

The Deconstruction of American Myth in *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*

ZHOU Tingting¹

¹ College of International Studies, Southwest University, Chongqing, China

Correspondence: ZHOU Tingting, College of International Studies, Southwest University, Beibei, Chongqing, 400715, China. Tel: 86-155-2380-2516. E-mail: cherryzhou614@aliyun.com

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Abstract

Based on Sacvan Bercovitch's theory of the Puritan jeremiads and the American myth, the essay analyzes the deconstruction of American myth in *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* by T. S. Eliot. On the one hand, Eliot is influenced by the admonishing style of the Puritan jeremiad. Like a prophet howling in the wilderness, Eliot denounces the moral corruption of the New England city Boston and the spiritual paralysis of its inhabitants. On the other hand, by an ironic portrait of Prufrock, the modern incarnation of John the baptist, Eliot deconstructs the American myth by ironically representing the Puritan errand into the wilderness. Eliot tries to escape from the influence of the American myth which dominates his imagination. He indulges himself in an aesthetical world of sensual pleasure and turns his back on family obligation.

Keywords: the Puritan jeremiad, the American myth, errand into the wilderness, Deconstruction

1. Introduction

The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock is one of the most important poems of T.S.Eliot. When critics analyze the poem, they either focus on the character's psychological state or the poem's revelation of the decay of Western civilization. For example, Tony Pinkey thinks that "the world of J. Alfred Prufrock is clearly a paranoid-schizoid one, composed of shadows rather than solid things." (Pinkey, 1984, p.40) Elizabeth Drew believes that Prufrock retreats into "the world of despairing introspective day-dream" and mingles "self-pity and self-disgust". (Drew, 1949, p. 34) Cleanth Brooks points out that "'the love song' is not primarily about the plight of an individual person or a particular city but about the plight of an era and of Western civilization itself." (Brooks, 1988, p. 80) It is a pity that few critics pay attention to the poem's connection with the American Puritan jeremiad tradition.

Based on Sacvan Bercovitch's theory on the Puritan jeremiads and the American myth, the essay analyzes the deconstruction of American myth in the poem. Considered as a mode of denunciation, the jeremiad was an ancient formulaic refrain in Europe. In the 17th century, it was imported to Massachusetts from the Old world. Later, it was combined with the rhetoric of mission and became America's first literary type. Bercovitch refers to the Puritan jeremiad as "the political sermon tended at every public occasion (on days of fasting and prayer, humiliation and thanksgiving, at covenant-renewal and artillery-company ceremonies, and, most elaborately and solemnly, at election-day gatherings)". (Bercovitch, 1978, p. 4) The Puritan jeremiad is the product of the first-generation colonists. Within the first decade of settlement, the Puritan ministers were already thundering denunciation of the iniquities of the Bay colony such as "false dealing with God, betrayal of covenant promises, the degeneracy of the young, the lure of profits and pleasures". (Bercovitch, 1978, p. 4) Anxious about the moral decay of the colony, the Puritan ministers developed the European jeremiad into a special form of sermon. They warned in the sermon that if people did not acknowledge their sins and promise reform, the punishment was forthcoming.

Despite its denunciation of the iniquities, the Puritan jeremiad was characterized by its unswerving faith in the Puritan errand. The Puritans believed they were a peculiar people and their mission a peculiar one. They were a company of Christians not only called but chosen by God as instruments of a sacred historical design. Their church-state was to be a model to the world of Reformed Christianity and a prefiguration of New Jerusalem to come. (Bercovitch, 1978, pp. 7-8) The Puritans acknowledged the declension of New England, but their cries of declension and doom were part of a strategy designed to revitalize the errand: "They believed God's punishments were corrective, not destructive. His vengeance was a sign of love, a father's rod used to improve

the errant child. In short, their punishments confirmed their promise.” (Bercovitch, 1978, p. 8) The Puritans believed that the purpose of their jeremiads was to direct an imperiled people of God toward the fulfillment of their destiny, to guide them individually toward salvation, and collectively toward the American city of God. (Bercovitch, 1978, p. 9)

