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> We have got too familiar with the light.
> Shall I wish back once more that thrill
> of dawn?
> When the whole truth-touched man
> burned up, one fire?
>
> Browning's Pope Innocent XII,
> on primitive Christianity
> (*The Ring and the Book* X.1793–95)

ELIOT'S "Journey of the Magi" (1927), usually discounted as an unassuming Christmas poem or given only the most rudimentary of biblical glosses, occupies a central position in his poetic development. Its single, individuated voice, though still dramatically masked as in his earlier work, makes an obvious bridge between the multiple voices of *The Waste Land* and the single, "autobiographical" voice of the poet-quester in *Ash-Wednesday* (1927–30). Of the poems written in Eliot's middle period, "Journey of the Magi" is the one whose themes and methods most clearly foreshadow those of the *Four Quartets*. More than a grim, demythologized treatment of a difficult search for faith, it is also more than Eliot's fictionalized account of his conversion to Anglo-Catholicism. The poem transmutes the biographical material into a dramatic monologue that is one of the most experimental in the genre. While it may seem "a simple, rather conventionally constructed monologue in which one of the Magi tells his story pretty much as he really might, in his own voice," it is not; nor does it shut out "the panorama of history" elaborated in "Gerontion,"[1] for like Yeats's "The Second Coming" it dramatizes the anxiety of verging toward a great cultural shift. Indeed, Eliot's *un*conventional structuring is precisely what generates a vision of historical process both more complex and more focused than anything he had previously attempted.

The poem's core is its blatant anachronism. How can the Magus, ostensibly living at the time of Christ's Incarnation but ignorant of subsequent Christian history, speak a narrative that draws freely not only from Lancelot Andrewes' Nativity sermon of 1622 but from the New Testament, a literature that has not yet come into being? And why does Eliot create such laminations of text? These questions, consciously posed to the reader by the same Eliot who could write, "Stetson! / You who were with me in the ships at Mylae!" (*The Waste Land* I.69–70), point to the poem's primary concern with the quality of Christian faith as it occurs *within* the context of Christianity's historical development. This dual perspective, both private and panoramic, is partly responsible for the poem's peculiar resonance; the anachronistic discontinuities in speech elements multiply the poem's explorations beyond the Magus' own awareness. By giving the speaker a subtly impossible language that subversively queries what the Magus understands of his own speech, Eliot broaches afresh the matter on which Andrewes had founded his Nativity sermons: the nature of sign and symbol. By having the Magus order his scribe to record his recitation, Eliot questions—in a poem focused on the Incarnate Word—both the relation between oral and written traditions and the link between faith and literature. And by making a poem of laminated texts, he dissolves linear time: the poem's structure imitates the eternal simultaneity of the Logos. Notably, although "Journey of the Magi" originates independently of Saussure's *Cours de linguistique générale* (1915), it shares in the logocentric metaphysics for which Derrida faults Saussure—the assumptions that "full" speech is spoken, not written, that the artifice of writing debases the natural "presence" of the Word.[2] Eliot, however, does not expound that position uncritically; indeed, he articulates its components.

I

These complications, concealed by the evocative realism of the opening section, surface only when Eliot begins manipulating the multiple symbols in the second verse paragraph:

> 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.[3]

Though these details seem as descriptive as those in the first verse paragraph, a quantum leap in signification has occurred: the landscape presents "an emblematic life of Christ in miniature."[4] The abrupt transition from winter to spring, from desert to "temperate valley," embodies the topos by which medieval and Renaissance painters indicated the radical alteration in human history that Christ's coming signals.[5] As commentators have it, the "running stream" resembles the baptismal Jordan, while the "water-mill" recalls Christ's winnowing fan of judgment (Matt. iii.12); the "three trees" of the Crucifixion lead into the "white horse" of Revelation (vi.2, xix.11); both the "vine-leaves" and the "empty wine-skins" invoke familiar parables (e.g., Matt.ix.17; John ii.–11, xv.1); and the "dicing for pieces of silver" conflates the soldiers' casting of lots for Christ's cloak (John xix.23–24) with Judas' betrayal (Matt. xxvi.15). Even the word "satisfactory" (in the section's last line) suggests the Anglo-Catholic doctrine of Christ's "Satisfaction for all the sins of the whole World, both Original and Actual."[6]

What could be more straightforward? Yet the character of these symbols is rather more perplexing than has been realized.

First, they are not static intimations of a fixed history. More kinetic than the symbols in Andrewes, they intermingle three distinct temporal perspectives. Viewed from the Magus' historical stationing at the outset of the Christian era, the symbols are all proleptic of Christ's *future* life on earth. Eliot has formulated a visionary landscape, "God's book," in which one may "read" the future, the dispensation of grace that eludes the Magus. But that "future" can be read as prophecy only because it is already *past*, only because its symbols have for centuries been culturally received as history. Seen from the (continually changing) present of 1927 or 1980, the symbols invoke the beginnings of Christianity, the chief episodes from which the Christian tradition evolved. Only with the allusions to Revelation and final judgment does the reader, by recognizing in the landscape events that have yet to happen, share a temporal stationing with the Magus. Of these fluid interweavings Eliot would later write:

> . . . the future is a faded song, a Royal Rose or a lavender spray
> Of wistful regret for those who are not yet here to regret,
> Pressed between yellow leaves of a book that has never been opened.
> ("The Dry Salvages" III.126–28)

Finally, within the conventions of Christian eschatology, these shifting and contrary historical points coexist simultaneously in an eternal place. The landscape's iconic stillness, achieved through the spatialization of temporal referents and through the Magus' paratactic observation, suggests the supernatural redemption of the mundane order: "Midwinter spring is its own season / Sempiternal though sodden towards sundown, / Suspended in time, between pole and tropic" ("Little Gidding" I.1–3).

Second, challenging a readership necessarily imbued (until recently) with Christian symbolism, Eliot has defamiliarized the symbols, compelled his reader to apprehend a known world made strange. He has juggled their chronology, given them a random sequence, and altered their usual appearance (the crosses on Calvary become "three trees"). These transformations, without rendering recognition difficult, urge the reader to question both the objects being recognized and the process of recognition

itself. The alteration of symbols exhibits Eliot's incessant preoccupation with testing his readers' minds: the ambiguous "you" of "Preludes" (III, IV) or "Burnt Norton" (I.15), through which Eliot blurs the boundary between poem and reader, finds its corresponding rhetorical device here in an unobtrusive disturbance of the reader's sense of temporal categories and defined concepts. As I demonstrate below, Eliot's strategy is to compare the kinds of knowledge possessed, respectively, by the Magus and the reader.

Third, and of critical importance, the Magus does not recognize the symbols. Commentary has balked at this situation: neglecting history, it has assumed the Magus to share a hindsight understanding with the Christianized reader.[7] But 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. Seen against nineteenth-century dramatic monologues, which commonly posit an antipathy between speaker and reader, the distance is particularly extreme; Browning's Guido, after all, professes his atheism in a Christian context he shares with the reader.

Indeed, as the poem's deviations from Andrewes' account of the journey show, Eliot intensifies that discrepancy wherever possible; he demythologizes Andrewes even more thoroughly than Andrewes does Matthew. For example, Andrewes has his Magi guided by the "Day-star which riseth in the heart," which he equates with the inner light of faith.[8] Eliot not only omits the star, he also suggests—by a parodic, deflationary syntax—the Magus' skepticism of heavenly guidance; the familiar King James locution indicating portentous utterance,

> And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and *saying*, Glory to God in the highest . . . (Luke ii.13–14)

becomes:

> At the end we preferred to travel all night
> . . . . . .
> With the voices singing in our ears, *saying*
> That this was all folly. (italics added)

And where Andrewes' Magi hurry cheerfully "to worship Him with all the possible speed they could. Sorry for nothing so much as that they could not be there soon enough . . ." (1622, I, 258), Eliot's Magus hastens to end an unpleasant journey; what he "regretted" is the vanishing of "the silken girls bringing sherbet."[9] In brief, Andrewes thinks of the Magi as Christians already; he writes anachronistically of their glad submission to an already institutionalized theology. This idealizing interpretation, which violates historical plausibility, Eliot rejects. His demythologizing insists that the speaker does not participate in the reader's spiritual world. A non-Christian, the Magus undertakes an absurd journey with no idea of divine teleology or of Christian signs. Why has Eliot constructed this dichotomy between the Magus' ignorance and the reader's knowledge?

