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Nosegays Which edify from Behind

Reflections on
"Little Gidding" by T.S. Eliot

H.F. Woodhouse

To expand and explain my subtitle, "Nosegays which edify from behind", will serve instead of a much longer introduction about T.S. Eliot's poetic outlook, methods, background and ideas which would be necessary for a full appreciation of any of the five movements of "Little Gidding" or even of any one movement. /1

The idea of a nosegay as a description of spiritual food comes from St. François de Sales (d.1622). In those days people had not our resources, or even concern with hygienic matters and methods that we have. The "upper classes", however, often mitigated the strong smells, sometimes from their own persons, by using nosegays, bunches of flowers whose pungent, pleasant perfume purified the atmosphere. Similarly, devotional ideas conducive to spirituality can sweeten and purify life and character.

To understand the significance of the latter part of the phrase we skip two centuries and find in Kierkegaard the phrase "thoughts which wound from behind". This phrase I have adapted to describe what the reading of the last of T.S. Eliot's four quartets can achieve, of which "Little Gidding" is one.

To me, some of his writings, some of St. François de Sales' writings and "Little Gidding" are, in at least one respect, like the Word of God. They are alive and active, piercing into the inmost recesses of the heart and also, like a sword, they can wound by glancing blows as well as by direct thrusts but, unlike most wounds, all three, again like God's word, can profit.

"Little Gidding" by T.S. Eliot

I believe it will help to provide a brief synopsis of the five movements.

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The first movement speaks of a "springtime not in time's covenant" /2 which the pilgrim to Little Gidding can experience. It develops associations with the haven for pilgrims and refers to others where pilgrims have found fulfilment of purpose.

If you came this way,
Taking the route you would be likely to take
From the place you would be likely to come from,
If you came this way in may time, you would find the
hedges

White again, in May, with voluptuary sweetness.
It would be the same at the end of the journey,
If you came at night like a broken king,
If you came by day not knowing what you came for,
It would be the same, when you leave the rough road
And turn behind the pigsty to the dull facade
And the tombstone. And what you thought you came for
Is only a shell, a husk of meaning
From which the purpose breaks only when it is fulfilled
If at all.

But the conditions, of proper prayer, for example, must be observed: Then the temporal and eternal can intersect:

You are here to kneel
Where prayer has been valid. And prayer is more
Than an order of words, the conscious occupation
of the praying mind, or the sound of the voice praying.
And what the dead had no speech for, when living,
They can tell you, being dead: the communication
Of the dead is tongued with fire beyond the language of
the living.

Here, the intersection of the timeless moment
Is England and nowhere. Never and always.

The second movement emphasizes the transience of things earthly, recounts a discussion between Eliot and a "dead master" as an air raid ends. They reflect on man's restlessness, some biblical ideas and the possibility of rest but realize that old age does not automatically bring the latter for the human spirit needs to be purified and refined:

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Let me disclose the gifts reserved for age
To set a crown upon your lifetime's effort.
First, the cold friction of expiring sense
Without enchantment, offering no promise
But bitter tastelessness of shadow fruit
As body and soul begin to fall asunder.
Second, the conscious impotence of rage
At human folly, and the laceration
of laughter at what ceases to amuse.
And last, the rending pain of re-enactment
Of all that you have done, and been; the shame
Of motives late revealed, and the awareness
Of things ill done and done to others' harm
Which once you took for exercise of virtue.

In the third, three attitudes to life - attachment,
detachment and indifference - are sketched and illustrated.

There are three conditions which often look alike
Yet differ completely, flourish in the same hedgerow:
Attachment to self and to things and to persons,
detachment
From self and from things and from persons; and,
growing between them, indifference

Which resembles the others as death resembles life,
Being between two lives - unflowering, between
The live and the dead nettle.

Later, a fourth - transfiguration and its effects - is
outlined. The hope of purification - all shall be well -
receives some development. Motives can be purified

And all shall be well and
All manner of thing shall be well
By the purification of the motive
In the ground of our beseeching.

