

# The Indeterminacy of Pronouns in “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock”

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## Introduction

T.S. Eliot’s “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” (“Prufrock,” 1915), which leads his first volume of poems, *Prufrock and Other Observations* (*Prufrock*, 1917), exemplifies the characteristic intricacy of his early works. This intricacy largely comes from the use of pronouns. In “Portrait of a Lady,” “Preludes” and “La Figlia Che Piange,” as well as in “Prufrock” and Eliot’s prentice works included in *Inventions of the March Hare* (1996), the speaker and other persona in the poems have no names, and are only referred to as “I,” “she” and “you.” Moreover, they have no clear identification or background as characters. In “Preludes,” for example, the subjects “you” and “His soul” begins the third and the fourth sections of the poem, respectively, without revealing who “you” and “he” are. In “La Figlia Che Piange,” the speaker observes a person called “he” but it is hard to tell whether “he” is the speaker himself or someone else. In these poems, the characters’ profiles are obscure, while the pronouns are foregrounded.

Pronouns are also significant in “Prufrock.” In this poem, the speaker only refers to himself as “I.” Though the title suggests that he is named “J. Alfred Prufrock,” the speaker never reveals who he is. The poem consists of a monologue by “I.” Though the monologue is not interrupted by any other voices, it is directed to “you.” He speaks to this person of his indecision and fear of acting. Sometimes he responds to “you,” such as when he says, “Oh, do not ask, ‘What is it?’ (11) or “No! I am not Prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be” (111). However, the speaker does not disclose the name of “you” or what “you” says.

Though this second-person pronoun “you” has evoked several interpretations (Ellmann 75, 89n), some scholars agree that the speaker’s self is divided into “you” and “I”: the speaker “sees himself alternately as he would like to be seen and as he fears he will be judged . . . . This nervous alternation of points of view dramatizes Prufrock’s fundamental bifurcation into at least two selves, as hinted by his opening address to ‘you and I’” (Dickey 125).

However, there is another documentation on the source of “Prufrock,” which explains who “you” is in a different phase. It is a part of the letter from Eliot to Kristian Smidt, who cites it as dateless:

As for THE LOVE SONG OF J. ALFRED PRUFROCK anything I say now must be somewhat conjectural, as it was written so long ago that my memory may deceive me; but I am prepared to assert that the ‘you’ in THE LOVE SONG is merely some friend or companion, presumably of the male sex, whom the speaker is at that moment addressing, and that it has no emotional content whatever. (Smidt 85)

This explanation might seem rather disappointing or even evasive. In fact, critics have disregarded the relevance of this letter in favour of the notion of divided self, though the letter supports Smidt's argument that the person "you" is "merely the confidant who is needed to make the monologue a dramatic one, one of the minor dramatis personae, intrinsically unimportant but useful in giving the main character an opportunity to speak" (85).

Eliot's explanation of "you" and Smidt's interpretation of this poem are worth consideration in so far as they refer to the rhetorical function of the pronoun "you" as the addressee to "whom the speaker is at that moment addressing." Even if Eliot used this pronoun vaguely imagining the speaker's male companion, it is interwoven into the poem and rhetorically functions without clarifying its personality. Whether "you" is the divided self or a male companion, we can consider "you" and "I" the addressee and the addresser.

This paper focuses on the functions of pronouns in "Prufrock." We regard "I" and "you" as the addresser and the addressee, rather than concretely identifying for whom these pronouns substitute. In this analysis, we also draw attention to another pronoun "they." "They" represents the people whom "you" and "I" visit. "I" often mentions his fear of "they," saying he is afraid of how "they" see him. When we see "I" as the first-person addresser and "you" as the second-person addressee, we must add the third person "they" to this perspective; the relation between "you" and "I" needs a "they" as opposed to "we" ("you and I"). Though the pronoun "they" plays a significant role in this poem, contrasted with "we," the rhetorical function of "they" has been little discussed so far. Critics have analysed the meaning of "you" only in relation to "I." This results in "you" and "I" being treated as opposites. Considering the relation between "they" and "we," we can find coordination rather than conflict between "you" and "I."

