"FLOATING REALITIES": MULTI-DIMENSIONALITY IN T.S. ELIOT'S "THE LOVE SONG OF J. ALFRED PRUFROCK"

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Multi-dimensionality in T. S. Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock"

by

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Just as Prufrock acknowledges the "realities" that affect him, I also want to recognize those who influenced my journey.

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ABSTRACT

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Concentrating on Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," with M. L. Rosenthal's term "floating realities" as my starting point, I discuss how time and its malleable nature relates to Prufrock's "linear reality" and his "non-linear" "floating realities." Prufrock's "linear reality" is the external world of appearances and his internal psychological landscape. I then reveal the "floating realities" that are generated by Eliot's otherworldly allusions. Finally, I discuss chaos theory, another way to explore the poem's multi-dimensional nature.

The distraction of art, and the art of distraction: both have served me well.

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Introduction

In his dissertation on F.H. Bradley, T. S. Eliot writes that: "'My mind . . . is a point of view from which I cannot escape'" (qtd. in Gordon 51). Throughout his life, Eliot attempts to decipher his view of reality by exploring it in his poetry and criticism. By attempting to reveal the influences and emotions that drive individuals within their own realities, Eliot discovered new ways of expression within his poetry. One of his most characteristic and controversial techniques is his use of cryptic allusions, a technique that has led readers and critics perilously far from the immediate content of Eliot's work. Source-hunting causes critics to overlook the result of numerous allusions within a work: a multi-dimensional enrichment. Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" is particularly receptive to a multi-dimensional reading because it is filled with numerous allusions. Examination of Eliot's allusions, the critical speculation surrounding them, their relationship to time, and the "linear" and "non-linear" realities that they signal within "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" reveals the poem's multi-dimensional nature.

In "Intertextual Eliot," Leonard Unger debates a reader's responsibility to attend "to the sources" (1095). Unger primarily discusses Eliot's *The Waste Land*, but much of Eliot's poetical work inspires readers and critics to focus on the sources

for his allusions. This awkward reliance on outside study may distract a reader from a poem's internal context. Eliot himself acknowledges the weakness of a commentary compared to the power that a literary work holds within its own context. Christopher Ricks quotes Eliot in his preface to *Inventions of the March Hare*:

> 'Good commentaries can be very helpful,' Eliot conceded, and moved at once to *but*: 'but to study even the best commentary on a work of literary art is likely to be a waste of time unless we have first read and been excited by the text commented upon even without understanding it.' (xix)

Focusing on the source of an allusion does not necessarily offer readers a greater understanding of poetry. Eliot's allusions must be returned to their context—Eliot's poetry.

Besides debating the importance and validity of Eliot's sources, many critics disagree on Eliot's reasons for including allusion. J. Bottum, in "What T.S. Eliot Almost Believed," paraphrases Steven Spender: "T. S. Eliot is a poet of fragments . . . through which run certain great and obsessive themes" (27). And, again referring to allusionary "fragments," Bottum himself comments: "Eliot mastered the ironic use of meaningful ancient (and Shakespearean) epithets to indict meaningless modern squalor" (26). The importance of the "fragments" is established, yet there is no concurrence among critics about why they are used by Eliot. In this, and many similar discussions, the significance of allusion's effect on a poem and its internal context remains problematic.

Looking beyond this vagueness, M. L. Rosenthal examines Eliot's poetics, style, and allusionary technique. Rosenthal, while primarily building on, and arguing with, Helen Gardner's *The Composition of Four Quartets*, briefly mentions an alternative interpretation of allusion—the "echoes" of "Eliot's reading" (1037). While reflecting on Eliot's treatment of the human struggle, Rosenthal suggests that the poet's allusions to Shakespeare, Milton, Dryden, Mallarmé and others constitute a different type of reality:

> Such observations, though not central, reflect notes of true if specialized interest that are *floating realities* of the poem and add to its atmosphere of inspired intelligence. Yet they would count for nothing were it not for the essential fusion of nervous intensity and visionary transport in the lines, which act out a progression from bafflement, loss and tragic memory to a cosmic grandeur and transcendence. (1037) [my italics]

While Rosenthal argues that "floating realities" merely "add" to the "atmosphere" of the *Four Quartets*, I believe his term usefully describes the function of allusion in much of Eliot's work. Because of their importance in Eliot's poetry, the "floating realities" that I will discuss require me to go beyond Rosenthal's brief definition.

Rosenthal says they "would count for nothing were it not for the essential fusion of nervous intensity and visionary transport." My expanded discussion will reach beyond Rosenthal's limited scope to a poem's internal landscape, where allusion leads to a sense of multi-dimensionality. Each time Eliot uses an allusion, he introduces another "floating reality." When considered in this way, it will be seen

that Rosenthal's "essential fusion," "bafflement," and "transcendence" are impossible without "floating realities." Concentrating on Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," with Rosenthal's term "floating realities" as my starting point, I begin this thesis by discussing how time and its malleable nature relates to Prufrock's "linear" reality: his external world of appearances and internal psychological landscape. I then reveal his "non-linear" "floating realities" that are generated by Eliot's allusions. Finally, I discuss chaos theory, another way to explore the poem's multi-dimensional nature.

Chapter One

Malleable Time: Prufrock's "Linear" and "Non-Linear" Realities

"The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" contains "linear" and "non-linear" realities. "Linear" reality is governed by chronological time; "non-linear" reality is free of time's limitations. Eliot's complex sense of time appears in many of his critical works, most notably in "Tradition and the Individual Talent," where his view on the relationship between the past and present and their impact on an artist influenced his work and the work of his entire generation of poets. Yet the past and its effect on the present is not Eliot's only theme in writing about time. Many critics note that Eliot experienced timelessness: visionary moments that gave him "a brief escape from a time-bound world" (Gordon 39). Primarily discussing *The Waste Land*, Kristian Smidt defines four portrayals of time by Eliot. Smidt's first two definitions represent "time as succession, flow, history or development" and "time as a 'perpetual revolution' or repetition; the cycles of the seasons" (169). These definitions are linear and are governed by time as present, progressive, and measurable. Smidt's third definition represents time "as eternal extension without any direction or order" (169). This definition introduces non-linear reality, where

time becomes malleable and deviates from its accepted boundaries. The fourth definition notes time's absence (timelessness) and occurs in what Smidt terms Eliot's "fourth dimension" (171).

