

T. S. Eliot, “Little Gidding” and “The Journey of the Magi”

Overview: these two poems and “Tradition” contrast with the despair and passivity of “The Wasteland” and “Prufrock,” showing Eliot’s transition from anomie to Anglican Christianity. This involves the surrender of the poetic and spiritual self to larger forces through prayer and through the acquisition of what Yeats called, in another context, “the pilgrim soul.”

1. Late Eliot: struggling towards belief

- a. Eliot, in response to the rootlessness and loss of belief that are characteristic of modernism, became conservative rather than radical, turning back towards traditions that had sustained his artistic and spiritual ancestors instead of stepping forward into the existential abyss. As he tells the pilgrim reader of “Little Gidding,”

“You are not here to verify,
Instruct yourself, or inform curiosity
Or carry report. You are here to kneel
Where prayer has been valid.”

- b. In “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” Eliot suggested that immersion in tradition was not a negative thing that stifled innovation, but a positive force that enabled a poet to transcend the terror of personality and personal emotion - which he saw, unlike Yeats, as factors to be feared rather than to be embraced as the source of poetry.
- c. In “Tradition,” Eliot argues that the poet is a medium, not a messenger. (This is an old argument in aesthetics that traces back to Plato’s dialogue “Ion,” which argues that the poet is simply inspired - filled with breath - from another source, rather than the origin of art itself.)

“The mind of the poet is the shred of platinum. It may partly or exclusively operate upon the experience of the man himself; but, the more perfect the artist, the more completely separate in him will be the man who suffers and the mind which creates; the more perfectly will the mind digest and transmute the passions which are its material. “

2. Pilgrimage as spiritual and aesthetic form

- a. In “The Journey of the Magi” and “Little Gidding,” Eliot adopts a modified first-person stance to affirm the importance of pilgrimage - the sacred journey undertaken to mortify the self, to find spiritual guidance and miraculous intervention.
- b. This happens aesthetically as well as spiritually, and centers on the paradox of death-in-life. Eliot suggests in the last paragraph of “Tradition and the Individual Talent” that the poet must not assert himself, but instead surrender

“wholly to the work to be done. And he is not likely to know what is to be done unless he lives in what is not merely the present, but the present moment of the past, unless he is conscious, not of what is dead, but of what is already living.”

- c. For Eliot, prayer is one vehicle that unites the aesthetic and spiritual:

“And prayer is more
Than an order of words, the conscious occupation
Of the praying mind, or the sound of the voice praying.
And what the dead had no speech for, when living,
They can tell you, being dead: the communication
Of the dead is tongued with fire beyond the language of the living.”

- d. But prayer will bring trouble rather than comfort. It will not necessarily solve mysteries, comfort the one who prays, or protection against death. Instead, it is a way of leaning into death: the deaths imagined by the Magi as the miraculous birth becomes “death in life” rather than an affirmation - the deaths adumbrated in “Little Gidding” which are the only path towards eternity.

3. “Magi”: the journey re-imagined

- a. Popular Christian mythology has blunted the sharp edges of the original telling of the journey of the Magi from the Gospel of Matthew, Chapter 2 - the only gospel in which this story is recounted. The magi set out on their journey, according to St. Matthew, without knowing their destination’s point, and at the urging of evil King Herod, who wants them to report back. They are not kings but simply wise men, and after they witness the birth something has changed their minds, for they return to their kingdoms without fulfilling Herod’s command to report back. Matthew 2 is blunt about their ambivalence, the base motive of their journey, and suggests that a transformation occurs that leads them to reject Herod’s commands. But the gospel doesn’t say much about what they think of what they have seen.
- b. Eliot restores the sharp edges in several ways:
- i. He adopts the narrative voice of one (any) of the wise men, conditioning us to see the events from their viewpoint, personalizing it - and setting us up to expect some magical revelation.
 - ii. In strophe 1, the travails of travel are emphasized; they journey from a high, cold place, complaining about the discomforts of the journey, the “refractory” spirits of those who carry and house them, and long for the easy comfort of their old kingdoms.
 - iii. In strophe 2, though the terrain becomes warmer and sense impressions (smell, taste, hearing) are restored, the magi are still plagued by inhospitable hosts and incomprehensible signs (the trees, the horse, the dicing hands) that seem uncannily disconnected from any understandable reality. “There was no information,” says the voice, and they arrive “not a moment too soon.” We are still viewing the story from the POV of a disenchanting traveler who wishes they had made better reservations!
 - iv. In strophe 3 we gather the teller is an old man, who now cuts to his desire to form a satisfying interpretation of the events: he can’t decide if it was birth or death, Birth or Death?
 - (1) The joyous birth of Christian myth, in retrospect, has turned into Death - “our death” - for the Magi, who have now grown old enough to

