

# Another journey

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## Inscriptions

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The historical sense compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order.

T.S. Eliot,  
‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’ (1919)

We ought not to seek to outlaw Eliot’s poems, but neither can we submit to them. We should not ban them; but we must not abandon ourselves to them. Instead we must contest that poetry, with strategies that acknowledge both its value and its menace.

Anthony Julius,  
*The Guardian* 7<sup>th</sup> June 2003

... the cities hostile and the towns unfriendly  
And the villages dirty and charging high prices:  
A hard time we had of it.  
At the end we preferred to travel all night,  
Sleeping in snatches,  
With voices singing in our ears, saying  
That this was all folly.

T.S. Eliot, ‘Journey of the Magi’

The hardest of journeys we migrants had of it,  
The lands we passed through hostile and menacing,  
The seas mostly rough, always unpredictable,  
The people-traffickers harsh, abusive, rapacious,  
And at every border the humiliating questions,  
The routine threat, whether voiced or unspoken,  
Of being sent ‘home’ to the place we’d come from,  
And facing again the necessity of explaining  
To our frightened, hungry and exhausted children  
Why we were treated as strangers and parasites,  
Deserving at best their administered charity,  
At worst their unconcealed hatred and contempt,  
Whipped up every day by the tabloid press,  
By politicians in quest of the populist vote,  
Or by those who unthinkingly do their work  
In the social media where any non-belonger

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To an online 'community' is, for just that reason,  
 An outsider, a threat, an unwanted alien,  
 Or 'potential terrorist', as the weasel-phrase goes.

My friends, I ask you only: please try to imagine  
 How it was for us, once we actually got here,  
 Once we somehow managed to pass the last obstacle,  
 Your narrow, almost risk-free English Channel  
 To this place of deliverance from all our afflictions,  
 The reward for our dangers and hardships en route,  
 The land where our kids might size us up again,  
 Perhaps even think: 'Ah, they're human after all,  
 Decent people with a claim to shared humanity  
 And not, as we had almost come to conclude,  
 The authors of some unknown outrage against it,  
 Condemning us forever to our stateless wandering  
 In the purlieu of suspicion and the bad precincts  
 Where often it seemed that the one thing we shared,  
 Us migrants, was the fact of our non-belonging,  
 The fragile, self-protective solidarity that comes  
 Of the knowledge that anyone within striking range  
 May have some imaginary score to settle.

So we came to this land of indifferent weather,  
 Of unremarkable landscapes, its people not given  
 To much in the way of strong or unruly passions,  
 And with a history no doubt rich in incident  
 To their mostly placid, insular way of thinking,  
 But one that seemed to us quite pitifully lacking  
 In the epic dimension, the scenes of high drama,  
 The treacherous depths, the savage complexities,  
 And, to cite once more that Virgilian polisher  
 Of phrases, the 'cunningly contrived corridors'  
 That have made of our own, more recent history  
 A nightmare one escapes from only at the cost  
 Of a deeply felt – call it spiritual – deprivation,  
 One unknown to you surely heaven-blest dwellers  
 In a united kingdom, or united enough  
 At least to save it from the alternating miseries  
 Of civil war, exodus, or just being constantly  
 At one another's throats.

You might have called it satisfactory  
 Had that first state of things improved even slightly,  
 Had our landing on these shores after such a journey  
 Been greeted, not perhaps with heartfelt joy  
 Or displays of sympathy on a grandiose scale,  
 But in the knowledge that we had, after all,  
 Arrived by the longest, most arduous of routes  
 From hell on earth to a place where (forgive my usage)  
 You natives had every reason to be thankful  
 For having so far witnessed nothing to compare  
 With such extremes of physical or mental torment,  
 And might thus be expected, in natural justice,  
 To grant us the right of domicile in their country,  
 Along with some adequate means of subsistence,  
 Respect for our culture, schooling for our children,  
 And acceptance – though we don't push it too hard,  
 You'll understand – that it was their governments

Who'd joined forces with our home-grown tyrants  
 To spawn the very horrors that drove us into exile,  
 A piecemeal diaspora that has gone unrecorded  
 In the annals or the gospels of those exiled peoples  
 More PR-minded than us, or just better placed  
 To work up their suffering into a providential tale  
 And turn it back on conqueror and victim alike.

