

Barry Spurr, 'Anglo-Catholic in Religion': T.S. Eliot and Christianity, Lutterworth Press, 325 pp., £25, pb, 2010, 978 0 7188 3073 1

Always protective of his privacy, Eliot gave instructions that no one should be assisted who sought to write his biography. When he married, twice, the ceremonies had a minimal number of witnesses, and when he converted to Christianity he did so secretly. The doors of the church were locked at Finstock near Oxford, in June 1927 when Eliot, aged 38, was baptized. His first wife Vivien did not attend, and a verger was on guard in the vestry. His confirmation the following day was similarly *in camera*. But from now on, by Spurr's account, 'most of his writing – and, we can imagine, his spiritual life – is about the difficulty of attaining to worthiness for the beatific vision and, more positively, about the celebration of the rare intersections of the spiritual and the temporal'.

An unusually attentive reader might have noticed that the poet who two years previously had published *Poems 1909-1925*, had, in his 1920 poem 'Gerontion', borrowed from a sermon of the 17th century bishop Lancelot Andrewes:

Signs are taken for wonders. 'We would see a sign!
The word within a word, unable to speak a word.

Eliot considered Andrewes to have been 'the first great preacher of the English Catholic Church', and when he published a volume of essays a year after his baptism on subjects as diverse as Machiavelli, Baudelaire, F. H. Bradley and Irving Babbitt he gave an essay on Andrewes pride of place, entitling the book *For Lancelot Andrewes: Essays on Style and Order*.

'Journey of the Magi' was written for Faber's Ariel series of Christmas poems, and appeared two months after his baptism. Andrewes' words ('flashing phrases which never desert the memory' Eliot wrote) from a Nativity sermon of 1622 provide the first lines: 'A cold coming we had of it.' The poem moves from the birth which is incarnation to an oracular, wished-for death, hinting at the redemption yet to be enacted. In the Preface to *Lancelot Andrewes*, responding to a suggestion of his former Harvard teacher, Irving Babbitt, that he should 'come out into the open', Eliot roundly declared himself a 'classicist in literature, royalist in politics, and anglo-catholic in religion'.

'Journey of the Magi' is a Christian poem, though not necessarily an Anglo-Catholic one, whereas in *Ash-Wednesday* (1930) the signs are unmistakable. The figure of Mary, not always explicit and named only once, informs the whole poem, which has a peculiar strangeness. 'This is Marianism discerned in the midst of the Modernist project of thematic and technical renewal,' comments Spurr. The three white leopards are the world, the flesh and the devil. The greatest difficulty for the penitent pilgrim is sensuality, but the white 'Lady' (though blue is Mary's colour in the Anglo-Catholic liturgical scheme) represents virginity, purity. The poem's incantatory quality reflects the pilgrim journey, the way, ascent of the Dantean stair. Mary will intercede, and in that is hope of attaining beatitude. 'The effect of her prayer will be stupendous: it will eradicate the inheritance of Original Sin, "spitting from the mouth the withered apple seed".' But the poem does not bring

closure. The penitent who has progressed through Lent to Good Friday does not reach the Resurrection.

In his 1933 Turnbull lectures at Cambridge, attended by, among others, James (*Golden Bough*) Frazer, A.E. Housman, G.E. Moore, I.A Richards, and F.R. Leavis, Eliot had emphasised that 'poetry is *incantation* as well as imagery.' In a high mass, such as that he had witnessed in the Madeleine in Paris, he could respond with fine aesthetic appreciation to the incantation, the drama, even the dance. 'Myth, ritual dance, the desire for an illiterate audience, even perhaps Anglo-Catholicism, are all aspects of a complex modern primitivism' Frank Kermode would later remark ('The Myth-Kitty' in *Puzzles and Epiphanies*, 1962). Dialogue in demotic London speech featured in *The Waste Land*, *Sweeney Agonistes* and *The Rock* which was performed in 1934 to support fundraising for London City churches, while incantation is a feature of the choruses. These bear contrasting witness to the poet's aspiration to 'the perfect order of speech, and the beauty of incantation'.

Murder in the Cathedral, commissioned by Bishop George Bell for the 1935 Canterbury Festival, was first performed in the cathedral where Becket was murdered in 1170. Its themes are psychological, spiritual, political, but as Spurr points out, Eliot 'applies Anglo-Catholic liturgical language to the pre-Anglican story'. He takes phrases from *The English Missal* (1912), but frequently with a conscious anachronism uses Cranmer's words, or the style of Lancelot Andrewes. Becket's Christmas Day homily refers to the mass as being 'to offer again to God His Body and Blood in Sacrifice, oblation and satisfaction for the sins of the whole world.' The phraseology is partly Cranmerian (although in the *Book of Common Prayer* where it occurs the emphasis falls on the singularity of Christ's sacrifice), but the Catholic doctrine runs contrary to the thirty-first of the Anglican Thirty-Nine Articles, which describes as 'blasphemous fables' the teaching that in the mass the priest offers Christ again in sacrifice. The incantation of the women of Canterbury ('Blessed Thomas, pray for us'), makes use of a form familiar in the Anglo-Catholic daily offices, petitioning the new saint to pray for them to God. Such prayers, based on the belief that the Virgin Mary and saints could be intermediaries between mankind and God, were specifically excluded by Cranmer and the Reformers.

