

T. S. ELIOT AND THE  
PROBLEM OF MODERN POETIC DRAMA

by

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## INTRODUCTION

One of T. S. Eliot's greatest contributions to English drama was his challenge to a whole period of criticism and practice. The problem seems to stem from the lack of poetry and style; and failure or the degree of failure due to continued adherence to false ideals. From these two concepts Mr. Eliot found it necessary to search elsewhere for the foundations of the art of drama. His search started as early as 1919 with the essay "Rhetoric and Poetic Drama." This was followed with "The Possibility of Poetic Drama," published in a collection of essays entitled The Sacred Grove, in 1920. Eliot's one attempt at strict drama from this early period, Sweeney Agonistes, 1926, remained a fragment. At this stage Eliot had not found the right relationship between theme, subject, and form that was required to compose a complete drama. This stage was reached after Ash Wednesday, 1930. Soon after finishing Sweeney Agonistes, Eliot wrote one of his most important early essays on drama entitled, "A Dialogue on Dramatic Poetry" in 1928. With these early essays Eliot performed the task of restating with precision and authority some first principles which would serve as guidelines for his later development.

The interplay between Eliot's creative work and his criticism, which was valuable to the comprehension of his poetry, is a different matter in the case of his dramas. His theory of poetry has been borne out by his practice, and both have been

influential during the present generation. But his conception of drama, particularly his belief in the need for poetic drama, has not fared so well, and is still more theory than fact. It is with this aspect of Eliot that this paper will be concerned, rather than his accepted position as a leading twentieth-century English poet.

Eliot's The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism contains the remark: "The ideal medium for poetry, to my mind, and the most direct means of social 'usefulness' for poetry, is the theatre."<sup>1</sup> By 1933, when this was written, he had already studied the problem of the verse play in his Introduction to Charlotte Eliot's Savonarola (1926) and in his "A Dialogue on Dramatic Poetry." As he observed in his "Dialogue," which he wrote as a preface to Dryden's great discussion of the subject, "It is one thing to discuss the rules of an art when that art is alive, and quite another when it is dead."<sup>2</sup> In his Introduction, where he was pursuing an inquiry into the limits of dramatic form, he adopted the premise that such form "may occur at various points along a line the termini of which are liturgy and realism"--the former being associated with the incantation of poetry and the latter with a "prosaic"

<sup>1</sup>T.S. Eliot, The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism (London, 1933), p. 153--hereafter cited as The Use of Poetry.

<sup>2</sup>T.S. Eliot, Selected Essays 1917-1932, (New York, 1932), p. 44--hereafter cited as Selected Essays.

mode of speech.<sup>3</sup> Through one of his speakers in "A Dialogue on Dramatic Poetry" Eliot stated his opinion that the relative merits of liturgy and realism in drama depend on the time: "When the age has a set religious practice and belief, then the drama can and should tend towards realism. I say towards, I do not say arrive at . . . The more fluid, the more chaotic the religious and ethical beliefs, the more the drama must tend in the direction of liturgy."<sup>4</sup> Eliot's intention as of the late 1920's was to justify the renaissance of poetic drama by suggesting that the theatre was most useful when it returned to its origins in liturgy, where poetry most profoundly touched the emotional life.

If at times in his treatment of verse in his plays Eliot has recreated the incantatory rhythms of liturgy, he has also duplicated by plot symbolism the conditions of myth and occasionally of ritual acts. He has never done so, however, without trying to respect the demands of the contemporary theatre audience. His verse, whatever the symbols, has a modern vocabulary and cadence, and it preserves the mean between liturgy and common speech. Also, the narrative elements of his plays involve ordinary people in such a way that what is mythic or ritualistic in the events is on a different level from the simple realism apparent on the surface. Eliot described in his essay on John Marston (1934) a

<sup>3</sup>T.S. Eliot, Introduction to Charlotte Eliot, Savonarola: A Dramatic Poem (London, 1926), p. x.

<sup>4</sup>Selected Essays, p. 37.

quality also discernible in his own plays.

It is possible that what distinguishes poetic drama from prosaic drama is a kind of doubleness in the action, as if it took place on two planes at once. In this it is different from allegory, in which the abstraction is something conceived, not something differently felt, and from symbolism (as in the plays of Maeterlinck) in which the tangible world is deliberately diminished--both symbolism and allegory being operations of the conscious planning mind. In poetic drama a certain apparent irrelevance may be the symptom of this doubleness; or the drama has an under-pattern, less manifest than the theatrical one. We sometimes feel, in following the words and behavior of some of the characters of Dostoevsky, that they are living at once on the plane that we know and on some other plane of reality from which we are shut out: their behaviour does not seem crazy, but rather in conformity with the laws of some world that we cannot perceive...In the work of genius of a lower order, such as that of the author of The Revenger's Tragedy, the characters themselves hardly attain this double reality; we are aware rather of the author, operating perhaps not quite consciously through them, and making use of them to express something of which he himself may not be quite conscious.<sup>5</sup>

How consciously Eliot has set out to appeal to different levels of sensibility or education in his audience is evident from the account of Sweeney Agonistes given in The Use of Poetry. Despite his efforts, however, Eliot has not always succeeded in developing his characters on a double plane. On the other hand, he usually produced a doubleness of action, whether by symbolic allusion or by an accidental and unconscious sub-structure.

Keeping in mind these concepts for which Eliot was striving, this paper will concern itself with the following plays and essays: Sweeney Agonistes, 1926; "A Dialogue on Dramatic Poetry," 1928;

<sup>5</sup>T.S. Eliot, Elizabethan Essays (London, 1934), pp. 189-90.

The Rock, 1934; Murder in the Cathedral, 1935; The Family Reunion, 1939; The Cocktail Party, 1949; "Poetry and Drama," 1951; The Confidential Clerk, 1953; and The Elder Statesman, 1958.



## SECTION I

Sweeney Agonistes

The most obvious failure among Eliot's attempts to develop a character who could function on more than one level occurred in his skit Sweeney Agonistes. The following is the example he cited.

My intention was to have one character whose sensibility and intelligence would be on the plane of the most sensitive and intelligent members of the audience; his speeches should be addressed to them as much as to the other personages in the play--or rather, should be addressed to the latter, who were to be material, literal-minded and visionless, with the consciousness of being overheard by the former. There was to be an understanding between this protagonist and a small number of the audience, while the rest of the audience would share the responses of the other characters in the play.<sup>6</sup>

Eliot was probably influenced by Aristophanes in writing Sweeney Agonistes, and in fact it was subtitled "Fragments of an Aristophanic Melodrama." As I have stated earlier, this first attempt at a drama remained a fragment containing only a few brief scenes. Even though Eliot subtitled these first brief scenes after Aristophanes, the source of the verse spoken by Sweeney and his friends was much nearer at hand. The poet was trying to utilize vaudeville rhythms, because he believed that any hope for a popular drama would spring from the robust entertainment of the lower class. The songs in Eliot's play, "Under

<sup>6</sup>The Use of Poetry, p. 153.

the Bamboo Tree" and "My Little Girl," found their stimulus in American jazz, as did the rhythm of the dialogue.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, in this play, Eliot's verse sounded more familiar to the American audiences.

The unfinished Sweeney Agonistes, which Eliot seems at one time to have called "Wanna Go Home, Baby?"<sup>8</sup> (perhaps an idea he conceived from his feeling about vaudeville) consists of two verse episodes, "Fragment of a Prologue" and "Fragment of an Agon."

"Fragment of a Prologue," in which Sweeney does not appear, has just enough plot to convey a sense of the superficiality of life on the everyday level. The characters, vulgar and rather boisterous, subsist in the sensual or surface world. What drama is apparent is simply the drama of contrast, or interruption. The opening conversation between the two girls, Dusty and Doris, is interrupted by the ringing of the telephone, then Dusty deals with the menace of Pereira with what she plainly feels is feminine expertise. The fortunetelling breaks off with the appearance of the deuce of spades, the "coffin"; but the thought of the coffin is pushed into the background by the arrival of the party and the fragment breaks off with dull social conversation and male boasting.

In the second fragment the dramatic contrast is provided by the gloom of Sweeney, and his anecdote of the man who 'did a

<sup>7</sup>Essays in the Modern Drama, ed. Morris Freedman (Boston, 1964), p. 267--hereafter cited as Essays.

<sup>8</sup>Grover Smith, T. S. Eliot's Poetry and Plays (Chicago, 1956), p. 113--hereafter cited as Poetry and Plays.

girl in.' The theme of Sweeney Agonistes is the boredom and horror that lie beneath the commonplace and the ugly. This boredom and horror are masked by all the paraphernalia of parties and drinks, although they break at the mention of fate which cannot be put off forever, and at the appearance of the coffin. They interrupt the party when Sweeney adapts the cannibalistic joke to his own purpose, to make of it an image of life reduced to its three facts: birth, copulation, and death. And in his story of the man 'who did a girl in' horror appears as the neurotic response to boredom.

This theme of the outer life of parties which tries to keep boredom at bay; and of the outer life of routine, such as the milkman calling, which accompanies the inner life of nightmare, provides dramatic moments. But it is difficult to see how, if he ever intended to, Mr. Eliot could have developed it into a play. It is not drama, although it has some of the qualities of drama. But Sweeney himself, in telling his story, avoids its drama. What impresses him is the undramatic: the dead girl in the bath, the murderer wondering who is alive and who is dead, and the milkman's daily call. Sweeney's incapacity to express the horror of life in any terms he feels to be adequate suggests that the subject of the two fragments is not even the contrast of inanity and despair, but the gulf fixed between those capable of comprehension above a surface level and those who are not. It is difficult to see how such a subject could be developed at

all except by repetition, as Sweeney was; for it is impossible to imagine the attitudes of Dusty and Doris and their guests changing. Therefore, it seems likely that the impulse behind the fragments was less the impulse to write a play, than the wish to experiment in the writing of dramatic verse.

As stated earlier, Eliot was attempting to devise a character, who could function on more than one level during the skit. According to this scheme Sweeney has to exist on a level of understanding or experience beyond the comprehension of some of the members of the audience. In practice, Eliot seems to have devised a character who utters certain gnomic statements about life and death. These statements fail to convince us in the audience that Sweeney knows more than the other characters present in the play. Sweeney is Eliot's mouthpiece, and as such he seems to be aware of moral and ethical ideas, which have been expressed by Eliot in some of his poems; but the double level of the action and theme seemingly does not extend to his awareness. There are many instances in which Sweeney makes a statement with no evidence whatever that he attaches any meaning to the words that the other characters miss or that the audience as a whole cannot grasp. If there are people in the play or in the audience whom the mystical overtone eludes, how is one to say that it does not escape Sweeney too? The understanding is between Eliot and the intellectual elite; it need not include Sweeney at all. There is even the possibility that Eliot is on one level, Sweeney

on a second level, and Doris and the rest on a third still lower level. This would not alter matters unless one could be assured by internal evidence that Sweeney had higher intelligence than his friends and their counterparts in the audience. This complete isolation of Sweeney from the rest of the cast, and also from the audience, is probably what made it seem unworkable for a play of much length, and it is not surprising that Eliot left Sweeney's "agon" a fragment.

One of Eliot's basic problems in writing Sweeney was his misunderstanding of audience psychology. He must have thought that an audience at a play would react to the play on an individual intellectualized level. He may have formed this opinion as a result of his knowledge of the selective, intellectual nature of the audience for his poetry. Such an audience could react on different levels and the poetry would not be affected, but the same is not true of plays. Audiences at plays react as a mob, not individually, and their reactions are not intellectual, but emotional.

Another problem which confronted Eliot was his lack of understanding of many of the basic concepts of what a play is, other than dialogue. Sweeney is undramatic because the characters make no choices. According to Aristotle, it is through choice (moral choice) that character is revealed, and without character-revealing action there is no dramatic action, and therefore, no drama.<sup>9</sup> Language is generally a peripheral con-

<sup>9</sup>Aristotle, On Poetry and Style, trans., G.M.A. Grube (New York, 1958), p. 13--hereafter cited as Poetics.

sideration when writing a play. Dramatic action, conflict, probability and necessity in the plot construction are all of more importance than language. This fact explains the failure of Sweeney as a dramatic piece.