### 1. The Restricted Presence of "You"

Does "the divided self" or "the self which observes the self" fully explain the abundance of "you" and "I" in this poem? The abundance of pronouns begins at the first line. As Jain writes, "In the opening line, 'Let us go then, you and I', three of seven words are pronouns" (34). The speaker talks to "you" about his indecision repeatedly. The role of "you," however, does not strongly assert itself. Rather, "you" is only an existence to whom the speaker addresses. The speaker talks to "you" but does not talk *about* "you," or mention any behaviour of "you" towards him. The following lines suggest that the presence of "you" is highly restrained (*italics added*).

Let *us* go then, *you* and I, . . . (1)

Oh, do not ask, 'What is it?'

Let *us* go and make *our* visit. (11-12)

There will be time, there will be time

To prepare a face to meet the faces that *you* meet; . . . (26-27)

And the afternoon, the evening, sleeps so peacefully!  
 Smoothed by long fingers,  
 Asleep . . . tired . . . or it malingers,  
 Stretched on the floor, here beside *you* and me. (75-78)

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. (129-31)

As these examples show, "you" is only mentioned as someone who is always beside "I." It is as if "I" refers to "you" only to make sure "you" exists.

The presence of "you" as a mere addressee is also implied in the interrogations. There are ten interrogatives in the speech of "I," and these interrogatives are not necessarily directed towards "you." For instance, the question "Do I dare / Disturb the universe?" (45-46) could be directed towards "you," but it could be also regarded as a soliloquy. "You" is ignored here or, at most, asked these questions without answering.

There is another reason why the presence of "you" seems blurred. It is that there are no clear differences between the characters of "you" and "I." George Williamson tries to distinguish them, explaining that "[t]he 'you' is the amorous self, the sex instinct, direct and forthright; but now suppressed by the timid self, finding at best evasive expression; always opposed by fear of the carnal, which motivates the defensive analogies. It is to this buried self that Prufrock addresses himself and excuses himself" (66). However, no such "amorous," "direct and forthright" personality is represented in this poem. The poem fully describes the timidity of "I," but the amorousness of "you" is not expressed, nor do any words spoken by "I" serve to keep back the forthright "you."

Even if the personality of "you" is "suppressed" or "buried" as Williamson insists, the distinction of timid "I" and bold "you" does not apply to the line 26-27, "There will be time, there will be time / To prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet." Here, it is "you" that is afraid of meeting other people and would "prepare a face" for the meeting. If "you" is forthright and direct alter-ego, it would be more likely that it is "I" who prepares a face, and not "you." In this passage, "you" is not a bold character contrasted with "I," but a self-conscious one like "I" who is sensitive to others' gazes.

The passage where the speaker imagines himself in other's eyes also suggests that the characters of "you" and "I" are not contrastive. The portrait here is that of the speaker himself, a lean man in formal clothes who is losing some hair.

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!') (39-44, italics added)

“I” sees the figure of himself objectively, and significantly, this detached perspective does not come from the relation between “you” and “I.” The self-image the speaker discloses is that which is exposed to the eyes of the people whom he visits (“they”). Here, the speaker’s fear of the other’s gaze is foregrounded. The objectivity of the self occurs when “I” imagines “they.” It does not occur by the existence of “you.”

As discussed above, “I” and “you” are not contrasted with each other. The interpretation of “you” as the suppressed alter-ego does not sufficiently explain the role of “you” in the poem. Williamson’s Jungian approach stays within the frame of conflict between the speaker and his alter-ego, and it strictly distinguishes the characters of “you” from that of “I.” However, throughout the poem, their roles are not clearly divided. Their relation is different from those in fiction which address *dédoublement* or the double, such as Edgar Allan Poe’s “William Wilson” (1839), Robert Louis Stevenson’s *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886), Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891), and Fyodor Dostoyevsky’s *The Double: A Petersburg Poem* (1846). These works of fiction differ from “Prufrock” in that the protagonist’s alter-ego appears as a discernibly different character, who acts or talks threatening the protagonist. Even the portrait of Dorian Gray grows older and uglier to vex its subject. In contrast, in Eliot’s poem, “you” remains the listener and does not appear as an opponent. It is “they” who play the role of opponents, and “you” is the allied person to whom “I” confides his problems. We will explore this relation among “they,” “you” and “I” in the fourth section.

