

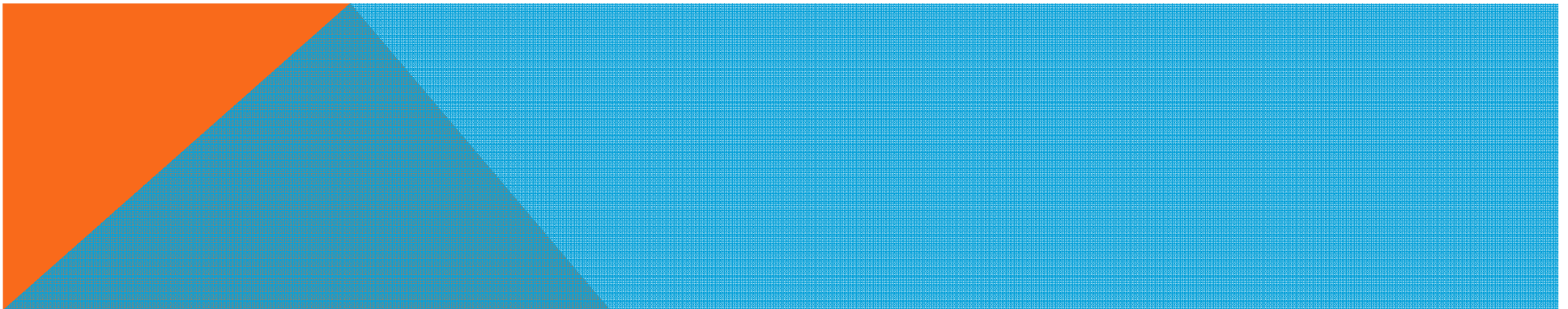
THE LOVE SONG OF J.
ALFRED PRUFROCK

BY T. S. ELIOT



REFERENCE

- Manju Jain's An anthology of Poems by T.S. Eliot

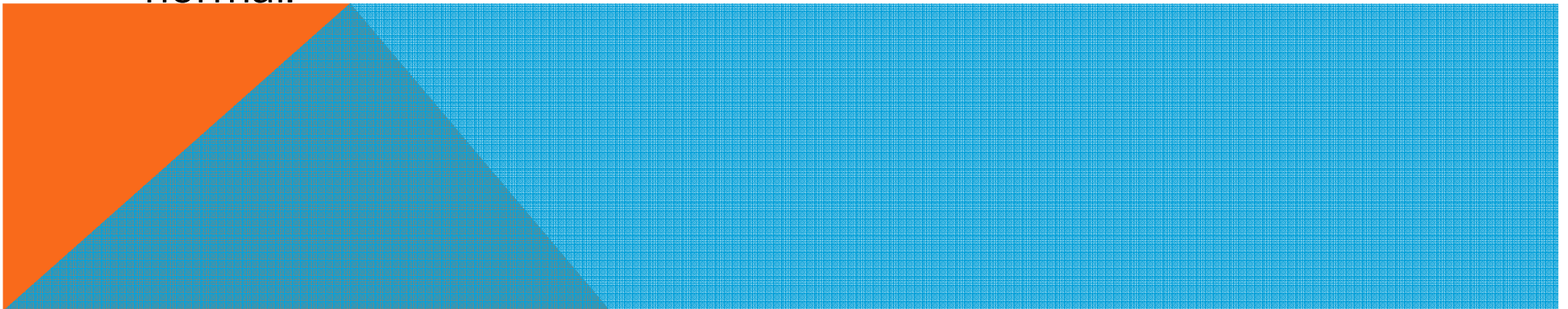


T.S. ELIOT

- one of the most important poets of 20th century.
- Born on 25th September 1888 in the United States
- a brilliant student in school and won a gold medal for Latin. Studied at Harvard.
- was influenced by lectures of Irving Babbit and George Santayana.
- studied Arthur Symon's book The Symbolist Movement in Literature.
- draws heavily from the famous French poets Charles Baudelaire and Jules Laforgue.
- earlier poems were published in 1917 in a collection entitled Prufrock and other Observations.
- "The Waste Land" was published in 1922 in the magazine The Criterion which was being edited by T.S. Eliot .
- In 1925 the Collected Poems of T.S. Eliot was published. He continued editing The Criterion till 1939.
- received the Noble Prize for literature in 1948
- died in London on 4th January 1965

T.S. ELIOT'S POETRY

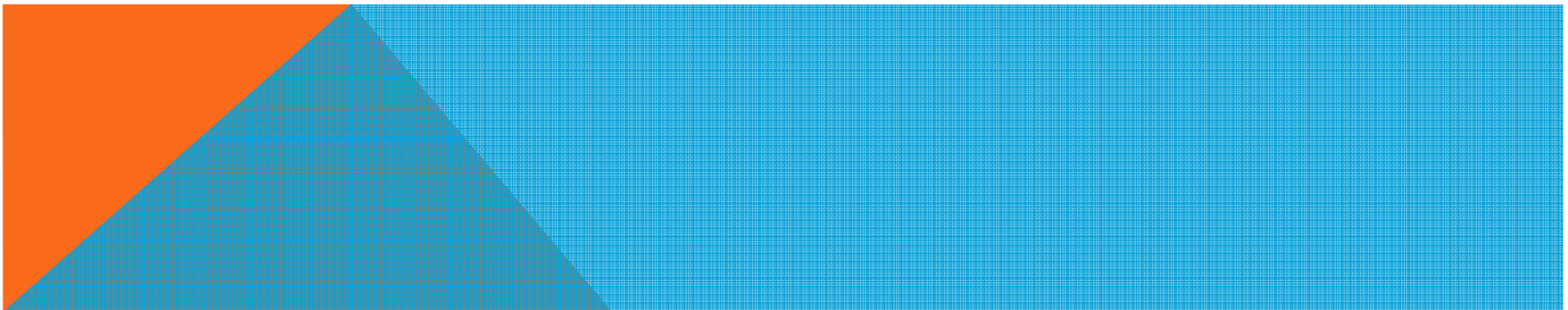
- We always find an epigraph in the beginning of the poems. These epigraphs can be interpreted variously according to the theme and nature of the poem.
- We often find Eliot choosing a character like Prufrock, Sweeney, Gerontion and portraying the character with such idiom and diction that he unravels what lies behind the action and beneath the appearance.
- Intertextual allusions are often used to achieve a historical sense and for entering into the realm of feelings
- T.S. Eliot uses elements of language and nature as symbols and creates special effects often by juxtaposing the grotesque and the normal.