In this section several salient media are mentioned -
experiences, memories, history, freedom, words and music.

The next short lyrical fourth movement could be
regarded as a most suggestive exposition of ideas latent
in some biblical words especially fire, love and redeemed,
whose exposition I develop. The Holy Spirit's work is

central.

The last movement hints at completion and perfection not only in the poet's craft but in creative living. There are parabolic allusions to the Christian life, a voyage of exploration into God and the hints of earlier movements and quartets are shown to be capable of realisation.

What we call the beginning is often the end
And to make an end is to make a beginning.
The end is where we start from. And every phrase
And sentence that is right.....
Every phrase and every sentence is an end and a
beginning,
Every poem an epitaph. And any action
Is a step to the block, to the fire, down the sea's
throat
Or to an illegible stone: and that is where we start....
We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.

Little Gidding: The Fourth Movement

These short lyrics, forming the fourth movement of this quartet, seem to me to contain more specific Christian content than almost any other passages of similar length:

The Dove descending breaks the air
With flame of incandescent terror
Of which the tongues declare
The one discharge from sin and error.
The only hope, or else despair
Lies in the choice of pyre or pyre -
To be redeemed from fire by fire.

Who then devised the torment? Love.
Love is the unfamiliar name
Behind the hands that wove
The intolerable shirt of flame
Which human power cannot remove.

We only live, only suspire
Consumed by either fire or fire.

This content is deepened by probing the allusions and the meaning of other verbal devices so characteristic of Eliot, e.g. that in *Burnt Norton* has the ideas of time, bell, cloud, sun (son) flower symbolism, yew, light, stillness, as well as the main stress on death, that of Christ. In *East Coker*, the corresponding lyric, using a sustained metaphor, that of a surgeon, himself wounded, healing the patient, stresses both the atonement and the eucharist and their results. Prayer and the role of the Virgin Mary are main topics of the fourth movement of *Dry Salvages*. Here in *Little Gidding*, the centre is the Holy Spirit pouring out the love of God abroad.

It may also be justifiable here to maintain that these other lyrics touch "allusively on moments in the institutional life of the Church at which the eternal intersects the temporal", e.g. burial in *Burnt Norton*, in *East Coker* where the reference to the Eucharist is obvious, in *Dry Salvages* to prayer and the Angelus bell. In this lyric that reference is made to absolution. /2

In the first stanza of this short lyric, Eliot, by the use of a modern phenomenon illustrates a biblical event and also a type of religious experience. One of his verbal devices to do so is the double meaning found in the words, dove, tongues, fire and discharge. The obvious reference to the first two lines of this section refers back to the flight and mission of a German raiding plane (one kind was called Die Taube, the dove). In the earlier reference Eliot speaks of its "flickering tongue" representing the flames, started by the incendiaries "discharged" by the plane as it flew over London where Eliot lived and was a firewarden.

The Fire of the Lifegiver

But there is a second, a religious meaning. The dove is a symbol of the Holy Spirit. So is the idea of fire. His appearance on the first day of Pentecost to those followers of Jesus gathered in the upper room is described as resembling "cloven tongues as

of fire". /3 But the tongues of fire also can represent the gifts of the Spirit by means of which the Christian receives a "discharge" from sin and error. Further, such phenomena, in the context of the raiding aeroplane formed the flame of incandescent terror and the "discharge" of fire bombs from the plane might well cause death, itself a type of discharge or release from sin and error.

Both the aeroplane and the Spirit (the dove) discharged their mission in each sense of the verb. Now, however, the parallel ceases.

The result of the Spirit's action is that humanity can have the hope of "discharge from sin and error", So Blamires may be quite right in hinting that this phrase recalls the scriptural promise to the disciples, "Whosoever sins ye remit, they are remitted unto them" and the prayer of absolution. /4 Especially is this so since references to the Holy Spirit in this lyric could be understood to correspond to those references to God, Christ and the Virgin Mary in the lyrics in the other quartets.

