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Death in Life at Christmas

T. S. Eliot's "Journey of the Magi"

ONE OF T. S. ELIOT'S MOST RECOGNIZED POEMS is "Journey of the Magi."¹ The poem first appeared inside a Christmas card. Richard de la Mare, who served with Eliot as director for the publishing house Faber & Faber, had the entrepreneurial idea of sending Christmas cards to those who had business with the press. In the spirit of Shakespeare, the series was called "Ariel Poems." The inside page of the card contained an unpublished Christmas-related poem from a contemporary poet, and the exterior was accompanied by an illustration from a noted contemporary artist. Between 1927 and 1931 the press released thirty-eight "Ariel Poems" by figures such as Thomas Hardy, G. K. Chesterton, Siegfried Sassoon, W. B. Yeats, and D. H. Lawrence. T. S. Eliot wrote five of the poems during these years, of which four were matched with illustrations by the avant-garde American poster artist, Edward McKnight Kauffer. A 1936 collection of Eliot's poetry for Faber & Faber included his contributions to the cards under the heading "Ariel Poems."

Eliot's "Ariel Poems," while written for Christmas cards, are a far cry from the maudlin warm and fuzzy Hallmark cards typical of the season. As in most of Eliot's poetry, a deep melancholy pervades

The Journey of The Magi

by T. S. Eliot

‘A cold coming we had of it,
Just the worst time of the year
For a journey, and such a long journey:
The ways deep and the weather sharp,
The very dead of winter.’
And the camels galled, sorefooted, refractory,
Lying down in the melting snow.
There were times we regretted
The summer palaces on slopes, the terraces,
And the silken girls bringing sherbet.
Then the camel men cursing and grumbling
and running away, and wanting their liquor and women,
And the night-fires going out, and the lack of shelters,
And the cities hostile and the towns unfriendly
And the villages dirty and charging high prices:
A hard time we had of it.
At the end we preferred to travel all night,
Sleeping in snatches,
With the voices singing in our ears, saying
That this was all folly.
Then at dawn we came down to a temperate valley,
Wet, below the snow line, smelling of vegetation;
With a running stream and a water-mill beating the darkness,
And three trees on the low sky,
And an old white horse galloped away in the meadow.

Then we came to a tavern with vine-leaves over the lintel,
Six hands at an open door dicing for pieces of silver,
And feet kicking the empty wine-skins.
But there was no information, and so we continued
And arrived at evening, not a moment too soon
Finding the place; it was (you might 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.
We returned to our places, these Kingdoms,
But no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation,
With an alien people clutching their gods.
I should be glad of another death.

T. S. Eliot, *Collected Poems, 1909–1962* (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1991). This poem has been shared here under fair use guidelines provided by The Poetry Foundation.

the lines. Unfulfilled longing and a searing awareness that this life is a penultimate season of ennui mark the “Ariel Poems.” Eliot’s casting of Christmas is not typical of what comes to mind when we think of Christmas. Nevertheless, Eliot points his readers toward an essential aspect of Christmas not often considered.

The joy of Christmas is the celebration of God entering into human life, the feast commemorating the moment when the immortal becomes mortal and eternal life breaks into the cycle of temporal existence. For Eliot, however, the joy of Christmas also introduces profound discomfort and angst. The light of life illumines the dark truth that life as we experience it is ultimately incomplete, that considered on its own it remains a riddle of brokenness and death. In the light of Christmas, we can no longer evade the reality that our life (in St. Augustine’s words) carries death around with it (*mortalitatem circumferens*).² In “Journey of the Magi,” the first and most familiar poem of his Ariel cycle, Eliot explores the dark reality that Christmas illumines. For Eliot, the mystery of the light of Christmas becomes intelligible from the darkness of the Passion. The three stanzas of this poem enter into the darkness of Christmas.

“Journey of the Magi” is equally Eliot’s own journey into the Christian faith. He composed the poem shortly after receiving baptism in the summer of 1927. Throughout the poem one can hear an unmistakable echo of Eliot’s recent reading of St. John of the Cross’s *Dark Night of the Soul*; the darkness of faith, to which the Magi give expression, is also Eliot’s darkness, even after formally entering into the Church. He wrote “Journey of the Magi” in one sitting. Eliot explained to his wife, Valerie: “I wrote it one Sunday after matins. I had been thinking about it in church and when I got home I opened a half-bottle of *Booth’s Gin*, poured myself a drink, and began to write. By lunchtime, the poem, and the half-bottle of gin, were both finished.”³