TITLE OF THE POEM: THE LOVE SONG OF J. ALFRED PRUFROCK

- Eliot saw the name Prufrock Littau, furniture Wholesalers on advertisements in St Louis.
- The name compounded of 'prude' and 'frock', awakens verbal associations of prudence, primness, prudishness and dandyism.
- In his early drafts, Eliot gave the poem the subtitle "Prufrock among the Women." This subtitle was apparently discarded before publication. Eliot called the poem a "love song" in reference to Rudyard Kipling's poem "The Love Song of Har Dyal". Eliot addressed a meeting of the Kipling Society and discussed the influence of Kipling upon his own poetry:

“Traces of Kipling appear in my own mature verse where no diligent scholarly sleuth has yet observed them, but which I am myself prepared to disclose. I once wrote a poem called "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock": I am convinced that it would never have been called "Love Song" but for a title of Kipling's that stuck obstinately in my head: "The Love Song of Har Dyal"



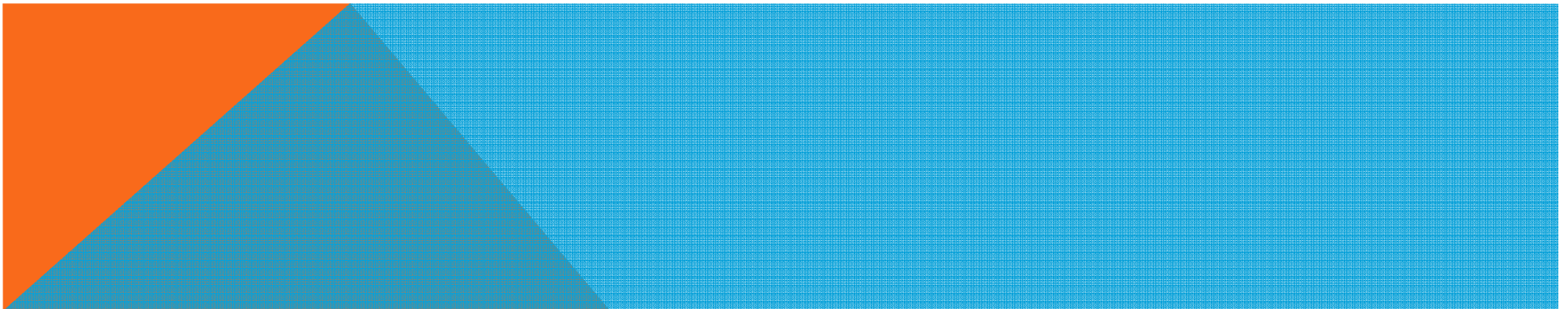
EPIGRAPH
DANTE



EPIGRAPH: DANTE'S INFERNO XXVI, 61-6

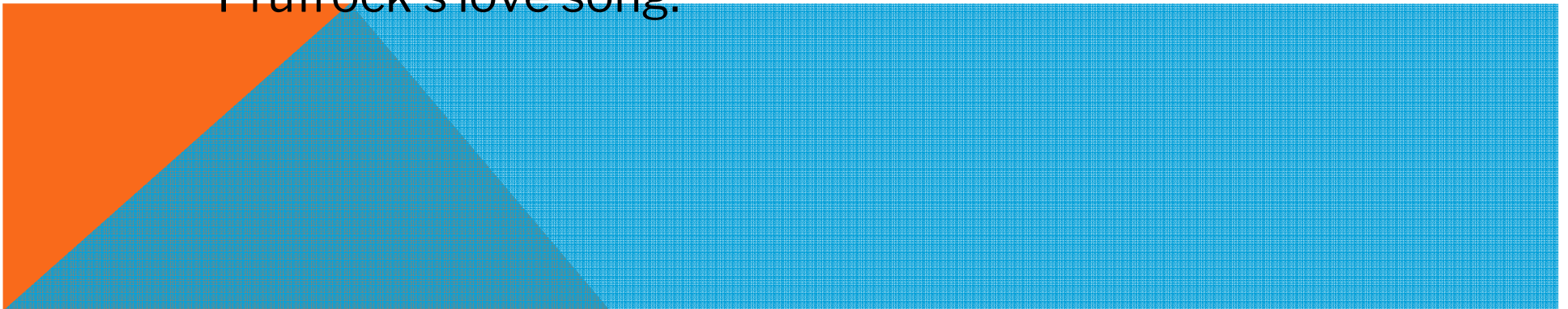
*Io credesse che mia
risposta fosse/
A persona che mai
tornasse al mondo,/
Questa fiamma staria
senza piu scosse./
Ma perciocchè
 giammai di questo
fondo/
Non tornò vivo alcun,
s'i'odo il vero,/
Senza tema d'infamia
ti rispondo.*

If I but thought that my
response were made
to one perhaps
returning to the world,
this tongue of flame
would cease to flicker.
But since, up from
these depths, no one
has yet
returned alive, if what I
hear is true,
I answer without fear
of being shamed



EPIGRAPH: ITS RELEVANCE

In context, the epigraph refers to a meeting between Dante and Guido da Montefeltro, who was condemned to the eighth circle of Hell for providing counsel to Pope Boniface VIII, who wished to use Guido's advice for a nefarious undertaking. This encounter follows Dante's meeting with Ulysses, who himself is also condemned to the circle of the Fraudulent. According to Ron Banerjee, the epigraph serves to cast ironic light on Prufrock's intent. Like Guido, Prufrock had never intended his story to be told, and so by quoting Guido, Eliot reveals his view of Prufrock's love song.



THE POEM

Let us go then, you and I,

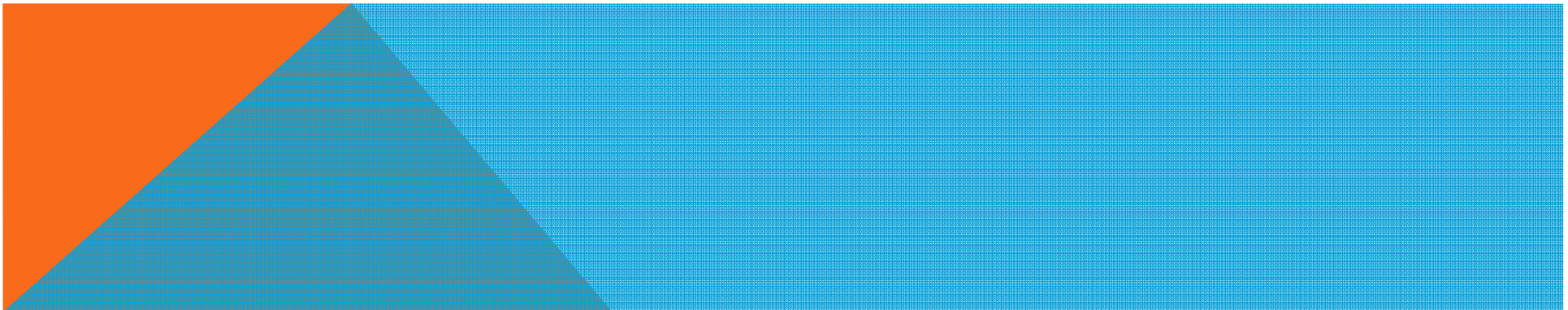
In the opening line “Let us go then, you and I”, three of the seven words are pronouns. The question that immediately arises is who is the ‘you’, the implied reader /listener being addressed? Guido reveals his identity to Dante only because he mistakes Dante for one of the damned, like himself, for whom there is no escape from hell. It would thereby follow that Prufrock’s relationship to the author is similar to that of Guido’s to Dante, and that Prufrock is willing to speak only because he believes that his love song will not be heard by anybody else since he and his creator are both imprisoned in hell. The implied listener could be the author, the reader, or Prufrock addressing himself since he cannot escape from the circle of his consciousness. There is a shifting and merging of the point of views of the poet, persona and reader, so that the distinction among them is blurred. Even while Prufrock is addressing himself, he implicates the reader and the author in his speech. The author, too, is a ‘split speaker’ who assumes different voices. For instance, Dante, the author assumes the voice of Guido and also remains detached from him. And Eliot said that Prufrock “was partly a dramatic creation of a man of about 40 ...and partly an expression of feeling of my own”. If the ‘you’ being addressed is Prufrock himself, the reader, in reading the love song is by implication also trapped within the closed circuit of Prufrock’s consciousness.

