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“ALMOST RIDICULOUS”:
DARK HUMOR IN ELIOT’S
“THE LOVE SONG OF J. ALFRED PRUFROCK”

Garrison Keillor, the story-teller and author who is also perhaps the most popular of recent American literary humorists, recalled in an early 2007 blog entry that when he was young,

most major American writers seemed to be alcoholic or suicidal or both, and we students absorbed the notion that the true sign of brilliance is to be seriously screwed up. The true poet is haunted by livid demons, brave, doomed, terribly wounded, and if one was (as I was) relatively unscratched, you concealed this and tried to impersonate doom.

The prime minister of high culture was T.S. Eliot, who suffered from a lousy marriage and hated his job and so wrote “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” a small, dark mopefest of a poem in which old Pru worries about whether to eat a peach or roll up his trousers. This poem pretty much killed off the pleasure of poetry for millions of people who got dragged through it in high school.

Keillor, of course, was simply tossing off, in passing, a brief impressionistic recollection, not offering extended literary analysis, but he was soon challenged by another blogger named Linda Sue Grimes, a Ph.D. in literature who argued that it “is funny that Keillor, whose own banter and reportage is laced with humor, does not see the humor in ‘Old Pru.’” The titular speaker of Eliot’s poem (Grimes contends) is “a ridiculous character, utterly laughable.” He is “merely a conglomeration of all the ridiculous traits of humankind at any time; therefore, readers cannot take him seriously. Readers are free to simply enjoy the inane things he thinks and says by laughing at them.” The poem, Grimes suggests, is “too funny to be a ‘dark mopefest,’” and Prufrock himself “becomes a caricature who instead of drawing sympathy draws derision from the reader.”

Somewhere between the opinions of Keillor and Grimes, something like the truth seems to lie. Prufrock is probably not as utterly laughable and completely ridiculous a character as Grimes seems to suggest; certainly any survey of the commentary the poem has elicited shows that Prufrock has frequently been read as far more than a figure of mere fun or simple ridicule. In fact, the poem has often been interpreted as a provocative meditation on such highly serious themes (to list merely a few in alphabetical order) as alienation from nature and others, antiheroism, anxiety and frustration, boredom or *ennui*,

bourgeois decadence, the corruptions of cities, damnation and redemption, the decline of Western civilization, the deconstruction of personality, disillusionment and passivity, failure of will, fear of old age, fear of sex, intense self-consciousness, the loss of youth, metaphysical distress, the perils of indecision, personal weakness in an ugly world, psychological insecurity, romantic despair, self-division, self-disgust, social isolation, solipsism, the sordidness of daily existence, spiritual emptiness and sterility, and turpitude and evil (see Blalock 53-83). No wonder young Keillor was depressed! Nevertheless, despite the often gloomy tone of the poem and the often persuasively gloomy ways in which it has been interpreted, the work does contain obvious elements of humor, irony, satire, parody, self-mockery, and burlesque. To the extent that it is indeed a humorous poem, then, its humor is dark, but its humor is also more complicated and subtle than Grimes seems to allow. Prufrock is not a figure who seems “utterly laughable,” nor is he simply a target of readers’ superior “derision.” He is, instead, a figure who is perfectly capable of mocking himself and who even (partly for that reason) earns a hard-won measure of the reader’s sympathy. If Prufrock were less fully self-aware, he might also be more merely laughable and more simply funny.

Almost everyone would agree that one of the most obviously humorous aspects of the poem is its very title. The name “J. Alfred Prufrock” sounds stiff, formal, pretentious, and affected; to imagine that a character with such a name might be either the subject or the author of a “love song” therefore seems (as Prufrock himself might put it) “almost ridiculous” (l. 118). The term “love song” will, of course, seem even more ironic and darkly comic as the poem develops, since this is a work which largely concerns the protagonist’s inability either to find love or to express it. For the moment, though, the title suggests a more blatantly comic poem than Eliot eventually delivers, and the shift to a darker tone seems evident immediately in the unexpected quotation from Dante’s *Inferno* that precedes the poem proper. Like so much else in this work, the precise import of the quotation is difficult to determine. The speaker, Guido da Montefeltro, is a liar who has been trapped as a flame in one of the lower circles of hell; he is willing to speak to Dante only because he assumes (ironically) that his words will never be repeated or reported: “If I thought that my reply would be to one who would ever return to the world, this flame would stay without further movement; but since none has ever returned alive from this depth, if what I hear is true, I answer you without fear of infamy” (Baym 1420).

