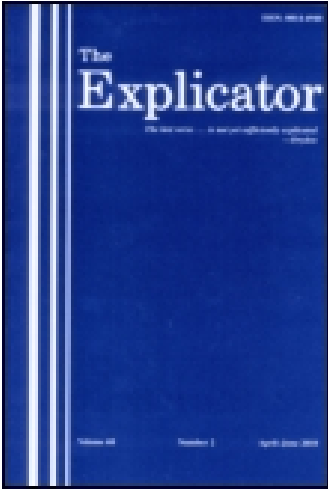


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Eliot's the Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock

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likely reality of “Bourton.” Rather, that reality remains the ironic product of a linguistic process on the border between fact and presentation.

—MOLLY HOFF, *San Antonio, Texas*

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Eliot’s THE LOVE SONG OF J. ALFRED PRUFROCK

The epigraph to Eliot’s milestone poem, one that resonates Western culture from Homer to Heinrich Heine and beyond, is taken from Dante’s *Inferno*. John Ciardi translated the original Italian as follows:

If I believed that my reply were made
To one who could ever climb to the world again,
This flame would shake no more. But since no shade
Ever returned—if what I am told is true—
From this blind world into the living light,
Without fear of dishonor I answer you. (*Inferno* 27, 58–63)¹

The speaker, enveloped in infernal fire, is Guido da Montefeltro, who, having been promised absolution by Pope Boniface VIII, advised the pope how to betray and destroy the Colonna family of Palestrina and died unrepentant.² The connection that Eliot makes with Prufrock is that, although Prufrock is in an earthly situation analogous to hell, he is still concerned about his honor. His negative concept of honor consists in not being laughed at as “the Fool” (119).³

Prufrock finds himself, in the ordinary ambit of his life, in the company of worldly sophisticates who would laugh at him if he ever revealed that he takes Christianity seriously. Inwardly, he compares himself with John the Baptist:

But though I have wept and fasted, wept and prayed,
Though I have seen my head (grown slightly bald) brought
in upon a platter,
I am no prophet[,] (81–3)

To give any hint of a prophetic disposition would expose Prufrock to ridicule. Prufrock's religious tendency, signified by the "J." of his name, remains repressed.

Deflected from the love of God and humility, Prufrock's love song is redirected toward himself and resembles that of a troubadour poet addressing a screen lady, or *senhal* (Provence: "sign, signal"), amounting to no more than ego-toxicity and self-pity. Prufrock projects his spiritual malaise on his physical environment—"certain half-deserted streets, / The muttering retreats / of restless nights in one-night cheap hotels" (4–5)—and further on the sea, a conventional symbol for time, on whose indifference he projects the mythic presence of singing "mermaids" (124). Prufrock's spiritual awareness, which includes the terror he experiences when reading certain minatory passages in the bible, is always only a psychological pastiche, heightened to the habitual condition of hallucination, "as if a magic lantern threw the nerves in patterns on a screen" (105).

Hardly daring to be convinced that he is sinning, Prufrock lives out his life as a long process of "meticulous" (116) conformity to the rituals of worldly sophistication, the conventions of the genteel tradition, always risking absurdity, jauntily treading the brink, wearing "white flannel trousers" (123), fantasizing about "sea-girls" (130)—"Till human voices wake us, and we drown" (131). Prufrock drowns recurrently in humiliation, in the mortification of knowing that he is only a dressed-up mannequin, with "necktie rich and modest, but asserted by a simple pin—" (43). That "simple pin" holds together the simpleton Prufrock's disguise as a composed human being.

Unlike humility, with its complex of sinfulness, reflex of dependency on God, fear of hell, and love of God, Prufrock's humiliation unfolds as a series of implacable descents into an earthly abyss, toward an encounter with his own absurd nothingness. Thus, Prufrock is not being religious but merely rehearsing the part of passion-wirepuller when he speculates on the special effect, or shock value, of his prepared outburst, "'I am Lazarus, come from the dead, / Come back to tell you all, I shall tell you all'—" (94–95).

Prufrock's self-esteem has long ago been shipwrecked in response to the singing sirens ("mermaids") who, in mock-heroic fashion, have drawn him to perdition "with coffee spoons" (51) tinkling "Among the porcelain" (89). (The word "porcelain" suggests that Prufrock is more like a pig than a human being.) In stark contrast to St. Augustine's "You have made us for Yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless till they rest in You," Prufrock is caught in a shifting, kaleidoscopic world of images, impressions, and sensations, the gist

of which replaces, *avant la lettre*, Heidegger's existential notion of *Grundstimmung* (the deepest attitude of a person; ground-tune; wavelength).⁴ Prufrock's love song is squandered at the sea's surface, amid Woolfian, stream-of-consciousness "waves blown back / When the wind blows the water white and black" (27–28), his psyche diffusing and blending itself like spin-drift with the utterances of "mermaids." Although these "mermaids" are commonly identified with Homer's sirens, they do not promise eternal rest and the recitation of past heroic deeds—the core of the sirens' temptation of Ulysses—but romantic entanglement and dissolution, in the manner of Heinrich Heine's Lorelei. It is in response to the allurements of the Lorelei, not to the sirens of Homer, that Prufrock's imagination and stunted aspirations take a downward turn: "I should have been a pair of ragged claws / Scuttling across the floors of silent seas" (73–74).

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NOTES

1. Dante's *Inferno*, trans. John Ciardi (New York: Mentor, 1982).
2. *The American Tradition in Literature* (Shorter Edition), ed. Sculley Bradley, Richard Croom Beatty, and E. Hudson Long (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1967) 1526.
3. All quotes of "Prufrock" from T. S. Eliot, "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," *The Waste Land and Other Poems* (New York: Harcourt, 1972) 1–9.
4. For the interconnectedness of humility and *Grundstimmung*, see Terrence G. Kardong, O.S.B., "Clarifications of Benedict's Chapter on 'Humility: A Reply to Francis Seeburger's article 'Humility, Maturity and the Fear of God,'" *The American Benedictine Review* 50.1 (1999):12–29.

Cummings's A MAN WHO HAD FALLEN AMONG THIEVES

Like Ralph Hodgson in "Eve," G. K. Chesterson in "The Donkey," and John Gardner in *Grendel*, E. E. Cummings, in "a man who had fallen among thieves," retells a familiar story from a new point of view, infusing it with a range of meanings strikingly different from those of the original. The poem seems to me much diminished by Ann Stetson's ingenious but rather arbitrary reading in which the drunken bum is Christ crucified, the pink vomit is his blood, the dozen citizens are the disciples, and the thieves of the title are the two men crucified with him. It is a highly successful poem in which the flexible iambic tetrameter and alternate rhymes, varied with slant rhymes, confer an unobtrusive, subtly incantatory structure on the modernized parable. The tropes are surprising but persuasive: the victim is "dressed in fifteenthrate