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English 415

12 May 2016

T. S. Eliot's *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*
in Light of Sigmund Freud's Conception of Dreams

Poems that can never be entirely exhausted are always rewarding. You end up reading multiple times, and each time you arrive at a new discovery or meaning, and come to appreciate the complexities of the poem even more. T. S. Eliot's *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* is one fine example of such poetry, as it is skillfully crafted and well-engineered to communicate before any meaning can be arrived at. *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* is a dramatic monologue, the poetic techniques of which are designed in a manner that represents the workings of repression, and the structure of which runs parallel to structures adopted from psychoanalytic criticism, aiding our understanding of the poem and extraction of meanings.

But before delving into the analysis of the poem, it is imperative to set up the theoretical framework to be adopted. In *The Premises and Technique of Interpretation*, Sigmund Freud establishes that dreams are psychological phenomena, and that they always signify something, even when the dreamer "does not know that he knows it and for that reason thinks he does not know it" (Freud 54). He then outlines the free association technique in simple terms, and concludes that "the associations to the dream element will be determined both by the dream element and also by the unconscious genuine thing behind it" (Freud 61). In *The Manifest Content of Dreams and the Latent Dream-Thoughts*, Freud introduces additional concepts and starts by claiming that dream-elements "are ungenthine things, substitutes for something else that is unknown to the dreamer" (Freud 62). That "something else" he calls "unconscious" or "inaccessible to the dreamer's consciousness", the uncovering of which can be arrived at by a "conscious" association (Freud 62). He also introduces the

“resistance” factor into the process of interpretation, as that standing in the way of associations, stating that if it is small, “the substitute cannot be far distant from the unconscious material; but a greater resistance means that the unconscious material will be greatly distorted and that the path will be a long one from the substitute back to the unconscious material” (Freud 64). Even though “manifest” and “latent” contents of dreams are introduced here, he delivers a more deliberate structure of dreams elsewhere:

Not only are the elements of a dream determined by the dream-thoughts many times over, but the individual dream-thoughts are represented in the dream by several elements. Associative paths lead from one element of the dream to several dream-thoughts, and from one dream-thought to several elements of the dream. (Freud quoted in Goulimari 137)

Freud adds:

There is often a passage in even the most thoroughly interpreted dream which has to be left obscure; this is because we become aware during the work of interpretation that at that point there is a tangle of dream-thoughts which cannot be unraveled and which moreover adds nothing to our knowledge of the content of the dream. This is the dream’s navel, the spot where it reaches down into the unknown. (Freud quoted in Goulimari 140)

In *The Insistence of the Letter in the Unconscious*, Jacques Lacan likens Freud’s structure of a dream to that of language, one which he develops from Ferdinand de Saussure: “The structure of language which enables us to read dreams is the very principle of the ‘meaning of dreams’” (Lacan 195). Applying his signification model to Freud’s dream model, he describes the above-mentioned “distortion” of unconscious material as “the sliding of the signified under the signifier” (Lacan 196). And again using the structure of signification, Freud’s conception of the structure of dreams with the associations between manifest and latent content can be understood in Lacanian terms as one signifier having many signifieds

and one signified having many signifiers, rather than Saussure's one-to-one relationship between signifier and signified (Goulimari 138). And finally, Freud's conception of what he calls the "navel" of the dream can be understood in the language of Lacan as the "non-arrival of the signified" (Goulimari 139), or an "incessant sliding of the signified under the signifier" (Lacan 191). Keeping in mind the above-outlined concepts, Freud's dream model will be applied to *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* in conjunction with a New Criticism approach of close-reading in order to extract "manifest" and "latent" meanings, in addition to demonstrating an obscure spot within the latent content of the poem: Prufrock's "overwhelming question", which reaches down into the unknown.

The poem starts with a sense of firmness and a soon-to-be fulfilled end: "Let us go then, you and I", which is undercut very shortly after with the image of "a patient etherized upon a table", conveying a feeling of paralysis in spite of a seemingly present intent to take action. This feeling of discomfort is further exacerbated by adjectives such as "half-deserted", "muttering", "restless" and "tedious", which all lead to the "navel" of the poem, the overwhelming question: "what is it?". Then, the persona of the poem, Prufrock, speaks of the yellow fog and smoke in an extended metaphor, likening it to a cat, which seems like a deliberate digression from the "overwhelming question". But why does he digress? It can be seen as a form of "resistance" to make associations and a conscious "substitution", willfully adding to the already experienced "distortion" of the content of the poem. He thinks, "there will be time/ To prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet". Prufrock seems to have an overwhelming desire that is likely to be judged by society (the superego), and therefore feels the need to conceal it, which results in repression. This repression culminates in a "compulsion to repeat" in psychoanalytic terms (Goulimari 129), leaving Prufrock stuck in the midst of "a hundred indecisions" and "a hundred visions and revisions". He is deeply stuck in limbo that even indecisions need to be revised, and no action materializes so far. One can sense what Freud calls "distortion" early on in the poem, manifest in the manifest

elements of the poem. However, certain meanings can be arrived at with a process of free association. For instance, likening the evening to “a patient etherized upon a table” can be a substitute for an internal sense of paralysis that Prufrock experiences. “Half deserted streets” signify an emphasis on emptiness felt within, and describing them as “tedious” can also be a substitution for the internal chaos Prufrock feels. And all of that seems to be a direct result of a repressed desire, resurfacing and being reiterated frequently throughout the poem, without being expressed explicitly.

