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Καθηγητοῦ τῆς ἑδρας Βύρωνος

Ἀγγλικῆς Φιλολογίας καὶ Λογοτεχνίας

T. S. ELIOT: AUTHORITY AND BELIEF

The Hollow Men marks the end of the first stage of Eliot's spiritual pilgrimage. 'Mistah Kurtz — he dead'. For five years there is a poetic silence; but something of what was taking place in Eliot's mind may be pieced together from asides in the critical essays. Here is a chain of some of the most significant of these statements. The first takes us back two years before *The Hollow Men*; the rest all come between *The Hollow Men* and *Ash-Wednesday*.

(i) Those of us who find ourselves supporting what Mr Murry calls Classicism believe that men cannot get on without giving allegiance to something outside themselves... If, then, a man's interest is political, he must, I presume, profess an allegiance to principles, or to a form of government, or to a monarch; and if he is interested in religion, and has one, to a Church; and if he is interested in literature, he must acknowledge, it seems to me, just that sort of allegiance which I endeavoured to put forth in the preceding section.

The interesting thing here is to find Eliot apparently unable to conceive the not uncommon type of religious mind which does not find it necessary to profess allegiance to a Church; and yet the history of religions seems to show that this type of mind came first, in the Founder or Prophet, and the subsequent Church represents an accretion or falsification of the original spirit. I am not arguing here that this view is the true one; I am saying that an 'interest in religion' need by no means imply allegiance to a Church, and Eliot's contention that it must throws a flood of light on his kind of mind.

(ii) There is, nevertheless, an alternative, which Mr Murry has expressed. 'The English writer, the English divine, the English statesman, inherit no rules from their forebears; they inherit only this: a sense that in the last resort they must depend upon the inner voice'. This statement does, I admit, appear to cover certain cases; it throws a flood of light upon Mr Lloyd George. But why 'in the last resort'?

Do they, then, avoid the dictates of the inner voice up to the last extremity? My belief is that those who possess this inner voice are ready enough to hearken to it, and will hear no other. The inner voice, in fact, sounds remarkably like an old principle which has been formulated by an elder critic in the now familiar phrase of 'doing as one likes'. The possessors of the inner voice ride ten in a compartment to a football match at Swansea, listening to the inner voice, which breathes the eternal message of vanity, fear, and lust. [*The Function of Criticism*, 27].

Leaving aside the somewhat snobbish and peevish animosity of the last sentence, we find in this passage the rejection of what we may call the quietist and individualistic view of the religious experience. 'The inner voice' is an idea associated most closely with such sects as the Quakers and the Buchmanites. It is an idea opposed to that of a hierarchical church and, as Middleton Murry makes clear, to that of a continuous tradition. It avoids discipline and it avoids codes of morality and ritual observance. We shall soon see (if we have not seen already) that Eliot does not deny the mystical experience; but he obviously regards it with great suspicion outside the bounds of an organised church.

(iii) Mr Murry will say, with some show of justice, that this is a willful misrepresentation. He says: 'If they (the English writer, divine, statesman) dig *deep enough* in their pursuit of self-knowledge — a piece of mining done not with the intellect alone, but with the whole man — they will come upon a self that is universal' — an exercise far beyond the strength of our football enthusiasts. It is an exercise, which I believe was of enough interest to Catholicism for several handbooks to be written on its practice. But the Catholic practitioners were, I believe, with the possible exception of certain heretics, not palpitating Narcissi; the Catholic did not believe that God and himself were identical. 'The man who truly interrogates himself will ultimately hear the voice of God', Mr Murry says. In theory, this leads to a form of pantheism which I maintain is not European — just as Mr Murry maintains that 'Classicism' is not English. For its practical results, one may refer to the verses of Hudibras.

Eliot's objections to the inner voice become yet clearer in this section. It is not European; it is socially disintegrating; it rests on a false metaphysic. There can be no doubt that this kind of quietism is more at home in the East than the West; and Christianity, for Eliot, is not an Eastern religion. One surmises that the primitive content of Christianity is a subject which has little interest for Eliot: he is interested only in what it represents in the European *milieu*, as the spirit of the European tradition. The passage helps us, too, to understand his

