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VICTORIAN POETIC SENSIBILITY AND T. S. ELIOT

»The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock« in the Light of Matthew Arnold's Poetics

INTRODUCTION

In this comparative study an attempt will be made to evaluate T. S. Eliot's poem »The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock« in the light of Matthew Arnold's standards of poetic excellence. The purpose of this evaluation will be to examine the possibility of a meaningful application of a typically Victorian poetic theory to a specifically modern literary text. This kind of critical evaluation may, I hope, expand our horizons and deepen our understanding of the differing critical approaches to poetry of the 19th and 20th centuries.

I have selected »The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock« because this poem, in my opinion, can meet the test of a comprehensive poetic theory: its theme is unique, the content is substantial, and the devices multiple and varied. As such it is one of the most outstanding achievements of Eliot.

The first section gives a concise outline of Arnold's standards of poetic excellence; the second section applies these standards to the text of Eliot's poem; and the conclusion tries to indicate to what extent this application was possible and what its results were.

OUTLINE OF ARNOLD'S THEORY OF POETRY

In order to understand Arnold's rules of poetic excellence, one has to search in his writings on other subjects for the ideas underlying his theory of poetry. In this respect Bate correctly remarks that the »central premise« for the understanding of Arnold's critical writing is »his conception of culture«,¹ as explained in Arnold's essay »Sweetness and Light.« According to Arnold the essential quality of culture consists »in becoming something rather than in having something, in an inward con-

¹ W. J. Bate, *Criticism: The Major Texts* (New York, 1951), p. 439.

dition of mind and spirit.«² Consequently, culture has »its origin in the love of perfection«.³ From his treatment of the concept of culture, one soon learns that only literature is called upon to perfect the man.⁴ »The grand power of poetry«, consists in »... so dealing with things as to awaken in us a wonderfully full, new and intimate sense of them«.⁵ Poetry accomplishes this task by »... expressing with magical felicity the physiognomy and movement of the outward world« and »the ideas and laws of the inward world of man's moral and spiritual nature«.⁶ As such, poetry is concerned with the »total man«.⁷ In view of these qualities, Arnold maintains, poetry is »... capable of higher uses, and called to higher destinies, than those which in general men have assigned to it.«⁸ However, in order to play this role, poetry must be »... of high order and excellence. Therefore, we must accustom ourselves to a high standard and to a strict judgment.«⁹ In their turn, these standards must show that »in poetry the distinction between excellent and inferior, is of paramount importance.«¹⁰

Here the question arises: Where does one find these critical standards necessary to evaluate a literary piece of art?

In Arnold's opinion one finds them in literary models. As he contends, »Critics give themselves great labor to draw out what in abstract constitutes the characters of high quality in poetry. It is much better simply to have recourse to concrete examples.«¹¹ These examples »... are far better recognized by being felt in the verse of the master, than by being perused in the prose of the critic.«¹²

The next question is: Where does one find these examples?

They can be found in the literature and culture of the Periclean period especially in Sophocles.¹³ Sophocles, according to Arnold, describes a »total man« as mentioned before.¹⁴ Furthermore, Sophocles' artistic form is fully consonant with his content.¹⁵

The last question is: What kind of substance and what artistic interpretation of the subject is required in order to satisfy Arnold's rules of poetic excellence?

² Matthew Arnold, »Sweetness and Light«, from *Selections from the Prose Works of Matthew Arnold*, ed. by W. S. Johnson (Boston, 1913), p. 248.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 244.

⁴ See Arnold's essays: »Sweetness and Light« and »Literature and Science.«

⁵ M. Arnold, »Essays in Criticism«, from *Arnold, Prose and Poetry*, ed. E. K. Chambers (Oxford, 1939), p. 147.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 148.

⁷ Bate, p. 441.

⁸ »Essays in Criticism« in Chambers, p. 145.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 146.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ »The Study of Poetry, in *Selections*, p. 65.

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 65—66.

