

Star Literature

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book

Eliot on "Prufrock"

by Ahsanul Haque

The following is an excerpt (slightly adapted) from Dr. Ahsanul Haque's *Eliot on Eliot* (University of Dhaka, 1996). The fragment attempts to illuminate some dark streaks and obscure references in a poem that has fascinated the imagination of the age.

IHE love song of J. Alfred Prufrock, the most popular poem by TS Eliot, one may safely assert, has been interpreted variously, and will continue to be done

so, with sanction from Eliot himself. But that does not mean that any guess-work is as good as another. In fact, critical examinations should attempt, as indeed they have always done, to arrive at a dependable reading of the poem. It has been noticed that Eliot's own comments and observations from time to time have been helpful in reducing the areas of error and many dark streaks in the poem are illuminated by his other writings, some of them unpublished.

Prufrock, the protagonist of the poem, has often been thought to be a middle-aged person. With F. O. Matthiessen as most prominent among them, a host of critics, such as Hugh Ross Williamson, Philip Headings, AG George, JP Sen and Louis Simpson, have maintained this view. But Eliot himself once referred to Prufrock as 'a young man; and on another occasion was explicit enough to say that he was in part himself (a student at Harvard at the time of writing the poem) and in part a man of about 40 in an interview published in the *Granite Review*. Whether Prufrock is in part Eliot or not is not so important as the idea of a young man assailed by the thoughts of age passing frequently into middle age and beyond, in his imagination — which is essential for a proper understanding of the poem. Peculiarly enough, Matthiessen admitted that the source of some of the wittiest irony in Prufrock would seem to spring from Eliot's detached ability to mock also the super-cultivated fastidious young man from Harvard, but still he insisted that the hero of the poem is not such a figure. The reason why he tried to set aside a valid point that he himself came upon confronts us with a patent problem in Eliot criticism. Matthiessen, as we can see from our vantage point, was guided by Eliot himself in one of his theoretical formulations — the theory of impersonality — put forward in 'Tradition and the Individual Talent'. The emphasis laid on the distance between the personality of the poet and the work of art led Matthiessen to his final assertion which is an echo of Eliot himself in that essay: 'By choosing a character apart from his immediate experience he has been able to concentrate entirely, not on his own feelings, but on the creation of his poem.' The error, as we see, could be corrected, if not by a bold assertion of the critic's instinct, by attending to some relevant remarks by Eliot himself elsewhere which may be less formal and guarded.

Eliot is also illuminating on the 'you' in the first line of the poem, that has proved a stumbling-block to the read-

ers. Since the poem is supposed to be a 'love son', and the evening described in the first few lines still retains an ethereal quality despite the fact that it is likened to a 'patient etherised upon a table (A D Moody) the person addressed is likely to be the beloved. But in the course of the poem, the female presence is referred to in the third person:

If one, settling a pillow or throwing off a shawl;

And turning toward the window, should say:

That is not it at all.

That is not what I meant, at all.'

Speculative explanations have flourished on the ambiguous situation and a common opinion is that the 'you' is the other part of Prufrock's divided self. But Kristian Smidt succeeded in eliciting a statement to the point from Eliot himself in a letter:

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

Commenting on the assertion Smidt says: This is a timely reminder that we tend nowadays to make even the complex seem much more complicated than necessary by our search for cryptic meanings. Eliot's explanation cannot be ignored. But it does not, of course, preclude associations which would give Prufrock's companion certain recognizable features, and Eliot would be the last person to discount such associations.

