

Prufrock Supine and Sweeney Erect

‘The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock’ was one of Eliot's earliest poems, begun while he was still at Harvard in 1910. It is the first purely modernist poem in English. The fragmented, allusive, ambiguous and ironic style enables Eliot to deal with highly personal subject-matter in a manner which gives an impression of detachment and complete objectivity. The strikingly modern urban imagery¹ simultaneously sets the scene and projects onto it the contents of the protagonist's psyche. The allusions to mythology, to other cultures and to classic literature sometimes point contrasts, sometimes continuities between the present and the past.

The poem is anti-romantic in style and content. The protagonist and speaker is a non-hero or mock-hero; a failure, alienated from his time and place, from nature and god, from his fellow men, and from the sources of creativity and fulfilment within himself. He is engaged in a fruitless search for a self and a destiny. As in ‘Preludes’ and many other early poems, this loss of integrity is imaged as a loss of contact between conscious and unconscious, body and spirit. Cut off from the psyche, the body becomes an automaton. The outer world seems to consist not of people but of disconnected bits of people — faces, hands, voices, eyes, arms, perfume, dresses, shawls, fingers, skirts ...

Before the poem itself begins, Eliot gives us a great deal of information about what sort of poem it is to be and how we are to read it. First there is the title. The name Prufrock is rich with suggestions. The first syllable suggests prudence (and the man from the Pru), prudery, prurience; the second a lack of masculinity, frocks being associated either with girls or priests. The form J. Alfred suggests someone attempting to use his name to assert an importance or claim a respect he cannot otherwise command. We picture him as some prematurely ageing, repressed, self-conscious, slightly effeminate insurance agent or bank clerk (very much the figure Eliot had himself become by 1917, when *Prufrock and Other Observations* was published). We do not expect the J. Alfred Prufrocks of this world to sing love songs. The idea is ridiculous.

Then there is the epigraph, from Dante's *Inferno*. Dante asks the flame (or ghost) of Guido to identify himself — ‘so may thy name on earth retain its front’. Guido replies:

If I thought my answer were
To one who might return to the world,
This flame would stay still and silent.
But since never I tom this depth
Did any return alive, if what I hear be true,
Without fear of infamy, I answer you.

This seems a world away from the title. The link is Prufrock's fear of infamy, if he should dare to rise from his private hell and attempt to identify himself in the world above. To tell the truth about himself would not be at all the way to ensure that his name retained its front (and his name is all ‘front’ — like a name stencilled on an

¹ The rather sordid setting of this poem, ‘Preludes’ and two of the Sweeney poems is very similar to that of the contemporary Camden painters, especially Walter Sickert.

office door). The epigraph alerts us to parallels between Prufrock and Guido, to other references to Dante, and to that whole spiritual frame of values represented by *The Divine Comedy*.

The second word of the poem introduces the first ambiguity: 'Let us go then, you and I'. If the speaker is Prufrock, to whom is he speaking? Our first thought (given the colloquial intimate tone of the line) might well be that he is addressing us, the reader — that the 'you' is the same 'you' addressed at the end of the first section of *The Waste Land*: 'You! hypocrite lecteur! — mon semblable, — mon frere!' And this invitation to identify ourselves with Prufrock (if we can drop the hypocritical pretence that there is nothing in us so abject) stays with us even after we realize that he is in fact speaking to another part of himself, the part which is inert ('like a patient etherised upon a table'), which is unable to venture out into the social world, make visits and sing love songs. The whole poem is very like a Hamlet soliloquy, where Hamlet tries to argue himself into taking action, calls himself coward, gives himself the lie, plucks his own beard, yet ends further from decisive action than he began. Prufrock himself is aware of the parallel: 'No! I am not Prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be', for Hamlet did at the eleventh hour, pull himself together and dare to disturb the universe.

