To Improve or Not to Improve: Liminal Iterations of the Self in T.S. Eliot’s ‘Prufrock’

Chinmaya Lal Thakur

Abstract

T.S. Eliot’s 1915 poem ‘The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock’ repeatedly registers the need to self-optimize in response to provocations. Yet, the narrator is never able to respond to them in a way that would either improve his personal standing or bring him favorable social recognition. As he never denies the need to improve, the inability transitions into disinterest in the question of improvement itself. This essay argues that the narrator’s (in)ability to support or oppose self-optimization in ‘Prufrock’ indicates a liminal position with respect to the problem, a position in which the self is impassive, indifferent, and perhaps even bored. However, even as this configuration of (in)capacity leading to disinterest is repeatedly brought forth in the poem, it cannot be taken to be ineffectual and pointless. Rather, the apparently endless iteration of the arrangement brings about new possibilities for the imagination of the self—possibilities of the self’s co-existence with contingencies of time, space, and expression.

Keywords: self-improvement, liminality, iterations, possibilities, contingency
The present essay takes a critical view of the relationship between self-optimization and modernist literature and culture. With specific regard to T.S. Eliot’s well-known poem ‘The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock’ (1915, hereafter referred to as ‘Prufrock’), it argues that modernist literature need not always be understood as taking an easily discernible position of support or opposition vis-à-vis the question of self-improvement and optimization. Instead, it suggests that the narrative of Eliot’s poem comes to repeatedly indicate indifference and disinterest towards the problem.¹ The speaker’s persistent impassive attitude therein entails him acquiring a liminal position, a position that nonetheless remains powerful as it brings about new possibilities of imagination and expression.² This suggestion is based on a careful perusal of the writings of Jacques Derrida who asserts that iterability in literature is not a mechanical repetition of the same but that which inscribes newness in the wake of its occurrence through différence and necessarily insufficient supplementation.

Accordingly, the paper has been divided into two sections. The first segment establishes, through a recourse to work by the Australian writer David Malouf, that humans have always been restless—restless to improve their lot in the world and achieve happiness. In the early twentieth century, as suggested by the sociologist and thinker Georg Simmel, this restlessness to get better could be said to transform into efforts by individuals in urban societies to participate only in discourse governed by logic, calculation, and money. The second part of the present essay close-reads sections from ‘Prufrock’ in the light of the discussion in the opening

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¹ Alongside ‘Rhapsody on a Windy Night’ (1911), ‘Prufrock’ is perhaps the representative poem in the early phase of Eliot’s oeuvre. As Jewel Spears Brooker underlines, the poet’s oeuvre can be divided into three parts which reflect three distinct attitudes towards metanarratives such as religion, spiritualism, and, as a corollary, self-improvement. The first stage is marked by disjunction, the second—whose signature achievements are ‘Sweeney Among the Nightingales’ (1918) and ‘The Wasteland’ (1922)—by ambivalence, and the final one by transcendence whose most substantial statement is found in the 1925 poem ‘The Hollow Men’ (Brooker 2018: 3-4).

² The impassive orientation of the speaker of ‘Prufrock’ makes him one among several central presences or protagonists of modernist literature who are disinclined towards action and activity. The eponymous protagonist of Herman Melville’s “Bartleby, The Scrivener: A Story of Wall-Street” (1856), for example, suddenly refuses to examine a document at the lawyer’s firm in which he is employed. Slowly, he refuses to undertake even the most basic tasks including eating and finding a proper place to live. Similarly, Ernst Junger’s novel Eumeswil (published in 1977, almost five decades after it was written) features the historian Manuel Venator, modelled on the idealized figure of the Anarch. The Anarch is an individual who lives peacefully and dispassionately without participating in any socio-cultural activity. In the novel, Venator thus tries to make a refuge for himself among the mountains as he feels that the space would allow him to realize complete freedom and self-sufficiency. Even K., the protagonist of Franz Kafka’s The Castle (1926), refuses to leave the scene and return to his temporary quarters at the village-school though he realizes that he would not be able to meet Klamm, the authoritative official. For a detailed analysis of K.’s refusal to leave the scene and opting to wait, apparently pointless, see [Author].
section to argue that the poem's speaker repeatedly indicates disinterest towards self-optimization and improvement. This section of the paper demonstrates that the iteration of such a liminal position entails a significant re-imagination of contingencies of time and space, in line with arguments by Derrida.

