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The Love Song of Jeffrey Aspern Prufrock

When T.S. Eliot, an unknown 28-year-old, published "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" in Harriet Monroe's *Poetry Magazine* in 1915, he launched a character who would become a synecdoche for the fragmented, disconnected, post-WWI modern age. Prufrock's confused and dreamlike interior landscape reflected the shifting, labyrinthine, modernist world that writers would explore for the next forty years. This halting, timorous, middle-aged, self-conscious male soon became a commonplace of twentieth-century literature.

It is the argument of this paper that Prufrock, unlike Jay Gatsby, did not spring from a Platonic conception of himself—or full-blow from the brow of his creator—but from a forebear created by the American writer whom Eliot most admired, Henry James. Because literary critics tend to deal with either poetry or fiction, there has been very little written about the relationship between these two towering innovators who bear such striking similarities. To be sure, F. O. Matthiessen did note in his groundbreaking 1935 work, *The Achievement of T. S. Eliot: An Essay on the Nature of Poetry,* "a fundamental sameness in point of view" between the two (53). And in 1979, A. David Moody wrote that "James was probably the obvious living writer for Eliot to read and study—the literary master of America and Europe. To read [James's] later fiction alongside Eliot's earlier poetry brings out the clear fact that Eliot read him not dutifully but passionately and to immense effect" (37). We know that the young Eliot also thought of James in a distinctly competitive way: in 1918 he wrote his mother: "I really think that I have far more *influence* on English letters than any other American has ever had, unless it be Henry James" (Gordon 145). Eliot titled one of his earlier poems "Portrait of a Lady"; another early Eliot poem, "Burbank with a Baedeker; Bleikstein with a Cigar," uses Jamesian language in its epigraph; and the first title of *The Waste Land* was *In the Cage,* the title of James' 1896 short story. Without a doubt, Eliot was much aware of James's towering presence.

The two writers, almost two generations apart, share some extraordinary biographical similarities. Both were raised by remarkable American families. Both attended Harvard, spent a crucial year in Paris, became heavily influenced by French literature, settled as expatriate writers in London, wrote important literary criticism, turned to drama in their later careers, became British citizens, and founded a new kind of literature marked by interior monologue and shifting points of view. After WWII, Eliot moved into the Chelsea flat on Cheney Walk, directly beneath the flat James had lived in before his death.

Both received honorary degrees from Harvard and Oxford. Both died childless in London after a long career. And as a final, ironic gesture of togetherness, were both cremated at Golders Green Crematorium.

On the other hand, though their lives overlapped by 28 years and both lived in London in the beginning years of WWI, they never met. James, essentially self-educated after his famously peripatetic young education, spoke only passable French. Eliot, a talented academic and linguist, knew many languages and spoke French, German, and Italian. James, a fiction writer and critic, wrote no poetry; Eliot, a poet and critic, wrote no fiction. All the more surprising, then, that a heretofore unacknowledged influence should be so strong.

What literary work does the following describe? The first-person narrator is a timorous, self-conscious, halting, middle-aged bachelor who, in spite of measuring out the risks, fears his words might seem "imprudent" (106). Events lead him to a "question" (108), perhaps even to "the riddle of the universe" (46)—but he recoils from asking it for fear he would be misinterpreted and rebuffed. Because he hesitates and "couldn't decide" (50), he realizes with poignant self-awareness that he is no heroic, romantic figure of old. To the extent his story has a plot, it is about his halting, ludicrously ineffective attempts at courtship. He "descends the stairs" (141), has a vision of "taking tea" (51), and imagines a voice in a "dying fall" (46). Women walk "to and fro" (130) in a large, upstairs room. The setting is a city; the narrator is not always sure of his bearings; and the work ends with the speaker living on in a sort of dreamlike half-state.

Every undergraduate would recognize in this summary "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," the groundbreaking poem that began Eliot's career. In fact, each of these details is from the novella 27 years earlier that James's called his favorite, *The Aspern Papers*. James's novella looks forward to Eliot's famous poem a generation later in three surprising ways: in its insubstantial setting, its new narrative persona, and its indefinite sexuality.