The resonances of incantation would continue in Eliot's later work, in for instance, *Four Quartets* and *The Cocktail Party*. Meanwhile his new direction was to appear in his critical writings. Denis Donoghue comments in *Words Alone* that 'if he intended to assert the primacy of ethics he would have to approach the task directly and explicitly; he could not rely on poetry, even the poetry of "Ash-Wednesday" and the Ariel poems to do the job for him.' At home in America, Eliot's family's preoccupation had been, he once said, with right and wrong, but this he now put aside, with their Unitarianism, as inadequate. Eliot's new project was a promotion of something more than ethics, it extended beyond poetry to the wider culture, and it invoked a metaphysical sanction. In 1935 he declared in 'Religion and Literature' that his 'primary concern' was recognition of 'the primacy of the supernatural over the natural life', and urged that principles and beliefs that transcend those of this world should be applied in reading and criticism.

Spurr's book is comprehensively excellent on the nature and history of twentieth century Anglo-Catholicism, on Eliot's reputation as an Anglo-Catholic, his observance of its practices, his associations within Anglo-Catholic circles, and its expressions in his creative work, but has much less to say about the criticism. Yet

Eliot, in the voice of one who knew he commanded influential and elite audiences was, after his conversion, campaigning for the values he associated with Christian and Catholic doctrine. An early attempt, which he soon came to recognise as unsuccessful, was the series of lectures delivered at the University of Virginia in 1933, *After Strange Gods*. It aimed, he said in a letter at the time, to show the lack of religious criteria in the criticism of modern literature, which was where his 'real interest had turned'. He discussed works by Katherine Mansfield, D.H. Lawrence, James Joyce, Thomas Hardy and others, replacing a familiar dialectic of Classical vs. Romantic with Orthodox vs. Heretical. Blasphemy and the 'operations of the Evil Spirit' receive attention. 'No man was less a sensualist' than Lawrence, who was however 'spiritually sick'. It was a confusing message, and at the London obscenity trial in 1960 concerning *Lady Chatterley's Lover* Eliot offered to appear for the defence, eschewing, as he had with *Ulysses*, any censorship of literature.¹ Yet Eliot's campaign was no mere squib. As Ronald Schuchard points out in *Eliot's Dark Angel*, it was 'the first sustained attempt in English literature to construct a logical, dialectical, and categorical critical system for the moral valuation of "truth" and greatness in literature.'

A fellow member of St Stephen's Gloucester Road, Eliot's church in London, was Mary Trevelyan (1897-1983). She was awarded the OBE for her work for international students with the Student Christian Movement, and they had met in 1938 at a student conference at Swanwick, Derbyshire, where Eliot was invited to read *The Waste Land*. Spurr was permitted to see her diary and an important cache of one hundred and twelve letters written her by Eliot between 1940 and 1957. After his death she carefully prepared the letters for publication, but the project was vetoed by Eliot's widow, Valerie. Without quoting them Spurr is able to tell us what they reveal about Eliot's religious beliefs and observances. He tells her for example that the Assumption of Mary into heaven was to be understood as 'Our Lady by-passing Purgatory'. In Lent one year he told her he was giving up gin – except on Wednesdays. (In Lent 1928 he had taken a vow of celibacy, perhaps just for Lent.) Eliot attended auricular (private) confession of his sins about three times a year. After confession came penance and absolution, a pattern to be found in Eliot's plays, though we may note that the grace of God's love was regarded as conditional upon the performance of these things, a belief that distinguishes it from the Pauline doctrine of personal faith in the all-sufficient cross.

Although he might go to confession to his parish priest, Eliot had his own confessor. The first of four was Francis Underhill, cousin of the author of *Mysticism* (1911), a book Eliot had read closely as a student at Harvard. Confessor figures appear in *The Family Reunion* (the G.P. Warburton), and notably in the gin-and-water drinking psychiatrist Harcourt-Reilly in *The Cocktail Party*. To efforts towards ecumenism, such as a controversial joint communion service in East Africa in 1913, and the churches of South India scheme after 1930, Eliot together with most Anglo-Catholics, was opposed. The integrity of the apostolic succession, which alone conferred legitimacy on celebrations of communion, was regarded as compromised.

¹ I discussed the ambiguities of Eliot's offstage involvement with the Old Bailey trial in 'Knowing Good and Evil: T. S. Eliot and *Lady Chatterley's Lover*', *ANQ: A Quarterly Journal of Short Articles, Notes and Reviews*, Heldref Publications, Washington DC., Vol 11 No 3, Summer 1998.

The South India scheme was 'a pantomime horse'. Ecumenical reunion for him could mean only reunification with Rome.