From a different angle we can say that Eliot, with his strong Anglicanism, is thinking of institutional practices of the church, especially absolution. (It is worth reading the corresponding lyrics as referring to activities of the church at worship, the scene where the eternal is most likely to intersect the temporal.)

Whether these surmises are correct guesses or no, the possibilities mentioned in these lines give rise to hope since, when we realize how we have failed, unless we turn, we may despair. Again, we are faced with a choice between two, and only two alternatives. Despair is the opposite of hope; as the Latin root shows, it means without hope.

The consequence of our choice is that we are faced with the fire of destruction or the fire of purification; we are redeemed from the former by the action of the latter. Only when selfishness has been burnt up are we "freed unto selflessness."

In this context there may well be the background of a classical allusion to Heracles contained in the phrase, "intolerable shirt of flame". Similarly, Dame Helen Gardner uses a quotation which speaks of a shirt "soaked with blood". Does this suggest the blood of Christ? Heracles was in agony because the shirt on his back was poisoned; it had become unbearable and the only way he was able to free himself was to kindle a fire and throw himself upon it. Then he ascended to heaven.

Eliot uses the word "love" in this connection with "torment" (1.210). The use is justified because the purpose of the torment here mentioned was redemption, an act of love. Here is a case where love's methods can sometimes be severe. So the use of the word "love" may well be called "unfamiliar" especially as we are speaking of God; a fact which Eliot has signified by spelling "Name" with a capital "N". (It may help in this connection to remember that God's hands are "pierced" hands. More tentatively, I mention a second point, viz, adjectives that we can apply to hands, and phrases about hands in the poem and elsewhere may profitably be recalled, e.g. Pilate washed his hands.)

The burden of sin is like a flame whose intolerable heat burns us up, which human power cannot remove, and yet divine fire can purify us. There are those things which we cannot bear ourselves since they are "intolerable" (this word is used in the prayer of confession during the Eucharist in the Anglican Prayer Book.). Yet this flame can enable us to live. We cannot presume on it. We cannot command it. We cannot remove it. So we live and only live, no matter on what level, when we are consumed by some type of fire but it is we who choose the type of fire - either that which can elevate and ennoble or that which degrades and destroys. We choose.

The word "choice" is a reminder that there are certain ideas in this movement which are as obvious as the fact that they are neglected. They merit attention. First is the fact that each human being has an element of choice. That choice is urgent and

fateful, a fact repeatedly pointed out in the teaching of Jesus.

Secondly, the Holy Spirit is dynamic, powerful as fire can be powerful. Indeed it has been said that in the NT "power is almost an equivalent" for Holy Spirit.

God's Merciless Compassion

Thirdly, the NT closely associates him, his actions, and the fruits of his action with love. Here once more Eliot's thought is indebted to "Revelations of Divine Love" by Julian of Norwich, and I take a quotation from it:

"Wouldest thou learn thy Lord's meaning in this thing? Learn it well; Love was his meaning. Who showed it thee? Love. What showed he thee? Love. Wherefore showed he it? For love."

/5

Evocative of the Spirit's role is a phrase from St. John of the Cross - "the living flame of love"; To such there are, quoting Eliot, adequate responses, "a lifetime's death in love" and expansion "beyond desire". (Little Gidding 1.157 and 204)

Concerning what the NT calls love I sketch further points to be noted. First, we must always remember that the biblical meaning of love is active good will; it is not a matter of liking, or of any sort of merely emotional or sentimental attachment. It is a direction of the will capable of the widest extension, the most complete effort despite the cost.

Secondly, true love can include an element which, if isolated and casually considered, can seem harsh and severe. Apparently stern words can be "the voice of his love". Yet both from the human side and the divine side the stern face of love is genuine love. Therefore it can be an attribute of God while appropriately called "unfamiliar".

