

Political Judgment and the Face-to-Face

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The following critical essay brings insights from political communication and political philosophy to bear on an analysis of T. S. Eliot's "Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," with the aim of teasing out the stakes for contemporary citizenship when subjects are exhausted of their capacity for judgment and action. The essay proposes a strategy for reading Eliot's poem as a resource for thinking critically not only about the character of "the citizen's voice" in the modern age, but also about the tension between political judgment and the face-to-face encounter.

Cet essai critique utilise la communication politique et la philosophie politique pour analyser un poème de T.S. Eliot : « La chanson d'amour de J. Alfred Prufrock ». Le but est de mettre en relief les enjeux de la citoyenneté contemporaine, particulièrement lorsque les individus sont vidés de leur capacité de jugement et d'action. Cet article conçoit le poème d'Eliot comme une ressource pour la pensée critique, qu'il s'agisse de caractériser « la voix du citoyen » ou de montrer la tension qui s'établit entre le jugement politique et la rencontre face-à-face.

*There will be time, there will be time
 To prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet;
 There will be time to murder and create,
 And time for all the works and days of hands
 That lift and drop a question on your plate;
 Time for you and time for me,
 And time yet for a hundred indecisions,
 And for a hundred visions and revisions,
 Before the taking of a toast and tea.*

Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock, T.S. Eliot, c. 1917¹

Indeed, there will be time. There will be time to style and restyle an appearance to suit the expectations of each occasion. There will be time to enact the rituals of construction and destruction. There will be time to kill and time to let live, time to banish and time to include. There will be time to labour and time to work still, and time to go about doing things perhaps without asking in the end, “what is worth doing?”² There will be “time for you and time for me” (line 31), and time to worry, or perhaps not fret too much about all the choices, all the setbacks, all the shifts and rifts in everyday life that consume the mind before one settles into yet another distraction or yet another interruption that promises release: *toast and tea, anyone?* There will be

¹ All in-text citations of the poem refer to this volume: T. S. Eliot, “Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” in *The Humanistic Tradition, Vol 6: The Global Village of the Twentieth Century*, ed. Gloria K. Fiero (New York: McGraw Hill, c. 1998), 77.

² “What is worth doing in this barren twilight is the incredibly difficult question.” George Parkin Grant, *Technology and Empire: Perspectives on North America* (Toronto: House of Anansi, 1969), 178.

time to “prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet” (line 27), just as there will be time to judge and be judged in turn.

The ideal of *co-presence* in real-time, of those rare moments when subjects meet in the flesh, look each other in the eye, interact with one another, and communicate without the external mediation of technology,³ has turned into a nostalgic fantasy in some branches of political communication. *Co-presence* enters idyllically as the saving power for which many still hold out hope as a possibility—to extol the face-to-face as a necessary but albeit largely unavailable corrective to the laundry list of problems attributed to mass mediated politics. Indeed, *co-presence* sometimes enters as the perfect but often-unattainable *solution* to the *problem* of disengagement that routinely figures as the *diagnosis* of a *media malaise*⁴ in contemporary democracy. *If only* there were more opportunities to meet and mingle, so goes the assumption, life might be better somehow—less alienating.

If only the multitude of citizens could find more corporeal sites to engage one another in person, so the argument runs, then the problems of cynicism and disengagement vis-à-vis political life might be less weighty and less burdensome—less *problematic* as far as a democratic politics predicated on “active participation” goes. If only one could create more and better occasions for intimacy among strangers so that they no longer appear as strangers to

³ The definition of co-presence as a form of mutual awareness of self and others within a shared physical space in which agents remain “accessible, available, and subject to one another”(22) can be attributed to Erving Goffman, *Behavior in Public Places* (New York: Free Press, 1963).. For a comparison of co-presence against other typologies of “presence” as they are employed across research disciplines, cf. Kwan Min Lee, “Presence, Explicated,” *Communication Theory* 14, no. 1 (2004).

⁴ For an explication of the ‘media malaise’ thesis and related debates, cf. Richard Nadeau and Thierry Giasson, “Canada’s Democratic Malaise: Are the Media to Blame?,” in *Strengthening Canadian Democracy*, ed. Paul Howe, Richard Johnston, and Andre Blais (Montreal: Institute for Research on Public Policy, 2005).

one another, then perhaps there will be fewer estranged citizens out there. Presumably, a better and healthier democracy will arise as a result, because there would be fewer alienated and disaffected outsiders and more happy and committed insiders who know each other well enough to care about each other's welfare and each other's future more than they might have otherwise.⁵

In a word, what *co-presence* promises in such lofty terms is the production of better, less *problematic* citizens and less *problematic* forms of being in the world. If only more people visited the local bowling alley for an evening of collegial co-fraternity, rather than sit idly before the multiple screens of digital and electronic media, as Robert Putnam has famously argued,⁶ then perhaps the quality of life in the polis would improve. People could conceivably rediscover their communal roots, and rekindle a sense of belonging through unmediated rituals of casual bonding. All they would need is to come together, face-to-face. Once that occurs, everything else would somehow fall into place.

Admittedly, edifying claims about the power of *co-presence* to move people to political action are perhaps most compelling when they hinge on examples from outside the North American and Western European contexts—especially when they figure in accounts of struggles for alternatives, on the ground, in failed regimes, in failing states or in societies undergoing so-called processes of democratization. Jeffery Goldfarb's amorous account of the "politics of small things" in post-communist Poland and Czechoslovakia is a case in point:

⁵ Michael Ignatieff tarries with a similar set of assumptions in his critique of the crisis facing the modern welfare state. He contends that welfare policies have failed unfortunately to realize the egalitarian and social-democratic ideals upon which they rest, because they are unable to foster an ethic of fraternity among strangers. They are unable to inculcate a communal spirit of interpersonal care and mutual concern, because the chief means of doing so remain largely impersonal—as nothing more than bureaucratized systems of anonymous resource re-allocation. cf. Michael Ignatieff, *The Needs of Strangers* (New York: Viking, 1984).

⁶ Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000).

