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BODY PARTS, SEX, AND LANDSCAPES: AN EXPLICATION OF ELIOT'S SYMBOLISM IN *THE LOVE-SONG OF J. ALFRED PRUFROCK*

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ABSTRAK

Situasi kultural dan intelektual baru, seperti di awal abad ke-20, membutuhkan mode-mode ekspresi yang juga baru yang mampu memberikan bentuk sekaligus kemampuan mengendalikan makna pada sensibilitas sang seniman. T.S. Eliot memenuhi kebutuhan itu dengan menciptakan teknik *objective correlative* yang diwarnai oleh *disjunction*, pengalaman personal, realisme simbolik, dan kompleksitas makna. Teknik ini diandalkan untuk memberikan bentuk dan kontrol pada *chaos* dan hilangnya arah hidup yang mewarnai zaman itu. Dalam kajian ini, teknik itu diterapkan dalam salah satu karya Eliot dengan harapan pembaca akan terbantu untuk menyimak karya-karya Eliot yang lain, atau karya-karya lain yang juga modernis, yang biasanya sangat sulit bagi orang-orang yang masih harus bergulat dengan bahasa asing dasar.

Kata Kunci: *disjunction*, realisme simbolik.

INTRODUCTION

T.S. Eliot introduced into poetry techniques of expression and a world view that in early 20th century were indeed new. Three aspects serve as the driving force behind this. First, man in the twentieth century found himself in a new cultural situation. It was the time of anthropologists like Sir James Fraser, people who for the first time probed into the mythic consciousness of the past. Their works helped a lot in giving modern man a nearly comprehensive view of himself. This is strongly reflected in Eliot's consistent use of mythic allusions to comment on modern experience. Second, the new insights offered by psychologists like Freud and William James opened up new routes of exploration into the workings of man's mind and personality. This helped Eliot in producing a new realism in which his protagonists reveal their innermost souls. Third, this modernist world view reflected the chaos and lack of direction in 20th century life, where the human being was lost amid the rush of metropolitan existence, the horror of world war, and the deterioration of established values. These are the core of the modern sensibility presented in Eliot's poetry (Hargrove: 1978, 4).

This contemporary sensibility demanded new modes of expression. A new content necessitated a new form. To build this form, Eliot came up with four specific techniques. First, his form is to be composed of disjunctive sequences of images, events, or thoughts. Juxtaposition is used without connectives. An idea about chaos should be presented in and as a form which is itself chaotic. A well-ordered expression of a disorder would simply be a bad art. Second, details are to be presented as they are without any attempt to elevate or glorify the poet's subject matter. But they are to be elevated into an imagery of the greatest intensity — presenting it as it is, and yet making it represent something much more than itself. The poetry that is so composed would be filled with graphic realistic details, and in turn these details are carefully controlled by the form to endow them with the greatest significance (Leavis: 1932, 25). Third, the artist should invent a new rhythm —one that should be the rhythm of the age. Fourth, there should be a technique of symbolizing emotional states intensely and poignantly. For this Eliot invented what he called the "objective correlative" —in which concrete sensory detail is to be used to communicate complex emotions objectively (Matthiessen: 1959, 82).

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Hargrove summarizes the characteristics of the Eliotean symbol as follows: (1) it conveys a complex moral or emotional state, (2) it originates in the poet's personal experiences in literature and/or in life, (3) it is grounded in the real, the actual, but it expresses universal feelings, emotions, experiences, and, (4) it has a multiplicity of meanings . . . reflecting the complexity of modern human experience (Hargrove: 1978,11).

The application of the above techniques in Eliot's poetry is most obvious in his elaboration of setting: his choice and arrangement of its details, and the rhythm with which it is conveyed. His setting is typically symbolic, representing a complex emotional or moral state. This symbol is the means with which the intangible, almost inexpressible feelings and experiences of the human being (in particular the modern human being) could be communicated in poetry. It is the poet's means of controlling and manipulating feelings. Furthermore, a poet should make his own symbol out of his own experience. If he uses a traditional symbol, he must recreate it and give it a fresh life by using it in new ways or infusing it with new meanings. Memories of"the song of one bird, the leap of one fish, at a particular place and time, the scent of one flower, and old woman on a German mountain path, six ruffians seen through an open window playing cards at night at a small French railway junction where there was a water-mill . . . may have symbolic value" (Eliot: 1933, 148) and thus constitute an appropriate material for poetry.

This paper aims to show how such characteristics of the Eliotean symbol can be recognized in Eliot's poetry. It takes one poem, "The Love-Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," as an example, and tries to recognize its details, their artistic arrangement, and their complexity of meanings. The writer expects that this explication, meager though it is, could help Indonesian readers in "making sense" of Eliot's poetry —which is indeed very difficult.

