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Eliot's Eternal Sea: Repetition, Regression, and Change in "Prufrock"

A moment in one hundred and thirty one lines, which appraises all moments—their plodding, indistinguishable progression, each undoing the next in a tidal wave of stagnation—as experienced by a man mortally aware of himself as a man among far more than one hundred and thirty—afloat in society, gasping for air, who tries to force a moment to matter...

T.S. Eliot's poem "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" begins with the titular Prufrock addressing a companion—a gesture at which he is clearly unpracticed. He bids him or her along on a night "spread out against the sky like a patient etherized upon a table" (3). The poem concludes with Prufrock declaring "human voices wake us, and we drown" (131). Between these two references to a single instance of human interaction, Eliot evokes the monumentality of the raucously insecure Prufrock's night on the town as enough, even in theory, to smother and destroy him. He is poised, in the moment that the poem takes place, on the precipice of an evening that could be potentially disastrous, or—even more harrowing—of no consequence at all. Drowning is the inevitable end ever taking place inside of every moment; even a moment like this, the moment that is "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," rocks like the sea. It is much easier to remain etherized upon a table than to awake to human voices (Childs 384). Eliot establishes society as a sea in which to drown not through the use of direct metaphor but in the way individuals figure into the scheme of his anxiety-ridden monologue. The poem does not describe an action; the poem is an action. The "silent sea" through which Prufrock scuttles is

composed of Eliot's words, and, through his use of apprehensive repetition, panicked regression, and a transmutation of imagery that suggests Prufrock's gradual loss of understanding regarding the difference between what he perceives (society) and how he perceives it (a body of water in which to drown), we share in Prufrock's moment "forced to crisis" (Eliot 80). This way, Eliot creates a narrative that builds and crashes back like waves, giving the reader a visceral impression of Prufrock's descent into the white and black waves of a city at night.

Repetition occurs within the poem's first stanza, with streets as the subject of Prufrock's initial, fixative concern. Upon them he projects the unease of interacting with another person, and, as he and his companion proceed, the setting is evoked by means of what interactions he expects to take place. Two instances of this—streets like both "muttering retreats" and "a tedious argument"—arise in the first stanza, but it is with the next that repetition as a device is made plain (5-9). The yellow fog recurs twice in succession, then proceeds to haunt the following stanza (15-16; 25). It is there that eight separate instances of the word *time* in twelve lines, two of which are the same as those in the previous stanza, indicate that Prufrock is clinging—scrambling to *not* move forward, holding fast to shore (23-24). As soon as he shoves off, he sinks and muddles the very beginning of the poem with this repetition once he sees the night prone before him. The two aforementioned stanzas are bookended by the repeated phrase: "In the room the women come and go, talking of Michelangelo" (13-14; 35-36). The repetition of this phrase evokes the clapping of a wave: coming, receding, and coming again, the way Eliot establishes the phrase, leaves, and returns to it. Prufrock may be static, but there is something churning in him despite how he struggles against it: his relationship to others. The women are the first images of other people in the poem besides Prufrock's companion, and their influence over him—indicated by the repetition of the stanza—courses throughout the poem.

Prufrock then states, “and indeed there will be time to wonder, ‘Do I dare?’ and, ‘Do I dare?’” The same question, from which he cannot move beyond, pulls him down to the painstaking examination of his physical shortcomings (38-44). This tallying of his inadequacies—bald spot, thinning forelimbs—evokes the question that has been bewildering him from the moment his outing began: “Do I dare disturb the universe?” This question provokes time to crash over again. He says, “In a minute there is time for decisions and revisions which a minute will reverse” (45-48). Perhaps he may disturb the universe, but time will recede and advance like the sea—and, in a moment, like a lady—and smother his efforts as he makes them.

