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T. S. ELIOT'S VERSE DRAMA

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Sister Mary Loyola

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I

A NEW VERSE FORM

I believe that poetry is the natural and complete medium for drama; that the prose play is a kind of abstraction capable of giving you only a part of what the theatre can give; and that the verse play is capable of something much more intense and exciting.¹

The aspirations of many of England's greatest poets seem to indicate that there is more than a little to be said for the theory that the poet, as he perfects his art, tends to move from the lyric to the epic and thence to the dramatic, the most genuinely creative of genres. If poetry is language raised to its highest power and drama is that form of representation which allows greatest concentration of effect, the fusion of the two should substantiate Eliot's claim that "the greatest drama is poetic drama,"² and Lessing's statement that "dramatic poetry contains the sum of poetic achievement."³ It is not surprising then that, as Eliot expresses it, "the majority,

¹T. S. Eliot, "The Need for Poetic Drama," The Listener, XVI (November 25, 1936), 994.

²Selected Essays (London: Faber and Faber, 1963), p. 50.

³Cited by Ronald Peacock, The Poet in the Theatre (New York: Hill and Wang, 1946), p. 4.

perhaps, certainly a large number, of poets hanker for the stage."⁴

A glance at the history of drama bears this out. Not only has the greatest drama of the past been poetic drama, but even in those periods when verse gave way to prose in the theatre, the poets have dreamed of writing great plays in poetry. The poetic tradition in drama, although often obscured by apparently insuperable obstacles, remains a persistent attraction.

It is not only for the poet that verse drama fills a need. Eliot maintains that "a not negligible public appears to want verse plays" and this because "there is some legitimate craving, not restricted to a few persons, which only the verse play can satisfy."⁵ Poetry in the theatre transforms immediate and particular impressions into an experience that gives us a new awareness of the permanent and the universal. "It is in fact," writes Eliot, "the privilege of dramatic poetry to be able to show us several planes of reality at once."⁶ He does not deny that there are great works of imaginative prose which share this richness; but he is convinced that, since "poetry both imposes a form to which the author must submit himself, and releases more unconscious force, than prose can...only dramatic poetry can give us the full satisfaction that we ask of the theatre."⁷

When we concede that poetic drama has a wealth of its own to offer to both the poet and the audience, we realize that a primary

⁴The Sacred Wood (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1964), p. 60.

⁵Ibid.

⁶"The Aims of Poetic Drama," Adam, 200 (1950), 16.

⁷Ibid.

reason for our century's need of it is that we have none. "The stage has lost all hold on literary art, ...many poetic plays are written which can only be read, and read, if at all, without pleasure,"⁸ wrote Eliot in 1920. Poetry as a natural mode of writing for the English stage stopped with the Protectorate. It came back after the Restoration; but, when it did, it was no longer popular drama. The heroic plays did not long survive Dryden's time. A few attempts at poetic drama, genuine enough and even partially successful, were made by eighteenth-century writers. But the verse tradition became a tradition of rant; and with the great emphasis on "common sense" and reason, a new prose evolved, eminently suited to the enunciation of logical argument and witty repartee. Comedy, for which prose dialogue had been acceptable since the time of Lyly, became the dramatic form which best expressed the spirit of the eighteenth century.

After the time of Sheridan drama declined rapidly. Theatres were very large; they required spectacle and bombast. Many authors who might have been interested in writing drama turned to other literary forms; the rift widened between men of letters and the theatre. Those poets who did attempt to write plays followed devoutly the cult of Shakespeare. Shakespearean influence governed choice of themes, induced character imitation, and fettered the poetic dramatist to a blank verse which was out of harmony with the age. Nevertheless, many of the poets dreamed of writing a successful play in blank verse. Early in the nineteenth century Charles Lamb had become the spokesman of a growing

⁸The Sacred Wood, p. 60.

conviction that the great poetic plays of Shakespeare ought not to be subjected to the hazards of a decadent theatre. This understandable desire to save the plays from second-rate production--and worse--aroused enthusiasm for poetic drama, but at a heavy cost. Poetry and drama were looked upon as sharply distinct and the verse play became closet drama.

A specific verse form which once served a dramatic purpose cannot be picked up and revived simply because it carries prestige. In Eliot's mind, nineteenth-century sterility in poetic drama stems from slavish imitation of Shakespeare which inevitably results in second best, and in a failure to search for, and hence to find, an adequate living verse form. For Eliot, the concept of "form" has wide significance. He speaks of it also as a "framework", not merely a verse pattern, not merely plot, but also and especially, "a preparedness, a habit on the part of the public, to respond to particular stimuli."⁹ Obviously, then, the failure is not to be attributed to the poets alone. Of them, Eliot writes:

Two men, Wordsworth and Browning, hammered out forms for themselves--personal forms...but no man can invent a form, create a taste for it, and perfect it too. Tennyson, who might unquestionably have been a consummate master of minor forms, took to turning out large patterns on a machine. As for Keats and Shelley, they were too young to be judged, and they were trying out one form after another.¹⁰

Though nineteenth-century poets made no significant contribution to poetic drama, one of them at least realized the need of a new verse form.

⁹The Sacred Wood, p. 64.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 62.

"With greatest reverence for all the antiquities of drama," wrote Thomas Beddoes, "I still think that we had better beget than revive-- attempt to give the literature of this age an idiosyncrasy and spirit of its own."¹¹

Eliot and his contemporaries faced a similar problem, made more complex and intensified by time. A long-standing naturalistic trend had established prose as the language of drama. The poet and the theatre had been disassociated and "theatre" itself had developed into a skilled and elaborate craft. Actors today experience difficulty speaking poetic lines, and today's audiences have been conditioned by film and television to look rather than to listen. Ronald Peacock points out that the poet today

has to re-establish dramatic poetry against a multifarious hostility, including that of other forms of art and entertainment. For the Elizabethans the verse-drama was the predominant form of their age, with many forces working to maintain it. The novel holds that position today in literature; drama has to compete with it, and in addition with the film.¹²

But before poetic drama could begin to compete with "other forms of art," the poet had to

find a language and metrics which would start images and play the nerves, that is, be poetry, without sounding like poetry--for if they sounded like poetry they would introduce the insulation of prejudice, whether ignorant hostility or fake respect, between players and audience.¹³

¹¹Thomas Lovell Beddoes (1803-1849), cited by Allardyce Nicoll, British Drama (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1963), p. 219.

¹²The Poet in the Theatre, p. 18.

¹³Herbert Howarth, "Eliot and Hofmannsthal," South Atlantic Quarterly, 59 (1960), 508.

Such obstacles were not easy to overcome, but the poets continued to try.

James Elroy Flecker's Hassan, produced in 1923, seemed to give promise of a revival of poetry in the theatre, but its surface brilliance soon burned out, and it is now described as "a great festival of words" in which "exotic romanticism runs wild."¹⁴ Stephen Phillips, Lascelles Abercrombie and Gordon Bottomley were among the poet-playwrights of the early twentieth century. Abercrombie succeeded in pointing out some of the major problems of the poetic dramatist. Phillips was able merely "to shake the dying bones of pseudo-Elizabethanism into a slightly less hollow rattle"¹⁵ than the nineteenth century had done. Bottomley, though his verse is of a high standard, introduced into the English theatre some of the legendary lore that Yeats was using in Ireland and which in some ways only served to make poetry more remote from the contemporary scene than ever.

Eliot, Auden and Isherwood, Fry, Duncan and others were all striving toward the ideal of a new poetic drama. As late as 1942, after two attempts of his own, Eliot wrote:

We have still a good way to go in the invention of a verse medium for the theatre, a medium in which we shall be able to hear the speech of contemporary human beings, in which dramatic characters can express the purest poetry without high-falutin and in which they can convey the most commonplace message without absurdity.¹⁶

¹⁴Ernest Reynolds, Modern English Drama (London: George G. Harrap, 1949), p. 70.

¹⁵Ibid., p. 62.

¹⁶On Poetry and Poets (London: Faber and Faber, 1957), p. 38.

Much has been made of Eliot's insistence on the need to free drama from every echo of Shakespeare, as if Eliot were somehow contemptuous of the greatest of English dramatists. The truth is that Eliot was too historically-minded to pretend that three hundred years of history had not happened. He himself tells us: "I believe that I have as high an estimate of the greatness of Shakespeare as poet and dramatist as anyone living; I certainly believe that there is nothing greater."¹⁷ It is not Shakespeare himself, but Shakespeare "strained through the nineteenth century"¹⁸ which convinces Eliot that

the primary failure of nineteenth-century poets when they wrote for the theatre was not in their theatrical technique, but in their dramatic language; and that this was due largely to their limitation to a strict blank verse which, after extensive use for non-dramatic poetry, had lost the flexibility which blank verse must have if it is to give the effect of conversation.¹⁹

Because of this conviction Eliot attempted to avoid iambic pentameter and looked to the irregular, yet rhythmic, versification of Everyman in the hope that its very "unusualness" might serve as the beginning of a new verse form. He tells us that "an avoidance of too much iambic, some use of alliteration, and occasional unexpected rhyme, helped to distinguish the versification [of his first verse play] from that of the nineteenth century."²⁰

It is merely coincidence that Eliot's first play has for its

¹⁷Selected Essays, p. 128.

¹⁸"London Letter," The Dial, LXX (June, 1921), 687.

¹⁹On Poetry and Poets, p. 80.

²⁰Ibid.

subject St. Thomas Becket who is likewise the central figure in Tennyson's greatest dramatic achievement. In a brief but perceptive analysis, Nevill Coghill points out why Tennyson's Becket is not successful. "Period costume," "antique or pseudo-antique locutions," and "falsified history, told for the sake of its intrigue, sentimentality, violence and spectacular effects"²¹ do, it is true, account for the failure of Becket. Nevertheless, it is equally true that all of these have their reflections in the language of the play. A living verse would have given the entire drama new life and enabled its author to use his sources more effectively. Eliot avoided the pitfalls of historicity and legend by concentrating "on death and martyrdom,"²² but he also capitalized on the fact that "remoteness of theme" and the "use of picturesque period costume rendered verse more acceptable."²³ That which most clearly differentiates Eliot's play from Tennyson's is the pervading atmosphere which emanates from a verse that is vital and convincing. Tennyson's Becket soliloquizes:

Methought I stood in Canterbury Minster,
 And spake to the Lord God, and said, 'O Lord,
 I have been a lover of wines, and delicate meats,
 And secular splendours, and a favourer
 Of players, and a courtier, and a feeder
 Of dogs and hawks, and apes and lions, and lynxes.
 Am I the man?' And the Lord answer'd me,
 'Thou art the man, and all the more the man.'²⁴

²¹"Appendices," Murder in the Cathedral, ed. Nevill Coghill (London: Faber and Faber, 1965), p. 155.

²²On Poetry and Poets, p. 81.

²³Ibid., p. 79.

²⁴The Complete Poetical Works of Tennyson, ed. W. J. Rolfe (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1898), p. 665.

Eliot's Becket cries out under pressure of subtlest temptation:

Is there no way, in my soul's sickness,
Does not lead to damnation in pride?
I well know that these temptations
Mean present vanity and future torment.
Can sinful pride be driven out
Only by more sinful? Can I neither act
nor suffer
Without perdition?²⁵

And when reassured, he ponders:

Servant of God has chance of greater sin
And sorrow, than the man who serves a king.
For those who serve the greater cause may
make the cause serve them,
Still doing right.²⁶

Eliot's success with Murder in the Cathedral by no means solved his problem of finding a verse for today's theatre. In his own words: "it solved it for this play only, and provided me with no clue to the verse I should use in another kind of play."²⁷ He set himself the task of finding "a rhythm close to contemporary speech, in which the stresses could be made to come wherever we should naturally put them, in uttering the particular phrase on the particular occasion."²⁸ It was in The Family Reunion that he worked out the idiom and the metric which he was to continue to use and to perfect in his later plays:

a line of varying length and varying number of syllables, with a caesura and three stresses. The caesura and the stresses may come at different places, almost anywhere in the line; the stresses may be

²⁵ Murder in the Cathedral, ed. N. Coghill, p. 49.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 53.

²⁷ On Poetry and Poets, p. 80.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 82.

close together or well separated by light syllables;
the only rule being that there must be one stress
on one side of the caesura and two on the other.²⁹

Though The Family Reunion was severely criticized on other points, its
verse was almost invariably commended. Many of those who experienced
the play in the theatre testified to the flexibility of its language
which ranges easily from commonplace interchange:

Violet: Really, Gerald, I must say you're very tactless,
And I think that Charles might have been more
considerate.

Gerald: I'm very sorry: but why was she so upset?
I only meant to draw her into the conversa-
tion.³⁰

to superb poetry, reminiscent of The Four Quartets:

...yet you seem
Like someone who comes from a very long distance,
Or the distant waterfall in the forest,
Inaccessible, half-heard.
And I hear your voice as in the silence
Between two storms, one hears the moderate usual
noises
In the grass and leaves, of life persisting,
Which ordinarily pass unnoticed.³¹

Eliot reminds us on more than one occasion that "the music of verse
is not a line by line matter, but a question of the whole poem," and
what he says of the poem he applies also to the verse play, insisting
that music of sound and of imagery "has to do with the total effect."³²
For this reason, short quotations are not wholly illustrative of the
musical pattern which pervades the complete play. Eliot is his own

²⁹On Poetry and Poets, p. 82.

