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“My Madness Singing”: The Specter of Syphilis in Prufrock’s Love Song

Since T. S. Eliot’s publication of “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” in the June, 1915 issue of *Poetry*, it has become one of the most widely quoted poems of the twentieth century. Despite its popularity, though, few readers know about the existence of “Prufrock’s Pervigilium.” When Eliot inscribed “The Love Song” in his writing notebook in 1911, he left four blank pages before the line “And the afternoon, the evening, sleeps so peacefully!” (*March Hare* 177). In this space, Eliot intended to eventually add a section that would unite the other two parts. In 1912, he wrote 38 lines in the blank pages (*March Hare* 176), calling the addition “Prufrock’s Pervigilium.” However, Eliot seemed dissatisfied with this solution, recalling in a 1960 letter to the TLS that when his Harvard friend Conrad Aiken read the “Pervigilium,” he “perceived at once that the additions were of inferior quality” (*March Hare* 176). Thus, with an act of Prufrock-like indecision, Eliot deleted most of this section shortly before publishing “The Love Song.” Consequently, the “Pervigilium” remained largely unknown until 1996, when Eliot’s notebook, *Inventions of the March Hare*, was published with annotations by Christopher Ricks. Reading the “Pervigilium” back into “Prufrock” alters the poem by adding a surprising stroll through a red-light district in the speaker’s unidentified modern city. While the “one-night cheap hotels” of the opening scene seem to hint at such a location, the rest of the originally published poem takes place in more respectable “rooms” inhabited by cultured women, where Prufrock fails to raise his all-important question. Restoring the “Pervigilium” changes the

trajectory of “Prufrock:” the poem now interrupts that drawing-room narrative by taking us back to the seedy streets where his quest began.

Because the insertion of the “Pervigilium” alters the narrative of “The Love Song,” the public release of Eliot’s notebook has allowed for previously impossible interpretations of “Prufrock.” Indeed, until the New York Public Library announced in 1968 that it had purchased the *March Hare* ten years earlier (*March Hare* xiii), scholars had no access to the unpublished poems. Even then, the library forbade quoting from the collection (Mayer x), so that even critics with knowledge of Prufrock’s nighttime walk through a dodgy neighborhood could not discuss it explicitly or openly in print. Interpretations of Eliot’s poem from before 1996 typically read Prufrock as a hesitant character who is divided between a superficial self and a fundamental self. Piers Gray looks at the influence of Bergson on Eliot’s intellectual development (39), enabling him to see that “the deeper [the mind] is aware of itself and its reasoning, the further it renders the body impotent” (65). Relatedly, John Mayer focuses on Prufrock’s Bergsonian *dédoublement*, arguing that “in ‘Prufrock,’ the deep self tries to break through the mask and into life through vocation and relationship” (97). Mayer discusses Prufrock’s indecisiveness, proposing that “the cause of his withdrawal [is] the sight of the self naked before the world” (125). Eric Sigg employs a *homo duplex* model, attributing Prufrock’s failure to a weak inner self when he states that “his self-doubting question [“Do I dare/ Disturb the universe?”] makes a kind of acknowledgement that in fact he lacks the strength to force the moment to its crisis” (91). Finally, A. D. Moody claims that “[w]ithin the poem, the poet is simply an intelligence contemplating and analyzing its object” (30), continuing that Prufrock hesitates because “[h]is wit is so easily diminished by the mere reflection of what one might say, a woman’s languid dismissal of some meaning which exceeds her interest” (35). All of these interpretations

understand Prufrock's problem as part of his psychological makeup. However, none of these scholars consider how Prufrock's experiences in the "Pervigilium" contribute to his failed proposal or to his seaside vision. Therefore, reading the deleted section back into "Prufrock" allows us to understand him as a character paralyzed by a widespread social problem.

Eliot wrote his additions to "The Love Song" shortly after spending the 1910-1911 academic year in Paris (*March Hare* 176-177). By this time, an epidemic of syphilis had terrified Parisians for more than half a century. Alexandre Parent-Duchâtelet, a prominent 19<sup>th</sup>-century doctor studying the virus, contributed to this fear when he proclaimed that "Of all the diseases that can affect mankind through contagion, and which have the most serious repercussions on society, there is none more serious, more dangerous, and more to be feared than syphilis" (Corbin 5). Europeans mainly blamed prostitutes for spreading the infection (Harsin 246), and in 1878 the chief of the Paris Bureau of Morals estimated that there were between thirty thousand and forty thousand women secretly selling themselves in the city (Harsin 241-2). Considering these high numbers, it seems almost unsurprising that in the early 1880s, a French professor claimed that about 5,000 new cases of syphilis developed each year in Paris (Corbin 248). This virus had severe symptoms that could last for years, including fever, rashes, paralysis, blindness, dementia, and altered behavior. If left untreated, it could even lead to death (CDC). However, the social consequences of syphilis could be devastating as well. For one, it became a tremendous source of shame, sometimes even driving young bachelors to suicide (Corbin 250). At the same time, married men who contracted the disease often spread it to their innocent wives (Corbin 249). Alain Corbin even mentions stories about "fathers who murder[ed] sons-in-law who had infected a dear daughter" (249). Understandably, then, the virus contributed to a decreased marriage rate and an increased divorce rate (Corbin 250). In short, prostitution and venereal

disease threatened to undermine marriage and family at every level of society, and the fear of syphilis particularly haunted the young men of Paris.

