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# *Who Knows?:* Readers and Horizons in "Journey of the Magi"

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Abstract:

T.S. Eliot's "Journey of the Magi" is a poem so utterly saturated in Biblical reference and Biblical intertext, that it is impossible to form any coherent reading of the text without engaging with it. This article attempts to meet this problem head on: I will attempt to classify the different kinds of Biblical intertext present in the poem—retellings of Biblical stories, direct references to Biblical ideas or imagery, and conspicuous distortions of Biblical stories—and work out their theological and philosophical significance. In doing so, I will also argue for a reader-response based understanding of this significance: using Gadamer's idea of the horizon, the sum of the understanding any individual can bring to an interpretation as prejudice or forestructure, I shall demonstrate that these intertexts can only fully signify to the reader who is capable of relating these intertexts to their Biblical sources, as opposed to the speaker who produces them without understanding, being incapable, because of their necessary temporal priority to it, of catching these references to the Bible. Thus, I can counter readings of the poem which treat the Magus as a direct analogue for the reader, that treat his defeat as the reader's, and allow for a new, positive reading, one that promises the attentive reader a kind of answer to Eliot's perpetual question, the question of how to deal with the state of lostness produced by modernity.

It is indisputable that the Biblical intertext in T.S. Eliot's "Journey of the Magi" is essential to any kind of understanding of the text. It signifies on three levels: the level of *explicit retelling,* the narrative being an expansion of the story of the Magi in Matthew 2; the level of *reference,* specifically the Biblical references dotted throughout the second stanza; and the level of *spectres,* that is, elements of the Biblical narrative conspicuous by their absence or their contradiction in or by the poem. These have often been noted individually, but I am here concerned with how all three levels interact when recognised by the assumed reader, and what they produce: a kind of spiritual counsel for readers lost in the modern condition.[1]

My focus on the reader is not incidental; on the contrary, the mind of the reader is the *sole locus* in which all these levels can be recognised. The other options, of course, would be the minds of the author and the speaker. I have dismissed the author: beyond the familiar objections to that focus, the levels as I have drawn them cannot discriminate between *intended* and *unintended*. All the identified intertext can produce meaning when interpreted regardless of intentionality: the assumed reader can comprehend comprehensively.

We could also consider the speaker, from whose mouth or pen the text purportedly flows. But the speaker is situated in a particular time, or a particular temporal horizon*,* as Gadamer would put it (Caputo 103): his[2] horizon, being that of a Magus who comes from a time and society ignorant of Christ, of the New Testament, cannot contain the foreknowledge necessary to recognise any of the levels of Biblical intertext. When the Magus comes across

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[1] While speaking of "the reader" is a dicey business—one could cite Stanley Fish's *Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities*—I don't speak here of the cultural horizons of the reader, beyond assuming a familiarity with the Bible. But this familiarity needn't extend to recognising without aid every, or even most of the examples of intertext; rather, I make the assumption that "the reader" will recognise that the poem has something to do with the Bible, and will be conscientious enough to do their research after that. It's simply the hypothetical capability the assumed reader has of comprehending all the intertext that I'm thinking of.

[2] I use male pronouns for the speaker advisedly: while it is not made clear in the text, Biblical convention would have the Magi as exclusively male.

"three trees on the low sky" (line 24), to them they may signify merely as background detail or, given their inclusion (their having been noted by the Magus), they may even signify a certain unspecified portentousness. But they cannot signify Golgotha, they cannot signify the Passion. To the contemporary Western reader, however, in whose horizon the story of the Passion is certainly contained, the dense matrix of connotations (specifically *theological* connotations) of the Passion are brought to mind, and thus to bear upon the poem.

Here we see, too, the first major interaction between levels. The Magus as a character is part of the *explicit retelling;* with a knowledge of the Biblical significance of the Magi, the assumed reader will necessarily think of Eliot's Magus as having the same significance, until prompted by the poem to change this. Thus, the thoughts and actions of the Magus are all read against what we know of him from scripture. The Magus' lack of acknowledgement, then, of the significance of the *reference* (the second level of intertext) of the Golgothan trees jars: it arrives at the end of a sentence detailing the increasing verdancy of the landscape, contrasted with the barrenness of the desert (a typical motif in Eliot's poetry (Fuller 699), and redolent of the Exodus). So one could convincingly suggest that the Magus was using the image to signify the fertility of the land he approached—"this is so far from desert, there are even trees!"

However, the assumed reader has a knowledge of Matthew 2:11, of one of the most memorable aspects of this Nativity story: "they presented unto him gifts; gold, and frankincense, and myrrh." Now, myrrh has been often interpreted as a symbol of death, never so memorably as in the traditional carol "We Three Kings:"

MYRRH is mine; its bitter perfume
Breathes a life of gathering gloom;—
Sorrowing, sighing,

Bleeding, dying,

Sealed in the stone-cold tomb.

*Chorus.*—O Star, &c. (Hopkins 19)

The bringing of myrrh thus suggests a foreknowledge on the part of the Magi of the Passion. The absence of acknowledgement, then, of the Golgothan resonance of the three trees—or the *spectre* of the acknowledgement that would Biblically have been there—signifies when recognised by the reader (I will suggest shortly what it signifies). This is the aforementioned prompting that changes how we see the significance of the Magi within Eliot's poem. But to understand what this means for a reading of the poem, we must first outline the assumed reader's initial conception of the significance of the Magi.

If the assumed reader has a typical understanding of the Gospel of St. Matthew as being concerned with relating the birth of Jesus to the prophecies of the Old Testament, specifically those of Isaiah 9:6-7 and Psalm 72:11 (Brittanica, "Magi"), they will understand the role of the Magi as being to confirm the kingliness of the infant Jesus—and the birth of his kingdom ("and the government will be upon his shoulder," (Isaiah 9:6)).