## 2. Dramatic Monologues and the Indeterminacy of “You”

Here we should go back to the fundamental question: why is it difficult to determine who “you” is? One reason is that, in the text of the poem, there is no description of the person to whom the speaker refers as “you,” which means we cannot substitute the name of any person for the pronoun. The speaker addresses “you,” but we cannot find any clue to the identity of the person to whom the pronoun applies. While we read in the poem that the speaker invites “you” to go out with him or confides in “you” about his troubles, no more information than that is given. The speaker never talks *about* “you.”

Another reason is that the indeterminacy of “you” comes from the very nature of a pronoun. A pronoun is functional and can be substituted for any person depending on the context. This possibility of substitution, the indeterminate nature of pronouns, allows “you” in “Prufrock” to be interpreted diversely. In this poem, it is not fully definite who “you” is. It is partly tied to the context of the poem, the epigraph, and the poet himself; nonetheless, the sum of all of these contexts cannot define “you.”

As we have already seen, Kristian Smidt’s interpretation of “you” as “merely the confidant who is needed to make the monologue a dramatic one” seems to regard “you” as functional. His interpretation refers to the technique used in Victorian dramatic monologues, especially that of Robert Browning’s “My Last Duchess” (1842). Many past literary works have been mentioned as sources for Eliot’s poetry, but concerning his treatment of viewpoints, he takes advantage of the form of dramatic monologues, which flourished in the Victorian era “when interest peaks in the fascinations of personality and in psychology as a discipline” (Cooper 49).

As Robert Langbaum insists, "The dramatic monologue is proportionately as important in Eliot's work as in Browning's, Eliot having contributed more to the development of the form than any poet since Browning" (77). "Prufrock" is also a monologue, and the speaker addresses someone whose words are not included in the poem. This is the same as in "The Last Duchess" or Alfred Tennyson's "Tithonus" (1860) which are often referred to as the representatives of Victorian dramatic monologues. However, the voice of "I" in "Prufrock" is less personal rather than that of concrete *dramatis personae*, like the speakers in "My Last Duchess" or "Tithonus."

Compared with "Prufrock," the dramatic monologues by Browning and Tennyson seem to show the "*dramatis personae*" clearly. In "My Last Duchess" and "Tithonus," a particular person who is not the poet speaks to someone in a particular situation. What the listener says does not appear in the poem, but the speaker's words gradually reveal who the listener is, as well as who the speaker is. In "My Last Duchess," the speaker is the Duke of Ferrara in Italy, probably modelled on Alfonso II, the fifth Duke of Ferrara (O'Gorman, 173). He talks about his ex-wife in front of her portrait. The last passage shows that the listener is an *envoi* who has come to arrange a new marriage between the daughter of his master, the Count, and the Duke. Throughout the monologue, the reader can deduce that the Duke had felt suspicion and jealousy towards his beautiful ex-wife, and might have murdered her. The speaker of "Tithonus" also clearly reveals his identity in the poem. He is the Tithonus of Greek myth, and, in this poem, he talks to his lover, Aurora. Being human, he was loved and given eternal life by the goddess. However, she did not give him eternal youth, so he endlessly grows older. Looking at Aurora, who is beautifully reborn every morning, and at the human cycle on the earth, Tithonus laments his misfortune and speaks of his love for her. These two dramatic monologues clearly show the identities of their speakers and the listeners, as well as the situation where the monologues occur.

