

The Peach in Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Marvell's "Garden," and Eliot's "Prufrock": Etymology, Sin, and Transgression

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Introduction

The peach as a symbol in works of the Western imagination has a longstanding tradition of polysemous meanings, much more subtle than its "cousin," the apple. Yet, these two fruits have been conflated in some works of the greatest writers in English literature, as well as in the works of some artists. The peach/apple relationship appears particularly significant in works of three great poets of the English language, representing early modernity and modernity in English literature, far apart in time and aesthetics: John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Andrew Marvell's "The Garden," and T. S. Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock." It also appears in the works of two painters working independently of each other: the Symbolist Georges de Feure and the Surrealist Matthew Skenandore, whose paintings help explicate the connection between the peach image

and a form of transgression, religious or moral. A study of the etymology and the moral/religious associations of these two fruits—the first two set in a type of Edenic garden and the third in an arid landscape suggesting the absence of a garden—supported by an analysis of the paintings of de Feure and Skenandore will illustrate how and why the peach is used in these works as a subtle substitute for the traditional apple, a symbol of Original Sin and other types of transgression. This paper also argues that there are thematic connections and shared beliefs among these three poets in their use of the peach as forbidden fruit in religious and moral contexts.¹

Etymological Considerations

In a general sense, the word “apple” included in its definition a certain *type* of fruits up until the seventeenth century and even beyond (*Oxford English Dictionary*). The word *mālum* (apple) could have been applied in Milton’s time to any fleshy fruit having one or more kernels within, such as “quinces, pomegranates, peaches, oranges, and lemons” (Appelbaum, “Eve’s and Adam’s Apple” 224, 225; cf. Leverett 518, col. b). But the apple, as is well known, has accrued a longstanding tradition associating it with sin, particularly Original Sin, ever since the mythical Greek Apple of Discord that led to strife among Greek deities above and strife among human beings below. Moreover, the Latin pun on *mālum*, based upon coincidental similarities in sounds rather than linguistic origin (i.e., with a long *ā* meaning “apple” and with a short *a* meaning “evil”), and the subsequent identification of the “forbidden fruit” in Genesis as *mālum* (“apple”) in Latin translations by Venantius Fortunatus (see Ruthven 16), St. Jerome, and others, have strengthened this association. Therefore, the “peach,” as a species of the same general type of fruit as the “apple,” a

¹ For more on the peach/apple conflation in *Paradise Lost*, see Appelbaum; Hodges.

fleshy fruit with one or more kernels, inherited the evil associations of the "apple" since it is an example of an "apple" in the general sense, as were the fruits mentioned above. As for the word "peach," it derives from the French *pêche* (peach):

ME. a. Fr. *pêche*, OFr. *peche*, earlier *pesche*, in ONFr. *peske* (= Pr. *persega*, Ital. *persica*, *pesca*): - late L. *persica* (med. L. in Du Cange), for cl. L. *persicum*, ellipt. for *Persicum mālum* lit. Persian apple. (*OED*)

The French word *pêche* ("peach") also invites a pun on the French word *péché* ("sin"), a possibility to be looked at later in this paper. One should here note that in 1969, Kenneth K. Ruthven, in his study of wordcraft in poetry, was the first to offer the intriguing etymological analysis found in the *OED* for the word "peach." This was before Robert Fleissner, Robert Appelbaum, Neil Forsyth, and other scholars—although in 1951, John McChesney briefly mentions the derivation of the "peach" from *Persicum mālum* in his explication of Andrew Marvell's poem "The Garden" (248). To give an example of poetic craft, Ruthven discusses the ambiguity in the meaning of the "peach" through its identity as the "Persian apple" (*Persicum mālum*), allowing for the play on *mālum* as "apple" and *malum* as "evil." Later, he adds, writers like Galfred (i.e., Galfredde Percy, a Norman supporter of William the Conqueror, writing in AD 1100) used *gustatio māli* ("taste of the apple") to mean *causa mali* ("the cause of evil") (16). In order to further illustrate the long-standing association of "apple" with "sin" in the Christian tradition, though in this case *not* based on a genuine linguistic derivation, Ruthven quotes from Skeat's *Principles of English Etymology*, 1891 (Series 2, ch. 25, under "On Some False Etymologies"), on the suggestion "that the German word for 'apple' (*Apfel*) is simply a corruption of *Abfall* (literally, 'a fall from')" (16). Note that the word *Abfall*, meaning "trash" or "garbage," is consistent with a fallen world, and thus would this false

etymology from *Abfall* have resonated with Christian traditions on the apple as culpable in corrupting the world. On linguistic grounds, of course, this is little better than noting that Old Saxon *ubil* (“evil”) resembles Old Irish *ubull* (“apple”), but such false connections can readily resonate with cultural assumptions.

Milton and the Peach/Apple

According to Robert Appelbaum, the fruit in *Paradise Lost* is initially described so generally by Milton in the temptation scene that it could well be an “apple” as the term is used today. But Appelbaum goes on to note that after Eve eats the fruit, readers perceive it from her perspective, experiencing its “nectar,” its “ambrosial” odor, and particularly its “downy” texture—all three of these being characteristic of “the peach, the apple of Persia” (*Aguecheek’s Beef* 198). The transcendent characteristics of such qualities as “nectarous” and “ambrosial,” as opposed to the inodorous and watery apples, are clear here and point to a peach. The pun on *malum*, supplied by Ruthven above, is also noted by Appelbaum to establish the association of the peach with evil (224, 225), and there may be a further pun, of the adjective “downy” on the adverb “down,” an association reminiscent of the fall—both in human nature and in nature itself—thereby perhaps accounting in part for Milton’s choice of the peach.

Other puns may also lurk. In his work on Milton, Neil Forsyth, writing after Ruthven’s publication, also notes the pun on *malum* that renders the apple an image of evil and then humorously remarks that “had the language of Jerome been French, the fruit would no doubt have become a peach (Fr. *pêche*; *péché*, sin)” (196). As far as Milton himself is concerned, since he was fluent in Latin and French, composed in Latin, has read St. Jerome’s work, and taught French at times, he would have been aware of

both the etymology and the pun. Milton, moreover, is known to have punned through etymologies and across languages (Flannagan 94). One can conclude that "[i]f Appelbaum is right about the peach as forbidden fruit and if Milton is punning upon the French words for peach and sin, then by eating the forbidden peach, Eve is simultaneously eating 'sin'" (Hodges 402; cf. "eating Death" [PL 9.792]).

