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Prufrock's simultaneous archetype. Between literary and psychic function

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ABSTRACT In this article I propose a reading of Eliot's poem "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" in the light of its intertextual relations with two works in particular: Dante's *Comedy* and Homer's *Odyssey*. Moreover, I take the structural positions of these references as fundamental to understand the very meaning of the poem's voice, that is to say, Prufrock as a poetic I. Finally, from a Lacanian perspective on Prufrock's desires, I posit the interpretation of this intertextual relation with Dante and Homer as the result of a double-faced archetype, shaped by Eliot's idea of simultaneity which, according to his poetics, affects all literary paradigms.

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PAROLE-CHIAVE: Eliot, Dante, Homer, archetypes, intertextuality.

The *Love Song of Alfred J. Prufrock* has the value of generating its own meanings with the modalities of the living psyche, weaving them with the grace and rhetorical density of the classics. In this, I believe, lies the reason of its longevity and its ability to reflect the image of the contemporary individual: ontologically divided by a traumatic relationship with reality, unable to find a reconciliation with the concept of truth. Right from the title, the text reveals that the path on which Prufrock – the poetic I – moves, is desire. My analysis of the poem will be based on this premise, and it will lead to the identification of an archetype with which the poetic I confronts himself, and in which he identifies the end of his desire. In fact, in general terms, the archetype shares the ability «of giving a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is» (Eliot 1975: 178) identity in the contemporary world. However, using this poetic tool, Eliot succeeds in showing the mechanisms not only of literary creation, but more generally of the psyche: in fact, through a comparative reading, one may show that Prufrock's thoughts and actions follow the archetype's path, which is not monolithic, but composed of two literary models, acting *simultaneously*. It is precisely this feature of the archetype that will emerge from the analysis and will be discussed in the conclusion, in order to highlight the adherence to Eliot's theoretical literary and philosophical writings.

The *love song* of the title is extremely useful to interpret the poem and the emblematic exergue from Canto XXVII of Dante's *Inferno* in which theological uncertainty is part of ontological uncertainty, so that Montefeltro, astonished by Dante's body, decides that his confession, the one of a damned man, can find usefulness «sanza tema d'infamia» (Dante 1962: I, XXVII, l. 66) in the pen of the Florentine. Montefeltro is neither a lover nor a man of literature, he is a man of war, a ruthless calculator; nevertheless, I believe that an analogy with the lover's desire may be possible by reading the lines reported by Eliot as a request for recognition of one's life and identity. In *Inferno*, identity is strictly tied to the punishment suffered, therefore it is identified with sin, that is, the action carried out in life that determines the afterlife identity of the person. So why talk about it, given the pleonasm? The reason lies in the dynamics at the base of the *Comedy*, that is, the anamnesis of sin and therefore the agnition of one's own identity present in the living reality: the Earth and the loved ones who pray for the souls. The *Divine Comedy* is characterized by the importance of agnition: the souls of the damned wish to be recognized, they want

to be exempla in the Catholic orthopraxis that shapes the identity of believers. In this regard, Montefeltro's desire matches Jacques Lacan's theory of the desire of the Other¹.

The *love song*, however, does not refer primarily to the exergue, but is peculiar to the poetic text that follows it. Therefore, Prufrock's love discourse is openly a discourse that problematizes the possibility of the recognition of the individual as a unique and self-contained subjectivity. From the beginning, the poetic I appears as divided and entangled in a tension aimed at achieving a goal shared by both parties, whose possible reconciliation lies, perhaps, in the «overwhelming question»² (l.10), especially considering its obsessive recourse in the text. In fact, the declared path of the poetic I («let us go you and I» l.1) is enlightened by the «magic lantern» (l.108), called to specifically illustrate what to the protagonist «is impossible to say» (l.107), namely, that the main implication of the possible relationships with the Other is the ontological confirmation of one's own identity. What he refuses, in this sense, by avoiding to make a decision and translating his thoughts into words addressed to a woman, is therefore the assertion of his own identity. Thus, Prufrock appears divided in a dialectic in which the desire for acknowledgement has to reckon with a drive to self-sabotage, a masochism whose symptom of the trauma with the real is stasis, a reality that appears as exhausted in the previous knowledge of the protagonist, and therefore already rejected.