¹³ M. Arnold, »On the Modern Elements in Literature«, from *Essays in Criticism* (Boston, 1910), pp. 59—61.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 60.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

As Arnold contends, »The characters of a high quality of poetry are what is expressed there [in the models].«¹⁶ However, if the critic is pressed to give »some critical account of them«,¹⁷ he should find them in »the superior character of truth and seriousness, in the matter and substance of the best poetry« which »is inseparable from the superiority of diction and movement marking its style and manner.«¹⁸ There, »an accent of high beauty, worth and power« is to be found.¹⁹

Since Arnold refrains from elaboration on these statements, one has to return to his essay, »Preface to Poems«, to find a more concrete implementation of his definition.

In this famous essay Arnold asserts that in the works of the Greeks »... the poetical character of the action in itself and the conduct of it, was the first consideration.«²⁰ This action stood in a Greek play as »... the central point of interest, unforgotten, absorbing, principal.«²¹ Specifically this action is always »human actions; possessing an inherent interest in themselves.«²² This interest is the content of the action and consists in exemplifying »those elementary feelings which subsist permanently in the race, and which are independent of time.«²³

Why has Arnold selected »action« as the essential element in his concept of excellence?

The reason lies perhaps in his criticism of what one might term the dichotomous character of the poetry of his time. This, which he called »modern« poetry, was more concerned with single thoughts and the beauty of descriptive passages than with the plot. Consequently, it existed merely for the »sake of single lines and passages.«²⁴ This ran contrary to Arnold's very models, the Greeks. In their works the stress was put not on the parts but on the whole.²⁵ The »whole« in the light of Arnold's ideas on artistic »representation«²⁶ and »action«²⁷ is »human action«²⁸ which is »consistently drawn.«²⁹ As he explained it the Greeks had shown »... that the tone of the parts was to be perpetually kept down, in order not to impair the grandiose effect of the whole.«³⁰ As »parts« he considered the expression or »grand style« which must always be subordinated to the action. Curiously enough, it seems that Arnold often identified

¹⁶ »The Study of Poetry«, in *Selections*, p. 65.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 66.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 67.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 66.

²⁰ »Preface to Poems«, in *Bate*, p. 446. Hereafter quoted as »Preface«.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ »Preface«, in *Bate*, p. 447.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 445.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 446.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 445.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 446.

action with the subject-matter of the poem.³¹ From this point of view, »modern« poetry, according to Arnold, with its undue emphasis on thoughts and images, was not able to produce a »total impression« on the reader.³² Only the representation of a great action could accomplish this.³³

Modern poets, he maintained, lacked the Architectonice, »... that power of execution, which creates, forms, and constitutes.«³⁴ This vagueness of form and looseness of execution, came, in Arnold's view, not as the result of a shortage of gifted poets but because of the age, which was devoid of vitality, faith, enthusiasm and energy.³⁵ Modern poetry describes ennui, depression, and the restlessness of modern man.³⁶ Consequently, it lacks a serious substance and a superior artistic presentation. As such, it is reminiscent of the Greek culture of Menander's period, when man was intelligent and refined but skeptical and dissolute.³⁷

In Eliot's case we deal with a »modern« poet par excellence, whose poetry seems to imply and at the same time to contradict Arnold's rules of poetic excellence. For example, Eliot's themes are taken from modern life, though the construction of his poems has classical overtones. He describes the ennui of modern man but seems not to condone it.

Because of this seemingly inconsistent relationship of Eliot's poetry to Arnold's rules, one must look at »The Love Song of Alfred Prufrock«³⁸ from all the possible angles of Arnold's poetic theory. Only then we may be able to arrive at a coherent scheme of reference in order to evaluate Eliot's poetry in terms of Arnold's poetics.

INTERPRETATION OF »THE LOVE SONG OF J. ALFRED PRUFROCK«

From the epigraph of Dante and from the first lines of Eliot's poem, one can expect the pattern of the poem to be introspective in character.

Dante:

S'io credesse che mia risposta fosse.