³⁰"The Family Reunion," The Complete Poems and Plays (New York:
Harcourt, Brace and World, 1952), p. 227.

³¹Ibid., p. 251.

³²On Poetry and Poets, p. 36.

most severe critic concerning other aspects of The Family Reunion,

but of the verse he says:

I had made a good deal of progress in finding a form of versification and an idiom which would serve all my purposes, without recourse to prose, and be capable of unbroken transition between the most intense speech and the most relaxed dialogue.³³

From the beginning Eliot had been convinced that verse, in order to have the range necessary for the stage,

will not be 'poetry' all the time. It will only be 'poetry' when the dramatic situation has reached such a point of intensity that poetry becomes the natural utterance, because then it is the only language in which the emotion can be expressed at all.³⁴

He wanted dramatic poetry to have its effect upon the audience without their being aware of it. When the poetry rose to the sublime, the transition, carried forward by the underlying musical pattern, was to be a natural one that would carry the listener's experience with it into the realms of the "purest poetry" where music and meaning are one. The Cocktail Party was another step toward this ideal. Eliot tells us that he deliberately set out "to avoid poetry which could not stand the test of strict dramatic utility."³⁵ So successful was he in this attempt that some critics argue that there is little or no poetry in the play at all. Nevertheless, many others, conversant with Eliot's purpose, agree with Wimsatt who finds "the metre, or at least the

³³On Poetry and Poets, pp. 84-85.

³⁴Ibid., p. 74.

³⁵Ibid., p. 85.

rhythm, a very marked thing throughout" with echoes of the "rhythmically original passages"³⁶ of the poems. It is interesting to note that Eliot, with a subtle sense of timing, gives us an opportunity to compare the effect of his verse with that of nineteenth-century verse by introducing, near the close of the play, an occasion for Sir Henry Harcourt-Reilly to recite some splendid lines from Shelley's lyrical drama, Prometheus Unbound. No one would deny that the passage is, as Reilly calls it, "poetry"; no one would consider The Cocktail Party more dramatic if it were written throughout in Shelley's style.

Gradually Eliot was creating a new medium for the drama. His lines become still more flexible in The Confidential Clerk. After seeing the play produced, Bonamy Dobrée is convinced that Eliot "has achieved complete and triumphant success in the matter of stage speech."³⁷ However, many who are acquainted with Eliot's poetry of The Waste Land or The Four Quartets look upon the verse of the plays as an abject failure, a tired poet's descent to the commonplace. This is to misunderstand what Eliot set out to do. His verse is ordinary speech intensified in such a way that when eloquence is required the language is ready for it. Those who criticize it as not being poetry forget that it was never meant to be poetry but rather a neutral idiom that would metamorphose into poetry. The idea seems to have been totally Eliot's own--an original and intriguing idea and a unique achievement. So new

³⁶"Eliot's Comedy," Sewanee Review, LVIII (1950), 670.

³⁷"The Confidential Clerk," Sewanee Review, LXII (1954), 126.

is Eliot's verse in the plays that one author is honest enough to admit that it lies beyond the scope of present day approaches to criticism:

I am not at all sure that I understand what Eliot is trying to do, but my own experience in the theatre, hearing the play, leads me to believe that something was being done, effectively, something for the analysis of which the critical training of most of us is simply inadequate.³⁸

Those who deplore Eliot's apparent loss of poetical power in his plays, surely must acknowledge its "reappearance" in the intense moments of The Elder Statesman. The play opens with a conversation between two young lovers, moves to a simple avowal of love, and then quite naturally to a poetic marvelling at the wonder of love's quiet approach:

How did this come, Charles? It crept so softly
On silent feet, and stood behind my back
Quietly, a long time, a long long time
Before I felt its presence.

Charles replies with a simple, yet comprehensive, expression of what love does for those who love:

Your words seem to come
From very far away. Yet very near. You are
changing me
And I am changing you.³⁹

The poetic effect results not only from the imagery and cadence, but also from the dramatic timing of the words which carry their message like a sustained but unobtrusive melody throughout the play to Monica's final lines:

³⁸William Arrowsmith, "English Verse Drama (II): The Cocktail Party," Hudson Review, III (1950), 429.

³⁹The Elder Statesman (London: Faber and Faber, 1959), p. 13.

Not even death can dismay or amaze me
Fixed in the certainty of love unchanging.⁴⁰

To understand and appreciate Eliot's achievement in this, his last play, is to experience

...music heard so deeply
That it is not heard at all, but you are the music
While the music lasts.⁴¹

What is, perhaps, Eliot's latest and final comment on his own verse is recorded by Leslie Paul in a 1965 issue of the Kenyon Review. Eliot sums up both his purpose and his achievement, and speculates about the future of verse in drama:

I felt it was necessary to find a metric which was as far removed as possible from the iambic pentameter. That's what I hammered out for myself in The Family Reunion and have used since. You asked if it was a personal prosody: it may be too personal a prosody. What I mean is that I should like--my ambition would have been--to start a prosody which would be an impersonal one, so to speak, useful to other dramatists--poetic dramatists--coming after me.

I don't know whether what I've done is a personal prosody or to any degree a public one. On the other hand, there's this: it may be that the norm of English versification is iambic pentameter, but that the only way to refresh it from one time to another will be to get away from it in a curve which will gradually return--having freed itself from the stiffness of previous generations. It may mean future verse dramatists will be able to go back to the iambic pentameter as a fresh instrument. And if I helped in bringing that about I should be very happy, beyond the grave.⁴²

Whether or not the prosody of Eliot's plays will be used by future poets for the advancement of verse drama, it is impossible to say.

⁴⁰The Elder Statesman, p. 108.

⁴¹"The Four Quartets," The Complete Poems and Plays, p. 136.

⁴²"A Conversation with T. S. Eliot," Kenyon Review, XXVII (Winter, 1965), 20.

What is certain is that, with regard to verse, he did achieve what he set out to do. Its progress is apparent through the plays. Parts of The Family Reunion require a special state of mind in those who are to recite its verse. In The Cocktail Party, though the speech is stylized and musical, it is very close to ordinary conversation. The verse of The Confidential Clerk is so "ordinary" that it has been accused of not being poetical at all, yet it has also been described as having "a flexible, anonymous and lightly hypnotic power."⁴³ In The Elder Statesman, poetry comes naturally to Monica's lips and slips back again just as easily into neutral verse. It may be that Eliot's new verse will not be imitated; it cannot be ignored.

⁴³Richard Findlater, "The Camouflaged Drama," Twentieth Century, 154 (October, 1953), 315.

II

ELIOT'S CONCEPTION OF THE DRAMATIC

A verse play is not a play done into verse, but a different kind of play.... So the poet with ambitions of the theatre, must discover the laws, both of another kind of verse and of another kind of drama.¹

Escape from the onus of a devitalized blank verse was not the only problem which faced Eliot when he set out to write poetic drama. He was firmly convinced "that a form which has been perfected by one age cannot be copied exactly by writers of another age. It belongs to its own period." If we wrote in the dramatic form of Shakespeare, he tells us, "we should not be contributing anything to the life of our own time."² Elsewhere he writes:

The fact that Shakespeare transcended all other poets and dramatists of the time imposes a Shakespearean standard: Whatever is of the same kind of drama as Shakespeare's, whatever may be measured by Shakespeare, however inferior to Shakespeare's it may be, is assumed to be better than whatever is of a different kind.³

Eliot's insistence that Shakespeare can be a stumbling block for the poetic dramatist comes as a shock to those who hold Shakespeare sacred. It is well to realize that drama critics as well as poetic dramatists

¹Eliot, "Introduction," S. L. Bethell, Shakespeare and the Popular Dramatic Tradition (Westminster: King and Staples, 1944).

²"The Need for Poetic Drama," The Listener, p. 994.

³Selected Essays, p. 233.

regard Shakespeare as an obstacle. Eric Bentley writes:

Is it not the classic error of academicism to classify first-rate examples of a new genre as second-rate examples of an old genre? And of all the old genres has not Shakespearean drama been the greatest hindrance to all new departures?⁴

Modern poets and critics are by no means the first to write thus. Dryden points out that Shakespeare laid waste the legacy he left the dramatist simply by possessing it so conclusively himself. This, Dryden explains, is "a good argument to us, either not to write at all, or to attempt some other way."⁵

Eliot found that current trends in drama had little to offer as an alternative. In his view, "the theatre, in the effort to get greater and greater realism" is only attempting "to do what the cinema can do better."⁶ He writes:

In the desire to emphasise those essentials of drama which have tended to be forgotten--the permanent struggles and conflicts of human beings--we wish to remind the audience that what they are seeing is a play, and not a photograph.⁷

It is true that Eliot's conception of drama did not evolve in a vacuum. Reynolds sees the possibility of Ibsenian influence in what he calls Eliot's "drama of psychological tension," though he hastens to add that the likeness is "not in the psychology or the structure but in the underlying purpose of an intense interpretation of contemporary society to

⁴The Playwright as Thinker (New York: Meridian Books, 1960), p. 310.

⁵"An Essay of Dramatic Poesy," The Best of Dryden, ed. L. I. Bredvold (New York: The Ronald Press, 1933), p. 451.

⁶"The Need for Poetic Drama," The Listener, p. 995.

⁷Ibid.

itself"⁸--which tells us merely that both authors deal with the contemporary human situation. Eliot would admit that, for Ibsen as for Seneca, we "have included the demerits of his admirers in his own faults."⁹ Nevertheless, he has no use for the naturalism attributed to Ibsen. Drama is not intended to present "a slice of life", but rather to effect a transformation of life. Eliot envisions a drama in which "our own sordid, dreary daily world would be suddenly illuminated and transfigured."¹⁰ "What is needed of art," he wrote in a "London Letter" to the Dial, "is a simplification of current life into something rich and strange."¹¹

Eliot was by no means alone in his revolt against both the excessive veneration of the past and the more recent insistence on naturalism. Speaking of the "modern spirit" in poetry at the turn of the century, T. E. Hulme writes:

There is an analogous change in painting, where the old endeavoured to tell a story, the modern attempts to fix an impression. We still perceive the mystery of things but we perceive it in an entirely different way--no longer directly in the form of action, but as an impression...¹²

Padraic Colum looks upon Hulme and Pound as "the idea-men of that under-capitalized corporation that was English poetry before 1914."¹³ Pound's

⁸Modern English Drama, p. 100.

⁹Selected Essays, p. 67.

¹⁰On Poetry and Poets, p. 82.

¹¹The Dial, LXXI (August, 1921), 214.

¹²Further Speculations, ed. Sam Hynes (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1955), p. 72.

¹³"T. S. Eliot: A Symposium," Saturday Review, 41 (July-December, 1958), 31.



encouragement of the young Eliot is well known. Eliot never met Hulme, but when Speculations was published posthumously¹⁴ in 1924, Eliot described Hulme in the Criterion as "the forerunner of a new attitude of mind, which should be the twentieth-century mind, if the twentieth century is to have a mind of its own."¹⁵

But Eliot was no devotee of change for its own sake. He was capable of seeing what was valuable in the work of past dramatists as well as in that of his contemporaries. He himself suggests the possibility of a Shavian influence on his first play. Speaking of the use of prose for the knights' speeches in Murder in the Cathedral, he says, "I may, for aught I know, have been slightly under the influence of St. Joan."¹⁶ There would seem to be little affinity between Shaw's theory of a drama of discussion and Eliot's ideal of verse drama:

I have before my eyes a kind of mirage of the perfection of verse drama, which would be a design of human action and of words, such as to present at once the two aspects of dramatic and of musical order.¹⁷

As Matthiessen points out, it was the "discursive conversational pieces of Shaw" that convinced Eliot that "the drama needed an intensification, a tightening."¹⁸ Nevertheless, Eliot's opposition to Shaw's views and to some of his methods did not keep him from acknowledging that, since

¹⁴Hulme died in 1917.

¹⁵"Commentary," The Criterion (April 24, 1924), p. 231.

¹⁶On Poetry and Poets, p. 81.

¹⁷Ibid., p. 87.

¹⁸The Achievement of T. S. Eliot (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959), p. 158.

the time of Shakespeare, "our two greatest prose stylists in the drama are Congreve and Bernard Shaw."¹⁹ Writing of Eliot's attitude toward Shaw, Herbert Howarth tells us:

However drab he thought Shaw's beliefs, however pernicious he thought him as a disseminator of those beliefs, he owed him debts: for the pleasure of the dialogue and of the well-manipulated situations; and for proving that comedy is the way to say serious things to a British audience which fancies itself resistant to ideas.²⁰

Howarth goes on to suggest that some of the lively scenes of The Elder Statesman may owe something to Shaw's "rapid and cogent" comedy, Mrs. Warren's Profession. But he admits that the comparison must not be unduly stressed, for "if Shaw's influence touches the play, it touches it only lightly."

