

# “The Loud Lament of the Disconsolate Chimera”— T. S. Eliot’s Tea Time Allusions

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Footfalls echo in the memory  
Down the passage which we did not take  
Towards the door we never opened  
Into the rose-garden. My words echo  
Thus, in your mind.  
(*Complete Eliot*, “Burnt Norton,” I, 11–15)<sup>1</sup>

Overhanging the mind of the anonymous “your” (15), the move “Into the rose-garden” (14) becomes a movement into both a literary landscape and a mental state. This mind is arguably not only a separate self, but an echo of a past self whom T. S. Eliot is remembering, and with which he is reconciling himself, moving together at last as a “we” (12) into the beauty of the timeless moment. These lines were illuminated by Eliot as an allusion, his last, to *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*,<sup>2</sup> opening the door once more to an unpublished landscape written in youth—*The Inventions of the March Hare*.<sup>3</sup> This allusive opening of “Burnt Norton,” the opening itself of Eliot’s last major poems, provides a stark contrast to his first collection, revealed through the unfolding allusions to the *Alice* books. Moving backwards in time, Eliot’s future poetry throws into light the deep-seated problems which fester in *Inventions*, lingering in its tea-time allusions.

The eponymous March Hare of *Inventions* is first encountered in Carroll as a guest at “A Mad Tea-Party” (p. 60), the focal chapter of *Wonderland*. Even beyond this initial allusion, Eliot’s early work seems preoccupied with the Tea-Party itself as a phenomenon.

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<sup>1</sup> T. S. Eliot, “Burnt Norton,” in *The Complete Poems and Plays of T.S. Eliot*, ed. Valerie Eliot (London: Faber and Faber, 1969), 171–76, V, line 22. All future references to this collection will be of this edition, abbreviated to *Complete Eliot*, with line numbers given within the body of the text, page numbers for the first reference.

<sup>2</sup> Lewis Carroll, *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland and Through the Looking-Glass and What Alice Found There*, ed. Hugh Haughton (London: Penguin, 1998). All future reference to these novels will be of this edition, abbreviated to *Wonderland* and *Through the Looking-Glass* respectively, with page numbers given within the body of the text.

<sup>3</sup> T. S. Eliot, *Inventions of the March Hare*, ed. Christopher Ricks (London: Faber and Faber, 1996). All future references to this collection will be of this edition, abbreviated to *Inventions*, with line numbers given within the body of the text, page numbers for the first reference.

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*Literary Imagination*, volume 16, number 2, pp. 157–170  
doi:10.1093/litimag/imu021

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Tea (and occasionally coffee) are mentioned fourteen times in works pre-1920 as opposed to a mere five times in all the following works. Thus the title of *Inventions* suggests obsession with not only the March Hare, but the occasion of Carroll's teatime, the reasons for which must derive from Carroll's own understanding of the Mad Tea-Party.

As Andrea Broomfield's research shows, Victorian children would have dinner, as opposed to the adult luncheon, at around noon, followed with a light tea before bed, at around five.<sup>4</sup> When the Hare and Hatter refer to "half-past one, time for dinner" (*Wonderland*, p. 63) and "it's always six o'clock now" (p. 64), they are speaking of the childish clock, rather than the adult one. At the heart of *Wonderland*, eternal childhood reigns, and it is this childhood, centred on the idea of tea, which Carroll stubbornly refuses to relinquish. The Tea-Party becomes the focal point of novel, itself inextricably linked to the literal times of childhood. "Five o'clock tea is a phrase our rude forefathers, even of the last generation, would not have understood, so completely is it a thing of today"<sup>5</sup> Carroll notes in *The Blank Cheque*, a comment telling not for its historical observation so much as for its alignment of tea with the absolute present. This may be seen as not only referring to the contemporary era, but also to a deeper idea of teatime as an eternal today-ness, a cyclically recurring ritual which refuses both past and future, stopping time completely.

Yet exactly why Carroll places this stillness at the heart of his novel only becomes clear from the original source of the tea-party. In a time before the novel, a time which at its heart the novel seeks to eternalize, Charles Dodgson took a trip down the Isis to Godstow with Alice Liddell and her sisters, a tea-time journey in which he told her the stories eventually included in *Wonderland*.<sup>6</sup> Manifesting in the rowing poems opening *Wonderland* (pp. 5–6) and closing *Through the Looking-Glass* (p. 241), *Wonderland* is essentially bounded by a dream-frame, a journey into the day and the teatime Carroll marked with a white stone in his diary (Haughton, "Introduction," p. xxii). Holding Alice in the eternal teatime, Carroll resists the fleeting of the moment, and the disappearance from his life that Alice had undertaken by the time of the first book's publication. As Haim Hazan writes, referring to Simone de Beauvoir, teatime becomes an inherently cyclical construction which aims to resurrect the past. "If some ritual – the ceremony of tea among the English for example – is an exact repetition of that which I observed yesterday and I shall observe tomorrow, then the present moment is the past brought to life again, the future anticipated."<sup>7</sup>

Indeed, this Tea Party seems not only a happenstance landscape within the novel, but a veritable trap designed to lure outsiders and restrain them within the unending present.

