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THE ROYCEAN COMMUNAL IDEAL IN T. S. ELIOT'S "THE LOVE SONG OF J. ALFRED PRUFROCK"

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Abstract

T. S. Eliot's poem "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" has often been read as a thoroughly cynical assessment of the modern individual and community. This totalizing portrayal misses the poem's ability to serve as a foil to a more ideal community. If Eliot is so ill-disposed to the timid, fragile Prufrock and his shallow, ostentatious social network, then Eliot must believe in the essence of a better community. We may look to one of Eliot's intellectual mentors, Josiah Royce, for his philosophy of community, which stands as an ideal inverse in relation to the Prufrockian community. After examining Royce's thought and reviewing the scholarly dialogue on this topic, this article contrasts the inferior Prufrockian community with the Roycean community, its ideal counterpart, on their respective communication styles, quality of interpersonal relationships, and conceptions of selfhood. These comparisons elucidate Royce's vision for social living and demonstrate how "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" affirms the possibility for flourishing human community.

In T. S. Eliot's poem "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," the titular protagonist imagines a series of social interactions that leave him feeling empty and misunderstood. Prufrock describes these disappointing interchanges within the structure of a winding dramatic monologue. This technique gives the reader insight into his fearful, reactive psychological state, which is particularly evident when he is confronted with the possibility of interpersonal relationship. The hypothetical conversations that Prufrock describes always fail to create meaningful mutual understanding and connection, suggesting that the protagonist's actual relationships, which would shape his imagination, are similarly unfulfilling.

Eliot foregrounds the difficulty of social interaction in the poem not only to provide a dialogic structure in which to voice his philosophical ideas but also to comment on the topic of community (i.e., a network of individuals who share lived experience through interpersonal relationship). Several factors directed Eliot to consider the potential for a functional community at the time of writing the poem in 1911, including the sociopolitical climate of the West leading up to World War I and the contemporary academic discourse influenced by philosophers such as Josiah

Royce. Eliot's understanding of community developed and changed dramatically throughout his career, so any of Eliot's individual depictions of community should not be taken as representative of his whole thought. Arriving at the beginning of his poetic career as his first published poem, though, "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" constitutes an important landmark in understanding the evolution of Eliot's perspective on community.

In his internal musings, Prufrock constitutes what we may call "the Prufrockian community," an imaginary social and relational structure that includes himself and other individuals he refers to in the poem. This society is characterized by fractured communication, relationship, and selfhood. Prufrock's jaded vision of what a community can be, however, does not necessarily reflect Eliot's view. The poet does not condemn all community to the same broken fate but instead casts the broken Prufrockian community as a negative manifestation from which the reader may infer a positive, ideal inverse. This inverse is a flourishing community that resembles and is clarified by Josiah Royce's vision of an interpretive community, one where there is honest communication, meaningful connection, and communally integrated selfhood.

Eliot's intellectual kinship to Josiah Royce figures prominently into his views on community and its portrayal in the "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock." At the time Eliot was writing the poem, Royce was teaching at Harvard and developing a pragmatic, idealistic philosophy that he would use to formulate a framework for community. After completing undergraduate studies at Harvard in 1910, Eliot applied himself to a year of intellectual growth in Paris before returning to Harvard in 1911 to begin doctoral studies. After deliberating upon a dissertation topic, Eliot eventually decided to write about and research the epistemology of F. H. Bradley, and Royce was appointed as Eliot's dissertation supervisor. Their close philosophical ties were deepened when Eliot involved himself with Royce's 1913 seminar on interpretation entitled "A Comparative Study of Various Types of Scientific Method," and this experience shaped Eliot profoundly (Gray et. al). Though Eliot had written "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" shortly before commencing his studies under Royce, he would have already been very familiar with Royce's work from the time they had previously shared at Harvard.

