

Neville Braybrooke

## T. S. ELIOT AND CHILDREN

MR. T. S. ELIOT has often shown a preoccupation with childhood, and at times this preoccupation has shown itself as a search for a lost Eden. In *Burnt Norton* the leaves are alive with the laughter of children:

Quick, said the bird, find them, find them . . .

In *Little Gidding* there are

the children in the apple-tree  
Not known, because not looked for  
But heard, half heard, in the stillness  
Between two waves of the sea.

Moreover, as the waves of the sea recall the river-god from *The Dry Salvages* that "was present in the nursery", so the apple-tree, acting as a double symbol, recalls both the Expulsion from the Garden and the Cross that made Redemption possible.

This theme has found its repetition in the plays, notably in *The Family Reunion*, where Harry speaks nostalgically of the hollow tree in which he played "Injuns" and regrets the summer-house that has been put in its place "to please the children". For the question that confronts Harry is "Who am I?"—a question, in some form or other, that all Mr. Eliot's *dramatis personae* have to answer. In *The Confidential Clerk* the problem is intensified because there the question or quest of self-identification is closely allied with that of heredity and illegitimacy. In *The Cocktail Party* the problem is the same, though there the quest is concealed in the question.

*The Cocktail Party* had its premiere at the Edinburgh Festival; when the curtain went up, Lavinia and Edward Chamberlayne had been married five years. Later, when the play was transferred, the number was increased to twelve. What was the reason? I suspect that it was bound up with something that Mr. Eliot had to say ten years before in 1939 when he published his book *The Idea of a Christian*

*Society*: "It would be more natural," he wrote then, "as well as in better conformity with the Will of God, if there were more celibates and if those who were married had larger families." Hence it becomes more noticeable if after twelve, rather than five years, the Chamberlaynes have no children. Again, in Martin Brown's New York and London productions, Lavinia was shown resting on a couch at the beginning of the Third Act; some took this to mean she was pregnant—and, since Edward's old self-centred egotism had been replaced by a remarkable attentiveness to her, they felt that this lent strength to their supposition. Characteristically, Mr. Eliot declined to comment.

Once more, in his most recently published Ariel poem there is the same marked concern for children. (It might be added that there is equally a concern for those as yet unborn, which is perhaps another way of saying that a poet is thinking of the future.) Yet the lack of attention since 1954 that has been paid to *The Cultivation of Christmas Trees* suggests that critics have either found this concern too repetitious to comment on, or else that they have been disconcerted by it. I believe the second of these two answers to be nearer the truth.

*The Journey of the Magi* was originally published in an Ariel edition in 1927. Its concern was with death, but death in relation to the birth of a particular child; basically its sentiments had been echoed many times before in hymns and Christmas card greetings, although the language of its poetry was such that it lifted readers into another sphere. Likewise, *The Cultivation of Christmas Trees* is a nativity poem, concerned with the birth of a child and an "awareness of death," but concerned at the same time with the problem of distinguishing between being "childish" and "becoming as a little child":

The child wonders at the Christmas Tree:  
Let him continue in the spirit of wonder . . . .

The child sees the candle as a star and sees the angel with its spreading wings embracing the branches not only as a decoration "but [as] an angel." For the poem, published as a greeting card to be slipped into an envelope, is an invocation that the rapture, reverence, and gaiety of the first remembered Christmas may not pall with the thirtieth or fortieth, the seventieth or eightieth:

(By 'eightieth' meaning whichever is the last).

Neither fatigue nor tedium must be allowed to creep in; neither bored habituation, nor the consciousness of failure. There is, too, an express warning against the piety of the converted

Which may be tainted with a self-conceit  
 Displeasing to God and disrespectful to the children . . .

“Disrespectful” is a key word.

As there is a difference between being “childish” and “becoming as a little child,” so there is a difference between “respect” and “respectability.” Respectability implies a host of minute observances—the neatly tied cravat; being at one with the Establishment; conversation restricted to What Precisely and If and Perhaps and But; and a severe adherence to a strict Sunday discipline at all times. Of this side of his nature, Mr. Eliot is most beautifully aware, having gently mocked at his own features of “clerical cut.” In fact, his friend Ezra Pound has carried the joking a step further, referring to “Old Possum” as “the Rev. Eliot.” Others have found in his eagle-like bearing a similarity to that of an elder statesman (the subject on which he has written his latest play), while others have been struck by a strong facial resemblance to John Foster Dulles. And yet there lies the paradox that despite this conventional exterior he remains, linguistically, a poet and dramatist who has done more than any other poet or dramatist since Shakespeare’s day to revolutionize the common forms of speech.

