot character feels that he needs to preserve the inviolacy of self, and simultaneously feels that he needs sympathy from others whom he cannot reach and who cannot decorously

reach him. Shall we surrender decorum? Where two or 1
more are gathered together it is the condition of life.

That Prufrock feels his self-sufficiency to be threatened is clearly true. To explore this theme fully, however, we must discover the ways in which this threat to "the inviolacy of self" is revealed in the poem. In order to do this, I shall begin once more at the beginning and work progressively through the poem in an attempt to discern, from the language of the poem, the nature of Prufrock's sensibility.

The first emotions we encounter in the poem -- indecision and fear -- lead towards and emanate from the "overwhelming question" (10), but they are first projected² onto the threatening landscape. As noted above (page twenty-four), the streets "mutter" and hold "insidious intent". These threats are, Prufrock feels, aimed directly at him; and the threat is that they will prove "overwhelming". The use of this word is the first indication that Prufrock feels his very identity to be in "question". For Prufrock, we begin to see, the whole world is "overwhelming".

Prufrock makes the landscape "overwhelming" by allotting it emotions which properly belong to people. He transforms

¹
Hugh Kenner, p. 30.

²
See page twenty-seven above for a definition of projection.

the evening by personification into a patient engulfed by ether, and, as I pointed out above (page twenty-three), Prufrock seems to identify with the patient. This fear of engulfment is the second indication that Prufrock feels his identity to be in danger. He fears losing consciousness, being swamped by everything which is not him. Such a conclusion is suggested by the fact that, in Prufrock's 'anaesthetized' syntax, it is the nights which are spending him rather than the other way around. There is even the suggestion, since Prufrock identifies with the 'evening', that he feels himself to be indistinguishable from his surroundings. Kenner says:

. . . the whole of Bradley's metaphysic emanates from his denial that the dichotomy of observer and observed is anything but a late and clumsy abstraction, of limited usefulness, crassly misrepresenting the process of knowing. The streets, the yellow fog, the drains, the coffee spoons are Prufrock; the "evenings, mornings, afternoons" are Prufrock, as much so as the voice which says, "I have known them all already, known them all."³

Prufrock thus feels himself to be at the mercy of everything outside his own consciousness: he is the passive object for the world's sport. Indeed, he feels his identity being sucked away by what he sees.

The fact that these opening lines (1-12) seem phantastical and hallucinatory reveals that Prufrock is living in a world in which only his thoughts are 'real'. He seems to

³
Hugh Kenner, p. 49.

feel disconnected from the way his 'outer' self behaves (the self that he dubs "you"). Indeed, he views this 'outer' shell of his personality as an object in just the same way that he does the rest of the external world and the people in it. In other words, he "derealizes"⁴ everything except for the small core of being where his thoughts and feelings exist.

The 'fog' section, beginning at line fifteen, has previously been explained as a reification⁵ of the woman as a cat (see page twenty-seven). It thus appears that Prufrock can think about persons, or at least as in this case woman, by making them phantoms of his imagination. It follows from this that Prufrock regards other people, or, again, at least the opposite sex, as a completely different species. He thinks of them, that is, as animals to which he is the natural prey (82). Here, in the depiction of the cat/woman as fog, Prufrock again betrays his dread of being engulfed, swallowed up or devoured. And the fact that Prufrock is compelled to transpose the women from a physical 'presence' to an insubstantial phenomenon (fog) reveals his fear of physical intimacy. Any-

⁴
"Derealization" is "the symptom which leads the patient to complain that the world seems unreal." (Charles Rycroft, A Critical Dictionary, p. 33.)

⁵
"Reification" is "the process of treating concepts as though they were things." (Charles Rycroft, A Critical Dictionary, p. 140.)

thing physical is direct, and Prufrock can relate 'truly' with the world only through his phantasy life.

The first real indication that Prufrock has split his being into an 'inner' and 'outer' self is given in the line: "To prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet" (27). It is significant, of course, that people are here characterized merely as "faces": their integrity, reality and substantiality is thus implicitly denied. Now, because these "faces" pose a constant threat (by lifting and dropping a question on his plate -- in other words by pushing him into a commitment, or even by trying to understand him), Prufrock seems to believe that they are trying to "murder" him (28). His integrity, he believes, will be destroyed by being defined, understood, "formulated" (57). He must be free, insubstantial and elusive; otherwise, he feels, he will be "grasped, pinpointed, trapped, possessed".⁶ For, in the words of R.D. Laing, "[t]o be understood correctly is to be engulfed, to be enclosed, swallowed up, drowned, eaten up, smothered, stifled in or by another person's all-embracing comprehension."⁷ Since he experiences other people's impulses as destructive, however, he seems to imagine his own on the same terms. He is in danger,

⁶ R.D. Laing, The Divided Self (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965), p. 94.

⁷ Ibid., p. 45.

therefore, not only of being 'murdered' but of 'murdering' others: "There will be time to murder and create" (28).

Hence Prufrock's tendency to depersonalize not only other people but himself too: in destroying people as people, their power to destroy is taken away.