*Senza tema d'infamia ti rispondo.*³⁹

³¹ Though »action« and »subject matter« are two different literary terms, Arnold sees little difference between them. He speaks here of excellent »action« (»Preface«, in Bate, p. 449) and there of »excellent subject« (»Preface«, in Bate, p. 447).

³² »Preface«, in Bate, p. 447.

³³ »Preface«, in Bate, p. 450.

³⁴ »Preface«, in Bate, p. 448.

³⁵ »Modern Elements in Literature«, in *Essays*, p. 81.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 77.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 66.

³⁸ The poem will hereafter be referred to as »Prufrock«. Prufrock without quotation marks will stand for the name of the protagonist.

³⁹ T. S. Eliot, *The Complete Poems and Plays* (New York, 1950), p. 3. Hereafter quoted as *Poems*.

Eliot:

Streets that follow like a tedious argument
Of insidious intent
To lead you to an overwhelming question
Oh, do not ask, »What is it?«⁴⁰

Furthermore, the structure of this monologue appears not to be synthetic in character, as Arnold would require, but analytic, which he would violently oppose.⁴¹ As a matter of fact, one can easily predict that such a poem would deal not with action but with the description of the hero's feelings and thoughts. As such, Arnold would think the poem to be both improperly conceived and poorly constructed.⁴² However, he might concede that the poem, though unacceptable because of the lack of action, could nevertheless be acceptable from the point of view of a successful description of »... the inward world of man's moral and spiritual nature.«⁴³

From what was said in the outline, it appears that the concept of action is the most essential ingredient in Arnold's theory of poetic excellence. Therefore, in order not to preclude a successful application of Arnold's rules to Eliot's poem, I would advance a broader interpretation of Arnold's concept of action. By »broader interpretation« I mean that »action« denotes not only physical activity, of which »Prufrock« is devoid, but also one's psychological processes, providing their exposition creates effects necessary for a dramatic representation. This seems to have also been the classical interpretation of »action.«

In view of this, one may accept »Prufrock« as a dramatic poem. Any decision contrary to this does injustice to the construction of the poem which was conceived as the drama of the hero's life. In »Prufrock«, the unwinding of the mixed moods of the protagonist, from their complex stages to greater psychological clarity, tends to create necessary dramatic effects.⁴⁴

The stage for the presentation of Prufrock's life is set by a description of an evening in a city.

Let us go then, you and I,
When evening is spread out against the sky
Like a patient etherized upon a table;
Let us go through certain half-deserted streets

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ M. Arnold, »The Function of Criticism«

⁴² »Preface«, in Bate, p. 447. Arnold's discussion of the *architectonics* i.e., the proper construction of the poem.

⁴³ »Essays in Criticism«, in Chambers, p. 148.

⁴⁴ Modern science has shown that our subconsciousness stores in itself unrealized or half-realized actions in the form of unfulfilled plans, intentions, hopes, etc. These fragments of our never-lived life, being never tested in reality breed emotional conflicts which lie at the bottom of every dramatic effect.

The muttering retreats
Of restless nights in one-night cheap hotels . . .
And sawdust restaurants with oyster-shells . . .⁴⁵

The impression derived from these images is reminiscent of the »bare outlines« of the old Greek mythic story as Arnold envisioned it. According to him, »The terrible old mythic story on which the drama [Greek] was founded stood, before he entered the theatre, traced in its bare outlines upon the spectator's mind.«⁴⁶ Eliot too in the quoted passage, gives a stately introduction to the story of the fate of modern man. All essential characteristics of modern life are outlined here: the loneliness of modern man, his loss of a firm direction in life, his wanderings and his emotional restlessness.