Guido, needless to say, is mistaken in his assumption that Dante will never be able to report what he is told; indeed, the words Guido speaks become embedded in one of the most famous and most widely read poems ever written. The same, of course, is also true of Prufrock’s own confession. The joke, then, is on both Guido and Prufrock, or perhaps (if Prufrock himself is imagined as deliberately including the quotation from Dante in his “Love Song”), the joke is deliberately *by* Prufrock at his own expense. Yet however the quotation from Dante is precisely interpreted, its import seems not only dark (since it implies that Prufrock is trapped in a kind of hell) but also somewhat comic (since it calls attention to the fact that his embarrassed confessions are about to be made widely public). Nevertheless, in trying to determine the exact tone of the quotation from Dante, much depends on whether we assume that it is inserted by Eliot (the creator of Prufrock) or whether it is intentionally included by Prufrock himself. If the latter assumption seems persuasive, then Prufrock has already begun a process of self-mockery – a process that becomes even more undeniable and obvious as the poem proceeds. Paradoxically, the

more Prufrock is willing to openly mock himself, the less merely risible (because the more humble, sympathetic, and self-aware) he ultimately seems.

The very first words of the poem proper – “Let us go then, you and I” (l. 1) – are typically puzzling and may also, already, be characteristically ironic. Presumably the “I” is Prufrock himself, but who is the “you”? Commentators have disagreed greatly about the identity of this latter figure, but surely the “you” is in one sense the reader, who is about to accompany Prufrock (as Dante accompanied Virgil) on a tour through a kind of hell. The opening line of the poem implies, then, a purposeful journey with a companion – an implication that will seem somewhat ironic by the conclusion of the work, since Prufrock will ultimately arrive nowhere and will seem incapable of making or sustaining connections. Meanwhile, the poem’s second line – “When the evening is spread out against the sky” – implies an already literally dark setting, although whether such darkness is meant to seem appealing or disturbing is as yet unclear. Only when we reach the third line – “Like a patient etherised upon a table” – does the tone suddenly and clearly seem both shocking and ironic. If the image seems darkly humorous (and it does often provoke surprised laughter during classroom discussions), it also seems surprisingly grotesque, suggesting already a theme of figurative sickness that runs throughout the work. Is Prufrock, by using such an image, already suggesting his own capacity for a kind of grim and sardonic dark humor? And, if this is the case, should a man capable of such biting irony himself be treated as a figure of mere ridicule and derision? Here as so often elsewhere, any humor the poem displays seems both dark and provocative, and the attitude we are meant to adopt toward Prufrock is by no means simple or obvious.

Humor – dark or otherwise – is not especially obvious in the first thirty lines or so of the poem. Instead, gloomy and depressing imagery tends to predominate, especially when the speaker proposes a journey “through certain half-deserted streets, / The muttering retreats / Of restless nights in one-night cheap hotels, / And saw-dust restaurants with oyster-shells” (ll. 4-7). Any humor here – even of a dark sort – is hardly blatant (to say the least). The references to “cheap hotels” and “saw-dust” restaurants may strike some readers as comically melancholy, as if Prufrock is a depressed, depressing person who is absolutely determined to be joyless. Likewise, his comment that the streets “follow like a tedious argument / Of *insidious* intent” (ll. 8-9; emphasis added) may already contain a hint of comic paranoia, while his reference to an “overwhelming question” (l. 10) may perhaps imply that he takes himself and his humdrum existence far too seriously and is therefore already a target of ironic mockery by the poet. There may, too, be a touch of comic exasperation when Prufrock exclaims, concerning the supposedly “overwhelming” question, “Oh, do not ask, ‘What is it?’” (l. 11), and there certainly seems more than a touch of comic incongruity in the abrupt shift reporting that “In the room the women come and go / Talking of Michelangelo” (ll. 13-14).