THE POEM

When the evening is spread out against the sky

Like a patient etherized upon a table;

- ‘etherized’ has clinical and romantic connotations. It suggests ether which is used for anaesthetics and ‘ethereal’ which awakens romantic associations. The clinical overtones of the pun undercut the descriptions of evening in Romantic poetry, as in Wordsworth’s sonnet, “It is a beauteous evening, Calm and Free”.
- It suggests the suspended state of Prufrock’s consciousness.



“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:”

(4-7)

Imagery of an *Ugly*



Cheap Hotel

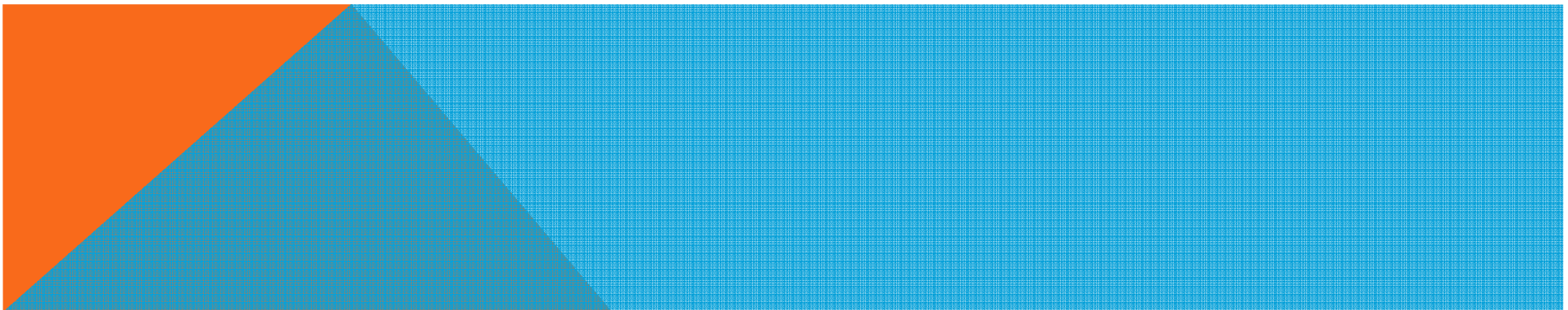
Half-deserted Streets

THE POEM (LINES 8-9)

Streets that follow
like a tedious
argument

Of insidious intent

[Insidious-
proceeding in a
gradual, subtle
way, but with
very harmful
effects.]



THE POEM (LINES 10-12)

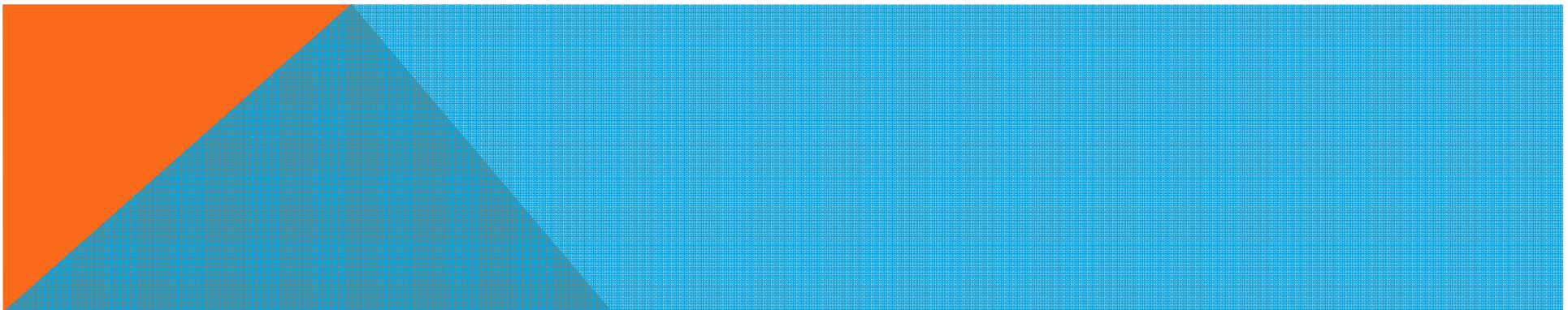
To lead you to an overwhelming question ...

Oh, do not ask, "What is it?"

Let us go and make our visit.

- The overwhelming question remains unstated and indeterminate, although it has been interpreted as Prufrock's intended proposal to the lady is about to visit, and as a question concerning the meaning of Prufrock's life, social and existence.

(overwhelming - very great in amount, profuse, enormous, immense, inordinate)



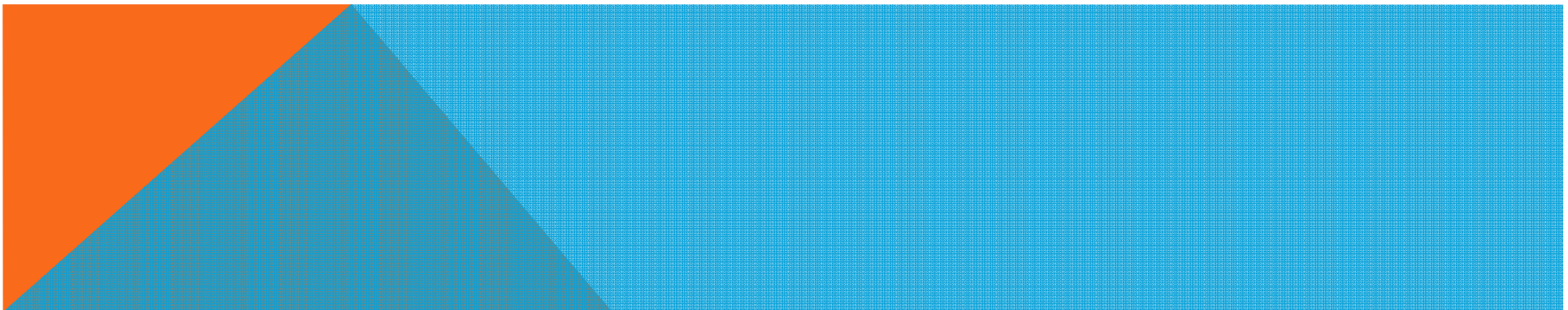
THE POEM (LINES 13-4)

In the room the women come
and go

Talking of Michelangelo.

