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Angela Leonardi

Depression on a Screen. *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* in the Light of Cognitive Theories of Depression

Abstract I: Questo articolo analizza *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* alla luce di alcuni studi dello psichiatra americano A. T. Beck, in particolare le teorie cognitive e i criteri diagnostici da lui elaborati per interpretare e analizzare sintomi e livelli della depressione. Dallo studio è emerso che molti dei sintomi presenti nell'*Inventory for Measuring Depression* (sedici su ventuno) sono rinvenibili – a diversi livelli di significato e significante – sia nella struttura poetica che nel tessuto figurativo dell'opera, mentre aspetti specifici della *Cognitive Theory of Depression* (in particolare ciò che Beck definisce "Faulty Information Processing" e due dei punti cruciali di questo processo cognitivo, vale a dire la "Selective abstraction" e la "Arbitrary inference") sono individuabili in alcune delle più importanti isotopie figurative del poema.

Abstract II: This article analyzes *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* in the light of the American psychiatrist A. T. Beck's diagnostic criteria and cognitive theories for interpreting and evaluating symptoms and levels of depression. This study aims to show that many symptoms listed in Beck's *Inventory for Measuring Depression* (sixteen out of twenty-one) are recognizable – at different levels of signifier and signified – in both the poetical structure and the imagery of the poem, whereas specific aspects included in *Cognitive Theory of Depression* (for instance, the cognitive process defined by Beck as "Faulty Information Processing" and two crucial points of this process, "Selective abstraction" and "Arbitrary inference") are identifiable in some of the most relevant figurative isotopies of the poem.

Keywords: Prufrock, Beck, Modernism, psychology, depression.

Since the ancient Greeks, the nature of creative genius has been a subject of interest for speculative curiosity. In Plato's *Phaedrus*, Socrates maintains that the supreme poet is invariably one who creates his verses under the inspiration of the Muse, and the state of mind into which he falls is comparable to madness:

If a man comes to the door of poetry untouched by the madness of the Muses, believing that technique alone will make him a good poet, he and his sane compositions never

reach perfection, but are utterly eclipsed by the performances of the inspired madman (Plato trans. 1973: 48).

Over the centuries, the assumption of a close connection between creativity and mental imbalance has become increasingly sophisticated with the development of psychology as a distinct field of study, leading to notable present-day research which tries to shed more and more light on any possible connection between geniality and specific psychological or even psychiatric disorders¹.

It was during the years in which Freudianism was progressively widespread that many writers themselves started to become aware of a definite connection between their creative impulse and some kind of psychological distress. This is demonstrated by the fact that they refused to undergo psychoanalytic treatment or to complete it if they were engaged in composing a literary work. In this regard, Wellek and Warren maintained that:

Most of them have not wanted to be 'cured' or 'adjusted', either thinking they would cease to write if they were adjusted, or that the adjustment proposed was to a normality or a social environment which they rejected as philistine or bourgeois. Thus W. H. Auden has asserted that artists should be as neurotic as they can endure (Wellek & Warren 1978: 83).

Nevertheless, while it is true that many writers withdrew from Freudian therapies for fear of withering their inspiration, it is also true that most of them were attracted to psychoanalytic theories to such an extent and absorbed them so profoundly as to be inspired in their experimentalism by the basic psychoanalytic method known as "free association of ideas". From that moment on, the synergy between literature and psychology has become not only apparent but also unavoidable and extremely fruitful. As time goes by, their interaction, founded upon their mutual interest in investigating the human mind and soul, has resulted in the development of hitherto unexplored fields of research powered by a reciprocal illuminating role which has pointed to unexpected perspectives of interpretation.

To return to the technique of "free association of ideas", whereas its influence has been unanimously recognized in Woolf and Joyce's narrative techniques (obviously with stylistic peculiarities which differ from one author to another), it is in T. S. Eliot's work, and namely in *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*, that we find a pattern of how this method can act, at several cognitive levels, as a structural basis for the poetic process. Indeed, if in modernist novels the stream of consciousness offers an exploration of the characters' psyche through a dramatization of their thoughts, in *Prufrock* we can observe how "the