Eliot was certainly no exception to this rule. Three years after his 1911 departure from the French capital, he admitted in a letter to Conrad Aiken that

... I have been going through one of those nervous sexual attacks which I suffer from when alone in a city. Why I had almost none last fall I don't know—this is the worst since Paris. ... One walks about the street with one's desires, and one's refinement rises up like a wall whenever opportunity approaches. I should be better off, I sometimes think, if I had disposed of my virginity and shyness several years ago: and indeed I still think sometimes that it would be well to do so before marriage. (*Letters I*, 82)

Here the word “refinement” suggests that Eliot’s “opportunit[ies]” to satisfy his “desires” arose from women he deemed socially beneath himself. Eliot’s sense of propriety stemmed from his upbringing: his father, Henry Ware Eliot, wrote in a 1914 letter to his brother, Thomas Lamb Eliot, that “[he] hope[d] that a cure for Syphilis w[ould] never be discovered,” calling the virus “God’s punishment for nastiness” (*Letters I*, 41). H. W. Eliot’s strong judgment of anyone with a venereal disease explains in part why his son’s “refinement” kept him from simply paying for the services of a prostitute to end his “nervous sexual attacks.” Indeed, had T. S. Eliot “disposed of [his] virginity” with a loose woman, he would have risked contracting the infection his father so harshly condemned. Such a virus would have brought tremendous shame on the young man and his family, not to mention the harmful effects of the disease itself. Clearly Eliot’s inner conflict between propriety and carnal desire weighed heavily on his mind from 1910 to 1914; it thus makes sense that the topic would find its way into the poetry he wrote during these years. This poetry includes “Preludes” and “Rhapsody on a Windy Night” as well as “The Love Song” and

the “Pervigilium” (*March Hare* 176-177). Looking at these poems in the context of the syphilis epidemic and its representation in French art yields quite a different understanding, particularly of Prufrock’s undecided, hesitating nature. This paper argues that the “Pervigilium” reveals Prufrock’s fear of syphilis and anxiety about understanding women’s social cues.

### Paris, City of Sin

After French government officials accepted that the exchange of sex for money would occur regardless of its legal status (Corbin 9), they decided to regulate its practice in an effort to contain the spread of venereal disease among other reasons (5). Under this plan, Parisian officers created a list of every prostitute they could find. Once a woman’s name appeared on the register, the government would subject her to regular medical examinations. If a prostitute tested positive for syphilis, the doctors would send her to either the Lourcine or the Saint-Lazare Prison for the duration of the infection’s contagiousness (Harsin 253). A policeman pointed out the irony of these lists when he stated that the creation of the *fille publique* only led to the rise of the *fille insoumise* (Harsin 241). These clandestine prostitutes worked independently, managing to stay off the official registers of the city. Whereas the subjugated women generally remained in *maisons de tolérance* known by the government, the *filles insoumises* strolled the boulevards after dark and slept with their clients in cheap hotels. Moreover, clandestine harlots may have worked other jobs during the day, selling themselves at night as a source of supplementary income. Indeed, Corbin writes that “[Parent-Duchâtelet] had demonstrated the vulnerability of virtually all working-class women [to clandestine prostitution]; contemporaries ... us[ed] [this vulnerability] as a reason for suspecting all working-class women of at least part-time prostitution” (247).

Artists of the era began to play on the “suspicion” that Parent-Duchâtelet’s contemporaries had of “all working-class women.” Many of Edgar Degas’s paintings depict women associated with the secret trade of prostitution. For instance, his 1869 *The Laundress* shows a young girl ironing a white dress while she gazes out at the viewer. Charles Bernheimer includes “laundresses” in a list of what he calls “female professionals . . . known to be involved in clandestine prostitution” (159). Given this context, Degas’s contemporary audience would have returned the woman’s gaze with the knowledge that she might sell herself after she finishes pressing the cloth beneath her hands. Thus, this painting exploits the “suspicion” that the French had of lower-class women. Bernheimer also puts “dancers” on his list (159). The need for Parisian dancers to turn to harlotry resulted from the opera’s dependence on private funds, which enabled wealthy but immoral donors to give gifts with the stipulation that they receive a sexual favor in return (Bernheimer 159). Resultantly, Bernheimer states that “by the 1870s it was common knowledge that the dancers at the Opera were chosen more for their sex appeal than for their talent” (159). Therefore, 19<sup>th</sup>-century viewers would have looked on Degas’s famous ballet scenes with the suspicion that the ballerinas’ duties do not only consist of the dancing shown on the canvas. Bernheimer pays close attention to the well-dressed old man with his hand outstretched to the dancer in *The Ballet Rehearsal* of 1874. The scholar claims that through this gesture Degas acknowledges the sexual requirements of the ballerina’s profession (160). Nevertheless, Degas only depicts the dancers and the laundress at work, leaving it unconfirmed that these figures are part-time prostitutes. The ambiguous status of these women gives Degas’s images what Bernheimer calls “one of their most powerful effects of modernity,” where “[a] hint of prostitution is countered by a suggestion of autonomy” (163). Eliot engages with this same sense of uncertainty in his notebook poem “Paysage Triste.” Julia Daniel writes that the

speaker's class renders him unable to determine whether or not a girl who steps onto an omnibus works as a *fille insoumise* (7). The unclear status of the subjects in Degas's paintings relates to the questionable figure in "Paysage Triste."