Because Prufrock fears that other people are intent upon robbing him of his very being, by peering into his mind and grasping him at the core (see 56-58), "[1]ove is preclud-⁸ed and dread takes its place". Since the women are conceived of as 'murderous', Prufrock withdraws to the safety of his 'inner' self. Thus any direct, whole relationship with whole people is impossible. The women to him are "eyes", "arms", or even "evenings, mornings, afternoons", not whole or real people.

The fear associated with the tea party also seems to stem, in part, from Prufrock's fear of being turned into a woman*. He appears to feel that were he to allow himself to like someone he would be under a compulsion to be that person, to be swallowed up by and merged into that identity. Such loss of identity is a desire as well as a dread to Prufrock, however. On the one hand he dare not relax his vigilance over his consciousness -- note the fear which seizes him when he feels himself merging with the quiet of the afternoon (75-

80) -- while on the other hand he seems to long for such a surrender of himself. His admitted constant presence at such social rituals testifies to his need to receive "sympathy from others"⁹ but in the attempt to achieve the rapport necessary for such sympathetic interchange he fears that he will be engulfed, "or otherwise lose his identity, which has come to be equated with the maintenance of the transcendence of the self."¹⁰

This "maintenance of the transcendence of the self" is, however, shown to be impossible. Before reaching the tea party, Prufrock is assailed by an intense feeling of self-consciousness. Seeing himself as he imagines he appears to others, Prufrock feels "the inviolacy of self"¹¹ to be in jeopardy merely by being seen. In R.D. Laing's words, "the gaze or scrutiny of the other" is experienced as "an actual penetration into the core of the 'inner' self".¹² In other words, Prufrock experiences himself as transparent, able to be grasped by the mere fact of being seen. Or, as Hugh Kenner puts it, "the X-ray eyes of the silent women at the stair-head per-

⁹
Hugh Kenner, p. 30

¹⁰
R.D. Laing, p. 80.

¹¹
Hugh Kenner, p. 30.

¹²
R.D. Laing, p. 106.

ceive the insufficient reality within."¹³

Self-consciousness, of course, has two distinct meanings, and Prufrock, besides feeling the target for other people's stares, feels the target for his own unrelenting self-scrutiny. He is, again in Laing's words, "tormented by the compulsive nature of his awareness of his own processes, and also by the equally compulsive nature of his sense of his body as an object in the world of others."¹⁴

As we have seen, it is Prufrock's sense of danger to himself that prompts his desire to take flight when on the threshold of the tea party. And it is his sense of the greater danger of turning tail that causes him to overcome this impulse (since merely by being seen and assessed he would be in someone else's power and control). Having entered "the room" where "the women come and go" (13), therefore, he takes flight psychically in compensation for the impossibility of physical flight. From this retreat he observes himself as body and object along with the other bodies and objects in the room. In Charles Rycroft's words, he is "trying to escape completely from the physical world, and from the people in it. Since this is impossible [he] has no choice but to deny

13
Hugh Kenner, p. 24.

14
R.D. Laing, p. 106.

that the physical world and the real people in it have any meaning for him." ¹⁵ Since it is the 'outer' self that takes all action, that is to say, all action is false, and has no connection with the 'real' self. Thus, when faced with his "crisis" in the drawing-room, Prufrock convinces himself that nothing could be gained by such an assertion of courage. He knows the voices "dying with a dying fall"; and, because these voices have no real meaning for him, this 'knowledge' brings him only ennui:

I know the voices dying with a dying fall
Beneath the music from a farther room.
So how should I presume? (52-54)

A creative interchange of voices is thus shown to be unattainable: all the voices can do is to destroy him by fixing him "in a formulated phrase" (56). These voices, or eyes, as he calls them at this point in the poem, want to penetrate his being and drain his life's blood:

And when I am formulated, sprawling on a pin,
When I am pinned and wriggling on the wall,
Then how should I begin . . . (57-59)

Of course, by dubbing these whole people "voices", "eyes" or "faces", Prufrock is turning them into things, and thus attempting to reduce their power to destroy him. Because of this, any real, human relationship is out of the "question", since the only contact between things which would have any signif-

15
p. 82. Anxiety and Neurosis (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970),

icance would be if they collided and broke each other. But human contact, of course, would endanger the little safety he gains by isolating himself. Hence, as Rycroft expresses it, he "distrusts human contact as such and suspects the motives of anyone who makes overtures to him."¹⁶

We may say, then, that in place of the usual polarities of separateness and relatedness, in Prufrock we find the polarities of isolation and engulfment. In the section beginning at line sixty-two, we come across these revealing lines:

Is it perfume from a dress
That makes me so digress? (65-66)

In the previous chapter it was said that these lines represented an unwelcome invasion of awareness to Prufrock. It is, of course, the fact of digressing itself which proves so worrying to him. In relaxing his vigilance over self-awareness, Prufrock feels that he is laying himself open to engulfment into non-being. But, so long as he maintains his rigid isolation, and without relaxing his hold upon himself, Prufrock feels in a certain measure safe from the grasp of others.