'imperfect sympathy' with Blake, already expressed in the 1922 essay; for Blake is the great Western prophet of the inner voice and for him God and Man are truly identical. From first to last, indeed, Eliot's preoccupation is with order, Blake's with freedom. Eliot shrinks in disgust from what he calls 'the low dream', which finds the source of vision in the subconscious and affirms that 'everything that lives is holy'; his mysticism rests on 'the high dream', in which light comes from above, from outside the soul. The mysticism which looks inward needs no metaphysic, for it is content to accept whatever elements it finds within itself and work with these only; but the vision which looks outwards needs a supporting theology to assure itself that what comes from without is not an illusion. Hence Eliot's insistence on the intellect as the faculty which orders the structure of faith. Hence, too, the necessity of a Church. But which Church is one to choose? The claims of the Roman communion would appear, on first sight, paramount; but Eliot's studies in the seventeenth century Anglican divines and devotional poets have led him in another direction. Within the Anglican fold he can find a Catholic ritual, an intellectual framework, and a continuous devotional life; and a *decency*, to use the word of the Prayer-Book, which must appeal strongly to his fastidious mind.

(iv) To the ordinary cultivated student of civilisation the genesis of a Church is of little interest, and at all events we must not confound the history of a Church with its spiritual meaning. To the ordinary observer the English Church in history means Hooker and Jeremy Taylor — and should mean Andrewes also; it means George Herbert, and it means the churches of Christopher Wren. This is not an error: a Church is to be judged by its intellectual fruits, by its influence on the sensibility of the most sensitive and on the intellect of the most intelligent, and it must be made real to the eye by monuments of artistic merit. The English Church has no literary monument equal to that of Dante, no intellectual monument equal to that of St. Thomas, no devotional monument equal to that of St. John of the Cross, no building so beautiful as the Cathedral of Modena or the basilica of St. Zeno in Verona. But there are those for whom the City churches are as precious as any of the four hundred odd churches in Rome which are in no danger of demolition, and for whom St. Paul's in comparison with St. Peter's, is not lacking in decency; and the English devotional verse of the seventeenth century — admitting the one difficult case of conversion, that of Crashaw — finer than that of any other country or religious communion at the time. [*Lancelot Andrewes* (1926) p. 332].

The essay on Bishop Lancelot Andrewes is, next to the essay on Dante, the most significant document of this interim period. We find

Eliot's mind moving, not only in terms of the authority of the Anglican Church, but also in terms of Anglican devotion. 'Bishop Andrewes is one of the community of the born spiritual, one:

*che in questo mundo,
contemplando, gusto di quella pace*’.

He is interested in the Bishop's *Preces Privatæ*, which, he says, 'should take for Anglicans a place beside the Exercises of St. Ignatius and the works of St. François de Sales'. He discusses the *Sermons on the Nativity* with their dominant subject of the Incarnation, and defends the subtle involutions of their style.

(v) To persons whose minds are habituated to feed on the vague jargon of our times, when we have a vocabulary for everything and exact ideas about nothing — when a word half-understood, torn from its place in some alien or half-formed science, as of psychology, conceals from both writer and reader the meaninglessness of a statement, when all dogma is in doubt except the dogmas of sciences of which we have read in the newspapers, when the language of theology itself, under the influence of an undisciplined mysticism of popular philosophy, tends to become a language of tergiversation — Andrewes may seem pedantic and verbal. It is only when we have saturated ourselves in his prose, followed the movement of his thought, that we find his examination of words terminating in the ecstasy of assent.

We note, again, the mordant criticism of modern thought or absence of thought, the support of dogmatic beliefs, and the condemnation of 'undisciplined mysticism'. Attachment to the Church of England is, we assume, an insurance against these dangers. But Eliot reveals nothing of his private feelings. There is nothing in the nature of a confession. And, except in certain passages of his verse we never feel that we get to know Eliot's personal religious convictions. Perhaps he would say that there are no such things, that the essence of religious convictions is not personal. But the reader who feels baffled by Eliot's 'conversion' knows quite well what it is that baffles him. He wants to know *what difference* to Eliot's private life, to his attitude to his beliefs about immortality, Hell and Heaven, his acceptance of Anglicanism has made. And this kind of confession is precisely what he will not get. He is assumed to know enough about Christian theology to make his own deductions.

A more cogent doubt as to Eliot's religious beliefs is suggested by the fact that he has obviously arrived at allegiance to the Anglican Church along a road which began with a literary interest in certain Angli-

can writers. Now in fact such an approach rarely turns out satisfactorily. In the first place an enthusiasm for the Church in question will rarely survive the waning of an enthusiasm for its cultural monuments. In the second place the contrast between the glories of the past and the insignificance of the present becomes only too acute. It is difficult to connect the Anglicanism of Donne and Herbert with the Anglicanism of the Bishop of Birmingham and the Rev. Billy Sunday. If Eliot has survived these dangers it is because, first, he has not outlived his interest in the seventeenth century writers; and, second, because he has no illusions about the condition of the Anglican Church at the present day.