Also worthy of mention here, as a support for the peach/sin association, would be a work by the contemporary surrealist artist Matthew Skenandore, whose 1990-91 *Paradise Lost* Series includes a painting, *Eve's Dream or Eat a Peach* (1990), based on the artist's reading of *Paradise Lost* 5.28-95 and 9.850-852. Skenandore's aesthetic rendering of the interdicted fruit as a peach and associated with Eve is not widely known among Milton scholars. The painting depicts a sleeping Eve borne aloft by Satan in angelic form. One small peach appears on Eve's hips, another on Satan's. A third floats near Eve's hips, and there may be a fourth grasped, along with a pear, in Eve's left hand. Each of the three clearly visible peaches seems to have a slit, lending them the appearance of buttocks—or even, especially for the peach on Eve's hip, reminiscent of a woman's sexual organs. Skenandore would thus appear to have linked the peach as forbidden fruit to feminine sexuality, perhaps to the experiential knowledge of sexual activity. Whether Skenandore is aware of the possible wordplay between the word for "peach" and the word for "sin" in French or the two-word identification for "peach" and the word for "evil" in Latin cannot be determined from this painting, but the image certainly establishes the association between peach and forbidden fruit to be examined in this study (see Fig. 1 Appendix A).

As Milton at times seems to suggest, the species of the fruit does not matter vis-à-vis God's prohibition and Eve's disobedience of this prohibition. For example, in book 9, lines 659-63, Eve tells Satan,

"Of the Fruit

Of each Tree in the Garden we may eat,
 But of the Fruit of the fair Tree amidst
 The Garden, God hath said, Ye shall not eat
 Thereof, nor shall ye touch it, lest ye die."²

The tree was seemingly singled out only by being prohibited. Because of the fruit's ambiguity, the reader is expected to be free to concretize the image of the fruit so as to "see," "smell," and "feel" it in order to enter into the setting of the poem where the action is to take place. Admittedly, one could just as easily imagine a generic apple, or any other fleshy fruit, e.g., a pear. The discussion presented above, however, points to a fruit very similar to a peach and serves to provide a more concrete image of the unidentified fruit.

The initial ambiguity of the fruit in *Paradise Lost*, however, has encouraged some scholars to dismiss any attempt by the reader to engage in specifying the fruit as a "foolish, idle fancy of the kind that Raphael specifically warns Adam against when he wants to know how angels have sex" (Barton). However, although Adam was enjoined to "be lowly wise" (8.173) and restrain his needless curiosity about the cosmos and its workings so as to focus on the imminent worldly temptation heading his way, the reader certainly need not restrain such curiosity. The poem as poem demands an active imagination. A poet of Milton's magnitude could not have believed, as Gregory Machacek does, that "we should exercise [...] mental discipline [...] and [...] say to ourselves, 'though I am curious as to the variety of this fruit, I will fight that curiosity and remember that the only thing important about it is its being forbidden'" (n. pag.). The mental discipline in reading literature is the opposite. Whether the fruit be apple,

² All quotations from *Paradise Lost* are from *John Milton: Complete Poems and Major Prose*, ed. Merritt Y. Hughes (Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1975).

peach, or pear, only a poor poet would require readers to preemptively and prematurely restrain their curiosity or imagination at the first stage of interpretation in order to get a theological doctrine across. Reading a poem begins with the text, moves into research, ponderings, and deliberations, and returns to the text for validation.

The defense of the primary role of imagination in reading/interpreting literature has long roots in tradition. It is actually based on the Medieval/Renaissance Faculty Psychology ("psycho-physiology" [Boaddus 187]) which accounts for the processes of perception in a human being. Most versions of this theory state that knowledge starts as sense impressions that are carried by "spirits," i.e., links made up from the humors to various organs of the body, from the stomach/liver by the "natural spirits" to the heart where they are refined as "vital spirits" and conveyed through the "animal spirits" to the "interior senses": Fancy/Imagination (*Phantastes*), Common Sense (*Cogitato*), and Memory (*Memoria*). These faculties would then sort out these sensory impressions, survey images, and judge them before they are conveyed to Reason, which informs the Understanding and directs the Will. Of these faculties, the Imagination, which was used interchangeably with Fancy in the Renaissance (Rossky 50), has the capacity to store and reconstruct images from the senses in order to enable thought.³

While the Renaissance witnessed a rise in rank of the Imagination from the Classical/Medieval view as an image-making faculty to that of a visionary power (Maccaffrey 9, 121), *Phantasia* also accrued negative views as a dangerous faculty that can supplant the true images with distorted ones causing fear or aversion in a human being. Bundy explains that these tainted images "account for the fright of the man who cries out because he thinks that he sees something, the physical effects of lascivious thoughts,

³ Sumillera 21; Hunter 259; Rossky 51; Hardy 42, 51, and *passim*.

our beguilements in sleep, the hallucinations of the mad" (162). These images are a distraction to thought (Hardy 51). Two passages from *PL* show that Milton incorporated these concepts in books 4 and 5 in the narration and explanation of Eve's Satanic dream. In book 4, Satan, squatting close to the ear of the sleeping Eve, attempts "by his Devilish art to reach / The Organs of her Fancy, and with them forge / Illusions as he list, Phantoms and Dreams" (800-03). In book 5, Adam explains to the distraught Eve the crucial role of Imagination in her dream:

But know that in the Soul
 Are many lesser Faculties that serve
 Reason as chief; among these Fancy next
 Her office holds; of all external things,
 Which the five watchful Senses represent,
 She forms Imaginations, Aery shapes,
 Which Reason joining or disjoining, frames
 All what we affirm or what deny, and call
 Our knowledge or opinion. (lines 100-08)

Milton is thus presenting the Medieval/Renaissance concept that distortion in the process of knowing occurs in the faculty of Imagination, or the "animal spirits," for, unlike Reason, Imagination is susceptible to external influences such as demonic forces, wherefore it forms images not based on sense impressions, which are illusions. This is the reason why Satan targets Eve's Fancy, especially when it is unprotected by the watchful Reason in the state of sleep, although the "internal wits" or senses are still active (Hardy 49).