I add two further considerations. The phrase "love

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of God" is frequently found, especially in the NT, but the genitive usage has a degree of ambiguity meaning either (a) the love we should have for God or (b) the love which God shows to us. I would think that the latter is much more appropriate here and we could develop the phrase in biblical contexts as a meditation.

But alongside this is the love we should practise towards men as well as God and I merely list a few words which could be indefinitely expanded in thought, prayer and action. These form some of the basic ingredients of love - concern, compassion, commitment, involvement, identification, self-sacrifice, justice and careful thought. They are incarnate in Jesus Christ. /6

Thus the lyric uses two names or emblems of the Holy Spirit. The first on which I have just commented is love. The second which I have mentioned on several occasions is fire and now it may help to repeat some suggestive scriptural facts. Where the bush was burning there God was and Moses feared to look upon him. Fire made the coal live so that it cleansed Isaiah's lips. The cloven tongues like as of fire enabled followers of Jesus to speak with other tongues. The same Jesus was to baptize his followers with the Holy Spirit and with fire. /7 Come, Holy Spirit, come as the fire!

Love Redeeming by Fire

So far I have omitted comment on one important biblical word linked with fire in the first stanza. This is the word "redeemed" and some comment should be made. First, we use it seldom today. It is used chiefly of stocks and shares and loans. It might here be translated "buy back". With this meaning, it is also a term used in the game "Monopoly", describing mortgaged property and therefore useless to the owner while in that condition. It has a similar meaning when used of getting back property which has been pawned, an occurrence much more familiar half a century ago.

At the present time, we would seldom use it of carrying out a promise, or saving a life, or making amends for a failure though these are legitimate meanings. Today, it could depict the situation of passengers in a hi-jacked aeroplane who feared inevitable destruction and death. If and when freed, they, despite the dangers incurred by them, might say they had been redeemed, set free by others, often at risk, even great cost to their deliverers.

All of these usages help us to grasp biblical meanings of "redeem" which belong to a group of words or synonyms, going back to the original Hebrew context and, later, in the Greek of the Septuagint. "Save", "rescue" and "deliver" are some of its equivalents in English. In the NT, we have Jesus described on one occasion as "Redeemer" (Acts 7.35) (lutrōtēs), his work is described as "redemption" (lutrōsis, apolutrōsis) on a number of occasions (Luke 1.68; 2.38; Hebrews 9.12) but especially linked with his sacrifice on the Cross (lutron: Mark 10.45 and par; apolutrōsis e.g. Romans 3.24; Ephesians 1.7; Colossians 1.14) for the human race. Therefore it is wise to ponder its NT usages, perhaps for meditation or study.

The value of a meditation on the significance of redemption can be enhanced by remembering that it can be linked to slavery. A slave had no claims or rights against his owner, nor had he any time as his "free time." He had no time, no rights and no property that he himself controlled or owned. This was his condition.

But he could be redeemed and become a free man. What a blessing this was! No one could deny the benefit. But the slave, while a slave, had literally no power of himself to help himself. He had no money so there was no way that he could pay the price of freedom, of redemption. Someone else had to do it for him. This was the general background of redemption.

Now for the people of Israel it had an additional meaning, that told in Exodus. /8 To the Israelite the yearly celebration of the Passover reminded him of

national slavery in Egypt and deliverance at the Red Sea. They would realize forcefully the truth of Eliot's remark that there was no "human power" strong enough to redeem them.

In the NT the whole spiritual significance was transferred to Christ. He was the Redeemer, the Paschal Lamb. He wrought redemption and this symbolism underlies many Easter hymns. Meditation on these concepts can awake us to praise and to an awareness of the glory of God. We may seek a "thousand tongues to sing my great Redeemer's praise"; we may pray

Come down, O love divine,
Seek thou this soul of mine,
And visit it with thine own ardour glowing.....

