‘The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock’

Here are the opening few lines of Eliot’s poem ‘The Love Song of J Alfred Prufrock’ (composed in 1910–11):

S’io credessi che mia risposta fosse
a persona che mai tornasse al mondo,
questa fiamma staria senza più scosse.
Ma per ciò che giammai di questo fondo
non tornò vivo alcun, s’i’odo il vero,
senza tema d’infamia ti rispondo.

Let us go then, you and I
When the evening is spread out against the sky
Like a patient etherised upon a table.

Before continuing with this exercise, read the whole poem out loud to yourself. You can find it here: [http://www.bartleby.com/198/1.html](http://www.bartleby.com/198/1.html)

Some questions:

1) How do you respond to the foreign epigraph (the quotation at the opening of the poem)? Do you try to translate it? Ignore it?
2) Who are ‘you’ and ‘I’? Do you feel as if you are being personally addressed? Do you imagine another ‘you’? Do you see ‘I’ as the poet speaking, or as a persona?
3) What is the effect of describing the evening ‘Like a patient etherised upon a table’?

I’ll begin by offering a close reading of these lines. This is my reading alone; you can disagree with it.

Ignoring the epigraph at first, I read the first two lines (‘Let us go then, you and I / when the evening is spread out against the sky’) romantically, partly because this is, the title tells me, a ‘Love Song’. ‘You’ could be the reader of the poem, a character within the poem, or both, but the address feels intimate. Walking out in the evening also suggests a date.
The identity of ‘I’ is also suggested by the poem’s title: this is the love song of ‘J. Alfred Prufrock’. A strangely formal name for someone singing a love song: why give only his first initial, but his whole middle name? What kind of character is this?

The evening spread out against the sky ‘Like a patient etherised upon a table’ is surprising in this romantic context: after the bold ‘Let us go then’, there is stillness. The etherised patient is also a complex, convoluted image: Eliot doesn’t just write that the sky is spread out, but that the evening is spread out against the sky; what’s more, the evening is personified, creating a double image.

Ether is an anaesthetic, so it’s as if the sky is a flat surface, and the evening is lying across it, waiting for an operation. Evening also means that the sky is darkening, so this image might be of someone changing colour, in a drugged sleep. It’s as if we’re looking down at the sky like observing angels, or like the evening’s spirit, hovering over its etherised body (ether is also an alcoholic spirit, so there are several kinds of spirit present here).

‘You and I’ might also be like doctors, hovering over the body of ‘evening’ with a scalpel. If the evening is spread out against the whole sky, which is like a table, then rather than looking up at the sky, it’s as if we’re looking down on the sky from the earth, which might be a kind of spirit world. Or perhaps the evening seems to be lying flat against the horizon.

This woozy, morbid image resonates with the Italian epigraph at the opening of the poem. It is from Canto 27 of Dante Alighieri’s Inferno (1317), in which Dante imagines himself journeying through the seven circles of Hell. The person speaking in this passage is Guido da Montefeltro, a sinner who has been trapped inside a flame, as punishment for giving false counsel. Dante has asked him to tell what sin he committed. Guido’s speech roughly translates as: “If I believed my answer were to a person who might ever return to the world, this flame would remain without stirring. But since from this gulf, if truth be told me, nobody has ever returned alive, without fear of infamy I answer you.”

If we assume a relationship between the epigraph and the poem, it suggests a few things:

1) ‘The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock’ might be a confession;
2) Prufrock might be in torment or ‘damned’;
3) Prufrock, like Guido, might be preoccupied with what people will think of him; and
4) Prufrock, like Guido, might be giving ‘false counsel’, or misleading people.
5) Alternatively, the poem might be about being or feeling misled.
Putting a quotation from Dante, about being trapped forever in hell, next to the seemingly-light ‘Let us go then, you and I’, and the tea and coffee spoons of Prufrock’s world, could also be funny. There’s a drama in being eternally damned that this character might struggle to live up to.

These opening lines also tap into the pleasure of sound and rhyme, the repeated ‘I’ in ‘I’ and ‘sky’ and ‘etherised’: the foreign epigraph can also be sounded out before being understood. Part of the appeal of Eliot’s poetry is musical, due to his highly developed use of rhyme and repetition. Eliot wrote skeptically in his essay ‘The Music of Poetry’ (1942):

> when I learn that a difficult sonnet was inspired by seeing a painting on the ceiling reflected in the polished top of a table, or by seeing the light reflected from the foam on a glass of beer, I can only say that this may be a correct embryology, but it is not the meaning. [...] the poet is occupied with frontiers of consciousness beyond which words fail, though meanings still exist. A poem may appear to mean very different things to different readers, and all of these meanings may be different from what the author thought he meant.

With that said, perform your own close reading of the rest of ‘The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock’, responding to some of the following questions (there is no single ‘right answer’: these questions are designed to get you to think about how you read and interpret this poem):

1) The ‘muttering retreats’, ‘restless nights in one-night cheap hotels’, ‘sawdust restaurants with oyster-shells’: what atmosphere is created by this landscape?
2) What is the effect of making the retreats ‘mutter’ and the streets follow like an ‘argument’?
3) ‘In the room the women come and go / Talking of Michelangelo’. Given that these two lines do not seem to connect in a linear way to the stanzas surrounding them, what is their role in the poem? What effect do they have?
4) What is the effect of making the yellow fog/smoke into an animal?
5) What patterns of rhyme and repetition, ‘visions and revisions’, can you see running through the poem? What is the effect of repeating particular refrains?

6) ‘To lead you to an overwhelming question…’ Think/write about Eliot’s use of questions throughout the poem, and their effects.

7) ‘(They will say: ‘How his hair is growing thin!’)’ Think/write about Eliot’s use of pronouns (‘I’ ‘You’ ‘They’ ‘We’) throughout the poem, and their effects.

8) ‘It is impossible to say just what I mean!’ What relationship is there between ‘saying’ and ‘meaning’ in this poem?

9) ‘I am not Prince Hamlet’: what kind of character is Shakespeare’s Hamlet? Why would Prufrock invoke him? Is he right to suggest that he is not like Hamlet?

10) How does Prufrock describe himself in the poem?

11) How does he describe female figures in the poem?

12) What kinds of interactions does Prufrock have with the women he portrays in the poem?

13) What is the effect of moving from an urban landscape, to interiors, to the sea at the poem’s end?

14) In a letter to Conrad Aiken on 31 December 1914, Eliot wrote of being in London:

I have been going through one of those nervous sexual attacks which I suffer from when alone in a city. […] One walks about the streets with one’s desires, and one’s refinement rises up like a wall whenever opportunity approaches.

Think/write about ‘nervous sexual attacks’, ‘desire’, or ‘refinement’ in this poem.

15) Think/write about the use of distraction and delay in this poem.