

Sensuality, H. G. Wells and T. S. Eliot

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H. G. Wells and T. S. Eliot would seem to have little in common, either personally or literarily. One, a prolific journalist and fiction writer, turbulent representative of the common man devoted to the causes of world community, profoundly skeptical of all religious dogma, widely known, even notorious, for illicit sexual affairs; the other, an elitist poet and critic selective in his publication, committed to religious search, a deeply private individual drawing back from the fires of carnality. Yet there is evidence that Wells in an early work, *The Sea Lady* (1902) made an impact on the young Eliot, an impact which resulted in a significant contribution to Eliot's first published poem, "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock." And the connections serve to emphasize the threatening attractions of sensuality as a basic theme in that work.

One wonders whether Wells recognized flickerings of *The Sea Lady* in Eliot's poem, if indeed he read it, antagonistic as he was to what he called Eliot's "sham" writings. A year before his death, in *The Happy Turning* (1945), he referred to his poetry as "jingling vulgarity," "void of the mysterious exaltation of beauty."¹ In *The Camford Visitation* (1937), Mr. Trumber, a "disciple" of Eliot, is notable for pompous pronouncements in an Eliotian strain patently distasteful to the author. As for Eliot, the borrowings from *The Sea Lady* are sufficiently evident to make it certain that he had read it with some attention. In the 1940's he expressed qualified praise for Wells. Considering him as belonging to a bygone

1) John Batchelor, *H. G. Wells* (Cambridge and New York, 1985), p. 142.

time, Eliot is surprised to find him still appearing in print, although he remembered reading his early work with pleasure as a school boy. He does not refer to *The Sea Lady*, but he recalls the effective description of the sunrise in *The First Men on the Moon*, published a year earlier. And he applauds Wells as “a great journalist” for bringing “imagination of a very high order” to his exploitation of popular science “for a generation all ready to suspend disbelief in favor of this form of romance. . . .”²⁾

If Eliot did remember drawing from *The Sea Lady*, it is understandable that he didn’t go out of his way to call attention to the relation of such a slight and almost forgotten “romance,”³⁾ appropriately subtitled “A Tissue of Moonshine,” to the incomparable poem in which he is said to have “invented modernism.” But the young poet had found a great deal to engage him in a work that is at once fantasy and mocking social comedy.

In brief, the Buntings, a proper middle-class British family, are decorously “bathing” at their summer home on the beach near Sandgate when a young female, swimming toward the shore, appears to be drowning. Young Fred gallantly goes to her rescue and brings her ashore in his arms, her lips against his cheek, although in fact she is the rescuer. Suddenly, with genteel horror, it is noticed that she has a tail: a mermaid. She is quickly carried into the house for tea, where she settles down, her tail discreetly “swathed.” It develops that earlier, swimming offshore, she had seen and been smitten with Harry Chatteris, a friend of the Buntings, and a somewhat indecisive aspirant to the local parliamentary seat. Now she has come to claim him. Chatteris is engaged to Adeline Glendower, beautiful, but conventional and austere, ambitious for her

2) T. S. Eliot, “Wells as Journalist.” *New English Weekly* 8 February 1940: 319–20. Reprinted in *H. G. Wells: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Patrick Parrinder (London and Boston, 1972), pp. 319–20.

3) *The Sea Lady* was out of print since publication until 1976 when it was reprinted in the Hyperion Press reprint series, *Classics of Science Fiction*.

fiancée to make his mark in society. Eventually, however, he succumbs to the seductive "Miss Waters," and after an emotional struggle between the two drives of his nature, carries the sea lady down across the "white and blank" Leas on the seafront, she "holding his hair with her fingers in among it," and, "tall and white and splendid, interlocked, with his arms about her, his brow to her white shoulder and her hair about his face," they swim seaward until they disappear under the waves.

Thus Chatteris's conflict is similar to that between Prufrock's life of timid social conventionality and his unrealized yearnings for the mermaids; and both protagonists drown, metaphorically or otherwise. Harry Chatteris is like Prufrock in many specifics. He is identified as a young man—Eliot once referred to Prufrock as "my young man"—of thirty-two with "fair hair" and a rather thoughtful face." When the sea lady had seen him, he "was dressed all in white linen, and sat on the beach." Chatteris is a dilettante. He has written some "passable verse," which "suggests to the penetrating eye certain reservations and indecisions." His touch of refinement is "weakness in the public man." "Modest," he has a certain "defect of vigour." There is a suggestion of past sexual involvements, "something hushed up about a girl or a woman in London," and again a hint of scandal from America when he is sent there. He has come back with "diminished glory" having come upon "something like a failure," and his aunt has told him he was a "Fool." Melville, a friend, describes him as "rather divided against himself" with a "vague wish" for something beyond the life of limitations and regulations he will be settled into with Miss Glendower. As Chatteris contemplates his choice, he charges himself with being "flappy and feeble and wrong. . . . To hesitate, to have two points of view, is condemned by all right-thinking people. . . . Still—one has the two points of view." At such moments of indecisiveness, there is a frenetic lighting of cigarettes and flinging away the unfinished ends.

