

András Szigeti

THE LOVE SONG OF J. ALFRED PRUFROCK

*"I grow old... I grow old... I shall wear
the bottoms of my trousers rolled."
What does that mean Mr. Marlowe?
'Not a bloody thing, it just sounds good.'¹*

INTRODUCTION

Often when a poet feels compelled to revise the available means of poetic expression, bequeathed on him by literary tradition, he does so because he looks at the world somewhat differently than his predecessors. The introduction of a new poetic technique indicates the poet's changing approach to the relationship between the constitutive experience and the poem. How radical this change is may vary in subsequent periods of literary history - sometimes a significant new poem alone may succeed in carrying out a revolution, sometimes the change is more gradual, each poet of the day contributing to it to some extent. Most literary critics would subscribe to the claim that the work of T. S. Eliot and his contemporaries (E. Pound, etc.) marks a very important turning point in the history of poetry. There is less agreement, however, as to how the nature of this development can be best described.

By introducing the concept of *textualization*, this essay will try to point out how this change in the use of the various poetic means of expression occurs in

¹ Raymond Chandler: *The Long Good-bye*. Penguin Books. London. 1990.

Eliot's poem "The Love Song of Alfred J. Prufrock". Therefore, two things must be noted in defence of what follows. First, it is by no means argued that the poetic technique or process of textualization, which will be discussed here, could exhaustively describe all the novelties to be found in the poem. Second, this work is not intended to be a complete analysis of this elaborate and difficult poem. Always remaining within the generic boundaries of the essay, it will focus on three main aspects of the Love Song. These three aspects have been chosen, because they seem to be best suited to showing how Eliot makes his poetry 'differ' from that of his predecessors. I will identify textualization as a crucial element of this difference. The three key aspects will be considered from this point of view, that is, to what extent they demonstrate the working of a new poetic technique.

TEXTUALIZATION

"The poet has no idea of what he wants to say until he has found the words of his poem, and 'When you have found the words for it, the 'thing' for which the words had to be found has disappeared, replaced by the poem.' What the poet has at first is a kind of rhythm or movement which becomes manifest in words and 'may bring to birth the idea and the image'".² In Prufrock's Love Song we see the first instance of Eliot's new approach to poetic creation. The poem is not the expression or representation of a distinct and definable experience. The traditional notion of poetic meaning is abandoned. No doubt, one can find a great number of poems, at any point in the history of poetry previous to Eliot's Love Song, in which the layer of the poet's actual experience and the layer of the poetic images and language, through which the poet turns his actual experience into poetry, are difficult to separate. Yet in these instances of pre-twentieth century poetry, there seems to remain a recognisable inner core of the actual experience. With Eliot's poetry (and with that of some of his contemporaries), however, the point is reached where the dividing line between experience and language, experience and images is blurred to an extent that these very distinctions seem to carry no

² T. S. Eliot: "The Three Voices of Poetry." in: *On Poetry and Poets*, 1953, 97-98. Quoted by Fry 28.

significance any more. "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" is a pre-eminent example of this tendency.

Eliot does not want the reader to find the 'inner core' of experience. The clearest evidence of this intention is offered to us by the famous story about how the poem gained its final form. As it is well known, Eliot showed a previous version of the poem to Ezra Pound. After having expressed his admiration for the Love Song, Pound grabbed a pair of scissors and simply cut most lines of the poems shorter. The reader is not presented a poem that tries to 'say something' by creating meaning through linking particular segments of reality to certain images. We have a poem that is, first and foremost, a *rhythm* created by the combination, repetition and variation of words. Images, ideas are born out of this rhythm after the poet has found his words. This method, which has been labelled 'textualization' for present use, is quite different from previous poetic techniques. Priorities change: the text is not a means to convey the poet's image of a certain experience of his, on the contrary, the text is the foundation on which poetic images and ideas are built.

This essay will attempt to discuss the poem along these theoretical lines. It will argue that the concept of textualization may significantly contribute to an interpretation of Prufrock's Love Song, implying that the ways in which rhythm and images, structure and poetic language, versification and meaning are interrelated in the poem are highly innovative and to some extent unprecedented in earlier literary periods.