Michelangelo: Italian sculptor,
painter, architect, and poet;
full name Michelangelo
Buonarroti.

- This epitomises the social settings and ethos of the poem. Prufrock's inability to articulate his feelings is in contrast to the linguistic self-assurance of the women



THE POEM (LINES 15-22)

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.

- The sources of urban imagery is autobiographical and literary. The poet here compares the fog and smoke with a cat. The description of fog in terms of a cat is an example of Eliot's use of conceit to express Prufrock's mental state. Prufrock contemplates action through movement of the cat and the fog, but the contemplation ends in inertia.



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AND INDEED THERE WILL BE TIME (LINE 23)

- An allusion to the first line from the poem “To His Coy Mistress” by Andrew Marvell:

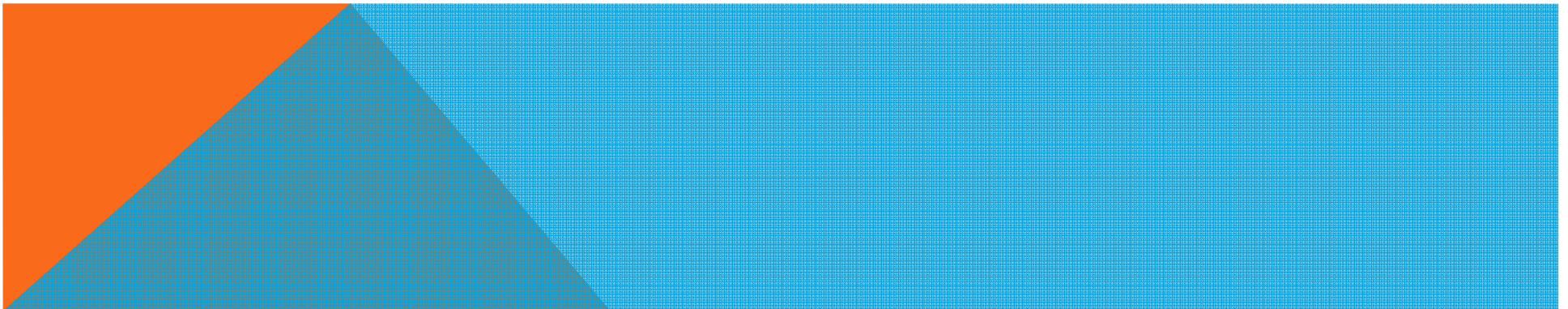
“Had we but world enough and time”

- The poet in the poem tries to persuade his mistress of the urgency of the passage of time. Prufrock however takes comfort in the thought that there will be time to make a decision. But his indecision and procrastination paradoxically serve only to increase the tension and to heighten his awareness that the crucial moment will inevitably arrive.

“To His Coy Mistress” by Andrew Marvell

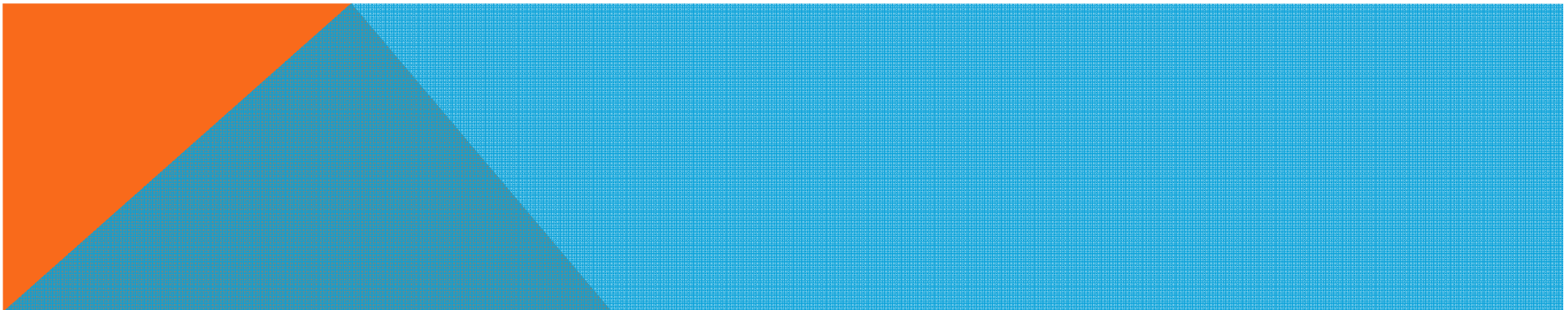


AND INDEED THERE WILL BE TIME
FOR THE YELLOW SMOKE THAT SLIDES ALONG THE STREET,
RUBBING ITS BACK UPON THE WINDOW-PANES;
THERE WILL BE TIME, THERE WILL BE TIME
TO PREPARE A FACE TO MEET THE FACES THAT YOU MEET;
THERE WILL BE TIME TO MURDER AND CREATE,
AND TIME FOR ALL THE WORKS AND DAYS OF HANDS
THAT 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. **(LINES 23-34)**



