

“...for a hundred visions and revisions”
**A Comparative Study of T.S. Eliot’s ‘The Love Song of
J. Alfred Prufrock’ with Gustav Mahler’s Symphony No.2
and Édouard Manet’s paintings**

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Abstract

T.S. Eliot’s Prufrock represents the quintessential modern man – a *flâneur* figure, filled with doubts and uncertainties, living in a shrinking, mundane world of fragmentation. The name Prufrock itself is prosaic in nature. The identity of this man is never clarified throughout the poem. His thoughts are not sequential, rather disjointed. The premise of the poem is dark, with a tone of despair, set at a slumbering pace, bringing out the monotony of mechanical modern living with a single refrain after every stanza. In Gustav Mahler’s Second Symphony the uncertainties of Prufrock’s expressions find a voice. Using instruments like the violins, trombones and drums, he sets the tone for the relentless upwelling of the incalculable which seek to threaten us. With transient, mellow melody alternating the grim tones, his composition creates the urge of the modern man to move past his ambiguities and listlessness. Each of the movements contribute significantly, in showcasing the despondence associated with a dissonant, fractured existence. Édouard Manet, one of the most versatile painters of the 19th century, largely considered to be an impressionist, is also considered by many to be a modernist painter, for the “bafflingly detached, opaque” (Fried Michael, 1992) technique he employed in his compositions. Rarely do the figures in his paintings look directly at the viewers. The sense of distance and alienation is expressed by the lack of visual contact even amongst the figures in his paintings. Manet experimented with a wide range of colour palettes, according to the subject matters he chose to depict. In this paper I shall attempt to draw thematic parallels between Eliot’s poem, Mahler’s Second Symphony and Manet’s paintings like *Masked Ball at the Opera* (1873), *The Dead Christ with Angels* (1864) and *Before the Mirror* (1876) which serve as critical commentary on the predicament of modern life.

Keywords: *Fragmented self, tempo, resurrection, funeral, sense of detachment, non-linear composition.*

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‘Thou hast nor youth nor age
But as it were an after dinner sleep
Dreaming of both.’

— *Measure for Measure* (III.i.32-34)

The above lines appear in the epigraph of T.S. Eliot’s ‘Gerontion’ (1920), a poem casting doubt upon human experience which is often held as the cornerstone for gaining knowledge. In his earliest poems like ‘The Waste Land’ (1922), Eliot dealt with inner conflict, horror, abjection, disgust in such a way that an entire generation wrought with war and pestilence would be finding their own voices echoed in his poems. ‘The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock’ (1915) is no exception to this. According to John Xiros Cooper, Eliot does not use the dramatic monologue in this poem as ‘a vehicle for the exposure of an interesting personality, but an invitation to the reader to experience the dismantling of personality.’¹ The monologue therefore invites the reader to participate in the poet’s creation rather than being a passive observer, by actively placing oneself in Prufrock’s position (the world of the persona).

Eliot begins, ‘The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock’² with an epigraph from Dante’s *Inferno*, a fragment of Count Guido Da Montefeltro’s speech while being entrapped in a gulf of hellfire from where there is no return. This sets the premise for Prufrock’s despair, his knowledge of his fragmented self in a society that is gripped by decay, waste, indecision and uncertainty. Images of ‘restless nights in one night cheap hotels’, ‘sawdust restaurants with oyster shells’ speaks of the transient, ephemeral nature of life which is superficial, lacking in depth, love, certainty and purpose. The nonchalance with which a cultural icon like ‘Michelangelo’ is treated displays the ignorance of people absorbed in their own material existence. The impediments to growth and interaction are again emphasised by the window panes that are clouded by the ‘yellow fog’ and ‘yellow smoke’. The colour yellow indicates a putrefaction, degeneration, stagnation and clogging of the senses, a mind that is numb and is not driven to instil positive change in society.

According to Robert J. Nicolosi, the epigraphs that Eliot was fond of beginning his poems with, function similarly to a ‘composer’s use of a key signature and tempo markings’, suggesting the mood or character of a

certain musical piece.³ This brings us to Gustav Mahler, an Austrian composer and conductor of the late nineteenth century, known to have influenced composers such as Arnold Schoenberg and Benjamin Britten. His compositions featuring emotions of turbulence and fright interspersed with fleeting hope, have been studied by scholars as a reckoning to the dilemma of modern living. Mahler's *Resurrection Symphony No.2* in C Minor (1894) has five major movements. Each of the movements capture a plethora of emotions, the finale being a 'behemoth of sound, symbol and drama', as suggested by Marilyn L. McCoy.⁴ The state of melancholic desolation in Prufrock's utterances finds its complementing score in Mahler's composition. The first movement *Allegro maestoso* begins with strings in a low register slowly building motion, the flutes seem to alleviate the fast-paced tension in the rising tempo created by the percussion and brass instruments. In this movement, when the quartet of French horns appear, it anticipates the symphony's finale by presenting both a new idea based on 'Dies irae' ('Day of Wrath') depicting the Last Judgment as well as a motive which Mahler will associate with 'Auferstehen' ('Resurrection').⁵ The second movement *Andante moderato* has free-flowing passages with graceful melody which moves to bring restless, formidable tones of chaos and fear through rising winds and strings along with thumping beats of drums. The following lines come to mind:

There will be time, there will be time[...]

