

## Jewel Spears Brooker: On "Gerontion"

The psychological coherence of the first verse paragraph, instrumental in clarifying both the main structural principle of superimposed contexts and the main image of the house within the house, is abandoned as Eliot moves to his second stanza. The tenuous psychological connections that critics have pointed to as transitions between these two stanzas are inventions, not discoveries. They are fabrications compelled by a desire for order. The fact is that the second stanza "follows" the first only in its arrangement on the page; logically and psychologically, the second does not follow at all. It does not properly begin, and it does not end; it simply starts, and then, without a period or even a comma, in the middle of a sentence, in the middle of a line, it stops.

[. . . .]

This stanza relocates readers, giving them a far more inclusive vantage point. All of those ruined houses in windy spaces--from Gerontion's withered brain to Europe's war-shattered civilization--are suddenly placed in the context of the rejection of Christ. Although the second stanza lacks the internal coherence of the first, it is unified by the fact that all these fragments are related to the Christian religion and, as will become evident, to a special relation between knowledge and unbelief. As far as the overall structure of the poem is concerned, this stanza takes the most teratological image of the previous stanza--the Jew lying in wait for his prey--and superimposes one of history's greatest houses, the house of David. The principal tenants in this vision of the house of Israel are the Pharisees, Christ, and pulling together nineteen hundred years of history, the landlord squatting on the window sill of Europe. But these sons of David are not the only tenants of this antique house. Joining the natural brothers are many half brothers, audacious upstarts who irreversibly alter Abraham's line. The rejection of Christ by his brothers in blood led to an expansion of the house of Israel. Anyone of any race whatsoever who would accept Christ in faith was adopted into what the Bible calls the new Israel, the Christian Church. The tenants in Jacob's greater house include, then, Christ's adopted brothers and joint heirs, including in this stanza the seventeenth-century preacher, Lancelot Andrewes. The house of Israel, like the house of Gerontion, is decayed, dry, wind-sieged.

Eliot's main allusion in this second verse paragraph is to a sermon preached by Lancelot Andrewes before King James I on Christmas Day, 1618:

Verbum infans, the Word without a word; the eternal  
Word not able to speak a word; a wonder sure and . . .  
swaddled; and that a wonder too. He that takes the sea  
"and rolls it about the swaddled bands of darkness," to

come thus into clouts, Himself.

This sermon deals with the particular theme of Christmas--the Incarnation. The mystery of the Incarnation, of course, is the mystery of God being immured in a house of flesh. The ancient image of the body as a house, central in the previous stanza of this poem, has a special meaning here. In the case of Jesus of Nazareth, the tenant of the body is a god; the house, therefore, is much more than a house--it is a temple. The Bible frequently describes the body of Christ as a temple. The book of Hebrews, for example, contains a detailed analogy between the Jewish house of God, the tabernacle, and the incarnate Christ, "a greater and more perfect tabernacle, not made with hands" (Hebrews 9: 11). And Christ referred to his own body in just these terms in a text alluded to by both Andrewes and Eliot (John 2:18-21). The temple of the Christ, then, is superimposed upon the Jewish temple which it transformed. The greater temple was swaddled in darkness, the darkness of infancy's powerlessness, the darkness of corrupted Judaism, the darkness of history. The body of Christ is a house apart in "Gerontion"; it also stood in a dry and windy land, but instead of decaying in the general aridity, it was arrested in full strength and destroyed. The ruin in all of the houses in the poem is related to the destruction of this temple.

The text for Andrewes's sermon (and for Eliot's poem) is the demand by the Pharisees that Christ give them proof of his divinity--"We would see a sign!" This text focuses attention on another house within the house of Israel. The mind of the Pharisees is this new house, and it is in certain ways analogous to the mind of Gerontion.

Then certain of the scribes and of the Pharisees answered, saying, Master, we would see a sign from thee. But he answered and said unto them, An evil and adulterous generation seeketh after a sign; and there shall no sign be given to it, but the sign of the prophet Jonas. (Matthew 12:38-39)

This passage is crucial to understand "Gerontion," for it identifies the curse that has brought all these houses (Greek, Jewish, Christian) to ruin; this curse is a mentality that isolates intelligence from passion and from belief. Separated from its context, the above passage seems to say that Christ refused to give the Pharisees a sign, demanding that they accept him by faith alone. In context, the passage says almost the opposite. Most of Christ's career was devoted to giving signs to these professors of law and religion; but whenever a sign was given, the proud but unperceiving scholars took it for a wonder and, ironically, resumed their campaign for a sign. In the incident quoted above, Christ gave two signs of his divinity. First, he restored a paralyzed hand, and then he cast out a demon which was making its victim blind. The Pharisees witnessing these signs responded with their usual request, "We would see a sign!" They accepted the authenticity of the miracles, but they refused to accept their validity as signs. They would soon see the supreme sign, but their unbelief, inseparable from their learning, would prevent them from recognizing it.

This rejection by the Pharisees, quoted by Andrewes and by Eliot, was a turning point in the life of Christ and in history, because it led to an expansion of the house of Jacob. In his immediate response to these Pharisees, Christ oversteps the racial definition of Israel by asking "Who is my mother? And who are my brethren?" and by answering "Whosoever shall do the will of my Father, who is in heaven, the same is my brother, and sister, and mother"

(Matthew 12:48-50). In the second stanza of "Gerontion," Eliot's use of Andrewes's sermon superimposes this more inclusive house of Israel, the Christian Church. It may be supposed that Eliot, who became an admirer of Andrewes's theology, is contrasting the rejection of Christ by the Jews to the acceptance of Christ by the Church, or that he is contrasting the Pharisees' blindness to Andrewes's insight. But Eliot's opening fragment, "Signs are taken for wonders," is as applicable to Andrewes as it is to the Pharisees, as applicable to the Christian Church as to Israel. In the specific part of the sermon to which Eliot alludes in his poem, Andrewes repeatedly declares that the Incarnation is a "wonder too," a "wonder sure." The seventeenth-century divines loved to preach about the supreme wonder of infinity incarcerated in a finite prison, of the one who swaddled the sea being swaddled in baby clouts. Seduced by paradox, they were enthralled by the wonder of omnipotence dependent upon a young woman for diaper changes, of omnipresence locked up in infant flesh. By transforming the Incarnation into an abstraction, by treating it as an occasion for rhetorical play, the Church had also taken the sign for a wonder. The Church is another of this poem's decaying, crumbling houses in dry and windy lands. The Church, furthermore, is occupied by desiccated and dying tenants housing dull and shriveled thoughts; the churchyard is parched and, literally as well as figuratively, packed with dry bones, dry stones, dry excreta.

The third stanza, which describes a corrupt eucharist ceremony, elaborates and complicates the houses already introduced in the poem. Attention is focused on the house of the twentieth-century Church as contemporary participants in the Mass are superimposed upon the Pharisees and upon the seventeenth-century Church as accomplices in the ongoing rejection of Christ. The motif of the body as a house is extended in this stanza. In the Church Age, i.e., after Pentecost, the bodies of Christians constitute the house of God. "Ye are the temple of the living god," Paul tells the weak Christians in Corinth (II Corinthians 6:16). Mr. Silvero, Hakagawa, Madame de Tornquist, and Fraulein von Kulp, then, are decayed temples, windswept, wind-sieged, wind-abandoned, wind-destroyed.

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