

On the Question of Prufrock

Milton Hindus

FROM THE BEGINNING there have been many questions asked about T. S. Eliot's J. Alfred Prufrock, none more direct and "innocent" perhaps than by Norman Foerster when he inquired: "What is Prufrock's 'overwhelming question?'" Just as directly, it would be hard to refute the reader who answered this with lines 45 and 46 of the poem:

Do I dare
Disturb the universe?

But what are these words supposed to mean exactly? Are they just silly, or do they contain some hidden allusion, or what? In all the mountains of talmudical commentary that has grown up around this most allusive and elusive of poems since it was first submitted by Eliot's friend Conrad Aiken to editorial consideration at Harold Munro's Poetry Bookshop in London and summarily rejected as the work of a madman, I do not recall that it has occurred to anyone to ask why these lines in "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" (1915) are broken as they are.

Between the sublimity of this initial

question ("overwhelming" indeed) and the ridiculous anticlimaxes which later follow ("Shall I part my hair behind? Do I dare to eat a peach?"), there would seem to be no solid resting place for any realistic assessment of precisely what it is that the character is contemplating. It is as if the reader were compelled to accept the character's own advice on the matter:

Oh, do not ask, "What is it?"

We must not seek to formulate him, he warns us, or pin him "wriggling" to the wall. But what if we stubbornly insist? Is there really no making him out, as he seems to think?

I should like to hazard a guess at a possible covert allusion which may have escaped those engaged in the endless chase of the overt ones, from the Italian epigraph from Canto 27 of Dante's *Inferno*, through the Shakespearean voices "dying with a dying fall," the biblical characters Lazarus and Salomé, Hamlet and Chaucer's Clerk of Oxford "full of high sentence," down to Marvell's proposal "to his coy mistress" to "roll...all...into one ball."

It may be that Eliot's readers have been, like his character, too exclusively literary in their interests, and, unlike the author himself, not sufficiently philo-

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sophical. They have sought to solve the admitted difficulties of the poem with knowledge and information but have overlooked its ingredient of wisdom. It is not for nothing, after all, that Eliot's most influential teacher at Harvard was Irving Babbitt or that the subject of his doctoral dissertation, interrupted by World War I, was F. H. Bradley. Critics from the beginning went off on wild goose chases because of the indirection of the title. "Love Song" indeed! I'm afraid they've never quite recovered their balance. Stanley Sultan in his *Eliot, Joyce & Co.* (1987) calls to our attention W. K. Wimsatt's interpretation thirty-six years earlier:

In *Prufrock* it is nearly possible, tantalizingly plausible, to suppose a basic story of a little man approaching a tea party at which there is a woman to whom he might ...propose marriage, or to whom he stands, rather, in such a casual relation that his very thoughts of proposal are almost hallucinatory.

Impelled by such speculations as well as similar ones in Brooks and Warren's textbook *Understanding Poetry* (1938), I recall endless class discussions which revolved around such questions as whether it was really a proposal that Prufrock was turning over in his mind or only a proposition (which would account for the lady's puzzled, gentle, or indignant rejection of his ineffectual suit). One colleague, I recall, who may have spent too much time in Paris reflecting on Picasso's epoch-making *Demoiselles d'Avignon*, went so far as to suggest that the situation in the poem made most sense if it were imagined taking place in a brothel!

Lately, however, there seems to have been a reaction against such Baudelairean "romanticism." Professor Sultan also calls our attention to Lyndall Gordon's *Eliot's Early Years* (1977), which reveals that *Prufrock* initially contained a section called *Prufrock's Pervigilium re-*

counting "a night-long vigil which climaxes in a terrifying vision of the end of the world."

Ms. Gordon, in her own book, goes on to say that "Prufrock's overwhelming need is to ask not a lover's question but a metaphysical one, suggested by Henri Bergson, about the point of man's accumulated experience. "'To live, live,' says Bergson, 'is to grow old.' ('I grow old...I grow old,' Prufrock murmurs.) Life is a succession of psychological states, memories, and roles, 'a continual rolling up, like that of a thread on a ball, for our past follows us, it swells incessantly with the present that it picks up on its way.'"

Reading her reminds us that it was to hear Bergson lecture at the *Collège de France* that Eliot, after graduating from Harvard, made his trip to Paris before settling in London. Evidently, Prufrock's "rolling ball" may be traced to a philosophical origin in Bergson as well as a literary one in Marvell.

