

Introduction, by Margaret Morgan

When Nigel Morgan first asked me to look at the text of the Lancelot Andrewes' sermon on the Nativity I was at a loss to see how I would convert it into a poem, a poem able to be set to music for a choir. Knowing that T. S. Eliot had dipped into it and drawn from it his poem, 'The Journey of the Magi' was both encouraging and daunting. On the one hand his work proved it was possible to convert part of a sermon into a poem, but, on the other, who was I to follow suit?

Reading the wonderful, elegant, moving yet sometimes wryly humorous words soon inspired me. I could see the Latin quotations, so much part of the preaching style of the seventeenth century, as an opportunity for choral decoration and emphasis around arrangements of his text, already so rhythmic and carefully crafted.

In his 1928 essay on Andrewes Eliot argues that his sermons 'are too well-built to be readily quotable; they stick too closely to the point to be entertaining'. In attempting a work such as 'The Text is a Star' we are flying in the face of this opinion and of course the sermon is much reduced in volume in the poem. But I think the argument is there and little has been added except the small anachronism of 'terrorist activity', and Andrewes' lambasting of contemporary attitudes suggests that he might have been comfortable with this accusation of apathy.

There are differences between the libretto and the poem, changes made for the sake of setting and to accommodate the occasional need for more metric writing and for the dramatic impact this sermon still delivers.



To read T.S. Eliot's essay on Lancelot Andrewes, visit Marianne Dorman's website:
<http://mariannedorman.homestead.com/Eliot.html>

The Text is a Star

Words by Margaret Morgan after a sermon preached before King James on Christmas Day 1622 by Bishop Lancelot Andrewes (transcribed by Dr. Marianne Dorman)

Their errand we may best learn
from themselves out of their
dicentes, which, in a word,
is to worship Him; their errand
our errand, the errand of this day.

The text is a star, and we
may make all run on a star
so that the text and the day
may be suitable, and Heaven
and earth hold a correspondence.
For now we have got us a star
on earth for that in Heaven.

Kings

We have taken to heart the star.
Its five beams manifest themselves.
One casts itself from our mouths.
One picks out the glow of faith.
One lights our obstinate feet
and the steps of our painful coming.
One fuels our minds to enquire
Ubi? Ubi est? One chafes
each soul to a warm worship.

He hath a star in Heaven of His own,
stellam ejus; He the owner of it.
Now, we know the stars the stars of Heaven,
He the Lord of them and Lord of Heaven too.
Any that will but look up may see a star
but might not see the Ejus of it.
For this birth was above nature.
No trigon nor triplicity could bring it forth.
They are but idle that set figures for it.

The owl-light of our reason is too dim
to see it by. Only God's morning light
must certify the Ejus.

It is not recommended
to stand gazing up to Heaven too long
nor on Christ Himself ascending,
much less on His star. They sat not still
gazing on the star. Their vidimus
begat their venimus. Their seeing
made them come a great journey.

Kings

We were not as hard by as the shepherds
just a step across the fields from Bethlehem.
We rode many hundreds of miles that cost us
many a day's journey neither pleasant, plain
nor easy. Through deserts, the way waste
and desolate over the crags of both Arabias,
specially Petraea, our journey lay. Safe
it was not, but exceeding dangerous,
through the midst of the black tents of Kedar,
a nation of thieves and cut-throats, over
the hills of robbers infamous then
and infamous today. No passing without
great troop or convoy and a cold coming
we had of it.

And we, what should we do?
Sure the men of the East will rise up
against the men of the West.
Will ours be always, "We shall come,"
rather than, "We come." Shall we
wait till the threat of terrorism
is reduced at airports and the long -range
weather forecast promises a mild winter?
Why the rush? Christ is no wild-cat.
Best get us a new Christmas in,
say, September.

But what is venimus without invenimus?
Is it possible to cover ground and fail to uncover truth?
Can there be coming without overcoming, a vague
wandering and wondering, more errant than errand?
For when they came they hit not on Him at first.
Nor must we think, as soon as ever we
become, to find Him straight.
Ubi est?

Kings

You must now remember that.
For though it stand before we came and came
before we asked; asked before we found
and found before we worshipped, between coming
and worshipping there stands the Ubi est?

And the text is a vidimus, and of a star;
that is, of an outward and visible worship
to be seen by all.

Kings

Let us see you fall down.
Let us see what you offer.
There now remains nothing but to include
yourselves and bear your part with us
and with the angels and all
who this day adored him.
Vade et fac similiter.