<sup>4</sup> Andrea Broomfield, *Food and Cooking in Victorian England* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2007), 46.

<sup>5</sup> Charles Dodgson, *The Blank Cheque* (Oxford: James Parker and Co., 1874), 1.

<sup>6</sup> Introduction in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland and Through the Looking-Glass and What Alice Found There*, ed. Hugh Haughton (London, 1998), ix–lxv (p. xxxi). All future references to this essay will be of this edition and within the body of the text.

<sup>7</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, *The Coming of Age* (New York: G.P. Putnam, 1972), 468. Cited from Haim Hazan, "Holding Time Still with Cups of Tea," in *Constructive Drinking: Perspectives on Drink from Anthropology*, ed. Mary Douglas (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 205–19 (p. 216).

'Now, if you only kept on good terms with him [Time], he'd do almost anything you liked with the clock. For instance, suppose it were nine o'clock in the morning, just time to begin lessons: you'd only have to whisper a hint to Time, and round goes the clock in a twinkling! Half-past one, time for dinner!' ('I only wish it was,' the March Hare said to itself in a whisper').

(*Wonderland*, p. 63)

The genesis of Carroll's teatime is the quarrel with Time in the month of March, maddening the Hare and Hatter and consigning them to an eternal teatime (p. 64). This "whisper" (p. 63) betrays the despair of those caught within, unable to escape. The fact that the Hare was not mad before he quarrelled with time, coupled with the Cheshire Cat's observation that "we're all mad here" and if Alice weren't she "wouldn't have come here" (p. 57), suggests that the Hare was not necessarily from Wonderland. Instead, he may have been caught in it by the breaking of time and his madness, a possible future for Alice herself. Now it is always March, always a teatime of frustrated desire, without consummation or consumption for those within it. The denizens of the Tea Party move eternally round in circles, refusing to answer Alice's question, "what happens when you come to the beginning again?" (p. 64). For those trapped within teatime, there is no end or beginning.

A notable feature of The Tea Party is its veritable lack of consumption, all characters moving round too quickly to drink their tea, other foodstuffs absent from the table.

'Two days wrong!' sighed the Hatter. 'I told you butter wouldn't suit the works!' he added, looking angrily at the March Hare.  
(p. 62)

Attempts to eat or drink merely slow time further, exposing the event as an implicit counter to Wonderland's prime terror—consuming, or being consumed. As she falls through the rabbit hole, the only object Alice takes from the shelves is a jar of "ORANGE MARMALADE" (p. 10), which she promptly returns in case it falls and kills someone. Capitalized, this marmalade becomes the first example of a significant trend in Carroll's works—the propensity of food to kill. Eating and drinking pervade the songs and parodies of Wonderland, which center around "food and the food-chain" (Haughton, "Introduction," p. lx). The fear of being eaten, of finding one's natural role as prey, is pervasive. "Off with his head," go the lines from *King Richard III*, given by Carroll to the Queen of Hearts, "Now, by Saint Paul I swear, / I will not dine until I see the same."<sup>8</sup> Death and eating are united both temporally and in the recurrent shout heard through Wonderland, a command used against Alice at the last, prompting her expulsion from the land.

More than a fear of death, this is arguably indicative of Carroll's fear of change, in particular his fear of Alice Liddell growing from girlhood and entering a land he cannot reach. Food allows Alice to navigate her way through Wonderland, simultaneous to

<sup>8</sup> William Shakespeare, *Richard III*, ed. James R. Siemon (London: Arden, 2009), Act 3. Scene 4. 76–77.

threatening her destruction, or at least the destruction of the eternal girl Carroll wishes to maintain. In spite of her words “at least there’s no room to grow up any more *here*” (p. 33), food and drink will constantly transform her, allowing her passage through the locked doors of Wonderland and finally to her escape. All harkens back to the original bottle paralytically not marked “poison,” the threat implicitly lurking behind the instruction of “Drink Me” (p. 13). The perfect little girl, like the “Bread-and-butter-fly” (*Through the Looking-Glass*, p. 151) should prefer weak tea, forbidden physical growth by her stunted appetite. As Alice remarks, the things people consume influence their personalities—hot-tempered people, for instance, must have consumed too much pepper as children (*Wonderland*, p. 78)—and so the great variety of food on offer in Wonderland offers Alice’s being a great variety of change. It is this change, so feared by Alice in the opening of the novel, which eventually allows her to reject the nonsense of the Jam-Tart trial, as the absurdity of being forbidden to eat living food at the close of *Through the Looking-Glass* wakes her from the dream. In rejecting the nonsense of nonconsumption, Alice rejects the dream of Wonderland, and is expelled back into the waking world, away from the land of Carroll’s stories.