Thus, Prufrock is divided into an I that is the subject of an identification with the archetype he is oriented to, and a You that is called to motion and knowledge of his own identity, or the opposite. The face that prepares to meet other people (l.27) is not the place of a deception, but the place of creation born from a death («murder and create» l.28), whose positive denotation as a place of restoration for the human kind can be found in the notes to *The Waste Land*. This preparation, understood as a process that forcibly passes through death, is what «lift[s] and drop[s] a question on your plate» (l.30), the same question that can be found in line 10 and is translated into the question *who am I?*, whose answer lies in the entity of one's own actions, therefore in the experience derived from relations with the Other. In Prufrock's case this social plane is highly symbolic and ritualistic, consisting in a conformation to a national identity that appears problematic and is eventually denied (Serpieri 1973: 107). As a matter of fact, the protagonist fails to act «before the taking of a toast and tea» (l.34), a prototypical and extended action of Englishness, which in Prufrock's reality should precede the meeting with a woman.

The emerging of the ritual dimension as a possible subjectification and horizon towards which we can orient our actions is crucial in order to determine the archetype, from which the «hundred indecisions» (l.32) arise and are motivated. In fact, there is a mythical precedent that represents «the archeology of the European image of man» (Boitani 1992: 12), which is useful to decipher one's identity in the face of contemporary chaos: Odysseus. Thus, it is through a particular type of Odysseus (whose morphology and action on Prufrock and on the poem itself I will discuss below) that the problem of identity is thematized. The Greek hero is quintessentially the man who accepts his place in the world as mortal (this is the case with his refusal to stay with Calypso on the island of Ogygia where he would become the immortal husband of the nymph ([Homer 2005: V, ll. 87-312]) and senses the urge to fulfil his destiny by answering the question that Prufrock dissimulates. He is, moreover, the hero who, even though he knows more about the world than anyone else, has not lost the ardour to know, at least according to the tradition of which Dante is the most eminent author. Therefore, in the following pages I will argue for this

¹ «Il desiderio dell'uomo trova il suo senso nel desiderio dell'altro, non tanto perché l'altro detenga le chiavi dell'oggetto desiderato, quanto perché il suo primo oggetto è di essere riconosciuto dall'altro» (Lacan 2002: 261).

² All the following references of the poem are taken from T. S. Eliot, *Collected Poems 1909-1962*, London, Faber and Faber, 2002, p. 3.

presence and at the end of the analysis I will define its function and morphology by advocating the interweaving of Homer's Odysseus and Dante's Ulysses, in the light of Eliot's idea of tradition.

As Jung defined it, «The archetype in itself is empty and purely formal» (Jung 2001: 13) in that its formal aspect remains unchanged but its substance changes insofar as it is differently semantized by the societies or subjects that use it. Indeed, the first elements that I will take into consideration to show the presence of Odysseus as a simultaneous archetype are formal. After his agnition in Canto XXVI of the *Inferno*, Ulysses tells of the «folle volo» (Dante 1962: I, XXVI, v. 123) and reports a speech made to his companions to encourage them to recognize their own identity as essentially “born to know”. It is an invitation to travel and a ritualized hymn to the disavowal of atavistic fear in order to open up to the drive towards the unknown for knowledge's sake. Keeping in mind the immanence between fear and desire in Ulysses' speech, it is easy to hear its echo in the opening of Eliot's poem. If it is true that Ulysses' companions can be seen as alter-egos of the polytropos hero, then it is all the more likely that Prufrock's encouragement may make use of the archetype as a *memento conosciendi*, since, as we will see by analyzing the thematic relationships with the archetype, his journey has a basically ontological purpose. The following lines reinforce the echo of the archetype and show its morphological similarity to the Homeric text. The journey that the poetic I undertakes has a precise and significant chronotope: the sunset in the alleys with chthonic, labyrinthic and sexually connoted features. The description of the sunset is significant because it traces the Homeric stylistic device «rhododaktulos eos» (Omero 2005: I, v. 1)³ («Smoothed by long fingers» v. 76) making it an objective correlative of an era in which man is immobile, «etherized upon a table» (v. 3), contrary to the Homeric world, always caught in the arrival of dawn, which, like the poem's evening, is always placed at the beginning of a minimum unity.