We arrived two years ago though it feels a lifetime,  
 And still I'm here with my wife, children and a few  
 Familiar compound ghosts in a 'short-term' holding camp  
 Where the guards or warders (the only words for them)  
 Do their utmost to strip us of every last dignity,  
 Every shred of self-respect that we'd somehow held onto,  
 And where our kids ask again: what parents are these  
 Who have brought us to this drab suburb of Purgatory,  
 Fed us stories of a land where the insults and terrors  
 Would at last be made up for by acts of kindness,  
 Yet delivered us into the hands of new enemies  
 Who differ from the old ones solely in so far  
 As their cruelty has a more briskly bureaucratic,  
 Less overtly threatening but just as effective  
 Range of methods to crush out any life-hopes retained  
 Through all the dismal stations of our journey to date.

'But this set down', your poet has his magus say,  
 And again, 'this set down', with that trademark air  
 Of scriptural *gravitas* that masks its purpose  
 Behind a narrative and a language expertly honed  
 Down the centuries by those whose task it was,  
 Or whose 'vocation' when suitably kitted out  
 In theological garb, to place the formal seal  
 Of church-and-state approval on such fine tales  
 As tell of star-led journeys, celestial portents,  
 And travellers, like the sadder-but-wiser Magi,  
 Returning unmolested to their distant palaces  
 And sherbet-girls. Meanwhile, unknown to them,  
 Herod's soldiers go on with the requisite slaughter  
 Of infants by the thousand, and history goes on  
 With its routine business – in Auden's less unctuous  
 Though scarcely more kindly or comfortable words –  
 Of refusing to help or to pardon those earmarked  
 As simply 'the defeated' while none the less adding,  
 Albeit *sotto voce* or strictly off the record,  
 Its mealy-mouthed 'alas!' in token recognition  
 That the star-roles have long since gone to the ruffians,  
 The conquerors, or the late-triumphing victims,  
 Those prodigals whom, in its own time, history showed  
 To have been, so to speak, on the right wrong side  
 Of the victory-parade, unlike us who keep clutching  
 Our alien gods.

I trust you'll not have concluded  
 That I, a lifelong reader and devoted student  
 Of English Literature, a graduate in that discipline,  
 And a product of your own truly splendid system  
 For its conveyance to colonials and post-colonials –  
 Not concluded, I say, that it's one more instance  
 Of that overworked trope, 'The Empire Writes Back',

Even if I've given voice to a certain special animus  
 Against Archbishop Eliot as, of all modern poets,  
 He who did most to set the tone and the syllabus,  
 'Literary' as well as cultural-historical-political,  
 For coaxing generations of complicitous readers  
 To accept that ultra-civilized yet lethal concoction  
 Of snobbery, religiosity, thinly-veiled racism,  
 And – as even his greatest admirers acknowledge,  
 If they've the keenness of ear to perceive it –  
 The extent and depth of those Eliotic prejudices  
 To be heard in so many long-familiar passages,  
 In the phrasing, verse-rhythms, and frequent tone  
 Of mock-diffident assurance, or self-irony mixed  
 With the kind of presumptive authority that comes  
 So naturally of writing, as he schooled us to believe,  
 With all the history of Christian and Classical Europe  
 'In one's bones', along with the placid awareness  
 (Not unknown among your Home Office officials)  
 Of embodying the interests and values of a clerisy  
 To whose sole keeping is entrusted the knowledge  
 Of what constitutes *culture* as distinct from *cultures*,  
 Or merits the attention of literary critics,  
 Not the Gurkha regiments of Cultural Studies.

Please forgive, then, this brash and vulgar intrusion  
 By one of your culture's (I confess) disenchanting  
 Yet not altogether unappreciative products  
 When he seeks, with a return to that 'sly civility'  
 Much theorized by the Cultural Studies people  
 As their subaltern rejoinder to the Lit Crit guys –  
 When he seeks, as I do, to regain your attention  
 And suggest, speaking very much as 'one of yours',  
 That the barbarians are already inside your gates,  
 Though not in the guise of your criminals, deviants,  
 Street-people, unemployed, benefit claimants,  
 'Skivers' as opposed to 'strivers', gender misfits,  
 Or indeed – to assume my own designated place  
 In this tabloid litany – refugees, asylum-seekers,  
 'Economic migrants', and those who arrive  
 Seeking long-term redress for the manifold crimes  
 Enacted against them not only by the masters,  
 But also by the dedicated culture-servants  
 Ever busied about their masters' business.