Everything is contained in the title, “Journey of the Magi.” To read the title is to have the whole narrative of Matthew 2 cascade into our minds. In three stanzas, Eliot depicts the journey, the arrival, and the return. In a world-weary tone, the voice of one of the Magi describes

the journey undertaken in the first stanza. It is an arduous journey, fraught with challenges. Nature and man conspire against the Magi. The first five lines of the poem are a quotation from a 1622 Nativity sermon preached by the Anglican divine, Lancelot Andrewes, before King James I on Christmas Day. The speaker adopts Andrewes's description of the Magi's journey ("and such a long journey").⁴ The Magi travel in the "dead of winter," through inclement "sharp" weather, contending with intransient camels and stinging cold. These sheiks on pilgrimage can only look back with longing to their previous life:

There were times we regretted
The summer palaces on slopes, the terraces,
And the silken girls bringing sherbet.

Their opulent and self-indulgent existence hardly prepared the Magi for this journey. (Sherbet! The extravagant anachronism of an English dessert as the "guilty pleasure" of the Magi is a delightful expression of Eliot's wit and humor). What is it that the Magi "regretted"? Their former life? The fact that they undertook such an expedition at all? Whatever the source of their regret, the Magi were not spiritually steeled for this venture.

Listening to the litany of complaints from the Magus, we, the readers, hear something else; in the grumbling we discern (on a different register) the intimation of another journey, one that was equally exacting. Joseph and his very pregnant wife also found "cities hostile and towns unfriendly." They too experienced a lack of hospitality, dirty lodging, and exorbitant accommodation. Joseph and Mary would nod in affirmation, "A hard time we had of it." But this connection is completely lost on the sour Magus. The Magi are unaware; they travel by night in intellectual and moral darkness, unable to make sense of their journey: "With the voices singing in our ears, saying / That this was all folly." Unlike the wise men of Matthew's Gospel, Eliot's Magi have no revelation from on high, there

is no bright star providing divine guidance by night, no holy angel directing them away from danger. The “voices singing” are not those that we expect, the heavenly chorus singing the *Gloria*. Instead, these voices sound only the interior doubt of the forlorn Magus muttering, “This was all folly.” But the reader might (if for much different reasons than the Magus) wholly agree with this assessment. The mystery of the Incarnation, which for Eliot is inextricable from the Passion, is, indeed, “folly to those who are perishing.”

Everything changes in the second stanza. Eliot transforms the *mise-en-scène* from darkness and cold to light and life. The Magi leave their desert journey to enter a lush, verdant valley. It is “dawn” and “temperate.” We know they have at last arrived at their journey’s end. But this is a strange Christmas encounter: there are no stable or shepherds, no donkey or ox, no Mary and Joseph gazing down lovingly into the manger on the face of the Holy Infant. Rather, this stanza contains a host of allusions to the Passion. The geography is “wet”: “With a running stream and a water-mill beating the darkness.” Here there is a fusion of Johannine themes regarding the triumph of light over darkness and rebirth through water and the Spirit. We are invited to think of Christ’s discourse to Nicodemus with the summons to be “born again” as well as Christ’s invitation to the Samaritan woman to drink from “the spring of water welling up to eternal life.” The landscape is “an emblematic life of Christ in miniature.”⁵ The “three trees” are an unmistakable reference to Golgotha, and the “old white horse” evokes the judgment of the apocalypse. At the tavern, the Magi discover “vine-leaves over the lintel.” Again, we are led to think of the Passion: the lintel recalls Passover and the lamb’s blood over the doors of the Israelites, saving them from destruction. This blood finds its typological consummation in the blood of the Lamb slain in the Passion, a blood made present sacramentally in consecrated wine (“vine-leaves”). With one or two words, Eliot calls to mind both Christ’s betrayal for thirty “pieces of silver” and the soldiers sitting at the foot of the cross casting lots (“dicing”) for his clothing. But all this is lost on the Magus (“there was no information”). An envoy of “the

old dispensation," the Magus lacks the vantage of faith to perceive the significance of what he sees.

The literary success of the poem lies in Eliot's repeated use of intertextuality, whereby we readers catch allusions lost on the speaker.⁶ Each feature mentioned by the Magus—the "cold coming," the regret, the inhospitable shelter, the "voices singing," the verdant description of what we know to be Bethlehem, and (most importantly) the significance of the Christ child—requires the reader to supply meaning unavailable to the Magus: "The primary sensory associations give way to an idea, and we find we are involved in a meaning beyond the Magi's actual experience."⁷ It is as if we overhear the complaints of the Magus but understand infinitely more in his words than he could possibly intend.⁸