> For I have known them all already, known them all—
> Have known the evenings, mornings, afternoons,
> I have measured out my life with coffee spoons;
> I know the voices dying with a dying fall
> Beneath the music from a farther room.
> So how should I presume? (49-54)

Development and flow, Smidt's first definition of time, is apparent in the repetitive and rhythmical nature of the lines above. Prufrock methodically lists what he has attained, what he knows. He repeats "I have" and "I know" as if they are a solemn invocation of the past. His "measured out . . . life" has reached and heard the "voices dying with a dying fall." He has attained knowledge, experienced life's progression, and has found himself a witness to "dying" "voices." Still, this experience immobilizes Prufrock.

Time as repetition dwells within Prufrock's cycle of "evenings, mornings, afternoons." Prufrock's meditates on time's deceptive progression: or rather not a progression but repetition. Prufrock's morning ritual mirrors the commonplace nature of time. The "evenings, mornings, afternoons" relationship to the vast expanse of time becomes as insignificant as the "coffee spoons" that "measure out" Prufrock's existence. Each new day is as tedious as the previous one. The vastness

of time and its repetitive nature adds to Prufrock's sense of stagnation and hopelessness.

Time as eternal introduces non-linear reality by transcending time's limitations. Eliot portrays the eternal by invoking myths:

> Psychology (such as it is, and whether our reaction to it be comic or serious), ethnology, and *The Golden Bough* have concurred to make possible what was impossible even a few years ago. Instead of narrative method, we may now use the mythical method. It is, I seriously believe, a step toward making the modern world possible for art . ("*Ulysses*, Order, and Myth" 178)

Eliot invokes the eternal in "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" through mythical allusions that give the work some of its tensest moments. These fleeting mythical encounters, revealed in visionary flashes, form the non-linear "floating realities" that distract Prufrock's from linear reality.

Although Prufrock "knows" time, he is unable to comprehend its vastness and power. He cannot control time and, as a result, his own destiny seems beyond his control. Time is intangible, unexplainable, and remains beyond his grasp, even though it has a powerful grip on his life. He recognizes time's power over his existence, but in non-linear reality's mythic moments, time's powerful grip is loosened. Although linear time may confine Prufrock, the visions of non-linear reality offer him escape. Yet, despite the many possibilities found in non-linear time's eternal nature, Prufrock still feels anxious. While the "floating realities" reveal

powerful visions, Prufrock is paralyzed by their power. Hence, although time's powerful grip is loosened, Prufrock, like Prince Hamlet in early scenes, is unable to act. Paradoxically, Prufrock's experiences of time are a source of hope and hopelessness.

Eliot hints at dimensional possibilities in his definition of the mythical method. He describes the impact of the use of myth in literature as "manipulating a continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity" ("*Ulysses*, Order, and Myth" 177). By recognizing contemporaneity and antiquity as two concepts that can mirror each other, Eliot suggests that time may consist of more than linear chronology: it may have proportion. The objective of his mythical method, Eliot says, "is simply a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history" ("*Ulysses*, Order, and Myth" 177).

The idea of "controlling" history adds significance to Eliot's mythical allusions. By manipulating history with the mythical method, Eliot creates the multi-dimensionality within "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock": an order that reconsiders the boundaries of linear time. "Floating realities" take form in Prufrock's internal dialogue and intersect with "linear" reality. Prufrock encounters mythic images, such as Death and mermaids, that leave him questioning his sanity and existence. The content and nature of his mythical flashes leave him dismissing his

own linear existence and the feasibility of connecting with the heightened awareness of the "floating realities." In the end, he remains dubious about what the "floating realities" offer him—enlightenment or madness.

Another aspect of the poem's non-linear reality are its images of timelessness, which go beyond Smidt's definition of time as eternal and are revealed in what Smidt terms Eliot's "fourth dimension" (171). This idea emanates from questions that Eliot attempts to answer throughout his life:

> The analysis of the time concept, however, is no end in itself. The poet's main purpose is apparently to find a solution to the problem of living. What constitutes the identity in time of a human being or a civilisation? Has life any aim or purpose in time or outside of it? Can past omissions and failures be atoned for and obliterated? All these questions add up to one: 'Is time redeemable?', which in a sense is the major question of all of Eliot's poetry. (Smidt 171)

Smidt concludes that "Eliot had always known of a solution, provided he could only believe in it. Plato, Augustine, Kant and many other thinkers pointed to a transcendent reality in which time, as we know it, is non-existent" (171-72). Eliot acknowledges the idea of timelessness in his definition of the historical sense in "Tradition and the Individual Talent": "a sense of the timeless as well as of the temporal and of the timeless and the temporal together, is what makes a writer traditional" (38). Still, the vagueness of his comment begs further clarification of his view of timelessness. Eliot's description of a "timeless moment" can be more clearly seen in a recently published early poem called "Silence":

Yet the garrulous waves of life
Shrink and divide
With a thousand incidents
Vexed and debated:—
This is the hour for which we waited—
This is the ultimate hour
When life is justified
The seas of experience
. . . . . .
Are suddenly still
You may say what you will,
At such peace I am terrified.
There is nothing else beside.
(*Inventions of the March Hare* 2-15)

According to some critics, this poem represents the visionary moment that Eliot—the poet and man—struggled to define for much of his life (Schuchard 1045-56, Gordon 15, 51-54). Because of his visionary moments, Eliot acknowledges the possibility of a transcendent reality, a world beyond the boundaries of time, and a world that terrifies him.

Kenner, Gordon, Smidt, and Schuchard have referred to this transcendent reality as Eliot's "timeless moment" (300-02, 15, 173, 1056). Eliot's timeless moments were fleeting; he recalls them by noting their frustrating absence as well as their enlightening presence. Gordon notes that "[t]hroughout his career . . . Eliot tried to understand this brief escape from a time-bound world" (39). Time's malleability and the visions associated with it attracted Eliot's interest and are often revealed in his poetic work. Smidt notes, "Eliot seems to have been particularly

attracted by . . . the timelessness reported in the experience of the mystics of various religions. The possibility of a fullness of life divorced from time altogether has always been either a mirage or a faith in his work" (172). Prufrock's experiences in the non-linear reality of "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" reveals that although the poem is not exclusively autobiographical, its narration likewise considers both the possibility of timelessness and the fleeting nature of vision.

For Prufrock, when the eternal occurs, linear time becomes obsolete. Prufrock's statement, "[i]n a minute there is time" (47) reveals time's malleability. The "minute" becomes a microcosmic representative of time's manifold nature. In Prufrock's linear reality it is measurable and finite; in his non-linear reality it takes on infinite proportions and possibilities. Because time's normal confines are eliminated, a transcendent reality is able to beckon.

