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COMMENT

Eliot Among the Nightingales: Fair and Foul

"... c'est pour les oiseaux."—Baudelaire.

"I am . . . befouled."—*The Family Reunion*.

"Drip drop drip drop drop drop drop."—*The Waste Land*.

ALTHOUGH critical and analytical examinations of the poetry of T. S. Eliot abound in such numbers that further exegesis and commentary would seem to be, to say the least, supererogatory, a recent reading of the *oeuvre* has revealed to me a hitherto undiscussed aspect of the poet's thought and imagery. Eliot's principal symbols are, of course, familiar to the man in the street, thanks to the many detailed studies of his metaphor. The merest novice in literature knows the significance of Eliot's use of the wheel, the rose garden, the rock, water, hair, and hyacinths, to name only a few of the recurrent symbols. But an exceptionally revealing insight into the poet's mind and art may be had through a consideration of another cluster of objects which function symbolically in his work—a strand of imagery both complex and subtle, which, unaccountably, has never yet been the subject of close examination.

We may begin by noting some significant terminology in an important exchange between Agatha and Harry, in *The Family Reunion*. Describing a crucial experience from her past, Agatha associates it most clearly with a particular observed detail: "And then a black raven flew over." Harry, attuned to his aunt's psychic wave-length, responds intuitively, and meaningfully refers to a similar experience as "the awful evacuation." And a few moments later he speaks of his present predicament in the following relevant phrase: "I am still befouled." Describing elsewhere the nature of this feeling, in somewhat greater detail, he says:

... the slow stain sinks deeper through the skin
Tainting the flesh and discolouring the bone—
... it is unspeakable.

And a further detail:

You do not know
The noxious smell untraceable in the drains.

This feeling is also developed several times in *Murder in the Cathedral*, in the choruses spoken by the women of Canterbury:

... now a new terror has soiled us,
Which none can avert, none can avoid,
Flowing under our feet and over the sky.

And again:

We are soiled by a filth that we cannot clean . . .
It is not we alone, it is not the house, it is not the city that is defiled,
But the world that is wholly foul.
Clear the air! clean the sky! wash the wind!

The source of this defilement is referred to in terms which confirm Agatha's symbol:

The Lords of Hell are here.
They . . . swing and wing through the dark air.

Furthermore,

... through the dark air
Falls the stifling scent . . . ;
The forms take shape in the dark air.

The various forms which "take shape in the dark air" are remarkably numerous throughout the body of Eliot's work; a few of the more interesting ones will be enumerated below. It is relevant to note first, however, that they are not motiveless, nor is their behavior purely instinctive:

... the . . . hawk
Will only soar and hover, circling lower,
Waiting excuse, pretence, opportunity.
(*Murder in the Cathedral*)

And it will be recalled that the bird which flits through "Burnt Norton" is full of imperatives (perhaps to his companions): "Quick, said the bird, find them, find them"; and also "Go, go, go, said the bird."

The somewhat nervous speaker in "A Cooking Egg" asks the apprehensive question, "Where are the eagles?" This is answered, if obliquely, by the pained exclamation of the spectator of the parade in "Triumphal March," who says, "And so many eagles!" and later, as if in desperation (note the shift): "But how many eagles!" How-

ever, "The Eagle [which] soars in the summit of Heaven" (*The Rock*, Chorus I) is not the only bird inhabiting Eliot's aviary. The smallest are "The small creatures [which] chirp thinly through the dust" in "Difficulties of a Statesman." "Gerontion" finds a gull sailing against the wind, and "Ash Wednesday" exhibits a "dove descending [which] breaks the air", and "The cry of quail and whirling plover," as well as "seaward flying / Unbroken wings."¹

The images of bird life are frequently found in conjunction with images of water, naturally enough. In "Ash Wednesday," for example, "the fountain sprang up and the bird sang down." The first section of "Burnt Norton" describes the effects capable of being wrought by a bird (the same one which urges his fellows to "Go, go, go"):

Dry the pool, dry concrete . . .
And the pool was filled with water . . .