However, recent critics tend to find the speaker's identity in those dramatic monologues less secure: "Victorian dramatic monologues expose a terrifying prospect for poets and speakers. Monologists speak in order to affirm their authority; they argue for the validity of their position and perceptions in order to establish the self . . . . Yet the moment they speak, they commit the self to a social or dialogical intrusion, to an inevitable division, that ironically undermines their single sovereignty in the very act of attempting to establish it" (Slinn 84). The "[s]peakers are both determinate and indeterminate" and "dramatic monologues tend rather to disrupt the authority (and hence the authenticity) of speaking voices, whether authorial or fictive" (Slinn 84). Eliot's "Prufrock" explores this undermining potential of the speaker, which is also intrinsic to the Victorian dramatic monologues. In "Prufrock," the speaker's authority is less secure than in "My Last Duchess" or "Tithonus"; the speaker's identity is not revealed in the poem. Manju Jain concludes, "The poem questions the notion of the self as a unified entity" (41).

Moreover, the speaker does not reveal where "I" is. He describes the "half-deserted streets" (4) and suggests that he is invited to the tea, but "[i]t is difficult to determine when, where, and to whom the persona speaks. In all likelihood Prufrock's journey is only contemplated and not actually undertaken" (Jain 36). Most of his words are about what he might

dare to do or what “they” might say of him. The only passage which shows the “scene” where “I” talks is the following :

And the afternoon, the evening, sleeps so peacefully!  
Smoothed by long fingers,  
Asleep. . . tired. . . or it malingers,  
Stretched on the floor, *here* beside you and me. (75-78, italics added)

The word “here” vaguely suggests the place where “I” is, though the passage does not concretely define “here.” On the contrary, in the dramatic monologues by Browning and Tennyson, the speakers and listeners are concretely situated.

“Prufrock” lacks the concreteness of a speaker, listener and situation, which makes it elusive. However, the pronouns that represent these functionally perform among themselves. “You” in this poem does not represent a definite person, but it sufficiently draws out the speaker’s confession : the speaker talks about himself to “you.” He also responds to “you,” in the line “No! I’m not Prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be” (111). Additionally, when he says “Oh, do not ask, ‘What is it’” (11), he is foreseeing how the listener responds. In this respect, “you” would be called the “interlocutor,” the term which Slinn introduces instead of “auditor” to refer to the audience in dramatic monologues (81), though we should not emphasise the subjectivity of “you” too heavily, because this “interlocutor” in “Prufrock” only exists as the pronoun.

The listener or interlocutor has further importance in the dramatic monologues. There are no words uttered by the interlocutor in those texts, which means that the speaker’s words appear to be uttered toward the reader directly. As Smidt points out, in “Prufrock” an assimilation of “you” and the readers also occurs, and “the reader can hardly help associating the person addressed with himself” (85). This interlocutor is indefinite, only referred to as “you,” but being addressed with the second-person pronoun is enough to entitle this character to the role of interlocutor. It is significant that this poem begins with the invitation, “Let us go then, you and I.” Thus, at the beginning of the poem, readers encounter this invitation, which includes the word “you.” In the opening lines, there is no telling whether “you” refers to the reader or someone else. On first encountering the word, the reader becomes involved in the relation between “you” and “I,” so that they embark on the journey through the poem with the speaker. This assimilation of “you” and the reader is also prompted by the fact that “you” has no concrete identification, and is plastic and able to become anybody. “You” is indeterminate and its function as a second-person pronoun sustains the rhetoric of “Prufrock.”

### 3. Laforgue’s “*Tu*”

Another model for Eliot’s detached viewpoint can be found in the poems of Jules Laforgue, a French Symbolist poet. As Peter Akroyd says, Eliot “was attracted primarily to the denial of conventional feeling in that poetry, both in its ironic skepticism about romantic passion and Laforgue’s refusal to reveal or even to take seriously his own” (34). Laforgue’s “ironic