Eliot stated that he had learned from Jules Laforgue the use of an ironic 'dedoublement of the personality against which the subject struggles'. This splitting of Prufrock into two selves, each of which constantly undermines what the other proposes, produces what Quennell calls:

this spirit of intensive self-mistrust and self-ridicule, implacable foe of all pretensions of personal Romanticism, indefatigable examiner of all those various proposals of Romantic action which a lively and impetuous nature may suggest, delighting to reveal them as the threadbare pretexts that they are.

This excruciating self-consciousness ('when I am pinned and wriggling on the wall') is characteristic also of the speakers in 'Portrait of a Lady' and 'La Figlia Che Piange' and the hyacinth girl passage in *The Waste Land*:

I could not
Speak, and my eyes failed, I was neither
Living nor dead, and I knew nothing.

Particularly it inhibits declarations of love, or any emotional commitment, Eliot was all too familiar with it.

Prufrock's own spiritual paralysis spreads across the sky and colours the whole scene with its inertia like a yellow fog. To venture out into these sordid streets (where Sweeney would be at home), to undertake to make his visit to the salon where he is invited to tea, where the women congregate to one of whom he must sing his love song, is to expose himself to being asked the 'overwhelming question', the same question Dante asked Guido, 'who are you? who do you think you are?' To give an honest account of himself would entail speaking his ridiculous name, admitting that it fits him well, since he is 'almost ridiculous, almost, at times, the Fool'. In the past he has tried to present a face to meet the faces that he meets, but his efforts are betrayed by his bald spot; to mask his real self by careful presentation of a sartorial 'front':

My morning coat, my collar mounting firmly to the chin,

My necktie rich and modest, but asserted by a simple pin

but lie cannot conceal the thinness of his arms and legs. That pin and those thin legs and the idea of being fixed in a formulated phrase generate the terrible image of the pinned and wriggling insect.

And what if he were able to drag himself there yet again and presume to speak of his need to one of these women, these pretentious and affected dilettantes, what, exactly, could he say with any hope of being understood? He tries out a possible opening:

Shall I say, I have gone at dusk through narrow streets
And watched the smoke that rises from the pipes
Of lonely men in shirt-sleeves, leaning out of windows . . .

He is virtually proposing to go back to the beginning of this poem and use *that* as his lovesong. Impossible. Prufrock wishes he could shed the terrible burden of self-consciousness, of any kind of consciousness, and just grab what he wants, like a crab:

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

Yet even here, Prufrock cannot escape the duality of his nature — perhaps the claws would not agree which way to scuttle; and the words tagged and scuttling also import into the fantasy his sense of his own worthlessness. The floors of silent seas are clearly the depths of the unconscious into which he will sink at last.

Unable to visualize himself in the role of lover, Prufrock now attempts to cast himself in the role of prophet, the prophet whose revelations are never understood, who is always ignored or persecuted, but whose very persecution guarantees his greatness. A prophet persecuted by a woman would fit the bill. John the Baptist, beheaded by Salome. But the incongruous image of his own head – grown slightly bald – brought in upon a platter, soon punctures these pretensions.

Unconsciously, Prufrock is still yearning to be the great lover. He half-remembers one of the greatest love poems ever written, Marvell's 'To His Coy Mistress', There the lover proposes:

Let us roll all our strength, and all
Our sweetness up into one ball:
And tear- our pleasures with rough strife,
Thorough the iron gates of life.

The image is of warfare, with cannon balls smashing through the iron gates of cities. But in Prufrock's lines

To have squeezed the universe into a ball
To roll it toward some overwhelming question

the lover sounds more like a dung-beetle or a child with a soft ball which never even leaches its target. All the strength is in the 'overwhelming question'.

Even if Prufrock were to make some shattering statement in answer to that question, such as

I am Lazarus come from the dead,
Come back to tell you all, I shall tell you all —

in other words, to communicate to the living the truth of his buried life, this would cut no ice with the bored woman, who would turn away, saying:

That is not what I meant at all.
That is not it, at all.

