

The Siren Song of J. Alfred Prufrock

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要約

J. Alfred Prufrock のセイレンの歌

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「J. Alfred Prufrock の恋歌」を人魚ないし海の精のイメージで締め括るにあたって、Eliot は広範な内容をもつセイレン伝説を利用している。この伝説は19世紀後半に数多くの作家達を魅了してきたのであるが、本論では、その中でも Hopkins, Arnold, Norman Douglas そして Jane Harrison といった人々の、この伝説に関する多様な使用方法に注目する。そうすれば、Eliot が伝統の一部と見なして使ったそうした「出典」の複雑な構造が示されるのみならず、セイレンのイメージによって、この詩に付加されると Eliot が考えていたに違いない深遠な余韻についても明らかになるからである。この詩の最後の部分は、しばしば装飾的で難解な補足に過ぎないと考えられてきたが、実は Prufrock の性格描写上、彼の「声」が聞こえてくる欠くべからざる部分なのである。Prufrock の詩人としての挫折のイメージは、不満足な詩神であるが、これは若い Eliot の結論に対する客観的相関物と考えられるし、また人魚ないし海の精達は、その挫折を導いた原因の一つとして機能している。

Although Ezra Pound did not like “the paragraph about Hamlet, ” he spiritedly defended the immediately following lines which conclude “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock.” Against Harriet Monroe’s request for editing he exploded, “‘Mr. Prufrock’ does not ‘go off at the end.’ It is a portrait of failure, or of a character which fails, and it would be false art to make it end on a note of triumph.”¹ Pound, and Eliot, prevailed, of course, and the “mermaid passage” remained part of the poem. Accustomed as we now are to one of the most widely read and closely analyzed poems of the twentieth century, it is impossible to think of it without the mermaids.

This is not to say, however, that the mermaids have received much critical attention. In an early comment, I. A. Richards referred to the poem’s decorative final “patch,” illustrative of a “logical freedom” that is there “to be responded to, not to be pondered or worked out.”² Most critics seem to have agreed with Richards as they have subjectively responded to the image instead of working it out ; but then they have often gone on to employ it in support of whatever individual thesis was being offered. To some, the mermaids are “symbols of adventure, freedom and fulfillment,”³ providing a “glimpse of a life-rhythm where living creatures delight spontaneously in their natural environment, mastering it and being carried along with its vital energies”;⁴ to others, the image signals a “retreat to the sea-chambers of fantasy,”⁵ culminating evidence of Prufrock’s incapacity. The widely variant response-interpretations suggest either, as has been advanced, that the mermaid imagery is not really an essential part of the poem,⁶ or, on the other hand, that this component of the poem requires more careful attention than it has received. To return to Pound’s assessment, how does the ending of the poem relate to the total “portrait of failure”? I believe there is significant internal and external evidence which should be brought to bear on this question.

In undertaking a close look at the mermaids, it is important at the outset to note several characteristics which, although obvious, too often have tended to be confused, passed over quickly, or altogether ignored. First, the mermaid imagery is emphasized not only by its climactic position, but also by being quite apart from the urban setting of the rest of the poem. To ignore this emphasis is, in effect, to delete part of the structure of the poem and thus impair “the magical rightness of one of the most engaging and haunting and completely accomplished poems that ever existed.”⁷ Secondly, it should be kept in mind that the mermaids are presented as Prufrock’s vision : they are part of the “sub plot”⁸ of the poem, although ultimately the total poem, the “main plot” provides a clarifying comment on that sub plot. In considering the mermaids, then, two related but finally different questions must be kept in mind. How does Prufrock see the mermaids? How does the poem see the mermaids?

A third basic characteristic of the passage is that Prufrock projects two separate images of sea creatures which reflect different states of mind. He has seen and overheard the mermaids singing, but he has no hopes they will ever sing to him. The poignancy of his admission is heightened by nostalgic yearning, although for a past that

never fully existed for him, expressed in one of the most attractive images of the poem.

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.

This romantic picture of the mermaids is immediately modified, however, beginning with the first word, in the following tercet which ends the poem on a deeper note of failure.

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.

The contrast between the two tercets is striking. In the first, although Prufrock sees the mermaids irreversibly riding the waves away from him toward their realm of the wind-blown open sea, he pictures them as vigorous and attractive. In his dream, which he presumes he shares with his auditor, Prufrock is closely attended in "the chambers of the sea" by the unvisualized sea-girls, as the tactile imagery in the second line almost unpleasantly suggests. Although he does not definitely reject the sea-girl dream, and in fact opposes it to the human voices he has mentioned disapprovingly earlier, still he does not seem fulfilled by their attention. Moreover, the passage vaguely echoes previous unpleasantnesses. The "chambers" are reminiscent of the rooms; and "lingered" connects verbally with two tactile images of stagnancy and dormancy, associated in one instance with water and in the other with a room.