It should be noted that the poem which has been commonly regarded as an objective and impersonal expression of the mood or moods of a dramatically conceived character, bears an epigraph — particularly 'confessional' and 'confidential': 'If I thought that my reply would be to someone who would ever return to earth, this flame would remain without further movement...' — a lost soul's confidence reposed in another supposedly lost. The highly guarded confidential tone of the epigraph agrees well with the drift of the poem. The personal inflections of the poet are unmistakable in this confidential utterance. Personal factors, it may be pointed out at once, do not make or unmake poetry, they may simply be there. Poetry emerges with or without them, on its own merits. If personal elements in the Shakespearean Sonnets or Tennyson's *In Memoriam* did not preclude them from being poetry, there is no particular need to deny Eliot's presence in his writings. It is largely Eliot's theoretical insistence, contradicted often by his actual practice, that brought in the debate. It is better, therefore, to agree unhesitatingly with Kristian Smidt: 'As for the Prufrock figure, it can hardly be considered irrelevant to our understanding of the poem to feel that Eliot is present in this creature of his imagination.'

The thematic scheme in Prufrock had been developing in the mind of Eliot for a long time; and Prufrock has

been rightly identified not as an individual, but as the 'generic Eliot character'. The name, most probably borrowed unconsciously, as Eliot concedes, from the signboard of some furniture wholesalers of St. Louis, ultimately provides a 'zone of consciousness' that persists from Prufrock and Other Observations to 'Gerontion', 'The Waste Land' and beyond.

The focal point of this zone of consciousness may be sought in the origin of the character in Eliot's self-portraiture. In an unpublished poem, 'Suite Clownsque', Eliot sketched himself as the firstborn child of the Absolute, turned out neatly in flannel suit. (In his later 'Lines to Cuscuscaraway and Mirza Murad Ali Beg', Eliot underscored his coat of fur and a wopsical hat). In 'Spleen,' published in the *Harvard Advocate* in January 1910, Eliot set against the vapid round of daily activities highlighted by empty Sunday rituals a character named

... Life, a little bald and gray.
Languid, fastidious, and bland,
[who] Waits, hat and gloves in hand,
Punctilious of tie and suit

(Somewhat impatient of delay)
On the doorstep of the Absolute.

Prufrock, J Alfred, sketched not long afterwards, answer to the description of this quaint Mr. Life with his baldness, coat, tie and all.

The central traits of the basically same personality conceived by Eliot, are his compulsive metaphysical preoccupations and his mundane, somewhat funny, exterior. The situation is in the last analysis, that of the dichotomy of the body and the soul, a theme that Eliot fondly dwelt on. It may be noted that in the month 'Spleen' was published, Eliot wrote a confessional poem (not published). The first Debate between Body and Soul, in which he implores the Absolute to save him from the degrading physical senses, and in his 2nd Debate between the Body and Soul (written during the period he had been working on Prufrock) he contemplates a spiritual rebirth threatened by his over-cautious nature.

Considered from his focal point, Prufrock turns out to be yet another version of the struggle between the body and the soul, worked out in 20th-century idioms and images. Prufrock, in this way, turns out to be a 20th-century Everyman. It is this quality which imparts a particular strength to the character, in spite of its apparent thinness and flippancy. His is the manner of a 20th-century man, devoid of glory and heroism precariously clinging to his spiritual pretensions.

Looked at from this angle, the introductory lines, unless misread as a communication between lovers, appear to have a metaphysical predilection leading to an overwhelming question, which in an anti-climatic transformation, is lifted up and dropped on a plate. Playing around the question are a 'hundred indecisions,' 'a hundred visions and revisions' and the momentary desire to 'Disturb the universe'. The pivotal line, 'I have measured out my life with coffee spoons' is a serio-comic recognition of a metaphysical failure.

The philosophical bent has a religious substratum (not to be a accommo-

dated in any orthodox frame as yet), manifested mainly in a predilection for martyrdom:

But though I have wept and fasted,

wept and prayed,

Though I have seen my head (grown

slightly bald)

brought in upon a platter.

I am no prophet — and here's no great

matter.

I have seen the moment of my great-

ness flicker...

The saint-motif in Eliot, modulated variously in a number of his unpublished poems, surfaces here. The would be martyr, the hesitant prophet wants to shock the world into an awareness of its spiritual void by confronting it. Lazarus-like, with an apocalyptic truth.

