DANTE AND T. S. ELIOT'S *PRUFROCK*

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In the course of this essay I shall have occasion to refer to F. O. Matthiessen's work *The Achievement of T. S. Eliot* in several contexts. I would like to begin with a quotation from that book: "Eliot's conceits sometimes have the look of being too studied; that is to say, of coming into existence not because the poet's mind has actually felt keenly an unexpected similarity between unlikes, but as though he too consciously set out to shock the reader. Such an objection might be made against the opening lines of *Prufrock*:

> Let us go then, you and I,
> when the evening is spread out against the sky
> like a patient etherised upon a table."

Matthiessen continues: "Even though the reader can perceive wherein the comparison holds, he may still have the sensation that it is too intellectually manipulated, not sufficiently felt."

I am not arguing with the contention that Eliot may be guilty of the defect pointed out by Matthiessen in even large areas of his poetry. I am concerned here only with the verses from *Prufrock* which Matthiessen chooses to scrutinize in defense of his proposal that they are illustrative of a failure on the part of the poet to have created them out of a felt experience. I do agree with Professor Matthiessen's view that Eliot set out to shock the reader; where he might well have disagreed with me is in the nature of the shock that Eliot intended to produce.

The nature of that shock, and by implication a fuller interpretation of the opening verses of the poem, must take us back

to the epigraph which heads *Prufrock*. Standing at the beginning of the poem are two *terzine* from the *Divine Comedy* (*Inferno*, XXVII, 61-66). Even Karl Shapiro has reluctantly admitted that many of the epigraphs to Eliot's poems are functional parts of the poems themselves. Matthiessen informs us unequivocally, "In each case the epigraph is designed to form an integral part of the effect of the poem; and in the most successful instances a subtle aura of association." He offers two instances of such successful uses of the epigraph, "Mr. Kurtz-he dead" in the *Hollow Men*, an evocation of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and the Dante verses which are prefixed to *Prufrock*. The cry of utter horror which climaxes Conrad's novel, says Matthiessen, "epitomizes in a sentence the very tone of blasphemous hopelessness which issues from the *Hollow Men*."

Of the epigraph to *Prufrock* Matthiessen writes: ". . . the closed circle of Prufrock's frightened isolation is sharply underlined by inscribing this speech from the *Inferno* . . . Prufock can give utterance in soliloquy to his debate with himself only because he knows that no one will overhear him. The point of calling this poem a Love Song lies in the irony that it will never dare to voice what he feels." Evidently Matthiessen had failed to take his own advice and seek for "full understanding" of this allusion from another poet. For that is what the epigraph is, an allusion to an area of event in the *Divine Comedy* which, if it is truly and formally integrated into *Prufrock*, provides us with a means of reading the poem with greater understanding. What we should first do, then, is to explore more carefully the source of the epigraph.

The scene is familiar to all readers of Dante's poem. We are in the Eighth *bolgia* of the Eighth Circle of Hell, among the Fraudulent Counsellors. Guido da Montefeltro, who had given to Pope Boniface VIII evil counsel which had enabled this new leader of the modern Pharisees to capture a town on which his avarice had fixed, is punished, like Ulysees, by being enclosed in a flame. Guido, asked by the wayfarer Dante to tell his story answers:

> If I thought my answer were to one who would ever return to the world, this flame would shake no more; but since, if what I hear be true, none ever did return alive from this depth, without fear of infamy I answer thee.

And with the setting down of these words of the Italian poet Eliot begins his *Prufrock*:

Let us go then, you and I . . .

It should not come with any shock to those of us brought up in the milieu of the New Criticism that even apparently very neutral pieces of philological material, such as conjunctions, have a way of being significant in our reading of a poem. But there are signs, and have been for some years now, that the Grammarian's funeral is in process and that more cases that hotis's have been settled. So, at the risk of being buried along with the Grammarian, I should like to suggest that it is precisely the conjunction in the first verse of Prufrock which should attract our attention. "Let us go *then,* you and I." If we were to translate this into Latin we might have "Procedamus *igitur.*" *Therefore, as a consequence of something,* is the force of that *then.* It is connective tissue in an argument. What is the connection, to what does that *then* relate, what is the argument that is being developed? It would appear that we, the readers, have lost the first part of whatever it is of which this *then* is pointing to as a consequence.