Though Eliot has succeeded in giving a stately introduction to the theme, the very fact that he selected a modern subject matter for his poem could incur Arnold's censure. Arnold preferred the themes from antiquity. However, in spite of Arnold's opposition to modern themes his stricture was distinctly qualified. As he maintained, »The modernness or antiquity of an action . . . has nothing to do with its fitness for poetical representation.«⁴⁷ Arnold stood only against the emphasis on the external aspects of life and not against a poem's interpretation of the problems which agitate every man, be he a contemporary or not. As »externals«, Arnold considered ». . . modern language, familiar manner, and contemporary allusions, to all our transient feelings and interests.«⁴⁸ As »internals«, he conceived that »His [the poet's] business is with their inward man; with their feelings and behavior in certain tragic situations which engage their passions as men; these have in them nothing local and casual . . .«⁴⁹ One can notice immediately that the phrasing of the first few lines in Eliot's poem is typically modern. Describing this general atmosphere, Eliot succeeded, as Arnold required, in permeating himself with the feeling of the situation.⁵⁰

The next two lines:

In the room the women come and go
Talking of Michelangelo,⁵¹

suggest in their illogical sequence of images, the modern atmosphere of spiritual disorientation. The word »room« and the fact that the »women« are not identified enlarges the concept from the individual to the universal. In this image Arnold would detect moods of depression and ennui and label them as the diseases of advanced civilizations.⁵² In Eliot's case

⁴⁵ *Poems*, p. 3.

⁴⁶ »Preface«, in Bate, p. 447.

⁴⁷ »Preface«, in Bate, p. 446.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ »Preface«, in Bate, p. 449.

⁵¹ *Poems*, p. 4.

⁵² »Modern Elements in Literature«, in *Essays*, p. 78.

the impression is that the poet was detached from the material and that he did not stand approvingly behind the interpretation of life as he pictured it in his poem. Eliot tries to remain strictly impersonal. This satisfies Arnold's advice that in a poem there should be no intrusion of a poet's »personal peculiarities.«⁵³ The poem is most successful when »he [the poet] most entirely succeeds in effacing himself.«⁵⁴ Eliot's tenets on art seem to be similar to Arnold's. According to Eliot, the poem is there to produce an effect, to enliven the objective world and not to express the personal state of mind and feelings of the poet.⁵⁵

The following image describes the scene from a modern city.

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,

— — — — —⁵⁶

These verses have no logical connection with the preceding or the following images. Arnold would label this disjointed sequence of unrelated images as typically »modern«, in his own pejorative meaning of the word. He would consider this phase of the poem to interfere with the »rigorous development« of the theme.⁵⁷ This phase would be here »... merely for the sake of single lines and passages.«⁵⁸ However, this image might be acceptable to Arnold because of its high poetic suggestiveness. In terms of poetic expressiveness, Eliot's choice of words here would not be »graceful and felicitous«,⁵⁹ as Arnold referred to Keats' poetry, but Eliot's associations of words would form, nevertheless, »vivid and picturesque turns of expression, by which the object is made to flash upon the eye of the mind, and which thrill the reader with a sudden delight.«⁶⁰ Furthermore, in his praise of Byron, Arnold said that Byron had »... a deep and strong sense for what is beautiful in human actions and sufferings.«⁶¹ Apparently, this passage in Eliot's poem might indicate, if not the outward beauty of the object, then at least the fact that Eliot possessed that »strong and deep sense« for the peculiar kind of beauty that was filtering from the ugly scenes of ordinary life in modern cities.

⁵³ »Preface«, in Bate, p. 448.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ T. S. Eliot, »Tradition and the Individual Talent«, in *Selected Prose of T. S. Eliot*, ed. F. Kermode (London, 1975).

⁵⁶ *Poems*, p. 4.

⁵⁷ »Preface«, in Bate, p. 450.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 447.

⁵⁹ »Preface«, in Bate, p. 448.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ »Essays in Criticism«, in Chambers, p. 161.

