

'THE STILL UNSPEAKING AND UNSPOKEN WORD': THE LANGUAGE OF AVOIDANCE IN T.S. ELIOT'S TREATMENT OF THE BIRTH AND DEATH OF CHRIST'

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Whenever T.S. Eliot writes about the Crucifixion in his poetry, he distances it by setting it in the past or the future,¹ or by using metaphor and grammatical devices. Only in *The Rock* does he mention the subject directly in main clauses, and then the reference is liturgical:

And the Son of Man was not crucified once for all ...
But the Son of Man is crucified always ...

Chorus VI

In Eliot's poetry, Christ is usually passive, and rarely the centre of attention. Eliot minimises Christ's humanity, never using the word 'Jesus', and only once, in *Gerontion*, using 'Christ'; instead he speaks of 'the Infant' or 'the Word'. His poetry is not devotional, and shows no compassion for the suffering man or the new-born baby, but concentrates on the theological meaning of Christ's life, on his divinity rather than his humanity.

One reason for this may be Eliot's lifelong discomfort with human feelings,² especially those surrounding 'Birth, and copulation, and death' (*Sweeney Agonistes*). Another may be the conflicting Catholic and Puritan traditions behind his own faith. Moreover, as Graham Hough has pointed out, the fragmentary methods of modernist poetry are not suited to Christian poetry, so that 'Eliot was a poet and a Christian, but he was never a Christian poet — as George Herbert was a Christian poet'.³ Finally, the Nativity and Crucifixion are difficult topics, avoided to a large

extent even by the greatest Christian poets such as Dante, Langland, and Milton, as if their polished techniques and metaphors are a disadvantage in treating these two timeless human moments. Lesser poets, writing like the medieval lyricists for children or the unlearned, use simple poetry to present the humanity and the divinity of Christ at the same time, as Hillaire Belloc does in *The Birds*:

When Jesus Christ was four years old,
The angels brought Him toys of gold,
Which no man had ever bought or sold.

And yet with these He would not play.
He made Him small fowl out of clay,
And blessed them till they flew away:

Tu creasti, Domine

Jesus Christ, Thou child so wise,
bless mine hands and fill mine eyes,
And bring my soul to Paradise.

In Eliot's poetry, the moment which evokes a *feeling* of redemption is not the Crucifixion or Nativity, but the Annunciation. At 'the point of intersection of the timeless with time' (*Dry Salvages*, V), God becomes incarnate, conceived without the intervention of the flesh. As the medieval poem puts it:

I syng of a myden that is makeles,
kyng of alle kynges to here sone che ches.

he came also styll ther his moder was
as dew in aprille, that fallyt on the gras.⁴

Medieval paintings often show a beam of light descending from heaven, sometimes bearing a tiny figure of the child, and entering Mary's ear so that the Virgin's purity is maintained.

Eliot's rather puritanical Unitarian upbringing left him with such a dread of self-gratification that he was never able to buy sweets.⁵ At the same time, he went to church with his Roman Catholic nurse, and a copy of Murillo's *Immaculate Conception* hung in his parents' house.⁶ While the painting probably hung there for

artistic not devotional reasons, it may partly explain Eliot's emotional attachment to the Virgin. According to Martin Buber, when we use the third person to talk about another being, he or she is 'limited by other Hes and Shes', but when we address another as 'thou' then 'neighbourless and seamless he is You and fills the firmament'.⁷ Apart from a handful of liturgical quotations, Eliot never addresses God or Christ in the second person; this intimacy is reserved for the Virgin.

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In the pre-conversion poem, *Gerontion*, Eliot's feeling for Christ is marred by fear and guilt. Christ the tiger brings no redemption. He becomes passive, 'to be eaten, to be divided, to be drunk', not as the Eucharist, but as the sort of food eaten by Eliot's sinister urban dwellers. The 'wrath-bearing tree', the Tree of Knowledge, is not transformed into the redemptive Tree of the Cross; the tiger merely 'devours'.

In *The Waste Land*, the Passion is more directly dealt with :

After the torchlight red on sweaty faces
 After the frosty silence in the gardens
 After the agony in stony places
 The shouting and the crying
 Prison and palace and reverberation
 Of thunder of spring over distant mountains
 He who was living is now dead
 We who are living are now dying
 With a little patience

What the Thunder said, 322-30

Here, partly because Eliot is writing about a spiritual waste land, Christ is distant and inactive. Eliot sets the early stages of the Passion in the past, and misses the crucifixion entirely. Any action in the scene has been toned down by turning verbal processes into nouns — 'the shouting ... the crying ... reverberation' — which join a list of other nouns: *torchlight, faces, silence, gardens, agony, places, prison, palace, thunder, spring, mountains, patience*. The only verbs are not 'material processes' but 'relational processes', describing states, not actions: 'He who was living is now dead/We who are living are now dying'.