The language of the second verse paragraph focuses the question exactly, for here Eliot mastered a problem that could have damaged his design. In making a language for the Magus, Eliot trod the invisible line between plausibility and anachronism; he risked a speech nearly inappropriate, for it includes symbols and allusions that Christian literature had not yet created. Still, Eliot surely understood the arbitrary nature of signs, knew that signifiers exist only when a community makes a compact that the (chosen) signifier shall designate the (chosen) signified. He maintained, further, that "A sign has its existence beside its content, and it is just this separate existence—the fact that the sign might be misinterpreted or simply not recognized as a sign at all, which makes it a sign and not an identity."[10] He could thus blur the biblical material so as to create two linguistic fields, two realms of understanding, by means of only

one parole: the resulting language hovers between Christian sign and heathen blank, symbol and thing; it encompasses the vastly different communities and historical positions of reader and speaker. The traditional emblems have been sufficiently defamiliarized for the Magus to use them plausibly as counters for natural objects and occurrences; yet they still sufficiently resemble their Christian referents for the reader to discern their sacramental meaning. Such a balance is essential. Had Eliot rendered only a full-fledged symbolic speech, he would have violated the Magus' culturally possible understanding and lost the strange resonance of a diction that now verges toward both a mystery and a new epoch that the Magus does not comprehend. Had Eliot presented only a "literal" speech, he would also (though in a different way) have lost that nuance and its implicit pathos. More important, he would have sacrificed the reader's ethnocentric engagement in the Christian world and the reader's knowledge of the Magus' ignorance. The collision between linguistic communities (e.g., "*Is* the 'white horse' a sign?") is fundamental to the poem's operation.

For the poem's grand paradox is that those who can read the signs, through education or mere assimilation, ultimately know less than the Magus, who cannot—in Andrewes' phrasing—"open the signature" (1620, I, 246). In this second section, Eliot springs an epistemological and moral trap that is almost impossible to sidestep. The reader with even a modicum of exposure to New Testament literature blithely deciphers the disguised signs so tantalizingly strewn about the passage and, like the commentators, automatically reformulates Eliot's quasi-naturalistic details into their proper biblical referents.[11] The literary mechanics of unraveling thus obscures the sacred history the signs once invoked; knowledge of the sign, as a "thing," replaces knowledge of the mystery signified. The text becomes arid. Yet, simultaneously, the ease of recognition pushes the reader into superiority and condescension: "How can the Magus not see such obvious symbols?" Having induced that ethnocentric surprise, Eliot closes his trap. Through intellectual pride, he teases the reader to equate, falsely, literary knowledge with religious faith. Whether mocking the Magus' illiteracy or pitying his ignorance, the reader vaunts the superiority of Western culture.[12] Eliot will ultimately juxtapose that complacent pride against the Magus' baffled consciousness of mystery.

Thus subject to misinterpretation, symbol in "Journey of the Magi" loses its positive value as an opening into true perception, and Eliot here temporarily abandons his method in *The Waste Land*. In that poem both Madame Sosostris (I) and the Cleopatra figure (II) inhabit worlds suffused with symbols they cannot—but should—comprehend; their inability to "open the signature" marks Eliot's judgment against their failure to transcend material vision. While Madame Sosostris sees "crowds of people, walking round in a ring" (I.56), she cannot hear the Dantean echoes in her own phrasing, which, had she used them deliberately, might have made her a prophet rather than a charlatan; nor can she see that the omission of a sign (I.54–55) is itself significant. The Cleopatra figure barricades herself behind artifacts signifying pagan sensuality, the loss of sexual innocence, and Christian history from Eden (II.98) to the Redemption, figured in the "carvèd dolphin" (II.96); yet she can read neither the moral nor the religious implications of these signs. The passage stunningly exposes the power of art to corrupt the mind by inducing a contemplation of the sign rather than of the thing signified. In "Journey of the Magi" those who can interpret the signs (the readers) are as derelict as the characters in *The Waste Land* who cannot. It is not so much that Eliot now doubts the truth of relation between signifier and signified; rather, he distrusts the reader's susceptibility to wrong reading and acknowledges the tendency of the signifier to obscure the signified. Gerontion's suspicion of symbol—his scoffing at those who cannot accept the miraculous without a signifying proof[13]—has had its effect. Eliot now urges the efficacy of unmediated perception: it is the Magus, illiterate in Christian signs, who glimpses a visionary wisdom. Thus the reader is judged, and harshly. Eliot has reshaped the dramatic monologue (which typically invokes the reader's judgment of the *speaker*[14]) to include a judgment of the reader. Partly through the reader's awareness of

that judgment, the value of the Magus' ignorance emerges.

The moral foundation of Eliot's judgment is clear. Concomitantly, he criticizes a Christian chauvinism that denigrates other modes of revelation; latitudinarian, the poem thus conforms with *The Waste Land*, where the Buddhist Upanishads, as much as the Bible, provide the ancient wisdom from which self-renovation may spring. Because the reader's initially false judgment of the Magus derives from a hindsight knowledge that presumes historical development, Eliot further rejects the common "idea of progress" and the linear model of history it presupposes. In "Gerontion" history is a maze that cannot be made linear merely to reassure humankind that forward movement is inevitable. Here, attacking the reader's cultural pride, Eliot anticipates his speculation in "The Dry Salvages" that

> . . . the past has another pattern, and ceases to be a mere sequence—
> Or even development: the latter a partial fallacy
> Encouraged by superficial notions of evolution,
> Which becomes, in the popular mind, a means of disowning the past. (II.86–89)

Eliot would later denounce "the provincialism . . . of time, one for which history is merely the chronicle of human devices which have served their turn and been scrapped, one for which the world is the property of the living, a property in which the dead hold no shares."[15] In "Journey of the Magi" that provincialism begins not only with the reader's pride in small knowledge but with a cultural fixation on its source: writing, the book, and the Bible.

In his most radical criticism, Eliot argues that the Bible itself, an assemblage of written documents transmitted through history and made familiar through casual or dogmatic usage, has helped subvert primitive Christianity. The fixing of Christian concepts and imagery in a permanent artifact that encourages endless repetition of the text transforms the felt, sounded presence of God into a written representation and deafens the reader—who "knows" the symbols—to the mysteries they once freshly signified. Creating inscribed images kills the Word: this paradox leads Eliot to polarize the Magus' unmediated perception of the Incarnation against the reader's entrapment in its written substitutions. Behind the antithesis lies Plato's anecdote about the invention of writing:

> But when it came to writing Theuth said, "Here, O king, is a branch of learning that will make the people of Egypt wiser and improve their memories. . . ." But the king answered and said, ". . . If men learn this, it will implant forgetfulness in their souls; they will cease to exercise memory because they rely on that which is written, calling things to remembrance no longer from themselves, but by means of external marks." (*Phaedrus* 274E–275A)

As writing estranges the self from authentic experience, so Christian literature undermines the faith it was meant to foster. Although this is not Eliot's final position in "Journey of the Magi," it is consonant with his recurrent suspicion of the written text. Gerontion, intellectually keen but morally jaded, is "Being read to by a boy" from a tantalizingly unidentified text that he ignores; the counterpointing of spoken voice against literary artifact in this dissection of Western civilization questions the value of literate culture itself. In *Ash-Wednesday* the speaker, not content to repeat the ritualized language of the Mass (presumably coextensive with the poem), develops a meditative language capable of "restoring / With a new verse the ancient rhyme" (IV).[16] "Journey of the Magi," whose stationing shows how well Eliot understood that dramatic monologue requires present action as backdrop and foil, situates his suspicion of the text at the most dramatically appropriate moment: the Magus is having his recitation transcribed—transformed from speech into document, into "external marks." This shrewd accommodation of setting and content probes the relative merits of oral and written modes of transmission. Although it was Browning who taught Eliot how dramatic monologue could encompass such problems of textuality, poems like "Cleon" and "Karshish" remain epistolary monologues whose "speakers" are not conscious of changing their thought into literary artifacts. By contrast, the Magus participates passionately in that central transformation which, here, lays bare the poem's concern with Incarnation. Whatever the latent irony that his personal witness, when made into "text," may become as barren

as the husk of biblical symbol, Eliot's formal stationing presses the reader to rethink, in individual and cultural terms, the process that occurs when speech is incarnated in writing.

II

If the reader's vicarious knowledge, gained from Christian literature, yields such an unknowing, what of the Magus' ignorance? Unimpeded by the absorption of biblical signs, the speaker intuitively apprehends the Incarnation as sacred miracle. Having been skeptical, having vacillated ("There were times we regretted"), having sought facts ("But there was no information"), he confronts Christ and, casting aside all desire for empirical proof, affirms a new concept of truth: "We had evidence and no doubt." His capacity to perceive the miraculous within the apparently natural—he reads correctly the divine paradox in the central sign, the Birth—is precisely what, in Eliot's view, distinguishes his mind from that of enervated modern Christianity. "We have a mental habit," Eliot would upbraid centuries of materialist philosophy,

> which makes it much easier for us to explain the miraculous in natural terms than to explain the natural in miraculous terms: yet the latter is as necessary as the former.[17]

Through the miracle the Magus understands both his own inward revolution and the rise of a paradoxical theology; comparing "these Kingdoms" with the realm the Birth initiates, he senses an imminent transformation in historical pattern. Experiencing these reversals, though ignorant of their eschatology,[18] he becomes in Eliot's own spiritual development the first quester to actualize that spontaneous apprehension of the numinous toward which the speakers of *Ash-Wednesday* and *Four Quartets* strive. A proto-Christian unbaptized, yet one who has almost learned "how to see the world as the Christian Fathers saw it,"[19] he enacts Eliot's praise of Baudelaire's courageous

> theological innocence. He is discovering Christianity for himself; he is not assuming it as a fashion or weighing social or political reasons. . . . [B]eing a discoverer, [he] is not altogether certain what he is exploring and to what it leads; he might almost be said to be making again, as one man, the effort of scores of generations.[20]

The Magus embodies the awe and the difficulty, if not the fulfillment, of primitive Christianity, Browning's "thrill of dawn" (for which Eliot longed), "When the whole truth-touched man burned up, one fire."

