



Ash-Wednesday: Getting Nowhere

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THIS is hardly an encouraging title, but a heading does not have to make everyone feel better; it is enough if it commands some unlikely angle. So, I propose that 'getting nowhere', far from being a let-down or a sign of failure, may be the best of outcomes for a poet keen to disconnect our usual ways of thinking, and to evoke un-times and non-places.

Eliot is such a poet. I am not sure, however, that his Anglo-Catholicism is usefully invoked here. Rather, to frame the argument, let me distinguish two perspectives: on the one hand, that shaped by what I shall call 'humanist' or 'secular' time; on the other, a projection of the world that strives after time 'not in the scheme of generation'; 'sacred', mythic time.

Secular time is what clocks measure, the ticking of the world, as it comes into being and simultaneously passes away. This time never repeats itself; its defining attribute is sequence, whereby every moment gives way to the next; and each instant (if only because of its position in the sequence) is unique. This day, with thousands of years behind it, can never occur again. On the page, this means a forward-moving humanistic syntax representing life as a series of deeds and choices. Resonant with moral consequence, secular grammar organises our moment-by-moment flux into a procession of events. Favourite conjunctions are 'therefore' and 'because'. It is perfect for novels and plays.

Naturally, a logical/moral sense of things runs through Eliot's writing; it is, however, offset by an oppositional strain: that is, a sense of sacred time. Concerned less with sequence than with recurrence, re-enactment is central to this understanding of things. In nature, the living die, but



in the realm of the sacred, birth-death-rebirth is perpetually played, so that the dead return, clad in eternity, as is Joe Hill in the song, or Elvis in his many sightings. They are always with us. Alternatively, just as mythic figures are, *in perpetuum*, alive, they may similarly be dead: the Lamb slain today is no less slain from the foundation of the world: it has always been being sacrificed, in sacred time, where life is seen not as a procession of events so much as a simultaneity. Thus, sacred time reaches for timelessness: striving to compress all present-future-past, into a transparent now where events occur not just because we make them, but so 'that it might be fulfilled that was spoken by the prophets', as if the future already preceded the present.

In this syntax, the great conjunctive is simply 'and'. And: word of reiteration, beloved of the Bible; conjunctive with least direction built into it, and so perhaps the closest our words (necessarily one after the other) get to being simultaneous. I would call this upsetting of time a 'sacred' projection of the world, as distinct from 'secular' vision. Without restricting Eliot to that dichotomy, from the outset of his career we meet a poetry intensely susceptible to the sensuous play of nature, yet at the same time yearning to be freed. This is the first step on the twisting stair of my discussion: the early poems and their propensity to melt place and actor into 'atmosphere'.

'Portrait of a Lady' begins with a room dissolving even as it materialises, 'among the smoke and fog of a December afternoon'. The verse mistrusts the seeming solidity of the places it evokes, and mistrusts their inhabitants too. It is ready to unsettle our everyday mind's acceptance of both these apparent realities. So, rising out of the haze summoned by the opening words, is something between a house and an hallucination. And how about the 'You' who fails to appear in the next line, yet exists enough to be addressed directly and handed responsibility – 'You have the scene arrange itself' – except that having the scene do so is not the same as arranging it oneself. Agency is fast dispersing itself. And even then the setting only *looks* as if it has stage-managed what is going on – 'as it will seem to do'. One phrase belies another, while the poem's darkened room is called into question by the very 'You' or eye that strives to see. In fact, amidst the

burdened air of the afternoon, the rings of light and touches of Juliet's tomb, the place was never more than 'effects' in any case; a simulacrum, waiting, not so much to be seen (and thus become convincing), as to be seen through (and thus escaped from, as a deception).

More alarmingly, the same might be said of the actors who play the parts: how real are they? How real is any of us, caught by the reflection of the lines?