In the long essay “The Happy Life: The Search for Contentment in the Modern World” (2011), David Malouf attempts a synoptic account of how happiness has been conceived and perceived by human beings throughout the ages. Some readers may rightly feel that it is counter-intuitive to begin the present essay on Eliot's ‘Prufrock’ with a reference to this piece by Malouf. Yet, Malouf’s essay is relevant for a discussion of self-optimization in literature and culture as happiness is often understood to be the goal, the end that the human being supposedly achieves once he or she improves and makes progress. Malouf’s story of happiness among humans has three key milestones—two unusual narratives about the origins of human life and society and a late eighteenth-century historical sketch by the Frenchman Marie Jean Antoine Nicolas de Caritat, Marquis de Condorcet. In the first tale of human origins, Malouf considers Plato’s eponymous dialogue involving the Sophist Protagoras. Protagoras tells the story of the genesis of human, animal, and plant life on the planet. He states that Zeus, the father of the gods, passes the job of creation to the Titan Prometheus who, in turn, passes it to his twin-brother Epimetheus. Dutifully, Epimetheus distributes special qualities like fur, feather, and thick hide among all creatures that would protect them from the elements. To ensure their survival amidst their inevitable struggle amongst each other, he provides some with poisonous fangs, some with sharp claws, and some with the power to fly. Moreover, he is careful to compensate for the great size of some creatures with the slowness of their movement and he even makes some animals plant-eaters only. At the conclusion of the exercise, as Epimetheus wants to inform his brother, he realizes that he has forgotten to provide man with anything, neither clothing, nor any source of food or living spaces.

In the dialogue, Protagoras states that Prometheus then comes to the rescue as he suggests that man must fend for himself—what the gods have provided to other creatures, he must find on his own. As Malouf argues, this creation myth in the dialogue thus sets man in a heroic light. It establishes man as the maker of his own destiny, as a self-sufficient and autonomous creature of his own nature, history, and fate. Yet, as Malouf underlines, underneath man's heroism lies unrest or restlessness—a significant aspect that would make man always curious to know and have more, be dissatisfied with whatever he would achieve, and be insecure...
about his accomplishments. Restlessness or unrest, in other words, goes hand in hand with material comfort and happiness that man seeks for himself—he would always optimize and improve his socio-economic position but never feel that he has done enough (Malouf 2011: 16-19).

The second myth of origins that Malouf discusses in the essay is the Judeo-Christian one, one that is figured in George Herbert’s poem ‘The Pulley’ (1633). In this poem, like the Epimetheus story, man is ordained with everything but remains devoid of any rest. God provides him with all the riches of the world but makes him suffer interminable dissatisfaction and restlessness till he meets death. In this regard, the role of the central conceit of the poem that also gives it its title is worth considering. The pulley creates force and leverage—a contrast to the rest that God does not give to man. Interestingly, it is also what connects man to God as the latter uses rest as leverage to pull the former closer.

When God at first made man,
Having a glass of blessings standing by;
“Let us” (said he) “pour on him all we can:
Let the world’s riches, which dispersed lie,
Contract into a span.”

So strength first made a way;
Then beauty flowed, then wisdom, honor, pleasure:
When almost all was out, God made a stay,
Perceiving that alone all of his treasure
Rest in the bottom lay.

“For if I should” (said he)
“Bestow this jewel also on my creature,
He would adore my gifts instead of me,
And rest in Nature, not the God of Nature:
So both should losers be.