That the Magus responds in this way is particularly notable because he sees the Incarnation and nothing else. Equipped only with a historically plausible understanding, he does not know, with Andrewes' Magi, that "The cratch is a sign of the Cross" (1618, I, 201). Knowledge of Christ's ministry, the Death and Resurrection, is denied him. The theological interdependence of *all* episodes in Christ's life—Matthew, for example, defines the Incarnation by the Crucifixion—eludes him. The poem experiments with the question, How much can one know from the Incarnation alone?[21] Enough, Eliot suggests; and more than that. Indeed, as *The Waste Land* implies, knowledge of Christ's subsequent history is useless unless accompanied by faith in mystery; although the quester knows of the Crucifixion (v.322–30), he fails to recognize Christ's theophany (v.360–66). The Magus possesses what the quester lacks: the overwhelming experience of the absolute and therefore the omnipotent. If, unlike Andrewes' "great learned troop" (1620, I, 245), the Magus has no sense of his own redemption through Christ, he thus acknowledges the miraculous presence without any hope of personal advantage. If he knows nothing of God's loving sacrifice, he certainly understands that Christ's nature, showing him his own mereness, invites ascetic renunciation. Throughout, his vision is dispassionate, austere. In accord with Christ's aversion to performing miracles, it emphasizes miraculous being, not miraculous act; faith in the first, Eliot implies, is of a higher philosophic and religious order than faith in the second, which expediency must always tinge.

The Magus' *manner* of recognition is as important as what he knows. 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 sec-

tion. As he meditates on Christ's coming, his language becomes analytic, abstract, paradoxical; the suspended participles 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 apperception, 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. Such inwardness contrasts radically with the reader's response to signs earlier; by the end, the Magus' involvement in the unknown has topped the reader's power to display received knowledge.

An obsessed man, like many of Eliot's other characters, the Magus knows that, in "finding the place," he has completed only his outward journey.[22] Where Gerontion disingenuously claims, "I have no ghosts" (though the Holy Ghost still haunts him), the Magus would doggedly repeat an experience that was "hard and bitter agony"; indeed, the poem's utterance is his repetition. The witnessing—like the hyacinth garden (*The Waste Land* I) or the rose garden ("Burnt Norton" I)—enthralls him:

> We returned to our places, these Kingdoms,
> But no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation,
> With an alien people clutching their gods.

The differentiation between "the place" of the manger and "our places" measures—geographically, politically—the religious distance between witnessing the miraculous and enduring the mundane. Like Tennyson's Ulysses (whose contempt for domestic government Eliot remembered here), the Magus craves return to an exhilaration that, though deadly, may end his present estrangement. Eliot's representation of that unsatisfied desire continues the treatment of "between-ness," so fastidiously attentive to anxiety, which runs from "The Hollow Men" (V) through *Ash-Wednesday* (IV) to the vacant simile of "East Coker," "as, when an underground train, in the tube, stops too long between stations . . ." (III.118). Ultimately the Magus cannot tolerate the strain of that double life, and thus the closure: "I should be glad of another death."

The thought, perhaps not conscious before the recitation, is dense; Eliot's language, again fusing two distinct historical contexts, invokes conventional responses in order to cancel them. If the Magus appears to wish Christ's death (which may have already occurred), it is the contemporary reader who equates "death" with "Crucifixion" and thus supplies (what Eliot elicits) the shocking, self-reawakening idea of killing God. Although the quiet sadomasochistic desire to annihilate the numinous recalls the tormented world of Prufrock and "The Death of Saint Narcissus," such hatred requires an energy beyond the pathos of the Magus' paralysis; Christ's theophany has not yet become "The intolerable shirt of flame / Which human power cannot remove" ("Little Gidding" IV.210–11). Nor does the Magus seek to "die into Christ," to submit fully to God.[23] Would he have understood the metaphor? While he can envisage an ascetic humiliation, the transformation of that self-loathing into an *imitatio Christi* is not yet a culturally accepted mode. The gap in language and interpretation, however, suggesting the discipline of Christian renunciation, focuses the Magus' dilemma: the problem of the will, perhaps the most prominent theme in Eliot's poetry and certainly one that preoccupied him during his conversion. On its face, "I should be glad of another death" is a wish for a natural, effortless release from the turmoil his ineradicable memory provokes. But it also whispers a craving for suicide, a willed self-negation to annul Christ's power and assert human dignity against the transcendent absolute. The Magus cannot choose between these opposed solutions. Nor can he contemplate suicide directly; "I *should be* glad" remains hypothetical, self-distancing. When the chips are down, the Magus falters, and his irresolution meshes with his character. Decisive enough to "travel all night," enough convinced to "do it again," he has nevertheless portrayed himself as an automaton: he has obeyed hallucinatory voices, he has been "*led* all this way."

The unrelieved tension of a paralysis taut with contradictory impulses bears directly on the poem's central act: the Magus' decision, years after the journey, to record his experience. Privately and publicly, the act is chiefly historical. Identifying his witness as the defining event of

his life, the Magus weighs his testimony and lays claim on future generations to acknowledge the cataclysm he describes. Unable to commit himself to the miraculous, he will compensate for his ambivalence by making his text a gesture toward his experience; as Eliot writes in "Burnt Norton," "I can only say, *there* we have been: but I cannot say where" (II.68). While he thus nearly joins those who "affirm before the world and deny between the rocks" (*Ash-Wednesday* V), he passes beyond the histrionic vacillations of Prufrock, who merely queries, "Would it have been worth while, / . . . To say: 'I am Lazarus, come from the dead, / Come back to tell you all. . . .' " The Magus, prepared to interpret to an invisible future a past it does not know, will risk the candor of presenting his life as an unresolved problem; in doing so, he creates a community of readers for whom his text will signify both himself and the difficulty of commitment that Christ's coming demands.

The speaker's impulse to make history is enriched by the poet's concern to show the complexity of the historiographical motive. Although Eliot knew the Peircean theory of interpretation expounded by Royce in *The Problem of Christianity* (1913), his view of the writing and reading of history is more keenly psychological than his mentor's.[24] The Magus' recording of his experience is a catharsis, and the choice of this mode *as* a catharsis presupposes his having designs on a potential audience. Reifying his quandary in a text, the Magus distances himself from his problem and partly controls it. With his text as intermediary, he foists his dilemma on others, attempts to achieve inner peace by displacing his anxiety. His writing, with its unanswered metaphysical questions, is a kind of violence: while he may hope that his readers will resolve what stumps him, his psychology is more akin to the Ancient Mariner's. Yet where the Mariner compulsively recites, the Magus records—chooses the permanence of textuality over the transience of speech. Implicitly, a merely oral transmission cannot assuage his tension: as he himself is in some sense the victim of the Logos, so he incarnates his words in a text that will, analogously, disrupt his readers; extending himself beyond his mortality, he can wound without being present.

The cathartic act has its own structure. Although the Magus may not consciously seek to neutralize the Incarnate Word by containing it within an artifact, the remarkable point is that his command to the scribe to "set down" his language is quickly associated with self-annihilation. Does the Magus think death an apt punishment for violating an unspoken taboo against reducing the potency of the numen to a text? While the artifactual distancing preserves the Magus' balance, is the catharsis of writing simultaneously self-negating in that it empties the Magus of his most valued moment? As in the *Four Quartets*, the analogy of aesthetic creation illumines the questioning of the Incarnation. The text as preserver and destroyer of the experience, the act of writing as the gaining of surrogate immortality and the losing of actual life —these paradoxical intersections imitate thematically the interweavings of birth and death in Christ. The poem's central dramatic act is the mundane repetition of the miraculous: the incarnation of sound within the body of a text.

The Magus' command, his only imperative, crystallizes the poem:

> All this was a long time ago, I remember,
> And I would do it again, but set down
> This set down
> This. . . .