Consider then, if you will, the scholar-literati  
 Of an empire whose reach, in its time near-global,  
 Narrows now to the point of a stylistic inflection,  
 A judicious turn of phrase, a well-placed comma,  
 A subtly nuanced view of literary history,  
 Or a deployment of just those scriptural tonings  
 Reliably conducive to just what's required  
 In the way of response, both from those well-trained  
 To come running at such high-cultural whistles,  
 And also – alas – from those whose every conscious,  
 Every critically aware or reflective inclination  
 Is to take that still potent ideology apart,  
 And do so using all the fine devices picked up  
 Through a lengthy education, suffered or enjoyed,  
 At the hands of their masters, mentors and poets.

Let me not, for all that, become too much addicted  
 To the always seductive since ever-so-human  
 Role of victim-accuser, a role better suited  
 To those who've lost out in every possible way,  
 Whose lives have touched absolute degree zero  
 Of what lives should be if they're to count as 'human',  
 Since – unlike me, as you'll probably be thinking –  
 They don't 'have the education' it takes to get quits  
 With both the old rulers and their dissident heirs,  
 Those post-colonial theorists who craftily rework  
 All the tropes and tricks hatched during a half-century  
 Of table-turning techniques and refinements.

I write these thoughts – these ideas you'll recognize  
 As the products of just such a fine education –  
 Because they're ideas that 'come naturally' to me,  
 Or rather because it is so hard to tell what's natural  
 From what's 'second nature', the latter then taken  
 (Unless you're a devotee of the tabloid papers)  
 As signaling some large and unwitting contribution  
 From the idioms of 'common sense', popular belief,  
 Or (excuse the intrusion of such vulgar jargon)  
 Right-wing ideology. I write them because, plainly,  
 They are thoughts of the kind I was taught to think  
 By tutors and critics who had nothing in common  
 With your immigration officers, court officials,  
 Benefits assessors, Home Secretaries, and so forth,  
 Except – as with Eliot's strangely popular poem  
 And its certified exegetes – the apostolic tone  
 Of perfect self-assurance and fittedness to judge  
 In the name of all thinking, cultivated persons,  
 Or as God's (their own God's) authorized deputies  
 On an earth still cross-hatched, on their mental maps,  
 By borders that follow no topographic contours  
 But solely the edicts of government committees,  
 Advisory bodies, and 'expert informants'  
 Or scholars who just chanced to fetch up 'in the field'.

After such knowledge, as he says, what forgiveness?  
 What forgiveness for me who have broken the rules  
 Of civilized taste, not to mention academic discourse?  
 What forgiveness for you who, in your own no doubt  
 Very different ways, shored up the contingencies  
 Of your short-lived imperium and decreed them signs  
 Of a non-contingent since historically predestined  
 Or sacrosanct order? What forgiveness, again,  
 For my having exploited the most advanced ideas  
 Of your ultra-refined literary scholarship  
 In order to launch another Oedipal assault  
 On their ingenious devisers? And, if you'll permit me  
 One last bitter twist: above all what forgiveness  
 For me who now indulge these self-shriving thoughts,  
 These interminable probings of critical conscience,  
 When faced, I and my family, with the evidence  
 On your streets, in your tabloids, and in the chatter  
 Of your leading politicians or opinion-formers  
 That time is very short and that theory, in the end,  
 Has rather little to say on more urgent topics,  
 Such as how to talk honestly to your children,

How persuade them that attending a British school  
 Is something they'll not at all regret having done  
 Even if, needless to say, they hate having to do it,  
 Or again, how explain that, despite all I've said,  
 An education by these, their teachers in a new life,  
 Is a tainted chalice that's well worth the taking  
 As payback, in some sort, for the old oppressors.