BODY PARTS AND BROKEN IMAGES

The Javanese typically swear at each other by shouting "*dagadu, dengkulmu, untumu* . . . etc." In using this characteristic hell-raising, we pick up only one body part, especially the one we hate the most, and use it to represent the enemy. To us, the enemy is no longer a person —just a piece of bone or a bitten flesh. We have broken him into a thousand pieces. By means of this verbal violence— basically this is synecdochic— we have dissected and rejected him. That is exactly how Prufrock's mind works:

> *And I have known the eyes already, known them all —*
> *The eyes that fix you in a formulated phrase,*
> *And when you are formulated, sprawling on a pin,*
> *When I am pinned and wriggling on the wall, . . .*

Prufrock seems to say "That look in your eyes makes me understand well enough that you have treated me like a dried specimen —a laboratory butterfly dried and pinned in a glass box. (1) I am just a dead worthless object, not a living human being. (2) I am just a dissected object of your scientific gaze. You fix my identity, you force your formula, your category, your classification parameters on me without even asking me, and you disdain my protest. In your eyes I am not a person, but just a function, a phrase —maybe something like "this intellectual fossil of the Mojopahit era" or "one of those socialist freaks that think all rich people are thieves". . . and the phrase could be racial, demographic, political, hierarchical, psychological, or biological. (3) So, in your eyes I am only a tiny insignificant part of a scientific concept. Just an abstraction. You have done me a great injustice —you and your vain scientific outlook— and I suffer under your gaze."

When we regard a person with scientific eyes, we identify that person according to our category, and we are likely to take in only those aspects of that person that fit in well with our category; as to the rest, we say Go to hell! This is the commonest and corruptest practice of popular "psychology." But Prufrock is not simply denouncing a popular habit of pseudo-psychological insight. We are led to feel how this shallow and abusive popular habit can easily become devastating to our own self-perception when it is used in connection with new ideas and new ways of thinking like those outlined by Darwin, Marx, Freud, William James, and many others. We are forced to see ourselves as an animal creation that is undergoing perpetual changes dictated by environmental forces, or as a being dictated by inviolable social forces, or as a being whose motives and values are largely mysterious or irrational, whose feeling and thinking processes are mostly vague and capricious. The old comprehensive self is gone. What remains is simply pieces of a vanishing self. The need to recompose it is great. Here the use of synec-doches to express this concern with shattered selfhood is obvious.

A synecdoche uses a part of something to represent that thing. It should be noted, however, that when so many synecdoches are used pervasively in a poem, what stands out clearly to the reader is the very state of brokenness, of unwholesomeness. The things referred to are not whole, coherent, or sound. Furthermore, the use of synecdoches in this poem is coupled with a strong sense of irony. Prufrock, as an alter-ego of Eliot, feels that he is perceived by other characters in synec-dochic terms; he feels that he is dissected by people's gaze. But Prufrock himself sees other people with the same dissecting eyes. He is well aware of this fact, and that makes it all the more painful. With his dissecting eyes, he draws sharp critical caricatures of people (and himself). He does this by using an imagist technique —drawing small, sharp, precise, poignant images, in free verse and colloquial language. Eliot uses such images to create pictures which are highly disjunctive and seemingly incoherent.

In addition to synecdoche, other linguistic means commonly employed to build such imagistic pictures are metonymy and conceit ; the visual technique commonly employed are caricatures, parodies, and the grotesque; and the logical constructs commonly employed are irony, paradox, and disjunction. (It is better to use the photographic term for imagism — "snapshot." This kind of portrayal was pioneered by Ezra Pound in the English circle and Stephane Mallarme in the French. Later it was extended in the disjunctive stream-of-consciousness novels of James Joyce, Marcel Proust, William Faulkner, Virginia Woolf; in the paintings of Pablo Picasso; in the music of Dmitri Shostakovich (Edel: 1964, 11-26). To appreciate works of this kind, it will be a great help to watch Mickey Mouse cartoons and the like, because cartoons use lots of manipulated distortions —visual violence.

But why disjunction and disorder? Late 19th and early 20th-century was a time of tremendous changes. Physical and social sciences developed tremendously. All kinds of new knowledge about the physical world and about the self were available, so were new ways to spread it massively —newspapers, magazines, radio, telephone, telegraph. Communication and transportation developed at a prodigious speed: railways, cars, paved roads, fast ships. New things gave all kinds of convenience, powered with electricity, and they were mass produced. In effect, changes in life were radical. So was the change in self-perception.