PRUFROCK RECONSTRUCTED

Rhythm

One of the ways in which Eliot establishes the primacy of the text is that he assigns new functions to rhythm. It ceases being just a pre-organized form of 'verse', metre and rhyme. In the process of textualization rhythms of many kinds are interwoven sometimes amplifying and sometimes contradicting each other. Rhythm in the stricter sense, that is, versification is of an accentual kind, the number of syllables being variable between the stresses. Yet, not even versification is subject to a rigorous pattern. "Eliot has said that the most interesting verse is that which constantly approaches a fixed pattern without quite settling into it: 'it is this contrast between fixity and flux, this unperceived evasion of monotony,

which is the very life of verse".³ The validity of Eliot's statement concerning fixity and flux could be extended to all the manifold rhythms that make up the 'text(ure)' of the poem. There is a rhythm of sections,⁴ a rhythm of changing line-lengths, a rhythm of repeating words, a rhythm of the occurrence of rhymes running parallel to, but equally often going against the rhythm of concepts and the rhythm of literal allusions. As if the poem had an underlying score like a piece of music. The difference between a musical piece and the poem is that the score of the latter is nowhere written except in the poet's head during the creation of his poem. One can also distinguish the internal rhythm of the section from that overall rhythm of the whole poem. By analysing the following example, we will be attempting to take a glance at one page of the poem's imaginary score as it were. In other words, we will be trying to separate and formalize one section of the intricately interwoven layers of the poem's rhythmic structure:

And indeed there will be time
 For the yellow smoke that slides along the street
 Rubbing its back upon the window-panes;
 There will be time, there will be time
 To prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet;
 There will be time to murder and create,
 And time for all the works and days of hands
 That lift and drop a question on your plate;
 Time for you and time for me,
 And time yet for a hundred indecisions,
 And for a hundred visions and revisions,
 Before the taking of a toast and tea."

The most apparent feature of the section is the rhythmic alternation of lines referring to everyday life and Prufrock's surrounding ("For the yellow smoke...") with those that stand for his thoughts ("To prepare a face...") and those that 'represent' general ideas ("And time for all the works..."). However, this rhythm is combined with that of rhymes and versification: the most stressed line in the section, the citation from the Bible ("There will be time to murder and create") rhymes with a line that brings us back to Prufrock's thoughts ("That lift and drop..."), and subsequently, we arrive back to another everyday image by the rhyming of the last line ("Before taking of a toast and tea...") with a line that could

³ T. S. Eliot: "Reflections on 'Verse Libre'". in: T. S. Eliot: *Selected Prose*, ed. F. Kermode. 1975. Quoted by Salinger 445.

⁴ I will use the term 'section' for labelling the various parts of the poem, as the term 'stanza' would be technically inappropriate.

be Prufrock addressing somebody or Eliot addressing the reader ("Time for you..."). The third rhythmic element - obviously not independent from the first and second - connects the this section with the rest of the poem by repeating or modifying lines in other stanzas ("For the yellow smoke...").

An exhaustive analysis of the poem should probably aim at deciphering its underlying 'musical' score completely. This analysis would then bring to the surface all layers of the poem's rhythm structure, as well as all the relationships between these layers. For the purposes of this essay, however, it is sufficient to observe the complexity and richness of the rhythmic structure in this section to understand the importance of rhythm in the process of textualization, on the one hand, and to realize the organic unity of the entire poem, on the other.

"I believe in an 'absolute rhythm'; a rhythm, that is, in poetry which corresponds exactly to the emotion or shade of emotion to be expressed. A man's rhythm must be interpretative, it will be, therefore, in the end, his own, uncounterfeiting, uncounterfeitable."⁵ The emergence of Prufrock's very personality is determined by the poem's rhythm structure. The rhythm of words represent his oscillating between thought and emotion, sincerity and self-concealment. The rhythmic patterns make his soliloquy swing back and forth, from the preparation of "his face to meet other faces" to self-analysis and introversion, from the courage to accept defeat to the arrogance of believing that he understands.