## SECTION II

## "A Dialogue on Dramatic Poetry"

During the period when Eliot was advancing his "levels" theory he was also working on another theory of poetry and liturgy in drama as expressed in his essay "A Dialogue on Dramatic Poetry,"<sup>10</sup> which was written in 1928. One gets a hint of the direction Eliot would take in his next attempt to write a play from his discussion of the satisfaction he finds in the formality of the ballet, the elimination of all unessentials in its concentrated and highly trained movements. As one of the speakers in the "Dialogue" remarks, "Here seemed to be everything we wanted in the drama, except the poetry." The mention of liturgy leads on to the remark that "the consummation of the drama...is to be found in the ceremony of the Mass." Another speaker takes exception saying, "the Mass is a small drama, having all the unities," and that "if you consider the ritual of the Church during the cycle of the year...you have represented the full drama of the creation," nevertheless, "even if you are a believer, you will have dramatic desires which crave fulfillment otherwise...Religion is no more a substitute for drama than drama is a substitute for religion."<sup>11</sup> In these statements concerning the connection between religion and drama, Eliot once again

<sup>10</sup>Selected Essays, pp. 31-45. .

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., pp. 35-36. .

seems to confuse basic issues. True, there is a drama of the Mass, the same as there is a drama of a car race or of a circus; but again Eliot forgets that without characters who make moral choices, there can be very little drama in the artistic sense.

Eliot, at this time, also stated his ideas concerning verse drama and his reasons for believing that verse drama was the form one should strive for. Early in his "Dialogue" he stated, "I say that prose drama is merely a slight by-product of verse drama."<sup>12</sup> He goes on to say in support of this that "we should expect a dramatic poet like Shakespeare to write his finest poetry in his most dramatic scenes...what makes it most dramatic is what makes it most poetic."<sup>13</sup> The problem here is that Eliot offers us no proof or explanation of this statement. He doesn't appear to understand that drama is a matter of revealing character, and that the central abstraction of drama is not the word, but the act.<sup>14</sup> Another point that he chooses to overlook is that Shakespeare wrote some of his finest poetry in his sonnets and not in his plays. Also, when Shakespeare is translated into German, say, with a consequent loss of literary value, the plays

<sup>12</sup>Selected Essays, p. 34.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., p. 39.

<sup>14</sup>Susanne Langer, Feeling and Form (New York, 1953), p. 306--hereafter cited as Feeling and Form.



as drama seem to be entirely satisfactory, as performed in theatres. As Aristotle would say, Shakespeare is a dramatic poet not because he is a maker of verses but because he is a maker of plots.<sup>15</sup>

Eliot then states that "the dramatist who is not a poet is so much less a dramatist."<sup>16</sup> A confusion arises here, over the meaning of "poet". Generally speaking, a dramatist and a poet are one, in the sense that both are fictionists; the difference lies in the means of expression, rather than the object of expression. Aristotle, in the Poetics, speaks of differing types of poetry and the manner in which they differ:

Poetry as Imitation

The epic, tragedy, comedy, and dithyrambic poetry, most music on the flute and on the lyre--all these are, in principle, imitations. They differ in three ways: they imitate different things, or imitate them by different means, or in a different manner.<sup>17</sup>

It is hard to see how a dramatist could be "less" a dramatist for want of poetic gifts. Shelly was "less" a dramatist because he was lacking in histrionic imagination.

Further along in the "Dialogue" Eliot again makes an assertion which he does not try to defend. In discussing William Archer's competence as a drama critic he states:

<sup>15</sup>Poetics, p. 40.

<sup>16</sup>Selected Essays, p. 35.

<sup>17</sup>Poetics, p. 3.

he had one fault: he knew nothing about poetry...he made the egregious error of supposing that the dramatic merit of a dramatic work could be estimated without reference to its poetic merit. Henrik Ibsen certainly had more dramatic ability than Cyril Tourneur.<sup>18</sup> But as Archer did not realize that dramatic and poetic ability are less different than chalk and cheese, he made the mistake of supposing that Ibsen was a greater dramatist than Tourneur. Greater if you like, but he will not last as long. For the greatest drama is poetic drama, and dramatic defects can be compensated by poetic excellence.<sup>19</sup>

Such assertions, offered without evidence of any kind, offered in fact, in the face of evidence to the contrary, do little to convince us that Mr. Eliot has a firm grip on the principles of dramatic art. The living theatre certainly tends to prove him mistaken: Tourneur is forgotten, Ibsen remembered; Shelly, Keats, and Byron are considered closet dramatists; Shaw, Strindberg, and Chekhov are still being produced today.

<sup>18</sup> 1575-1626, English Dramatist: "It is regrettable only that Tourneur, about whom we know little more than that he devoted himself only casually to the theatre, should have allowed the machinery of his plays to creak so audibly...Powerful poetry appears in the generally shoddy but sometimes extremely stirring work of Cyril Tourneur." John Gassner, Masters of the Drama (New York, 1945), pp. 257-258.

<sup>19</sup> Selected Essays, p. 38.

## SECTION III

The Rock

Eliot's experiment with drama in Sweeney Agonistes constituted a poor start. Not until 1934, six years after writing his "Dialogue," did he try again and then with not a great deal of success. The Rock, it is true, is more a pageant than a play. Its situation does not give rise to any intense struggle or conflict; rather, its structure consists of a series of scenes of a related tone, which dramatize the story of the growth of the Church, the hardships it encountered in various crises of the past as well as the present, and the firmness of its triumph. The play is written largely in prose, so Eliot, within boundaries imposed by the producers, had little opportunity to develop his theory of levels. The Rock was specifically written for performance at Sadler's Wells Theatre, May 28th to June 9th, 1934, on behalf of the "Forty-Five Churches Fund of the Diocese of London,"<sup>20</sup> and as Eliot stated in the preface of the play:

I cannot consider myself the author of the 'play' but only of the words which are printed here. The scenario, incorporating some historical scenes suggested by the Rev. R. Webb-Odell, is by Mr. E. Martin Browne, under whose direction I wrote the choruses and dialogues, and submissive to whose expert criticism I rewrote much of them. Of only one scene am I literally the author: for this scene and of course for the sentiments expressed in the choruses I must assume the responsibility.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>20</sup>Essays, p. 269.

<sup>21</sup>T.S. Eliot, The Rock (London, 1934), preface--hereafter cited as The Rock.

As previously noted, Eliot fails to implement in The Rock certain of the ideas advanced in his "Dialogue." Although he cannot be censured for having failed to develop an adequate conception of characters he did not invent, neither can he be acquitted merely because of who he is for having lent his talent to an undertaking of this nature. The Rock's appeal appears to be limited to people who need no convincing. The Cockney scenes are particularly stilted and might irritate an experienced, theatre-going audience; the lines fail to give the illusion of life and the sentiments of the speakers seem to fit some never-never land. Even though the middle-class characters, Millicent and the Major, speak as they are expected to, they are hardly more than stock figures.

The formality of Eliot's writing sounds more natural in the historical scenes with deceased saints and bishops than with the Cockney and middle-class figures. Eliot also manifests good taste by inserting a Latin ritual for the taking of the Crusader's cross. The suggestion of plot, wherein Eliot correlates Ethelbert's views on religion with those of the Saxons, and his difficulties in erecting the modern edifice with those of Rahere, could possibly have been more dramatically coherent by having all the historical scenes result in a similar revelation to the Workmen. Perhaps the Agitator scene fails to show any connection with the tribulations of Nehemiah because Eliot has a keen sense of the difference between ancient Jerusalem

and an English church. Also it might be too shocking to have the Agitator and the Crowd wreak their vandalism upon Ethelbert's brick walls, after the fashion of the invading Danes; but the shift of attention away from Ethelbert harms any unity of perspective afforded by the previous correlation. One never learns whether or not the Crowd really damages the church; when the theme reappears in the iconoclasm scene, it refers not to them but to the remarks of Millicent.

The verse of the pageant is of eight different types. The first of these occurs uniquely in the comic song sung by Ethelbert; another occurs in the "Builders' Song" which sporadically interpolates into the action a reminder of the central theme, the contemporary need for the building of churches. A third is in the prologues spoken by the Chorus Leaders before certain of the scenes, including the ballet divertissement of Dick Whittington and his cat. A fourth occurs in the verse assigned to the Plutocrat, and a fifth and sixth in the contrasting chants of Redshirts and Blackshirts in the same dialogue. Analogous to these chants is another type occurring in the chants of the Workmen and of the Unemployed. Lastly there is the type occurring in the choruses proper impersonating the voice of the Church of God; to it belong also the lines of the Rock himself. The effect of such variety, interspersed with a like variety of dumb shows, with prose speeches, and with music, would be more pleasing if more systematic or, at least, coherent.

Where verse is present, as in the only scene without prose, that featuring the Chorus, the Plutocrat, and the totalitarians, Eliot's true ability is obvious. In this scene, the one solely of his invention, he diversifies his style to sharpen contrasts. Lines for the Reshirts parody a clumsy unmusical free verse; those for the Blackshirts have a heavy, regular beat. In both places the verbal ironies are crude, even more so than in the speeches of the Plutocrat. It is clear that Eliot was trying to denigrate these villains of the scene by making them as silly and vulgar in their talk as they are unchristian in their views. Being present only as symbols of what has already been repudiated, they are hollow men. The Chorus' Greek-tragedy recognition of the Plutocrat prepares again for disapproval. He, though likewise hollow, has a chance to argue his side. He is suave instead of militant, but he is for this reason all the more vile, and he will not be taken seriously when he grumbles about the salaries of the clergy, tithes, the Ecclesiastical Commission, and the difficulties of divorce. When at length he offers the Golden Calf, his role is converted into a burlesque of anti-ecclesiastical criticism. To enforce the moral, Eliot has the scene end in an undignified scramble for the Calf. From the dramatic point of view the whole episode is not so crude as most of The Rock: it is mainly comic and dispenses with the idea of rationally convincing anybody about anything. In this respect some of the other scenes, pretending to weight opinions, seriously

err. To the purpose of the episode the Plutocrat's verse is exactly adapted; it sustains just the amount of stately pomp, enhanced by a mechanical blank-verse measure, necessary to make the bland triteness of his remarks sound foolish.

Throughout the work, the Chorus, assuming a Greek role of commentary, employs supple diction with a broad range of tone. Its speeches convey pleading and reproach, sorrow, wrath, and joy, at tempos extending from the slow calm of its prologues, through the irony and grief of its reflective passages and the intensity of its exhortations, to the quick jubilation of its hymn of praise. Among the most satisfactory features of its language is the agreeable mixture of Prayer Book English and blunt, unhackneyed colloquialism by which it maintains a traditional authority while reaching, sometimes with a shift into irony, the contemporary ear through contemporary idioms. Occasionally it simply meditates on biblical themes, as when, after the completion of Ethelbert's church, it apostrophizes the tabernacles of the Lord in lines molded after Psalms 84 and 132; more often it descends almost to parody, as in the paraphrase of Nehemiah 4:17:<sup>22</sup> "one hand labored on the work and with the other held his weapon."<sup>23</sup>

<sup>22</sup>Poetry and Plays, p. 174.

<sup>23</sup>The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version (New York, 1952), p. 503.

Remembering the word of Nehemiah the Prophet:  
 'The trowel in hand, and the gun rather loose  
 in the holster.'<sup>24</sup>

In the final chorus the verse attains its richest lyric splendor. The theme is light--the light of the Church as a city set on a hill, shining against the darkness where "The great snake lies ever half awake, at the bottom of the pit of the world, curled / In folds of himself until he awakens in hunger," and where power is given to "those who prize the serpent's golden eyes, / The worshippers, self-given sacrifice of the snake."<sup>25</sup> , the chorus glorifies the "Light invisible" and then, enumerating a descending hierarchy of lesser lights, offers thanks for the light of morning, and the light of evening, and

The twilight over stagnant pools at batflight,  
 Moon light and star light, owl and moth light,  
 Glow-worm glowlight on a grassblade.<sup>26</sup>

Finally, speaking with the voice of small creatures whose succession in the cycle of life is as a candle extinguished and re-lighted, it joins the theme of the temporal, by the candles set on the altar, to the theme of the eternal, the Invisible Light in whom darkness and light are the same.

In contrast with the Chorus, which represents the Church in fields of action, the Rock himself is the spokesman for the Church as the eternal witness, the sufferer and martyr. Though

<sup>24</sup>The Rock, p. 39.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid., p. 84.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid.



at the end he stands revealed as St. Peter, the allegory seems to forbid too literal an identification. That is, he embodies rather a type of Christian sainthood than an particular Christian saint. The dramatic role of the Rock is to prop the Chorus in its faith by encouraging humility and by painting the present difficulties of the Church as an immemorial contest forever continuing. In one aspect he is the protagonist of the pageant, for, though he divides with the Chorus leader the function of narrator, the narrative itself concerns a past and present which coexist in his knowledge; the experience of the Church is his own, for he is the Church.

