

The irish ballad: past,
present, and future
time in joyce's "the
dead" and eliot'...



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Though James Joyce's realist short story "The Dead" and T. S. Eliot's mock-epic poem "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" both describe a climate of self-conscious emotional inarticulacy and division, the protagonists of each work deny themselves the pleasures of the present by their refusal to integrate differing tenses into their lives. The alienated Gabriel obscures the past and its shades in "The Dead," and the insecure Prufrock's anticipatory nightmares mire him in a prison as static as his repetitive and symmetrical stanzas. These two hallmarks of Modernist literature critique the spiritual desiccation of the early 20th-century and, not surprisingly, it is the temporal movement of regression to better times, not progression to an unknown future, that rejuvenates Gabriel and drowns Prufrock.

Willful dislocation from Ireland is one of the more outright signs of Gabriel's severance from the past. His conversation with Molly Ivors at his aunts' annual Christmas party a liminal event that looks forward to the future while remembering the past, but one which has grown stale for Gabriel cements his status as a "West Briton," not a patriotic Irishman:

Gabriel's position as an outsider looking in is magnified through his linguistic disconnection from his people (later capitalized on by Miss Ivors as she shouts a Gaelic goodbye, "Beannacht libh," in her final verbal jab at Gabriel); indeed, music and song, two highly mnemonic cultural essentials, are foreign elements to his ears throughout the novella: "Gabriel could not listen while Mary Jane was playing her Academy piece...the piece she was playing had no melody for him" (2014). His domain is speech, a far less memorable and emotional medium than music, yet even his poetic allusions, he fears, will fall flat and exaggerate his intellectual separation from the

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other guests: “ He was undecided about the lines from Robert Browning for he feared they would be above the heads of his hearers. Some quotation that they could recognize from Shakespeare or from the Melodies would be better...He had taken up a wrong tone” (2010). The wrong tone is not just in the ostentatious reference, but in the actual currency of the speech, adjectives and transitive verbs over octaves and tonal variations. Even in an old love letter, he acknowledges language’s relative paleness: “ Why is it that words like these seem to me so dull and cold? Is it because there is no word tender enough to be your name?” (2030)

Muted but lingering music is the untapped reservoir of memory for the characters in “ The Dead,” though for Gabriel his words must suffice for harmony: “ Like distant music these words that he had written years before were borne towards him from the past” (2030). Other characters comment on the explicit connection between music and memory throughout: “ Mr Browne could go back farther still, to the old Italian companies that used to come to Dublin...Those were the days, he said, when there was something like singing to be heard in Dublin” (2022). The absence of music in present-day Dublin hints at the emotional coldness sweeping over the city and its inhabitants. It is an old Irish ballad, *The Lass of Aughrim*, that triggers the reminiscence of a girlhood love for Gabriel’s wife, Gretta. Music’s association with vitality is explicated in her recollection: “ He was going to study singing only for his health. He had a very good voice, poor Michael Furey” (2034). Gabriel’s inability to connect on this sonic level is exemplified by one of his literary reviews, recalled just before Aunt Julia restores her own youth

through song: "One feels that one is listening to a thought-tormented music" (2018).

No matter how thought-tormented music is for Gabriel, it is no match for Prufrock's thought-tormented consciousness. His mental courses are as fractured and non-linear as the "Streets that follow like a tedious argument/Of insidious intent" (8-9). The irregular metrical pattern sometimes shifting between tetrameter and hexameter, each missing half a beat, sometimes not mimics his confused vision of the future's "decisions and revisions which a minute will reverse" (48). Even the bravado of the opening line "Let us go then, you and I" is false in its assertion of a "then" in Prufrock's world. Repetition is a byword for Prufrock, from the nearly identical lines that describe his emasculated, passive, and feline self-image of "The yellow fog that rubs its back upon the windowpanes,/ The yellow smoke that rubs its muzzle on the windowpanes," to the two symmetrical stanzas that begin "And would it have been worth it, after all" and end with "That is not it, at all" (15-16; 87/99, 98/110). He manages to spend multiple "restless nights in one-night cheap hotels" (6). The body parts of his object of desire, traditionally unique details the poet savors, are similarly conflated in an automaton-like intonation that makes the reader question Prufrock's potential for passion: "And I have known the eyes already, known them all /...And I have known the arms already, known them all" (55, 62). Eliot's insistence on beginning so many lines with the word "And" is not lazy poetry but, rather, an indictment of Prufrock's use of the conjunction that never incites action but always poses yet another self-conscious question: "And how should I presume?" (61)