Any serious person who was old enough to have witnessed such changes would see that many things were transformed beyond recognition, with the biggest burden being on on the way people perceive their own selfhood: "Who am I?" The personality was no longer what it looked like years before; so was life. The trouble with knowing very much or too much is this: the more we know, the more we don't. That is the hell of the intellectual. Happy is the dumb who is content with the little he knows. Anyway, ordinary human beings do not have the much needed free memory in the head and space in the heart to store and cherish extra knowledge without letting themselves go crazy. The baby cries for milk; the wife is busy eyeing the neighbor's new dress; this month's installment on the house has to be paid. But serious people were forced to make up new ways to make sense of everything.

Life was no longer an easily recognizable, tellable, and teachable thing as it used to be. This should be reflected in the modern art work. A Jane Austen or a Charles Dickens who does much telling and explaining would be too authoritative, too patronizing, too God-like. Artists should only "show" —not "tell." The telling should be done by the readers themselves —not the artists.

LANDSCAPES

Eliotean landscapes are those which are used to indirectly present complex emotional, moral, and spiritual situations. For example: the yellow fog landscape that reflects the emotional conditions of its seer. Prufrock is in the window of his room. Looking out, he sees the smoke/fog outside down in the streets:

The yellow fog that rubs its back upon the window-panes,
The yellow smoke that rubs its muzzle on the window-panes
Licked its tongue into the corners of the evening,
Lingered upon the pools that stand in drains,
Let fall upon its back the soot that falls from chimneys,
Slipped by the terrace, made a sudden leap,
And seeing that it was a soft October night,
Curled once about the house, and fell asleep.

To Prufrock the smoke/fog looks like a cat —a leisurely cat. But when the cat "licked its tongue into the corners of the evening," in October, and later metamorphoses again into time —an "evening"— we know it is not a common cat; it is a metaphysical cat. The cat is only a projection of Prufrock's mind. The cat exists only in his head.

Why a cat? Cats are not likable for many reasons. They are solitary creatures. You can feed a cat lovingly as much as you like, carry him on your lap, caress him, but he always leaves you whenever he likes; he doesn't give a damn how you feel about him. Open the door for him, and he will glide out without ever looking back at you. A dog would not be that selfish. You never see cats play by the dozen, except when they are kittens and helpless. When you see a cat rub its back on a table leg, you see a Narcissus. And cats make love like the devil. Is it because of these reasons Prufrock chooses a cat for a picture of his mind? In all likelihood, yes. If so, then the cat is likely to raise many notions about solitariness, selfishness, and self-conceit.

What is Prufrock's smokey cat doing?
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;

The cat turns out to be getting ready for a date. This is a date he cannot avoid. It is the call of nature, as hinted by the insistent rhythm:

. . . . . . .there will be time . . . .
There will be time, there will be time
. . . there will be time

This is indeed unromantic —making a date under the force of the insistent rhythm of nature, not because of a beautifully and romantically conceived urge to want to do so. This can be a date that we hate very much, especially when we only have that vexing thing under the pant and are going to see somebody that we cannot even name —not a Cathy or a Felicia. Maybe to that "sawdust restaurant" first, to have some oysters or *sengsu* to help that lame stick turn into a mighty horn, and then to that "one-night cheap hotel" . . . "to force the moment to its crisis" —onto or into a mermaid, or a peach. (Oysters are aphrodiziac; mermaids and peaches are common sexual symbols).

> *To prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet*

The diction and rhythm here are very evocative. They suggest something that is mechanical, material, routine, and debased. A face "prepared" is a tool, a mask. A mask is "personae" in Greek, the root word of "personality." We have a public mask, a political mask, a religious mask, a racial mask, a demographic mask. The real person beneath could well be unknowable. To "meet faces" is similarly undignified. Those faces are nameless because they only serve a function, like prostitutes. They are not presented as persons. Similarly, making love is simply "*time to murder and create*"—a derogatory and ironical allusion to the death and rebirth rhythm of existence from a Christian sense. There is no romance in the world of this lonesome male cat. Although romantic allusions abound here, although much romance hangs in the air, however much he wants it, it always fails to materialize. Everything about sex is trite and repulsive. Even erotism is absent. What stands out is just something sterile and dessicated.

> *And the afternoon, the evening, sleeps so peacefully !*
> *Smoothed by long fingers,*
> *Asleep . . . tired . . . or it malingers,*
> *Stretched on the floor, here beside you and me.*

If an affair has ever taken place, it must have been a sickly one, as if with a witch —with those "long fingers." But, then, behold: the yellow smokey timey cat turns out to be Mr Prufrock himself —a projection of his self, or a projection of an aspect of his self. The smoke, the fog, the evening, the cat, the "you," the "me" . . . they all turn out to be one and the same person —Mr Prufrock himself. There is only one person in that upper-floor room. All the events that he is talking about only happen in his head, never in actuality. The "you" he is speaking to turns out to be himself as well—not a silent listener as in that poem by Robert Browning, "My Last Duchess," not even us the audience as in Shakespearean soliloquies —both of which are strongly evoked by this poem in its monologue format, but only to be manipulated for magnification effect and its resultant ironic twist. Actually Mr Prufrock never comes out of that room.