From 1958 to 1963, two years before his death, Eliot was a member of the Commission for the Revision of the Psalter. His contributions were of a minor kind, urging here and there the retention of a hallowed phrase. As Spurr says, 'the Modernist in poetry was a conservative'. Today's popular language, Eliot wrote in an article in *Theology* in 1949, is 'threadbare' and 'incapable of expressing exact and subtle thought'. Any new translation of the Bible should be for those capable of understanding, and it should not be made easy to understand. Latin was best for worship. In the *New English Bible* appearing from 1961, he noted 'frequent errors of taste', 'monotonous inferiority of phrasing', 'Boeotian absurdities', and 'verbal infelicities'. Another member of the Psalter Revision commission was C.S. Lewis, to whom he had been introduced by Charles Williams in 1945. Their first meeting started inauspiciously with Eliot telling Lewis, ten years his junior, that he looked older than appeared in his photos. Lewis had for years disliked Eliot's poetry and criticism ('a very great evil' he called it in a 1935 letter to Paul Elmer More), but somehow in the context of Psalter Revision Eliot must have won him over, since Lewis wrote afterwards that seeing him, he 'loved him'. In their exchanges of letters 'Dear Mr Eliot' became 'My dear Eliot'.

Spurr points out, largely on the basis of evidence from the correspondence with Mary Trevelyan, that Eliot's involvements with the discussions at St Anne's Soho, the *Christian News-Letter*, the Christian Frontier Council and the Moot are not to be read as indicating uncritical agreement with those projects. 'He was at one with them, theologically, insofar as they could be seen to be Catholic; but he was generally dissociated from their political leanings'. The Moot lacked focus, and the *Christian News-Letter* was 'nothing more than Panprotestantism rampant'. He wrote to Trevelyan in 1945 that social justice is the business of politicians, not of Christians; his book *Notes towards the Definition of Culture* was to 'blow up the Moot'.

Spurr's study elucidates the history of Anglo-Catholicism, its differences from Roman Catholicism and from Protestant traditions. After its heyday in the early 1930s it went into decline until now when, giving way largely to liberal theological thinking, it has 'virtually disappeared'. Doctrines such as that of the Apostolic Succession and trends such as the nineteenth century Catholic Revival, and the Tractarian or Oxford Movement are explained. High mass, where the laity do not 'communicate', would have been a feature of St Stephen's, where Eric Cheetham, the incumbent until 1956, maintained the traditions Eliot esteemed. Anglo-Catholics held that there is a 'Real Presence' of Christ at the mass, regardless of the faith or lack of it of the participants. The elements really change, but metaphysically not materially. They are more real, or belong to a higher order of being, than human flesh and blood, as referred to in 'East Coker'. Bishop Jeremy Taylor (d. 1667, a figure whose writings Eliot admired) would attack Roman transubstantiation while espousing the Real Presence.

The marriage with Vivien was in crisis from its earliest days in 1915, and was an important factor in Eliot's search for the consolation he would find in Anglo-Catholic religion. Spurr reviews the evidence, arguing against an earlier view that Eliot was simply a sufferer from the numerous physical, mental and emotional troubles of Vivien, and the view that he was (as in *Tom and Viv*, the play and the

film) indifferent to her very complicated anguish. The letters show they cared deeply for each other. But by 1933, despite their efforts, the marriage had passed breaking point, and in consultation with Vivien's brother Maurice, Eliot arranged a separation. Eliot's letter to Bertrand Russell thanking him with unusual effusiveness ('Vivien says you have been an angel to her') for taking Vivien to Torquay in January 1916, six months after they married, for what could easily have been taken as an amorous episode remains puzzling. Eliot seems glad of the therapeutic effect on Vivien of the romantic weekend, even though to all appearances he had been cuckolded.

Eliot wrote in 1952 to W. T. Levy, an American priest with whom he was friendly, that he intended to live out the last years of his life in the Anglican Benedictine community at Nashdom Abbey, Taplow. Because he was a priest, Levy would be permitted to come and stay. But a few years after Vivien's death Eliot's eye was caught by his secretary, Valerie, aged thirty to his sixty-nine when they were married in 1957. They lived happily thereafter, albeit for only the remaining eight years of his life.

There are appendices on the unpublished letters and diary of Mary Trevelyan and of George Every of the Anglican community at Kelham in Nottinghamshire. Every later 'went over' to the Roman Church. A short appendix discusses Eliot and C. S. Lewis, while the fourth gives nine pages to 'T. S. Eliot and Anti-Semitism'. 'I am not an anti-Semite,' Eliot remarked in 1956. 'In the eyes of the Church to be an anti-Semite is a sin.' Spurr engages with Anthony Julius' immoderate attack in *T.S. Eliot, Anti-Semitism and Literary Form* (1995). Julius argues that Eliot's work, by contributing to anti-Semitism, was one of the causes of the Holocaust. 'To single Eliot out for such a savage indictment is a prejudice in itself.' And 'to argue that the passing reference to the Jew in "Gerontion" degrades Jews, is as compelling as to argue that Milton's Paradise of Fools degrades Catholics or that Eliot's "Sweeney" poems insult the Irish.'

Dr Roger Kojecký's *T S Eliot's Social Criticism* describes Eliot's attempts to engage as a Christian man of letters with social issues. It has first publication of a paper contributed by Eliot to the proceedings of The Moot. He is among the contributors to the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* and the *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* (IVP).