The yellow fog . . .
The yellow smoke . . .
Lingered upon the pools that stand in drains . . .
Curled once about the house, and fell asleep.

* * * *

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.

Prufrock's admission, "It is impossible to say just what I mean!" is warning not to translate either his shift of pronouns or images in the tercets too readily into statement. It seems legitimate, however, to venture this much: The mermaid/sea-girls images are similar in that they are both seen, in immediate sequence, by Prufrock and neither offers a sustaining memory, a present actuality, a promise for the future. But there are also differences in the two images: A mysterious, dynamic, if finally inaccessible, potential has modulated into a less vigorous dream of stagnant proximity; and the "I" has forsaken any expectation of guiding the "you" which might have been aroused by the first line of the poem.

The mermaids and the sea-girls thus in some complicated, ambiguous way express Prufrock's essential failure, the enactment of which has been the course of the poem. In trying to understand what may indeed be "deliberate irrationality"⁹ there is the danger of warping the poem into yet another special scheme. But "mermaids" do inescapably

bring certain ideas to mind. Patently, they have a more involved and specifiable history external to the poem than many other images, "coffee spoons," or "ragged claws," for example; they extend beyond their visual, aural and tactile presence. That history can be traced in various literary and scholarly works which were part of the heritage of the beginning poet.

Establishing Eliot's indebtedness to his tradition has been a major concern of Eliot scholarship from the very beginning, of course, and from time to time various "sources" of the mermaids have been proposed. Professors Wimsatt and Beardsley early observed, with Eliot's mermaids as a case in point, that the detection of a source, even if the echo is indisputable, is worthwhile only if "it makes any sense" in terms of the poem. Granting that "I have heard the mermaids singing each to each" bears a certain resemblance to Donne's "Teach me to hear Mermaides singing," they question

whether mermaids considered as 'strange sights' (To hear them is in Donne's poem analogous to getting with child a mandrake root) have much to do with Prufrock's mermaids, which seem to be symbols of romance and dynamism, and which incidentally have literary authentication, if they need it, in a line of a sonnet by Gerard de Nerval.¹⁰

It must be conceded that neither the Donne nor the de Nerval lines—presumably the reference is to "J'ai reve dans la grotte où nage la sirène"—is particularly helpful in explaining Prufrock's mermaids, at least immediately; and other possible sources that have been mentioned, particularly as they have been presented as a kind of literary curiosity, have seemed to be even more removed from the poem.¹¹ And yet the proposal of inconsequential or dubious antecedents should not be permitted to obscure the fact that Eliot himself was extremely conscious of his sources, as "Notes on 'The Waste Land,'" his critical theory and his poetic practice all clearly attest. "Tradition and the Individual Talent" was a general statement of his strong sense of continuity with and variation on his literary heritage, and the famous passage from "Philip Massinger" presents his theory of specific literary borrowing.

Immature poets imitate; mature poets steal; bad poets deface what they take, and good poets make it into something better, or at least something different. The good poet welds his theft into a whole of feeling which is unique, utterly different from that from which it was torn; the bad poet throws it into something which has no cohesion.¹²

The mermaid image provides a fascinating and complex illustration of this description of the practice of the "good poet," welding a "theft" into a new "cohesion."

It is impossible to point to one particular poem or passage as *the* source of Eliot's mermaids. Too many writers over the centuries have referred to similar aspects of mermaids, understandably enough since they were all drawing on more or less the same body of lore, for even a set of resemblances in one work to authenticate it as the origin of the imagery. In other words, the source of Eliot's mermaids is the entire body of that

lore with which he was familiar. In taking a symbol from a context of this scope, Eliot had to have been aware of the consequences of incorporating such a “theft” into the “whole of feeling” which he was creating. The mermaids, far from an afterthought, change every line of the poem because of their ineradicable echoes.

