

## The Weakness of T. S. Eliot's J. Alfred: More of Verdenal in "Prufrock"

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### Abstract

Recently published letters from Jean Verdenal to T. S. Eliot corroborate my earlier suggestion that Prufrock may be modelled on Verdenal. Prufrock's weakness in normal sexual identification reflects the poet's close friendship with Verdenal, who has also been suggested as the "Floret" of another poem. Onomastically, the connection may go beyond the secretive *J.* of the first name to the name *Alfred* itself, which is almost an anagram of *Verdenal*.

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May I add further evidence to my suggestion of a few years back that the secretive *J.* in T. S. Eliot's dramatic monologue about J. Alfred Prufrock stands for the poet's Parisian friend Jean Verdenal? Verdenal's "death by water," as it were, may then correlate with Prufrock's reference to drowning at the end. (It appears clear enough that Eliot did not know all the facts about his friend's death, so that the question of whether he literally drowned is not so important.)<sup>1</sup>

The argument is that the poet was attached to, shared similar Laforguean interests with, Verdenal—emotion strong enough presumably to have even affected his marriage shortly thereafter and plausibly instrumental in leading to his view of celibacy. Although Prufrock's initial *J.* could stand for a number of names, *John* (thus reminiscent of French *Jean*), would come first to mind; such a hidden resonance appears easily invited on the level of final, if not necessarily original intent. One reason for Prufrock's reticence in not spelling out his first name may reflect the caveat that if *J.* at all recalled Verdenal's Christian name, it could at the same time have unduly coy associations in English (having feminine connotations that way in terms of its orthography). At the same time, the very use of an initial also obliquely reflected on the author's having at times written his name T. Stearns Eliot.

It is well recognized that Eliot allowed for the "you and I" of the poem to stand for, at least on one level, male companions, and he dedicated his

*Prufrock and Other Observations* (as well as his 1920 collection, *Poems*, the American edition of *Ara Vos Prec*, not to mention his *Poems: 1909-1925*) to Verdenal with uncommonly high praise, fervent emotion. It would appear that the question in the dedication (“Or puoi la quantitate/ Comperder dell’amor ch’a te mi scalda...” [“how to understand the measure of the love that warms me to you...”]) could then be answered right in Prufrock’s name, which appears shortly beneath Verdenal’s in *The Complete Poems and Plays: 1909-1950* (3). One way “to understand the measure of the love...” is by way of onomastics, the echo (or is it echoes?) of the dedicatee’s name in the titular figure. As I have elaborated upon earlier, this points to the anti-hero’s inherent weakness, his lack of normal sexual identification, specifically his inability to get on with women (“Anent” 208).

Because such an onomastic identification can seem a bit specialized at first and is open to some dispute, further evidence may be welcome. For example, Alfred Dorn, in his review of my book which deals with this issue in its leading chapter, finds the connection with the initial *J.* theoretical; he grants that “the name of the monologue’s persona holds meanings which require interpretation,” that the *J.* indeed may refer to *Jean*, and that Prufrock’s middle name, *Alfred*, would then point to “Alfred, Lord Tennyson, whose ardent friendship with Arthur Hallam resembled that of Eliot with Verdenal” (96). But is there a compelling reason for the identification? One major problem is the extent to which dedications can intrude in the meaning of literary works themselves. Sometimes they can (in poetry); often, not.

Let us momentarily consider a few analogies. For years probably the most famous of “dedications” to poetry has been that to Shakespeare’s *Sonnets*; it has caused considerable controversy, many readers having assumed that the cryptic “Master W. H.” refers to the youth for whom Shakespeare wrote most of the poems. But nowadays it is often sensibly felt that because the *printer* signed the dedicatory address, the initials may have nothing to do with the poetry itself but simply have had an “in-house” meaning for the manager of the printing house and his cohorts. On the other hand, Eliot’s “official” dedication of *The Waste Land* to Ezra Pound doubtless reflected structurally on the poem insofar as “il miglior fabbro” revised it so much. Likewise Eliot’s dedication for his book on cats (signed “O. P.” for Old Possum) included reference to “the Man in White Spats,” doubtless itself a feline allusion, thus echoed in the poetry. So it would be plausible enough if Prufrock’s full name

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likewise contained or revealed a topical allusion—at least the middle name as well.

Vinnie-Marie D'Ambrosio's *Eliot Possessed*, which appeared during the Eliot centenary year, indirectly supports the Verdenal thesis by claiming that the allusion to an otherwise unidentified "Floret" ("Pray for Floret") in "Animula" (line 36) was likewise an allusion to Verdenal, one suggested by the obvious floral association in Eliot's friend's surname with its allusion to springtime (39).<sup>2</sup> Moreover, the first volume of Eliot's letters, which appeared the same year, indicates once again the strong emotions shared by these two men. Although the letters that Eliot wrote to Verdenal are not included, some that he received from him are. Whereas I would agree with the reviewers who have claimed that no explicit sexual revelations are discernible here, they are scarcely ruled out either. Verdenal writes of the strong affection in which he held Eliot, especially during a visit to a "forest filled with mystery," whereby "*vous me fûtes particulièrement évoqué par le contact de ce paysage senti ensemble*" ("*you were especially called to mind by the contact with a landscape we appreciated together*") (*Letters* 33-34). In other words, the fervent emotion felt for Eliot was revitalized. Further, in a letter of February 5, 1912, Verdenal writes of Eliot getting an "enormous pleasure" from André Gide (*Letters* 32), surely the leading French proponent of male preference. Such a connection, though circumstantial at best as valid historical evidence, scarcely detracts from the supposition that Eliot's and Verdenal's relation was extremely close.