Around the old Soviet bloc, the most creative and ultimately consequential alternative to modern tyranny was constructed in the space between people. People came together, communicated and interacted in the presence of each other, developed the capacity to act together, and changed the world. They acted *as if* they lived in a free society and a free society resulted.⁷

Perhaps a “politics of small things” has led to *great things* in some instances when people come together, when they dream together and when they activate their shared hopes together, while doing so against the odds and in the face of collective oppression.

Unfortunately, Goldfarb soon launders away the historical specificity of his model of *co-presence* and *collective action* when he attempts to graft it too easily onto the contemporary landscape of American politics in a digital age. Goldfarb was honest and daring enough to spell out his model with a short formula. As he puts it bluntly, “SMALL THINGS + THE INTERNET = NEW ALTERNATIVES.”⁸

Goldfarb was perhaps too forthcoming, too generous and too explicit with this equation, although he does inadvertently capture the contours of what digital democracy perhaps looks like when it drives on blind faith, and invites wired citizens to cheer from their driver-side windows: “look, no hands!” “Look, new alternatives, over here, right around the bend.” The assumption underlying the formula is that the modest act of *coming together* and *doing small things together* is sufficient. The question one ought to put to Goldfarb’s formula is whether it computes, and whether a “politics of small things” is in truth sufficient. Sufficient to what end, exactly?

⁷ Emphasis mine. Jeffrey C. Goldfarb, “The Politics of Small Things,” *The Communication Review* 8, no. 2 (2005): 159.

⁸ Ibid, 159.

The “politics of small things” is but a variation on the slogans that routinely rouse support for charitable drives and high profile campaigns for “causes” ranging from the fight against cancer to the fight against poverty, and every cause in between that a clever PR executive might bring to market with an assortment of rubber wristbands and (RED)TM iPods.⁹ These slogans ride on almost the same “*as if*” mentality that Goldfarb presents as the midwife to the birth of “open societies” in the post-Soviet bloc.

Behave *as if* every penny in the pot counts, *as if* every vote counts, *as if* every digital signature on the petition counts, *as if* every effort to forward emails documenting injustices at home or abroad indeed counts, and *as if* every register of an opinion on blogs, Twitter and Facebook ultimately counts. Proceed *as if* every new member on *Moveon.org* will move electoral mountains; and act *as if* every purchase of Bono’s latest album on iTunes will feed mouths and supply AIDS medicine to Africa. In a word, and to borrow some quixotic words of wisdom from Dr. Pangloss in Voltaire’s satire, *Candide*,¹⁰ operate *as if* one already lives in the best of all possible worlds. Do this; and the best of all possible worlds awaits us, over there—new alternatives just around the bend.

Keep in mind that the defense of a pragmatic, piecemeal politics in Goldfarb’s formulation of the power of “small things” on the Internet complements somewhat his defense of the need for intellectuals to function as

⁹ cf. Milan Singh, “Consuming Citizenship: Exploring the Moral Authority of the (Red) Campaign” (M.A. Thesis, University of Calgary, 2008).

¹⁰ “Pangloss taught metaphysico-theologo-cosmolo-nigology. He proved admirably that there is no effect without a cause and that, in this best of all possible worlds, My Lord the Baron’s castle was the best of castles and his wife the best of all possible Baronesses. ‘Tis demonstrated,’ said he, ‘that things cannot be otherwise; for, since everything is made for an end, everything is necessarily for the best end. []’” Voltaire, “Candide,” in *Classics of Western Thought, Vol. 3: The Modern World*, ed. Edgar E. Knoebel (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1964), 97.

political gadflies, an argument which he elaborates in *Civility & Subversion*.¹¹ Here, Goldfarb calculates the pros and cons of the two options implied in the book's title. He evaluates the virtues and vices of adopting either path, as he analyses a number of case studies in which intellectuals have chosen one over the other. Here too, Goldfarb sides cautiously with pragmatism when he concludes that *the choice between civility and subversion always depends on the situation*.

One may choose to be a *civil gadfly* in those instances of uncivil unrest when prudent restraint seems in short supply. Alternatively, one may choose to be a *subversive gadfly* in those instances when the society has settled too easily into comfortable routines—when radicality, criticality and a thirst for “new alternatives” seem in short supply. The house of intellect ought to serve essentially as the air brakes in politics—as the motor that strategically primes and diffuses, cools down and heats up controversies as they arise, so that the journey down the path to civil society travels without too many bumps, glitches or accidents. Regardless of how one chooses between civility and subversion, however, Goldfarb leaves the impression that the focus ought to centre on “small things” because “big things” after all are too explosive for anyone to handle. They are too dangerous even for critical thought, it seems, and regardless of whether thinking proceeds within the confines of an “open” or “closed” society. Unfortunately, nowhere in the book does Goldfarb consider how part of the problem contributing to a crisis in contemporary political thought and in left politics more generally, as Slavoj Žižek has wondered recently, might be too much of the same thing and not enough of

¹¹ Jeffrey C. Goldfarb, *Civility & Subversion: The Intellectual in Democratic Society* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

what counts.¹² Žižek suggests that the problem might not be a shortage of critical voices, but an oversupply of gadflies policing the embers of well-worn debates; not an excess of “reckless minds” as Mark Lilla would believe,¹³ but rather an undersupply of intellectuals willing to ignite real fires.

What is most puzzling about the above argument, given the focus of the present essay, is not so much Goldfarb’s implication that “thinking small” is what politics presently needs instead of the opposite: “thinking big,” or perhaps even better, “thinking dangerously.” Rather, what is most thought provoking is his use of an all-too-familiar conciliation that often accompanies appeals to contingency, as a consoling strategy of avoidance—as a cop-out perhaps. The contention that choosing between civility and subversion *should always depend on the situation* is, in essence, only a variation of T.S. Eliot’s line, “there will be time to prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet” (line 27). There will be time to adapt an appearance to suit each occasion. There will be time; and because there is so much time, there will be ample time to suspend judgment indefinitely, merely to go with the flow, and to let the chips fall as they may.