The consumption so devoutly to be feared, however, also creates a central paradox of the *Alice* books, a paradox which will utterly undermine Carroll’s endeavors. For a novel so threatened by consumption, it is remarkable the degree to which it is created by it. Following from Carroll’s understanding of “literature,”<sup>9</sup> Wonderland is created through modes of allusion. Moving as food into the mouth of the writer, the words of the source are taken and mutated, providing the essential fodder for Carroll’s food-based parodies. Thus allusion here becomes a form of consumption, growing Wonderland from the masticated remains of other sources, a simultaneous excretion and fuel for life. As one of Carroll’s parodies suggests in its final lines, “While the Panther received knife and fork with a growl / And concluded the banquet by—” (*Wonderland*, p. 93), the insidious possibility of being consumed both haunts and constructs Wonderland. Moreover, the nature of allusion, as opposed to reference, is not merely to repeat the original artifact, but in these instances to suggest a relic of it, mimicking a past self which is no longer quite real. The foundations of Wonderland are built on a paradox, attempting to sustain an identity constructed within a landscape built of allusive change and decay. The desire for storytelling within the eternal teatime, two activities linked in other contemporary publications, becomes an opportunity for infection, bringing decaying allusions into the moment of desired timelessness.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, teatime itself is impossible as a timeless construction, its name dependent on a temporal structure. This paradox and the resulting failure to maintain the timeless child is clearly expressed in the changed nature of teatime within *Through the Looking-Glass*, written after Dodgson’s split from the Liddell family. Dinner is moved to the adult time of six (p. 168); the Hatter is finally allowed to drink his tea (p. 199), and Carroll’s proxy, the White Knight, is instrumental in guiding Alice to the end of her journey (p. 207). All instances move toward a recognition of

<sup>9</sup> Lewis Carroll, “Preface,” in *Sylvie and Bruno* (London: Macmillan, 1898), x.

<sup>10</sup> E. H. Knatchbull-Hugessen, *Tales at Tea-Time: Fairy Stories* (London: Macmillan, 1872).

consumption as inevitable, and time as inherently progressive. The desire of Wonderland's inhabitants (and here by extension Carroll) to "live backwards" (p. 171) is negated even before the novel has even begun, every move of Alice's journey foretold for the reader as moves on a prophetic chessboard (pp. 112–13). Recalling the medieval dream-frame, "fals Fortune's"<sup>11</sup> game of chess necessitates an ending in the fall of a Kingdom, and every dream must be woken from.

It is not the Red King (in whose dream Alice plays), however, with whom Carroll most obviously aligns himself, but a White Knight seen only in a single chapter, "It's My Own Invention" (p. 205). It is this figure, coupled with the Tea-Party and the March Hare, whom Eliot primarily recalls in his early poems. The failure of male invention is central both to Carroll's work and Eliot's later use of it. Allusion as a concept recalls a world outside the text, and a source which it has to some extent altered. By filling Alice's Wonderland with decaying allusions to the real world, Carroll provides the girl with a nonsensical mutation to reject, a way out of Wonderland, each parodic song calling the girl back to the waking world. Carroll can never make Wonderland such that Alice cannot escape it, and even less can he create an invented Alice who maintains the vitality of the real girl. All he manages is a phantom, an allusion to a girl who once was. An allusion himself to both Carroll and Millais' *Sir Isumbras at the Ford*,<sup>12</sup> originally exhibited as *A Dream of the Past* (*Looking-Glass*, p. 325) and now drawn in the novel's frontispiece (p. 114) the Knight who should win the damsel can now only guide her out of Wonderland, leading her to where he cannot follow. An aged man carrying a wooden sword, turnips, and upside-down sandwich boxes, Alice's protector becomes a fool for whom she does not cry as much as he expected (p. 218). Carroll's own invention of both himself and the girl merely brings about the decay of the two—the etymological "caedere" of "decay" becoming the "fall" into Wonderland, failing to prevent either of their aging, reuniting them only to finally part.