The reader of Eliot's poem will discern in Chatteris certain of Prufrock's lineaments, his "indecisions," fastidiousness of dress—Prufrock's "rich and modest" necktie, e. g.—his dilettantism, his desire for a less conventional life, his timidity in seeking it, his knowledge of alluringly feminine "arms," the motif of hair, his yearning for whatever is suggested by the mermaids's singing, his designation as the "Fool." Some of the echoes are faint, even questionable. For example, "To spit out all the butt-ends of my days and ways" perhaps is only consonant with rather than adapted from the cigarette smoking in *The Sea Lady*. Cumulatively, however, the echoes are pronounced. Prufrock ponders, "Should I, after tea and cakes and ices,/ Have the strength to force the moment to its crisis?" In Wells's romance, a chapter comprising over one-fourth of the book is entitled "The Crisis," focussing on Chatteris's emotional state when "a whole life rush[es] to a moment." The word *crisis* appears some half-dozen times; Melville, for example, cannot "go straight to a crisis."

More important than these and other fainter echoes—such as a "remote suggestion" of music, walking on the beach, conversation taking place on a stair—however, is the general and similar pull of sensuality on the two men, a complex of allurements embodied in the mermaid trope. As Lovat Dickson has remarked, the story started out as "an amusing joke"⁴ about, in Wells's tongue-in-cheek words, "a real live legendary creature," "visibly fishy," seeming at least as real as the Buntings's tea-time proprieties. *The Sea Lady*, however, is not merely "a tissue of moonshine." Melville remarks that the conventional image of mermaids disporting "through groves of coral, diversified by moonlight hair-combings on rocky strands, needs extensive modification." Much of the modification

4) H. G. Wells (New York, 1971), p. 108.

is pure farce—the discussion of reading materials culled from sunken ships, the difficulties of keeping lace nice or drying hair under water, the sea lady's desire for a "soul" come to mind. Wells was writing from deeper feelings, however, as he said himself: "There is an element of confession in the tale but it is a confession in motley. And love, instead of leading to any settling down, breaks things up. But the defeat of the disinterested career is just as complete. Chatteris, the lover, plunges not into domesticity but into the sea, glittering under a full moon. A craving for some lovelier experience than life had yet given me is the burden in this second phase."⁵ Ultimately, the romance can be read as "a passionate cry of distress for beauty lost and pleasures forgone in the line of duty."⁶ On one level the anticipated pleasures are clearly sexual: the appeal of the sea lady is probably as explicitly sexual as convention permitted Wells in 1902. Chatteris is "the reasonable man who yet cannot deny his own sensuality;"⁷ and choosing Miss Glendower would be such a denial.

The contrast between the two ladies, however, is broader than primary physical sexuality. For Chatteris to listen to the sea lady, Melville comments, "is like going out of a house, a very fine and dignified house, I admit, into something larger, something adventurous and incalculable. She is—she has an air of being—natural. She is as lax and lawless as the sunset, she is as free and familiar as the wind. . . . She has the quality of the open sky, of deep tangled places, of the flight of birds, she has the quality of the high sea. That I think is what she is for him;—she is the Great Outside." In yet another passage the narrator comments that it is "an elemental struggle," not an individual case, not, as in the view of

5) H. G. Wells, *Experiment in Autobiography*. Quoted in *An H. G. Wells Companion*, J. R. Hammond (London, 1979), p. 101.

6) Lovat Dickson, *H. G. Wells* (New York, 1971), p. 108.

7) Dickson, p. 152.

conventional society," a mere everyday vacillation, a commonplace outbreak of that jilting spirit which dwells covered deep perhaps, but never entirely eradicated, in the heart of man. . . ."

The sea lady herself sums up "this world of yours "as" a phantom life, unreal, flimsy." "Your life, I tell you, is a dream—a dream and you can't wake out of it—" Her desire is to take Chatteris away from such an existence. "I shan't marry him. . . . And grow old as all women must. . . . This life of yours. . . the growing old. . . . For some there is an escape. When the whole life rushes to a moment. She concludes, in a phrase repeated by Chatteris, "there are better dreams!"