The question remains, however. What happens to judgment and to judging subjects when they find themselves immersed in frenzied efforts at managing the “face-to-face” in a world saturated with endless and unending invitations to play and to enjoy playing with surfaces?¹⁴ Whether one manages the “face-to-face” across mediated distances or in full co-presence, here one finds a contemporary predicament for politics nonetheless. What

¹² Slavoj Žižek, “Intellectuals, Not Gadflies,” *Critical Inquiry* 34 (2008).

¹³ Mark Lilla, *The Reckless Mind: Intellectuals in Politics* (New York: New York Review Books, 2001).

¹⁴ A debt of gratitude is owed to Prof. Darin Barney for his critical comments on an earlier draft of this essay, and for encouraging me to consider the implications of the *call to enjoy* and its consequences for political judgment and the capacity for action.

happens to judgment when the judging subject is worn out, and exhausted of the capacity for judgment and action? What happens to the judging subject who is drained and restless—who is on edge precisely because the world imposes constant demands to latch onto things joyfully, and to engage repetitively in the many “*as if*” scenarios that tend to animate simulations of political participation? Maybe *the drive to attachment* is what blocks a capacity for judgment and action. Maybe part of the problem is precisely this compulsion to appear before others constantly, to have one’s head counted along with countless others, to register a voice in as many depositories as possible, to engage impulsively and then disengage haphazardly, and to partake in everything and anything, but often for the sake of nothing in particular. With this formulation of the worry, I turn to T.S. Eliot who captured the shape of a similar anxiety in his poetic enactments of modern malaise.

Introducing the “Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock”¹⁵ might seem like an unusual heuristic in a discussion of political judgment and face-to-face communication. At first glance, the poem by T.S. Eliot seems an unlikely first choice. Indeed, too often one finds efforts at critical inquiry that proceed by dressing up readings of literary works and other artistic expressions precisely in this way. They assume from the outset that art contains self-evident political messages and, in the process, risk collapsing any distinctions worth making between *politics* and *poesy*, or even between *reasoned argumentation* and *creative literature*. Thomas Farrell once called this trend the *textualization of politics*. Soon, all politics appears textual, all texts appear political and all action appears discursive, if one pushes the linguistic turn in contemporary theory too far with the result that nothing else apart from words, signifiers

¹⁵ The short title, “Love Song,” shall refer to the same work.

and discursive constructs seem to matter. Nothing else seems to matter other than perhaps a compulsion to produce analyses that strip away effective reality by locating “reality” exclusively within texts.¹⁶

This essay, however, pretends neither to contribute to the above debate, nor to respond in some way to Farrell, but rather to introduce Eliot’s “Love Song” provisionally as a text worth thinking about further on the subject of judgment and co-presence, albeit with a degree of caution and sobriety. I want to give the poem the same treatment that Michael Keren, drawing inspiration from Milan Kundera, gives to the novels of the twentieth century as a rich resource for reflecting critically about the character of “the citizen’s voice” in a modern age saturated with scientific and technological novelties.¹⁷

In this case, the interpretation of the “citizen’s voice” finds its form in and through an account of the deeds and utterances performed by fictional characters. To clarify how a political theorist might begin reading such literature politically, Keren proposed a compromise: a “middle-of-the-road position between an approach to novels [or poems, one might add] as multifaceted texts that cannot be reduced to a political dimension but should be handled within a literary paradigm and an approach to novels [or poems] as political texts in their entirety whose role in a larger political discourse ought to be reconstructed.”¹⁸ Still, it might be worth begging the question whether one ought to read these fictional characters and their stories always *as if* they were models or parables that reveal something about citizenship, or encourage one to think the contours of the political? Is it always prudent to

¹⁶ Thomas B. Farrell, “On the Disappearance of the Rhetorical Aura,” *Western Journal of Communication* 57, no. 2 (1993).

¹⁷ Milan Kundera, *L’art Du Roman: Essai* (Paris: Gallimard, 1987); Michael Keren, *The Citizen’s Voice: Twentieth Century Politics and Literature* (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2003).

¹⁸ Keren, *The Citizen’s Voice: Twentieth Century Politics and Literature*, 7.

treat such texts *as if* they were *Bildungsromane*, especially if the texts were never intended to be interpreted with *Bildung* in mind? With such question begging, therein lays the risk, but a risk worth taking here.

The risk is worth taking with the “Love Song” even though Eliot animates the voice of J. Alfred Prufrock with unsettling and fallible character traits that severely hamper the prospect of imagining him as a citizen worth emulating or as a model for *Bildung*. Despite this problem, the risk is worth taking precisely because Eliot offers an archetypal depiction of a common, alienated subject. Prufrock is the estranged citizen *par excellence*. He appears lonely, bored, insecure, indecisive and paralyzed by anxiety. He appears melancholic, apathetic, withdrawn, depressed and disengaged. Eliot presents Prufrock as someone who constantly wavers and wanders without a purpose, as someone who waxes and laments about the sorry state of his condition, his world, his body, his dress, his surroundings, and the nameless others whom he passes in the streets. However, he traverses these paths of solitary loathing with a disarming sense of indifference, as if every world-weary observation also contained an unapologetic shrug, and as if what he says in the course of the poem matters but also hardly matters in the end. He is a survivor of the modern wasteland, but a survivor without a will worth channeling or a conscience worth redeeming.

Something and nothing happens in the “Love Song,” except perhaps Prufrock’s ability to lyrically hold together all those frustrated sentiments that embody the expression, *genug ist Genug!* Enough is enough! Yet, the tone and delivery sublimates this frustration, quickly sedates it, and pummels away almost all intimations of defiance, of longing for change, of wanting a better world or of wishing to find a satisfying way out of the often petty predicaments that consume Prufrock to the core. All hope and pretensions of

heroism or courage retreat into a deep sleep along with that “patient etherized upon a table” (line 3), which appears early in the poem.

