

## **Poetics of Preference: Logics of Decision Making in T.S. Eliot’s “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” and William Carlos Williams’s “The Red Wheelbarrow”**

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### **Abstract**

Popular belief draws a fine line between procrastination and its opposite, calling the former bad and shameful, while celebrating those who procrastinate by tackling arduous tasks as early as possible. But research in behavioural and cognitive science suggests that this division is not as firm as we think, and that procrastination and procrastination each have the potential to serve or hinder our long-term interests depending on the situation. In keeping with recent methodologies used in the field of cognitive poetics, this article applies principles of decision-making theory (rooted in behavioural science) to two poems. By reading procrastination and procrastination in relation to T.S. Eliot’s “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” and William Carlos Williams’ “The Red Wheelbarrow,” I show through an analysis of voice and plot in “Prufrock” that procrastination can become a habit that redefines intentions over time and that is ultimately difficult to escape. In the case of procrastination, I argue on the basis of a formal reading of Williams’s poem that mental reasoning often prioritizes subgoal completion. Both applications shed light on the mental processes at play when we make interpretations about literature and the world.

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Scholars working in the emerging field of cognitive poetics examine the mental processes and patterns of human attention undergirding the stylistic, thematic, and rhetorical impact of literature. This methodology can take several forms, ranging from considerations of structure or metre, to discussion of characters’ circumstances and plot-related choices, to applications of principles from behavioural science and psychology to the literary text. Regardless of the methodology used, because cognitive poetics heightens our awareness of the subconscious processes at play when we observe and interpret the world, formulate conclusions about phenomena, and make decisions, it is a particularly suitable approach for analyzing the nature of preference as it is reflected in literature.

Thus far, research on preference in cognitive literary studies has focused on how our narrative decisions and desires influence the way we read and the interpretations we make about fiction and poetry. Focusing on fiction, Lisa Zunshine has written about “mind reading” and literature, observing that “our ability to interpret the behavior of real-life people – and, by extension, of literary characters – in terms of their underlying states of mind seems to be such an integral part of being human” (“Theory” 195). According to Zunshine, we will attempt to predict a character’s actions as we progress through a novel. However, as we make predictions about what we read, we also come to expect that new information may later complicate those impressions. This notion of intertemporal bargaining impacts the way we understand characters and scenes, but it is also important to how we read poetry and understand a poem’s development over the course of several stanzas. William Flesch has called the process of reading an act of

gambling or bargaining. In "Reading and Bargaining," he observes that the reader is always in the act of bargaining with the text, even though the outcome of a work of literature is predetermined: "we don't know, and can't know, what will happen. At some level of realistic processing we care what happens . . . [but] what will happen . . . is what in fact has already happened. . . . Our emotional experience of [text] is an experience of bargaining, an experience of getting some but not all the things we want" (371).

This is true for poetry analysis at the level of both narrative and form. For example, in a 2012 article on the originality of works by the Russian poet Omar Khayyam, Leila Sadeghi Esfehiani points out that "cognitive poetics offers a theory which systematically explains the relations between the structure of literary texts and their perceived and conceptualized effects" (314). Meanwhile, Patrick Colm Hogan has argued that cognitive approaches to literary emotion are about reasoning more than affect, discussing the ways scholars have applied principles like induction, deduction, and inference to their conclusions (237) about the various effects of a text. And yet there are some fundamental differences between the ways that cognitive poetics tends to be used when it regards poetry versus prose. While studies involving the latter tend to focus on characters, fictionality, and possible worlds, approaches focusing on poetry, as this article will do, centralize the analysis of poetic voice, grammar and syntax, and the impact of form upon the perception of poetic effects. Not surprisingly, fiction and poetry share a concern with narrative and plot. Scholars working with prose and poetry also agree that applying cognitive poetics to literature generates unique insights about the nature of the reading process and about the ways our minds grapple with narrative trajectories and structural turns.

The debate in behavioural science over the relative merits and/or costs of procrastination and precrastination offers a new window into the nature of preference that literary analysis can further inform. Research on both pre- and procrastination are relatively recent areas of inquiry. Decision-making theorists claim that humans will often forgo their long-term interests for the sake of immediate gratification. These thinkers cite procrastination as a primary example of this pattern of behaviour, while figuring precrastination, or the act of completing tasks right away, as the more rational decision. But recent studies by David Rosenbaum and his colleagues at Pennsylvania State University suggest that these two processes are more intimately connected than we think, as both procrastination and precrastination can benefit or hurt our long-term goals depending on the context in which a decision is made. In this article, I apply decision-making theory to T.S. Eliot's 1915 poem "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" and William Carlos Williams's "The Red Wheelbarrow" (1923) to produce new readings of these two poems, readings which explain how humans rationalize the connected cognitive processes of pre- and procrastination. These poems were chosen because they are examples of the ordering of preferences; at a narrative level ("The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock") and formal level ("The Red Wheelbarrow"), the poems reflect how humans manage their preferences and make choices about procrastination and precrastination. Through a narrative analysis of "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock", I identify reasons why procrastination becomes appealing, but show how, in the end, these justifications can function as the beginnings of a self-defeating habit. Then, after detailing recent research on precrastination, I consider the formal logic of precrastination through a stylistic explication of "The Red Wheelbarrow". This reading suggests that theories of precrastination are mirrored by modernist poets' interest in pairing signification with concision. At a grammatical and stylistic level, it also contends that mental processes often prioritize subgoal completion

over goal completion. But these conclusions are only a start: as precrastination is a concept that has only recently been named and conceptualized, coming into coinage for the first time in May of 2014, and as procrastination has only of late become the focus of serious academic study, much work on pre- and procrastination relative to the nature of preference remains, especially in terms of its implications for decision-making theory, behavioural science, and cognitive literary and cultural studies.