At this point Prufrock finally abandons the role of tragic hero, and the attempt to say what he really means, to answer the overwhelming question. Perhaps Polonius would be a more appropriate part than Hamlet; but his analysis of Polonius reveals to him to be

At times, indeed, almost ridiculous —
Almost, at times, the Fool.

Perhaps Prufrock is reminded of Yorick and the grave. He knows that he will never now sing his love song. What chance he ever had of love or passion is now gone. There is nothing before him but old age. In panic he plans trivial excesses, wild hysterical gestures against age and nonentity:

I shall wear the bottoms of my trousers rolled.
Shall I part my hair behind? Do I dare to eat a peach?
I shall wear white flannel trousers, and walk upon the beach.

The peach is a particularly sensuous, fleshy fruit, with a bloom like the skin of a plump girl. Hopkins could never sink his teeth into one without a sense of sin. Of course Prufrock will never do any of these things. For him they are imaginings in the same category as listening to mermaids. The mermaids are a dream version of the women in the salon. Prufrock had there been particularly excited by the women's arms 'downed with light brown hair!'. In the dream this erotic feature is grossly exaggerated; the mermaids are 'wreathed with seaweed red and brown'. Yet even in his wildest fantasies, the mermaids sing only to each other, not to him.

Prufrock's needs, especially his sexual needs, cannot be resolved in real life, only submerged, thrust into the unconscious (the 'chambers of the sea'). The two dissociated halves of Prufrock's psyche, the you who wants to dare and live, and the I who prefers oblivion at the bottom of the sea, are unified at last only in death. Neither can survive the demands and the ridicule of other people. 'You and I' become 'we' for the first and only time in the poem's last words —

Till human voices wake us, and we drown.

Eliot, like Beckett, was fascinated by a passage in Dante's *Inferno* where Dante sees the shades of 'those unfortunates who never were alive', those who, from cowardice, 'made the great refusal'; that is, those who lacked the courage to be either

good or bad, who opted out from the challenge of life. Perhaps Prufrock is one of those, living out his damnation this side of the grave.



Walter Sickert: *The Camden Town Murder* c. 1908

Sweeney is the exact opposite of Prufrock, an aggressively male being with no self-consciousness or sensitivity whatever. Eliot said that he first saw Sweeney's prototype in a bar in south Boston, and that he thought of him as a mildly successful pugilist who retired to keep a pub. Indeed a bar, dive, brothel or seamy boarding-house is Sweeney's home ground, whether in Boston, London's dockland or Buenos Aires.

The name cannot fail to evoke Sweeney Todd, the demon barber of Fleet Street. And there was a key witness, McSweeney, whom Dr Crippen was unable to produce at his trial in 1910. Sweeney is a denizen of an underworld peopled by pimps, prostitutes, and, perhaps, murderers. Sweeney is as unlikely as Prufrock to sing a love song, for the opposite reason — he is constantly surrounded by all-too-available women, with whom his relationship seems to be predatory.

The title 'Sweeney Among the Nightingales' is therefore highly incongruous. We do not expect Sweeney to be interested in the romantic beauties of the natural world. But 'nightingales' is a slang term for prostitutes; and even real nightingales do not always in literature and mythology have romantic associations. The title echoes Elizabeth Barrett Browning's 'Bianca Among the Nightingales', which ends:

They sing for spite,
They sing for hate, they sing for doom,
They'll sing through death who sing through night,
They'll sing and stun me in the tomb —
The nightingales, the nightingales!

In *The Waste Land* Eliot refers to the myth of Philomela, who was raped by her brother-in-law Tereus, who then cut out her tongue to prevent her telling. She was transformed into a nightgale and continually retold her story in her song.

‘Sweeney Among the Nightingales’ was originally published with two epigraphs, one of which said:

Why should I speak of the Nightingale.
The Nightingale sings of adulterous wrong.

