

John Paul Riquelme: On "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock"

The complications of "Prufrock" involve from the poem's beginning a more direct transformation of the dramatic monologue than does "Gerontion" when the pronouns that "I" uses suggest the presence of an unspecified listener. In many dramatic monologues the listener is also not specified, and the reader is invited to take over the role of listener in a one-sided conversation. In "Prufrock," however, it is not clear whether a real conversation is being dramatically presented, whether the "I" is having an internal colloquy with himself, or whether the reader is being addressed directly. The "you" that is "I"'s counterpart stands in two places at once, both inside and outside Prufrock's mind and inside and outside scenes that can with difficulty be imagined based on the minimal details provided. The reader's situation resembles the position of the viewer of Velázquez's "Las Meninas," in which a mirror invites an identification with the observers of the scene depicted in the painting while the painting's geometry indicates that the illusion of that identification can be sustained only by ignoring obvious details. Reader and viewer stand both inside and outside the frame of an illusion that cannot be sustained.

Two epigraphs from Dante precede and follow the poem's title, one for the entire volume that takes its name from "Prufrock," the other for the poem itself, which stands first in the volume. Together they suggest the oscillation and indeterminacy of Prufrock's position and the reader's. In the first epigraph, Statius mistakes Virgil's shade for a "solid thing" and forgets momentarily what he himself is and can do. In the second, Guido da Montefeltro predicates his address to Dante on the opposite mistake, that Dante is not human and cannot carry his words further. Like Statius and Guido, the reader who tries to pin down the indeterminate identities and locations of "you and I" in the poem will always be mistaken. What is taken for a shade or a figment may be flesh and blood, and what is taken for living flesh may be only a figment in a perpetual instability that marks "Prufrock," like "Rhapsody," as the transforming end of a sequence of poems to which it can be said to belong but some of whose implications it subverts. The subversion occurs largely through the removal of those referential, seemingly stable elements of scene and character that contribute to making the illusion of hearing a personal voice in poetry possible.

Eliot's particular transformation of the dramatic monologue in "Prufrock" depends on the character of the pronouns "you" and "I," which linguists call "shifters" because they are mutually defining and depend for their meanings on the pragmatic context of the discourses in which they occur. Instead of naming something unchanging, these pronouns indicate positions that can be variously occupied.

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