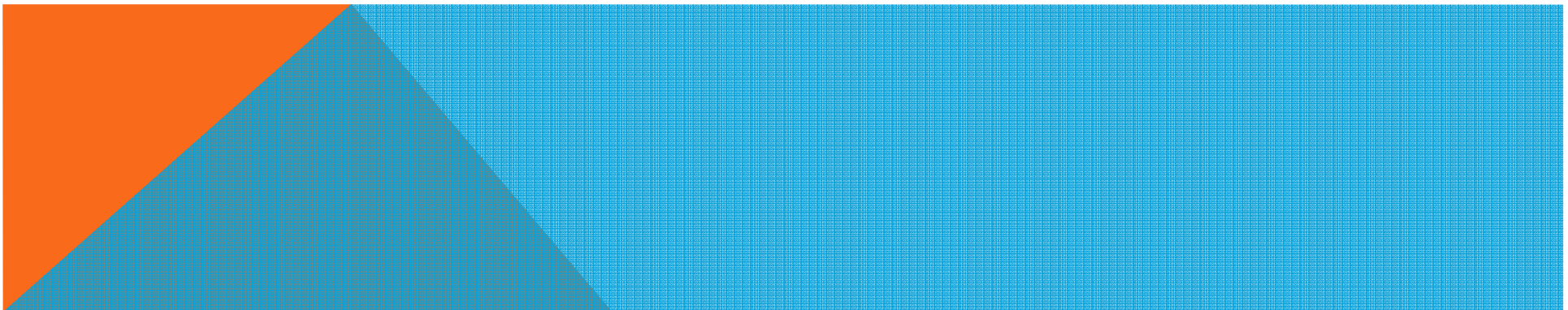
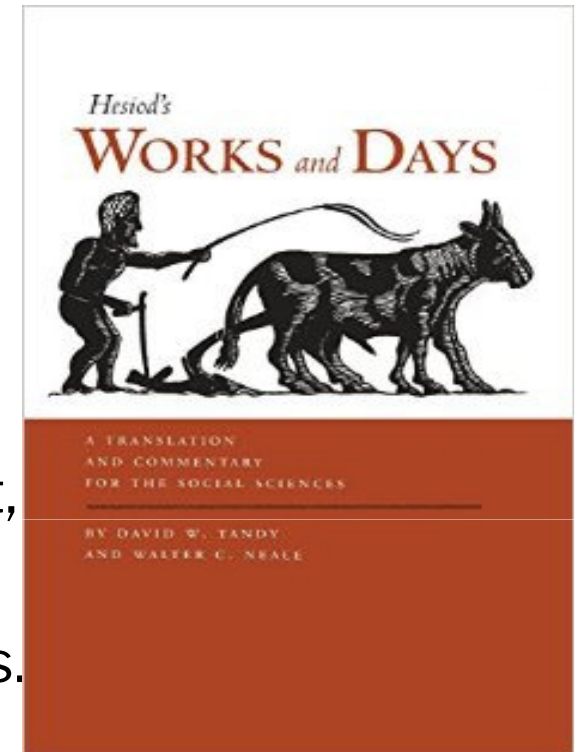
LINES 23-48

- The phrase ‘there will be time’ and variants upon it reverberate throughout this section. It echoes the words of the preacher in Ecclesiastes iii, 1-8: *To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven: A time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up that which is planted; A time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up; A time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance; A time to cast away stones, and a time to gather stones together; a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing; A time to get, and a time to lose; a time to keep, and a time to cast away; A time to rend, and a time to sew; a time to keep silence, and a time to speak;*
- The language draws upon the portentousness of Ecclesiastes while accentuating the gulf between the momentous nature of the acts listed there and the banalities of Prufrock’s world.



AND TIME FOR ALL THE WORKS AND DAYS OF HANDS (LINE 29)

- An echo of the title “works and Days”, a poem by the Greek writer Hesiod. The poem advocates honest labour and contains maxims and instructions on agriculture. There is a mock heroic contrast between the world of the peasant, evoked by the title of the poem, and the over refined society in which Prufrock lives.



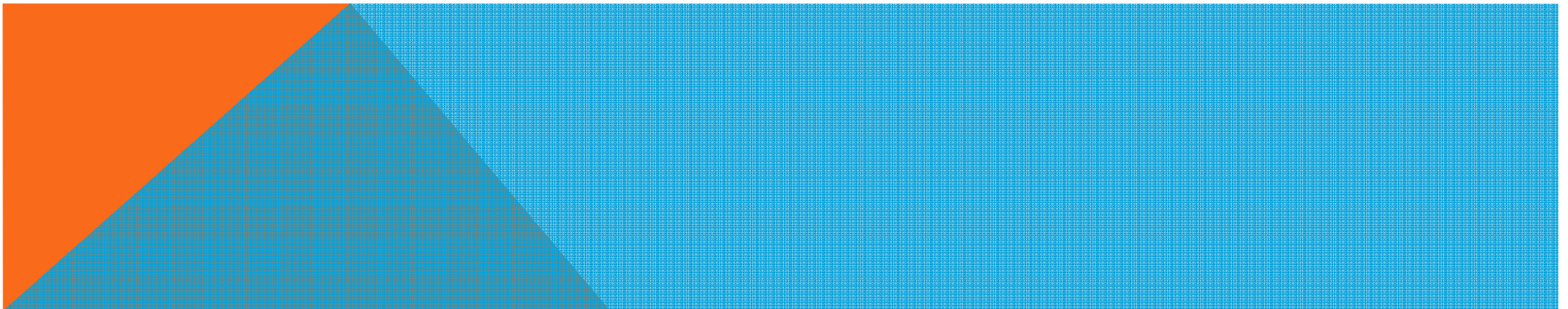
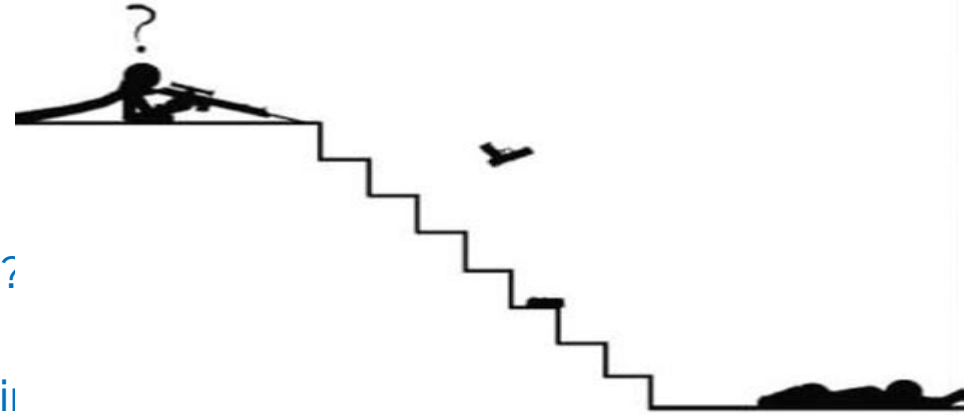
LINES: 37-9

And indeed there will be time

To wonder, “Do I dare?” and, “Do I dare?”

Time to turn back and descend the stair

- A central situation in Eliot’s early poems is the proposed ascent of a staircase, at the top of which awaits a woman who is both desired and feared. Possibly Eliot may have had in mind Doestoevsky’s *Crime and Punishment*, in which a young man, Raskolnikov, ascends a staircase to murder a woman. The image of the stair is an ambivalent one. It posits the possibility of communication while preserving a saving distance between the protagonist and the woman. It also implies the effort needed to attain an ideal.



LINES 40-48

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 p

(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.