(vi) We fight for lost causes because we know that our defeat and dismay may be the preface to our successors' victory, though that victory itself will be temporary; we fight rather to keep something alive than in the expectation that anything will triumph... wisdom consists largely of scepticism and uncynical disillusion... and scepticism and disillusion are a useful equipment for religious understanding. [Francis Herbert Bradley (1926), p. 411].

That is the temper in which Eliot has allied himself with the Church: not in the hopes of her triumph in this generation, but in the hopes of preserving the *depositum fidei*—‘meanwhile redeeming the time’, as he says at the end of his essay *Thoughts After Lambeth* ‘so that the Faith may be preserved alive through the dark ages before us; to renew and rebuild civilisation, and save the World from suicide’. But in quoting this passage I anticipate a note of assurance and certainty not attained in 1926.

The interest in the history and traditions of the Anglican Church which Eliot showed in *Lancelot Andrewes* is continued in his essay on another seventeenth-century bishop, John Bramhall. Incidentally, Eliot discusses the mechanical determinism of Hobbes and its recrudescence in some degree in modern thinkers like I. A. Richards and Bertrand Russell. But the main interest of the essay is the discussion of the relations of Church and State, and the theory of kingship in relation to the Church. Bramhall upholds the divine right of kings: ‘Hobbes rejected this noble faith, and asserted in effect the divine right of power, however come by’. Bramhall’s *Just Vindication of the English Church* ‘is a work which ought to be studied by anyone to whom the relation of Church and State is an actual and importunate problem’. The remark prepares us for Eliot’s tract *The Nature of a Christian Society* to come many years later.

(vii) The problem of humanism is undoubtedly related to the problem of religion. Mr Babbitt makes it very clear, here and there throughout the book, that he is unable to take the religious view — that is to say that he cannot accept any dogma or revelation; and that humanism is the *alternative* to religion. And this brings up the question: is this alternative any more than a substitute? and, if a substitute, does it not bear the same relation to religion that 'humanitarianism' bears to humanism? Is it, in the end, a view of life that will work by itself, or it is a derivative of religion which will work only for a short time in history, and only for a few highly cultivated persons like Mr Babbitt whose ancestral traditions, furthermore, are Christian, and who is, like many people, at the distance of a generation or so from definite Christian belief? Is it, in other words, durable beyond one or two generations? [*The Humanism of Irving Babbitt* (1927), p. 434].

In his search for a tradition, Eliot was bound to come up against the claims of the humanists, for they offer him what he wants without the impediments of a religion. But he was shrewd enough to see through their claims. There is no living humanistic tradition. There is either a sentimental harking back to an idyllic Greece, or there is a scientific and naturalistic view of man which degenerates into Behaviourism or Hedonism.

(viii) The difference is only of one step: the humanitarianism has suppressed the properly human, and is left with the animal; the humanist has suppressed the divine, and is left with a human element which may quickly descend again to the animal from which he has sought to raise it. [*Ibid*].

Christianity is a vital part of the history of our race; and it has been and is a continuous part, whereas humanism has been something of a fashion, cropping up now and again and never appealing to more than a section of the people. The tradition of Western civilization is emphatically that of Christianity; and to attempt to recover that tradition without also professing the Christian faith is a hopeless task.

By this time the problem of poetry and belief has become acute. It seems that the instrument of Eliot's verse, fashioned originally for what seemed destructive and satiric purposes, is to be used as the medium of religious experience. Eliot has already prepared us for this transition in the passage I have quoted from the 1926 essay on Bradley: 'scepticism and disillusion are a useful equipment for religious understanding'. In the next year we find this statement in another essay:

I cannot see that poetry can ever be separated from something which I should call belief, and to which I cannot see any reason for

refusing the name of belief, unless we are to reshuffle names altogether. It should hardly be needful to say that it will not inevitably be orthodox Christian belief, although that possibility can be entertained, since Christianity will probably continue to modify itself, as in the past, into something that can be believed in (I do not mean *conscious* modifications like modernism, etc., which always have the opposite effect). The majority of people live below the level of belief or doubt. It takes application, and a kind of genius, to believe anything, and to believe *anything* (I do not mean merely to believe in some 'religion') will probably become more and more difficult as time goes on.