That Prufrock feels dissociated from his body is evidenced in these lines which affirm a quasi-mystical belief in his discarnate spirituality:

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 . . . (81-83)

The process of which we have an instance here is termed, in psychoanalysis, "splitting".¹⁷ Prufrock has split his identity into a 'good', spiritual side, with which he identifies, and a 'bad', sexual side -- the part of himself which cannot be brought under control -- from which he feels alienated. This 'bad' part of himself is projected onto the people around him (whom he can bring under control only by "petrifying" or turning to stone), and the 'good' part of himself becomes the only reality. "The unembodied self", Laing remarks, "as onlooker at all the body does, engages in nothing directly. Its functions come to be observation, control, and criticism vis-à-vis what the body is experiencing and doing, and those operations which are usually spoken of as purely 'mental'."¹⁸ Laing's words perfectly describe the processes Prufrock goes through when he imagines himself standing up to announce: "I am Lazarus come from the dead" (94). He prejudges the 'action' before it has a chance to take place. That is to say, he condemns the 'action' by the manner in which he expresses it. Prufrock's use of the word "dead" corroborates Laing's assertion that the measure of safety gained by with-

17

"Splitting" is the "process (defence mechanism) by which a mental structure loses its integrity and becomes replaced by two or more part-structures." (Charles Rycroft, A Critical Dictionary, p. 156.)

18

R.D. Laing, p. 69.

drawing into the self is itself that which generates a pervasive 'dead', empty feeling, with its concomitant sensations of futility and purposelessness. It is these sensations which guide the direction of Prufrock's mental meanderings. And it is this 'dead', empty feeling which augments the threat of the 'full', alive people around him. They could, he feels, "obliterate his self completely as a gas will obliterate a vacuum".¹⁹ This 'dead' feeling carries yet another consequence: life itself comes to be experienced as unreal and dream-like. The phantasy we have been dealing with is 'real' experience to Prufrock. Such 'action' could never 'really' take place, because any action is out of the question for Prufrock. "Action is the dead end of possibility. It scleroses freedom. If it cannot be utterly eschewed then every act must be of such an equivocal nature that the self can never be trapped in it."²⁰ Again Laing's words describe Prufrock's position exactly. He avoids the act of proposing marriage completely; but in the imaginary scenario in which it takes place, the 'act' is so disguised, and of such an ambiguous character, that nothing can be concluded from it. "The act is 'what can be said of it'. But he must never be what can be said of him. He must remain always ungraspable, elusive, transcendant".²¹ What is

¹⁹
R.D. Laing, p. 77

²⁰
Ibid., p. 87.

²¹
Ibid., p. 88.

it that the woman 'says' of his imagined act? -- "That is not what I meant at all / That is not it at all." (97-98) She rejects Prufrock's judgement of the situation and thus, he feels, himself. Participation by action, therefore, is seen as impossible without damage to the self. As Laing says, he "is afraid of letting anything of himself 'go', of coming out of himself in any experience, etc., because he will be depleted, exhausted, emptied, robbed, sucked dry."²²

Thus the problem of communication becomes not a matter of merely surrendering decorum, as Kenner would have it, but of surrendering the self's integrity. To one such as Prufrock the slightest intrusion upon "the inviolacy of self"²³ entails a complete surrender of safety. Thus it is that Prufrock "exists under the black sun, the evil eye, of his own scrutiny. The glare of his awareness kills his spontaneity, his freshness; it destroys all joy"²⁴. In other words, he invests his being-in-life with death. Prufrock's hypercritical, remorseless self-scrutiny does indeed create death where there should be life.

Kenner's declaration that the theme of Eliot's early poems is "self-sufficiency threatened"²⁵ is, then, manifestly

²²
R.D. Laing, p. 83.

²⁴
R.D. Laing, p. 112.

²³
Hugh Kenner, p. 30.

²⁵
Hugh Kenner, p. 30.

true, at least in the case of "Prufrock". A corollary of this need to defend self-sufficiency has been shown to be the obviation, or the death, of action and communication. Prufrock's preoccupation with death, and all the forms it can take, emerges, in fact, as one of the most dominant themes in the poem.

Of those aspects of the death-theme which have already been mentioned, only one has thus far been directly connected (in this script) with death. This is Prufrock's fear of engulfment which is diffused throughout the poem, and here it need only be remarked that the poem opens with this concern and closes with the concern only slightly altered: "Till human voices wake us, and we drown." (my emphasis)

A second aspect of this theme revolves around Prufrock's use of "petrification".²⁶ The term "petrification" includes the processes of "depersonalization" (turning oneself and others to stone) and "derealization" (turning the world to stone). It is immediately apparent that turning a living organism into stone robs it of its life. This defensive manoeuvre, therefore, is essentially a movement toward death.

One of the more intricate forms that the death-theme assumes in the poem is Prufrock's fear of castration. The

anxiety surfaces unmistakably in the image of the speared fly on the wall (57-58), but there are many other, less obvious, ways in which Prufrock betrays this central fear. For example, when the image of the cat/woman first appears, Prufrock observes: "Licked its tongue into the corners of the evening / Lingered upon the pools that stand in drains." (17-18) The tongue is imagined exploring every inch of its territory, even the most unsanitary places. Assuming, as I have before, that the cat represents the woman, and that the evening is Prufrock ("etherised upon a table" (3)), we can see how Prufrock's belief that he is at the mercy of the woman materializes. That the tongue must be a displacement²⁷ for the penis^{*} suggests that Prufrock views the woman as 'phallic'. According to Rycroft, a "phallic woman" is "a neurotic conception of woman found in men with an aversion to women or with a masochistic, submissive attitude towards them."²⁸ Now this 'alley cat' is seen as wishing to fight, conquer and demand submission from Prufrock by 'attacking' his genitals. (For, since Prufrock is alienated from the sexual side of himself, it does not seem fanciful to infer that the unhealthy "drains" (18) represent Prufrock's genit-

27

See page twenty-one above for a definition of displacement.