“Yet let him keep the rest,
But keep them with repining restlessness:
Let him be rich and weary, that at least,
If goodness lead him not, yet weariness
May toss him to my breast.” (Malouf 2011: 19-20)

Condorcet’s treatise *Sketch for a Historical Picture of the Progress of the Human Mind* (1795) challenges the traditional and ecclesiastically authorized version of history that conceives of time gone before as a storehouse of exempla. It argues that the reality which humans inhabit is not composed of people, events, and movements
which are mere repetitions of those in the past. Instead, as Malouf underlines, the treatise is invested in the idea of progress—progress of man encompassing nine stages from the nomadic hordes of pre-history to early industrialization concomitant with the French Revolution of 1789. Man’s journey on the planet, in other words, has been a tale of advancement and improvement according to Condorcet and the journey cannot come to an end for man must always invest in making the future for himself as well as succeeding generations. As pointed out by Malouf, Condorcet’s message of working hard in the present to make the future without any regard for what may have happened in the past continued to hold sway till at least the close of the nineteenth century. Malouf suggests that the writings of Anton Chekhov provide ample testimony to the phenomenon for the latter’s characters like Astrov in Uncle Vanya (1898) and Vershinin in The Three Sisters (1901) repeatedly wonder if the generations that will inhabit Russia after them would recognize and remember their hard work (Malouf 2011: 24-26).

In his essay, Malouf rightly underscores the vision of man’s destiny that the Epimetheus story, Herbert’s poem, and Condorcet’s treatise share. For the three of them, man is self-driven and there are no limits to what he may achieve. In fact, the essential requirements of discovery, invention, improvement, and optimization are what make him man. If and when he achieves ends to all these drives, he may be (finally) happy. Yet, even in Condorcet’s historical sketch, the shadow of unrest always creeps behind man. To achieve the purported happiness and perfection, he cannot and must not rest. In Malouf’s words, “It is no coincidence that Condorcet’s exact contemporary was Goethe. There is something Faustian in this new, this ‘modern’ version of Man as both the happy child of progress, of the will to knowledge and power, and its endlessly unresting slave” (Malouf 2011: 28).

Georg Simmel’s well-known account of urban life in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century titled ‘The Metropolis and Mental Life’ (1903) further attests to Malouf’s assertions about a certain restlessness accompanying man’s desire to improve and optimize his lot in the world. Simmel argues that man, especially in metropolitan centers such as Berlin and Paris, carries on a conflict with nature—a conflict in which he tries to maintain independence from social forces, the weight of historical heritage, and contemporaneous techné of life. To be successful in the struggle, he configures a protective shield around himself, a shield that is governed by rational mental processes instead of emotional and sensitive responses. As a result, the metropolitan man comes to be a stickler for ‘virtues’ such as punctuality, calculability, and exactness that capitalism celebrates as paradigmatic values of a hardworking individual (Simmel 2002: 11-13).

Based on the above discussion, it can be argued that the self-optimizing and improving human being must work continuously for the betterment of his or her own self, the time and place he or she inhabits, and the world that he or she
supposedly makes for succeeding generations. Self-improvement and betterment then are not only assumed to benefit the subject who endeavors to progress but are also purported to drive the development of human society in the future. Self-optimization, in other words, goes hand in hand with restlessness, work, and activity. The following section of the present paper will argue that Eliot’s ‘Prufrock’ adopts a disinterested and liminal position towards the problem of self-improvement precisely because its narrative does not consolidate the capitalist and progressivist ethos of relentless work and activity. Eliot’s speaker repeatedly lingers, dithers, and digresses in his monologue and makes the readers of the poem reconsider normative assumptions about the apparently necessary work required to pursue self-improvement and optimization. In the process, the repetition itself scrutinizes the need to self-optimize and creates fresh possibilities of self-imagination and linguistic expression vis-à-vis contingencies of time and space.