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His presumptions are his undoing, worrisome conceptions of a future rife with internal debate over the most minute matters: “ Shall I part my hair behind? Do I dare to eat a peach?” (122) His hair is a great concern to him as an exterior sign of aging that subverts his conscious attempts to stall time: “ 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!’)” (39-41). Even his decision about parting hair is an effort to reverse time, a return to this earlier battle down the stairs, a spot further away from his recitative admission of a death which he will pathetically combat by appropriating a youthful style: “ I grow old...I grow old.../ I shall wear the bottoms of my trousers rolled” (120-1). Prufrock’s fearful sequence of time’s march is “ evenings, mornings, afternoons”; it ends not with a death but a delay, not with a bang but a whimper.

Just as Prufrock retreats within the safe confines of his mind, so does Gabriel shelter in cramped quarters that oppose the notion of an expansive past: ““ Listening to-night to the names of all those great singers of the past it seemed to me, I must confess, that we were living in a less spacious age. Those days might, without exaggeration, be called spacious days” (2024). In contrast, Gabriel’s earlier positions were confined, as in the small pantry, where even his coat harbors some frigidity from outside: “...a cold fragrant air from out-of-doors escaped from crevices and folds” (2009). It is in these situations that Gabriel cannot reconcile past and present; while he remembers Lily as a child, “ nursing a rag doll,” the artificial light from the “ gas in the pantry made her look still paler,” and Gabriel’s attempt to recall that bond by looking to the future backfires: “ O, then, said Gabriel gaily, I

suppose we'll be going to your wedding one of these fine days with your young man, eh? The girl glanced back at him over her shoulder and said with great bitterness: The men that is now is only all palaver and what they can get out of you" (2009). Gabriel exits the pantry at the end of the party much the same way he entered: " Gabriel advanced from the little pantry, struggling into his overcoat" (2026).

The past is also cast by soft, natural light, which Gabriel calls for in his regenerative phase: "' We don't want any light. We have enough light from the street. And I say, he added, pointing to the candle, you might remove that handsome article, like a good man'" (2031). The " ghostly light from the street lamp," which sheds memorial exposure on Gretta's beauty for Gabriel to see, is further celebrated by Joyce as a mingling of past and present: " His own identity was fading out into a grey impalpable world: the solid world itself which these dead had one time reared and lived in was dissolving and dwindling" (2031, 2035). Choice words by Joyce reflect the murkiness that paints Gabriel's existence: " A shadow passed over his face...He stood still in the gloom of the hall...A dull anger began to gather again at the back of his mind and the dull fires of his lust began to glow angrily in his veins" (2014, 2028, 2033). Gretta, meanwhile, is literally lit up by her remembrance of ghostly things past, the personification of chiaroscuro: " Her blue felt hat would show off the bronze of her hair against the darkness and the dark panels of her skirt would show off the light ones" (2028).

