



## Eliot's *Journey of the Magi*: The Metaphoric Arabesque of Human Soul in Quest of Reality

### VOYAGE DES MAGES D'ELIOT: L'ARABESQUE METAPHORIQUE DE L'AME HUMAINE EN QUETE DE REALITE

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#### Abstract

The present study is a new attempt to make a religious analysis of Eliot's touchstone called *Journey of the Magi*. Thomas Stearns Eliot wrote *Journey of the Magi* during the Modernist Free Verse era which began in the 1920s and continues on to this day as a part of the Post-Modernist movement. Poems composed during the time period are best known for their originality that makes the critics to brood on them repeatedly. Apart from Eliot's literary and critical vocations, his *Journey of the Magi* is of great significance; though the poem, on the surface, portrays the journey of the Magi<sup>3</sup> to find the baby Jesus, the potential Messiah who will bring about redemption to the world, it serves as a metaphoric arabesque for the difficult experiences one has to face in the course of a human soul's bid to take the religious ascent and crystallize its integration and travel in a spiritual pursuit of faith. This is how Eliot got deeply committed to religion in terms of poetic sensibility though, his critics labeled him as a heterogeneous innovator of postmodern literary form and language. With this hypothesis in mind, in this article the treatment of religious arabesque of the modern man in ascending spirituality and search for reality in the Eliot's *Journey of the Magi* is undertaken to be examined.

**Key words:** Religiosity; Quest; Reality; Magi; Soul; Journey

#### Résumé

La présente étude est une nouvelle tentative afin de faire une analyse religieuses de pierre de touche d'Eliot appelé *Journey of the Magi*. Thomas Stearns Eliot a écrit *Voyage des Mages* à l'époque Free Verse moderniste qui a commencé dans les années 1920 et continue à ce jour comme une partie du mouvement post-moderniste. Les Poèmes composés pendant la période de temps sont surtout connus pour leur originalité qui fait la critique à ruminer sur eux à plusieurs reprises. En dehors de vocations littéraires et critiques d'Eliot, son voyage des Rois Mages est de grande importance, bien que le poème, à la surface, dépeint le voyage des Rois Mages à trouver l'enfant Jésus, le Messie potentiel qui va apporter la rédemption au monde, il sert une arabesque métaphorique pour les expériences difficiles qu'on a à faire face au cours de la candidature de l'âme humaine de prendre l'ascension religieuse et cristallisent son intégration et de voyage dans une recherche spirituelle de la foi. Voilà comment Eliot s'est profondément attaché à la religion en termes de sensibilité poétique cependant, ses détracteurs lui étiqueté comme un innovateur hétérogène de la forme littéraire postmoderne et la langue. Avec cette hypothèse à l'esprit, dans cet article le traitement de l'arabesque, religieuse de l'homme moderne dans l'ordre croissant de spiritualité et de recherche pour la réalité dans le voyage du Eliot des Mages est entrepris pour être examinés.

**Mots clés:** Religiosité; Quête; Réalité; Mages; Ame; Voyage

<sup>3</sup>The Magi were, according to the Bible, the three wise men of the East who came to honour the new-born Christ. They were later identified as Balthazar (king of Chaldea); Gasper (king of Ethiopia); and Melchoir (king of Nubia). Magi was also the common name for the priestly class of Magicians in Ancient Persia.

