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On First Looking into Eliot's "Prufrock"

When I first heard aloud lines from "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," I was among a group of young men in English class at DeWitt Clinton High School in the 1960s. We were in the Scholarship Program, a cohort of smart kids separated in every academic subject from the general population of the all-male institution. As I recall, we'd been sailing chronologically through some anthology, Mr. Greenhouse at helm—only weeks out from the martyred tones of "The Prisoner of Chillon"—when we came on this dramatically different voice. A sufferer, too, but inwardly only, in a jail of self; when J. Alfred Prufrock spoke even students not terribly interested in poetry perked up. What I'd discerned in reading was reinforced in Greenhouse's voice, and as I re-read, I re-heard. Here, as we would learn, was the sound of the modern, which we took in a general way for the sound of the contemporary, and we had reasons. It was the sound, though, that impressed, the allusive echoing (we'd read *Hamlet*, been sent to Marvell), and weaving through, not a rhyme scheme but scheming rhyme and variable rhythm—and repetition—of word, of line—everything playing unpredictably with expectations. All sufficient to put a young reader off balance, and yet there was something deeply familiar about it.

Anyone raised in the Bronx in the 1950s—and perhaps St. Louis in the 1890s—had the ear trained by the meter of the street as much as the nursery. We were steeped in the cadences and variations and close rhyming that helped make jump rope, patty-cake, and choose-up rhymes compelling, hypnotically strange, and almost literally unforgettable. With repeated use, the oddness submerges. I suspect few children consistently visualize what it would be to "catch a tiger by the toe." These chants are emphatically formal, frequently bizarre in content, and often irregular, too. "Eenie, meeny, miny moe/ Catch a tiger by the toe/ If he hollers, let him go," is followed by a version of "My mother said to pick this one and out goes Y-O-U," a sort of rhythmic collapse. Insistent and then the receded rhyme in a muddied sense of line feels here in miniature a rough equivalent of Eliot's technique in "Prufrock."

Scores of these chants have closely rhymed beginnings that change: an apparent couplet (many with internal as well as end-rhymes) can precede a quatrain on two rhymes—AA (with an "A" or two mid-line, as well) becoming BXBX, or, say, XBXB as in "Ink a bink a bottle of ink/ The cork fell out and you stink/ Not because you're dirty/ Not because you're clean/ Just because you kissed the girl/ Behind the magazine." It is common, too, for strongly established rhythms to shift. Similarly, the promise of regularity in Eliot's opening couplet evaporates by line three, to resume in line four, sustained for three couplets of uneven line lengths, and then again rhyme is temporarily abandoned. The rhyme in "Prufrock" struck me with its obvious, if somewhat inconsistent, presence. It seemed important, though—a cumulative effect I could not quite describe at sixteen beyond how it makes for strangeness, and humor. (Has the speaker made the joke or unknowingly made himself one?)

The short-lined couplet that concludes that initial verse paragraph with the invitation to move, paralleling "visit" with "is it" has a doggerel feel, and certainly childish verselets could accommodate the next lines, the muted silliness of monosyllabic "go" matched with "o" in the polysyllabic "Michelangelo." Later, we find obsessive instances—triplets and more—"dare" (twice in a line), "stair," and "hair" precedes "thin," "chin," "pin" and "thin" again. Ordinarily, repeated rhyme has comic effect, till it repeats so much that what was a little humorous verges on clang-association, a little crazy. Suitable accompaniment, however, for self as ragged claws on the sea floor. (Hyper-rhyming and irregular intervals form habitat for Dr. Seuss' bizarre creatures.)

Rhyme represents an irrational element, illogical yokings, to begin with and rhyme at random only more so: makes the audible line-endings shifting, ragged. As the arena of the poem is Prufrock's consciousness, a dreamlike place of jump-cuts of association—rhyme becomes crucial to how that atmosphere of internality is established. Metrical regularity is offered and then withdrawn, interval expands and contracts—a graceful pentameter might be followed with a truncated line and then by something extended well beyond five stresses. This variable music the poem plays, by rhyme and stress, does indeed make a case for Eliot's contention that poems can communicate before comprehension. Eliot subtly accesses something deep inside our heads, some amorphous Ur region of rhythm and rhyme, filled in childhood, to help create the illusion that we are inside another's head, at the edge of the rational, that this was the sound of an interior. That, I believe, was the sound I heard when introduced to the poem.