Eliot’s characterization of Prufrock is essentially the anti-thesis of the model, committed citizen. Prufrock could very well serve as the ideal-typical profile of exactly what idealistic accounts of civic dialogue and communicative participation wish to avoid or correct, as Putnam does, with prescriptions of greater investment in *social capital* and *community building* experiments. Still, that one might be working from a negative representation, here, in what amounts to a cancellation of typical profiles of “engaged citizenship,” should not lead one to conclude that the poem offers little insight on the subject. That conclusion would be too hasty. To the contrary, Eliot reveals much about what happens once one pulls all the flesh from the bone on this concept, grinds it down to a pulp, and invites the skeletal remains to roam reflectively through the streets like a forgotten ghost.

One could indeed speculate that the success of the poem as a canonized example of modernist English poetry rests partially in the uncomfortable ease with which readers of the twentieth century may strangely identify with Prufrock. It is possible to extend a branch of empathy in Prufrock’s direction while simultaneously remaining repulsed by his disposition as well as disgusted, perhaps even sorely shocked by the facility with which identification with the character occurs as one absorbs each stanza. The “Love Song” manages to create and sustain the perfect conditions for judging Prufrock with sympathy rather than with outright condemnation or direct pity.

Prufrock stands in for what remains of the *citizen’s voice* once all else passes into the dimming twilight, while reminding readers how they share his despairing voice on some level, even if they might be unwilling or unable to

express the sentiment in their everyday lives. In the process, Eliot holds out a disturbing mirror to the world—a reflection perhaps so fragile that it soon shatters under the weight of Prufrock’s own reconciled acceptance of a purposeless burden. Prufrock has resigned himself to exist purely for the sake of wading in and wading out of everything and anything that crosses his gaze without necessarily making any commitments other than perhaps to “[measure] out [his] life in coffee spoons” (line 51).

Since face-to-face communication is the other theme of interest here—a concept that often implies assumptions of a conversation occurring between two souls—it might be worthwhile to state the obvious still. The “Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” hardly presupposes a dialogue between two or more distinct minds, an exchange, or a correspondence of some kind, but rather acts as a dramatic monologue addressed to nobody in particular other than perhaps to Prufrock’s own *ghostly Doppelgänger*.

The “Love Song” unfolds within a reflective space of inaction, despite all the vivid images that suggest a choreographed tumbling motion through enchaind observations and contemplations. Perhaps Prufrock is walking, and witnessing as he walks past the scenes that animate each stanza. Even so, he is not acting in the world dramatized in the poem. As is the case with most dramatic monologues, the “Love Song” presupposes a momentary break, a pause or disjuncture in the presumably normal pace of worldly events. This suspension of time allows the narrative to turn productively inward, and thereby develop the subjectivity of a judging actor or spectator, while the world outside either freezes or recedes into the background. In doing so, the dramatic monologue opens a space where sustained reflection on the part of a protagonist may proceed. Here and only here Prufrock stands.

Alone and fully exposed, here and only here can Prufrock conceivably begin his lyrical self-address, because here and only here is that important moment of *stasis*¹⁹ dramatically possible—that moment when a solitary retreat occurs and when a different conversation may begin: what Hannah Arendt has described as an internal dialogue between *me* and *myself*.²⁰ Admittedly, Eliot employs the coupling, “you and I,” which suggests an encounter between Prufrock and another being. Perhaps the reader is the one whom Prufrock invites to accompany him on his journey, when he utters, “Let us go then, you and I” (line 1). Still, because the poem presents a monologue without a second subject—a “you”—with an ability to speak back, one may infer that an internal and silent conversation drives the poem. The conversation is between Prufrock and his Double, even if the Double might only be the silent reader in the end.

¹⁹ My employment of the term *stasis* is derived from an understanding of *stasis theory* or the *stasis system* in civic discourse, as developed fully by Cicero in *De Inventionne*, but also based on Aristotle’s observation in *On Rhetoric*—how, in our position as judges, “we limit our consideration to the point of discovering what is possible or impossible for us to do” (1359a40). Ronald Beiner cites perhaps a more eloquent translation of this same line: “we [in our position as judging subjects] turn a thing over in our mind until we have reached the point of seeing whether we can do it or not.” These points of discovery are the points of *stasis* in Cicero’s system. They are the “stops” that arise in the course of deliberative and judicial proceedings, according to James A. Herrick. These stops occurs whenever points of struggle—where disagreements are likely to arise, but must be resolved eventually with a judgment following the end of a speech-act. Cf. Aristotle, *On Rhetoric: A Theory of Civic Discourse*, trans. George A. Kennedy (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 53; Ronald Beiner, *Political Judgement* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1983), 87; James A. Herrick, *The History and Theory of Rhetoric: An Introduction* (Boston: Pearson, 2009), 104.

²⁰ “Since Plato, thinking has been defined as a soundless dialogue between me and myself; it is the only way in which I can keep myself company and be content with it.” Hannah Arendt, *Responsibility and Judgment*, ed. Jerome Kohn (New York: Schocken Books, 2003), 8–9.

Stasis not only grants an occasion for contemplation, but also prefigures judgment as its necessary precondition. *Stasis* normally enters only once the comparatively more public and vocal exchanges and deliberations have ended—only after the noise dies down, after the chatter drops into uncomfortable silences, perhaps after a fellow interlocutor leaves the room, or after the gossip and banter at tea parties has concluded, and the door closes behind the last departing guest. Here and only here, Prufrock stands. *Stasis*, then, is a personal and intimate moment when the stakes remain high nevertheless. What often is at stake is whether the two halves in silent dialogue (the *me* and *myself*, albeit expressed by Eliot as “you and I”) can still live with one another and with their judgments and actions, post-deliberation, once they decide and commit either to do something or do nothing, to go one way or follow the other, to charge or retreat.

