

‘Gerontion’ and the Context of Belief

Context, in the reading of poetry, is a matter of belief, and of the attenuation of belief. I do not necessarily mean religious belief, but perhaps it was so for Eliot, even for the an attitude to the Christian doctrine of the Word made flesh, an attitude implicit in its allusions to Lancelot Andrewes, as I shall contend. This could be thought of as a stage in the ‘scepticism . . . which leads to faith’ that he spoke of in his essay on Pascal,¹ though I make this suggestion tentatively, aware that to read the early work in the light of what came later is to impose a context which the poem seems to obscure, to swaddle with darkness.

Wittgenstein, who was much occupied by the relation between language and context, observed that ‘The contexts of a sentence are best portrayed in a play. Therefore the best example for a sentence with a particular meaning is a quotation from a play’.² ‘Gerontion’ begins, accordingly, with a quotation from a play, from Act Three Scene One of *Measure for Measure*: ‘*Thou has nor youth nor age/ But as it were an after dinner sleep/ Dreaming of both*’. On the whole the contexts of Shakespeare’s sentence are effectively portrayed in Eliot’s poem, whose opening lines dream of youth and age as an ‘old man in a dry month,/ Being read to by a boy’. The words of the epigraph belong to the Duke Vincentio, who, disguised as a friar, offers solace to the imprisoned Claudio as he awaits his impending execution with the solemnity of a man being read his last rites. And this is also written in to ‘Gerontion’: ‘Think at last/ We have not reached conclusion’, the speaker instructs, tendering the thought of an afterlife as the Duke does to Claudio. However, Eliot does not entirely keep faith with Shakespeare’s play. For one thing he misquotes it, dispossessing ‘after

¹ ‘The “Pensées” of Pascal’ (1931), in Eliot, *Selected Essays* (London: Faber and Faber, 1951), pp. 402-16 (p. 411).

² Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Last Writings on the Philosophy of Psychology*, trans by C. G. Luckhardt and Maximilian A. E. AUE, I (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1982), p. 6e (I. 38).

dinner sleep' of an apostrophe 's' after 'dinner', and mistaking 'Dreaming *on* both' for 'Dreaming *of* both'. This is forgivable, since poetry is not, or should not be, answerable to pedantry. But then what of are we to make of the later misquotation of Lancelot Andrewes, which changes 'the Word *without* a word' to 'The word *within* a word'? Surely Eliot, judging from the insistent negatives in the early parts of the poem, means to negate or invert the phrase, as he also does Andrewes's negative affirmation that 'Christ is no wild-cat' with his 'Christ the tiger'? Make no mistake, this can be no mistake; more like wilful error or formal sin. And after such knowledge, what forgiveness? What forgiveness, one might add, for a man being read his last rites, thinking, if not praying, that we have not reached conclusion, and fearing that the dream to come will make for nothing so cosy as an after dinner sleep. Which is to say that it suits Eliot's purpose to misremember the lines from *Measure for Measure*. After all, the poem's persona is an old man with a decaying mind and a failing memory, memory being the only remnant, as he reminds us, of what's still believed in.

Similarly with the introduction, into the poem and into the language, of the word 'juvencence', which Denis Donoghue conjectures 'probably started as Eliot's mistake for "juvenescence," and has been retained, perhaps for metrical preference'.³ 'Eliot's *mistake*'? A poem brimming with book-learning, and its author doesn't possess a dictionary? As always its author is careful to cover himself. Again, it is Gerontion rather than Eliot who seems to be relying on a memory which is distinctly unreliable, his not bothering to look words up or to check his sources further suggestive of what Donoghue sees as the 'spiritual lassitude' ('On "Gerontion"', p. 238) pervading the poem – notably its verbs, which are often passive: Gerontion is

³ Denis Donoghue, 'On "Gerontion"', *The Southern Review*, 21.4 (1985), 934-46 (p. 934).