There will be time to murder and create.⁶

The third movement is led by the German phrase— 'In ruhig fließender Bewegung' translates to 'in calm smoother movement'⁷ which is ironic because of the jarring introduction using booming timpani, rushing strings and wind instruments. There is a whimsical nature to the rise and fall of rhythms. Thomas Bauman notes that Arno Fochert attributes the organisation of events in the music of Mahler to a 'dissolution of traditional formal categories in music around 1900.'⁸ In the fourth movement *Urlicht* the composer introduces the human voice, an alto soloist. 'Urlicht' ('Primal Light') from *Des Knaben Wunderhorn*, an anthology of German folk songs, expresses a yearning for spiritual union with God.⁹ Musicologists note that there is chromaticism, (the use of foreign notes to the mode or diatonic scale which a composition is based upon) when the pitch rises

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gradually with constant fluctuating meter in this movement, evoking the following lines:

Full of high sentence, but a bit obtuse;
At times, indeed, almost ridiculous—
Almost, at times, the Fool.¹⁰

The movement however ends in a delicate and subtle manner. The fifth and the final movement of the symphony, Thomas Bauman observes, opens with a ‘chord of terror’, which the German critics called Beethoven’s “Schreckensakkord.”¹¹ This can be seen to validate Cooper’s statement – ‘If anyone were to set “Prufrock” to music, it would have to be to the accompaniment of shattering glass.’¹² Bauman notes, ‘a form of compositional standstill’ which Monika Lichtenfeld, called a “Klangfläche,” where the ‘expectation of what is to come and remembrance of things past interpenetrate, as befits the beginning of a finale.’¹³ The finale, lasting roughly forty minutes, can be divided into three broad sections: a ten-minutes-long exposition with slow tempi, followed by another ten- minutes-long explosive development, finally closing with the voices of the chorus and soloists – ‘[...] the voices dying with a dying fall [...]’¹⁴

In the development, the violins, trumpets, trombones gain tempo, with rising rhythm. Fragments of the funeral march that was anticipated in the first movement is expanded here. The trombones which had a lighter tone gain a dark timbre imbuing the composition with a horror of contingency. The way in which the light, slow melody moves out of focus to give rise to the screeching violins and loud drums can be seen as a parallel to Prufrock’s social anxiety rising amidst a seemingly joyous social gathering

Should I, after tea and cakes and ices,
Have the strength to force the moment to its crisis?¹⁵

Mahler’s footnote to the conductor in the central section of the development which is marked by a pathological collapse says, ‘vom Wind vereinzelt herüber getragene Klänge einer kaum vernehmbaren Musik’ (‘isolated sounds of a barely audible music, carried on the wind’).¹⁶ Such ‘isolated sounds’ speak for the uprooted alienation of the man preoccupied

with thoughts of one's doomed existence. Bauman regards key and meter to be effective elements in this passage, introducing a heterogeneous, 'layered experience of time'.¹⁷ Homogeneous time representing causal, hierarchical, goal-oriented thinking seems to be overturned by Mahler here. He uses a non-linear composition as used by Eliot in his poem to direct us towards the wide array of confusions and ambiguities in Prufrock that buries his sense of purpose and burdens his sense of self. Lyricism regularly gets alternated with grim tones of trombones. The occasional brass fanfare that resounds with gusto can be seen as the modern man's efforts to deal with his constricted, asphyxiating worldview –

Shall I say, I have gone at dusk through narrow streets
And watched the smoke that rises from the pipes
Of lonely men in shirt-sleeves, leaning out of windows? ...¹⁸

McCoy notes that Mahler's music that emerges from the silence, following the climax and collapse of the march creates the most 'ingenious passages'.¹⁹ At the end of the development, the instruments building up to form a sense of hope for a better tomorrow gets contrasted by the sombre tones of the chorus. This establishes the conflict in the idea of permanence and solidarity pertaining to hope. The soloists and the chorus quieten the atmosphere, their voices blending almost into a funeral dirge. The alto voice creeps erratically upward taking a certain shape which is interrupted by the disciplined sounds of the marching band. The band grows louder pulling the believer forward until both fade into the same musical space confronting the terrible truth of the Last Judgment. Prufrock however, is never able to come to terms with the truth, he struggles to grapple with his purpose in life, with all his vitality buried like a corpse under the earth, he sees himself to be Lazarus, a voice of the dead.