The poem, judged by its central theme, can hardly be called a 'Love Song'. The title may be traced back to its origin for a proper understanding of its meaning. A number of Eliot's early poems (mostly unpublished) dealing with Eliot's ruminations and reflections on life were entitled *Inventions of the March Hare*. Some of these pieces were called 'Caprices' and 'Interludes'. The titles indicate Eliot's lack of confidence in the merit of these figments of his imagination. More artistically finished pieces of the same category were later dignified by the title 'Preludes' (an improvement upon 'Interlude' and, as I guess, a distant echo of Wordsworth's *The Prelude*). Another poem is entitled, 'Rhapsody', which, thematically, is of the same kind as the 'Preludes' (the musical analogy serving as a link between the two). Prufrock, most finished of the entire group, is directly called a 'Song' and a 'Love Song'; but, depending upon the comparative lack of artistic finish, it could be called an 'interlude' or 'caprice' — one more of the *Inventions of the March Hare*. The title is one of Eliot's triumphs of whimsicality. Kenner pointed out a 'whimsical feline humour in seizing on the name of Prufrock and pointed out the 'surgical economy that used the marvellous name once only, in the title... It was genius that separated the speaker of the monologue from the writer of the poem by the solitary device of affixing an unforgettable title. The device doing the trick, the achieved tone of the poem could 'draw on every emotion the young author knew without incurring the liabilities of 'Self-expression.'

The metaphysical preoccupations of Prufrock are basically those of an academic student of philosophy — 'the super-cultivated fastidious young man from Harvard.' A street to him is like an 'argument', hands lift and drop a 'question' on one's plate, revisions' are further revised, coffee spoons evaluate a life's achievement and a person may be fixed in a 'formulated phrase'. The words 'you and me' repeated four times in the poem in different combinations may recall Omar Khayyam's 'Some little talk of you and me' before a locked door to which no key is found — summing up man's metaphysical stance before the mystery of creation.

The martyrdom motif in Eliot, as discussed earlier, has the psychological variation of a very personal nature. The martyr's zeal is mixed up with morbid thoughts of suicide and the imagined

laceration of the flesh has a masochistic and auto-erotic streak in it, God's martyr may also suddenly change into Love's martyr. On top of all, the protagonist is inadequately convinced of the validity of the martyr's course. Prufrock, in consequence, is no more than an arm-chair martyr (as most of us are) whose occasional journeys are along the suburban streets ending up at the sea beach. Eliot's success lies in exploring the martyrdom potentiality of a representative 20th century middle-class man. We miss his ecstasy, but sense his pang, or, at least, his whimper.

Another submerged tendency in the poem is that it is erotic without being amorous; and, furthermore, the metaphysical in the poem is inseparable from the erotic (Eliot has consciously worked out this combination in 'Whispers of Immortality' where the 'Abstract Entities' circumambulate the compelling physical charms of Grishkin).

The world, particularly its, feminine part, exerts an irresistible fascination on him as it repels him at the same time. The drift of the poem has strange syncopations. Starting in a particular way, the lines run into unexpected affiliations and end up on quite a different note. Eliot himself is conscious of this process in poetic creation. Referring to one kind of writing — and Prufrock surely comes under this category — as beginning under 'the pressure of some rude unknown psychic material', Eliot elaborates in 'The Three Voices of Poetry':

The frame, once chosen, within which the author has elected to work, may itself evoke other psychic material; and then lines of poetry may come into being, not from the original impulse, but from a secondary stimulation of the unconscious mind.

The poem begins with the proposal of a journey which has an indeterminate goal, and a legitimate question about it is forestalled by the facile and facetious rhyme:

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

Let us go and make our visit.