### **Procrastination and Precrastination in Behavioural Science Research**

In a completely rational world, people would fulfil their obligations in the most efficient and timely manner possible, given the range of personal, mental, financial, and/or professional rewards that are attached to doing so in any given situation. This leads to concrete rewards, which, in the long-term, can be reasons for personal or professional success. It also contributes to mental health and well being, as the anti-procrastinator feels less anxiety throughout the day, given that s/he has fewer tasks left to complete compared to the procrastinator. As Samuel Johnson has written, "idleness never can secure tranquility" (Murphy 209). Economists cite intertemporal bargaining and hyperbolic discounting as sources of this problem. George Ainslie has observed in *Breakdown of Will* that we prefer immediate gratification to long-term satisfaction, even if, later on, we regret this decision and would like to have preferred to prefer our overall well-being over pleasure (39). It is for this reason – we sacrifice our long-term goals when we catch wind of a short-term preference – that, when caught in the act, procrastinators are considered lazy, morally reprehensible, and indulgent by the wider public, who acknowledges no valid reason for indefinitely delaying tasks that could be completed in the present.

Literature on procrastination tends to emphasize humans' struggle with self-control, which is a problem associated with immediate gratification. Ainslie frames this as a problem of preference. He uses hyperbolic discounting, or devaluing goods according to their delay, over exponential curves, wherein discounting occurs consistently over time, to show that people generally prefer smaller rewards that come sooner to larger rewards that will come later, even if we can reasonably foresee that we will be able to accept the larger reward in the future: "We're unable not to choose the reward that looms largest when discounted to the moment of choice" (Ainslie 39). For decision-making theorists, procrastination is an irrational behaviour that can be explained through hyperbolic discounting: we feel more enjoyment in the present for putting off a difficult task, even if this decision will come to disappoint us when we need to deal with what we postponed. With this logic in mind, seemingly illogical choices like procrastination actually make a lot of sense: there are many situations when it is sensible to act in ways that would normally be considered irrational.

The most commonly cited defence for procrastination links last-minute deadlines and eustress (stress that is beneficial to health or performance) to a positive, emotional reward, and this biological argument is one lens through which we can make sense of procrastination and its rational side. Procrastination is a matter of timing, not quality, although these are sometimes linked, so the argument here is that it does not matter when you put in the work, so long as you put in the same amount of effort that you would at any other time. This is because the value of the product will be the same no matter when you produce it. According to this logic, to "work best under pressure" is an emotional argument: when work is being completed close to the deadline, there is an added affective reward compared to when it is being produced well before the deadline. Finishing something at the last minute generates a feeling akin to thrill, not unlike the sensation one might experience after a big drop on roller coaster. If the

pleasure of completing a task is also the pleasure of meeting a deadline, then the closer to the deadline that one experiences the pleasure of completing the task, the less the discount. In both cases, there is negative excitement and great relief when the experience is over. Dianne M. Tice and Roy F. Baumeister, the co-authors of a 1997 report on procrastination in the classroom, offer an explanation for this emotional perspective on procrastination: procrastinators are often perceived as those who suffer at the last minute because of what they have delayed, but this viewpoint, they argue, "may conceal a pattern of stress suffered by non-procrastinators who do their worrying and hard working earlier in the project period. . . . Procrastinators may suffer late, whereas others suffer early, but the total amount of suffering [is] the same" (454). Because a dreaded task involves suffering at any point in the process, those who procrastinate and argue that they "work best under pressure" are motivated by the emotional excitement that accompanies the last-minute completion of a work-product. In such cases, the affective reward for procrastinating is greater than that for not procrastinating, even considering that both habits of conquering work produce stress.

The emotional experiences of thrill and relief that go hand-in-hand with procrastination may compensate for the suffering associated with one undesirable task, but logics of procrastination must also take into account the multi-layered nature of choice and preference. In "Choice and Procrastination," Ted O'Donoghue and Matthew Rabin identify problems that arise when we think of procrastination as related to only one responsibility. "In most situations," they write, "a person must decide not only *when* to complete a task, but also *which* task to complete, or how much effort to apply to a chosen task" (121). This thinking is more rational than logic that expects people to do everything right away, because tackling a task head on may very well be worse for a person's long-term goals and commitments.

Both O'Donoghue and Rabin's logic of choices among choices and the notion of emotional rewards associated with procrastination help to make sense of this seemingly self-defeating activity, but because procrastination is what Ainslie calls a "value-based" decision (Ainslie 115), the real danger and cost of a lapse in productivity occurs when people think of it as a low-stakes decision. Hyperbolic discounting assumes that there are larger stakes available only in the long-term that we are foregoing for immediate gratification. But when there is no "bright line to divide good and bad choices . . . a large, credible stake [may never] form" (Ainslie 115). Social norms dictate that to procrastinate is bad, while to complete tasks early is good, but we do not necessarily learn in these environments that "personal self-esteem will be lost by any breach" (Ainslie 115). Few fear that procrastination will ever become an addictive or a compulsive behaviour, and for this reason, "people are more apt to tolerate lapses" (Ainslie 115), especially if they still manage to accomplish whatever task they were postponing. We see this most particularly in those who frequently cite the "I work best under pressure" defence, for those who truly believe that this is the most efficient way of working and who see it as beneficial in the long-term will continue to do so, even as society tells us that procrastination is irrational. The ironic part of all of this is that those who procrastinate because they see it as worthwhile in the long-term or because they do not consider it a high-stakes decision end up in a situation in which these "decisions predict the pattern of future decisions" (Ainslie 116), such that procrastination becomes a habit rather than a temporary and one-time failure of the will. At some point, a person is likely to fail to complete the desired task. Only those who conceptualize procrastination as morally bad and who develop a personal rule in order to take control over future motivational states will refuse the opportunity to procrastinate: "A person who fears drifting into procrastination," says Ainslie, "may have some awareness that