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."²⁰

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Édouard Manet, a French painter in the nineteenth century, belonging to the school of Impressionists, created visual compositions which can also be perceived to complement this humdrum state of modern living. According to a few critics, *Masked Ball at the Opera* (1873) is a celebration of the charm and elegance of masked Opera balls, while others like Julius Meier-Graefe in 1912, remarked that the painting displayed ‘multi-coloured life of the flesh market’.²¹ This comment by Graefe brings us to the line by Prufrock –

There will be time, there will be time
To prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet;²²

The concept of a masked ball shows a need to conceal one’s true intentions, Manet seems to satirise this world of ostentation and conspicuous consumption in bourgeois lifestyle. Although, the poem is titled as a ‘Love Song’, ironically enough, neurotic and insecure Prufrock has nothing to say which can be considered to be an expression of love. For the modern man, according to Cooper, the need to invent masks is tempered by the horror of how others might perceive us past our facades—

[...] for Eliot, sympathy was the greatest horror, even more than that of being judged. On one side [...] lies abjection, abasement, humiliation; on the other, damnation. Eliot gave the name of J. Alfred Prufrock to this condition.²³

Manet places a mass of gentlemen in the centre of the scene through an extensive use of black. However, he breaks this monotony by interspersing in between, a few women in red and white. It is in such a setting that after a ‘hundred visions and revisions’²⁴ people would formally launch themselves in the ‘multi-coloured life of the flesh market,’²⁵ remarking about ‘Michelangelo’ in a mundane fashion. Some critics note that the inspiration for the final version of *Masked Ball*²⁶ came from the works of Manet’s close friend, the poet Baudelaire. John Hutton states that Baudelaire espoused a notion where the spirit of his contemporary bourgeois society was that of a ‘funeral celebration.’²⁷ Although Baudelaire’s concept had a heroic, egalitarian flavour linked to the idea of political equality asserted by bourgeois theorists, a certain state of stasis, stagnation and lack of dynamism pervades Manet’s funeral motif— the black-clad men in hats.

Most of the men look the same, there is a sense of detachment, a denial of individual differences. Michael Fried has called this style to be 'bafflingly detached, opaque, non-communicating, without psychological interiority of any kind.'²⁸ Although there are exchanges of calculated looks, grasping hands throughout the work there is no explicit display of emotion that would suggest mirth in the crowd. Fried cites a comment by Thoré in *Salons de W. Bürger*: 'His [Manet's] present vice is a sort of pantheism that doesn't value a head more than a slipper; that sometimes accords even more importance to a bouquet of flowers than to the physiognomy of a woman[...].'²⁹ Manet's treatment of human subjects as if they were no different from inanimate matter was his way of showing the lack of emotional and psychological depth in people engaged in their own individual endeavours of forming liaisons in balls as a matter of social routine. The use of a single dark hue like black right at the centre draws us into a limited frame, due to which we almost immediately make an effort to find colour and vitality but that is again hindered since there is not much scope to do so beyond the sides of the painting where the colour white stands in stark contrast to the dark sombre tones in the middle of the painting.

Another discernible feature in Manet's paintings is the lack of eye contact the characters engage in, either amongst themselves or with the viewer. This is seen in paintings like *The Old Musician* (1862) where only the central character looks back at us, while the others distractedly look elsewhere. In *Before the Mirror* (1876) there is no clarity in the reflection of the woman standing in front of the mirror.³⁰ It is a complete blur, bringing us back to the doubts of middle aged Prufrock, who is extremely conscious of his ageing body, worried about society's comments on his bald spot in the middle of his hair. In the painting we are only able to see the rear side of the woman, who seems to be dressed neatly, with her hair tied up in a bun and clad in a white and blue gown. We can neither get a glimpse of her soul through her eyes, nor can we see any facial expression that would allow us to draw conclusions about her emotions. Manet's deliberate sense of ambiguity in this painting and the abrupt brush strokes on the mirror can represent the confusions and insecurities in a person's mind regarding societal perception and acceptance. Prufrock's commentary on the same suggests the harsh, brutal nature of society's judgment —

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The eyes that fix you in a formulated phrase,
And when I am formulated, sprawling on a pin,
When I am pinned and wriggling on the wall,
Then how should I begin
To spit out all the butt-ends of my days and ways?
And how should I presume?³¹