To begin to see how the mermaids function in “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” it is useful to look at Gerard Manley Hopkins’ “A Vision of the Mermaids.” This schoolboy exercise, written in 1862, was first published in a fragment of thirty-five out of 143 lines in 1893,¹³ the complete poem not until 1929.¹⁴ In the full version there is not only a general, extended picture of sportive mermaids, but also almost every detail of Eliot’s mermaid imagery: song, waves, hair, heads “chapleted” with “rosy” sea weed, combing, wind. And Hopkins’ speaker, like Prufrock, concludes sadly that he sees “those Mermaids now no more.” Surely here is a major source of Eliot’s image and ideas. Undermining this speculation, however, is the fact that Eliot almost certainly did not know the complete poem; and in the published fragment which he quite possibly did read,¹⁵ there is no reference to many of these details, including the wistful admission just cited: both Eliot and Hopkins must have drawn on another source or sources. Yet Hopkins’ fragment is worth attention in relation to Eliot, for it presents several aspects of mermaids which aid in understanding more precisely what is at work in Prufrock’s vision.

So those Mermaidens crowded to my rock
I know not why, but know that sadness dwells
On Mermaids—whether that they ring the knells
Of sea-men whelm’d in chasms of the mid-main,
As poets sing; or that it is a pain
To know the dusk depths of the ponderous sea . . .
I know the sadness but the cause know not.
Then they, thus ranged, ‘gan make full plaintively
A piteous Siren sweetness on the sea,
Withouten instruments, or conch, or bell,
Or stretch’d cords tunable on turtle’s shell;
Only with utterance of sweet breath they sung
An antique chaunt and in an unknown tongue.¹⁶

In “A Vision of the Mermaids” there is a “tone of wistful self-pity . . . an air of intense fatigue”¹⁷ akin to Prufrock’s voice and attitude. Hopkins’ speaker is utterly serious about his vision which is the world of the poem, and so, surprisingly, is Prufrock, although he lives principally in a “naturalistic” urban, as opposed to a “romantic,” world. Each speaker is subdued, Prufrock to a greater degree, by his awareness that his vision is of a mysterious, transcendent state that is unattainable by him. In each poem the mystery involves a vague cluster of implications among mermaids, the speaker of the poem, poets, and the act of singing. In effect, the two speakers are potential singers who wish to “know” the song of the mermaids and so to sing their own songs—Hopkins’ speaker cannot proceed “As poets sing,” for he doesn’t “know” the cause underlying the mermaids’

mysterious sadness; Prufrock does not think "that they will sing to me," and his love song remains unsung, except in "the chambers of the sea."

If the two would-be singers have essentially the same attitudes toward mermaids, the two poems do not. The difference is one of context. Hopkins' speaker is alone with his vision, and all we know of him is his plaintive lyric voice on the subject of that vision, the largely undramatized voice of the youthful author; and there is nothing in any aspect of the poem to suggest that everything he says is not to be taken just as he says it. If we accept the poem, we remain, even linger, in the dream-world of its speaker. On the other hand, Eliot's dramatic monologue provides what amounts to a system of ironies warning the reader not to take Prufrock too seriously. The warnings include the title, the Dantean epigraph, the implied function of Prufrock's auditor, various images, and the speaker's continuing self-belittlement. We thus see his mermaids and sea-girls only after 123 lines of cumulating realization that Prufrock is "At times, indeed, almost ridiculous." At this point, the poem has made clear to us, we cannot accept Prufrock's version, or any romantic version, of the mermaids. Hopkins' "A Vision of the Mermaids," by contrast, allows us to see that Eliot has taken conventional mermaid imagery, which he could have found in Hopkins' poem or elsewhere, and indeed made "something different" of it.

"A Vision of the Mermaids" has been said to echo "Arnold's evocation of the sea's inhuman strangeness in 'the Forsaken Mermaid,'" ¹⁸ and possibly Arnold's poem must also be recognized as a potential contributor to Eliot's mermaid imagery. Neither of these poems, however, makes as much "sense" in relation to "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" as does the youthful "The New Sirens," which must have attracted Eliot's attention as, following the discovery of Fitzgerald, he "took the usual adolescent course with Byron, Shelley, Keats, Rossetti, Swinburne."¹⁹ Although Eliot, for whatever reasons, does not include the early Arnold in this grouping, he might have been directed to "The New Sirens" by Swinburne's celebration of the poem,²⁰ which, as Kenneth Allot has noted, "was admired by Swinburne and the Pre-Raphaelite poets generally."²¹ Arnold himself wrote of his poem at the time of Swinburne's praise, "I don't thoroughly understand it myself, but I believe it is very fine and Rossetti and his school say it is the best thing I ever wrote."²²

