

David Spurr: On "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock"

This five-line interlude ending on "the floors of silent seas" forms an encapsulated version of the remainder of the poem, in which the frustrated effort to establish purposive discourse leads once again to withdrawal downward and inward to a silent world of instinctual being. A return to images of distension and distracting sensuality provokes a final impulse toward violent imposition of the will--"to force the moment to its crisis"--which ends, like previous thoughts of disturbing the universe, in ruthless self-mockery. The image of decapitation parodies the theme of disconnected being and provides for at least a negative definition of the self: "I am no prophet."

By this point the tense has quietly shifted from present to past, and the speaker offers a series of prolonged interrogatives on the consequences of action not taken. While its grammatical context ("And would it have been worth it") reduces it to the contemplation of "what might have been"; the language and imagery of this passage enact with renewed intensity the recurring drama of mental conflict:

Would it have been worth while,
To have bitten off the matter with a smile,
To have squeezed the universe into a ball
To roll it towards some overwhelming question,
To say: "I am Lazarus, come from the dead,
Come back to tell you all, I shall tell you all."

The infinitives in this passage--to have bitten, to have squeezed, to roll--conform to the poem's widespread use of transitive verbs of direct action in expressing the speaker's violent impulse to combat the forces of disorder: to murder and create, to disturb the universe, to spit out all the butt-ends, to force the moment.

The poem's linguistic and thematic strategy consistently opposes active verbs to the passive voice which causes things to be spread out, etherized, smoothed, and stretched. It sets these infinitives against present participles, which are constantly muttering, sprawling, rubbing, scuttling, and settling. Finally, it opposes these transitive verbs to intransitive verbs which lie, linger, mangle, lean, curl, trail, wrap, slip, and sleep. A relative lack of modifiers and the absence of plural forms further distinguishes the passage cited above. By contrast the language of disordered experience, of imprecision and aimlessness, abounds in modifiers and plurals: restless nights, one-night cheap hotels, visions and revisions, the sunsets and the dooryards, and the sprinkled streets.

The structure of the imagery at this point in the poem corresponds to the thematic role played

by linguistic form. To have "bitten off" the matter, in addition to its hint of blunt force, would constitute a positive reaction against endlessly idle talk; squeezing the universe into a ball would counteract the world's tendency to fall apart and to spread itself out like yellow fog; finally, the act of rolling it toward some overwhelming question at least imparts direction to the movement of the universe, even if the actual destination, like the question, remains unclear. The idea of proclaiming oneself a prophet "come back to tell you all" implies a power of linguistic discourse equal in magnitude to the physical act of squeezing the universe into a ball. Once more the idea of language joins with images of purpose, only this time in such hyperbolic fashion that the ultimate failure of discourse strikes one as inevitable: "That is not what I meant at all."

The speaker's failure to master language--"It is impossible to say just what I mean!"--leads in this case not to a statement on the inadequacy of words themselves, but rather reflects upon the speaker's own impotence. In a poem so obsessed with problems of speech and definition, to have failed with words is to have lost the war on the inarticulate: the speaker as heroic Lazarus or Prince Hamlet is suddenly reduced to the stature of an attendant lord, "Full of high sentence, but a bit obtuse." The old man with rolled-up trouser bottoms has shrunk from his former size. Paradoxically, this diminution of the outer self--the part of the mind concerned with imposing order on experience--brings about a corresponding expansion of the inner self.

In the same essay where Eliot locates the beginnings of a poem in an unknown, dark "psychic material" that is put into form by the conscious mind, he allows for a secondary resurgence of the unconscious that arises from the very process of poetic composition: "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 mental forces at work in Eliot's description of the poetic process serve as an analogy to the conflicts besetting the speaker in Prufrock. The speaker is a failed poet in terms of his inability to "murder" existing structures in order to "create" anew; he finds it impossible to say what he wants to say. In the "secondary stimulation of the unconscious mind" that occurs at this point, he partly abandons and partly resolves the struggle of form and matter; the integration of the psyche remains at best incomplete.

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