28

Charles Rycroft, A Critical Dictionary, p. 117.

alia.) As implied above, Prufrock's inner self is a sado-masochistic one -- a fact which can be deduced from his compulsion to belittle both himself and others -- and the evidence shows that, despite his fear of castration, Prufrock wants to castrate himself*, that is, to make himself as sexless as possible. For, shorn of his sexuality, Prufrock would no longer be the object of the woman's unwholesome and destructive desire. The fear of losing his potency is, however, as great as the wish. Throughout the poem we are shown instances of the woman's power to sap or drain his potency; (for example, simply by "settling a pillow by her head" (96) or "throwing off a shawl" (107) the woman exhausts Prufrock's courage). This fear of depletion is so powerful, of course, because such a sapping of energy would mean losing the absolute control over himself that Prufrock protects so desperately. The desire is so great, on the other hand, because, were he castrated, there would be less need to control himself. Both are defensive ploys designed to secure safety.

A further suggestion of castration anxiety is to be found in the section in which Prufrock casts himself in the role of Polonius (111-119). For, besides being a voyeur* of the scene between Hamlet and Gertrude, Polonius was also stabbed behind the arras. The killing came once his presence had been detected, once, that is, he had been exposed. This murder parallels Prufrock's identification

of himself as a fly on the wall -- the voyeur exposed, then stabbed at the core. The 'exposure' entails distress equal to the 'stabbing' for Prufrock. In fact, being seen and being stabbed are, to him, one and the the same:

No one feels more 'vulnerable', more liable to be exposed by the look of another person than the schizoid individual . . . [to avoid this anxiety] he turns the other person into a thing, and depersonalizes his own feelings towards the thing . . . [E]very pair of eyes is in a Medusa's head which he feels has power actually to kill or deaden something precariously vital in him. He tries therefore to forestall his own petrification by turning others into stones. By doing this he feels he can achieve some measure of safety.²⁹

Thus R.D. Laing describes the dread of being annihilated merely by being visible; (for, as I remarked above, 'visible' in this sense refers to his whole being and not just his outer shell). To Prufrock, to be seen is to be understood, to be grasped is to be castrated, and castration is death to his vitality.

A third area of the death-theme resides in Prufrock's preoccupation with cannibalism. In the imagined scene in which he sees his head brought to the table on a platter, Prufrock again betrays his fear of being eaten up or devoured by the women*. It is an arresting fact that, in the section devoted to the women's arms -- the one through which sexual anxiety runs most strongly -- the arms should "lie along a

table"* (67). In characteristic fashion Prufrock has reversed the import of the table, making it the scene not for his own feeding but for being fed to others. That the annihilation and torture this entails is most closely associated with sex is evidenced by the lines: "I know the voices dying with a dying fall / Beneath the music from a farther room" (52-53). As I pointed out above (page thirty-six), the allusion is to Twelfth Night:

Duke: If music be the food of love, play on,
 Give me excess of it; that surfeiting,
 The appetite may sicken, and so die. 30
 That strain again, it had a dying fall;

Prufrock's fear, it would seem, is that, if he relaxes his vigilance over his thought-processes, he will become the music, and "so die". He will become literally "the food of love". Love itself, then, is conceived of as destructive, since it forces the self to surrender its unmitigated self-scrutiny.

Prufrock, therefore, throughout the poem, refuses to become the target for love. When he cries "I am Lazarus, come from the dead" (94) (my emphasis), he is claiming that he will survive the women's gorging. In other words, he is resisting their, and his own, 'love', or rather appetite. Hence, the imagined 'proposal' is an anti-proposal or rejection. In such a one as Prufrock everything is reversed: love becomes hate, sympathy becomes aggression, life becomes death. As

R.D. Laing remarks: "He regards his own love and that of others as being as destructive as hatred."³¹ "The other's love is therefore feared more than his hatred, or rather all love is sensed as a version of hatred"³² since it demands possession by and loss of identity to the other. It is thus entirely fitting that this scene of love, or of hatred rather, which is the poem should be shot through with the theme of death.

³¹
R.D. Laing, p. 93.

³²
Ibid., p. 45.

IV

PRUFROCK: THE STRUCTURE

My intention in this chapter is to examine the ways in which the structural format of its protagonist's thoughts reveals "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" to be a stream-of-consciousness poem. Once again I shall use Hugh Kenner's remarks on the subject as a point of reference. He describes the poem's "method of control"¹ thus: "the elements in the poem are contained by a dramatized consciousness whose associative shuttling loosely unites them".² The extent of this control, he says, is merely "to allow the protagonist himself to confess inability to sustain the heroic note".³ While both these assertions are in a limited sense true, Prufrock's thought-patterns are not quite so disunified as they at first seem.