Respect informs all his best writing—be his subject the protection of bird sanctuaries, the preservation of London squares, or the correct procedure when addressing cats. *Old Possum’s Book of Cats* is “respectfully dedicated” to all those that have assisted him, and in the last piece called “The Addressing of Cats” there is the wise advice to

always keep in mind that he  
 Resents familiarity,

followed by the suggestion that hats should also be raised because

A cat’s entitled to expect  
 These evidences of respect.

Nor is it being particularly chestertonian to submit that some of Mr. Eliot’s profoundest beliefs are to be discovered in his one departure into nonsense verse, since there is a hierarchy in the animal kingdom no less binding than there is in the government of men. Remember that

A dog’s a dog — A CAT’S A CAT

and that cats, unlike dogs, are one of the very few animals (as recent veterinary research has shown) that are never bored with their own company; such minds as they have (if the word be permitted) are never blank.

In another century another poet wrote of the cat as "an instrument for the children to learn benevolence upon." All along the line these too are Mr. Eliot's sentiments, and indeed this attitude or approach comes through in every line that he has ever written. For his hierarchical view of society and the world is that everyone must know his appointed place—the favourite goldfish swimming round the prickly pear or the domestic pet lying before the hearth no less than the child or his elder. This does not bring with it an air of condescension or patronage because Mr. Eliot, with the humility that attends the great, has never been afraid to listen to the voices of children—be they from Eden, or in the garden of Wishwood or Burnt Norton, or in the New Hampshire orchard

Between the blossom- and the fruit-time.

How, in turn, it may be asked, have the children responded and with what respect?

## II

This is not merely a rhetorical question, because it is one that I propose answering by calling upon the children themselves. When I had the idea of editing a symposium for Mr. Eliot's seventieth birthday on September 26, 1958, I had the aim of making it as comprehensive as possible; if there were to be voices from every generation, why not from the youngest of all? So I set about approaching hundreds of headmasters and headmistresses in order to gain their collaboration. I told them that if there was an eight-hundred-word restriction for their candidates, there was no restriction on theme or manner of approach. The best entries were included in my anthology.\* However, in my comments here I shall draw not only upon the book, but upon the experiences of having read hundreds of pieces by those whose essays had to be returned simply because there was not space to print them in the limited number of pages at my disposal.

The first thing that I noticed was that the *Four Quartets* and later plays were preferred to the author's earlier poems and first attempts at poetic drama. One boy in his last term at school wrote: "I revolt from Eliot's view of society in *The Waste Land* . . . . Love is a sexual act in which the female is indifferent, the male lustful." Or if I may paraphrase from a girl, also in her last term: "We feel sick in the Sweeney poems. The mood is sordid—'She yawns and draws a stocking up'. The 'feels' in the earlier works are too thick, can be touched too easily." These are judgements that most people of the middle and older generations would reverse, a fact doubtless

\*Neville Braybrooke, *T. S. Eliot, a Symposium: Fifty Tributes in Honour of his Seventieth Birthday* (New York: Farrar, Straus, 1958).

springing from the human weakness of always attaching the greatest importance to "what was contemporary when one was young oneself."

For instance, quite a number of schools have produced *Murder in the Cathedral*, but few have so far ventured as far as *The Family Reunion* or *The Confidential Clerk*—a lack of initiative lamented by several of the candidates. Once more, can this be due to the age barrier between those teaching and those taught? For those that are now teaching were mostly educated themselves during the period between the Wars when the threat of both Nazism and Fascism lent a kind of extra colour to the struggle between Church and State as symbolized in the struggle between the Archbishop and the Knights; but that colour has passed, or rather darkened. Atomic bombs have introduced new and terrifying shadows into the possibility of any future war. "We have become ensnared within a revolving circle of ambition, power, atoms," said one contributor with reference to the current political scene—and then chose an image appropriate to her sex: "We are caught up . . . and whirled round as surely as if we were trapped in one of our own . . . labour-saving devices, the washing machine."

Some pendants and dons might dismiss this remark as schoolgirl hyperbole—which would, remembering the child's age of fourteen, be a little unfair. After all, hydrogen and atom bombs have given a literal meaning to the phrase "being blown sky high," which might a few years ago have been similarly dismissed as schoolboy exaggeration. Perhaps a working knowledge of atoms and the sense of insecurity that a stock-piling of hydrogen bombs fosters are not unrelated to the present demand for space-fiction from all classes and ages. It may represent a modern form of escape, no less than ghost stories did in the eighteenth century.