Suddenly energetic rhythms define his priorities. No matter if the scribe has missed a few words of the narrative; but he must not slip in recording the indispensable meditation on the Birth. Having crossed the psychic line between speech and writing, the Magus becomes anxious about textual accuracy. Will the scribe take dictation correctly? Will the written word precisely signify his spoken language? Note how Eliot makes the poem's emotional peak coincide with his clarification of its genre: the scribe, recording throughout, becomes visible as the internal audience of dramatic monologue only because the Magus feels impelled, at this crisis, to instruct him. His command, moreover, poses speech against writing: *heard* as two imperatives, his words are *read* as an instance of fused syntax.[25] And, beyond the Magus' intent, the fused syntax has an iconic significance. As in *The Waste Land* (e.g., III.218–23), it upsets common notions of order. By inversion and dovetailing, Eliot renders the Magus' complete break from narrative linearity,

temporal progressiveness: the idea of Christ dissolves historicity. The stilled, circular language, anticipating *Ash-Wednesday* (v), images eternity and approximates the paradoxes of the Logos: "This," the repeated demonstrative, is both the Omega of one sentence unit and the Alpha of the next—an imitation of Christ within the text. Thus the form makes this instruction, despite its theologically neutral content, the poem's theological center. For this reason, and because these lines so clearly reveal the Magus' intensity of character and the poem's concern with textuality, the passage is the poem's epitome. Yet this command—as, seemingly, a mere instruction—will not be recorded; it is the sole portion of the Magus' utterance that will not be transmitted to posterity. What does this omission from the final "text" mean?

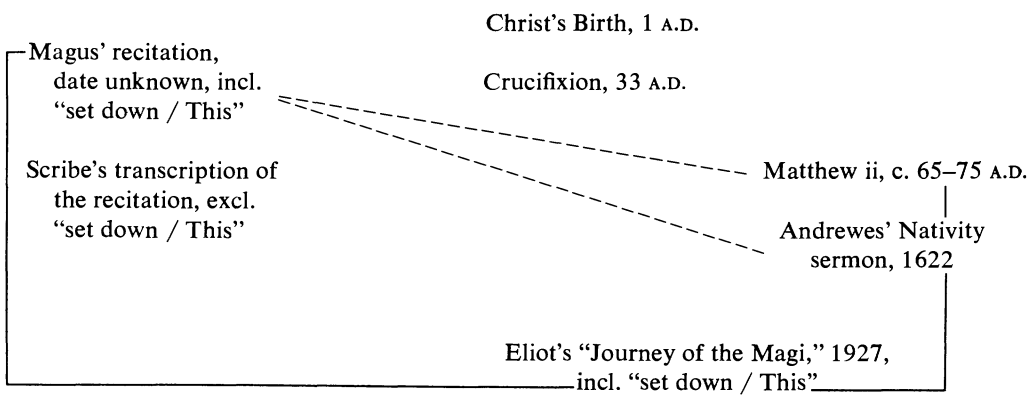
III

The question opens major paradoxes in the poem's form. These, like Eliot's manipulation of symbol, concern the relation between literature and faith, the conflict of individual vision with institutionally authorized understanding, and "The point of intersection of the timeless / With time" ("The Dry Salvages" v.201–02). For if the Magus' directions to the scribe are omitted from his "text," how have they survived? The poem, that is, patently offers *two* texts: (1) the "text" the Magus intends, one that excludes his directions; (2) the text of the poem, including the directions. The fissure between the two texts matters. In a poem about the Logos, Eliot works his form to expose a difficulty in manuscript transmission that underscores, in artifactual terms, both the Incarnationist theme and the sometimes abrasive connection between religious texts and religious traditions. His poem, following Browning's path in "A Death in the Desert," is the most elaborate in early modernist literature to derive from the Higher Criticism.[26]

Had Eliot omitted the Magus' instructions from the poem, "Journey of the Magi" could be simply a twentieth-century revision of the Nativity story begun by Matthew and continued by Andrewes:

Matthew ii.1–12, c. 65–75 A.D.
|
Andrewes, 1622
|
Eliot, 1927

But Eliot's inclusion of the directions invalidates such a clear stemma. *Someone* must have overheard the Magus instruct the scribe, must have decided to record those crucial words in a document, called "Journey of the Magi," that differs from the one the Magus intends (the significance of that "someone" will emerge shortly). Eliot the writer, toying with Mill's dictum that "poetry is *over*heard,"[27] purports to return—for his source—not to Andrewes or Matthew, but to the Magus' historical act of recitation, one that inaugurates a textual tradition seemingly unknown to Matthew and Andrewes yet that anachronistically includes them. Of course Eliot's poem is based on those "real" texts. But in pretending that it derives from an independent tradition, Eliot creates an illusory problem in textual transmission that gives rise to the stemma that appears below.



Three points should be noted: (1) although both textual traditions concern Christ's life, only the Magus' account claims eyewitness authority for the Nativity; (2) the Magus' account as recorded by the scribe is a "lost" document, of which not even Eliot pretends knowledge; (3) the broken lines represent connections between the textual traditions. From the Magus' historical stationing, such connections involve impossible anachronisms; from that of Matthew or Andrewes, they suggest possible borrowings for which no evidence—other than Eliot's poem—exists.

Consider first how Eliot's two texts function, remembering that he uses the concept of "text" in analogy with the Incarnation. Can a version that excludes the Magus' instructions (the poem's center) be accurate? Or is it a false—because incomplete—signifier of his psyche? Must writing inevitably shadow the gesture of communication that prompts it? These themes have, here, a new import because Eliot has posed a "true" text (the poem) against the "false" one made by the scribe. He questions how a "true" text, one that includes the gestalt of writing as well as the writing itself, comes into being, survives into posterity; for presumably the matrix of writing (the urgency of the instruction) is self-consciously discarded as conception passes into creation. These matters Eliot broaches through a daring handling of dramatic monologue that lays the genre bare. He confronts—what his previous monologues evade—the problem implicit in all dramatic monologues whose speakers have historical reality. How is the speech of such a monologist (Lucretius, Andrea del Sarto, the Magus) transmitted to the future and known by the poem? How does a poet validate the "authenticity" of a speech not otherwise preserved? Like the Word, the "historicity" of the utterance can be discredited by an inept poetic incarnation; any suggestion of improbability, in character or transmission, normally endangers the poem's success. Thus, Tennyson and Browning largely avoid the transmission problem and present the historical monologue as a fait accompli; they assume a convention of dramatic ventriloquism and rely on the reader's willing suspension of disbelief, the predisposition to accept historical fiction as exactly that.[28] Eliot refuses such a method. He treats the problem *as* a problem and thus makes his poem's form turn on an impossibility. If "Journey of the Magi" had followed convention, the reader could rightly be satisfied that only the Magus and his scribe are present in the scene; yet the included instructions compel the recognition that a third party overhears the episode—a third party who cannot have been in attendance. Through this impossibility, Eliot opens the historical chasm between, say, 20 A.D. and 1927; thus he exposes the fictiveness of the genre. Impugning a glib literary faith that the problem is spurious, he moves to a new order of awareness to test the relations between "history" and "invention."

Here his lamination of the texts is indispensable. Because the transcription partly falsifies the recitation, it enhances the Magus' historically objective status; his historicity is recognized because the "true" version gives the reader a standard of judgment. Yet that standard itself emerges from a seeming impossibility: the poet's "overhearing." In "Andrea del Sarto," by contrast, there is no discrepancy between what the painter's wife, Lucrezia, hears and what Browning presents Andrea saying; in "Journey of the Magi" the scribe also "hears" everything *but* screens out the instructions as extraneous, and the poet thus exposes the fissure between spoken language and its shadow, "external marks." In doing so, Eliot strategically jeopardizes both his credibility and his invisibility. By what means can he "correct" what he cannot have heard? Making such a correction, he comes into view as being more reliable than the scribe, though the grounds of that reliability are obviously vexed. Participating in a form that normally demands authorial anonymity to preserve the historical fiction, the poet accentuates his own historicity as distinct from that of the Magus and thereby stresses the impossibility of his overhearing his speaker; Eliot's sensory apprehension, which cannot be empirically verified, leads to mystery.[29] The reader thus encounters a paradoxical character, Eliot, who, hovering between past and present like the poem's landscape of symbols, is both the Magus' contemporary and the modern poet playing with his sources. Although conventional historical monologues typically conceal such a paradoxical split in the poet's identity, Eliot exploits this dynamic potentiality in the form: the

hovering renders him a bodiless "zone of consciousness"[30] expanded beyond temporal fixity. As the poet's present merges with the present of the Magus, the two historical points appear virtually identical; in Eliot's exposition of Bradley, the experiencing of the past is not a memory of the past but an atemporal self-presenting of a past transformed in consciousness (*Knowledge and Experience*, p. 51). That simultaneity becomes an aesthetic analogue of the eternal.