With three words ("Finding the place") the poet has us imagine the Magus entering the stable and encountering the Christ child. Eternal life breaking into his dreary living death. In the face of the Christ child, we expect the Magus (at last!) to discover the joy and hope of Christmas. But it is nothing of the sort. There is no epiphany. (In fact, there is no reference to Jesus in the poem.) The Magus leaves unchanged, still despondent, still hopeless. The encounter in the stable evokes no spiritual rebirth: "arrived at evening, not a moment too soon/ Finding the place; it was (you might say) satisfactory." The nonchalant shrug ("satisfactory") with which the Magus responds to the Christ child contains a completely different sense for the reader. The word "satisfactory" is charged with atonement theology, the articulation of how Christ's death "satisfies" for sin. Here we touch upon the theological aspiration of the poem. For Eliot, to find the stable is at the same time to find the place of the skull. To come "at evening" to the Christ child in the manger is equally to come "at evening" to the dead Christ hanging on the cross. The one who fails to see death in the manger will also fail to see life on the cross. Cradle and cross are inseparable. Both the believer and the Magus gaze down at the same child, both exclaim "satisfactory," and yet the believer and the Magus are worlds apart.⁹

Another abrupt shift marks the beginning of the third and final stanza. It is not the temperature or geography that changes here, but the time. The speaker remarks, "All this was a long time ago, I remember." The collective voice of the Magi gives way to the solitary aged speaker remembering—a frequent "voice" in Eliot's poetry. The Magus now recalls this first Christmas experience as if it occurred many decades ago. The detached, reflective metaphysical character of the last stanza in which the Magus attempts to "make sense" of his encounter contrasts sharply with the communal, sensory-laden mood of the first two stanzas. Daniel Harris articulates this antithesis:

The witnessing of the Birth, though it prompts neither joy nor melodramatic conversion, forces a redefinition of self that is sharply marked, even in this recitation years later, by his altered style in the final section. As he meditates on Christ's coming, his language becomes analytic, abstract, paradoxical; the suspended particples of the first two sections disappear as continuous action in the temporal order cedes to the eternal. Whereas the narrative is descriptive, realistic, filled with sensory perception, and lacking in self-questioning, the concluding reflection, shunning outward detail, transcends the sensible world. At the center of this passage lies the primary paradox, the poem's only question, still nagging for self-examination.¹⁰

Evidently, his encounter with the Holy Infant left a mark on the Magus, but not in the manner we might expect (or hope!). It is this recollection and (quasi-liturgical) commitment to memory on which the Magus insists. He desires that his experience be memorialized, written down, a permanent record kept. What does he want recorded? It is the *question* that continues to haunt his memory after meeting that Child:

but set down
This set down

This: were we led all that way for
Birth or Death?

The fierce urgency of the Magus's demand is "the most colloquial and jaggedly modernist part of the poem."¹¹ Commentators readily note that these lines refer both to Lancelot Andrewes's Christmas Sermon of 1622 (1.260) and to Shakespeare's *Othello* (5.2.35), where they express Othello's final directive for commemoration after his suicide. However, the substance of the question inscribed with a will to permanence ("Birth or Death?") also invokes the climax of Moses's speech to the Israelites prior to his death: "I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life" (Deut. 30:19). The Magus recognizes in this "Birth or Death" a cosmic significance, radically unlike ordinary birth and death by which creatures flow in and out of existence. Eliot marks this distinction by setting off this Birth or Death with capital letters:

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.

The indissoluble link between Incarnation and Passion suggests that the Magus (whether he realizes it or not) has witnessed the two coming together in the manger. He has seen Birth-Death. Ordinary experience, of course, reveals birth and death to be woven together: the Magus is wizened enough to realize that each birth sets a person irrevocably on the path to death. He knows that life is not Life, but a living death. Augustine's description of man carrying his death about with him is not foreign to the Magus.

But this Birth is different; it does not conform to the regular cycle of "birth and death." It is not simply one more attestation of life as "being-towards-death." This Birth brings about cosmic Death. The "hard and bitter agony" of the Passion, present already in this Birth, is at the same time the "hard and bitter agony" of "our death." For the



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Magus, Christ's Birth-Death sounds the death knell of everything he knows and treasures. His hopes, values, and civilization die in this Birth-Death.