On the need for the two halves in silent dialogue to reach agreement, Arendt locates this imperative in Socrates’ famous line in the *Gorgias*: “I think it’s better to have my lyre or a chorus of men disagree with me and contradict me, than to be out of harmony with myself, to contradict myself, though I’m only one person.”²¹ Although one can always choose to walk away from those with whom one disagrees, as Arendt notes, an internal conflict with oneself—between *me* and *myself*—leaves out this option. One cannot simply walk away from inner turmoil—that is, of course, unless one chooses self-annihilation as the ultimate exit strategy. For this reason, Arendt claims that the above line by Socrates provides the most compelling answer to the main question in the dialogue: *whether it is better to suffer or to commit a wrong*. “If I do wrong I am condemned to live together with the wrongdoer in an unbearable intimacy; I

²¹ Plato, “Gorgias,” in *Plato on Rhetoric and Language*, ed. Jean Nienkamp (Mahwah, NJ: Hermagoras Press, 1999), 482c.

can never get rid of him,” she notes, “as I am my own partner when I am thinking, I am my own witness when I am acting. I know the agent and am condemned to live together with him.”²² It would be better, then, to withdraw and to walk away, if the price of staying and partaking in a wrong—whether as the principle agent or as another ‘cog in the wheel’—entailed the supreme sacrifice of this harmony.

It would be better to suffer than to commit wrong, regardless of the real or imagined consequences, regardless of the ridicule that might accompany such asceticism, regardless of how others might want to calculate the pragmatic “costs and benefits” of turning or not turning the other cheek, and regardless of how others might wish to weigh their options. Given what is at stake, no compromise in this department seems justifiable to Arendt, regardless of the number of worldly reasons, arguments, and explanations that might show how committing some wrong today could serve some greater good tomorrow. As Arendt interprets Socrates, it would be better to have everyone judge one a self-righteous fool for holding fast to some principle until the end, than to judge and act in discord with oneself—to bring about a conflict between *me* and *myself*, merely to appease a hostile world.

The above conception of judgment and action operates in negative terms, indeed. Here, the activity is more about negating than about positing—more about the *capacity to refuse* and *to abstain* from wrong than about the power of a Kantian will to create, affirm or self-legislate the boundaries of what seems right. As Arendt maintains, “morally the only reliable people when the chips are down are those who say, ‘I can’t.’”²³ In the darkest hour, when all bets are off, the reliable people are not necessarily those with a talent for calculating

²² Arendt, *Responsibility and Judgment*, 90.

²³ *Ibid*, 78–9.

the best outcomes all while averting the worst calamities. They are not necessarily those who may turn to religion for guidance, and then lean later on their Gods, prophets and saints for repentance when they happen to judge poorly or act unjustly. The reliable people are not necessarily those who have absorbed all the books on moral philosophy, have solved all the ethical riddles in their college notebooks, and have dutifully memorized all the codified rules, tenets and best practices of their chosen profession.

As Arendt insists, when the chips are down, the only reliable people are those who simply say, “I can’t, I’d rather die, for life would not be worthwhile when I had done it.”²⁴ The only reliable people are those who move beyond the deontological and utilitarian assessments, even those of the negative form: “*I can*, but *I will not*, and here are my reasons.” Rather, given their allergic reaction to wrongdoing and their distaste for the ugliness of injustice, the only reliable people in the last analysis are those who judge without qualification, and say, “I simply cannot. I simply refuse.”

In contradistinction to the Arendtian ideal, however, the “Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” is perhaps best read as a masterpiece in the constant deferral of judgment—a deferral that nevertheless remains tormented by an inability to find rest and then, once there, to overcome *stasis* with enough strength to enact a refusal. Disciplined judgments of the form, “I can, but I will not,” and of the form, “I simply cannot,” have lost their anchor in the world that Prufrock inhabits. They have lost their footing to a point where the only disposition that seems to hold sway is a resolve to do as one pleases, and be ridiculed arbitrarily for doing so, all while inhabiting a universe indifferent to

²⁴ Ibid, 278.

purpose. All that remains for Prufrock is an orientation that slides slowly down slippery slopes toward the arid realization: “I can. So why not?”²⁵

As Prufrock navigates the half-deserted “streets that follow like a tedious argument of insidious intent” (lines 8-9), he knows the Nietzschean dictum perhaps too well: *God is dead* and *the wasteland grows still*. No fixed horizons exist upon which to anchor a moral dispensation in the modern age. Anything is possible, including the possibility that all the tedious paths and strands of reasoning will lead Prufrock back to nowhere in particular.

Almost every line in the poem presupposes the same endless query composed in the future tense: Shall I or Shall I not? As Prufrock wonders, “Shall I say, I have gone at dusk through narrow streets?” (line 70); then, weighing the alternatives, he muses, “I should have been a pair of ragged claws / Scuttling across the floors of silent seas” (lines 73-74). Prufrock’s implied retort, of course, would be to beg the question once more: what difference would it make? He seems to acknowledge that he can claim to be anyone, and can claim to have done anything, because he knows that his anonymity in a mass age renders him invisible.

There are perhaps too many ways for Prufrock to prepare a face to meet the other faces in this indifferent world. Overwhelmed by the possibilities to a point of numbness, Prufrock must ask a series of somewhat vain questions just to keep his disorientation in check: what to do and what to say. “And how should I presume?” (line 60) “And how should I begin?” (line 69) “Shall I part my hair behind? Do I dare to eat a peach?” (line 123). “And would it have been worth it, after all / Would it have been worth while[?]” (line 99-100). Almost

²⁵ Here and elsewhere, the invocation of this phrase draws inspiration from recent exposure to the ideas of Jodi Dean, during her time as visiting scholar in the Department of Art History and Communication Studies at McGill, in February 2010. Her thoughts on the ubiquity of the word “whatever” in contemporary discourse and online practices are in essence a variation of the same pairing: “I can. So why not?”

all speech-acts in the poem appear tentative, as though Prufrock intended to bracket all his options, and then freeze them inside a permanent placeholder for further consideration, if only to avoid making any decisions—because, after all, “there will be time, there will be time” (line 26).