Christ remains dead. The mysterious figure in the Emmaus sequence ('But who is that on the other side of you?') does not materialise into the risen Lord. The Grail chapel is deserted, and a cock crows on the roof, suggesting betrayal. For a generation that has lost its faith, Christ has no saving power, and yet, his presence in the poem, and the ending, 'Shantih shantih shantih', which Eliot glosses as 'The Peace which passeth understanding', suggests where the cure may lie.

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In *Journey of the Magi* (1927) and *A Song for Simeon* (1928) two old men meet Christ as a child. Eliot presents the experience in the context of the Crucifixion. This is not in itself unusual: Rogier Van der Weyden's *Visitation of the Magi* has a crucifix on the wall above Mary's head, and many of the medieval Nativity lullabies foresee the Crucifixion:

Lullay for wo, thu litel thing,
 thu litel barun, thu litel king;
 Mankindde is cause of thi murning,
 that thu hast loued so yore.⁸

The difference lies in Eliot's lack of emotional response to Christ as a baby, and in what Nancy Gish has called, 'the peculiar joylessness... a puzzling sense of something missed rather than found'; both Simeon and the Magus are unable to understand Christ's birth fully because Redemption has not yet been completed by his death.⁹

To the Magus, the Crucifixion is remote, conveyed by glancing allusions in reverse order: 'dawn ... a water-mill beating the darkness ... three trees ... six hands ... dicing for pieces of silver'. It brings no grief, and the Nativity no joy:

... it was (you may say) satisfactory.
 All this was a long time ago, I remember,
 And I would do it again, but set down
 This set down
 This: were we led all that way for
 Birth or Death? There was a Birth, certainly,
 We had evidence and no doubt. I had seen birth and death,
 But had thought they were different; this Birth was
 Hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our death.¹⁰

Most medieval paintings and poems centre on the baby. Here there is no baby, merely the abstract nouns, *Death* and *Birth*. The episode is set in the distant past. Christ is not present to the speaker or reader, and does not give the Magus any renewal of this life: the poem ends, 'I should be glad of another death'.

In *A Song for Simeon*, the Crucifixion is distanced by being set in the future, again in a phrase rather than a clause.

Before the time of cords and scourges and lamentation
 Grant us thy peace.
 Before the stations of the mountain of desolation,
 Before the certain hour of maternal sorrow,
 Now at this birth season of decease,
 Let the Infant, the still unspeaking and unspoken Word,
 Grant Israel's consolation
 To one who has eighty years and no to-morrow.

Christ again is inactive, 'the still unspeaking and unspoken Word', the subject of only two verbs, the liturgically based 'Grant us thy peace' and its echo, 'Let the Infant ... grant Israel's consolation'. There are, however, nineteen nouns, mostly abstract and general: *time, hour, season, to-morrow, lamentation, desolation, peace, sorrow, birth, decease, Word, Infant, consolation*. The only concrete words suggest things which are done to Christ: cords, scourges, stations, and mountains. Again, a wish for death is central:

I am tired with my own life and the lives of those after me,
 I am dying in my own death and the deaths of those after me.
 Let thy servant depart
 Having seen thy salvation.

Again, this salvation does not renew Simeon's worldly life. In his essay on *Dante* written in 1929, soon after these two poems, Eliot spoke with approval of the need

not to expect more from *life* than it can give or more from *human* beings than they can give; to look to *death* for what life cannot give ...¹¹

These poems offer little hope for life in the human world.

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In *Ash-Wednesday*, Eliot describes a restoration of life. In lines which suggest the Annunciation, the Virgin, renewing the fountain of creativity, is a catalyst for action:

The silent sister veiled in white and blue ...
 ... bent her head and signed but spoke no word
 But the fountain sprang up and the bird sang down
 Redeem the time, redeem the dream
 The token of the word unheard, unspoken.

IV

The ratio of verbs to nouns (30:49 in this section) is much higher than in most of Eliot's work, but Christ is still the subject of passive verbs:

If the lost word is lost, if the spent word is spent
 If the unheard, unspoken
 Word is unspoken, unheard;

V

In the final section, Mary remains the active intercessor:

Blessèd sister, holy mother, spirit of the fountain, spirit of the
 garden,
 Suffer us not to mock ourselves with falsehood
 Teach us to care and not to care
 Teach us to sit still ...
 Suffer me not to be separated
 And let my cry come unto Thee.