It is not one of the motives of The Rock to suggest to the audience a negative way of sanctity through contemplation or martyrdom. The effort of the saint, to transcend time by union with God, differs from this affirmative law of service to the Church, and to Christ through the Church, by labors of body and mind which sanctify time. The Rock contains, in other words, a philosophy of using time rather than of escaping from it for the sake of a more immediate communion. Yet ultimately both ways are the same if every moment under the aspect of eternity is concurrent with the moment of the Incarnation, which has redeemed all the moments of time that meet and become eternal in it; the saint's absorption in the moment of Incarnation brings him no closer to God than does the worker's absorption in the moment of his toil. But it is doubtful whether these

themes, as handled by Eliot, furnish anything to the average listener's understanding. They are hard to trace and compare even on close reading. One suspects that much of the choric verse could convey little meaning when recited; it would merely punctuate the shifts of action. These facts are regrettable, for this verse admirably fulfills the ambition of Eliot not only to make poetry have an auditory force but to put it where it is ideally heard--in the theatre. Obviously the choruses, referring in their themes to serious and potentially very dramatic situations, contain also a comedy of time and eternity that latently unifies an irregular, episodic train of incidents.

## SECTION IV

Murder in the Cathedral

Although The Rock hardly met Eliot's test for a religious play, "that it should be able to hold the interest, to arouse the excitement, of people who are not religious."<sup>27</sup>, nor did it rise to his more exacting demand of creating a double pattern of poetry and drama, it did provide a beginning and was certainly an improvement over Sweeney Agonistes. But the case was very different with the play which Eliot wrote the following year.

For the Canterbury Festival of June, 1935, Eliot wrote his first independent full-length play, Murder in the Cathedral. Unlike The Rock, this play was a product of his own creative imagination, but it was not originally intended as a venture into the competitive world of the theatre. Assured for the occasion of an audience, to whom the subject would appeal, Eliot was able to indulge his affection for religious symbolism without calculating, as was needful with his later plays, the odds against success if he did not compromise with public demands. He could remain a poet writing about life on his own terms without unduly fretting over the fact that these were not the terms of most people. Murder in the Cathedral, in other words, is just as much coterie literature as Eliot's earlier poetry. It has had a good deal of vogue among audiences possessing religious sym-

<sup>27</sup> Essays, p. 269.

pathies; and it enjoyed a good London run at the small Mercury Theatre, at the Duchess Theatre in the West End, and at the Old Vic, to which it returned in 1953. An operatic version with a musical score by Ildebrando Pizzetti was staged in 1958. The play was given a film premiere at Venice in 1951, but the venture achieved little popularity.<sup>28</sup> It has been a favorite with amateur companies, and on both sides of the Atlantic it has often been produced by universities.

All of Eliot's experiments with the drama to this time reached their culmination in Murder in the Cathedral. The martyrdom of Thomas Becket was an obvious choice for a Canterbury play, made more attractive no doubt by the association of the saint's name to the Cathedral of Canterbury. Also, the theme of conflict between the spiritual and the secular powers, the relation of Church and State was topical, and a subject in which Eliot was interested. The story of Becket's life would seem to hold great dramatic and tragic potentialities, even though the final deed takes place not between close relatives, as Aristotle seemed to think best, but at least between two people closely bound by friendship. Also the deed takes on an added horror by the addition of sacrilege to the crime of murder. Although the conflict of Church and State is present in the play,

<sup>28</sup>Poetry and Plays, p. 180.

it is subordinate to another theme, and the drama of personal relationships is deliberately avoided. The king does not appear and the knights are not persons, but at first a gang, and then a set of attitudes. They murder for an idea, or for various ideas, and are not shown as individuals, disturbed by personal passions and personal motives. The central issue of the play is martyrdom, and martyrdom in its strictest sense. We are not to think of a martyr as primarily one who suffers for a cause, or who gives up his life for truth, but as a witness to the awful reality of the supernatural.<sup>29</sup>

The actual moment in which Thomas is struck down is in a sense unimportant since it is not the dramatic climax toward which all that has happened leads. We are warned again and again that we are not watching a sequence of events which has normal dramatic logic of motive, act, and result, but rather an action which depends on the will of God and not on the wills of men.

Thomas:

For a little time the hungry hawk  
Will soar and hover, circling lower,  
Waiting excuse, pretence, opportunity.<sup>30</sup>  
End will be simple, sudden, God-given.

Nothing prepares us for the murder. We are told rightly that

<sup>29</sup>Helen Gardner, The Art of T.S. Eliot, (New York, 1950), p. 133.

<sup>30</sup>T.S. Eliot, Collected Plays (London, 1962), p. 18--hereafter cited as Collected Plays.

"the substance of our first act / Will be shadows, and the strife with shadows."<sup>31</sup> Thomas can hardly be said to be tempted, for the play opens so near its climax that any inner development is impossible. Except for the last, the temptations are hardly more than recapitulations of what has now ceased to tempt, as exposition of what has happened rather than a present trial; and the last temptation is so subtle and interior that no audience can judge whether it is truly overcome or not. What spiritual pride lurks in a martyr's heart, even in his last agony, is not to be measured by the most subtle and scrupulous self-analyst, far less by any bystander. Though Thomas may say:

Now is my way clear, now is the meaning plain;  
Temptation shall not come in this kind again,<sup>32</sup>

a question has been raised that cannot be answered dramatically and that simply has to be set aside. We have to take it for granted that Thomas dies with a pure will, or else, more properly, ignore the whole problem of motives as being beyond our competence, and accept the fact of his death. If in the first act the strife is with shadows, in the second there is no strife at all. The martyr's sermon warns us that "a martyrdom is never the design of man,"<sup>33</sup> and that a Christian martyrdom is neither

<sup>31</sup>Collected Plays, p. 18.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid., p. 30.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid., p. 33.

an accident nor "the effect of a man's will to become a Saint."<sup>34</sup>

The hero has only to wait for his murderers to appear:

All my life they have been coming, these feet.

All my life

I have waited. Death will come only when I am worthy,

And if I am worthy, there is no danger.

I have therefore only to make perfect my will.<sup>35</sup>

When the knights rush in, the momentary drama of their irruption breaks against the calm of Thomas, and the murder takes place as a kind of ritual slaughter of an unresisting victim, a necessary act, not in itself exciting or significant.

The attempt to present in Thomas, the Martyr, in will and deed, with mind and heart purified so as to be made the instrument of the divine purpose, is a bold one. Success is hardly to be expected. There is a taint of professionalism about his sanctity; the note of complacency is always creeping into his self-conscious presentation of himself. He holds, of course, the pastoral commission, and it is right that he should teach his flock. Due to this, his dramatic function seems less to be a martyr or witness, and more to give a demonstration of how a Christian can die. Thomas is indeed less a man than an embodied attitude, for there is in this play an almost Gnostic contempt for personality and its expression in acts. When Thomas declares

<sup>34</sup>Collected Plays, p. 33.

<sup>35</sup>Ibid., p. 43.

with some scorn:

You argue by results, as this world does,  
To settle if an act be good or bad.  
You defer to the fact,<sup>36</sup>

he seems to have forgotten that the test of absolute goodness versus absolute badness is not only the world's test; it is deeply rooted in the Gospels. When he announces "I have only to make perfect my will,"<sup>37</sup> he speaks more as a Gnostic Sage than as a Christian Saint. Sanctity here appears too near to spiritual self-culture. The difficulty lies partly in the nature of dramatic presentation. The protagonist of any play must be conscious and aware; that is part of his function as protagonist. It is through him that the situation is made clear to us, and we recognize implications hidden from other persons in the play. But if there is no true action, if the center of the play is a state of mind, the protagonist can only be self-aware and self-conscious, and self-consciousness is incompatible with sanctity. Mr. Eliot has conceived his hero as a superior person. The nature of his superiority can be projected dramatically only by himself, for the play assumes a gulf between the saint and the ordinary man. Inevitably in the projecting the protagonist appears superior in the pejorative sense.

But for all its lack of action and its unconvincing protagonist, Murder in the Cathedral is intensely moving and at

<sup>36</sup>Collected Plays, p. 45.

<sup>37</sup>Essays, p. 270.



times quite exciting when performed well. A certain grandeur can be found in the choral sections, as F.O. Matthiessen states:

One of the most conspicuous technical triumphs in all Eliot's poetry is in the choruses that were designed to be spoken by the working women of Canterbury. Here he carried further his experiments in finding verse forms suitable for ritualistic drama. He had no living stage tradition upon which to draw, but he believed that a chorus could still perform something of the same fundamental function that it had for the Greeks. It could 'mediate between the action and the audience'; it could 'intensify the action by projecting its emotional consequences, so that we as audience see it doubly, by seeing its effect on other people.'<sup>38</sup>

Eliot's women are there to watch and suffer, and their feelings are nearly all in the most sombre key. Their gamut is from nameless dread of foreboding, to horror at the fact of Becket's murder. The fluctuations of the chorus are the true measure of Thomas's spiritual conquest. They feel his failure of faith after the last temptation. They know obscurely that if sanctity is nothing in the end but a higher egoism, there is no value in any human goodness. Only if the heroic has meaning can the ordinary have dignity. They "know and do not know;"<sup>39</sup> for they feel the danger but mistake where safety lies:

God is leaving us, God is leaving us, more pang,  
more pain, than birth or death.  
Sweet and cloying through the dark air  
Falls the stifling sense of despair;  
The forms take shape in the dark air;

<sup>38</sup> Essays, p. 270.

<sup>39</sup> Collected Plays, p. 27.

Puss-purr of leopard, footfall of padding bear,  
 Palm-pat of nodding ape, square hyaena waiting  
 For laughter,<sup>40</sup> laughter, laughter. The Lords of Hell  
 are here.

If he is safe, they are safe too; if he is destroyed, they are destroyed. They implore him to save himself for their sake, but the safety he and they find is of another kind. They have to learn that there is no safety in flight, and no escape in obscurity from evil and death. They have to accept their share in the burden of sin, and the glory of redemption. In the great chorus before the martyrdom they identify themselves with a whole world groaning and travailing. The monstrous act they are about to witness is not an aberration; it is an expression of the universal malice and corruption, which it is man's burden and glory to be conscious of. It is not something of which the common man is innocent. The evil plotted by the potentates is the same evil as is met

in the kitchen, in the passage,  
 In the mews in the barn in the byre,<sup>41</sup> in the market place  
 In our veins our bowels our skulls.

They have to pierce deeper, beyond all agents and forms of evil, beyond death and judgment to "Emptiness, absence, separation from God."<sup>42</sup> In face of the intensity of the Dies Irae chorus,

<sup>40</sup> Collected Plays, p. 27.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., p. 42.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., p. 44.

the ecstasy of penitence and shame that breaks out with the cry: "Clear the air! clean the sky! wash the wind! take stone from stone and wash them."<sup>43</sup>, and the final chorus of praise, criticism of the presentation of the hero and of the action, seems irrelevant. Although we may not get from Murder in the Cathedral the experience we normally look for in a play, the experience we do get is undeniably dramatic. Only in the larger sense, of aesthetic experience proper to tragedy, is the play lacking in stature.

<sup>43</sup>  
Collected Plays, p. 47.

## SECTION V

The Family Reunion

Stimulated by a modest success on the commercial stage, Eliot attempted in The Family Reunion something more difficult than Murder in the Cathedral, a play that would be set in the milieu of drawing-room comedy and that would still include the Eumenides in its cast.

Eliot is absorbed again, in much the same fashion as he was in Sweeney, in projecting different levels of consciousness. One danger that he did not foresee was in the verse he chose for his characters to speak. It has a deliberate flatness, and seems to have been designed to sound hardly distinguishable from prose on the stage. In this kind of effort to approximate colloquial speech, Eliot seems to have forgotten his earlier and wiser principle that verse should always be used for a heightening, that whatever can otherwise be said just as well in prose, should be said in prose.

The Family Reunion is quite different than Murder in the Cathedral, and the critical problem it presents is more acute. It is full of dramatic clash and dramatic excitement. The drama is here at the center. The hero experiences the change and makes the discovery; the chorus is static. The central figure is not a saint or a hero, but a man, who is shown at the very moment of turning, or conversion. The play attempts to present

directly the discovery in experience of a meaning which reintegrates his whole personality, and changes the direction of his will. The experience is at the center of the play, in the scenes between Harry and Mary, and Harry and Agatha, both of which are highly dramatic and highly poetic. The story of the play is a modern story, which translates the myth of Orestes pursued by the Furies into terms of everyday life. What Greek influence there is in this play is to be looked for in the link between the plot and the Orestes myth, and seems to many to be quite superficial.

Although the symbol of the powers beyond us is the Eumenides, they are employed in a way no Greek dramatist would have used them.

They are purely symbols and have no dramatic life. They neither act nor speak, but simply appear, or do not appear. The difference from the Furies in Aeschylus is profound, and suggests that in handling his material Eliot failed to keep to his realization that the action in a play must be perfectly intelligible.