Now, Eliot's poem, by making them ignorant of the Biblical *references* they come across, denies the Magi their *precise foreknowledge* of the significance of the infant. This is not to say, however, that they have no sense of it at all. On arrival at the birth, they find it "(you may say) satisfactory" (line 31). To be satisfied, there needed to be an expectation—indeed, for the journey to be made, there needed to be some expectation of import. More important than the sensation of import, however, is the sensation—imprecise, felt—that the birth ushered in a death. Here we move into the third stanza and the question of *what death?*

but set down

This set down
This: were we led all that way for
Birth or Death? there was a Birth, certainly,
We had evidence and no doubt. I had seen birth and death,
But had thought they were different; this Birth was
Hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our death.

Here again the assumed reader understands more than the Magus: with the New Testament and the basics of Christian theology surrounding the Passion held within their horizon, they can see, with Gerald Boersma, that "[t]he indissoluble link between Incarnation and Passion suggests that the Magus (whether he realizes it or not) has witnessed the two coming together in the manger. He has seen Birth-Death" (31). Boersma continues:

> The "hard and bitter agony" of the Passion, present already in this Birth, is at the same time the "hard and bitter agony" of "our death." For the Magus, Christ's Birth-Death sounds the death knell of everything he knows and treasures. *His hopes, values, and civilization die in this Birth-Death* [...] to share in Christ's Life is equally to share in his Death. It is to renounce life's finite desires and aspirations as illusory; it is to confess that our ambitions and achievements have no significance except as they are ordered to eternity. (31-32, italics mine)

As an unpacking of the theological implications of the third stanza, it's hard to do better than this. But Boersma is limited in the conclusions he can draw given his focus on the implications *for the Magus.* By reintroducing the reader and the levels, certain implications

beyond the tragedy of the Magus, implications *for the reader,* can be drawn out, and thus near what I called above the poem's counsel.

To expand a little on Boersma's theological explanation, and to return to the import of the assumed reader's knowledge of the Magi's Biblical significance: we understand them to be announcing through their visit the kingliness of Christ, and the creation of His kingdom: this represents an end to the existing order, to the Magus' "hopes, values and civilization," hence the lostness of the poem's Magus, his ennui.

But look at Boersma's parenthesised aside: "whether he realizes it or not". I do not think that the Magus could have interpreted the Birth-Death as the Incarnation and the Passion as we know them; his horizon would not have allowed it, and I believe I have cast reasonable doubt upon the Magus having foreknowledge of the Passion within the poem. But he understands—look at the agitation of his broken "set down/This set down/This" (lines 33-35)—that what he has seen has an import which it is beyond his interpretive capabilities to comprehend, because he does not have the assumed reader's understanding of the Birth-Death as the creation of Christ's kingdom. So the Magus is adrift in a world he can feel no longer suffices; he knows his horizon can no longer produce any worthwhile interpretations. But he doesn't know what can fill that gap. This ennui is evident from the beginning of the poem, in the grumbling parataxis (see lines 12-15, so redolent of the "murmuring" of Exodus 16's displaced "Children of Israel"), and the intensely negative description of the journey, this phenomenal dissatisfaction (Goerke 288). This forms another *spectre:* what is absent is any reverence for what the reader understands to be holy, what the Biblical Magi understood to be holy.

But this ennui, this disconnection to one's society, this irreverence, is the essential link to Eliot's broader oeuvre—his attempt to reckon with the modern condition. Think of the imagery of the desert, suggesting as it does the imagery of "The Waste Land," the desert as

"a symbol of spiritual aridity" (Fuller 699). We encounter the Magus recounting a wander through the desert while in a state of spiritual loss; in retrospect the desert seems to stand for the same "spiritual aridity" it does in "The Waste Land." But most importantly, *this is relatable:* this feeling of disconnection *is* representative of the modern condition in which Eliot found himself, and which he is determined to point out to the reader that *they* are in. The Magus represents the reader.

But the poem doesn't leave it there; we are not simply left to bemoan the Magus' tragedy now made ours (Boersma 34). Returning to the earlier point: the assumed reader *can* see that the Birth-Death is the Incarnation-Passion. The assumed reader *does* understand all the theological connotations, including the basic fact that this Incarnation-Passion is that of the *Savior;* that through these two intermingled acts, heaven is possible: our "ambitions and achievements" on Earth may have no import, but the assumed reader understands the eternity to which they are ordered (31-32). Thus when the Magus leaves the desert, and the verdancy of Bethlehem envelops him, we understand the significance, and another *spectre* is created: where the Magus should cheer up, Biblically speaking, being in the presence of the Savior, he continues to grumble. The reader sees their representative within the poem take a wrong turn, and they know why: because they do not understand the Incarnation-Passion. But crucially the reader does; they may feel as alienated and lost as the Magus, but in the light of the Savior, the poem says, with that understanding in their horizon, they need not follow the misery and ennui of the Magus. When the reader says "I should be glad of another death" (line 43), they need not say it with the Magus' heavy heart. As Paul says in Philippians, "to live is Christ, to die is to gain" (1:21).

The assumed reader recognises what the speaker cannot (the three levels of Biblical intertext): this awareness is why the poem can speak to the reader not of the Magus, but of the reader themselves, and their lostness, their miredness in the modern condition. "Journey

of the Magi" therefore offers the reader a way out of that, of the modern condition, in the form of their knowledge of the saviour narrative, a narrative they can think in the context of their own existence. What is this if not a kind of spiritual counsel?

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