But actually the *then* as consequential conjunction, is related not to anything we have not been allowed to perceive by the poet, but to something which lies in the *very* beginning of his poem. The first verse, "Let us go then, you and I . . ." is not so abrupt as it may sound on first hearing. Not, at least, if we grant to the epigraph a functional strategy in the structure of the total poem. If we can do this, then, we shall be able to see how that *then* of the first English words implies the continuation of something well known to the reader by the time he comes to them. If we were not familiar with the verses of Dante, it is true, we would have been forced to find out means of identifying them. But having identified the verses, what are we to make of them? We would have identified them as coming from Canto XXVII of the *Inferno,* and further have identified the speaker as Guido da Montefeltro. We would have read on, perhaps, as Dante himself suggests to us elsewhere in the *Comedy,* in that which follows. This might well have called our attention to the thematic aspects of the whole canto and invited us to look at the nature of the sin being punished in this area of Dante's Hell. Guido, like Ulysses, is among the Fraudulent Counsellors.

Of course, we come to our investigation of these matters after many readings of the poem. And after many readings, perhaps after very many readings, will we be prepared to stake much on the contention that Prufrock is engaged in giving fraudulent counsel? I think that no really sound defense could be given of that position.

Again I would invoke Matthiessen. He reminds us (with respect to Eliot's frequent use of epigraphs for his poems), that the "intention is to enable the poet to secure a condensed expression in the poem itself, as well as to induce the reader to realize, even from the moment before the poem begins, that in reading poetry every word should be paid full attention."

To ask my question again. Is it Guido whose story condenses for us the structure of Eliot's poem? Is it his story on which we must focus? Is the epigraph formally integrated into the rest of the poem by means of what surrounds Guido (and then, of course, by implication, Ulysses, who is also a Fraudulent Counsellor and who is being punished in the same circle and *bolgia* in the preceeding *canto* of the *Inferno*?) Would not Eliot have been asking more of a reader's patience than he might have expected, to have failed even to identify the Italian verses as coming from Dante, and then to have expected the average reader to have gone on to speculate about the full context of the words once they were identified for him?

I think so. And thinking so I would turn to another explanation in my attempt to demonstrate that the epigraph is functional to the poem. Perhaps we should consider not so much the speaker and the implications of his being where he is in Hell as simply what he says:

> If I thought my answer were to one who would ever return to the world, this flame would shake no more; but since, if what I hear be true, none ever did return alive from this depth, without fear of infamy I answer thee.

Guido knows, he knew it before he came to the place, that no one leaves Hell alive. And since Dante is there, he assumes that his presence falls under the general case. Erroneously he is convinced that what he will tell Dante will never be repeated, for the poet will never return to the world above to rehearse his tale. And for that reason (però che) he tells his story to Dante.

But as we continue to read on we find:

Let us go then, you and I . . .

Però che . . . ti rispondo. Wherefore . . . I answer you. Guido's narrative suddenly becomes a dramatic action. Let us go then you and I, And at the same time the *then* which might have perplexed a reader at first is clearly seen as a consequence of something that preceded. What that is, is beyond doubt contained in the epigraph. The words of Prufrock have a strange way of becoming the words of Guido da Montefeltro. Since, if I hear right, none ever did return alive from this depth, without fear of infamy I answer thee. Let us go then, you and I.

But if matters stand thus with J. Alfred Prufrock, if indeed by a kind of double vision, we are enabled, through the epigraph, to see him as Guido-Prufrock, can we hold with Matthiessen that the Love Song is a soliloquy? And, if we are forced to answer no, how do we account for the "you" in the first verse: Let us go then, you and I. The analogy Guido-Prufrock is firmly imbedded structurally. Is the corresponding analogy *you-Dante*? In other words, just as Guido addresses Dante does Prufrock—? And here we pause, for we perceive that we do not have the terms of a real analogy if we were to go on. Guido is to Dante as Prufrock is to Dante will clearly not work. And that is for several reasons. First of all we need to confront two figures outside Eliot's text and their relationship, and two others within the Eliot poem that bear to each other analogical relationship to the first pair. Guido in the 27th canto of Dante's *Inferno* is to J. Alfred Prufrock as Dante in that same canto is to whom? Our identification of Prufrock as Guido (with the reservations that are required by analogy) arose from our recognition that the epigraph is continued by the opening words of the Love Song. In short, the *I* of Eliot's opening verse is Prufrock, and he bears analogical relationship to Guido of Dante's poem. The difficulty would seem to lie in identifying the *you*. Then, of course that *you* would have to have an analogical relationship to Dante in the twenty-seventh canto.