Since poetry is a game of engagement and enchantment, the reader must surrender to the poet's world through the imagination and "risk being taken in," as C. S. Lewis suggests (*An Experiment in Criticism* 94). Poetic language distinguishes itself from scientific and religious language in

that it more often rides on the back of metaphors and so requires more interpretation on the part of the readers ("The Language of Religion" 129-31). A good critic, therefore, must engage with the literary text, or any work of art, through the imagination, which has been discussed above. Lewis defends this view in *An Experiment in Criticism*: "The first demand any work of any art makes upon us is surrender. Look. Listen. Receive. Get yourself out of the way" (19). Ideally, he explains, one must first engage with the work and then evaluate it. People must not "rush hastily forward to do things with the work of art instead of waiting for it to do something to them" (25). The words, the colors, and the atmosphere must be tasted and savored as well as the content. To achieve this total imaginative engagement, one must first free oneself from any restrictions that would impede this process, restrictions from expectations, pre-conceived ideas, or foregone conclusions. Another mistake in reading a literary work is to foreclose too soon, which would abort a full interpretation (see the discussion above). The faculty of the imagination must have the time and freedom to exercise its creativity and fertility, to wander unrestricted over words and images in order to produce significant interpretations and enable fruitful thought (*Experiment in Criticism* 133). This notion parallels the Medieval/Renaissance Faculty Psychology in that if Imagination does not provide Reason with material to transfer to the Will and Understanding, or with distorted material, thought is either incomplete or eccentric as was seen in Eve's demonic dream. In short, if one is permitted to wander in one's imagination over the forbidden fruit in *PL*, fathoming its shape, savoring its smell, apprehending its colors, and recollecting its traditional associations and reflecting on them, unencumbered by supposed admonitions from Milton, or fixed opinions from critics who have foreclosed too soon in the process of interpretation—the likelihood of imagining it as a peach is very strong.

Before turning to Andrew Marvell, we should note that Milton stands

partly in the dominant Christian hermeneutic tradition of ascribing the Fall to Adam and Eve's curiosity, a point that will come up in discussing Marvell's poem. Milton alludes to this tradition in lines 771-77 of *Samson Agonistes*, where Dalila blames *curiosity* for her desire to know the secret to Samson's strength and attributes them to "female faults" (l. 777) or "woman's frailty" (l. 783):

I may, if possible, thy pardon find
 The easier towards me, or thy hatred less,
 First granting, as I do, it was a weakness
 In me, but incident to all our sex,
 Curiosity, inquisitive, importune
 Of secrets, then with like infirmity
 To publish them, both common female faults.

One might legitimately distrust Dalila, but Milton himself in *De Doctrina Christiana* implicitly blames curiosity for the Original Sin: "Seeking for knowledge of things which are hidden from mankind is a third type of folly: as, for example, when our first parents sought to obtain knowledge of good and evil, which God had forbidden them" (649-50). Milton appends to this statement several Biblical proof texts, including Acts 9.19, which uses the expression "*qui curiosa exercuerat*" in the Latin text favored by Milton (398). John Carey translates this as "who had practiced occult arts" (650), but Charles R. Sumner earlier translated it as "which used curious arts," the word "curious" here for Sumner implying that one "is prying into hidden things," as Adam and Eve did (252-53). Let us now turn to Marvell's poem "The Garden," which adds support to the underlying connection between the apple and the peach images.

Andrew Marvell and the Peach/Apple

Since all gardens in early modern literature were connected in some way with the fall of man, the Genesis tradition underlies Andrew Marvell's "The Garden." In fact, the setting suggests both a prelapsarian and a postlapsarian Edenic garden with the speaker as Adam, the first gardener. It reaches back in stanzas 1 through 5 to Milton's garden in *Paradise Lost*, and ends with a wish for paradise not yet fallen in stanza 8, a paradise before Eve:

Such was the happy garden-state
While man there walked without a mate:
After a place so pure, and sweet,
What other help could yet be meet! (lines 57-60)

In a sense the speaker is here shifting the responsibility of the fall from Adam to Eve, a misogynistic view that will be reflected later in T. S. Eliot's poem "Prufrock." As Frank Kermode states, "The resemblance to Adam . . . is rather to man alone, to the period before Eve's creation; the poet echoes St. Ambrose's misogyny" (Marvell 297 n 47). The poem explores a complex relationship between man, nature, and God. The fall remains at the center of the poem, in accordance with what one scholar observes about Marvell's poetry, that "in a sense [it] has only one subject: the fall of man" (Chernaik 26).

After comparing nature and humans in the first four stanzas and concluding that nature is superior to men and women, that nature is beneficial to mankind, Marvell then extends a complex metaphor in stanza 5 to describe the abundance of fruits in the garden:

What wondrous life in this I lead!
Ripe *apples* drop about my head;

The luscious clusters of the *vine*
 Upon my mouth do crush their *wine*;
 The nectarine and *curious* peach
 Into my hands themselves do reach;
Stumbling on melons as I pass,
Insnared with flowers, I fall on grass. (lines 33-40; italics added)⁴

Unlike Milton's Adam, who is called upon to cultivate the garden as well as enjoy the foods that appear as superabundant blessings and pleasures, Marvell's speaker is confronted with fruits that seek to impose themselves willfully on him, and this is where such a garden reveals its ambiguous postlapsarian character, as much curse as blessing. Marvell's garden thus reminds readers of potential human transgression, for it promises all the pleasures possible from plants and fruits. Although the main argument is that the gratifications of contemplation supersede physical pleasures, these pleasures are at the forefront of the speaker's mind in the beginning of the poem. Indeed, there is an undercurrent of sensuousness and temptation exhibited in the speaker's description of the fruits of the garden as suggested by the italicized words in the quoted passage. Despite the superiority of the contemplative to active life, of the beauty of trees to women's beauty, and of the garlands of repose to the garlands of heroism, the various fruits in this quoted stanza, these "eatable beauties" (Empson 246), spring up to confront and challenge the speaker. This fruit stanza (or the "gourmet" stanza—Legouis's term qtd. in Monnickendam 194) is a dream for etymologists and literary scholars.

Contrary to Don A. Keister's view (248), Marvell, whom Eliot considered a learned, witty poet of his time, could well have been aware of the etymological reflections on the word "peach" and the other fruits he

⁴ All quotations from Marvell are from *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, 7th ed. Ed. M. H. Abrams and Stephen Greenblatt (New York: Norton, 2000), 1698-1700.

mentions.⁵ Fleshy, kernel-bearing fruits associated with the apple are here: the nectarine, the grapes, the melons—and the "curious" peach. These fruits, if examined as "apples"—and as thereby sharing the apple's punning etymology—reveal the temptation of sensuous pleasures in this garden of solitude, hidden or suppressed in the mind of the speaker though they may be. Once revealed in the speaker's and reader's minds, they form a dialectic with the theme of solitude to suggest that contemplation supersedes sensual pleasures in moral significance. Andrew Monnickendam gathers references to the "peach" from Renaissance treatises and more recent works to show the pleasurable associations of peaches in Marvell's poem: according to *The Boorde Dietary* (1542), the peach (one assumes when ripe) is easily digestible; Sylvester Du Bartas (1591) mentions "the velvet Peach," using an adjective interchangeable with "downy," as in James Thomson's "The downy peach" in *The Seasons-Autumn* (1776); also, autumnal ripeness, in Monnickendam's view, has erotic associations, as shown in this line from Miss Braddon's *Ishmael* (1884): "A gray velvet bodice that fitted the plump, supple figure, as the rind fits the peach" (n. pag.). All these references, according to Monnickendam, suggest sensuousness (197).