Other visual artworks more clearly depict prostitutes. Not all of Degas's subjects remain so vague as the laundress and the dancers. For instance, in *Les Femmes devant un café, le soir*, a group of women gather on a café terrace at night. T. J. Clark states that "[t]he critics that year were certainly aware that the women in question were prostitutes, sitting at a table on the sidewalk of the Boulevard Montmartre, swapping stories and picking up trade information" (100-101). The critic's "certainty" about the women in *Les Femmes devant un café* suggests that Degas did not intend for these subjects to remain ambiguous. Degas's talented student, Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, drew on his personal intimacy with Parisian *maisons* when he created his own brothel scenes (Bernheimer 195). For example, Toulouse-Lautrec's 1894 work *In the Salon of the Rue des Moulins* shows six *filles soumises* sitting in the waiting room of a grand bordello. Bernheimer mentions that actual harlots modeled for Toulouse-Lautrec in his studio, identifying the five women who sit on the sofa (196). This information illustrates the extent of Toulouse-Lautrec's artistic engagement with prostitution. Unlike the seated harlots who appear relaxed and even proud on the sofa, the sixth woman turns her head away from the audience and casts her eyes to the floor while she lifts her dress to her lower back. This woman's posture gives a sense of her humiliation when she exposes herself to the viewer. Bernheimer observes that this standing *soumise* "derives from a series of images Lautrec painted of prostitutes waiting for their periodic medical exam" (198), reminding the viewer that disease had a strong presence in the bordellos. Thus, *In the Salon of the Rue des Moulins* not only gives its audience a view of the

inside of a luxurious *maison de tolérance*, but it also captures the humiliating effect of government regulation on prostitutes.

Before Degas or Toulouse-Lautrec, however, the painter most notorious for addressing the reality of French prostitution was Édouard Manet. His *Olympia*, an adaptation of Titian's classic nude, *Venus of Urbino*, became so scandalous when it was displayed at the 1865 Paris Salon that the curators had to hang it above the reach of outraged spectators (Bernheimer 104). Bernheimer argues that "*Olympia's* scandal ... is due to its simultaneous activation and exposure of the dynamics of the production of woman as fetish in patriarchal consumer society" (104). Here Bernheimer proposes that Manet "expos[es]" the "fetish" men had for prostitutes in mid-19<sup>th</sup>-century France. Contemporary critics specifically complained about *Olympia's* similarity to a corpse because of her pale complexion and her nudity (Bernheimer 102). According to Bernheimer, "[their rhetoric's] emphasis on absence, negativity, lack, and decay reveals a deep-seated anxiety that is at once expressed and controlled through this morbid imagery" (104). The word "reveals" shows that in *Olympia*, Manet brings out the "anxiety" of Parisians towards harlots. Clark presents another theory about the insults directed at *Olympia*, proposing that "[the critics] were perplexed by the fact that *Olympia's* class was nowhere but in her body" (146).

Like *Olympia*, Manet's final masterpiece, *Un Bar aux Folies-Bergère*, also depicts a likely prostitute, although this painting did not cause such a controversy. In this work, a woman stands behind the bar at the Folies-Bergère music hall, a place that Clark claims "[w]ithout a doubt, by the time Manet painted it ... had become a 'permanent fair for prostitutes'" (245). Bernheimer states that much like the performers at the opera, "café-concert singers" became known for prostitution (149). Given this woman's profession and her restaurant's reputation, Manet presumably wanted to arouse suspicion in his audience. Indeed, the painting itself subtly



hints at sexual work. For one, the woman stands surrounded by bottles whose phallic shapes symbolize her possible source of supplementary income. The reflection in the mirror shows the woman leaning in to talk with a well-dressed man who holds a cane in his hand. This object represents the customer's desire for the barmaid, whom Clark states he sees as "one more such object which money can buy" (254-255). Whether or not the woman actually sells herself, she plays into the illusion that she does by pinning a bouquet of flowers to her bosom. These flowers both call attention to her breasts and restrict visual access. An earlier sketch of *Un Bar* does not include a concealing bouquet, leaving the area largely exposed. Here the woman's low-cut dress makes her role as a prostitute more plausible, but still the viewer has no way to know that she does in fact work as a *fille insoumise*. Returning to the finished version of the painting, a bowl of mandarin oranges on the countertop symbolizes the barmaid's difficulty to characterize. Frances Dickey analyzes a half-peeled orange beneath the bird in Manet's *Woman with a Parrot*, stating that this fruit "reminds us that outer coverings can be removed to reveal what is underneath" ("Parrot's Eye" 122). In *Un Bar*, though, the oranges remain peeled, representing the viewer's inability to "reveal what is underneath" the woman, or in other words, to determine whether or not she will sell herself to the client facing her. Ultimately, whether the orange is peeled or not, both paintings emphasize the difficulty of assessing the ambiguous female figure.

Unlike the paintings that depict either *filles publiques* or *filles insoumises*, Manet's *Nana* portrays a third type of prostitute, the *courtisane*. Although Bernheimer states that "[i]t was a commonplace of the time to observe that a prostitute of the better class was practically indistinguishable from a proper lady of society" (90), this woman is, in fact, a courtesan. The cranes on the wallpaper support this claim. Bernheimer points out that the French word for "crane," "*grue*," also means harlot (231). Thus, the birds suggest that *Nana* works as a prostitute.

Clark states that “[the *courtisane*’s] business was dominance and make-believe” (110), and Manet brings out Nana’s “dominance” by having her pay no attention to the man behind her, instead staring out at the viewer and applying cosmetics. Meanwhile the customer gazes at Nana’s backside from the margin of the *tableau*, showing his sexual desire for the prostitute before him. The cane in the customer’s hand represents his arousal and contrasts with the soft objects and smooth curves surrounding Nana, such as the sofa cushion and the pillows on either side of her. In fact, the sofa’s legs have the same shape as Nana’s legs, and her back follows the same curve as the top of the sofa. These shapes call attention to Nana’s plump and rounded figure. Bernheimer states “the emphasis on [Nana’s] ample hips and rounded stomach strongly sexualizes her body” (231).