*I feel like one who smiles, and turning shall remark
Suddenly, his expression in a glass.
My self-possession gutters....*

This is not just the embarrassment of the would-be sophisticate. It shivers on the brink of the abyss, for if self-possession's candle fails, what of self is left? Deprived of who we thought we were, feeling all the frailty of a consciousness continually dependent on its own uninterruptedness, and lit by no more than a light guttering to extinction, we are 'really in the dark'. 'Portrait of a Lady' may have been an early skirmish in Eliot's jousts against secular regimes of mind, but with increasing delicacy and growing confidence his poetry, from the *Observations* to the *Preludes*, *The Waste Land*, and beyond, takes up the challenge. 'Prufrock' makes a second step on the stair. Certainly, in 1917, verse that talked of drains and eateries and cheap accommodation might momentarily look realistic, even solidly put together, but 'Prufrock's' locales rest on nothing more three-dimensional than the echo of word with word. It is through these irrational sporadic rhymes that streets double in upon themselves to make retreats, and hotels leave behind the oyster shells that (except for the chime of the lines) better belong with restaurants. Even the sky of the second line is spread out, not to record some glorious sunset, but in order to answer a rhyming-word; a pronoun, not a person:

*Let us go then, you and I,
When the evening is spread out against the sky....*

The proper entities of this poem are neither places nor persons, they are sounds that ricochet around us, or (more exactly) echoes of sounds bouncing off one another: as when the come-and-go of women suddenly collides with a giant syllabled presence no one could have predicted in the

poem's room until Michelangelo materialised out of the rhyme.

Unpredictability, words, rhymes, rhythms, moving in undetermined directions, help the verse lay to rest the sequence and regularity of the secular, so that we may set out towards nowhere, that unplaced place, and be persuaded towards time new-made. So I brush past the poems we should examine, the theoretical writings, editorials, plays; *Ash-Wednesday* urges us inwards, to start the rearrangement of the self from inside the music of the verse.

By contrast with 'Prufrock' and 'Portrait', this poem sets no opening scene, not even the atmospherics of smoke and fog. It begins in an altogether stranger place: namely, someone else's poem – Guido Cavalcanti's, contemporary with Dante, out of a distant time, a foreign language, a mystery cult of love. This is a lot of luggage to bring aboard, so perhaps the suite needs to open with the erect figure of its insistent 'I.... I...': nineteen times repeated, announcing itself, and promising (it seems) to unfold the story lying behind the defeatedness of its declarations. But no such explanation is achieved. The narrative, if there is one, does not progress; the poem, instead, does just what it says it *cannot* do: it turns, then turns again, and again, in what seems empty space: 'Because .../ Because...', until the connective strength even of that conjunction loosens, as each additional link slips through its own substance instead of holding firm:

Because I do not hope to turn again
Because I do not hope
Because I do not hope to turn
Desiring this man's gift and that man's scope
I no longer strive to strive towards such things....

Striving not to strive is a difficult non-activity to maintain, but it does have an air of nowhere, the atmosphere and style of the unplaced place, and thus opens a way towards where we want to be. Yet how do we make the ascent or inward journey?

The opening stanza is often taken as a painful confession of emptiness: the self frustrated by its own weakness at every turn. Suppose we read it, instead, not as a portrait but as a piece of music. The nineteen 'I's need



not then be warring aspects of one psyche so much as the leading and answering voices of a never quite completed *fugato*, or fugue-like non-fugue, disobedient to the strict rules of the form, but all the more inclined to carry along the resonances of the originating term (*-fuge* 'a word element referring to "flight"' says the *Macquarie Dictionary*, '...fugitive, fleeting, transitory, ephemeral, fleeing, elusive, difficult to define'). The subject is veiled from us by the same phrasings that disclose it. Yet the great accomplishment of the poem is precisely that: to suspend the mind between meanings. To climb the twisting stair, we turn upon ourselves, for balance and for punishment as well. As we do, in a further sign that transformations are at hand, the lines with their advancing retreatings have the look of a dance or song; a small danced song or *ballatetta* the scholars are ready to tell us, for Eliot has taken Cavalcanti's address to his Lady, and transposed it into an English *mezzo del cammin*, or poem of the poet's middle life.

