

“Between Love Meant and Love Lost”: the Plausible Love Song of Prufrock’s Impossible Love

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Abstract:

The idea of Love has always plagued generation of writers and artists and a definite consciousness of articulating the essence of this Love has been one of the primarily preoccupations of Modernist Writers. The attempts to invade into the psyche of the ‘Modern Man’, whose existence is enmeshed not in the modern milieu that constitute his immediate environ, but also of a psychical surrounding of which he is an innate part. This paper undertakes a close reading of ‘The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock’ by T.S Eliot to situate this fragmented consciousness of the modern man and show how the idea of Love (re)surface in the Modern World and closely analyse how the morphology of love accentuate or undercut the possibility/ impossibility of meaningful existence for the Modern Man in a Modern World.

Keywords: Love, existence, fragmentation, monologue, communication

“For one human being to love another; that is perhaps the most difficult of all our tasks, the ultimate, the last test and proof, the work for which all other work is but preparation,” reads a passage in one of Rilke’s *Letters to a Young Poet*. (Rilke2004 [1904]: 37) Thus, preparation is the interstitial space between the question of Love and the possibility of Love, one determining and eliding the other simultaneously.

To try to define love at the outset is to “confront the muck of language; that region of hysteria where language is both too much and too little, excessive (by the limitless expansion of the ego, by emotive submersion) and impoverished (by the codes on which love diminishes and levels it).” (Barthes1978: 99) Undoubtedly it is love or the lack of it which forms the nucleus of our human existence and cannot be ignored on easy planes. The modern notion of Love is distant from classical idealization and instead focuses upon the “consumerist depictions of human relatedness... [which] supersede the human reality of love, in all its contradictions, its failures and its diversity.” (O’Dwyer2009: 10) There is a dizzying change, from Rilke’s Eros mitigating between two selves that need time to grow into autonomous worlds, to Barthes’s semiotics of erotic encoding, and, from mid-twentieth-century on, to the reduction of love to consumerist relatedness at the beginning of the twenty-first century. The present paper is trying to locate Eliot or one of his personae as professed lover at some point along this scale.

The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock (1917) by T.S Eliot is one such poem which throws the readers into this abyss of contradictions; even though the title of the poem seems to speak of love in the form of a Love Song, but it is immediately undercut by the title itself, since the love song is sung by none other than ‘Prufrock’, a name which fails to capture the grandeur of a love poem because of the verbal associations it evokes, like ‘prudence’, ‘primness’ and ‘dandyism’. That this poem is not a Love Song according to the Elizabethan or Romantic standards is easily discernible,

as neither the form nor the content echoes the traditional conventions of a Love Song the way the sonnets of William Shakespeare or Petrarch do, thus making the poem ironic and consequently reducing the possibilities of Love impossible for Prufrock. However, this paper is looking not only into what makes Love impossible for Prufrock but also into that which, despite this impossibility, modulates the poem into a “Love Song” of Prufrock in all its might.

Throughout the poem, Prufrock makes several attempts to start his journey beginning from the first line, where he addresses some silent interlocutor: “Let us go then, You and I” (1), but the phrases ‘let’ and ‘then’ assert that the journey would be a prevaricated one, delayed, half-deserted like the ‘streets’ and restless like the ‘one-night cheap hotels’, but such preparatory stances are derailed and significantly at the moment when the overwhelming and amorous question was to be asked. Some inexplicable fear posed a threat to his quest for romantic union and his remark, ‘Oh, do not ask, ‘What is it?’ (11), impoverishes not only his existence but the possibility of his relationship with another beloved is also thwarted by it.

Prufrock as a prototypical modern man who contains within him the seeds of failure which blooms not only within himself but also in his environs where, unlike the Wordsworthian pastoral landscape which was infused with a sense of harmony and unity, the evening for Prufrock, which should otherwise have provided the favour of a romantic encounter, is bathetically represented “Like a patient etherised upon a table.” (3) It would be too naïve to comment that the modern inability to love emanates only from the laxity that pervades within him as the modern landscape also contributes to this sense of numbness or etherisation of which he is merely a part, so his dwelling place lies within the series of impossibilities that has already encapsulated him. To expect love from Prufrock is to negate modern existence in a post-war reality, where love is possible only in its impossibility of realization. Such is the paradox of modern existence, as Eliot saw it, where love is devoid of a definite telos, but this is exactly what love is for a modern man in a modern world, for ‘We cannot revive old factions/ We cannot restore old policies/ Or follow an antique drum’ (*Four Quartets*, 3) that resonates the beats of idealized love in a fractured, dismembered world.