Only in the last play of Aeschylus' trilogy are the Furies transformed into the Eumenides which reflects the evolution of society from the doctrine "a life for a life" to one of judgment by a court of law. The moment is of the widest social significance. The Furies who have tracked down the murderer, Orestes, are forced by Athena to yield and to become benevolent guardians of the state. What is dramatized thereby is the immense

step that was taken by mankind in giving up primitive blood-vengeance, a life for a life, and submitting to the ordered process of courts of law. Orestes is then released as having done sufficient expiation for his terrible vengeance of his father's death upon his mother, and the curse on the house is at an end. Eliot wanted to suggest a comparable transformation in The Family Reunion.

The first of many problems that confronted Eliot in regard to this transformation was the choice of characters for his play. His characters are persons living in the present century, associated with a certain class and with defined ways of life. They are not in any way mythical. Although we are constantly reminded of the House of Atreus, the characters remain within the bounds of realistic presentation. We never forget that we are in a house in Northern England, the house of a young man of property, whose aunt, Agatha, is the Principal of a college, and whose cousin, Mary, is thinking about taking up an academic career. The chorus is also entirely unlike any Greek chorus. It is a group of four quite distinct persons, who are at moments impelled to speak together to express their common bewilderment. Its members are conspicuous for their lack of comprehension. They are not interpreters to the audience of a story which without them might seem too remote from common experience. They seem present partly to warn us against certain misunderstandings by presenting them in an obviously absurd form, and partly as

comic relief. Unlike the women of Canterbury, who embody the drama of Murder in the Cathedral, they do not change as the play proceeds. At the close, as at the beginning, their real anxiety is to "do the right thing."<sup>44</sup> The most important difference between The Family Reunion and any Greek drama is in the direct action. In The Family Reunion there is no great event. The direct action of the play can be briefly stated: it consists of the return of Harry, Lord Monchensey, to his home, after an absence of eight years, and his departure again, after about three hours, which causes the death of his mother from heart-failure. This is the event with which the play deals; it is not what happens. We may use the Greek myth to help us in understanding what happens, but in form The Family Reunion is completely original.

The inner drama, the true play, is a play devised and controlled. In this play Harry, Agatha, Mary, and Amy, though she does not wish to and does not know it, play their appointed parts. Harry's is the most important part, but Agatha has the clearest apprehension of the nature of the drama and knows from the beginning, not what is going to happen, but what kind of action they are involved in. She has to lead Harry, and give direction to Mary, so that all three may play rightly the parts

<sup>44</sup>Collected Plays, p. 121.

they have to play. Like an accomplished actress, prompting gifted amateurs, she carries the play, though not herself acting the chief role, and has her reward in the performance Harry gives. But there is a second play which has been designed by a human will. This is Amy's drama, which she has invited all the characters to come and enact. In her play, the last eight years are to be ignored; the three sons are to be gathered together for their mother's birthday party, in order that Harry may take up his destined role as master of Wishwood. Mary, it is hoped, will be able to fit in as Harry's wife, a scheme that had gone wrong once, but is now to be fulfilled. This drama of Amy's never really gets started. It collapses at the first appearance of Harry. But her will is set upon it, and she ignores his condition, as later she ignores the non-arrival of his brothers, and with the aid of Dr. Warburton attempts by improvisation to get Harry to play his part. This drama she has planned and which she tries again and again to impose on the true drama, finally has to be abandoned when Harry announces his departure. Having always lived as the slave of the future, she finds the future taken from her; she is left at last alone with the present. The chorus of aunts and uncles, snatched away from their harmless unnecessary occupations by Amy's imperious command, to act in her drama of Harry's home-coming, realize even before Harry's entry that things are not going as they



should:

Why do we feel embarrassed, impatient, fretful,  
 ill at ease,  
 Assembled like amateur actors who have not been assigned  
 their parts?  
 Like amateur actors in a drama when the curtain rises,  
 to find themselves dressed for a different  
 play, or having rehearsed the wrong parts?  
 Waiting for the rustling in the stalls, the titter in  
 the dress circle, the laughter and catcalls  
 in the gallery?<sup>45</sup>

The ironic comedy of the play arises because, though they realize that Amy's drama has gone wrong, they fail to penetrate into the true drama. They make ineffective efforts to turn what is happening into the kind of play they might understand and in which they could play their parts with satisfaction, a play of detection. At other times, when Amy's eye is on them they try to reassume their old roles of the helpful aunts and uncles inaugurating the happy new regime. Although they vary in the extent of their stupidity or malice, Gerald being, as Amy says, the stupidest, Ivy the most snobbish, Violet the most malicious, and Charles the nicest, they agree in the end in a common statement of their inadequacy: "We have lost our way in the dark."<sup>46</sup>

We learn later in the play that Mary, who is almost thirty, has been designed by Lady Monchensey for Harry's wife, and that she is unhappy and touchy about her spinsterhood. We have a strong impression of the dominating personality of Lady Manchen-sey, who has collected together against their will, for this

<sup>45</sup>Collected Plays, p. 62.

<sup>46</sup>Ibid., p. 121.

family reunion, her three younger sisters and her late husband's two brothers. She declares:

I keep Wishwood alive  
To keep the family alive, to keep them together,  
To keep me alive, and I live to keep them.<sup>47</sup>

The clash between Amy and Agatha becomes more obvious when, in spite of Amy's dismissal of Mary's exit: "Meanwhile, let us drop the subject. The less said the better,"<sup>48</sup> Agatha insists on bringing the subject up:

It is going to be rather painful for Harry  
After eight years and all that has happened  
To come back to Wishwood.<sup>49</sup>

The exposition is completed by the conversation of the family. We learn that Harry made a disastrous marriage, with a person who, his mother says, "never would have been one of the family,"<sup>50</sup> that his wife was drowned at sea just about a year ago, and that the family is certain her death was due to an accident or suicide, though Ivy's added: "Swept off the deck in the middle of a storm"<sup>51</sup> suggests accident. Lady Monchensey then proceeds with her plans that the family is to behave as though nothing has happened:

<sup>47</sup>Collected Plays, p. 59.

<sup>48</sup>Ibid.

<sup>49</sup>Ibid., p. 60.

<sup>50</sup>Ibid., p. 61.

<sup>51</sup>Ibid., p. 61.

Harry is to take command at Wishwood      52  
 And I hope we can contrive his future happiness.

The rest of the family senses that this is possibly not the best play to follow without first talking to Harry.

The forebodings of the family are immediately justified by the entrance of Harry, whose condition makes nonsense of the drama of reunion for Lady Monchensey's birthday. He is in a state of mind which he finds almost impossible to explain to anyone else. Seven years before, after a brief marriage, while traveling on an ocean liner, he either pushed his wife overboard or at least watched her slip and drown. He is not quite clear which, but he had wanted to kill her, and has felt himself pursued ever since, by the Furies. And at Wishwood he at last sees them, and with the question, "Why here? Why here?"<sup>53</sup>, he breaks off to greet his mother. Here at Wishwood he finally sees his pursuers and comes to recognize their true meaning. The two scenes in which they appear on the stage are between Harry and Mary, and between Harry and his Aunt Agatha, the one deeply perceptive and sympathetic member of his family. But these scenes, though here Eliot quickened and intensified his verse, are very obscure, owing to Harry's own obsessed state, and do not begin to convey to the audience the intention that Eliot outlined in a letter to E. Martin Browne:

<sup>52</sup> Collected Plays, p. 62.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., p. 64.

The scene with Mary is meant to bring out, as I am aware it fails to, the conflict inside him between...repulsion for Mary as a woman, and the attraction which the normal part of him that is left, feels toward her personally for the first time. This is the first time since his marriage ("there was no ecstasy") that he has been attracted towards any woman. The attraction glimmers for a moment in his mind, half-consciously as a possible "way of escape," and the Furies (for the Furies are divine instruments, not simple hell-hounds) come in the nick of time to warn him away from this evasion--though at that moment he misunderstands their function. Now, this attraction towards Mary has stirred him up, but, owing to his mental state, is incapable of developing; therefore he finds a refuge in an ambiguous relation--the attraction, half of a son, and half of a lover, to Agatha, who reciprocates in somewhat the same way. And this gives the cue for the second appearance of the Furies, more patently in their role of divine messengers, to let him know clearly that the only way out is purgation and holiness. They become exactly "hounds of heaven." And Agatha understands this clearly, though Harry only understands it yet in flashes. So Harry's career needs to be completed by an Orestes or an Oedipus at Colonnos.<sup>54</sup>

In the scene with Agatha, Harry comes at least to know his situation. She tells him, to relieve his mind, that his father, long since dead, had fallen in love with her and had wanted to kill Harry's mother, but that she had kept him from doing so. Nevertheless, the thought was there, and Harry must now expiate a repetition of the same crime. Or rather,

What we have written is not a story of detection,  
Of crime and punishment, but of sin and expiation...

It is possible  
You are the consciousness of your unhappy family,

<sup>54</sup>Essays, p. 274.

Its bird sent flying through the purgatorial flame.  
 Indeed it is possible. You may learn hereafter,  
 Moving alone through flames of ice, chosen  
 To resolve the enchantment under which we suffer. 55

Eliot searched for an equivalent for the transformation of the Furies through the difference between Hell and Purgatory, in the acceptance of the purifying fire, and thus tied the Eumenides into his pattern of thought, but he failed to be explicit enough to take an audience with him. Also, the inferiority for dramatic purposes of Harry's story to that of Orestes' is manifest, since the hatred of a wife, though repeated in two generations, does not, as Eliot handles it, assume much more than private significance. After Agatha's revelation, Harry accepts the fact that his destiny is to suffer more, not to evade, no longer to flee from, but to follow the Furies. Yet Harry can speak of his future in only the most general terms:

Where does one go from a world of insanity?  
 Somewhere on the other side of despair.  
 To the worship in the desert, the thirst and deprivation,  
 A stony sanctuary and a primitive altar,  
 The heat of the sun and the icy vigil,  
 A care over the lives of humble people,  
 The lesson of ignorance, of incurable diseases.  
 Such things are possible... 56  
 I must follow the bright angels.

But when, in lieu of the traditional chariot of the deus ex machina, we have the highpowered car in which his faithful valet, after returning to pick up his Lordship's cigarette case, is to drive him away, the break between the surface of the play

<sup>55</sup>Collected Plays, p. 105.

<sup>56</sup>Ibid., p. 111.

and the depth it is meant to symbolize becomes ludicrous and irreparable. By no voluntary suspension of disbelief can we conceive how Harry, whose life seems to have been passed mainly in resorts and luxury hotels, can undergo the discipline of suffering in any meaningful sense. And when, after his departure, Agatha closes the play by reciting a rune to end the curse while she and Mary make a stylized dance around the birthday cake and blow out the candles, so that the "last words shall be spoken in the dark"<sup>57</sup> the effect seems an unintentional parody of liturgy rather than a reinvigoration from it. Eliot has not succeeded in persuading us that Harry has anything of the overmastering love of God that alone could give sanction to the mystic's terrible renunciation.

The Family Reunion is an improvement dramatically from Murder in the Cathedral. Perhaps this is true because Eliot by now seemingly became conscious of the need to control his impulse to poetize. In The Family Reunion the lines sound more colloquial and natural and less poetic and stilted. Also in this play one can see character development in the figures of Harry and Amy, choices are made resulting in dramatic action. This quality is absent in Murder in the Cathedral. Although one can argue that Murder in the Cathedral is the more literary of the two pieces, The Family Reunion is more satisfying dramatically. Many times it is necessary to be less literary in

order to become more dramatic as in the case of Garcia Lorca. As noted by his brother in the preface to Lorca's collected plays, he states that for him to become a great playwright he had to control his impulse to poetize.<sup>58</sup> One can see where this proves true in a comparison of The House of Bernarda Alba and Blood Wedding. It is also true when comparing The Family Reunion and Murder in the Cathedral.

<sup>58</sup>Federico Garcia Lorca, Three Tragedies of Lorca, trans., James Graham-Lujan and Richard L. O'Connell (New York, 1955), p. 18-19.

## SECTION VI

The Cocktail Party

The Cocktail Party, produced for the Edinburgh Festival of 1949 and even more successfully in New York and London in 1950, is a versified drawing-room comedy.<sup>59</sup> In many of its details it burlesques Eliot's poetic symbols as it simultaneously offers a theme of serious spiritual quest. The plot structure, as in The Family Reunion, is indebted to the traditions of ritual drama.