Recently, as I was reading one of the "unpublished essays" of David Hume, *On Suicide*, with thoughts of Prufrock as far as possible from my mind, I came across not one but a series of passages which, without reproducing precisely the line "Disturb the universe," seemed to suggest to my mind strongly that Eliot had read this essay long before I did. In addition, as I shall indicate, the essay contained a clue to the origin of another important image in the poem.

Hume's essay, for reasons which will become clear, is not the easiest of his writings to find. My own copy is in Volume 4 of a German reprint (by the Scientia Verlag Aalen, 1964) of "the new edition London 1882" by T. W. Green and T. H. Grose among a group of four unpublished essays originally printed in an edition of 1777, a year after Hume's death. The history of the various editions indicates that he had originally intended to publish it himself but gave up the idea because it might have added fuel to the

controversy and misunderstanding which he felt had already surrounded his name. Rumors of this self-suppression had spread widely in philosophical circles, so that in Germany, as late as the time of the composition of Schopenhauer's *Studies in Pessimism*, which contains an essay of his own on the subject of suicide, these rumors inspired an indignant protest that the thought of one of the principal British philosophers was being bowdlerized. In other words, Hume's essay had early achieved notoriety, and to this day it still seems to be generally absent from selections and anthologies and excerpts from his philosophical writings. For this very reason, as well as for its intrinsic merit which is not inferior to his other writings, it must have attracted the attention of other curious and enterprising readers as it did mine.

Hume's essay, it should be pointed out, is not in any sense an advocacy of suicide, and the manner of his own death, which is described in the pages he wrote about his own life and the supplementary pages by his friend Adam Smith written after his death, was exceptionally resigned and peaceful and not self-inflicted. What Hume defends instead is the right of an individual to take his own life without suffering the consequences of such religious sanctions as are often leveled against the memory of one who has availed himself of that right. He aims to prove that the act of suicide is not rebellion against the decrees of the Almighty or the laws of nature but that the very same beneficent providence which has bestowed the gift of life upon us in the first place has also given us the option of rejecting that gift when the retention of it has become intolerable.

Without naming his sources, Hume draws on some of the arguments of ancient philosophers like the Stoics (Epictetus, Seneca, Marcus Aurelius) and, again without naming him, undertakes to

refute the arguments against suicide like that of Plato, who regards the assertion of the right to suicide as an instance of insubordination to the great Commander of the universe who has brought all things and ourselves into existence and with whose decrees we must not quarrel. In contrast to such anthropocentric views as those of religion and of religious philosophers like Plato, Hume downgrades the importance or privileged position of mankind in the scheme of creation and elevates the status of some of the humbler creatures. Only the grossest superstition (such as some of Hamlet's speeches suggest), according to Hume, would encourage the conviction that a human soul could deserve cruel punishments for the assertion of a human being's right to die when life has become too painful, and only the most uncharitable would label the act of suicide as cowardice and refuse burial to the suicide in consecrated ground or destroy his moral reputation after his death. The signal passages in Hume's essay *On Suicide* which I wish to indicate are these:

What is the meaning then of that principle, that a man who, tired of life, and hunted by pain and misery, bravely overcomes all the natural terrors of death and makes his escape from this cruel scene; that such a man, I say, has incurred the indignation of his creator by encroaching on the office of divine providence, and disturbing the order of the universe....

If I turn aside a stone which is falling upon my head, I disturb the course of nature, and I invade the peculiar province of the Almighty by lengthening out my life beyond the period which by the general laws of matter and motion he had assigned it....

There is no being, which possesses the power or faculty, that it receives not from the Creator, nor is there any one, which by ever so irregular an action can encroach upon the plan of his providence, or disorder the universe....

'Tis a kind of blasphemy to imagine that

any created being can disturb the order of the world or invade the business of providence!...

A man may disturb society, no doubt, and thereby incur the displeasure of the Almighty: But the government of the world is placed far beyond his reach and violence....

The life of a man is of no greater importance to the universe than that of an oyster....

The advantage of assuming a trace of Hume in Prufrock's thought is that it enables us to translate his egregiously inflated question into Hamlet's famous one: namely, whether it is the course of wisdom

To be or not to be....

That, indeed, as Hamlet himself says, is the question of questions. It would bestow upon Prufrock a kind of dignity which he denies himself and it would make intelligible his otherwise pathetic alexandrine:

No! I am not Prince Hamlet nor was meant to be....