Theoretically at least, Eliot gives action the foremost place in his conception of drama. He tells us: "Drama is essentially an action exhibited to an audience."²¹ Scanning his writings for further elucidation of what he means by action, we find statements which appear to indicate that in his mind action is synonymous with such concepts as "point of view" and "communication":

The essential is to get upon the stage this precise statement of life which is at the same time a point of view, a world--a world which the author's mind has subjected to a complete process of simplification.²²

¹⁹On Poetry and Poets, p. 73.

²⁰Notes on Some Figures Behind T. S. Eliot (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1964), p. 335.

²¹On Poetry and Poets, p. 96.

²²The Sacred Wood, p. 68.

For character is created and made real only in an action, a communication between imaginary people.²³

His primary concern with language is apparent also in his emphasis upon listening to drama:

When we listen to a play by Shakespeare, we listen not to Shakespeare but to his characters.²⁴

And if you have to listen to a verse play, take it first at its face value, as entertainment, for each character speaking for himself with whatever degree of reality his author has been able to endow him.²⁵

It is not surprising that Eliot, in spite of his emphasis on drama as "exhibited action," has been accused of stressing language to the neglect of action.

No one would argue that action alone is sufficient to give drama universal and permanent significance. The question is, can language alone convey the dramatic? David E. Jones maintains that

In genuine poetic drama, the poetry and the drama are fused; the language is the essential action: first, in the sense that it often does what it says, and, secondly, in the sense that it is the most important part of the play, making explicit what is really happening.²⁶

Eliot is well aware that when the poet writes for the theatre, he is writing "for other voices".²⁷ He has little control over the actors

²³On Poetry and Poets, p. 95.

²⁴Ibid., p. 96.

²⁵Ibid., p. 102.

²⁶The Plays of T. S. Eliot (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1962), pp. 7-8.

²⁷On Poetry and Poets, p. 79.

who perform his play, certainly no permanent control except over what they will say, in short, over the text of his drama. Eric Bentley commends as "excellent" the argument of Brooks and Heilman:

that the legitimate drama is primarily an auditory art, and that the dialogue is its primary element. For drama, therefore, costumes, setting, and even acting itself are, finally, secondary.²⁸

We are still much influenced by a preceding century's love of gesticulation and spectacle. When we think of dramatic action, we have visions of restless movement and external conflict which are very near the melodramatic in the pejorative sense. It is the rare audience today that can listen to a well-delivered soliloquy with eager interest or even with much patience. This device for laying bare the hero's mind and soul is regarded as an interval in the play during which "nothing is happening." But surely some manifestation of inner conflict is an essential part of dramatic action--and are not struggles of soul best expressed in apt language?

John Gassner tells us that "for better or for worse, plot and external action did lose status in the modern drama, as they did, more thoroughly, in fiction," and that when Maeterlinck proposed "plotless static drama as the ideal form," and practised it in his own one-act poetic plays, he "won the admiration of the modern theatre's arch-realist, the great Stanislavsky, himself."²⁹ Eliot, aware of the intricacies of modern thinking which is so concerned with how we think, realized that

²⁸Cited by Bentley, The Playwright as Thinker, p. 309.

²⁹"Introduction," Playwrights on Playwriting, ed. Toby Cole (New York: Hill and Wang, 1960), p. xvi.

he must find means to unfold to a modern audience the "psychological action" that the writers of the novel exploited with apparent success. Man's decisive inner struggles, though momentous, are often silent and usually devoid of spectacle. To present them dramatically to a modern audience is to create a new drama.

This new approach Eliot accomplishes in several ways. His unique verse form, as we have seen, effectively expresses the problems of contemporary men and women in speech that is both modern and poetic. With this power for poetry Eliot possesses a remarkable ability to convey the reality of the world of the spirit. In the words of Ronald Peacock:

Nothing grips one so much in these plays as the compelling sense of spiritual powers that have a real operation above life and in it, transcending human experience but working through it; and the vividness of the communication is a mark of spiritual conviction and poetic imagination in the closest union.³⁰

A third element in Eliot's new drama is a different conception of character. "A 'living' character," writes Eliot,

is not necessarily 'true to life'. It is a person whom we can see and hear, whether he be true or false to human nature as we know it. What the creator of character needs is not so much knowledge of motives as keen sensibility; the dramatist need not understand people; but he must be exceptionally aware of them.³¹

Eliot's characters, with few exceptions, have a nebulous quality about them. He seems to recoil from the individual human being, one-hundred-

³⁰The Poet in the Theatre, p. 6.

³¹Selected Essays, p. 212.

twenty to one-hundred-eighty pounds of flesh and blood whose footsteps echo across the boards and whose very entrance enhances the potentiality of the dramatic moment. Eliot's characters are, in part at least, the result of his opposition to the Ibsen theatre. They may also derive from Eliot's interest in the philosophy of F. H. Bradley. A phenomenalist writing drama is in a very odd position. If the persons and actions which make up daily living are themselves but appearances simulating reality by some form of self-transcendence, then the characters and their performance in the drama are but make-believe "appearance", and as such cannot be very palpable. But perhaps the best explanation of Eliot's characters is that they combine the transparency which has always been allowed to characters in comedy with the allegorical quality of characters in the morality play.

There remains a further consideration to account for the apparent lack of action and the intangibility of character in Eliot's plays. Kenner speaks of it as "his unemphatic use of a structure of incidents in which one is not really expected to believe, thus throwing attention onto the invisible drama of volition and vocation."³² Normally drama incarnates what it talks about; but "volition and vocation" belong deep down within the recesses of the human will, and all but defy presentation in dramatic form. Becket's decision to accept martyrdom "for the right reason" is made known to us through his confrontation with the Tempters. In The Family Reunion, Harry's spiritual awakening is revealed

³²The Invisible Poet (New York: Ivan Obolensky, 1959), p. 337.

to us by his final understanding, through his Aunt Agatha's assistance, of the Furies which pursue him. Celia, in The Cocktail Party, comes to her decision with the help of a character unique in drama, Sir Henry Harcourt-Reilly, who combines the role of priest, psychiatrist and man of affairs without really being any one of these. This portrayal of the "drama of volition and vocation" by means of allegorical, mythical or imaginative figures may not appeal to twentieth-century minds. Yet we who have accepted the novelist's "stream of consciousness" technique (some of which all but defies reading), and are so self-conscious about our own thought processes, should surely be interested in a dramatist's attempt to portray these in a new way on stage.

What Eliot aims to do will be clearer if we keep in mind his conviction that dramatic poetry shows us several planes of reality at once. Any dramatic structure complex enough to reproduce the varying levels of human experience--sensuous, psychological and spiritual--requires an integration of several dramatic forms. Thus, it is possible to examine an Eliot play and find a surface resemblance to Noel Coward's drawing-room drama popular in the twenties, as well as a substratum borrowed from Greek myth and carrying the weight of Christian principles in a manner suggestive of the morality plays. That the integration of these elements is not successful in all the plays does not make it any less relevant to a discussion of Eliot's characterization and dramatic form.

Of the actors in a verse drama, Eliot writes:

They cannot be translated to a fairyland where they may talk appropriately in verse; they must on your stage be able to perform the same actions, and lead the same lives, as in the real world. But they must somehow disclose (not necessarily be aware of) a deeper reality

than that of the plane of most of our conscious living; and what they disclose must be, not the psychologist's intellectualization of this reality, but the reality itself.³³

What Eliot wrote of Marston applies equally to his own poetic drama:

He is occupied in saying something else than appears in the literal actions and characters whom he manipulates... it is different from allegory, in which the abstraction is something conceived, not something differently felt, and from symbolism 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.³⁴

It may be that, in consequence of Eliot's attempt to portray a realistic scene through which an underlying pattern brings deeper meaning to the surface, his drama appears to lack external incident and therefore theatrical effect. "I can only say," writes Eliot, "that wherever you have a form you make some sacrifice against some gain."³⁵

Eliot's plays are too often judged solely in terms of drama as we have known it. The first step in evaluating a new dramatic form is the firm conviction that the theatre has room for variety. Eliot himself writes:

The forms of drama are so various that few critics are able to hold more than one or two in mind in pronouncing judgment of 'dramatic' and 'undramatic'. What is 'dramatic'? If one were saturated in the Japanese Noh, in Bhasa and Kalidasa, in Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides, Aristophanes and Menander, in the popular mediaeval plays

³³"Introduction," S. L. Bethell, Shakespeare and the Popular Dramatic Tradition.

³⁴Selected Essays, p. 229.

³⁵Ibid., p. 115.

of Europe, in Lope de Vega and Calderon, as well as the great English and French drama, and if one were (which is impossible) equally sensitive to them all, would one not hesitate to decide that one form is more dramatic than another?³⁶

In Eliot's drama, Ronald Peacock insists (as do many others) that "we are dealing with something that imposes conditions of its own and has to be judged accordingly,"³⁷ a fact that some critics tend to ignore. Eliot's verse plays may not cover a broad range of human action, but they probe into the deep recesses of man's soul where quiet conflicts often smoulder. They may be untheatrical according to present day stage techniques, but they are not undramatic; for, when they are produced, they exert a power which the critics confess themselves unable to explain. Perhaps the explanation lies in Eliot's vision of the life of the spirit which, combined with his dramatic sense, gives each of his plays a significance vital to the world of "the asphalt road/And a thousand lost golf balls."³⁸

³⁶Selected Essays, p. 75.

³⁷The Poet in the Theatre, p. 5.

³⁸"Choruses from the Rock," The Complete Poems and Plays, p. 103.

III

ELIOT AND DRAMATIC CONVENTIONS

Let us try to conceive how the Elizabethan drama would appear to us if we had in existence what has never existed in the English language: a drama formed within a conventional scheme.¹

In a Preface intended for a book which he never finished-- and perhaps did not even begin--Eliot expresses his opinion that the weakness of Elizabethan plays is "the same weakness as that of modern drama, it is the lack of a convention."² He explains that no single convention used by the Elizabethans is fundamentally bad, but that many and varied conventions borrowed from other times and places are used indiscriminately within the same play. Abstract ideas presented in concrete form had been a convention of very early English drama. In the mid-sixteenth century, characters which are the embodiment of a single trait and even allegoric figures such as Rumour and Vice still appear in plays that also make use of soliloquy and stage aside borrowed from the Roman drama unearthed during the Renaissance. The Elizabethans in their "artistic greediness" desired "every sort of effect together" and were unwilling "to accept any limitation and abide by it." "What is fundamentally objectionable," insists Eliot, "is

¹Selected Essays, p. 111.

²Ibid.

that in the Elizabethan drama [and hence also, in ours] there has been no firm principle of what is to be postulated as a convention and what is not."³

Basically, convention means simply a coming together, an agreement between artist and audience. Certain techniques which do not conform to daily experience are given artistic reality by the dramatist, and are accepted by the audience. It is Eliot's contention that this agreement, in order to be valid, must be definitely specified and approved by the writer and by those for whom he writes. He insists that "a necessary condition of all art" lies in the

counter-thrust of strict limitations and the expression of life. Ordinary social drama acknowledges no limitations except some tricks of the stage. A form when it is merely tolerated becomes an abuse. Tolerate the stage aside and the soliloquy, and they are intolerable; make them a strict rule of the game and they are a support.⁴

Neither soliloquy, stage aside, nor any other convention became "a strict rule of the game" in English drama. Most of what we speak of as "Elizabethan convention" is surmised merely from examples of what we know to have been done on the Elizabethan stage. Its conventions are not formulated as the classical conventions were. Their very lack of form is Eliot's chief argument against them.

Faced with the need of avoiding this haphazard use of conventions, Eliot and other poetic dramatists of our century have also had to struggle against the rejection of all convention in the drama of

³Selected Essays, p. 115.

⁴"London Letter," The Dial, LXXI (August, 1921), 214-215.

stark realism. They have tried in various ways to break through the limitations of naturalism, the one "convention" which was made into "a strict rule of the game." For Eliot, realistic drama "is drama striving steadily to escape the conditions of art." "It is essential," he writes,

that a work of art should be self-consistent,
that an artist should consciously or unconsciously
draw a circle beyond which he does not trespass:
on the one hand actual life is always the material,
and on the other hand an abstraction from actual life
is a necessary condition to the creation of the work
of art.⁵

Though artistic conventions thus circumscribe the portrayal of life on the stage, they are also a means of revealing much more than a purely realistic presentation can impart. In this sense, conventions are, says David E. Jones, "liberating agencies, allowing the author to supplement the action by information and insights which will illuminate it."⁶

It was Eliot's conviction that, in order to steer a course between the chaos of erratically used conventions and the tyranny of one convention alone,

we have to make use of suggestions from more
remote drama, too remote for there to be any
danger of imitation, such as 'Everyman,' and
the late mediaeval morality and mystery plays,
and the great Greek dramatists.⁷

Murder in the Cathedral has some striking resemblances to the morality plays and through them to the very origins of drama. Its theme

⁵Selected Essays, p. 111.