The plot of The Cocktail Party, concerning domestic relations, is interesting aside from its profound meanings. Edward Chamberlayne, a barrister, is estranged from his wife, Lavinia. She is in love with a young film writer, Peter Quilpe. Peter is in love with Celia Coplestone, who writes poetry. Celia is Edward's mistress and is in love with him. Edward loves nobody, and nobody loves Lavinia. At the opening of the play the principal characters, except Lavinia, are attending a cocktail party in the Chamberlaynes' London flat. As is discovered a little later, Lavinia without warning has left Edward that very afternoon. He, therefore, fortified with the tale that she is visiting a sick aunt, is acting as solitary host to Peter, Celia, and three other people of whom he knows only two-- Julia Shuttlethwaite, an impertinent gossip, and Alexander Mac-Colgie Gibbs, an eccentric amateur chef and traveler in some

<sup>59</sup>Poetry and Plays, p. 214.



way connected with the Foreign Office. The stranger, known until Act II only as the Unidentified Guest, is Sir Henry Harcourt-Reilly, a consulting psychiatrist. Act I is devoted to exposition, to a final severance of relations between Edward and Celia, and to a restoration of Lavinia to Edward. In scene I, when the other guests have temporarily left after the party, Edward submits to questioning by Sir Henry, from whom he obtains a mysterious assurance that Lavinia is coming back. Afterwards Edward listens to Peter confess his disappointed love for Celia. In the next scene Celia breaks her emotional ties with Edward, and in scene 3, occurring on the following afternoon, Edward receives another brief visit from Sir Henry, who again makes his exit without revealing his name. Lavinia returns, and, after the departure of Celia, Julia, Alex, and Peter, who have shown up one by one in response to messages ostensibly originating from her, she and Edward renew their longstanding incompatibility.

Act II occurs several weeks later in Sir Henry's consulting room. We discover that Lavinia's departure and return have been part of a conspiracy arranged among Sir Henry, Julia, and Alex to reconcile the Chamberlaynes. Confronting Edward and Lavinia unexpectedly with each other, Sir Henry, who has been counseling Lavinia and whom Alex has tricked Edward into seeing, persuades them to have another try. In the latter part of the same long scene, after Edward and Lavinia are gone, Sir Henry, in an

interview with Celia encourages her to put into order her own life by means of a sanatorium. Celia's choice, though she does not perceive it, constitutes a life of potential sainthood. Sir Henry's task seems to have been that rather of a father confessor than of an ordinary psychiatrist. At the end of Act II he, Julia, and Alex go through a little ritual of drinking one toast "for the building of the hearth" and another "for those who go upon a journey."<sup>60</sup> This is faintly reminiscent of the ritualistic dance by Mary and Agatha at the end of The Family Reunion.

In Act III, two years later, another cocktail party is about to begin at the Chamberlaynes', who are living amicably together. The same people except Celia, drop in unexpectedly: first Julia and Alex, then Peter back from film-making in California, and lastly Sir Henry, all uninvited. Alex brings word that Celia, having enrolled in an austere nursing order and having gone to a remote country called Kinkanja, was stationed there with two other sisters at a Christianized village. During an insurrection by the heathen, who resented the Christian natives' impiety of eating saffron monkeys, it was Celia's fate to be "crucified / Very near an ant-hill."<sup>61</sup> After the shock of this news has somewhat abated, Sir Henry reveals that he foresaw

<sup>60</sup> Collected Plays, p. 194.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., p. 206.

she would die a violent death.

That was her destiny. The only question  
Then was, what sort of death? I could not know;  
.....  
She did not know. So all that I could do  
Was to direct her in the way of preparation.<sup>62</sup>

The remainder of Act III disperses the visitors and leaves Edward and Lavinia alone once more, waiting for their cocktail party to begin.

The Cocktail Party is a clever, tart comedy, readily intelligible in the theatre and for that reason a better play than The Family Reunion. Scene I resorts to slick, superficial dialogue to beguile the attention of the audience. Nothing in the first few minutes of action prepares for a weighty message, so that by the time it comes, in the final act, it is less startling than one might imagine. In Act II the tone becomes more generally serious, and problems are solved. The delayed discovery of Sir Henry's occupation cannot emerge earlier, for a mystery is needed to keep the audience alert throughout the initial plot development. For this reason Eliot was well advised to put the discovery and the double climax close together. He was perhaps not quite so correct in relying on further curiosity about the Chamberlaynes and Celia to sustain high interest into Act III. On the other hand, it would be intolerable to the audience not to know whether Sir Henry's prescriptions worked; the curiosity, though diminished, is still alive. After Act II the plot is no longer Sir Henry's--who by disclosing his

<sup>62</sup>Collected Plays, p. 209.

name has lost his power over the spectators--but Eliot's own. What happens subsequently is the act of superior destiny. Eliot makes a pretense of giving the dramatic control back to the Chamberlaynes and, in a manner of speaking, to Celia, for her death is a result of her free choice. Sir Henry is no longer considered. To appease the audience after this, the author has to vindicate Sir Henry further by re-establishing the mystery; but the lines in which Sir Henry talks of having beheld the apparition of a future dead Celia are as likely to dismay as to satisfy.

The authority of Sir Henry, from the point of view of realism, is not that of a magistrate. Neither Celia nor the Chamberlaynes are forced to obey him, nor does he dictate their future modes of life. But in purely dramatic terms nothing can happen to them until he acts. He has greater wisdom and, as has been seen, a faculty of second sight which bears a resemblance to divine foreknowledge. Since Eliot's plot depends on what Sir Henry does, and since the other actors respond only to this, the relationship parallels that between God and man. This fact might not be worth comment but for the further configuration of ritual atonement, or initiation, forming the underpattern of the drama.

The only very conspicuous clues to its nature, apart from the analogy between Celia's death and Christ's, are the attributes and behaviour, first, of Sir Henry and, second, of his adjutants, Julia and Alex. These three compose a sort of cabal

dedicated to the reordering of the other characters' mixed-up lives. Sir Henry is obviously the chief guardian, having in charge, so to speak, both the Chamberlaynes and Celia. One is certainly entitled to speculate on the ritual implications of Sir Henry's curative treatment of Edward. He re-creates for Edward a satisfactory relationship with his wife: that is, he effects a "ritual" marriage. In the last act of the play the common ritual term of seven years has elapsed since Edward's original union with Lavinia.

According to Eliot's testimony in "Poetry and Drama" the source of his story was the Alcestis of Euripides.<sup>63</sup> Sir Henry, in bringing back Lavinia like Alcestis from the grave, is cast in the part of that great boaster, drunkard, and ruffian, Herakles. Although he says,

....it is a serious matter  
To bring someone back from the dead,<sup>64</sup>

he behaves the same as Herakles ignorantly misbehaves in the house of grief, calling for drink. The ritual origins of the myth of the savior, Herakles, are essentially solemn; but Herakles himself, not only in Euripides' play, is frequently boisterous and comic, rather than solemn. Now the excuse for Sir Henry's levity is certainly to be looked for partly in the comic intentions of Eliot's plot: Lavinia, Sir Henry very well

<sup>63</sup>T.S. Eliot, On Poetry and Poets (New York, 1961), p. 91-- hereafter cited as Poetry and Poets.

<sup>64</sup>Collected Plays, p. 156.

knows, it not dead at all. His own talk of death is purely figurative, though by no means frivolous; the resurrection of Lavinia is to be no less miraculous because it is not a realistic resurrection for the dead. It is to bring emotional reconciliation with Edward, a new life for both of them. It is true, he did not wholly dismiss Euripides' miracle, for the action corresponding to the supposed resurrection of Alcestis, namely Lavinia's emotional cure, is perfectly genuine. Furthermore, he develops the gin-guzzling Sir Henry beyond the character of Herakles into a dispenser of advice. He dignifies Sir Henry, bestowing on him some of the attributes, though not all, that Euripides spurns.

In introducing the "Guardians"<sup>65</sup>, Eliot was not being capricious. The important thing about the Guardians here is that they initiate Celia and the Chamberlaynes into vocations according to their potentialities. Celia is capable of full enlightenment; Edward and Lavinia, less gifted, remain partly in the dark. The figuratively one-eyed Sir Henry and the sibyllic Julia are interpreters of light to darkness. The significance is not limited to psychological adjustment. Although Eliot excludes most religious terminology, the virtues that the Chamberlaynes practice, and the martyr's death that Celia accepts, constitutes a spiritual discipline.

The Cocktail Party suggests an opposition between common-

<sup>65</sup>Collected Plays, p. 155.

place and heroically vital people. Of the four suffering characters two are men and two are women. They are paired so that each has an opposite on his own sex, an opposite in temperament and in what is crucial to this play--the ability to love or be loved. By nature Edward and Lavinia are alike in being dispassionately conservative; their inertia triumphs over will and imagination. Celia and Peter are imaginative and rebellious. Celia, however, is converted to patience, and by sublimation of the will she is led to attain a nobler calling than is possible even to imagination. Only Peter, upon whom the Guardians exert no present influence, still relies, at the end of the play, on his own forces of creative will. Will is acquisitive, but not necessarily selfish. Peter and Celia resemble each other not simply in the detail of being creative artists, though this is important, but in their common ability to affirm through love for another. This is all that Peter has, and in losing Celia he can only retreat to his film writing. Celia more readily, in losing Edward, upon whom she has fixed her desire, abnegates her will to the service of holiness. Celia in submitting to the "tougher self" accepts suffering through action.

Edward and Lavinia, the opposites of Peter and Celia, both yield to tougher selves by following the advice of Sir Henry, but they have too much of the spirit of mediocrity to become saints. The vocation of Celia is not for them. Eliot's

characterization of Lavinia does not seem quite as good as that of Edward; she is rather wooden. Edward, however, exhibits his conflict plainly. Without being in love with Celia, Edward indulges in a kind of dream of her and, out of selfishness, simply wills their relationship. Lavinia's problem corresponds to her husband's, but rather as its converse. Loving is his masculine inability, and being loved is her feminine one. Her fancy of being at some time loved by Peter is like Edward's fancy of loving Celia. Realizing that their defects are complementary, Sir Henry calls Lavinia and Edward "exceptionally well-suited to each other."<sup>66</sup> Peter and Celia are suited to each other too, but a romantic solution for them is precluded by Celia's having passed beyond such an emotional stage at the time of her disagreement with Edward. Furthermore, even though both Peter and Celia are capable of loving and of being loved, neither, until too late, sees that what he loves is only an ideal. Celia discovers the truth for herself and confesses:

The man I saw before, he was only a projection--  
 I see that now--of something that I wanted--  
 No, not wanted--something I aspired to--      67  
 Something that I desperately wanted to exist.

To Peter it is revealed by Lavinia after Celia's death:

What you've been living on is an image of Celia

<sup>66</sup>Collected Plays, p. 181.

<sup>67</sup>Ibid., p. 154.



Which you made for yourself, to meet your own needs.<sup>68</sup>

In The Cocktail Party, then, Eliot depicts no human relationship which is satisfactory in itself. Those who think they love cannot marry; those who are married simply endure. Sir Henry's program for Edward and Lavinia might be disastrous, but miraculously it is not, though even he, in a momentary lapse into humanity, admits, "I have taken a great risk."<sup>69</sup>

Celia's crucifixion in Kinkanja is a grim conclusion, unalleviated by comic surprise or cynicism or any such brutal levities. In the kind of comedy Eliot devises, the characters either fulfill their greatest potentialities or else are set firmly on the way toward doing so. Peter Quilpe alone waits for someone to show him his direction. It may be that Sir Henry, despite his foresight, is mistaken in thinking that Peter will go far, unless he means only that Peter will become a successful film dramatist. This mystery the play does not expose.

In this play, The Cocktail Party, Eliot has succeeded in controlling his tendency towards extreme versification and has made an even further attempt to approach natural prose speech

<sup>68</sup>Collected Plays, p. 207.

<sup>69</sup>Ibid., p. 192.

patterns. In place of versification and poetizing he has relied on ritual to carry the poetic rhythm of the play. Due to this ritualistic quality the play still has an underlying rhythm pattern which maintains its poetic quality in a special sense. Francis Fergusson in The Idea of a Theatre stated that if the elements need to celebrate the ritual in a play are present the poetic rhythm of the play will come through.<sup>70</sup> In this sense, Eliot has advanced a great deal from his dramatic attempt with The Rock.

<sup>70</sup> Francis Fergusson, The Idea of a Theatre (Princeton, New Jersey, 1949), p. 30.

## SECTION VII

## "Poetry and Drama"

As was to be expected, a number of Eliot's ideas concerning poetic drama changed from the time he wrote his "Dialogue" (1928) to the time he delivered his lecture "Poetry and Drama," (1951) which was the first Theodore Spencer Memorial Lecture delivered at Harvard University.<sup>71</sup> One could almost foresee this because of the changes in his plays. Two of these changes in particular were apparently the result of a better understanding by Mr. Eliot of the qualities necessary to make a play an artistic, dramatic achievement. The two specific changes to be dealt with in this chapter concern Eliot's attitude towards poetic dialogue and his use of ghosts. In a comparison of the two works one can see where these changes have taken place.