her housekeeping behaviors are precedents that predict the extent of this drift" (Ainslie 108). These people consider procrastination to be detrimental to their goals and overall well being. It is not clear from this research whether procrastination is rational or irrational, or good or bad, but what we can hypothesize is that when procrastination becomes a habit, it is likely to interfere with the quality of work products, such that the thrill of completing a task right before the deadline skews a person's understanding of how much time is really needed to finish. The next section of this article will use literature to explain the logic behind and inevitable costs of procrastination and, through a reading of Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," it will demonstrate how procrastination can become a habit that redefines one's intentions over time.

### **Prufrock and the Case of Procrastination**

Fictional and poetic worlds reflect how people structure and rationalize the decisions they make and thus illuminate the mental processes at work related to procrastination. T.S. Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" stands alongside *Hamlet*, Shakespeare's classic tale of repeatedly delayed revenge – which Prufrock, the poem's speaker, actually alludes to in his dramatic monologue – as one of literature's most direct examples of postponement. The poem, which chronicles Prufrock's thought process as he imagines the consequences of asking his beloved an "overwhelming question" (line 10), highlights extreme fear of refusal and how this can lead to inaction and regret. A close reading of the plot of the poem suggests that it is an example of how procrastination can become habitual. Although it often rhymes, the poem is not written in consistent verse or metre, but Eliot occasionally uses heroic couplets or rhymes to emphasize the absurdity of Prufrock's situation: for instance, "greatness flicker" (line 84) rhymes with "and snicker" (line 85). This indirectly contributes to the insecurity that Prufrock feels. Eliot does the same with "dare" and "stair" in lines 39 and 40, wherein the double entendre of "stair" (and its connotations of the fallen) and "stare" add meaning to the risk inherent in the word "dare." It is through these notions of fear, shame, and inaction that Eliot's poem supports understandings of procrastination derivative of utility theory, and particularly Ainslie's framework for decision making, by showing how succumbing to the temptation to procrastinate can become a habit. By applying these theories to Prufrock's struggle as it has been interpreted by several literary critics, we see that Prufrock is trapped within his own mind, caught in an endless cycle of hyperbolic discounting and intertemporal bargaining, which prevents action. This analysis suggests that procrastination can altogether redefine one's initial views of dreaded tasks and that it can lead to denial about the overall importance of the onerous task to the self's well being.

Eliot's "Prufrock" opens with an epigraph from Canto 27 of Dante's *Inferno*, at once introducing us to Prufrock's state of mind and positioning his indecision as a perpetual Hell for him. Roughly translated, Eliot's epigraph reads:

*If I believed my answer would be to someone who would return to earth  
this flame would move no more  
but because no one has ever returned alive from this gulf  
if what I hear is true  
I can reply with no fear of infamy (T.S. Eliot).*

The "gulf" that Prufrock identifies with in this epigraph is an underworld that exists only in his own mind. If we apply this epigraph to the poem, we see that Prufrock knows what he wants, which is to ask an "overwhelming question" (10), but he can never bring

himself to do it. Critics have pointed out that the "you" in the poem is likely Prufrock himself. As William Irwin has noted, "Prufrock is solipsistically introspecting. The 'you' of 'Let us go then, you and I' is likely Prufrock addressing himself. But if it is addressed to another person, it can only be a reader who is as hopeless as he is, with no chance of return or redemption – only such a reader would really understand what is said" (Irwin 184). Edward Lobb comes to a similar conclusion about Prufrock's persona, reading the missing words and ellipses in the poem as evidence of his "coyness, reticence, and procrastination" (Marsh 161). By the end of the poem, it is clear that Prufrock will never escape this state of indecision and delay, because his pattern of procrastination has persisted so long that it has become a self-defeating habit.

Prufrock's dramatic monologue invites the reader to travel imaginatively along with him, and it is through this offer that we see that his procrastination is the result of a form of intertemporal bargaining and hyperbolic discounting. Written in the imperative mood, the poem starts in a manner characteristic of anti-procrastination and even precrastination, but it quickly shows how eagerness can turn into procrastination: "Let us go then, you and I" (1), says Prufrock, as we expect that we are about to embark on some kind of adventure head-on. We learn that we are taking a mental journey rather than a physical one, for Prufrock actually goes nowhere. Prufrock envisions himself trekking through "half-deserted streets / . . . / that follow like a tedious argument" (5, 9). These are paths that Prufrock knows will lead to an "overwhelming question" (10), but their tediousness frames this decision as dreadful and burdensome, thus making his thought process a ripe site for reflection on procrastination and on the mental processes that characterize it. The *Oxford English Dictionary (OED)*, which borrows its first definition of the term from Samuel Johnson, defines "tedious" as "wearisome by continuance" ("Tedious"). For Prufrock, what makes this question "tedious" is the fact that the process resembles an argument: mentally, he can only move forward and make progress toward his end goal by pushing back and enduring back-and-forth debate. Throughout the poem, Prufrock undergoes a series of deliberations with himself. Prufrock is always grappling with resistance, even as he generates the source of much of it. While he tackles the task eagerly enough, by the end of the first stanza, he appears frustrated and irritated by it, and it is from this point on that his desire becomes wearisome. Indeed, clearing the mental and affective space necessary to ask his "overwhelming question" (10) requires constant attention. Prufrock can focus on nothing else, which makes what is supposed to be romantic mind-numbing and dull; throughout the remainder of the poem, instead of dealing with and refusing to let the self-doubt and indecision bother him, he procrastinates and never ends up asking his question. Prufrock's procrastination is thus rooted in cowardice, rather than the poor ordering of his priorities, but as the poem reveals, this procrastination is such a habitual pattern of behaviour that he can never escape it.