⁶The Plays of T. S. Eliot, p. 2.

⁷"The Need for Poetic Drama," The Listener, pp. 994-995.

is simple and universal, the Archbishop's sermon and the Knights' speeches are direct addresses to the audience, and the shadowy figures of the four Tempters might have stepped right out of mediaeval allegory. Of Becket we can say what Eliot said of Everyman:

He is on the one hand the human soul in extremity,
and on the other any man in any dangerous position
from which we wonder how he is going to escape.⁸

Written for a specific religious festival, Eliot's first play is as apt (in all but its length) as a trope for the feast day of St. Thomas Becket as the Quem Quaeritis was for the celebration of Easter.

Indeed, perhaps it comes too close to being what Eliot says drama should never be, "a substitute for liturgical observance and ceremonial," too close to "doing something that the liturgy does better."⁹

Though Eliot's other plays do not lend themselves as readily to comparison with mediaeval drama, it is possible to see in them at least the shadow of Everyman. Since it is the privilege of dramatic poetry to be able to show us more than one level of reality at once, the characters of the later plays represent particular people at the immediate level, but they are "all of us" at a level that is deeper and more universal.

Though Eliot insists that drama can be no substitute for the liturgy, he does reserve an important place for ritual in drama. He goes so far as to say that "the failure of the contemporary stage to

⁸"Religious Drama: Mediaeval and Modern," University of Edinburgh Journal, IX (Autumn, 1937), 10.

⁹Ibid.

satisfy the craving for ritual is one of the reasons why it is not a living art."¹⁰ For Eliot, ritual as a dramatic convention bears a resemblance, not only to the common conception of it as religious observance, but also to a more unusual understanding of it as "a set of repeated movements...essentially a dance."¹¹ Speaking of what he considers some of the finest passages in Shakespeare, he says,

For a moment life is elevated to the dignity of dance or liturgy, with a gaiety which is in all great poetry, and the greater seriousness behind the gaiety.¹²

Howarth sums up Eliot's dual conception of ritual:

In his plays the ritual which is rhythm and the rituals which are ceremonies are essentially the same and are doing the same work: evoking their corresponding rhythms from our depths, and disclosing to us, as we respond with that inner movement, the sudden sight of eternal verity.¹³

There was no difficulty in finding a source for the liturgical quality of the ritual apt for drama, but what of a suitable dance measure? "The ballet," Howarth points out, "provided a clue."¹⁴ In the ballet Eliot saw "a new form as strict as any old one, perhaps, stricter,"¹⁵ and he asked himself and the public on more than one occasion, "If

¹⁰Cited by Herbert Howarth, "T. S. Eliot's 'Criterion': The Editor and his Contributors," Comparative Literature, XI (Spring, 1959), 104.

¹¹"The Beating of a Drum," The Nation and the Athenaeum, XXXIV (October 6, 1923), 11.

¹²"The Aims of Poetic Drama," Adam, p. 16.

¹³Notes on Some Figures Behind T. S. Eliot, p. 308.

¹⁴"T. S. Eliot's 'Criterion': The Editor and his Contributors," Comparative Literature, p. 104.

¹⁵"London Letter," The Dial, LXXI (August 1921), p. 215.

there is a future for drama, and particularly for poetic drama, will it not be in the direction indicated by the ballet?"¹⁶ The music-and-dance effect of the ballet is evident not only in the measured cadence of Eliot's verse but also in the movements suggested to accompany certain passages in his plays. The Family Reunion closes with a solemn "dance" around a small table upon which has been placed the birthday cake intended to grace the festivities for Lady Monchensey who now lies dead in an adjoining room. The candles are gradually blown out by the members of the "chorus" and they speak the closing words of the play in the dark. In The Cocktail Party, the "prayers" for the marriage hearth and for the protection of Celia as she sets out upon a journey which is to end in martyrdom are accompanied by a "libation" offered in unison by the "Guardians". To ritualistic rhythms suggested by the ballet as well as to liturgical patterns borrowed from religious ceremony, Eliot's plays owe much of their power to stir the spectator and to evoke that audience participation which he considered necessary.

For his use of the chorus, Eliot was deeply indebted to "the great Greek dramatists." He insists, however, that he "did not aim to copy Greek drama," and this for a valid reason:

There is a good deal about the Greek theatre that we do not know, and never shall know. But we know that some of its conventions cannot be ours.... But the chorus has always fundamentally the same uses. It mediates between the action and the

¹⁶Selected Essays, p. 46. See also "London Letter," The Dial, LXXI: 214.

audience; it intensifies the action by projecting its emotional consequences, so that we as the audience, see it doubly, by seeing its effect on other people.¹⁷

This rapport between the chorus and the audience is remarkable in Murder in the Cathedral. Eliot tells us that he "had depended greatly upon the use of the chorus" in this play both because it was suitable for "the essential action," and because "it is easier for a poet to write choral verse than to write dramatic dialogue."¹⁸ Successful though this chorus was, he realized that it served a purpose for the one play only. It was "remote from modern life," and he wanted, through the theatre, "to bring poetry into the world in which the audience lives."¹⁹

In his next play, The Family Reunion, he "dispensed with the formal chorus, and replaced it with choral passages spoken by one or more of the actors who take part in the ordinary dialogue and who have also individual parts in the play."²⁰ Ronald Peacock views this use of the chorus very favourably. He considers it

an unobtrusive and appropriate convention that weaves in and out of the substance of the play [and yet] maintains...the generalizing functions of the Greek chorus, the direction of the common thought upon the events being witnessed.²¹

¹⁷"The Need for Poetic Drama," The Listener, p. 995.

¹⁸"The Aims of Poetic Drama," Adam, p. 11.

¹⁹Ibid., p. 12.

²⁰Ibid.

²¹The Poet in the Theatre, p. 17.

Nevertheless, Eliot himself was not entirely satisfied. He saw that it was too much to expect the four characters to sleep in unison, to go into a trance, in order to recite choral verse together. Why had he suggested a trance? Did this sort of chorus not stand as a convention? His urge to supply a psychological explanation for it seems to indicate a certain unwillingness on his own part "to accept a limitation and abide by it." On the other hand, it may be an indication of his moving away from the conventions of "more remote drama" and his search for newer ones. E. Martin Browne writes of the chorus in The Family Reunion:

This semi-submerged Chorus, I suspect will be Eliot's last: and I think his instinct is sound. Modern drama has developed individual characteristics too far to be able to return to group thinking.... The chorus is not of our age.²²

Eliot's last use of what might be regarded as a chorus comes in The Cocktail Party. On only one occasion, a small group of characters offer a brief invocation for the others. It is little more than a formal toast to absent friends.

The Furies of The Family Reunion are also from the Greeks. In a letter written to E. Martin Browne, Eliot explains that "the Furies are divine instruments, not simple Hellhounds." They are intended to warn Harry and "to let him know clearly that the only way out is purgation and holiness."²³ The device is dramatically valid; the difficulty

²²"The Poet and the Stage," New Writing, No. 31, ed. John Lehmann (London: Penguin Books, 1947), p. 91.

²³cited by F. O. Matthiessen, The Achievement of T. S. Eliot, pp. 167-168.

lies in making the Furies a part of the actual dramatic situation. Once again Eliot is his own severest critic. He considers that his failure to integrate the Furies with the rest of the play is its "deepest flaw," and he resolves that "they must, in future, be omitted from the cast, and be understood to be visible only to certain of my characters, and not to the audience."²⁴ The role that the Furies played (as well as that played by the chorus) is taken over by the Guardians in The Cocktail Party, by Eggerson, and in some measure also, by Mrs. Guzzard, in The Confidential Clerk, and by the "ghosts" from Lord Claverton's past in The Elder Statesman.

Though Eliot abandoned both the chorus and the Furies, he tells us:

I was still inclined to go to a Greek dramatist for my theme, but I was determined to do so merely as a point of departure, and to conceal the origins so well that nobody would identify them until I pointed them out myself.²⁵

It was not until the publication of his essay Poetry and Drama in 1951, two years after the first production of The Cocktail Party, that its source in the Alcestis of Euripides was revealed. Though some of the critics resented Eliot's "practical joke," others have taken it as an invitation--and even as a challenge--to pursue the game further, to search for complete parallels with Greek originals not only in The Cocktail Party, but also in the plays which followed. Legitimate and interesting though such a study may be, to postulate detailed similarities between Eliot's plays and their supposed Greek counterparts is to

²⁴On Poetry and Poets, p. 84.

²⁵Ibid., p. 85.

forget Eliot's resolve to use his Greek models as "points of departure" only. Robert Heilman writes that Eliot, having "distilled an idea" from the Greek,

dramatically explores it further, reinterprets it and enlarges it. As Raymond Radiguet has said, 'A creative writer runs no risk in "copying" a work, since this is impossible to him. The creative mind will instinctively discard the model, and use it only as a fulcrum.'²⁶

In an age that had no formal conventions of its own, the Greek drama used "as a fulcrum" was invaluable to Eliot, especially in his early plays.

The dramatist alone cannot create a set of conventions and impose it upon his audience. Eliot was well aware of this. He realized, too, that the greatest Elizabethan drama was the result of a poet's handling of elements derived both from the drama of antiquity and from the popular drama of the age. Perhaps Eliot hoped that, by a union of great Greek drama with some popular form of our own time, a viable poetic drama might again be born. He did not wish to take artistic convention and popularize it, but to find a popular form and raise it to the level of art. W. B. Yeats wanted to create for himself "an unpopular theatre and an audience like a secret society where admission is by favour and never to many."²⁷ In contrast to Yeats' dictum that

We must make a theatre for ourselves and our friends
and for a few simple people who understand from sheer

²⁶"Alcestis and 'The Cocktail Party'," Comparative Literature, V (Spring, 1953), p. 106.

²⁷Explorations (London: Macmillan, 1962), p. 254.

simplicity what we understand from scholarship and thought,²⁸

Eliot suggests that "possibly the majority of attempts to confect a poetic drama have begun at the wrong end; they have aimed at the small public which wants 'poetry'." He goes on to remind us that

The Elizabethan drama was aimed at a public which wanted entertainment of a crude sort, but would stand a good deal of poetry; our problem should be to take a form of entertainment, and subject it to the process which would leave it a form of art. Perhaps the music-hall comedian is the best material.²⁹

What attracted Eliot to the music-hall was not the individual conventions often associated with it--the male comedian looking as ludicrous as possible, the chorus taken up by the "gallery boys", the burlesque actress, and all those things which make up what Max Beerbohm calls "the old convention of unalloyed ugliness."³⁰ It was rather that advantage which the old music-hall provided for a spirit of cordial understanding between actors and audience. This sense of being a part of entertainment that had "more élan, and less pretension"³¹ made Beerbohm exclaim, "That old lilt in the veins of us--how bitterly we miss it!"³² and set Eliot hoping that something of this spirit might be captured

²⁸ Essays and Introductions (London: Macmillan, 1961), p. 166.

²⁹ The Sacred Wood, p. 70.

³⁰ Around Theatres (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1953), p. 13.

³¹ Ibid., p. 414.

³² Ibid., p. 299.

and made a part of a new poetic drama.

On the occasion of Marie Lloyd's death in 1922, Eliot paid special tribute to her as "the greatest music-hall artist of her time." Her audiences were, he wrote, "invariably sympathetic," and

no other comedian succeeded so well in giving expression to the life of that audience, in raising it to a kind of art. It was, I think, this capacity for expressing the soul of the people that made Marie Lloyd unique, and that made her audiences, even when they joined in the chorus, not so much hilariously as happy.³³

Eliot saw no hope of any such expressive figure arising from the "morally corrupt" middle classes or from an aristocracy "gradually being absorbed into and destroyed by the middle class." But the lower class still existed and found "the expression and dignity of their own lives" in artists like Marie Lloyd:

The working man who went to the music-hall and saw Marie Lloyd and joined in the chorus was himself performing part of the act; he was engaged in that collaboration of the audience with the artist which is necessary in all art and most obviously in dramatic art.³⁴

But Eliot was seeing the end of what Beerbohm describes as the theatre of his youth. The music-hall tradition was dying; it is fitting that Eliot's essay commending it should be an obituary.

The successors to the music-hall artists were Charlie Chaplin and Buster Keaton of the silent cinema. This form does not seem to have interested Eliot for the very good reason that a complete absence of words

³³Selected Essays, p. 457.

³⁴Ibid., p. 458.

can scarcely have much appeal for a poet. He does commend Chaplin for "having escaped in his own way from the realism of the cinema and invented a rhythm,"³⁵ but the "intimacy of relation to the audience which had for a long time been the secret of the music-hall comedian"³⁶ was, at best, much clouded over by the film.