Some twenty-six years earlier, admitting to Clough that the poem was a "mumble," Arnold had summarized its argument. "The speaker (one of a band of poets) dreams of the Sirens as "the fierce sensual lovers of antiquity," but on awakening he asks whether the "New Sirens" are not "really something better and more attractive than the old Sirens?" His answer: "Your love is romantic, and claims to be a satisfying of the spirit." He accepts this view when he remembers their "beauty and life as I witnessed it at sunrise on these lawns"—their abode has changed from the deep where the speaker had observed the old Sirens in his dream—but as the "day" had advanced he had seen them fall into their present "languor." He wonders whether "your vivacity of this morning suffices to console you in the void and weariness of the afternoon and evening?" As night falls, their lassitude is succeeded by revelry in the "palace," contrasting with the speaker-poet's

“dark and cold under my cedar.”Unable to share their illusion, he further queries whether this “*alternation* of ennui and excitement is worth much?” He concludes that in time “the elasticity of spirits will be worn out, and nothing left but weariness.”²³

Although this gloss was not available to Eliot, it emphasizes many of the motifs of the poem that might have attracted him as his taste “developed” toward that time at about his twenty-second year, when, he later remarked, he “advanced” beyond his “romantic” period.²⁴ And even without the assistance of Arnold’s comment, the poem does not seem all that much of a “mumble.” Formerly, as the speaker-poet recognizes in his dream, the old Sirens had appeared in the “form” of the “pensive Graces,” even when their “blown tresses, and . . . beckoning hands” most certainly led to destruction. Now, although the new Sirens no longer aggressively “fret the storms,” they are also unsatisfactory in their debility, as the argument states explicitly and as the poem vividly images toward the close.

And you too, O worshipped Graces,
Sylvan Gods of this fair shade!
Is there doubt on divine faces?
Are the blessed Gods dismayed?
Can men worship the wan features
The sunk eyes, the wailing tone,
Of unsphered, discrowned creatures,
Souls as little godlike as their own?

In sum, the lines of “The New Sirens” unmistakably present the expression of “one of a band of poets” regarding the new Sirens at first hopefully as attractive and legitimate embodiments of poetic inspiration. Eventually, however, it appears to him that their “jeweled gauds surrender/Half their glories to the day”; and the speaker-poet finally abjures any commitment.

Arnold’s farewell to the romantic appeal imaged by the “Sirens” is made more abstractly explicit in “Despondency” a few years later, with the “forms” being succeeded by “thoughts.”

The thoughts that rain their steady glow
Like stars on life’s cold sea,
Which others know, or say they know—
They never shone for me.

Thought light, like gleams, my spirit’s sky,
But they will not remain.
They light me once, they hurry by ;
And never come again.

A. Dwight Culler terms this “the negative point at which Arnold began. In his view, it was the point at which his age required him to begin, for it was the point at which the Romantic poets left off.”²⁵ In passing, Culler likens this position to that of “Prufrock on the mermaids (‘I do not think that they will sing to me’),” and this valuable insight

provides the impetus for a necessarily more precise description of the relation between the two poets and their respective personae. In "The New Sirens" the speaker's tone of sadness, of self-pity, emphasizes that his detachment from "the negative point" is not complete, although he finally achieves some distance from his predicament as a poet listening to the Sirens. Prufrock's wistful longing for the mermaids, his dream of the sea-girls mark his kinship with this poet, although he remains to a greater degree than his predecessor immersed in his vision, more in accordance with Hopkins' speaker. The kinship is particularly striking, however, in the parallels to be noted between the vivacity-languor opposition imaged by Arnold's early and later "new Sirens" and by Prufrock's mermaids and sea-girls. Arnold's persona in "Despondency" achieves considerably more distance from the "thoughts" "Which others know, or say they know," than did the speaker in "The New Sirens" from his subject, despite a hint of a lingering wish that it were otherwise. In "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," the voice of the total poem, the main plot, is in ironic commentary on Prufrock's voice, the sub plot, as noted previously. The *two* voices of Eliot's poem thus bracket Arnold's "negative point . . . at which the Romantic poets left off," described by Culler, one expressing only the negative ending, one beginning where Prufrock ceases.

These correspondences between the mermaid imagery in Eliot's poem and that in poems by Hopkins and Arnold—and also perhaps Tennyson, Rossetti and Shelley, to mention some others from whom Eliot may well have drawn—whether coincidental or consciously imitative enable us to see what has heretofore not been as obvious. Prufrock, whatever else his "voice"²⁶ expresses in addition, is "one of a band of poets" come to the realization, as the title ironically reinforces, that he can no longer sing. The sirens that others know, or say they know—the romantic muses sought by such members of the "band" as Hopkins' and Arnold's personae—are not available to him except in ineffectual yearning and precious, dream-like fantasy.