skepticism about romantic passion" is represented by a viewpoint through which he ironically observes his own feelings from outside. His style and diction powerfully influenced Eliot from around 1908 to 1911, the years before and during the composition of his early poems including "Prufrock." Later, Eliot writes about what Laforgue and Browning brought to his poetry, and, apparently, he viewed these poets in different ways. In "The Metaphysical Poets" (1921), he values Laforgue's "uses of obscure words and of simple phrasing" as suitable for contemporary poetry, while he classifies Browning as one of those who "do not feel their thought as immediately as the odour of a rose" (*Selected Essays* 289-90). In the introduction to Ezra Pound's *Selected Poems* (1928), he retraces the beginning of his poetry writing, saying its form "was directly drawn from the study of Laforgue together with the later Elizabethan drama" (Pound 362). In 1946, he refers to Browning, on the other hand, as "more of a hindrance than a help, for he had gone some way, in discovering a contemporary idiom" (Ricks 388). In his effort to find a way to write poetry around 1910, a decade past the end of the Victorian period, Browning's poems seemed an accomplishment which belongs to the past. Browning's dramatic monologue provided Eliot with a model but it was through the filter of Laforgue's French language poetry that the model was assimilated and metamorphosed into its contemporary form.

Eliot adopted much from Jules Laforgue, including his method of self-detachment and use of urban images. In addition to these, we can see the similarity between Laforgue's use of "*tu*," the second-person singular pronoun in French, and Eliot's use of "you." "*Tu*" is used to address someone equal or close to the speaker, in contrast with the formal "vous." In his "L' Hiver que vient" ("The Coming Winter"), Laforgue uses "*tu*" for the unidentified addressee. The speaker laments the coming of winter and illustrates chilly, deserted, and morbid winter images. Though the lament is more sentimental than the lament in "Prufrock," there are nevertheless some similarities between the two poems in style, tone, and diction. Interrogations, interjections, and exclamations are casually connected. The ironic monologue catalogues the imagery of winter in a colloquial style:

Mais, lainages, caoutchoucs, pharmacie, rêve,  
 Rideaux écartés du haut des balcons des grèves  
 Devant l'océan de toitures des faubourgs,  
 Lampes, estampes, thé, petits-fours,  
 Serez-vous pas mes seules amours! . . .  
 (Oh! et puis, est-ce que *tu* connais, outre les pianos,  
 Le sobre et vespéral mystère hebdomadaire  
 Des statistiques sanitaires  
 Dans les journaux)? (70-78, italics added)<sup>1</sup>

(But woolens, medicine-chest, dreams, waterproofs,  
 Curtains open on balconies high on strands over roofs  
 Of suburbs looking like the sea,  
 Lamps, engravings, petit-fours and tea,

Won't you be the only loves for me?

(Oh, and then, beyond the pianos, don't *you* contemplate  
The sober and vesperal mystery each week  
The health figures speak  
And papers tabulate?) (70-78, italics added)<sup>2</sup>

A comparison with the following lines from Eliot's poem shows the resemblance between them:

And would it have been worth it, after all,  
After the cups, the marmalade, the tea,  
Among the porcelain, among some talk of you and me,  
.....  
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?— (87-103)

In both, the speaker casually and ironically catalogues daily things (including those on the tea-table) which dampen his spirit. Besides this resemblance, what we should note here is the use of second-person pronoun. Laforgue uses the informal second-person pronoun "*tu*" in line 75. This suggests that the addressee of this lament is someone close or equal to him.

In "L'Hiver que vient," "*tu*" appears only once, and it is not clear to whom it refers; but this "*tu*" like a pivot, sets this poem's tone.<sup>3</sup> This use of "*tu*" creates an intimate, addressing tone, leaving it unclear who is indicated by this second-person pronoun. This is also characteristic of the use of "you" in Eliot's "Prufrock," and it is significant that Eliot makes use of the second-person pronoun in the same way as Laforgue does.

#### 4. "You" as the Allied and "They" as the Others

"Prufrock" begins with the act of address, shown in the phrase "Let us go then, you and I." In addition to the pronoun "you," the phrase "you and I" follows to emphasize their cooperation, or their conspiracy. In the first line of the poem, someone called "you" is invited to go somewhere. Neither who these two people are nor where they might go is explicit. "I" does not talk about these and speaks as if he does not have to do so. In other words, the person called "you" understands hidden context. The word "then" in the first line also shows that "you" and "I" are the fellows who shares the context. It emphasizes the cooperation and conspiracy of "you" and "I" because the meaning of "then" is shared between "you" and "I." What precedes to "then" is not explained here, and it is indeterminate for the readers.