Etymological considerations reveal another layer of meaning in the poem that further supports the peach-curiosity-Fall relationship. While the editors of *The Norton Anthology of English Literature* gloss the word "curious" in "curious peach" (line 37) as "exquisite," Ruthven interprets it more significantly, as follows: "[The] 'curious peach' is another fruit to be wary of, for unlawful *curiositas* was the cause of the Fall, which makes the peach *pêché* ('sin') as well as a *pêche* ('peach')" (16). We have already noted that Milton alludes to the interpretive tradition that blames the Fall on curiosity. In *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, a remarkable work revealing the Medieval trial of curiosity, Hans Blumenberg has described

⁵ Marvell may have been influenced by the fruits in Tasso's description of the garden of Armida in *Il Mondo Creato* 3.1407-409 (see McChesney 248).

Christianity's suspicions about curiosity. Indeed, curiosity was considered a vice—and not just any vice, but one of the seven deadly sins, surprisingly, sloth! There is even a Biblical basis for such deep suspicions of curiosity, as can be seen in the *OED* (10a) entry for “curious,” which can mean “inquisitive” in a negative sense, as in: “Nether hath he pleasure in curious and depe inquisicions (Job 35.15, the 1535 Bible [Coverdale]);” and “We must abstaine from ye curious searching of Gods maiestie (Epist. to Galatians (new ed.) f. 16, 1577 T. Vautrollier tr. M. Luther Comm.).” This distrust of curiosity extends beyond the word “curious.” Monickendam and others are also aware of the obvious theme of the Fall suggested by the fruit images in Marvell’s poem. He points out that “it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the crucial stanza’s emphasis falls on *falling*, in other words sin and damnation, as first fruit and then man, plummet to the ground” (198). Kermode acknowledges the image of the “fall” from the ideal state of solitude and contemplation in this poem, but he believes that the consequences are not serious, unlike the biblical Fall (“The Argument” 260).

William Empson, building on this negative meaning of “curious,” suggests that the “curious” peach is “inquisitive” in the sense of having a feeling towards the speaker (132). To other critics, the word “curious” falls along with other interpretations that suggest the role of “ensnarement” on the part of the fruits and, indeed, the whole garden with its plants, trees, and flowers. This interpretation is echoed by Kermode: “The trees and plants press their fruit upon [the speaker]” (259). They “give themselves so as to lose themselves, like a lover, with a forceful generosity; like a lover they *ensnare* him” (132). Indeed, the various fruits are far from passive, waiting to be plucked. They reach out to the speaker: The apples *drop* about his head, the grapes *crush* their wine in his mouth, the melons seem to purposely *lie* in his path so that he falls on the grass, and the nectarines and the “curious peach” *reach* into his hands, perhaps a postlapsarian

reversal as to how Eve's "rash hand . . . [was] forth reaching to the fruit" (9.780-81), for two variants on "reach" occur within Milton's description of the initial stage of the temptation scene (9.591 and 593) and three variants in the final stage of the scene (9.732, 779, and 781). Even more intriguing, Milton suggests that Eve has been "over-reach't" (9.313), somewhat as the speaker in Marvell's poem has been. When one applies, as Empson himself does, another meaning of "curious," i.e., "occult" (*OED* 10.c), one might allow for a more sinister interpretation of the peach as possessing hidden qualities, possibly even of a magically attractive force (see McChesney 248). However, there is only a light sense of such a magical force in the peach in that, for this witty poem, this fruit possesses merely an active role in the process of ensnarement. Monnickendam offers an original insight regarding the poem's setting as a garden. He believes that if we were to contextualize the fruit in Marvell's stanza, we would be reminded of one of the types of Renaissance gardens, "Circe's enchanted garden." He thinks that the "exotic" fruits in the poem fit into this model (200). However, Circe's island is a place of enchantment resulting from Circe's transforming humans into animals. Her "garden" is not known for exotic fruit but for animal-human hybrids. In a sense, Marvell's garden may be closer to Bosch's "Garden of Earthly Delights," but to a limited extent since nude male and female figures are not included. An appropriate interpretation would be to think of Marvell's garden, specifically when the speaker is experiencing the sensuous pleasures of the fruits, as a Golden Age expressing the poet's momentary rejection from contemporary established authority in England (Monnickendam 201), including moral and religious authority, one might add. The peach, along with the other fruits, has a role to play in this transgression, even though in fantasy, but it would seem to be Marvell's favorite choice for alluding to the forbidden fruit, given his use of "curious" suggesting one of the seven deadly sins.

At the end of Marvell's poem, the sensuous pleasures give way to

meditation. Marvell's garden is also a garden of prelapsarian solitude (i.e., without Eve) as opposed to Milton's garden of prelapsarian matrimonial bliss:

Meanwhile the mind, from pleasure less,
 Withdraws into its happiness:
 The mind, that ocean where each kind
 Does straight its own resemblance find;
 Yet it creates, transcending these,
 Far other worlds, and other seas. (lines 41-46)

But this feeling comes to the speaker, perhaps momentarily, only after being on the verge of transgression through succumbing to the pleasurable feelings that were experienced. The poem demonstrates that the senses can be controlled, that reason can be strong to resist temptations issuing from the created world with the aid of imagination—an interesting use of the Renaissance Faculty Psychology discussed above in relation to Milton. Marvell was close to Milton as a friend, both supporting Cromwell and focusing on religious liberty (Smith, “The Boomerang Theology” 144). In 1653, Milton recommended him for the post of Latin secretary, for which Marvell might have repaid him by helping save his life after the Restoration (Marvell xi). In 1674, Marvell penned a poem as part of the “Front Matter” to the second edition of *Paradise Lost*, praising and promoting the poem and the poet. A close reader of Milton's epic poem, Marvell would likely not have missed Milton's possible interpretation of the forbidden fruit as a peach—a reinterpretation that, indeed, fits well with Marvell's “curious peach” in his poem “The Garden” and thus with the traditional Christian critique of curiosity (though which poem came first, Milton's or Marvell's, is still not fully clear). Considering the complex meanings of the peach, described above, one might easily agree with Monnickendam regarding this fruit: “We could not create the same effect

with a mundane apple. [...] [The peach's] powers of suggestion clarify Prufrock's reference to the same fruit, which . . . actually deals with several kinds of appetite" (197). This is a proper segue to T. S. Eliot's poem and its peach.