Of all the things which the Knight claims are his invention, the song he sings is a tune of another, the words only being his (p. 214). This particular "invention" is indeed perhaps the most central for Eliot. Christopher Ricks notes the dual propensity of the word for both a physical creation and a short musical piece, the idea of the latter resonating through *Inventions* (pp. 5–6). The form of the White Knight's song winds insidiously through the forest scene, a reminder of a world outside the dream that lends only a form, refusing full substance. The name of the song is "The Aged Aged Man" and the song "really is" "A-sitting On A Gate," set to the tune of "I give thee all, I can no more," both the invented titles and the original revelatory of Carroll's purposes (p. 214). Like the old man of the song, straddling the gate, the White Knight and Carroll move between two worlds, the real and Wonderland, yet are aging and powerless in both, a mockery of the men they would like to be. These words and this theme, set to the tune of "I give thee all, I can no more" (p. 214), makes the lyric self-referential—this was to be

<sup>11</sup> "The Book of the Duchess," in *The Riverside Chaucer*, general ed. Larry D. Benson, 3rd edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 329–47, l. 618.

<sup>12</sup> John Everett Millais, *A Dream of the Past: Sir Isumbras at the Ford* (1857).

the last book Carroll wrote for Alice, now forever gone from his life. And like the song whose tune he cannot quite lay claim to, the girl too will forever elude his grasp, recreated in words but always ultimately part of a different, changing world. Carroll's invention belies the acknowledgement that he can do no more than parody and partially consume songs, forever hoping to invent his own shadow of Alice. The White Knight's song resonates as the decaying tune of lost love, falling in every reiteration as Alice rises out of the rabbit hole. Even the Hare and Hatter have now become Haigha and Hatta (p. 196), nonsensical parodies of what they once were, flung out of the eternal tea party.

'I see you're admiring my little box,' the Knight said in a friendly tone. 'It's my own invention – to keep clothes and sandwiches in. You see I carry it upside-down, so that the rain can't get in.' 'But the things can get out,' Alice gently remarked. 'Do you know the lid's open?' 'I didn't know it,' the Knight said, a shade of vexation passing over his face. 'Then all the things must have fallen out! And the box is no use without them.'

(*Through the Looking-Glass*, p. 207)

As the sandwiches fall out of the tin, the reader is perhaps reminded of Alice's fall from the author's inventions as she topples through Wonderland, moving always away from the Knight's possession. Despite her reinvention, the girl is never quite wholly consumed by the text, however much of the world around her it snatches between its jaws. "The box" (p. 207) and the book make do with a phantom Alice, having already guided the other away, ultimately the useless invention of a tired old man.

Twinkle twinkle little bat  
How I wonder what you're at  
Up above the world you fly  
Like a tea-tray in the sky.

(*Wonderland*, p. 63)

The song of the dormouse transforms the diamond of the star into the "tea-tray," all beautiful things caught in the moment of the tea party. A diamond, like Alice, is drawn into Wonderland only to be transmuted to a tea tray, reconstituting the beautiful within the eternally recurring center of the dream. Yet Alice's flight also recurs before Wonderland is abandoned, and in such a way that exposes the futility of the tea-time song. The final poem of *Through the Looking-Glass* (p. 241) is an acrostic of "Alice Pleasance Liddell," itself an attempt to grasp a long-gone girl within a song of loss, trapping even as it acknowledges its inability to trap.

Still she haunts me phantomwise  
Alice moving under skies  
Never seen by waking eyes.

(lines 10–12)

Despite Carroll's attempts to transform Alice into his own invention, he instead transforms her into a phantom, forever travelling somewhere above. Out of his sight she lurks somewhere between the dream and the waking world, an elusive bat never quite captured in what can only ever be an insubstantial parody of her real self. By attempting to change

the diamond into the tea tray, Carroll exposes the allusive ineffectuality inherent in Wonderland. At the heart of his poetry lies the recognition that allusion sustains nothing, merely takes something from the past and brings about its decay in a new present. There is no possibility of resurrection but only an invented half-life called into being, a star dimming into a bat, a girl shadowing into a phantom. As the rose of Carroll's own flower-garden informs her, Alice is fading with every step she takes into the imaginary world (*Through the Looking-Glass*, p. 138).

It is this sense of decay inherent in Carroll's allusions, their failure to retain the vitality of the original source, which is taken by Eliot and reformulated within *Inventions*. To complement the comprehensive work done by Christopher Ricks to identify the allusions and references to Carroll in Eliot's early poems, the importance of the Alice books is central to understanding both the larger semantic and the minute referential meaning of Eliot's allusions. Lurking in *Inventions*' obsession with teatime is its preoccupation with the decay of the past. The tea-time allusion becomes a fearful expression of modern triviality and Eliot's own impotence revolving around the moment of "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock."<sup>13</sup>

Consuming the *Alice* books as it welcomed so many other texts, *Inventions* swallows something necrotic, imbibing a poison which will both expose and decompose its insides. Bringing the memory of Carroll's impotent allusions into his text, Eliot reiterates a vision of decay, mutating his sources and spreading their failures across his own work. Taking the influence of a text which had sought to stunt a child's growth through eternalizing allusions, Eliot pours the nonprogressive and nonvital times of Carroll into *Inventions*. It is not merely its tea-time references that are infected by this decline, but the nature of allusion itself. In alluding to and consuming a text in which allusions themselves fail to preserve, all allusions in Eliot acquire a sense of impotence. As Hartman elucidates of the nature of allusions, "they evoke in us a sense of leprous insubstantiality, of a contagion that might spread over language as a whole[...]. The literary nihilist is the Cheshire Cat of language[...]. language shows its teeth in an empty grin."<sup>14</sup> Once more the reader is thrown into a world of stagnant time, growing without progression, never finding enough sustenance in the works it feeds on. As the body of the cat disappears, all we are left with is a mouth that cannot devour, yet with teeth still sharp enough to break the skin.