Manet’s *Nana* soon became a fictional character as well as a visual image, as the eponymous heroine of an 1880 novel by Émile Zola, who had defended *Olympia* earlier in 1867 (Bernheimer 112). Bernheimer calls the years 1879 and 1880 “a time when literary versions of the prostitute’s life were arriving on the cultural scene in rapid succession” (167). According to him, Guy de Maupassant, Auguste Villiers de L’Isle-Adam, Edmond and Jules Goncourt, Honoré de Balzac, Alexandre Dumas, *fils*, and Joris-Karl Huysmans also wrote stories about harlots in the mid-1800s (96; 97; 139; 167). This incomplete list of authors writing about the world of prostitution shows that the topic became a popular literary theme in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Eliot certainly knew about some of these works before arriving in France thanks to Arthur Symons, who mentions Flaubert, the Goncourts, Zola, Villiers de l’Isle-Adam, and Baudelaire in the introduction to *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* (4; 8). Symons devotes an entire chapter of this book to Baudelaire, whom he calls “a hermit of the brothel” (115). Indeed,

Baudelaire wrote a series of seventeen or eighteen poems about his prostitute-lover Jeanne Duval in *Les Fleurs du Mal* (Baudelaire 357-358).

In addition to Eliot's familiarity with the literary representation of the "city of sin," he was also interested in visual art. In a 1955 essay, he looked back on his undergraduate years at Harvard when he discovered "Manet and Monet, Japanese prints, the plays of Maeterlinck, the music of Debussy and above all the combination of Maeterlinck and Debussy in *Pelleas and Mélisande*" ("Gordon Craig's Socratic Dialogues"). This reminiscence informs us that Eliot drew inspiration from a variety of art forms. Dickey has demonstrated that Eliot incorporated these interests into his own work in 1909 when he wrote two ekphrastic poems about Manet's *Woman with a Parrot* ("Parrot's Eye"). Although neither "Prufrock" nor the "Pervigilium" explicitly describe a work of art, that does not mean that painters did not influence Eliot when he wrote these verses. "The Love Song" does have a refrain about Michelangelo, after all. Hence, by the time Eliot reached Paris in 1910, he already had at least some familiarity with the subject of prostitutes in French literature and painting.

The representation of prostitution that may have had the greatest direct impact on Eliot was Charles-Louis Philippe's 1901 novel *Bubu de Montparnasse*. In Eliot's preface to the 1934 English translation of this book, he remembers that "[he] first read *Bubu* ... when [he] came first to Paris," calling it "a symbol of [the city] of that time." This story follows the lives of three young characters living in the French capital: Berthe, a *fille insoumise*; Bubu, her pimp; and Pierre, her primary customer. The narrator mentions that Berthe's father was a house-painter, and that Berthe herself worked as a florist before becoming a full-time harlot (31-32). Berthe's lower-class background reflects the tendency of the French to associate prostitution with poverty. In fact, Berthe's sister, Blanche, becomes a *cocotte* during her apprenticeship as a laundress (32),

bringing Degas's paintings to mind. At the beginning of the fourth chapter, Berthe discovers that she has syphilis in a scene that especially influenced Eliot. Here Philippe's narrator mentions Berthe's "unclean feet" and "pale yellowish slimness" (49). Similarly, the speaker of the third "Prelude" describes the "yellow soles of feet" clasped by the woman who "ha[s] such a vision of the street/ As the street hardly understands" (15; 11-12). Ricks points out that in the notebook version of this poem, Eliot condenses three phrases from Philippe's novel into the epigraph "*Son âme de petite putain*" (*March Hare* 336). The word "*putain*" immediately indicates that the poem deals with a prostitute, which the association of the character with the "street" matches. Considering the tradition established by the French painters and writers of the preceding century, this poem shows Eliot becoming a modern European artist by taking an interest in Parisian literary themes and cultural concerns. At the same time, however, Eliot calls the notebook draft of the third "Prelude" the "Prelude in Roxbury." With this title and the poem's content, Eliot meshes Paris and Boston into one city, adapting Philippe's scene to the cityscape of an American suburb near his college town.

"Preludes" is not Eliot's only early poem to dwell in the landscape of prostitution. Indeed, Eliot also engages with the theme of venal sex in "Rhapsody on a Windy Night," which he wrote in Paris. This poem begins at "Twelve o'clock" midnight and continues up to "Four o'clock" in the morning over the course of its four sections. Harlots come out during these late hours, and the speaker suspects that he sees one coming towards "you" at "Half past one" when the street lamp tells "you" to

... "regard that woman

"Who hesitates toward you on the corner

"You see the corner of her dress

“Is torn, and stained with sand

“And the corner of her eye

“Twists like a crooked pin.” (15-22)

Here the lamp encourages “you” to look at a probable *fille insoumise* “on the corner.” In this way, the streetlight helps the woman advertise herself. Of course, the lamp cannot actually talk, so the poet imagines its role to the likely prostitute. Much of the speech focuses on vision, including the words “regard,” “You see,” and “eye.” This visual attention reflects how the woman uses the lamp so that she can signal to potential customers at night. The woman promotes herself “on the corner,” where her sexual occupation makes its imprint on both her attire and her visage. Indeed, the gaslight mentions that “the corner of her dress is torn, and stained with sand,” which results from her frequent loitering on the “corner” of a sandy street in a poor neighborhood. The streetlight also states that “the corner of her eye twists like a crooked pin.” Here the sharp, “twis[ting]” “pin” denotes a certain danger stemming from the *fille*’s gaze. Perhaps for this reason “you” does not approach the woman, and she only “hesitates toward [him].” The “hesitat[ion]” results from the harlot’s uncertainty about whether “you” desires to pay for her services.