In addition, Arnold would also detect some »magic« quality in this passage. »Magic«, as Arnold thought of it, was a quality (in poetry) by which poets, if they possessed it, might in a few words arouse the emotions of others and suggest the atmosphere.⁶² Finally, he would approvingly recognize the »concrete« character of the description and the compactness of stylistic expression.⁶³

This image tends to create the atmosphere of a modern city as seen by the emotionally distressed Prufrock. His inner life is too weak and barren to be able to control the flow of outer impressions which affect his moods. In this respect Arnold would consider this image as a necessary, although accessory, part of the whole. Its function would be to contribute to a »consistent« delineation of the protagonist's character. He would also recognize as valid Eliot's technique of constructing the poem through a sequence of images. At first glance these images would seem as unrelated to each other. However, after careful examination of their content, it becomes apparent that in »Prufrock« each preceding image is the key to the understanding of the next. At the end, this technique contributes to an accurate and logical construction of the »whole.«

The next passage serves as a prologue to the drama of Prufrock's life. The theme of this human drama emerges through a mixture of the sensations which Prufrock receives from the outer world, and his own reflections upon them.

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 face that you meet;⁶⁴

It is at this point that Eliot enters more deeply into the »inward« life of his hero.⁶⁵ From the layers of Prufrock's sub-consciousness Eliot develops a theme of frustration; he dramatizes the emotional conflicts of his protagonist. Prufrock's reminiscences of his past and his reflections about the present, juxtaposed with each other, build the plot of his personal drama. The suspense of the plot is in our apprehension of the future fate of such a character. As already mentioned the elements of Prufrock's buried life carry, in their psychological framework, great dramatic potentialities. It is in this phase of the poem that they start moving towards their crystallization. This process develops very much in Arnold's manner with »... not a word wasted, not a sentiment capriciously thrown in: stroke upon stroke, the drama proceeded.«⁶⁶

⁶² M. Arnold, »On the Contributions of Celts to English Literature«, in *Selections*, p. 176.

⁶³ »Preface«, in Bate, p. 445. Arnold's discussion of the major characteristics of style.

⁶⁴ *Poems*, p. 4.

⁶⁵ »Preface«, in Bate, p. 447.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 447.

On the basis of what I have said, Arnold would, at first glance, deny dramatic character to the poem, and declare the poem's pattern to be »an allegory of the state of one's own mind.«⁶⁷ Therefore, Eliot's representation of Prufrock would be a »false practice«, a poetry with »false aims.«⁶⁸

Moreover, the following passage, indicating the existence of two selves in the character of Prufrock, would add even more fuel to Arnold's discontent.

There will be a time to murder and create,
And time for all the works and days of hands
That lift and drop a question on your plate;
Time for you and time for me,
And time for a hundred indecisions,
And for a hundred visions and revisions,
Before the taking of a toast and tea.⁶⁹

In this passage Arnold might detect a typical case of a dialogue of the mind with itself.⁷⁰ With this pattern, according to Arnold, the poet would be unable to devise a plot. As a matter of fact Arnold would evaluate this passage in the same manner in which he evaluated Goethe's *Faust*. *Faust*, according to Arnold, »... as a whole and judged strictly as a poetical work, is defective.«⁷¹

The entanglement of Prufrock's complex state of mind forms, nevertheless, a kind of plot. The dramatic quality of this plot is not in the development of the action, but in the self-inquisitory exposition of the hero's turbulent past and in his predicament concerning his future.

And there will be time
To wonder, »Do I dare?« and, »Do I dare?«
Time to turn back and descend the stair,
With a bald spot in the middle of my hair ...⁷²

This analysis proceeds in the following four sections of the poem.

For I have known them all already,
known them all: —
Have known the evenings, mornings, afternoons ...⁷³

This self-analysis fulfills a double role. First, it delineates Prufrock's character, and, second, it builds the plot.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 448.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ *Poems*, p. 4.

⁷⁰ »Preface«, in Bate, p. 445.

⁷¹ »Preface«, in Bate, p. 448.

⁷² *Poems*, p. 4.

⁷³ *Poems*, p. 5.

Prufrock is a young man whose ambitions have been defeated, but who still hopes for their eventual fulfillment at a later time. He lives as an isolated individual. His mental powers degenerate; he becomes incapable of action but at the same time very sensitive to everything that is dull. Sentiments of love do not move him. At the end even his ethical standards deteriorate.