Although the eighteenth century was one of rationalism, ghost stories achieved a popularity which subsequently they have never surpassed; in the twentieth century, with its accent on materialism, something similar may have happened with regard to space-fiction. And yet if this is an age of materialism (as Mr. Eliot contended in his book about a Christian society and later in his *Notes Towards a Definition of Culture*), then it is one that is being countered, from a literary point of view, by a most notable Christian renaissance in letters. In that revival, Mr. Eliot is one of the most significant protagonists, although as far back as the Twenties he always cut something of a lone figure; like Yeats and Ezra Pound, he stood aloof from those poets who grouped themselves into bands, issuing manifestos and creating "schools" of writing in which more often than not a strong party line was the principal binding thread. I was curious to note how two of the

most popular poets in schools today were also lone figures—Dylan Thomas and John Betjeman.

This may spring from a youthful fear of regimentation, working on the principle that, whereas armies fought against Nazism and Fascism, with Communism the best tactics are those of commando infiltration. "Hang it all, who wants to start a war with atom and hydrogen bombs?" If such questions from the young may seem to have global implications and little to do with a poet celebrating his seventieth birthday, then the question "Who am I?" may seem to fade into insignificance. Yet precisely for that reason "it may become more necessary than ever to ask it." On one hand the individual is so small, on the other hand he is so important: that is a paradox of which Mr. Eliot's own *dramatis personae*, no less than his youthful admirers, are particularly aware. "He knows that 'the culture of the individual cannot be isolated from that of the group' . . . He therefore gives his culture to the world, and with it a portrait of the world as it is."

The problem stated here is a perennial one—in fact, so perennial that it might be called timeless. Indeed, it came as a shock to one girl in her middle teens to realize that *The Cocktail Party* was being acted in a modern setting in modern dress; then suddenly she understood that the characters belong "to no century," because their problems are "those which might happen at any time." Their setting was in "a kind of universal limbo"—and interpretation emphasizing how Mr. Eliot's drawing-rooms or consulting-rooms are really divine waiting-rooms of comedy in which changes are wrought on the characters that are as imperceptible as the transitions in which their thoughts move from prose into poetry.

"His language is communicated before it is understood," suggested one boy. Another wrote to say: "I was impressed by the realism in the poetry, the human touch of the gin and water episode in Act I." Then another, this time illustrating his arguments from *The Waste Land*, went on: "I liked, but did not understand, the interpolations in foreign tongues—Latin, French, Italian, German and Greek . . . They added a professional touch . . . and we all secretly pride ourselves on our pronunciation of foreign words: '*Le Prince d'Aquitaine a la tour abolie*'. Or which is simpler: 'Shantih shantih shantih'."

This may have something to be with "all the sound or joy of primitive creation" found by another in the lines:

Weialala leia  
Wallala leialala.

Or it may have something to do with a relaxing quality, which one boy discovered while writing his essay in the school infirmary: "I find T. S. Eliot so completely relaxing to read, especially when worried or bothered. A poem which really does relax me is *Animula*. It seems to unroll itself like a carpet. I can imagine myself to be there, moving among the legs of the tables and chairs." And with this tribute would seem to go the inference that without becoming "childish," the poet has succeeded in "becoming as a little child," just as in his *Four Quartets* he succeeded in recalling "the laughter in the garden" no less than

The bitter apple and the bite in the apple,

while bringing Burnt Norton and Eden together with Calvary and Little Gidding in the image of "the children in the apple-tree."

In the last forty years Mr. Eliot has been described as both a Classicist and a Romantic—titles that have been bestowed by critics of different generations. Yet the garland that the young would bring today would best be worn by a poet of Love. Against the increased mechanization of the world he has made verbal the thoughts of many in his insistence that

all shall be well

And all manner of *thing* shall be well. (My italics)

For in his view no *thing* is ever too small not to matter—be it the child's cry raised in protest against the triumphal battalions on the march; the angel spreading its wings over the Christmas tree; or the goldfish swimming round the prickly pear. No voice, cry, or protest is every wholly lost. Sometimes when everything is black and overcast and the odds are a hundred to one, men are fond of consoling themselves with the knowledge that there is just a cat's chance that things may grow better. As a cat is "an instrument for children to learn benevolence upon," so in turn children are instruments . . . . The argument comes full cycle. For to poets, children have always served as symbols of hope, redemption, and resurrection; even before they are born they unconsciously celebrate them in their verses when they hail the future. But the state is transitional since the time arrives when the future becomes the present and "here and now cease to matter"; and at that moment the journey of the Magi ceases to be symbolic and becomes the universal experience of all men.