The community that Prufrock envisions in the poem is made more intelligible through contrast with Royce's ideal interpretive community. M. L. Briody defines the Roycean conception of community as "a reality constituted by unique individual selves who share a common history and/or aim" (226), and Royce's ideal version of this community, which he calls "the Beloved Community," is unified by "loyalty, which is the love of a self for an [sic] united community" and shares the aim of helping its members to understand the world and thrive in it (Royce, *War and Insurance* 34). Another key aspect of the ideal Roycean community is that it is interpretive. Royce's epistemology is summarized as follows:

Knowledge is not at bottom merely the accurate and complete perception of an object, as empiricism would have it. Nor is it the accurate and complete conception of an idea, as rationalism maintains. Knowledge is instead a process of interpretation: the true idea selects, emphasizes, and re-presents those aspects of the object that will be meaningfully fulfilled in subsequent experience. (Parker and Pratt)

In an interpretive community, the members approximate an increasingly accurate understanding of their being and world through collaboratively interpreting meaning, experiences, and objects. Parker and Pratt quote Royce in suggesting that, in an ideal Roycean community, this objective for understanding through interpretation is completely fulfilled: "If the interpretation is a reality, and if it truly interprets the whole of reality, then the community reaches its goal." Through contrasting the Prufrockian community to Royce's Beloved Community, readers will develop a fuller picture of the latter. This insight is unlocked through acknowledging the importance of community as a theme in the poem and maintaining an awareness of the degree of Royce's influence on Eliot.

The scholarly discussion on the ideal community in "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" can be advanced by demonstrating that the poem advocates for a Roycean approach to community and elucidates the nature of that approach. James C. Haba originates the discussion by showing how Prufrock's distorted perception of himself and his failure to observe the humanity in other people precludes his ability to enter meaningful, communal connection (Haba). Haba identifies many of Prufrock's misunderstandings about community, and Robert McNamara later extends these insights by showing how Prufrock's distorted view of self drives much of his alienation (McNamara). McNamara argues that Prufrock's narcissism, which reflects the fragmentation of the modern self, drives Prufrock away from real people and relegates him to merely abstract connection. Abstraction is the only place where Prufrock can cohere a self that he desires while maintaining a rigid individuality.

Royce's philosophy would condemn the Prufrockian self as explained by McNamara, which is part of the reason why Charles Anthony Earls introduces the Roycean framework of community into the dialogue surrounding the poem. Earls applies Royce's concept of the interpretive community as an antidote to the communicative and relational issues of the Prufrockian community (Earls). Earls then redirects his application of Royce toward refuting Frank Lentricchia's contentions against Roycean communal paradigms (Lentricchia). Kate McLoughlin then extends Earls's connection between the poem and the Roycean communal paradigm through a more focused literary and critical analysis. In this analysis, she leverages Royce's framework to identify some of the distorted aspects of and challenges within the Prufrockian community (McLoughlin). More thoroughly than in Earls's approach, McLoughlin demonstrates how the Prufrockian community's

failure as a Roycean interpretive community paralyzes Prufrock in fear, isolation, confusion, and inaction, then suggests that this failure reveals an underlying cynicism in the poem about the potential for any true community to arise.

There is now the opportunity to synthesize and advance the discussion. Earls's work sees a validation of the Roycean communal framework in "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," but his treatment of the poem was brief and primarily served as a tool to combat Lentricchia. His strong ideas pairing with a merely tangential focus resulted in an approach that was potent but lacked the breadth and depth of a thorough critical analysis. McLoughlin's more extensive contribution leverages Earls's lens but fails to acknowledge the potential for a positive affirmation of an ideal community to arise out of the poem. McLoughlin reads the poem as an admission of the impossibility of true interpretive community, when instead, Eliot implies that the reader should seek beyond the failed communal attempts of the poem to envision an inverse approximating Royce's Beloved Community. I will attempt a synthesis of these viewpoints by demonstrating how, through portraying the Prufrockian community as an inverse, the poem clarifies Eliot's conception of the Roycean community. In addition, I will attempt to incorporate previously undiscussed examples from the text that enhance the juxtaposition between the Prufrockian community and Royce's Beloved Community; this is done so we may more fully realize the poem's power to elucidate the nature and characteristics of the ideal community.