¹ An extremely interesting study about the relationships between creativity and mental disorders (manic-depressive illness in particular) is included in *Manic-Depressive Illness: Bipolar Disorders and Recurrent Depression* (2nd ed.), Frederick K. Goodwin & Kay Redfield Jamison, Oxford University Press, 2007. The *Part III*, "Creativity", presents studies, tables, evidence and data about "Depression, Mania and Suicide in Eminent Writers, Composers, and Artists". A table recording "Mood Disorders and Suicide in Eminent British and Irish Poets born 1705-1805" and a "Suicide rates" diagram (updated to 2001) of writers and artists are included in the chapter.

poet assumes the right to make use of any materials that seem to him significant" (Kenner 1978: 127). This in order to 'freely' communicate both the emotional state and the cognitive workings which underpin the composition of his dramatic monologue, without avoiding those moments when he feels incapable of generating poetry and that may be defined as 'creative impotence'. Furthermore, being a man who had been prone to depressive episodes throughout his life, Eliot gives shape, alongside the externalization of his sense of failure as a poet, to moods, sensations and mental attitudes that could be seen as a sort of universal mirror of a depressive state.

It is a well-known fact that he suffered from severe depression from 1921 to 1922, and that this experience was decisive in inspiring the composition of his masterpiece, *The Waste Land*. Nevertheless, it is in *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*, lines that so extraordinarily impact our minds – written by the poet when he was in his early twenties (when he had not yet been diagnosed with any psychological problem) – that we find a vivid poetical projection of several depressive symptoms. He was young but – as he explained later in life, when asked about the nature of his disturbed (if not desperate) *persona* of his first poem – he was in an anguished mood more appropriate to middle age: "It was partly a dramatic creation of a man of about 40 I should say, and partly an expression of feeling of my own through this dim imaginary figure" (Eliot 1962: 17)².

That in *The love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* Eliot was giving a poetic shape to a personal malaise was somehow revealed in two moments of his private life in which he formulated the same expression – "The Prufrock Complex" – as a response to the way some people were trying to categorize his behavioural attitudes:

In a palm-reader's report on himself, TSE pencilled "The Prufrock Complex" against "when faced with a personal problem, any prolonged contemplation of probabilities merely produces hesitancy and indecision. You must have quick decisions but not the impulsive ones". He wrote "Prufrock complex" again in the matching report on Henry, against "you are inclined to weigh too carefully the pros and cons of your difficulty, with the result that you merely become hesitant and undecided (Eliot 2018: 382).

Considering the nature of the two circumstances, it is difficult to decipher exactly how serious Eliot was when formulating this definition. What is certain is that in modern literary imagination Prufrock "[...] has become the archetype for the 'complex' of over-scrupulous timidity. He is a man paralysed by an overwhelming anxiety about the possibility of getting things wrong: his judgement has such nicety and fastidiousness that it never arrives at decision, let alone action" (Perry 2016). I would add that the 'complex' revealed by *The Love Song* goes far beyond an "over-scrupulous timidity": as we shall see, precise symptoms of a depressive state seem to emerge from the poem.

² Interview in *Grantite Review*. I agree with Ronald Schuchard when he states that "Though Eliot upheld an impersonal theory for the poet in the creative process, as a critic, he was, ironically, always in search of the ways in which a poet's sensibility or vision of reality are evident in the allusive texture of the poem" (Schuchard 2017: 94).

Seen from this angle, *Prufrock* can be considered as a tangible, valuable tool for psychologists to gain further insights into their depressed patients' thoughts and attitudes, to empathise more with them: a patient affected by a psychological disturbance will be required to describe the signs of his mental state, but he will never be able to illustrate them with the exactness and vividness of a poet. Conversely, a psychologist/psychotherapist could interpret from a non-exhaustive perspective the transferred meanings conveyed by a poetical and distinctively figurative language (above all in such a case, when the poem is recognized as one of the most cryptic in modern literature).

An interwoven analysis aimed at interpreting a selection of lines from *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* in the light of certain cognitive theories of depression could, on the one hand, provide literary critics with new insights into the poet's inner feelings and the obscure significances of his verses and, on the other hand, add knowledge to the complex jigsaw puzzle of depressive disorders.

I will focus in particular on some theories developed by Aaron T. Beck, nowadays one of the most authoritative figures in the field of psychopathology and globally recognized as the father of cognitive therapy. The two studies I will use are the pillars of Beck's research: *An Inventory for Measuring Depression* and *Cognitive Therapy of Depression*.