Phlebas the Phoenician, a fortnight drowned, "forgot the cry of gulls"; himself a part of the water now, he is no longer pained to worry like the others: "What is that sound high in the air?"

The "sound high in the air" is represented variously by Eliot. In "The Waste Land," we find the sounds created as "Twit, twit," "Tereu," "Co co rico," and "Jug, jug."² But the most explicit of all these is the sound of the hermit-thrush, which goes quite simply, "Drip drop drip drop drop drop drop." The poet's attitude toward all this is that of despairing acceptance. Thus, in "New Hampshire," he exclaims, apparently to bird-dom in general:

Black wing, brown wing, hover over;
....
Cover me over . . .

As the result of this attitude, the poet concludes (in "Lines to a Persian Cat") that "Beneath the trees there is no ease," for the quite evident reason that this is where "The songsters of the air repair." This same distrust of trees is echoed in two poems of the fragmentary *Coriolan*. In "Triumphal March" the "palmtree at noon" is inextricably associated with the symbol of "running water"; in "Difficul-

¹ The title of *The Cocktail Party*, needless to say, includes another reference to a bird of a sort.

² Incidentally, the "Jug, jug" reference, while perhaps adequately explained by Edmund Wilson, may have another meaning, particularly when taken in conjunction with the exclamation in Part V—"O swallow swallow." I do not think that this collocation has ever been pointed out before.

ties of a Statesman" the emotion is so intense that the protagonist finds himself speaking in broken phrases:

O hidden under the . . . Hidden under the . . .
Where the dove's foot rested and locked for a moment,
. . . under the upper branches of noon's widest tree.

Eliot mocks those who are able to be truly at ease under a tree, by parodying their unquestioning acceptance. In the "Fragment of an Agon" from *Sweeney Agonistes*, the jazz lyric satirizes the failure or the renunciation of discrimination.

Tell me in what part of the wood
Do you want to flirt with me?
Under the breadfruit, banyan, palmleaf
Or under the bamboo tree?
Any old tree will do for me
Any old wood is just as good . . .

Of all the various winged forms which wreak their vengeance from the air, however, none is more frightful than the eponymous beast in "The Hippopotamus." It will be recalled that, toward the end of the poem,

The 'potamus takes wings
Ascending from the damp savannas

The terrifying possibilities inherent in this transmogrification are realized in Harry's words from *The Family Reunion*, as he refers with horror to "The unexpected crash of the iron cataract."³

It is only thus when we examine Eliot's concept of birds ("The Lords of Hell") as embodiments of (literally) "un-earthly" evil that we are able to account for a facet of his career which other critics have resolutely avoided, tacitly ignored, or politely assumed to be irrelevant. This is, of course, his role as the creator of the "Book of Practical Cats." These poems which have not as yet been given the critical examination they so richly deserve, are clearly not incidental to his main development, but are part of it. This is not the place to undertake an extended discussion of the poems,⁴ but it is certainly not amiss

³ The women of Canterbury may also be referring to this vision when, in enumerating the possibilities of Death, they chant of "the sudden shock upon the skull."

⁴ An analysis demonstrating that the poems are an intricately-constructed symbolic structure dealing with the theme of Original Sin (and incidentally tracing the influences of Kierkegaard, Rilke, Dante, Edgar Wallace, and Massinger) is in the process of preparation by the author.

to point out that the natural enemies of birds are—cats. Nor should the significant adjective be overlooked. These are not idle house pets but active and energetic creatures; they are “practical” in the sense in which Lavinia, in *The Cocktail Party*, uses the word. Rejecting the ability to fill out an income-tax blank as evidence of practicality, she says, “When I say practical, I mean practical in the things that really matter.” The alert reader of Eliot is, of course, aware (1) that the Chamberlayne household has no bird as pet; and (2) that Lavinia reveals herself as capable of being exceptionally “catty.” In the final act, the reconciliation is partly due to Edward’s recognition of his wife’s quality. “You have a very practical mind,” he tells her then.

