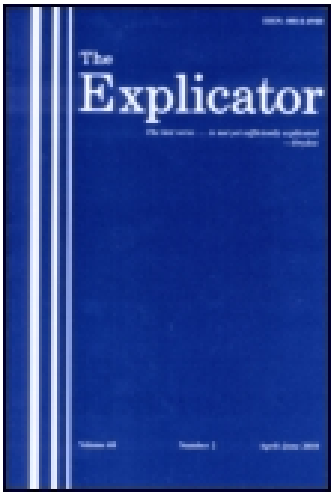

The Explicator
Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:
http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/vexp20

Eliot's the Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock

Sara Trevisan [a]
[a] Università di Padova

Published online: 30 Mar 2010.

To cite this article: Sara Trevisan (2004) Eliot's the Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock, The Explicator, 62:4, 221-223, DOI: 10.1080/00144940409597228

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00144940409597228

edition of the collected poems and its successive reprintings that came out before his death. In their 1997 edition, Frank Kermode and Joan Richardson based their texts of the poems in *Harmonium* on the first edition, hence the reading "black bird." I am indebted to Off-Broadway actor-director Richard Edelman for pointing this alternate reading out to me.

WORKS CITED

Kreymborg, Alfred, ed. *Others: An Anthology of the New Verse*. New York: Knopf, 1917.
Stevens, Wallace. *Harmonium*. New York: Knopf, 1923.
———. *Harmonium*. New York: Knopf, 1931.
———. *Harmonium*. New York: Knopf, 1947.
———. *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens*. New York: Knopf, 1954.
———. *Wallace Stevens: Collected Poetry and Prose*. Ed. Frank Kermode and Joan Richardson. New York: The Library of America, 1997.

Eliot's THE LOVE SONG OF J. ALFRED PRUFROCK

In *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*, T. S. Eliot thus makes his character describe himself:

> (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!") (lines 41–44)

The morning coat, the collar, the necktie, the pin, all suggest a fashionable, sophisticated morning suit from the late Edwardian era: in particular, a wing collar (which was considered a conservative feature), a necktie (possibly made of silk, with a sober geometrical pattern), a pin. Pins were used mainly for scarves, but they might also be used for neckties.[1] The obsessive rhyming pattern *thin-chin-pin-thin* paves the way to a personification of the pin, which "asserts"[2] Prufrock's necktie, and, as it were, his whole way of dressing and his own status. The voices in the background, commenting on Prufrock's outer appearance, keep stressing his thinness, which seems to concern each and every part of his body, thus assimilating him to the pin itself. In the end, the pin wins over Prufrock's persona, as he will be sprawling on it like an insect.

To weave the texture of these subtle semantic and visual metamorphoses, Eliot may have mixed up two different sources, each of which served half his purpose. The former source is Chaucer's "General Prologue" of the *Canterbury Tales*, precisely the Monk's physical description:

> And, for to festne his hood under his chyn,
> He hadde of gold ywroght a ful curious pyn;
> A love-knotte in the gretter ende there was. (195–97)

Although this may be a simple coincidence, grounded in similarities of apparel, the chin-pin rhyme and the contrastive pattern between the lexical constituents of the couplets add to the possibility that Eliot might have consciously based Prufrock's appearance on that of the Monk. Prufrock's coat and collar are opposed to the Monk's hood, whereas the former's rich, modest necktie and simple pin are opposed to the latter's elaborate and precious pin. The Monk's costume is "asserted" by the "love-knotte" on the pin, which defines his whole self as connected with worldly business,[3] Prufrock's clothing is "asserted" by his simple pin, which is supposed to suggest sobriety and balance. These two features are not deeply felt by Prufrock, who would like to dress in a different way—"I shall wear the bottom of my trousers rolled" (121); "I shall wear white flannel trousers, and walk upon the beach" (123). Prufrock, however, cannot act according to his inner impulses because he has been matched with the very pin he is wearing by those voices from nowhere. His formal appearance is identified with his whole self.