Prufrock states and restates the possibility and promise that time may hold, hinting about time's malleability: "And time yet for a hundred indecisions, / And for a hundred visions and revisions, / Before the taking of toast and tea" (32-34). Yet, in the midst of a stanza that seems dedicated to the reassurance that "there will be time"(23, 26, 28), Prufrock suggests some uncertainty. Indeed, as Prufrock lists the ends that might be accomplished in "time," he negates the accomplishments by referring to "indecisions" and "revisions." By acknowledging a potential for revision, Prufrock concedes that time's progress may not always run in a forward track. His

inference recalls Eliot's question: "Is time redeemable?"

An alternative to linear time is also revealed in the statement "a hundred visions and revisions." Not only does Prufrock recognize time's malleability, he hints at the possibilities held beyond its boundaries. The reference to "revision" goes beyond Eliot's conception of a developing, cyclical, and eternal linear time. The reference to "vision" brings Prufrock to another level, a level that encompasses and encourages "vision." It is a transcendent reality filled with fantastic, visionary possibilities that linear time cannot hold. While this proves to be a fleeting moment for Prufrock, Eliot continues to ponder and portray the "timeless moment" in his work. Smidt notes the "moment's" transitory nature: "The timeless condition, however, is a matter of experience, not of speculation. It can be arrived at only in enchanted moments, those moments frequently symbolized in Eliot's work by a scene in a rose garden or apple orchard" (173). Schuchard likewise acknowledges the resolution that Eliot finally found and portrayed in his later works, such as *Four Quartets*:

> For thirty years the thrust of Eliot's criticism had been to define the drama of the soul. . . . In his own life, however, the intersection of the timeless and the horrific moment had come. . . . In his new world, so close and so far from the old, Eliot's horrible darkness had become his divine light, his furies, his 'bright angels.' (1055-56)

While Eliot was eventually able to receive the visions of his timeless moments, Prufrock remains behind—unable to reach a "new world" of resolution.

Chapter Two

Prufrock's Linear World

I. Eliot's World of Appearances

Referring to "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," Eliot admits that Prufrock is in part a man of about forty and in part himself (qtd. in Gordon 45). An examination of Eliot's concept of reality offers readers insight into the portrayal of Prufrock's world of appearances and internal dialogue: his linear world. For Eliot, the inner workings of the mind and the external world of appearances were at odds. As a young student of philosophy, he attempted to define and justify the circumstances and events that influenced reality—a reality that seemed beyond verbal explanation. Gordon explains that much of Eliot's youth was overshadowed by a "sense of prophetic power he could not quite grasp or express," noting that he "felt an overwhelming need to question an abhorrent world based on attrition, poverty, and drabness, but he did not know in what direction to carry his questions or what exactly to do" (44). In his attempts to find a direction for his questioning, Eliot studied several theories that would influence his ideas, life, and work.

The influence of Oxford philosopher F. H. Bradley is undeniable. Eliot saw in Bradley a kindred spirit, a soul who questioned reality. In 1913 Eliot bought

Bradley's *Appearance and Reality* (Gordon 49); his encounter with Bradley's work of 1893 was a breakthrough:

> He found an immediate acknowledgment of the disturbing gap that separates hints of Absolute truth from everyday experience. . . . To Eliot, Bradley seemed to radiate 'the sweetness and light of the medieval schoolmen.' (Gordon 49-50)

The validation that Bradley offered Eliot enabled the young poet to continue questioning the gap between appearance and reality in his dissertation and his poetry. Although some of Eliot's questions were occasionally beyond Bradley's approach, "[w]ith Bradley's help, Eliot was able to chart a way through the intellectual maze in which he found himself in 1912" (Gordon 51, 49).

Before finding validity for his questioning in Bradley's ideas, Eliot was isolated with his thoughts about the uncertainty of reality. Eliot's uncertainty resulted from uncontrollable and brief visionary moments which caused him to question external reality. Smidt notes Eliot's preoccupation with the gap between appearances and reality: "To a mind naturally inclined towards the metaphysical, any mystical experience which seems to put him within reach of another plane of essence or existence must be something to treasure up" (32). Eliot acknowledges the power of "mystical experiences" ("The *Pensées* of Pascal" 357-58) in *Selected Essays* and writes a description of a moment in his poem called "Silence." Vision and its possibilities fascinated Eliot throughout his life because it held "an area of experience

just beyond his grasp, which contemporary life could not compass" (Gordon 15).

Beginning with his dissertation, *Experience and the Objects of Knowledge in the Philosophy of F. H. Bradley* (written 1913-16), appearances and their relationship to vision became the subject for much of Eliot's work. Bradley's insights helped Eliot understand his own visionary experiences:

> The dissertation's concern with a maddeningly brief visionary moment and its contradictory interpretations may be seen as a continuation of Eliot's introspective vigils in his Parisian room where he would mull over the elusive message contained in the ring of silence and fail to make sense of it. And the dissertation's denial of the substantiality of the material world fits neatly with poetic fantasies of a dissolving world. Neither the vigil poems nor the dissertation could formulate a coherent vision. All hinted at an extraordinary experience, an intuition of sublime truth, that was wretchedly curtailed. In *Knowledge and Experience* Eliot's trains of thought trailed, stopped, started in differing directions, like the streets Prufrock had followed. (Gordon 51-52)

During his encounter with Bradley's ideas and his exploration of the philosopher's work in his doctoral dissertation, Eliot came to accept the power of vision (Gordon 53). Eliot's recognition, acceptance, and portrayal of the division between appearance and reality is a result of his susceptibility to visionary moments. Sona Raiziss notes that "his simultaneous recognition of several planes of existence, give him hints beyond all data" (172).

Eliot's acceptance of his power of vision, and his resulting recognition of the gap between the world of appearances and reality, can assist in interpreting the interrelatedness of Prufrock's multi-dimensional existence. Besides depicting a

visionary moment, the poem illustrates the division between the linear world of appearances and "floating realities." By recognizing the two worlds, Eliot looks for reconciliation.

Although Bradley influenced Eliot, there are significant differences that reveal the singularity of Eliot's belief system. Both men began with the question, "'whether the universe is concealed behind appearances?'" (Gordon 50). Yet, Eliot's path deviates:

> His long exercise in philosophy only taught him that the approach was futile. Whereas Bradley was willing to accept the incomplete truth gained by the calculations of "mere intellect," Eliot strained towards a final truth contained in heightened moment of 'lived' experience—experience indeed so 'mad and strange' as to elude common understanding. (Gordon 51-52)

The harmony between appearances and reality and the subjectivity of an individual's ideas are two areas in which Eliot chose to determine his own theories. While Eliot may have been "comforted" by Bradley's belief in the underlying harmony between appearances and reality, his hesitancy to believe in such a bold statement is revealed in his work:

> In 'Oh little voices' Eliot poses the irreconcilable worlds of appearances and reality; Bradley insisted that the two worlds were linked. Admittedly appearances jarred one with a sense of discrepancy from the presumed underlying harmony, but the unifying harmony, Bradley asserted, was there. (Gordon 50)

Unlike Bradley, Eliot was unable to reconcile appearance and reality. Furthermore,

appearances were distractions for Eliot; he "despairs" while trying to find meaning in objects that "'pass right through or clog his brain'" (qtd. in Gordon 50). Smidt asserts that this preoccupation with objects led Eliot to greater understanding: "Awareness begins with a strong impression, usually of the senses, and it translates itself immediately into a state of consciousness which absorbs all the activities of the mind in the moment's concentration on an object" (117).