At such moments, "The song of the Sirens [is] in her voice," although Chatteris knows the price: "For me she is evil. For me she is death. . . . Only why have I seen her face? Why have I heard her voice. . . ." He determines after such struggling with himself to choose Adelaide on the basis of reason: "We have desires, only to deny them, senses that we must all starve. . . . Why should I be exempt?" "I want a moral cold bath, and I mean to take one. This lax dalliance with dreams and desires must end. . . . if there's to be no Venus Anadyomene, at any rate there will be Pallas Athene." Having made this decision, "his lethargic meditations gave way to a sort of hysterical reaction against his resolves and renunciations." He "shaved. . . . brushed his hair"—the narrator refers to "his poor human preoccupations with the toilette"—"changed his grey flannels—which suited him very well—for his white ones which suited him extremely," and disappears under the waves with the mermaid.

A cluster of expressions, gestures and attitudes extracted from *The Sea Lady* in the above quotations may be found in the last twelve lines of "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock." Prufrock fears he will *grow old*, he worries about his *hair*, he has *seen* and *heard* the *singing* of the mermaids, he will wear *white flannel trousers* as he goes to the beach, and

metaphorically he lingers in "the chambers of the sea" attended by "sea-girls" until he *wakes* from his dream and drowns in reality. And the entire poem is a "lethargic meditation" from which Prufrock, unlike Chatteris, does not rouse, although for each the end is a kind of death.

As Grover Smith has observed, "always when Eliot borrows, the adoptions form a new equilibrium."⁸ The equilibrium, what Randall Jarrell praised as "the magical rightness" of "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," accommodates a scope of impressive "borrowings," including from the Bible, Dante and Shakespeare. H. G. Wells's *The Sea Lady* in such company? Why? I suggest that three related aspects of this minor work struck a chord in the young Eliot. The character Prufrock aside for the moment, Eliot himself might well have felt a kinship with Chatteris in his indecisiveness, especially in his response to sensuality. Moreover, like Chatteris, Eliot was much concerned for many years with whether he would be able to resolve this state of threatening impotence into potency as a man and, in Eliot's instance, as a poet. Unlike Chatteris, Eliot effectively resolves his plight, at least for the time being. Instead of disappearing into a sea of sensuality (or, like Prufrock, lingering in indecisiveness), he writes a dramatic monologue about a character who fails to achieve a resolution. But "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" bears witness to the struggle of the poet, a struggle he had found broadly sketched in Wells's romance.

Turning back to Prufrock, Eliot's own pronouncement about literary "theft" is to the point. "The good poet welds his theft into a whole of feeling which is unique, utterly different from that which it is torn." Gregory S. Jay has succinctly summarized the "whole of feeling" in the poem as "the condition of hesitation," a condition to be identified with

8) "The Structure and Mythical Method of the Waste Land," in *T. S. Eliot's The Waste Land*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York, New Haven and Philadelphia, 1986), p. 103.

Eliot's own description, when he was trying to complete *The Waste Land*, of his "aboulie. . . which has been a life-long affliction," the inability to make decisions. As Jay remarks, "This emotional state pervades and unites the poem, though ironically, for it is a unity of inability, indeterminacy, indecision."⁹ Thinking over Chatteris's indecisiveness may well have reinforced Eliot's perception of his own "affliction" ten years or more before his self-diagnosis just quoted, an affliction which becomes Prufrock's distinguishing characteristic. Drawing on Chatteris's characterization may have served in Eliot's mind, consciously or no, to distance Prufrock from the author, to make the poem more impersonal, less confessional.

Eliot's interest in *The Sea Lady* may also have been stimulated by the fact that Chatteris's indecisiveness is, on one level, as I have shown, specifically about sexuality. Eliot was less frank in speaking about his sexual feelings than about his "aboulie," but recently scholars have increasingly called attention to an Eliot deeply troubled by sexual matters in his personal life and to the poet who in most of his early poems "explores the disturbing effects of sensory life on orders of consciousness."¹⁰ "Mr. Apollinax," a portrait of sorts of Bertrand Russell as Eliot saw him at a party at Harvard in 1914, is a striking example. Cleo McNelly Kearns observes that Eliot associated the British philosopher "with a certain faunlike sexuality, with a general stirring of the kinds of desires, fantasies and images such occasions usually exclude. He enjoyed presenting. . . this troubling sense of a more sexually charged, more alive, less-well-repressed world, together with the faint sense of social contretemps which hung in the air."¹¹ More broadly, Kearns suggests that Eliot

9) "Discovering the Corpus," in *T. S. Eliot's The Waste Land*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York, New Haven and Philadelphia, 1986), p. 127.

10) Jay, p. 128.