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## INTRODUCTION

The intellectual world of the 1927 and 1930s, among the host of Eliot's critics, at first suspected his rather new commitment to liturgical Christianity and Anglican Church and claimed, "that it was the Church of England to which he wrote spiritual allegiance deepened the suspicions; that Eliot, the bohemian artist, had simply tendered his soul to the Establishment and to the mainstream society rather than to true religion" (qtd. In Maleki, Mirzaei, Navidi, 2011: 45). Nevertheless, this unexpected Anglo-Catholic choice was regarded as an unfashionable and abrupt hernia since his former work had earned him a reputation of a heterogeneous artist who destroys religious images and opposes their venerations, or one who attacks established beliefs or institutions (Strandberg, 2002). However, such unfavorable and ugly sarcasms were simultaneously changed to delicious ironies. A pioneer of the modernist movement, T. S. Eliot, known for his invisible, elusive poetry, became, in his own words, a classicist in literature, royalist in politics, and Anglo-Catholic in religion. The author of *Journey of the Magi* and his hidden tendency and interest in religious belief and question of the religious faith were not of recent birth, nor were they motivated by mercenary self-interest (Cooper, 2007). In the words of Peter Ackroyd, Eliot had a very strong and innovative sense of tradition and a spontaneous desire for high self order and aptly found the church, spirituality and faith as ways of securing him from despair and frustration (1984). Ackroyd further says that, "Eliot was aware of what he called 'the void' in all human affairs—the disorder, meaninglessness, and futility which he found in his own experiences; it was inexplicable intellectually.... which could only be understood and endured by means of a larger faith" (qtd. In Lombardo, 2011: 2). Similarly, in the opinion of Pinion, "In the early years of his marriage, Eliot would visit churches to admire their beauty; in later years, he visited them for the sake of peace, contemplation, and spiritual refreshment" (Ibid: 1). Here, was a spiritually humble, contrite artist ritualizing his acceptance of a higher spiritual authority.

Eliot's poetry was intensely influenced by his religious beliefs. He truly believed that the very existence of Western civilization was threatened and knew of only one real alternative: a vigorous rediscovery of what it means to live christianly. Eliot was deeply convinced that there is a close relationship between art and religion and believed that without it, the recourse to any form of real utopian vision would not be of much avail. His studies in

anthropology at Harvard had already introduced him to the sociocultural importance of religion as a primordial binding force in society. A common set of transcendental beliefs made it possible for a people to experience the plenitude of a vital and real communal life and the psychological and emotional reassurances that come with authentic belonging (Cooper, 2007). Eliot has tried to convey something deep and culturally meaningful through his poetic vocations. They explain the way Eliot looked at the pace of things and events that affect modern man in one form or another. In his *Journey of the Magi*, in addition to Lake's analysis giving insight to Eliot's idea that death leads to a new birth (2000), it also transparently put light on the old theory of modern man's unchangeable nature even in the postmodern ear. Though the *Journey of the Magi* is thought to convey Eliot's belief that humans can't evolve, perhaps that is what he is yearning for. He wants a change in the present hopeless world that will ultimately lead to a promising future. Who will the next Savior be, and from which part of the glob he might rise? Are the New Springs in the world the signs of his approach? And what we should do if there won't be another Savoir? Maybe human can't change, but did it ever cross our mind that maybe we can? Just as Eliot did throughout his entire life, the rest of the world continues to look for a Savior who will bring about salvation from the past pitfalls and mistakes and lead to a new dawn of reality full of greatness and happiness. With this perspective in mind, in this article the treatment of religious arabesque of the modern man in ascending spirituality and search for reality in the Eliot's *Journey of the Magi* is undertaken to be examined. We therefore start analyzing this poem, foregrounding man's struggle to retain his spiritual identity in an age increasingly devoted to the secular remedies. The article ends, conclusively, by briefly speculating on the reasons for the above phenomenon. The modern man's religious struggle and complexity can be explored through analysis of the poem, and the extracts cited serve mainly to contextualize and support the reality of the fragmented loss and religious identity of the modern man who in the modern age are trapped in a welter of confusion arising out of the clash of ideologies and vested interests pitted against one another.

## DISCUSSION

T. S. Eliot steps in with his poetry in the confused turmoil of the modern age. Even from the beginning of his poetic carrier, Eliot was woefully conscious that something was lacking in the modern ethos. As a man of sensibility, he understood fairly well that the days of the orthodox religions were well past. In the existing malaise, he diagnosed correctly man's degenerate condition, which could be improved by persuading him to imbibe values—religious and secular both which have stood the test of time. He also took into account the peculiar psychic