Prufrock would pass himself off as a sort of Polonius, but Polonius himself is far too smug, self-satisfied, and sententious a rhetorician to have us believe that he might ever question the value of his own existence or entertain even a momentary thought of self-annihilation. Prufrock is far too sensitive and soft-shelled a creature to make a successful courtier (in any sense of the word), which no doubt accounts for the ease with which we may identify our most vulnerable selves with him. He may indeed wish he were different, a crustacean

scuttling across the floors of silent seas....

But he is more akin to Hume's oyster, whose existence or non-existence is of no consequence to an imperturbable universe or even to the fashionable soci-

ety he cultivates, which would no doubt receive the news of the demise of a Jonathan Swift with the indifference which Swift imagined in the verses he composed on his own death. Prufrock's symbolic mollusk had made his appearance early in the poem, among the sawdust on the floor of cheap bars and restaurants.

It has been suggested that Prufrock's "ragged claws" are connected with Hamlet's invocation of the crab in his mockery of Polonius: "You yourself, sir, should be old as I am, if like a crab you could go backward." The image suggests not only that Prufrock wishes he were less thin-skinned and more aggressive than he is but also that he could escape the bondage of time, getting younger instead of older.

Any student of the lexicon would also be aware that a slang usage of the word oyster describes "an extremely taciturn and reserved person." Is there any better description of Prufrock, though he resists the crudities of formulation and talks volubly in riddles, allusions, circles, in order to say "nothing"?

The reader of dictionaries would also be aware of the oyster-crab which lives as a "commensal" in the gill cavity of the oyster and suggests the near relation of the mollusk to the crustacean. Even the undoubted crustacean lobster, as the dictionary tells us, has the slang meaning of "a gullible, awkward, fumbling, red-faced person," which is also not far off the mark as a description of aspects of the unheroic Prufrock.

But how likely is the somber and tragic theme "to be or not to be" to have crossed the mind of a man of Prufrock's generation? I find it not insignificant that in at least two places in the correspondence of William James (*The Thought and Character of William James*, Vol. II, by Ralph Barton Perry, Boston 1935), there are glancing references to the subject of suicide, which seem to indicate that it was

by no means foreign to the reflections of contemporaries, whose lives overlapped Eliot's student days at Harvard in the first decade of the twentieth century. Despite James's positive, pragmatic, sanguine, yea-saying temperament, we find him writing to his Polish correspondent and friend Wincenty Lutoslawski, in answer to the latter's comments on his *Will to Believe* (1897), "I will just say that I thoroughly believe in suicide for certain situations." And to his friend Benjamin Paul Blood (whose interesting *Anesthetic Revelation* he had reviewed in *The Atlantic* in 1874, whom he had mentioned in *Varieties of Religious Experience* [1902], and to whom he had devoted the last considerable essay of his life, "A Pluralistic Mystic"), he had written on June 28, 1896: "I take it that no man is educated who has never dallied with the thought of suicide."

Eliot could not have been aware, of course, of these sentiments at the time of the composition of *Prufrock* around 1910-1911, but James's word "dallied" seems exactly the right one to apply to Prufrock. The title of the poem points to one sort of dalliance that has so far almost exclusively engaged the attention of his critics. I am simply arguing the case that what makes for a tragi-comic poem is Prufrock's ability to make sudden transitions and leaps from the physical to the

metaphysical, from the sublime to the ridiculous, from love to death. The poem describes a trajectory from the Dantean underworld, among the dead, to its protagonist's ending in deep trouble where awakening to self-consciousness is equated with dying.

Finally, as a postscript, I should like to cite a passage from Pearson and Purtilo's 1974 study *Separate Paths: Why People End Their Lives* in which they quote Dr. Joseph Richman, a psychologist at The Einstein College of Medicine, who has said that suicide is "mostly a problem of dealing with love."

Do I dare
Disturb the universe?

The lame pentameter is the "objective correlative" (to use a critical term of Eliot's) of the despondent speaker's soul.

Commentaries on Prufrock have proliferated because it has always been felt that the darkness of the utterance requires some additional illumination. The reader is faced with the problem of accounting for the fact that a poem which declares itself on its face to be about love should revolve so continually about the subjects of age and death. The possibility of suicide seems to have been overlooked thus far.