Indeed, as in the *Alice* books, consumption in Eliot becomes a matter of pervasive anticipation, entering the text as an eternal possibility for its characters, never quite attainable. Working as a form of dream-frame (another relic from the Alice books), food, drink, and particularly tea become objects of the past or future, but rarely of the present. Despite Prufrock mentioning "toast and tea" (*Inventions*, "The Love Song

<sup>13</sup> T. S. Eliot, *The Letters of T. S. Eliot*, ed. Valerie Eliot and Hugh Haughton, vol. 1, 4 vols. (London: Faber and Faber, 1988), 63. (September 30, 1914). All future references to letters of T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound will be of this edition, abbreviated to *Letters* and cited with page numbers and dates within the body of the text.

<sup>14</sup> Geoffrey H. Hartman, "Forum," *Publications of the Modern Association*, 92. 2 (1977), 307–12 (308). Cited in Allan H. Pasco, *Allusion: A Literary Graft* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994), 4.

of J. Alfred Prufrock,” pp. 39–46, line 34), these things are always temporally unavailable, bordering his song yet never present in it. “And a time for a hundred visions and revisions / Between the taking of a toast and tea” (33–34) mirrors “should I after so many cakes and ices” (79), imagining all daring as occurring before or after teatime. Yet Prufrock is always waiting for a new moment of ingestion that will never occur, the possibility of consumption a hazy and unattainable future. Eliot creates for the reader a new Wonderland in which our perspective shifts to the native characters caught within an eternal stagnancy. Without the girl to be preserved, the residents of the Tea Party decay aimlessly, falling ever further away from their original referents and purposes. Prufrock cannot even begin to “spit out all the butt-ends of my days and ways” (60), no food in his mouth to turn to ash when the moment comes. His “days and ways” are inherently substanceless, holding him within a time from which he cannot escape or progress. The “visions and revisions” (33) of himself and other works eternally reoccur, always held within the past and future, never quite present enough for whole and purposeful being.

In the few instances where consumption does occur in the early poems, it rarely seems to impart any true nourishment. In “Portrait of a Lady” consuming is done by the speaker only, a brief visitor to the static land who will leave, wandering as Alice from Wonderland. Where the Lady’s statement “I shall sit here serving tea to friends” (*Inventions*, “Portrait of a Lady,” pp. 327–31, 2, line 34) is contrasted with her companion’s “I smile, of course,/ And go on drinking tea” (10–11), it merely emphasizes the way in which the invented landscape pours itself out to those who observe it, unable to consume anything sustaining. As she sits, offering the tea to the object of her affections (as Carroll offered the Tea Party to Alice), the object consumes all she has to give without returning what she desires. In the end, like Alice, he will abandon the static setting in pursuit of more appetising consumption, away from the eternal tea party, never a true character of the early poems but an unnamed “I” (line 10). Eliot’s landscape becomes a Wonderland which Alice has abandoned, debris of characters leftover in a world without purpose or meaning, fragments which are increasingly fragmenting, unable to put themselves back together again.

The characters of *Inventions of the March Hare* allow the world around them to fall to ruin, shut away behind windows which conceal them from the natural world.

With marmalade and tea at six  
Indifferent to what the wind does  
Indifferent to sudden rains  
Softening last year’s garden plots.  
 (“Interlude in London,” p. 16, lines 3–6)

Nothing may be grown in this stagnant environment, “last year’s garden plots” softened to waste, an eternal six-o’clock the only horizons of the speaker’s knowledge. The lines asyndetically refuse connection and thus linking in time, remaining within their own cutoff present, as “down the street the spring goes / Inspiring mouldy flowerpots” (8–9). Instead they sit, drinking tea ad infinitum, allowing time to moulder in a manner

suggestive of the Hatter's own slow and slowing pocket watch, winding down the time across London.