responses and reactions arising there from, of modern man, both in the East the Western world. If one cares to reflect over the ideology-content of his poetry from *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* (1917), *passing through the terrain of The Waste Land* (1920) to *The Hollow Men* (1925), one would realize that all of them are expressive of the poet's disenchantment with the profile of things in the modern world. It is true that Eliot has touched upon ideas and reflections to find a way out of modern man's predicament, as for example in *The Waste Land*, especially in the third and the fifth sections of the poem. Nonetheless it constitutes a criticism of the modern malaise rendered from the standpoint of a commentator looking at the human condition objectively. It has religious elements too. But, it is only from his 'Ariel Poems' like *Journey of the Magi* (1927), that Eliot gets distinctly involved in reflecting over the touching obstacles that man faces on his way to ascend spiritually; and then to find reality of the religious integration in a world given to chaos and confusion.

It is in the first of the 'Ariel Poems' that is *Journey of the Magi*, that Eliot describes the arduous journey made by the wise men of the East to see the infant Jesus and thus, symbolically, towards Christianity. They had seen Him; but they fail to understand the cosmic importance of his Birth. They remain mystified about the outcome of undertaking so arduous a journey in a biting, bitter cold winter season. They had come with great expectations; and possibly, had visualized experiencing beatitude but they did not get what they had expected. Eliot has made an understatement about their 'less-than-expected-satisfaction' at the end of their journey:

Then at dawn we came down to a temperate valley,  
Wet, below the snow line, smelling of vegetations  
With a running stream and a water-mill beating the darkness,  
And three trees on the low sky,  
And an old white horse galloped away in the meadow,  
Then we came to a tavern with vine-leaves over the lintel,  
Six hands at an open door dicing for pieces of silver,  
And feet kicking the empty wine-skins.  
But there was no information, an so we continued And arrived at evening,  
not a moment too soon  
Finding the place; it was (you may say) satisfactory (1959: 103).

This is a journey that parallels Eliot's and presumably man's struggles with their faith. Many critics suggest that Eliot's highly symbolic lines focuses on the affirmation of Christ that comes from the Magi's difficult journey towards aspiring faith through birth, death, and rebirth-a dissatisfactory journey which all men on earth should endeavor to attain reality. Lancelot Andrews, 'Sermon 15 of the Nativities' which inspired Eliot to compose *Journey of the Magi*, provides a clue to the specific reason why the reaction of the Magi (the wise men from the East) was lukewarm:

A sign, they were highly conceited of His Birth, believed some great matter of it, that they took al these pains, made all this haste, that they might be there to worship Him, with all the

possible speed they could. Sorry for nothing so much, as that they could not be there soon enough, with the very first, to do it even this day, the day of His Birth (1967: 109-10).

Apparently, they were disappointed at not reaching the place on the day when the Saviour was born. At the same time, they had a feeling of regret as to why they had left 'the easy and pleasurable life'; and this feeling of regret got sharpened as a consequence of the hardships and physical suffering that they underwent in the course of their journey to the destination. *Journey of the Magi*, as it has been poetized by Eliot, is the monologue of a man who has made his own choice. He believes in the Incarnation of Jesus; since he is still a part of the old dispensation, not completely liberated of the old values, he is in a hesitant mood (Drew, 1949). His hesitation as also that of the Magi is partly due to their ignorance of the full meaning of the Birth and Death and the rebirth of Jesus.

Through the proleptic symbolism of 'there trees on the low sky' and the evocative image of 'an old white horse galloped away in the meadow' ---linked to the crucifixion of Jesus, Eliot imparts a religious solemnity to the scenic background of the point of destination of the Magi. In the same way, as extrapolated by Smith,

The allusions to 'the communion (through the tavern 'bush'), to the paschal lamb whose blood was smeared on the lintels of Israel, to the contumely suffered by Christ before the Crucifixion, to the soldiers casting lots at the foot of the Cross, and, perhaps, to the pilgrims at the open tomb' heighten the theological significance of this poem (1974: 124).