Prufrock then stretches the moment further and starts to question if he dares. He is well-dressed, suggesting that he is prepared. However, all he can think of is to “turn back and descend the stair”, which can be thought of as a metaphor that connotes the return of the desire to the id of the unconscious. But while continuing to question if he dares, he makes a shift to “decisions and revisions” as opposed to the earlier “indecisions”. All of that crumbles again in a minute in the context of repetition, which is more obviously now driven by repression. His preparedness includes his meticulous study of time and the patterns of his life, measured with “coffee spoons”. But that does not provide him with the slightest confidence in the face of “the voices dying with a dying fall”, which he claims to know as well, in a reference to his potential fate, driven by his question. The superego (society) is reiterated as a harsh formulating power, causing him to wriggle like a pinned insect fearing scrutiny, and the desire is further repressed. We can start to speculate regarding the source of the desire as he questions if it is “perfume from a dress/ That makes [him] so digress”. Apparently, a step forward is taken from presumption to questioning how he should begin. But that illusive step is shortly shattered with the wish of being “a pair of ragged claws”, with no capacity to bear overwhelming repressed desires and the accompanying questioning. If the poem is to be seen as one extended moment, with its own timeline, the “bald spot” can signify aging in a moment: a melodramatic expression in direct relationship with the amount of frustration resulting from the repression of the desire. It can, in addition, signify a deep insecurity in

spite of his preparedness (being well-dressed), an insecurity that can justifiably be claimed to be linked to his “overwhelming question”.

After that, Prufrock shifts his questioning to whether or not he has the energy “to force the moment to its crisis”, even when time seems to be conducing to his uttering his thoughts: “And the afternoon, the evening, sleeps so peacefully!”. But he confesses that he “was afraid”, and shortly after shifts to question if it “would have been worth it, after all”. Even though the entire poem appears to be condensed in one single moment, Prufrock seems to traverse a line, back and forth, between desire and the actualization of that desire, in a seemingly endless fashion, reiterating his fear of rejection in two consecutive stanzas: “That is not what I meant at all”. Again, the external reality (the reality principle) causes him to repress his desire. He then justifies his inaction by stating that he is “not prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be”. In contrast to Hamlet, a man of action, Prufrock is an average man, and the lack of materialization of his desire is therefore expected to him. At the end, his hesitation and indecision diffuse and permeate his everyday mundane activities: “Shall I part my hair behind? Do I dare to eat a peach?”. Such constant repression causes him to be thrust into an imaginary realm, where he hears “mermaids singing, each to each”. However, it is ironic that even in his own imagination, he does not “think that they will sing to [him]”, which shows how deep his sense of alienation cut. And again, the mermaids not singing to him signifies his exclusion, that which is the result of avoiding his “overwhelming question”, as well as the possibility of such exclusion stemming from addressing the question.

Adopting the above-followed close-reading approach allows one to move empirically from the particular to the general and draw parallels between generalizations about the poem and postulates of other literary critical approaches, in this paper: psychoanalytic criticism. Prufrock is generally allusive regarding his overwhelming question in his speech. The reason behind that is expressed in what can be considered the climax of the poem: “It is impossible to say just what I mean!”. That confession, which he is frequently on the brink of making

over and over again in the poem, however fails to do so, can be seen as the “navel” of the poem, that which reaches down into the unknown. The impossibility of conveying that meaning, expressed by Prufrock, can be regarded as what Lacan calls “the incessant sliding of the signified under the signifier”, the outcome of which is never to arrive at a meaning. Even though certain images, phrases and word choices can lead one to a specific, however broad and still vague, interpretation of what the “overwhelming question” might be in reference to, such interpretation cannot be made with much confidence. However, circling around the never-uttered confession, without actually expressing it, creates a gap that can be filled differently by different readers. That gap, or “navel” of the poem, makes the poem relatable by everyone; it universalizes Prufrock’s condition.

Such a reading of “non-arrival” is in tune with what formal attributes of the poem convey. The lack of a rhyme scheme (except for a few dispersed instances of consecutive rhyming lines) elicits a feeling of lack of shelter, or a feeling of homelessness. When the poem is run through a word cloud generator, one can see that the word “streets” is one of the most heavily used (Prior). Such streets are “half-deserted” rather than half-full, which conveys a sense of loneliness. They “follow like a tedious argument”, alluding to a dull and too long a journey, ominous as the streets are “of insidious intent”. They are also “narrow”: suffocating; and “sprinkled”: exist randomly everywhere, with no sense of organization or purpose. In any case, no arrival takes place, as all there is is the never-ending journey. Perhaps Prufrock evades his fragmented and inconsistent “self”, a sense amplified by a lack of regularity in rhythm and meter. However, there are peculiarities when it comes to the use of rhythm in some parts. Noteworthy is the use of an iambic pentameter in lines 111-114: “No! I am not Prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be”. The use of such a rhythm, one that Shakespeare uses, in this specific part, creates an irony, one of a number of ironies present in the poem. Another irony is the use of heroic couplets, when the speaker (Prufrock) is no hero whatsoever. The poem is evidently well-engineered in a way that even formal attributes as

“manifest content”, signify deeper meanings (“latent content”), which are in turn linked to the never-expressed confession, or “navel” of the poem, augmenting the sense of “non-arrival”.

As has been demonstrated above, the poem conveys a strong sense of repression through various poetic techniques. The mouthpiece of the poem, Prufrock, oscillates between his desire and the materialization of his desire, which never takes place. A Psychoanalytic Criticism approach, in conjunction with a New Criticism approach of close-reading, elucidates “manifest” and “latent” meanings, in addition to an obscure spot of the poem with a meaning never to be arrived at. Formal attributes of the poem also conspire with the contents of the poem to contribute to the meanings and feelings conveyed by the poem. T. S. Eliot’s Prufrock might seem like a peculiar character at first. However, the more we read, the more we recognize ourselves in him, and that is why *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* resonates.

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