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Arms, Voices, and an Overwhelming Question:

Modernist Answers from Stephen Dedalus and J. Alfred Prufrock

T.S. Eliot and James Joyce published the first important works of their careers within a year of each other, and both have lasted as defining works of the era. The fragmented, self-conscious monologue of Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" reveals the private turmoil of a man who cannot find the courage to "disturb the universe" (Eliot l.46) and say what he means. Stephen Dedalus of Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* grapples with the social structures of his youth which he feels suppress the transcendent artistic vision he finds for himself. The concluding pages of the novel, in the form of Stephen's diary entries, offer the closest access to his direct thoughts, creating an effective parallel to Prufrock's interior conversation. The legacy of these two odd characters, who are so different in form yet so similar in their modes of thinking, is such that they surely embody some essential part of the spirit of modernism. Prufrock's love song and Stephen's diary reveal the modernist artist and his questions, particularly the crisis of self that results from loss of trust in the major voices of influence in one's life, leaving the individual struggling to place his consciousness in an unfamiliar outer reality. Joyce and Eliot's agonized characters bring the reader into the heart of this division, and challenge the expectation of a climactic answer, instead providing, in different ways, a cyclical process of detachment and searching which extends beyond the end of the works, leaving readers only with the hope or possibility of eventual reconciliation.

Stephen Dedalus is a talented young poet who has been squashed by increasingly unfortunate circumstances at home, friends who do not understand his desires, and a religion motivated mainly by fear. All this against a tempestuous political backdrop which spills into every channel of his life, results in a young person with no secure place from which to seek answers for his soul's questions. In the diary portion, Stephen describes not wanting to chase after women anymore (Joyce 263), rather regarding them as objects of poetic beauty (265). He expresses his disconnect with Catholicism when he mentions that it was not his countrymen who had "invented" the religion (264). Brief entries about his parents show that Stephen has stopped agonizing over those relationships and either speaks his mind carelessly (263) or lies to keep the peace (265). Since encountering the girl at the stream, he has wrenched himself from church, family, friends, even nation, to pursue the beauty he experienced in that moment. Most of this struggle is presented to the reader in a third person stream of consciousness, but in the diary we enter Stephen's unfiltered mind, and find a fragmented, slightly disoriented conclusion to a novel that we had already thought of as being close to his consciousness. It is at the end that we get to see only what he sees (or cares for, or retains) at the end of a day.

Prufrock does not give the reader details about what exactly is haunting him, or what exactly led him to this moment of crisis, but rather brings us through a single agonized thought, fragmented and trailing, lamenting over an "overwhelming question" that he fears will never be answered (Eliot l.10). The epigraph from Dante's *Inferno* suggests that he is hoping to speak only to someone who understands, so he doesn't give any explanation (Schneider 1104). However by taking cues from Stephen, we can find the things Prufrock is considering separating himself from. To begin with, the forces that aggravate him or trigger his melancholy are of a mundane nature: sounds of the streets, tea parties, and voices drowned by music. The refrain "In

the room the women come and go / Talking of Michelangelo” (Eliot l.13-14) show a disconnect from the intellectual conversation which, we might safely assume, would usually be something Prufrock would enjoy. Yet he does not feel familiarity with those women, and watches them come and go without much apparent emotion. (Comparable to Stephen’s growing disappointment in conversation with his friends throughout *Portrait*.) The three stanzas which begin “I have known” signal three things which Prufrock has analyzed and found insufficient. He wrestles with the concept of time, feeling that every day is the same, equally filled with the mundanity that he so loathes (l.49-54). He resents the “eyes that fix you in a formulated phrase,” (l. 56) indicating that the criticism of others makes him feel trapped, and unable to move or “presume” to speak his mind further. Next, he has “known the arms already, known them all.” (l.62) Here is where he is closest to Stephen. Prufrock reveals that he has already sought refuge in the arms of women, and, (except for the “one” mentioned later) has not found a suitable answer there, but only more questions: “is it perfume from a dress, / that makes me so digress?” (l.65-66) Finally, also in line with Stephen (though perhaps with less intensity), Prufrock says that he has “wept and fasted, wept and prayed” (l.81) yet has not been relieved of his fear.