Precisely because it is a journey, it is interesting to meditate on Prufrock's destination and its parallels with the archetype. The character walks «certain half-desert streets» (v. 4): in both the indefinite adjective and the reference to hesitancy, we notice a variation with respect to the archetype, who goes according to Dante «di retro al sol, | del mondo senza gente» (Dante 1962: I, XXVI, v. 117), without too many doubts. The movement of the poem, then, develops under a sunset whose Homeric origin is evoked together with the objects of that past world; only the wrappings of the latter, however, seem to survive, overtly hinting at the emptiness of the modern world. In fact, the rhetorical operation to which the objects of Odysseus' myth are subjected is *reductio*, which transforms the main material of the odyssey and of the infernal tale – the wood of the boats and of the oar – into sawdust. In this sense, if the evocation of these emptied objects – metonymic *mise en abyme* of the archetype – occurs through a transfer of the objects from the semantic field of the archetype to that of the Prufrockian context, then the oyster, a marine symbol of earthly eroticism, derives from Odysseus' banquet at his departure from Calypso. With that, with the elimination of the erotic substance from the oyster shell – and by metonymy of the scene of the archetype – only Prufrock's empty journey to «the room *in which* the women come and go» (italics mine, l.13) remains. The visit to this room is at the origin of the «overwhelming question» (v. 10), which is ultimately the question that explains the reason for the journey. As a matter of fact, if Odysseus has no doubt

³ And many more times, usually at the beginning of every chapter.

about the dual nature of his travels – social and affective duties in Homer, love for «virtute e canoscenza» in Dante – Prufrock seems not to want to investigate his own motives.

Arguably, reading the poem through the archetype can generate satisfying meanings and throw a new light on the nature of Prufrock's identity. We notice how the poem is articulated following the *Comedy* and *Odyssey* in wanting to give symbolic meaning to the chronotope – theological for Dante, anthropological for Homer. However, time and its meaning also seem to be subject to *reductio*, since unlike the two poems in which the human protagonist reiterates his own mortality in worlds dotted with eternal divinities (and entities), J. Alfred Prufrock, who «ha[s] measured out his life with coffee spoons» (l.51), seems to be convinced that the time to answer the question that troubles him is more or less infinite (ll.26-34). The objects, the speeches, the people seem to expand in the expanded time, permeated by a tedious regularity. The paths he follows, unlike those of the archetype, seem to bore him (l.8); the women speak of representations whose beauty is ideal and therefore perpetual (ll.13-14); the sunset is etherized (l.3); even «in a minute there is time for decisions and revisions which a minute will reverse» (ll.47-48). Time – reading «afternoon» and «evening» (l.75) as metonyms – appears to be sleeping peacefully plunged in its eternal stasis before the protagonist crosses the threshold of his own indecision to «disturb the universe» (l.46). This occurs until he decides who he has to be, e.g. to cross the woman's arms so as to finally perceive the unity of a fragmented contemporary Ego. Like Odysseus, Prufrock must decide who he wants to be: while Odysseus' choice is between the semi-divine husband of Calypso and the human king and husband of Penelope, Prufrock is torn between the eternity of the universe or the exposure to the song of the sirens (v. 128) who, like oystershells, have no content, or, at least, they do not address it to Prufrock, while they once sang for Odysseus.

This measurable time, though eternal in the minute of contemporary subjectivity, is the key to understanding the last fundamental difference between the archetype and Prufrock, that which defines his status as analogous to that of the Other theorized by Lacan. In fact, this particular Odysseus, halfway between Dante's rhetoric and Homeric themes and objects, presents himself as a Montefeltro-like man: a determined polytropos strategist capable of «biting off the matter with a smile, | [...] to roll it toward some overwhelming question» (vv. 93-95), to which he can answer driven to the knowledge of the unknown. This desire for knowledge is impossible for contemporary man, who finds himself lost in his journey among «infinite revisioni dettate dalle circostanze» (Carosso 1995: 51) and therefore he is divided in his essence. It is this desire that meanders in Prufrock, who is frightened even to pose as its subject. Moreover, he is even unable to build himself as a value system (Carosso 1995: 51) and therefore approach his ideal ego as identical to the archetype. So, it is the fearful refusal to experience that constitutes the last difference between Prufrock and the archetype. If, on the one hand, Odysseus can be polytropos and steadfast in his decisions, it is «solamente [because] nel corso dell'esperienza che sappiamo che cosa è l'oggetto» - where by object Eliot means the principle of reality, which makes it possible to «orient[are] la sensazione o l'esperienza» (Carosso 1995: 51). As with the Lacanian desire for the Other, the subject «è orientato verso un oggetto al quale reclama la sua appartenenza [ontological], ma che non riscatta mai completamente la promessa» (Carosso 1995: 51).

The desire to experience reality in order to construct one's own identity is the theme of the poem and, at the same time, the thread that binds Prufrock to his archetype.