Besides their distinct viewpoints about the worlds of appearance and reality, Eliot also differed from Bradley in his view of subjectivity. While Bradley warned against the idea "'that all the world is merely a state of myself'" (qtd. in Gordon 51), Eliot proclaimed in his doctoral dissertation that "'What is subjective is the whole world'"(qtd. in Gordon 51). The individual's viewpoint remains an important and consistent focus for Eliot in much of his work:

> In view of Eliot's famous rejection of personality in "Tradition and the Individual Talent," it is important to note that in his thesis Eliot distinguishes between subjectivity, which he endorses, and personality, which he rejects. Note also that he rejects personality only in this special context of visionary experience. (Gordon 52-53 n.)

As a result, both individuality and visionary motifs become important factors when considering "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock." As an individual, Prufrock defines his own reality within his internal dialogue. His subjective view becomes the reality of the poem.

II. Prufrock's World of Appearances

In his dissertation on Bradley, Eliot examines and defines the characteristics that make up appearances. They are characteristics that appear also in "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock." In his dissertation, Eliot finds that it "is only when the visionary power fails . . . that people resort to social custom and common knowledge" (Gordon 53). By failing to connect with the visionary realm, Prufrock depicts humanity's return to "custom and common knowledge" to define existence. He attempts to connect with the world of appearances and finds that it is impossible: his visions have tainted him. The world of appearances no longer satisfies Prufrock. Furthermore, Eliot's dissertation defines "the world as a precarious, artificial construction. Divergent images were rather arbitrarily drawn into a frame of common knowledge which was eroded at every moment by a fresh subjective experience" (Gordon 53). Prufrock's subjective experience—his reality—is likewise filled with visions from a non-linear world. "Divergent images" hinder Prufrock's connection to either world. Prufrock's attempt to decipher the significance of appearances overwhelms him and causes him to hesitate. Similarly, his routine, linear life hinders his ability to connect with a transcendent reality. This constant susceptibility to distraction is a reason that reconciliation remains out of reach for Prufrock.

The beginning of the poem reveals Prufrock's preoccupation with the

appearance of things, including himself and those around him. An inundation of images moves the poem along while hindering the narrator. Prufrock compares the evening to a lazy, distracted feline:

> The yellow fog that rubs its back upon the window-panes,
> The yellow smoke that rubs its muzzle on the window-panes,
> Licked its tongue into the corners of the evening,
> Lingered upon the pools that stand in drains,
> . . . . . .
> Curled once about the house, and fell asleep. (15-22)

Although the first line states matter-of-factly, "Let us go then," the third stanza encourages the reader to hover over lines as the fog "lingers" over the city's landscape. The pattern of insinuation and hesitation has begun. Addressing an unnamed "you," the narrator "lead[s] you to an overwhelming question" (10) and then admonishes: "Oh, do not ask, 'What is it?' / Let us go and make our visit" (11-12).

Reflecting the poem's pattern, Prufrock is consistently susceptible to insinuation and hesitation. Again, the images within his internal dialogue hinder his progress. Even as he reassures himself that "there will be time," (37) Prufrock "turn[s] back"(39). During this moment of hesitation he imagines how he appears to others. The images are verbs of progression that, nonetheless, take the narrator nowhere. The "collar *mounting* firmly" and the "necktie . . . *asserted* by a simple pin" (42-43) [my italics] are negated by the image that follows: "how his arms and

legs are thin!" (44). Indeed, the pin's image and the legs' and arms' thinness conduct a sense of insinuation and hesitation by their similar syntax and negative connotation. The similarity rests in the rhyming of "pin" and "thin" and their correspondence of meaning: a pin is a thin object. The negativity occurs when the image's context reveals the underlying mimicry, which continues when he is "pinned and wriggling on the wall" (58). Progress is subverted.

Eliot warns about the distracting nature of the world of appearances, noting that they "'clog his brain'" (qtd. in Gordon 50). Similarly, the images that hinder Prufrock tempt and distract. After Prufrock spends several stanzas reassuring himself that "there will be time," he begins another catalogue of images to rationalize his procrastination and inaction. He states "I have known them all already, known them all" and recites familiar images. He talks about "evenings, mornings, afternoons," "voices dying with a dying fall," and "eyes that fix you in a formulated phrase." As he continues the images become more sensual:

> And I have known the arms already, known them all—
> Arms that are braceleted and white and bare,
> (But in the lamplight, downed with light brown hair!)
> Is it perfume from a dress
> That makes me so digress?
> Arms that lie along a table, or wrap about a shawl. (62-67)

He is undone by his own imagination. The images within this too familiar world lead him away from the "overwhelming question" and leave him asking "how should

I begin?" (69) These "divergent images" have led Prufrock down a path that has no meaningful end.

III. Routine and Social Concerns

Another bad effect of the world of appearances is Prufrock's preoccupation with routine. Prufrock, as narrator, is aware of his life as a linear existence. He constantly refers to routine and time by relating them back to himself; they regulate and repress him. The narration begins and follows through a "soft October night" (21). As the evening progresses, Prufrock confirms and reconfirms that "[t]here will be time" (23). Indeed, in one twelve-line stanza he returns to the phrase, in various forms, eight times (23-34). Prufrock attempts to reassure himself of the vast possibilities that this time—this external linear existence—has to offer: "time yet for a hundred indecisions, / and for a hundred visions and revisions" (32-33).

Prufrock's external linear existence is not full of possibility. This linear existence, laden with appearance and routine, is tediously familiar to him: "For I have know them all already, know them all— / Have known the evenings, mornings, afternoons, / I have measured out my life with coffee spoons" (49-51). His significance is waning; his experiences have become mundane. He dreads life's routine and attempts to explain his own existence. He finds it implausible: "Then how should I begin / To spit out all the butt-ends of my days and ways?" (59-60).

His life, and his "ways," are as insignificant and useless as "butt-ends" (60). He finds that not only are appearances and routine insignificant, his place and existence within that world is also pointless.