The epigraph also suggests the cooperative function of "you." It is taken from Dante's *Inferno*, canto 27, lines 61-66. In that passage, Count Guido da Montefeltro, the damned ghost, speaks to Dante. In the English translation, it reads as follows: ". . . but since none ever did

return alive from this depth, if what I hear be true, without fear of infamy I answer thee" (Jain 43-44). Guido believes that Dante is also the damned and should not return to this world, so that he narrates his life. In this epigraph, the person whom Guido addresses as "thee" is Dante. Likewise, it is possible to think that "you" in this poem is analogized with Dante in *Inferno*: This "you" is the person to whom someone confides his secret. They share the experiences and "I" confesses his plight to "you." The context of his problems is not told in detail because "you" is a well-informed person who is accustomed to the situation. "You" appears as the persona allied with "I" rather than an enemy or an ironic observer.

The speaker is always counting on "you" to listen to his confession. Like Dante for Guido, "you" is a sympathetic person who shares in the situation to some extent and would not betray his secret, or so Guido believes. They go out together and are exposed to other's gaze. They sit at table for tea together, and other people talk about them: "Among the porcelain, among some talk of you and me" (89). This line suggests that both "you" and "I" become the topic of conversation among other people. In the following lines, their unity is evident: "And *I* have known the eyes already, known them all— / The eyes that fix *you* in a formulated phrase, / And when *I* am formulated, . . ." (55-57, italics added). Here "you" and "I" mingle and become interchangeable. This confused viewpoint suggests that "I" and "you" are identified with each other and, more importantly here, both are threatened by "the eyes."

In this poem, the people or person whom "you" and "I" meet are also indicated by pronouns, namely, "they" or "she." Otherwise, they are referred to only as "the women." In the lines "They will say: 'How his hair is growing thin!'" (41) and "They will say: 'But how his arms and legs are thin!'" (44), there are no signs which tell who "they" are, or whether they are male or female. In other lines, however, those referred to in the third person are all female. The lines "In the room the women come and go / Talking of Michelangelo" (13-14, 35-36) appear twice and underline the fact that the women place some pressures on the speaker. In the following passage, the subject is represented as "one," but its gender is suggested in line 96 ("settling a pillow by *her* head", italics added). This person also wears a shawl, dress, and perfume, and has bare, white arms, which suggests that "one" is female. So "one" stands for "one of the women." Consequently, whenever their sex is clarified, the people referred to in the third person appear as female, and "I" fears them and hesitates in their presence. In this context, "they" in the lines "They will say: 'How his hair is growing thin!'" (41) and "They will say: 'But how his arms and legs are thin!'" (44) are also regarded women. The speaker is afraid of the eyes of these women, not of the eyes of the allied "you."

Throughout the poem, the allied "you" and "I" face women. Whether "you" is the speaker's divided self, or (imaginary) male companion as Eliot explained, he is the same sex as "I." As Dickey points out, it is the speaker's "indecisive negotiation between, on the one hand, the outdoor urban space of male companionship and anonymity, and, on the other, the feminine indoor space of social conversation" (123). "I" shares the fear of the women as the others with the male companion "you" and they also share the fantasy of the sea-girls. Describing their walks through some shabby streets, restaurant with sawdust, and cheap hotels, the speaker repeatedly imagines this scenario: "In the room the women come and go / Talking of Michelangelo" (13-14, 35-36). Their trip is through "urban venues that these women would

have been sure to avoid fastidiously” (Dickey 124). Many lines are devoted to the excursion of “you” and “I,” but the women do not share in this experience. “I” thinks that he will tell the story of his trip: “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). However, he dares not do that, and he does not share his story with them.

