

## **Sartre, Nietzsche, and Prufrock's Existential Becoming**

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### **Abstract**

In “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” Eliot refers to Prufrock’s “overwhelming question” throughout the poem. Its repetition becomes the dubious center missing throughout the lines of the poem. This project is guided by a primary research question: how does an existential understanding of Prufrock help us navigate as well as track the progression of the romantic ideal that history is progress and the search for authenticity between two centuries, specifically the Nietzschean Übermensch and Sartre’s existential authenticity? The existential reading reveals both the equivocal question and answer central to the poem itself: Prufrock’s authenticity. The vein of technology proliferating the lives of individuals in today’s world exacerbates the ignorance at the center of their lives due to this period’s predilection towards unrestrained subjectivity. Social media and other digital spaces create an extension and permutation of the Nietzschean State ruled by pseudo culture that vies for power over the modern man as it did for Prufrock in his era, revealing the poem as a power struggle between becoming oneself through self-mastery as the Übermensch or falling victim to the power of the state and being subordinated to the “last man”. Throughout the poem’s meandering, Eliot reveals Prufrock’s search for authenticity leading him to intersect with what Sartre termed “the look,” bringing into discussion the concept of the Other. These themes inherent in the poem are evident in the twenty-first century when considering how technology presents another buffer between individuals and their authentic selves by way of rapid new conceptualizations.

**Keywords: History, Übermensch, Authenticity**

### **1. Body of Paper**

Both Jean-Paul Sartre, the founder of modern existentialism, and the late-nineteenth century philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche sought methods through which to live life authentically, to make the most of life and overcome that which imposed itself on their freedom, to overcome their nature and the falsehoods of the state: in short, to become free spirits. For Nietzsche, in his early philosophy and throughout, those shining examples of authentic living were solidified in artists, philosophers, and saints. In 1964, Sartre became the first person to reject the Nobel Prize. Concerning his reasons, he wrote,

A writer who adopts political, social, or literary positions must act only with the means that are his own—that is, the written word. All the honors he may receive expose his readers to a pressure I do not consider desirable. If I sign myself Jean-Paul Sartre it is not the same thing as if I sign myself Jean-Paul Sartre, Nobel Prizewinner<sup>1</sup>.

Nietzsche was not concerned with awards either, not because they held an unnecessary weight like a sinker attached to the line of his life and actions, but because they meant absolutely nothing in the grand scheme of things. Based on

his philosophical interpretation of Darwin's theories, he did not come to the optimistic assumptions of progress posited by the Darwinists of his day, but concluded that the masses of individuals had no worth, being closer to animals than the artistic and philosophical giants of history. Awards came from these masses which Nietzsche dubbed "the herd." To become anything in this life we must, according to Nietzsche, raise ourselves above our animal nature, above the herd, aiming to become the *Übermensch*.

At the end of his play *No Exit*, Sartre famously wrote, "Hell is other people"<sup>2</sup>. By this he meant that in death we can no longer affect the look of the Other. Having solidified our stances in life through our actions, we are helpless to influence the object, the portrait, we gave rise to in the eyes of another. This look of the Other objectifies and qualifies the individual from beyond themselves: that beyond is the Other and is unknowable. In T. S. Eliot's 1915 poem "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," Prufrock says that he has "known the eyes already, known them all— / The eyes that fix you in a formulated phrase"<sup>3</sup>. For Nietzsche, however, morality is social and thus a product of the state. The state intimidates humanity into conforming to the status quo, playing its primordial role as the depressor of greatness and individuality. He calls it "the coldest of all cold monsters"<sup>4</sup>. The state, in a way, symbolizes the mediocrity of Nietzschean herd as well as that which exacerbates it. Viewing Sartre's concept of the look in conjunction with Nietzsche's conception of the state, the look of the state is then mediated through the Other. Prufrock then sees the eyes of the state. We become objectified by the Other through the standards outlined by the state, fixed in the state's formulated phrase. The look of the Other, being simultaneously the look of the state, is the look of mediocrity come to qualify us. Nietzsche's critique of the state is suprahistorical, above individual histories, above individual states. For him, hell goes beyond other people to the everyday conditions of mediocrity supported by the state. This hell found in the space between Nietzsche and Sartre's thought is a hell strung between the look of the state and herd extended toward those free spirits attempting to raise themselves above its mediocrity. Those who attempt this, who become aware of the state, are the ones who realize its lies and become aware of the hell they are in.

