

The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock

Ali AlHaddad

Presented to the Philosophical Club of Cleveland on December 15, 2009

Thomas Stearns Eliot was born in St. Louis, Missouri in 1888 and lived there until 1905 when he moved to Boston, the town from which his ancestors had hailed. He earned a Bachelor's degree in philosophy from Harvard University in 1909. After spending the school year of 1910-1911 at the Sorbonne in France, he returned to Harvard to work on a Ph.D. But he moved to England in 1914 when he got a scholarship to Merton College in Oxford. He remained in England, converted to Anglicanism and became a British citizen in 1927, working for many years at the publishing house of Faber & Faber. For his writings of prose, plays and poetry he received the Nobel Prize in literature in 1948. He died in England in January 1965.

Eliot wrote "The Love Song of J Alfred Prufrock" in his twenties, and it first appeared in print, in 1915 in Poetry magazine, at the suggestion of its overseas editor Ezra Pound to Harriet Monroe the magazine founder. Then in 1917, Eliot included the poem in his first publication called "Prufrock and Other Observations." I first heard a portion of it about 35 years ago, from a friend of mine whom I left behind when I left Iraq. About 20 years ago, in Cleveland, I saw the poem in print and finally got to read all of its 131 lines.

Though the poem contains frustrated desire, it lacks the conventional themes of love, and certainly has no song or singing. Then I learned that the expression "Love Song" meant a monologue, a long speech from one speaker to a listener who does not participate, and is definitely not expected to reveal the contents of the long speech. Hence the text of the poem is preceded by an Italian quote, from the Inferno by Dante whom Eliot clearly admired. While in the eighth circle of Hell, Dante meets Guido da Montefeltro and asks him about the offence that got him in Hell. Guido's answer translates thus:

"If I thought my answer were given to anyone who would ever return to the world; this flame would stand still, without moving any further. But since never from this abyss, has anyone ever returned alive, (if what I hear is true) without fear of infamy I answer you."

Another remarkable feature of the poem, which was written during the author's twenties, is its frequent reference to middle age and old age. In line #120, Prufrock says "I grow old, I grow old," then highlights the physiological fact that old age leads to loss of bone mass and shortening of the spine. So the next line is "I shall wear the bottoms of my trousers rolled." Around line #40, Prufrock speaks about his thinning hair, his thin arms and legs and the bald spot in the middle of his hair. Again remember that all this was written when the author was young, and for that matter, the twentieth century was young, well before the computer and the TV. The magic lantern that threw patterns on a screen, in line 105 was the precursor for the overhead (celluloid) projector, itself now

outdated. Also in that time ether was the only form of anesthesia, hence Eliot's use of the verb etherized to mean anesthetized, when a person is not only asleep but is also without muscle tone. So the patient lies spread on the operating table. To that Eliot simulates his picture of the "evening spread out against the sky, like a patient etherized upon a table."

A pervasive theme in the poem is Prufrock's hesitations and his constant revisions his lack of self-confidence; and his repeated questioning in line 38 and thereafter, whether he is daring enough before every task be it major or minor, even the task of eating a peach. Line 122 asks "Do I dare to eat a peach?" Self-deprecation comes out when Prufrock says that he "should have been a pair of ragged claws, scuttling across the floors of silent seas." At the bottom of the sea is where he should be, neither seen nor heard. Self-effacement comes out again when he compares himself to John the Baptist with the phrase "though I have seen my head brought in upon a platter," but quickly dismisses himself as unworthy of the comparison by saying "I am no prophet and here is no great matter." Even the mermaids that sing to each other, and to sailors whom the mermaids lure into destruction and death; these mermaids "will not sing me."

In line 111, Prufrock admits that he is not the center of attention, because he is "not Prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be." He, rather, is one of the lords in the court who attend the prince and advise him. He is "glad to be of use and to be cautious and meticulous, though he is a bit obtuse and at times almost ridiculous." The mention of Hamlet takes us back to England in the 16th Century and the Monarch of its second half, i.e. Queen Elizabeth who liked to take most members of her Court on a summer visit to the castle of one of her rich noblemen. Each of those visits was called a Progress. So Prufrock being not a prince but a mere attendant lord, was only to "swell a progress" by increasing the number of attendant lords in that royal visit.