Interestingly, throughout the poem, this dating, slowly and almost imperceptibly, metamorphoses into a prophetic mission. Prufrock is entertaining a grand idea: to save the world. But at the same time we also understand that he is not communicating with us at all. We only overhear him. There is no intended communication.

What kind of a prophet is this Prufrock[1], then? What is he talking about? These are questions which are intentionally aroused in the reader. The reader's struggle with the poem comes in part from an effort to find any possible answer. The power of the poem lies in its ability to involve the reader directly in this intellectual and moral search.

SEXUAL IMAGES

Western art often employs sexual images where sex and spirituality are blended. What relationship can there be between dating or sex and a prophetic mission to save the world? To understand this requires a background knowledge.

Indonesians are in deep trouble when confronted with Western images of sex. It is so because Western ideas about sex differ greatly from ours in many important respects. First, they are much more open about sex. Our newlyweds, on the contrary, know little about sex because it is a taboo. They take it for granted; no parents or grandparents tell them about it. They should find out on their own. When they have a better understanding of it, it's too late —they are already 50 years old; the mighty and youthful years have all been wasted. Second, in the Western perception about love-making, men serve women; women derive their pleasure from men. In our perception, women serve men; men derive their pleasure from women. And perception affects action. Our idea about virility is when a man is able to display a long entourage of beauties behind him. Our icon is Arjuna. What happens in bed is not this important. The Western idea about virility is when a man is able to let his woman have as many peaks as possible —with the wildest shrieks you can possibly imagine— on a single run before the man collapses. Their icon is Arnold Schwart-zenegger. (That is why the Western house has private rooms, one for mom and dad; our traditional house has large common open spaces for everybody —with that long bamboo "galar" bed to hold 12 sleepers in a row.) Third, sex as a personal expression is paramount in the Western culture; in our culture, it is sex as a propagation method. When you kiss a girl, people who happen to see you two will think only of babies.

A key to the understanding of the Western sexual culture is the mythological Tiresias —that man of knowledge who never lies. Zeus king of the gods quarrel with his queen, Hera. They accuse each other of having acted selfishly in love-making. Then they ask Tiresias to be the judge: which of the two sexes has the greater pleasure in love? Tiresias says, in love-making the woman has nine times as much pleasure as the man. Hera is enraged, and strikes him blind. But Zeus gives him an eternal life. Another key is the rituals of Aphrodite the goddess of love and Dionysus the god of wine, that culminate in a sexual act, sometimes wild to the point of orgies, representing what the Javanese Kejawen calls "manunggaling kawula-Gusti."

This culture, then, has one important principle: sex and sacrifice are inseparable, if we want to have it meaningful. A meaningful love is one that elevates all partners. Sacrifice is a must because man and woman are not identical; they always have to make up. The keyword here is elevation, exhaltation of the partner. (Western) artists portray man-woman relationship as both a private affair and as a microcosmic representation of the bigger world out there, and if they are spiritual —be they platonics, neoplatonics, animists, fetishists, totemists, nature-worshippers, or those who believe that Divinity pervades the universe— it is also a manifestation of the union with the Divine—whatever it is, or can be. How a man relates to his woman at the same time reflects the interactions between the members of a society, as well as his interaction with the whole Creation. Characters are therefore both private and symbolic. (Characters should not be confused with persons. An artist creates a character to represent an idea.) With them sex never stands alone; it is always related to something else, usually something much more important. An understanding of this basic principle and the sexual culture above is crucial to the effort to make sense of the sexual images that in "Prufrock" carry intellectual, spiritual, and moral overtones: Hamlet, Michelangelo, John the Baptist, Lazarus, mermaids, oysters, cigars, peaches, pillows, one-night cheap hotels (which ironically is juxtaposed with the "*muttering retreats*" with its religious undertone), etc.

HAMLET:

1. Hamlet is enraged by the fact that his mother the queen marries his uncle a short time after her husband's death. Hamlet's disgust about what he perceives to be his mother's disloyalty to his father poisons his relationship with his girl Ophelia, and poisons his perception about sex. ("*Frailty, thy name is woman*!")
2. Hamlet is disturbed by the scientific findings of his time (1601). It was the time of Galileo Galilei, Kepler, Copernicus, Francis Bacon, Newton and so many other scientists, who began to see that the earth rotates around

the sun —not the other way around—; that the sun is a gigantic fire; that the sun—not the earth— controls all the planets around it, including earth; that there are billions of other suns in the universe, very far away. The earth, and mankind in it, was no longer the perceived center of the universe. Man's special place in the universe —as the center of it, its Paragon, its Quintessence— was challenged. So was God's special place in the order of things.