In several places in the text, in conjunction with the uncertainty towards the overwhelming question, Prufrock sorrowfully asserts that he «know[s] them all already, know them all - | Have known the evenings, mornings, afternoons» (vv. 50-51) and, simultaneously showing the Homeric and Dantean tradition, he «know[s] the voices dying with a dying fall | Beneath the music from a farther room» (vv. 52-53). However, the latter is a partial knowledge, exactly because it is limited to the experience of only one of the senses. The totality that Odysseus achieves by dying is fragmented, divided as a lack of totalizing experiences. In fact, there follow lines that

separate Prufrock's senses, identifying first of all sight: «I have known the eyes already» (v. 55); then touch: «I have known the arms already» (v. 62); and finally smell: «Is this perfume from a dress | that makes me so digress?» (vv. 65-66). With this last sense, the verbal aspect changes, bringing the protagonist into the present tense, while still preventing him from answering the question that haunts him. Instead of being the place of agnition and of one's own identity, the senses are the dislocated limits of knowledge, making the protagonist disoriented within himself, with no fixed boundaries: «And should I then presume? And how should I begin?» (vv. 68-69). Like Odysseus, he is «a conscious mind in a world of objects» (Boitani 1992: 31), which, however, do not seem to be made to be experienced by him: nothing seems to remain of Odysseus' world, which does not want «d'i nostri sensi ch'è del rimanente, | [...] negar l'esperienza» (Dante, *If*, I, XXVI, vv. 115-116). And here the limits of Prufrock's experience emerge in the last lines of the poem that establish the last and most obvious analogy with Homeric Odysseus. The singing mermaids enter the scene (v. 128). Having no heroes to sing to, they sing to each other, involving no humanity outside the myth, except by negatively highlighting indecision, the lack of the urge to know. Therefore, this leads Prufrock to a damnation that is quite different from Odysseus', but that seems to be textually codified by following the hero's narrative in Dante's afterlife:

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. (vv. 130-135)

This is what Odysseus describes to Dante. The descriptions of the play of light between the moon and the sea, between the ship and the whirlwind that sucks it in, seem to persist, even if reworked, as well as the metaphor of the sea as a prison:

vedea la notte e 'l nostro tanto basso,
 che non surgea fuor del marin suolo.

 Cinque volte raccesso e tante casso
 lo lume era di sotto da la luna,
 poi che 'ntrati eravam ne l'alto passo,

 [...]

 Noi ci allegrammo, e tosto tornò in pianto,
 ché de la nova terra un turbo nacque,
 e percosse del legno il primo canto.

 Tre volte il fé girar con tutte l'acque;
 a la quarta levar la poppa in suso
 e la prora ire in giù, com'altrui piacque,
 infin che 'l mar fu sovra noi richiuso (Dante, *If*, I, XXVI, vv. 128-142).

To define the variants and the poetic value of the implications of Eliot's text is beyond the scope of the present paper, but I think it would be useful to notice the few elements that help to characterize the place where Prufrock wakes up and that, keeping in mind the presence of the archetype, can help to understand which place it is. Prufrock seems to be drowning together with someone else: after lingering in the sea chambers with the «sea-girls», human voices wake him up, and only after that, he drowns together with his traveling companion. According to what has been said and to the fact that the archetype acts as the Other of Prufrock's desire, we can assume that death is the fulfilment of subjectification, of the recognition written in the diagram of Lacanian desire. In fact, the identity of Odysseus, as Boitani explains (Boitani 1992: 24-26), is double and sacrificed to a

desire for death, to a Beyond that on the human level is fulfilled in the immortality given by the written word. So is Prufrock a contemporary myth, a touchstone, a compass of identity like Odysseus? Or is the contrary true: Odysseus performs a morphogenic function of Prufrock's identity, analogous to what Lacan explains regarding the relationship between Other and subject, orienting and literally generating the actions that constitute the literary code of the text?

In order to answer these questions, it is necessary to note that Prufrock is a character caught up in the oppositional law of the *langue*, of the Symbolic (as Lacan puts it), and his identity is clearly shaped on literary and mythical hypotheticals: «I'm not a prophet» (v. 84), «I'm not prince Hamlet» (v. 115); but equally clear is the way in which he defines himself: by opposing himself to something/someone. It turns out to be true, then, that «l'evocazione del modello mitico serve a definire la natura meschina di Prufrock, la sua nullità» (Calimani 1998: 85), so his realization of identity lies precisely in his ability to be saturated as a void, as an empty form, as an archetype itself. This acceptance of one's ontology as nothingness is, in fact, unailing, since for Eliot it is «nell'intersezione del conoscere e dell'agire che si hanno veri oggetti e veri soggetti» (Carosso 1995: 39) in a world in which:

ciascun individuo vive potenzialmente in due mondi – uno costituito dai suoi oggetti e l'altro dalle sue azioni; due mondi che si completano a vicenda, che effettivamente tendono all'identità, che si sforzano di adattarsi l'uno all'altro, ma mai con pieno successo. D'altro canto, per quanto si sforzino di isolarsi l'uno dall'altro non vi riescono mai fino in fondo (Carosso 1995: 32).