II

As stated earlier, the method used in this paper in perusing ‘Prufrock’ will be close-reading certain extracts and sections from the poem. The method is not coincidental as it has been chosen after careful consideration of the argument presented here thus far. If one looks at the discussion carefully, it establishes that the human instinct to self-optimize goes hand in hand with the given requirement for him or her to work continuously. In the same breath, it suggests that ‘Prufrock’ takes a critical look at this conventional relationship between self-improvement and restlessness and thus subverts capitalism. But how can the poem be a critique of capitalist ethos specifically if the relationship between self-improvement and restlessness is constitutive of even the origin myths of human life on the planet?

Elizabeth S. Goodstein’s classic study, Experience Without Qualities: Boredom and Modernity (2005), provides a clue towards resolving the conundrum. Goodstein argues that boredom entails that the identity of the modern subject can no longer be anchored in the fabric of collective meaning as provided by forces such as religion and history. The modern subject is disenchanted in boredom and this disenchantment is the key constituent of his or her lived reality. Yet, as Goodstein suggests, the subject’s rejection of the everyday, his or her lived experience of nihilism and disaffectedness in the quotidian and daily, is precisely what may appear to be a timeless aspect of the human condition. The skeptical, critical distance that boredom entails, in other words, is undermined the moment the phenomenon is regarded as a universal and natural situation. In Goodstein’s words,
lived as a pseudo-religious revelation of the ultimate meaninglessness of existence, such ennui obscures its own historical specificity as a symptom of the particular losses that plague modern subjects. In thereby effacing the historicity of the crisis of meaning with which it is associated, boredom exemplifies the deterioration of Enlightenment into mythology. (Goodstein 2005: 3-4)

As suggested earlier, Goodstein comes up with a solution to this problem. She admits that boredom resembles and resonates with older forms of malaise such as *taedium vitae*, *horror loci*, acedia, and melancholy. Yet, she asserts that boredom is not exactly synonymous with any of them because any experience of discontent cannot be abstracted from the language in which it is expressed and the historical and cultural context in which it is embedded—a specific ethos, in other words, that she calls “rhetoric of reflection”. The language of melancholy, for example, suggests a deviation from the ideal of a homeostatic balance of humors in the body while acedia represents a spiritual disconnect between the human and the divine. Boredom, on the other hand, stands for a recognizably and particularly modern manner of thinking about human existence as it is simultaneously the bane of modern subjects and a homeopathic strategy for stabilizing identity in a world of interminable change (Goodstein 2005: 4). It is in the same vein as Goodstein’s analysis of boredom as a uniquely modern problem then that the present essay chooses to close-read passages from ‘Prufrock’. Perhaps there cannot even be a better way of responding to the language of the poem’s expression, to its rhetoric of reflection, so to say, as close-reading singularly allows for attention to be paid to linguistic inscriptions, possibilities, and enunciations in representation.

The orientation will also resonate, again not coincidentally, with how Derek Attridge and Henry Staten engage with the poem in their refreshing work *The Craft of Poetry: Dialogues on Minimal Interpretation* (2015). In their reading of ‘Prufrock’, they make it a point to emphasize that even though a skeletal structure can be shown as underlying the poem’s narrative, its various elements such as metaphors, irregular rhyme patterns, and bewildering imagery cannot be explained completely. These stylistic features of the poem, Attridge and Staten argue, invite the reader to engage and re-engage with its narrative as they possess the potential to present new possibilities and imaginations each time they are perused (Attridge/Staten 2015: 108-127). There is another key reason for the present essay’s preference for Attridge and Staten’s reading of ‘Prufrock’. Most criticism of the poem fails to establish a relationship between the speaker’s attitude of disinterest and boredom therein and new possibilities of linguistic and epistemological
enunciation that its patterns of repetition configure. Frank Lentricchia, for example, rightly suggests that the poem’s persona makes layered gestures of “irony, indifference, and tiredness” but errs in arguing that such gestures only signify the persona’s (and Eliot’s) battles with conventional linguistic expression and literary inheritance (Lentricchia 1994: 242-244). Martin Scofield, similarly, astutely recognizes that the images evoked in ‘Prufrock’ serve to “disconcert the reader, and to widen his sense of the possibilities of language and alert him to the way in which language is likely to be stretched in the poem” but does not see any relation between such experience of reading the poem and the attitudes of its narrative persona (Scofield 1988: 50-51). Recent work by the likes of Jewel Spears Brooker does not even allow the poem’s speaker to possess any self-consciousness agency or awareness and reads his entire persona as a “type” that “dramatizes painful psychological and social conflicts.” According to Brooker, such personality-types represent “thought-tormented figures who are paralyzed by the disjunction between thought and body, mind and action” (Brooker 2018: 1-2).