This is the most direct and personal address anywhere in Eliot's poetry, and it is directed to the Virgin. As in the medieval paintings which show Mary protecting a cluster of souls from the wrath of God, Eliot's Virgin is accessible when the Father and Son are not.

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metaphor: 'We feel the compassion (abstract) of the art (abstract) of the healer (metaphor). This compassion (abstract) resolves (abstract) the enigma (abstract) of the fever chart.' Donne's personal Christ looked at a personal sinner; Eliot's metaphorical surgeon is displaced by an abstract concept (compassion) performing an abstract action on an inanimate object (fever chart).

Donne uses no adjectives in the passage quoted; Christ is the subject of verbs 'look'st ... hang'st ... thinke ... punish ... Burne ... Restore ... know'. Eliot uses many adjectives: 'wounded ... distempered ... bleeding ... sharp ... dying ... constant ... worse ... whole ... ruined ... absolute paternal ... mental ... frigid purgatorial ... dripping ... bloody ... sound, substantial ... good.' This reduces both the substance and movement in Eliot's description.

Whereas Donne's poem moved towards Christ, Eliot moves away to focus on 'Adam's curse', and the Church or hospital, endowed by 'the ruined millionaire':

Wherein, if we do well, we shall
Die of the absolute paternal care
That will not leave us, but prevents us everywhere.

Despite the suggestion of God's prevenient grace (surely both meanings of 'prevent' are intended) Eliot's view of the fall lacks the sense of joy in the Catholic motif of *felix culpa*, found in the lyric 'Adam lay I-bowndyn':

Ne hadde the appil take ben, the appil taken ben,
ne hadde neuer our lady a ben heuene qwen;
Blyssid be the tyme that appil take was,
Ther-fore we mown syngyn, 'deo gracias!'¹⁴

In the last stanza, Eliot returns, not directly to Christ, but to what one critic has called 'a horrid travesty of the holy communion'.¹⁵ This has something of the flavour of late medieval or Counter-Reformation exaggeration of the physical suffering of Christ:

The dripping blood our only drink,
The bloody flesh our only food.
In spite of which we like to think
That we are sound, substantial flesh and blood
Again, in spite of that, we call this Friday good.

Although some critics are comfortable with this, Eliot said that here he was attempting something 'in the style of Cleveland or Benlowes',¹⁶ two lesser seventeenth century poets. The result is, as Eliot said earlier in *East Coker II*, 'not very satisfactory/ A periphrastic study in a worn-out poetical fashion'. Unlike Donne, Herbert, or the medieval lyricists, Eliot makes no direct address to Christ, shows no compassion for Christ's suffering, and no joy in the redemptive value of that suffering. Indeed, for Eliot, the moment does not appear to be redemptive, for the poet is still lost in the dark wood: 'here I am in the middle way' (*EC. V*), still burdened with sin and 'the emotionless /Years of living among the breakage', listening for the terrifying 'Clamour of the bell of the last annunciation' (*Dry Salvages II*).

For Eliot, again the answer lies in the 'Prayer of the one Annunciation' and the 'Lady, whose shrine stands on the promontory', who prays for 'all those who are in ships, those/Whose business has to do with fish' (*DS.IV*). These concrete details contrast strongly with Christ's metaphorical hospital. Eliot addresses the Lady directly, with confidence: 'Pray ... figlia del tuo figlio/ Queen of Heaven,' for those who are lost 'wherever cannot reach them the sound of the sea bell's/Perpetual angelus'.

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Eliot's treatment of the Crucifixion is reminiscent of Gauguin's *Yellow Christ*, of which Eliot once owned a print.¹⁷ In the painting none of the bystanders look at Christ: some sit at his feet, calmly looking at their laps, others are leaving the scene, their backs turned. The dead Christ does not sag; there is no blood, no mark of agony on his smooth face. The painting may be pleasing as a composition, but is hardly moving as a meditation on the Crucifixion. In contrast, Grünewald's stark confrontation of the Crucifixion in all its horror and ugliness is redeemed by the Nativity and Resurrection scenes on the reverse of the Isenheim Altarpiece. The Resurrection, meaningless without the fleshly realities of Christ's death, is another moment which Eliot avoids. Eliot, as a poet, retained his horror of the flesh until the end, portraying Christ as the Infant, the Word, the tiger, or a metaphorical surgeon — anything but a child, a man, a body which might require tenderness and emotional engagement, or which might be able to act.

REFERENCES

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- 17 Ackroyd, p.46.