For this reason, Prufrock begins a journey similar to that of Odysseus, without, however, being able to reconcile the world by concretizing the myth in himself. According to the implicits and contradictions inherent in the simultaneous Homeric-Dantesque archetype, Prufrock underlines the outcomes of the modernist search for the contemporary episteme, and infers the impossible conciliation between man and truth, understanding the latter as the possibility of an ontology rooted in reality. His attempts to *interact with* the world, therefore, can be seen as attempts to *place himself in* the world, believing that «è con la dimensione della parola poetica che la verità si scava nel reale», and that therefore «la parola introduce il vuoto dell'essere nella tessitura piena del reale» (Lacan 2014: 283).

In conclusion, I would like to argue the morphological specificity of the archetype as simultaneous, supporting my position with Eliot's literary theories. Thus, during the analysis, the co-presence of two poetic models – Dante, *Inferno*, Canto XXVI and Homeric *Odyssey* – has been highlighted, guiding the rhetorical-formal and thematic development of the text with regard to the character. The fact, however, that they act together, to the point that the stylistic features of Odysseus' first journey coincide with the themes and symbols of the second, produces a unique morphology in the archetype as a whole. Thus, the result is a model that blurs the connotations of the archetypes and condenses them: it treats them in the way that the material read by the subject – understood as read by both Eliot and Prufrock's explicit reader in line 115 – is subjected to a treatment similar to the one experienced in the subconscious. This takes place when «la mente incamera i nuovi dati e le nuove situazioni che continuamente le vengono presentate e modella un insieme che rappresenta un nuovo esempio» (Carosso 1995: 41). This example must be the result of a complex operation, whose function seems to be necessary for the formation of the individual, since «I is a construction out of experience» (Eliot 1964: 19) and what organizes experience is therefore a principle that lets matter act simultaneously, making the creation of a model possible. This, precisely, works according to

il principio di simultaneità, da Eliot esplicitamente proposto già nella tesi su Bradley quale via d'uscita o «fuga» dalla «difficoltà del tempo nella percezione», investe ogni sua operazione, e in particolar modo, sul piano gnoseologico, la relazione simultanea di «percipiente e percepito» e, sul piano estetico-letterario, la visione sincronica della tradizione e la sua concezione dell'opera d'arte come un «tutto» che si forma nel segno della funzionalità relazionale di elementi disparati (Serpieri 1973: 16).

According to Serpieri, moreover, «quel principio rese possibile, anche teoricamente, il “metodo mitico”» (Serpieri 1973: 16), in the sense in which the mythical «non costituisce un'aura che circonda un'essenza, bensì una cosa scoperta attraverso una complessa rete di interpretazioni» and experiences in which «è impossibile differenziare l'archetipo dalla sua estensione discorsiva» (Gould 1981: 32 in Carosso 1995: 79). In this sense, the artistic creation is consistent with the mechanisms of the psyche that are supposed to structure the identity of the person due to the fact that «what happens when a new work of art is created is something that happens simultaneously to all the works of art which preceded it» (Eliot 1982: 36-42), similarly to the formation of Desire as a resemantization of the Imaginary by inscribing it in the Symbolic through the recognition of the Other. And, as previously seen, the Other coincides in its effect on Prufrock with the simultaneous archetype of Odysseus. The presence of the latter in the text consists, indeed, in the action of «manipulating a continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity» making the forms and meanings that this method creates a possible way «of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and significance» (Eliot 1975: 178) to Prufrock's identity when he will have reached «l'Altro come sede della parola e garanzia della verità» (Lacan 2014: 8), by virtue of the fact that «è effetto di una parola piena il riordinare le contingenze passate dando loro il senso delle necessità future» (Lacan 2002: 249), namely, those of subjectification. This is how the simultaneous archetype works, together with its analogies with the function of the Lacanian Other, thus illustrating its developments in the text as the model toward which Prufrock's identity aims and the instrument by which Eliot generates and reinforces the mythical method's action.

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