The following stanza constitutes the famous opening of Eliot’s ‘Prufrock’:

Let us go then, you and I,
When the evening is spread out against the sky
Like a patient etherized upon a table;
Let us go, through certain half-deserted streets,
The muttering retreats
Of restless nights in one-night cheap hotels
And sawdust restaurants with oyster-shells:
Streets that follow like a tedious argument
Of insidious intent
To lead you to an overwhelming question...
Oh, do not ask, ‘What is it?’
Let us go and make our visit. (Eliot 1963: 3)

In the whole stanza, there is not even a single suggestion of the speaker taking an active lead with regard to either making a decision or describing the context in which he appears to be situated. He invites the “you” to come along with him only because something that had begun even before the beginning of the poem’s narrative has come to its conclusion—indicated, clearly, by the “then” in the opening line. The evening is pale and sick(ening) and appears to be an etherized patient. The other adjectives too establish the sense of the speaker not occupying a specific, stable position—he is on the edge somewhere, neither here nor there. So, even the streets are neither deserted nor crowded, they are “half-deserted”. Similarly, the retreats are neither silent nor loud, they are “muttering”. Even the proposed action of going or moving is qualified to the extent that one begins to doubt the speaker’s
resolve. The streets, for example, are not marked by any great activity on the part of pedestrians or vehicles. They are not only half-deserted but follow “like a tedious argument / of insidious intent”. It thus seems that much like an argument in which he has participated repeatedly, the speaker has taken these very streets in the past to know in the present that they do not lead to any clear resolution or destination and have “insidious intent”. Unsurprisingly, the “overwhelming question” they lead to does not even get articulated. And, the you is invited again to go with the speaker in what appears to be an interminable cycle.

The pattern of either not taking any active action or of doing something without resolve has been rightly identified by Marjorie Perloff as (the speaker’s) “torpor” in her acute reading of the stanza’s prosody. Perloff underlines that the poem’s opening gesture—“Let us go then, you and I”—has seven monosyllables which demand a certain stress in being read aloud or recited. The stress, combined with the caesura that follows “then”, creates a note of torpor, “an inability to move”. This stasis gets further accented, argues Perloff, as the poem’s overture rhymes with the second line—“When the evening is spread out against the sky”—which is eleven syllables long and has at least six primary stresses. Additionally, the second line of the poem leads to the “catatonic torpor” of the third line—“Like a patient etherized upon a table”—which is even longer with twelve syllables, is ungainly, and marked by the odd movement of falling to rising rhythm in the second half (Perloff 2011: 257). Needless to say, the trend of increasing syllable length, the prominent marks of cadence and stress, and the awkward rhythm at the end of the stanza cause the reading experience to mirror the passive, bored, and indifferent attitude of the poem’s speaker.