That Eliot by the time he wrote "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" had read these and other poems dealing with sirens/mermaids is reasonably certain; but that he interpreted them generally in the way I have suggested and that he incorporated the mermaid imagery in his poem in accordance with that interpretation is, of course, sufficiently particular to invite disagreement. In Norman Douglas' *Siren Land*, however, Eliot could have found a similar interpretation of the Sirens just prior to and during the time he was working on his poem.²⁷ The unifying theme of this anecdotal and yet informative book is "the conception of the Sirens, their evolution from Homer to the present, and the changes in culture which that evolution reflects."²⁸ Douglas queries "Whether Sirens of this true kind are in existence at the present day . . . for the waste places of the earth have been reclaimed, and the sea's untrampled floor is examined and officially reported on."²⁹ "In Greece, too, Sirens of every kind have ceased to sing,"³⁰ and this observation leads him into a discussion of "the wonderful Hellenic genius for borrowing and adapting": whatever the Greeks appropriated, "they stole with exquisite taste . . . The grotesque, the cruel, became humane. Borrowed gods of frantic aspect put on fair and benignant faces." In addition, he refers to one particular aspect of their "fair

but elusive shapes." "Long ago, the Sirens engaged the Muses in a singing-contest. They were worsted . . . Who is not tempted to detect in this legend the victory of disciplined music over the wild improvisations of natural song."³¹ This natural song, through the authority of Pontanus, he describes as "nothing but the irresistible seduction of eloquence and literary pursuits."³²

Two aspects of Douglas' whimsically and nostalgically described Sirens should be particularly noted in relation to "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock." As in the other works that have been discussed, *Siren Land* associates the Sirens with the Muses. And, even more significantly, Douglas stresses the Dionysian qualities of original Sirens, a quality which again came to the "fore" in "the uproarious Middle Ages," in spite of the overlay of Hellenic "temperance."³³

These same aspects are stressed in the still fully appreciative but more scholarly, less enthralled treatment of mermaid lore by Jane Harrison, with whose work Eliot was certainly familiar. As a student in Josiah Royce's seminar in 1913-14, he presented a paper on "the interpretation of primitive religions."³⁴ Among the authors he cited was Harrison, whose *Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion*, published in 1903, had immediately been acclaimed.³⁵ In this work, Eliot could have read some ten pages on the Sirens which "are to the modern mind mermaids, sometimes all human, sometimes fish-tailed, evil sometimes, but beautiful always."³⁶ Here the implications of the characteristics of the mermaids are extensively examined and explained, and their mysterious, equivocal nature noted. Moreover, she directs the reader to the earlier *Myths of the Odyssey* (1882), where at even greater length she traces the transformation of the "sinister bird-woman . . . through gradual states of anthromorphism . . . to the purely human shape stamped by no outward impress of evil; then again, by a mediaeval reaction to the modern fish-maiden."³⁷ Here also Eliot could have found most of the details which make up Prufrock's image of the mermaids, but which, it is apparent, he could have found in any number of sources. And he could not have missed in either work the reiterated view that the Sirens came to function as "Muses of Inspiration." In a vivid conclusion to the earlier book she offers her interpretation of the Sirens' significance.

We cannot find in [the Sirens] with one author merely an incarnation of the smiling sea, nor with another an embodiment of chthonic heat, nor with a third see in them the song of the wind in the clouds; still less with a fourth do we think them to have been originally birds, nightingales by the sea-shore beguiling mariners to listen.

They seem to us, from the outset to the end, to have been a kind of evil Muse, not wholly evil, but very far from entirely good; sprung from a lower world of mystery and evil and death; as such fitted for the sombre funeral lamentation; sculptured on tombs with a half propitiatory prophylactic intent; yet largely, because of Dionysian association, merging by degrees this character into that of more seductive loveliness, becoming in later days a sort of mythic hetairai; yet, because to the pure all things are pure, rising at times

to loftier functions . . . Muses they are in their knowledge of all things, in their sweet song ; but Muses rather of the barren sea than of the clear spring water, Muses who dwell below, not they who ["have Olympian homes"].³⁸

Thus, a complicated network of sources available to Eliot as part of his tradition—those I have called attention to and undoubtedly others as well—indicate not only the profound reverberations of the mermaid passage but also that Eliot, undoubtedly aware of these traditional reverberations, must have chosen to end the poem as he did because he wished to include them. Like the other important allusions, the mermaids introduce a significant complex of specific, although perhaps not fully specifiable, meaning. Whatever that meaning may be, the extended imagery, a total of eight lines, acquires emphasis both by its climactic placement and by the fact that it makes explicit an entirely different, "Dionysian," dimension of Prufrock's experience, a dimension in sharp contrast to the "muttering" urban scenes dominating the rest of the poem.