Moreover, Prufrock is restless. He has grown tired of the conversations and the endless expectation to stand before others, to judge and be judged in turn. Prufrock has grown weary of the face-to-face encounters. He knows too well “the eyes already, known them all—the eyes that fix you in a formulated phrase” (lines 55-6). He has grown impatient with the inquisitorial speech that forces him to submit, and “to spill out all the butt-ends of [his] days and ways” (line 60). He is tired of the exchanges that compel him to give his reasons, and to justify his existence to everyone. He casts himself as the prey of conversational tyranny. He casts himself as the victim always “sprawling on a pin” (line 57) whenever he is questioned and, when figuratively pinned and “wriggling on the wall” (line 58), finds himself trapped in dialogical loops that implore him to examine and then re-examine his life, *ad infinitum*, as if he were one of Socrates’ reluctant interlocutors.²⁶

Prufrock knows too well the entrapments of idle chatter where “In the room the women come and go / Talking of Michelangelo” (lines 13-14).²⁷ He

²⁶ For more on the invasive, at times aggressive, domineering and inquisitorial character of *dialogue* and the Socratic method, cf. the chapter on “Dialogue and Dissemination” in John D. Peters, *Speaking into the Air: A History of the Idea of Communication* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990).

²⁷ John Carey cites this line by Eliot as a typical illustration of attempts by literary intellectuals in the early twentieth century to sublimate the voice and presence of the masses, by assigning them an indefinite form: “‘In’ is odd with ‘come and go.’ You would expect people to come and go to and from a room. What is meant by coming and going *in* is not clear, and cannot, of course, be clarified. The poetic enterprise is successfully evasive, embodying Prufrock’s evasiveness. Instead of facts, it offers a phantom meaning which dissolves when the reader tries to isolate it.” John

knows too well the elaborate rituals of grooming, and how despite his “necktie rich and modest, but asserted by a simple pin / (They will say: ‘But how his arms and legs are thin!’)” (lines 42-43). In Prufrock’s world, the greatest achievement of the day appears to be the ridiculous determination to dare “turn back and descend the stair, with a bald spot in the middle of [his] hair” (lines 39-40), and to greet onlookers who will nonetheless remark, once again, “how his hair is growing thin!” (line 41). Exhausted by the expectation to manage presentations and impressions, he is too afraid and too worn down to possess in the end “the strength to force the moment to its crisis” (line 80), even though he has “wept and fasted, wept and prayed” (line 81). He concedes willingly, “I am no prophet—here’s no great matter” (line 84). Prufrock accepts his role as the everyman doomed not only to be surveyed constantly by judging eyes, but also to remain forever invisible. Because he has already seen “the moment of [his] greatness flicker” (line 83), he turns to self-loathing while also paradoxically embracing this fate. He knows that the business of appearing before another soul to air his grievances would be futile anyway: “It is impossible to say just what I mean!” (line 103). Even if he were to dare shout from the nearby window, “That is not it at all, / That is not what I meant at all” (line 109-110), the lingering question for Prufrock is whether such speech about incommunicability would have any effect or would merely add more noise. “I can. So, why not? But, what difference would it make?” Therein rests Prufrock’s submissive shrug.

The “Love Song” in many respects is a dramatic monologue about the impossibility of authentic co-presence and dialogue with strangers—about the impossibility of purposeful speech and meaningful action in the modern age.

Carey, *The Intellectuals and the Masses: Pride and Prejudice among the Literary Intelligentsia, 1880-1939* (Chicago: Academy Chicago Publishers, 1992), 33.

The “Love Song” is a self-defeating and self-imploding ode, composed from the vantage point of someone who has presumably tried it all, seen it all, experienced it all, and now jointly mourns and abhors it all in the same swirling breath.

Nevertheless, it would be presumptuous to conclude that mere depression is what weighs down, exhausts and drains away Prufrock’s resolve, and explains his suffering and his willingness to suffer more. Pathologizing all inklings of withdrawal and ennui would do the poem and our appreciation of the stakes for citizenship—as expressed here—a disservice, indeed. Yet, in many respects, treating apathy as a form of pathology is exactly what Robert Putnam and theorists of social capital seem to propose when they issue their diagnoses and prescribe their recommendations—when they meticulously check the pulse of the polis against their *cynicism* scales and charts on low voter turnout.

To pathologize is to invite nothing more than a reassuring gloss—to find solutions that advocate business as usual or, more precisely, Realpolitik as usual. *If only* Prufrock could find a good bowling alley, find some friends, find better ways to connect, better ways to join the community he inherited, better ways to find intimacy, better ways to appear before the multitude, better ways to register his dissatisfaction, better ways to live meaningfully and in concert with others. *If only* Prufrock could do this and more, all would supposedly be well and good. *If only* Prufrock could *get his act together*, to borrow the colloquial phrase. *If only* the apathetic could be less disengaged; *if only* the depressed could be happier; *if only* they could learn how to reach out; *if only* they could listen and behave accordingly, and learn to enjoy life supposedly like everyone else, the world might be better.

If only Prufrock could have “force[d] the moment to its crisis” (line 80), things might have been otherwise. Perhaps this retrospective hypothetical is the only scenario worth entertaining in this case, because it concerns an instance in the poem where a political gesture—an act of defiance with an end in sight—could have been possible. Prufrock could have acted out. He could have refused to bear his condition any longer. Rather than despair once more about living out his days without purpose; rather than remain complicit; rather than endure the open-ended loops of pointless dialogue, and rather than grovel over his inert state of endless indecision, Prufrock could have sabotaged something. He could have quit. He could have walked away. He could have done something. *Genug ist GENUG!*

Unfortunately, even here, fulfilling such a tall order would require rewriting Prufrock’s character beyond recognition. Eliot would no longer be Eliot the tragedian poet of the twentieth century, because Prufrock would no longer be Prufrock, but instead the object of a noble delusion, at best—a warmed-over political fantasy, at worst. Prufrock cannot simply *get his act together*, move on or walk away, because a lapse in judgment and action has perhaps already occurred by the time Prufrock composes the “Love Song.” The lapse in judgment that ultimately unhinges the poem could simply be Prufrock’s inclination to remain yet another cog in the wheel, despite his awareness of the aridity of the modern dispensation. Disgust of his own resignation and presumed meekness accelerates to a point where, indeed, one could conclude that Prufrock’s two halves are already entwined in a personal hell: a wasteland of repetition and sameness in which the *you* and *I*, the *me* and *myself*, remain plagued by indecision and disagreement. In this light, the dramatic monologue enters as an exercise in self-rationalization and as an act of desperation—perhaps as a last appeal for sympathy rather than final

judgment, and as an address murmured deafly under the noise and chaos that pushes Prufrock closer and nearer to the precipice of an action, each time, but never close enough *to bring about some kind of end*.²⁸

To be sure, Eliot wrote the poem almost a century ago when words such as *alienation*, *estrangement* and *anomie* circulated widely—more so then, than now perhaps—in standard diagnoses of the modern condition. Still, I want to suggest that the poem remains relevant to contemporary readings of malaise in the twenty-first century, even if the above terms have perhaps shed most of their analytic purchase today. To the contrary, a fresh reading of “The Love Song” might even encourage a productive inversion of classic descriptors of modernist angst and withdrawal.