The speaker’s situation gets reflected even in the functioning of the yellow fog or smoke which is figured in ‘Prufrock’ as a cat. It does not, for example, spread across the evening authoritatively. Rather, it “licks its tongues” into the corners of dusk. Similarly, it “lingers” upon “the pools that stand in drains” and “lets” the soot from chimneys fall upon its back. Yet, for both the you and the yellow fog, there is an assurance from the speaker—the assurance that “there will be time”. The speaker repeatedly asserts that there will be time, time for “a hundred indecisions” and “a hundred visions and revisions” (Eliot 1963: 3–4). These affirmations suggest that he is not only unlikely to take any decision in the present but is also likely to revise again and again, in case he was to arrive at some resolution in the future. The irony in the situation becomes apparent if one carefully considers what his assurance entails. The speaker assures the you of there being indecisions in the future. In other words, he assures the you that there will be time (left) in the future to not decide or to decide to not decide. Similarly, he assures the you that there will be time (left) in the future to revise all their visions. Again, it appears that the underlying motivation in the speaker, if he can be said to have any motivation at all, is to not take decisions and revise them repeatedly if at all they are reached in the future.
Zulfikar Ghose and Denis Donoghue rightly underline, regarding the passage about fog and smoke, that the latter are not referents which get ‘actually’ described in the poem. While reading about the fog, for example, the reader does not see or experience it for what it is. Rather, he or she becomes “engaged in some habit or the other of language” and is “distracted by peripheral matter.” The object here may indeed be fog but the words that work out the elaborate metaphor are about a cat. So, every time that the reader tries to look at the fog, he or she ends up staring at a cat (Ghose 1978: 46). Additionally, the lines do not quite describe a city under fog as the references that enable the reader to imagine the scene are not independent of the speaker’s state of mind and disposition. The plural nouns—“corners, pools, and drains”, for example, generalize his or her impression and “release the language from the mundane duty of referring to something: no particular corner, pool, or drain is intended.” The fog and the cat do not even hold their respective places as they do not exist in a definite and mutual relationship with each other. The verbs, “made a sudden leap” and “curled”, imply a cat but “licked its tongue into the corners of the evening” suggests more fog than the cat. In effect, as Donoghue asserts, the impact of the passage in ‘Prufrock’ is that which keeps the readers of the poem among the words and their internal relations. It is as if “[the apparent local meanings [of words and expressions] were an unfortunate but necessary distraction...We are not allowed to escape from the words into another place” (Donoghue 2000).

Even when the you disappears from the scene in the poem, the speaker cannot give up his reassuring orientation and thus comes to provide solace to himself. And, poignantly, the gesture of self-confidence comes almost as a response to very clear provocations from the outside, voices that will demand self-improvement and optimization from him by ridiculing his thinning hair, modest clothes, and lanky frame. He cannot respond to any of them as he is certain that he has time, as a minute is apparently enough to take decisions, revise them, and even reverse them. Clearly, he would not dare to “disturb the universe” as he expresses assurance in the time he will have to “dare” and, “dare”.

And indeed there will be time
To wonder, ‘Do I dare?’ and, ‘Do I dare?’
Time to turn back and descend the stair,
With a bald spot in the middle of my hair—
(They will say: ‘How his hair is growing thin!’)
My morning coat, my collar mounting firmly to the chin,
My necktie rich and modest, but asserted by a simple pin—
(They will say: ‘But how his arms and legs are thin!’)
Do I dare
Disturb the universe?
In a minute there is time
For decisions and revisions which a minute will reverse. (Eliot 1963: 4)
In evocations like the “tedious” streets which figure in the poem’s opening stanza, the speaker seems to imply that the reason for him not daring to take control of the situation and force the issue, as it were, is that he is too familiar with the entire circumstance, the whole setup. He claims that he knows the “evenings, mornings, afternoons”, “voices dying with a dying fall”, “eyes”, and “arms” thoroughly and completely. Additionally, he claims that he is not a prophet or some great man who will have some important matter to report or decide upon. The readers of ‘Prufrock’ thus are neither told what the matter at hand is nor whether it is the same as asking the overwhelming question or disturbing the universe. Moreover, when the speaker ultimately claims that he is afraid even as the “eternal footman” (death) holds on to his coat and snickers at him, one begins to wonder if the (not-so) great matter, of disturbing the universe, may even be of accepting the truth of human mortality (Eliot 1963: 4-6).