According to Robert Humphrey, "the writer of stream-of-consciousness literature has to manage to represent consciousness realistically by maintaining its aspects of privacy

¹
Hugh Kenner, p. 122.

²
Ibid., p. 37.

³
Ibid., p. 122.

(the incoherence, discontinuity, and private implications)"; he also, however, "has to manage to communicate something to the reader through this consciousness."⁴ Thus, although "he sets out to depict what is chaotic (human consciousness at an inchoate level)", he is yet "obligated to keep his depiction from being chaotic (to make a work of art)".⁵ "Consequently, the stream-of-consciousness writer has to do two things: (1) he has to represent the actual texture of consciousness, and (2) he has to distill some meaning from it for the reader."⁶ He does the latter of these things, Humphrey states, by an "unusual reliance on formal patterns".⁷

My aim in this chapter, therefore, is to discover the ways in which Eliot accomplishes the two-fold task outlined by Humphrey. Let us consider, first, the manner in which Eliot succeeds in depicting the disordered nature of consciousness. In order to create the stimmung of conscious-

⁴ Robert Humphrey, p. 62.

⁵ Ibid., p. 85.

⁶ Ibid., p. 63.

⁷ Ibid., p. 86. These patterns are:

1. The unities (time, place, character, and action)
2. Leitmotifs
3. Previously established literary patterns (burlesques)
4. Symbolic structures
5. Formal scenic arrangements
6. Natural cyclical schemes (seasons, tides, etc.)
7. Theoretical cyclical schemes (musical structures, cycles of history, etc.)

ness, stream-of-consciousness writers make use of standard rhetorical figures. Many such usages are to be found in "Prufrock", for, as Kenner says, "the situation Prufrock dramatizes [is] a muffling of rational behaviour by rhetoric." I shall quote just one passage in illustration:

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.' (94-98)

In "'That is not . . . / That is not . . .'", we have an example of anaphora, and in "'That is not . . . at all / That is not it, at all'" (97-98) (my emphases), an instance of epiphora. Such combined use of anaphora and epiphora is termed epanaphora. Epiphora is also to be seen in "'Come back to tell you all, I shall tell you all'" (95). The first and second lines of the quotation, "'come from the dead, / Come back to tell you all'" show us enanalepsis. The second line exemplifies anacoluthon or aposiopesis. The last two lines exhibit mimesis. The third, fourth and fifth lines illustrate protasis, and the image of Lazarus is surely an example of auxesis or cathachresis.

These are just a fraction of the rhetorical devices to be found in the poem. The function of such repetitions, inversions, exclamations and twists of syntax is, of course,

to show us a mind at desperate work. In attempting to convince himself that in evasion lies the only safety, Prufrock sees himself in a dramatic light. He does this because "in a crisis a dramatic image of himself gives him a comfort the mere facts of the situation will not give him".⁹ His words, that is, "contain a higher rhetorical charge than is called for by the mere exigencies"¹⁰ of the situation. What Prufrock is doing, therefore, is not "conveying information but exhibiting the intensity"¹¹ of his despair. Or, in Eliot's own words, he is "adopting an aesthetic rather than a moral attitude, dramatizing himself against his environment . . . [T]he human motive is primarily to take in himself."¹² This species of rhetoric works, as Kenner says, in "figures of thought, not of words".¹³ These dramatic self-images, therefore, act as defensive manoeuvres. They also, of course, work to "heighten the sense of discontinuity in the privacy of psychic processes"¹⁴ by means of breaks and changes in construction.

In order to portray convincingly the privacy and disorder of human consciousness, a writer can avail himself

⁹
Hugh Kenner, p. 140.

¹⁰
Ibid., p. 120.

¹¹
Ibid.

¹²
Cited in Hugh Kenner, p. 121.

¹³
Hugh Kenner, p. 23.

¹⁴
Robert Humphrey, p. 74.

of devices such as those outlined above. The basic technique in this portrayal is, of course, the suspension of coherence and the adoption of the principles of free association. The associative network in "Prufrock" has already been explored in Chapter II of this thesis. There is, however, one further method for conveying the privacy of consciousness with which we have not yet dealt. This is the use of 'private' symbolism.

Since the symbols in "Prufrock" are used not only to achieve a measure of verisimilitude in the portrayal of consciousness, but are also a unifying device, this consideration of the symbol-system in "Prufrock" should act as a bridge in our discussion of the two-fold task of the stream-of-consciousness writer (described on pages seventy-two and seventy-three). For it is in these symbols that Prufrock's 'stream' is most effectively bound together. It is in the symbols, too, that the opposing themes of isolation and engulfment are most forcefully presented.

The import of Prufrock's private symbol-system is revealed to us only gradually as the poem progresses. The first time Prufrock sees the evening as a person, for example, we perceive that the person (Prufrock) is clearly threatened in some way, but we do not discover the exact nature of the threat until we have seen the fog/cat/woman lick "its tongue into the corners of the evening" (17). Thus, when the evening is next portrayed, and it is as a cat that it appears, we realize that the evening (the threatened Prufrock) has been merged

with its threatener. In other words, Prufrock has been engulfed by the fog/cat/woman/evening, and now looks only for a means to escape. The evening, therefore, comes ultimately to symbolize the threat of the woman.