Near the beginning of his lecture Eliot states:

I start with the assumption that if poetry is merely a decoration, an added embellishment, if it merely gives people of literary tastes the pleasure of listening to poetry at the same time that they are witnessing a play, then it is superfluous. It must justify itself dramatically, and not merely be fine poetry shaped into a dramatic form. No play should be written in verse for which prose is dramatically adequate. The audience should be too intent upon the play to be wholly conscious of the medium.<sup>72</sup>

This statement seems to be in conflict with his earlier state-

<sup>71</sup>Poetry and Poets, p. 75.

<sup>72</sup>Ibid., pp. 75-76.

ment in the "Dialogue" that states:

People have tended to think of verse as a restriction upon drama. They think that the emotional range, and the realistic truth, of drama is limited and circumscribed by verse, and that only prose can give the full gamut of modern feeling, can correspond to actuality. I maintain the contrary. I say that prose drama is merely a slight by-product of verse drama. The human soul, in intense emotion, strives to express itself in verse. The tendency of prose drama is to emphasize the ephemeral and superficial; if we want to get at the permanent and universal we tend to express ourselves in verse.<sup>73</sup>

Whereas Eliot seemed to think in 1951 that at times verse was used merely as an added embellishment to a play, the opposite was true in 1928 when he seemed to think of prose as the added embellishment, and a poor one at that. This was one aspect of his writing that Eliot seemingly attempted to change in his later plays--not that he wrote in prose, or even considered it--but he did make an attempt to versify less in order to control his writing so that it sounded more like prose.

Another conflict is also evident in his attitude towards ghosts. In his essay he states "nothing is more dramatic than a ghost."<sup>74</sup> But in using the word "ghost" Eliot does not mean that one should take him literally and conjure up images of spirits or spooks. Rather he uses the word ghost more frequently to mean past events that have caught up with the present.

<sup>73</sup> Selected Essays, p. 34.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., p. 39.

In some of his early plays such as The Family Reunion, however, the ghosts do appear on stage as a constant visual reminder of the futility of trying to escape the past. It is to this visual representation that Eliot, in his lecture, is mainly opposed when he uses The Family Reunion as an example.

...the deepest flaw of all, was in a failure of adjustment between the Greek story and the modern situation. One evidence of this is the appearance of those ill-fated figures, the Furies. They must, in the future, be omitted from the cast...We tried every possible manner of presenting them...and they are never right.<sup>75</sup>

It is interesting to think how often Eliot has written about ghosts. The Specters in The Rock are conventional, but those in Murder in the Cathedral are ambiguous and strange. The Eumenides of The Family Reunion pass from mythology into supernaturalism. Lavinia in The Cocktail Party rises from the past as from the tomb, to be reunited with her husband. In his last play, The Elder Statesman, there are two ghosts in Lord Claverton's past which return to haunt him. Apparently the only play of Eliot's which does not make use of a ghost is The Confidential Clerk. It is not surprising that Eliot made use of ghosts in his earlier plays in view of the statement in his essay, but why he returned to their use in his last play is questionable, and will be discussed in a later chapter. Nor is it surprising that his ghosts should have nothing to do with spiritualism and the seance room. They are conjured up to clarify the known, not to expose the unknown. They are familiar creatures

<sup>75</sup>Poetry and Poets, p. 90.

viewed under an unfamiliar aspect, or else inhabitants of a real world veiled by time. Their secret lies in the meaning attached by Eliot to tradition: that an understanding of one's buried life, with which are buried the lives of others, can help one understand the self that is rooted there.<sup>76</sup>

<sup>76</sup>Poetry and Plays, p. 244.

## SECTION VIII

The Confidential Clerk

The characters in The Confidential Clerk, in which Eliot sacrificed poetry to an even greater extent than in The Cocktail Party, speak lines which are verse in typography but prose in cadence. More rarely than in the preceding play is there a whisper of Eliot's poetic voice. Nor are there any symbolic objects like Julia's broken spectacles or Alex's eggs. There is but one verbal symbol of note--the garden. Also, its personages are more credible. Eliot dispenses with the central figure of the wise counselor around whom the other characters revolve. No one here heals ills by recipe; the characters insist on their own diagnoses. In two people, Eggerson and Mrs. Guzzard, the physician type is residual, but their function is not to direct but to ratify. As initiator and prophet they exhibit few pretensions. Mrs. Guzzard is a kind of fairy godmother who, after evaluating wishes, grants them if she can. As to levels of spiritual sensibility, Eliot's useful but factitious device persists, though with less than its former prominence. Mrs. Guzzard and Eggerson are both earnest Christians. Of the characters who act out the conflict of choices, the protagonist, Colby Simpkins, Sir Claude Mulhammer's new confidential clerk in succession to Eggerson, is of an alert artist type, beset with a spiritual hunger similar to that of Celia

Coplestone. Neither he, however, nor the lesser characters, Lucasta Angel, B. Kaghan, and the baffled Lady Elizabeth Mulhammer, are other than ordinary men and women. Nobody in The Confidential Clerk is a genius; nobody is a saint. Even Colby has only second-rate talent; even the Christian Mrs. Guzzard and Eggerson himself are capable of compounding a lie. While certain of the characters co-operate to dramatize Eliot's regular themes--communication among the isolated, vocation, attainment of an ideal within the limits of actuality, freedom of choice subject to exigencies created by past time--they do so independently with a variety of attitudes. For this reason the play, apart from one tedious scene, succeeds in dramatizing its author's struggle for harmony.

Having already written a pageant, a tragicomedy, a melodrama, and a comedy, Eliot made his Confidential Clerk a farce. It was originally produced for the sedate Edinburgh Festival in 1953.<sup>77</sup> There it was recognized to also have serious motives. Although it uses the immemorial plot device of a mystery about a bastard's parentage, it makes this carry some weighty truths about the emotional life.

The setting is the London household of a middle-aged financier, Sir Claude Mulhammer, and his wife, Lady Elizabeth. The time is the end of winter. Act I opens with a conference

<sup>77</sup> Collected Plays, p. 292.



between Sir Claude and Eggerson, his confidential clerk, just now retiring after more than thirty years' service. Before Eggerson settles down exclusively to gardening and church work at his home in rural Joshua Park, he has one more task to perform: having already familiarized his successor, young Colby Simpkins, with the routine of being Sir Claude's secretary, he has been summoned to break to Lady Elizabeth the news of his retirement, on grounds of health, and to prepare her for her first meeting with Colby. Since she is scheduled to arrive this same day from the Continent, he is to meet her plane and during the drive into London tell her enough about Colby--that he has been engaged for the position quite suddenly, and that he is very musical--to reconcile her to the change. What he is not to tell her, what Sir Claude is saving until her reaction to Colby becomes clear, is that the young man is Sir Claude's illegitimate son. The whole problem is the more delicate because, as she knows, Sir Claude has an illegitimate daughter, Lucasta Angel; whereas she herself, her marriage being barren, is without any children, her one son, also illegitimate, having disappeared without a trace. The reason Sir Claude thinks she might be disturbed by the identity of Colby is not that the son's position is irregular but that he gives Sir Claude an unfair advantage. Act I does not disclose Sir Claude's relation to Lucasta, who is a charming, whimsical, and deceptively shallow girl. Her

fiance, B. Kaghan, is a bumptious humorist with a golden future in city financial circles. B. Kaghan is to be revealed as Lady Elizabeth's long-lost child--but not till almost the end of the play.

Sir Claude's talk with Eggerson is interrupted by the entrance of Colby, presently followed by B. Kaghan and Lucasta. The dialogue is excellent, especially in the chaffing exchanges between Kaghan and the flippant Lucasta as against the punctilious dignity of Eggerson. It grows even livelier when, after the young couple depart, the inane Lady Elizabeth herself shows up ahead of schedule. She babbles about theosophy and such-like cults, to which she is addicted, and about which Sir Claude is a little confused. She toys with vegetarianism and numerology, flirts with doctrines of reincarnation, and judges strangers by their auras. Sir Claude is not excessively fond of Lady Elizabeth and she has had a wasted life, thwarted in her desire for children and, it appears later, in her pathetic wish to inspire an artist or a poet.

The exit of Lady Elizabeth and then of Eggerson leaves the scene to Colby Simpkins and Sir Claude. Lady Elizabeth after looking Colby over, seems to find the arrangement satisfactory; she even persuades herself that it was she who interviewed and recommended him. The dialogue of father and son touches a more profound note. Initiated by Sir Claude's observation that his wife "...has always lived in a world of

make-believe,"<sup>78</sup> the talk takes form as Colby reveals what is to become the fundamental disagreement between himself and the older man.

It doesn't seem quite honest.  
If we all have to live in a world of make-believe,  
Is that good for us?<sup>79</sup>

In his youth, Sir Claude admits to Colby, he had no wish to imitate his own father by becoming a financier; rather, he had dreams of becoming an artist, a potter. And Colby himself at this very moment is thinking of his own disappointed ideal of becoming a musician, a great organist--an ideal he is relinquishing to become Sir Claude's confidential clerk. Their values perceived by each of these men in his own ideal are finely delineated by Sir Claude when he says of the potter's creations:

To be among such things,  
If it is an escape, is escape into living.  
Escape from a sordid world to a pure one.<sup>80</sup>

This is what he means when he speaks of going "through the private door / Into the real world, as I do, sometimes."<sup>81</sup> But Sir Claude is not able to live the virtually consecrated life of devotion to art; he has relegated "the real world" to a private room holding his collection of china and porcelain, things

<sup>78</sup>Collected Plays, p. 234.

<sup>79</sup>Ibid., p. 234.

<sup>80</sup>Ibid., p. 236.

<sup>81</sup>Ibid., p. 237.

to which he may turn occasionally for

...that sense of identification  
With the maker...an agonizing ecstasy  
Which makes life bearable.<sup>82</sup>

For, stimulated by his doubt whether a man could be said "to have a vocation / To be a second-rate potter,"<sup>83</sup> he chose not art but business. And through this doubt he came to see that his own father, to whom business was a passion was right. By following his dead father's vocation he atoned to him for his former loathing of it. Lacking "the strength to impose...terms / Upon life,"<sup>84</sup> he obeyed realistically, or fatalistically, the need for accepting the terms it offered him. In the process he became, as Colby is becoming, a man adapted to facts. The substitute life, Sir Claude tells him, "...begins as a kind of make-believe, / And the make-believing makes it real."<sup>85</sup>

But, it becomes obvious, that the dream world of art into which Sir Claude sometimes withdraws is also make-believe, for although it is the world of his heart it is not the world of his hand. He lives in two worlds, each a kind of make-believe. Thus, like Lady Elizabeth, he is the victim of delusions. Colby's misgivings about imitating Sir Claude spring from his reluctance to be content with less than the wholly real and also from his

<sup>82</sup>Collected Plays, p. 238.

<sup>83</sup>Ibid., p. 237.

<sup>84</sup>Ibid., p. 234.

<sup>85</sup>Ibid., p. 236.

feeling that he does not owe to Sir Claude the same kind of emulation with which Sir Claude repaid his own father. Rebellious thus against make-believe, he is about to reject Sir Claude's fatalism along with his optimism that through acceptance of life's terms the make-believe can be real.

Act II brings together Colby and Lucasta, clarifies the young man's own view of his vocational problem and then complicates the plot by having Lady Elizabeth invent a hypothesis about his parentage. Lucasta, though more intuitive than she seems, is diffident and insecure. She resents being brought up poor, fatherless, under a cloud. She discloses to Colby before she leaves that she is Sir Claude's daughter; hence, though she does not know it, she must be Colby's half-sister. For Colby's perplexity Lucasta thinks she has a cure--for him to retire often into the "secret garden," as she calls it, of his "inner world."<sup>86</sup>

...it's only the outer world that you've lost:  
You've still got your inner world--a world that's  
more real.<sup>87</sup>

In effect her advice is the same as Sir Claude's. On the other hand, Colby himself is not prepared to rest with a part-time consolation. He wants a "garden" as real as the literal one at Joshua Park. To a man of Colby's sensibility, the only

<sup>86</sup>Collected Plays, p. 245.

<sup>87</sup>Ibid., p. 244.



themselves. Colby asserts that "There's no end to understanding a person"<sup>90</sup>; one has to keep up with the changes in him. Obviously, without understanding, one cannot even communicate from one's private world--unless perhaps with God.