Baptism and Eucharist (alluded to in the second stanza) are a participation in the eternal Life of Christ. However, to share in Christ's Life is equally to share in his Death. It is to renounce life's finite desires and aspirations as illusory; it is to confess that our ambitions and achievements have no significance except as they are ordered to eternity. The tragedy of this Christmas poem is that the Magus knows this to be true. He knows the Incarnation has overturned the regnant order of "the old dispensation" and unmasked all finite claims to finality and meaning as specious.¹² After this Birth-Death nothing can be the same; ordinary time is suspended. The pursuit of power, money, and pleasure (the "summer palaces," "silken girls," and "sherbet") no longer have meaning. For the Magus, his entire civilization is dissolved. He feels deeply the pain of this loss (a "hard and bitter agony"), but he has nothing to put in its place. Grover Smith remarks, "It is not that the Birth that is also Death has brought him hope of a new life, but that it has revealed to him the hopelessness of the previous life. He is resigned rather than joyous, absorbed in the negation of his former existence but not yet physically liberated from it."¹³ The Magus cannot enter into the hope and joy of Christmas. Instead, he goes back home ("We returned to our places, these Kingdoms"). But it is no longer home; he is out of place, displaced. What infinite distance between "the place" of the manger and "our places"! The poem concludes,

But no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation,
With an alien people clutching their gods.
I should be glad of another death.

The Birth-Death has altered the calculus of life. The Magus cannot seamlessly reenter what has now become an "old dispensation." The "wineskins" have worn out.¹⁴ He no longer identifies with who he

was: his people have become “alien” to him and their religion foreign (“their gods”). The Magus has nothing to put into this gaping emptiness: “The speaker has reached the end of one world, but despite his acceptance of the revelation as valid, he cannot gaze into a world beyond his own.”¹⁵ The tragedy of this Christmas poem is that the speaker only knows the Death of Christmas; he has not experienced the Birth of Christmas. We leave the Magus at a liminal place, hanging between Death and Life.

Notes

1. T. S. Eliot, *The Complete Poems and Plays* (London: Faber & Faber, 1969), 103–104.
2. Cf. Augustine, *Confessions* 1.1.1.
3. Paul Johnson, *Brief Lives* (London: Arrow, 2011), 104.
4. Eliot had profound admiration for Andrewes’s diction and theology. In his study, *For Lancelot Andrewes*, Eliot remarks that Andrewes’s writing is punctuated by three qualities: “ordonnance, or arrangement and structure, precision in the use of words, and relevant intensity.” T. S. Eliot, *For Lancelot Andrewes: Essays in Style and Order* (London: Faber & Faber, 1970), 15.
5. Arthur R. Broes, “T. S. Eliot’s ‘Journey of the Magi’: An Explication,” *Xavier University Studies* 5 (1966): 131.
6. Daniel Harris notes, “The poem’s core is its blatant anachronism.” Daniel A. Harris, “Language, History, and Text in Eliot’s ‘Journey of the Magi,’” *PMLA* 95 (1980): 838.
7. David Moody, *Thomas Stearns Eliot: Poet* (Cambridge, 1994): 133.
8. Harris comments,

The Magus regards the terrain, like any other ‘thing,’ literally. With an ironic sameness of vision, he feels a change in climate but not in mode of signification. In a world of signs recognized by the reader, the speaker can read nothing; nor does he know himself ignorant. But can one speak of the Magus’ failure to read the signs when success is not yet possible? For the Magus is an unwitting explorer—a pre-Christian—in an uncharted world whose hero has yet to achieve mythic status; there is no reason why the Magus should understand Christian figuration. The discrepancy between the worlds of the Magus and the reader is nearly absolute” (Harris, “Eliot’s ‘Journey of the Magi,’” 840).
9. Eliot’s Magi do not know what Lancelot Andrewes’s Magi immediately perceive: “The cratch is a sign of the Cross” (1618). *The Works of Lancelot Andrewes*, 11 vols., Library of Anglo-Catholic Theology (Oxford: Parker, 1865–1874), 1.201.
10. Harris, “Eliot’s ‘Journey of the Magi,’” 843–44.
11. Nicholas Birns, “Birth and Death: Eliot’s *Journey of the Magi*,” *Sewanee Theological Review* 51 (2008): 277.

12. Daniel Harris comments, "Like Yeats's 'The Second Coming' ['Journey of the Magi'] dramatizes the anxiety of verging towards a great cultural shift." Harris, "Eliot's 'Journey of the Magi,'" 838.
13. Grover Smith, *T. S. Eliot's Poetry and Plays: A Study in Sources and Meaning* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1956), 122–23.
14. Robert Crawford comments, "Though explicitly Christian, 'Journey of the Magi' forms between the earlier and later work a bridge over which the reader (with access to the gospel word) may cross into the release of Christianity, the new birth; but, denied that access, the speaker of the poem can only seek relief in death to escape from having to return to the old way in which he is 'no longer at ease.'" *The Savage and the City in the work of T. S. Eliot* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), 186.
15. Smith, *T. S. Eliot's Poetry and Plays*, 124.