The Puritan jeremiad persists throughout the 18th and 19th century in all forms of the literature and helps sustain the myth of America through two hundred years of turbulence and change. Bercovitch points out that the ritual of the jeremiad bespeaks an “ideological consensus” and has played a major role in fashioning the myth of America which sustains and restricts the imagination of American writers. (Bercovitch, 1978, p. 176) It is the Puritan typology infuses the symbolic meaning into the term “America” and constructs the American myth. Typology is a particular form of rhetoric. According to Bercovitch, it is “the historiographic-theological method of relating the Old Testament to the life of Christ (as antitype) and through him, to the doctrines and progress of the Christian Church”. (Bercovitch, 1967, p. 167) For example, Jonah’s three days in the whale typologically parallels Christ’s three days in the tomb, and Job’s patience prefigures Christ’s forbearance on the cross. The New England Puritans developed this method into a distinctively American one. They believed that as Old Testament foreshadowed the New Testament, all of history after the Incarnation foreshadowed the Christ’s second coming. (Bercovitch, 1978, p. 14) Hence, from Moses to John the Baptist to the Puritan preachers, from Israel in Canaan to New Israel in American wilderness, from Adam to Christ to the second Adam of the Apocalypse, there was a relationship of analogy.

The Puritan typology is a rhetorical strategy by which the Puritans envisioned the meaning of their errand into the wilderness. By the imaginative energy of typology, they identified America as the new promised land foretold in Scripture. Their migration to New England was a flight from another Babylon or Egypt; their conflicts with the Indians were foreshadowed by Joshua’s conquest of Canaan; and New England would in due time be the site of new Jerusalem. Considered as “a kind of imperialism by interpretation” (Bercovitch, 1975, p.xi) by Bercovitch, the Puritan typology enables the immigrants to usurp the very meaning of the story of the ancient Jews. (Bercovitch, 1978, pp. 10-11)

2. The Prophet Howling in the American Wilderness

As a descendant of the Puritans, Eliot has a deep affiliation with the Puritan New England. Andrew Eliot, his first American ancestor, migrated in 1669 from the village of East Coker, Somerset County, England, to colonial Massachusetts. Although Eliot’s grandparents reached Missouri in the 1830s, the family carefully maintained its connection with New England. When Eliot was a child, he spent every summer in the house his father bought in Cape Ann, Massachusetts. He enrolled at Harvard University in 1906 and spent his formative years in Boston. The poem, composed just before Eliot left for Europe in 1910, is the sum of Eliot’s New England experiences. With the modern New England city Boston as its setting, the poem denounces the moral decadence of the city and its people. The admonishing style and the representation of the Puritan mission of the poem indicates the influence of the American Puritan jeremiad tradition.

Eliot inherited from his family a Puritan conscience. His grandfather William Greenleaf Eliot was an Unitarian clergyman but his temper was more Calvinistic than Unitarian. He published *Letters to Young men* in Boston in 1854 to warn his grandson of the terrible temptations he must at his peril avoid. The roads to ruin include alcohol, violation of the Lord’s day, the sin of gambling, lust. (Miller Jr. 2005, p. 15) Charlotte, Eliot’s mother, loved writing poetry but her strength is essentially that of a preacher. She wrote habitually of “the vision of the seer” and “the prophet’s warning cry”. (Gordon, 1977, p. 5) Influenced by his grandfather and mother, Eliot had an acute moral consciousness. Like a prophet howling in the wilderness, Eliot denounces fiercely the corruption of the modern city Boston and its inhabitants.

Boston at the turn of the 20th century was no longer “the city upon a hill” governed by the Puritan conscience but a society in decadence. The political and moral power of its oldest and most distinguished citizens had been displaced by great commercial corporations. The profit-first principle of the industrial age replaced Mosaic laws. The poem presents hell-like urban images. The city is shrouded in “yellow smoke” and “yellow fog” (Eliot, 1969, p.13) due to industrial pollution. “The dry pool” (Eliot, 1969, p. 5) hints at spiritual dryness and a failure to resurrect. The inhabitants in the city are compared to “a patient etherised upon a table”. (Eliot, 1969, p. 13) From the perspective of the Puritan doctrine of original sin, “patient” is a metaphor for a sinner. The metaphorical meaning of “patient” indicates the moral decadence and spiritual paralysis of the urban inhabitants. The working-class residents in the “half-deserted streets” (Eliot, 1969, p.13) lead a licentious and vulgar life. They indulge themselves in “one-night cheap hotels and sawdust restaurants with oyster-shells” (Eliot, 1969, p. 13) which hints at deadly sins of lust and gluttony. The upper-class women “in the room” are much like prostitutes.