Christianity, therefore, is something that can modify itself, and recommend itself to belief; but Eliot does not tell us in what this modification consists. He deliberately rules out the modifications of Modernism. But apart from such conscious adaptations to contemporary thought it is difficult to see how Christianity itself can change. Through the centuries ecclesiastical polity has altered, and doctrinally the emphasis has shifted now to one dogma and now to another; but the general tendency has been for faith to become more difficult and not less so. And so the problem for a definitely religious poetry has become increasingly acute. In what way can a twentieth century poet treat the religious theme, and express his own convictions, without running the risk of losing the respect of his audience? And to what extent can a poetic instrument used for expressing the conviction of decay and disillusion adapt itself to the theme of salvation? These were the problems which confronted Eliot at this stage of his progress.

The problem would have been more acute if Eliot's religious convictions had shown any great difference in mood from his earlier disillusion. But, in fact, they didn't. The transition is a gradual one; and the pessimistic element of the first poems never wholly disappears. We rapidly become aware that for Eliot the Church's outlook itself is pessimistic and realistic. The doctrine of original sin looms large. The stupidity of men is as obvious a fact as ever: even more obvious, in fact, for they have rejected Christ. If he could say:

After such knowledge, what forgiveness?

in *Geronion*, he can repeat it with still greater emphasis in *Murder in the Cathedral*. And though the stupidity does not bring condemnation, but only pity and weariness, it does make impossible any easy belief in human perfectibility — even if that perfectibility is envisaged through the ministrations of the Church. Eliot's view point here is markedly mediæval; and it agrees perfectly well with his singling out

of the single type — the saint — as the ideal man. For the Middle Ages there was no idea of progress: man indeed was getting worse and worse with every year that separated him from the Fall; and only the ark of the Church availed to carry a few souls to salvation. The mass of the people can be saved, at best, by devotion to the Church and obedience to her precepts.

If Eliot was looking for a model for the new type of religious verse he was about to write, he would find it difficult to discover one. Gerard Manley Hopkins is the only first-rate religious poet that England has put out since the seventeenth century; and there are strong reasons why Hopkins should not appeal so much to Eliot as he has done to other poets and critics. (The paucity of reference to Hopkins in Eliot's critical prose is significant). Hopkins is a whole-hearted acceptor of intransigent Roman Catholic dogma: while many of Eliot's utterances suggest that he himself accepts only a Christianity that will continue 'to modify itself into something that can be believed in'. I have already pointed out the difficulty of interpreting this statement; as it stands, without elucidation, it is suspect. Moreover, Hopkins is too modern to be any use to Eliot for borrowing. I think, too, that Hopkins's love for the minutiae of the external world repels the ascetic Eliot.

But if Eliot is content to rely on a source which will supply him with the *spirit*, though not at all with the *technique*, of his new poetry, he has not far to seek. The dominant influence of Dante has never been absent from his work. It died down a little to give place to the Elizabethans in the 1920 volume; it existed on equal terms with them in *The Waste Land*; in *Ash-Wednesday* and the later poems it emerges triumphant. *The Waste Land* is Eliot's Inferno, *Ash-Wednesday* and its successors are the Purgatorio, and the Paradiso has not yet appeared, and probably never will, except fragmentarily.

The essay on Dante appeared in 1929. It has been hailed as the best short introduction to its subject, but it is much more than that: it is a valuable indirect statement of Eliot's religious position and it prepares us for *Ash-Wednesday* in the following year. The problem of poetry and belief crops up on the first page and we are never out of sight of it. The next important point to concern us (who are not engaged in a study of Eliot's literary predilections for their own sake) is his praise of the allegory; and when we come to look at *Ash-Wednesday* we shall find no small trace of the allegorical method as well as the allegorical mood in it. Moreover we may find it useful to follow

Eliot's advice — 'I do not recommend, in first reading the first canto of the *Inferno*, worrying about the identity of the Leopard, the Lion, or the She-Wolf' — when we are reading his own poem and find ourselves puzzled by the meaning of the three white leopards and the unicorn. What Eliot goes on to say is also relevant to his own verse:

What we should consider is not so much the meaning of the images, but the reverse process, that which led a man having an idea to express it in images. We have to consider the type of mind which by nature and *practice* tended to express itself in allegory; and, for a competent poet, allegory means *clear visual images*. And clear visual images are given much more intensity by having a meaning — we do not need to know what that meaning is, but in our awareness of the image we must be aware that the meaning is there too.

This faculty for clear visual images we have certainly noticed in the writer of *Preludes* and *Rhapsody on a Windy Night*. If, then, for a competent poet allegory means clear visual images, it will be no long step from the objectivity of the early verse to the allegoric intensity of the later.