In “Prufrock’s Pervigilium” which is a part of the draft of “Prufrock” Eliot continues after the passage above. In “Prufrock’s Pervigilium” the speaker depicts the sordid streets and the varieties of phantasms threatening him awake through the night. The passage is omitted from “Prufrock” except the first three lines and the two lines, “I should have been a pair of ragged claws / Scuttling across the floors of silent seas . . .” (*Inventions of the March Hare* 43-44). These omitted images appear in other poems in *Prufrock*, specifically “Preludes” and “Rhapsody on a Windy Night.” In “Prufrock,” on the other hand, the speaker wonders, “Shall I say [. . .] leaning out of windows?”, but he does not mention his experience of a sleepless night. Then the lines describing the lonely men with pipes and the ironical comment concerning the “pair of ragged claws” remain. They appear in “Prufrock” and have lighter tone in their new context. Through them, the speaker confirms that he cannot share his thoughts and visions with others.

There is a distinction between “you and I” and “they.” Whether “I” goes through the sordid streets or visits a fashionable tea party, “you” is always beside “I.” “I” is able to tell “you” about both of these situations. The third-person “they” and “she” on the other hand, do not belong to the former world. “They” and “she” are confined within the drawing room, the woman’s chamber, and at the tea table. Moreover, “they” are people who are against the speaker. While “you” is a sympathetic friend, “they” are critical observers. The alliance of “you” and “I” is contrasted with “they.” “They” criticize and laugh at “you” and “I.” “I” always fears their eyes and that he might fail to communicate with them. The fear of miscommunication is well represented when he is afraid of being said, “That is not what I meant at all” (97, 110) or says, “It is impossible to say just what I mean!” (104).

The people in the house which “I” visits are never addressed with the second-person “you,” while the companion “you” is never referred to with the third-person “he” or “she.” Through this mode of address, the speaker maintains comradeship with “you.” In this poem, “you” never becomes one of “they,” or the others.

In the last dreamlike scene under the sea, “you” and “I” become “we” which underlines their unity. “We” linger with “sea-girls” in the enchanted “sea-chamber” until “human voices” wake them and they drown (129-131). “I” dreams of being with the romanticized femmes fatales, and shares this fin de siècle fantasy with “you.” “We” suggests male companionship, while “they” represents the women. In this poem, a woman is never referred to as “you.” Rather, she is always kept in the third-person position. “I” never directly addresses the object of his courtship. Nor does he show hesitation and fantasy towards one particular woman. For the speaker, the women are always “they.” Even the woman whom he wants to court is represented only as “one.” This “love song” does not express how much he loves a certain woman. Rather, it sings of his failure in courtship and of his indecision.<sup>4</sup> This complaint by a man of indecision is structured in terms of “we” - “they” relationship.

In a draft stage, "Prufrock" had the subtitle, "Prufrock among the Women" (*Inventions of the March Hare* 39). This subtitle suggests that the speaker is worried about his relation with women, rather than with a particular woman. The draft had an epigraph different from the published version. It came from Dante's *Purgatorio*, Canto XXVI (*Inventions of the March Hare* 39); here, Arnaut Daniel, the celebrated Occitan troubadour, asks Dante not to forget his pain, and goes back to the fire which refines him from his lust. Surrounded by women, the speaker of "Prufrock" cannot be a troubadour singing a love song like Arnaut Daniel. The subtitle and the epigraph were altered in the final version, which is less associated with a singing poet and the torment due to lust. Instead, the indeterminacy of the pronouns "you" and "I" is foregrounded.