Faced with such plenitude of impossibilities, Prufrock seeks shelter in the ‘formulated phrase’, where people evaluate and judge him the way he himself ‘measured out’ his “life in coffee spoons” (51). He is too self-conscious, timid and inhibited and tries to get a semblance of his being through the eyes of others; it is one of his vague attempts to make sense of his otherwise inert existence. His words, “Do I dare?...’Do I dare?’” (38) and ‘Shall I part my hair behind” (122) bear ample testimony to the way he:

tries to find a system in the universe around him, a pattern that he can apply to a solution of his problems of his existence...a formula, a governing rule... [that] will make him free... (Hodes 1972: 33)

Such an attempt cannot be relegated as a ‘surrendering quest’ or an ‘insecurity’ (Hodes), but as his attempt to avoid being “pinned and wriggling on the wall” (58); his attempt to avoid the ‘inescapable aloneness of the individual’ self can also be read as a strive ‘to belong, to be a part of a group... with its illusions of connection and uniformity’ (O’Dwyer 67). Erich Fromm in *The Art of Loving* considers that the result of such excessive dependence on the ratified offerings of others is an impediment to the possibility of love, (Fromm 1956: 18-20) and perhaps that is why Prufrock remarks “how should I begin” when “I am formulated, sprawling on a pin/...and wriggling on the wall” (57-59), suggesting how he measures his self-worth and potential through the eyes of others. The personal and subjective experience that forms the kernel of the possibility of love for Prufrock is preceded by a priori assumptions of others and his acquiescence to this illusory sense of

belonging to the world thwarts his individual engagement in Love so much that the potential of his amorous love is determined not by the coordinates of his desire but by the geometrics of the world around him. Prufrock’s excessive self-consciousness of “How his hair is growing thin” (41) in the first part of the poem finds no resolve but is carried even in the last few lines where he thinks “Shall I part my hair behind? Do I dare to eat a peach?” (122) This not only diminishes the possibility of love but also breaks the vital dialogic needed for reciprocity in love, thus it is no wonder that his love remains unfulfilled and unconsummated. The paralysis of/ in communication gives him the impression that his monologue is a pseudo dialogue between him and his beloved, but practically it is a pseudo- dialogue ‘which is not the dialogue of... [love]... that is, it has the appearance... but not the essence of dialogue...’ (Buber2004[1947]; 22)

Perhaps it is in this appearance of communication, that love remains confined to an ‘I-It relationship’ (O’Dwyer: 74), in spite of his attempt in configuring love as an ‘I-Thou’ relationship in the first line: “Let us go then, you and I” (1). He is indecisive on whether “Is *it* [italics mine] perfume from a dress” (65) that makes him digress or “would *it* [italics mine] have been worth it, after all” (87) to “roll *it* [italics mine] to some overwhelming question,” (93) but he tries to control the damage created through the incapacities of language; he refuses the reality of his incompetent discourse and tries to satisfy the lack in himself by saying “That is not it at all, That is not what I meant, at all,” (109-110) paradoxically reflecting that even his flight from the incapacities of language leading to the impossibility of love is met with further impossibilities, because it is that ‘It’, i.e., the possibility of love that he did not mean “at all.” (110) Prufrock’s denial of the ‘I-It relationship’ by saying “That is not what I meant, at all” (110) is a denial of his initial assertion of love that he established through “You and I” in the first line of the poem. Consequently, by saying so, he negated every possibility that would otherwise have helped him to reach his beloved; but an inability to do so further reduced the chances of realizing love in his life. Prufrock is an unreflexive and monologic man, who assimilates the beloved within his psychic circumference, thus failing to have any genuine encounter with her. This makes him someone who “should have been a pair of ragged claws/ Scuttling along the floors of silent seas,” (73-74) who, as a ‘subhuman crustacean,’ is divested of human identity and is “doubly dehumanised by the synecdoche of claws even beyond its identity as a crab or lobster.” (Schneider 2016: 1104)

The indeterminacy of Prufrock’s existence and the inability to love in this modern world hinge on the point that he could not say what he meant and did not do what he said, i.e., in the hope that there is “...time... for a hundred indecisions/ And for a hundred visions and revisions” (32-33) and in the fear that such “...decisions and revisions...will reverse” (48) in a minute, he annuls the possibility of any real encounter with the person he loves. The possibility of love is further reduced because Prufrock is more interested in “speaking about” what he desires, rather than “speaking with” (Irigaray 2002: 7) whom he desires. He lucidly and graphically explains the act of sexual initiations through the feline imagery, “that rubs its back... [and] its muzzle on the window panes/ Licked its tongue... / and fell asleep” (15-22) rather than engaging himself; he “speaks about” the “women [who] come and go/ Talking of Michelangelo” (35-36), rather than “speaking with” her/ them. In the face of this crisis of communication, in abstaining himself from the fear of disturbing ‘the universe’ and meeting the logistics of presumption, he guards his presence in the ‘narrow complacency of the self’ (O’Dwyer; 77), thereby undermining love in all its possibilities. According to Martin Buber:

When a man withdraws from accepting with his essential being another person in particularity...of his own self...dialogue becomes a fiction...the mysterious intercourse

between two human souls only a game, and in the rejection of the real life confronting him the essence of all reality begins to disintegrate. (Buber: 28)

That is plausibly why his reality begins to disintegrate when he conceives of women in fragmented and fragile bodies, in “the *skirts* (italics mine) that trail along the floor”(102) and the ‘*Arms*(italics mine) that are braceleted and white and bare” (63), rather than conceiving of a fully embodied woman. It is this fractured panorama of reality that refuses him the experience of life and love altogether. He has diluted his self under the veneer of ‘various aliases or possibilities’ (Childs 2011: 80); his being ‘Hamlet’ or ‘Lazarus’ or an ‘attendant lord’ or the ‘Fool’ or Guido de Montefeltro or John the Baptist does not bring any closure to the innumerable contradictions of his life. Instead he is further drawn down more into the quagmire of it when he mentions like a prophet that “I have known them all already, known them all- /...And I have known the eyes .../...And I have known the arms already, known them all,” (49-61) but immediately contradicts himself by saying ‘I am no prophet- and here’s no great matter.” (83) The ambiguities and contradictions in Prufrock’s monologue can also stand in for the ambiguities of language, its inherent capacity of having no meaning of its own in the modern era, where, like the dilemma of Hamlet, to be or not to be a prophet will however bring no significant change, love will continue to exist for Prufrock in the way it did, in all its impossibility.

But if the possibility of love is the only valid criterion for Prufrock’s Love Song, one may wonder who gets to evaluate its validity and what are the necessary metrics for validation? Isn’t defining Love in a “formulated phrase” which achieves fulfillment “only” in consummation driving us to further impossibilities of never realizing what Love is or can be? Can there be a specific language of love which determines the degree of possibility/ impossibility? According to me, Prufrock is a Barthesian (Roland Barthes) lover, one who waits only to realize love and this is evident when he says that “indeed there will be time/.../Time for you and time for me” (23-31); moreover, his ceaseless wait is reverberated even at the end of the poem in the form of ‘human voices’ which will ‘wake us... [even if] we drown” (131), thus leaving enough room for realization of love even if laxity or death arrests him at the end. He is unlike the speaker of the poem ‘To His Coy Mistress’ by Andrew Marvell, who in the apprehension that there is no time and that making love is the need of the hour never really realizes Love.

In order to realize love, though Prufrock begins with ‘I’ as a subject in the first line, he departs from the exclusively subjective position and embraces himself as ‘me’ (not ‘I’)(31), a pronoun which stands for an object rather than a subject in a sentence and then ‘embraces both the polarities of what is possible between them’(O’Dwyer: 85) in the form of ‘us,’ (131) therefore he breaches the barriers of the self to ‘meet with [the]essential otherness’ (Buber 213) of his beloved; thereby ultimately recognizing love as a responsibility for himself as well as his beloved. One may argue that the central paradox of language as a means and an obstacle of communication should not be seen as an impediment for realizing love. Jacques Lacan argues that ‘speech is in its essence ambiguous’ (Lacan: 228) and perhaps it is within these ambiguous realms which often resist systematic analysis that love finds its true expression and communication. Prufrock’s speech is also not devoid of ambiguities, he insists that he has “strength to force the moment to its crisis” (80) and to squeeze “the universe into a ball” (92), but in reality, such actions could not be materialized by him. He articulates a language of his own, however ambiguous and limited, nonetheless the last few lines capture the lyrical and romantic fantasy of the “mermaids, singing, each to each” (124) and not to oneself as Prufrock does, establishing how

his vision of love has undergone transfiguration, communication and expression ,being ultimately restored so as to make love possible.

It might seem that the love song of Prufrock is an ironic one, and love is impossible for him and that his language for articulating love is inappropriate, but it should not be forgotten that his language is that of someone who inhabits the grimy and slimy clime of the modern world, where the meaning of love has also undergone transformation to suit the situations of a devastated post-war world. *The Love Song of J Alfred Prufrock* is indeed a love song in spite of the impossibilities in it, because Love itself assumes a unique morphology, where the impossibilities or lack of possibilities make a way for realizing what Love is rather than limiting it.

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