Confirm my heart's desire
To think and speak and act for thee."

We participate in the liberation or redemption if this latter term is more meaningful. We are free in Christ, freed by Christ, enabled by the refining fire we call the "Spirit of Life". So the Christian theme of "The Dry Salvages" - the Incarnation - is supplemented and joined with that of "Little Gidding", the Holy Spirit.

Focus on the Holy Spirit

Certain words in this lyric appear very prominently - dove, fire, redeemed, in the first stanza and, in the second, love, unfamiliar Name and consumed. They all share a common point of reference - God the Spirit, the Life Giver. The dove and the fire are both emblems of him and of his operation; his nature and his name are love. The nature of the divine love and its centrality in the Christian conception of the Holy Spirit is well known. Also, the verbs "consumed" and "redeemed" are applicable both to fire and the Spirit though the Spirit's work through the medium of fire might well be an "unfamiliar Name" for love. It can, however, be so designated since love is the dominant force behind every action. This action consumes the dross in our lives and refines our nature. Thereby we

are redeemed.

Concerning redemption, we usually mean Jesus Christ when we speak of the Redeemer, and we can say that the effect of his work was to make available the treasure of redemption. The treasure, however, remains in one pile and it is the Spirit who helps us to appropriate individually our own individual portion. In appreciation we respond; we can say that we are "burned with endless love", as a medieval mystic puts it. /9 We are set afire with love, love for him who is love incarnate for whom nothing save himself is expendable. /10

We have been drawn by love; we have heard the voice. (1.237). Now the pilgrimage is coming to its end. I use the word "end" in two senses - to denote finality and the completion of a purpose. The destination of the pilgrim, that is, his own "Little Gidding", is in sight. The desire of the pilgrim can be fulfilled for the pledge of forgiveness has become a personal reality; the promise of power, the gift of the Spirit, can be obtained. This is so because the pilgrim has heard the call to self surrender, the need for penitence has been heeded.

All this is more fully worked out in the last movement. Its opening words carry us back to the start of the first quartet and the better we know it, the more significance we shall find in the last fifty or so lines. Indeed the themes of baptism and all it means, of the crucifixion, burial and resurrection, and what they accomplished, are latent even if not obvious.

We have been plucked out of a fire that purifies, redeems and refines, that fire which reflects God's holiness. Hence we are at the end of a journey, made as a quest for a shrine, a quest for a purpose. Having reached this end, we shall also make a new beginning. (L.G. 1.214)

Notes

*** Thomas Stearns Eliot (1888-1965) is generally regarded as one of the most influential of the poets

of this century. Born in St Louis, Missouri, U.S.A., he included Harvard and Oxford in the Universities at which he studied. He became a British citizen in 1927 and, later joined the Anglican Church. His works reflected his profound knowledge of the Bible and, in particular, his play "Murder in the Cathedral" and poems such as e.g. "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock", "Ash Wednesday", "A Song for Simeon".

1. For fuller background, see my article, "Approaches to Little Gidding". The poem itself was published in 1944 as one of the Four Quartets.
2. H. Blamires, "The Word Unheard", Methuen, 1969, p170f. I expand these ideas later. Readers should peruse and ponder these other lyrics.
3. Acts 2.3
4. St. John 20.22f; Blamires, op.cit. 170
5. Quoted by G. Huelin, "The Kingdom within you"; Skeffington 1960, p57.
6. See also 1 Cor. 13, 1 John passim, St. John 13 and much of the NT; books that can repay study on the words I have used are: J. MacIntyre, "On the Love of God"; C. Outka, Agape; V.H. Vanstone, "Love's Endeavour, Love's Expense"; D.D. Williams, "The Spirit and the Forms of Love".
7. Exod.3.2; Isaiah 6.6f; Acts 2.4 and Luke 3.16.
8. Exod. 12
9. R. Rolle, "Fire of Love", 2.10
10. V. Vanstone, op.cit. uses this phrase.

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