Image

"...When you were a tiny boy, learning to talk, you used to sound the rhythm of sentences without shaping words - the ups and downs of the thing you were trying to say. I used to answer you in kind, saying nothing yet conversing with you as we sat side by side on the stairs at 2635 Locust Street. And now you think the rhythm before the words in a new poem!... Such a dear little boy."⁶ Northrop Frye remarks that "the capacity of poetry to be unconsciously memorized is a criterion of genuineness, and the capacity of Eliot's own poetry for this is extraordinary."⁷ It can be argued that one of the reasons for Eliot's poetry being so 'memorable' is to be found in the intimate connection of rhythm and images. "An 'Image' is that which presents an intellectual and

⁵ Ezra Pound 63.

⁶ Ada Eliot Sheffield (1869-1943) writing to TSE. Quoted by Valerie Eliot XXXXI.

⁷ N. Frye 29.

emotional complex in an instant of time... It is the presentation of such 'complex' instantaneously which gives that sense of sudden liberation; that sense of freedom from time limits and space limits; that sense of sudden growth, which we experience in the presence of the greatest works of art."⁸ In fact, it is possible to identify 'focal images' which serve as centres of the various sections of the poem. Yet, these images are not fixed in terms of their location in the poem, neither are they based on an exclusive reference. Like watching the glimmering lights of a city in the night, some of them are precise and readily localisable, some are blurred and their position is difficult to tell, some seem to form figures (or it is perhaps only our eyes that reads these configurations into what we can see) and some appear to stand alone. As a whole, however, the we scarcely ever fail to see the totality of these lights to be constituting a fascinating pattern.

The focal images are constituted by a particular combination and variation of lines, words, rhymes. They may also occur in other sections around another focal image, but not with the same degree of concentrated intensity. Some of these images are variations, some are closer to each other than others, although the distance of the 'focus' is not proportional to the distance expressed in the number of lines that separates them. In this way, there emerges a rhythm of images as well. One may say that, not unlike the rhythm of versification, the images function as beats, stresses between which the number of not directly related ideas and secondary images is variable.

The focal image of the section cited previously ("And indeed there will be time, For the yellow smoke that slides along the street...") is time, whereas that of the following one is ageing ("And indeed there will be time..."). We see the theme of time returning in the next section ("For I have known them all already..."), but here the focal image is that of the time of everyday life (coffee spoons, etc.). The theme of ageing returns in the penultimate section, but here the central image is that of death.

The comparison of the yellow smoke lingering in the evening to a cat by its wonderful precision creates an image of extreme intensity. Later, however, the image of the smoke is re-evoked by only a single line ("And watched the smoke that rises from the pipes..."), because the poem's economy and rhythm structure do not require more precision at the given point. This veiled reference is sufficient to remind the reader of one particular aspect of Prufrock's urban environment.

8 Ezra Pound 59.

Certainly, these images are not completely independent of a given external reality. Emphatically however, the experience of the encounter with an external object remains in the poet's mind where he transform it consciously and unconsciously to an extent that the reader will have no access to the direct experience. One may even argue that the innovative manner in which images are used is the most characteristic evidence of the novelty of the process of textualization.

"Language in a healthy state presents the object, is so close to the object that the two are identified."⁹ Images in *Prufrock* are not references, they are not intended to mean anything in a direct way, and therefore one should not aim at deciphering them one by one. "He [Prufrock] reads 'an overwhelming question' into the layout of the city blocks. What the question is - a proposal of marriage? the question of human dignity? - is not put into words; but the way it emerges expresses the condition of seeing a problem and shrinking away from it".¹⁰

PRUFROCK SINGING

It seems rather easy to lose sight of the fact that the title unambiguously classifies the poem in terms of its genre. T.S. Eliot leaves the reader in no doubt that what he is about to read is a *love song*. There is a blatantly obvious contrast, however, between the dominant characteristics of Eliot's poem and other lyric works of the genre. On consulting the dictionary we find that a song is traditionally defined as a brief poem with an unsophisticated structure and unequivocal mood expressing a simple emotion clearly and directly without the interference of intellectual reflections, descriptions and narrations. It is furthermore noted that a song is generally constituted by a handful of images and only a limited number of variations on the central theme.¹¹ Eliot, obviously well-aware of the like definitions, has very consciously manipulated the available means of the genre. One could argue that he has set out to present the reader with an outright parody of the lyric and popular songs characteristic of the Romantic age. It seems more likely, however, that Eliot has gone further. He has chosen to

⁹ T. S. Eliot: "Swinburne as a Poet". in: *Selected Essays*. 327. quoted by N. Frye. 29.