We see Prufrock beset by gazes, both real and imagined. These gazes can be seen as the influence of the Nietzschean state. The poem begins in hell with a quote from Dante's *Inferno* in which Dante speaks to one of the souls in hell, asking for its name. It agrees to tell him only because none return from those depths, thus he has no infamy to fear. In the poem, Prufrock meanders in thought and through town. Prufrock's journey begins "When the evening is spread out against the sky / Like a patient etherized upon a table." The etherized patient symbolizes humanity, those who have succumbed to the state. This anesthetized sleep becomes their life, while hell becomes the night itself into which Prufrock emerges, the world established by the state, setting the stage for Prufrock's drama. The struggle is to separate himself from this hellish night by overcoming it lest he be consumed by it. The poem oscillates between obfuscating around Prufrock's "overwhelming question" and the distractions that surround him. Those distractions stand between himself and his self-realization. He asks early on, "Do I dare disturb the universe?" This is the universe of the state.

Nietzsche's main interest is in values. In his book *The Gay Science*<sup>5</sup> he announces the death of God. Our values, coming from the Christian tradition, devalue themselves as we have thrown out the otherworldly structure that supports them. As a culture, we can no longer believe in God. This state of being, the realization that our values have been devalued, he calls nihilism. Throughout the poem, Prufrock encounters various extravagancies and comforts, from attending a party, discussions of toast and tea, marmalade, and his fancy attire. They are not over the top excesses, but they are the myriad little instances with which Prufrock and his contemporaries fill their lives. Eliot writes, "I have measured out my life with coffee spoons." There is no longer any overarching narrative against which they can measure their lives. There are merely empty fragments left in the vacuum God's death created. As Nietzsche writes, "The goal is lacking"<sup>6</sup>. We no longer have a target to aim for beyond ourselves, beyond the qualifying Other before us.

Nietzsche claims that there are two sides to the state. The first side oppresses and intimidates humanity so that they will remain in the herd, remain mouthpieces and representatives of the look for the state. The second, however, Nietzsche says is even more dangerous. Whereas intimidation does not conceal truth, belief does. Nietzsche writes that "The state, in the hands of the [military despots] ... wishes that people would lavish on it the same idolatrous cult that they used to lavish on the Church"<sup>7</sup>. Not only will the state intimidate individuals into conforming, but they, too, will trick people into doing it to themselves. The state, according to Nietzsche, says, "'On earth there is nothing greater than I: the ordering finger of God am I'"<sup>8</sup>. This is the situation in which we find Prufrock. He toys with believing in the lies he is told. In the poem, however, there are no explicit mentions of anyone wishing anything of him besides himself. The world, his interactions, and the looks he encounters all seem to play out, for the most part, on the stage of his mind. He toys with what he could be and fears the shameful repercussions that may reach him by way of the looks of the Other. Sartre writes that shame is recognition. When we are ashamed, we are aware that we are how the Other sees us. Yet Nietzsche would say that this is an empty shame, useless. The shame and pride we feel by way of the look are shame and pride at being in line or out of step with the state and its social morality. Prufrock is aware of an alternative that lies outside and above conformity, but he is too afraid to commit to it, too afraid of the looks of the

Other and the shame that will be conferred upon him along his journey to self-realization. Sartre calls this “bad faith,” in other words, self-deception. The reader can trace Prufrock’s self-deception in the text like a map of the streets upon which he wanders as he ebbs and flows between anxiety over the discomfort of reaching for greatness and reminiscing about the comforts of conformity. In Nietzsche’s book *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, he writes, “Everybody wants to be the same, everybody is the same: whoever feels different goes voluntarily into a madhouse”<sup>9</sup>.

A central line in the text offers a snapshot, a scene Prufrock witnesses at a gathering of sorts. “In the room the women come and go / Talking of Michelangelo.” This line acts as a microcosm of the poem itself. There is no center and there is no depth. It suggests a vapidity that permeates that world, our world. These circling women orbit around nothing. There is no real Michelangelo at the center but a mere mirage of culture. The form of the poem itself, the lack of center within the lines coupled with Prufrock’s meandering and the general ambiguity of the poem’s message conform to the type of world Nietzsche predicted would arise due to the death of God. This world centered on superficiality conforms to Nietzsche’s idea of the pseudo-culture of the state. He defines culture as “the unity of the artistic style in all the expressions of the life of a people”<sup>10</sup>. The culture of the state, however, does not fulfill this, lacking in overall intellectual integrity, which Nietzsche holds in the highest regard. It even goes so far as to suppress intellectual integrity. The pseudo-culture of the state arises in various ways throughout the poem. Not the least of which is the belief in progress by way of the many cultural references and lavish comforts around Prufrock. Though Prufrock feels crazy and on the brink of becoming an outsider, Nietzsche writes that the last man, the antithesis to the *Übermensch*, says, “Formerly, all the world was mad,”<sup>11</sup> believing wholeheartedly in the narrative of progress. In their pride, the last man and the state believe humanity has lifted themselves from the mud while Nietzsche says they are still “a herd with no shepherd”<sup>12</sup>. Pseudo-culture early in Eliot’s poem is exemplified in the superficiality of the Michelangelo women. But inherent in the text itself is another form.