Insubstantial Setting

Dickens' rendering of the London that Pip goes up to and Howells' depiction of the New York that Basil March moves to are definite and solid enough to allow us to construct a map and walk in their protagonists' footsteps, even today. Venice, the setting of *The Aspern Papers*, provides James a different kind of backdrop. (We know that James chose Venice consciously; he tells us in his Preface that the incidents his tale is based on occurred in Florence, where he actually wrote the story.) Venice, a city of canals that has

literally been sinking for many years, lacks the solid features that define most cities: streets, sidewalks, hills, wooded areas, parks. The Venetian neighborhoods are a series of small islands, approachable primarily by a confusing network of canals whose design seems haphazard. James's unnamed narrator of the tale, an American devotee of Jeffrey Aspern, literally floats, not walks, from place to place. Huck and Jim, a contemporaneous pair, float down the Mississippi River, but we know their journey is a linear one. Out at Walden Pond, Thoreau moves constantly between land and water, but his movement between the two is intentional and directed. In Venice, no matter one's intention, one gets lost. There are simply too many confusing, insidious turnings.

Most of the action in the story takes place in an old palace "very far from the centre" (61) where the Misses Bordereau live overlooking a "clean melancholy rather lonely canal" (49). James's description of it emphasizes not what it is, but what it is *not*. It has "an air not so much of decay as of quiet discouragement, as if it had rather missed its career" (49). Mrs. Prest does not "'know why—there are no brick gables'" and observes that though it is possible to pass it on foot, "'scarcely any one ever thinks of doing so. It's as negative—considering *where* it is—as a Protestant Sunday [when nothing is open]'" (49). Its main feature is a sparsely furnished "great cold tarnished Venetian *sala*" (46). On the upper floor are a "long succession of empty rooms" (67).

When the narrator leaves in the summer evenings, his man rows him to the most well known place in the city, the Piazza San Marcos. Even without the flooding that occasionally covers the square, the paved piazza takes on a fluid character in James's tale: "the traveler will remember how the immense cluster of tables and little chairs stretches like a promontory into the smooth lake of the Piazza" (79). The huge, solid basilica becomes vague and impressionistic: "with its low domes and bristling embroideries, the mystery of its mosaic and sculpture, [it] looked ghostly in the tempered gloom" (79). Near the end of the tale the narrator suddenly finds himself standing in front of The Church of Saints John and Paul, which is about as far from the Piazza as one can be in Venice. He has no idea how he got there. In *The Aspern Papers*, places are not only empty and insubstantial, they exist in a sort of free-floating universe, physically unconnected to one another.

New Narrative Persona

To populate this insubstantial setting, James created a new kind of narrator, one very different from the Duke of Ferrara, Henry Esmond, Jane Eyre, or other nineteenth-century story-tellers. His narrator, whose sole *raison d'etre* is to communicate the story to us, has trouble communicating. When Juliana surprises him as he fumblingly tries to

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break into the secretary to retrieve the letters, he tells us he "cannot now say what I stammered to excuse myself" (125). He flees the palace and wanders aimlessly for twelve days through the small towns surrounding Venice. In the tale's second climax, when Miss Tina makes her shocking proposal of marriage, his inability to speak is even more pronounced: "'Ah Miss Tina—ah Miss Tina,' I stammered for all reply. I didn't know what to do, as I say, but at a venture I made a wild vague movement in consequence of which I found myself at the door…. The next thing I remember is that I was downstairs and out of the house" (137). At precisely the most important times, he finds himself stammering, unable to move of his own volition. He tells his gondolier to take him "'Anywhere, anywhere'" and sits "prostrate, groaning softly to [himself], [his] hat pulled over [his] brow," trying to convince himself "for an hour, for two hours" that he had not actually made love to Miss Tina to get the papers. "I don't know where, on the lagoon, my gondolier took me; we floated aimlessly" (137).