According to Arnold, an inactive individual would be doomed to degeneration.⁷⁴ Arnold maintains that culture is »the study of perfection« and »perfection, as culture conceives it, is not possible while the individual remains isolated.«⁷⁵ This seems exactly to have been the case with Prufrock. Culture asks for a »harmonious expansion of all the powers which make the beauty and worth of human nature...«⁷⁶ We know that Prufrock's intellectual visions are clouded by his heavy disillusionment with life, and that his emotions are dissipated by his continuous state of inertia.

Finally one recognizes in Prufrock a man who does not inspire either love, admiration, or even interest. These qualities Arnold considered component parts of man's moral and spiritual greatness.⁷⁷ As a matter of fact, Prufrock himself denies any potential greatness of his character.

I am no prophet — and here's no great matter
I have seen the moment of my greatness flicker
And I have seen the eternal Footman hold my
coat and snicker
And in short, I was afraid.⁷⁸

At this point, in order to heighten the dramatic character of the theme, one would expect some kind of action from Prufrock. Therefore, in the following two sections Eliot heightens the spiritual anguish of his hero to the point where Prufrock must do or say something.

And would it have been worth it after all,
After the cups, the marmelade, the tea,
Among the porcelain, among some talk of you and me
Would it have been worth while,

— — —
Should say: »That is not what I meant at all.
That is not it, at all.«⁷⁹

These two sections mark the dramatic climax of the narrative. Prufrock's soliloquy passes from lamentation to more energetic tones (»And would it have been worth it after all«). These tones indicate that an event-

⁷⁴ »Sweetness and Light«. Arnold views culture as something dynamic.

⁷⁵ »Preface«, in Bate, p. 468.

⁷⁶ *Poems*, p. 6.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

ual change in Prufrock's character could occur. Arnold would expect some positive act from Prufrock, a determination to pursue a life of faith and energy.⁸⁰ As Arnold complained, the poetry of his time lacked these elements.⁸¹

Furthermore, at this point, one needs to search for the tragic elements in Eliot's poem, as Arnold conceived of them. The general impression, up to this point, was that Prufrock's life had been more melodramatic than tragic. As it appeared, Prufrock's suffering had no outlet in action; on the contrary, his sufferings were sublimated by his meditations.

On the basis of this analysis, Arnold would deny any tragic character to the poem.⁸² Actually he would label the poem as »monotonous« and »morbid.«⁸³ Prufrock is dramatic from the point of view of his moral dilemmas, but he is not tragic in the Greek sense. He does not defy destiny.

Being deficient in its tragic conception, the poem in Arnold's mind would not »convey charm and infuse delight.«⁸⁴ On the contrary, the impression left on the reader, by the representation of Prufrock's character, would be »painful.«⁸⁵

This section is also important from the point of view of the treatment of moral values in poetry. Its reference to Lazarus and the recurrent line, »That is not what I meant, at all«, suggests a certain hope of salvation for Prufrock. In this respect, this passage would be profoundly meaningful for Arnold. Arnold taught that what distinguishes English poetry from other world literature is its »energetic and profound treatment of moral ideas.«⁸⁶ However, Arnold admits that poets should not compose »moral« poems, but that they should show the application of moral ideas to life »under the conditions fixed by the laws of poetic beauty and poetic truth.«⁸⁷ »How to live«, says Arnold, »is in itself a moral idea.«⁸⁸ He would admit that Prufrock seriously and thoroughly investigated whether or not his life was worth living. Thus, Prufrock would be, to Arnold, morally profound and impressive,⁸⁹ though, because of his lack of a strong will, not a noble personage.⁹⁰

The dramatic denouement is completed in the remaining part of the poem. At the end Prufrock breaks out of his shell and finally recognizes his true self.

No. I am not Prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be;
Am an attendant lord, one that will do

⁸⁰ »Modern Elements in Literature«, in *Essays*, p. 81.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

⁸² »Preface«, in Bate, p. 445.