Critics rightly point out that Prufrock's is trapped within his own mind, which is an example of how intertemporal bargaining can produce procrastination. As J. Hillis Miller has argued, "Prufrock's paralysis follows naturally from [his] subjectivizing of everything." Miller continues, "one of the puzzles of the poem is the question as to whether Prufrock ever leaves his room. It appears that he does not, so infirm is his will, so ready 'for a hundred indecisions, / And for a hundred visions and revisions, / Before the taking of a toast and tea'" (139). For Miller, Prufrock's problem is that he never acts – he only imagines acting, after repeatedly rethinking everything. Reading Prufrock's mentality in relation to modernity, Roger Mitchell has noted that Prufrock "look[s] out on the world from deep inside some private cave of feeling, and though [he sees] the world and [himself] with unflattering exactness, [he] cannot or will not do

anything about [his] dilemma" (43). Prufrock's "failures of will" (Ainslie 3), as Ainslie would call what these critics are noticing, cannot be separated from intertemporal bargaining. Recall that intertemporal bargaining refers to making a decision about a choice whose rewards or consequences manifest at different points in time. William Irwin points out that Prufrock's "inability to act on sexual desire floods his consciousness" to the point that he is unable to "take charge of his own life and freely choose to pursue what he wants" (188). Because Prufrock's issue is cowardice, the short-term relief of inaction is more valuable to him than the long-term potential reward associated with acting in the way that he wishes he could. This decision motivates Prufrock's continued "paralysis" and procrastination.

Intertemporal bargaining connects Prufrock's situation with Ainslie's view that procrastination can become habitual; as we see in Eliot's poem, procrastination is so much a part of Prufrock's pattern of behaviour that he cannot overcome it. Dilip Soman, Ainslie, and their team of researchers argue that "it is evident that most – if not all – choices that individuals and organizations make in the real world are intertemporal. However, while past studies cover a wide range of choice situations, there is a remarkable consensus in the literature that future outcomes are discounted (or undervalued) relative to immediate outcomes" (Soman 348). Prufrock repeatedly chooses the immediate reward over the future one; he repeatedly chooses procrastination over action. As Omri Moses notes, "Eliot's early poems present diffident characters who, like Prufrock, escape the present by compulsively anticipating how others react to them" (190). This obsession with others' possible reactions prevents Prufrock from ever acting. In *Conflicts in Consciousness*, David Spurr reflects on this aspect of the poem at the level of language and grammar. Prufrock is constantly thinking through potential reactions to his behaviour, but this culminates in a "language of disordered experience . . . of imprecision and aimlessness, [which] abounds in modifiers and plurals: restless nights, one-night cheap hotels, visions and revisions, the sunsets and the dooryards, and the sprinkled streets" (Spurr 9). Phrases like "one-night" highlight Prufrock's belief that his deferrals are only temporary, while the frequency of such "modifiers and plurals" suggests to the reader that these deferrals are not temporary at all. What is more noteworthy, though, is that when Prufrock attempts to order these experiences and feelings, he resorts to the passive rather than the active tense: "the poem's linguistic and thematic strategy consistently opposes active verbs to the passive voice which causes things to be spread out, etherized, smoothed, and stretched" (Spurr 9). Even at a grammatical level, then, Prufrock settles on the passive, choosing inaction over action.

Prufrock constantly rationalizes procrastination. For Prufrock, the "yellow fog" not only highlights fear, but also represents time and the acceptability of occupying it unhurriedly. Prufrock's conceptualization of the fog becomes a mental catalyst for postponement, for he draws a parallel between the movements of the yellow fog and his own life. The fog lingers (18) before it makes its "sudden leap" (20) into the unknown, so Prufrock imagines that there is no harm in his also doing so. In the grand scheme of things, Prufrock thinks, "there will be time, there will be time . . . / for a hundred indecisions / And for a hundred visions and revisions" (26, 32, 33). These lines function as rationalizations for procrastination: just as those who claim to "work best under pressure" argue that one is not sacrificing the quality of a work product by delaying completing it, Prufrock convinces himself through the symbol of the fog that his chances with his beloved will remain the same no matter when he acts. The fog travels leisurely about the streets for several lines, and even though it delays its "leap" (20), it nevertheless achieves what we are to consider a pleasant end goal, a peaceful

sleep (22). Similarly, Prufrock believes that he can also dillydally and put off asking his question, but still take his celebratory "toast and tea" (34) in the end, which are relatively weak rewards.