My principal purpose in this essay has been to argue that the mermaids are not merely a decorative and provocative adjunct to "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," but an integral, and I think essential, element of the total poem. To proceed to describe the "whole of feeling which is unique, utterly different from that which [the poet's theft] was torn" is a more complex attempt which must follow from the basic recognition that the mermaids are at the very center of the poem.³⁹ It would involve, among other things, a careful consideration of what Monroe K. Spears terms the two definitive aspects of "modernism," "Dionysus and the City."⁴⁰ In anticipation of such a consideration, however, I would like to offer here a tentative and limited hypothesis about the role of the mermaids in this "portrait of failure." The Siren Tradition provided Eliot with an "objective correlative" for his developing disenchantment with the "new Sirens" of Romanticism. In the total poem, Prufrock's mermaids/sea-girls, are not without the siren attractions deeply sensed to varying degrees by Hopkins, Arnold, Douglas, Harrison, and others, including the youthful poet ; but ultimately, they no more than the half-deserted streets lead Prufrock to "Olympian" questions. An image of Prufrock's failure as a poet, they function also as a *cause* of that failure, "a kind of evil Muse, not wholly evil, but very far from entirely good," as they have been, in Harrison's judgment, "from the outset to the end." Prufrock fails because even a generation later he is unable to accept the implications of the question of Arnold's "speaker-poet" and sing his song from that negative point.

Can men worship the wan features
The sunk eyes, the wailing tone,
Of unsphered, discrowned creatures,
Souls as little godlike as their own?

As Prufrock shrinks from the rooms, so his imagination fails at the edge of the sea to evoke a real "sense of dark underground forces mysteriously stirring."⁴¹ Instead, he projects despairing, sordid images of the city, and despairing, conventionally prettified

images of the “dark underground,” images which cannot be brought together, or, rather, he cannot bring together from his point of departure, and thus he has no song.

Unlike the character, however, the poem does not fail. Instead of drawing back from the urban wasteland, the poem fixes its “incentive” on what R. P. Blackmur called the “living relation between anarchy and order,” and thus it constitutes an act of “creation in honesty” as opposed to “assertion in desperation.”⁴² Among the things that act of creation involves in the total world of “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” is the rejection of Prufrock’s hopeless assertion of the unavailable strangeness of the mermaids and the dubious sea-weed laurels of the sea-girls, the alternative failures of hearkening to the song of the Sirens, as the song seemed to Eliot at the beginning of his poetic career.

FOOTNOTES

- 1 *The Letters of Ezra Pound: 1907–1941*, ed. D. D. Paige (New York, 1950), p. 50.
- 2 I. A. Richards, *Principles of Literary Criticism* (New York, 1925), p. 293.
- 3 Douglas Bush, *Mythology and the Romantic Tradition in English Poetry* (Cambridge, Mass., 1969), p. 511.
- 4 Elizabeth Drew, *T. S. Eliot: The Design of His Poetry* (New York, 1949), pp. 35–36. Usually, the mermaids are seen as attractive. Two characteristic views: Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren describe them as “riding triumphantly and effortlessly seaward into their natural creative element.” Prufrock, however, “can immerse himself in the life-giving sea only in a dream” *Understanding Poetry* (New York, 1960), p. 395. Morris Weitz regards the mermaids as “symbols of that which is alive, active, and purposeful.” They are like John the Baptist and Lazarus in playing a “creative role” in the poem. *Philosophy of the Arts* (New York, 1964), pp. 101–03.
- 5 Robert Langbaum, *The Poetry of Experience* (New York, 1963), p. 189. Many critics, although noting the subjective and escapist aspects of Prufrock’s reverie of the mermaids, tend to consider it an attractive alternative to the “desiccated ‘human’ world” in which Prufrock lives. Brooks and Warren, p. 395. To Leonard Unger, the mermaids are a product of “Prufrock’s self-indulgent reverie”; on the other hand, “Prufrock’s escape to the beautiful and the ideal from the ugly and the real, his reverie of the mermaids, is only momentarily sustained, ‘Till human voices wake us and we drown.’” *T.S. Eliot: Moments and Patterns* (Minneapolis, 1966), pp. 16–17, 33.
- 6 Bernard Bergonzi offers an extreme and explicit example of such readings. “Yet Eliot must end the poem at some point, and he does so with lines that for all their beauty might have come from a different and more conventional poem: the nervous sexuality of a small world . . . is exchanged for the pure but remote eroticism of the ‘sea-girls wreathed with sea-weed red and brown.’” *T. S. Eliot* (New York, 1972), p. 17.
- 7 Randall Jarrell, “Fifty Years of American Poetry,” *Prairie Schooner*, 37 (Spring, 1963), 14.
- 8 George Wright, *The Poet in the Poem* (Berkeley, 1960), p. 58.
- 9 Richard Poirier, “T. S. Eliot and the Literature of Waste,” *New Republic*, 166 (May 20, 1967), 19. Poirier adds, “In trying to release Eliot from schematization [the most perceptive critics] . . . direct us away from the seductions of neatness and into the wonderful mystery at the center of Eliot’s poetry and criticism.” Generally agreeing with Poirier, I am contending that the mermaids, although in a sense even a symbol of “irrationality,” do in a measure have a “rational” function in the poem. At least, I think it is possible, and even helpful, to examine the imagery.
- 10 W. K. Wimsatt and M. C. Beardsley, “The Intentional Fallacy,” *Sewanee Review*, 54 (1946), 486.