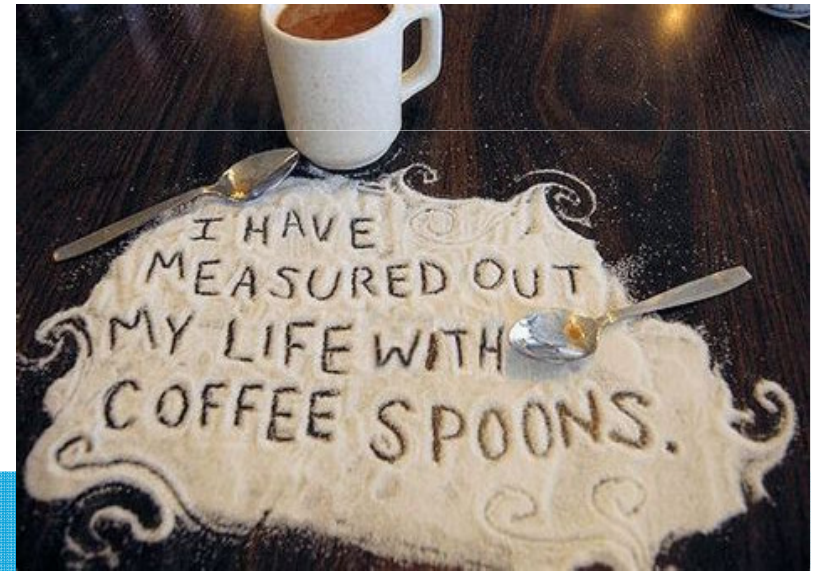
LINES 49- 51

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;

- (F.O. Matthiessen singled out this line: “the general, Platitudinous reflection is suddenly punctuated with an Electric shock which flashes into the mind, in a single, Concrete, ironic picture, Prufock’s futile way of existence)
- Here T.S. Eliot appears to allude to the philosophy of French thinker Henry Bergson (1859-1941) who proposes that though time is calculated in series of measurable units, actually our consciousness perceives them in a continuum without any succession of measurable duration.



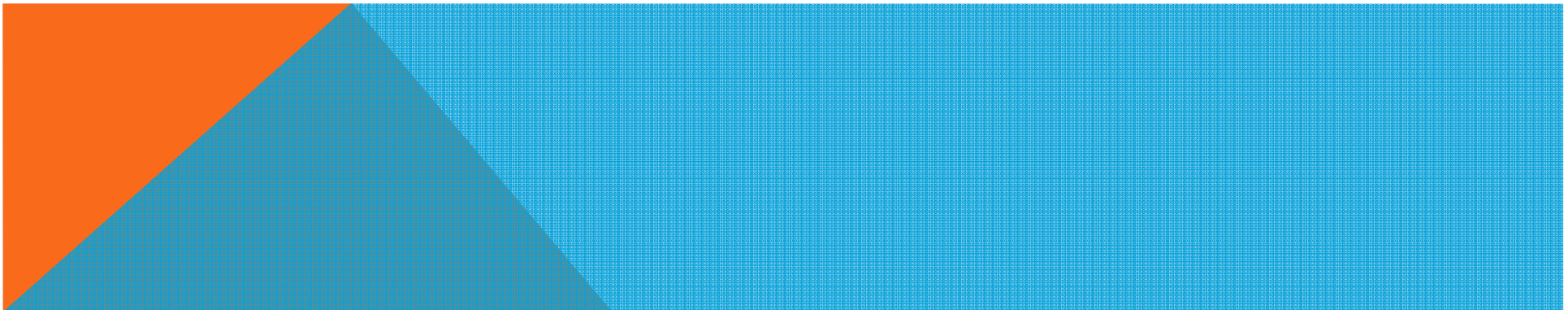
LINES: 52-54

I know the voices dying with a dying fall

Beneath the music from a farther room.

So how should I presume?

- Dying fall is an echo of the words of Duke Orsino in Shakespeare's Twelfth Night , Act I,i: "That strain again! It had a dying fall". Orsino is love sick; the music suits his mood. Voices dying with the dying fall would be voices fading away gradually. There is probably a play on the notion of the voices dying and the death-in-life existence of Prufrock and the women, submerged beneath the music and the conversation of a repetitive, monotonous, social routine.

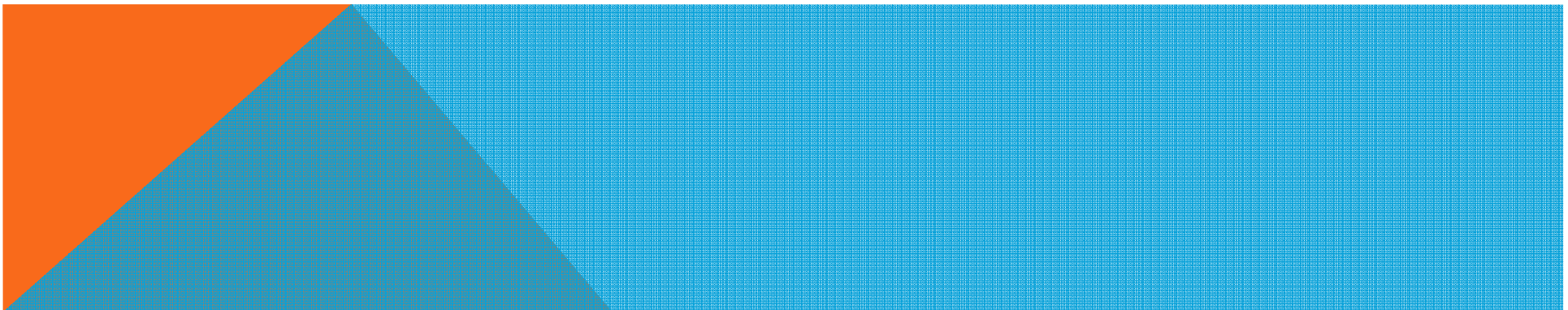


LINES 55-61

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?



- Prufrock feels both attracted and repelled , less by a specific woman than by the fragmented parts of female body—hands, eyes, arms. The impersonal use of definite articles with parts of the body fragments any sense of personal identity



LINES 62-9

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!)

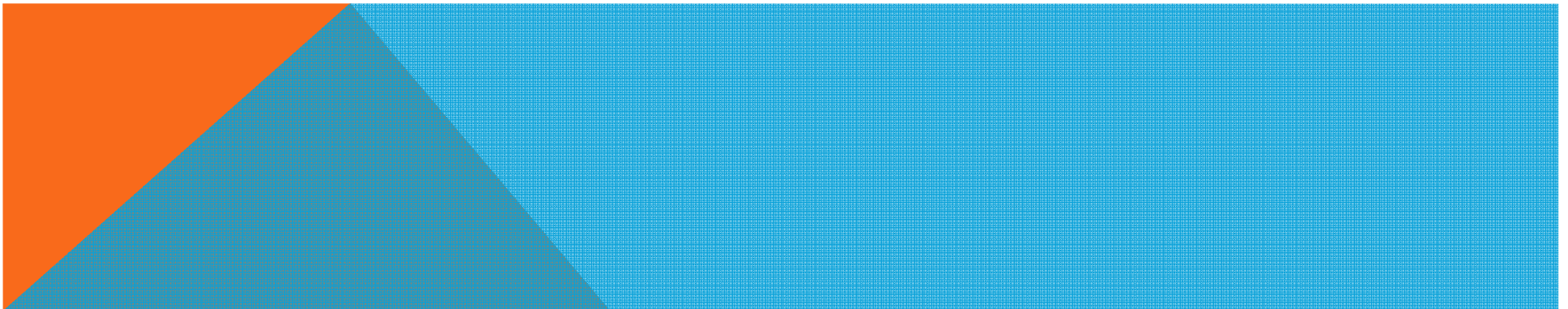
Is it perfume from a dress

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?

