

T. S. ELIOT IN PURSUIT OF THE WHALE

A look at the short stories that he wrote as a boy of 16

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IN THE BRITISH MUSEUM catalogue there are over a thousand references to books about aspects of T. S. Eliot's life and work. But there is one aspect that is completely ignored. This concerns his juvenilia, especially the short stories that he wrote at school in St Louis. Moreover, this neglect becomes doubly strange when it is remembered how much store has been placed on other details of his childhood: the fact, for instance, that some parts of *Ash Wednesday* can be linked with an engraving of Murillo's 'Immaculate Conception' which hung in his parents' bedroom at 2635 Locust Street.

In a centenary address given in 1954 at Washington University, Eliot declared that he had received the most important part of his education at Smith Academy, and in three numbers of the school magazine dated 1905 there is to be found a selection of his first published prose and verse. Most of it is simply initialled T. E., although there is one item signed in full—namely, *A Lyric*. This is written in the Ben Jonson manner—and begins:

If time and space, as sages say,
Are things which cannot be,
The sun which does not feel decay,
No greater is than we...

Two years later it was reprinted under the title of *Song* in the *Harvard Advocate*, with several slight changes. There have been less than a score of references to either version by critics.

To Eliot's first poem there have been no detailed references at all. This is called *A Fable for Feasters*, a rather Byronic set of twelve verses about medieval England which he published two months before *A Lyric*. Much of it is little better than doggerel, with an occasional lively phrase thrown in: 'They made a raid / On every bird and beast in Aesop's fable'; 'His eye became

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the size of any dollar.' Yet such interest as it possesses today comes primarily from curiosity: 'the beginning shall remind us of the end,' as the poet wrote in his last Ariel poem of 1954.

In the fable, a band of merry friars are given to heavy feasting and at Christmas time their refectory tables groan. But they are haunted by a ghost who steals their fatted cows, plays tricks with the bells in their belfry, and who once sat their prior

... on the steeple
To the astonishment of all the people.

So, the abbot vows that once and for all at Christmas they shall be free of these pranks. He purchases the relics of a Spanish saint, sprinkles his gown liberally with holy water and dowses also the turkeys, capons and boars that they are going to eat. The doors are bolted and barred. But alas! ghosts prove 'fellows whom you *can't* keep out.' The abbot is pulled from his chair and whisked up the chimney 'before anyone can say "O jiminy".' There follows the moral:

... after this the monks grew most devout,
And lived on milk and breakfast food entirely;
Each morn from four to five one took a Knout
And flogged his mates 'till they grew good and friarly '
Spirits from that time forth they did without,
And lived the admiration of the shire. We
Got the veracious record of these doings
From an old manuscript found in the ruins.

This is boisterous stuff, and many schoolboys in their time have written in a similar vein. The dissolution of the monasteries, at which in rather an indirect way the fable hints, was expressed much more forcibly thirty years later in *Murder in the Cathedral*. Indeed if his St Louis poems have a merit, it is as 'class exercises' - which is how his English master at the time rated them.

Far more original and far more exciting are his short stories of this period. These first appeared in *Smith Academy Record* and, unlike *A Lyric* (which was resurrected by Tambimuttu in a symposium honouring the poet's 60th birthday in 1948), they have never been reprinted. Their titles are 'A Tale of a Whale' and 'The Man who was King.'

The author was sixteen at the time, and neither runs to more than a thousand words; in fact economy and precision are two of their hallmarks. 'A Tale of a Whale' opens:

It was in '71, I remember, that I was on a whaling ship 'Parallel Opipedon', in the South Pacific. One day after a prolonged spell of bad luck we happened to be becalmed off Tanzatatapoo Island. We lay motionless for several days, and although the mizzen topgallant shrouds had been repeatedly belayed to the fore staysail, and the flying gib-boom cleared, and lashed to the monkey-rail, we made no progress whatever. It was a very hot and sultry day, and the captain was pacing the quarter-deck, fanning himself. The watch were amusing themselves holystoning the deck, while the rest of the crew were eating ice-cream in the fore chains.

This has something about it of the dash of Robert Louis Stevenson in his stories of the South Seas. The pace is fast and furious, and there is exhibited a youthful writer's delight in displaying his knowledge of ships. The year before Mrs Eliot had hired a retired mariner to teach her two sons sailing; later in life her younger son named Yachting as one of the sports he loved most. 'To holystone' means to scour, and 'monkey rail', I suspect, is a misprint for 'monkey tail', a sailor's slang word for a short handspike. Captain Marryat's sailors in his books use it as rhyming slang for nail.

Tanzatatapoo, like the island of Kinkanja in *The Cocktail Party*, is a made-up place. Eliot's genius for choosing significant names showed early. Nor in the whaler records of the 1870s does any ship feature called 'Parallel Opipedon'. This is not so surprising when the name is examined, since it is probably either a play on the word 'parallelopide', or on 'O pipe down' - a pun which should put the over-zealous researcher well and truly in his place. After all a good while passed before Eliot revealed publicly that the notes to *The Waste Land* were something of a leg-pull. Nor did the years lessen Eliot's love of punning. In *The Confidential Clerk* there is Lucasta Angel who is described by another character in the same play as being 'rather flighty'. Yet what distinguishes 'A Tale of a Whale' is its packed brevity. In the remaining five paragraphs there is enough action to fill fifty pages

A whale is sighted, they give chase to it, and the narrator (who is the harpooner) jumps into a gig. The harpoon is shot-and in fury the beast hurls the gig 'seventy-three feet into the air.' From the beginning, these touches of exactitude characterized Eliot's work. Yet though the gig is dashed to pieces, fortunately the narrator and two of the crew manage to stay on the beast's back. And there they stay, rather worse off than Jonah,' since they fear that at any moment the monster may decide to dive into the deep.