While affirming his familiarity with everything including items used in everyday human lives such as “cups”, “marmalade”, “tea”, and “porcelain”, the speaker unsurprisingly begins to ask if it would have been worthwhile after all to force the issue, to ask the overwhelming question. And, just as the readers of ‘Prufrock’ expect that they will finally get to know as to what the overwhelming question may be, the speaker digresses and comes to wonder if they would know even if he were to say it aloud. He suggests that it is not only impossible for humans to say what they mean, it is even impossible for them to say that they did not at all mean what they may have said. The moment in which the overwhelming question is to be articulated in Eliot’s poem, in other words, leads to an anti-climactic but potent suggestion about the ultimate incompatibility between human (in)ability to speak (in) language and language itself.

And would it have been worth it, after all,
Would it have been worth while,
After the sunsets and the dooryards and the sprinkled streets,
After the novels, after the teacups, after the skirts that trail along the floor—
And this, and so much more?—
It is impossible to say just what I mean!
But as if a magic lantern threw the nerves in patterns on a screen:
Would it have been worth while
If one, settling a pillow or throwing off a shawl,
And turning toward the window, should say:
‘This is not it at all,
That is not what I meant, at all’. (Eliot 1963: 6-7)

The present discussion of Eliot’s ‘Prufrock’ should make it clear that its speaker exhibits orientations and attitudes that do not at all go with the restlessness
that Malouf and Simmel have identified as the hallmark of the self-optimizing and improving human being across history. Instead of investing himself in hard work that would apparently make the planet a better place for future generations, he is disinclined towards even making a decision. He also exudes confidence that he will have the time to revisit and revise even those decisions that he may reach sometime. His sheer lack of activity borders on passivity, he lets himself get caught in situations where his gestures and suggestions, at best, carry negligible force and authority. Moreover, he does not even respond to provocations that may arise from various sources—voices and people around him, death, and even his self-consciousness—to improve and optimize his lot. He will be ridiculed for how he looks, how he behaves, and how he dresses but all is to no avail. Such is his indifference and disinterest in self-improvement and optimization that he asks if it is worthwhile at all to even attempt to address the question. When there is no congruence between what we want to say and what we end up saying, he seems to ask, is there any point in saying or doing anything at all? And, not to forget, this whole situation in which the speaker finds himself in ‘Prufrock’ appears to have taken place again and again. There is a repetitive logic to it, as if what the poem’s readers peruse is merely another instance of him being disinterested, then coming close to articulating the reason behind the disinterest without actually doing so, and then withdrawing to the ‘initial’ position in which he expresses his disinterest.

In the light of the above, the question that the present essay must contend with is this—is it enough to argue and demonstrate that Eliot’s ‘Prufrock’ takes a contrarian position vis-à-vis the problem of self-optimization, a position that neither supports nor opposes it directly, a position that is instead liminal and singular in refusing to engage with it? As underlined earlier in the paper, one could refer to Derrida’s suggestion here that iterability and repetition in literature are not mechanical exercises that entail the mere restatement of the same. Instead, each rhetorical articulation, each speech act, entails spatio-temporal difference, or what Derrida terms difference, on account of how it defers and thus mediates the metaphysical will to write and speak unambiguously. In his words, “Differer [in this sense] is to temporize, to take recourse, consciously or unconsciously, in the temporal and temporizing mediation of a detour that suspends the accomplishment or fulfillment of ‘desire’ or ‘will,’ and equally effects this suspension in a mode that annuls or tempers its own effect” (Derrida 1982: 8).

What is it that makes the same articulation differ and defer according to the context? Derrida argues that “the trace”, whose very working is constituted by erasure, gets inscribed or traced in the text of metaphysics. The latter document then comes to bear the mark of what it loses, reserves, and ultimately puts aside. Consequently, the (temporal and metaphysical) present becomes “the sign of the sign”, “the trace of the trace”. It does not remain what even the immediately previous
reference refers to. It becomes a function in a structure of unspecific reference, “a trace, and a trace of the erasure of the trace” (Derrida 1982: 24). Unsurprisingly, as Derrida underlines, metaphysical thinking inscribes writing with infallible value—a value that it cannot allow to be shaken. Hence, metaphysical discourse “supplements” the nodes at which it confronts its own limits. The supplement, in this sense, is an addition to the faults of the structure. However, the supplement remains a replacement as it cannot overcome the void at the center of the metaphysical enterprise. It is, in other words, an insufficient compensation, a substitute that provides no relief to metaphysics (Derrida 1997: 142-144). Much like the trace’s undoing of presence, the essential need of metaphysics to have supplementation reveals that the supplementation cannot come to an end. Metaphysical reason surely cannot conceive that the immediacy of presence, of the thing itself, of originary perception, is a mirage. Hence, as Derrida underlines, the interminable and ever-increasing chain of supplements “produces the sense of the very thing it defers” (Derrida 1997: 157).