The two Fragments of Sweeney Agonistes are Eliot's attempt at a play in the manner of the music-hall. Sweeney is still regarded by many critics as more promising than anything which followed it. Though the jazz idiom of the Fragments could not be sustained with ease through a full-length play, there is a "music-hall quality" in Sweeney which is to be found also in Eliot's later drama: the repetition of phrases tossed back and forth much as fragments of song were "bounced" from actor to "feeder" and back again in the music-hall. Sweeney opens with this exchange:

Dusty: How about Pereira?
 Doris: What about Pereira?
 I don't care.
 Dusty: You don't care!
 Who pays the rent?
 Doris: Yes he pays the rent
 Dusty: Well some men don't and some men do
 Some men don't and you know who
 Doris: You can have Pereira
 Dusty: What about Pereira?
 Doris: He's no gentleman, Pereira:
 You can't trust him!
 Dusty: Well that's true.
 He's no gentleman if you can't trust him
 And if you can't trust him--
 Then you never know what he's going to do.³⁷

³⁵ cited by Gilbert Seldes, The 7 Lively Arts (New York: Sagamore Press, 1957), p. 41.

³⁶ "The Need for Poetic Drama," The Listener, p. 994.

³⁷ The Complete Poems and Plays, p. 74.

And in The Cocktail Party more than ten years later:

Celia: It's your turn, Julia.
 Do tell us that story you told the other day,
 about Lady Klootz and the wedding cake.
 Peter: And how the butler found her in the pantry,
 rinsing her mouth out with champagne.
 I like that story.
 Celia: I love that story.
 Alex: I'm never tired of
 hearing that story.
 Julia: Well, you all seem to know it.
 Celia: Do we all know it?
 But we're never tired of hearing you tell it.
 I don't believe everyone here knows it.
 You don't know it, do you?
 Unidentified Guest: No, I've never heard it.
 Celia: Here's one new listener for you, Julia;
 And I don't believe that Edward knows it.
 Edward: I may have heard it, but I don't remember it.
 Celia: And Julia's the only person to tell it.
 She's such a good mimic.
 Julia: Am I a good mimic?
 Peter: You are a good mimic. You never miss anything.
 Alex: She never misses anything unless she wants to.³⁸

This game of "pitch and toss" does not continue throughout the entire play, but it reappears at intervals and some of it is to be found in the two later plays as well.

There is another element in the Fragments which is used in all the plays with varying intensity. Hugh Kenner speaks of it as "the entry of Lazarus, the man who has crossed the frontier and come back."³⁹ Sweeney bursts in upon the guests at a drinking party in Doris' flat; he has matters of life and death to discuss. His hearers dismiss his problems by putting them into the familiar yet remote realm of hearsay

³⁸Ibid., pp. 297-298.

³⁹The Invisible Poet, p. 31.

or fantasy. What is tragedy for Sweeney they make into music-hall song. In the later plays a similar figure appears, someone who has been where the others have not, someone who knows more than they can understand. Thus Harry in The Family Reunion, and the Unidentified Guest at The Cocktail Party cause a flurry of discomfort among the self-satisfied who would escape if they could the influence of the "stranger" in their midst.

Though The Family Reunion may, in many ways, be regarded as Sweeney rewritten and completed, the later play cannot be said to make use of the music-hall manner as Eliot had once dreamed that drama might do. The drawing room at Wishwood is far removed from Doris' flat, and the family group at Wishwood speak another language. Any reason offered for what seems to be Eliot's lost opportunity, his inability to finish Sweeney, can be only conjecture. Perhaps he realized that the music-hall tradition was indeed a thing of the past. In a tone that is almost nostalgic, he writes:

In Paris I had the first and most welcome reminder of London in seeing Mistinguette...she played a part which I thought would have been better understood by an English music-hall audience than it was at the Casino de Paris. I thought of Marie Lloyd again; and wondered again why that directness, frankness, and ferocious humour...should be odious to the British public in precisely those forms of art in which they are most needed, and in which, in fact, they used to flourish.⁴⁰

To attempt to base his plays upon something which had become "odious to the British public" would have been to defeat his own purpose of including a large audience in his plans for the revival of poetic drama.

⁴⁰"London Letter," The Dial, LXXII (May, 1922), 513.

Eliot continued his search for a popular form which might be used as a framework for verse drama. The theatre of the time had little to offer. He had written in the early twenties:

Eleven theatres are on the point of closing as the public will no longer pay the price required by the cost. Considering the present state of the stage, there is little direct cause for regret.⁴¹

Shaw was the only "respectable" dramatist working; but his comedy, however brilliant, was to Eliot, "a divagation from art."⁴² The next decade was no better. The Phoenix Society was engaged in a sort of taxidermy, attempting, not very successfully, to revive plays of the past. The "big name" in living theatre was that of Noel Coward much of whose work is "merely sentimental, frivolous or trivial."⁴³ Nevertheless, W. H. Auden and Christopher Isherwood, fired by the impact of Sweeney, were making a joint effort to blend elements, not of the music-hall, but of the popular theatre into serious and satirical dramatic commentary on society. Their Ascent of the F6, a typical play of this kind, uses prose and verse alternately. The verse is often little more than doggerel and the transition from rhyme to prose (or the reverse) usually comes with a jolt more annoying than salutary. In spite of its weaknesses, the effect of the F6 was twofold. As E. J. Burton points out, it "broke the shell of naturalism in which so many dramatists tended to confine their work."⁴⁴ More important still, it released poetic drama from the

⁴¹"London Letter" The Dial, LXXI (August, 1921), 213.

⁴²Ibid., p. 214.

⁴³T. R. Barnes, "Shaw and the London Theatre," The Modern Age ed. Boris Ford (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1961), p. 216.

⁴⁴The Student's Guide to British Theatre (London: Herbert Jenkins, 1963), p. 169.

cultural isolation which was causing it to atrophy and enabled it to make use of at least some of the conventions of the popular stage.

Eliot had influenced Auden and Isherwood; he also learned from them. Instead of turning his back upon the light comedy and farce popular in the thirties, he saw in it the "crude form" which, by a process of refining, might become an artistic thing. Consequently, Coward's is as pervasive an influence as any in Eliot's later plays. From him, Eliot borrowed the drawing-room setting, the social tone, and echoes of the comedy of manners. To many critics this use of the conventions of popular comedy appears to indicate that Eliot was yielding to the demands of realism which he had once repudiated. It is true that he sacrificed his desire to revive many of the conventions of "more remote drama." Even the symbolic figures in the later plays are given parts as members of the social circle which makes up the dramatis personae. None the less, there is a distinct difference between the convention which is naturalism and Eliot's use of conventions which are naturalistic. For Eliot, realistic portrayal of contemporary life provides a façade behind which some of life's most important issues are discussed and brought to the attention of the audience. In this Eliot is perhaps more realistic than are the advocates of theatrical realism who seldom discern behind actual human situations the depth and complexity which escape the notice of the casual observer.

To hope that one dramatist, after experimenting in a half-dozen plays, should have established a "conventional scheme" for drama is surely to expect too much. Nevertheless, in spite of his relatively small output, Eliot has given new life to poetic drama and deeper

significance to contemporary popular form. His methods may not be imitable and may never become "strict rules of the game." But he has given new interest to the "game" itself and has opened the way for enterprising playwrights to make it more interesting still.

IV

THE THEMES OF ELIOT'S EARLY PLAYS

So long as we simply re-act the mediaeval plays... we shall not be getting the full value out of them. It is only, I think, by attempting to do something for our time that these plays did for theirs, that we can recover the right attitude toward [them].

.
We want the whole of serious drama to have a religious background and to be informed by religious principles. I do not say that we shall ever get as much as this: but if we keep this ideal in mind we may hope to get nearer to its realization than if we ignore it.¹

Eliot's keen sense of history and his esteem for the literary achievements of the past might have led him to select from it subjects for his poetic drama had he not desired to reach a wide contemporary audience. To associate his verse drama exclusively with the past would have been to repeat the mistakes of his predecessors and to relegate his plays to library shelves already burdened with the closet dramas of the nineteenth century. Poetic drama, if it was to become a living art, had to deal with subjects familiar and of interest to modern men and women. Eliot writes:

People are prepared to put up with verse from the lips of personages dressed in the fashion of some distant age; therefore they should be made to hear it from people dressed like ourselves, living in

¹"Religious Drama: Mediaeval and Modern," op. cit., pp. 10-11.

houses and apartments like ours, and using tele-
phones and motor cars and radio sets.²

As an artist, Eliot's ambition was to bring poetry back into the drama; as a Christian, he wanted to see spiritual values reintroduced into a secular society. Indeed, the two aspirations were one, for he believed that poetry was capable of carrying a wealth of spiritual significance not only into drama but also into life. In his "Choruses" from The Rock he had described our society as characterized by "Knowledge of words, and ignorance of the Word."³ It was his hope that Christian themes in drama produced on the commercial stage would help to bring men back to a consideration of the Word. In an address delivered in 1937, he said,

The creation of a living religious drama in our time is not to be conceived as a problem entirely isolated from that of the secular theatre. I would even ask you to look at it the other way about from the usual, and say, that it is not so much that the Christian Faith needs the drama (for its evangelising possibilities) but that the drama needs the Christian Faith.⁴

Two qualities characterize the themes of Eliot's plays: they are (with one exception) contemporary and they are, at least implicitly, Christian. In spite of his occasional reference to our age as a post-Christian era, Eliot sees no reason for modernity and Christianity to be considered incompatible.

Eliot's Christian commitment is treated by many of the critics as a sort of scandal, something that must be accounted for, because, in

²On Poetry and Poets, pp. 81-2.

³The Complete Poems and Plays, p. 96.

⁴"Religious Drama: Mediaeval and Modern," op. cit., p. 10.

spite of it, his poetry is effective. His entrance into the Church of England in 1926 was followed by the publication of the Ariel Poems.⁵ Their Christian tone was too much for those who had admired what they took to be an expression of the "disillusionment of a generation"⁶ in The Waste Land. And, as Hugh Kenner puts it, "a whole battalion of Eliot-worshippers suddenly realized that they had been bowing at the wrong shrine and made for the door."⁷ Secularism accounts for much of the resentment towards Eliot's use of Christian themes in modern settings. Every age makes certain decisions as to what orders of reality are to be omitted in art. We have agreed that Freudian symbolism is acceptable and that Christian truth is not. Its introduction on the secular stage, we are told, makes the twentieth-century audience uncomfortable. If our age has achieved comfort as its normal state, the very first step toward a new vitality is surely to introduce an element of discomfort. In an interview with Iain Hamilton in 1949, Eliot said, "I should not like anyone seeing a play of mine to feel completely comfortable."⁸ Twelve years earlier he had warned that, in the process of rebuilding a Christian drama,

⁵Journey of the Magi, A Song for Simeon, Animula and Marina.

⁶Eliot says of this: "I may have expressed for them their own illusion of being disillusioned, but that did not form part of my intention." Selected Essays, p. 368.

⁷"Eliot's Moral Dialectic," Hudson Review, II (1949), 424.

⁸"Comments on 'The Cocktail Party';" World Review, November, 1949, p. 21.

We must be prepared to accept something less sedative, and perhaps something which may cause us some discomfort and embarrassment in the process of getting used to it.⁹

Though we need not agree with Eliot's particular view of Christianity, we must accept its influence in the plays if we are to accept his drama at all. As John Ciardi has said, "No good artist can take fire except from his human commitment, whatever it may be."¹⁰

Though Eliot's themes are Christian, they are not overtly didactic. Writing of literature in general, he insists, "What I want is a literature which should be unconsciously, rather than deliberately and defiantly, Christian."¹¹ The function of great plays, he tells us elsewhere, is

to suggest ideas to those who hear and read them; and they could not have this provocative power if the author had been concerned to impose an opinion, convey a doctrine, or influence conduct.¹²

All great drama, Eliot assures us "has always dealt with moral problems, with problems which in the end required a religious solution."¹³ Since this is so, dramatists need to assume some moral attitude in common with their audience. "But," he insists, "this must be already given; it is

⁹"Religious Drama: Mediaeval and Modern," op. cit., p. 9.

¹⁰"Thomas Stearns Eliot: 1888-1965," Saturday Review, January 23, 1965, p. 36.

¹¹Selected Essays, p. 392.

¹²"The Aims of Poetic Drama," Adam, p. 16.

¹³"Religious Drama: Mediaeval and Modern," op. cit., p. 11.

not the job of the dramatist to impose it."¹⁴ Perhaps Eliot's mistake has been the assumption that our age is more Christian than it actually is.

Though the first play, Murder in the Cathedral, is historical in subject and setting, its theme goes beyond the confines of mere history and recurs in the later contemporary plays. Eliot concentrates upon the conflict taking place in the soul of one whose sanctity is expressed in martyrdom. He is concerned with the difficulty of distinguishing, from the outside, the saint from the suicide, the mystic from the madman. Murder in the Cathedral contrasts two very different spiritual and mental states either of which may result in the same external action. They are differentiated only by the orientation of Becket's will. But the orientation of the human will is difficult to dramatize. Eliot could have managed it in the Elizabethan manner by putting an eloquent "farewell speech" on the lips of the dying Becket. But rhetorical self-justification is not indicative of self-abandonment; and Thomas, like so many Elizabethan heroes, would not have died "in the odour of sanctity," but rather, as Eliot aptly phrases it, "in the odour of Seneca."¹⁵ The saints are not eloquent but silent in the face of persecution and death; or, if they speak, they do so only in praise of God or in prayer for their tormentors. It is interesting to note that Dante makes those whom he places in hell very eloquently express the total preoccupation with self

¹⁴Selected Essays, p. 45.