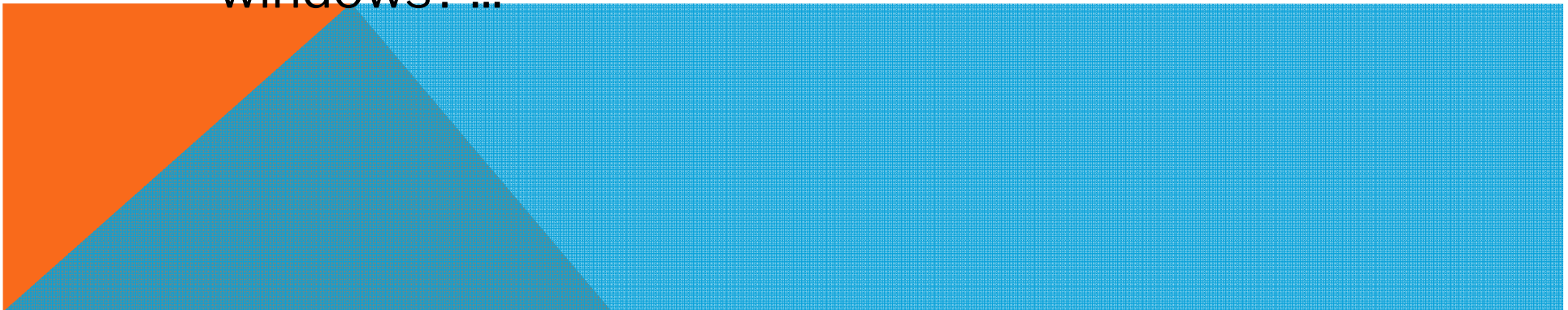


LINES 70-72

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.
Lines 73-74



LINES 75-80

And the afternoon, the evening, sleeps so peacefully!

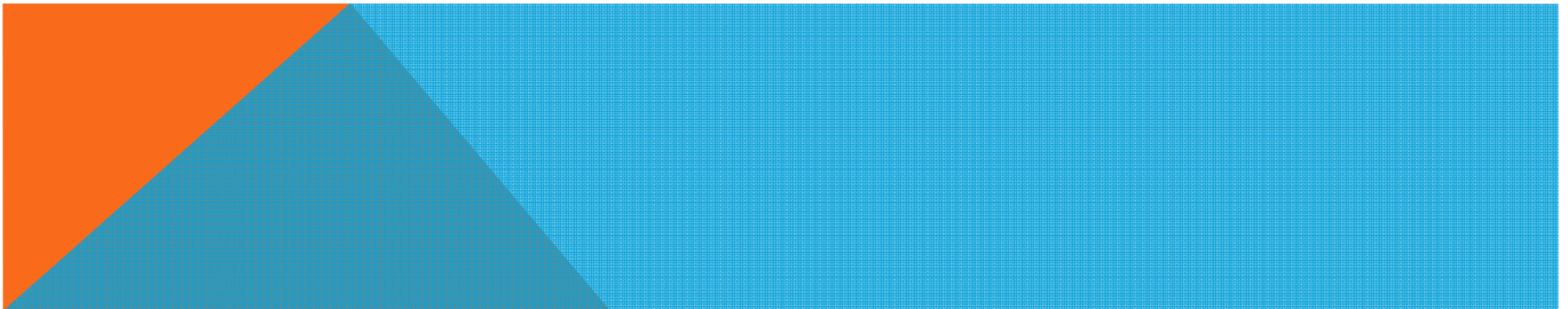
Smoothed by long fingers,

Asleep ... tired ... or it malingers, (to pretend or exaggerate incapacity or illness
(as to avoid duty or work))

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?



LINE 81 AND 82

But though I have wept and fasted, wept and prayed,

- (An echo of the Biblical lines: “they mourned, wept and fasted,” The line suggests Prufrock’s preparation for the role of prophet which he fails to perform and later disclaims.)

Though I have seen my head (grown slightly bald) brought in upon a platter,

- (John the Baptist was decapitated on Herod’s order and his head brought upon a platter before the court. Herod presented it to Salome, who had demanded it as a reward for her dancing. John the Baptist had declared Herod’s marriage Herodias, Salome’s mother unlawful, on the ground that she was Herod’s brother’s wife. The story is told in Mark VI and Matthew XIV, 3-11.

Prufrock draws a mock parallel between himself and John the Baptist in his feeling of being socially decapitated. Prufrock lacks the courage to tell the truth and so



LINES 83-6

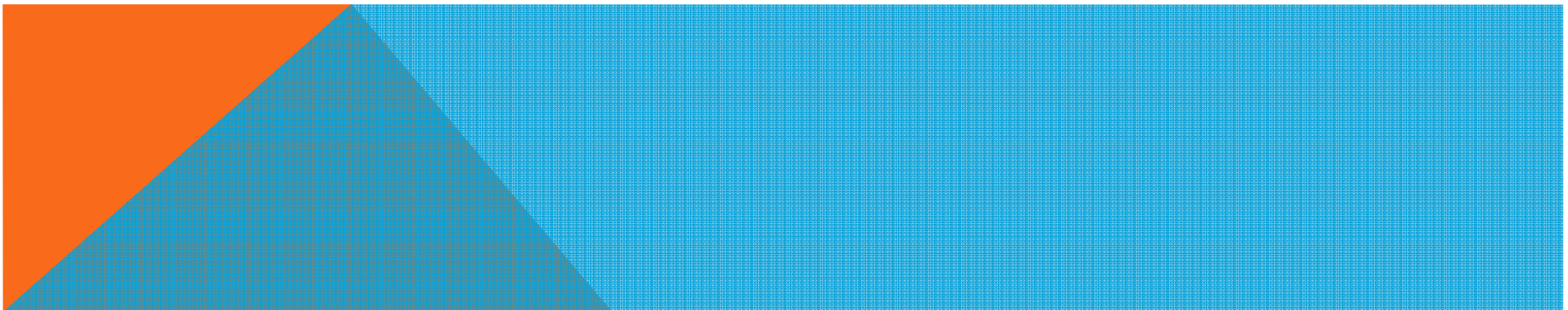
I am no prophet — and
here's no great matter;

I have seen the moment of
my greatness flicker,

And I have seen the eternal
Footman hold my coat,
and snicker,

And in short, I was afraid.

**(the eternal footman- a
parodic allusion to
Bunyan's The Pilgrim's
progress.)**



LINES 87-99

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 towards 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."

