

## T.S. Eliot (1888-1965)

### The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock

*S'io credesse che mia risposta fosse  
A persona che mai tornasse al mondo,  
Questa fiamma staria senza piu scosse.  
Ma perciocche giammai di questo fondo  
Non torno vivo alcun, s'i'odo il vero,  
Senza tema d'infamia ti rispondo.*

Let us go then, you and I,  
When the evening is spread out against the sky  
Like a patient etherized upon a table;  
Let us go, through certain half-deserted streets,  
The muttering retreats  
Of restless nights in one-night cheap hotels  
And sawdust restaurants with oyster-shells:  
Streets that follow like a tedious argument  
Of insidious intent  
To lead you to an overwhelming question. . . 10  
Oh, do not ask, "What is it?"  
Let us go and make our visit.

In the room the women come and go  
Talking of Michelangelo.

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,  
Slipped by the terrace, made a sudden leap, 20  
And seeing that it was a soft October night  
Curled once about the house, and fell asleep.

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 faces that you meet;  
There will be time to murder and create,  
And time for all the works and days of hands  
That lift and drop a question on your plate; 30  
Time for you and time for me,  
And time yet for a hundred indecisions  
And for a hundred visions and revisions  
Before the taking of a toast and tea.

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— 40  
(They will say: "How his hair is growing thin!")

The **epigraph**, from Dante's *Inferno*, is the speech of one dead and damned, who thinks that his hearer is also going to remain in Hell. Count Guido da Montefeltro (whose sin has been to give false counsel after a corrupt prelate had offered him prior absolution, and whose punishment is to be wrapped in a constantly burning flame) offers to tell Dante his story:

If I thought my answer were to someone who might see the world again, then there would be no more stirrings of this flame. Since it is true that no one leaves these depths of misery alive, from all that I have heard reported, I answer you without fear of infamy.

**works and days** (line 29) – title of a poem by Hesiod (8<sup>th</sup> century B.C.) depicting his life as a hard-working Greek farmer and exhorting his brother to be like him

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.

For I have known them all already, known them all—  
Have known the evenings, mornings, afternoons, 50  
I have measured out my life with coffee spoons;  
I know the voices dying with a dying fall  
Beneath the music from a farther room.  
So how should I presume?

And I have known the eyes already, known them all—  
The eyes that fix you in a formulated phrase,  
And when I am formulated, sprawling on a pin,  
When I am pinned and wriggling on the wall,  
Then how should I begin  
To spit out all the butt-ends of my days and ways? 60  
And how should I presume?

And I have known the arms already, known them all—  
Arms that are braceleted and white and bare  
(But in the lamplight, downed with light brown hair!)  
Is it perfume from a dress  
That makes me so digress?  
Arms that lie along a table, or wrap about a shawl.  
And should I then presume?  
And how should I begin?

. . . . .

Shall I say, I have gone at dusk through narrow streets 70  
And watched the smoke that rises from the pipes  
Of lonely men in shirt-sleeves, leaning out of windows? . . .

I should have been a pair of ragged claws  
Scuttling across the floors of silent seas.

. . . . .

And the afternoon, the evening, sleeps so peacefully!  
Smoothed by long fingers,  
Asleep . . . tired . . . or it malingers,  
Stretched on the floor, here beside you and me.  
Should I, after tea and cakes and ices,  
Have the strength to force the moment to its crisis? 80  
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.

**head ... platter** (line 82) – like that of John the Baptist, prophet and praiser of chastity, whom King Herod beheaded at the demand of Herodias, his unlawfully wedded wife (see Mark 6:17-28)

And would it have been worth it, after all,  
After the cups, the marmalade, the tea,  
Among the porcelain, among some talk of you and me,  
Would it have been worth while, 90  
To have bitten off the matter with a smile,  
To have squeezed the universe into a ball  
To roll it toward some overwhelming question,  
To say: "I am Lazarus, come from the dead,  
Come back to tell you all, I shall tell you all"—  
If one, settling a pillow by her head,  
Should say, "That is not what I meant at all.  
That is not it, at all."

And would it have been worth it, after all,  
Would it have been worth while, 100  
After the sunsets and the dooryards and the sprinkled streets,  
After the novels, after the teacups, after the skirts that trail along the floor—  
And this, and so much more?—  
It is impossible to say just what I mean!  
But as if a magic lantern threw the nerves in patterns on a screen:  
Would it have been worth while  
If one, settling a pillow or throwing off a shawl,  
And turning toward the window, should say:  
"That is not it at all,  
That is not what I meant, at all." 110  
. . . . .

No! I am not Prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be;  
Am an attendant lord, one that will do  
To swell a progress, start a scene or two  
Advise the prince; no doubt, an easy tool,  
Deferential, glad to be of use,  
Politic, cautious, and meticulous;  
Full of high sentence, but a bit obtuse;  
At times, indeed, almost ridiculous—  
Almost, at times, the Fool.

I grow old . . . I grow old . . . 120  
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 they will sing to me.

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 130  
Till human voices wake us, and we drown.

**squeezed . . . To roll it** (lines 92-93) – an echo from Marvell's "To His Coy Mistress," lines 41-42

**Lazarus** (line 94) – probably the Lazarus whom Jesus called forth from the tomb (John 11:1-44), but possibly the beggar seen in Heaven by the rich man in Hell (Luke 16:19-25)

**magic lantern** (line 105) – an early type of projector used to display still pictures from transparent slides

**an attendant lord ... the Fool** (line 112-119) – though this allusion to the play *Hamlet* is technically ambiguous, it is probably a reference to Polonius

## QUESTIONS

1. What expectations are created by the title of the poem? Are those expectations fulfilled by the text?
2. John Berryman wrote of line 3, “With this line, modern poetry begins.” What do you think he meant?
3. It has been said that Prufrock suffers from a “morbid self-consciousness.” Find at least a few specific references in the poem to back up that statement. How many such references can you find?
4. Lines 47-48 read, “In a minute there is time / For decisions and revisions which a minute will reverse.” In the total context of the poem, is the meaning of these lines reassuring or disturbing? Explain your choice.
5. Lines 70-72 read, “Shall I say, I have gone at dusk through narrow streets / And watched the smoke that rises from the pipes / Of lonely men in shirt-sleeves, leaning out of windows?” How do these lines relate to the questions that Prufrock raises in the three preceding stanzas (lines 49-69)?
6. What is the effect of rhyming “ices” and “crisis”? Does this specific rhyme contribute seriousness or humor to the poem’s larger tone? Can you find similar types of rhymes elsewhere in the poem?
7. Is the situation in the poem presented statically (i.e., with no change occurring), or is there discernible development as the poem proceeds? Defend your answer with a few specific references to the text.
8. What, finally, is your attitude toward Prufrock—identification, sympathy, contempt, or something more complicated? Why?