So there is some similarity in the tensions which these characters are facing. Both Stephen and Prufrock wonder if they can find solace in the arms reaching out to them, that is, those things which either ensnare or embrace them (or promise to do so). Both artists are replying with their own interior voice to the overwhelming voices which they hear in the world they feel so disconnected from—voices calling them either back or forward, in regression or towards freedom—wondering if any of these voices are worth believing. The personalities of Stephen and Prufrock are, in striking ways, both similar and opposite. Thoughtful, social, and with an intellectual brightness, they set out to answer the question with the same tools but end up

going in different directions. First, they both feel the urgent need to separate their inner self from the self that participates in social activities. However one very quickly gets the sense that Prufrock mourns this separation while Stephen has come to revel in it. Though the disconnect between inner and outer is pronounced and perhaps permanent for both characters, the value of belonging in society seems to be a crucial difference between them. In conversation with others, we get the sense that neither speaker is truly present or engaged in the reality of the moment. Though Prufrock does not give us any direct dialogue, the statement “There will be time, there will be time / To prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet” (l.26-27) tells us that he experiences human interaction as something not to be faced directly; that he needs to prepare a mask or persona in order to get through it. Though Stephen is not as afraid of expressing his thoughts, in his conversation with Emma in the April 15 entry, he admits to changing his tone dramatically in explaining his art to her, so as to be more palatable:

Asked me was I writing poems? About whom? I asked her. This confused her more and I felt sorry and mean. Turned off that valve at once and opened the spiritual-heroic refrigerating apparatus, invented and patented in all countries by Dante Alighieri. Talked rapidly of myself and my plans. (Joyce 267)

There is an arrogance which characterizes Stephen’s self-image, embodied by his statement of intention in the penultimate line of the novel: “I go to encounter for the millionth time the reality of experience and to forge in the smithy of my soul the uncreated conscience of my race.” (268) This sense of possessing enough knowledge in youth to pursue such a grandiose ambition is what fuels his flight from the voices he has rebelled against. In a less dramatic way, Prufrock expresses a similar aloofness in the three “I have known” stanzas. Though he is certain of little in this poem, he is confident that he has experienced all sides of the oppression, has heard all

voices, seen all eyes, known all arms, and is therefore qualified to complain about them. Pride is important to follow through on the search; to feel that something about the world does not line up with who one is, rather than accepting the allotted judgment. The way the speaker sees becomes the true state of things, usually after experiencing betrayal or loss of community. For Stephen this comes from being creatively understimulated, watching his family descend into poverty, and being forced to participate in religion in a way that suppressed his personality. In Prufrock's case, he has to believe that the evidence of his emotional exclusion is substantial enough to validate his anguish.

Of course, this kind of outlook inevitably results in a skewed and inaccurate view of reality. The unreliable narrator is a hallmark of modernist writing, and critic Zach R. Bowen points out that by exposing the reader to Stephen's unfiltered thoughts after just having experienced a (slightly) more objective point of view, the whole narrative is called into question. His inaccurate report of his conversation with Cranly in the first entry (262) "...fosters in the reader an attitude of incredulosity toward the entries which throws the rest of Stephen's judgments and epiphanic utterances into doubt and disbelief." (Bowen 487) Betting everything on the personal experience of one person's private emotional consciousness inevitably fosters doubts. Earlier in the chapter Stephen thinks "...was it for this folly that he was about to leave for ever the house of prayer and prudence into which he had been born...?" (Joyce 239) In Prufrock's case, there is "Time to turn back and descend the stair" (Eliot l.38), revealing an expectation to eventually turn from his dangerous decisions and return to his old life. For Prufrock, the doubt is overwhelming and ends in a fear of failure which he cannot overcome. It would not be "worth it, after all" (l.87), if the one he wanted to impress did not understand what he meant. (l.96-98) His truth is too sacred to speak out loud. For Stephen, it is too sacred to

suppress. In Stephen's previous conversation with Cranly, he expresses total abandonment of fear of being wrong, even if it cost him his soul (Joyce 262).

In order to address the tension in their path, our struggling characters have to detach themselves from their own interactions so they can study them and find the truth, or the perceived truth, to then either act on or surrender to. Prufrock describes the evening as "spread out . . . like a patient etherized upon a table" (Eliot 1.2-3). Donald J. Childs argues that Prufrock is momentarily in a state where the suffocating presence (the yellow fog?) is temporarily paralyzed, allowing him to study it, as a doctor to a patient. The way Stephen analyzes Cranly in the first diary entry reinforces the importance of this analytic attitude to the answers we are searching for. This process of separation from others, however, can leave the speaker alienated to the point of a total loss of identity. If they feel they are the only person having these kinds of thoughts, the rift only grows wider, until humanity itself feels like something on the outside which the speaker is trying to diagnose. Realizing that his words are not expressing his emotion in a way that others can understand, Prufrock mourns "I should have been a pair of ragged claws / Scuttling across the floors of silent seas." (1.73-74) Prufrock would rather lose his individuality completely than face human isolation. Stephen, on the other hand, knows what his detachment costs, and mostly accepts it, preferring to fight the voices with "silence, exile, and cunning." (Joyce 261)