The surviving epigraph is Agamemnon's dying words from Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*: ‘I am struck a mortal blow within’. The story of Agamemnon is also one of hate and doom and adulterous wrong. Agamemnon raped Clytemnestra and murdered her husband. He then married her, but later sacrificed their youngest daughter Iphigenia to gain favourable winds to take the Greek fleet to Troy. During his ten-year absence, Clytemnestra and her lover Aegistheus planned to murder Agamemnon on his return. He brought with him as concubine the ravished Trojan princess Cassandra. His wife, preparing him for a bath, put on him a bathrobe she had cunningly sewn to be virtually a straight-Jacket. Wearing this, he was as helpless as Sweeney Todd's victims in his barber's chair (destined to become meat pies). She butchered him and buried him without honours. Thus the epigraph prepares us for the otherwise unexpected shift from Sweeney to Agamemnon at the end of the poem.

We notice at once how different in style the Sweeney poems are from ‘Prufrock’. Short lines, short regular stanzas, bald rhymes. The free, spontaneous, insinuating verse of ‘Prufrock’ had been perfect for expressing the hysterias and squirmings of his interior monologue. None of Prufrock's thoughts emerged into action. None of Sweeney's actions appear to have been preceded by thought. Since the characters in the Sweeney poems have no inner life, the poems can only be narrative, describing their external actions, observing them with fascinated repulsion from the outside, as one might watch the behaviour of insects in a laboratory. In the middle of the poem Sweeney and the woman are being gaped at through a window. Later Sweeney gains the ascendancy by being the one who is outside looking in.

Sweeney is constantly associated with basic appetites and functions, and with wild animals — ape, zebra and giraffe in the first stanza alone. The first thing we are told about Sweeney is that he is laughing, and the last that he is grinning. Why? In 1921 Eliot's friend Wyndham Lewis invented some characters he called Tyros, whom he described as ‘elementary persons ... primitive creatures, immersed in life, as much as birds, or big, obsessed, sun-drunk insects’:

These immense novices brandish their appetites in their face, lay bare their teeth in a valedictory, inviting, or merely substantial laugh. A laugh, like a sneeze, exposes the nature of the individual with an unexpectedness that is perhaps a little unreal. This sunny commotion in the face, at the gate of the organism, brings to the surface all the burrowing and interior broods which the individual may harbour.

The other characters in the Sweeney poems are equally low, direct and unselfconscious. The lady in the cape does not wait to be invited to sit on Sweeney's

knees, seems equally happy to sprawl on the floor, and seems to be involved in some low conspiracy against Sweeney. Rachel tears at the grapes with murderous paws, echoing Prufrock's pair of ragged claws.

The sultry atmosphere is doom-laden, ominous. We need not look for any very specific meanings. Eliot stated that all he set out to create in this poem was a sense of foreboding. The constellation of Orion and the Dog star were associated by the Egyptians with the coming of the fertilizing rains and Nile floods; but here they ate 'veiled'. The seas themselves are 'shrunken', suggesting a drying-up of the sources of life. The waiter's bringing of oranges, bananas, figs and hothouse grapes seems like a mock fertility-offering, but somehow overheated and artificial. The eroticism of Sweeney's world is no more fertile or creative, no more likely to produce children or fulfillment, than the prudishness of Prufrock's.

The lines

Branches of wistaria

Circumscribe a golden grin

for the first time place the actions of the poem within an artistic frame; dignify them with latinate and poetic diction — but only ironically, since the golden grin presumably refers to Sweeney's gold fillings.