Perhaps the chief source of disorientation at our present conjuncture of media excess and technological saturation is *not* a deficit of engagement and connection, *but rather* a surfeit of hyperactivity coupled with an incapacity to disconnect when vitally necessary, as Albert Borgmann has noted.²⁹ A genuine politics of resistance has become increasingly difficult and unfathomable perhaps because, as Jodi Dean has remarked, the judging subject is too comfortable with the condition of actually-existing democracy—and thus is content to view politics as *habitat* rather than as *struggle*; “it is the setting in which we find ourselves rather than a position requiring sacrifice and

²⁸ Indeed, some have observed that the primary function of dramatic monologues in modern literature is to create a space where readers can oscillate between *judgment* and *sympathy* in the evaluation of fallible and sometimes deranged characters—often in ways that blur any distinction between those who suffered and those who commit a wrong, between protagonist and antagonist. The dramatic monologues in Hamlet are a case in point. cf. the chapter on “The Dramatic Monologue: Sympathy versus Judgment,” in Robert Langbaum, *The Poetry of Experience: The Dramatic Monologue in Modern Literary Tradition* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1957).

²⁹ Albert Borgmann, *Crossing the Postmodern Divide* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 78-147.

decision.”³⁰ Like Prufrock, the judging subject in the contemporary landscape is unable “to force the moment to its crisis” (line 80), perhaps because agency now wades in a universe not so much of *constraint*, but of *unrestrained* excess where it appears increasingly difficult to refuse the drive to latch-on, and to say instead, “NO! I cannot,” when the rejoinder emanating from more than one quarter insists to the contrary. After all, “I can. So why not?”

In many respects, Eliot prefigures and anticipates some of the patterns that Christine Ross has found in contemporary art invoking an *aesthetic of disengagement*. Ross attributes a “rupture of intersubjectivity” and an “aesthetic depreciation of connectedness” in artworks that reenact the inner turmoil of the depressed subject who is no longer able to see or communicate with the other. Even so, the aesthetic exhaustion of engagement prompts a reading of melancholia, loneliness and resignation not so much as engendering depoliticizing effects *tout court*, but rather as the fatigue that results from the neo-liberal, individualistic expectation, as Ross argues, to “incessantly initiate, create and claim one’s identity instead of being disciplined to do so.”³¹ The modalities of disengagement, expressed in such terms, forces one to reevaluate conventional notions of criticality that extol it as an unrestrained self-exertion of the creative will—criticality as the supposed freedom either to subvert or to accept, either to transgress or to latch onto almost anything and everything. Ross leaves open the possibility that the boundless call to freely style and re-style the self—in other words, *to prepare a face to meet the faces that we meet*—might be more burdensome and exhausting than one is perhaps willing to concede.

³⁰ Jodi Dean, “Politics without Politics,” *Parallax* 15, no. 3 (2009): 22.

³¹ Christine Ross, *The Aesthetics of Disengagement: Contemporary Art and Depression* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), xxii, xxiii, xxiv.

An aesthetic of disengagement might represent, paradoxically, the final enactment of what remains of articulated resistance—of the refusal (“I simply cannot!”)—once all other avenues of opposition have already been tried, absorbed, appropriated, sublimated and rendered inert. The gesture of refusal turns inward, and withdraws evasively into protective cocoons where the radical break of intersubjectivity—lack of interest in co-presence and in the other—becomes a necessary condition of survival. Like Prufrock, the depressed subject in contemporary art seeks refuge from the storms outside—the downpour of demands to perform and to enjoy performing self-styled roles and identities *ad infinitum* before judging eyes. Ross nevertheless entertains the critical question about the effectiveness of such an aesthetic as a presumed locus of resistance: “what is the function of this expanding image, I ask, if it cannot secure intersubjectivity, if it fails to bound and link, if it cannot be a motor for communities and communication? [...] Does it merely support disengagement?”³² One could put the same question to the “Love Song.”

In other words, what do Prufrock and his monologue offer in the end as an articulation of the “citizen’s voice”? Two contrasting possibilities come to mind. To draw on Žižek’s critique of the gadfly, introduced earlier, either Prufrock exemplifies a familiar disposition that offers contemporary politics only another serving of *more of the same and not enough of what counts*; or, to the contrary, his orientation captures exactly what might be missing but is vitally necessary today. At one extreme, Prufrock might be an example of the worst kind of citizen who thinks that nothing can be done because modern life already inhabits the worst of all possible worlds. At the other extreme, one could read Prufrock as the embodiment of a rare capacity to detect the absurd, to know when to shrug at the absurd, and to know how to judge and act in the

³² Ibid, 105.

face of the absurd when the time arises—if only because Prufrock perhaps knows all too well how to check the quixotic belief that insists, at every turn, how we supposedly live already in the best of all possible worlds.

When the chips are down, and when all bets are off in the darkest hour of a moral wager, one might indeed wonder if Prufrock would be one of those reliable few with enough strength to walk away with Arendt and Socrates, and say, “I simply cannot. I refuse, for I would prefer to die than continue living if I committed what was asked of me.” *Genug is GENUG!* Given the extent to which he seems fully conscious of the absurdity of his condition, there might be some reason to hold out hope for Prufrock still. Precisely because he is disengaged, and longs to disconnect from it all, Prufrock might possess that much-needed determination to break away when the moment *indeed* reaches its crisis—at those epochal junctures when breaking away at all costs might be the only avenue, apart from giving in and giving up.