‘being read to’; signs ‘are taken’ for wonders. Flowering judas is ‘To be eaten, to be divided, to be drunk’, though there passivity is overshadowed by a sense of purpose, of what was meant *to be*. Yet Gerontion’s ungainly way of asserting that he has ‘not made this show purposelessly’ doesn’t really sound purposeful; deliberate perhaps, ‘deliberate’ being the word within the word ‘deliberation’, which crops up later on. Part of what makes us thus deliberate is a suspicion that the poem’s failings cannot be laid solely at Gerontion’s door. There are moments when Eliot himself appears genuinely vulnerable, such as the climactic, or anti-climactic, ‘Tenants of the house,/ Thoughts of a dry brain in a dry season’, which Michael Edwards accurately describes as ‘a feeble explaining of the poem, a blurting-out of its method . . . a despairing, curt dismissal of it, a recognition of its necessary inadequacy’.⁴ And in the central passage on History it is as if the Gerontion persona has been forgotten, or dispensed with, for we can already hear Eliot pontificating or sermonizing in the manner of *Four Quartets*, where the different voices of the poem lie very close to his own. The reader schooled in Intentional Fallacy, who in many ways ‘Gerontion’ provides fodder for, finds himself at a loss upon encountering such cracks in the mask. The poem lends itself to a New Critical, non-contextual approach by purporting to give us all we need to know in order to read it, giving to understand that its meanings are contained within its borders, only to leave us wanting, the giving famishing the craving. Hence its allusive procedure, which unlike that of *The Waste Land* makes no recourse to notes or any other means of reference; but while Lancelot Andrewes, whose sermons are ‘peppered with allusion and quotation’ as Eliot notes in his 1926 essay,⁵ might justifiably presuppose a certain familiarity on the part of his congregation with his

⁴ Michael Edwards, *Eliot/Language* (Isle of Skye: Aquila, 1976), p. 15.

⁵ ‘Lancelot Andrewes’ (1926), in *Selected Essays*, pp. 341-53 (p. 344).

scriptural sources, Eliot can take no such liberty, even with a predominantly academic readership – A. C. Benson’s biography of Fitzgerald hardly amounting to required reading. Hence also a context within that is as tenuous as the context without. ‘These with a thousand small deliberations’, the final verse paragraph begins, though it is not altogether clear what ‘These’ refers to; Gerontion’s five senses seems probable, but this sits uncomfortably with the later reference in the same sentence to ‘sense’ in the singular, ‘when the sense has cooled’. Then there are verbs like ‘Blistered’, ‘patched’ and ‘peeled’: we know what these mean without having to look them up in a dictionary, but it is difficult to work out what they mean in context, and crucially whether they are active or passive. We come to realize that there is no ‘we’, or rather that we are part of the context missing from the poem, Eliot’s words lacking in the understanding common to all of Andrewes’s ‘Word’, the Logos. For Gerontion lives as if he had a wisdom of his own, the impression that he is speaking to another, or to others, or to God, shuddering against the feeling that he is speaking only to himself. The ‘us’ of whom he speaks – ‘Us he devours’ – is divided into a separate ‘you’ and ‘I’, the latter mournfully aware that they may never get to meet: ‘I *would* meet you upon this honestly’. And that ‘would’ picks up the earlier ‘We would see a sign’, a ‘we’ from whom the speaker indicates his distance by putting the phrase in quotation marks. Is it a sign of Gerontion’s faith that he should wish to dissociate himself from the unbelieving Pharisees addressing Christ? Or is it that he is aware he is addressing an unbelieving audience who may not otherwise recognise this as a quotation from the Bible? Such are the questions also facing the would-be Christian poet.

‘Gerontion’ dislocates language into meaning,⁶ and into the meaning of the Incarnation, ‘the eruption into time of the eternal, into space of the infinite’ as it has been glossed.⁷ In this case, however, the eruption is a bit of a damp squib. We do get a sense of all time – not *our* time – from the discussion of a Hegelian ‘History’ (capital ‘H’); yet her attempts to present the moment in and out of time are mistimed, for she ‘Gives too late’ or ‘too soon’. Gerontion too fails to seize the moment like a lover who has lost his passion; we wonder if in fact he has lost his Passion (capital ‘P’), since in his account of it Christ comes too late, not in April, but ‘In depraved May’. This could be taken, on the contrary, as a very timely comment on ‘the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history’,⁸ a panorama also glimpsed, as any historicist reading of the poem would be sure to point out, by the allusions to Rutherford’s ‘fractured atoms’ and to Poland’s ‘contrived corridor(s)’. How the reader is meant to place the poem in its historical context, though, when Gerontion cannot place himself at the hot gates, or anywhere else, is puzzling, one of History’s ‘supple confusions’. Place, as well as time, and in conjunction with time, is subject to linguistic dislocation. ‘Here I am’, Gerontion begins, where he is impossible to tell. Nor can we say with any certainty where he has been. He does mention several European cities where he might have met, honestly or otherwise, his cosmopolitan acquaintance: Antwerp, Brussels, London, Limoges; but there are suggestions that he is not the seasoned traveller we might think. ‘[S]ome estaminet of Antwerp’ could be any estaminet of Antwerp, not necessarily one Gerontion has