¹⁰ L. G. Salingar 446.

¹¹ Magyar irodalmi lexikon. Akadémiai Kiadó, Budapest, 1963.

extend radically the generic boundaries of this form, while retaining many of its essential elements at other levels of the poem.

The understanding of Prufrock's emotions does not require an extraordinary intellectual or emotional sophistication, "And in short, I was afraid", and could form part of a more traditional song, but Eliot breaks the rules by interweaving them with reflections, musings, descriptions. The structure is a far cry from being clear and unsophisticated. The Love Song is a difficult and lengthy poem with a number of layers, containing a medley of complex emotions and feelings. And yet, Prufrock sings. Eliot does not allow him to be harmonious and simple. Prufrock's song is unsung, it is a confession withheld. Its subjectivity is constantly ridiculed and kept in check by Eliot's other voice of sarcasm and irony "Though I have seen my head (grown slightly bald) brought in upon a platter".

At this point it is also possible to tie up the discussion of the genre with the discussion of the process of textualization, since there is another sense in which the Love Song can be characterized as a descendant of the lyric genre of the song. Just like its nineteenth century predecessors, it maintains intimate ties with music. The musical quality of the poem is primarily based on a rhythm established by-as it has been noted in the previous chapter - a complex pattern of repetitions, stresses and variations. "In short, behave as a musician, a good musician, when dealing with that phase of your art which has exact parallels in music. The same laws govern, and you are bound by no others."¹² The poem's tone swings back and forth between the caricaturistic parody of the genre of the love song and Prufrock's hesitant confession. The poem's musicality swings back and forth between a near-melody and a bare syncopated rhythm. This constant oscillation, therefore, is also an essential part of the process of textualization, inasmuch as it contributes to creating a new relationship between the text(ure) and all the superstructures (images, ideas, etc.) building on the text(ure) as the foundations.

PRUFROCK AMOROUS

Two voices

Even if one accepts the claims concerning the primacy of the rhythmic structure, there are still several questions left unanswered. The most important

¹² Ezra Pound 61.

among these concerns the overall cohesion of the Love Song. What keeps the poem together? Why is it still more than a boundless sequence of interwoven rhythms (as there are, of course, countless examples of this kind of good poetry as well)? The poem is not two-dimensional, in the sense that it is more than just a surface extension, more than an elaborate fabric (texture). The poem has a beginning and an end, and there is clearly a line of development, a course of events and unfolding thoughts between them.

In the poem Eliot creates an undeniably individualized character. In the final analysis, it is Prufrock's character that seems to be giving coherence to the rhythmically organized sequence of images. The focal images of each section can be in one way or another linked to Prufrock's thoughts, environment or interpreted as Eliot's comments concerning his own character. Thus for example, the first section ("Let us go then...") is the description of the evening of Prufrock's walk, the second ("The yellow fog..") is that of the city which surrounds him and so on.

We have already mentioned Eliot's sophisticated technique by which he always maintains some distance between his poetic voice and Prufrock's character. He uses a wide range of poetic means to create this effect. One of these, the re-definition of the genre of the lyric song, has already been discussed. Once again we should take note of the oscillating dynamics ('always approaching, but never quite settling into a fixed pattern') of the poem: the reader is being swayed back and forth between the two voices, the ironic, sarcastic voice and the other which is supposedly Prufrock's own.

Eliot sometimes denies the word from Prufrock or immediately comments on his utterances. At the very outset, of course, the reader comes across the untranslated motto from Dante's *Divina Commedia* (*Inferno*. Canto XXVII). All throughout the poem the reader is presented various interjections interrupting the flow of Prufrock's thoughts or the description of his surroundings (In the room the women...). These appear to subordinate the importance of Prufrock's individuality to developing the rhythmical structure of the entire poem. The mixing of everyday images with the discussion of 'existential' questions (After the cups...; To have squeezed the universe...) also serves the same effect. Most importantly, however, Eliot polarizes dreamy romanticism against sharp realism¹³ ("I shall wear white flannel trousers, and walk upon the beach. I have

13 N. Frye. 39.

heard the mermaids singing, each to each"). Prufrock's dreams are being continuously parodied against the background of banal everyday routine. He dreams but "human voices wake him" and then, presumably, he will fall back into his dreams again.