• • •

“Suffering is action,” Eliot has written. But some action may be taken to prevent suffering—this is the implication of another major strand of imagery which must be seen in its proper relationship to the symbols of the birds. There are two modes of response to the existence of implacable evil from above. Harry Monchensey’s decision to go into the desert, like that of Celia Coplestone, represents one way of outwitting the birds (there are no trees in the desert). The other way is to adopt some kind of covering, some defense, which may be either a hood, mantle, cap (“cape”), or hat. This second mode of response may be defined as the principle of protective coveration. It is clearly Eliot’s intention to contrast those who adopt such a principle with those who do not. “Lines for Cuscaraway and Mirza Murad Ali Beg” describes Mr. Eliot as possessing “a wopsical hat”; the picture is satirical but not unfavorable. On the other hand, the companion piece has a sharply malicious tone; in “Lines to Ralph Hodgson Esqre.” the significant lines are

He has 999 canaries
And round his head finches and fairies . . .

This bird-lover is obviously a friend of the “Lords of Hell,” whereas the “unpleasant” Mr. Eliot may be described as wearing a fragment which he shores up against the ruins.

“The Waste Land,” it will be recalled, contains many people who adopt this principle: “Who are these hooded hordes?” asks the protagonist in amazement. And he notices especially another figure:

There is always another one . . .
Gliding wrapt in a brown mantle, hooded . . .

(It is not irrelevant to note that we are meant to associate this figure with the Journey to Emmaus.)

A detail bothersome to previous critics of "Sweeney Among the Nightingales" may now be cleared up easily. The reason for the peculiar attire worn by the lady who attempts Sweeney's seduction—a Spanish cape—should now be apparent, especially when it is remembered that the scene takes place in a neighborhood where nightingales abound; furthermore, there is evidence in the poem that these particular nightingales have been at their "liquid siftings" for some time, a habit which would necessitate one's wearing a large garment for protection whenever venturing out.

Eliot uses the technique of "covering up" his meaning at the same time that he is dealing with the subject of "covering-up," a source of rich ambiguity and ironic tension, as well as fruitful paradox, in his poetry. Thus he is able to operate simultaneously at the levels of concrete generalities and general details. One instance of this practice is the precise naming of hats (perhaps a sly parallel echo to "The Naming of Cats") throughout his poems, while still managing to disguise what he is doing. Thus, upon close scrutiny "The Waste Land" reveals three obvious names of hats. The most obvious (and therefore the one which previous critics have never been able to account for) is found in the exclamation of the protagonist at the end of "The Burial of the Dead." His friend's name, of course, is—*Stetson!* In the chorus of the Thames nymphs, the sails are depicted as swinging to "*Lee-ward,*" and "past the Isle of Dogs" (which, with but slight alteration, may be read as "*Dobbs*"). In the fourth section of "East Coker," there is a significant reference to "*Adam's curse.*" And finally, to conclude this brief but I trust convincing demonstration of a recurrent device in Eliot, there is his extremely subtle use of the repeated "KNOCK" at the conclusion of *Sweeney Agonistes*: a series of "knocks" (*Knox*).

The hats may be of various kinds: we recall the "silk hat of a Bradford millionaire" in "The Waste Land," the straw "headpiece" of "The Hollow Men," and Celia Coplestone's urgent "feelings" (her *felt* need). But regardless of type or make, the "cover" is a necessity. And so, fittingly, under "cover" of madness, at the conclusion of "The Waste Land," Eliot-Hieronymo undertakes to pass on to his sensitive and understanding auditors the most profound truths granted him by his intelligence and poetic vision. You must take cover, he cries, and if you do—

Why then Ile fit you.

CHARLES KAPLAN

Private Views, by "Thersites" •

Reference: "The *Pervigilium Phœnicis*," by Niall Montgomery. *New Mexico Quarterly*, Vol. XXIII, No. 4 (Winter 1953), 437-472.

THE STUDY of the works of James Joyce is, we all know by now, a minor industry, with its factory headquarters in the U.S.A. Joyce, of course, is a "sitter" for the academic journeyman. There is material enough in him for countless Ph.D. theses. There is even material for a good book about him—though nobody ever seems to have got around to writing it.