The first study, an article published in the *Archives of General Psychiatry* in 1961, is an inventory of symptoms (known as "BDI: Beck's Depression Inventory") that is an objective method for diagnosing depression and measuring its severity. The research, carried out by Beck and some members of his team, identifies twenty-one symptom-attitude categories based on behavioural and other empirically measurable manifestations. The *Inventory* is still one of the most frequently employed psychometric methods in the diagnosis and assessment of depression, and it is notable that most of them (sixteen out of twenty-one) can be found – at different levels of signifier and meaning – in both the poetical structure and the imagery of *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*. They are, specifically: "mood, pessimism, sense of failure, lack of satisfaction, guilty-feeling, sense of punishment, self-hate, self-accusations, self-punitive wishes, irritability, social withdrawal, indecisiveness, body image, work inhibition, fatigability, loss of libido" (Beck *et al.* 1961: 562).

Focusing on *The Love Song*, it is immediately evident that the sense of 'creative impotence' and all the depressive symptoms it delivers are implicitly but ubiquitously present throughout the poem. Traces of 'mood' and 'pessimism' are, for instance, already detectable in the figurative effect of the epigraph, where the lines from Dante's *Inferno* point to a grim spirit of complicity which connects souls condemned to a mutual infernal fate. 'Indecisiveness', 'work inhibition' and 'fatigability' emerge whenever the syntax or rhetorical means such as anaphors or free repetitions of words, phrases or even sentences slow down the rhythm of the poem, so conveying a feeling of lethargy, a need to rest and "un formidabile stato d'inattività, uno stallo della coscienza che costituisce il *leitmotiv* della poesia" (Crivelli 2015: 85)³.

Many of the symptoms are also perceptible in those sequences of the poem in which the voice of the author himself is heard, becoming separate from the character-voice

³ "A formidable state of inactivity, an impasse of the conscience that is the *leitmotiv* of the poem" (my translation).

and intermittently inserting itself. This happens when the poet experiences his 'creative impotence', the feeling of being inept at writing proper lines and giving the answers a poet is expected to provide. It is at such moments that Eliot's early *persona* splits from the enervated speaker to directly express his emotional response at a self-reflective and self-referential level. In these circumstances the poet reveals himself to be anxious, irritated, devoured by a 'sense of failure' and a 'lack of satisfaction' which escalate into a self-interrogation of his own identity as a poet: "'Do I dare?' and, 'Do I dare?'"', "Do I dare / Disturb the universe?", "So how should I presume?" (Eliot 2018: 6); "And how should I presume?", "And should I then presume? / And how should I begin?", "Shall I say" (Eliot 2018: 7); "Should say: 'That is not what I meant at all. / That is not it, at all'", "'And this, and so much more? — It is impossible to say just what I mean!'", "[...] should say: 'That is not it at all. / That is not what I mean, at all'" (Eliot 2018: 8).

These questions – that come systematically before the creation of correlative objectives or metonymies which communicate a depressive mood through the convergence of several symptoms – mark the moments when Eliot achieves what he is subliminally wishing in the image he generates in the line: "But as if a magic lantern threw the nerves in patterns on a screen" (Eliot 2018: 8). Indeed, through the formulation of these meta-communicative questions, the nervous activity of the poet during the moments of his highest and most throbbing creative pressure is transcribed directly onto the page. The *climax* of this rhetorical-psychological mechanism is aimed at in the following distich:

I should have been a pair of ragged claws
Scuttling across the floors of silent seas
(Eliot 2018: 7).

After meta-poetical questions and efforts to get back into the right poetic gear, Eliot generates a correlative objective that superbly communicates a depressive state.

The verbal form that introduces the image, "I should have been", reveals low self-esteem: the poetical voice is implicitly admitting that he should not have been a human being but an animal, or better much less than an animal, because the comparison is to "a pair of ragged claws", that is to say to what remains of the carcass of an animal that is "not one of the noble creature of the sea, but one of the lesser and one that lives off the discards of others [...]" (Eiss 2016: 88). In this desire to have been created in such a disquieting mutilated shape, symptoms such as "guilty feeling", "sense of punishment", "self-hate", "self-accusations", "self-punitive wishes", come to the surface. This comparison goes far beyond a mere synecdoche. It goes further than an animalization, further than a dehumanization: "Le 'ruvide chele' sono una caduta dall'umano all'inumano, ma anche riduzione dal vertebrato all'invertebrato, e dall'integrità al frammento" (Calimani 1998: 53)⁴.