The second and fifth stanzas of the poem, its refrain, confirm that Prufrock's procrastination and constant self-bargaining are the products of cowardice. The women in the art gallery that Prufrock imagines are busy "talking of Michelangelo" (14), and they exacerbate his stasis, for they "come and go" (13), while movement for Prufrock only takes place mentally. As he imagines these women conversing, Prufrock compares his struggle to comfortably predict the future – which is the source of his procrastination, for he hesitates to ask his question out of fear of refusal – to "yellow fog" (15). Fog with a yellow hue, which in colloquial usage is the colour of cowardice, "rubs its muzzle on the window-panes" (16), the part of the built environment associated with seeing the beyond, where it lingers (18), until, like the animal that Prufrock personifies it as, it "curl[s] once about the house and [falls] asleep" (22). The fog haunts Prufrock; it is a metaphor for his own cravenness. If, as the opening stanza suggests, to ask a significant question requires envisioning different futures while also grappling with the possibility of refusal, then procrastination in this context means the refusal to imagine these other worlds to the point that it would motivate acting. Prufrock's fear prevents him from experiencing the mental processes necessary for action, for he never accepts or comes to terms with the risk of rejection: he thinks reflexively about his own timidity through this image of the fog, but he uses these emotions to justify delaying asking the question that he wants to ask. Prufrock practices intertemporal bargaining, but he always chooses the immediate reward: the safety of the present, which is also the safety of inaction.

Although Prufrock posits a sensible justification for postponement through his conceptualization of the fog, this thought process does not convince him, and the arguments he uses to re-convince himself only worsen his problem: procrastination has become a self-defeating habit for Prufrock. Prufrock repeats the phrase "there will be time" four times throughout stanza four, as if he were trying to assure himself that this is so. Prufrock wants to feel content with his decision to delay asking his question, for he tells himself that postponing will give him time both "to prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet" (27), or to ensure that he will make a good impression. By alluding to Hesiod's epic poem "Works and Days," Prufrock expresses his wish to put together "all the works" (29), or all the elegances, that are more likely to yield a favourable outcome. Ultimately, however, more time only leads to higher stakes, such that Prufrock paradoxically feels less sure of himself and procrastinates further as time elapses. We can surmise that considerable time has passed even though this shift occurs only over the course of a couple stanzas. In the sixth stanza, for instance, Prufrock self-deprecatingly predicts others' reactions to his appearance: "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!')" (40-44). A middle-aged man who may have been postponing his question for several years by this point, Prufrock worries that he may not be good enough for this woman after all and asks, "so how should I presume?" (54). Note that Prufrock does not ask himself how he should resume in this line, for he never moves forward, but rather goes back-and-forth, making "decisions and revisions which a minute [reverses]" (48). As J. Hillis Miller has observed, "there is a systematic confusion of tenses and times in the poem, so that is difficult to tell if certain images exist in past, present, future" (140). Eliot uses verb tense here to foreground complex states of temporality; the word "presume" registers



the difficulties of making important personal decisions. Earlier, Prufrock had resolved that procrastination was not harmful to his chances, for a delay would not affect the final outcome. Eventually, Prufrock had reasoned, he would ask his question and there would likely be a celebratory toast. But, in this line, we see that Prufrock has changed the topic of his internal debate: he is no longer asking himself when he should ask his question, but whether or not he should continue to assume that his feelings will be reciprocated when or if he finally asks his "overwhelming question" (10). What began as that which needed to be justified at the onset of the poem – that procrastination is okay because the time period during which the action is performed does not influence the end result – shifts to something else by the middle of the monologue, marking the beginnings of the costly "habit" that Ainslie warns his readers of in *Breakdown of Will*.

Once Prufrock stops trying to explain away his procrastination, showing that he no longer considers it detrimental to his overall well being and that he does not incorporate his delays into his conceptualization of self as "precedents that predict the extent of this drift" into inaction (108), he starts to conceive of the question he has for this woman differently. Instead of something important to his future and to his happiness, the question becomes a burden, something no longer worth the mental energy to ask: "Should I, after tea and cakes and ices / Have the strength to force the moment to its crisis?" (79-80). By framing the question as that which would ignite a "crisis," Prufrock is telling himself that it is best not to ask it. "Here's no great matter" (83), he resolves, as if to suggest that the thought of asking his question was all the while inconsequential. We know that Prufrock recognizes that this was actually a "great matter," and that he regrets having procrastinated. Melancholically, Prufrock asks again and again, "would it have been worth it, after all?" (87). He recognizes that he was a coward, saying "and in short, I was afraid" (86), and he acknowledges what he has given up by never asking: "the sunsets and the dooryards and the sprinkled streets . . . / this, and so much more" (101, 103). This ending is unfortunate, for we get the sense through the use of shifting verb tenses throughout the entire poem – the alternation between the present and past tenses – that it may not be too late, that this resignation and willingness to admit the loss of an ungraspable future is all part of the justification for procrastination. In this way, the poem supports Ainslie's theories about the will and intertemporal bargaining, and Ainslie's theories illuminate new aspects of Prufrock's dilemma and paralysis. We know that considerable time passes in his imaginings of whether or not to ask his question, for he ostensibly has a "moment of . . . greatness" (84) in the beginning of the poem. By its end, though, he is a self-proclaimed lonely old man, who has not yet "grow[n] old" (12) and can still ask his question, if it were not the case that he had convinced himself against it.

Although this reading of Prufrock's procrastination has focused on the plot of the poem, criticism on the dramatic monologue can be put into conversation with theories of decision making in order to highlight aspects of his situation that manifest at the level of form. Mutlu Konuk Blasing's analysis of Prufrock's deferrals centres upon the claim that "the poet expresses not a personality but a particular medium" (38). For Blasing, we cannot separate Prufrock's inaction from the form that his speech takes: the dramatic monologue. She continues, "as in Poe's 'Raven,' the speaker's relationship to the form within which his adventure transpires constitutes the nature of his adventure: his form determines the content of his story" (38). Blasing sees the epigraph as especially problematic for Prufrock's situation, for it "diminishes" the urgency of Prufrock's speech "by absorbing it within the prototype of another confession, so that the beginning 'let us go' is already the 'end of something'" (39). W. David Shaw produces a similar reading of the dramatic monologue in "Masks of the Unconscious."

