

THE LOVE SONG OF J. ALFRED PRUFROCK

BY T. S. ELIOT

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

The epigraph comes from the Inferno of Dante's Divine Comedy (XXVII, 61-66). Count Guido da Montefeltro, embodied in a flame, replies to Dante's question about his identity as one condemned for giving lying advice: "If I believed that my answer would be to someone who would ever return to earth, this flame would move no more, but because no one has ever returned alive from this gulf, if what I hear is true, I can reply with no fear of infamy."

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 ...
Oh, do not ask, "What is it?"

etherized: anesthetized.

5

Let us go and make our visit.
In the room the women come and go
Talking of Michelangelo.

Michelangelo: Italian painter, poet, and sculptor (1475-1564).

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,
And seeing that it was a soft October night,
Curled once about the house, and fell asleep.

15

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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;
Time for you and time for me,

25

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works and days: Hesiod's Works and Days, an 8th-century (B.C.) description of rural life.

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: 50
Have known the evenings, mornings, afternoons,
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?

morning coat: a formal coat with tail.

dying fall: love-sick Duke Orsino's opening line in Shakespeare's Twelfth Night, "That strain again! It had a dying fall" (l.i.1), referring to a piece of music. Cf. "Portrait of a Lady," line 122

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?

butt-ends: the discarded, unsmoked ends of cigarettes or cigars.

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 65
That makes me so digress?
Arms that lie along a table, or wrap about a shawl.
And should I then presume?

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,
 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 towards some overwhelming question,
 To say: "I am Lazarus, come from the dead,
 Come back to tell you all, I shall tell you all" – 95
 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?–

Herod gave John the Baptist's decapitated head to the dancer Salome as a reward (Mark 6.17-29; Matthew 14.3-11).

I am no prophet: Amos said, "I was no prophet, neither was I a prophet's son; but I was an herdman, and a gatherer of sycamore fruit" (Amos 7.14), when commanded by King Amaziah of Bethel not to prophesy.

Cf. Andrew Marvell's "Let us roll all our strength, and all / Our sweetness, up into one ball" ("To his Coy Mistress").

Lazarus: Jesus brought Lazarus, the brother of Mary and Martha, back from the dead by literally entering his tomb and bringing out the recently buried man alive (John 11.1-44). Jesus also tells a parable of how the poor man Lazarus went to heaven, and the rich man Dives to hell, and how Dives begged Abraham to send Lazarus back to warn his five brothers about damnation and was rebuked "if they hear not Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded, though one rose from the dead" (Luke 16.19-31).

sprinkled streets: necessary to keep the dust down.

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 130
 Till human voices wake us, and we drown.

a magic lantern: device that throws a magnified image of a picture on glass onto a white screen in a dark room.

Prince Hamlet: not Shakespeare's noble prince, who resisted the temptation to commit suicide in his "To be or not to be" speech (alluded to at line's end), but instead characters like Rosencrantz and Guildenstern (cf. 112-16), Polonius (cf. 117), and Osric (cf. 118). Ezra Pound wrote Harriet Monroe on Jan. 31, 1915: "I dislike the paragraph about Hamlet, but it is an early and cherished bit and T.E. won't give it up, and as it is the only portion of the poem that most readers will like at first reading, I don't see that it will do much harm" (Letters of Ezra Pound 1907-1941, ed. D. D. Paige [London: Faber and Faber, 1951]: 92-93).

progress: the travelling of a royal prince through the English countryside, from stop to stop, together with wagons loaded with possessions, and with servants and courtiers.

high sentence: a phrase from Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, meaning "elevated, serious and moral thoughts expressed formally."

the Fool: Shakespeare's plays have several characters called "the Fool," including the king's loyal servant and critic in *King Lear*.

the bottoms of my trousers rolled: that is, with cuffs, a novelty in fashion.

Shall I part my hair behind?: an avant-garde, potentially shocking hair-style.

Cf. John Donne's "Song," with its "Teach me to hear mermaids singing." Arthur Symonds' *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* (London: Heinemann, 1899) quotes "El Desdichado" ("The Disinherited") by Gérard de Nerval (1808-55): "J'ai rêvé dans la grotte où nage la sirène" ("I have dreamed in the cave where the siren swims"; p. 37).

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