The relevant lines are quoted to show the sequence of events which remained undecipherable to the Magi at the material point of time they came to their destination to hail the Birth of Christ. Embroidering on the same notion Eliot adds:

Then at dawn we came down to a temperate valley,  
Wet, below the snow line, smelling of vegetation,  
With a running stream and a water-mill beating the darkness,  
And three trees on the low sky.  
And an old white horse galloped away in the meadow.  
Then we came to a tavern with vine-leaves over the lintel,  
Six hands at an open door, dicing for pieces of silver,  
And feet kicking the empty wine-skins.  
But there was no information, so we continued  
And arrived at evening, not a moment too soon  
Finding the place; it was (you may say) satisfactory (1959: 103).

Being by far among the finest lines of Eliot, this extract is equally illustrative of the poet's wide-awakened sensibility to dress his message in the context of events about the Prophecy attending to the Birth and death and rebirth of Christ. In this way, Eliot has been able to heighten the theological significance of the *Journey of the Magi* across two thousand years and more. Ironically, one also gets a vivid picture of the mind of the people of those days who did not flinch from making any sacrifice for the sake of religious faith.

Man's quest for spiritual reality is also to be understood in the context of human endurance. The building of

religious faith is a constituent product of several elements. The way the *Journey of the Magi* has been composed is indicative of Eliot's awareness that the quest for Divinity is not as easy as man in the post-twentieth century would like it to be. The seeker of religious certitude must develop the physical and intellectual stamina to pass through the 'Slough of Despond'--- referred to by John Bunyan in *The Pilgrim's Progress*<sup>4</sup> - before he can have access to a true spiritual illumination. This aspect of the human soul in crystallizing its Divine Identity has also been touched upon by St. John of the Cross in *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*, which is a treatise on the soul's ascent. In this venture Peers transparently suggests that, "the aspirant has to face the dark night through which the soul passes in order to attain to the Divine light of the perfect union of the love of God"(1953,p.11). In the same manner St. John of the Cross's treatise, *The Dark Night of the Soul* makes it clear that the aspirant has to be extremely patient as he passes through the unnerving detours. Especially, when one ponders over the observation made by Peers in this treatise: "I said to my soul be still ..., one is first made to think, and then to understand the meaning of 'the agony of death and birth'" (Ibid).

In this context, if one takes a look at the last lines of *Journey of the Magi* quoted below; one has a better visualization of the arabesque of the human soul in quest of reality, higher and deeper, than the ordinary one.

All this was a long time ago, I remember,  
And I would do it again, but set down  
This set down  
This: were we led all that way for  
Birth or Death? There was a Birth, certainly,  
We had evidence and no doubt. I had seen birth and death,  
But had thought they were different; this Birth was  
Hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our death,  
We returned to our places, these Kingdoms,  
But no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation,  
With an alien people clutching their gods.  
I should be glad of another death (Eliot, 1959: 104).

The meaning of the last four lines is clear enough in the sense that the Magi who had come so far on an arduous journey to witness the Birth of Christ, though partly disappointed in not witnessing the Birth, being late, were certainly changed for they had definitely advanced spiritually; and hence, they could not reconcile themselves to the earlier dispensation and the values issuing out of it. From the first eight lines of this extract, one finds that Eliot's interpretation of the feeling-texture of the Magi after their journey is different to that of Lancelot Andrews in which he aptly records: "Secondly, set down this: That, to find where He is, we must learn of these tasks where He is: which we fully and aptly set ourselves to do" (1967: 112). To Andrews, the Magi set an example of great faith

and understanding, but in Eliot's version, this affirmative note about the Magi's steadfast faith is missing. The Magus who describes all about the Magi's Journey is in a hesitant mood which is clear from the following lines:

This set down  
This: were we led all that way for  
Birth or death? There was a Birth, certainly' (Eliot: 104).

The Magi, in Eliot's interpretation, are not bothered much about Christ's whereabouts, not do they care to know why they were brought to Him. To Eliot, it looked as if they drew less than adequate satisfaction from their journey. Apparently, Eliot who knew the mind of the post-modern man realized the attendant difficulties of shedding one's built-in prejudices and then coming around to a mood of innocence from where to develop undivided faith in the Divinity of the Savior. When the narrating Magus reflects:

We had evidence and no doubt. I had seen birth and death,  
But had thought they were different; This Birth was  
Hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our death  
We returned to our places, these Kingdoms,  
But no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation  
With an alien people clutching their gods. (104).