As Prufrock explains his life and his "overwhelming question," the stanzas begin to evoke "floating realities" beyond his linear existence. After following the narration through its multi-dimensional course, Prufrock returns to his linear existence. In the final lines he laments "I grow old . . . I grow old . . . / I shall wear the bottoms of my trousers rolled" (120-21). Prufrock has returned to the world of appearances, referring to time's passage and its effect on him. He also worries about appearances: his "hair," what to eat, and what to wear—turning away from visions of Hamlet and Polonius. At the poem's end, Prufrock drowns in the mundane concerns of his stifling, superficial, linear world.

IV. Prufrock's Internal Dialogue

"The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" is built upon the thoughts, actions, and reactions of the poem's narrator. Because he is a conduit for the "floating realities," Prufrock's characterization comprises the interior linear or subjective level of the poem (just as his external linear level is the world of appearances). "Floating realities" form in Prufrock's linear world when they are channeled through his thoughts as visionary images, but because they are experienced as involuntary flashes,

he is unable to control the power of his visions. As a result, Prufrock's attempts to decipher, relate, and master his visions leave him unable to act upon his heightened awareness. The visions that flash uncontrollably within the landscape of his interior dialogue distract Prufrock from the external world of appearances, yet his fusion with the "floating realities" is interrupted by his attention to the world of appearances. He is unable to function in either world.

Prufrock's internal dialogue provides readers with a unique, intensely subjective view of the narrator's world. Prufrock's internal dialogue divulges frustrating and fleeting visionary experiences. Prufrock questions, hesitates, and suffers under conformity, and his thoughts remain exposed. As Eliot communicates the power of vision, he also discloses concerns that accompany the experience within Prufrock's thoughts: "From Laforgue, Eliot learnt to broadcast secrets, to confess through the defeatist persona his own despair" (Gordon 29). Prufrock's most private thoughts convey the spirit of a failed visionary. Yet even though the narrator, his world, and his concerns remain an easy target for mockery, the poem nonetheless conveys respect for the power of vision. While Eliot produces Prufrock's pathetic exhibition underneath the poetic microscope, the power of the visionary element in Prufrock's experience remains intact.

Additionally, Prufrock's internal dialogue reveals that heightened awareness has consequences. This acutely sensitive modern man focuses on the trivial nature of

his life. He constantly debates his attempts to connect with his linear existence or the fleeting visions. As Prufrock quietly debates the difficulty of connecting with either world, every option seems unattainable and unsatisfying.

Prufrock's internal reality, his internal dialogue, reveals a hyper-aware self-consciousness. While the narration reflects an attitude of self-mockery, it also allows a unique glimpse into the terrors of modernity. Prufrock's insecurities, which he exposes and mocks, are the catalyst for movement within the poem. While Prufrock addresses his inability to approach and communicate with a woman, his disappointment involves more than superficial interaction. He is also preoccupied with his disconnection from his transitory visionary abilities. As a result, the narration fluctuates between an internal dialogue and an external, ambiguous "you"—a "you" that remains as unspecified as Prufrock's unspoken question. Within his internal dialogue, Prufrock leads the reader through his worldly and visionary experiences. His private moments and attempts at clarity are exposed to reveal an ongoing struggle with the gift of heightened awareness.

Although his awareness shows him that there is more to life than "tea and cakes and ices," Prufrock is also aware of his own inadequacy to transcend his linear existence (79). Even with his powerful knowledge, he is unable to escape the triviality of life. His internal dialogue reveals his paralyzing self-consciousness. He claims,

Though I have seen my head (grown slightly bald) brought in upon a platter,
I am no prophet—and here's no great matter;
I have seen the moment of my greatness flicker,
And I have seen the eternal Footman hold my coat, and snicker.
(82-85)

His awareness only enervates him more. Instead of empowering, his heightened awareness seems to put him in an even more trivialized position. Like Hamlet, he is unable to act: his awareness paralyzes him. He implies that he should be a prophet with a great matter, but he sees himself as undeserving and finds the entire experience beyond his capabilities. The triviality of his habits are apparent to him, yet he remains unable to give voice to or confront the "overwhelming question" (93). As he continually dismisses, mocks, and trivializes his situation he admits, "in short, I was afraid" (86).

Internal dialogue also reveals Prufrock's relationship with others. Like his opinion of himself, his awareness of others' opinions reflects back upon him in a scathing fashion. Not only is he aware of others mocking him, he is conscious of his absurd need to fit into their society. This sensibility leads to a paralyzing insecurity when interacting with those around him. He notes upon his entrance into a room:

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

He anticipates a scornful reaction to his every action. Every positive is balanced against a negative. The barrage of negativity within his own internal dialogue leaves him immobilized. He is unable to muster a reaction against imagined remarks and is instead left to question his own purpose. He posits, "Do I dare / Disturb the universe?" (45-46) He addresses the superficiality of the society that he inhabits, yet he is unable to separate himself from its charms or opinions. He attempts to emulate the superficial existence, noting that he needs a mask: "a face to meet the faces that you meet" (27). He recognizes society's trivial nature, but he succumbs to the parade and parody. Internal dialogue reveals that he is offended by his need to surrender to customs and mores that he knows too well.

In the end, Prufrock's attempts to adapt to society leave him feeling even more self-conscious. His internal dialogue reveals that he sees himself through the eyes of his social circle:

> And I have known the eyes already, known them all—
> The eyes that fix you in a formulated phrase,
> And when I am formulated, sprawling on a pin,
> When I am pinned and wriggling on the wall,
> Then how should I begin
> To spit out all the butt-ends of my days and ways? (55-60)

He imagines himself through their eyes, noting that he is "formulated" by their observations. By stating that he has "known" their gaze, Prufrock's description yields to various interpretations. While these "known" gazes may have actually

occurred, they may also merely reside in Prufrock's imagination. Whether imagined or real, he allows "them" to determine the boundaries of his existence and again negates the validity of his own purpose by "spitting" it out like a worthless "butt-end." As his self-talk progresses, it is apparent that the inhabitants of this superficial society do not take away his power and purpose; he releases it willingly.

By scrutinizing himself and others (who share his linear existence) within his internal dialogue, Prufrock recognizes that his attempts to fit in to society cause him to acquiesce to an accepted order—the only order he knows. Society represents a world that he hesitates to upset. He repeatedly asks, "Do I dare / Disturb the universe?" (45-46) and "should I then presume?" (68) In spite of its noted flaws, Prufrock is unable to conform to or accept society's arrangement, even as he is unable to disengage himself from it. To disturb this "universe" may bring destruction of the only reality he completely comprehends. While this existence seems trivial compared to his visions, it is an existence that he understands. This linear reality may leave him with little satisfaction, but the visions remain beyond his comprehension.