For Gabriel, a union of the past and present is untenable, and it presents an obstacle to the future:

Gabriel is not aware that without dwelling on the dead, the living become walking corpses. His good-natured request after carving the succulent goose at dinner “ kindly forget my existence, ladies and gentlemen, for a few minutes” carries more existential weight than he intends (2020). Talk of monks sleeping in coffins intrigues the table for a moment, then turns deathly itself as it reminds them of their own mortality: “ The coffin, said Mary Jane, is to remind them of their last end. As the subject had grown lugubrious, it was buried in a silence of the table” (2023). Death overshadows even their platitudes: “ I’ll engage they did, said Gabriel, but they forget that my wife here takes three mortal hours to dress herself” (2009). The one time Gabriel initiates the revivifying ritual of music, the song is the repetitive “ For they are jolly gay fellows,” which inadvertently highlights Gabriel’s pandering speech: “ Unless he tells a lie/ Unless he tells a lie” (2025).

Prufrock does recall the past through allusion, but it is only to compare his minimized ego in an ironic fashion with heroic figures. The opening gambit, a reference to Dante’s *Inferno*, is an example of a character fearlessly confronting another, an opposition to Prufrock’s sedentary “ flame [which] would stay without further movement” (p. 2140, footnote 2). The opening stanza and the first Michelangelo refrain form a sonnet, but a sonnet by the absurdly named J. Alfred Prufrock, an effeminate name suggesting a “ prude” in a “ frock.” His anthropomorphous and nebulous cat, pushed by the winds, passively “ Lets fall upon its back the soot that falls from chimneys” (19). It promises grandeur, as do the allusions, as it makes “ a sudden leap,” but inhibits itself: “ seeing that it was a soft October night,/ Curled once about

the house, and fell asleep” (21-22). Even the hallowed name of Michelangelo, who sculpted the embodiment of the male form, is reduced to superficial chit-chat in the emasculated and superficial (and, some might add, misogynist) world Prufrock inhabits where his love will “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” (27-30). The practice and knowledge of art is now fodder for social posturing, both metaphorically and physically, and the great pieces crumble under this weight.

Perhaps Prufrock’s most contradictory allusion is to another great piece of work, Hamlet, with whom he shares the quality of indecision. This section, written largely in Shakespeare’s iambic pentameter, is also thick with puns and other wordplay. “Am an attendant lord,” he calls himself, and the lack of a personal pronoun prompts consideration of his absent ego (112). As an advisor, he fancies himself able “To swell a progress, start a scene or two,” but it is precisely this dramaturgical initiative which his personality lacks (113). His string of adjectives about himself are broken up by caesurae which amplify the intermittent rhythm of his inert life: “...an easy tool,/ Deferential, glad to be of use,/ Deferential, glad to be of use,/ Politic, cautious, and meticulous” (114-116). Prufrock’s allusions inevitably lead to an anxiety-ridden possible future where his grandiloquent gestures implode and return to the somnolent present: “And would it have been worth it, after all/...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’” (87, 94-98).

Both “The Dead” and “Prufrock” have leitmotifs of windows which enhance their central themes of alienation and yearning. Gabriel turns to the window twice, both times prompted by his upcoming speech. The first instance is an escapist fantasy that, appropriately, inverts typical desire to be in from the storm: “Gabriel’s warm trembling fingers tapped the cold pane of the window. How cool it must be outside! How pleasant it would be to walk out alone...How much more pleasant it would be there than at the supper-table!” (2017) His need to flee is contrasted with his rather enviable position inside a hospitable, festive house: “People, perhaps, were standing in the snow on the quay outside, gazing up at the lighted windows and listening to the waltz music. The air was pure there” (2023).

The duality of the inside/outside-looking window-watcher is complicated in “Prufrock,” where everyone, it seems, has some occasion to glance out a window, real or metaphoric. Aside from Prufrock’s quasi-erotic motion against the women’s windowpanes, Eliot points a finger of social criticism at the industrial society which pollutes the atmosphere and drives men to clear air and hopes for connection: “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?” (70-72). The window becomes a casual focal point when Prufrock’s love callously disregards his gestures by “settling a pillow or throwing off a shawl,/ And turning toward the window, should say:/ ‘That is not it at all’” (107-9). Her shifted gaze is to, presumably, anything that is not Prufrock. In fact, Prufrock is anything but present; he is constantly underwater. Eliot intensifies the motif with the symbolic divide of sea and land, and the windows that result from their