Hamlet's time was also the age of religious Reformation, with people like Martin Luther, Calvin, and many other reformists, who changed people's perception about the Bible, its writing processes, its status as a source of truths, its religious dogmas, religious practices, the disparities between the biblical and the historical and the traditional, the disparities between what the Bible teaches and what sciences reveal, the great disparities in its interpretations, etc etc.

The Age of the Sciences and the Age of Reformation had produced a new way of thinking about everything and an age of disturbing doubts in spite of so many amazing discoveries. Later, with the coming of biological scientists like Darwin, social scientists like Karl Marx, psycho-logists like Freud, anthropologists like Sir James Frazer, the geologists, the particle physicists, the astronomers etc etc, people had to revise the way they perceive life and the universe around them at a very fast pace from day to day —with devastating impact on the spiritual and emotional aspects of living. People began to question their self-identities, their destiny of life, their ideas of morality, their values, their ideas of Heaven and Hell and Providence, their self-dignity or indignity. But most of all, people increasingly questioned their own perceptions: How do we know what we know we know ?

An answer to a question breeds questions and more uncertainties. The biggest pragmatic problem is: what can possibly remedy this situation? More science? More explorations to the farthest edge of the outer space out there and down into the tiniest part of the living cell in here? New religions? New Gods? More moral norms? More religious buildings? Artists ponder upon that one question very seriously —not to save the world, of course, because they are only artists, not prophets. Artists are in the business of crafting perceptions as art makers.

3. A central idea in *Hamlet* the play is an examination of the mind. Hamlet the prince is tested by the king three times to determine whether or not he is mad; but the tests cannot produce a satisfactory answer. Hamlet himself is questioning his own way of reasoning. He has just returned from the University of Wittenberg, Germany, where he learned about those new scientific findings and the troubles that they have aroused. In effect, he questions himself: 'Do I feel this way about mom, about Ophelia, about uncle Claudius, about my father the ghost —if indeed the ghost is real— because my mind has been troubled by those new scientific ideas? Why is it that suddenly everything is rotten in the state of Denmark? Is everything rotten because my mind is indeed rotten?"

Instead of a definite answer, Hamlet only finds deeper doubts and uncertainties. He becomes almost paralyzed. At a time like this, an impatient pragmatist would say, so what? You want to live or not? You want to wait for a heaven-sent revelation before you get to your feet and do something even when you don't believe in it anymore? You want somebody to tell you what to do even when you can no longer trust people and traditions and preachers and philosophers any more? When there is no longer any meanings any values any truths any sense of destiny in this whole wide world anymore, just make up one yourself and make it real! This is the essence of the famous "To be or not to be" soliloquy in this play. Hamlet does exactly that, although belatedly. In so doing he becomes a precursor to the modern Existentialists —those people who say, Create your own destiny, your own values, be your own God —if and when you have lost all faiths.[22]

When the traditional religious beliefs gradually lost their grip on Western society, people's interest in eternity was replaced by a greater involvement in the temporary world surrounding them. With the loss of the notion of eternity, the soul —which so far had been regarded as something solid and eternal— was felt to be vulnerable. But when it was nearly destroyed, the human personality was saved from destruction by the mind, and its ally, memory. Memory and the mind were seen to be capable of working together to mold the disparate, disjointed events of a fragmented existence into a meaningful whole. Hegel, Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, Sartre, Freud, Santayana, and many other philosophers and psychologists came to confirm people's ability and need to rearrange their disjunctive experiences to uphold their existence by relying on the mind and memory —on individual and personal perception and conception of existence, not one that is dictated by society, the state, religion, or tradition. Existentialism is rooted in this individualistic belief in man's power of mind and memory, although always with the awareness that a sense of completeness or wholesomeness has been lost, maybe forever, not to be regained in any way.

Prufrock resembles Hamlet in that he also examines his mind thoroughly, painstakingly, but also somewhat manipulatively. But the biggest irony is that Prufrock never comes close to becoming another Hamlet because he never makes up any single *visi-misi* for his life and never gets to his feet to make it real. He only entertains himself with grandiose ideas.

Prufrock is not a Hamlet, and this he admits. Instead, he recognizes himself as something of the man he hates —Polonius, the king's ass-kisser.

Am 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.

