

## Mutlu Konuk Blasing: On "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock"

The physical and psychological enervation of Eliot's early personae may be read in part as correlatives of his literary situation; this is the way Prufrock, for example, states his problem:

And I have known the eyes already, known them all?

The eyes that fix you in a formulated phrase,

And when I am formulated, sprawling on a pin,

When I am pinned and wriggling on the wall,

Then how should I begin

To spit out all the butt-ends of my days and ways?

And how should I presume?

Prufrock does not know how to presume to begin to speak, both because he knows "all already"?this is the burden of his lament?and because he is already known, formulated. His consciousness of the other's eye?I haunts his language at its source: "Let us go then, you and I." An "I" who addresses a "you" becomes subject to the laws of communication, and his voice is subsumed by expression. In his critical replay of the poetic process, Eliot remarks that the poet expresses not a personality but a particular medium. The particular medium expressed in "Prufrock" is a confession or a dramatic monologue. The you-I split being the formal ground of his medium, Prufrock's problem is in fact the problem the expressive medium introduces, and this identification of the formal and rhetorical dimensions of the medium with the emotion or psychic burden of the speaker makes for the airless closure of the poem. 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.

And if Prufrock's problem coincides with the dynamics of Eliot's particular medium of dramatic monologue, Eliot's problem coincides with the dynamics of the poetic medium itself; just as Prufrock is paralyzed by his consciousness of the other, his author is paralyzed by his consciousness of the tradition. In the line "It is impossible to say just what I mean!" the dramatic character and his author meet, "uttering the words in unison, though perhaps with somewhat different meaning," and displaying the rhetorical advantage a dramatic poet holds. And Eliot's imprisoning his speaker in the very medium of expressive or even confessional speech may register his own intertextual interment in a medium inscribed with prototypes of original or central speech?whether prophetic, like John the Baptist's, or epic, like Dante's, or dramatic, like Shakespeare's?which are codified in and reinforced by conventions precluding the possibility of saying "just what I mean." Eliot's ironic use of rhyme and meter in "Prufrock" acknowledges the complicity of the poet's conventions with his persona's "de-meaning"

language. On the one hand, the "comic" meter of lines like "In the room the women come and go / Talking of Michelangelo" equates poetic forms that channel force and the social forms of keeping conversation light. On the other hand, dreams of escape from the pre-formulating formulae are themselves recounted in formulaic lines, for the solution to Prufrock's problem would be a "solution" for Eliot as well-forgetting the present and the separate self, surrendering to the oblivion of an unconscious nature and the "natural" meter of English poetry:

I should have been a pair of ragged claws  
Scuttling across the floors of silent seas.

The epigraph to "Prufrock" formally subsumes its hero's problem with expressive language to the poet's problem with textuality. The poem is a dramatic monologue, a mimesis of speech, yet it opens with an epigraph that identifies it as writing and diminishes its urgency by absorbing it within the prototype of another confession, so that the beginning "let us go" is already the "end of something." At the same time that the epigraph consigns the persona to the company of his "semblables"—all those confined in the deadly circle of their solipsistic-confessional speech-likenesses—it seals the poet in the prison of literary "truth," which cancels out his life and tells someone else's "lie." Supernatural vision and natural blindness—issuing in prophetic or lyric utterances—would alike deliver Prufrock from himself; but such ascents and descents are not possible within writing, a historically coded and prescribed medium where vision drowns in revision and human voices drown out natural and supernatural music. And if Prufrock—too decorous and conventional to be a prophet or to dally with mermaids—is incarcerated in the echo chamber of his and others' chatter, Eliot finds himself locked in the "room" of literary "talk," too late to "tell all" or to "sing." The poem's epigraph at once opens and closes this discourse of a poet-hero generically old before his time. Eliot's early work is unusual in its dependence on epigraphs that mediate between the poet and the poem, preformulating the poem before it can begin, and his epigraphs often explicitly concern belatedness, exhaustion, and endings. Indeed, the epigraph to *Prufrock and Other Observations* locates Eliot's beginning as a poet by placing him in the company of Jean Verdenal and other "shadows"—Statius, Virgil, and Dante. In "Prufrock," the literary epigraph, bespeaking "not only . . . the pastness of the past, but . . . its presence" (SW, 49), casts such a shadow over the poem that nature itself disappears, for a "sky" that recalls "ether" is, in fact, "etherized" for the present speaker. Thus, social paralysis resulting from knowing all and being known or seen through parallels a literary anesthesia—knowing all predecessors and being preformulated and "epigraphed" by them. Both kinds of anesthesia subject the individual voice to anterior formulas, forms, and styles.

Prufrock's acute consciousness of his age is thus the classic symptom of Eliot's philosophical and literary problem. Prufrock's body is presented as a text, for he literally carries the burden of the past on his body—in the lines, the thinning hair and arms and legs, and other signs of age that record time's passage. In the same way, his monologue is a "polylogue," superscribed with quotations, allusions, and echoes that document the presence of the past. Since existential experience is subsumed by textual experience in early Eliot, bodily and natural forms correlate with literary forms. The labyrinthine cities and "corridors" of history, the sepulchral drawing rooms with their "atmosphere of Juliet's tomb" (CP, 8), the body aging "on its own," and the formulas of discourse are all experienced as suffocating incarcerations. They are all modeled as texts, as stages set and scripts written before the speaker enters to recite his lines. And attempts to free the individual voice by breaking out of forms register, as in "Prufrock," only as impulses to dismemberment and suicide.

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