Two hours later the streetlamp talks to “you” again, this time directing him to turn his attention towards the sky:

“Regard the moon

“La lune ne garde aucune rancune

She winks a watery eye,

She smiles from the corners of a face

Wrinkles the hideous scars of a washed-out pox

Her hand twists a paper rose; ..." (50-55)

Again the light begins with the word "regard," reflecting its role of enabling "you" to see the sights of this impoverished area at night. Here the lamp speaks in French, stating that "La lune ne garde aucune rancune," or in other words, the moon does not hold grudges. Instead, it harbors secrets, "wink[ing]" and "smil[ing]" to confirm that it will not expose "your" sins should "you" approach a prostitute. The poet's personification of the moon suggests that "you" feels concerned someone will learn about his exploits, although only the moon sees him on the deserted streets. The speaker turns lunar craters into "hideous scars of a washed-out pox," suggesting syphilitic pox. This image correlates night and the spread of disease by prostitutes. Formally, the recurrence of "twists" from the first section mimics the passing of a contagious infection. Because the word first appears in the lamp's mention of the probable harlot's "twisting eye," the virus seems to originate from her. Of course, the moon has not actually suffered from a venereal disease, so the description exposes "your" paranoia about getting syphilis from a harlot he meets on the street.

After this description of the moon, the speaker turns his attention to a brothel scene.

Specifically, the poet imagines the moon recalling

... female smells in darkened rooms,

And cigarette smoke of corridors

And cocktail smells in bars ... (64-66)

The anaphoric repetition of "And" connects these scents, suggesting that the recollection of one leads to reminiscences of the others. This association of the odors with each other could mean that they come from the same location, namely the inside of some place linked with prostitution. In particular, the description of "female smells in darkened rooms" refers to the sexual scents

inside a “darkened” brothel chamber or hotel room. Men fill the “corridors” leading to the rooms with “cigarette smoke,” and the lower-class *maisons à estaminet* featured “bars” that stunk of cigarettes and alcohol (Corbin 59). However, “you” does not actually enter a place associated with *filles* but instead continues home where he feels “[t]he last twist of the knife” (76). The image of a “knife” painfully “twist[ing]” into “you” indicates that he feels disappointed when he returns to his ordinary life after failing to pay for sex. At the same time, the recurrence of the verb “twist” continues the language of infection from the harlot’s eye in a process that suggests “your” fear of disease. Here the word has entered “your” home, where the memory of the woman still pierces him like a “knife.” This lasting feeling permeates into the character’s quotidian existence represented by the “bed” and the “toothbrush” (74). Eliot’s idea of a prostitute’s gaze infecting a man’s everyday interactions resurfaces when the “Pervigilium” is read back into “Prufrock.”

#### Women in “The Love Song” and the “Pervigilium”

The subject of prostitution appears in the opening stanza of “The Love Song” when Prufrock walks through a working-class city quarter. Prufrock describes the scene around him:

Let us go, through certain half-deserted streets

The muttering retreats

Of restless nights in one-night cheap hotels ... (4-6)

The adjective “certain half-deserted streets” follows from the setting in the late evening, since William Acton writes in *Prostitution* in 1858 that “even if some women are to be seen in certain streets in Paris in the early part of the evening, after half-past eleven the streets are quite deserted” (*The Poems of TSE* 378). Rather, only prostitutes, their *souteneurs*, and their customers

would stay out at this hour, explaining Prufrock's quantifier "*half-* deserted." These lines compare to a scene in *Bubu* when the narrator describes how "[p]rostitutes pirouetted on the street-corners, with their threadbare skirts and their querying eyes. [Pierre] did not even look at them" (21). Much as Pierre does not look at the harlots, Prufrock does not clearly acknowledge their presence around him. The overlap of Prufrock's description with Philippe's scene strengthens the assertion that *filles insoumises* "pirouette" on the "half-deserted streets," or at least that Prufrock thinks they do. Hence, although Prufrock does not explicitly mention the presence of harlots, the historical and literary context reveals that they walk on the boulevards around him.

The phrase "restless nights in one-night cheap hotels" more noticeably alludes to the activity of prostitutes. Jill Harsin remarks that "[u]sually, [the *logeurs à la nuit*] do not spend more than a single night in the same place, and this night, when they do not spend it in the haunts of prostitution, costs them from 5 to 15 sous" (244). This quote indicates that the "one-night cheap hotels" refer to the places where prostitutes work, with the adjective "restless" alluding to sexual activity. Indeed, throughout *Bubu*, Berthe sleeps in a number of rented rooms, which would have given Eliot his knowledge of a harlot's lodging habits. Grover Smith points out the similarity between the settings of "The Love Song" and this novel when he states "Prufrock's 'one-night cheap hotels' ... have an analogue in the '*chambres d'hôtels*' of *Bubu de Montparnasse*, though indeed it is the general connotation which serves as a link, rather than the words" (256). Since registered women would sleep in bordellos, though, only clandestine prostitutes like Berthe would stay in these "one-night cheap hotels." Therefore, in the opening stanza of his "Song," Prufrock feels certain that he sees signs of prostitution in his vicinity.



Although Prufrock only passes through this neighborhood for now, he will return to it in the “Pervigilium.”