"Progress" is a very old English word meaning an official royal tour to the countryside, especially to collect taxes (*Microsoft Encarta Dictionary*, 2009). That occasion used to be marked with the tolling of the village church bell. Over time the word "toll" became associated with the idea of payment, a heavy burden, or a sacrifice —like in "toll road" or the "death toll" of an airplane crash. "To swell a progress" implies a successful collection —fattening the royal purse. So the idea of "progress" in this poem implies something that is emphatically materialistic and is ironically associated with "sacrifice" or "suffering." The king or the state may have become richer and richer, but the people may have shed more and more tears. "To start a scene" is a political slang meaning to start an intrigue, especially when a person does that in order that two parties may fight each other to his own advantage —close to the Latin "*divide et impera*" ("divide and rule"). Starting a scene always implies a *fitnah*. Polonius is something of a Resi Kumboyono alias Durno. "Meticulous" is typical of Indonesian bureaucrats. When you go to your kelurahan to apply for a KTP, the officer there would ask a hundred questions about you and take half an hour just to stare at your photograph before passing the application form to the next table. That is meticulous.

So in using Hamlet as a literary motif, it is very likely that Prufrock (again, as an alter-ego of Eliot) reveals his uneasiness with the scientific positivism and progressive materialism of early 20th century, with their devastating impact on the emotional and spiritual aspect of life. It is reasonable, then, to see how Prufrock sees himself as a ridiculous person: how could anyone try to bring a warning about some spiritual suffering to a world when this very world is so sure that such an obsession with spirituality or religiosity is exactly the source of so much of human suffering? Indeed, how could you try to change a global mindframe, to awaken the whole world from what is perceived to be a self-complacency, especially if that very world regards you as obssessed with a big self-conceit? Would you do that by presenting yourself as an exemplar, when you feel that your own life is a complete mess? That will be a mission impossible. That is why Prufrock is driven by a great fear of rejection and futility:

Would it have been worth it after all.
. . . . That is not it, at all.

which is repeated twice for greater emphasis.

MICHELANGELO:

A 15th-century Italian artist, who was very-very religious, who created sculptures, paintings, and poems for Missal books, popes, cardinals, and rich people like the Medicis, and for churches —most importantly the Sistine Chapel at St Peter's Cathedral in Rome. Many of his paintings and sculptures are nudes and Neoplatonic: a blending of the sensual and the spiritual, portraying a physical beauty that strives for a transcendence without rejecting or depreciating the worldly —in many ways very close to the outlook of New England Transcendentalists like Emerson.

The allusion to Michelangelo in "Prufrock" serves to denote a sharp irony.

In the room the women come and go
Talking of Michelangelo.

The insistent repetition of this couplet makes it very evocative of a musing by Prufrock in his lonely room. Here Prufrock is musing about the futility of art: in Prufrock's materialistic world, art is unable to elevate people to a more dignified existence, or people are unwilling to let art do that, or too shallow to appreciate it, except its high prices. But it can be worse. The women talk of Michelangelo while coming and going simply because to them Michelangelo is repulsive. The hall rooms in Prufrock's world indeed give us the impression of a Victorian world, with some characteristic values which are undesirable to modern people. The Victorians see the body as dirty and sinful, or as highly susceptible to dirt and sinfulness. The Victorian fashion is characterized by the "corset." The way Victorians present themselves to the public is characterized by moderns with the verb "flaunt." Their moral outlook is regarded by moderns as full of guilt, fear, prudishnes, bigotry, and self-righteousness. This is the kind of world that is in sharp contrast to the world of Michelangelo and bitterly criticized by writers like EM Foster, DH Lawrence, George Orwell, James Joyce, and many others among Eliot's contemporaries.

In describing this Victorian world through sharp critical caricatures and yet with morbid fear of being overheard, Prufrock practically presents himself as a cowardly, ineffectual and hypocritical protester. He is so much a part of this world, although he resents it bitterly. When he says that he wants to save this world from its spiritual dessication, he is in effect cutting for himself the ridiculous figure of a prophet.

LAZARUS:

There are two Lazaruses in the Bible. One is a beggar who comes to the party of a rich man to beg for some crumbs of bread, and is rejected. He dies, so does the rich man. Lazarus goes to heaven, to Abraham's lap, to feast; the rich man goes to hell's fire, to burn. Now it is the rich man's turn to beg Abraham to let Lazarus drop a fingertip of water to quench his infernal thirst. Abraham says: "No, son. You've got your reward on earth. Now it is his turn to enjoy his reward in heaven." The rich man asks: "Then, please, let Lazarus go back to earth just for a minute, to tell my brothers not to repeat my mistakes. As he comes from the dead, they will listen." Abraham says: "No, sonny dear. They've got Moses and the prophets, but they have refused to listen. They won't listen to Lazarus either." In another biblical story a man named Lazarus dies. Jesus raises him from the dead.