Imitating the timeless is also Eliot's aim in citing Andrewes. The language of the Jacobean sermon is seamlessly integrated with the "present" of the Magus (the poet's past) and the "present" of the poem's creation (the Magus' future). In making Andrewes' text a transparent filter through which past and present reach to become each other, Eliot progresses beyond the diachronic view of historical mediation he had given in introducing Charlotte Eliot's *Savonarola*:

> Every period of history is seen differently by every other period; the past is in perpetual flux, although only the past can be known. How usefully, therefore, may we supplement our direct knowledge of a period, by contrasting its view of a third, more remote period with our own views of this third period! (p. vii)

The synchronicity of "Journey of the Magi" is partly stylistic: altering Andrewes' prose into his own three- or four-stress line, Eliot rhymes with Andrewes' "rhymes," "duplicates" Andrewes' use of sentence fragment and inversion (the noun-modifier combination in "The ways deep," "the camels galled"), and subtly shifts from Andrewes' gerund ("A cold coming") to his own present participles ("and charging high prices"). Compare this seamlessness with Eliot's use of *The Boke Named the Gouvenour* ("East Coker" I.28–33), where the archaic language magnifies the separateness of points in linear time. Here the reconciliation of texts is essential to the poem's attempt to transcend temporal categories. For Eliot presents an anachronism—the Magus' use of Andrewes' language—as the Magus' original speech: no anachronism at all. To have the Magus utter phrases from a text not yet extant is even more startling than Eliot's manipulation of symbol; while the symbols can be naturalized, partly de-Christianized, a text's temporal identity is not so easily altered. As with the person of the poet, Andrewes' text dissolves into the Magus' speech; its dissolution underscores both its historicity and the atemporal pressures exerted against it. Through Andrewes' language, the Magus participates, however unconsciously, in the lives of those not yet born; the living (including Andrewes, at a certain historical moment, as well as Eliot) join in the lives of the dead. As Eliot, entering the language of the dead, floats through the consciousnesses of the Magus and Andrewes, is possessed by them even as he contains and reanimates them, he negates the individual ego and approaches the vision of the transpersonal and timeless human community embraced in "Little Gidding":

> We die with the dying:
> See, they depart, and we go with them.
> We are born with the dead:
> See, they return, and bring us with them.
> (v.228–31)

This rejection of linear time and its psychic restraints (implicit in Eliot's criticism of the reader's cultural limitations) marks Eliot's management of all texts in the poem, not merely Andrewes'. Each of them—the Magus' eyewitness account, Matthew's gospel, Andrewes' sermon, the Magus' recitation as offered in the poem—signifies a unique moment in Christian history. But as Eliot fuses syntax, he compounds the texts, cancels their temporal successiveness. Each text looks Janus-like toward past and future; but because the past and future differ in each instance and because the poem's future is also that of primitive Christianity in Judea, temporal categories become meaningless. Unlike *Ulysses*, in which Eliot sees "a continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity,"[31] unlike *The Waste Land*, similarly structured by the Grail legend, this poem ultimately escapes the notions of contemporaneity, antiquity, and parallelism alike. Eliot has made historically fixed materials render an ahistorical vision. All quests for the divine fuse to image a metaphysical communion in the mystical body of Christ. The texts commingle in "a pattern / Of timeless moments" to become, like the Chinese jar, an

emblem of infinity ("Little Gidding" v.234–35; "Burnt Norton" v.142–43).

Eliot's deployment of literary texts to approach the Logos suggests that the capacity of literature to subvert Christian belief (discussed above) is part of a greater paradox: literature, as this poem exemplifies, also defines the Christian experience. Thus qualifying his misgivings, Eliot certainly does not endorse the Arnoldian view, exaggerated by Richards in *Science and Poetry*, that poetry "is capable of saving us";[32] nor does he join Yeats in claiming that art actually creates religion:

> The true faith discovered was
> When painted panel, statuary,
> Glass-mosaic, window-glass,
> Amended what was told awry
> By some peasant gospeller . . .
> ("Wisdom")

Eliot's more modest position, cognizant of art's bondage to material images, is that literature, though subsidiary to religion, provides belief with indispensable support by rendering aesthetic experiences that are analogous to those of religious contemplation or that themselves gesture toward the divine. This claim "Journey of the Magi" enacts. Its four primary texts are all re-presentations of the Incarnation; they are not the miracle itself but the defining circumscription of its indefinable essence. Individually, each text is incomplete, lacking dimensions possessed by the others, manifesting what the others neglect. Together, taken synchronically, they operate like the monologues in *The Ring and the Book*, each of which adds a limited truth to the final totality that transcends them, or like the speaking characters in Woolf's *The Waves*, each of whom gives partial definition to Percival's enigmatic silence. However constrained by their synecdochic function, they collaborate in pointing to the "Speech without word and / Word of no speech" that is the Logos (*Ash-Wednesday* II). This method is that of a self-consciously limited literature working by point of view; it jibes with Eliot's commitment to a religious absolute and with his theory of language and symbol. Although the theory assumes the inadequacy of the signifier (here, the individual text), it also posits a continuous relation between the signifier and the signified that validates the signified; the ontological reality of the signified is reinforced and confirmed through the multiplying of limited signifiers gesturing in the same direction. Eliot, expounding Bradley, implies his own procedure in the poem:

> Identity . . . is nowhere bare identity, but must be identity in diversity. If we are hit on the head with the same club, the club is only "the same" because it has appeared in two different contexts. There are two different experiences, and the sameness is quite ideal. We do, of course, partially put ourselves at each other's points of view; and it is the interweaving of these viewpoints which gives us the objective club. There is no one club, no one world, without a diversity of points of view for it to be one to. The "real" turns out everywhere to be ideal —but is none the less real for that.[33]

Eliot's analysis derives from Royce as well as from Bradley; and it is Royce's postulate of a "Community of Interpretation"[34] that most clearly reveals Eliot's purpose in constructing an interaction of texts in the poem.

The things of this world, Royce maintains—"a word, a clock-face, a weather-vane, or a gesture" (II, 283)—are signs, requiring interpretation; each interpretation becomes a new sign that prompts fresh interpretation. Not only does the interpreter, by interpreting, choose to be interpreted by the future, the interpreter is "dependent upon the results of countless previous efforts to interpret" (II, 210, 208). Thus begins a Community of Interpretation—ultimately, the human collectivity—whose members (alive, dead, unborn) are commingled by their common pursuit, even if they are merely "United in the strife which [divides] them" ("Little Gidding" III.174); indeed, "the very being of the universe consists in a process whereby the world is interpreted,—not indeed in its wholeness, at any one moment of time, but in and through an infinite series of acts of interpretation" (Royce, II, 285–86). Royce's Community of Interpretation is, ethically and socially, his model for "the Beloved Community . . . of the ideal Church, be that conceived as the Church on earth, or as the Church triumphant . . ." (II, 219). "Journey of the Magi" posits just such a community. All its characters—the Magus, the scribe who does not record the speaker's instructions, Matthew, An-

drewes, Eliot—are making interpretations that validate "the very being" of the Incarnation; notably, the partial nature of each interpretation, necessitating revision, ensures the ongoing history of the Incarnation within human experience. Simultaneously re-creating themselves as well, the interpreters in this community of anachronistic imitation and derivative invention are so tightly enmeshed through textual interpenetration that they use the same language, even if they do not mean the same things by it; through the time warp of that shared language, they "put [themselves] at each other's points of view" and thus establish the ground of society. Embodied in the poem's structure is Eliot's conviction that the Incarnation initiates and organizes the human community, renders it a version of the "formed visible Church," which Eliot envied Andrewes for having behind him,[35] and creates it a type of the "Beloved Church" triumphant.

IV

The view of "Journey of the Magi" presented above describes history as providing the materials and structures necessary for its own self-transcendence; as the various texts become a "complete consort dancing together" ("Little Gidding" v.223), humankind's enchainment in time is broken. Such a view, affirming the power of literature to assist belief, heeds both the poem's Christology and its muted hope of redemption. But Eliot knew that "History may be servitude" as well as freedom ("Little Gidding" III.162); and that negative, ironic view, equally implicit in the poem, counterbalances the allure of the first. The limitation in Royce's concept of a Community of Interpretation is that it scants those cases in which traditions of interpretation conflict so fundamentally that they sunder the very idea of community. Put differently: the view of the poem's four texts as sharing in a transcendent process can be sustained only by regarding them as atemporal gestures toward the Incarnation that, whatever their actual historical status, can be mentally reorganized in an emblematic harmony; in particular, it ignores the problems posed by the historical status of the Magus' account. That status, when scrutinized, indicates that Eliot, in his manipulation of texts, has sketched a critique of the development of Christianity that frankly admits the process of interpretation to be rough-and-tumble, perhaps accidental, sometimes fruitless and brutal. His concern with Christianity as an institution, beyond its influence on the reading habits of his contemporaries, acknowledges the divisiveness characteristic of Western theological history.