The 'overwhelming question', likely to be a metaphysical one, involves arguments of 'insidious intent'. The path taken toward it is vibrant with animal and carnal sensations (The muttering retreats of restless nights in one-night cheap hotels). The enveloping yellow fog is feminine and feline, rubbing its back upon the windowpanes. The narrator's progression is intercepted by abrupt glimpses of women talking of Michelangelo. His daring, expected to be spiritual in nature, is alternately perked up by sartorial smugness (My morning coat, my collar mounting firmly to the chain) and dampened by a consciousness of physical deficiency. He is morbidly aware of a cold, scrutinizing gaze (they will say: 'How his hair is growing thin!... how his arms and legs are thin!') that soon turns out to be unmistakably feminine, pinning him, insect-like, on a wall. The emerging feminine presence entices him by the whiteness of the arms and sways his reason by the perfume of a dress. After the tea and cakes and ices, he contemplates forcing the moment to a crisis, which is

potentially as metaphysical as physical (at purely physical level, when 'The meal is ended', the house agent's clerk in 'The Fire Sermon' forces the issue to a carnal end). The narrator's most determined attempt to declare his apocalyptic vision is bathetically in a lady's bed chamber, where, settling a pillow, she might say:

'That is not what I meant at all.'

'That is not it, at all.'

The narrator's hopeless ejaculation, 'It is impossible to say just what I mean!', is due to a real ambivalence of his intentions. To boost up his sagging spirits, he contemplates wearing the bottom of his trousers rolled, or eating a peach (recognized as a traditional sexual symbol). The poem ends with the erotic fantasy of the company of the sea-girls wreathed with seaweed red and brown — which is however no more than a pleasurable spell to be broken any moment, and shared by the narrator along with his companion — the you and I of the beginning of the poem (unlikely to be female).

Submerged under all these and unverbalized, there may, indeed, be detected a yearning which may be called a 'love' yearning, Eliot's rooted aversion to both physical and mental qualities of the female personality notwithstanding, the need for love was as keen in him as in any other member of his species. He was therefore in the paradoxical situation of being attracted instinctively to what temperamentally he must spurn. The resultant mood is one of deep depression. Prufrock, the Eliot surrogate, sings a love song in a most melancholic strain that we never hear. To the readers of the poem, however, 'Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard/Are sweeter.' 'Prufrock', therefore, has a message below the level of verbal communication. That the love a woman, gross and mortal, can be as fulfilling as anything on earth, as much as or more than all his other achievements could give, was not admitted by Eliot till his second marriage.

Eliot gathered together these diverse feelings and attitudes, public and private, conscious, subconscious and unconscious, of a typical 20th-century (young) man into a zone of awareness and distilled them into a song. The poetry of this kind has, to borrow Eliot's own words, 'a network of tentacular roots reaching down to the deepest terrors and desires.' Some rude, unknown psychic material evoking other psychic material gradually evolves the poem. The poet's role during this process, according to Eliot, is to make sure that all the varied notes produced as a result are 'heard in harmony'.

The title 'Love Song' may simply be the meat that a burglar throws to the house-dog as he carries on his business — a stratagem some artists resort to, according to Eliot. The obviously traditional and romantic charm of the title captivates the reader's imagination, the poet works on his mind at deeper levels. Eliot called his first volume of verse *Prufrock and other observations*.

It will be proper, therefore, to take its title poem as an observation — on life, on (lack of) love, on man's spiritual quest and his futile destiny and not as a 'Love Song'.

poems

Village

by Gonoful

I went to a village far away
where time turned upside down
to hear you
and learn your wisdom
and you answered with strong winds and clouds
but little rain

We travelled by cycle-van over
a long dusty road.
Night
entered the stage
on the way to Putjani

The moon was full
but cloud hidden
trees and houses
shown black in the horizon
Our driver struggled
four wheels embraced the deep dry silt
bird sounds
and wind
and then from the opposite direction
the moan of buffalo carts straining
under loads of wood

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Often I remember Bachchu,
A slender young boy of Mirganj.
In '71 how old was he, 19?
He was on guard along a road
That goes beyond Charkhat
Towards Bagha, a place unknown to us.
Our cart, a Tomtom, was held up.
Bachchu stood on our way.
Where are you bound for?
No destination.
I don't understand.
Let us look for a shelter.
Why not stay with us?
The village is still free and safe....

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