Besides confronting his self and his society within his internal dialogue, Prufrock also encounters the non-linear "floating realities"—visions that are a source of conflict and cause him to question the validity of his linear existence. His heightened awareness leads to frustration and hopelessness. Just as there is no

communication between Prufrock and the female figure implied in the poem, Prufrock is unable to reconcile the separation between heightened awareness and linear concerns. He is unable to convey his experiences and presumes that pronouncing his visions will leave him looking foolish. He cries, "It is impossible to say just what I mean!" (104), realizing the lost significance of his unspoken message. Even before the declaration is attempted he anticipates a disheartening response:

> 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.' (106-10)

Although Prufrock condemns his visions to silence, his internal dialogue reveals their significance. An examination of Prufrock's encounters with his "floating realities" reveal how he is left frustrated, hopeless, and teetering on the brink of madness.

Chapter Three

Prufrock's Non-Linear World: The "Floating Realities"

Rosenthal's term "floating realities" well describes the allusion-laden landscape of "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock." But whereas Rosenthal views the "realities" merely as evidence of Eliot's vast reading, I believe his term must go beyond to describe the poem's uniquely multi-dimensional nature. Although the "floating realities" are acknowledged in Prufrock's linear internal dialogue, Prufrock's visions become the key to understanding the poem's multi-dimensional nature. The poem's many idiosyncrasies, from Eliot's cryptic allusions to Prufrock's paralytic self-consciousness, find their purpose among the allusions or "floating realities" that make the poem a world in, and of, itself. "Floating realities" take Prufrock outside his linear existence into a world filled with heroic figures and extraordinary circumstances. Indeed, many of the allusions are "floating realities" because of their own multi-dimensional scenarios.

The poem's epigraph and the references to Hamlet, Lazarus, mermaids, and Death, relate tales of otherworldly journeys that reflect Prufrock's condition as a wandering visionary. As Prufrock encounters the "floating realities," his world

begins to mirror the allusions' narratives; like Lazarus, Hamlet, and others, he must confront his gift of insight. In the manner of a heroic figure, Prufrock attempts to relate and apply his visionary encounters to his linear existence. In the end, his attempts are unsuccessful, yet the effect on his existence is evident: heightened awareness has isolated Prufrock from his linear and non-linear worlds.

Prufrock's experiences illustrate Eliot's attitude towards heightened awareness. As Prufrock strives to transcend the world he knows toward the heightened awareness of the "floating realities," he finds himself drawn into a world of fleeting and, at times overwhelming, insight. As Prufrock confronts the non-linear visionary world, he finds himself isolated and unable to establish a connection; his visions also inhibit his connection with linear reality. Similarly, Eliot struggles with the irreconcilable nature of awareness and its effect on his world:

> *Knowledge and Experience* was written by a haunted young man, torn between the truth of his visions and his rational distrust of them. 'I have lived with shadows for my company,' Eliot quotes. The shadows point towards a higher reality that should suggest the meaning of the material world and confirm its lesser status. But he cannot be sure. (Gordon 53)

Eliot's apt use of visionary allusions establishes a precarious existence for Prufrock, resulting in contextual tension. Prufrock's encounters with the "floating realities" reveal that he is also unsure about the nature of vision and its application to his linear reality. An examination of Eliot's "floating realities" gives insight into Prufrock, his

world, and the resulting multi-dimensional nature of "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock."

I. The Epigraph

Before the poem begins, the epigraph's reference to Dante's *Inferno* signals the first "floating reality" and heralds more to come. The epigraph relates The Pilgrim's encounter with the deceiver Guido da Montefeltro, an inhabitant of the Eighth Chasm of Hell, who reveals his experiences only after noting that no one has ever returned from that depth (Canto XXVII). Stating "with no fear of dishonor I answer you" (66), Guido tells of his life as a soldier and of his deceitful advice to Pope Boniface. Using sailing metaphors, Guido portrays his life as a voyage of "wiles and covert paths" (76) leading to his end: "And here you see me now, lost, wrapped this way, / moving, as I do, with my resentment" (128-29).

Called a "piece of calculated opportunism" (Kenner 10), Eliot's epigraph lays the foundation for the poem by preparing the reader for otherworldly encounters. Like Dante, Prufrock will venture through an otherworldly existence hoping to apply the knowledge gained to his own life. Stories like Guido's eventually enable Dante to attain his own inner peace and virtue; to gain the same understanding Prufrock must emulate Dante, applying otherworldly insight to his worldly existence. Yet, unlike Dante, Prufrock is unable to reconcile with the power that heightened

awareness offers.

The epigraph foreshadows Prufrock's inability to recount and understand his otherworldly experiences. Guido tells his story believing that no one will hear or benefit from the sharing. Similarly, Prufrock relates his visionary encounters to an imaginary "you," confining the full narrative to his own internal dialogue. The imaginary "you" remains unspecified. Prufrock imagines attempts at description, but never acts on them. Corresponding to Guido's belief that his tale will not reach beyond Hell, Prufrock's narrative remains confined to his mind.

Besides an inability to relate his visions, Prufrock is also unable to understand his experiences. In the *Inferno*, Guido recounts his life but reveals that even in Hell he is unable to understand his sins (228). Prufrock is also destined for this fate because he is unable to understand and learn from his experiences. He struggles with and questions his visionary insight throughout the poem. Instead of finding virtue and wisdom in his experiences, Prufrock watches his "greatness flicker" (84). He cultivates his own end, creating a self-fulfilling prophecy when he states "I am no prophet—and here's no great matter" (83). Because he is unable to decipher the importance of his experiences, Prufrock will, at the poem's end, find himself "drowning" in Hell as Guido does.

II. Hamlet and the Treacherous Gift of Vision

Prufrock announces that he is not a hero like Hamlet and, with the comparison, he ironically gestures towards their similarities. He hints at their corresponding plights and then dismisses them, trivializing his own tragic existence with the comparison:

> No! I am not Prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be;
> Am an attendant lord, one that will do
> To swell a progress, start a scene or two,
> 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. (111-19)

Throughout this stanza Prufrock fluctuates between identifying with Hamlet and Polonius, just as he fluctuates between the linear world of social concern and the non-linear world of heightened awareness. Nevertheless, by invoking the spirit of Hamlet, Prufrock brings forth a "floating reality" that heightens our sense of his state of mind.