The next lines

The host with someone indistinct

Converses at the door apart,

again created an ironic distance between the formal diction and the banal, potentially sordid subject-matter. Then suddenly, with no change of rhythm or diction, in what ought to be a new sentence, but follows a mere comma, we find ourselves among nightingales and nuns, and a moment later, still in the same sentence, among the heroes of classical antiquity. It used to be the standard commentary on Eliot that, here as in *The Waste Land* and elsewhere, he juxtaposes ancient and modern simply to point the sordidness and meaninglessness of modern life in contrast with the glory and grandeur of the distant past, particularly classical antiquity. This we now recognize to have been (with a few local exceptions) a radical misreading, a wanton blindness to Eliot's real meanings. What he is pointing to is the continuity of ancient and modern. The fact that characters have resounding names like Agamemnon and Clytemnestra and that their lives were made the subject of myths, legends, epics and tragedies, does not make those lives any less sordid than the lives of characters called Sweeney and Doris. The romantic idealizing poetic tradition would dignify the death of Agamemnon with the warbling ('liquid siftings') of nightingales. The last line forces on us the unwilling realization that beneath the formal rhetoric what is actually being said is that the 'liquid siftings' are not songs but droppings. The nightingales, singing, if at all, of adulterous wrong, stained the shroud of Agamemnon with their shit. And he deserved no better ending.

'Sweeney Erect' was probably written in 1919, a year or so after 'Sweeney Among the Nightingales'. 'Erect' is suggestive, If we are familiar with the earlier Sweeney poem, where Sweeney had to repulse the woman's sexual advances because he suspected her of being involved in some plot against him, we might well take the

sexual meaning first, that Sweeney has an erection. And the first thing we are told about him in the poem is that he has spent the night with a woman. 'Erect' also suggests 'homo erectus', a primitive hominid formerly known as Pithecanthropus, which means 'ape-man'. The second thing we are told of him in the poem is that getting out of bed he looks like an orang-utan. Halfway through the poem we discover that the literal meaning of 'Erect' is that Sweeney is 'addressed full length to shave'. Ironically it also suggests the large claims made for the species by idealists:

(The lengthened shadow of a man
Is history, said Emerson
Who had not seen the silhouette
Of Sweeney straddled in the sun.)

The epigraph is from *The Maid's Tragedy* by Beaumont and Fletcher. The lines are spoken by the heroine Aspatia — a betrayed maiden suggesting a fittingly desolate background for her portrait. Two more abandoned maidens from antiquity, Ariadne and Nausicaa, are mentioned in the first few lines, while Sweeney is compared to the monstrous Cyclops Polyphemus. Again there is continuity as well as ironic contrast, for Sweeney is no more brutal in his relations with women than Theseus and Odysseus. But the woman Sweeney (who 'knows the female temperament') is about to abandon is no beautiful betrayed maiden. Nausicaa when she first appears to Odysseus early in the morning is a vision of loveliness; this woman looks appalling;

This withered root, of knots of hair
Slitted below and gashed with eyes,
This oval O cropped out with teeth

and her shrieks are not spiritual desolation but an epileptic fit. On the contrary, it seems likely that all the 'ladies of the corridor' (including Doris, who reappears in *Sweeney Agonistes*) are prostitutes, and Mrs Turner the madam. Sweeney's woman has offended their principles not by entertaining Sweeney all night, but by shrieking so loudly as to draw attention to 'the house'.

Ariadne hanged herself for grief. In the world of Sweeney and Doris there are no problems which cannot be cured by 'sal volatile / And a glass of brandy neat'.

L.G. Salingar² disliked the technique of the Sweeney poems, particularly their endings: 'What these lines emphasize most is not the horror of the spectacle but its monotony. Technique is not a means of clarifying the tangle of human experience but of withdrawing from it towards an artificial objectivity'. In much the greatest of the Sweeney poems, *Sweeney Agonistes*, Sweeney undergoes a transformation. Having murdered a woman, he finds he can no longer inhabit a world consisting of nothing but 'birth and copulation and death'; and Eliot develops a new technique to express his horror, to reveal, in F. O. Matthiessen's words, 'underneath the resolute purpose of the planning animal, the victim of circumstance and the doomed or sanctified being'.³

² *The Penguin Guide to English Literature: The Modern Age*, ed. Boris Ford, 1964, p.334.

³ *The Achievement of T.S. Eliot*, London 1958, p.131.

For that purpose Eliot invented in 1926 in *Sweeney Agonistes*, a dramatic verse thirty years ahead of its time. [131]