The result of this constant interplay is a tone of irony setting Prufrock meditations in a peculiar light. I believe it is this irony, the carefully kept distance between the poet and his character that 'allows' Eliot to touch on questions of human existence without the poem assuming a tone of empty and irrelevant pathos. From the viewpoint of modern poetry the transcendent ceases being an independent realm, sometimes it appears in the gaps of everyday life, sometimes most ordinary objects gain a transcendent value and sometimes it seems to be completely concealed by the "evenings, mornings and afternoons". Prufrock is not the Hamlet of to be or not to be. The poet is most interested in showing the way in which the thoughts, love (?) and surroundings of a not too extraordinary character, "an attendant lord", are mixed with glimpses of something beyond the everyday routine.

The image of Prufrock's personality is shattered to pieces, but ultimately his failure is not his fault. It is not his fault that tragedy and heroism are replaced by frustration and routine. You cannot sing your love song if the meaning of your words is lost in a maze of allusions, references and veiled implications. You cannot reach your loved one if she does not exist. And it is equally useless to try reaching her there, through Inferno, Purgatorio and Paradiso; you know you will never find the gates anymore.

"I am not..."

Prufrock's character is secondary to the rhythm that brings him to life. In a sense he does give coherence to the rhythm structure of the poem, the pattern of stresses, rhymes and images. At the same time, the poem's beating pulse is also Prufrock's pulse. The rhythm of the poem is also that of his vacillating steps, his hesitant words, his audible breathing. The reader is to follow this rhythm and not the meticulous description of a character. Prufrock's existence cannot be separated from the poem that created him.

Ultimately, the greatest paradox of the Love Song is that Prufrock's character is being simultaneously constructed and deconstructed, brought to life and taken to pieces, described and ridiculed. He is given qualities and then these qualities are denied of him. Not only is his love song counterpointed by its own parody, his very personality is being questioned as soon as it emerges from the poem. How

does Eliot achieve this? This essay has been arguing that Eliot was able to avoid the rigidity of a fixed pattern by employing the process of textualization. That is to say, rhythm acquired priority over meaning or to say it differently, *a radically new definition of poetic meaning was arrived at.*

We are witnessing the same oscillating dynamics in the poem which has been noted several times above. Prufrock, who in one sense is the protagonist of the poem, is fragmented, enlarged and then reduced, identified, ridiculed, questioned and tormented within the same poem. This technique is even more instrumental than Prufrock's own statements in creating an inescapable feeling that this portrait represents "the quintessence of futility".¹⁴

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Cs. Szabó, László: "A négy vonós négyes". in: *Alkalom*. Budapest: Gondolat. 1982. 281-301
- Eliot, T. S.: *Collected Poems 1909-1962*. London & Boston: Faber & Faber, 1990
- Eliot, T. S.: "Tradition and the Individual Talent." in: David Lodge (ed.): *20th Century Literary Criticism*. London & New York: Longman, 1991. 71-7.
- Eliot, Valerie (ed.): *The Letters of T. S. Eliot*. vol 1. London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1988.
- Fry, Northrop: *T.S. Eliot*. Edinburgh & London: Oliver & Boyd, 1963.
- Magyar irodalmi lexikon. Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó. 1963.
- Pound, Ezra: "A Retrospect" (1918). in: David Lodge (ed.): *20th Century Literary Criticism*. London & New York: Longman. 1991. 58-70
- Salingar, L. G.: "T. S. Eliot. Poet and Critic." in: Boris Ford (ed.): *The New Pelican Guide to English Literature*. vol. 7. London: Penguin Books, 1984.
- Somlyó, György: *Philoktetész sebe. Bevezetés a modern költészetbe*. Budapest: Szépirodalmi Könyvkiadó, 1986.

¹⁴ Ezra Pound writing to Harriet Monroe about the publication of Prufrock in 1914. Cf. Valerie Eliot 106n.