

Sunday 31st July 2011

Bits and pieces of TSE

I should like to end our summer term with a few bits and pieces of T.S. Eliot, the finest poet and critic of the 20th century and a pre-eminent Christian thinker. He was born in St Louis Missouri in 1888 and came to London, worked in Lloyds Bank foreign exchange department here in Cornhill. There is a lovely story of how his boss in the bank one day met the critic William Empson in a Swiss holiday resort. The bank boss asked Empson whether he thought Eliot was any good as a poet. Empson replied, "I think he is very good."

The bank boss said, "Well that's good to know. He's doing quite well in the bank too; and if he really works hard, one day he could rise to be a branch manager."

Eliot revolutionized and transformed English poetry. His original voice was first heard in his poem of 1917: *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*. In this poem Eliot allegorically expresses his disgust with the idea of culture as fashion, a function of the museum, the gallery and the salon. And here he is thrillingly on the verge of discovering his own genius and contemplating his vocation as a poet. You have to hear in it the jazz rhythms too:

LET us go then, you and I,
When the evening is spread out against the sky
Like a patient etherised upon a table;
Let us go, through certain half-deserted streets,
The muttering retreats
Of restless nights in one-night cheap hotels
And sawdust restaurants with oyster-shells:
Streets that follow like a tedious argument
Of insidious intent
To lead you to an overwhelming question ...
Oh, do not ask, "What is it?"
Let us go and make our visit.
In the room the women come and go
Talking of Michelangelo.
The yellow fog that rubs its back upon the window-panes,
The yellow smoke that rubs its muzzle on the window-panes
Licked its tongue into the corners of the evening,
Lingered upon the pools that stand in drains,
Let fall upon its back the soot that falls from chimneys,
Slipped by the terrace, made a sudden leap,
And seeing that it was a soft October night,
Curled once about the house, and fell asleep.
And indeed there will be time
For the yellow smoke that slides along the street,

Rubbing its back upon the window-panes;
There will be time, there will be time
To prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet;
There will be time to murder and create,
And time for all the works and days of hands
That lift and drop a question on your plate;
Time for you and time for me,
And time yet for a hundred indecisions,
And for a hundred visions and revisions,
Before the taking of a toast and tea.
In the room the women come and go
Talking of Michelangelo.
And indeed there will be time
To wonder, "Do I dare?" and, "Do I dare?"
Time to turn back and descend the stair,
With a bald spot in the middle of my hair—
They will say: "How his hair is growing thin!"
My morning coat, my collar mounting firmly to the chin,
My necktie rich and modest, but asserted by a simple pin—
They will say: "But how his arms and legs are thin!" Do I dare
Disturb the universe?
In a minute there is time
For decisions and revisions which a minute will reverse.
For I have known them all already, known them all:—
Have known the evenings, mornings, afternoons,
I have measured out my life with coffee spoons;
I know the voices dying with a dying fall
Beneath the music from a farther room.
So how should I presume?

The most hypnotic and visionary poem of the century was Eliot's *The Waste Land* 1922. It is really the transposition of Dante's *Inferno* to the City of London

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Unreal City,
Under the brown fog of a winter dawn,
A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many,
I had not thought death had undone so many.
Sighs, short and infrequent, were exhaled,
And each man fixed his eyes before his feet.
Flowed up the hill and down King William Street,
To where Saint Mary Woolnoth kept the hours

65

With a dead sound on the final stroke of nine.

It was a reflection of his own experience. I once met a man whose grandfather had known Eliot in his Cornhill days and he said Eliot, each morning, would never enter the bank but stand with his arms outstretched, as in supplication, outside the door until St Mary's clock struck nine:

In *The Waste Land* Eliot captures the mood of neurotic anxiety, people at the end of their tether:

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My nerves are bad to-night. Yes, bad. Stay with me.
'Speak to me. Why do you never speak? Speak.
'What are you thinking of? What thinking? What?
'I never know what you are thinking. Think.'

I think we are in rats' alley
Where the dead men lost their bones.

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'What is that noise?'
The wind under the door.
'What is that noise now? What is the wind doing?'
Nothing again nothing.

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'Do
'You know nothing? Do you see nothing? Do you
remember
'Nothing?'
I remember
These are pearls that were his eyes.
'Are you alive, or not? Is there nothing in your head?'

125

But
O O O O that Shakespeherian Rag—
It's so elegant
So intelligent

130

'What shall I do now? What shall I do?'
'I shall rush out as I am, and walk the street
'With my hair down, so. What shall we do to-morrow?
'What shall we ever do?'

135

The hot water at ten.
And if it rains, a closed car at four.
And we shall play a game of chess,
Pressing lidless eyes and waiting for a knock upon the
door.

Eliot is misrepresented as an arid intellectual, remote, abstract and barely comprehensible to all but the most learned. This is a perversion of the truth and a great slur on Eliot himself. He is so tender and has the knack of capturing the most intimate distresses of ordinary folk. How about this, also from *The Waste Land*...

The typist home at teatime, clears her breakfast, lights
Her stove, and lays out food in tins.
Out of the window perilously spread
Her drying combinations touched by the sun's last rays, ²²⁵
On the divan are piled (at night her bed)
Stockings, slippers, camisoles, and stays.
I Tiresias, old man with wrinkled dugs
Perceived the scene, and foretold the rest—
I too awaited the expected guest. ²³⁰
He, the young man carbuncular, arrives,
A small house agent's clerk, with one bold stare,
One of the low on whom assurance sits
As a silk hat on a Bradford millionaire. ²³⁵
The time is now propitious, as he guesses,
The meal is ended, she is bored and tired,
Endeavours to engage her in caresses
Which still are unreproved, if undesired.
Flushed and decided, he assaults at once;
Exploring hands encounter no defence; ²⁴⁰
His vanity requires no response,
And makes a welcome of indifference.
(And I Tiresias have foresuffered all
Enacted on this same divan or bed; ²⁴⁵
I who have sat by Thebes below the wall
And walked among the lowest of the dead.)
Bestows one final patronising kiss,
And gropes his way, finding the stairs unlit...

She turns and looks a moment in the glass,
Hardly aware of her departed lover; ²⁵⁰
Her brain allows one half-formed thought to pass:
'Well now that's done: and I'm glad it's over.'
When lovely woman stoops to folly and
Paces about her room again, alone,
She smooths her hair with automatic hand, ²⁵⁵
And puts a record on the gramophone.

There is not time to discuss what some regard as his greatest work *Four Quartets* and so I shall end with a few lines from his great Christian prophetic poem of 1934 *Choruses from the Rock*:

The Eagle soars in the summit of Heaven,
The Hunter with his dogs pursues his circuit.
O perpetual revolution of configured stars,
O perpetual recurrence of determined seasons,
O world of spring and autumn, birth and dying!
The endless cycle of idea and action,
Endless invention, endless experiment,
Brings knowledge of motion, but not of stillness;
Knowledge of speech, but not of silence;
Knowledge of words, and ignorance of the Word.
All our knowledge brings us nearer to death,
But nearness to death no nearer to God.
Where is the Life we have lost in living?
Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge?
Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?
The cycles of Heaven in twenty centuries
Brings us farther from God and nearer to the Dust.

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