Shaw maintains that "because the speakers in such monologues are pulled two ways at once, their incapacity to pursue wholeheartedly any single course of action make them unsuited for their roles" (439). These formal readings figure Prufrock's passivity as the result of the fact that his speech cannot exist apart from pre-existing literary texts, styles, and forms. While this article has prioritized a plot-based interpretation of "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," Blasing's reading calls our attention to the ways in which a formal analysis of poetry can add insight to logics of decision making, as the next section of this article will demonstrate vis-à-vis Williams's "The Red Wheelbarrow."

### **"The Red Wheelbarrow" and the Case of Procrastination**

Prufrock's struggle with procrastination demonstrates the mental and psychological consequences of putting off what one really desires to do, but recent literature has suggested that tackling a task early on can also have negative side effects. Psychologists have termed this phenomenon "precrastination." In May of 2014, David Rosenbaum, Lanyun Gong, and Cory Potts, scholars at Pennsylvania State University, published their findings on an experiment on procrastination in an article in *Psychological Science* called "Pre-Crastination: Hastening Subgoal Completion at the Expense of Extra Physical Effort." The researchers asked 27 college-aged participants to choose to carry one of two buckets down an alley. Both were full of pennies and both were the same weight: one was right next to where the participants were standing, while the other was further down the alley, but picking up the furthest bucket would mean that the participants would need to carry the weight of the bucket for a shorter duration. Rosenbaum and his collaborators expected that everyone would choose the second bucket, but many opted to carry the closest bucket down the alley. The researchers concluded "that this seemingly irrational choice reflected a tendency to pre-crastinate, a term we introduce to refer to the hastening of subgoal completion, even at the expense of extra physical effort. Other tasks also reveal this preference, which we ascribe to the desire to reduce working memory loads" (Rosenbaum, "Pre-crastination" 1487). Rosenbaum speculates that we act this way because we want to get rid of the mental burden of remembering to do something later on, so that we can save our energy and minds for other tasks. These findings suggest that when it comes to dealing with onerous tasks, many people care more about mental energy than physical energy: "The desire to lighten their mental load," said Rosenbaum of his study's participants, "was so strong that they were willing to expend quite a bit of extra physical effort to do so" (Burkeman). It is important to recognize, however, that this is a general phenomenon that may not necessarily apply to all groups of people, especially those who are disabled or elderly. As Rosenbaum himself acknowledges, "if it's a big deal for someone to carry a load a long distance, then he or she may be more judicious in [his or her] decision-making. . . . Elderly or frail people may therefore have better memory management abilities than more able-bodied individuals" (Rosenbaum, "Get It"). With that said, enduring a physical burden was for these college-aged and able-bodied participants a low price to pay for reducing their mental load. It may also be that the discounting of a future satisfaction, or getting the hard part over with, is a pleasure once one actually begins doing the task.

Procrastination is a wise strategy for memory management but, in many cases and despite its mental benefits, it is just as harmful for productivity as procrastination is. Rosenbaum discovered that many people will choose to complete an undesirable task right away so that they can get it over with, even if it may not be the easiest or most logical choice, and even if doing so may not payoff in the long-term. This is a form of hyperbolic discounting. Consider the following example: we might answer emails or

text messages right away instead of doing so all at once later on, which would be more time efficient. We will feel good about responding promptly to the sender, but in doing so we lose chunks of time that we could be spending on bigger, more important tasks. In this example, there is a very fine line between precrastination and procrastination, for both can hurt us, and it is often difficult to distinguish between the two. As Oliver Burkeman warns, "whenever you catch yourself thinking, 'Let me just get these little things out of the way first,' consider the possibility that you'd be better off not bothering . . . It's time to abandon the secret pride we precrastinators feel in having completed 25 small tasks by 10 AM: if they're not the right tasks, that's not really something to be proud of" (Burkeman). The problem that Burkeman identifies is that most people precrastinate with small tasks rather than large ones, which is really only a veiled form of procrastination, except those who do this can leave behind the sense of dread that procrastinators often feel.

Narratives of precrastination are not as copious in literature as are those of procrastination, but we can look to Williams's "The Red Wheelbarrow" for insight on the cognitive processes at work involving precrastination. Published in *Spring and All* in 1923, "The Red Wheelbarrow" offers an intriguing example of formal precrastination and of one way that applications of cognitive poetics and considerations of the perception of textual effects can produce a stylistic and structural reading of the nature of preference. James Paul Gee observes as much, noting that "perception played a key role in the aesthetics of William Carlos Williams" (375). Indeed, the wheelbarrow and Rosenbaum's bucket full of pennies are similar, for both are containers that hold objects upon which the individuals who need these objects depend. The poem prioritizes its own ready completion through the careful placement of its opening phrase, and it uses understandings of human patterns of reading and attention to its advantage in the aim of goal and subgoal completion.

