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The High Church of Despair: An Unfolding of Thomas S. Eliot's “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock”

by Steven Jackson

Although he strove to maintain a private life, T.S. Eliot tells all as his “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” sobs, “These are the thoughts of my creator; every emotion felt by this man is contained in my lines, questioning, warning, grieving, and shyly smiling.” Eliot’s Prufrock walks the streets and heaves his weighted conscience around bleak corners and before blinded eyes in order that the reader might be forewarned: we live “till human voices wake us.” Prufrock’s existence is limited to the hard pews in the high church of despair. And what has been gained by this experience?

Prufrock, an unbeliever in his very name, demands an answer: show me proof, give me something tangible—rock. However, contained in Prufrock’s thoughts, Eliot’s observations of life are firmly grounded only in abstraction. On this most difficult journey to Truth and understanding, Prufrock will not go alone; he invites the reader to join him on his questioning path: “Let us go then, you and I,” at a time when there is no longer light by which one might discern meaning, when time is numbed by the coolness of night, when evil pervades and holds lost souls closely by its side, “when the evening is spread out against the sky.” “Give me an answer, help me know myself, and let us begin at the close of yet another day,” Prufrock cries. Where will we go? How will we get there? “Like a patient etherized upon a table,” we will slowly pace “through certain half-deserted streets,/ The muttering retreats/Of restless nights”—nights during which it will be impossible to sleep—“in one-night cheap hotels.” This seedy life of quarter-consciousness and lack of dreamtime allows little hope. “Half-deserted streets” are occupied by those who will also sigh heavily at the thought of living another day in the light, a light that reveals nothing but pain and a promise of another night not soon enough arriving. Through “streets that follow like a tedious argument” we will wind and suffer under ignorance; but do not ask, Prufrock warns, “What is it?” We must suffer through the tinted shade of experience if we want to know release or pleasure. And this experience is one in which our time is measured; we cannot stay. Perhaps we are not welcome even here. We will go only to return empty-hearted, broken, defeated: “Let us go and make our visit.”

In two lines with a wealth of meaning, Eliot says, “In the room the women come and go/ Talking of Michelangelo.” Prufrock is utterly unaware of this; he does not even know that beauty exists. Yet, the recurring image of women plays a vital role in Prufrock’s discontent. The women in this room know about, discuss, and appreciate the lofty works of a master. And who is J. Alfred Prufrock? Not only is he a man without worth; he is a man who does not know himself—and much less the endeavors of human creation. Prufrock is lost in a city, walking the streets in the dark while women in some faraway room discuss a man who knew gods, an immortal in the artistic community. Prufrock is completely disengaged from the rest of society where there is time to discuss art because people find diversion and enjoyment in it; they succeed in the day-to-day ritual of life and have ample time to praise men who have come before them and have dropped pearls from their minds so that they might have a glimpse of that which is representative of meaning and knowledge, pleasure and art, leisure and reflection. In Prufrock’s reverie, fog engulfs a city and settles in as it realizes that, indeed, it can, because there is little opposition to its arrival. In Prufrock’s world there is no time to discuss art or pleasure; a dirty yellow fog dissuades thought.

During the time of the dirty yellow fog, “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.” During this endless time, you and I will have time, and plenty of it, dragging on and on as we work our hands on works that will amount to nothing. And at the end of this long day, our labor...
earns only a nagging question, dropped on the plate before us, blocking our physiological sustenance; we must first cut away at a puzzle; we must earn our food in order that we might answer the question. But food never comes. We are left only with the question. And during the time to murder and create (one negates the other) we are still left only with unanswerable questions, questions that will remain until we find a means by which we might approach them with an answer. Our very own hands deliver this pain and anguish. We are to blame for the strife which prevents our full existence. And just when we feel that we know how to go about an answer, there is “time yet for a hundred indecisions,/And for a hundred visions and revisions,/ Before the taking of a toast and tea.” When we do have a chance to rise to the occasion of knowing, we falter and review our initially flawed thought. With a blank face and less hope, we gladly clink glasses filled with an escape, a drink that settles one’s nerves. As Prufrock remembers easing into a chair (drink in hand), the women still “come and go/Talking of Michelangelo.”