11) "Realism, Politics, and Literary Persona in *The Waste Land*," in *T. S. Eliot's The Waste*

had “deep and deeply disguised impulses toward radical politics, philosophical realism, and that sexual freedom with which they were often associated in his time, and these impulses had aesthetic consequences, both in his theory and in his poetry. Ideas, impulses, and directions so different from his official position were, of course, troubling, and Eliot recognized them indirectly, if at all.”¹²⁾ In “Mr. Apollinax,” Eliot, according to Kearns, “was commenting on the power for poetry, of a certain philosophical, sexual and political position as well as on the necessity (for him) to frame that position with a certain irony.”¹³⁾

Prufrock is surely the opposite to the radically Dionysian Mr. Apollinax associated with “laughter. . . submarine and profound,” with the “beat of centaur’s hoofs”; and he is “grinning over a screen/With seaweed in [his] hair.” The allurements and dangers of sensuality the mermaid holds for Chatteris in *The Sea Lady* are apparent in various ways throughout the poem, but they function to point out that Prufrock’s timidity and indecisiveness preclude any sexual assertion, verbal or otherwise. Despite his claims, it seems highly unlikely that he has “known the arms already, known them all,” or even “restless nights in one-night cheap hotels.” His love song is unsung on any level.

Recently, I have called attention to Eliot’s use of the mermaid tradition, suggesting that in addition to their sexual attractiveness emphasizing Prufrock’s failure sexually, they also figure as partly “evil muses” pointing up another aspect of his failure—as a romantic poet.¹⁴⁾ *The Sea Lady* published in the opening decade of the twentieth century was a playful, science fiction addition and thus “modernization” of the tradition.

Land, ed. Harold Bloom (New York, New Haven and Philadelphia, 1986), p. 142.

12) Kearns, p. 139.

13) Kearns, p. 142.

14) Sam S. Baskett, “The Siren Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” *Kobe College Studies* July 1988: pp. 15–27.

Simplistic though it is in Chatteris's characterization, in the conflict over sensuality and in its melodramatic resolution, it is an effort at dealing in early twentieth century terms with the sexual, psychological and literary implications of the age-old song of the Sirens, even as they touched on Wells's own aspirations as a man of letters. Eliot's poem is a stunningly complex treatment of the same issues as he avoids the superficial resolution of the "great journalist" of his age. Despite the equilibrium of the poem, however, the issues of literary potency in relation to sexual potency continue to find representation in Eliot's poetry in subsequent poems, most powerfully in *The Waste Land*. But by that time Chatteris and the sea lady had long since sunk into oblivion.

要 約

官能性——H. G. ウェルズと T. S. エリオット

Sam S. Baskett

H. G. ウェルズの『海の女』(*The Sea Lady*) (1902) はエリオットの最初の重要な詩、「J. アルフレッド・プルフロックの恋の歌」(“The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock”) に重大な影響を与えた。『海の女』は英国の礼儀正しい (proper) 若い芸術愛好家 (ディレクタント) と彼の愛をもとめて海からやってきた人魚とのファンタジーである。優柔不断に苦しんだ後、彼は彼女と共に海に消えていく。プルフロックの葛藤も本質的には同じで、社会的因習のしがらみと人魚に象徴される無意識への渴望との間の逡巡である。ウェルズの主人公、シャタリス (Chatteris) の持つ多くの特長はプルフロックも共有する。

さらに、主題や言語表現上の共鳴がみられる。もちろん、その主なものは人魚の比喩である。ウェルズの人魚の魅力は明らかにセクシュアルなものだがそれ以上のものでもある。シャタリスにとって、彼女は自然美、自由、夢 (脅威を伴うが) であって、義務、調和の世界からの逃避を表わす。なによりも重要なのは、ウェルズが、シティーとディオニュシオスの間の、因習的秩序と神秘の世界との間の“根源的な闘い”を提供していることで、エリオットがウェルズのこの小品にひかれた理由がこの点にある。

以上、3つの関連あるモチーフは若い詩人のこのころの琴線に触れた。エリオットは、シャタリスのように、セクシャリティに関しては優柔不断であった。さらに広く言えば、シャタリスを苦しめる優柔不断はエリオットが自己診断をした “aboulie” (どのようなレベルにおいても決断する能力がない) と似ている。しかし、もっとも注目すべきことは、「J. アルフレッド・プルフロックの恋の歌」だけでなく、かれのすべての作品に見られる審美的重要性を左右する政

治的、哲学的、性的衝動の単純な扱い方をエリオットはウェルズの『海の女』の中に見つけたのである。シャタリスとプルブロックの両者は、またその著者たちも、1980年代の視点からは不徹底とはいえ、今世紀はじめの新しい“性の自由”の問題を扱おうとした。エリオットは、多分自己防衛の偽装として、彼自身が恐れた衝撃的な失敗者の肖像（恐ろしいが魅力ある人魚が彼に歌わないかもしれないということ）をウェルズの材料の「流用」によって作りだしたといえよう。