Their food consists of flying fish - 'we merely had to stand and let them hit against us'; 'jelly-fish' (a rather childish pun); and sponge cake made out of the sponges which grow on the bottom of the great animal. The oil needed for frying they extract by burning large chunks of the beast's back. On the fourth day it dies. The cause is put down to either indigestion brought about by having swallowed a boat whole, or loss of flesh brought about by the frying. 'At any rate we were free from the danger of sinking.'

In the two closing paragraphs everything is brought to a swift conclusion. The narrator decides to have a swim and spies some wreckage floating by (presumably from 'Parallel Opipedon'). (With the help of the other two he hauls it aboard their floating island. They then dig a hole in the whale's back and set up a mast as a sail. Three months later they arrive in Honolulu after 'an uneventful voyage.' No phrase could be more vintage Eliot; it has the same final quality about it which is to be found at the reaching of the stable in the *Journey of the Magi*: the place 'was (you may say) satisfactory.'

'The Man who was King' was published two months after 'A Tale of a Whale' and is also set in the South Pacific. It concerns Captain Jimmy Magruder, a retired mariner, who is reputed to be famous for telling sea stories. As a boy Eliot revelled in listening to the stories of the sailors in Gloucester Harbour, New England, and in 1928 he recalls this in a preface that he wrote for James B. Connolly's *Fishermen of the Banks* - published by his own firm in London. Further, in his *Smith Academy Record* second story, he begins by telling his readers that there is one tale of which Magruder is particularly fond, but adds that each time this old salt relates it it is embellished with more and more 'wonderful incidents.' The author, acting as a kind of editor, then says that

in every edition certain facts remain constant and that it is these which he is going to pass on.

These facts begin with a shipwreck. Magruder's vessel is a sealer of the last century and, 'about latitude 22 degrees south', it is smashed to pieces in a storm. He finds himself clinging to a spar. Later (for he cannot remember what happened in between), he finds himself washed up on the long sandy beach of an island. This proves to be in the Paumotu group - although the island's actual name of Matahiva is not listed in the world gazetteer. Magruder is the first white man to land here and, since the local king has just died, the natives take both his whiteness and sudden arrival as signs from the gods that he is to be their new ruler. He is given a harem, a royal fishing boat, and palace which is 'about the size of a large woodshed.' Life consists of bathing, feasting and getting drunk.

The previous king had been in the habit at feasts of breathing fire or performing the rope trick, but Magruder can do none of these feats. Nor is his repeated drunkenness 'remarkable enough to excite applause.' So his deposition becomes imminent, and a trusty slave warns him to fly before rebellion breaks out. Without delay therefore he stocks the royal boat with provisions and sets course. His object is Tahiti, which lies 'three hundred miles' away, and after an uneventful voyage he reaches it two weeks later.

In the sixty years that passed since the publication of these two adventure stories, Eliot travelled far. In the landscapes of his poems islands frequently featured. Often too he linked them with the theme of drowning - though drowning for Eliot did not necessarily mean the sea. In his poem *Morning at the Window* which came out in his *Prufrock* volume, the street was also seen as a sea in which people drowned: 'Brown waves of fog toss up Twisted faces from the bottom of the street.' For the point about all Eliot's poems is that in some sense or other they were all voyages: those who went on them were not the same people when they arrived at their destination, since in the course of they underwent what in oriental religions is known as a metempsychosis, or in the Christian religion as a change of heart. His boyhood descriptions of voyages to Honolulu and Tahiti may have been imaginary, but they set a pattern. The question that remains to be asked is - Why at sixteen did he choose to set them in the South Seas?

Two years before when he was fourteen, and at a time when the contemporary poetry of the period meant nothing to him, he read the Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam. The effect of Fitzgerald's translation on him was overwhelming, he later recalled: 'the world appeared anew, painted with bright, delicious and painful colours.' Yet it was a distant, Eastern world, and by comparison with it the islands of Hawaii and Paumotu in the Pacific seemed much less remote and closer to his St Louis and New England background. So the exoticism of Omar's world, it would seem, he replaced with an exoticism of his own in which the natives of Matahiva drink *madu-nut* wine, an imaginary nut and wine, and in which they beat *bhghons*, a made-up name for a musical instrument that is a 'cross between a tin pan and a gong.'

This was the range of his invention then, and the significance of this early prose and verse in the light of his later work was the use to which he put and adapted his boyhood fictions and observations: the leviathan of his first story - and 'the whale's backbone' remembered in *The Dry Salvages*; the thicket of taribushes under which Magruder is awoken by the islanders - and the juniper-tree of *Ash Wednesday* under which the Lady sits with three white leopards; or the moral for feasters in his first Christmas fable - and his warning ten years before his death in *The Cultivation of Christmas Trees* to distinguish between what is 'childish' and 'the vision of the child.'

These are some of the links that a look at his juvenilia in *Smith Academy Record* suggest. How much longer will it be before this aspect of his work is given the serious and detailed treatment that it deserves?