¹⁵Ibid., p. 96.

that brought them there. Yet their eloquence is no doubt what makes the "Inferno" so much more popular than the rest of The Divine Comedy. Eliot's subject was not a denizen of hell but a saint; and the author set himself the difficult task of expressing dramatically, but without "vicious rhetoric,"¹⁶ the union of Becket's will with the will of God.

The Archbishop's confrontation with his own thoughts made objective by the Tempters enables him to see how very mixed his motives are. The impulse which prompts his final decision comes from the "Chorus," from the rising images of confusion they present, and from their appeal to him in their helplessness. By the grace of a sudden illumination, Thomas realizes that his decision is no longer a personal one. It involves not only his own spiritual integrity but that of the whole Church and especially that of his spiritual children. He has found the right reason for martyrdom: charity. The last temptation has become for him a great grace, something he would never have achieved alone. He does not discuss his "new vision"; he merely states that it has been given to him. Allowed to address the audience briefly, he anticipates the sermon interlude and tells them quietly and without self-elation:

Now is my way clear, now is the meaning plain:
Temptation shall not come in this kind again.
The last temptation is the greatest treason:
To do the right deed for the wrong reason.¹⁷

¹⁶Selected Essays, p. 40.

¹⁷"Murder in the Cathedral," The Complete Poems and Plays, p. 196. Subsequent quotations from the play are from this edition; page numbers are indicated in parentheses after each citation.

The single act of acceptance of martyrdom will admit of double interpretation. Some will understand it as an act of supreme love for God and men. To others it will be: "Senseless self-slaughter of a lunatic, / Arrogant passion of a fanatic" (197). The Knights, rationalizing their murder of the Archbishop, conclude:

Suicide while of Unsound Mind. It is the only
charitable verdict you can give, upon one who was,
after all, a great man. (219)

But Becket's motives have been made clear to us, and the arguments of the Knights only serve to make us uncomfortably aware of the plausible excuses we often make in defense of shabby actions.

Becket's sanctity is meaningful not for himself only, but more especially for those about him. The author points out by means of the "sermon" that

A martyr, a saint, is always made by the design of
God, for His love of men, to warn them and to lead
them, to bring them back to His ways. (199)

The Archbishop has died for his flock; this is the Christian paradox of death and rebirth, a motif which constantly recurs in the later plays. For Eliot, the profound and timeless Christian theme is that expressed in the words of Christ, "Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies it bears much fruit."¹⁸ The members of the Chorus are conscious of what Thomas' death means to them. Acknowledging themselves to be "a type of the common man," they cry out to God:

¹⁸John, 12: 24 (All Biblical quotations are from the Revised Standard Version, 1952).

We thank Thee for Thy mercies of blood, for Thy re-
 demption by blood. For the blood
 of Thy martyrs and saints
 Shall enrich the earth. (221)

Earlier, they had seen earth's creatures as horrible and repulsive; now they can sing: "We praise Thee, O God, for Thy glory displayed in all the creatures of the earth" (220). And because God has willed that great grace should come to them through the generosity of their Archbishop, they conclude with a prayer to a new intercessor in Heaven, "Blessed Thomas, pray for us."

Murder in the Cathedral was a success; but in Eliot's mind, it was a success of a specialized sort. He had never been very patient with the particular. In an early essay he complains that "the world of Ibsen and the world of Tchekov are not enough simplified, universal."¹⁹ He was unwilling to settle for an occasioned success; he wanted a general solution to the problem of a Christian poetic drama. Special circumstances had made Murder in the Cathedral possible. Its theme was remote and it enjoyed the protection of the religious festival for which it was written. Its audience was willing to be piously bored, yet capable of surprise. "The path," he says, "was made easy...I had not solved any general problem...from my point of view the play was a dead end."²⁰

For his next play Eliot was determined "to take a theme of contemporary life, with characters of our own time, living in our own

¹⁹The Sacred Wood, p. 69.

²⁰On Poetry and Poets, p. 79.

world."²¹ The Family Reunion, though avowedly indebted to the Oresteia of Aeschylus, is both contemporary and Christian. This time, however, the Christian theme is not immediately apparent. Harry, the eldest son and the heir to the Monchensey estate, has returned home after a lengthy absence. His young wife, never accepted by his family, had persuaded him to go abroad. While they were on an ocean trip she was reportedly "Swept off the deck in the middle of a storm."²² Though Harry startles everyone when he speaks of "That cloudless night in the mid-Atlantic/ When I pushed her over" (235), it is clear that he is not at all certain that he "pushed her." He confesses, however, that he wished her dead, and he is oppressed by a sense of personal guilt. He is also burdened with inherited guilt, for there is a "curse" upon the House of Monchensey. The curse which afflicts the family is one of selfishness, of inability to live in mutual love. For them, Harry recalls,

Family affection
Was a kind of formal obligation, a duty
Only noticed by its neglect. (276)

For some of them the selfishness, the neglect, became a deadly hate. Of Harry's father, Agatha says, "I found him thinking/How to get rid of your mother" (274). Of Lady Monchensey's attitude toward Harry's young wife, Mary tells us: "I believed that Cousin Amy--/I almost believed it-- had killed her by willing" (245). Uncle Charles assures Harry who is tormented by doubt regarding his wife's death:

²¹On Poetry and Poets, p. 82.

²²"The Family Reunion," The Complete Poems and Plays, p. 229. Subsequent quotations from the play are from this edition.

I understand these feelings better than you know--
 But you have no reason to reproach yourself.
 Your conscience can be clear. (236)

And to the others when Harry is absent, Charles admits:

I might have done the same thing once, myself.
 Nobody knows what he's likely to do
 Until there's somebody he wants to get rid of. (238)

The "family curse," though borrowed from Aeschylus, has been given Christian overtones. "Even where the parallel is closest," Jones writes, "the action is transformed in the light of the Christian dispensation."²³ Hate, the antithesis of the Christian precept to "love one another," is indeed a curse when it takes possession of a family.

But the Christian implications of The Family Reunion are more clearly seen at a deeper level. Harry, aware of his own sin and of that which predominates in his family, finds that

It begins to seem just part of some huge disaster,
 Some monstrous mistake and aberration
 Of all men, of the world. (268)

He realizes that the Furies who have followed him for so long, appear to him for the first time at Wishwood, the place of his origin, to show him "The shadow of something behind our meagre childhood,/Some origin of wretchedness" (273). Clearly this "shadow" is that of original sin, the guilt we inherit as members of the human family fallen from the state of grace in which we were created. With the fall of our first parents in mind, we can understand Agatha's comment: "A curse comes to being/

²³The Plays of T. S. Eliot, pp. 90-91.

As a child is formed" (278). Her statement defies explanation in any other context. In spite of the arguments of Denis Donoghue,²⁴ Corbin Carnell²⁵ and others, Eliot is no Manichaeian. For, if there is a curse upon mankind, there is also the promise of redemption. Agatha repeats several times throughout the play a phrase reminiscent of Isaiah and of St. Luke, and containing the promise that the "knot of confusion" shall be "unknotted,"

The cross be uncrossed
The crooked be made straight
And the curse be ended. (293)

Though Harry speaks bitterly of a hope that is dead, Mary reminds him that out of "the sudden comprehension of the death of hope" a new hope may be born.

Eliot makes it clear that The Family Reunion is not a mere detective story. The question, Who is guilty? matters little, and can only be answered by saying that all share the guilt though it may fall to the lot of one to atone for it. Agatha, who appears to be in closer touch with the supernatural than the rest of the family, tells Harry:

What we have written is not a story of detection,
Of crime and punishment, but of sin and expiation.
It is possible that you have not known what sin
You shall expiate, or whose, or why. It is certain
That the knowledge of it must precede the expiation.
It is possible that sin may strain and struggle
In its dark instinctive birth, to come to consciousness

²⁴The Third Voice (Princeton University Press, 1959).

²⁵"Creation's Lonely Flesh: T. S. Eliot and Christopher Fry on the Life of the Senses," Modern Drama, 6 (September 1963), 141-149.

And so find expurgation. It is possible
 You are the consciousness of your unhappy family,
 Its bird sent flying through the purgatorial flame.
 (275)

Knowledge of one's own sinfulness is the basis of that genuine humility which, for Eliot, should characterize the Christian. Of Vergil's hero, Aeneas, Eliot writes:

There is in Aeneas a virtue--an essential ingredient in his piety--which is an analogue and foreshadow of Christian humility.... He is, in fact, the prototype of a Christian hero. For he is, humbly, a man with a mission; and the mission is everything.²⁶

Harry, Eliot's hero, must face all the discomfort to "self" that comes with real self-knowledge; for self-knowledge, understood in the Christian sense, is indispensable to that humility which makes the Christian capable of the "mission" of those "elected" to expiate their own sins and especially the sins of others. Becket had warned that the choice of such a one is God's choice; Harry tells us: "Why I have this election/I do not understand" (281). Nevertheless, Agatha assures him: "The burden's yours now, yours/The burden of all the family" (276). The rest of the group, like the women of Canterbury, "Are only watchers and waiters: not the easiest role" (246), but the one in which their salvation lies. Why a particular member of the family should be chosen from among the rest to make the "pilgrimage of expiation" remains hidden in the will of God: "In this world/It is inexplicable, the resolution is in another" (284).

Harry has complained bitterly of loneliness and isolation; even while surrounded by his family he cries out: "...one is still alone/

²⁶On Poetry and Poets, pp. 127-128.

In an over-crowded desert, jostled by ghosts" (235). Becket faces death alone, as we all must; but Harry's loneliness is the loneliness of man in today's world. For Eliot,

the religious crisis of the present day arises from the solitude of man, who no longer feels himself a participant in any church.... Eliot sees in the solitude of the individual the tragedy peculiar to the contemporary world.²⁷

Harry's loneliness in The Family Reunion may be regarded as a part of the price that he must pay for his special vocation of atonement. As Eliot develops the theme in the later plays, however, loneliness is clearly the lot of all men. Harry merely realizes man's loneliness more keenly than do the other members of the family. His awareness of isolation becomes less acute when he sees that his own problem is but a part of the larger problem of humanity. His call to "expiation" for himself and for others is "at once the hardest thing and the only thing possible"; yet he assures his family that, if they "could understand," they would be "quite happy about it" (287).

How Harry is to go about removing the curse on the House of Monchensey is never made clear. He has faced the Furies; now he must follow them. Asked where he is going, he replies, "I shall have to learn. That is still unsettled./I have not yet had the precise directions." He does, however suggest that he will go "To the worship in the desert, the thirst and deprivation/A stony sanctuary and a primitive altar" (281). His mother understands him to mean that he is going away to become a missionary, but Harry denies that this is his meaning. Following the lead of

²⁷ Cited by Alessandro Pellegrini, "A London Conversation with T. S. Eliot," Sewanee Review, LVII (1949), 290.

the Furies whom he has come to regard as "bright angels," he simply leaves Wishwood accompanied by his chauffeur. What his atonement is to consist of we are not told. Though he has been warned by his mother's doctor that shock will be fatal to her, Harry leaves home on the very day of his arrival, his mother's birthday. Lady Monchensey has been over-protective and possessive; Harry can not continue to play the part she would impose upon him. Nevertheless, his mother's death comes as a shock to us. Eliot himself writes:

We are left in a divided frame of mind, not knowing whether to consider the play the tragedy of the mother or the salvation of the son. The two situations are not reconciled.²⁸

Harry's "situation" itself leaves us "in a divided frame of mind." We are given to understand that he has been called "to leave all things" and to follow a special way. Yet his mother's domination and the picture we get of life at Wishwood make his departure a happy and necessary escape rather than a renunciation of home and loved ones for the sake of a higher calling. Harry himself shows little evidence of having achieved that love of God and man which might render his "sacrifice" efficacious in removing hate's curse from his unhappy family.

The Family Reunion was Eliot's first attempt--by no means wholly successful--to bring a Christian theme to the secular stage. That a Greek play with religious implications of its own should have seemed a likely vehicle for Christian thought may appear strange. Yet, even

²⁸On Poetry and Poets, p. 84.

where Christianity seems to be forgotten in our society, there is still some respect for the classics. What better way to bring home to our century its need of a Christian orientation than by reminding us of the part religion played in a civilization we still admire? John Peter, whose scholarly articles are often hostile to Eliot, remarks:

Eliot, then, has established a fundamental relation between two religious orientations, two cultures, and he has shown a single abiding constant in both. Not only is the process engrossing and valuable per se: it has the added merit that it reinforces his choice of the Greek type of drama as a milieu through which to attempt the reinstatement of verse drama in English. Method and content, as it were, coalesce.²⁹

The "abiding constant" is "the transmissibility of sin" and "the positing of an intercessory God through whom the chain can be broken." For the Christian audience the theme of "crime and punishment" becomes, as Agatha points out, one of "sin and expiation" (275). And the "intercessory God" who gives meaning to Harry's "atonement" is Christ through whose suffering and death man is freed from the bondage of sin. The time of the play's action is obviously intended to be understood as Holy Week; the closing ceremony recalls the Office of Tenebrae which is always followed by the joys of Easter. The implications for contemporary society find expression in the "chorus" chanted by Harry's uncles and aunts:

We understand the ordinary business of living,
We know how to work the machine,
We can usually avoid accidents,
We are insured against fire,

²⁹"The Family Reunion," Scrutiny, XVI (September, 1949), 223.