Lines 21 thru 34 show that Prufrock's solution to his hesitation and his indecision is to seek refuge into procrastination..... "There will be time for this and time for that.....even before the taking of toast and tea."

One curious bit of information I learned when reading about this poem, is where the name Prufrock came from. There is a suggestion that Eliot took it from the name of a company in St Louis "The William Prufrock Furniture Company." That is despite a note that Eliot himself wrote denying his recollection of that company's name but then conceding that it could have been some subconscious memory.

An important focus in the poem is on women, not surprising for a man in his twenties, nor for a middle aged loser with a lot of desire but no self confidence. In December of 1914, shortly after writing the poem, Eliot wrote in a letter to his friend Conrad Aiken "I am very dependant upon women, (I mean female society)" then added a complaint that he was still a virgin. Presumably, that problem was solved six months later when he married Vivienne Haigh-Wood, though the marriage itself was rocked by problems of psychiatric nature, and Vivienne spent the latter part of her life in a mental asylum. Back to the topic of women, the original title of the poem was "Prufrock and the Women," then Eliot changed it. The poem is full of references to Prufrock's obsession

with women that “come and go” in the room. He finds them desirable but unapproachable because they have haughty concerns such as Michelangelo. Despite that, he diffidently puts on his morning coat with his firm collar and his rich tie that is modestly asserted by a simple pin; and goes calling on a woman. Yet at her door, he hesitates whether to ring her doorbell or “turn back and descend the stair” of her building and walk away. He does not have the self confidence for, what to him seems equivalent to “disturbing the universe.” When he does muster the temerity to “bite the matter with a smile and squeeze the universe into a ball,” and to resurrect his dead courage (like Lazarus) to tell a woman all about his love, she rejects him and turns toward the window and tells him that her civility to him was not at all meant as a show of affection, or even interest. From line 87 and on, Prufrock wonders if it was worth it to pay all that attention to women, to have spent all that time with them, watching sunsets, drinking tea, talking in door yards, discussing mutually read novels and watching their “skirts trail along the floor.” Rather, he concedes defeat, because “it is impossible to say just what I mean.”

One word, I learned from commentaries on the poem is Synecdoche. It means the use of a part to refer to the whole, as when you say “All hands on deck” you mean “All Sailors on deck.” Synecdoche also means the use of the whole to refer to a part, when you say “Here comes the Law” and you mean “Here comes a Policeman.” The idea is that Prufrock’s reference to eyes, arms and skirts actually means women.

The yellow fog and yellow smoke, in lines 15 and 16, have more than one interpretation. The first interpretation considers these an allusion to the smoke coming out of St. Louis factories at the dawn of the twentieth century, just as the half deserted streets in the previous lines were meant as the streets of Boston. But another interpretation is that the smoke and the fog were metaphors for a cat that licks its tongue, lingers, slips, leaps, curls to sleep and slides along the street letting the smoke fall on its back from chimneys. The theme of cats recurs in Eliot’s work. Some of the lyrics in the musical Cats and especially (the song Memories) are Eliot’s. Also, in 1939 he published Old Possum’s Book of Practical Cats. So I am willing to take the fog and the smoke as a reference to a fluffy cat.

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 etherised upon a table;
Let us go, through certain half-deserted streets,
The muttering retreats 5
Of restless nights in one-night cheap hotels
And sawdust restaurants with oyster-shells:
Streets that follow like a tedious argument
Of insidious intent 10
To lead you to an overwhelming question ...
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, 15
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, 20
Slipped by the terrace, made a sudden leap,
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, 25
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 30
That lift and drop a question on your plate;
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 35
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!"]
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 45
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— 55
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!]
It is perfume from a dress 65
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! 75
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, 85
And in short, I was afraid.

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, 90
Would it have been worth while,
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, 95
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, 100
Would it have been worth while,
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: 105
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, 115
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 that they will sing to me.

125

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.

130