It has been proposed that the *you* of the verse: "Let us go then you and I" refers to the *alter ego* of J. Alfred Prufrock. In this case we would come up with such a configuration as: Guido is to Dante as Prufrock I is to Prufrock II. And certainly it could be said that the terms for such an analogy are present. There would be, as in

the *Comedy* one who tells his story and one who listens. Undoubtedly some such pattern was in the mind of Matthiessen when he observed that Prufrock in the poem delivers a soliloquy and that he "will never dare to voice what he feels." My contention is that the observations of J. Alfred Prufrock are not delivered in the mode of a soliloquy, and that, indeed, the interlocutor, that *you* whom we seek to define, is in a most advantageous position to hear the words of Prufrock. What we are attempting to find is the fourth term of an analogical metaphor: Guido is to Dante as Prufrock is to *you*. And in specifying that "you" the nature of the analogy will reveal itself.

Let us remind ourselves of another of Eliot's poets, Baudelaire. In the first poem of the collection *Les Fleurs du mal, Au lecteur,* Baudelaire presents his reader with a frightening array of allegorical monsters, a Dantesque zoo of the vices. There are vermin, panthers, gorillas, tarantulas and gangs of boozing demons. But they are not in any Hell which Baudelaire has created; rather they are in the human soul. And there we would keep them—in that tidy abstraction called the human soul. But the poet will not have it so, will not allow us the luxury of our hypocrisy, will not permit us to make application of the allegory to others. Perhaps only when we have come to the last lines of the poem are we forced to admit that it is not the human soul that Baudelaire has been exposing for us, but our own—or even more concretely *mine,* the soul of this particular reader who hears the words shouted at him:

Hypocrite lecteur, —mon semblable, —mon frère!

Not the human soul knows Ennui, *l'œil chargé d'un pleur involontaire,* dreaming of scaffolds, but I know him, I the reader, I know this obscene beast. And I know that I know him because Baudelaire has told me so, because the poet has caught me playing the old game of rationalizing away my implication in the human situation. And there we are, caught by the net of the poet, and we shall not escape for as long as we travel with him through the world of *Les Fleurs du mal.* We have been addressed and in so being addressed, we cannot again forget (as long as we choose to be with the poet) that we belong in the world he has created for his poem—and for us. But had he not warned us from the beginning that this would be our place in his poem? Had he not

spoken to us at the head of his poem and addressed us there —*au lecteur*. And yet before we had gone far in this dedicatory poem we may have forgotten that we were being addressed. At least this has been the experience of most readers coming to the poem for the first time. Only at the end, when we are addressed for the second time—*Hypocrite lecteur*—do we recall that the poem has been for *us* all along.

Perhaps, too, many readers of *Prufrock*, come to the poem too suddenly, that is without reading the epigraph; without *really* reading it. Perhaps we pass it by after a glance in our haste to get to the poem by Eliot. And that is why, it may be, we never really become aware that we are in the poem, each reader in confronting that *you* on the terms provided for it by the epigraph, from the *Inferno*. In the *Divine Comedy* it had been Guido da Montefeltro and Dante; in Prufrock it is 'you and I.' But Prufrock walks not with Dante, for the figure in the *Divina Commedia* lies within the poem the Florentine created. And Guido lies back there, too. Only an analogy remains to bridge somewhat that great distance. Something of Guido remains in Prufrock, something of that speaker in Dante's poem gets into the one by Eliot. And something of Dante also enters into that *you* which once we have learned the alchemy is transmuted into an *I*. When Prufrock says: Let us go *then*, you and I, we are caught up in a dramatic action, a dramatic action which moves us forward in our time (should I not say *me* in *my* time)? And yet, of course, just as Prufrock, the very type of the timid man is not Guido the warrior, so am I not Dante. I have never been to Hell: I am not Paul, nor Aeneas, nor Dante. But I am there with Prufrock and together we shall make our visit, for this is Hell nor are we out of it.