To write of the "historical status" of the Magus' account is, of course, to accept Eliot's wry invitation to treat the poem's fictive stemma as if it were "true" and to speculate about the "history" of a "text" whose existence has been recently invented. The remainder of this essay may thus require some justification. It is pertinent to remark that, if the painting that Fra Lippo Lippi proposes at the end of his monologue did not in fact exist (*The Coronation of the Virgin*, in Sant' Ambrogio, Florence), scholars would still be looking for it. Eliot's poem, too, creates its own expectations and realities. Precisely because it concerns itself with the production of a text, it engages the reader's curiosity about the actuality of that textual artifact, which it thereby endows with a certain historicity. As in "Fra Lippo Lippi," the case for the text's historical "reality" gains strength because its putative creator, the Magus, was a historical personage (though *his* historicity may itself result from Matthew's invention); compare the far more supposititious "reality" of Jeffrey Aspern's "papers" in James's novel. The Magus' text is thus inserted into the network of "real" New Testament texts as a matter of course; editorial questions follow naturally. To argue that the Magus' text is only phantasmal would both ignore the poem's main action (the making of the text) and skirt the issues of imitation that Eliot raises. The point is, not whether the text exists, but that it *might*. Eliot's aim here is to (con)-fuse history and fiction; as "The Three Voices of Poetry" makes clear, the method is intrinsic to his understanding of dramatic monologue. Such a fusion, deriving from the same mind that blurs distinctions between poem and reader, probes the nature of textuality and anticipates current movements in critical theory. By endowing a "fictive" text with a possibly "real" history, Eliot complements what Hayden White asserts in *Metahistory*, that "real" history is a function

of the historiographical fictions devised to interpret it.[36] If one is troubled by the hairline between a fictive (unreal) work of historiography (the Magus' text) and a fictionalizing (real) work of historiography, one may see that both Eliot and White are profoundly indebted to *The Ring and the Book*, a poem in which a "real" work (the *Old Yellow Book*, Browning's source) is, as James observed, "hammered . . . into powder."[37] Eliot's entangling of "real" and "unreal" texts is hardly arcane; it exemplifies a definite modernist tradition of which instances can be found in the unwritten poem behind Coleridge's "Kubla Khan," in Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus*, in Pound's "Near Perigord," and in the prefatory material to Yeats's *A Vision* (both versions). To explore the "historical status" of the Magus' text is simply to acknowledge the tradition in which Eliot worked.

In these terms, the Magus' account is a "lost" document whose source—his recitation—survives only through its impossible transmission to the contemporary poet (when and how the document was lost Eliot leaves deliberately ambiguous). It differs so fundamentally from Matthew (indeed, from the whole synoptic tradition) that it can safely be judged to have had no influence in shaping the Christian world. Where the Magus is beset by doubt, directed by hallucinations, struck by confused awe and a potentially tragic paralysis of will, Matthew's oriental kings endure neither physical nor psychological hardship; divinely guided in the spirit of worship, they rejoice "with exceeding great joy" (ii.10) and benefit from God's intervention to outsmart Herod (ii.12). Unfulfilled, the Magus offers his polytheistic people only his alienation; Matthew presents the Palestinian Jews with the fulfillment of their messianic prophecies (ii.2, ii.5–6) and the nearly magical conversion of the Gentiles to Hebrew tradition. The Magus is warily conscious of a difficult, portentous cultural shift that Matthew, simplifying, ascribes to providential design. The Magus confesses to an unknown audience; Matthew propagandizes by means of a historical-mythological pageant in which individuality, particularity, and psychology do not matter.

The two texts apparently share nothing but the motif of the journey and its goal; but perhaps their independence is only illusory. Think instead that the Magus' account is the sole eyewitness testimony to the Nativity, that it predates the Matthean version (like the "Q document" hypothesized by New Testament scholars as the "source" for Mark and Matthew), and that Matthew may have used the Magus' account for information about an episode not otherwise recorded.[38] The 1927 poem is thus no longer a modernist, demythologized treatment of Matthew; instead, Matthew's version becomes a deliberate mythologizing of the Magus' report. Part of Eliot's interest in this reversal lies in showing how the stuff of material experience is transformed into myth: the Magus' landscape of literal reality offers Matthew the objects from which to make symbols in his gospel; the process by which the poet de-Christianizes the symbols is now the gospeler's process of Christianizing the natural world. In this perspective, Matthew shrewdly understands that the Magus' account is the "wrong" kind of literature to support an emerging religion. A text that provides no certainties or rewards and fails to place human experience in a historical or theological scheme cannot gain converts. The same perspective, however, also characterizes Matthew as a falsifier who systematically suppresses firsthand information in the interests of creating a public institution. And it questions the historical veracity of Matthew's account: by what authority (the Magus' text gives none) does Matthew add the episode with Herod? *This* Matthew, Eliot may have thought, stripped the Magus' account of all elements intractable to myth—the boredom, the repugnance, the sexual frustration of the journey, the confusion upon seeing Christ—and thus obscured its central message: the revolution of encountering the divine, the agony of possible conversion. Hardly a Roycean "interpretation," Matthew's mythologizing appears as the outright cancellation of a text that might have inaugurated a conflicting tradition. In Eliot's irony, the "right" kind of gospel for the making of Christianity is, in this instance, one that excludes the problem of belief. Eliot's implicit exposure of Matthew's wholesale transformation of the Magus' text has its analogue, if not its source, in Browning's "A Death in the Desert," a poem that consciously criticizes the authority of the fourth Gospel. In his deathbed monologue, supposedly transcribed by "Pamphy-

lax the Antiochene," John confesses (ll. 301–11) that the self-aggrandizing claim in his gospel—that he was present at the Crucifixion, steadfast in his loyalty to the dying Christ—was a lie. He further acknowledges that he crafted his narrative in order to create a mythic literature (ll. 453–73). Both Browning and Eliot invent documents, purporting to be hitherto unknown, whose content and ironic realism alike threaten the credibility of accepted biblical texts. The method shows not only their desire to reach beyond texts to primitive Christianity itself but also the central issues of the Higher Criticism: what is the relation between revelation and its textual embodiment? what kind of allowances need to be made for mythological or historylike adumbrations of putatively immediate witness? what kind of religious truth does a religious narrative manifest, and how is that truth conveyed? These questions are of the same order as Eliot's concerns with the problem of signs, the linguistic character of the Incarnation, and the poising of the poem between oral and written transmission. They lead into the history and hermeneutics of biblical literature in Christian culture.

The Magus' text, in Eliot's fiction, claims an experiential authority not possessed by Matthew's, and it would do so even if Matthew never knew of it as a source to be raided. What then does it mean that the document was lost, suppressed, and/or removed from the arena of interpretation? The question is really twofold: it asks (1) how the loss of *this* text affected Christianity and Western culture and (2) what gives any text a canonical status. These matters join in a third: the relation between Christianity, the texts on which it is founded, and the ecclesiastical decisions to accept or reject certain documents. The fictive problem of textual history in "Journey of the Magi" thus implies not only the patristic controversies but the division between Protestant and Catholic positions concerning the authority of the text versus that of the institution and its traditions.

Had the Magus' account been accorded a status like that of a synoptic gospel, Eliot suggests, the subsequent history of Christianity might have been altered. The text's hard psychological vividness, its lack of prettifying generality, and its emphasis on the struggle to believe might have made Christianity a more ecumenical institution than the one Eliot saw splintered into sects.[39] Although not a work of skepticism, the Magus' testimony might have provided something akin to what Eliot admired in Tennyson's *In Memoriam*:

> It is not religious because of the quality of its faith, but because of the quality of its doubt. Its faith is a poor thing, but its doubt is a very intense experience.[40]

The Magus' bafflement might also have affected the development of Church dogma. The speaker does not—indeed, he cannot—insist on the theological reality of the Incarnation; instead, he ponders the truth of what he has seen. Eliot's own Anglo-Catholic distrust of dogma, one recalls, prompted the poet to endorse the attack on Catholicism that Paul Elmer More made in the *Criterion*:

> The presumption of infallibility has committed Rome . . . to a series of dogmas . . . which are already a grave embarrassment to the faithful and in the end must cause a complete rupture between a religion so committed and any reasonable philosophy of life.[41]

Above all, the Magus' text underscores the centrality of the Incarnation. This version of Christian experience concentrates not on the lurid brutality of an exiled death on the Cross (which Eliot himself found all too attractive and vicariously sought, through the Magus, to escape) but on God's grace in creating in his Son "The point of intersection of the timeless / With time." Thus, it might have redressed a historic imbalance in the subjects of religious meditation. In these respects, the Magus' text offers perspectives not consistently valued in the Western evolution of Christianity. Although they are not explicitly Eastern, it seems that Eliot, voicing such alternatives through his oriental quester much as Yeats used his orientalized Michael Robartes, was remembering the sharp antithesis between East and West by which Andrewes instructed his congregation in humility: "Sure these men of the East shall rise in judgment against the men of the West. . . . For they in the East were nothing so wise, or well seen, as we in the West are now grown. . . . Yet these were wise men; best learn where they did" (1622, I,

259). Eliot is less vociferous than Andrewes; but to the extent that the Magus' report suggests non-Western attitudes, its exclusion invokes the same criticism of Western ethnocentrism as does Eliot's judgment of the reader's limitations.