After Lucasta's pettish disruption of their confidential mood, she leaves with B. Kaghan handily in attendance. Lady Elizabeth Mulhammer, appearing with some officious motherly advice, notices a framed photograph of Colby's aunt, Mrs. Guzzard, who brought him up in Teddington. Recalling that Guzzard was the name of the woman to whose care her dead lover Tony arranged to have her child intrusted, and that Mrs. Guzzard also lived in Teddington, she concludes that Colby, being of about the right age, must be actually her own lost son. Sir Claude, however, when she tells him of her surmise, confesses the reason why her guess is wrong: Colby is the son of Mrs. Guzzard's sister and himself. Meanwhile poor Colby stands by, feeling at first, as he says, numb and indifferent, inclined to reject both of his would-be parents; next regretful that he never has had a father and mother, but unwilling to accept these on ambiguous terms; and finally eager to find out the truth, whatever it may be. To this end Sir Claude promises to summon Mrs. Guzzard as well as Eggerson, who "knows all about it."<sup>91</sup> With

<sup>90</sup>Collected Plays, p. 247.

<sup>91</sup>Ibid., p. 264.

compassionate words from Lady Elizabeth to Sir Claude, the scene ends.

Act III is rapid throughout if not vivacious. Sir Claude and Lady Elizabeth begin it with an exploration of their feelings and decide that they have each abandoned a valid ideal in "obedience to the facts,"<sup>92</sup> though the facts amount to a misunderstanding. But then Eggerson arrives; and then Lucasta, to announce that she shall marry B. Kaghan and to learn that Colby is her half-brother; and then Colby, like a third wheel, to be analyzed by Lucasta as either a "terribly cold"<sup>93</sup> person or else one warmed by some extraordinary fire:

You're either an egoist  
Or something so different from the rest of us  
That we can't judge you.<sup>94</sup>

It may be, indeed, that Colby is of saintlike composition. Lucasta rejoices that she has found a brother and goes on her way. But in a moment she is back to announce the arrival of Mrs. Guzzard.

The first portion of Mrs. Guzzard's narrative is quite simple. Some years before, she, Sarah Guzzard, and her husband Herbert took charge of an infant left with them by an

<sup>92</sup>Collected Plays, p. 267.

<sup>93</sup>Ibid., p. 274.

<sup>94</sup>Ibid.



agent of one of the parents. When, later, money for the child's support was withheld, they were forced by poverty to put him out for adoption by the Kaghans, their neighbors. They had already conditionally baptized him Barnabas. In view of Lady Elizabeth's recollections about what her lover Tony did with the child, Mrs. Guzzard now believes that B. Kaghan, and certainly not Colby, must be Lady Elizabeth's son. (Lady Elizabeth, despite her uncertainty about the length of time elapsed-- B. Kaghan being twenty-eight instead of twenty-five--accepts the account as probable; so does Kaghan himself.) The latter portion of Mrs. Guzzard's story is more complex. For as soon as Kaghan and Lady Elizabeth acknowledge each other, Mrs. Guzzard declares that she "should like to gratify everyone's wishes"<sup>95</sup> and proceeds to ask Colby whether he had rather be the son of Sir Claude or "of some other man / Obscure and silent? A dead man..."<sup>96</sup> Colby, having just indicated his preference for a father never known to him but by report,

An ordinary man  
Whose life I could in some way perpetuate  
By being the person he would have liked to be, <sup>97</sup>

<sup>95</sup> Collected Plays, p. 284.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid., p. 286.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid., p. 285.

answers (somewhat ungratefully, one fears), "A dead obscure man."<sup>98</sup> And Mrs. Guzzard immediately reveals that Colby is not Sir Claude's son but the legitimate son of herself and Herbert Guzzard, "a disappointed musician."<sup>99</sup> She and her sister (that is, Sir Claude's mistress of many years before) were undergoing confinement at the same time; her own child was born, but owing to her sister's death the other child was not. When at length Sir Claude returned from abroad and came to inquire about his child, he supposed it to be the infant he saw. Mrs. Guzzard let him believe so: at the moment she hesitated to eclipse his evident pleasure, and afterward she decided, her husband being now dead and her poverty more severe, to prolong the fiction so that her son might be "assured of a proper start in life."<sup>100</sup>

Thus the unexpected has come about. The parents of B. Kaghan and Colby have apparently been divulged, and the contest between Sir Claude and Lady Elizabeth for possession of Colby has been resolved with neither as the victor. This comedy of errors, however, has brought freedom to Colby. He need no longer consider himself indentured to Sir Claude's business; he can follow his own bent. Although Sir Claude would have him continue just as if their relationship had not altered,

<sup>98</sup>Collected Plays, p. 286.

<sup>99</sup>Ibid.

<sup>100</sup>Ibid., p. 287.

Colby chooses, as he has aspired, to claim a different inheritance. He has a chance to apply for the post of organist in the church at Joshua Park, where Eggerson is the Vicar's Warden, and to make spiritual capital out of sacred music. Eggerson predicts, in fact, that Colby will not stop in that capacity, that he will "be thinking of reading for orders":

Joshua Park may be only a stepping-stone  
To a precentorship! And a canory!<sup>101</sup>

In the interim he may share the Eggerson's home and occupy their spare room--vacant ever since the wartime death of their son. With this decision Colby becomes Eggerson's "son in spirit." Under the influence of Eggerson the young musician, though handicapped by admitted defects of ability, may go further yet; but whether he makes progress in his external tasks or not, he has already in his heart reached the point of destination. To him and to the others too, to Sir Claude and Lady Elizabeth, to Lucasta and B. Kaghan, Eggerson might stand as the example of entire serenity of life. With exhorting, without coercing, but mildly and faithfully serving, he is at hand to shed the light of reasonableness whenever it is wanted. Of the characters, he alone has practiced regulating his life harmoniously through understanding. As the arbiter of common sense, he makes the final sign of assent to the choices of

<sup>101</sup> Collected Plays, p. 290.

Colby and Lucasta, when, with a nod of his head in answer to Sir Claude's incredulous question, he affirms his belief in Mrs. Guzzard's story.

The play generates an atmosphere very different from that of its predecessors. One cause of the difference is that the plot is not dominated by the laws of guilt and atonement. The only person trying to atone for anything, namely Sir Claude, has done so in the wrong way; and he erred initially only through fatalism. Eliot's pattern wherein unhappiness brings conviction of a guilt to be expiated, and where in surrender to the will of God through expiatory vocation brings the happiness of salvation, is not present here. The Confidential Clerk sets the problem how to be happy in the first place. It declares for the theory that if one seeks happiness through vocation one will be doing God's will. What one's vocation is, is not hard to discover: it is whatever one ideally wants to do. It must, moreover, be an activity, and thus it is at once limited, defined, and fulfilled by one's relations with other people or with God. Only by self-knowledge can one elect it; and self-knowledge depends on communication with others and the understanding of them. Without such understanding, the ideal may seem as it did for Sir Claude, too high for attainment. But although one cannot irresponsibly accommodate the actual to the ideal, one can certainly, by comprehending the

actual, extract the ideal potentially in it. The effort does not mean, as Sir Claude has unhappily supposed, submitting to the grudging terms that life seems to dictate. Quite otherwise, it means finding out what those terms really are and making certain with precisely how much of the ideal they are consonant.

Curbing the mystical overtones of Eliot's poetry, The Confidential Clerk is somewhat difficult to fit into his familiar death-and-rebirth-scheme. It is not principally a play about death, but rather about life and its abundance. It reflects faintly the tension of affirmative and negative impulses as in mystical theology, inasmuch as it shows the young man rejecting the affection of human beings in favor of the life through which he may be closest to God. But if his rejection is negative in pattern, his turning toward music is emphatically affirmative, even though he has chosen a life of service, not of mysticism through art. On the other hand, neither art nor religion contributed much more than the raw material for the play, which is about a search for vocation rather than the merits of various callings. From Eliot's own background came the alternatives of art and business. Eliot's irony must have been deliberate when he brought forth in The Confidential Clerk a world of self-deception, petty falsehood, and hypocrisy, in which, as always happens in the never-never land of farce, good

sense and heart's desire somehow prevail. The Confidential Clerk, as has already been noted, affirms freedom of choice. Whether the play uses a true or a false story to symbolize Colby's freedom from an imaginary obligation to Sir Claude's choice for him is immaterial; and the ambiguity of the plot itself signifies the same thing. Of course the play does not justify self-deception. But its closing scene suggests, like The Family Reunion, that a free approach to the meaning of ones life can redeem and remake the past. In such terms, make-believe is reality.

As stated earlier, Eliot tended to poetize even less in The Confidential Clerk than in The Cocktail Party, but he continued to rely on Greek mythology for the idea of the play. In attempting a modernization of the story the same problem was presented as before. In this instance the plot structure was derived from the Ion of Euripides. <sup>102</sup>

One of the dramatic faults in the play is the lack of probability and necessity. Lady Elizabeth firmly believes Colby is her son (as does Sir Claude) and not for very substantial reasons: he looks vaguely familiar, he is twenty-five years old, and she remembers Mrs. Guzzard's name. Yet, prompted by Mrs. Guzzard, she believes just as easily that B. Kaghan is her son on only one of these three grounds; for he seems not

<sup>102</sup>Poetry and Plays, p. 239.

even slightly familiar, and he is the wrong age.

Another fault is the absence of dramatic action. At the end of the play Colby seems to make a decision, but even this is not particularly character-revealing. He decides to become an organist at a small church instead of staying as Sir Claude's confidential clerk, but he does this only after he is relatively certain that Sir Claude is not his father. Earlier in the play he expresses a desire to be an organist so this decision is not surprising. When, on the other hand, Eggerson gives him the opportunity to make a definite choice concerning his future, he answers, "We'll cross that bridge when we come to it."<sup>103</sup> With an answer of this nature, he completely avoids choosing and gives no indication that he ever will.

<sup>103</sup> Selected Plays, p. 290.

## SECTION IX

The Elder Statesman

The Elder Statesman, first produced at the Edinburgh Festival August 25, 1958,<sup>104</sup> like Eliot's earlier plays returns to an incorporation of ghosts in the action to tell the story. It reveals a man's dead past and it confronts him with the living successors to the dead selves of a man and woman with whom his own dead self was discreditably involved. The search for self-knowledge constitutes the essential dramatic theme of The Elder Statesman. In this drama the focus is once again as in the two early plays, Murder in the Cathedral and The Family Reunion, brought to bear upon the crises of one man's soul, the interior crises of Lord Claverton.

Lord Claverton so far has lived a life of unreality, externality, and illusion. The blaze of his glorious reputation as a famous public man has blinded his inner vision. As an extrovert he has ignored the genuine problems of his spiritual life. At his best he has managed to throw a semblance of moral perfection over his outward life. This reputation for ethical perfection is soon to be destroyed.

At the outset of the play, Claverton is disclosed as a lonely man, ill and prematurely aging. His daughter, Monica, who wishes to marry Charles Hemington, a young M.P., delays

<sup>104</sup>Collected Plays, p. 355.



her plans out of solicitude for her father's happiness. His son, Michael, has little consideration for him, and quotes the words of rebuke which he received from his employer, Sir Alfred Walter:

He (Sir Alfred Walter) took the usual line.  
Just like the headmaster. And my tutor at Oxford  
'Not what we expected from the son of your father.'<sup>105</sup>

The sarcastic irony implied by Eliot in the words "son of your father" is quite clear. For the headmaster, the tutor at Oxford, and for the world at large Sir Claverton is a model of perfection. As contrasted with the father, the son is not merely a failure, but an example of moral turpitude.

By a masterly stroke of dramatic irony Eliot turns this contrast between the father and the son into one of exact resemblance. A few moments later Mrs. Carghill enters the scene and she easily identifies Michael as Richard Claverton's son without any previous introduction. She tells Michael and Claverton:

Because you're so like your father  
When he was your age. He's the picture of you, Richard  
As you were once.<sup>106</sup>

Now Richard gains his inner vision. It is now that the past is fully revealed to our elder statesman. Mrs. Carghill,

<sup>105</sup>Collected Plays, p. 330.

<sup>106</sup>Ibid., p.334.

Federico Gomez (alias Fred Culverwell) are the spectres from his past, and in his son he confronts his own past in its fullness. Sir Claverton, who at his best has succeeded only in living in the sphere of ethics, without the reality of love, human or divine, the solace of sympathy, domestic or social. He faces the despair of the ethicist which is all the more poignant because he can see through his own hypocrisy. In this situation the ethical consciousness would escape from itself if it could:

What I want to escape from  
Is myself, is the past. But what a coward I am  
To talk of escaping! And what a hypocrite!<sup>107</sup>

In Act I, Claverton receives a caller, an old classmate named Fred Culverwell who has been living in Central America under an alias as Federico Gomez. This man, following a jail sentence in England for forgery, has amassed a fortune by shady means in a less particular country, the Graustarkian Republic of San Marco. Claverton is not glad to see him, especially after Gomez blames him for the course of life that led to his exile. And he is dismayed when Gomez reminds him of a secret they share. In their Oxford days, when Claverton, as yet unfamous and untitled, was still known as Dick Ferry, they once went for a moonlight drive with two girls, and Claverton, who

<sup>107</sup>Collected Plays, p. 337.

was at the wheel of the car, ran non-stop over the body of an old man lying in the road. This is one secret. In Act II, another comes out when a second caller, a Mrs. Carghill, identifies herself to Claverton as the one-time revue singer Maisie Montjoy and reminds him of their love affair, from which his father rescued him by buying her off (inexplicably leaving the love letters in her hands). In Act III, Claverton, now conscience-stricken at having so long covered his shabby behavior, confesses everything to Monica and Charles. Accusing himself of having dominated his children in order to keep up his pretense of integrity, he wins Monica's forgiveness. He then leaves the scene and dies offstage while Monica and her fiance renew their personal vows with a love intensified by their new emotional bond with Claverton.