Prufrock mirrors Hamlet's existence in one critical way: both have insight from a world beyond that inhibits their ability to function and reason within their linear existence of custom, routine, and appearances. They are at the mercy of horrific knowledge that they paradoxically seek and repel. Hamlet's keen awareness of another reality is revealed in his confrontation with his disbelieving mother: "My

pulse as yours doth temperately keep time, / And makes as healthful music. It is not madness / That I have uttered. Bring me to the test, / And I the matter would reword" (3.4.131-34). Hamlet's attempts to relate and recount his otherworldly knowledge are met with distrust, anxiety, and ignorance. In the end, Hamlet's heightened awareness is read by the courtiers as madness. Similarly, the fear that he will be misunderstood prevents Prufrock from confronting and explaining his visions. Prufrock aches to explain and be understood:

> It is impossible to say just what I mean!
> But as if a magic lantern threw the nerves in patterns on a screen:
> 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.' (104-10)

He exposes his need for understanding and imagines the outcome of his attempt at clarity: disbelief or rejection.

Hamlet's experiences illustrate the strange courtship between a tortured visionary and the other realities that he perceives: "[t]he problem Eliot posed in his dissertation was his own. To live like a visionary . . . was to court madness" (Gordon 53). During his madness Hamlet mistakenly kills the "attendant lord" Polonius. Polonius, with whom Prufrock also identifies, is caught up within his own existence—a linear existence of proper social appearance. Because of his preoccupation with court appearances and his inability to acknowledge corruption,

Polonius dismisses Hamlet's ramblings as love-sickness and, in his mind, reduces the entire tragedy to a love affair. Because Polonius is caught up in his own preconceptions, he is "obtuse" and unaware of Hamlet's frenzied awareness; he underestimates Hamlet and is killed. Ironically, whether "ridiculous" or heroically filled with great purpose and knowledge, both Hamlet and Polonius meet the same fate. Similarly, because of the powerful presence of both the linear and non-linear realm, Prufrock will not be able to connect with either.

III. Lazarus and Death

Another "floating reality" that enters Prufrock's consciousness is revealed when he associates himself with Lazarus: "'come from the dead, / Come back to tell you all, I shall tell you all'" (94-95). Prufrock again suggests the otherworldly and uncanny nature of his experiences. Prufrock invokes the spirit of Lazarus when he considers the consequences of an attempt at an explanation of his circumstances:

> 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,
> To say: 'I am Lazarus, come from the dead,
> Come back to tell you all, I shall tell you all'— (90-95)

There are two men in the Bible named Lazarus, both with narratives that reflect Prufrock's relationship with his "floating realities." In John 6:1-44, Lazarus,

the brother of Mary and Martha, was raised from the dead by Jesus and never told of his experiences. In Luke 16:19-31, Lazarus was a poor man who went to heaven and was forbidden to return to earth to tell his tale. During his earthly existence, the poor Lazarus had been neglected by a rich man who was eventually condemned to Hell. From Hell the rich man petitioned Abraham to let Lazarus warn his brothers about the consequences of a greedy life. Abraham declined the request, saying: "if they hear not Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded, though one rose from the dead" (Southam 53).

Like both Lazaruses, Prufrock has experiences beyond the boundaries of his reality and time. Prufrock and the Lazaruses experience what few humans do: knowledge of life beyond the linear world. Like the Lazaruses, Prufrock is a passive participant in the encounter; unlike them, he is unable to accept his gift. He questions his visions and his ability to interpret them. Like those who question the possibility of life after death, Prufrock questions the viability of his visionary encounter. He is unable to maintain faith in his vision.

Prufrock's questioning finds its basis in the mystical nature of his experience. Because of his inability to explain and relate his visions, they are negated. He judges his otherworldly experiences on the basis of how well they will sound to his linear counterparts. He predicts that others will find his declarations inappropriate, "That is not what I meant at all" (97), and wonders if the effort is "worth while" (90).

Sadly, Prufrock judges his visionary moments in linear terms, and his linear life by his non-linear encounters, thus trapping him between two worlds.

IV. Snickering Death

Prufrock encounters Death, his "eternal Footman," in another moment of "floating reality." This image, although mentioned briefly, works as a mythological figure and a variation on the personification of death. During this stanza Prufrock reiterates his inadequacy and inability to confront an "overwhelming question." He notes his monumental efforts in preparation, "though I wept and fasted, wept and prayed" (81), and his great defeat mixed with self-conscious humiliation, "I have seen my head (grown slightly bald) brought in upon a platter" (82). Yet, in spite of these extraordinary imagined efforts he negates his own purpose, "I am no prophet—and here's no great matter" (83). When defeat seems inevitable, the final humiliation comes as he envisions his final confrontation with Death.

Traditionally, the personification of death often takes the form of a pestilent skeleton or an angel of death (*OED*). Eliot uses an image of death in a servant's role, which suggests the humiliation that Prufrock feels in facing his own end: "I have seen the moment of my greatness flicker, / And I have seen the eternal Footman hold my coat, and snicker, / And in short, I was afraid" (84-86). The subtle rituals and customs of his linear world of appearances combine with the mythical in this image.

Although a footman is usually defined as the attendant to a person of rank and power (*OED*), this "Footman" is not under Prufrock's power. The simple nicety of holding out a coat takes on sinister ramifications by allowing the Footman to dictate the time and character of Prufrock's departure. The Footman controls Prufrock's response to death by snickering as he makes his exit. Prufrock's vision takes him to the depths of humiliation. He has not achieved "greatness," and Death adds to his discomfiture by laughing at his struggles. At the end of his encounter with the Footman, Prufrock realizes that even death will not offer him honor or relief.

V. Singing Mermaids

Another "floating reality" is Prufrock's encounter with the mermaids. In the final stanzas, the mermaids represent the heightened awareness that Prufrock attempts to connect with throughout the poem. Once again the image is otherworldly and fleeting, leaving Prufrock reaching for clarity. Prufrock resigns himself to the mundane questions of a man anchored to a linear existence. He muses, "Shall I part my hair behind? Do I dare to eat a peach? / I shall wear white flannel trousers, and walk upon the beach" (122-23). But the mermaids' song interrupts his simple, though diminished, linear reverie, calling his attention away from the trivial to the ethereal: "I have heard the mermaids singing, each to each" (124).

Eliot's attitude towards the lure of heightened awareness is illustrated by his use of the mermaid image. Traditionally, mermaids attempt to lure heroes to their death. In addition to being associated with the sea, the mermaid is also identified with the seductive and deadly Sirens that Odysseus encountered. During later plays, such as Shakespeare's *Comedy of Errors*, the term was also often used to describe a courtesan (*Brewer's*, *OED*). By using the mermaid as Prufrock's bait, Eliot causes and indulges the narrator's doubts.