F. O. Matthiessen agreed that “you begin to understand Eliot precisely as you begin to understand any other poet: by listening to the lines, by regarding their pattern as a self-enclosed whole, by listening to what is being communicated instead of looking for something that isn’t.” He added, however, in relation to the Thames passage in “The Fire Sermon,” that if one has Spenser’s “Prothalamion” in mind there is then added to [the contrast between the actual river and the idealized version of it] a greater volume and poignancy. *The Achievement of T. S. Eliot* (New York, 1958), p. 47. Gertrude Patterson observes, “The images of ‘Prufrock’ are raised to a higher ‘power’ . . . so that Prufrock, by being associated with figures from history and literature, becomes a type of universal figure.” *T. S. Eliot: Poems in the Making* (New York, 1971), p. 115. Specifically, I suggest, the mermaid reference changes the figure the poem makes of Prufrock.

- 11 For example, Grover Smith suggests, “Eliot’s three final lines seem to echo John Masefield’s ‘Cardigan Bay,’ from *Salt-Water Ballads* (1902)”:

Delicate, cool sea-weeds, green and amber-brown,
 In beds where shaken sunlight slowly filters down
 On many a drowned seventy-four, many a sunken town,
 And the whitening of the dead men’s skulls.

T. S. Eliot’s Poetry and Plays: A Study in Sources and Meaning (Chicago, 1956), p. 301.

- 12 *Selected Essays* (London, 1951), p. 206.
- 13 W. H. Gardner, *Gerard Manley Hopkins* (London, 1944), p. 207. A second impression was printed in 1906.
- 14 Edward Cohen, *Works and Criticism of Gerard Manley Hopkins: A Comprehensive Bibliography* (Washington, D. C., 1969), p. 7.
- 15 Robert Bridges had persuaded A. H. Miles to “admit Hopkins into the last volume of *Poets and Poetry of the XIX Century*,” Gardner, p. 207; and Eliot was probably familiar with this well-known anthology.
- 16 Hopkins’ mermaids are without the characteristic comb of mermaids which could be made from “turtle’s shell.” Eliot’s mermaids are also “withouten instruments,” combing the white hair of the waves, rather than playing an instrument. Robert Graves has pointed out that “The comb was originally a plectrum for plucking lyre-strings,” *The White Goddess* (London, 1952), p. 392. Prufrock, in possibly another aspect of the deterioration of the original image, when he is turning to the topic of the mermaids speculates whether he should “part my hair behind?”
- 17 Elsie Elizabeth Phare, *The Poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins* (Cambridge, 1933), pp. 102-03.
- 18 Paul L. Mariani, *A Commentary on the Complete Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins* (Ithaca, N. Y., 1970), p. 6. F. R. Leavis has written that “A Vision of the Mermaids” shows Hopkins “starting off very happily in a Keatsian line, a normal young contemporary of Tennyson, Matthew Arnold and Rossetti . . .” “Metaphysical Isolation,” in *Gerard Manley Hopkins by the Kenyon Critics* (Norfolk, Conn., 1945), p. 116.
- 19 *The Use of Poetry and The Use of Criticism* (Cambridge, Mass., 1933), p. 25.
- 20 “Matthew Arnold’s New Poems,” *Essays and Studies* (London, 1875), p. 125. Swinburne writes, “I had [“The New Sirens”] mainly by heart [before my teens] I do not say I understand [it] in a literal or logical fashion, but I had enjoyment of its music and color and bright sadness as of a rainy sunset or sundown . . . Here I must ask . . . if this beautiful poem is never to be reissued.”
- 21 *The Poems of Matthew Arnold*, ed. Kenneth Allot (London, 1965), p. 34.
- 22 W. E. Buckler, *Matthew Arnold’s Books: Towards A Publishing Diary* (Geneva and Paris, 1958), p. 97.