To contrast the nature of the Roycean community with its Prufrockian foil, we will first examine an individual quality of the Roycean community before contemplating the inverse quality manifested in the poem, starting with the theme of communication. It is evident, even etymologically, that communication fosters community; the Roycean community, though, considers communication as not merely socially preferable but also epistemologically vital. In Royce's interpretive epistemology, a Community of Interpretation "is the totality of all those minds capable of representing aspects of Being to one another or to their future selves" (Parker and Pratt). Representing Being to each other equips the members to better understand the world around them and to operate effectively in it. Because the interpretive process helps others in the community to live well, Royce proclaims that "no one who loves mankind can find a worthier and more significant way to express his love than by increasing and expressing among men the Will to Interpret" (*The Problem of Christianity* 218). In addition, the act of interpretation expresses love not only for the individual members of the community but also for community as such—"the purest forms of love for community possible" (Royce, *The Problem of Christianity* 218)—by acknowledging community's *telos* as an epistemological tool.

Communication in the Prufrockian community, though, is concealing and fractured. Instead of a community of people honestly and openly interpreting reality with each other, Prufrock can imagine only a community that is accustomed to trivial,

surface-level dialogue shrouded with pretense: “Among the porcelain, among some talk of you and me” (line 89), interpretive communication is unable to flourish. The community members’ discussions are often little more than “Talking of Michelangelo” (line 14), bantering about foreign cultures as a platform for ostentation instead of shared appreciation. Eric Sigg notes that “Eliot’s earliest poems quietly register the American tendency to associate culture with what is foreign,” and that Eliot extends this American impulse to the Prufrockian community specifically as a pattern of pretense when discussing foreign culture (19). McLoughlin affirms that the Prufrockian “conversations about art and novels do not constitute ‘the historical sense’ but are representative of the sort of ‘knowledge’ that Eliot noted could be ‘put into a useful shape for examinations, drawing-rooms, or the still more pretentious modes of publicity’” (55). Such is the duplicitous, manipulative nature of communication that characterizes the Prufrockian community.

The Prufrockian community’s conversation defaults to triviality, demonstrating how Prufrock has no understanding of a community in which members help each other interpret that which is important in life. He questions whether he would ever be allowed to “have squeezed the universe into a ball / To roll it towards some overwhelming question” (lines 92–93) in any of his interpersonal relationships. The “overwhelming question[s]” are exactly what a healthy interpretive community should address, yet the “tea and cakes and ices” (line 79) constitute an impenetrable barrier of banal pleasantries that Prufrock thinks would frustrate any of his attempts to “force the moment to its crisis” (line 80). Prufrock imagines the woman in the poem giving up in the face of their community’s nearly insurmountable obstacles to pure, honest, interpretive communication with a lament, “That is not what I meant at all; / That is not it, at all” (lines 97–98). Prufrock encapsulates his frustration with such fragmented communication when exclaiming, “It is impossible to say just what I mean!” (line 104). McLoughlin summates the communicative quandary: “Here are no communities of memory or hope, no consensual epistemology, but irredeemable inattention, misunderstanding and crossed purposes” (55). McLoughlin’s bleak diagnosis captures the inability of the Prufrockian community to corporately articulate and interpret what is true, significant, and beneficial.

By portraying vapid communication within the Prufrockian community, Eliot enables the reader to more clearly envision a hypothetical, Roycean inverse. This ideal community, clarified through contrast with the Prufrockian, would communicate transparently and honestly about all things. Its members’ conversational scope would not only encompass simple matters but also broach the difficult and profound questions of life in courageous interpretive acts. Earls sees how this interpretive community would remedy the Prufrockian communicative divide, as “members of this community would be united by their ambition to have Prufrock fully comprehend what his companion means, and in turn to have her understand Prufrock’s desire” (131). This pure communication—like “the mermaids singing, each to each” (line

124)—is yet unattained by the Prufrockian community: “I do not think that they will sing to me” (line 125), Prufrock sighs in recognition of the interpretive deficit within his envisioned community.

