T. S. Eliot as a Dramatist: A View of the 1960s*

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My subject tonight is the difficult birth of a dramatist; and I think I can already hear someone in the audience murmur to himself or to his neighbour: "The best he can do is to compose a delicate obituary." Indeed it may well be that the moment of obituary has come, and that after the tired cadences of *The Elder Statesman* the aged eagle will stretch its wings no longer. But obituaries tend to be either summary in their judgments or facile in their praise; only the best of them have the virtue of a revaluation. And there is evidently a feeling abroad, notably in the United States where they take nothing for granted except themselves, that the reputation of T. S. Eliot is ripe for overhauling. If the esoteric pundits of the Higher Literary Criticism had watched the people of Adelaide queuing up all night for the chance of getting a ticket for *Murder in the Cathedral*, they would have averted their steel-rimmed spectacles from the sight of so sinister a popularity, and mustered all their powers of analysis into a single, overwhelming question: "What, in the name of Heaven, has happened to J. Alfred Prufrock?"

I am grateful for the cue, for that is precisely the question that I intend to try to answer here. There is no other point of departure that will serve us nearly so well. What we have to consider is not so much a poet who took up playwriting in middle life, as a poet in whom the sense of character and situation was paramount from the very start. We may conclude that the best plays of T. S. Eliot are the plays which he has never written, and probably will never write; but even if that is our conclusion, we shall be interested to discover the reason for it. The answer will tell us a lot about playwriting in general, as well as about this playwright in particular. If the figure of Prufrock with his trousers rolled and his hair parted from behind, if the portrait of a lady "slowly twisting the lilac stalks", if Madame Sosostris with her horoscope and the cockney women in the pub, haunt us beyond most of the characters in the plays; if the fate of Phlebas

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the Phoenician moves us more and shocks us less than the fate of Celia Coplestone; if Gerontion in his garret seems to us a more interesting image of senescence than Lord Clavering under the spreading boughs of his cedar tree — we must still admit the difference between dramatic potentiality and *dramatis personae.* The creations of an essentially dramatic imagination have lost not a little, I think, by the rigorous disciplines and inevitable simplifications of the stage; but the stage itself has gained immensely by the transfer. It is this gain rather than that loss that I must try to evaluate here.

Now listen to these passages, one from *The Portrait of a Lady* and two from *The Waste Land,* and see if you don't surprise in them the intonations of a man who would have liked to be a dramatist and who had, at least, the right to his ambition.

> Now that lilacs are in bloom
> She has a bowl of lilacs in her room
> And twists one in her fingers while she talks.
> 'Ah, my friend, you do not know, you do not know
> What life is, you who hold it in your hands';
> (Slowly twisting the lilac stalks)
> 'You let it flow from you, you let it flow,
> And youth is cruel, and has no remorse
> And smiles at situations which it cannot see.'
> I smile, of course,
> And go on drinking tea.
> 'Yet with these April sunsets, that somehow recall
> My buried life, and Paris in the Spring,
> I feel immeasurably at peace, and find the world
> To be wonderful and youthful, after all.'
>
> The voice returns like the insistent out-of-tune
> Of a broken violin on an August afternoon:
> 'I am always sure that you understand
> My feelings, always sure that you feel,
> Sure that across the gulf you reach your hand.
>
> You are invulnerable, you have no Achilles' heel.
> You will go on, and when you have prevailed
> You can say: at this point many a one has failed.
> But what have I, but what have I, my friend,
> To give you, what can you receive from me?
> Only the friendship and the sympathy
> Of one about to reach her journey's end.
>
> I shall sit here, serving tea to friends. . . .'
>
> 'My nerves are bad to-night. Yes, bad. Stay with me.
> 'Speak to me. Why do you never speak? Speak.
> 'What are you thinking of? What thinking? What?
> 'I never know what you are thinking. Think.'

I think we are in rats' alley
Where the dead men lost their bones.

'What is that noise?'
The wind under the door.
'What is that noise now? What is the wind doing?'
Nothing again nothing.
'Do
'You know nothing? Do you see nothing? Do you remember
'Nothing?'
I remember
Those are pearls that were his eyes.
'Are you alive, or not? Is there nothing in your head?'
But
O O O O that Shakespeherian Rag —
It's so elegant
So intelligent
'What shall I do now? What shall I do?'
'I shall rush out as I am, and walk the street
'With my hair down, so. What shall we do tomorrow?
'What shall we ever do?'
The hot water at ten.
And if it rains, a closed car at four.
And we shall play a game of chess,
Pressing lidless eyes and waiting for a knock upon the door.

When we first read all this in the early 1920s, at a time when a volume of T. S. Eliot within eyesight of one's tutor was an act of indecent exposure, I doubt if we even asked ourselves what sort of plays this man would be likely to write. I have no idea whether T. S. Eliot had as yet put the question to himself. It was enough for us, who had been suckled on the Georgians, that here was a man who had restored the dramatic dimension to poetry; nor was this surprising in a critic who was steeped in the Jacobean drama. We noted the irony as well — and gave thanks. But the climacteric of Eliot's creative life was at hand; the climacteric which was also a conversion. There is a sense in which every conversion is a catastrophe, and there is an aesthetic sense in which it may be catastrophic as the word is more generally understood. "C'est avec de beaux sentiments qu'on fait de la mauvaise littérature." André Gide's dreadful warning is a red light to any artist who is tempted to allow his convictions to outrun his experience. It is a temptation to which Eliot has never succumbed. We have been spared the bombinations with which certain Christian poets have tried to stifle the salutary whisper of doubt in others, or in themselves. He has always left room, so to speak, for Jones to get in a word edgeways — for Jones, he knows only too well, "Jones — c'est lui."