The focus on the "ragged claws" emphasizes the absence of a body, the annihilation of any physical perception. The image of lifeless claws that are "Scuttling across the floors of

⁴ "The 'ragged claws' are a fall from what is human to what is inhuman. They are also a reduction from a vertebrate creature to an invertebrate one and from what is a whole to what is fragmented" (my translation).

silent seas” points to a violent sense of disorientation and, at the same time, underlines the impossibility for the claws to perform their primary activity of grasping material in order to survive: it is the objective correlative of the cognitive and expressive impotence of a poet who feels himself incapable of getting his hands on “the overwhelming question” of life, in order to turn it in poetry.

About twenty years after the *Inventory*, Beck published – together with A. John Rush, Brian F. Shaw and Gary Emery – *Cognitive Therapy of Depression*, a study focused on the cognitive aspects of neurotic disorders: the symptoms listed in the “BDI” are explained from a cognitive-emotional perspective. Particularly interesting from our point of view is the concept of “Cognitive Triad”, based on the assumption that “there are three major cognitive patterns that induce the patient to regard himself, his future and his experiences in an idiosyncratic manner”. These cognitive patterns are: “1. The patient’s negative consideration of himself/herself; 2. The tendency of the depressed person to interpret her/his ongoing experiences deleteriously; and, 3. A cynical view of the future” (Beck *et al.* 1979: 11-12).

Beck maintains that these cognitive phenomena are primarily activated by what he defines “Faulty Information Processing”: a retroactive elaboration of experience from a destructive perspective. This theory points to systematic errors in the thinking of depressed people that reinforce their belief in the validity of a negative conception of themselves and/or of some past experiences that can impinge on their lives. It is a pessimistic way to organise past reality, and the emotional response tends to be extreme. Two crucial points of this process are “Selective abstraction” and “Arbitrary inference”. “Selective abstraction” consists of “focusing on a detail taken out of context, ignoring other more salient features of the situation and conceptualizing the whole experience on the basis of this fragment”; “Arbitrary inference” refers to “the process of drawing a specific conclusion in the absence of evidence to support the conclusion or when the evidence is contrary to the conclusion” (Beck *et al.* 1979: 14).

Poetical dramatizations of “Faulty Information Processing”, of both “Selective abstraction” and “Arbitrary inference”, can be found in ‘The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock’. As widely noted, in the poem there are some explicit references to a – psychologically devastating – ‘social circumstance’ involving the speaker. It is not possible to know whether the situation he refers to is a specific one or represents a prototype of the speaker’s general and quotidian circumstance. Moreover, it is clear that this situation is the obsession that emerges neurotically in different parts of the poem in the shape of photograms of reality, metonymies and objective correlatives that enhance the overall depressed mood.

The toxic past experience creeps into the poet’s cosmic speculation by the double occurrence of the couplet “In the room the women come and go / Talking of Michelangelo”, which gives the first specific pieces of information about the external context in which the “Selective abstraction” has found fertile ground. The image created is crystalline, and its impromptu occurrence sounds like a sinister omen, the premonition of a breakdown that the speaker would not be able to escape from.

The detrimental refractions of the “Selective abstraction” will mostly manifest themselves after the couplet’s second occurrence, acting so vigorously on the speaker’s unconscious as to become dominant over – and distressingly pervasive throughout – the poetical mood, ebbing away the speaker’s *ego* progressively and irremediably:

In the room the women come and go
 Talking of Michelangelo.
 And indeed 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 —
 (They will say: "How his hair is growing thin!")
 My morning coat, my collar mounting firmly to the chin,
 My necktie rich and modest, but asserted by a simple pin —
 (They will say: "But how his arms and legs are thin!")
 Do I dare
 Disturb the universe?
 In a minute there is time
 For decisions and revisions which a minute will reverse
 (Eliot 2018: 6).

After this second occurrence the poet feels so weak that he lacks the strength to even ask himself whether he should dare compose poetry or not. He therefore postpones the matter with the expression – already repeated three times in the previous stanza – "there will be time"; but the successive lines make it clear that there will be no time to rebuild his identity as a poet. The poetic space is now entirely subjugated by the "Selective abstraction" that vehemently irrupts, forcing the poet to observe himself from the outside, to look upon himself with the same disqualifying eyes of the women in the room (and here the presence of symptoms which can be read in the *Inventory* such as "guilty-feeling", "self-hate", "self-accusations", "social withdrawal", "body image" are palpable).