The sudden juxtaposition of these lines with the verse paragraph that precedes them must have struck Eliot’s first readers, especially, as disorienting and nearly absurd, just as the equally sudden shift to the prolonged description of the “yellow fog” (which somehow seems both canine and feline in its behavior) must have made many early readers (and many later ones, too) wonder what, exactly, the structure and point of the poem was supposed to be and how to interpret both its protagonist and its odd opening mixture of tones and its strange combinations of images. Sometimes dark, sometimes

almost lyrical, sometimes portentous and paradoxical (“There will be time to murder and create”; l. 28), sometimes exhibiting shrewd social insight (“There will be time, there will be time / To prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet”; ll. 26-27), the poem for much of its first thirty lines seems to waver between the serious and the absurd, with touches also of the grotesque. Not until we reach the oddly deflating reference to “the taking of a toast and tea” (l. 34) – which suddenly plunges us into a world of routine bourgeois domesticity – does the tone become fairly obviously satirical and ironic.

From this point forward, the humor tends to be more blatant as the focus tends to shift more clearly to Prufrock himself. His repeated wondering – “‘Do I dare?’ and, ‘Do I dare?’” (l. 38) – suggests risible weakness, especially since he doesn’t even “dare” to report clearly what is troubling him, and this impression of somewhat laughable fragility and comic self-consciousness is soon reinforced by other details: his uncertainty about whether or not to climb a stair (presumably to engage in a social encounter he partly dreads); his worry about the “bald spot of the middle of [his] hair”; his acute awareness of how others might respond to his appearance (“They will say: ‘How his hair is growing thin! . . . ‘how his arms and legs are thin!’”); even his elaborately upper-middle-class style of dress (“My morning coat, my collar mounting firmly to the chin, / My necktie rich and modest, but asserted by a simple pin”; [ll. 39-44]). All these details make Prufrock a figure whom both he and others find it hard to take seriously, but the mere fact that he is willing honestly to report his defects suggests that he is not merely or entirely a figure of fun. Most people, if they are honest with themselves (as Prufrock apparently tries to be honest with *himself*) can relate, on some level, to the kinds of insecurities Prufrock expresses. Nearly everyone dislikes being judged harshly by others; nearly everyone dislikes the physical decay that accompanies aging; nearly everyone has wished to avoid an unwanted social encounter. Merely laughing at Prufrock is too easy; it implies a position of unrealistic superiority, as if the laugher were entirely immune to the kinds of anxieties Prufrock expresses. What makes Prufrock a figure of dark humor is the fact that we *cannot* entirely distance ourselves from him or find him merely ridiculous. The anxieties and uncertainties that trouble him (and that make him partly comic) are ones that were (and perhaps still are) by no means confined to Prufrock alone.

Prufrock is usually regarded, by himself and others, as both pitifully and laughably weak, especially in his relations with the women who increasingly come to dominate his thoughts and expressions. He seems emasculated, and his social awkwardness both results from and enhances his social insecurities: the more uncomfortable he feels, the more ineptly he acts; and the more ineptly he acts, the more uncomfortable he feels. There is, perhaps, a touch of comic paranoia in his focus on “The eyes that fix you in a formulated phrase” (l. 56), and there is, perhaps, a touch of risible self-pity when he imagines himself “formulated, sprawling on a pin” and then “pinned and wriggling on the wall” (l. 57-58). In lines like these, Prufrock does seem somewhat laughably pathetic, but any laughter directed at him also seems partly cruel, especially since he is himself so much aware of his own shortcomings. This is another sense, then, in which any comedy in “Prufrock” seems dark: laughing at Prufrock seems a bit like “kicking a man when he is down” (to use the old cliché), especially since no one seems harder on Prufrock than Prufrock himself. He seems highly aware of all his shortcomings and flaws; he seems full of genuine self-contempt; he doesn’t seem, especially,