The Roycean community concerns itself not only with deep, honest communication but also with similarly meaningful forms of relationship. The significant communication that occurs in an interpretive community is soul-baring and requires a type of vulnerability that strengthens interpersonal connection, as made evident by “current intimacy process models [that] suggest that vulnerable disclosures promote partner responsiveness and therefore increase intimacy” (Khalifian and Barry). Vulnerability increases intimacy through such means as “sharing personal information,” which “is a way of communicating trust and desire to share one’s self with another” (Khalifian and Barry). The interpersonal relationships in a Roycean community that encourages such communication will therefore be close and deep, a reality that Royce envisions when describing a community in which “we know even as we are known” (*The Hope of the Great Community* 35). In this light, Earls sees how, if Prufrock practiced less isolation and more vulnerability, he would be better able to understand the possibility of a healthy community with robust interpretive capacity: “If the attempt at mutual self-disclosure is successful, then the strategy leading to its success is likely repeated” (131). Individual members of the Roycean community, though, are not required to homogenize if they want to attain this depth of relationship. Instead of calling members of the Beloved Community to sacrifice their uniqueness, Royce declares that “a community does *not* become one, in the sense of my definition, by virtue of any reduction or melting of these various selves into a single merely present self, or into a mass of passing experience” (*The Problem of Christianity* 67). In a community replete with vulnerable, interpretive communication and in which uniqueness is celebrated, members will naturally connect through articulating the diverse, significant aspects of their shared lived experience.

The Roycean community’s relational intimacy contrasts with the shallow connection between members of the Prufrockian community. In Prufrock’s view of the world, the most prominent romantic venues are not chapels that feature the exchange of covenantal vows but are instead “one-night cheap hotels” (line 6). Noncommittal, licentious flings are the predominant mode of Prufrockian connection. Drawing rooms and parties also house transitory relationships, as “in the room the women come and go” (line 13). Prufrock describes these individuals as wandering in and out of community interactions without establishing any ties deeper than proximity. Even when members of this community are together, real connection is scarcely possible when Prufrock and his imagined interlocutors “prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet” (line 27), creating and acting out a façade instead of opening themselves to meaningful relationship.

Prufrock also projects his tendency to create inaccurate caricatures of others, which further inhibits authentic relationships from forming among members of his imagined community. Instead of acknowledging the individual complexity of their fellow humans or seeing the possibility for building a stronger relationship with them, Prufrockian community members assume that they have already plumbed the depths of relational potential and have come up empty. Prufrock does not see others' complex motives and personhood, so the community he envisions likewise sees each member as little more than a "patient etherized upon a table" (line 3), fit for surgically dissecting and critiquing but not for loving or knowing. Later in the poem, Prufrock rejects the possibility of authentic conviviality; his community members view each other less as friends and more as scientists who mechanically examine insects would: "And I have known the eyes already, known them all- / The eyes that fix you in a formulated phrase" (lines 55-56). Prufrock can see that his approach to relationship leads to shallow dead-ends; the issue is that, in his own narcissism and anxiety, he cannot imagine a form of companionship or community that would reciprocate a step toward the type of vibrant relationships we see in Royce's community. The reader can hear Prufrock's exasperated tone in facing this interpersonal quandary, where he remains hesitant to reveal any personal information that could spark meaningful relationship:

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?
And how should I presume? (lines 58-61)

Prufrock cannot imagine others caring for authentic relationship, so he chooses a reticence that relegates him to surface-level connection rather than having others scoff at his vulnerability.