We made fairly reductive sense of that sound in the classroom, the interpretation taking now familiar paths, but surprisingly connected to our growing awareness of contemporary culture. All of us were listening to rock and roll, some to Dylan. We were entirely alert to popular versions of "making it new"—rock was our music, new music, made much of, even then, as being a form itself of protest, some kind of affront to an old order. Maybe it was, and there were certainly the composed folk songs of explicit protest, also, to round out the zeitgeist. Cultural critique was familiar, the cry against alienation, as well, and much thematically in the poem resonated as of the moment. Perhaps what felt most relevant was the sense that the poem embodied a generational divide: a poet—in his twenties (twenty-seven at publication in 1915)—creates a middle-aged speaker, a victim of neurotic paralysis, with which to comment on the enervation, the spiritual depletion, of bourgeois society. This reading especially seemed apt for our cultural moment in the sixties.

That "Prufrock" might have contributed, fifty years before, to setting the terms of what would register as "of the cultural moment," I don't know that any of us considered. Literature was already losing its hold on most of my classmates even as it tightened its grip on some. However, just the fact that something that seemed as important as cultural critique happened through this poem—along with the necessity of digging to get at it—had an attraction for me. Much of rock and roll seemed puerile to me, which was partly genuine, partly the pose of the uncool, untough, ex-Yeshiva boy I was, in the midst of a large Bronx high school. I rejected what would reject me, had I the means to approach: rock and roll culture, singing its access to sex, and all sorts of secondarily longed-for freedoms, driving a car on the open road among them. I was still a subject person, controlled by those most proximate middle-agers, my parents, and already inundated in the 1960s rhetoric around Vietnam. "Always the old to lead us to the wars/ Always the young to fall," as Phil Ochs had it.

The protest song, too, even assenting to the message, struck me often as unartfully obvious. I wanted something "higher," deeper, more recondite, than song—as an adherent to the faith of my parents' generation, that high art that could transform the greenhorn into a toney sort of American. The hunt through "Prufrock" to bag the literary allusion, the layers of irony—the complexity, even of scansion, was highly satisfactory, felt worthy of the efforts of a scholarship-school

student and immigrant's son, felt like an alternative to the tremendous outwardness of rock and roll. Poetry like Eliot's did not merely offer the satisfaction of puzzle-solving to me. Rather, I wanted to trust that the complexities were there to serve intelligence as well as emotion; they promised a poetry of intellectually worthy emotion. Moreover, if I could absorb the "code" of references and allusions I would have in my possession some part of what powered Eliot: the whole English tradition, which I might then use as freely as he does. The enviable freedom he had extended to a kind of easy vandalism: break the pentameter, scatter fragments of great work, and in the service of the creation of a character like Prufrock the paralyzed upon whom the reader is invited to sit in judgment.

And yet, the paralysis of J. Alfred notwithstanding, from earliest acquaintance I did not only judge, I sympathized. In his apparent sexual frustration he was a target, but I, and I'm sure others of my classmates, identified unironically with his inability to get the question, however it might be framed, asked. The haunting sensual perception of the downy arm hair of the woman drifted close to me, too. And who better to understand J. Alfred's terrible social anxiety than a gawky, be-pimpled adolescent. But it's neither sympathy for nor judgment of the character of Prufrock that made the strongest impact in Eliot's love song, but the disbelief-suspending illusion of the mask, that a self might be presented, might say itself for us, that poetry might seem to get inside a mind's unfolding thoughts, might straddle the rational and irrational, might bring the sound of the inside out, and still communicate. That was the thrilling thing audible in Eliot, through Prufrock.