

## ELIOT AND LANCELOT ANDREWES. A QUESTION OF PUNCTUATION AND BELIEF

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«Eliot», writes Peter Ackroyd in the 1984 biography, «always needed a safety net, as it were, before he indulged in his own acrobatics»<sup>1</sup> Very true: like Pound, like Joyce, he was incapable of inventing either a character or a situation to put him in. Moreover, he was at a loss to create even a poetical style and diction which was entirely his own; when he tried (in *Sweeney Agonistes*, for example) confidence quickly flagged, and the works remained fragments. His great gift was manipulation: the taking of other writers' forms, ideas and particularly language, and assimilating them within an original literary design. The guiding hand of other writers lay particularly heavily upon the opening lines of his major poems — Chaucer in «The Waste Land», Guido Cavalcanti («Perch» Io Non Spero Di Tornar Giamai) in «Ash Wednesday» — as if he needed other «voices» to, as it were, kickstart himself into composition. Beginning «Journey of the Magi» with an adaptation of an extract from Lancelot Andrewes' 1622 Christmas sermon is, then, no departure from his usual method of composition.

Yet in other poems, even though the narrative voice shifts continually (from Chaucer to Ezekiel to Wagner to Dante via James Frazer in «The Burial of the Dead») there is no bracketing off of one «contributor» from the other. The effect given is that of one homogeneous persona — Prufrock the knight of the Grail legends — through whom Eliot is speaking.

In the first five lines of «Journey», Eliot goes to some lengths to subjectify his character; not, as in previous creations, by juxtaposing source references in a novel way, but by actually making changes in Andrewes' text. Instead of «A cold coming they had of it» there is the royal «we», no less personal for *being* royal; «... just the worst time of year to take a journey, and specially a long journey in»<sup>2</sup> becomes «Just the worst time of the year / For a journey, and such a long journey, *Such* a long journey»: we can virtually hear the magus drawing a long, deep sigh at the memory of what he, *personally*, underwent.

Then, however, Eliot seems to spoil it all by rather odd — and seemingly unnecessary — use of quotation marks. These appear to isolate the Andrewes adaptation from the rest of the poem, thus giving the lines back to their creator: «I admit it: they were a steal». The question is, what is the poet to do next? Carry on with himself as narrator? Not at all, since the first person plural crops up again in line 8 «There were times *we* regretted». It is still the magus who is addressing us.

<sup>1</sup> PETER ACKROYD, *T. S. Eliot* (London: Hamish Hamilton 1984; reprint ed. Cardinal (1988) p. 147.

<sup>2</sup> G. M. STORY ed. *Lancelot Andrewes - Sermons* (Oxford: At the Clarendon Press 1967) p. 109.

To account for the quotation marks I think we need to ask ourselves what type of poem this is. By making a historico-biblical figure speak to us, Eliot is obviously creating a dramatic monologue in the tradition of Browning. Given this fact, we should suspend belief and say «Very well: the author is Balthasar, Melchior or Gaspar», and *as* author he may use whatever punctuation he damn well pleases. He'll have his reasons.

Visualize the situation, The magus long returned to his kingdom, has set a moment aside to rekindle memories of an event which took place... How many years ago? Thirty-one? Thirty-two? Certainly not thirty-three, because Christ has not yet been crucified («I should be glad of another death») and because common-day objects and occurrences which were to assume a new significance (dicing for pieces of silver, three trees glimpsed against the horizon as a foreshadowing of Golgotha) are still only bits of the scenery, landmarks and events noted down in his diary all those years before.

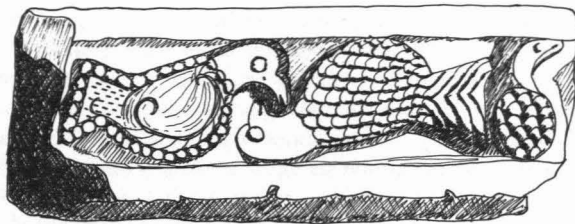
«In his diary». Here, I believe, is the answer to the quotation puzzle. We are not *supposed* to think of Eliot reshaping Andrewes, but of the magus jogging his own memory by reading back the chronicle of a pilgrimage. By reliving the experience in such a fashion, he is attempting to convince himself that the whole endeavour has not been «all folly» a complete waste of time.