> Prufrock cannot be a lover, a mindless body, seduced by mermaids he does not respect; but neither can his mind pursue overwhelming issues with distraction from his senses. The debate between would-be lover and would-be prophet is a more dramatic and complicated version of Eliot's earlier debates between body and soul. Eliot could forgo human attachments, but the alternative . . . could not, at any point, compose a durable vision. (Gordon 47)

Eliot's line also recalls the work of the seventeenth-century metaphysical poet John Donne. Donne's poem "Song" includes a reference to mermaids in the context of a poem that complains about the difficulty of finding a woman "true, and faire" (18). Donne declares,

> Teach me to heare Mermaides singing,
> Or to keep off envies stinging,
> And finde
> What winde
> Serves to'advance an honest minde. (5-9)

Donne's persona argues that even if one were "borne to strange sights" (10) such as

mermaids, there is still no possibility of finding a chaste woman. Applying the mermaids' historical context to Prufrock's multi-dimensional world reveals that his connection with a woman, whether in a linear sexual encounter or a non-linear mermaids' song, is as treacherous as the mermaid in all of her guises.

In spite of their treachery, the mermaids' song distracts Prufrock and he turns from trivial concerns of linear reality to the awareness of this final mythical encounter. Once more, failing as a lover and prophet, he is drawn toward a heightened awareness that he cannot quite connect with: "I do not think that they will sing to me" (125). Again, even as he acknowledges the encounter's power and the importance of the mermaids' song, he negates his role by relying on his own self-critical judgment. He has heard their song and he determines that they are not singing to him.

In spite of their seeming unawareness of him, he watches the mermaids and is drawn into a sensual reverie: "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" (126-28). As he wanders through the images, Prufrock moves towards a vague end. Paradoxically, the final lines have extremely clear images despite vague import: "We have lingered in the chambers of the sea / By sea-girls wreathed with seaweed red and brown / Till human voices wake us and we drown" (129-31). Prufrock allows himself momentary interaction with the mythological

figures, yet his lingering moments are abbreviated. The sensual reverie collapses. Just as the mythological level interferes with his connection to his linear reality, the "human voices" of the linear world have interrupted his moment of heightened awareness. Ultimately, Prufrock remains isolated.

Conclusion

The concept of "floating realities," developed from M. L. Rosenthal's insight, offers a new perspective into Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock." Eliot's allusions take on fresh meaning when considered in the context of a multi-dimensional text. By considering the allusions as "floating realities," or counterpoints to linear time, the reader can observe intertextual and dimensional characteristics previously overlooked in favor of source hunting.

As the poem comes to a close, Prufrock drowns in his linear existence in spite of his non-linear heightened awareness. He is unable to free himself from the triviality of linear existence. He questions, "Shall I part my hair behind? Do I dare to eat a peach?" (120). As crisis and indecision seem to wane, he is recalled to an alternative reality. He hears "the mermaids singing, each to each" (124) but concludes that "I do not think they will sing to me" (125). He is beyond the struggles of his past, yet he remains aware of his place in the linear world. His is a linear existence with the possibility of "hearing" and being aware of other realities, but he is unable to associate or interact with them. They exist only to him and their unattainable greatness constantly reminds him of his insignificance. It is a horrific gift that has followed him throughout the narrative.

Prufrock realizes that just as other realities can taint and reflect his linear world, the linear world can hinder his connection to realities beyond that existence: "We have lingered in the chamber of the sea / By seagirls wreathed with seaweed red and brown / Till human voices wake us, and we drown" (129-31). He is as fatalistic about his connection with heightened awareness as he is about linear existence. Finally, his attempts at connection overwhelm and "drown" him. In the end, his own multiple realities do him in.

Heightened awareness, its effect on the creative process, and the transcendent worlds beyond reality have been discussed in terms of chaos theory. John Briggs and F. David Peat's *Turbulent Mirror* offers a new context in which to consider Eliot's sensibility and the multi-dimensionality that he portrays in "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock." The sensitivity of Eliot and his narrator, the visionary flashes, and the "floating realities" that are created (and discovered) coincide well when considered alongside chaos theory. Prufrock and Eliot are both susceptible to a realm that few can imagine. Eliot's early struggle with the boundaries of the world is unique for several reasons. Briggs and Peat note that a "major distinguishing characteristic of a creative person is an extreme sensitivity to certain nuances of feeling, perception and thought" (194). While this in itself is not a major revelation, the way in which Eliot portrays those nuances makes "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" multi-dimensional.

> When a germ which contains nuance falls upon mental ground sensitive to it, the result in the creator's mind is a disequilibrium flux of wondering, uncertainty, and wholeness which allow the material being worked with—whether it's scientific data, a landscape and canvas, or a set of characters in a novel—to amplify subtleties, bifurcate to new planes of reference, and form feedback loops among different planes in a process which self-organizes a form to embody the nuance. (Briggs and Peat 195)

Because Eliot works deftly with nuances, he dabbles with the worlds of chaos and order. As a result, "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" takes on many of the qualities of a chaotic world.

One important characteristic of chaos theory, the "planes of reference," is revealed by examining "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock's" "floating realities" (Briggs and Peat 194). Because Eliot and Prufrock are susceptible to nuance, they are privy to other planes of reference (or realities). When several planes of reference come into play, many small shifts can lead to major shifts in perception (194). Likewise, a multi-dimensional world becomes receptive to "pressure points" where "a small change can have a disproportionately large impact" (24). A world with many realities becomes unstable and uncontrollable: and this is the chaotic world of Prufrock.

Prufrock's realities begin to collide, creating what chaos theorists call the merging of planes of reference, or "bisociation" (192). During his visions Prufrock finds disturbing clarity and horrific awareness. While Briggs and Peat find "flashes

of order from chaos" that combine "two distinct frames of reference" (192), Prufrock encounters flashes of non-linear chaos that collide with his linear world of routine. Both involve the merging of planes (or realities) and the possibility of great insight. Unfortunately, Prufrock cannot assimilate his heightened awareness.

Using Prufrock's internal dialogue as the primary voice throughout the poem, Eliot conveys the power and the perils of heightened awareness. By using Prufrock as the conduit for, and guide through, "floating realities," Eliot illustrates how man can be annihilated by vision. In this, Prufrock resembles Harry from Eliot's play *The Family Reunion,* who cries: "They don't understand what it is to be awake, / To be living on several planes at once" (*Complete Plays* 266). The cry echoes Prufrock's "It is impossible to say just what I mean!" (104) Both Prufrock and Harry live existences filled with brilliance and visionary possibilities. Yet, despite its potential, there is a crippling dimension to heightened awareness. Eliot's depiction of the paralyzed visionary Prufrock and his "floating realities" reveals the maddening isolation that can result from an unassimilated heightened awareness.

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