Against larceny and illness,
Against defective plumbing,
But not against the act of God.
(290-291)

They have, like so many of us, "lost their way in the dark"; but their final resolve to "do the right thing" is more than a passive acceptance of "the act of God" made manifest in Harry's vocation. It is an expression of Christian hope, the hope that is the source of Easter joy. In The Family Reunion, Christianity--in Greek garb--stepped onto the commercial stage; and, if not wholly successful, at least it was neither scoffed at nor forced to withdraw.

THE THEMES OF THE LATER PLAYS

For the Christian there is that perpetual living in paradox. You must lose your life in order to save it. One has to be otherworldly and yet deeply responsible for the affairs of this world. One must preserve a capacity for enjoying the things of this world such as love and affection.¹

Ten years elapsed before Eliot again wrote for the stage. In that interval he examined critically his two earlier plays, especially The Family Reunion. His analysis of his own play has been recognized as one of the most honest pieces of self-criticism ever written. Though Eliot realized the mistakes he had made, he had not changed his ideal of poetic drama in contemporary setting pervaded by the Christian spirit. Nor had he abandoned his use of the Greek plays as a "starting-point" for his own themes. Howarth tells us that

In 1938 he had published in the Criterion McEachran's article on the pattern of rebirth in the drama from Alcestis to Hamlet. It is not surprising if, long a student of anthropology, Eliot was drawn to Alcestis as a pattern for a modern play, and if, as a Christian and a polemicist of his faith, he wanted to apply McEachran's principle: that the Christian dramatist reproduces the ancient ritual of the hero-victim at "a higher level."²

¹T. S. Eliot, cited by Henry Hewes, "Eliot on Eliot," Saturday Review, 41 (July-December, 1958), 32.

²Notes on Some Figures Behind T. S. Eliot, p. 326.

The result of Eliot's attempt to apply this principle was The Cocktail Party, the play which was to be his greatest success on the secular stage.

In The Cocktail Party Eliot avoids "overt reference to the framework of classical drama."³ As a consequence the play is more truly contemporary and also more convincing. The Christian theme seems at first to have been pushed far into the background; it is, nevertheless, truly and perhaps more effectively present than it is in The Family Reunion. The marriage of Lavinia and Edward Chamberlayne has reached the breaking point. Lavinia has just left Edward; and, now that she is gone, his interest in Celia Coplestone palls, and he finds himself forced to admit,

...only since this morning
I have met myself as a middle-aged man
Beginning to know what it is to feel old.
That is the worst moment, when you feel
 that you have lost
The desire for all that was most desirable.⁴

Lavinia is no happier. Her "complete prostration" results from the discovery that Peter Quilpe, a young man in whom she has been unduly interested, has fallen in love with Celia. The process of acquiring self-knowledge is a painful one for both Lavinia and Edward. Celia, too, realizes her mistake. To her, Edward has really been

...only a projection--
I see that now--of something that I wanted--
No, not wanted--something I aspired to--
Something that I desperately wanted to exist.
(327)

³"The Aims of Poetic Drama," Adam, p. 13.

⁴"The Cocktail Party," The Complete Poems and Plays, p. 325. Subsequent quotations from the play are from this edition.

They are all helped toward self-knowledge by a group of three older persons who, though very much a part of the society in which they move, have, like Agatha in The Family Reunion, a deeper awareness of things of the spirit. One of them, Sir Henry Harcourt-Reilly, combines the role of priest and psychiatrist and yet is neither. The other two, Julia and Alex, are, in Howarth's opinion, "tertiaries of a religious order."⁵

The first lesson that Celia and the Chamberlaynes must learn is that "Only by acceptance/Of the past will you alter its meaning" (385). And each must learn the lesson for himself. The loneliness and isolation of the experience is vividly expressed by Edward:

Hell is oneself,
Hell is alone, the other figures in it
Merely projections. There is nothing to escape from
And nothing to escape to. One is always alone.
(342)

And if he and Lavinia have little else in common they at least share "the same isolation," that of "A man who finds himself incapable of loving/And a woman who finds that no man can love her" (355).

As Harry was in The Family Reunion, Celia is singled out for "an election which cannot be explained."⁶ She realizes more quickly and more profoundly than the Chamberlaynes that the past has been her own mistake. She holds no one responsible but herself, and expresses only compassion for Edward whom we are much inclined to blame. W. K. Wimsatt has gone so far as to criticize the play on this very point; he writes: "How

⁵"Eliot and Hofmannsthal," South Atlantic Quarterly, 59 (1960), 508.

⁶On Poetry and Poets, p. 128.

could so superior a girl as Celia ever fall for a mut like Edward?"⁷

The only answer, of course, is that such things do happen. Without self-pity or any attempt at self-justification, Celia explains to Sir Henry that her "symptoms" are "an awareness of solitude" and "a sense of sin" coupled with a need to "atone." Recognizing both her aspirations and her capabilities, she chooses the "second way" which he offers as a solution, the way of suffering and of expiation. He tells her: "You will journey blind. But the way leads toward possession/Of what you have sought for in the wrong place" (365).

The form which Celia's "vocation" takes is clearer than is Harry's. We are told that she "joined some nursing order, a very austere one," and that there were "three sisters at this station in a Christian village" on the island of Kinkanja where Celia met her death. How closely Eliot wishes us to equate Celia's vocation with what is usually understood as a "religious vocation," I do not know. But if he did intend Celia's to be an example of a vocation to the Anglican Sisterhood, he has made some serious blunders. That Celia should have been disillusioned over her affair with Edward, and have come "in desperation" to speak to a counselor of her "feeling of emptiness and failure" is all understandable enough; but it is hardly sufficient motive for religious dedication. She experiences, she tells us, "a craving for something which I cannot find"; but, in the words of the Anglican Father Freeland, "the true Religious is not looking for something. She is looking for Some One."⁸

⁷"Eliot's Comedy," Sewanee Review, LVIII (1950), 672.

⁸"The Steep Ascent," the script used for an Anglican radio program, May 13, 1956. It was written by Father Freeland and graciously loaned to me by the Sisters of St. John, the Divine, Qu'Appelle Diocesan School, Regina.

Speaking of the married state, Celia says: "I couldn't give anyone the kind of love--/I wish I could--which belongs to that life" (364); and so she enters a religious order! Surely she will need much love to give to others both as a nurse and as a sister. Father Freeland illustrates the fallacy of such an attitude by a story:

A great Abbot whenever he suspected a postulant was really fleeing to the cloister because he couldn't cope with life would say to that person: "My child, have you ever been in love?" If the young postulant was quick to answer, "Oh no, never, Father," then the Abbot would retort ironically, "How then do you think you can love the Creator if you have not even been capable of loving a creature?"⁹

Sir Henry, Celia's advisor, is no clearer in his conception of a religious vocation. He tells her that the way she has chosen requires faith, "the kind of faith that issues from despair." The faith that inspires a religious vocation issues not from despair but from God who is Love. Finally, in making her decision Celia says:

I don't know in the least what I am doing
Or why I am doing it. There is nothing else to do:
That is the only reason. (366)

That "reason" is not sufficient to render vows valid in any religious community. Reverend R. M. Benson, in a "Report to the Anglican Congress" at Manchester in 1888 wrote:

There can be but one reason for entering a religious life, one only reason--a call from God to do so... and those who enter the religious life must feel the call to be from God.¹⁰

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰Quoted by A. M. Allchin, The Silent Rebellion, (London: S.C.M. Press, 1958), pp. 150-151.

Clearly, Celia's "vocation" cannot be understood as compatible with what existing religious communities expect from aspirants. It shares a little of the inexplicably evasive quality that characterizes Harry's "pilgrimage of expiation." However, Celia's destiny is at least clear; her service to others reaches the heroism of martyrdom.

The Chamberlaynes, not endowed with Celia's honesty of mind and spiritual awareness, take much longer to acquire self-knowledge and to accept humbly their limitations. Edward has to be shown in various ways how subtle self-deception can be before he begins to understand himself. Lavinia, after a "rest cure," seems to reach self-knowledge more quickly than does her husband. Nevertheless, it is only when the two are brought face to face, not only with themselves, but with each other that delusions vanish and "they have, for the first time, somewhere to start from" (367). For Edward and Lavinia, salvation lies in humble acceptance of choices they made in the past.

Much has been said of Sir Henry's remark to Edward, "The best of a bad job is all any of us make of it" (356). Some critics suggest that Eliot means to imply that marriage is somehow "a bad job" at best whereas the religious life is the way to sanctity. Clearly, Eliot intended no such thing. His prose comment concerning the "spiritually elect" is of interest:

Each man has his destiny, though some men are undoubtedly 'men of destiny' in a sense in which most men are not.... But this is an election which cannot be explained, a burden and responsibility rather than a reason for self-glorification. It merely happens to one man and not to others, to have the gifts necessary in some profound crisis, but he can

take no credit to himself for the gifts and the
responsibility assigned to him.¹¹

It may be argued that whatever Eliot's intentions, the play itself gives the impression that, whereas Celia goes the way of martyrdom and sanctity, the Chamberlaynes--and all married folk with them--are condemned to mediocrity and to an endless round of cocktail parties. To argue thus is to forget that, if the Chamberlaynes are condemned to mediocrity, it is because they are mediocre, not because they are married. The "Guardians", offering the only invocation in the play, pray first for Edward and Lavinia:

Let them build the hearth
Under the protection of the stars.
Let them place a chair each side of it.
May the holy ones watch over the roof.

Only then do they add "the words for those who go on a journey":

Watch over her in the desert
Watch over her in the mountain...
.....
Protect her in the tumult
Protect her in the silence. (369)

When Celia asks Sir Henry which is the better way she receives the answer:

Neither way is better.
Both ways are necessary. It is also necessary
To make a choice between them...
.....
Each way means loneliness--and communion.
(365)

Surely there can be no valid reason for refusing to accept this answer as it stands. The goal toward which the two ways are directed is one

¹¹On Poetry and Poets, p. 128.

and the same for both. Moreover, the grace of martyrdom is not given to Celia for herself alone any more than it was for Becket. It is true that Edward sees her death as a waste, "just for a handful of plague-stricken natives/Who would have died anyway" (381). But, as Sir Henry asks, "Who knows the difference that made to the natives who were dying/Or the state of mind in which they died?" (383). Indeed, Celia's sacrifice is not without its effect upon the Chamberlaynes themselves. They are, as J. E. Hardy suggests "learning from Celia, or through Celia's story. The two ways do connect, after all."¹² Though Edward and Lavinia appear to be merely beginning again the same uninspiring routine, they are changed people. She has been restored from the "dead," and he has been brought face to face with himself and is wiser for the experience. Who knows how far they also may progress along that way in which "the human is transhumanized," or what suffering they too "must undergo on the way of illumination" (367)? Indeed, J. Middleton Murry sees "the transvaluation and transformation of the ordinary" as the "main theme" of The Cocktail Party. "In it," he writes, "the scheme of salvation is satisfying and universal.... The eventually liberated souls in The Cocktail Party recognizably belong to the human condition: they are such as you or I."¹³

Eliot's next play, The Confidential Clerk, continues the theme of salvation for man through self-knowledge, humility and the fulfilment

¹²"An Antic Disposition," Sewanee Review, LXV (1957), 58.

¹³"Mr. Eliot's Cocktail Party," Fortnightly (December, 1950), pp. 395; 396-397.

of vocation. The resolution of a complicated plot adds the suggestion of a providence guiding the lives of men. Many times throughout the play, the concept of fatherhood is stressed, and there is that in the recurring phrases which recalls the words of Him who said, "I have come in my Father's name."¹⁴ The Fatherhood of God clearly replaces the power of the gods in the Ion of Euripides which was Eliot's "starting-point" for The Confidential Clerk.

Colby Simpkins, the newly appointed "confidential clerk," and Sir Claude Mulhammer, his employer, are both restless and often ill at ease in a world that to them is unreal. They have chosen careers in the business world as their life work. But they cannot find fulfilment in business careers because each has aspired to something quite different. Sir Claude's interest is ceramics; Colby's is music. Each realizes that he can never achieve anything but second best in the work he most loves. Yet, because they cannot be happy in the business world, each tries to maintain an inner world, a sanctuary into which he may retire when life becomes oppressive, even as Eggerson, the former clerk, retires into the peace of his garden. But the expedient fails, for,

If you have two lives
Which have nothing whatever to do with each other--
Well, they're both unreal. But for Eggerson
His garden is part of one single world.¹⁵

Colby tells us that it is loneliness which makes his "sanctuary" unreal and unsatisfactory--the loneliness of man without God since Adam our

¹⁴John, 5: 43.