In biblical tradition, “prostitutes” are usually synonyms for heretics. Their bodies which smell of “perfume” and their “white and bare arms” (Eliot, 1969, p. 15) are sensually attractive. They feign to talk about “Michelangelo” (Eliot, 1969, p. 14) to show off their refined taste. However, in fact, they stealthily laugh at Prufrock’s “bald spot in the middle of his hair”, “thin hair” and “thin arms and legs”. (Eliot, 1969, p. 14)

Eliot feels distressed about the sins of the modern descendants of Puritans. Identified with the character Prufrock, he “wept and fasted, wept and prayed” (Eliot, 1969, p. 15) to express his disquietude and persuades people to regret and reform. In biblical tradition, “weeping”, “fast” and “praying” are rituals by which prophets communicate with God. For example, when Jerusalem was to be destroyed by God due to its corruption and betrayal, Jeremiah wept bitterly and mourned for the coming destruction of the city and the sufferings of its people. (Jeremiah 8: 14-22) Before Jesus began his public ministry, he fasted in the desert for 40 days and endured the temptation by the Devil. (Matthew 4: 1-11) When Daniel came to understand that the years for the desolation of Jerusalem was 70 in number, he implored God by prayer and requests to turn his raging anger away from the holy city. (Daniel 9: 1-17) The rituals of “weeping”, “fast” and “praying” allude to the ceremony of the humiliation day. In the Bay Colony in the 17th century, when there were winds, storms, plagues, pests, smallpox, fires, etc, a day of humiliation would be appointed. On that day people were required to abstain from bodily labor, gather in their churches and listened to the ministers’ jeremiads. The ministers denounced the iniquities of the people and warned that if they did not acknowledge their sins and promise reform, the punishment was forthcoming. Influenced by the ministers’ admonition, the listeners wept, fasted and prayed to beg for God’s forgiveness. By referring to the humiliation day, Eliot directs a way for the sinners in the modern city. Only in the mounting wail of sinfulness and cry for repentance can the Puritans purged themselves.

3. Deconstruction of the American Myth—the Ironic Representation of the Errand into the Wilderness

In May 1670, Reverend Samuel Danforth delivered an election-day sermon entitled *A Brief Recognition of New England’s Errand into the Wilderness*, which was considered as the community expression of a whole generation. Danforth condemned the colonists’ shortcomings and justifies their afflictions. Yet what did not change was his faith in the founders’ dream. Danforth compared the Puritan’s migration to the American wilderness to Jews’ Exodus experiences and insisted that the only remedy which God prescribed for the prevention and healing of the immigrants’ apostasy was “their calling to remembrance God’s great and signal love in manifesting himself to them in the wilderness, in conducting them safely and mercifully, and giving them possession of their promised inheritance”. (Bercovitch, 1978, p. 12) Like the wilderness through which the Israelites passed to the promised land, the American wilderness is endowed special symbolic meaning. It witnesses the Puritans’ progress towards the fulfilment of their destiny and towards the American city of God.

By contrast with optimistic Danforth, Eliot feels pessimistic about the Puritan errand. In the satirical portrayal of Prufrock, the modern incarnation of John the Baptist, Eliot represents the Puritan errand ironically and tries to deconstruct the American myth. Prufrock identifies himself with John the Baptist when he sees his “head (grown slightly bald) //brought in upon a platter”. (Eliot, 1969, p. 15) In Mark, Herod married Herodias, his brother Philip’s wife. John repeatedly told him it was not lawful to marry his brother’s wife. Herodias nursed a grudge against John and wanted to kill him. On Herod’s birthday banquet, Herodias’ daughter danced and pleased Herod. Herod promised to give her whatever she wanted. The girl, to revenge for her mother, made the request: “I want the head of John the Baptist on a platter.” Herod had to behead John. (Mark 6: 17-25) Similar to John, Prufrock was a victim of women’s persecution. “Pinned and wriggling on the wall”, he was isolated and ridiculed by the women talking about “Michelangelo” and castrated by their “eyes” and “formulated phrase”. (Eliot, 1969, p. 14)