Eliot and the Peach/Apple

"The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" was begun at Harvard in 1910, completed in Munich in 1911, and first published in *Poetry* in 1915. Eliot was going through a period of rebellion against his Unitarian upbringing and traditional poetic forms. In 1906, he criticized Unitarianism for its austerity, contempt for beauty, imagination, ritual, and suspicion of self and subjectivity (Jain 14, 18, 20)—all elements that would attract him later to the Anglo-Catholic faith. He also rebelled against Georgian forms of poetry and was searching for a new voice to express his own poetry. His "corrosive skepticism" of established faith (Crawford 177; Jain 194) pushed him to study theology and mysticism at Harvard, spurring his desire to know the Absolute. The study of myths, with their patterns of death and resurrection, accentuated the continuity between primitive religions and Christianity (Jain 131-32). His conversion was a "slow incubation" (Gordon 33) begun in his pre-"Prufrock" days. In 1928, after horrible struggles with self-identity, he was able to state in the preface of *For Lancelot Andrews* that he was "a classicist in literature, royalist in politics, and anglo-catholic in religion" (vii).⁶ Anglo-Catholicism connected Eliot to English culture and to European Christianity (Gordon 213).⁷

Yet, Eliot's brand of Calvinistic Puritanism remained rooted in his

⁶ Manju Jain and Joseph Maddrey believe that this statement shows the influence of the French right-wing Charles Maurras (1868-1952) (58; 141-42, respectively).

⁷ On Eliot's conversion, see also Gordon 192-232; Jain 230.

Anglo-Catholicism. As late as 1954, he stated that he combined “a Catholic cast of mind, a Calvinistic heritage, and a Puritanical temperament” (“Goethe as the Sage” 243). His acquaintances commented on his Puritanism. Robert Lowell called Eliot a “a tireless Calvinist” who “harried his pagan English with godliness and austerity” (qtd. Gordon 227). C. D. Lewis considered him the “son of Puritans who [was] stooped, lined and bowed by a sense of sin” (qtd. Gordon 528). Dal-Yong Kim has demonstrated how New England Puritanism shaped Eliot’s criticism and poetry (58, 77). Eliot’s brand of Puritanism encompassed a belief in an all-powerful God (Kim 52) and such commendable virtues as chastity, humility, uprightness, self-restraint, and duty; but its focus on “inner depravity” (331) and sin (256) led to horrific attitudes of “intolerance” and prejudice against women. As Lyndall Gordon, one of his biographers, concludes, “Eliot started his poetic career with the smell of decay in his nostrils” (35).

Eliot was also profoundly influenced by the French Symbolists of the *fin-de-siècle*. Ahn Joong-Eun (안중은), in a nearly fifty-page article in Korean, has demonstrated Eliot’s expert scholarly understanding of the French symbolist poets, particularly Charles Baudelaire, Jules Laforgue, and Paul Valéry (“T. S. Eliot and French Symbolism,” *passim*). In his early poetic ventures, Eliot needed a new voice and a new form for his poetry. These came to him through reading Arthur Symons’ *Symbolist Movement in Literature* in 1908, which was a turning point in his life and which drove him to Paris in 1910. About the poet Jules Laforgue (1860-87), Eliot states that no other writer meant so much to him (Gordon 42). Laforgue provided him with new forms of poetry, the use of self-irony, the juxtaposition of the sublime and the banal, the dream monologue, a modern urban setting of blighted city with its “nocturnal wanderer,” and the split-self persona—all of which Eliot uses in “Prufrock” to express ironies and complex consciousness through allusions and symbols (Kim 29). Most of all, Eliot

was able to "articulate a sense of displacement profoundly important in modern literature" (Gordon 267). In the poet Charles Baudelaire (1821-67), he found a kindred spirit, quasi-Puritan with an acute sensitivity to good and evil, sin and redemption (Kim 235), but who also uses blasphemy as a way of affirming his beliefs. Eliot found him to be a *naturaliter* Christian ("Baudelaire in our Time" 104). What Eliot most appreciated about these poets was that they were on a solitary journey, like himself, to discover Christianity and that they provided him with new forms of poetic expression that he needed in the 1910-11 period.

In the somewhat autobiographical "Prufrock," the two voices available for Eliot combine: the self-denying Puritan voice of his New England ancestors and the modern voice of the alienated and fragmented self of the French Symbolists. In this poem, the Laforguian persona wanders the sordid streets of a metropolis, one side of it desiring acts of daring, the other suppressing all such desires. He clearly explains that these "desires" were for women (Gordon 53). Eliot's brand of Puritanism that was based on inner depravity and a conflict between body and soul, nourished longstanding hatred and prejudices, especially against women. In pre-"Prufrock" poems he reveals his disgust for women: they were the "eternal enemy of the Absolute" which he was trying to understand (Gordon 34); they were "baffling" and "alien" creatures (Gordon 37), "self-absorbed" (38), waiting to humiliate men (35-36). In a remark that alludes to "Prufrock," Gordon writes, "The characteristic irritability of Eliot's [early] pieces on women was the rankling of inhibition compounded by a fear of having dared too little" (38). Besides, as his biographer Robert Crawford claims, due to his father's remarks about the "nastiness" of sex (65), Eliot developed an aversion for recreational sex, which he associated with sin. All these attitudes regarding women and sex are present in "Prufrock," which was originally titled "Prufrock among the Women" (Gordon 34). In this poem, notes Hyun Young Min (현영민), Eliot seems to

dismiss most women as temptresses, so a man needs to purify himself of such sensual desires to avoid succumbing to temptation (100). Eliot's ideal woman is silent and still, like the Virgin Mary, Dante's Beatrice, and Poe's Helen or Annabel Lee, each of whom has a transcendent beauty never defiled by man's base desires (100-01).

Eliot's involvement with the Symbolist movement makes his imagery especially subtle, evocative, and strange (for his time). No reader can forget some of the similes in "Prufrock": the evening compared to "a patient etherized upon a table" (l. 3)⁸ and the speaker to "a pair of ragged claws / Scuttling across the floors of silent seas" (ll. 73-74). However, one of the most challenging images to interpret in "Prufrock" is the peach, found in Eliot's line, "Do I dare to eat a peach?" (l. 122), because this fruit in Eliot's poem is an abstract peach, mentioned once and that rhetorically, in a non-garden setting, a fictional wasteland, rather than in a garden like Milton's and Marvell's poems. Robert Fleissner, in *Ascending the Prufrockian Stair* (1989), admits of the poem "J. Alfred Prufrock" that "the identification of the peach is a mystery" (39), somewhat similar to the difficulty of identifying the fruit in *PL*. He goes on to present and then reject, correctly, some conflicting interpretations of the peach that he deems of little significance: that Prufrock did not dare to eat the peach because he was too fastidious and doubted that the peach was ripe enough, or that he had false teeth, and the like. He believes that the peach should not be taken too literally (40). As a symbol, it could mean "fruit seed" or semen (40). In a broader sense, eating the peach could mean an initiatory rite, entering "life for its own sake [...] which would include the finale of dying" (42). John Cooper offers a more significant interpretation in line with the concept of moral transgression. He believes that the image of daring to eat the peach resonates with a litany of various images of debilitation in the poem—the