The Ph.D. students must now, however, be scurrying for shelter, hastily dismantling their elaborate apparatus, and wondering whether the whole job can be re-assembled from the bottom up within the statutory time. For a native scholar has spoken. It is so rarely the native scholars do speak: but when they do, the tone is unmistakably magisterial and authoritative. And what is more, this native scholar has spoken on the foreign students' home ground. He is Mr. Niall Montgomery, who has an article on Joyce, called "The *Pervigilium Phœnicis*," in the current issue of the *New Mexico Quarterly*.

Mr. Montgomery's learned, subtle and witty article cannot fail to win admiration. Even in presentation it is impressive. To nine pages of text there are appended 23 pages of footnotes (much of which are obligingly supplied by Mr. J. A. Joyce), and footnotes within footnotes, not to mention footnotes within footnotes within footnotes. It is a Byzantine performance which could hardly have failed to elicit the enthusiastic approval of the Master. The brief article itself is closely-printed and full of echo-hunting and pun-hunting of a complexity that is guaranteed to turn any rival Joycean green with envy. This is a short sample of Mr. Montgomery in the brief, crowded night of "Phoenix's Wake":

Constructionally, Original Sin is the engine of duality. Given One in Three, Adam added One to One and made Two. Alternatively, he may be taken as introducing to Good its opposite, Evil, and thus creating the archetype of mortal symbiosis: this assumes an axis, and another identity: $x - x = 0$. But, as in Genesis, the 'addition' had a visual aspect: . . . *the eyes of*

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both of them were opened, and they knew that they were naked. Self-consciousness, Narcissus' State, was added to the Union, when Adam saw, in Eve, a self that was not himself. The coincidence of opposites.

This is a kind of writing which, though I understand it only imperfectly, I feel compelled to take off my hat to. And, if Mr. Montgomery will not feel offended at a suggestion from a mere neophyte, I think he might expand his thesis of the reconciliation of opposites, mirror-images, and so on, by pushing back past Plotinus, whom he draws on heavily, to the old sage, Heraclitus.

Still, though I admire Mr. Montgomery's essay and heartily recommend it to anyone in search of a rousing session at the intellectual parallel bars, I must confess that it leaves me less than happy. I remain unconvinced that Joyce was really an important writer; that he was anything more than a very agile verbal and stylistic acrobat.

He was, of course, a remarkably intelligent man—and a very sensitive one. But one remark by A. E. has always stuck in my mind as getting to the heart of the matter about Joyce: "Young man, I do not know whether you are a fountain or a cistern, but I think you have not enough chaos in you to make a world." The neat, pedantic and intensely contrived floridness of Joyce is like the extreme forms of Churriguerresque architecture—it merely conceals the fact that behind the façade there is nothing at all.

Joyce was an artificial writer—in the sense that he had really nothing to say; but he had an expert, acquired knowledge of how to appear to be saying something when you are saying nothing at all. *Punch* in the last century used to portray Irishmen as looking rather like apes. Joyce gave some reality to this caricature by becoming the chimpanzee of literature.

The absurd suggestion—to which, I regret to say, Mr. Montgomery lends some colour—that "Ulysses" and "Finnegans Wake" are great Universal Works summing up human knowledge and experience in masterfully orchestrated symphonies is all too current. It has gained support because most people, very rightly, do not read these sterile and unrewarding works. "Ulysses" has moments that show that Joyce would have made a very good reporter: "Finnegans Wake" is a far-rago, not of universal wisdom, but of all the discarded shards, of the abracadabra that keeps cropping up as "wisdom" in Western Europe.

Mr. Montgomery is a great believer in the pun. The pun, of course,

is the decadent flower of a philosophy which has come to believe that language has a separate existence of its own apart from the people who use it for purely practical purposes. It is with regret that I feel impelled to use the word "reactionary," for it is a dreadful and not very useful word. But, in so far as it has any meaning at all, it does apply to Mr. Montgomery and Mr. Joyce. They are both rooting in the slag-heaps, while civilisation has moved on.