For once inside their citadel you acquire this knack  
 Of getting inside the heads, the thoughts and feelings  
 Of the subtlest mind-benders, Eliot among them,  
 Who have fashioned the very terms of our victimage  
 Through a cultural discourse that played its own role,  
 Discreet though effective, in their mission to ensure  
 That nothing should disturb the predestined order  
 Of languages, cultures, and well-regulated lives  
 Whose record is inscribed, as Walter Benjamin said,  
 On every monument of civilization and barbarism,  
 On your poet's suavely turned lines and cadences,  
 And on his thoughts concerning the undesirability  
 Of 'free-thinking Jews' beyond a certain fixed quota  
 Finding house-room in 'our' cultural midst, or again,  
 In his lines about the 'hooded hordes swarming  
 Over endless plains', their location vague and distant  
 The more forcefully to vouch their savage alterity,  
 Yet not so far off as to lessen their imminent threat  
 To 'our' classically-divinely ordained way of life.

I admit: there were brain-worm thoughts, phrases  
 And images of yours that once I 'shored against my ruin',  
 Perhaps thinking that a dose of the master's medicine,  
 If administered with sufficient grace of utterance,  
 Might lend an equivalent weight and authority  
 To our own, albeit more astutely critical  
 Since dissident ways of thought, while drawing notice  
 To our special kind of inwardness with your culture,  
 Requiring we exhibit such renegade allegiance  
 If our writings were not to be dismissed as products  
 Of a culturally alien, a distorted since 'provincial'  
 Grasp of its finer points. Call this collaboration,  
 If you like, or sleeping with the enemy, or maybe  
 Something worse, but do at least give us credit,  
 Us reverse Calibans, for deploying that knowledge  
 To turn insults back and so, by sheer civility,  
 Stick inky fingers up to your own native Calibans,  
 Your fools-in-office, your dimwit politicians,  
 And your cabinet ministers to whom Oxford  
 Is a fast-track finishing school for wealthy idiots,  
 Those upon whose brutish nature, as Prospero says,  
 'Nurture cannot stick'.

If the empire writes back  
 Then it will be by learning from your best and worst,  
 Or those who mix best and worst in themselves,  
 The meme-artificers and haunting line-spinners  
 In poetry or prose that often chimes softly  
 With barbarous themes – like Eliot's *Kulturkampf*  
 Or Prospero's spell-bound regime – and yet gives a hold  
 For us cuckoos, pitch-perfect colonists of your nest,

To ventriloquize our grievances in subaltern key  
 And in some part redeem our obeisance to the masters  
 By rendering our tributes of skewed intent, our homage  
 Of tweaked meanings, or our revisionary ratios,  
 Adopted as often from those writers most complicit  
 In our histories of exile, humiliation and despair  
 As from those, the inventors of our fight-back strategy,  
 Whose texts bear all the obdurate witness-marks  
 Of that same inner strife.

Think of me, should you wish,  
 As a riled-up avatar of Arnold's scholar-gypsy,  
 Though one whose journey has been forced upon him  
 By factors beyond his grasp, let alone his control,  
 But has here done his best, in however confused  
 Or piecemeal a fashion, to contrive some narrative  
 That would fit them all in, all the crazily ill-matched  
 Aspects of a life that found so much of its meaning  
 In the ideas and speech-rhythms, niceties, nuances,  
 And Eliot-inflected tones of cultural assurance  
 That somehow survived every border-guard-inflicted  
 Sharp reminder of how little such attainments mean  
 For one whose situation declares them invalid,  
 Since they serve as yet another standing provocation  
 To the guardians of native, homegrown English culture  
 Against us now civilized, well-schooled barbarians.

On Dover Quay I can connect/Nothing with nothing.  
 You taught me literature, and my profit on't/  
 Is I know to curse. Who are these hordes swarming  
 Across walls and borders, stumbling over questions,  
 Ringed by the bureaucracies of a dozen alien kingdoms?  
 We shall not cease from forced migration,  
 And the end of all our years-long futile wandering  
 Is to arrive at a hostile place like where we started  
 And know it for the third, fifth, twentieth time.  
 In our godforsaken end is our godforsaken beginning.  
*Moi! Hypocrite lecteur, – son semblable, – son frère!*  
 Who shall rid me of this my own voice in my own head?