Several scholars have noticed the ontological importance of the wheelbarrow, and the way in which it is useful as a window into human experience, but these observations have yet to be linked to processes of signification and logics of decision making. For Richard R. Frye, the poem "manifests certain ontological reassurances. One of these is that the artist's relation to nature is not causal . . . 'out there' are chickens, rainwater, and wheelbarrows to evoke; they aren't some purely solipsistic image" (Frye 93-94). By interpreting the poem in this way, Frye positions the wheelbarrow as important to our knowledge of the social and cultural world and of the subjects who inhabit that world. Indeed, one of the most pervasive readings of the poem emphasizes the wheelbarrow's importance to industrial society. Barry Ahearn summarizes: "civilization depends on them. The wheelbarrow is one of the simplest machines, combining in its form the wheel and the inclined plane . . . civilization depends on simple machines, both in themselves and in their increasingly complex combinations" (4). This understanding of the wheelbarrow is important for considerations of precrastination, because just as the wheelbarrow is a device for saving physical labour, precrastination is a method that humans use to reduce mental labour. This article adds to discourse surrounding the ontological importance of the wheelbarrow by pointing out that, at a structural level, the way that Williams foregrounds the wheelbarrow presents precrastination as an establishment of being in addition to a strategy for saving labour. Kenneth Lincoln hints at the approach that this article takes in his own analysis of the poem: "'so much' . . . [makes] light of how much . . . bears [upon] a trochaic heave that could overload the slight line. . . . The opening catches us in the pitch of needing to know, and unknowing" (187). Lincoln is referring both to traditional interpretations of the place of wheelbarrows in society and to our

reading process. As I will show, the poem gets itself over with, so to speak, by placing the weight of its signification at the beginning.

"The Red Wheelbarrow" is uniquely fit to be mined for formal considerations of precrastination, for the weight of the poem resides in its first line. In an essay in *Holiday* that was published in 1954, Williams explicitly links his composition strategy with a desire to get the writing out of the way, recalling the language used by the participants in Rosenbaum's bucket experiment: "I am not good at remembering what I have written. I just want to get rid of it" (Rizzo 36). The poem is a sentence broken up into four, enjambed couplets:

*so much depends  
upon*

*a red wheel  
barrow*

*glazed with rain  
water*

*beside the white  
chickens.*

The poem acquires signification only because of the opening line, "so much depends," suggesting to readers that what follows will be very important. For the poem's narrative, this is surely the case. Without this opening section, were we to read that there was "a red wheel barrow, glazed with rain water, beside the white chickens," we might feel tempted to say "so what?" Worse, we might dismiss the poem as yet another description of landscape that does not necessarily suggest wider importance. Indeed, so much depends upon the opening couplet and on the lines that result from the enjambment, such that what Williams's poem amounts to is an example of formal precrastination: if the description of the wheelbarrow is to have any ontological weight, then we must feel that this is the case early on. For Gee, whose grammatical and linguistic analysis of the poem complements this article's focus on procrastination, Williams confirms the ontological weight of the wheelbarrow as early as the title: "the title, then, states the product, what is 'given,' what is grasped, what is made, and therefore marked as definite, out of the dynamics of the perceptual process. The title is at the beginning, but it is really the end" (381). By titling the poem in this way and by opening with "so much depends," it is almost as if the speaker of the poem realizes this and wants to relieve himself of the burden of ensuring that the poem has meaning by giving us the components we need to decipher its significance right away.

Because "so much depends / upon" comes at the beginning of the poem, the speaker can finish the poem sooner than if this phrase were placed at the middle or end, and the poem can get itself over with very fast. We know immediately that the wheelbarrow is significant, for, putting the title aside for a moment, we read about its importance in the opening line before we even learn that there is a wheelbarrow. But if the speaker were to introduce the wheelbarrow before commenting on its significance, which would exemplify a kind of formal procrastination (through a delay of signification), then the poem would lose its concise charm and signification would be postponed. For instance, we can rewrite the sentence that comprises the poem in an attempt to delay the moment at which the reader realizes the overall impact of the

wheelbarrow, but doing so would not work as well formally, and it would make the poem longer. If we channel the energy that Rosenbaum discovered, showing that many people just want to get things done as fast as possible, a mindset that mirrors the brevity of many modernist writings, we can see that precrastinating is actually the most logical formal choice for a poem that has as its primary aim a desire to position the red wheelbarrow as meaningful. There are several viable renditions of the poem, all of which retain its basic implications, but do so by repositioning "so much depends" in less than ideal ways. We might say that "there is a red wheel barrow, upon which so much depends, glazed with rain water, beside the white chickens," so as to defer meaning for a bit longer. Or, if we wanted to completely delay signification until the last possible moment, we could say that "glazed with rain water and beside the white chickens sits a red wheelbarrow, upon which so much depends." Neither of these figurations retains the original structure of the poem (couplets comprised of three words followed by one bisyllabic word) and, in both cases, the rewritten version renders the poem less rhythmic, clunky, and too long. In the case of the opening couplet, then, precrastinating on the subgoal – of conveying the importance of the wheelbarrow – helps to complete the actual goal of finishing the poem more efficiently, aesthetically, and desirably.