Through a logical-figurative mechanism moving within a synecdochic progression, the poet firstly takes the image of the moment of his departure from the room out of context ("Time to turn back and descend the stair"); secondly, he insists on a detail (taken out of context) of his appearance which he believes to be the source of the staring women's negative judgements: "With a bald spot in the middle of my hair". The following parenthesis reveals the violent eruption of the "Arbitrary inference": without any evidence to support such a conclusion, he infers that the women are maliciously making fun of his baldness: "(They will say: "How his hair is growing thin!")".

Then, at times, the poet seems to instinctively try to learn a way of facing the situation and fighting his fears by grasping for tangible details which could save him from falling into the pit of despair into which the "Arbitrary inference" is pulling him. He concentrates on the elegance of his garment, on some sartorial details: his "morning coat", his "collar mounting firmly to the chin". However, soon some negative feedback, revealed by a couple of adjectives ("modest", "simple" regarding his necktie), are sufficient to restart the "Faulty Information Processing" by leading his thoughts towards the second "Arbitrary inference", once again closed in brackets: "(They will say: "But how his arms and legs are thin!")".

From this moment on, the psychological collapse will not relent until it has led to desires of physical punishment (represented, for instance, by images such as: he "pinned

and wriggling on the wall"; his balding head "brought in upon a platter"), followed by the ego's total annihilation conveyed by objective correlatives that weave the moods within which depression determines itself.

The self-destructive attitude is also perceived through the frustrating comparison with John the Baptist: Prufrock feels demolished by the mythic parallel. John the Baptist's decapitation was due to the inflexibility of his certainties. Prufrock's head upon the plate symbolizes his ridiculous uncertainties: it is the figurative objectivization of the "Selective abstraction" of a small group of women laughing at his "slightly bald" head. Prufrock feels to be nothing but a parody of a prophet. He has got neither answers nor words of hope and all he can prophesize is a future of failures, panic and death:

But though I have wept and fasted, wept and prayed,
 Though I have seen my head (grown slightly bald) brought in upon a platter,
 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
 (Eliot 2018: 7-8).

What he wants is to absolve himself of any responsibility, both as a man and as a poet. He seeks social withdrawal to avoid external judgement and poetical proof. So, he images himself an old man wearing "white flannel trousers" and walking "upon the beach":

I grow old ... I grow old ...
 I shall wear the bottoms of my trousers rolled.

Shall I part my hair behind? Do I dare to eat a peach?
 I shall wear white flannel trousers, and walk upon the beach.
 I have heard the mermaids singing, each to each.

I do not think that they will sing to me
 (Eliot 2018: 9).

The anxiety seems to decrease, and the imagery becomes oneiric and peaceful. He seems to have found peace with the feminine voices that had so ruthlessly tormented him, and he eavesdrops on the "sea-girls" singing their mermaid songs in the deep. The depths of the sea, that had earlier been the correlative objective of a persecuted psyche, are now a sublime reassuring world inside which Prufrock's escape from reality would seem to find refuge.

Nevertheless, it is nothing but a temporary illusion. The tendency of a depressed person to minimise pleasure and maximise pain prevails again. The momentary and ephemeral capacity to avoid anguish is stifled and the poem is eventually driven to lines that reinstate the supremacy of a pessimistic mood. The antinomy of the lines "till human voices wake us, and we drown" communicates a tragic inescapability from the trivial chat of the humiliating women over their cups of tea. Prufrock is not only unable to forget the

past “Selective abstraction”, but he is completely overwhelmed by it. As lucidly maintained by Ezra Pound, who knew both Eliot and *Prufrock* so well, “It is a portrait of a failure, or of a character who fails” (Pound 1971: 50)⁵ and, as I have demonstrated, of depression.

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Angela Leonardi is RtdA in English literature at the University of Naples “Federico II”. Her fields of research are focused on Shakespeare, modernist and postmodern writers. Her publications include articles on William Shakespeare, E. M. Forster, Virginia Woolf, Hanif Kureishi and two monographic studies: *Tempeste. Eduardo incontra Shakespeare* (Napoli 2007), *Il cigno e la tigre. Figurazioni zoomorfe in Shakespeare* (Napoli 2010). Her current research interests are focused on Virginia Woolf’s literary essays, Sarah Kane’s linguistic strategies to communicate physical and psychological violence, and the communicative functions of cognitive metaphor in Kazuo Ishiguro’s *Never Let me Go*.

angela.leonardi@unina.it

⁵ From a letter written by Ezra Pound to Harriet Monroe on 31st January 1915.