Prufrock perceives individuals in parts, fragments, as seen in the above lines, ‘The eyes’, after which he refers to ‘arms’— herein lies Eliot’s masterful composition of the poem which mirrors the broken, fragmented psyche of his poetic persona. Similarly, in Manet’s *Before the Mirror*, a vague white outline only of the head and the fingers of the woman’s hand are discernible in her reflection, implying a fractured, shrinking sense of self. There is a certain unevenness of execution that made Manet’s paintings unintelligible in terms of technique. There might be a sense of diffidence in the woman as she holds her right hand in the back, while her left hand in front of the mirror, in a certain posture, ‘to prepare a face to meet the faces [...]’³²

Prufrock goes on to mention the daily quotidian things of having tea and cakes, however, he cannot approach the ‘overwhelming question’, a question on his existence, his sense of purpose. He digresses, his thoughts do not form a linear progression, they are disjointed and random. The following lines of Prufrock bring *The Dead Christ with Angels* (1864) by Manet, to mind:³³

But though I have wept and fasted, wept and prayed,
Though I have seen my head (grown slightly bald) brought in upon a platter,
I am no prophet — and here’s no great matter;
I have seen the moment of my greatness flicker [...]’³⁴

There is a sense of despair and loss of conviction in the above lines which is clearly seen in Manet’s composition as well with a pale Christ in the arms of a compassionate angel on one side and a crestfallen angel on the other. The quiet pallor and lifelessness in the expression and posture of Christ is

unsettling. The cited lines of Prufrock seem to be the essential voice of the dead Christ who is now lying helpless in the hands of the angels, murdered by his own pupils. After a few lines, Prufrock addresses himself as Lazarus rising from the dead but he is again arrested by his own fear and indecisiveness. Prufrock is torn apart by a philosophical dilemma, which Cooper defines as :

the rattling play of self-images and the increasing awareness of personal identity as a metaphysical fiction [which] unsettle both Prufrock and the reader [...] What the poem brings vividly to our ears is the stammering into which a certain privileged humanist discourse has degenerated by Eliot's time.³⁵

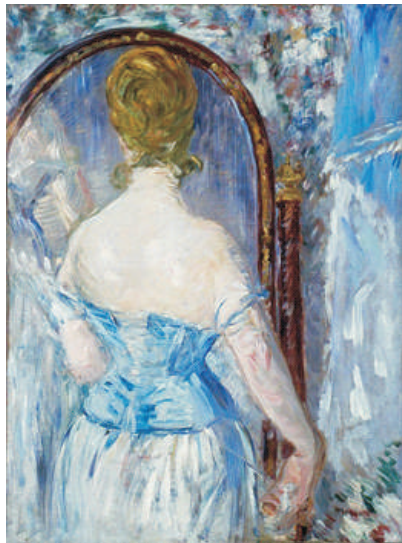
The prosaic, pedestrian Prufrock's continual self-questioning, cataloguing of daily quotidian activities in a stale, gloomy, static environment is Eliot's statement on the mechanistic outlook of modern living. By the end he wishes to wake from the mental, intellectual slumber only to drown. Bauman in Mahler's composition notes a 'pattern of discrete, juxtaposed segments in the finale's exposition [which] finds continued application in the massive development section.'³⁶ The fragmented, fragile modern man's trepidation and uncertainty gets mirrored in such a composition. Through a non-linear composition, Eliot imparts a sense of ambiguity to his flawed, insecure poetic persona which Manet too embodied in his 'double edged' approach of being both engaged and distanced at the same time in his paintings. According to Hutton, 'Manet himself is both present and absent: he does not simply sign the work, but puts his name on a crumpled and discarded admission ticket to the ball, in the painting's lower right corner.'³⁷ In this paper, I have attempted to draw thematic parallels between Eliot's poem, Mahler's Second Symphony and Manet's paintings. It is clear that all three artists in their own fields tried to provide a veracious account of human fallacies and portrayed the dreary, mundane

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Paintings by Manet referenced in the paper



Masked Ball at the Opera (1873)



Before the Mirror (1876)

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The Dead Christ with Angels (1864)

aspects of life during their time.

Endnotes :

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- ¹³ Bauman, 'Mahler in a New Key', 478.
- ¹⁴ Eliot, *Collected Poems (1909-1962)*, p. 5.
- ¹⁵ Eliot, *Collected Poems (1909-1962)*, pp. 5-6.
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- ¹⁷ Bauman, 'Mahler in a New Key', 476.
- ¹⁸ Eliot, *Collected Poems (1909-1962)*, p. 5.
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- ²³ Cooper, *The Cambridge Introduction to T.S. Eliot*, p. 50.
- ²⁴ Eliot, *Collected Poems (1909-1962)*, p. 4.
- ²⁵ Hutton, 'The Clown at the Ball', 76.
- ²⁶ Édouard Manet, and French. *Masked Ball at the Opera*. Oil on canvas, 1873.

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