¹⁵The Confidential Clerk, (London: Faber and Faber, 1954), p. 53. Subsequent quotations from the play are from this edition.

common father once "walked with God" in a garden:

I turn the key and walk through the gate
 And there I am...alone, in my 'garden'
 Alone that's the thing.

.....
 If I were religious, God would walk in my garden
 And that would make the world outside it real
 And acceptable, I think. (53)

Colby finds relief from this sense of loneliness and isolation not only by self-knowledge, but also by the establishment of his own identity, by finding out just who his father is. Sir Claude who in the soul-searching process of genuinely facing himself loses a "son," gains instead the deeper understanding and love of both his wife and his daughter.

The idea of vocation in the religious sense is obscure in The Confidential Clerk. At surface level it is difficult to see Colby's insistence on doing what his father did as an "election". He is not following any example; there is none for him to follow, for he never knew his father. Within himself, however, there is an unfulfilled desire. He tells us: "The art that I could never excel in,/Seems the one thing worth doing" (38). When he discovers the identity of his father and learns that he, too, had been an "unsuccessful" musician, he resigns his position as clerk to Sir Claude in order to follow the vocation that had been his father's. Of the significance implicit in Colby's decision Arrowsmith writes:

When Colby rejects Sir Claude and Lady Elizabeth, he insensibly, and yet, I think, clearly, paraphrases Scripture: we know he is about his "father's business." The play's worldly quest of fathers seeking sons and sons seeking fathers is perfected and transfigured in the adoption of God ("ye have received the spirit of adoption whereby we cry, Abba, Father!").¹⁶

¹⁶"Transfiguration in Eliot and Euripides," Sewanee Review, LXIII (1955), 434.

revealed in the texture of the play itself and not by formal oracular statement.¹⁸

Colby, himself spiritually perceptive, recognizes Eggerson as one whose love for God and man gives unity to his life. Speaking to him, Colby says, "I'm convinced/That you always contrive to think the best of everyone" (27); and, speaking of him to Lucasta, "His garden is a part of one single world" (53). Seeking a similar integrity, Colby follows his "vocation"; and Kaghan admits "we wanted Colby to be something he wasn't" (134). In the opinion of Bonamy Dobrée,

Eliot's intention was to make each member of the audience ask himself "Am I leading the sort of life I really ought to be leading? Am I not worshipping false gods, and whoring after all manner of inventions?" It is, of course, a salutary question.... If this, as I believe, was the state of mind into which Eliot wished to throw his hearers, then he has been successful. If he wished to persuade us to any sort of doctrine, then, I think, he has failed.¹⁹

I think it is clear from Eliot's relevant prose that he had no intention of persuading his audience to any sort of doctrine. He would have been perfectly satisfied with having made his audience--one which was at least nominally Christian--ask pertinent questions about their own daily living.

Though Colby is not set apart to the extent that Harry and Celia are in the earlier plays, he is acknowledged as different:

¹⁸Richard Findlater, "The Camouflaged Drama," Twentieth Century, 154 (October, 1953), 314.

¹⁹"The Confidential Clerk," Sewanee Review, LXII (1954), 130.

...you've some fire
 To warm you, that isn't the same kind of fire
 That warms other people. You're either an egotist
 Or something so different from the rest of us
 That we can't judge you. (102)

Again we are shown how easily the same action may be motivated by either of two opposing purposes. Does Colby give up his position with Sir Claude and pursue his taste for music because of the egocentric desire to do his own will? Or does he sacrifice the possibility of success in the business world in order to follow that work to which he feels he is being called? It is said of him: "He's the sort of fellow who might chuck it all/And go to live on a desert island" (65). Colby does nothing so sensational. He makes it clear that his choice, which must appear odd in the light of worldly ambition, has been made because he is now convinced that "It doesn't matter about success." He admits: "I aimed too high before--beyond my capacity" (129), and he assures Sir Claude: "Now that I've abandoned my illusions and ambitions/All that's left is love" (130-1). This love dwells in the heart of one who has known "That state of utter exhaustion and peace/Which comes in dying to give something life" (41). These words may be those of the creative artist only, but they may also be understood at a deeper level. The Biblical phrases which echo throughout the play indicate that a profounder level is at least implied. Lady Elizabeth sums up the answer to man's apparent isolation and loneliness. She could be speaking to Harry, to Celia, to Edward and Lavinia as well as to Colby when she says:

Of course, there's something in us,
 In all of us, which isn't just heredity,
 But something unique. Something we have been
 From eternity. Something...straight from God.
 That means that we are nearer to God than to anyone.
 (72)

The solution for each of them, and for us, lies in the resolve of the Prodigal Son, "I will arise and go to my father."²⁰ Is not this what Colby is saying when he insists "I must follow my father--so that I may come to know him?"

In The Elder Statesman, Eliot's last play, the theme of man's salvation through humble self-knowledge and loving acceptance of his limitations is fully and explicitly developed. Lord Claverton, the "elder statesman" finds, in the leisure of retirement, time to look within, and to ask,

What is this self inside us, this silent observer,
Severe and speechless critic, who can terrorize us
And urge us on to futile activity...²¹

He does not wish to be alone and he is afraid of "being exposed to strangers." His daughter, Monica, accompanies him to "an expensive hotel for convalescents." Here, two former acquaintances meet him and remind him of incidents that he would prefer to forget. Their vivid recollections assist him in a ruthless scrutiny of what his life has been. Fred Culverwell, a fellow student of Oxford days, recalls an occasion when he and Claverton were returning to the college after a gay evening with two young women. Claverton, driving the car, "ran over an old man lying in the road," and did not stop. An hour or so later, a lorry driver ran over the same man, stopped, was arrested, and would have been charged with manslaughter had not medical evidence shown that the victim had died hours earlier of "natural causes". Neither Claverton nor the

²⁰Luke, 15: 18.

²¹The Elder Statesman (London: Faber and Faber, 1959), p. 44. Subsequent quotations from the play are from this edition.

lorry driver had killed him. Nevertheless, Claverton cannot forget that he did not stop. Now Culverwell has come back into the picture, and flings at Claverton:

The worst kind of failure, in my opinion,
Is the man who has to keep on pretending to himself
That he's a success. (35)

The other "friend" of former days, Mrs. Carghill, is the one-time Maisie Montjoy, a revue singer, who had foregone a breach of promise suit in return for a considerable sum offered her by Claverton's father. Now she also accuses Claverton of pretense:

The difference between being an elder statesman
And posing successfully as an elder statesman
Is practically negligible. And you look the part. (56)

Claverton has a fairly keen insight into his own soul. He maintains his dignity in the presence of these "spectres from his past," but he does not resent the things they say. He realizes that he, like Michael, his son, is not "a fugitive from justice," but only "a fugitive from reality." He is speaking to himself as much as he is to Michael when he says, "Those who flee from their past will always lose the race" (70).

Michael resents being "the son of a famous public man." He has made little of his life so far, and he blames his father for this failure. He insists, "I want to be somebody on my own account" (67), and he seizes upon the first opportunity to leave the country, an opportunity offered him, ironically enough, by Fred Culverwell. Claverton refuses to "bar his way," though the leave-taking fills him with agony of soul. Monica pleads with Michael in an effort to make him realize just what he is doing:

You must make your own life
 Of course, just as I must make mine.
 It's not a question of your going abroad
 But a question of the spirit which in-
 spired your decision. (100)

We are reminded of Harry's departure from Wishwood and the anguish it caused his mother. Monica's remark points the difference between Michael's going and Harry's, and in some measure at least, justifies Harry's action. The "spirit" in which Michael departs recalls Becket's warning of how easy it is to do the right thing for the wrong reason.

Eliot's poem, "The Hollow Men" was inspired, at least in part, by Conrad's Heart of Darkness. In The Elder Statesman another Conrad touch is discernible, this time from Lord Jim. Claverton has been haunted all his life by the voice of Fred Culverwell saying, "You didn't stop," and by the ghost of Maisie Montjoy who tells him now that she was once warned, "That man is hollow." "Each of them," says Claverton, "remembers an occasion/On which I ran away" (89). As Eliot has stressed in the earlier plays, so, too, in this one, "salvation" lies in facing the past squarely. The "new vision" thus attained in this--the final play--can be summed up in the one word: love. Claverton's love for his daughter leads him to pay her the supreme compliment of his entire trust. He confesses all to her. Monica's genuine love for her family and for Charles, her betrothed, has given her a heart that understands. She responds beautifully; and we appreciate the full significance of words she has spoken earlier:

There's no vocabulary
 For love within a family, love that's lived in
 But not looked at.... This love is silent.
 (71-72)

destiny. The vocation may be a special "election" to follow the way of vicarious suffering and even heroic sanctity; it may be a call to simple and humble acceptance of our limitations and to an awareness of the needs of others. Both paths lead along the way of expiation and atonement adapted to our spiritual capacities by Him Who leads us. Both require our own decision and our cooperation. The man who follows either way to the road's end will often be judged a madman rather than a saint; for, as Agatha in The Family Reunion, shrewdly remarks,

In a world of fugitives
The person taking the opposite direction
Will appear to run away.

More than twenty years before The Elder Statesman appeared on the English stage, Eliot had said:

What I am opposing is not merely a division of religious and secular drama into watertight compartments.... It is an opposition to the compartmentalisation of life in general, to the sharp division between our religious and our ordinary life.... We need to strive toward a kind of reintegration of both kinds of drama, just as we need to strive toward a reintegration of life.²²

Eliot's approach to the spiritual ills of our time has been a quiet one. The calm insistence of his plays may not be so theatrically effective as some might wish, but his drama does have power. Those who resent it most are often those who, in spite of themselves, have come under its spell.

P. W. Martin tells us:

Our problem is that we are caught up in a civilization having immense drive but no direction, marvelous capacity to get there, but no idea where it is going.²³

²²"Religious Drama: Mediaeval and Modern," op. cit., p. 13.

²³Experiment in Depth (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1956), p.14.

The great contribution that Eliot's plays of vocation and destiny have made to the drama is their affirmation of the life of the spirit and their suggestion of the "direction" which the spiritual can give to our age of "immense drive." Eliot faces "the boredom, and the horror, and the glory"²⁴ of life in the twentieth century; he points out that for each man there is a share in the "glory", if he will only take the trouble to look within and above.

²⁴T. S. Eliot, The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism (London: Faber and Faber, 1964), p. 106.

the drama of external action and conflict is often "full of sound and fury signifying nothing." He has shown that the motives, the decisions, which emanate from the heart and will can be portrayed on stage quietly, yet effectively. If he has not totally restored poetic drama to the theatre, he has at least given the verse play new life. That new life may be so tenuous that the poetic dramatists may not be able to bring it to maturity, but it will always remain a courageous and genuine effort made in the face of heavy odds.

Eliot's purpose to bring Christianity to the secular stage has failed--in the opinion of many--because the Christian element in his plays has not been sufficiently explicit. Would The Family Reunion (and the plays which followed it) have achieved greater and more lasting success if Eliot had avoided the Greek and given his plays a specifically Christian character? Is his attitude to Christianity in the plays an evasive one? Is evasion ever convincing? Answers both pro and con have been given to such questions as these--and every answer is a conjecture based upon personal opinion. It is impossible to know what the audience reaction to explicit and forthright Christian themes might have been. It may well be that the "battalion" of critics who "made for the door" when Eliot clearly stated his personal religious commitment would have been joined by several battalions of theatre-goers also making for the door of the playhouse which Eliot is accused of having turned into a temple.⁴

⁴Cf. Allan Lewis, The Contemporary Theatre (New York: Crown Publishers, 1962), pp. 143-169.

I prefer to look upon Eliot's use of a Greek "point of departure" for implicitly Christian themes not as an evasion but as Richard Hayes does when he writes:

They are rather the gallant effort of imagination to unite all life in continuity of spirit...one of the few searching labors after wholeness our splintered time has known. Nor will I admit the themes and pressures of Mr. Eliot's theater to be alien to anyone not in the last extremity of spiritual atrophy.⁵

Hayes' last sentence may seem harsh, but I think it should stand. One does not need to agree with Eliot's view of Christianity to feel a kinship with themes that admit of values which transcend a world given to material advance for its own sake. Eliot has broken through the compartmentalization of religious and secular life which he deplored. The theatre was the "market place" into which he carried the Christian message expressed in a manner he judged suited to the times. After their humble measure of success, his plays may slip back into the "darkness" as the scene in the theatre changes. But, from "the darkness of God" into which he himself has gone, he would assure us that

Last year's words belong to last year's language
And next year's words await another voice.⁶

⁵"The Voice of This Calling," Commonweal (November, 1958), p. 233.

⁶"The Four Quartets," The Complete Poems and Plays, p. 141.

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