Similarly, at the first occurrence of the animated streets, we are told of their "insidious intent", but, again, the reason for their insidiousness is not at first clear. When the streets are next dwelt upon (70), the previous association with engulfment is reversed. They now symbolize the other side of the coin -- loneliness and isolation. We discover that the association with engulfment in the first instance was due to their leading him, on that particular occasion, to a threatening situation.

Turning now to the 'ordered' side of the depiction of psychic states, we must consider in more detail Robert Humphrey's words on the subject. If the representation of human consciousness is not to crumble into incomprehensibility, he says, its private associative patterns must be presented with
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 "discipline and clarity" :

The reader demands these things, and he must have them in order to have his own undisciplined consciousness focused and in order to be able to understand and interpret. Consequently, the writer must somehow impose a pattern, or form, on his material This accounts for the unusual reliance on formal patterns which is found in the writers of stream-of-consciousness fiction.¹⁶

15 Robert Humphrey, p. 86.

16 Ibid.

To this Humphrey adds a note:

It is this highly designed quality of stream-of-consciousness fiction which sets it apart from the formlessness and chaos of much other twentieth-century fiction, especially that which springs from the naturalistic novel of the late nineteenth century. This quality also aligns stream-of-consciousness fiction closely with the resurgence of classical methods in poetry and drama. The astounding thing is that in defeating chaos, stream-of-consciousness fiction essentially has chaos as its subject matter. C.f. T.S. Eliot's Family Reunion as a counterpart in the poetic drama.¹⁷

Humphrey elsewhere argues, however, that the presentation of psychic states in verse form cannot be convincing;¹⁸ but, according to Humphrey's dictum, it might equally be argued that the discipline of verse form should be sufficient to create form from formlessness (and thus, presumably, to create a true stream-of-consciousness work). In the case in question, however, no matter how stringently constructed the verse, had Eliot not anchored his protagonist to a specific place at a specific time, the presentation of a remembering, speculating consciousness could well have proved more than confusing. For, as Humphrey has himself pointed out, the psyche is free of conventional time and space barriers,¹⁹ and can travel, therefore, to any point in history on any part of the

¹⁷ Robert Humphrey, p. 128.

¹⁸ Ibid., pp. 40-41.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 90.

globe and beyond. Thus, like the stream-of-consciousness writers, Eliot adhered to the unities of time and place. In the tea party we have an 'objective correlative' of Prufrock's situation to which we can refer in our attempt to understand the nature of his dilemma.

Humphrey lists seven formal patterns which have been used by stream-of-consciousness writers to build the framework necessary to embrace a meaningful portrayal of the human psyche (see page seventy-three above). It is my intention now to discover which of these devices Eliot utilized and to what effect. The first of these, the unities, has just been mentioned. Limiting the psychic 'action' to the space of a few miles and a few hours at most gives a point of reference from which to depart into the phantasy sequences and to which to return. The device which Humphrey lists as number two is the "Leitmotif". In "Prufrock" these recurring motifs carry the weight of symbols, and these have also been dealt with above (see pages seventy-six to seventy-seven).

The third of these devices for imposing order upon disorder is, according to Humphrey, the burlesque or parody of an established literary mode. Now, although the 'love song' is not an established literary mode as such, there have been sufficient examples of the genre to cause the irony of the title to become almost immediately apparent. No structural function could be served by such a faint literary echo, however. It is the epigraph which performs a formal as well

as a thematic function, since it warns us to expect themes far removed from love. It warns us more specifically of the impossibility of 'going back alive from these deeps', though, of course, the significance of the warning cannot be fully grasped until later in the poem.

The "formal scenic arrangements" are the last of Humphrey's seven devices which Eliot employed for structural and thematic purposes. Throughout the poem we are aware of an 'inside/outside' opposition. And, although Prufrock seems generally to identify with life outside the rooms, in two instances we are shown how the safety (through isolation) of the 'outer' world is infiltrated by the 'inner' world. The first 'streetscape' (1-22) bears the imprint of the woman's insidious intent, and the final seascape proves to be no haven from the drowning power of the "human voices". Thus even isolation is shown not to be entirely invulnerable. Even when Prufrock is able to escape successfully, however, as in the section beginning "Shall I say . . .", he finds that the alternative to life-engulfing sexuality is life-draining isolation. Throughout the poem, then, we have a dual awareness of two equally impossible alternatives by means of the 'inside/outside' scenic opposition.

The technique of montage, though not one of Humphrey's seven formal patterns, is worthy of attention here. It could, in fact, be classified under the "formal scenic arrangements" discussed in the paragraph above, since it consists of the rapid

substitution of one scene for another. The two 'women' refrains are a good example of the technique. On film one would imagine the image of the women moving to and fro being flashed across the screen in the manner of a 'cross-cut'. In the poem it represents their flashing upon the screen of Prufrock's mind. If the imagined scene is a memory, we have an illustration of both time- and space-montage. If the women are visualized moving to and fro at the same time that Prufrock is moving in their direction, only space-montage is involved. The five-line section between the first set of ellipses (70-74) certainly exemplifies both space- and time-montage, for, in saying "I have gone at dusk through narrow streets" (70) (my emphasis), Prufrock is clearly recalling a specific instance which has in some way become symbolic to him. The final example of the technique in the poem is to be found in the swift change from the 'Hamlet' sequence to Prufrock's mental picture of himself pacing a beach in rolled-up trousers (119-120). Here, also, since the scene is speculated, we are shown both a time- and a space-shift.