His attempt to escape the scene of his embarrassment takes him to the Lido, the skinny barrier peninsula that serves as Venice's beach. On that shifting landscape, his helplessness is only exacerbated. He flings himself down on the sand for an unknown period, then tells us: "I am far from remembering clearly the succession of events and feelings during this long day of confusion, which I spent entirely in wandering about, without going home, until late at night" (139). On his second attempt to communicate what happened, his repetitive, halting words mimic his confusing physical movements:

> I forget what I did, where I went after leaving the Lido and at what hour or with what recovery of composure I made my way back to my boat. I only know that in the afternoon…I was standing before the church of Saints John and Paul and looking up at the small square-jawed face of Bartolomeo Colleoni…. Was it before this or after that I wandered about for an hour in the small canals, to the continued stupefaction of my gondolier. (139)

In this tale, James's narrator is literally and figuratively unmoored, moving between *terra firma* and water—or between a floating gondola, propelled and directed by someone else, and the shifting sands of the Lido. It is difficult to imagine such a watery, insubstantial setting and such a dazed narrator *before* James—and easy to imagine them after Prufrock, whose outer and inner landscapes are similarly vague, fluid, and directionless. Prufrock—as his creator Eliot liked to do—wanders through the little-known parts of a city that is fully as dreamlike and shifting as James's Venice. His opening invitation is for us to wander with him through "certain half-deserted streets" that "follow like a tedious argument / of insidious intent" (3). The physical place with the

most solidity in that poem, the room where the women come and go, reminds us of the sparsely furnished Bordereau *sala,* where James's women and narrator come and go. At the end of the poem, Prufrock declares that he will "wear white flannel trousers, and walk upon the beach" (7). Like James's earlier narrator, Prufrock moves increasingly into a dazed state. He has "heard the mermaids singing," then lingers "in the chambers of the sea" with sea-girls "Till human voices wake us, and we drown" (7). Eliot's final vision is a poetic extension of the last view we have of James's narrator, who "can scarcely bear [his] loss" as he sits forlornly beneath the portrait of his beloved Jeffrey Aspern.

The very language of James's narrator echoes the circumlocutions and looping back of his physical and mental movements. One example here may suffice. As he sits in the garden "spinning theories" about the relationship between Juliana and Aspern, he says: "It was incontestable that, whether for right or for wrong, most readers of certain of Aspern's poems (poems not as ambiguous as the sonnets—scarcely more divine, I think—of Shakespeare) had taken for granted that Juliana had not always adhered to the steep footway of renunciation" (76-77). His clear, straightforward beginning ("it was incontestable") becomes so elaborately qualified ("whether for right or for wrong, *most* readers of *certain of* Aspern's poems" [emphasis mine]) as to call into doubt the "incontestable" point. The interpolated phrase within the dashes that are within the parentheses ("scarcely more divine—I think—") is confusing on two counts: does "scarcely more divine" indicate less or more divinity? And is it Aspern's poems or Shakespeare's sonnets that are "scarcely more divine"? Finally, there is the elaborately distanced, doubly negative to indicate sexual union: "had not always adhered to the steep footway of renunciation." If Prufrock finds it hard to speak to us directly ("It is impossible to say just what I mean!"), James's narrator is surely his model in prose. Both speakers are hesitant to act or speak, and then question every small action they hazard. When James's speaker offers Juliana the use of his gondola, he tells us he had "scarcely said this, however, before [he] became aware that the speech was in questionable taste and might also do [him] the injury of making [him] appear too eager, too possessed of a hidden motive" (62).

Prufrock continues to fascinate, partly because Eliot makes us see and understand the poignancy of his failed character. James's narrator similarly captures our attention and earns our sympathy. Like most first-person narrators, we see him rationalizing his failures. What makes him unique is that he is simultaneously aware that he *is* rationalizing them. He has, then, a sort of double vision throughout the story, showing us the workings of his own mind and critiquing those workings as he goes. In the middle of July, he sits in the garden waiting for something to happen—someone to appear on the balcony—and conflates Romeo and Juliet with Aspern and Juliana and then, preposterously enough, with himself and the dull, faded Miss Tina: "but Miss Tina was not a poet's mis-

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tress any more than I was a poet. This, however, didn't prevent my gratification from being great" (80). His inability to outwit his insipid, unimaginative "Juliet" is brought into sharper focus by his constant allusions to the heroic, romantic figures of the past: Orpheus, Romeo, Cassanova, Colleoni, Marcus Aurelius.

