Magister, Magus, and “the Shadow”

Chapter 4

No sight to comfort them, nor a word for which they any whit the wiser; nothing worth their travel... Well, they will take Him as they find Him, and all this notwithstanding, worship Him for all that.

—Lancelot Andrewes, Nativity Sermon preached before James I, Christmas Day, 1622

It is now time to rest. Fate has deprived me of the joy of being present at the birth of him the star announced; I can at least be present at his death... and birth and death are not so different, after all.


Journey of the Magi, Ash Wednesday, and the Difficulty of Understanding

One of his so-called Ariel poems, Journey of the Magi, published in 1927, the year of his formal embrace of “anglo-catholicism,” constitutes Eliot’s literal representation of the “journey toward understanding.” In following the star to the birthplace of Christ Jesus, so as to worship God’s Incarnation, “the wise men” travel to Understanding, the Second Person of the Trinity. There they experience, or at least sense, a passing-strange confrontation with death (represented as enigmatically linked with birth). As Magi, moreover, these “masters,” these “teachers,” are Magister; they know. And the short poem in which they appear may be said to be a hinge between Eliot’s own
pre-Christian and Christian points of view, for here he offers a poem in which the speaker and the other Magi differ from and stand in conflict with him. Eliot the Magister may appear in the Magi, who may be said to represent the way of “knowing” that he has refined.

From the beginning, the Magus who speaks tells of the difficulty of the journey. The opening verses are, in fact, a quotation adapted from the 1622 Nativity sermon before the king preached by Lancelot Andrewes, on whom Eliot was then writing and whose “brand” of Anglicanism played such a determining role in his thinking: the “coming” of the God-man is recalled in the Magus’s first plaintive words about their “cold coming” that was their long journey at the very “worst time.”1 Exactly how a quotation, for that is what the first five verses are, here works poetically is difficult to see: why, for instance, is the Magus quoting someone? Whatever the answer to our difficulty in reading, he continues the note through the long first verse paragraph (of three). Is, then, the quotation the words of these inner voices—an answer that comes, if it does, only in time, the time that runs from the opening of the poem through this temporary stop?

What follows—the shorter second verse paragraph—shifts in texture to description of the “temperate valley,” thence to “a tavern,” where—the reader is surprised—there was “no information.” Thus the Magi continue on. We get “no information”—only that the place is “satisfactory.” Perhaps the Magus explains the dearth of (essential) details, opening the final verse paragraph, in saying that he remembers it was a long time ago. Now he shifts back to himself, the focus of the opening paragraph, his reaction, his difficulties. And yet he says that he would do it again but immediately wonders what they were “led all that way for.” Was it “Birth or Death”—the ultimate question, and he urges us to “set [it] down.”

The Magus—the master, the teacher—does not know the answer. He ends the poem, then, with synoptic words, which immediately follow his looming question: there was “a Birth”; of that they “had evidence and no doubt.” He says he has seen something similar before. This “Birth,” though, was different and meant agony for them, “like Death, our death.” Back home, they were “no longer at ease” in the situation and conditions in which they left, in, he says, “the old dispensation.” As a consequence, the Magus admits he would be glad of “another death.” We notice straightaway the contrast between obviously desired “ease” and the difficulties the Magi have experienced on their journey, difficulties now revealed as incarnate in “this Birth” that was so hard, bitter, and agonizing for them: so much difficulty was