Leaving aside Humphrey's formal devices, I shall now discuss in general terms the manner of organisation of Prufrock's thoughts in the poem. The tendency is for Prufrock to attempt a "working through"²⁰ of each aspect of his dilemma

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"Working through" is "the process by which a [person] discovers piecemeal over an extended period of time the

within a fairly static framework. In this sense, then, the "method of control" is indeed merely "to allow the protagonist to confess inability to sustain the heroic note".²¹ The manner in which Prufrock attempts to 'work through' these problems is by asking himself unanswerable questions, so that a successful 'working through' is inevitably forestalled. By this means Prufrock evades the problem of action but reaps further insurmountable problems, as shall be seen later. This tendency endlessly to repeat insoluble problems is termed by Rycroft (citing Freud) a "repetition compulsion".²² According to Freud, this compulsion, says Rycroft, reveals "an innate drive, the death instinct, to return to the inanimate".²³ It also manifests itself as a "resistance to therapeutic change".²⁴ And thus "the compulsion to repeat operates as a 'resistance of the unconscious' which necessitates a period of 'working through'".²⁵ Unfortunately, but unavoidably, at each stage Prufrock's discussion with himself ends in a cul-de-sac with the means of entry the only means of exit.

full implications of some interpretation or insight . . . [T]he process of getting used to a new state of affairs or of getting over a loss or painful experience." (Charles Rycroft, A Critical Dictionary, p. 179.)

²¹ Hugh Kenner, p. 122.

²⁴ Ibid.

²² A Critical Dictionary, p. 141. ²⁵ Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

Structurally, then, the most substantial part of the poem consists of an accumulation of evidence by Prufrock intended to act as a kind of case in his own defence. This evidence is neatly sorted into compartments for each side of the "question". The result, of course, is on the one hand a blockage of all means of escape, and on the other an obviation of all conclusions. The feeling generated from such a relentless accretion of 'evidence' is, for Prufrock, boredom -- the feeling that all life has to offer is a series of discrete, unsyncretised and therefore meaningless events. This impression of futility and boredom is created, technically speaking, by opening each deliberative stanza with the conjunction 'and', even when the consequential logic of the 'and' is not apparent. Its prominent placing at the beginning of the stanza following the 'fog' section, for example (23), creates the necessary surprise at the lack of connective logic from the previous section. A similar salience is lent to the conjunction which begins the stanza following "I should have been a pair of ragged claws . . ." (75). From these examples of polysyndeton we receive the impression that each time Prufrock returns to his besetting problems it is with a feeling of dry despair; we sense that these fruitless thoughts have all been thought before, and will continue to be thought ad infinitum.

It is when Prufrock reaches the inevitable stalemate in these eternal debates with the self that he tries to escape the intolerable impasse by a flight into fancy. Consider, for

example, the two lines which form a climax to the "And I have known them all . . ." stanzas, and which herald the first phantasy/memory scene (70-74): "And should I then presume? / And how should I begin?" The asking of such unanswerable questions is thus just another path to despair.

Psychoanalysis terms such modes of thinking "obsessional". In Rycroft's words, the function of obsessional thinking

is to reconcile ambivalent attitudes, and it tends therefore to consist of . . . statements which tend to cancel one another out. Alternatively, all assertions may be so qualified by references to exceptions, conditions or hints as to the possibility of another and better formulation that the subject in fact avoids committing himself to them.²⁶

This, it seems to me, is the ineluctable concomitant of Prufrock's withdrawal into self. In this state his ability to act atrophies as a result of his inability either to accept, forget or resolve contradictions.

In choosing to portray a protagonist whose mind is constantly treading and retreading familiar paths of associations, and is exclusively focused upon its own problems, Eliot avoided many of the structural problems that he set himself to overcome in The Waste Land, for example. The portrayal of the kaleidoscopic consciousness of the "poet-protagonist" of that poem, which perceives itself to be "a chance correlation

or conglomerate of mutually discolorative fragments"²⁷ demanded the more intricate formal patterns that we find there, and which were discussed on page twelve above. In "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock", however, it is the depiction of the protagonist's consciousness, compulsively ratifying its own processes, which provides the poem with its chief manner of organisation. Prufrock's constant sorting and sifting of psychic 'data', that is to say, is that which gives the poem its structure.

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Conrad Aiken, "An Anatomy of Melancholy", in T.S. Eliot: The Man and His Work, ed. A. Tate, p. 201.