Eliot may have recalled the common English saying "not worth a pin": according to *OED*, *pin* is here used as "a type of something very small or of very slight value or significance" (def. 3.b) and not in the sense of "brooch." Prufrock's pin (as "brooch") is, indeed, "simple," which, according to *OED*, may mean "free from pride and ostentation" (def. 2) or "free from elaboration or artificiality; artless, unaffected; plain, unadorned" (def. 3.a). This clashes with Chaucer's description of the Monk's pin, which was "delicately made," according to the glosses in W. W. Skeat's edition:[4] here, according to the *OED*, *delicate* may mean "fine in workmanship; finely or exquisitely constructed" (def. 6.c). It is interesting to note that the word *pin* appears only three times in Eliot's whole production: twice in the sense of "peg, nail"—the former in *Prufrock* ("and when I'm formulated, sprawling on a pin," 57); the latter in *Rhapsody on a Windy Night* ("the corner of her eye / Twists like a crooked pin" 21–22)—and only once in the sense of "brooch" (*Prufrock* 43),[5] gliding toward the former sense, as will be explained. Purfrock's pin, while looking like a brooch, now has now the value of a peg or nail.

Indeed, Eliot may not have meant to say that Prufrock is not worth a pin, as the saying puts it. Prufrock actually depends on the pin, as the pin gets to be the objective correlative for Prufrock's entire persona. Thus, Prufrock's life *is* worth a pin: this diaphora is used to indicate that Prufrock's life (and self) is worth nothing (pin as peg or nail) and Prufrock's life (and self) matches his outer appearance (pin as brooch). Here Eliot seems to be punning on the saying quoted above: it somewhat materializes the older variation on the "not worth a pin" saying that goes "setten not at a pin." According to the *Middle English Dictionary* (*MED*), the latter saying means "to consider something worthless" (def. 9.b). Now, Eliot could not have read this definition in the *MED*. The closest and most famous source may have been Shakespeare's *Hamlet*: "I do not set my life

at a pin's fee" (1.4.44) says Hamlet as he is about to follow the Ghost. Eliot's essay on Hamlet was published in 1919, whereas *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* was first issued individually in 1915 and as part of *Prufrock and Other Observations* in 1917. The poem contains a strong hint at the Shakespeare play:

> No! I am not Prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be;
> Am an attendant lord, one that will do
> To swell progress, start a scene or two,
> Advise the prince; no doubt, an easy tool
> Deferential, glad to be of use,
> Politic, cautious, and meticulous;
> Full of high sentence, but a bit obtuse;
> At times, indeed, almost ridiculous—
> Almost, at times, the Fool. (111–19)

The reference points Eliot's interest in the *Hamlet* text.[6]

In lines 41 to 44, Prufrock and the pin still maintain their respective objective roles in the real world. However, the pin recurs further on in Eliot's poem: "And when I am formulated, sprawling on a pin, / When I am pinned and wriggling on the wall" (57–58). Here Eliot further develops the metaphor: the pin has become a "peg or nail" altogether, pinning Prufrock to the wall, as to subject him to biological categorization.[7] It is no longer a matter of clothing and fashion: now Prufrock's life is literally "setten at a pin," and both the semantic and visual metamorphoses are complete.

—SARA TREVISAN, *Università di Padova*

NOTES

1. Moretz Whitener Clothing Company, *Men's Togs Catalog* 13.9 (Chicago, 1910).
2. According to *OED* (7. trans), *to assert* means "to declare formally and distinctly, to state positively, aver, affirm."
3. This was the shared interpretation of the love-knot until at least 1939, when Bressie suggested it might also have religious purposes. See *A Variorum Edition of the Works of Geoffrey Chaucer, The Canterbury Tales, The General Prologue*, ed. P. G. Rugiers and D. J. Ransom (Norman: U of Oklahoma P, 1992) vol. 2, 208.
4. Eliot owned a copy of Skeat's *The Student's Chaucer*. See T. S. Eliot, *The Varieties of Metaphysical Poetry*, ed. R. Schuchard (London: Faber and Faber, 1993) 228.
5. J. L. Dawson, P. D. Holland, D. J. McKitterick, *A Concordance to the Complete Poems and Plays of T. S. Eliot* (London: Faber and Faber) 1995.
6. In 1909–10, at Harvard, Eliot attended George Pierce Baker's course on English drama from the Middle Ages to 1640 and recommended Baker's book on Shakespeare for his extension lectures in England in 1918–19. See C. Warren, *T. S. Eliot on Shakespeare* (London: UMI Press, 1987) 13.
7. R. F. Fleissner, "Prufrock's Ricardian Posture," *Research Studies* 47 (1997): 33.

WORKS CITED

Chaucer, G. *The Canterbury Tales*, in *The Riverside Chaucer*. Ed. L. D. Benson. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1988. 195–97.
Eliot, T. S. *The Wasteland and Other Poems*. London: Faber and Faber, 1972. Lines 41–44.
Shakespeare, William. *Hamlet*. Ed. G. R. Hibbard. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1987.