⁶ ‘The poet must become more and more comprehensive, more allusive, more indirect, in order to force, to dislocate if necessary, language into his meaning’. Eliot, ‘The Metaphysical Poets’ (1921), in *Selected Essays*, pp. 281-91 (p. 289).

⁷ Gabriel Josipovici, *The World and the Book* (St. Albans: Paladin, 1973), p. 49.

⁸ ‘[Joyce’s mythic method] is a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history’. Eliot, ‘Ulysses, Order, and Myth’ (1919), in *Selected Prose of T. S. Eliot*, ed. by Frank Kermode (London: Faber and Faber, 1975), pp. 175-78 (p. 177).

visited, or even read about in a Baedeker. True, he is speaking here of the *déraciné* ‘Jew’, ‘the owner’ of the ‘decayed house’ he rents; but like his landlord he has nowhere he can call home, ‘The woman’ who ‘keeps the kitchen . . . poking the peevish gutter’ sounding far from homely. By the same token, the poem doesn’t sound at home in the language. At first ‘Gerontion’ seems reassuringly English, the epigraph, in spite of its inaccuracies, serving to locate the poem in a quintessentially English tradition – Shakespeare so ingrained in the culture, we gather, that he doesn’t require referencing, albeit that these aren’t exactly his most famous lines. What follows seems more like the English of a foreigner not all that *au fait* with such cultural reference points:

I was neither at the hot gates
 Nor fought in the warm rain
 Nor knee deep in the salt marsh, heaving a cutlass,
 Bitten by flies, fought.

The weird word order, the holding off of the second ‘fought’, is the sort of solecism one might expect from somebody who has only studied the language in textbooks. So too with the strange, and slightly stiff formality of ‘I that was near your heart was removed therefrom’, which fails to convey a feel for the idiom of the language, having instead the feel of translationese. If the speaker of the poem is meant to be a foreign speaker of English, one who can’t blend in with the crowd, who isn’t what one might call ‘naturalized’, this is at once indicative of an English language which can’t convincingly assimilate or naturalize foreign words, words like ‘merds’. It is also indicative of the problem of origin at the heart of the poem, the heart removed therefrom. The question of where words originate, whether ‘merds’ is French or Belgian, whether ‘Gerontion’ is a corrupt form of Newman’s ‘Gerontius’ or of the Greek word ‘ger_n’, is a question that haunts the speaker, who shows, as does the German-speaking Lithuanian of *The Waste Land*, that there is no necessary

connection between the language you speak and the country you come from, not least because of history's cartographical revisions, of the Germany-Poland border for instance. This disconnection is the paradoxical source of Eliot's disturbed English, an English that may actually be American. Theologically speaking, the lost or displaced origin of languages and of words would be understood as the Word; but Gerontion is unable to speak theologically, only in the occult riddling of lines like,

Gives too late
 What's not believed in, or if still believed,
 In memory only, reconsidered passion. Gives too soon
 Into weak hands, what's thought can be dispensed with
 Till the refusal propagates a fear.

Ironically, the riddle of these subject- and object-less sentences, of what gives and what's given, could be solved, one senses, by supplying just one word; that the word never comes is even more ironic, for that is what gives the clue to what's not believed in.