In "Prufrock," Lazarus is a blending of the two biblical Lazaruses, with some ironical twists. Prufrock fancies himself to be a heaven-sent Lazarus (not the rich man !) who has come back to warn people about hell. But the hell in Prufrock's head is not the moralist's hypothetical after-life hell. Instead, it is a living hell, a hell of the here and the now. Besides, it is not other people's hell; ironically it is also his own hell. It is the hell of all people, rich and poor alike. (The moralist' stance says something like this: "Rich people go to hell; poor people go to heaven." The psychological realist' stance says: "A hell is a hell; you know it when you have it; you can have it now and you can have it here, no matter you are rich or poor.")

The hell in Prufrock's head is that of a psychological realist, and it is universal. It extends to the two different worlds which Prufrock inhabits —the world of the lower class and that of the upper class. The world of the lower class is the world

Of restles nights in one-night cheap hotels
And sawdust restaurants with oyster shells
Streets that follow like a tedious argument
Of insidious intent
. . . narrow streets,. . ./ . . .the smoke that rises from the pipes
Of lonely men in shirt-sleeves, leaning out of windows

The world of the upper class is the one where . . . . *the women come and go / Talking of Michelangelo*. It is the world of "*the cups, the marmalade, the tea*," . . . ."*the porcelain*" . . . "*the eternal Footman*" . . . .the "*perfume from a dress*" . . . . and the men who "*have bitten off the matter with a smile*." (To light a cigar, you bite one end of it, spit it off, and smile a big smile. Only the upper class consume cigars. And it should be understood that cigar smoking is so different from cigarette smoking; the former is done in so much ease, leisure, and privacy. And it should not be forgotten that cigars are often suggestive of sex, especially that mouthful Cuban cigar.)

Prufrock's dual worlds, upper and lower, are contrasted nicely in a couplet through an excellent choice of diction and rhythm:

After the sunsets and the dooryards and the sprinkled streets,
After the novels, after the teacups, after the skirts that trail along the floor—

Both worlds, however, are characterized by loneliness and emptiness. It is to them that Prufrock thinks of delivering his prophetic mission —one that is never accomplished.

JOHN THE BAPTIST:

John the Baptist, a desert prophet, censures Herod Antipas, tetrach of Galilee and Perea, for the many evil things he has done and for illicitly marrying Herodias, the wife of his half-brother, and is imprisoned for this. Enraged by John's condemnation, Herodias sets up a scheme. She asks her daughter, Salome, to dance beautifully in a royal party. The king praises her, and asks her to name a gift that he wants to give her. Whispered by her mother, Salome replies: "The head of John the Baptist." And so it is: John's head, instead of a red kakap, is served on a silver platter.

The idea of using John the Baptist as an image in Prufrock's mind is obvious: the sacrificial price for a prophetic mission, and the juxtaposition of the sexual and the spiritual, where the spiritual is sacrificed for the sake of the sexual. But here the comparison is done by way of a parody, a caricature —a purposely distorted and impoverished imitation of an original. The effect is a self-mockery. When Prufrock compares himself to John the Baptist, he is aggrandizing himself, although speaking in the negative:

But though I have wept and fasted, wept and prayed,
Though I have seen my head [grown slightly bald]
ought in upon a platter,
I am no prophet—and here's no great matter;

Prufrock practically mocks himself by showing a preoccupation with a silly detail —a bald head— when everything else should have made a grand spectacle. The self-mockery becomes more impressive when he indicates that the grand spectacle is only a daydream ("*I have seen my head*"). People who overhear him would think, How can this guy dare to dream of saving mankind when he himself indulges in sentimentality that much? He is preoccupied with physical appearances, which must have been trivial as compared to the grand mission of a real prophet. He is deeply offended to overhear the ladies' whispers about his physical appearances: "*'How his hair is growing thin*!' . . . '*But how his arms and legs are thin*!'" and he bitterly resents "*The eyes that fix you in a formulated phrase*." He is also preoccupied with the physical appearances of other people in a shallow meaningless way. Talking about the ladies in the hall room, he says to himself:

> *. . . I have known the arms already, known them all—*
> *Arms that are braceleted and white and bare*
> *[But in the lamplight, downed with light brown hair!]*
> *And he seems to be half-conscious about this, that makes him all the more ridiculous:*
> *Is it perfume from a dress*
> *That makes me so digress?*

A first-century prophet was skin-clad because he didn't care about his own look. With his sensitivity about physical appearanc-es, Prufrock as a first-century prophet is unimaginable. So is he as a 21st century prophet, because contemporary prophets ride high-powered Mercedeses or BMWs, speak through parliamentary megaphones and global satellite TVs, oversee legislature sessions, set up global fundraising committees and banking networks, and raise standing armies —all that to save our puny little souls. Prufrock even as a modern prophet would certainly look grotesque and ridiculous.