Both the diary and the poem reflect in some way what it is like to be inside the speaker's head, and reveal a particular focus on "daily concerns and violent images." (Schneider 1105) The fact that this untangling of self and surroundings is a personal hell for Prufrock is undeniably affirmed by the epigraph. He feels hyper-aware of his mortality, and it frightens him: "I have seen the eternal Footman hold my coat, and snicker, / And in short, I was afraid." (Eliot 1.85-86)

Stephen knows all about hell too, having been steeped in a religion which greatly emphasized the fear of it, and endured frightening dreams. He is left with shadows of that experience: the mysterious rider that passes by in the night (Joyce 266), and the goat-like creatures from his dream in the March 25 entry (264-265). Stephen was once deeply affected by such things, but for the most part now is no more than “troubled.” However, he does express fear of the old man his friend describes in the April 14 entry. Michael Levenson draws a parallel between this man and the mythology of birds that has run through the novel, starting with Stephen’s last name. (Levenson 1030) Stephen’s new belief system does not completely free him from fear of an inevitable divine force which may prove impossible to resist.

On comparing these experiences, the question I find is, who is the oppressor? For Prufrock, after turning his Question over as many times as he can bear, it is he himself who can not bear to “force the moment to its crisis” (Eliot 1.80). Though the world is overwhelming, it is Prufrock’s own consciousness which cannot safely enter the picture of society. For Stephen, I believe it is the other way around: “His father's whistle, his mother's mutterings, the screech of an unseen maniac were to him now so many voices offending and threatening to humble the pride of his youth.” (Joyce 189) Stephen does dare to “disturb the universe.” He is willing to rebel against the constraints placed on him by society, because he sees “the pride of his youth” as worth defending. Prufrock, in spite of his aforementioned aloofness, rejects the notion of being anything great or transcendent. He insists that he is of little importance, not a king or a prophet. (1.83, 111) Yet I suspect that this insistence does not stem from true humility, but from apprehension of the consequences of such a position. Perhaps he is saying that if he accepted a role as a prophet (or as Hamlet), it would cost him his life, hence his head on the platter (1.82). If so, it is reasonable to hope that one day, when he is old and “grown slightly bald,” he will at last

break free. But for now he shakes the thought away, for it would be too inappropriate “To say ‘I am Lazarus, come from the dead, / Come back to tell you all, I shall tell you all’” (l.94-95). Yet this is exactly the kind of declaration Stephen seems to want to make. By the end of the novel, he has no problem thinking highly of himself, and earlier in the chapter appoints himself “a priest of the eternal imagination, transmuting the daily bread of experience into the radiant body of everliving life.” (Joyce 235)

The thinking that Stephen arrives at, which Prufrock is contemplating but cannot justify, requires a dedication to powerful mythic belief. Both novel and poem end on a surprisingly similar magical theme, and each speaker’s treatment of it states most clearly the direction which he has chosen to take in his search. Prufrock describes walking on the beach and seeing mermaids singing and riding on the waves, but says “I do not think that they will sing to me.” (Eliot l.125) He knows he is not able to give himself over to his imagination, though he has “lingered in the chambers of the sea / By sea-girls wreathed with seaweed red and brown / Till human voices wake us, and we drown.” (l.129-131) Prufrock feels decisively separated from whim and belief by the “human voices” that, though alien, are too important to leave behind. In contrast, in the April 16 entry Stephen envisions his artistic ambition calling out to him:

Away! Away!The spell of arms and voices: the white arms of roads, their promise of close embraces and the black arms of tall ships that stand against the moon, their tale of distant nations. They are held out to say: We are alone—come. And the voices say with them: We are your kinsmen. And the air is thick with their company as they call to me, their kinsman, making ready to go, shaking the wings of their exultant and terrible youth.
(Joyce 267)

Stephen, fully convinced of his need for exile, is ready to run toward this whimsical vision, arguably to the point of losing all touch with reality in exchange for that of his own creation. The parallel of Prufrock's "sea girls" to the girl in the stream who inspired Stephen's epiphany is particularly striking: "She seemed like one whom magic had changed into the likeness of a strange and beautiful seabird." (183) A most intriguing notion arises: could Stephen's epiphany be the answer to Prufrock's overwhelming question? Alas, if only Stephen's epiphany were any less questionable than Prufrock's sorrowful conclusion.