Nietzsche recognized another symptom of his time: decadence, which the Oxford English Dictionary defines as, “Applied to a particular period of decline in art, literature, etc.”<sup>13</sup> For Nietzsche there arose a style of decadence to be found in the art of his time. Kaufmann quotes Nietzsche, that in these forms of art,

life no longer resides in the whole. The word becomes sovereign and leaps out of the sentence, the sentence reaches out and obscures the meaning of the page, and the page comes to life at the expense of the whole—the whole is no longer a whole. This, however, is the simile of every style of decadence: every time there is an anarchy of atoms.<sup>14</sup>

One may say that “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” is the epitome of decadence. It foists its learning and excess upon us, reaching to all culture to obscure all culture. Nietzsche even writes that excessive education and knowledge often points towards a barbarism, “the lack of style or the chaotic confusion of all styles”<sup>15</sup>. Simply because you know it does not mean you are able to organize it into anything meaningful. This culture becomes the antithesis of Nietzsche’s culture defined by a “unity of the artistic style.” However, upon closer inspection, the poem is not a sign of decadence, but of overcoming it, pointing out the decadence in its own society. Eliot shows that there truly has been no progress and that his age is a retrogressive age, contrary to what the herd might say. Thus, the form itself points to an overcoming of itself, upholding the ethics of self-overcoming which Nietzsche blackened pages about. We find evidence of this right from the beginning, a hope inherent in the quote from Dante’s *Inferno*. The soul Dante questions believes he may speak freely, “without fear of infamy,” because no one has returned from hell, but Dante does and so will Prufrock, returning the look of the devilish state and qualifying it turn, truly becoming himself outside of the confines of the state, above its morality, shame, and intimidation. Most of the poem plays out in Prufrock’s mind, thus the look of the state had imbedded itself in his consciousness. The end becomes the exorcism of the state from the depths of Prufrock’s soul. Sartre’s statement that “hell is other people,” still holds true, but, following what the quote from Dante hints at, Prufrock has or will overcome this hell by lifting himself above the look and the binding mediums of shame and pride the state uses to keep individuals in line. If Prufrock overcomes the hell imposed by the state, he becomes the qualifying look that comes from beyond the state’s power. He establishes a measure beyond belief in the standards of the state, thus overthrowing the old gods of the cold monster.

The poem ends in ambiguity:

We have lingered in the chambers by the sea  
By sea-girls wreathed with seaweed red and brown  
Till human voices wake us, and we drown.

The sea represents death, but to what exactly is Prufrock dying? Keeping in mind the quote from Dante, we can read the “human voices” that wake him as the truly human voices of culture, those who overcame their nature and the state to create art and philosophy. The herd’s use of culture as ornaments, pseudo-cultural decorations instead held the seeds for Prufrock’s true existential becoming. Prufrock’s realization that he can no longer live in this hell, dying to his old self and being born anew with aid by the voices, art, and philosophy from the past that populated the poem. The sea-girls represent the temptations of the decadent state, the Sirens that lure humanity into their teeth with their pseudo-culture, decadence, and excessive comforts, from whose trance the voices of culture awaken Prufrock and perhaps Eliot, too, turning them into artists, symbols of overcoming. It is only through art and philosophy that the individual can escape the hell of the state into the heaven of the free spirit, the true individual.

Today we have made leaps and bounds of progress from the time that Eliot wrote and Prufrock roamed. Technological developments took to a steep upward trajectory. Yet, even when simply taking up the notion of technology in the modern age, we see that Nietzsche was correct. Technology has become the great equalizer, the double-edged sword of knowledge and decadence. The world rests at our fingertips, but it is just as much distraction and a tool of ideology and manipulation as it is one of knowledge. Writer and Professor emerita Shoshana Zuboff announced the age of surveillance capitalism<sup>16</sup>, with the publication of her 2019 book of the same title, in which individuals’ digital information is sold and traded like a new digital currency in order to “predict and shape their behavior”<sup>17</sup>. Companies and governments know the internal mechanism that make the individual tick, reducing the gestalt of the human to the black and white of a chess board. The look of the state is more pervasive than ever. Perhaps in this new age of fragmentation and myriad disparate narratives, we may be able to find a new unity between the individual, the culture, and the past. The call of “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” is for a new narrative, a new braid of stories to counter the single string the state balances all the universe on. This is the universe Prufrock and Eliot once dared to disturb, a universe that must be overcome time and again.

## Endnotes

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