The victory of Matthew's account over the Magus' demonstrates the power of texts, particularly when construed as canonical, to influence culture. But how does a text achieve canonical status? The poet's question is none the less revolutionary for having been raised countless times in the nineteenth century; that it occurs as Eliot accepts the traditions of Anglo-Catholicism attests the critical circumspection informing his conversion. By asking, within his fiction, why a supposedly eyewitness account did not survive or why it was barred from the New Testament, he probes the authority of the Bible and the ecclesiastical institution that formed it. On what grounds can the texts comprised in the Bible—these, and no others—be claimed to constitute God's revealed Word? Having shown through the poem's form the problems in transmission that surround the development of a textual tradition, he has demonstrated the contingent rather than necessary relation among the Bible's various parts; historical accident, traditions of canonicity have determined its apparent coherence. Eliot does not doubt the religious validity of the biblical documents themselves, but he does indicate the incompleteness of biblical authority and the dangers inherent in the concept of a sacred book that presumes God's written revelation finished. Eliot's suspicion of writing as an impediment to the reader's penetration of symbol has its corollary here in the implication that no congeries of texts can fully represent the Logos; he would concur with Jowett in *Essays and Reviews* that "The meaning of Scripture is one thing; the inspiration of Scripture is another."[42]

If the Bible as final authority is thus questioned, what of the religious institutions it supports? "Journey of the Magi," although it suggests the question, provides no answers. Eliot's position on this matter, quite firm by 1927, is known from elsewhere. Committed to "the conception of the Church," Eliot nevertheless opposed its infallibility; although more Roman than Protestant, he was not thereby "tempted to place all the hopes of humanity on one institution."[43] He had found in the *via media* of Anglo-Catholicism an *ecclesia* that was neither so bound by scriptural authority that it neglected the functions of ritual and tradition nor yet so entrenched in dogma and ecclesiastical habit that it forestalled the innerness of private meditation on a text. It is perhaps enough to observe how much of this position Eliot manages, through his handling of textual problems, to articulate in "Journey of the Magi."

What permits Eliot to invent for the Bible a text that might have gained inclusion is his latitudinarian consciousness that the Bible's textual wholeness is superimposed. Here, as so often, his essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent" helps clarify his final aims in juggling his poem's texts:

> . . . what happens when a new work of art is created is something that happens simultaneously to all the works of art which preceded it. The existing monuments form an ideal order among themselves, which is modified by the introduction of the new (the really new) work of art among them. The existing order is complete before the new work arrives; for order to persist after the supervention of novelty, the *whole* existing order must be, if ever so slightly, altered; and so the relations, proportions, values of each work of art toward the whole are readjusted; and this is conformity between the old and the new.
> (*Selected Essays*, p. 5)

A derivative poem on so recurrent a theme as the Nativity may not seem "really new," but in Eliot's context "Journey of the Magi" is exactly that. The poem interprets the Christian literary tradition it joins; its novelty is classic in its sensitivity to the relation between the New Testament texts and the faith that their own limitations circumscribe. By inventing a Nativity story that diverges so sharply from received tradition yet remaining so much within the tradition his story criticizes, Eliot realigns the "existing" biblical "monuments"; his scrutiny of those texts through the addition of another entails a readjustment in the perception of their "ideal order." By inventing a dramatic monologue whose textual complications station it both at the beginning and at the (present) end of mundane Christian history, he plays both "ends," marked as they are by individual struggle and personal quest, against the middle, the world of institutionalized

Christianity whose traditions can sometimes blunt the authentic power of the Incarnation to induce shock. Eliot elsewhere remarks that religion "is only renewed and refreshed by an awakening of feeling and fresh devotion, or by the critical reason" ("Irving Babbitt," p. 387). In "Journey of the Magi" it is the last of these capacities, exercised with subtle intelligence and keen appreciation of strategy, that Eliot summons in his business of "restoring / With a new verse the ancient rhyme."

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Notes

[1] Elisabeth Schneider, "Prufrock and After: The Theme of Change," *PMLA*, 87 (1972), 1114; Grover Smith, *T. S. Eliot's Poetry and Plays: A Study in Sources and Meaning* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1956), p. 122. Although both Schneider and Smith (p. 121) refer to the poem as a dramatic monologue, it has never been analyzed as such; see, e.g., John T. Hiers, "Birth or Death: Eliot's 'Journey of the Magi' and 'A Song for Simeon,'" *South Carolina Review*, 8 (1976), 42: "Although written with implied dramatic structure (the magus is talking to someone)," the poem "is very introspective. It becomes a dialogue with the self."

[2] Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1976), pp. 11–15, 30–44.

[3] All quotations from Eliot's poems are taken from T. S. Eliot, *The Complete Poems and Plays: 1909–1950* (New York: Harcourt, 1952), with the exception of citations from the *Four Quartets*, for which I have used the lineated edition, *Four Quartets* (New York: Harcourt, 1971).

[4] Arthur R. Broes, "T. S. Eliot's 'Journey of the Magi': An Explication," *Xavier University Studies*, 5 (1966), 131.

[5] See, e.g., Piero della Francesca's *The Resurrection*, Palazzo Communale, Borgo San Sepolcro, Italy. Christ's resurrected body is physically the mark of division between the two dispensations: on his right, a barren wilderness; on his left, a fertile landscape in the midst of which stands a city, symbol of the civilization his presence vouchsafes. There is no evidence that Eliot knew Piero's painting; but "Mr. Eliot's Sunday Morning Service" (st. 3) shows his familiarity with its principles of construction, which indeed were conventional.

[6] From Art. 31 of the Thirty-Nine Articles of the Anglican communion, cited by R. D. Brown, "Revelation in T. S. Eliot's 'Journey of the Magi,'" *Renascence*, 24 (1972), 137; see also Rosemary Franklin, "The Satisfactory Journey of Eliot's Magus," *English Studies*, 49 (1968), 560.

[7] The preponderance of the criticism assumes either a Christianized magus or a proleptic landscape of Christian symbol to which the Magus' mode of vision is irrelevant. See Brown, p. 139; Mary Eleanor, "Eliot's Magus," *Renascence*, 10 (1957), passim; Hiers, passim; Balachandra Rajan, *The Overwhelming Question* (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1976), p. 47; Smith, pp. 123–24; David Ward, *T. S. Eliot between Two Worlds: A Reading of T. S. Eliot's Poetry and Plays* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973), p. 165. Other commentators have noted the division between the Magus' vision and that of the reader but have not analyzed its significance. See Elizabeth Drew, *T. S. Eliot: The Design of His Poetry* (New York: Scribners, 1949), p. 120; Hugh Kenner, *The Invisible Poet: T. S. Eliot* (New York: Harcourt, 1959), pp. 248–49; Nancy K. Gish, "The Meaning of the Incarnation in Two 'Ariel Poems,'" *Michigan Academician*, 6 (1973), 62.

[8] Lancelot Andrewes, "A Sermon: Of the Nativity," 1620, in *The Works of Lancelot Andrewes*, 11 vols., Library of Anglo-Catholic Theology (Oxford: John Henry Parker, 1865–74), I, 235. Andrewes achieves his reading by glossing Matt. ii.1 with 2 Pet. i.19. I have used Andrewes' rendition of Peter. Subsequent citations of Andrewes' Nativity sermons are to this edition and are identified in the text by the year of the sermon and the volume and page of the *Works*.

[9] Gish has noted similar discrepancies (p. 61).

[10] T. S. Eliot, *Knowledge and Experience in the Philosophy of F. H. Bradley* (London: Faber and Faber, 1964), p. 48. Eliot's consciousness of such an arbitrariness in the cultural operation of language modifies but does not annul his philosophic apprehension of the metaphysical and epistemological interdependence between a word and the reality toward which it points:

> The reality without the symbol would never be known, and we cannot say that it would even exist (or subsist); but on the other hand the symbol furnishes proof of the reality, inasmuch as without the reality it would not be that symbol: i.e. there would be an identity left which would for our purposes be irrelevant. (p. 104)

See Richard Wollheim, "Eliot and F. H. Bradley: An Account," in Graham Martin, ed., *Eliot in Perspective: A Symposium* (London: Macmillan, 1970), p. 183: "What is of supreme importance for Eliot is the way in which any word merges with, and therefore necessitates the existence of, its reference."

[11] See, e.g., Broes, pp. 129–30; Brown, pp. 138–39. My own classroom experience with this poem, among

graduate as well as undergraduate students, has repeatedly shown the same habit of reading.