see Christ's life and death unfold.

- (2) The only thing the journey has given the Magi is a sense of dis-ease with their old comforts and kingdoms, their life among "an alien people clutching their gods." The magus concludes: "I should be glad of another death," perhaps his own.

4. Little Gidding: the journey completed through pilgrimage and prayer

- a. Eliot's masterpiece is *Four Quartets*, which was issued as a book in 1943, though each "quartet" is a complete poem.
 - i. The first of the quartets, "Burnt Norton," had appeared in the *Collected Poems* of 1936. It is a subtle meditation on the nature of time and its relation to eternity. On the model of this Eliot wrote three more poems, "East Coker" (1940), "The Dry Salvages" (1941), and "Little Gidding" (1942), in which he contemplates the past, the past of the human race, and the meaning of human history.
 - ii. Each of the poems stands alone, but together they all make up a single work as well, in which themes and images recurred and were developed in a musical manner and brought to a final resolution. This work made a deep impression on the reading public, and even those who were unable to accept the poems' Christian beliefs recognized the intellectual integrity with which Eliot pursued his high theme, the originality of the form he had devised, and the technical mastery of his verse. This work led to the award to Eliot, in 1948, of the Nobel Prize for Literature.
- b. "Little Gidding," the last of the four, establishes the power of paradox to reveal truth. Knowledge comes, not from desiring to know, but from relinquishing desire and submitting the self to the mysteries of death.
 - i. The settings articulate the first paradox: now and forever, here and anywhere, beginning or end.
 - (1) Location - specific but general - in a west England churchyard that had family and historical significance to Eliot, but also could be anywhere.
 - (2) Time: during WW2 (we hear the bombs overhead in the poem, transfigured into a "dove with tongues of fire") but it could also be any time - now and forever. As Eliot points out, wars have been going on forever; this one isn't anything new.
 - (3) Season: midwinter spring - that "silence between two waves of the sea" when spring has not yet come, but the world promises spring - heat inside cold, when snow on a shrub might be mistaken for flowers.
 - ii. The metaphor of the journey is expanded in all directions.
 - (1) A journey can be insignificant - to get somewhere, to find something, to see someone, to travel as a tourist, to make a pilgrimage to an

important place.

- (2) Eliot emphasizes that many have journeyed here, and that all journeys are essentially the same - guided towards prayer, which lives on universally in everyone willing to submit the self to the voices of eternity and the past.
- iii. Using modified terza rima, the stanza used by his great influence Dante, Eliot punctuates the poem with a meeting with a "compound ghost" of his two immediate POETIC influences - Yeats and Mallarme - who help him articulate the losses, and paradoxical gains, of aging and eventual humility and knowledge.
- iv. Death and indifference are presented not as negatives that take away, but as fundamental principles of nature, an appropriate detachment from self, event, and feeling that leads us back into our collective past.
 - (1) Those who fail to submit to this process will continue to journey without reaching a destination that they are finally able to "know, for the first time" - and which ironically will turn out to be the simple things set before us at our start.
- v. The aesthetic and the spiritual are linked by the metaphor of the pilgrimage, which in each case takes the same shape: submission, humility, balance, and the willingness to listen to what seems inconsequential.