In two very different tones, Prufrock asks, “Do I dare?” It is at this time we realize that while our walk is one on which answers may be found, we will not even try to open doors behind which the answers may lie. Prufrock asks twice, “Do I dare?” Am I allowed to go forth and seek an answer to this life? If so, do I take the risk? The lighthearted time during which the “Do I dare?” of a child (destined the fall, although not from a great height) offers hope and possibility is negated by an older man’s “Do I dare?”--a question involving personal safety, security, and the sickening feeling that his time may have already passed. And, indeed, it has.

Knowing that his time has passed, Prufrock lowers his head in order to take into account others’ responses to his decline. During the “time to turn back and descend the stair” (I watch his easy footsteps on the stairs as he returns to one of many social engagements during which he is bored and tired) Prufrock gives up. He is no longer a young boy, virile, curious, and indestructible; he is an old man, aged, elderly, and dilapidated. And although “they will say: ‘How his hair is growing thin!’” Prufrock maintains a certain respectability; he has tried and failed to answer the questions which life poses, but he recognizes this and chooses to shield his being with “[his] morning coat, [his] collar mounting firmly to the chin, [his] necktie rich and modest, but asserted by a simple pin.” In this attire, Prufrock is safe. His collar is not simply starched but “mounting firmly to the chin” to protect him; although battered with futility, Prufrock will turn away from the tempest with a slight, yet important degree of thankfulness for the chance to know and understand the nature of his helplessness.

Now far more than a question asked by a child, Prufrock asks, “Do I dare disturb the universe?” The universe! The expansiveness of all that exists is pinned and waits for Prufrock to decide. If he should choose to “disturb the universe,” the pin holding the red-eyed beast of reality would crush him. Why take that chance? It is no matter, for “In a minute there is time/For decisions and revisions that a minute will reverse.” Even if he were to plod and slave for an answer, it would be subject to a change of mind that time would alter and render useless.

In a delusional duality of time opposed to itself, Prufrock wants to know (but has already known) what life scrapes together in a sad offering for the struggling soul. Prufrock recollects: “For I have known them all already, known them all--/Have known the evenings, mornings, after­noons:” Prufrock has been there. And since he has, why then should he have so many doubts about what he may know? He has known evenings, mornings, and afternoons—times during which he may have wakened and recalled a dream; pulled back curtains to watch the setting sun; basked in the midday heat; but Prufrock has experienced nothing of the kind. His life has been no more memorable than the swing of a pendulum; he rises each day to fall, measuring his life “with coffee spoons.” And during this measured life, those who have gone before him and those who are falling barely get out the words to express whatever it is they may have discovered during their time: “[Prufrock] know[s] the voices dying with
a dying fall/Beneath the music from a farther room.” He does not hear their words.

“So how should I presume?” he asks. After asking “Do I dare?” Prufrock shrugs at the thought of presuming that what he knows means anything at all. He has known “the eyes already, known them all—/The eyes that fix you in a formulated phrase.” I can barely see him among the people now. As he blends in, cruel eyes follow and “fix” what they do not like about his appearance. With pre-formed, rehearsed thoughts and manners polite and cutting, every eye that fixes sees what it wants, a man like any other, dissected and chiseled away to fit the paradigm of others. Prufrock wonders, “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?” How should he begin to tell about his experiences personified in the ritual of smoking, a leisurely, mind-easing pasteime of watching hopes and dreams in vapor trails rising from the tip of a tightly-rolled cigarette? The end product—“the butt ends”—interests no one.

When knowing peoples’ souls in their eyes has failed him, when the windows of the soul have, for Prufrock, glossed over and reflected nothing, he says, “And I have known the arms already, known them all—/Arms that are braceletel and white and bare/(But in lamplight, downed with light brown hair!)” These working arms, filled with creative potential, stretch out to Prufrock white and pure. They are, perhaps, the arms of a woman refined, dignified, honest. The welcome image is quickly dampened as Prufrock exclaims that they have been “downed with light brown hair!” The symbol of that which may be pure and may offer hope provides only another let-down. As I take in the bleak surroundings which Prufrock has prepared for us all, I realize that we are all pure; yet we have been tainted by a film of brown which is viewed in an even dimmer light. But this scene is a mere digression. Prufrock still asks how to begin. Midway through his dismal tale, Prufrock gives up: “I should have been a pair of ragged claws/Scuttling across the floors of silent seas.” All hope is lost. Why go on but to hope that things might change? If it were not for a slight change in Prufrock’s tone, he maintains that it would have been better that he had been a lonely creature on the bottom of the ocean, hiding during the day only to feed at night when the threat of a predator is minimal.