Michael Levenson suggests that the diary serves to change the meaning of that epiphany. Instead of the true single turning point that we are persuaded to celebrate, Stephen's more intimate reflections may reveal an ongoing, cyclical nature to his narrative. In his ambitious declaration, he is going for "the millionth time," a shockingly large number for someone so young, suggesting that he has actually been at this point before, or perhaps that others have before him (Levenson 1020). In addition, the form of a diary actually prevents any kind of conclusive end, meaning we can not even be sure that Stephen does leave, or what new epiphany awaits within the very next day after we leave him (1019). This conflicts with the ascending shape of a *bildungsroman*, and instead positions Stephen's epiphanies as the framework which he uses to make sense of his reality. He fashions arms of whim and poetry to run into, sure that they will prove stronger than all those which he has found weak in his previous life. He is arrogant and confident, and at first the reader likely wishes to believe him and root for his apparent freedom. However upon looking closer it becomes clear that what Stephen has found is not the answer to his disconnect, but only the path he sees fit to follow, and on which he hopes to find fulfillment for the rest of his artistic career. A pattern of constant renewal.

Following this thread, Prufrock's process is that of finding a time when he is away from the pressures that stifle him—on an evening walking lonely streets where he can find the etherised feeling— and to initiate the dream state where whims are more real and he is free to ponder the “overwhelming question”. Though I'm not convinced that the Question is whether change is possible, as Elisabeth Schneider suggests (1103), I do agree it has something to do with whether he can release his thoughts into the open (perhaps particularly in relation to the “one”), and be brave enough to face the consequences. Prufrock realizes that the path of trusting himself unconditionally carries great risk, and he is far more hesitant to make that choice. Perhaps the freedom will not be worth the pain of rejection. Perhaps it is better to be “human.” And yet, he wishes he were not, and after making that wish the window of possibility closes. But he makes an inch of progress. He has led us to the overwhelming question and held his ground as long as he could before waking. In the morning light, the analysis is no longer possible.

There is something fundamental which causes Prufrock to end on a melancholy note rather than Stephen's euphoric one. I suggest that the question they both pose is, which voice is stronger, mine or the world's? Stephen answers with reckless abandon: mine of course, and if nobody here likes it I'll gladly go elsewhere. Prufrock however, cannot bear to approach such a harsh sundering of all the connections he knows, so he continues to slowly ease himself into the Question, in a few stolen moments when he does not feel overwhelmed. So the answer to Prufrock's question is not really a painful reintegration into society and abandonment of self. Likewise, exile and blinding pride is not the extent of Stephen's solution. Both characters arrive at the pursuit of change, fashioning a shape for their story to follow (Levenson). After all, a process, rather than a final product, seems more natural for the forms of a diary and an inner monologue.

Modernism is change, flux, the exploration of consciousness— a reaction rather than a state. The tremors of crisis reveal divisions that were invisible in times of peace. It no longer feels safe to be the same on the outside as on the inside when the leaders, homes, friends, belonging places that used to form one's identity fail in a fundamental way. Reality appears to be dependent on whoever is dictating it, and so it is natural to suspect everything and everyone of infringing on the freedom to create it for oneself. The themes and modes we attribute to the modernist literary movement reflect this shift from romantic harmony to detached skepticism, and Pufrock and Stephen demonstrate what happens when one leans too far to one side of the divide. The melancholy artist turns to his own failings and interprets the crisis as meaning that he will never have the strength to be reconciled with his surroundings. The restless visionary turns to the failings of others and declares that he is above it all, and leaves to find meaning in isolation. Thrown into their very feelings and thoughts as they search for an answer, we as readers receive something—something lasting and poignant. But that entrance into the mind of the modernist character means that the trajectory will continue the moment we stop reading, and so there is little possibility of presenting a solid conclusion. Perhaps the best we can hope for is to catch the start of a process, and trust that it will one day lead to a solution to the pain they have shared with us. The tension, it turns out, is on both sides, and by their struggle they confirm that either way, true reconciliation requires a vulnerable confrontation of the inner man, with all his frightening and unpredictable affections.

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