According to Bercovitch, the figural use of John the Baptist is a characteristic of the New England pulpit, and part of the Puritan legacy to American rhetoric. (Bercovitch, 1978, p.13) The Puritan writers such as Samuel Danforth, Thomas Hooker, Edward Johnson, Increase Mather and Jonathan Edwards all interpret John as a typological forerunner of their own mission to prepare the way for Christ in the American wilderness. (Bercovitch, 1978, p.13) For example, Danforth says in the jeremiad: “John was greater than any of the prophets that were before him, . . . the Baptist was the harbinger and forerunner. All the prophets saw Christ afar off, but the Baptist saw him present, baptized him, and applied the types to him personally.” (Bercovitch, 1978, p. 13) The Puritan typology explains the Puritans’ preference to John. The New England Puritans believe all of history after the Incarnation foreshadows the Christ’s second coming. Thus, as John the Baptist prefigures Christ, the Bay Colony is a light proclaiming the coming of the Messiah, a herald sent to prepare the world to receive the long-expected kingdom.

Different from John, Prufrock was a coward and could not undertake a prophet’s duty. In the Biblical tradition, a prophet is an individual inspired by God through the Holy Spirit to deliver a message for a specific purpose.

With a strong sense of morality, a prophet castigates the evil and corruption around him and is often the target of persecution and opposition. John shows great courage in condemning Herod's breaking of Mosaic laws. By contrast, Prufrock had no courage to "disturb the universe" (Eliot, 1969, p.14). He consoles himself: "There will be time, there will be time...// And time yet for a hundred indecisions, //And for a hundred visions and revisions, // Before the taking of a toast and tea." (Eliot, 1969, p. 14) In the rite of Eucharist, "toast and tea", as the symbol of Jesus' body and blood, foreshadows Jesus' crucifixion. "A hundred indecisions" before the Eucharist hint at Prufrock's hesitance to sacrifice. Prufrock recognizes his difference from John with his "bold spot in the middle of the hair" (Eliot, 1969, p. 14). In religious paintings, John has a thick hair. In the Bible, hair is the source of strength. Samson is strong because of his hair. When his hair is cut, he is as weak as others. (Judges 16:15) Prufrock's bald head indicates his lack of courage and strength. Prufrock at last becomes aware that "he was no prophet" and "here's no great matter". (Eliot, 1969, p.15) He is merely "an attended lord", "an easy tool" and "a fool". (Eliot, 1969, p. 14)

4. Escape to the World of Art

The American myth both sustains and restricts the imagination of Eliot. It sets free great creative energies of Eliot and becomes the source of his images, metaphors and symbols. Meanwhile, it confined Eliot's imagination to the terms of the American myth, barring him from paths that led beyond the boundaries of American culture. To escape from the dominating influence of American myth, Eliot indulges himself in an aesthetical world of sensual pleasure. At the end of the poem, Prufrock leaves the hall and walks on the sea beach. "The mermaids" are "singing" and "riding seaward on the waves"; water was "white and black" and "sea-girls" were "wreathed with seaweed red and brown". (Eliot, 1969, p. 16) These images denote a beautiful world of art which stands opposite to the barren New England wilderness. William Greenleaf Eliot, Eliot's grandfather, migrated to St. Louis in wilderness in the 1830s and established the first Unitarian church of the city. For Eliot, William personifies the Puritan errand. Echoing the typological language of Puritan jeremiad, Eliot describes William as "a Moses bringing down the tables of the Law". (Eliot, 1964, p. 44) Indulging in the world of art, Eliot turns his back on the family obligation.

Because of its deconstruction of American myth, the poem is not a jeremiad or an anti-jeremiad. The anti-jeremiad denounces all ideals, sacred and secular, on the grounds that America is a lie. (Bercovitch, 1978, p. 194) However, Anti-jeremiad is not a rejection but a variation of the American myth. The symbol of America is an enclosed and bipolar system. (Bercovitch, 1978, p. 178) America is represented as either "world's fairest hope or man's foulest crime, American heaven or universal hell". (Bercovitch, 1978, p. 194) Locked within the bipolar structure, Jeremiad and anti-jeremiad are equal and opposite expressions of the same symbol.

The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock shows the influence of the Puritan jeremiad tradition upon T.S.Eliot. Besides the sermonic style of a prophet, the poems shows Eliot's imagination is dominated by American myth and he is always haunted by images, metaphors and symbols tracing back to the Bay Colony in the 17th century. However, on the other hand, Eliot no longer believes the American ideals any more. By the ironical portrait of Prufrock, Eliot denies the Puritan errand and collapses the American myth. To escape from the dominating influence of American myth, Eliot constructs an world of art and indulge in it.

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