Journeys are constantly suggested within *Inventions*, whispers of "let us go" ("The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," 1) and "let us embark" ("Goldfish," pp. 26–30, 2, line 4). Yet behind these looking glass windows the only journey truly begun is that into "porcelain land" (13), moving ever more into the eternal teatime. Eliot takes Carroll's Tea-Party without taking tea, and now emphasizes the china in which it is held. Tea is both unsustaining and itself bordered by a fragile and artificial boundary, stagnating in a porcelain world. "Mandarins" (pp. 19–22), the second episode in which tea is actually drunk, opens with the phrase "Two ladies of uncertain age / Sit by a window drinking tea" (2, lines 1–2), yet quickly moves on from this present continuous to slow down the art of tea-drinking until it essentially ceases to be. Even before the end of these lines, a curious stasis has been given the poem—"ladies of uncertain age" (1) refusing them a place in time, as "tea" (2) gives its sound to its rhyme—"tranquillity" (4), a slowing down of both word and poem. "(No persiflage)" (3), moreover, seems to direct the reader into the space between the brackets, a space defined by its lack of content and lack of speech, moving like the larger poem into an absence of spontaneity.

And while one lifts her hand to pour  
You have the other raise  
A thin translucent porcelain.  
(14–16)

In these penultimate lines, the imagery within the poem is caught in the moment of pouring tea, held fast before the consumption. "Pour" (14) at the end of the line mirrors "raise" (15) in the line below, the space between the two allowing the actual pouring of the tea to hang incomplete, never quite flowing into the "thin translucent porcelain" (16). Instead, the present continuous yet again holds the tea fast in the moment, eternally offering it yet never quite giving it to the reader. Harkening back to the opening poem of the collection, "Convictions (Curtain Raiser)" (p. 11), the raised "thin translucent porcelain" ("Mandarins," 2, line 16) seems metaphorical of the poems. A thin, insubstantial, teacup is raised out of the hands of Carroll and given nothing of substance by Eliot that a reader may consume. The reader is ushered again and again into a new dream, a journey into a "porcelain-land" (Goldfish, 2, line 13) "where blue delft-romance is the law" (l. 14), each figure reduced and ossified into illustrations on china. Where Carroll created a nonsense-dream to undo the change and decay of the physical, Eliot cannot manage a similar transformation of a purposeless world, his characters static figures pinned to a wall or surrounded by the walls of some eternally cooling teacup.

Yet the true trauma of *Inventions* lies in the fact that this is no mere sleeping terror. Eliot has not, in fact, redreamt the beautiful haze through which Alice slept, but picked up on quite a different line of Carroll's invention—"life, what is it but a dream?" (*Through the Looking-Glass*, p. 241). And while Carroll used this line wistfully, Eliot exposes it as altogether more threatening. *Inventions* spreads the dream-like landscape across not only the sleeping but the waking world, fusing them into an eternal

evening from which one can only wake to “drown” (“The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” 131). In this Wonderland the moon is always “on its way” (“Goldfish,” 2, line 1), and the daylight always fading, a half-light and half-life of uncertain and inescapable purpose. Where Alice could escape her dreams into the world she desired, and Carroll could in turn escape this world and move back into the dreamland, the melding which occurs in Eliot infects each reality equally with futility. Triviality and nonconsumption haunt every corner, filling each all too real landscape—Cambridge, London, Paris, Palestine. Multitudes of windows trap figures behind them like darkened looking glasses, not only in London (“Interlude in London,” 2) but across the world entire. Eliot’s landscapes are framed by a dream outside of which death alone resides. Carroll’s chess-progression through life, mirroring the dream frame of *The Book of the Duchess*, becomes an endless game, “pressing lidless eyes and waiting for a knock upon the door” (*The Waste Land* pp. 61–75, line 138), an awakening which will never arrive. Both the Black Knight of Chaucer and the White Knight of Carroll are merged by Eliot into one gray figure in the living dream, unable either to find a love or lose one, existing eternally without feeling consummation or even desire.

Yet the importance of these tea-time allusions does not lie in the decay and triviality they spread across Eliot’s poems, characters, and landscapes, but in their implicit threat to Eliot’s own inventions. Surrounding the writing of *Inventions* were two overwhelming fears held by Eliot—that his own poetry was inconsequential, and that the very landscape of Anglo-American poetry was itself decaying (T. S. Eliot, *Letters*, p. 75, November 16, 1914). While he would later assert in “Tradition and the Individual Talent,”<sup>15</sup> that all poets participate in a larger line of succession, in *Inventions* he fears a succession that culminates in failure and stagnancy (T. S. Eliot, *Letters*, p. 63, September 30, 1914). As in Carroll, fragments of a broken past entering the poems as ruins.