⁸ All quotations from T. S. Eliot's poetry are taken from *T. S. Eliot: The Complete Poems and Plays, 1909-1950* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1971).

bald spot in Prufrock's hair (l. 122), wearing his trousers rolled up to appear young (l. 121), among others—to denote a "crisis in self-fashioning" (52). Amar Dwivedi, writing in 2003, believes that "[l]eft with no other options to console himself, the protagonist walks down the seashore dandyishly in his white flannel trousers where he can part his hair to conceal his baldness and 'risk the solaces of a peach'—the sole forbidden fruit" (31; Smith, *T. S. Eliot's Poetry* 20).⁹

This poem is based upon the thrust and counterthrust forces of desire and inhibition, desire for women and repression, emblemized in the question, "Do I dare to eat a peach?" where the peach is clearly the

⁹ Interestingly, in other poems, Eliot uses many fruits, other "cousins" of the apple, to suggest physical temptations. Hyun argues that Eliot also draws upon a traditional interpretation that the forbidden fruit of Genesis was the fruit of a fig tree, of which the fig leaves signified the male principle and the fig fruit, the female, whereby Eliot understood the Original Sin as a Fall into sexual passion (83-84). According to Hyun, this fig fruit is reinterpreted as a peach in "Prufrock," but as an apple in "Dry Salvages" (84-85), where it symbolizes the experience of sinning:

People change, and smile: but the agony abides.
Time the destroyer is time the preserver,
.....
The bitter apple and the bite in the apple. (2.66-67, 69)

In "Ash Wednesday," Eliot describes a "slotted window bellied like the fig's fruit" to introduce a figure that represents the charms of physicality. In the satirical poem "The Hippopotamus," he distinguishes between the "broad-backed hippopotamus" rolling in mud and the "True" Church, whose members are luxuriating with fleshy fruits, cousins of the apple in lines 13-16:

The 'potamus can never reach
The mango on the mango-tree;
But fruits of pomegranate and peach
Refresh the Church from over sea.

For Eliot, then, several fruits can stand in for that traditional Forbidden Fruit, the apple.

forbidden fruit. Unlike the other natural images in the poem—i.e., the crab and the yellow fog—which are used simply as images, the peach, although mentioned once and that in passing, is the vehicle for communicating Eliot's pervading sense of sin and transgression. The peach in Hyun's view thus stands as a symbol for women and thus sensual pleasures, or, rather, Prufrock's desire for a woman; yet he does not obtain one, for he dares not eat a peach (86-87). Hyun interprets this conflict, in light of other evidence from Eliot, as meaning that one should forego sensual pleasure and not eat the forbidden fruit (87). However, Prufrock, like Baudelaire, is contemplating transgression also as a way of affirming his identity in a world where women are objects of fear and lust and where streets run in circles "like a tedious argument" (l. 8) in blighted cities leading nowhere.

According to Hyun, Eliot assimilates his religious beliefs to his theory of poetry by casting his concerns about sexuality in terms of a Puritan aesthetic of abstract, spiritual values versus concrete, sensual images that he finds in the Puritan theologian Jonathan Edwards (102). Like Prufrock, one must refrain from eating the peach, but unlike Prufrock, one must refrain through adherence to higher, spiritual values. Prufrock avoids the peach, but he never stops desiring it, so he bears the same guilt as one who has eaten the peach. To free oneself from fear of punishment, one must humble oneself before God. The doctrine of Original Sin, deeply set in his heart, is worked by Eliot into his aesthetics of poetry, which requires self-sacrifice by the artist (81, 102). But the question remains for readers: why a peach? Did Eliot notice that Milton described the forbidden fruit as "downy" (9.851)? If so, then the "dare" in Eliot's self-questioning—"Do I dare to eat a peach?"—could correspond to Eve's bold daring in eating the forbidden fruit, for Eve is described by Adam in *Paradise Lost* as having "dar'd" (9.922) not only to touch, but even to taste, the fruit, a daring action for Eve, such that "Earth felt the wound" (9.782), and a daring action for Prufrock, such as would "[d]isturb the universe" (ll. 45-6).

Another approach, which can also substantiate interpreting the peach in terms of Eliot's early religious beliefs, is to re-examine its etymology, which was presented above in relation to Milton's and Marvell's use of the fruit in a garden, though the landscape in Eliot's poem suggests the absence of any garden or, even, the hope of a "Paradise Regained." Using the etymological approach to the "peach," first broached by McChesney, but developed by Ruthven, Fleissner arrives at his conclusion that the obvious symbolic role of the peach in the Prufrock poem is that it stands for the Forbidden Fruit, understood as the sin of disobedience, like the sin in the Garden of Eden. The strongest reason Fleissner gives is that Eliot had in mind the pun on *malum* and the designation of the peach as *persicum mālum* ("Persian apple"), which associates it with sin, especially if Eliot is thinking of another pun, the French *pêche* ("peach") on *péché* ("sin") (50). By using the peach, Eliot could avoid a cliché and yet still suggest the apple and its connection to the first sin. Regarding Eliot's verbal acrobatics, Fleissner quotes from a letter he received on June 28, 1977 from Professeur Sylvère Monod, one of the professors at the Sorbonne, who wrote, in answer to Fleissner's query about this wordplay by Eliot (the pun on *péché* in French): "[T]here can be no doubt that T. S. Eliot, like Joyce, indulged in that kind of game" (qtd. in Fleissner 50). Fleissner also writes that "since Eliot was so knowledgeable on French literature and wrote poetry in French himself, and since he fitted into a group of writers who indulged in verbal acrobatics, this playful explanation is perfectly apropos" (50). It is noteworthy that in a later essay on Baudelaire, Eliot quotes Baudelaire's use of the term "*péché originel*": "La vraie civilisation n'est pas dans le gaz, ni dans la vapeur, ni dans les tables tournantes. Elle est dans la diminution des traces du péché originel" ("Baudelaire" 381). ("The true civilization is not in the gas, nor in the vapor, nor in the turning tables [of spiritist seances]. It is in the diminishing traces of Original Sin.")