When Claverton is approached by Gomez and by Mrs. Carghill, he is jolted into self-judgment, much as Harry in The Family Reunion is jolted by the Eumenides into adopting, with Agatha's help, a new attitude toward his suffering. For him as for Harry, it is the past that haunts--not the present. His present visitors are not ghosts but unwitting messengers of redemption. Claverton, unlike Harry, not only understands the haunters, ghosts of memory inhabiting the past, but also acknowledges his guilt in the perspective of this meeting. When he has exorcised his own uneasy ghost, his past self, which, as he says, has always usurped his reality, then the others

cannot harass him, and he is free. Confession leads to absolution and sanctifies the communion of death. Claverton has descended into hell, has done battle with the accusing phantoms who turned the key on his shadow self, and has come forth to receive the benediction of his guardian spirit. He has not erased the penalty of a morose life and of estrangement from his son, who contracts a business alliance with Gomez; but he is content.

A tragedy almost by default, The Elder Statesman is not great poetry, nor a great play. The action in the play drags. Act I stirs interest, especially because of Gomez' exposure of the first secret. But Act II, with the milder second secret, abates the dramatic force. The utility of Michael as a character is unconvincing, and the climax is blurred. Act III, with its problems of conscience and its passages between Monica and her rather colorless young man, is weak because the tension is further reduced. This defect is not mended by the late announcement that the old man in the road was already dead when Claverton ran over him. The play does not bristle with stunt effects like The Cocktail Party; it exploits neither the wit nor the logic of the absurd. Even the character's names, though multiple, are less engaging than usual, however various their overtones.

Thematically The Elder Statesman is concerned with the

affirmation of the grace transmitted through human love. On the strength of the dedicatory verses to Valerie Eliot (T.S. Eliot's second wife), the play seems on one level a rather special kind of private testament. This fact need not cause one to overlook the crankiness of Claverton even in his re-birth through love, or the lack of active tenderness in Charles, who is ill matched with gentle Monica. Nor should it pardon the implied definition of love as an emotion hedged round with personal advantage. One cannot object to the way Claverton deals with the ghosts of his past. But it is hard not to demur at his treatment of the callers. He calls them "malicious" and "petty", and though no doubt they are the latter, they show no malice. Gomez appeals for friendship, Mrs. Carghill for affection. Both make jocular references to blackmail; but it is for his acceptance of them and not for money, which they do not require. Claverton cannot bear the idea of associating now with a former criminal or a worldly-wise extrollop. And so he justifies himself by labeling his callers as hostile--a characterization that on the whole the play does not substantiate. Encouraged by the priggish Charles, he lets distaste prevail over generosity and shuns the pathos of Gomez' lament in Act I: "O God, Dick, you don't know what it's like / To be so cut off!"<sup>108</sup> Brooding over Michael's

<sup>108</sup>Collected Plays, p. 308.

defection, for which he himself is to blame, he accepts no present responsibility for them. To him, what they were has infected them intolerably. They were, and are, the damned. The past state of the ghosts has been defined in Act II by Mrs. Carghill, who recalling her relationship with Claverton, says she is frightened by the thought that they are "still together" and "may always be together." She adds "There's a phrase I seem to remember reading somewhere: / 'Where their fires are not quenched.'"<sup>109</sup> She appears almost as unlikely as her fellow revenant, the man from San Marco. If, as Claverton says later, "the ghost of the man I was / Still clings to the ghost of the woman who was Maisie,"<sup>110</sup> the play does not support the hope that past time can be redeemed--unless perhaps for Claverton, his sins changed in meaning by penitence. His present self, despite his past cowardice, has escaped the fate of the coward Garcin, the principal character in Sartre's No Exit, condemned to loveless eternity with two women in the hell of a locked room.

The liberation of Gomez and Mrs. Carghill from ghostly torment forms no part of Eliot's dramatic design. Claverton, troubled by his role in their past, is indifferent to their

<sup>109</sup>Collected Plays, p. 325.

<sup>110</sup>Ibid., p. 344.

future, though neither has wronged him so much as he has wronged them. He makes no atoning gesture. The tardiness of his self-judgment banishes the quality of mercy which is said to bless both giver and receiver. Devoid of humanity before, he is uncharitable still. He fails to see the terrible inclusiveness of love. He can love only the elect who love him and who, to him, seem worth loving. If the others are to be redeemed, it must be through efforts in which he takes no hand. This unspoken tragic irony in his drama of too-late repentance underlies its affirmative joy. His ingrained flaw mars the ending.

The central theme is the genesis and development of the sense of guilt in the conscience of a man. Claverton's feeling of failure, his sense of loneliness, his horror of being alone, and all other symptoms of psychic instability which are introduced at the beginning of the play only seek to preclude the slowly yawning awareness of guilt which will by the end of the third Act completely engulf Lord Claverton's consciousness.

The Elder Statesman like The Family Reunion deals with guilt. But there is a difference between the treatments of guilt in the two plays. In The Family Reunion guilt is inherited, while in The Elder Statesman it is the product of self-knowledge. Lord Claverton, like his son Michael, is a "fugitive

from reality,"<sup>111</sup> the reality of

Temporary failures, irreflective aberrations,  
Reckless surrenders, unexplainable impulses,  
Moments we regret in the very next moment,<sup>112</sup>  
Episodes we try to conceal from the world.

Only contrition based on true self-knowledge can bring redemption, and this Richard Claverton knows well. There is only redemption "When contrition ensues upon knowledge of the truth."<sup>113</sup>

The Elder Statesman is a drama of the quest of self-knowledge. Its action takes place in the plane of inwardness where a character, whose condition typifies for us that of the self-complacent leaders of human society today, progresses from the birth of the consciousness.

With this last play, Eliot, once again returned to his earlier practice of relying on ghosts, and past events in their relation to present time. He attempted, as he did in The Family Reunion and The Confidential Clerk, to rely on unexpected happenings to hold the interest of the audience, but it was unconvincing dramatically. The main character, Lord Claverton, made no choice of any dramatic value. In his past he had made

<sup>111</sup>Collected Plays, p. 332.

<sup>112</sup>Ibid., p. 340.

<sup>113</sup>Ibid., p. 353.



the choice not to go back after running over the body of the man in the road, but as it turned out since the man was already dead, the choice made no difference. And at the end of the play he made no attempt to atone for what he had done to the "ghosts" from his past.

There was little if any character-revealing action in the play; few choices were made, and no decisions were made, except on the part of Michael, and his for no apparent reason except for the lack of anything better to do. Also, no climax reached in the play. Lord Claverton died off-stage with no comment made by anyone and Monica and Charles left to be married. The play, rather than coming to a conclusion or climax, just stopped and was therefore unsatisfying dramatically.

Eliot made an attempt in this play to control even further his instinct toward versification. Even though the lines in the play read almost like prose he still lacked the "histrionic imagination" necessary to create a work of dramatic significance.

## CONCLUSION

In this thesis the discussion of the plays has followed a chronology from the earliest to the latest, in an attempt to show Eliot's development as a poetic dramatist. Also considered were two other works on dramatic poetry: an essay, "A Dialogue on Dramatic Poetry" and a lecture given at Harvard, "Poetry and Drama." These two works show the change in his attitude towards poetic drama over the ensuing years.

In Eliot's earliest attempts at writing poetic plays he seemed to adhere too closely to the versification utilized in his poetry. This close adherence to versification seemed to have hindered his works dramatically. Instead of concentrating on plot construction and characterization, which would lead to dramatic action, he confined his efforts to writing verse dialogue. As stated by Aristotle, the most important element in a play is imitation of the action:

The imitation of the action is the plot...  
The most important of these (elements) is the arrangement of incidents, for tragedy is an imitation of action. Without action there could be no tragedy...<sup>114</sup>

He goes on further to state that the action in the play must be character-revealing action. In other words, a moral choice must be made.

<sup>114</sup>Poetics, pp. 12-14.

A person's character makes clear what course of action he will choose or reject. Speeches, therefore, which do not make this choice clear, or in which the speaker does not choose or reject any course of action at all, do not express character.<sup>115</sup>

It seems clear from this statement that much more is involved in writing a play than merely writing dialogue, even if it happens to be well-written.

Eliot, it appears, misunderstood dramatic theory. In his plays he was more conscious of writing good poetic dialogue than adhering to the principle of imitation of action. Perhaps had Eliot written more plays this defect would have been eliminated. By the time Eliot wrote The Family Reunion his work had greatly improved, but it was ten years before he wrote his next play, The Cocktail Party, and in the nine years after The Cocktail Party he wrote only two more plays. Had he concentrated on playwriting during the time he wrote The Family Reunion this paper might have been able to reach an entirely different conclusion, for in this period (1939) he appeared to reach his height as a playwright and the rest of his work was anti-climatic to a degree. Much of this may have been due to his belief in poets being able to write better plays than prose playwrights. He seemingly did not wish to recognize a prose dramatist as being of any merit and was usually able to qualify their success

<sup>115</sup>Poetics, pp. 14-15.

much as he did that of George Bernard Shaw in his "Dialogue" by stating that: "Shaw was a poet--until he was born, and the poet in Shaw was stillborn."<sup>116</sup> This statement is reminiscent of Tschaikevsky's insistence that Wagner was a "symphonist". Another aspect of this problem seems to be the very successful way Eliot avoided defending the inferior plays of the great English poets such as Yeats, Byron, Shelly, and Keats. Perhaps they could not have helped his argument any. The fault in these poets, and in Eliot, as far as writing plays goes, was not their inability to write good verse dialogue but their inability to conceive plays as something other than literature. As Susanne Langer states the matter:

Drama is not merely a distinct literary form; it is a special poetic mode. That is to say, it makes its own basic abstraction, which gives it a way of its own in making the semblance of history. Literature projects the image of life in the mode of virtual memory; language is its essential material. But drama presents the poetic illusion in a different light: not finished realities, or "events", but immediate, visible responses of human beings. Its basic abstraction is the act...<sup>117</sup>

Eliot seemed, all the time he was writing, to be concerned first and foremost with the literary aspects of his plays, and not with the dramatic qualities that make a good play. He was never able during his literary career to realize that drama is not a form of literature.

<sup>116</sup>Selected Essays, p. 38.

<sup>117</sup>Feeling and Form, p. 306.

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T. S. ELIOT AND THE  
PROBLEM OF MODERN POETIC DRAMA

by

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## ABSTRACT

In this thesis the author has traced T. S. Eliot's accomplishments as a poetic dramatist from his earliest attempt (1925) to his last play (1958). Also under consideration were two other works by Eliot concerning poetic drama: an essay written in 1928, and a lecture given in 1951 at Harvard University. The two works were selected to show the change in attitude by Eliot over the years. No attempt was made to evaluate his literary out-put other than the works mentioned.

It was the intention of this author to show how and why T. S. Eliot failed to become a playwright of stature. In his earliest attempts to write poetic plays he seems to adhere too closely to the versification utilized in his poetry. This close adherence to versification appears to have hindered his works dramatically. Instead of concentrating on plot construction and characterization, which would lead to dramatic action, he confined his chief efforts to writing verse dialogue.

Eliot, it appears, misunderstood dramatic theory. In his plays he was more conscious of writing good poetic dialogue than adhering to the principle of imitation of action. Perhaps had Eliot written more plays this defect would have been eliminated. Many of his misconceptions seemed to stem from his belief in poets being able to write better plays than prose playwrights. He seemingly did not wish to recognize a prose

dramatist as being of any considerable merit. Another aspect of this problem seems to be the very successful way Eliot avoided defending the inferior plays of the great English poets such as Yeats, Byron, Shelly, and Keats. The fault in these poets, and in Eliot, as far as writing plays goes, was not their inability to write good verse dialogue but their inability to conceive plays as something other than literature. Eliot seemed, all the time he was writing, to be concerned first and foremost with the literary aspects of his plays, and not with the dramatic qualities that make a good play. He was never able during his literary career to realize that drama is not a form of literature.