⁸³ *Ibid.*

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

⁸⁶ »Sweetness and Light«, in Bate, p. 471.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 477.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

⁸⁹ »Preface«, in Bate, p. 450.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 446.

To swell a progress, start a scene or two,
Advise the prince; ...⁹¹

By becoming fully conscious of himself, Prufrock untangles the dramatic knot of the poem. The entire poem seems now to exist solely for him. A sense of the »unity« of theme is thus created.⁹²

At the end of his life and in spite of all his efforts Prufrock does not reach a meaningful conception of life. The reason does not lie in his personality, but in the morally decayed world, which, as Arnold often viewed his own age, offers no firm pattern of salvation.⁹³ Finally, Prufrock will die as an honest but weak man.

We have lingered in the chambers of the sea
By sea-girls wreathed with seaweed and brown
Till human voices wake us, and we drown.⁹⁴

As a concluding remark to this analysis, let me add that Arnold defined as one of the aims of poetry the consolation of the reader confronted by the difficulties of life.⁹⁵ This, it seems to me, Eliot's poem does not accomplish. However, it does »interpret« modern life for us. Only in this respect, it satisfies one of the important tenets of Arnold's theory of poetry.⁹⁶

CONCLUSION

In conclusion I shall try to answer the main question of this study: Are Arnold's rules on poetic excellence applicable to this poem by Eliot?

I shall give the answer in respect to three basic rules of poetic excellence championed by Arnold. The importance of the subject matter, the accurate construction of the poem, and the subordinate character of the expression.⁹⁷

In regard to the choice of the subject matter, there is little to be said. Arnold would allow modern themes in poetry providing they exemplify a powerful action. With respect to action Eliot's poem stirs human emotions but these emotions are part only of those aspects of life which are characteristic of our age. Here Eliot had to overcome many difficulties inherent in our modern age. According to Arnold, it would seem as if our age was not made for great emotions. Nevertheless, Arnold insisted that one should take material not from books but directly from life.⁹⁸ If the age is brimming with new and inspiring ideas, so much the

⁹¹ *Poems*, p. 7.

⁹² »Preface«, in Bate, p. 450.

⁹³ »Preface«, in Bate, p. 447.

⁹⁴ *Poems*, p. 7.

⁹⁵ »The Study of Poetry«, in *Selections*, pp. 55—56.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

⁹⁷ »Preface«, in Bate, p. 450.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

better for the poet.⁹⁹ On the other hand, if life is barren and too complex, the poet must exercise great critical effort in discerning the right from the wrong material.¹⁰⁰ Eliot seems to have held similar ideas. According to Eliot, a modern poet must cloak himself with shades of obscurity and complexity of his age, »in order to dislocate, if necessary, language into meaning.«¹⁰¹ Eliot, in my opinion, has succeeded in his »Prufrock« in learning about the intricacies of modern reality, in realizing where its poetic potentialities reside, in finding a content and in devising a structure which would adequately convey the spirit of his times. At the same time he exerted all his efforts to represent those »elementary human emotions«, as stipulated by Arnold.¹⁰²

In so far as the construction of the poem is concerned, »Prufrock« seems to be an accurately constructed poem in consonance with Arnold's standards.¹⁰³ When the metaphors and symbols are deciphered, Prufrock's personality emerges as a logical »whole«. Consequently, he is neither »loosely drawn«¹⁰⁴ nor »feebly conceived.«¹⁰⁵ Prufrock's characterization, nevertheless, is not made in »simple« terms, as Arnold would ask.¹⁰⁶ Eliot probably wanted the reader to feel the complexity of his hero's cultural background. In this respect one has difficulties in establishing an »intimate« rapport with the hero.¹⁰⁷ This comes as a result of Eliot's art. Eliot tries to impress his material on the reader while simultaneously detaching himself from the work. Therefore, one feels that the representation of Prufrock's life is highly »restrained.«¹⁰⁸