Recent scholarship has touched on the Eliot-Verdenal relationship. Donald J. Childs writes that the "Stetson" allusion in *The Waste Land* is not so much to an American western hat, but to one from Australia: "Stetson, Mrs. Porter, and all things Australian, lead to Gallipoli. Why? Because reference to Gallipoli is Eliot's way of referring to Jean Verdenal" (140). He grants that this association need not entail "subscribing to the theory ... homosexual," that Eliot admitted that "his knowledge of Verdenal's death" was "incomplete" (141), and that probably the Frenchman's body was "thrown into the Dardanelles" (142), thus incidentally accounting for Eliot's French phrase in the dedication to *Prufrock and other Observations*: "mort aux Dardanelles." Although it has been contended that Verdenal did not literally drown, that he was shot, his body was still in effect "drowned" by having been submerged in the water.

In a recent book, John T. Mayer suggests that the Frenchman's

letters to Eliot reveal that “Verdenal himself may have been deeply attached to Eliot” (200). The key is in his remarks concerning “ardour,” “heart,” and “our wishes must be prudent” (*Letters* 36). He moved into Eliot’s room in the pension after the poet left, though it was smaller than his own; he wrote the latter of his prayer “to remove evil from me, even though I ask for it” (36). Mayer adds: “The very ambiguity ... may project an uncertainty and confusion in Verdenal’s own feelings,” for he “may have desired, and perhaps invited, a more ardent relationship with Eliot than they shared; he may have made Eliot aware of certain aspects of his own sexual identity that he only dimly suspected” (200-01). This, however, need not say anything about the poet’s own preference, as Mayer admits, though the former apparently allowed for homosexual (as well as heterosexual) love being “rationalized only through a higher love, the love of God” (318). Finally, another article argues that Eliot indulged in bawdiness on “penises and sphincters” (Koestenbaum 121) in still unpublished poems and that he had the support thereby of Pound. Again, although such a revelation may shed no explicit light on the Prufrock-Verdenal relation, it hardly need detract either.

This leads me finally to what may be a new insight. It appears distinctly possible that the echoing of Jean Verdenal’s name in the “Love Song” is not limited to the *J.* but is cryptically detectible in *Alfred* as well. The point is that all the letters in Prufrock’s middle name are to found in the surname *Verdenal* – with the exception of the *f*, but that is identifiable with the *V* if the latter is considered linguistically as a voiced *f*. Orthographically, then, a parallel manifests itself not only with the Tennyson-Hallam double-Arthurian association (Tennyson’s *Idylls*, about King Arthur and Arthur Hallam), also akin to the Eliot-Verdenal one, but with Verdenal’s last name itself. In proposing this, we may note that some previous Eliotists have claimed that “J. Alfred” may also be a reflection or reverberation of the name of Jules Laforgue, whose style likewise strongly influenced the poem, as I had pointed out as well. Most of the letters in *Alfred* are to be found in *Laforgue*, too – but not all. The most conspicuous overlapping is with the reversal of the first two letters. In some respects, a reversal suggests, by its very nature, more of a contrast than a comparison. Because “Jean Verdenal” appeared in print right above “J. Alfred,” however, it would be more natural, at least orthographically speaking, to make the association with *Verdenal* rather than *Laforgue*. This would allow for what could be called implicit codification.

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It must be admitted that some of these configurations amount to guess-work, but they are at least calculated. Irresponsible theorizing would involve correlations outside the text from afar, and such has been purposefully avoided. As for Prufrock's surname, more can be said on that as well, especially with regard to the familiar Prufrock-Littau connection (for the name of a St. Louis furniture dealer), which ties in with the passing reference to "Litauen" in *The Waste Land* (see my note on "The Germanic Insect Image"). Hence, owing to the Germanic overtones in the surname, one reason for Eliot's defensively playing down the French connotations of the first two names, especially in the secretive initial, is that they might seem a bit at odds linguistically and geographically with the rest of the name. In any case, Verdenal's vernal name evidently did have its flowery connotations for Eliot, ones which even might seem effeminate. In his article in *The Criterion* years later, Eliot referred specifically to his friend "waving a branch of lilac" (Southam 37). But then who dislikes flowers?

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## Notes

1. My original paper appeared in *Names* as "Anent J. Alfred Prufrock" and was then reprinted in *Names and Their Varieties* (Harder) and in my *Ascending the Prufrockian Stair*. In the latter (15-16, 19-24) I respond to George Watson's objections to my article and also include an "Afterword" which adds much more to the original article.

2. D'Ambrosio, who is Secretary of the T. S. Eliot Society, likewise finds numerous parallels between Eliot's work in general and the life and writings of Edward FitzGerald. In this respect, she argues that Eliot, like others at the time, "probably had very 'normal' doubts about himself" sexually (227). This may have been so, though it allows for more acceptance of Freud's view that all human beings are naturally bisexual than I would allow, not to mention Eliot himself, whose strictures against "free-thinking" Jewish people in his notorious University of Virginia speech published (but never reprinted) in *After Strange Gods* no doubt alluded to those who followed in the train of Freud and Marx. Prufrock did not have much of a love life, as Eliot conceded, but that did not entirely reflect on the author himself.

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