"I" confides in "you," but the confession is full of exaggeration and figuration. However exaggerated his talk is, or however much he dwells on his failure, "you" keeps listening attentively; nonetheless, the speaker's timidity and the words with which he confesses this timidity are ill-matched so that they ironically accentuate his self-conscious pettiness. The speaker's confession should not be made public, because it is an extremely private worry and both embarrassing and humiliating. He worries about how he is looked at by others (especially by women), how his thought is hard to communicate, how he hesitates to court a woman. When he reveals these private worries, he often uses metaphysical epigrams. For example, when he talks about his indecision, he says, "In a minute there is time / For decisions and revisions which a minutes will reverse" (47-48). He also uses some grand images, like "to force the moment to its crisis" (80) or "[t]o squeeze the universe into a ball / To roll it toward some overwhelming question" (92-93). He even imagines himself talking as the resurrected Lazarus (94-95). His exaggerated manner of speaking is as "Full of high sentence" (117) as "an attendant lord" to Prince Hamlet (112). The grandeur of his expression contrasts with his problems. The more he confesses his problems to "you," the more he reveals the gap between his rhetorical grandeur and the timidity of his actions. His confession is full of negation ("No! I am not Prince Hamlet, not was meant to be," 111). He tries to compensate for his timidity and indecision with exaggerated words, but he negates this attempt himself. His ironical exaggeration and recurrent negation manifest through his talk to "you." In the end, his self-definition does not succeed and he drowns.

In this poem, the speaker's fear and hesitation are represented as the failure of a courtship, and women are seen as others. The beginning line "Let us go then, you and I" suggests solidarity and an advance towards male companionship. However, this is not positive like the companionship of Boy Scouts. The word "then" is slipped in, and it changes the tone. This poem opens in medias res, and there is no explanation of what happened before that. This indeterminacy blurs the positivism of the opening address, and makes it sound casual, aimless, and careless. The positivity of "Let us go" is also cancelled by the image of an "etherized" patient (3), immobile and unconscious. Moreover, the following passage adds sordid and winding images. All of this stands in the way of "you" and "I."

## Conclusion

Considering the function of pronouns and their indeterminacy, we can read “Prufrock” as a conflict between “we” and “they.” “You” and “I” do not conflict with each other, but they are fellows sharing private worries. “I” tries to define himself by talking to “you,” and his self-definition depends on the existence of the others, “they,” in addition to “you.” “You” is a reliable companion, and “they,” the women, are the others.

Though this poem is based on the confessions to a male confidant, male companionship does not perform as the hegemony of the male “homosocial” bond, which Eve K. Sedgwick finds in the British literary texts of the 18<sup>th</sup> and the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In these texts, according to Sedgwick, the male homosocial bond secures its hegemony through heterosexual love. In “Prufrock,” on the other hand, the bond of “you” and “I” does not exhibit male authority over women. In “Prufrock,” the women talk about Michelangelo, the image of masculinity. They severely observe and criticize “I” and “you,” who wriggle as if under a pin. “You” and “I” are united through some fear and fantasy about women, and through some image of women in general rather than that of a particular woman. However, this poem does not necessarily exclude its female readers because these male and female characters remain indeterminate. The pronouns perform to generate the relation between the addresser and the addressee every time the poem is read, and take the reader outside the situation.

The relationship among the pronouns shows the attempted self-definition of the speaker. The attempt manifests through the speaker’s address of the confidant “you” and the facing the others “they.” Because these pronouns are functional, they are not determined beforehand as particular characters. “You” and “I” are united only in the relationship of pronouns. This indeterminacy can generate the multiple interpretation of this poem, while it represents the unstable self of the speaker. “We” at last escape into the fantasized world under the sea, but they are woken up by “human voices” –the voices that disturb the relationship of “I,” “you” and “they” –and then drown. Their dependence on each other dissolves in the sea. The instability of the speaker’s self comes from its dependence on the relationship among the pronouns, which define each other.

## Notes

- 1 The French text is from *Poésies Complètes 2*.
- 2 The English translation is from *Poems*, translated by Peter Dale.
- 3 In line 74, there is another second-person pronoun, “vous.” Though it also translates to “you” in English, “vous” is plural and substitutes for “woolens” “medicine-chest” and “dreams” among other nouns.
- 4 As early as the year 1915, Ezra Pound writes of “Prufrock” in a letter to Harriet Monroe, saying “‘Mr Prufrock’ does not ‘go off at the end’. It is a portrait of failure, or of a character which fails, and it would be false art to make it end on a note of triumph” (Paige 92).

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