Prufrock walks from this seedy place to a social gathering with respectable women. He expresses his discomfort at the event when he thinks

And I have known the eyes, I have 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? (55-59)

Here Prufrock only mentions the “eyes” of the people surrounding him, showing his hyperconscious tendency to feel like the center of attention. Words like “sprawling,” “pinned,” and “wriggling” express Prufrock’s resulting discomfort. The use of repetition and anaphora with “the eyes,” “when I am,” “pin” and “pinned,” and “formulated” builds momentum, and the lack of punctuation allows the energy of the poetry to accumulate up to the fourth line. This fast pace captures Prufrock’s nervousness. Since Prufrock has become so uneasy, he asks “how should [he] begin” to ask his question when he has the opportunity. An end rhyme between “pin” and “begin” connects Prufrock’s inability to “begin” proposing with the group’s act of making him self-conscious by “pinning” him with their eyes. “Pinned” resonates with Prufrock’s “necktie ... asserted by a simple pin” (43), which Dickey says “transforms the pin from an object in the external world to a metaphor for his (interior) feelings” (“A Walking Tour”125). In this case, the “pin” brings out Prufrock’s “interior” anxiety, foreshadowing his hesitation to raise his question.

When these women stare at Prufrock, he averts his gaze to their arms, where he sees their beauty:

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

While Prufrock talks about eyes in the previous stanza, he now only mentions “arms.” This fragmentation suggests that Prufrock feels intimidated by the women’s glamour and attractiveness, leading him to focus on smaller parts of their bodies. A rhyme scheme picks up here with “all” and “shawl,” “bare” and “hair,” and “dress” and “digress.” The second of these pairs captures how the “light brown hair” downs the otherwise “bare” arms. This beautiful “hair” contrasts with Prufrock’s own balding head, which embarrasses him (41). Moreover, Prufrock uses an internal rhyme between “downed” and “brown,” and he repeats the word “light.” These lovely poetic sounds reflect Prufrock’s feelings about the women’s appearance. The word “digress” has three possible meanings. On a formal level, Eliot uses an uneven rhythm in the two lines between the dashes, indicating a “digress[ion]” from Prufrock’s meter. Prufrock also “digress[es]” from his discussion of the arms here to describe the women’s pleasant “perfume” and beautiful “skin.” Finally, the word “digress” can mean “to depart,” showing how Prufrock leaves the social event at the end of this stanza.

Because Prufrock feels intimidated by these proper women, he loses hope that the beloved will want to become romantically involved with him. Unable to determine how he should “begin” asking his question when he has the chance, Prufrock returns to the city streets. At the outset of the “Pervigilium” section, we find him in a district similar or identical to the one

where he began his walk. This time, however, the prostitutes tempt Prufrock, which the title of the “Pervigilium” reflects. Indeed, the name “Pervigilium” comes from the *Pervigilium Veneris*, or the “Eve of Venus,” an anonymous Latin poem from the third or fourth century AD (*March Hare* 177). By choosing his title from a poem about Venus, Eliot immediately associates “Prufrock’s Pervigilium” with female sexuality. Moreover, in Walter Pater’s 1885 novel *Marius the Epicurean*, Pater imagines that his character Flavian writes the *Pervigilium Veneris* (*March Hare* 177). Since Flavian catches the plague in this story, Ricks notes that “Pater’s diseased description has the effect of invoking the dark sense of *Veneris*, not only Venus but the venereal” (*March Hare* 178). Thus, the connection between “Prufrock’s Pervigilium” and *Marius the Epicurean* associates Eliot’s poem with “the venereal” as well.

Indeed, when Prufrock wanders through the seedy neighborhood, he encounters women who he suspects work as prostitutes:

... women took the air, standing in entries —

Women, spilling out of corsets, stood in entries

Where the draughty gas-jet flickered ... (6-8)

The “women” described here compare to Degas’s subjects and Manet’s barmaid, who remain ambiguously classed even though the artists provide strong indications that they sell themselves. These artworks reveal that the distinction between harlots and respectable working-class women became blurred in 19<sup>th</sup>-century France, rendering spectators unable to distinguish between the two groups. Similarly, when Prufrock walks through a red-light district at night, the presence of women outside makes us think he sees prostitutes. We have no way of knowing, though, since Prufrock does not clarify what he sees due to his own confusion. The anaphoric repetition of the word “women” suggests that Prufrock stares, but he cannot make a definitive identification,

showing the same mindset exploited by Degas and Manet. Part of Prufrock's difficulty results from his observation that the women stay "in entries" on the threshold of the street and the house. This liminal space is a metaphor for the women's ambiguity. Hence, Prufrock cannot determine if the figures advertise themselves on the boulevard by "spilling out of corsets" or if they have merely stepped outside for some air.

Eliot's reference to the "draughty gas-jet" adds further evidence that these women work as prostitutes, since the shade in the covered "entries" would conceal their facial features. Harsin mentions that "the *cabinets noirs* in back were kept deliberately dark to hide the ravages of venereal disease from the customers" (243). Therefore, the women could attempt to conceal their pox in these shadowy entranceways. With their blemishes hidden in the darkness, the women could then entice passersby like Prufrock with their partially exposed bodies. At the same time, though, the harlot in "Rhapsody" uses the lamp to advertise herself, suggesting that if the women Prufrock sees wanted to sell themselves, they would stand in the light. These contradictory signals again make Prufrock's determination difficult. Resultantly, he begins to doubt his understanding of all women. Prufrock's uncertainty will later contribute to his paralyzing fear that he misinterprets the beloved's feelings for him.