One should not, however, dismiss the importance of Andrewes' work in the creation of «Journey». The narrator, in sections one and three at least, employs a tone —and, more importantly, a method of arranging ideas— of which «The Right Reverend Father of God, Lancelot, Bishop of Windsor» would have approved most heartily. When developing a sermon, he would take a very short biblical quotation (in this case Matthew 2:1 «...there came wise men from the east to Jerusalem), take a key word or words from it (here, the notion of «coming») and squeeze every last ounce of meaning from them, using whole paragraphs (whole *pages* if necessary) to do so. In lines 6-10 Eliot does exactly the same thing; the adjectives «cold» and «hard» have been applied to the journey, but in what sense? He explains at length. Again, in lines 36-9, the words-become-concepts of Birth and Death are given such a thorough overhaul that one comes to mean the other: the nativity of Christ. —Who, the stars have foretold, will uproot and transform the age-old concepts of man's relationship with God has been a «death» to them, in the sense that until He has risen, they inhabit an agonizing limbo of unproven belief. On the other hand, it is implied, His death will mean *rebirth* for the world. This form of analysis through repetition and re-examination, until the biblical sense of a word is disassociated from its dictionary definition, is (you may say) Andrewes to the letter.

In the poem's second section, however, such matters as analysis through repetition are thrown to the four winds. What we are confronted with is a series of fleeting and random glimpses of the last stages of the pilgrimage. The trees and the dicing have already been accounted for: the white horse may well be connected with the apocalyptic chargers of Revelations 6, vv. 2 and 19. This leaves us, however, with «a running stream and a water-mill beating the darkness»; no possible biblical reference here. We should remember two things, however: first, that, this being a travelogue (potentially a *mere* travelogue) the magus was taking note of

everything that he believed might assume importance at a later date. In this particular case he was wrong. If one classifies the reference as meaningless, however, we attribute to the narrator a certainty of foresight which he himself did not dare to believe he possessed. In so doing, in short, we are depriving the poem of all its dramatic tension, which, to my mind, is its most important feature. Will the journey — and what happened on the way — prove to be important or not?

Secondly, there is the question of where Eliot stood in relation to all this. It should be remembered that, despite the employment of narrator-as-distancing-technique, he himself was in the full throes of religious conversion (to Anglo-Catholicism) at the time of composition. If a writer does not put something of himself into his creation, in however ambiguous a manner, the whole thing tends to become a bloodless literary exercise — which «Journey» most certainly is not — and in citing the water-mill Eliot was inserting into the poem a vivid impression — that of «six rufians seen through an open window playing cards at night at a small French railway junction where there was a water-mill»<sup>3</sup> that he himself was once had. *Why* was this impression so vivid? Why did it stand out from the million others received? No reason. Did it have any significance? Probably not. This being the case, how can anyone — most especially a magus — be expected to sort out the wheat from the chaff of a lifeworth of experience and say «*This* is a decisive factor»? We may include the calling and perhaps even up to one's death — as merely one more impression in a whole random series that we simply chose to hang onto, for reasons that not even we are fully able to explain. In a discussion with Hugh Sykes Davies about marxists, Eliot is recorded as having said «They seem to be certain of what they believe. My own beliefs are hold with a scepticism which I never ever hope to be rid of»<sup>4</sup>. By associating himself (via the image in line 23) with the magus, he appears to be implying that questioning the validity of pontetially blind faith is a human failing which even Christ's resurrection could not put an end to. Not everyone happens to be as unwavering in belief as Lancelot Andrewes.



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<sup>3</sup> T. S. ELIOT, *Selected Prose Of T. S. Eliot* (ed. Frank Kermode) (London: Faber & Faber, 1975) p. 91.

<sup>4</sup> Quoted in Peter Ackroyd, *T. S. Eliot* p. 163.