Whether or not Eliot's expression is subordinated to the main theme, or as Arnold says »kept in the right degree of prominence«,¹⁰⁹ could be evaluated only from the stylistic point of view. Through his compactly molded thoughts into clear-cut phrases, Eliot excluded from the poem all intellectual and stylistic superfluities.¹¹⁰ His images are arranged to explain each phase in the poem and finally to create, by an accumulative process of images, a »total impression«. This seems to be also Arnold's point of view.¹¹¹

Furthermore, according to Arnold, the theme expressed should have a »self-subsistent« character, »detached« from the emotions of the poet.¹¹² In spite of the fact that the poem has the form of a personal address, one cannot detect in it the intrusion of the poet's personality. Prufrock exists

⁹⁹ »Function of Criticism at the Present Time«, in Bate, p. 454.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁰¹ T. S. Eliot, »The Metaphysical Poets«, in Bate, p. 533.

¹⁰² »Preface«, in Bate, p. 456.

¹⁰³ »Preface«, in Bate, p. 450.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 445.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 449.

¹⁰⁶ »Preface«, in Bate, p. 449.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 446.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 447.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 450.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 450.

¹¹² »Preface«, in Bate, p. 447.

for himself, and the reader can put himself in direct relationship to the protagonist. What one feels is only a »calm pathos« of the exposition.¹¹³

In the matter of versification, Arnold demanded that the subject be adaptable to the kind of poetry selected.¹¹⁴ What he had in mind were the classical modes of drama, lyrical poetry, satire, epic, etc.¹¹⁵ Eliot's poem does not fit into any of these traditional molds. »Prufrock« is a lyrico-dramatic poem, but its free verse, irregular rhyming, and changeable metrical system make it stand apart from all traditional patterns.¹¹⁶ However, many characteristics of the style which Arnold championed can be found in the poem.

Arnold also favored a »perfectly limpid, simple style«,¹¹⁷ which is also »precise« and »firm.«¹¹⁸ Eliot's poem seems to satisfy these rules. His style is never elaborated or decorated; it is extremely bald and almost dry. Eliot, as Arnold required, thinks his images clearly and delineates them firmly.¹¹⁹ Eliot never succumbed to those poetic faults that Arnold termed »curiosity« and »fancy« of style.¹²⁰ The images in the poem are definitely of the plainest possible nature.

To sum up, I would say that Arnold's poetic theory could be applied to Eliot's poem in parts, but not in its entirety. My impression is that Eliot's poem, so to speak, »meanders« through Arnold's poetic standards of excellence. When it satisfies one requirement, it fails another, which would seem to be demanded by Arnold's theory. However, if Arnold were to judge Eliot along the broad lines of his poetic theory and his philosophy of life, he would find in Eliot a poet of kindred spirit, one whom only an advanced stage of the same »modern« age has made different.

S a ž e t a k

VIKTORIJANSKA POETSKA OSJETLJIVOST I T. S. ELIOT

(»The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock« u svjetlu poetike Matthewa Arnolda)

Da bi pokazao da se jedna tipična teorija poetike viktorijskog vremena može primijeniti na specifično moderan literarni tekst, autor analizira i ocjenjuje jednu od najboljih pjesama T. S. Eliota »The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock«. Primjenjuje standarde poetskih vrijednosti Matthewa Arnolda kako ih je on sam definirao u svoja dva eseja o poetici. Nakon detaljne analize Eliotove pjesme autor zaključuje da ona samo djelomično zadovoljava Arnoldove poetske standarde.

¹¹³ »Preface«, in Bate, p. 450.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 447.

¹¹⁵ »Sweetness and Light«, in Bate, p. 476.

¹¹⁶ For example, Arnold's personal poetry widely differs in structure and content from Eliot's poems.

¹¹⁷ »The Influence of Celts«, in *Selections*, p. 177.

¹¹⁸ »Preface«, in Bate, p. 478.

¹¹⁹ »Preface«, in Bate, p. 451.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 449.