V

CONCLUSION

My contention throughout this thesis has been that, in "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" and The Waste Land, Eliot's primary concern was to probe the question: 'What does consciousness contain?' Humphrey has said that the exploration of consciousness demands consideration of both "the what [and] the how".¹ I have tried to reflect this by treating separately the themes of the poem ("the what"), its emotional connections, and its structure ("the how"). It must be noted that, in many ways, The Waste Land is a much fuller exposition of the 'stream-of-consciousness genre' than is "Prufrock". In a thesis of this length, however, a similar treatment of The Waste Land to the one presented here is prohibited. Consequently, it has been necessary to limit myself to the earlier and shorter poem. A few remarks can and should be made, however.

I will examine briefly a passage from The Waste Land which is a development of one from "The Burial of the Dead" (22-26). The passage I shall discuss begins:

¹ Robert Humphrey, p. 7.

Here is no water but only rock
 Rock and no water and the sandy road
 The road winding above the mountains
 Which are mountains of rock without water
 If there were water we should stop and drink
 Amongst the rock one cannot stop or think

and it ends:

If there were the sound of water only
 Not the cicada
 And dry grass singing
 But sound of water over a rock
 Where the hermit-thrush sings in the pine trees
 Drip drop drip drop drop drop
 But there is no water (331-358).

It is not my intention here to explicate the symbolism of this passage; I wish merely to consider the ways in which we are justified in considering it a depiction of consciousness.

As the steady 'thud' of the verse testifies, this is a passage to be chanted. It is an expression of the "agony in stony places" (324), and the mind which expresses it creates this parched landscape from the desolation it feels. The effect wrought by this highly rhetorical passage is, I am sure, that of making the reader or hearer feel equally parched and dry as does the protagonist. It must be stressed, however, that the intention of the "poet-protagonist" is to allow himself to be overpowered by his rhetorical creation -- the symbolic landscape. At line 345, as the imagined aridity becomes "overwhelming" ("Prufrock", 10), the chant falters to become a breathless lyrical mourning and yearning. The rhetorical charge is, however, still powerful, and carries one through to the climactic lines of the sequence:

Drip drop drip drop drop drop drop
 But there is no water .

The conditional premise "If there were water" (336) which becomes "If there were the sound of water only" (352) (both of which phrases exemplify anacoluthon and protasis) is never completed, but is finally transformed into the climactic "But there is no water" (358) (an example of apodosis). The whole passage is a piling-up of points in an argument (incrementum), but without a conclusion, for as the climactic line is designed to show no conclusion is yet possible. The impression of moral collapse is thus created by one image -- the lack of water. We are constantly reminded of this lack by the rhetoric. As an illustration of this let us look at the first five lines of the passage. These illustrate the rhetorical figure enanalepsis in a most unusual and stylised form: the last word of the first line becomes the first word of the second line; the last of the second line becomes the second of the third line; the last of the third line, the third of the fourth line; the last of the fourth line, the fourth of the fifth line. In this way the "poet-protagonist" makes the "rock", the "road", the "mountains", and the lack of "water" enclose him inescapably. I should repeat that the effects generated by the rhetoric are directed not at the reader but at the protagonist himself, since we are in a sense eavesdropping upon his thoughts. In this passage the "poet-protagonist" reveals himself in his true voice. And,

although the rhythm and tempo of the voice change, its tonality is utterly consistent. The protagonist's concerns are conveyed by means of the mountain landscape (a 'formal scenic arrangement') and its symbolic features; the intensity of his concerns by the rhetorical power of the passage.

In what ways, though, are we entitled to consider this section of verse as belonging to the 'stream-of-consciousness genre'? In the first place, there is no syntactical coherence to this passage whatsoever; it is a fine illustration of Hugh Kenner's claim that Eliot 'anaesthetizes' his syntax. It is almost pure rhetoric, with the breaks, repetitions, stresses, inversions, and overall discontinuity that that entails. Secondly, the thing perceived unites with the protagonist's state of mind to create an impressionist painting, and that impression is almost wholly emotional.

Leon Edel notes that stream-of-consciousness writers "invoke prose -- and produce poetry! What begins as an attempt to click the mind's shutter and catch the images of outer reality impinging upon it ends as an impressionist painting"². Humphrey's declaration that "trying to depict consciousness in verse" in "an impossible task"³ just does not seem to stand up to scrutiny. If he means that the conscious

²
The Psychological Novel
 (London: Hart-Davis, 1955), p. 123.

³
 Robert Humphrey,
 p. 40.

mind does not think in rhythms, he is surely wrong. The human psyche may well be, as Humphrey claims, "logically unord-⁴ered", but so is this verse "logically unordered". Its order is derived from its three prime symbols -- mountain, rock and water -- and their emotional reverberations. The emotion is sustained, but it is expressed in a tangle of rhetorical figures.

To do justice to even such a brief passage as this lies beyond the scope of this Conclusion. Here my intention has been merely to indicate the kind of attention The Waste Land still warrants. Critics tend generally to remark upon the emotional power of passages such as this, but detailed analysis of that power is still lacking, and long overdue. Doubtless, one criticism which could be levelled at this kind of approach is that, at the time of "Prufrock"'s publication, only Proust and Dorothy Richardson of the stream-of-consciousness 'school' were then writing. But examination of T.S. Eliot's poetry up to and including The Waste Land does yield remarkable evidence of his concern with the contents and processes of consciousness at a time when the limits of expressing such concerns were first being tested.

4

Robert Humphrey, p. 40.

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