If the peach in "Prufrock" can be taken as a symbol of transgression,

theological and moral, as the etymological investigations associated with the word have thus far suggested, and if Eliot's deep knowledge of French supports the likelihood of his awareness of such etymological possibilities, Fleissner concludes that the peach means, in the context of the poem, Original Sin. He affirms, "[T]he Augustinian emphasis on Original Sin is found everywhere in Eliot, deriving largely from his own Puritan background" (41). Fleissner believes that Prufrock himself is aware of Original Sin, and the reference to the peach in his question—"Do I dare to eat a peach?"—is "simply [...] his own coy way of referring to it" (40). Fleissner gives an explanation of eating the peach from Eliot's aesthetic view as well. The peach is thus an objective correlative for murder and dissection (51). That is, eating the peach means not appreciating its beauty as well as partaking of the Forbidden Fruit (52). Prufrock thus "remain[s] outside the pale of sin—and also, paradoxically, [outside] an aesthetic reward—by simply avoiding serious commitment" (52).

Of further potential use to the study of the peach/sin association in Eliot's poem are two paintings by the Symbolist French painter Georges de Feure (1868-1943), a contemporary of Eliot, for these two artworks pictorially illustrate the pun of *pêche* ("peach") on *péché* ("sin") and thereby establish that this pun was in use in France by the late nineteenth century. One painting is titled *Le Fruit défendu* (*The Forbidden Fruit*, 1895), the other, *Scène de Bruges la Morte* (*Scene from the Dead City of Bruges*, 1896), and both starkly illustrate the connection between peach/apple and the Fall. In *Le Fruit défendu*, there is in the foreground, partially obscured by a floral border, a nude woman, Eve-like, who holds the gaze of the spectator and proffers a peach that she has already bitten. This fruit and its rich juice, which Ian Millman explains as symbolic of blood, evoke the biblical temptation in Paradise, and mankind's ensuing Fall from grace, the consequences of which may be alluded to by the apparent bacchanal taking place with all its feminine sensuality in the painting's background (see Fig.

2 Appendix A). On page 89, Millman describes the painting thus: "Jouant sur une série de dualités fondées sur l'idée du péché original et de la Rédemption, de Feure a mis l'accent sur le côté sexuel et sensuel pour créer une image délibérément provocante" ("Playing on a series of dualities founded upon the idea of original sin and redemption, de Feure has put emphasis on the sexual and sensual aspects to create a deliberately provocative image"). De Feure is obviously using the pun on *pêche* and *péché* to make the connection between "peach" and Original Sin.

In another painting, titled *Scène de Bruges la Morte* (1896), de Feure uses the image of a peach with similar associations. This painting is based upon the final scene from the Symbolist author Georges Rodenbach's novel *Bruges la Morte*, where the character Hugues's mistress seizes a lock of hair of his dead wife. In the struggle that ensues to retrieve it, Hugues strangles her with that same lock. On the table, in front of the mistress, there are some coins (symbolic of her crass materialism) and a peach, stained with blood (see Fig. 3 Appendix A). Here is Millman's description of the painting on page 94: "Une pêche tachée de sang, comme dans *Le Fruit défendu*, serait le symbole de la faute et de la sexualité féminines. Dans ce tableau la référence à Bruges est réduite aux toits de maisons recouverts de neige vus par la fenêtre symbolisant la fin d'une relation stérile et sans issue" ("A peach stained with blood, as in *Le Fruit défendu*, is the symbol of the Fall and feminine sexuality. In this painting, the reference to Bruges is reduced to the roofs of houses covered with snow, as seen from the window, symbolizing the end of a sterile relationship, one without offspring"). Again, in this painting, de Feure links the peach, blood as a symbol of violence and evil, and the Fall. The scene in the painting is also related to feminine sexuality and the serpent since, as Millman adds, the wife's strands of hair used in the strangulation (of another woman) metamorphose into a serpent (94), a clear Eve-Serpent-Fall association. The landscape of Bruges (a city in Belgium), eerily reminds one of Prufrock's

landscape, reflecting a cityscape of isolation and sterility, even covered with snow, hence going further in this respect than in "Prufrock."

It is clear that de Feure's two paintings belong to the tradition of the peach as associated with the Fall and feminine sexuality. There is no solid evidence that Eliot had seen either of these paintings at any time during his European travels. He was in Paris in 1910, a year after de Feure's exhibition at the Galerie Boissy-d'Anglais (Millman 216). He was also in Belgium in 1914, two years after one of de Feure's exhibitions at Brussels, visiting galleries and studying paintings and monuments (Cooper 4; Millman 241). As noted above, he also had studied the poetry of Baudelaire, Verlaine, and Mallarmé at the Sorbonne—poets who influenced de Feure and with whom de Feure had deep personal and professional associations, having rendered some of the themes from their poetry into lithographs and paintings (Cooper 4; Millman 18, 36, 45).

Through the use of imagery in "Prufrock," including the peach, Eliot deals with themes that revolve around the fragile and self-conscious human condition, touching on the ideas of inadequacy, sexual anxiety, and fear of women, but as the use of the peach image has indicated, also the origin of human transgression. The poem is an iconic work of modern despair, reflecting the feared degeneration of the West. Gregory Jay writes, "Eliot stages the disappearance of the Romantic genius loci as a variation on the theme of the death of the gods" (95), a state certainly conducive to sin or moral transgression. Vincent Sherry observes, "Eliot's doctrine of original sin and negative theology allow for a critique of the metaphysics of Western idealism, denying to man any sublime knowledge of the living presence or logos" (108). To the question of who is responsible for acts of transgression, the individual or the suffocating, sterile environment that Eliot describes, consisting of silly, sexually provocative women "[t]alking of Michelangelo" (ll. 14, 36), Prufrock refuses to answer, to act, or to enter into any prescribed role of sinner, lover, or rebel against moral conventions. But

he ponders the transgression, is even on the verge of transgression like the speaker in Marvell's "Garden," as his contemplation of the peach suggests.¹⁰

Conclusion

This etymological study of the image of the peach/apple in the three poems, based upon an engaged reading of the texts with some support from the artists Skenandore and de Feure, opens a new vista on Milton's, Marvell's, and Eliot's use of this image. This study has clarified some lingering ambiguities of the image and its role by showing how the authors have woven it into the fabric of their works to demonstrate their common themes of Original Sin and transgression. In *Paradise Lost*, the fruit as a peach that "downy smil'd . . . and ambrosial smell diffus'd" (9.851-52)—qualities of this fruit as described in Eve's temptation of Adam—is clearly the means, if not the agent, of sin. Eve is thus tempted, acts, and partakes of the fruit, though not knowing that she is "eating" death. Yet, she attains forgiveness and salvation even as she receives her punishment. In Marvell's "The Garden," sensuous temptations in the form of the "curious" peach—unlawful *curiositas* being the cause of the Fall—appear in the garden to ensnare, ever so lightly, the speaker and arouse both a rejection of his time's established authority, only to be subsumed by the *eros* of contemplation. In "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," the peach suggests the ubiquity of temptations, of unfulfilled sexual appetites, but there is no action dared on the part of Prufrock, unlike the daring of Eve,