Perhaps because Prufrock cannot figure out exactly what he sees, he does not approach the revealing women. Instead, he continues down the boulevard to a row of brothels:

Then I have gone at night through narrow streets,  
 Where evil houses leaning all together  
 Pointed a ribald finger at me in the darkness  
 Whispering all together, chuckled at me in the darkness. (14-17)

The phrase “evil houses” suggests *maisons de tolérance*, which in 19<sup>th</sup>- and 20<sup>th</sup>-century Paris one would find in the poor areas with “narrow streets” not renovated by Baron Haussmann. Prufrock’s description of the structures “leaning all together” shows their dilapidation, reflecting the moral and physical decay of the diseased women inside them. Similar to the way Prufrock imagines the guests of the social gathering saying to one another “‘How his hair is growing thin!’” or “‘But how his arms and legs are thin!’” (41; 44), these buildings “Whisper all together” and “chuckle” at him. Clearly the houses do not actually talk, so this nightmarish personification comes from Prufrock’s anxiety. Prufrock does not seem to think that the buildings make fun of him, but rather conspire against him, showing that he fears certain consequences should he decide to enter. For one, brothels had a strong association with syphilis, as evidenced by the woman preparing for a medical screening in Toulouse-Lautrec’s *In the Salon of the Rue des Moulins*. This illness would not only be bad in itself, but the rash would reveal Prufrock’s sin and thereby socially humiliate him to a greater extent than his “thin hair” and his “thin arms and legs.” The “ribald finger” also resonates with the part of “The Love Song” in which Prufrock fragments the guests into “voices” (52), “eyes” (56), and “arms” (62). These correlations suggest that Prufrock feels as intimidated by the bordellos as he does by the women at the party. Yet the intimidation seems different, considering that Prufrock’s appearance does not matter to the *filles soumises*. Prufrock’s evident anxiety about this district shows that his fear probably results from his knowledge of the diseases carried by the disreputable women inside the buildings. In an effort to stay healthy, Prufrock remains in the boulevard.

Nevertheless, Prufrock’s surreal presentation of the *maisons* suggests that his fear of their infection makes him begin to go insane. The anxiety does not subside overnight, since Prufrock has another hallucination the next morning:

I fumbled to the window to experience the world  
 And to hear my Madness singing, sitting on the kerbstone  
 [A blind old drunken man who sings and mutters,  
 With broken boot heels stained in many gutters] ... (28-31)

Here Prufrock admits his insanity when he calls his vision “my Madness,” indicating that he sees a version of himself “sitting on the kerbstone.” Prufrock’s act of “singing” suggests that he tells his “Love Song” about the “madness” that begins in the “Pervigilium.” One possible source of Prufrock’s “madness” is his maddening frustration after he fails to lose his virginity in the night. At the same time, though, syphilis causes both “madness” and “blind[ness],” which shows that the idea of infection is on Prufrock’s mind. Thus, the fear of syphilis also becomes a kind of madness for Prufrock. Indeed, Prufrock describes the time of day, stating “And when the evening woke and stared into its blindness” (4), and later adding “And when the midnight turned and writhed in fever” (18). Given that “blindness” and “fever” are two signs of syphilis, it seems that Prufrock correlates the impoverished arrondissement and the night so strongly with venereal disease that he attributes syphilitic symptoms to the setting. Prufrock’s strong association of this location with sexually transmitted viruses and harlotry leads him to fear its infection, leaving him with syphilitic “madness.” The rhyme between “mutters” and “gutters” further unites the boulevard and Prufrock’s insanity, since his madness causes him to “sing and mutter.” Interestingly, the word “mutter” also appears in “The Love Song” when Prufrock goes through what he calls “muttering retreats.” Because Prufrock finds harlots and their places of business in these “retreats,” his action of “mutter[ing]” connects him with this quarter.

The imaginary drunkard’s “broken boot heels stained in many gutters” represent his “broken,” “stained” soul due to his sexual sin with a *fille*. Indeed, in the third “Prelude,” the poet

states that the syphilitic prostitute “clasped the yellow soles of feet” (15), with the homonym between “sole” and “soul” suggesting the “thousand sordid images of which her soul was constituted” (6). Similarly, in the “Pervigilium,” the “boot heels” conceal Prufrock’s sordid “soul” by covering the “yellow soles” of his feet. The “gutters” that stained these “boot heels” have tremendous symbolic value, with the filth of the city externalizing Prufrock’s spiritual filth. Additionally, in “Rhapsody on a Windy Night,” the speaker mentions a “cat which flattens himself in the gutter/ ... And devours a morsel of butter” (35; 37). Here the presence of a “cat” eating thrown-out “butter” in the “gutter” suggests that animals belong in these drains. Through this correlation, we see that Prufrock reduces himself down to the level of an animal feeding on the filth of the city, showing his guilt after he considers visiting a prostitute in the red-light district.

In the end, Prufrock’s nighttime journey only worsens his situation since he becomes frustrated by his indecision, plagued by the streets, uncertain about his understanding of women’s cues, and ashamed of his lustful desires. Thus, when the opportunity arises for Prufrock to ask his question to his beloved in “The Love Song,” he fails:

And would it have been worth it, after all,  
 After the cups, the marmalade, the tea,  
 Among the porcelain, among some talk of you and me,  
 Would it have been worth while, ... (87-90)

This stanza begins in the conditional perfect tense when Prufrock wonders “And would it have been worth it.” Prufrock first uses this tense in the previous stanza when he shifts from the conditional “Should I” to the past “Though I have” (79; 81), revealing that he now assesses the event after its occurrence. Emphasizing the word “after” through anadiplosis, Prufrock dwells on

the meeting because he failed to raise his question. Prufrock's polite meeting over "the cups, the marmalade, the tea," shows the division between masculine and feminine spaces, with the room—a parlor—belonging to the woman. Since Prufrock can only meet the lady in this location, his chance to raise his question came during the conversation accompanying the refreshments, or as he puts it, "Among the porcelain, among some talk of you and me." The "you" Prufrock mentions does not refer to the "you" in the opening line of "The Love Song" but rather to the woman with whom he took tea. It remains unclear, though, whether Prufrock and the woman discussed their separate lives or their relationship to each other. Either way, the talk certainly did not feature Prufrock's question, since he repeats himself in the next line by asking "Would it have been worth while." This revision of the first line shows Prufrock obsessing over his missed opportunity.