The following three stanzas begin in a near identical manner, with Prufrock professing to know “them,” “the eyes,” and “the arms”—“know them all” (49; 55; 62). He surveys each broadly and then steps back as he gets closer and closer to the concept of genuine human interaction. Beginning with the “music from a farther room,” the “eyes” that proceed to “fix him in a formulated phrase” render him “pinned and wriggling on the wall” (53; 56; 58). There is a quality not so despairing about this line when one considers how Prufrock has pinned himself already to this moment, fretting his and his companion’s departure into neurotic echolalia; he understands only how to be as scrutinized as his etherized patient. When Prufrock arrives at the hypothetical figure to whom these eyes belong—a woman with “arms that are braceleted and white and bare (but in the lamplight downed with light brown hair!)”—he flees back to the streets in an effort to put off real interaction—or, as it would seem, confrontation (63; 64; 70). But, in despair of becoming one of the “lonely men in shirt-sleeves” who “lean out of windows” smoking pipes, he disowns the whole matter of not only casual socializing, but humanity itself: “I should have been a pair of ragged claws,” he says, “scuttling across the floors of silent seas” (71-74). As Nathan A. Cervo so eloquently states in his essay on the poem, Prufrock’s self-

esteem is “shipwrecked” by his ethereally evoked interaction with others, specifically women (208).

The next three stanzas are strung together by recurrent images of teatime and all its trappings: cakes, ices, marmalade, novels, and teacups (Eliot 79; 88; 102). He likens himself to John the Baptist and Lazarus but undoes both grandiosities first by stating plainly that he is afraid and then by envisioning his moment-which-matters undone by this woman, the one with the eyes who, with a shake of her head, states, “That is not what I meant at all. That is not it, at all.” This is repeated at the close of the next stanza, wherein he exclaims, “It is impossible to say just what I mean!,” which is, as far as one can tell, quite true, considering how incapable he is of keeping an idea from intruding upon him as he tries—or tries to feign—to move past it (97; 98; 104; 109; 110). He makes it clear at—aptly—the beginning of the end of the poem that he is fit to “swell a progress, start a scene or two” but not to be the one who carries out the action—even to such an extent that Hamlet, the figure he cites as being his dramatic foil, cannot act to keep the action moving (113). He is more inert than even that, as he proves with his use of another device: regression.

Regression is another manifestation of Prufrock’s introversion; each line is undone by the one that follows it. After opening with the remark about the night resembling an unconscious body, he proceeds with normal—if neurotic—talk of the evening: the streets and restaurants, and the room “where women come and go” (6; 7; 13; 14). For Prufrock there is time to both “murder and create,” to undo what you’ve tried to accomplish (28). Within the next stanza—not quite halfway through the poem—he turns attention to the “bald spot in the middle of [his] hair” and ponders whether, after all this initial fretting, all his sizing up of any and all immanent existential threats, it is worth it to move on with the poem at all (40; 45-48).

There is a uniform back-and-forthness between each of these next three stanzas: he sees his every day until his end all filled throughout with voices “dying with the dying fall” (52). When he is “pinned and wriggling on the wall,” he wonders, “How should I begin?,” when it is clearly too late for beginnings (58-59). Confronted by a woman, he stumbles back to the closing line of the previous two stanzas: “And should I then presume? And how should I begin?” (68-69). He is utterly lost at sea when faced with the concrete image of a woman.

The “ragged claws,” as well as the stanza before it, form the center of the poem. The first half of the poem ends with Prufrock wondering if it is worth it to remark on the loneliness of man, and the next begins with his “silent seas” lament, which makes his decision clear (70-74). He recedes and swallows up the entire poem thus far with that statement, dismissing it as a failed attempt to “disturb the universe” (46).

The extent of Prufrock’s vulnerability is, befittingly, stated baldly with his comparison of himself to John the Baptist, as opposed to contextually through the use of repetition (82). He attempts to make up for his failed attempt at universal disturbance by posturing alongside dramatic figures. The comparison in the next stanza to Lazarus builds upon the tensions expressed through the previous one. This is a persecutory move on Prufrock’s part, directed firmly at his companion. “Would it have been worth it,” he asks, “to say: ‘I am Lazarus, come from the dead, come back to tell you all, I shall tell you all—’” He undoes this by stating that his hypothetically imperial lady “settling a pillow by her head” would dismiss the whole business anyway (94-98). This imagined scenario demonstrates how he feels such a lack of integrity about his own thoughts and feelings—as if they were water—that he can dismiss them all so easily, simply by figuring what a woman might have to say about it all.