to be seeking any pity or merely playing the role of victim to elicit sympathy; he doesn't try to hide, disguise, or make excuses for his flaws; and (most significantly) he also seems capable of genuinely sympathetic responses to others (as when he mentions that he has gone "at dusk through narrow streets / And watched the smoke that rises from the pipes / Of lonely men in shirt-sleeves, leaning out of windows"; ll. 70-72). For all these reasons, it seems difficult merely to laugh or jeer at Prufrock; his predicament, instead, arouses more complex responses – responses that should involve our own awareness of our own flaws and shortcomings. No one is more aware than Prufrock himself that he cuts a somewhat ridiculous figure, and his honesty in confessing his faults and foibles therefore makes him seem less a purely comic buffoon than a figure in a somewhat painful tragicomedy. Only an immensely self-assured and perhaps uncharitable person – only a person who might actually seem comically arrogant or even cruel – could entirely dismiss Prufrock as merely ridiculous. His predicament demands a more humble, more humane response, if only because we cannot entirely distance ourselves from the defects he displays.

Despite Prufrock's obvious weaknesses, he does exhibit a genuine ability to laugh at himself, and the mere fact that he puts his weaknesses on such public display suggests, ironically, a kind of strength. It is Prufrock himself, after all, who imagines his "head (grown slightly bald) brought in upon a platter" (l. 82), and it is that unnecessary but added parenthetical phrase that makes especially obvious his genuine willingness to mock himself. This is a willingness he demonstrates again and again. Thus, it is Prufrock himself who imagines that the "eternal Footman" will "hold my coat, and snicker" (l. 85), just as it is Prufrock himself who repeatedly provides all the other details that make his life seem a continuous routine of incongruities and anticlimaxes that are described through a whole series of mock-serious allusions to such grand sources as the Bible and Shakespeare. For this reason, when Prufrock announces that he is "not Prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be," our first response is to think, "well, that's obvious," but our second response should be to recall all the ways in which Prufrock does indeed resemble Hamlet, including in his melancholy, his indecisiveness, his self-contempt, and his sense of being woefully out of step with his complacently comfortable society. This is not to say that Prufrock is tragic; it is merely to say that he is not simply laughable. A similarly complex response is provoked when Prufrock, after dismissing any likeness between himself and Hamlet, implicitly compares himself instead to a figure like Polonius: he says that if he resembles any figure in a play, he is simply

. . . an attendant lord, one that will do

To swell a progress, start a scene or two,

Advise the prince; no doubt, an easy tool,

Deferential, glad to be of use,

Politic, cautious, and meticulous;

Full of high sentence, but a bit obtuse;

At times, indeed, almost ridiculous –

Almost, at times, the Fool. (ll. 111-19)

Once more, however, the phrasing is double-edged, since the reference to obtuseness helps remind us of all the ways in which Prufrock, in fact, is *not* obtuse. He is, if anything, painfully sensitive and self-aware, and the mere fact that he can mock himself as he does in the lines just quoted shows how far he is from entirely resembling Shakespeare's Polonius, whose key flaw is that he takes himself too seriously and cannot imagine himself as ridiculous in the ways he seems to others. Similarly ironic is Prufrock's comparison of himself to "the Fool" in an Elizabethan play. On the one hand, the comparison exhibits once more his humble (and/or perhaps masochistic) willingness to mock and denigrate himself in print; on the other hand, the comparison may also remind us that the fools in Shakespeare's plays are often the wisest characters, partly because they are also the most self-aware.

Here, then, as so often in Eliot's poem, Prufrock's phrasing cuts both ways: Prufrock does indeed, in some ways, seem "almost ridiculous," but the word "almost" is crucial. Prufrock never becomes a merely risible, entirely laughable figure. He is never the target of simple satire or uncomplicated irony – even his own. He is not simply the butt of an elaborate joke or the protagonist in a Monty Python sketch. His weaknesses, his flaws, his shortcomings are all ones of which he is himself painfully self-aware, and honest readers will have to confess that Prufrock's flaws are not his alone. We cannot help but laugh sometimes at Prufrock, just as he insistently laughs at himself (especially in the latter half of the poem). Yet the joke, alas, is not entirely on Prufrock alone. He is, in many ways, the archetypal modern man, and conscientious readers will have to confess that in laughing at him, they laugh partly (and perhaps somewhat ruefully) at themselves.

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