Death and the comfort it may bring to a meaningless life seem a proper alternatives to Prufrock as a small smile twitches his upper lip. The morning (mourning) is over. The pinnacle of his life has passed and the midday bell has sounded. The most welcome close of day is at hand, and it is in this that Prufrock takes a some slight delight: “And the afternoon, the evening, sleeps so peacefully! Smoothed by long fingers, asleep...tired...or it malingers./Stretched out on the floor, here beside you and me.” Death is at hand, and Prufrock welcomes it. The “long fingers” of Death offer peace. And there is time for Death to do His work; “asleep...tired...or [he] malingers” knowing full well that Time allows Death ample time to work. Prufrock calls on this fact and wonders, “Have I the strength to force the moment to its crisis?” Has Prufrock the will, strength, or desire to die? After “tea and cakes and ices” and other meaningless niceties, does he have the ability to accept that which may calm his mind and offer an escape? Prufrock has asked these questions, and he has come only to minor conclusions, puzzles which stare back at him from the void in his tortured soul.

Prufrock has suffered to know. He has stood inside the church of despair and “wept and fasted, wept and prayed,” only to see his “head (grown slightly bald) brought in upon a platter.” Prufrock may have been a believer. He may have had faith in the coming of something better in life, but, in a moment of realization, Prufrock knows that he is “no prophet.” He has confronted Death as a mortal man with little or no faith in that which he had hoped might save him: “I have seen the eternal Footman hold my coat, and snicker./And in short, I was afraid.”

In his fear, Prufrock has but one chance to reflect on anything that may have been worthwhile during life; but like every other observation, Prufrock asks more questions, unanswerable, but necessary. If he had gathered the strength and believed that it had been possible to dare to ask,
Prufrock wonders, “And would it have been worth it, after all,/.. . .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,/Come back to tell you all, I shall tell you all.’” In this challenging passage, Prufrock asks a fundamental question: would it be worth it to try to answer life’s most difficult question? Even when a woman “should say: ‘That is not what I meant at all./That is not it, at all,’” after having been given an answer to a question, the most basic of questions, which has been insufficient? If she is disgusted at Prufrock’s answer to her question, why would the world be interested in an inferior Lazarus, a man, in this case, who has no idea what truth may be? Just as one can see the woman settle “a pillow by her head,” so too may the world turn away from Prufrock as he stands to “tell [us] all.”

Prufrock is inhibited, debilitated, and chained by insufferable odds against him. He knows this as he bawls, “It is impossible to say just what I mean!” The woman in his delusion merely turns toward the window, looking out, away from him and he is left alone once again.

In his isolation, Prufrock recounts the ways of his life and almost seems to be at ease with himself: “No! I am not Prince ‘Hamlet, nor was meant to be,” he says. From this and what follows, we may infer that Prufrock knows his place; he is not one placed in a position where action is a necessity. Unlike Hamlet, Prufrock can profit from the fact that he did not falter. Prufrock knows “to be” but does not know what to be. The wealth of his life is contained in small flakes of what may be gold dust: “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.” Prufrock has some minor claims to a mediocre fame: he is one to serve and offer little resistance; he is educated, civic-minded, careful, and clean, but a graceful tombstone with high praise will not be erected in his honor.

In his ultimate futility, Prufrock “grow[s]...”. The smallest of pleasures are his only source of redemption: the simple acts of parting his “hair behind,” daring to “eat a peach,” and strolling along the beach wearing “white flannel trousers.”

As this sad service ends, Prufrock leaves the streets and rooms behind. He closes his eyes and sees “mermaids singing, each to each.” He says that they will not sing to him, nor to me, for I have been invited, ordered to come along. Like Prufrock and Eliot, I have also 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.” However, Prufrock knows the secret. Prufrock, in his high service, wishes only to remind us of the fact that “We have lingered in the chambers of the sea/By sea-girls wreathed with seaweed red and brown.” We have had the chance to live, imagine, and be. We have the perception to take in despair, hopelessness, and loss. In our ability to combine the dynamic of the beneficial life with that of the ever-confronting purpose of mankind, we find that we are living in a dream. In this dream, we may be content, we may search for personal Truth, or we may fall subject to the other questioning voices all around, “Till human voices wake us, and we drown.”