

E Pluribus Unum: All Shall Be Well

I grow old ... I grow old ...
I shall wear the bottoms of my trousers rolled.

“*The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* is the greatest love poem ever written,” Steve said. Steve was my features editor on the college newspaper. Steve was tall and fleshy with curly brown hair and glasses—a whip-smart physics major who would later go to Harvard’s John F. Kennedy School of Government. But no lady’s man.

I trusted Steve’s opinion, so I tried to read *Prufrock* but rapidly became lost—it starts with a Latin quotation and proceeds to talk about evening like a patient etherized upon a table. Some romance.

No doubt, that was part of my problem—I was at the age when *love* and *romance* meant the same thing. Had Steve already lost hope in romance? Or was he simply more mature than I was?

A couple of decades later, my wife asked, “Why do you love me?”

“Because I choose to,” I answered.

My answer was, no doubt, neither romantic nor emotionally satisfying. On some level, most of us want to think that being loved is somehow under our control, that we can earn it or that we have some attribute that makes us deserve it.

But, perhaps, maturing is letting go of that delusion. I think Goethe got it right when he said, “If I love you, what business is it of yours?” Love is *my* choice, not yours.

Let’s suppose that I had instead answered my wife, “Because of your most excellent personality,” and then she developed Alzheimer’s, as my mother did. Do I stop loving her?

Or suppose I answered, “Because of your exquisite hair,” and then her hair fell out during chemotherapy, as my father’s did. Again, do I stop loving her?

Is there any single thing I can point to that my love depends upon? I don’t think so.

So how does this relate to *Prufrock*? Dear old J. Alfred is a people-pleaser. He can’t give love freely without expecting something in return. And not getting it, he sinks into melancholia. He fails to see the worth of the love he offers, thinking its value is dependent only upon the response of the recipient. He has been timid and missed out on love and opportunity. He fears rejection. Instead of *carpe diem*, he is a cold carp, dead-eyed and limp.

Contrast *Prufrock* with Goethe’s *Faust*. At the end of Part II, the angels say,

Whoever strives, in his endeavour,
We can rescue from the devil.

And if he has Love within,
Granted from above,
The sacred crowd will meet him,
With welcome, and with love.

No mention is made of good works, nor faithfulness, nor another's approval. Goethe's view is that it is the striving and the passion we have inside ourselves that matter, not how much we seek to please someone else, not even some cosmic superpower. Goethe's is a view from the vantage-point of self-possession and maturity.

But T.S. Eliot was only 22 when he wrote *Prufrock*. Young T. Sterns might have joined Steve and me late at night sitting around unfinished copy-editing for the newspaper, commiserating about unrequited love, drinking cheap alcohol. We all had some living yet to do—Steve to Harvard, me to Africa, and Eliot to endure World War I and II plus marriage.

At 26, Eliot married Vivienne Haigh-Wood, a marriage that only added to his disappointment in love. As Vivienne's mental health proved fragile and declined, Eliot stuck it out for 18 years before separating from her. Five years later Vivienne's brother committed her to a mental institution where she lived until her death nine years later. Eliot avoided visiting. Instead, he transmuted his despair into poetry, including *The Waste Land*, published when he was 34.

Four years later, Eliot began digging himself out of his melancholia when he converted to Anglicanism, a conversion rarely embraced by the intelligentsia of the time. But it worked out pretty well for him—he won the Nobel Prize for Literature for *Four Quartets*, a set of poems heavily reliant on Christian tradition and thought.

Much later, when Eliot was 68, old T. Sterns married his second wife, who was 30 years old. He had failed to live into his prophecy of wearing his trousers rolled. Perhaps by then Anglicanism had actually allowed him to find his passion. Beauty within form. A living sonnet, of which his second marriage was the final couplet.

Steve would have been in his early 20s when he loved *Prufrock*. After college, did Steve continue to despair of love? Or did he, too, find his passion, choose to love, to *carpe diem*, as Goethe advocated. Or did he find a calm acceptance, as did Eliot:

All shall be well and
All manner of thing shall be well.
Four Quartets