Prufrock is filled with an existential dread when recognizing the paucity of meaningful interpersonal relationships within his life, a void that he also projects onto the Prufrockian community. He reflects, "I have measured out my life with coffee spoons" (line 51), signifying that his social experience has been characterized by empty interactions instead of the meaningful events that are more common within a flourishing community. Interpersonal milestones such as marriages, funerals, childbirths, and adventures with friends, mark the lives of relationally invested individuals operating in an ideal community. Even commonplace activities, such as sharing meals with loved ones, become much more significant and contributive toward a flourishing human experience when they are conditioned by deep relationship.

When Prufrock envisions community, though, he sees only idle, isolated activity, "the smoke that rises from the pipes / Of lonely men in shirt-sleeves, leaning out of windows" (lines 71-72). The image suggests a vapid, somber existence, in which

solitary musings stand in for true connection. Perhaps a first step toward relationship would occur if they came down from their windows and smoked together on the street, vulnerably admitting their desire for companionship and having that desire reciprocated. Instead, as Prufrock meanders alone “at dusk through narrow streets” (line 70), he feels as anonymous and unseen as a crab on the desolate ocean floor: “I should have been a pair of ragged claws / Scuttling across the floors of silent seas” (lines 73–74). The sense of solitude perpetuates Prufrock’s anxiety when he considers death: “And I have seen the eternal Footman hold my coat, and snicker” (line 85). He feels as though death itself mocks his isolated state and condemns any dream of finding more substantial relationship before the grave.

Reflecting on the Prufrockian community’s relational void enables us to perceive the obstacles preventing flourishing relationships and the significant experiences they provide. By vulnerably sharing their authentic selves, investing in consistent rather than transitory relationships, and refusing to create shallow caricatures of their peers, community members will be closer to attaining that Beloved Community that enriches their lives.

In addition to advancing meaningful communicative and relational practices, the Roycean community also fosters a specific sense of self. As mentioned, Royce did not envision a complete envelopment of the individual self when adjoining to the Beloved Community. In his view, the self is not compromised but fulfilled in the ideal community. Briody elaborates that in Royce’s view, “Through each man’s effort toward forming community through interpretation, his own individuality is enhanced rather than diminished. He becomes more uniquely himself precisely through his communal relationships” (229). The self and the community integrate and exist symbiotically instead of dissolving into each other. The individual maintains their uniqueness while contributing to and benefiting from the interpretive, relational, and edifying aspects of membership in the Beloved Community. If “it is from his own unrepeatable individuality that a man contributes to the greater wealth that is community” (Briody 225), then uniqueness is not seen as a barrier to communal unity but as its supplement.

Individuals’ identities integrate into Roycean community primarily through sharing “a common past and/or a common future. In regard to their past, the group constitutes a community of memory; in regard to the future, a community of hope” (Briody 226). The community members must share core values for understanding the past if they narrativize their history similarly. If they have a common hope for the future, then they are allied under beliefs that inform what to strive for and how to attain their mutual goals. Such a fundamental point of connection empowers members to “act as a community as well as individuals. In so acting, they achieve a personal reality over and above their isolated individualities” (Briody 226). It is when living out

of unified values and beliefs in a communal context that the individual self and the community are most fully integrated.

The Prufrockian community distorts Royce's vision of an authentic, integrated self and community by enforcing a surface-level homogeneity, under which there are no shared values. Prufrock highlights the monotony of his envisioned community's polite drawing-room interchanges to describe the disingenuous roots of their behavioral unity. He sighs, in an exasperated and fatigued tone, "For I have known them all already, known them all— / Have known the evenings, mornings, afternoons" (lines 49–50), "I know the voices dying with a dying fall / Beneath the music from a farther room" (lines 52–53); "I have known the eyes already, known them all" (line 55), and "I have known the arms already, known them all" (line 62). Prufrock does not have faith in the possibility of a community that properly celebrates that which is different and "other." Instead of embodying the Roycean ideal in that way, the Prufrockian community militates a behavioral uniformity that belies disparate motives and clashing values beneath a manicured surface.