The air of 'universal foreignness' Eliot attributed to Kipling⁹ also surrounds the host of unfamiliar names given in the poem, which bear out Geoffrey Hill's assertion, in one of his recent Empson lectures, that 'if you stress alienation you are bound to stress context as a counterweight'. One of these names, the candle-shifting Madame de Tornquist, further establishes the presence of the occult by stressing the absence of context as the absence, or dilution, of belief. Just as her seance seems something of a sham, especially in view of Gerontion complaining that he has 'no ghosts', her name, like that of her later incarnation, Madame Sosostris, hints at how easily the foreign might be faked, both women as likely to come from East London as Eastern Europe, or from some other unreal city. And how easily the foreign might be

⁹ 'Rudyard Kipling' (1941) in Eliot, *On Poetry and Poets* (London: Faber and Faber, 1957), pp. 228-51 (p. 242).

faked by a High Modernist wanting to make his poetry sound so elegant, so intelligent, so appealing to the likes of the lady who pretentiously remarks ‘life, what *cauchemar!*’; or the women who talk of ‘Michelangelo’; or ‘Hakagawa, bowing among the Titians’. This spurious definition of culture gives to the ‘pseudo-learning’ that F. W. Bateson detects in the early Eliot.¹⁰ His poetic procedure, in ‘Gerontion’ as in *The Waste Land*, is not so much that of the scholar painstakingly working his way through the whole of literature, as that of the *flâneur* in a world of books, taking a phrase from here, a word from there – which is perhaps not as difficult as he would have us believe. Similarly Yvor Winters, in his discussion of the poem in *Primitivism and Decadence*, points to Eliot’s employment of ‘pseudo-reference’ as a mode of poetic obscurity, citing the ‘Reference to a non-existent plot’ of which ‘De Bailhache, Fresca, Mrs. Cammel’ et al. are the non-existent characters.¹¹ They are not characters for the same reason that Gerontion is not a character, peeling away to reveal the dark recesses of personality that lurk behind the veneer of impersonality. It is here that Eliot’s engagement with Lancelot Andrewes is overshadowed by his later distaste for Donne, the villain of his piece on Andrewes. There he says that ‘Donne’s sermons, or fragments from Donne’s sermons, are certainly known to hundreds who have hardly heard of Andrewes’ (p. 344), concluding that ‘Donne will certainly have always more readers than Andrewes, for the reason that his sermons can be read in detached passages and for the reason that they can be read by those who have no interest in the subject’ (p. 353), i.e. those who do not hold Christian beliefs; Andrewes’s sermons, on the other hand, ‘are too well built to be readily quotable’ (p. 341), since ‘Any

¹⁰ F. W. Bateson, ‘The Poetry of Learning’, in *Eliot in Perspective*, ed. by Graham Martin (London: Macmillan, 1970), pp. 31-44.

¹¹ ‘Each one of these persons is denoted in the performance of an act, and each act, save possibly that of Hakagawa, implies an anterior situation, is a link in a chain of action; even that of Hakagawa implies an anterior and unexplained personality’. Yvor Winters, *Primitivism and Decadence* (1937), in *In Defence of Reason* (London: Routledge, 1960), pp. 15-150 (p. 46).

passage that we can choose must be torn violently from its context' (p348). Aside from the question of whether this tells the whole story about Andrewes, who himself is prone to tearing words and phrases from their Biblical contexts, as is evident from the passages Eliot readily quotes in his essay; aside from that, one feels that 'Gerontion' more closely approximates the fragments of Donne in that it can also be read as a collection of detached passages, passages torn violently from context. But Donne, or Eliot's reading of Donne, infects the poem in a more insidious way. For Donne, Eliot tells us, 'is a "personality" in a sense which Andrewes is not' (p. 351), and he concurs with Logan Pearsall Smith, who writes in his introduction to the 1919 Oxford edition of the sermons that 'Donne is often saying something else, something poignant and personal, and yet, in the end, incommunicable to us', something 'baffling' (quoted, pp. 344, 351). It is just this kind of 'baffling' that Winters, with acute critical insight, ascribes to the pseudo-referential manoeuvres of 'Gerontion': 'A feeling is claimed by the poet', he argues, 'the motivation of which is withheld, and of which in all likelihood he has no clearer notion than his readers can have' (*Primitivism and Decadence*, pp. 46-47), this withheld motivation the equivalent of 'The shadow of the impure motive' ('Lancelot Andrewes', p. 345) that Eliot insists hangs about Donne. The shadow also darkens Gerontion's claim that he 'would meet you upon this honestly', creating a feeling that something, something poignant and personal, prevents him – though I doubt Eliot would have confessed to this, not at that stage.

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