- 23 *The Letters of Matthew Arnold to Arthur Hugh Clough*, ed. H. F. Lowry (London, 1932), pp. 105–07.
- 24 *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism*, p. 25.
- 25 *Imaginative Reason* (New Haven, 1966), pp. 24–25.
- 26 Hugh Kenner, *The Invisible Poet* (New York, 1959), p. 73. In concurring with Kenner that Prufrock is more a voice than a person, I am suggesting that voice can be more specifically designated.
- 27 *The Siren Land* was originally published in New York and London in 1911. Several chapters, including those containing most of the material I have quoted here, also appeared in *The English Review*, May, 1909 to February, 1911. Cecil Woolf, *A Bibliography of Norman Douglas* (London, 1954), pp. 31–32.
- 28 Ralph D. Lindeman, *Norman Douglas* (New York, 1965), p. 110.
- 29 Norman Douglas, *Siren Land* (New York, 1923), p. 7.
- 30 Douglas, p. 9.
- 31 Douglas, pp. 11–12.
- 32 Douglas, p. 313.
- 33 Douglas, p. 12.
- 34 *Josiah Royce's Seminar, 1913–14*, ed. Grover Smith (New Brunswick, N. J., 1963), p. 193.
- 35 Gilbert Murray considered *Prolegomena* an epoch-making “work of genius.” Jessie Stewart, *Jane Ellen Harrison* (London, 1959), p. 23. As has been well attested, “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” was begun at Harvard in 1910 and finished in Europe in 1911. Eliot, of course, might well have been familiar with *Prolegomena* and the earlier *Myths of the Odyssey* before taking Royce’s seminar: he knew Harrison’s work by this time. Pound’s remark that the Hamlet section is “an early and cherished bit,” *Letters*, p. 50, suggests perhaps a longer period of reworking, as does Conrad Aiken’s report that he “brought the typescript to London in 1914 The poem had been written during the previous year, was given to me in Cambridge, Massachusetts; and I believe it was written there” *The Times Literary Supplement*, June 3, 1960, p. 353.
- 36 Jane Ellen Harrison, *Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion* (Cambridge, 1903), p. 197.
- 37 Harrison, *Myths of the Odyssey* (London, 1882), p. 177. “The grim austerity of these mediaeval tempters brings to our mind the strange awful outline of Dante’s Siren” Harrison quotes from the Longfellow translation, “‘I am,’ she sang, ‘I am the Siren sweet,/Who mariners amid the main unman/So full am I of pleasantness to hear,’” pp. 171–72.
- 38 Harrison, *Myths of the Odyssey*, pp. 181–82. Harrison footnotes “knowledge of all things,” towards the end of the above passage, with a quotation “Of the Muses” from the *Illiad* ii. 484 “for ye are goddesses and are present and know all”; and “Of the Sirens” from the *Odyssey* xii. 189 “for truly we know all things.”
- 39 James T. Bratcher calls the mermaids the “master-key” to the poem in discussing briefly five motifs suggested by the imagery, although he does not deal with what I take to be their most significant aspect, both historically and in the poem, their function as Muses. “Prufrock and the Mermaids Re-Viewed,” *Descant*, 6 (Spring, 1962), pp. 13–17. Many critics, Gertrude Patterson, for example, see the mermaids as a sort of afterthought, since “Prufrock has no ‘outlet’ in significant action” After consequently acting “as befits the fool, like Hamlet,” there are images of the sea “and the choice of ‘mermaids’ suggests escape into the world of the imagination,” p. 115. This choice, although certainly suggesting such an “escape” is not made merely as a last resort, I would claim—surely Prufrock has long desired the mermaids to sing to him even if they do not—but functions as one of the significant tensions of the poem.

- 40 Monroe K. Spears, *Dionysus and the City* (New York, 1970). Citing Eliot frequently in the development of his thesis, Spears mentions the opposition to be found in "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," although only in passing. Mr. Apollinax, "like the mermaids and the undersea imagery of 'Prufrock,' . . . represents the world of repressed emotions, the Unconscious," p. 51. But the poem also portrays an individual "in relation to an urban society," p. 77.
- 41 Spears, p. 40.
- 42 R. P. Blackmur, *Anni Mirabiles: 1921-1925* (Washington, D. C., 1956), pp. 7-8.

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