He deigns to do such mundane things as “part [his] hair behind” and “eat a peach” as he

“walk[s] upon the beach” (122-123). Here, attempting these simple tasks, he overhears the song of the mermaids. This he discredits with the next stanza, a single line: “I do not think that they will sing to me” (124-125). To close, he once again addresses his companion, asserting that they “have lingered in the chambers of the sea”—they have been stalling. Now this progression—from the streets, the toast, the tea—to Prufrock’s dramatically rendered, imaginary undoing by a woman climaxes in a total diffusion of the ultimate action of which Prufrock is capable: drowning.

Brought on by the sound of “human voices,” drowning is worked up to throughout by a gradual transmutation of imagery rather than by simple recurring images. The first is the evening, “spread out against the sky like a patient etherized upon a table” (131; 1-3). The idea of being rendered unconscious is the first to occur to Prufrock when confronted by his companion. The yellow fog into which they pass, down “streets that follow like a tedious argument,” “rubs its back” and “rubs its muzzle” (15-16). The landscape is anything but sedate and, while not necessarily threatening, something of an indifferent beast. This causes it to seem “crowded but lonely,” as Peter Lowe points out in his article, “Prufrock in St. Petersburg” (5). This is what thrusts him into his tangent and arrests his ability to even progress tangentially past the women “talking of Michelangelo” (Eliot 13-14; 35-36). The way that image appears and bobs back again, juxtaposed by the menacing life teeming from the city, renders the women, ever coming and going, more like a force—like waves.

The streets are charged with a vigorous sense of being, but interaction with others is abstract—“visions and revisions,” “the taking of a toast and tea” (33-34). Prufrock’s catalogue of weary inevitabilities, which ends with women, is followed closely by his remark on his preferred fate as one scuttling “against the floors of silent seas” (49-74). Considering how human figures

have been rendered wave-like by Eliot's use of churning repetition and regression, this vital image at the center of the poem could be read as Prufrock's wish to be amongst people. But he specifies "silent" seas. After all the muzzle-rubbing of the yellow fog, this is Prufrock's reassertion of the etherized patient spread before him, posing no threat; he would like to be around others, but under certain stipulations. This is as close as he comes to admitting he would like to be in the situation in which he has found himself—associating with another person—and, considering how he takes the opportunity to liken himself to a crustacean, it would seem his concern regarding how impossible it is to "say just what [he] means" is appropriate (104).

Prufrock refers to himself as "one that will do to swell a progress"—to advance the wave, to acquaint himself with all the eyes and arms, to be afloat amidst society until he "grow[s] old" (113; 55; 62; 120). The poem ends with his traversing along the beach, observing the mermaids and being entranced by the waves, which constitute the most concrete and straightforward image in the whole poem:

I have seen them riding seaward on the waves
 Combing the white hair of the waves blown back
 When the wind blows the water white and black.

Still, the waves have hair—a human quality (126-128). At this revelation—that, as far from the streets as the beach can be, humanity is as likely to be found in the sea as it resembles the sea—Prufrock concludes that we "have lingered in the chambers of the sea" (129). We have loitered too long in the antechamber of human interaction. It is time to plunge into it.

Whether Prufrock makes it past this declaration and goes off with his companion successfully or not remains ambiguous, but, if one gathers as much from Eliot's deluge of arm-flailing attempts to move from one thought to another—communicated by the repetition and

regression—and from the slight, almost unconscious progression of imagery from panting, bestial city to humanity rendered in liquid abstractions, a likely conclusion washes ashore. Eliot understood that a poem could be a moment, a moment could be a life, and poetry could be charged with this churning, fluid inevitability—that all things are always unstable and, in that, never change—instead of struggling against it, forcing sense and story where there are simply this fact and the fear of what that means for Prufrock, Eliot, and other human voices.

Works Cited

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