If we are to accede to the demands of the analogy completely (as completely as is possible, that is) shall we not have to take into consideration at least one more fact. Had not Guido (or rather Prufrock) informed us at the beginning of the poem, the one called *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*, that it was his understanding that what he is about to reveal about himself will never be repeated, since he has it on good authority that Dante (that is, I, the reader) will never return from Hell to cast infamy upon his name! But just as Guido was wrong about Dante, so is Prufrock wrong about his interlocutor, about me. I, *like* Dante, come

to this Hell where Prufrock speaks to me and takes me visiting, under *similar* auspices of grace, and I, too, shall return after a while; for in the reader this grace always abounds—to return from the longest voyages, to come back from the lowest depths of Hell.

It is now clear that even as Prufrock is wrong about me, Professor Matthiessen was wrong about Prufrock. Prufrock is not alone, he delivers no soliloquy, but rather a dramatic monologue, of the type of *Dover Beach*. And of course Matthiessen was equally wrong about the nature of the irony involved in the title of the poem—*The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*. The irony lies not in the fact that what is called a song will never be heard, but rather in that it is called a *Love Song*. If we translate the title of Eliot's poem into Italian we get *Cantica d'amore*. And can we fail to notice how we are justified in so translating the Love Song as *Cantica d'Amore*? It has been Dante again who points the way to the nature of the irony in the poem's title. *Cantica* is the word that Dante uses to designate each of the three major divisions of his *Commedia*. But Prufrock is in no part of Dante's poem (to avail ourselves of the analogy)—which can be characterized by love. He is in Hell, and this would be the *cantica di odio* not *amore*—hate not love. The irony is that here in Prufrock's Hell, as in Dante's, there is no love. Here also the good of the intellect has been lost. Perhaps Dante's damned souls put to themselves and to each other questions such as those posed by Prufrock. Perhaps only once in all the eternity of Hell did they ever speak rationally, when for a brief moment we hear them in the recorded memory of the great poet.

And if the epigraph of *Prufrock* so stands with respect to the rest of the poem the allegation cited by Matthiessen to the effect that the image of the opening lines is too intellectual, "not sufficiently felt," also falls. There, in those opening lines of the poem, evening is compared to a patient lying stretched upon a table under an anaesthesia. It is true that without consideration of the epigraph the image is too sudden, apparently coming from nowhere and articulating with nothing else in the rest of the poem. Seen in this way the criticism of Matthiessen holds, that the image is "manipulated." But suppose we can grant to the image an existence that springs from the life contained in the epigraph. How would matters then stand?

Suppose we see the image thus: it is a preparation for the poem

that is about to unfold, and which the epigraph gives us reason to suspect is itself derived from Dante. If the world of Prufrock is a kind of Hell then Dante might well be the source of the image of the hospital. For Dante too had compared one of the deepest regions of his Hell to a *lazzaretto*:

> Qual dolor fora, se delli spedali
> di Valdichiana tra 'l luglio e 'l settembre
> e di Maremma e di Sardigna i mali
> fossero in una fossa tutti insembre,
> tal era quivi, e tal puzzo n'usciva
> qual suol venir delle marcite membre.

In these verses of the *Commedia*, Dante compares the condition of the sinners in the Tenth *bolgìa* of the *Inferno* to the state of the sick in hospitals in the malaria infested Maremma and Sardinia. In Eliot the opening verses metaphorize into the image of the sterile hospital, anaesthesia, and a patient being operated on. There are many Hells, and we may forget that Dante's is not the only one. The clear perception of where Prufrock is and where I the reader am (in reading the poem, that is) may help us to become more fully instructed as we visit with our host in his Wasteland.

I would conclude by observing that no where else in the range of Eliot's use of the epigraph is it more successfully integrated into the structure of a poem as here in *Prufrock*. In a very real sense, the six verses from the *Commedia* are as much the property of Eliot as they are Dante's. And the fact that Eliot does not give us the epigraph in his recordings of the poem, does not change matters. It is there, the poet put it there, and it forces interpretation in one direction rather than in another.

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