In a more concentrated fashion—in the more concentrated genre—Prufrock reveals the same double vision. He is "not Prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be; / Am an attendant lord, one that will do to / To swell a progress, start a scene or two, / Advise the prince; no doubt, an easy tool." Then, like James's narrator, his recognition and admission of his own failure makes us see him as a truly poignant figure: "a bit obtuse; / At times, indeed, almost ridiculous— / Almost, at times, the Fool" (7).

What Martha C. Nussbaum writes of James himself is true for both his 1888 narrator and Eliot's 1915 one: his "ellipses and circumnavigations of language and thought work to convey not truth but 'the lucidity of his characters' bewilderment, the precision of their indefiniteness" (149).

Indefinite Sexuality

Wendy Graham, in her 1999 book *Henry James's Thwarted Love*, writes that James "shared the culturewide panic over changing gender and professional roles" and "practiced sexual abstinence both to forestall nervous collapse and to conserve energy for his work" (1). Colm Toibin, in his superb fictional depiction of James in *The Master*, presents a figure who has strong libidinal temptations, but finds himself unable to act on them. Colleen Lamos, in "The Love Song of T. S. Eliot: Elegiac Homoeroticism in the Early Poetry," argues that Eliot "presents the dilemma of an avowedly heterosexual, homophobic writer whose work is obliquely yet significantly marked by homoerotic investments." Although Eliot rarely commented on what critics thought of his work, he "censored the only essay to appear in his lifetime that ventured a homosexual reading of *The Waste Land*" (Lamos 23). Strictly biographical matters are beyond the scope of this paper, yet it is interesting to note that the sexual orientation of both writers has been the subject for queer theorists and others for many years. What Martha Nussbaum calls the "indefiniteness" of James's characters extends to the sexuality of both his and Eliot's narrator.

Certainly neither narrator fits into the clear-cut, pre-modern categories of sexual orientation. Several critics have remarked how Prufrock metaphorically dismembers his women, focusing only on their parts: their eyes that "fix you in a formulate phrase," their "arms that are braceleted and white and bare [But in the lamplight, downed with light

brown hair!]" (5). Famously sensitive about the women talking about his bald spot and thinning hair, Prufrock knows that even his fantasy Mermaids will not sing to him.

James's earlier narrator presents a similarly ambiguous but somewhat different case. Leland Person, in *Henry James and the Suspense of Masculinity,* uses *The Aspern Papers* as an example of how James "transgenders" his desire, using ancient Juliana and dull Miss Tina to "physically mediate" his relationship with Jeffrey Aspern, the real object of his hopeless quest (125). James's narrator tells us he "had invoked [Jeffrey Aspern] and he had come; he hovered before [him] half the time." He even hears the dead poet speaking to him, cautioning patience: "'Meanwhile, aren't we in Venice together, and what better place is there for the meeting of dead friends? See how…the sky and the sea and the rosy air and the marble of the palaces all shimmer and melt together'" (73). The narrator's language, peppered with double entendres (or Freudian slips), occasionally suggests an almost comic voyeurism: "I hadn't meanwhile meant by my private ejaculation that I must myself cultivate the soil" (55), "I felt her look at me with great penetration" (61), "She had expected me to draw amusement from the drama of my intercourse with the Misses Bordereau, and was disappointed that the intercourse, and consequently the drama, had not come off" (70), and "then I could pounce on her possessions and ransack her drawers" (55). The final image the narrator leaves us with combines much of what we have learned about James's new narrative persona: he sits at his writing desk, alone, in some unknown and unconnected place, staring at Aspern's small portrait, scarcely able to bear his loss.

It is not possible or important to prove causality between literary texts. But the extraordinary similarities in setting, narrative presence, and sexuality between James's 1888 tale and Eliot's 1915 poem suggest that the later poet simply distilled and brought up to date the tale of the American writer he most admired.

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