Then again, given what one knows about Prufrock’s capacity for judgment in the course of the poem, he might simply shrug at the prospect of walking away. Unable to distinguish or decide between going and staying, and unable to grasp the stakes of a political struggle, Prufrock might be more than happy to concede, and more than happy to suspend judgment, because he knows that he is probably trapped anyway—much like the women in the poem who come and go within the room. When the chips are down, and when all of the familiar anchors that tend to orient judgment in everyday life dissolve in the final hour, Prufrock might be more than happy to resign once again. He might be more than happy to serve as another cog in the wheel, and more than happy to count the remaining days of his life with coffee spoons. Prufrock might simply shrug at the horror of committing a wrong when the chips are down. He might shrug at the thought, much in the same way that he shrugs at

the absurdities of everyday life, having known from the beginning that all paths and all options tediously point back to the same, dark conclusion about a universe unmediated by pre-given horizons: “I can. So why not?”

Both of the above scenarios are purely speculative thought experiments, to be sure, which test the limits of a political reading of the “Love Song” perhaps too far. One can never know what Prufrock “would have done,” of course. What is worth retaining from this reading, by way of conclusion, is the insight that a position of disengagement seems to contain a gamble with political judgment—one that is arguably Janus-faced. Prufrock, the disengaged subject, stands between past and future with a view that *shrugs* simultaneously in two directions. As a judging spectator looking on events that have already occurred or are in process, Prufrock *shrugs productively* at intimations of nonsense and the absurd in everyday life. However, as a judging actor who seems permanently caught in *stasis*, and unable to see the next steps toward some horizon of action, Prufrock *shrugs perhaps too unproductively* at intimations of the miraculous.

Miracles do happen in politics, if by this ideal one means something less delusional than the messianic fantasy of the swift arrival of some promised land at the hands of some divine power. Miracles do happen in politics, if by this notion one also means something less piecemeal than the bet waged in favour of a spontaneously coordinated upsurge of “new alternatives” at the hands of a “politics of small things.” Miracles happen not necessarily in the “space between people,” as Goldfarb would argue, when people meet each other face-to-face, when people network together, when people gather to problem solve, or when people convene to deliberate with the aim of devising “new alternatives.” These activities might be vital to the working of Realpolitik; but there is nothing particularly miraculous about them.

For Arendt, the truly miraculous in politics spreads its wings when the reliable people hold their ground and hold it fast until the end, regardless of the harms and inconveniences they might personally suffer as a result. Miracles happen not so much in the spaces of the face-to-face encounter, but in the field of struggle and action. Miracles happen not so much in the activity of *shrugging at the absurd* from the comfortable vantage point of a judging spectator, but in the refusal to partake in the *truly absurd* as a judging actor—the refusal, for example, to be and remain a cog in the wheel of an injustice.

On this point, as an example of what it means to act in concert with others, Goldfarb's account of the liberating power of co-presence in the post-Soviet bloc stands somewhat in contrast to Arendt's account of a comparable "miracle," which occurred during the Second World War. In her introduction to *Responsibility and Judgment*, Arendt notes how the Danish citizenry allegedly resisted, *en mass*, the order to enact the "Final Solution" within its territory, under the Nazi occupation. What sustained this kind of non-violent resistance had little to do with a capacity for imagination, for ingenuity, for industriousness or for calculation. This form of active resistance had little to do with what I described earlier as a Panglossian faith in the midwifery of the "as if" scenario. The response of the Danes had little to do with a talent for building a *democratic habitat* for "new alternatives" in the darkest hour. There was no time for that—no time for "as ifs"—when the chips were down. As Arendt seems to suggest, the "miracle" in the Danish refusal is perhaps best explained as the product of well-engrained and plain intolerance for the absurd on the part of the citizenry. What the new masters occupying the land had asked of the Danes made little sense; and the Danes knew it; and, according to Arendt, they were one of the few nations in Nazi-occupied Europe who defiantly protested before their new masters. They dared to utter

those words publicly: “No. I simply cannot.” The Danes were willing to risk their own annihilation in the process, preferring to perish rather than continue living with the “new alternatives” awaiting them on the horizon: the alternative of a world without justice. The miracle, of course, is that few perished in the end. The *refusal to obey*, alone, tossed a wrench into the machinery of the Nazi occupation in this small part of Europe,³³ and accomplished what someone like Prufrock could perhaps never achieve let alone claim—the courage “to force the moment to its crisis” (line 80).

No intimations of the miraculous, in the sense of what I described above, can conceivably unfold in the “Love Song.” So long as the moment of *stasis* persists indefinitely, there can be no miracles within the spaces of Eliot’s poem. There can be no politics in Prufrock’s world, if by politics one means action and if by action one means something other than a masterpiece of wavering addressed to nobody in particular. There can be no action, so long as Prufrock insists on the deferral of judgment and so long as one continues to believe along with Eliot’s anti-hero that, indeed, “there will be time / There will be time to prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet” (line 26-7). There can be no politics and no political struggle in a life measured out in coffee spoons, no matter how much one complains about the sweetness or bitterness of the toast and tea, and no matter how often people might gather in

³³ The Danes resisted *despite* a history, prior to the war, of denying Jews as refugees the rights of citizenship: “Despite the absence of anti-Semitism, Jews as foreigners were not welcome, but the right to asylum, nowhere else respected, apparently was considered sacrosanct. For when the Nazis demanded first only stateless persons for deportation, that is, German refugees whom they had deprived of their nationality, the Danes explained that because these refugees were no longer German citizens the Nazis could not claim them without Danish assent. [...] The Danes were the only ones who dared speak out on the subject to their masters. And the result was that under the pressure of public opinion, and threatened neither by armed resistance nor by guerilla tactics, the German officials in the country changed their minds.” Arendt, *Responsibility and Judgment*, 6.

joy or in sorrow to “come and go / talking of Michelangelo” (line 13-4). For Prufrock to possess a “citizen’s voice,” he needs first to find some way out of the many enclosures that arrest action within such loops of frenzied gathering, coming, and going.

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