[12] Hiers's commentary typifies many that not only disregard Eliot's disguising of his symbols but assume that the Magus *ought* to have understood symbols that had not yet come into being (p. 42).

[13] "Gerontion," l. 16. Eliot's source for "Signs are taken for wonders," as is frequently observed, is in Andrewes (1618, I, 204).

[14] See Robert Langbaum, *The Poetry of Experience: The Dramatic Monologue in Modern Literary Tradition* (1957; rpt. New York: Norton, 1963), Ch. ii, passim; see esp. pp. 106–08. As "Journey of the Magi" indicates, Langbaum's paradigm does not account for some modernist developments of the genre.

[15] "What Is a Classic?" in T. S. Eliot, *Selected Prose of T. S. Eliot*, ed. Frank Kermode (New York: Harcourt; Farrar, 1975), p. 130. See also T. S. Eliot, *The Idea of a Christian Society*, in T. S. Eliot, *Christianity and Culture* (New York: Harcourt, 1968), p. 49: "We have been accustomed to regard 'progress' as always integral; and have yet to learn that it is only by an effort and a discipline . . . that material knowledge and power is gained without loss of spiritual knowledge and power." See also T. S. Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," in *Selected Essays* (New York: Harcourt, 1932), p. 6: "Some one said: 'The dead writers are remote from us because we *know* so much more than they did.' Precisely, and they are that which we know."

[16] No study of *Ash-Wednesday* has yet treated Eliot's use of the Mass as a dramatic backdrop—a parallel, if not superimposed, text—to the central meditation, despite the poem's manifold echoes of the liturgy. For a brief comment, see Schneider, p. 1111; for a general account of Eliot's use of the Anglican liturgy, see Karen T. Romer, "T. S. Eliot and the Language of Liturgy," *Renascence*, 24 (1972), 119–35, esp. pp. 125–27.

[17] "Virgil and the Christian World," in T. S. Eliot, *On Poetry and Poets* (New York: Farrar, 1957), p. 137.

[18] Cf. Brown, p. 137: the Magus "realizes with a shock that this baby is not like any other: it is the fulfillment of God's plan for all mankind."

[19] *The Idea of a Christian Society*, p. 49. For Eliot's preoccupation with the early Fathers, see Lyndall Gordon, *Eliot's Early Years* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1977), pp. 58–63, 121–22.

[20] "Baudelaire," in Eliot, *Selected Essays*, pp. 337–38.

[21] Eliot's exclusionary emphasis on the Incarnation, of course, ultimately leads the reader to the Crucifixion. Gish has stressed the motifs in the second verse paragraph that allude to it (pp. 62–63).

[22] The emphasis on "finding" Christ in Andrewes' 1618 Nativity sermon is marked, and Eliot doubtless remembered Andrewes' language.

[23] Cf. Hiers, p. 42; Gish, p. 64; Eleanor, p. 30 (who reads the poem as a mystical allegory based on John of the Cross); and Smith, p. 123.

[24] For Eliot's contact with Josiah Royce at Harvard, see Herbert Howarth, *Notes on Some Figures behind T. S. Eliot* (Boston: Houghton, 1964), pp. 209–13. Howarth, however, does not note the issue in hermeneutics—manifest throughout Volume II of *The Problem of Christianity*—with which Royce was engaged while Eliot studied with him. The introduction that Eliot wrote for Charlotte Eliot's *Savonarola* (London: Cobden-Sanderson, [1926]), pp. vii–ix, shows that he was indeed attuned to Royce's concern with the function of signs in interpretation, for he explicitly refers to an essay he had written for Royce on the theory of interpretation; it is instructive that in the year or so before he composed "Journey of the Magi" he was plainly rethinking his earlier education with Royce. For additional commentary on Eliot and Royce, see Adrian Cunningham, "Continuity and Coherence in Eliot's Religious Thought," in Graham Martin, ed., *Eliot in Perspective: A Symposium* (London: Macmillan, 1970), p. 214; and Wollheim, in Martin, ed., pp. 171–72. In *Knowledge and Experience* (p. 103), Eliot alludes to Charles Sanders Peirce's essay "The Icon, Index, and Symbol."

[25] Eliot's phrase "set down / This" derives, as Gish has also noted (p. 64), from Andrewes' Nativity sermon of 1622 (I, 260); Gish rightly observes Eliot's ironic disparity from Andrewes. What is more significant here is that Eliot has transformed Andrewes' instruction for private meditation into a direction for external transcription; that is, he has taken Andrewes' phrase literally. Eliot's other source for the phrase is *Othello* v.ii.351 (see Rajan, p. 48). Othello's "Set you down this" refers to the reports to be *written* about him (v.ii.340); his direction is immediately followed by his suicide, self-punishment for having violated Desdemona's innocence. The same collocation is evident, less explicitly, in the Magus. A fair copy of "Journey of the Magi" that Eliot made for the *Signet* on 24 July 1961 (now in the possession of the Humanities Research Center, Univ. of Texas, Austin) omits line 34, "This set down." Valerie Eliot observes, however, that Eliot made a copy of the poem for her, at roughly the same time, that conforms with the printed versions (personal correspondence).

[26] For a provocative study of the influence of the Higher Criticism on English literature (including a chapter on Browning's "A Death in the Desert"), see E. S. Shaffer, *"Kubla Khan" and* The Fall of Jerusalem*: The Mythological School in Biblical Criticism and Secular Literature, 1770–1880* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1975), esp. pp. 207–08.

[27] John Stuart Mill, "What Is Poetry?" in J. B. Schneewind, ed., *Mill's Essays on Literature and Society* (New York: Collier, 1965), p. 105.

[28] For the role of monodrama and prosopopoeia in creating such a predisposition in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, see A. Dwight Culler, "Monodrama and the Dramatic Monologue," *PMLA*, 90 (1975), 366–85. Browning's "A Death in the Desert"—with its complicated interpenetrations of historical truth and historical fiction, its elaborate "frame" of uncertain textual transmissions—forces a severe questioning of the grounds of historical fiction and thus

represents a significant exception to the general acceptance of the genre's conventions, an exception from which Eliot plainly learned.

[29] It should be noted that the separation in "Journey of the Magi" between the poet and his historical mask or persona conflicts with Eliot's analysis of the function of mask in "The Three Voices of Poetry" (*On Poetry and Poets*, p. 103), in which Eliot posits little or no discrepancy between the writer and the disguise.

[30] The phrase is Hugh Kenner's (*The Invisible Poet*, p. 149); see also J. Hillis Miller, *Poets of Reality: Six Twentieth-Century Writers* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1966), pp. 174–76.

[31] T. S. Eliot, "Ulysses, Order and Myth," *Dial*, 75 (1923), 483.

[32] T. S. Eliot, "Literature, Science, and Dogma," *Dial*, 82 (1927), 243. See also Eliot's more sustained attack on Richards' position—and on Arnold's—in "The Modern Mind," in T. S. Eliot, *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism* (London: Faber and Faber, 1933), pp. 121–42.

[33] *Knowledge and Experience*, p. 144. On point of view, see Wollheim, pp. 183–84; Cunningham, pp. 214–15.

[34] Josiah Royce, *The Problem of Christianity*, 2 vols. (1913; rpt. Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1968), II, 211.

[35] "Lancelot Andrewes," in Eliot, *Selected Essays*, p. 291.

[36] White, Introd., *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1973), esp. pp. 30–31.

[37] Henry James, "The Novel in 'The Ring and the Book,'" in *Notes on Novelists, with Some Other Notes* (1912; rpt. New York: Biblo and Tannen, 1969), p. 388.

[38] The fictive stemma also raises the possibility that Andrewes somehow knew of the Magus' account and borrowed from it, in his 1622 Nativity sermon, as he revised Matthew's narrative. The complications resulting from such a possibility are too great to be treated at length here. Suffice it to say that Andrewes' sermon thus represents a partial "return" to the original "source," a return that Eliot, as Andrewes' successor, completes; that Andrewes' "return" to the Magus' account—and, consequently, Andrewes' implicit criticism of a "false," chiefly Catholic, textual tradition—coincides with the peak of Anglican supremacy is a collocation Eliot is not likely to have missed.

[39] *The Idea of a Christian Society*, in Eliot, *Christianity and Culture*, p. 40.

[40] "*In Memoriam*," in T. S. Eliot, *Essays Ancient and Modern* (London: Faber and Faber, 1936), p. 187.

[41] Quoted in John D. Margolis, *T. S. Eliot's Intellectual Development: 1922–1939* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1972), p. 134. Margolis cites Eliot's letter to More approving More's position (pp. 134–35).

[42] Benjamin Jowett, "On the Interpretation of Scripture," in his *Essays and Reviews* [ed. Henry Bristow Wilson] (London: John Henry Parker, 1860), pp. 350–51.

[43] "The Humanism of Irving Babbitt," in Eliot, *Selected Essays*, p. 391.