It does not indicate any spontaneous reaction of joy and satisfaction; rather it ends in a subdued note. They are inclined to accept a 'Birth' of no extraordinary import; and when they visualize His Death, they, in the same as committed by the modern man, are unable to admit it as different to the notion of an ordinary death. From the *Journey of the Magi*, it is apparent that the Magi after their arduous journey were still far from spiritual illumination. Their mental condition was that of dwelling in-limbo but, despite this unenviable equation, they knew that they could resign themselves completely to the old dispensation; and necessarily, in terms of the last line: "I should be glad of another death" (Ibid), perhaps in the hope that after birth, they may be able to reconcile with the New Dispensation, following the Incarnation of the Savior. It is reasonable to point out here that Eliot, as he was moving towards the acceptance of Christianity, was actually aware of the mental and emotional somersaults he would have to undergo before he could have a unified religious vision.

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## CONCLUSION

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This paper has attempted to add another dimension to the looming question in modern man's arabesque to get into spiritual reality in his existence. One can suggest that cutting across such a discipline is the modern man's quest for fulfilling religious identities. The tendency has

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<sup>4</sup>John Bunyan (1628-88) who wrote *The Pilgrim's Progress* (1678) understood very clearly the attendant difficulties when one undertakes a spiritual pilgrimage. Bloomsbury Guide to English Literature. (1989). London: Bloomsbury Publication Ltd., p. 801.

been to draw certain terminations on the dilemma of the modern man to ascend spiritual identities and its hardships through Eliot's poetical observations. Eliot's approach to art and its creation, in terms of his poems, dramas and critical writings, is indicative of the fact that he tried to grapple with the problems of his age from a religious and philosophical standpoint; and out of this encounter, wrote works of varying standpoints. By reading his *Journey of the Magi*, one gets a flavor of the spirit of Catholicism. At the end of Eliot's long and tiresome journey he terminates his poem with 'I should be glad of another death', thus bringing satisfaction to his search and metaphorically the man's search for a life of faith. The spiritual arabesque of the meaning of birth, death and rebirth that the magi, Eliot and the modern man must undergo in an attempt to find a new faith. In the end, the magi shifted to the pivotal center of Christian faith and found that death is the way to rebirth. The poem touches on the journey of the human spirit and their everlasting struggle for perfection. It delivers a message to the people of the world who are presently fighting in the different corners of the exhausted globe that: we are all involved in the process of perfection of self and somberly, one can only reach this reality and satisfaction through acclamation of death. However, modern man is unwilling to understand this positive reality and give up his life to find out what that exactly is. The real and positive side of death is that you ascend into spiritual freedom afterwards. However, modern men don't understand that spirituality is not only the reason for death, but it is the reason for our existence. Nonetheless, Eliot appreciated the role of Christianity as a unifying and cultural force in purifying the life and happiness of people all over the world:

It is in Christianity that our arts have developed, it is in Christianity that the Laws of Europe have-until recently-been rooted. It is against a background Christianity that all our thought has significance. A modern individual European may not believe that the Christian Faith is true, and yet what he says, and makes and does, will all spring out of his heritage of Christian culture and depends upon that culture for its meaning. Only a Christian culture could have produced a Voltaire or a Nietzsche. I do not believe that the culture of Europe could survive the complete disappearance of the Christian Faith. And I am convinced of that, not merely because I am a Christian myself, but as a student of social biology. If Christianity goes, the reality of our culture goes (1948: 122).

Eliot, while trying to incorporate some form of

universality of the religious spirit into his poetry and drama, also took into account the liberating force of Christianity. He held that a true Christian would not waver in his faith in God and his fellow men, whatever the odds and obstacles. Not elaborating any more upon the concluding remarks on Eliot's quest for spirituality, what comes out palpably clear is that Eliot had a unified and genuine vision of life in which the pride and reality of place was given to the true spirit of religion. Such a tendency can demolish practices that are considered inimical to development like fall of the ethics, hypocrisy, blasphemy, material advancement, insects, and exploitation of human being.

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