The rhetorical structure of the poem plays with conventional patterns of human attention. By introducing "so much depends / upon" in the opening two lines of the poem, we are immediately encouraged to pay closer attention to what follows, whereas were these lines to come at the poem's end, we might glance over or only partially think about the description of the red wheelbarrow, feeling as if that is not the significant part of the work. These insights on attention are not entirely new; in fact, these ideas about ordering go back to the ancients. Douglas Hofstadter has toyed with this concept in "Aria with Diverse Variations," a dialogue that ends pages earlier than its form suggests it will. Hofstadter knows that readers will anticipate that the "big reveal" will come at the end of the dialogue, and that they will thus pay more attention to the last few pages of it than to the ones in the middle, which is why readers are truly surprised when the ending comes much earlier than expected (Hofstadter). This is also a central idea of Raymon Queneau's *Exercises in Style*, which tells the same anecdote ninety-nine times, each in a different style. Williams does similar work in "The Red Wheelbarrow," as his form anticipates, accommodates, and uses to the poem's advantage natural patterns of human thought. If it is true that, in our leisure reading, we expect signification to come toward the end of the work, and, therefore, that we focus less intensely on pages further from the end, then Williams's work reverses this practice and works as a MacGuffin of sorts: his speaker tells us that there is something significant about the red wheelbarrow early on, so we paradoxically end up paying more attention to the lines that follow, which we might otherwise have overlooked, in an attempt to figure out what is so important about the red wheelbarrow. As Charles Altieri has written, "So much depends upon the red wheelbarrow, because so much depends on understanding what is at stake in the dual attributes of 'so much depends'" (Altieri 233). For Altieri and for those interested in cognition, Williams's usage of "so much depends" is less about the wheelbarrow and more about the mind.

Precrastination manifests in the reader's assumption that s/he knows what the words "depends," "wheel," "rain," and "white" will signify later on, only to find out that this is not the case. The poem generates more questions than it does answers. When we reach the end of the poem, we cannot help but wonder: so much depends on a red wheel barrow doing what? The same sense of surprise is present as we read the poem as a whole, a result of its consistent use of enjambment. Words like "water" and

“chickens” are unexpected because we may have expected (precrastinated) to read different words.

Indeed, how we understand signification is as much about the placement and temporality of those meanings as it is about their inherent content. In other words, what those participating in Rosenbaum’s bucket experiment and the speaker of Williams’s poem have in common is their relationship to mind and temporality. The weight of the buckets was the same over time for those who chose to haul them for longer down the alley so that they could finish the task sooner, just as the content of the poem does not change depending on the placement of “so much depends.” In each situation, precrastination affects our mental life and how we read or think about the task in front of us: participants in Rosenbaum’s study wanted to free up their minds for other tasks, while Williams forces his readers to engage more deeply with the content of his poem by placing “so much depends” at the beginning.

### **Pro- and Precrastination in Context: Cognitive Literary Studies**

Popular belief draws a fine line between procrastination and its opposite, calling the former bad and shameful, while celebrating those who precrastinate by tackling arduous tasks as early as possible. Research in cognitive and behavioural science on both phenomena shows that this division is not as firm as we think, and that procrastination and precrastination each have the potential to serve or hinder our long-term interests depending on the situation in which we find ourselves. For example, procrastination adds a thrill to dreaded activities but can easily become a self-defeating habit, while precrastination can relieve us of significant mental burdens, but can mean that we do not actually have time to complete more important tasks over the course of a day. By turning to Eliot’s “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” and Williams’s “The Red Wheelbarrow,” I have mapped how minds rationalize these interconnected processes and the respective costs and benefits of doing so. On the one hand, “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” imagines how procrastination due to excessive fear of refusal can justify inaction. Prufrock convinces himself that “there will be time” (26) to ask his “overwhelming question” (10), and that therefore it does not matter when he talks to his beloved, for just like the “yellow fog” that lingers (15), the end result will not change if he delays asking his question. Procrastination, he believes, is actually more practical than precrastination, for it gives him more time to prepare for the moment and to make a good impression. The longer he delays, however, the more unsure Prufrock becomes, such that procrastination becomes a self-defeating habit. On the other hand, Williams’s poem, as a formal representation of precrastination, demonstrates the logic of coupling goal and subgoal completion. Williams’s poem prioritizes its own completion through its early placement of “so much depends,” such that we feel the work’s ontological significance right away. Furthermore, Williams asks us to pay closer attention to what we might otherwise only gloss over – the details about the red wheelbarrow – positioning the poem as a good example of the cognitive processes that govern reading and interpretation. Ultimately, the formal and rhetorical structure of Williams’s poem means that it finishes at the first semantic opportunity.

As these readings suggest, cognitive poetics has much to offer debates about procrastination and precrastination as they relate to decision-making theory and its expression in literary texts. Cognitive literary critics seek to trouble the divides between the humanities, the sciences, and the social sciences: as Nancy Easterlin notes, “the very nature and diversity of literary artefacts, which are themselves only fully constituted via a complex cognitive process of production and consumption, a process inherently interpretive,” means that literature is an especially ripe site for thinking about mental

processes (Zunshine, "Introduction" 2). As such, scholars have applied cognitive studies to literature along a variety of lines, ranging from reflections on sympathy and empathy, to concerns about narratology and reading practices, to considerations of disability in the form of neuroaesthetics. Decision-making theory is another such application and framework. As William Flesch has written, "literature and rhetoric work, like all interesting statements, by eliciting and then satisfying a desire. This holds in literature at scales from the smallest to the largest, from Hamlet's doggerel rhymes to the plot of *Hamlet* to the resolution and completion of our sense and his own sense of his character, of his person" (208). Flesch's observations about preference, desire, and satisfaction also apply to procrastination and precrastination and their implications for our ability to conceptualize the cognitive processes associated with reading poems like the ones discussed in this article. He continues, "we can begin to see the extent to which our desire in narrative, as in couplets, is inconsistent at different time levels. We want to wait for a rhyme; we want to cease waiting. And then: we want to be frightened and we want to be safe. . . . Any decent story will orchestrate the different themes of our narrative desire; and so will any decent poem" (209). As readers, we will grapple with our various conflicting preferences at all times – until we get to the end of the poem or text. Both "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" and "The Red Wheelbarrow" bring to light the many ways that humans rationalize seemingly illogical choices and the benefits or consequences of doing so.

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