

Passages 2

The following poem contains many quotes, allusions, and references. I've indented these and put them in italics, along with a few glossed words.

The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock

(1915, 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 perciocche giammai di questo fondo
Non torno vivo alcun, s'i'odo il vero
Senza tema d'infamia ti rispondo.

From Inferno, Canto XXVII, lines 61-66, by the Italian Medieval poet Dante: 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.

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?'
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,
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;
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.

** Hesiod's Works and Days (c. 700B.C.) explores the roots of suffering. In the Bible's Ecclesiastes "a time to" occurs 29 times. Eliot's passage may also allude to Andrew Marvell's 17th Century seduction poem, "To His Coy Mistress" which begins "If we had world enough and time." Eliot refers more clearly to Marvell later in the poem (see the note below).*

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.

For I have known them all already, known them all—
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?

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?
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
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?

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, * *Death*
And in short, I was afraid.

*** John the Baptist is said to have prophesied the coming of Christ; his head was later offered on a plate to Herod's daughter, Salome.*

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
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.'

** This phrase echoes the 32nd stanza of Omar Khayyam's Rubaiyat, as loosely translated by Edward Fitzgerald: "There was the Door to which I found no Key; / There was the Veil through which I might not see: / Some little talk awhile of Me and Thee / There was—and then no more of Thee and Me."*

*** This part echoes Andrew Marvell's 17th Century seduction poem, "To His Coy Mistress." Marvell encourages his mistress to have sex, to make the most of time, so that they will not be victims of Father Time, or Death: "Now let us sport us while we may, / And now, like amorous birds of prey, / Rather at once our [Father] Time devour / Than languish in his slow-chapped power. / Let us roll all our strength and all / Our sweetness up into one ball, / And tear our pleasures with rough strife / Thorough the iron gates of life: / Thus, though we cannot make our sun / Stand still, yet we will make him run."*

**** In the Bible (John 11), Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead. This fits with Prufrock's pre-occupation with death and with the opening quote from Dante.*

And would it have been worth it, after all,
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:
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.'

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.* * *like Polonius in Hamlet*

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.

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.

Quintessence of dust (*Hamlet* 2.2. 255-278) ([link](#))

GUILDENSTERN: My lord, we were sent for.

HAMLET: I will tell you why; so shall my anticipation prevent your discovery, and your secrecy to the king and queen moult no feather. I have of late—but wherefore I know not—lost all my mirth, forgone all custom of exercises; and indeed it goes so heavily with my disposition that this goodly frame, the earth, seems to me a sterile promontory, this most excellent canopy, the air, look you, this brave o'erhanging firmament, this majestic roof fretted with golden fire, why, it appears no other thing to me than a foul and pestilent congregation of vapours. What a piece of work is a man! how noble in reason! how infinite in faculty! in form and moving how express and admirable! in action how like an angel! in apprehension how like a god! the beauty of the world! the paragon of animals! And yet, to me, what is this quintessence of dust? man delights not me: no, nor woman neither, though by your smiling you seem to say so.

ROSENCRANTZ: My lord, there was no such stuff in my thoughts.

HAMLET: Why did you laugh then, when I said 'man delights not me'?

ROSENCRANTZ: To think, my lord, if you delight not in man, what lenten entertainment the players shall receive from you: we coted them on the way; and hither are they coming, to offer you service.

To be or not to be (3.1. 57-89)

To be, or not to be: that is the question:
Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer
The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,
Or to take arms against a sea of troubles,
And by opposing end them? To die: to sleep;
No more; and by a sleep to say we end
The heart-ache and the thousand natural shocks
That flesh is heir to, 'tis a consummation

Devoutly to be wished. To die, to sleep;
 To sleep: perchance [perhaps] to dream: ay, there's the rub;*
 For in that sleep of death what dreams may come
 When we have shuffled off this mortal coil,*
 Must give us pause: there's the respect
 That makes calamity of so long life;
 For who would bear the whips and scorns of time,
 The oppressor's wrong, the proud man's contumely,*
 The pangs of despised love, the law's delay,
 The insolence of office and the spurns
 That patient merit of the unworthy takes,
 When he himself might his quietus* make
 With a bare bodkin?* who would fardels* bear,
 To grunt and sweat under a weary life,
 But that the dread of something after death,
 The undiscovered country from whose bourn*
 No traveller returns, puzzles the will
 And makes us rather bear those ills we have
 Than fly to others that we know not of?
 Thus conscience does make cowards of us all;
 And thus the native hue of resolution
 Is sicklied o'er* with the pale cast of thought,
 And enterprises of great pith* and moment*
 With this regard their currents turn awry,*
 And lose the name of action.

***rub** = crucial difficulty or problem ***coil** = coil or confusion,
 turmoil ***contumely** = insolence or insulting language ***quietus** = death, release
 (soothing) ***bodkin** = small sharp instrument or pin to pierce
 clothing ***fardels** = burdens ***bourn** = boundary line, limit; also, goal or
 destination ***sicklied o'er [over]** = lacking vigour or strength
 (weakened) ***pith** = essence; also, forceful and precise expression ***moment** =
 importance ***awry** = off course

Alas, Poor Yorick! (5.1. 165-194)

[The scene is in a churchyard, next to a graveyard with unearthed skulls. Hamlet
 is with his best friend Horatio, and he is holding the skull of the court jester
 Yorick.]

Hamlet: Alas, poor Yorick! I knew him, Horatio: a fellow of infinite jest, of most excellent fancy: he hath borne me on his back a thousand times; and now, how abhorred in my imagination it is! my gorge rises at it. Here hung those lips that I have kissed I know not how oft. Where be your gibes now? your gambols? your songs? your flashes of merriment, that were wont to set the table on a roar? Not one now, to mock your own grinning? quite chap-fallen? Now get you to my lady's chamber, and tell her, let her paint an inch thick, to this favour she must come; make her laugh at that. Prithee, Horatio, tell me one thing.

Horatio: What's that, my lord?

Hamlet: Dost thou think Alexander looked o' this fashion i'the earth?

Horatio: E'en so.

Hamlet: And smelt so? pah! [*Puts down the skull*]

Horatio: E'en so, my lord.

Hamlet: To what base uses we may return, Horatio! Why may not imagination trace the noble dust of Alexander, till he find it stopping a bung-hole [beer keg hole]?

Horatio: 'Twere to consider too curiously, to consider so.

Hamlet: No, faith, not a jot [bit]; but to follow him thither with modesty enough, and likelihood to lead it: as thus: Alexander died, Alexander was buried, Alexander returneth into dust; the dust is earth; of earth we make loam; and why of that loam, whereto he was converted, might they not stop a beer-barrel? / Imperious Caesar, dead and turn'd to clay, / might stop a hole to keep the wind away: / O, that that earth, which kept the world in awe, / should patch a wall to expel the winter flaw!