separation. Prufrock's deprecating statement, "I should have been a pair of ragged claws/ Scuttling across the floors of silent seas," not only anticipates his drowning at the alarm of human voices, but indicates his desire for a speechless netherworld (73-4). However, the very alliteration of "s's" in the line bespeaks that impossibility. Neither can he join the feminine world of the mermaids, whom he hears from afar, "singing, each to each./ I do not think that they will sing to me" (124-125). This communal aspect of life is what Prufrock desperately needs; the final three lines encapsulate his desire to attach plurality to singularity: "We have lingered in the chambers of the sea/ By sea-girls wreathed with seaweed red and brown/ Till human voices wake us and we drown" (129-131). There was no "we" in the previous few stanzas; Prufrock was alone on the beach. His "lingering in the chambers of the sea" is illustrative of his penchant for delay, and the "human voices" that drown him, coupled with Eliot's suddenly terse verse, remind the reader of Prufrock's short time left "till" his future enslaves him.

"The Dead," on the other hand, ends on a rather upbeat note. Gabriel initially experiences a flood of universal emotion and a connection with the cyclical qualities of life from his merging past with present: "Moments of their secret life together burst like stars upon his memory...A wave of yet more tender joy escaped from his heart and went coursing in warm flood along his arteries. Like the tender fires of stars moments of their life together...broke upon and illumined his memory" (2030). His arousal from his present gloom is not altogether positive; his newfound appreciation for his wife's beauty borders on the violent: "He longed to cry to her from his soul, to crush her body against his, to overmaster her" (2032). Just as

artificial light is too garish and cannot match the subtlety of shadowy light, so, too, does Joyce warn against this exuberance to embrace. Only when he is spurned for the dead does Gabriel undergo a spiritual review and transformation: "A shameful consciousness of his own person assailed him. He saw himself as a ludicrous figure, acting as a pennyboy for his aunts, a nervous, well-meaning sentimentalist, orating to vulgarians and idealising his own clownish lusts, the pitiable fatuous fellow he had caught a glimpse of in the mirror" (2033-34).

Unlike Prufrock, who always considered himself a "Fool," Gabriel's recognition is his first step towards achieving the neutrality Joyce desired, both artistically and morally. Gabriel, in the opening, goes to great pain to separate himself from the snow on his person (though he enjoys the sight of cold snow out the window): "He stood on the mat, scraping the snow from his galoshes...He continued scraping his feet vigorously" (2009). Snow serves as the collective unconscious throughout the narrative "I think Christmas is never really Christmas unless we have snow on the ground," says a party guest a blanket that unifies all of Ireland (2029). As Gabriel learns to love, he watches snowflakes "falling obliquely against the lamplight" of the past. He accepts that the snow not only covers him, but also on the "lonely churchyard where Michael Furey lay buried...upon all the living and all the dead" (2036). Past is permanently fused with present, and Gabriel decides "to set out on his journey westward" (2035). The West, the dying sunset, is his wish to reconnect with his Irish past and reclaim a greater sense of self than that of a suffocating man, be it in a cramped pantry or under a sea of mermaids.

The early 20th-century, with its deluge of change, of mass-production automobiles and massive land wars, loss of nationalism and confusion of sexual politics, necessarily produced works of art that questioned the role of the individual inside his cold shell. Both “The Dead” and “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” examine this through the lens of fairly similar characters, though the latter brands a pessimistic emphasis on the problem. However, they will be with us one hundred years from now and more, as their universality reaches beyond the boundaries of Modernism. Perhaps millennial anxiety, the computer revolution, and an ambiguous global power structure will produce much the same work at the start of the 21st-century. Human voices, from all the living and all the dead, will be required for us to mine the past, examine the present, and advance into the future so that we may not drown.

Works Cited:

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