Another way of suggesting that iterability in literature and language is not an ineffectual and meaningless repetition of the same, in line with Derrida’s arguments detailed above, is to argue that différance and the trace undo metaphysical thought to produce (glimpses of) fresh possibilities, especially in temporal and spatial terms. Since différance and the trace are structured in terms of erasure, their impact cannot be expected to be permanent, static, or eternal. They would simply be surrendering themselves to metaphysics if they functioned in this manner. Accordingly, one could revisit some of the passages from ‘Prufrock’ already referred to above to see the kind of radical spatio-temporal imaginations they call for. When the speaker asserts, for instance, that there will be time yet “for a hundred indecisions” and “for a hundred visions and revisions”, the very grammar and syntax of the lines exert immense pressure on the imagination of the readers. The speaker, located in the present for the reader, is affirming that there will be time left in the future for not deciding to decide at least a hundred times. Similarly, in the reader’s present, the speaker suggests that his future self will have time enough to not only imagine his future but also to revise it. In both these constructions, in other words, the reader is expected to handle at least three temporalities simultaneously—his or her own present which may be taken to be the present of the speaker of the poem, the latter’s future, and the (in)decision or re(vision) that the latter might commit in the future of the future. There is comparable complexity in the speaker’s affirmation that there will be time in the future for him “[T]o wonder, ‘Do I dare?’ and, ‘Do I dare?’”. The speaker again demands radical spatio-temporal shifts in the reader’s imagination. He suggests that he will wonder in the future, wonder about daring to undertake some action. But he imagines the passage of time even between two successive articulations in the future. Otherwise, it would not make
sense to not only have the repetition of “Do I dare?” but to also have it separated and joined with the conjunction “and [,]”.

Needless to state, with every such articulation that problematizes the imaginations of the readers of ‘Prufrock’, the poem presents the speaker as being capable of such liminal but powerful imagination in the first place. He may thus indeed not be like Prince Hamlet but is surely like the Fool—“an easy tool/deferential, glad to be of use” but also “a bit obtuse” (Eliot 1963: 7). Both the speaker and readers of the poem, put differently, cannot let their self-imaginations be curtailed and limited by the seemingly circular and repetitive logic of its narrative. The poem may be disinterested towards problems of self-optimization and improvement, but it certainly is not bound to an ineffectual aesthetic of insignificant iterability. Eliot’s ‘Prufrock’, in other words, can be read as a potent critique of the logics of improvement, betterment, and optimization that govern the currently prevalent capitalist ethos across the world. Moreover, as its speaker or central presence adopts an impassive, disinterested, and even bored attitude that recurs throughout, the recurrence can generate new possibilities for the imagination of time and space that do not concur with those of global capitalism. Capitalism desires, needs, and thrives on both time and space being made subject to precise calculation. The temporal and spatial enunciations possible in and through ‘Prufrock’ are radical precisely because they are possible enunciations, enunciations that are yet to come, and hence outside human bounds of calculable and deterministic imagination.

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**


Chinmaya Lal Thakur
Shiv Nadar University, Delhi
chinmaya.thakur@snu.edu.in
Izboljšati ali ne izboljšati: liminalne iteracije jaza v Eliotovem "Prufrogku"


Ključne besede: samouresničitev, liminalnost, iteracije, možnosti, kontingenca