In the writing of *Inventions*, Eliot becomes the White Knight, guiding us through a Wonderland, peddling songs, and objects that are not of his own invention. Instead, he too has become trivial, a Dr Hasenpfeffer or ‘jugged hare’—himself a reference to something that will be consumed and spat out again, less than it once was (T. S. Eliot, *Letters*, p. 46, June 19, 1914). Despite the marionettes being “my marionettes” (“Convictions (Curtain Raiser),” line 1), the collection as a whole is merely the *Inventions of the March Hare*. Eliot is not only influenced by but infiltrated by the connotations that this insidious being brings. Most obviously this title refers to a character trapped forever in an eternal teatime of frustrated desires, haunted by echoes of an intertextual world in which everything has come to decay and madness. Yet the March Hare is not of his own invention, a stock phrase with a centuries-old history, and any inventions of his will merely reflect this—decay to decay ad infinitum. As Eliot becomes the progeny of the Hare he too comes to participate in the repetition of things not of his own invention.

<sup>15</sup> T. S. Eliot, “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” in *The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism* (London: Methuen, 1997; first published 1920), 39–50.

Taking the consumed songs of Carroll, Eliot's early poems regurgitate them in "capricious monotone" ("Portrait of a Lady," 34). His writing is constantly "dying with a dying fall / Among the music from a farther room" ("The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," 52–53), never quite present, floating in from another room, another text and other reminiscences. Like the riddling "Sphinx of the physical" ("Goldfish," 1, line 11) they are ancient works constantly decaying, played on "broken flutes" ("Interlude in London," 10), a "frail" street piano ("First Caprice in North Cambridge," p. 13, line 1) and a "cracked" violin ("Portrait of a Lady," 2, line 25). As the music plays on and calls its lulling siren song to both the reader and those within the poem, it fragments, drawing all those who listen into a universe breaking apart as it harkens back to the past.

I heard my Madness singing, sitting on the kerbstone  
[A blind old man who sings and mutters,  
With broken boot heels stained in many gutters]  
And as he sang the world began to fall apart . . .  
("Prufrock's Pervigilium," pp. 43–44, lines 29–32)

This old man of madness, moving through Carroll to the White Knight and Eliot to Prufrock reverberates through each text, a single tune that becomes various in its fragmentations. Captured in the frequent references to "a street-piano, mechanical and tired" ("Portrait of a Lady," 2, line 45), the song, like the mechanical limitations of a street-piano, may only come in one tone, different words played again and again to the same decaying fall.

In his letters, Eliot implies that he has become his one (perhaps ironically) successful creation, Prufrock, the repetitive character unable to progress—"a portrait of a failure, or a character which fails" (*Letters*, p. 63, September 30, 1914). He expresses in words similar to Prufrock the dilemma of his situation:

The great need is to know one's own mind, and I don't know that: whether I want to get married, and have a family, and live in America . . . and compromise . . . and forfeit my independence . . . ; or save my money and retire at fifty to a table on the boulevard, regarding the world placidly through the fumes of an aperitif at 5 p.m. – How thin either life seems! . . . I suppose that I shall be forced to a decision in a few days.  
(T.S. Eliot, *Letters*, pp. 95–96, February 25, 1916)

Eliot foresees a decision which he does not yet have the time to make, and a future that is "thin," that lingers on the promise of compromise and the eternal "5 p.m." He fears that in a failure of newness and spontaneity he would live to become another society figure, another marionette not quite of his own invention. The curtain would close on a goldfish swimming in circles in its glassy, fragile world "suggesting one question or mystery"<sup>16</sup>—in Alice's terms, "which dreamed it?" (Through the Looking Glass, p. 238).

<sup>16</sup> Henry James, *The American Scene* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1907), 456. Cited in Eliot, *Inventions of the March Hare*, 147.

This fear of personal failure to create one's own inventions, coupled with Eliot's general disdain for the current impotence of Anglo-American poetry is thus revealed by the tea-time allusions so pervasive in Eliot's early poems. Those poems that surround the central Prufrock—a poetic inspiration both he and Pound feared might never strike again—linger in the ineffectual consumption of what has come before. To bite into the peach is only to spit out butt ends of the ashes previously ingested, the remnants of the literary canon. The use of the Alice books to express this heightens the focus on a recurrent tradition of consuming “literature,”<sup>17</sup> decaying now from Carroll's impassioned nonsense to Eliot's static triviality. The future looms as the repetition of every nonconsumptive moment of the past, frustrating invention, and progression. Eliot lives as one of his marionettes down a rabbit hole, within a month of “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock's” publication entering into another period of poetic malaise and a marriage fraught with its own problems of consummation. It is for perhaps these reasons that *Inventions* went unpublished, deep-rooted fears far more insidious than Eliot's own excuse—“because I am disappointed in them” (Eliot, *Letters*, p. 48, July 25, 1914).