As in Cavalcanti, the Lady is not here, she is an absence, as real but unpossessable as music is itself. The difference is that *Ash-Wednesday* does not conspicuously desire its Lady's voice and 'blessèd face', instead, it rejoices to renounce them, just as the instant we glimpse 'the Garden / Where all loves end', we are excluded from it, or exclude ourselves:

Because I cannot drink

There, where trees flower and springs flow, for there is nothing again

The lines peter out into the empty space left on the page, and we come-to, unable to tell what Eliot has summoned out of emptiness, for it vanishes even as it appears. The verse is full of secrets, mysteries it keeps to itself; at best, one could say it gestures towards the tradition or dream of the Lady, but gives her neither voice nor visibility in this opening ritual. Almost the same is true of the second movement where she presides over the fastidious leopards' meal. Not until the fourth movement does she speak, and then she is 'Talking of trivial things / In ignorance and in knowledge of eternal dolour'. In section V, she is almost lost in the word-plays, the puns and homophones, straining paradoxes and riddles, where 'the unstilled world still whirled / About the centre of the silent Word'. The Lady's fullest appearance is reserved for the end of the poem,



where she becomes a variety of non-sexual overseers or animas: 'Blessèd sister, holy mother, spirit of the fountain, spirit of the garden. . . spirit of the river, spirit of the sea'. Dante's Beatrice may stand somewhere behind this apotheosis, but if so, it is at a very oblique angle.

What I have left out of account so far, however, is one other presence in the opening bars of the first movement:

*Because I do not hope
Because I do not hope to turn,
Desiring this man's gift and that man's scope
I no longer strive to strive towards such things....*

For the reader who recalls where that central line has come from, this is a discomfiting intrusion from another poem's anguish: that of Shakespeare's sonnet 29.

*When in disgrace with Fortune and mens eyes,
I all alone beweepe my out-cast state,
And trouble deafe heaven with my bootlesse cries,
And looke upon my selfe and curse my fate.
Wishing me like to one more rich in hope,
Featur'd like him, like him with friends possest,
Desiring this mans art and that mans skope,
With what I most injoy contented least,
Yet in these thoughts my selfe almost despising,
Haplye I thinke on thee, and then my state,
(Like to the Larke at breake of daye arising
From sullen earth) sings himns at Heavens gate,
For thy sweet love remembred such welth brings,
That then I skorne to change my state with Kings.*

The Shakespearean poem revolves, fascinated, around its own 'disgrace'. Disgrace, perhaps, is just a matter of being temporarily out of favour, even being broke, maybe – but it does have a hint of scandal clinging to it, and with that, the word shakes out other, fiercer anxieties. The sonnet curses fate, it 'almost despises' itself, in an exclusively male world where maleness and success are intertwined. Here, the mere pronoun 'him' is sexy. All its men are he's, one 'he' is so good-looking, another so well-connected, a third 'he' wealthy beyond words, and other



hunks again are replete with skills and opportunities that make men want them, while even the lark sings 'himns' (duly spelt with an 'i') 'himns at Heavens gate', leaving only the speaker, the failed male, an 'out-cast', rejected and unpartnered.

Like Cavalcanti's *ballatetta*, this sonnet or 'little song' comes from a tradition of praise-poetry, but that is almost where the similarities cease. Through Shakespeare, the political energies of compliment and courtship have been taken up into a music of desire. At a stride, new awarenesses of self, previously unheard-of panics, envies, tenderesses come into view as the love poetry of the sonnets swells beyond its banks, and the intimacy of address gives promise that almost anything may be said in the hush that folds lovers together: 'For thy sweet love remembred such welth brings, / That then I skorne to change my state with Kings'.

But what this intimacy signals is a shift away from the cult of the Lady, *mia donna*, and a turning instead towards the Elizabethan cult of the Fair Youth, entrancing women and men alike. The Lady withdrawn to contemplation, the Fair Youth hidden in the memory of the poem but not forgotten: one or both of these presences may have been what brought the poem almost to a standstill as it tried to get under way, for *Ash-Wednesday* can be seen as shaped by a double desire: a longing for what is simultaneously renounced. It is this doubleness that makes its final movement a masterpiece of contrapuntal writing, and also, arguably, Eliot's most sensuous stretch of writing. It rouses itself in a stiffening and rejoicing of what was thought dead to the world, an erotic quickening, rebellion and exhilaration of white sails flying seaward. All these impulses pull against that ascetic temper which would 'Teach us to sit still / Even among these rocks'. But can the bent golden-rod's returning power, the carnal need and its attendant joy and suffering, be denied so completely? Yes, says the one guide, for the eye must be 'blind' that is satisfied with 'empty forms' emerging through the ivory gate, and memory must be dull if it does not remember that this is the gate of false dreams only (true dreams come through the gates of horn). Nevertheless, says the other guide, while Nature cannot save us, she still brings strength and delight. The 'salt savour of the sandy earth' is renewed, the lost sea voices return,



