

The Journey of the Magus

Eliot's Reflective Journey to the Garden, by Marion Montgomery, Troy, N.Y.: The Whitson Publishing Co., Inc., 1979. 170 pp. \$12.00.

"A COLD COMING they had of it," said Lancelot Andrewes of the journey of the Magi to Bethlehem, "just the worst time of the year to take a journey, and specially a long journey in. The ways deep, the weather sharp, the days short, the sun farthest off, in *solstitio brumali*, 'the very dead of winter.'" T. S. Eliot adapted these words from an Andrewes Nativity sermon and put most of them into the mouths of the Magi themselves to begin his poem, "The Journey of the Magi." Continuing the Eliot practice of preserving and adapting fragments of the past, we could apply the same words to Eliot himself: a cold coming he had of it on his journey to Christianity, and certainly at the worst time of the intellectual year. The American Magus, as Marion Montgomery called Eliot in an earlier study, began by confounding the poetic establishment with what appeared to be nihilistic and cynical poetry, then went on to confound a new intellectual establishment, which his early poetry had helped to shape, by his conversion to what they held (and had assumed Eliot held) to be a creed outworn, the Christianity of Lancelot Andrewes. For the past half-century the critics have been attempting to come to grips with Eliot's conversion. Professor Montgomery, who has already shown himself a sensitive and sympathetic critic of Eliot, makes his contribution to the effort to understand Eliot's position in the present study.

In a kind of reprise of his method in *The American Magus*, Montgomery approaches his subject through a series of relatively brief, reflective chapters on aspects of Eliot's "journey to the garden." This is not the conventional thesis-

method of literary scholarship, yet it is not entirely a circular method either. A kind of argument is advanced, but advanced by approaching the topic from a variety of perspectives rather than by dogged pursuit of a single point throughout. Perhaps more important than any argument is the atmosphere of sympathetic understanding and insight about Eliot and chiefly about his early poetry that is created by this volume. The method is rather like that Montgomery posits for *The Waste Land* itself, which he sees as incomplete but not therefore lacking unity (a subtle distinction, but he puts it persuasively), as having dramatic movement even if it does not have finality.

The Waste Land, which is the central issue of this study, is in Montgomery's view a poem about Eliot's conversion. This is the thesis of this non-thesis book, and it is not so much defended as illuminated. Montgomery's reflections on *The Waste Land* were prompted in large part by the publication by Eliot's widow in 1971 of the original version of that poem with all the previously only guessed-at excisions and emendations by Ezra Pound, the "miglior fabbro," or better maker, of Eliot's dedication. Thus, much of Montgomery's concern is to put *The Waste Land* back together again as a whole work of poetry in the face of the flood of criticism that issued from the publication of the original manuscript, criticism that focussed attention on what Pound did and what Eliot tolerated rather than on the finished poem known to readers. In this endeavor Montgomery makes many valuable observations and helps to right the critical balance that at times has veered dangerously close to reading, not *The Waste Land* as known for fifty years but *The Waste Land* as reborn in the publication of the original manuscript. Which is not to say that Montgomery ignores the original version; rather he uses it to clarify the poem as it stands in finished form.

Montgomery is also concerned to approach thoughtfully and tastefully the issue of the personal dimension of *The Waste Land*. Eliot said in later years that *The Waste Land* was not the cry of a generation but only the utterance of a "personal grouse" of his own. This remark, like his more famous one about classicism, royalism, and Anglo-Catholicism as the marks of his literary, political, and religious positions, has come to haunt him; for it has opened the flood-gates to personal interpretations of the poem as everything from the expression of Eliot's hatred of women to a supposedly suppressed love for the still obscure Jean Verdenal killed at Gallipoli in the Great War. Montgomery recognizes the personal element in the poem, but recognizes it as the spiritual anguish that Eliot was undergoing on his cold journey. In that light he makes personal and poetic sense of *The Waste Land* in ways impossible for those who would use it as solely the record of external, biographically verifiable events, salacious if possible.

At the same time Montgomery is so thoughtful and learned a student of literature that he never lets his reading of Eliot lose sight of the enormous literary and philosophic range of Eliot's intellect. Of particular value is Montgomery's frequent linkage of Eliot with his immediate nineteenth-century literary past, a topic now being given greater attention by critics. Thus the reader of this study will find countless passages in which references and allusion in *The Waste Land* are clarified and enlarged by Montgomery's remarks well beyond even the copious notes in modern editions of the poem.

Indeed, *Eliot's Reflective Journey to the Garden* can be read with profit solely for its abundance of commentary on personal and literary references in *The Waste Land*, though it must be kept in mind that the book is not organized for that purpose but rather for the purpose of casting light on Eliot's conversion and the nature of his belief and his intellectual position. This

too it does in rich measure. But all of the illuminations of this book can best be used by those who already know author and subject fairly well. For this is no primer to Eliot or his poetry; this is a work for the serious student of Eliot who largely sympathizes with Eliot's mature intellectual and religious position and for the student who seeks to understand the lines of connection between the early, spiritually questing Eliot and the later Magus who had found his way to Bethlehem.

Because Montgomery makes much of the facsimile publication of *The Waste Land* and also of the misdirected personal interpretations of the poem, it is regrettable that his work, though published in 1979, takes no account of scholarship and criticism later than 1975 (and only one work for that year and that one not on Eliot). Indeed, his citations seem frozen at the time of the original publication of the facsimile, so that he is led to remark on the exorbitant cost of that publication, even though a paperback reprint at quite accessible price has been available for the past five years. More regrettable yet is the fact that his neglect of recent studies of Eliot means that he takes no account of either Lyndall Gordon's sympathetic study of the development of the early Eliot toward Christianity nor of James Miller's challenging interpretation of *The Waste Land* as a hymn to a lost love for Verdenal (though Montgomery does note the earlier, less elaborate versions of this thesis as advanced by G. Wilson Knight, from whom Miller drew some of his interpretations). The reasons for Montgomery's freezing his Eliot researches at about 1971 are nowhere explained.

Almost equally regrettable is the quality of proofreading in a volume otherwise handsomely prepared. Typos abound, especially in names of persons and places (some names, like Gerhart Niemeyer's, are never spelled correctly, though frequently cited). There are even instances

of entire words omitted, with consequent confounding of meaning.

Yet the technical flaws and even the arbitrary cutting off of recent scholarship do not fatally mar the value of this progressive series of deep and deeper readings of Eliot's conversion poem, as one is tempted to call *The Waste Land* after Montgomery's treatment, though that title has usually been reserved for *Ash Wednesday*. It is a treatment to savor and to come back to. Like the poem itself, it gains in value as it is read and pondered.

Montgomery says *The Waste Land* "dramatizes the attempt to move off the point of suspended spiritual death which Eliot saw as pervasive." Montgomery's book helps us to see that inner drama and the movement it renders and to see that at the end of the cold journey the Magus enters a stable that has become a garden.

Reviewed by G. B. TENNYSON

Loquacious Sphinx

The Sphinx and the Commissar: The Rise and Fall of Soviet Influence in the Middle East, by Mohamed Heikal, *New York: Harper & Row, 1978. 304 pp. \$12.95.*

MOHAMED HEIKAL, the former editor of *Al Ahram*, a long time friend of Nasser, and one of the foremost journalists in the Arab world, here gives us an account of Arab relations with the Soviet Union from the 1950's to the late 1970's. Heikal tells the reader in the Introduction that this book is not intended as a general or academic history of Arab-Soviet relations, and indeed there are somewhat inexplicable gaps in his narrative. There is only tangential treatment of Arab states other than Egypt, and the account of Nasser