We may perceive this deep dissonance by examining Prufrock's inner turmoil when he considers seemingly harmless social contexts. Maintaining homogeneity distresses Prufrock, as doing so would force him to compromise his identity and conform instead of expressing who he truly is, yet he has no point of reference for a community that would welcome him without changing him. His monologic musings on relationship, forming the basis of the Prufrockian community, express this anguish in his repeated refrain "Do I dare?" and in his indecision on whether to enter stressful social interactions by allowing "Time to turn back and descend the stair" (lines 38–39).

Moreover, Prufrock does not view social interactions as fluid, natural, and enjoyable, as they often are in a community where people love each other and share values. Prufrock instead anticipates "time yet for a hundred indecisions, / And for a hundred visions and revisions" throughout when conversing with others (lines 32–33). Prufrock's psychological and emotional volatility manifests in strained, manufactured rapport; he can imagine little else among people who lack a true shared identity to connect through. Amidst the social scrutiny arising from fragmented identities, he even views such trivial breaches of conduct as parting his hair a different way and eating a peach as daring endeavors (line 122), and he attaches cosmological significance to minor impropriety: "Do I dare / Disturb the universe?" (lines 45–46). Prufrock feels compelled to perform an insincere self if he wants to qualify for community. He risks social rejection if he fails this performance on the stage of the drawing room, and this possibility of alienation amplifies his anxiety.

While the Prufrockian community represents a distorted view of communication, relationship, and self in community, the end of the poem suggests Prufrock's ability to change in closer resemblance to the Roycean ideal. McNamara

notes how Prufrock is not rendered “as a unified and coherent self, but rather as a figure paralyzed by his narcissistic investments” (372), but near the poem’s conclusion, Prufrock begins to shed his narcissism and develop a view of self that is more in keeping with membership in a flourishing community:

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. (lines 111–115)

Though this monologue has often been read as Prufrock languishing in his insecurities, we may just as reasonably read it as Prufrock integrating his view of himself into community. He is casting off his self-centeredness that previously convinced him of the need to be the beloved star of the drawing room. In a Roycean community with shared hope and future, members recognize their individual roles in contributing to that future and acknowledge that not everyone is given a lead role in driving the plot forward. Prufrock is starting to realize the significance of others around him, causing him to reflect on whether he needs to be the hero for his community to flourish.

It is this realization, where Prufrock begins to break through his narcissism, that Haba sees as completed in the final line of the poem. Haba explicates “Till human voices wake us, and we drown” (line 131) as Prufrock realizing the value and humanity of others in his actual, not imagined, community. Prufrock’s realization mirrors Christian baptism in that he “drowns” his old self and previous isolation and resurrects with a new self that is integrated into an ideal community resembling the Church (Haba 56–59). Prufrock wakes up from that monologic dream in which he paints a failed vision of community where only his voice resounds. He now distinguishes the actual other voices around him, no longer muddling them with the imagined Prufrockian community, thus opening the possibility for true relationship. Despite the difficulty of realizing Royce’s ideal community, Eliot portrays the potential for positive communal change at the end of the poem, challenging readers and Prufrock himself to attain the Beloved Community.

Though the beginning period of Eliot’s career, in which he wrote “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” is perhaps his most cynical, we still find prominent features of hope for the self, the community, and the integration of the two in the poem. Considering that Royce compared his theorized Beloved Community to the Christian Kingdom of Heaven, it is unsurprising that, after a “long meditated and perhaps even long deferred” process (Kearns 88), Eliot converted to Christianity. Perhaps his vision for an ideal community, portrayed inversely in “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” led him to pursue that fellowship in the religious venue where he deemed it most likely to be found. Regardless, the Prufrockian community’s distorted practices of

communication, relationship, and selfhood serve as a foil to better perceive the characteristics, worthiness, and partial attainability of the ideal, Roycean community.

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