¹⁰ The relation of his question—"Do I dare to eat a peach?"—to Milton's Forbidden Fruit finds echoes in more recent literature, e.g., in Benjamin Hale's Miltonic novel, *The Evolution of Bruno Littlemore*, in which a chimpanzee named Bruno is tempted by the ambrosial odor of a peach to give an explicit yes to Eliot's question, whereby Bruno falls into the human condition by a process the reader can only marvel at (12-13).

no acknowledgment or understanding of himself and his situation, and thus no disobedience—although he too, like Marvell’s speaker, is on the verge of transgression—and therefore no resolution, or salvation. As Cooper puts it so eloquently:

The poem silently laments the absence of an external or historical measure or standard for human agency, a criterion embodied in institutions (such as a church, for example) that give individual identities not only metaphysical density but meaning as well. What is meant by this is simply that one cannot ascend from the details of experience in “Prufrock” to a framing cosmology. [...] There is no protection here of a symbolic canopy of Christian values. (53)

Whereas Adam and Eve exit the Garden of Eden, watering the ground with their tears, with the promise of “[a] Paradise within thee, happier far” (12.587), and the speaker in “The Garden” comes to understand and celebrate “[h]ow well could such sweet and wholesome hours / Be reckoned but with herbs and flowers” (ll. 71-72), Prufrock wanders in a city abandoned by the gods, by “a standard of human agency” (Cooper 53), filled with humanity’s sexual and social anxieties, a figure of pathos in a sterile landscape that is the inverse of any type of “paradise,” or “garden”—moral, Christian, or poetic.¹¹ As for Eliot himself, unlike Prufrock, he seems to have managed to ascend from Prufrockian despair to the protection of the Anglo-Catholic faith, not quite a “Paradise within,” but perhaps an enclosure of comfort without.

¹¹ Dr. Hwang Sun-Ae (associated with the Korean-German Literature Translation Research Institute and the Literature Translation Institute of Korea, both located in Seoul, South Korea) assisted the authors with the Korean articles by Ahn Joong-Eun and Hyun Young Min. Salwa Khoddam has translated the passages in French.

Appendix A



Fig. 1. *Eve's Dream or Eat a Peach* (1990)



Fig. 2. *Le Fruit défendu* (1895)

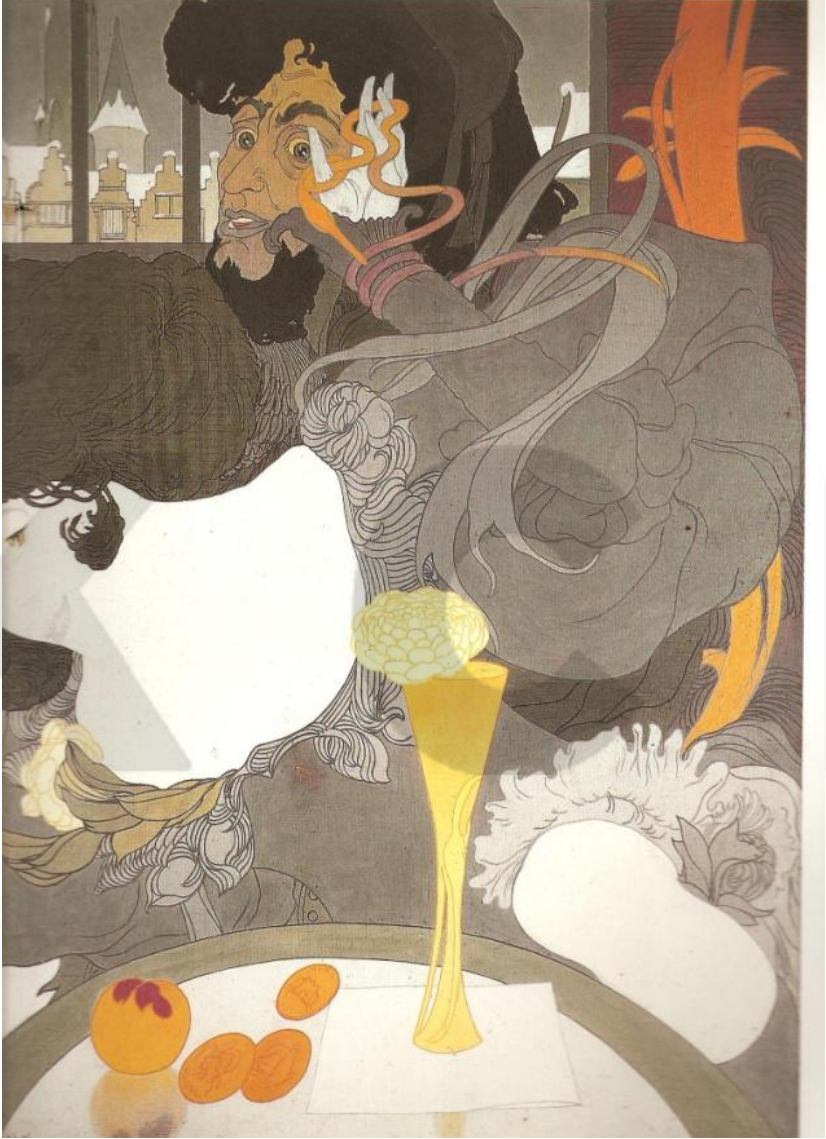


Fig. 3. Scène de Bruges la Morte (1896)

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ABSTRACT**The Peach in Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Marvell's "Garden," and Eliot's "Prufrock": Etymology, Sin, and Transgression****Salwa Khoddam · Horace Jeffery Hodges**

The article investigates the peach as symbol of the forbidden fruit in Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Marvell's "Garden," and Eliot's "Prufrock." Milton focuses on the fruit's appearance as "downy," Marvell refers to the peach as "curious," and Eliot worries that to "dare" to eat a peach could disturb the universe. Milton's choice of "downy" fits the peach better than what we would now call an apple. Marvell's choice of "curious" fits the Christian world's long-held belief that curiosity was the vice that led Eve to try the forbidden fruit. Eliot's choice of "dare" fits Eve's having "dar'd" to eat the forbidden fruit in *Paradise Lost*, for daring to eat the fruit can disturb the universe, as, for example, Eve's eating did. These three points are supported by context, analysis, explication, connections, etymology, and more. Noted in passing are a few brief references in art and literature to the peach as the forbidden fruit, and these are treated merely to show that such identification is not unheard of. More important are the connections drawn between the fruit in the three poems, for such connections are the focus of this paper.

Key Words | John Milton, Andrew Marvell, T. S. Eliot, forbidden fruit, peach, etymology, curiosity