Two, in a garden scene  
Go picking tissue paper roses;  
Hero and heroine, alone,  
The monotone  
Of promises and compliments  
And guesses and supposes.  
(*Inventions*, “Convictions (Curtain Raiser),” lines 8–13)

Wandering at the last back into Carroll's rose garden, the scene where the flowers acknowledge that Alice is fading, the openings of both *Four Quartets* and *Inventions* move us into a scene rejuvenated, revived from the artificial tissue paper. The falsity of the marionettes “picking tissue paper roses” (*Inventions*, “Convictions (Curtain Raiser),” 9) is brought full circle in the opening of *Burnt Norton*, travelling “into the rose garden” (*Complete Eliot*, “Burnt Norton,” 1, line 14) once more to find the flowers finally brought to life. Eliot disturbs the “dust on a bowl of rose leaves” (117)—not now to show them as dead references to a former life, but to lift them in the eternal presence and life of memory. The reader and Eliot enter at the last the door locked to Carroll, the door to which only the living Alice had the key. In the newly living eternal present, the girl who can undo the lock to the past may finally be found, alive and vital as she once was.

“What might have been and what has been” (“Burnt Norton,” 1, line 47) within Wonderland “point to one end, which is always present” (48), an eternal present which to Carroll and the early Eliot manifested as an eternal decay. “If all time is eternally present, all time is unredeemable” (4–5), unable to be brought back or absolved of the frustrations it has gathered in its endless repetitions. Yet this inability to be redeemed has another facet now, unable to be brought back not because it is a substance lost, but because it had never vanished in the first place. The eternal present becomes a time

<sup>17</sup> Carroll, *Sylvie and Bruno*, x.

which, for all its fragility, shows the persistence and the preservation of memory, absolved of the need for redemption.

The rose garden newly opened now moves both "down" (12), in the decaying fall, but also "towards" (13), anticipating the progression which neither Carroll nor Eliot's earlier self had realized. "My words echo / Thus in your mind" (14–15) Eliot writes, and with these words reminds the reader of the echo in his own mind of the earlier text, echoes meeting with echoes upon entry to the rose garden. Within "Burnt Norton" the echoes resolve themselves into something larger, something far less fragmentary than a collection of allusions pointing to their own dying and decaying fall.

Words strain,  
Crack and sometimes break, under the burden,  
Under the tension, slip, slide, perish,  
Decay with imprecision, will not stay in place,  
Will not stay still.  
("Burnt Norton," 5, lines 13–17)

Moving away from the chaotic and decaying presences of allusion understood in *Inventions*, "Burnt Norton" harmonizes the strain, gathering the many words into eternal and, to a degree, timeless present. "Words" (13), multiple and fragmentary, find in this eternal presence the "pattern" (23) which is needed, a pattern which conquers time while working through it, joining the many into the one Word of Christian redemption. By embracing this multiplicity, Eliot simultaneously creates a space for a whole and unified being. Where eternal time had once been seen both in his works and Carroll's as a still instance of a being, cut out and reiterated without progression, it now becomes the medium for the wholeness and full presence of all instances of being.

But only in time can the moment in the rose-garden,  
The moment in the arbour where the rain beat,  
The moment in the draughty church at smokefall  
Be remembered; involved with past and future.  
Only through time time is conquered.  
("Burnt Norton," 2, lines 41–45)

The fragility of the moment is renewed in memory, the reader moving through it, like Alice in a rejuvenated Wonderland to the recognition of the beauty and unity it offers. Wonderland may not be redeemed, but this does not mean it is damned, merely a stepping stone to the enlightenment of the ordering still point through which its inhabitants may find their own redemption. Turning away from the eternal present of earlier works, Eliot draws upon and corrects his former poetic self. In the meeting of past and future Eliot the man is revealed as whole, absolved of his former worries in the healing effect of memory. The door to Wonderland is reopened to be closed, moving us to the one Word, toward a moment timelessly eternal, no longer bounded by the stagnancy of an eternal decay.

Thus as we move to his final rose garden, Eliot at the last identifies his own "disconsolate Chimera" ("Burnt Norton," 5, line 22) loudly lamenting his early works. It is a form made up of many different parts, an allusive and temporal attempt at wholeness.

Taken from Carroll, this chimera unifies only to fragment, the allusive work which cannot recreate itself as a whole being and instead gathers its many decaying features in a vision of monstrosity. The loud incoherent wail mirrors the broken strains of the street-pianos, fracturing despite their unified tone, a being that haunts Eliot's past with its grief-stricken temporal losses. Yet having met it, he can now recognize it as a being of beauty, if ultimately also of decline. Resolving its obsessions with decaying time and the present loss of the past, Eliot himself redeems *Inventions* from the disappointment he had originally ascribed to it. Freed from the worries of personal stagnation following "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" and modern literary decline. Eliot now sees allusions becoming part of a larger memory which in its stillness will make them whole. Carroll's teatime is, in the later works of Eliot, finally allowed its consumption, memory sustaining the still point in its entirety, the mouth no longer gnawing around the edges of a long-lost past.