Line 87- the past conditional tense suggests that the question is rhetorical—it would not have been worth it. The crucial moment is over and he tries to rationalize his failure.

Line 92- Prufrock probably alludes to his social universe, but to disturb it by posing the overwhelming question would be as momentous an act as disturbing the universe itself.

Line 94-95- Two Lazaruses are mentioned in the Bible. One was the brother of Martha and Mary whom Christ brought to life because of their imploration. The parable of other Lazarus is narrated in Luke XVI. Lazarus was the beggar at the gate of Dives. After their death, Dives goes to hell and Lazarus to heaven. Dives implored Abraham to send Lazarus to his brothers to warn them of the torment of the hell. But Abraham refused: "If they hear not Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded, though one rose

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 SHIRT,

AND TURNING TOWARD THE WINDOW, SHOULD SAY

“THAT IS NOT IT AT ALL,

THAT IS NOT WHAT I MEANT, AT ALL.”

(LINES 100-10)



LINES 111-19

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;

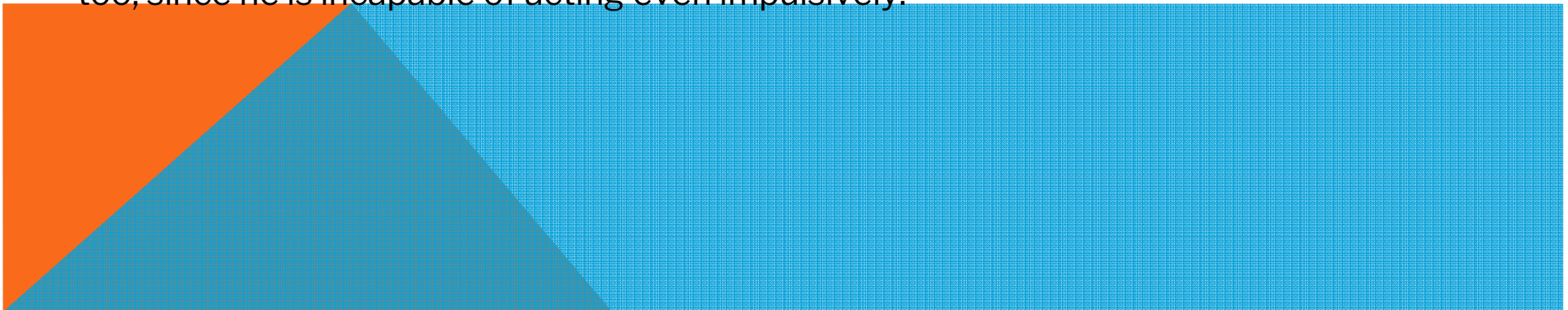
At times, indeed, almost ridiculous—

Almost, at times, the Fool.



“NO! I AM NOT PRINCE HAMLET, NOR WAS MEANT TO BE;” EXPLANATION

- **This passage was influenced by Laforgue.**
- Hamlet, prince of Denmark, had been commanded by his father’s ghost to take revenge on Claudius, his uncle. Claudius had murdered Hamlet’s father to usurp the throne and married his mother, Gertrude. Hamlet however vacillates and delays in taking action.
- According to the 19th century interpretations of the play especially that of Coleridge, the cause of Hamlet’s inaction is that his will is paralyzed by too much reflection and self-analysis. After the encounter with his father’s ghost Hamlet exclaims: “The time is out of joint: O cursed sprite,/ That ever I was born to set it right”.
- Prufrock may resemble Hamlet in his indecisiveness and procrastination, but he rejects the role because he is aware of his inadequacy to perform the heroic task of setting the world in order. He is not born to set it right. Consequently, he takes refuge in self-mockery and distances himself from the prince by assigning to himself the un-heroic, subordinate roles in the play. Paradoxically though, Hamlet resorts to hasty, impulsive action when he kills Polonius, mistaking him for Claudius. Prufrock is disassociated from Hamlet in this respect too, since he is incapable of acting even impulsively.



LINES 120-25

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.



An underwater photograph showing a vibrant coral reef. The foreground is dominated by large, colorful coral structures in shades of purple, pink, and orange. The background is a deep blue sea with many small, dark fish swimming. The lighting is bright, creating a clear view of the underwater environment.

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.

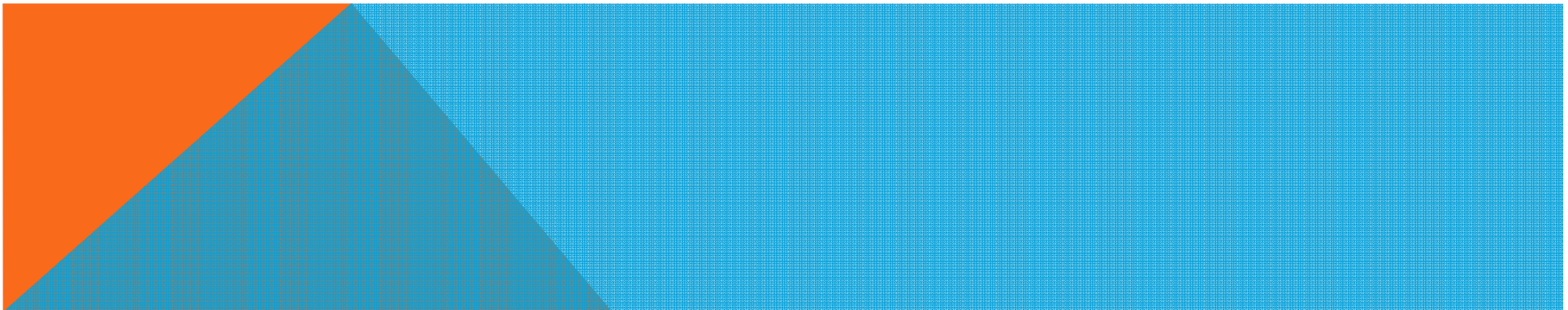
Lines 126-31

LINES 126-131

- These lines combine a number of allusions, including Nerval's "El Desdichado" and Baudelaire's "La Vie Anterieure": "Long was my home among vast porticos, which the suns of the sea tinged with a thousand fires..."
- The three final lines seem to echo John Masefield's 'Cardigan Bay' from Salt Water Ballads:

Delicate, cool sea-weeds, green and amber-brown,
In beds where shaken sunlight, slowly filters down
On many a drowned seventy four, many a sunken town,
And the whitening of the dead men's skulls.

- The imagery is also drawn from "The Forsaken Mermaid" by Matthew Arnold. The poem is about a mermaid forsaken by his mate, a mortal woman, who responds to the call of her own world.



INTERPRETATION (LINES 126-31)

These lines have a strangely disturbing quality despite their haunting beauty.

Danger is implicit in Prufrock's marine paradise, since mermaids traditionally drown their lovers. The allusion to Masefield's poem, too, has disquieting overtones, since the dead men's skulls are a disturbing contrast to the delicacy of the earlier imagery.