and so does the lost heart, and the lilac brought by one long dead as he ran towards you through the Spring gardens in Paris. Loss is real, so is fulfilment: deny neither! For Flesh embodies Spirit, while Spirit enlivens Flesh; desire dancing against desire. You cannot forfeit the one or the other and remain whole. So, wavering 'in this brief transit where the dreams cross', *Ash-Wednesday* achieves an end by returning finally to the Anglo-Catholic liturgy's outstretched arms: 'And let my cry come unto Thee' – a moving conclusion, but can it satisfy the quests and questionings, the glimpses, lacerations, longings the verse has sent abroad? It seems to me that such an ecclesial end is hardly the answer to so troubled a poem.

As so often in Eliot's poetry from *The Waste Land*, onwards, section IV is the pivot on which the whole work turns – as with Phlebas the Phoenician, the kingfisher, and dove descending. But my own conclusion can do no more than point to *Ash-Wednesday* IV's betweenesses, its devices of disorientation that help to rearrange the mind so that sequentiality, which makes us at home in the secular dispensation, is – however briefly – confounded:

Who walked between the violet and the violet
Who walked between
The various ranks of varied green....

Are these the same, or different? Does 'violet' (meaning the flower) come before or after 'violet' (meaning colour)? Which, if either of them, is the higher form and which the lower? The mind strives but fails to make such distinctions, given the language of the verse where the variance of one thing from another is constantly sighted and just as often thwarted or nullified. The result is a poetry that almost manages not to be going anywhere, it occupies both a no-where and a no-when, since time as we usually know it moves from what has been, to that which is yet to come – whereas in these verses from section IV, the word just passed ('violet') is the same as the word still in the future of the line: 'violet' thus preceding and simultaneously following itself. Even longer phrases mirror each other ('Who walked between . . . Who walked between . . .') while syntax suspends its actions, since we never hear if the opening 'Who' initiates a question or stands as a relative pronoun on its own. By means such as

these, movements are made, yet not made, and shades are distinguished from one another in 'various ranks of varied green', while being at the same time amalgamated and conjoined. Not 'secular', this world, but not entirely 'sacred' either. Like the Fair Friend of the sonnets, like the young Jean Verdenal bearing his armful of lilacs, or the garden's broadbacked figure seen only from behind, it 'enchants' the maytime, transforming it into a nowhere both erotic and otherworldly. So the heart of the sequence, section IV, gently delivers its close in an orchestration more of quietude than of sound.

For this brief spell, actions leave no footprint and words remain in silence, or, uttered by no one, become the singing of a bird. The sparse lines of print are surrounded by untouched space, even the statue (if he is a statue) refrains from a flute that is 'breathless', and the sister who signs but speaks no word leaves just an untranslatable gesture on the surrounding air:

*The silent sister veiled in white and blue
Between the yews, behind the garden god,
Whose flute is breathless, bent her head and signed but spoke no word*

*But the fountain sprang up and the bird sang down
Redeem the time, redeem the time
The token of the word unheard, unspoken*

Till the wind shake a thousand whispers from the yew

And after this our exile.

Finally, in the silence the poem has made, comes a faint prelude to *Four Quartets*. Suppose we separate 'Nowhere' into two words. According to how they fall, two different insides appear: perhaps the negativity of no-where, no-place or nothingness, but just as possibly the reassurance of 'now-here'. It lasts for barely a moment; if one turns to 'drink / There, where trees flower, and springs flow... there is nothing again'. But the writing has passed beyond the formularies of the Church, it does not rely on prayers we already know. In that now-here, 'no-where' is transformed into a moment of sacred time, a simultaneousness whose promise will be



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taken up again in *Four Quartets*: 'Quick, now, here, now, always'. From poem to poem the quest goes on, for of all the poets of our age, Eliot is the most continuous with that divided spirit 'himself'.