Prufrock is afraid that he will meet rejection, that his prophetic mission will be futile. Even if he performs his self-appointed duty, all he can accomplish is just stupid pantomimic gestures, like the ones shown through a "*magic lantern*" (camera in the silent-movie era). The same stupid gestures are shown in his picturing himself as a crab:

> *I should have been a pair of ragged claws*
> *Scuttling across the floors of silent seas.*

A crab directs his eyes ahead, to the front, but can only move sideways, to the left or to the right. This is a vivid and entertaining picture of someone whose sense of direction is awkwardly at odds or *ngalor-ngidul* with his actual action. The situation evoked by this image is sharply comic but also pitiful.

MERMAID:

A mermaid makes a very sexual image. A mermaid is also a singer. But a mermaid is usually dangerous. She entices human beings with her sexy body and sweet singing, and then drowns them to death. The final lines of "Prufrock" indeed contain some of the most romantic images in the poem, with several layers of irony:

> *I have heard the mermaids singing, each to each.*
> *I do not think that they will sing to me.*
> *I have seen them riding seaward on the waves*
> *Combing the white hair of the waves blown back*
> *When the wind blows the water white and black.*
> *We have lingered in the chambers of the sea*
> *By sea-girls wreathed with seaweed red and brown*
> *Till human voices wake us, and we drown.*

Prufrock has been in the company of those romantic singers, perhaps writing poetry of daydreams and make-believe, of the wizards of Hogwarts, the knights of Mordor, the pirates of the Carribeans, King Julien of Madagascar. Prufrock is not only an onlooker; he himself is a merman; otherwise would have drowned when he "*lingered in the chambers of the sea*" and wouldn't drown with them when the human voices wake them. In other words, Prufrock is himself a singer, a poet. This poem is his love-song, anyway, or at least what he wants it to be. But he is also aware that his poem is not a poem of reality. And this song is never sung, simply because it is not to be sung. Worse still, this poem can never be a love-song, simply because the world in this poem is a world without love.

It is the mermaids' songs which drown, because theirs are not the songs of humanity, of real tragic life. (Life is most real only when it is tragic.) When it comes to human voices —of chaos and disorder— they do not know how to pull together those jumbled incoherent broken pieces into any form of harmony. Another tragic thing for Prufrock is that he does not want to have the poetry of the past anymore, but is unable to write the poetry of the present and future either. Worse still, he does not have the courage to write it, to sing it. It is this lack of courage that makes him feel he is growing old —an excuse for not doing something. The haunting final image at the end of the poem is that of a man with an acute sense of futility, helplessness, boredom, and self-disgust.

CONCLUSION

An understanding of Eliot's symbolism and its workings would help us appreciate "Prufrock" as a successful art work about failure and chaos. This is the biggest irony of all. Prufrock's repressed utterance has become a verbal Picassoic painting of dismembered bodies, or a Shostakovichian pandemonic symphony of disharmony and distortion. But Eliot's achievement is not only aesthetic. If we understand how Prufrock tries to pull together his broken pieces of life, we are already well on the way to saving our own soul, or what remains of it. If we do, then Eliot's art has also served its redemptive purpose.

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[1] The name "Prufrock" can also be seen as symbolical. It may ironically refer to "proof rock" —the rock people use to test gold. Another irony is this: "J. Alfred Prufrock" is a formal name and address —in fact, it was the formal address of a St Louis furniture dealer, and this was pointed out by Eliot himself (Baym: 1985, 1196). But the poem turns out to be about someone who is an alien in this world, a man without any fixed address, without any clear identity or self-identity. And, of course, that name sounds weird.

[2] When the traditional religious beliefs gradually lost their grip on Western society, people's interest in eternity was replaced by a greater involvement in the temporary world surrounding them. With the loss of the notion of eternity, the soul —which so far had been regarded as something solid and eternal— was felt to be vulnerable. But when it was nearly destroyed, the human personality was saved from destruction by the mind, and its ally, memory. Memory and the mind were seen to be capable of working together to mold the disparate, disjointed events of a fragmented existence into a meaningful whole. Hegel, Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, Sartre, Freud, Santayana, and many other philosophers and psychologists came to confirm people's ability and need to rearrange their disjunctive experiences to uphold their existence by relying on the mind and memory —on individual and personal perception and conception of existence, not one that is dictated by society, the state, religion, or tradition. Existentialism is rooted in this individualistic belief in man's power of mind and memory, although always with the awareness that a sense of completeness or wholesomeness has been lost, maybe forever, not to be regained in any way.