Prufrock continues in the hypothetical vein with his next lines, at last elaborating on what he considered doing:

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;"  
 —If one, settling a pillow by her head  
 Should say, "That is not what I meant, at all.

That is not it, at all." (91-98)

Here Prufrock explicitly mentions his "question." However, the adjective "overwhelming" reveals that he failed to raise it because he sees himself putting his entire "universe" at stake by



expressing his sentiments. Prufrock imagines how he might have proposed when he says “I am Lazarus.” Obviously Prufrock did not plan to actually begin his “overwhelming question” by calling himself “Lazarus, come from the dead,” so there must be something figurative about his hypothetical utterance. “Lazarus” has three possible references, two of which come from the Bible. Ricks mentions the Lazarus whom Christ raises from the dead at John 11 and Lazarus the beggar whom Dives wants to return from Heaven to tell his five brothers to repent at Luke 16 (*The Poems of TSE* 393-394). Prufrock meshes these two figures into one “Lazarus” when he expresses his wish to return to the drawing room in order to admit his feelings. Much of Eliot’s early-20<sup>th</sup>-century audience would have also recognized the name “Lazarus” from the infamous Saint-Lazare Prison in Paris. Since French officials sent syphilitic harlots to this infirmary, the name “Lazarus” suggests that Prufrock’s fear of venereal disease continues to haunt him in this scene. According to Corbin, the virus led to anecdotes about “young men who commit suicide rather than contract a marriage that would risk contaminating a beloved wife” (249). These stories about bachelors “commit[ting] suicide” after getting syphilis show that the infection ends a man’s chance of marriage. Although Prufrock does not actually have this virus, it has still morally infected him. Resultantly, he cannot bring himself to raise his question. Indeed, Prufrock’s juxtaposition of his imaginary disease and his hypothetical proposal suggests that his guilt over returning to the red-light district keeps him from asking his beloved his urgent question. Prufrock’s confusion about the ambiguous women in the “Pervigilium” influences his thoughts in the next line. After Prufrock reflects on what he might have said during his proposal, he imagines that the beloved “should say: ‘That is not what I meant at all./ That is not it, at all.’” This hypothetical rejection shows how uncertain Prufrock feels about the way women will react to him since he worries that he cannot understand their social cues.

Because Prufrock feels terrified of diseased prostitutes and confused by his beloved, he turns to the last women available to him: the make-believe. In the final section of the poem, Prufrock conjures up a group of seductresses in his mind, stating

I have heard the mermaids singing, each to each.

I do not think that they will sing to me.

...

We have lingered in the chambers of the sea

By seammaids wreathed with seaweed red and brown,

Till human voices wake us, and we drown. (124-125; 129-131)

Here Prufrock excludes himself from the mermaids' song when he admits that he "do[es] not think that they will sing to [him]." Prufrock's exclusion from the only singing in "The Love Song" suggests that his "love song" becomes one of lonesomeness after his failure to raise his question. A dissatisfying slant rhyme between "each" and "me" reflects Prufrock's consequent sadness. Going along with Prufrock's seclusion, the word "will" uses the future tense as opposed to the past perfect "I have heard," and Eliot separates the line "I do not think that they will sing to me" from the others with a space. Together, the shift in tense and the space strand the line. In fact, Prufrock walks along a beach in this scene (123), so he remains literally separated from the mermaids. This gap between Prufrock and the mermaids represents his loneliness due to his inability to propose, his failure to go into a brothel, and his confusion about how to read women's cues. The sudden ending of Prufrock's vision in "drown[ing]" signifies his "drown[ed]" hope with all women after the "human voices wake [him]" and he returns to reality.

This unpleasant conclusion results from Prufrock's night in the "Pervigilium," since his encounters with ambiguous women and his fears of venereal disease disturb him so much that they distance him from both his beloved and the mermaids. Eliot's missed sexual opportunities bothered him, and in a 1962 interview, he acknowledged that he based Prufrock on himself, stating "[i]t was partly a dramatic creation of a man of about 40, ... and partly an expression of feeling of my own through this dim imaginary figure" (Sigg 242). Thus, the progression of Prufrock's anxieties over the course of the "The Love Song" and the "Pervigilium" serves as "an expression" of Eliot's inner conflict during his time in Paris. Perhaps, then, Eliot deleted the section because he felt that it invaded his sense of privacy and modesty. Going along with this idea, Eliot may have worried that the explicitly sexual aspects of the "Pervigilium" would offend his parents; his female readers; and even the editor of *Poetry*, Harriet Monroe. Alternatively, perhaps Eliot simply felt that his additions were not at the same artistic level as the rest of the poem. Whatever the case, in 1960 Eliot wrote to the TLS that "[he had] enough recollection of the suppressed verses to remain grateful to Mr. Aiken for advising [him] at once to suppress them" (*March Hare* 176). Still, writing the "Pervigilium" allowed Eliot to examine the consequences of his own carnal desires. With Prufrock's defeat in "The Love Song," Eliot could see the potential outcome of lifelong hesitation. Terrified by his character's status as an eternal bachelor, Eliot quickly altered his own course: in 1915 he married Vivienne Haigh-Wood.

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