Allegory, Eliot insists, is a matter of seeing and describing *visions*: a faculty which the modern world (does he include Blake?) has lost.

We have nothing but dreams, and we have forgotten that seeing visions — a practice now relegated to the aberrant and the uneducated — was once a more significant, interesting, and disciplined kind of dreaming. We take it for granted that our dreams spring from below: possibly the quality of our dreams suffers in consequence.

The pageantry of the *Paradiso* (the last canto of which 'is to my thinking the highest point that poetry has ever reached or ever can reach') 'belongs to the world of what I call the *high dream*, and the modern world seems capable only of the *low dream*'. Here again we have the rejection of the psychological approach to poetry: the approach which was exploited practically by D. H. Lawrence and James Joyce, and theoretically by I. A. Richards. There is a something not ourselves, it seems, that makes for clear visual images. The source of our poetry must be outside and above.

Eliot recommends the study of Dante (much in the same spirit that Arnold urged the imitation of the Greeks) rather than the study of Shakespeare, as a disciplinary exercise for the young writer. One learns from the *Inferno* 'that the greatest poetry can be written with the greatest economy of words, and with the greatest austerity in the use of metaphor, simile, verbal beauty, and elegance'. A phrase like



this makes us cast a backward glance over Eliot's early verse. 'From the *Purgatorio* one learns that a straightforward philosophical statement can be great poetry; from the *Paradiso*, that more and rarefied and remote *states of beatitude* can be the material for great poetry'. Though Eliot never gets free from his *Purgatorio*, there are undeniably *Paradisaic* elements creeping in from *Ash-Wednesday* onwards. When we come to discuss *Ash-Wednesday* we shall see something of how Eliot, with the help of Dante, succeeds in solving the problem put earlier in this chapter: how is an intelligent modern poet to convey religious experience without losing the confidence of the more intelligent of his readers? Something of the answer to that question Eliot has already given, in warning the reader (vicariously, as usual) to pay attention first to the images and not to the doctrine behind them.

Again, while still speaking of Dante, he anticipates the objection which may be brought against his own new poetry by the unbelieving critic: I am not a Christian, so I am afraid that your verse from now on is of no interest to me. The second clause, says Eliot, does not necessarily follow from the first. One can enjoy poetry as poetry without believing the things it says.

My point is that you cannot afford to *ignore* Dante's philosophical and theological beliefs, or to skip the passages which express them most clearly; but that on the other hand you are not called upon to believe them yourself. It is wrong to think that there are parts of the *Divine Comedy* which are of interest only to Catholics or to medievalists. For there is a difference (which here I hardly do more than assert) between philosophical *belief* and poetic *assent*. I am not sure that there is not as great a difference between philosophic belief and scientific belief; but that is a difference only now beginning to appear, and certainly inapposite to the thirteenth century... You are not called upon to believe what Dante believed, for your belief will not give you a groat's worth more of understanding and appreciation; but you are called upon more and more to understand it. If you can read poetry as poetry, you will 'believe' in Dante's theology exactly as you believe in the physical reality of his journey: that is, you suspend both belief and disbelief. I will not deny that it may be in practice easier for a Catholic to grasp the meaning, in many places, than for the ordinary agnostic; but that is not because the Catholic believes, but because he has been instructed. It is a matter of knowledge and ignorance, not of belief or scepticism. The vital matter is that Dante's poem is a whole; that you must in the end come to understand every part in order to understand any part.

Eliot goes on to suggest that 'we can make a distinction between what Dante believes as a poet and what he believed as a man'. This

seems to me to be carrying subtlety too far; and Eliot's lumping together our 'belief' in the reality of Dante's journey with our 'belief' in the truth of his theology is disingenuous. The journey is a part of the allegorical framework; the theology is the subject and motive of the poem. If we 'clear our minds of cant' we shall have no doubt that we enjoy a great poem like the *Divina Commedia* more if we believe in the theology which it expresses; it is pleasant to think that a Dante could subscribe to our views, be of the same Church with us, and so buttress our convictions with his genius. Moreover I believe with Blake that belief does give appreciation and understanding: 'taste and see how good the Lord is' is still the classical formula. In any case man is made as he is made: he cannot clear out of his mind the lumber of prejudices for and against which life has heaped up within it, whenever he sits down to read a poem. Moreover one of the great delights in reading a first-rate author is setting off one's own convictions against his. This is part of the athletic give and take of reading, which makes it more than a passive absorption of pictures.

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