Pascal and Montaigne are nicely balanced and mutually necessary — nor does this immense intellectual honesty in any way compromise the act of faith.

Nevertheless, the conversion of Eliot to Christian orthodoxy, in itself an event more dramatic than any other conceivable, however patient and prolonged its processes may have been, inevitably altered the dramatic rhythm which is so apparent in his earlier poetry. It naturally disposed him to contemplation; and *Ash Wednesday*, like the *Four Quartets*, is among the greatest contemplative poems in the English language. Contemplation and drama do not go easily hand in hand, for the reason that contemplation, though it generally contains an element of dialogue, is something into which drama properly so called has been resolved. There is little or no sign of the secret dramatist in the Ariel poems, and when he reappears in *Sweeney Agonistes* he makes no bones about it. This is Eliot's first play, or pattern for a play, and if the pattern had been worked out more thoroughly, I believe it would have been the best play he ever wrote.

Some years ago I was reading *The Portrait of a Lady* at a recital in the Royal Festival Hall, and Stephen Spender remarked to me afterwards: "I wish Eliot had gone on writing plays like that"; and I have already quoted for you enough from this poem to let you see what he meant. And Archibald Macleish said exactly the same thing to me apropos of *Sweeney Agonistes*. What they meant was that there was no nonsense about this poetry not being poetry. The rhymes were open, and the rhythms did not hide their heads in shame. There was a subtle or a brazen incantation. The tunes were catching. Eliot would probably reply that in each of his plays he is trying to do something different, that a poet repeats himself at his peril, and that in any case the language of *The Confidential Clerk* is not more different — or hardly more different — from the language of *Murder in the Cathedral* than the language of *The Tempest* is from the language of *Love's Labours Lost*. This answer, as we shall see, may not always be comforting to those who feel that an imperceptible verse is a poor substitute for an absent poetry; but I am running on ahead too fast, and we must get back to *Sweeney Agonistes*.

This is described as "Fragments of an Aristophanic Melodrama". You notice the plural; the fragments, though related, are distinct. The epigraphs at the head of the poem, or play, are also indicative; one from the *Choephoroi* of Aeschylus — "You don't see them, you don't — but I see them: they are hunting me down, I must move on", and we shall remember this when we

come to *The Family Reunion*; the other from St John of the Cross — "Hence the soul cannot be possessed of the divine union until it has divested itself of the love of created beings" — and we shall remember this when we come to the *Four Quartets*. But where does Aristophanes come in? Well, Aristophanes is a man after Mr Eliot's heart; a satirist of deeply serious intention, on whose vote a Tory government could have counted in almost any imaginable circumstance. So, although we shall expect to hear the great themes of Eliot's later poetry stated here, we shall hear them *en sourdine*. Imagine Francis Poulenc getting hold of something out of Beethoven's late Quartets and vamping it up into a spicey one-act opera for the *avant-garde*, and you will have some idea of the sort of aesthetic satisfaction that I, for one, derive from these fascinating fragments. It will be the last time that Eliot's didacticism veils itself completely beneath the mask of irony.

Fragmentary, however, *Sweeney Agonistes* remains — a feeler put out in the direction of organic drama — an essay in jazz rhythm, and the characters who dance to it are no more individualized than the characters in a Thurber drawing. This is the one work of Mr Eliot's that could be packed up, glossy and provocative, within a single issue of the *New Yorker*. And that says a good deal for it. Listen to the opening. Two ladies of easy virtue are conversing in their London flat; obviously they hunt in pairs along Piccadilly — or did so until Sir John Wolfenden put a stop to it.

DUSTY. DORIS.

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.

DORIS: No it wouldn't do to be too nice to Pereira.
DUSTY: Now Sam's a gentleman through and through.
DORIS: I like Sam
DUSTY: *I* like Sam
Yes and Sam's a nice boy too.
He's a funny fellow
DORIS: He *is* a funny fellow
He's like a fellow once I knew.
He could make you laugh.
DUSTY: Sam can make you laugh:
Sam's all right
DORIS: But Pereira won't do.
We can't have Pereira
DUSTY: Well what you going to do?
TELEPHONE: Ting a ling ling
Ting a ling ling
DUSTY: That's Pereira
DORIS: Yes that's Pereira
DUSTY: Well what you going to do?
TELEPHONE: Ting a ling ling
Ting a ling ling
DUSTY: That's Pereira
DORIS: Well can't you stop that horrible noise?
Pick up the receiver
DUSTY: What'll I say!
DORIS: Say what you like: say I'm ill,
Say I broke my leg on the stairs
Say we've had a fire
DUSTY: Hello Hello are you there?
Yes this is Miss Dorrance's *flat* —
Oh Mr. Pereira is that you? how do you do!
Oh I'm *so* sorry. I *am* so sorry
But Doris came home with a terrible chill
No, just a chill
Oh I *think* it's only a chill
Yes indeed I hope so too —
Well I *hope* we shan't have to call a doctor
Doris just hates having a doctor
She says will you ring up on Monday
She hopes to be all right on Monday
I say do you mind if I ring off now
She's got her feet in mustard and water
I said I'm giving her mustard and water
All right, Monday you'll phone through
Yes I'll tell her. Good bye. Goooood bye,
I'm sure, that's very kind of *you*.
Ah-h-h

Some years ago I read the whole of this poem at a public recital in Colombo, and was horrified to realize that practically everyone in Colombo is called Pereira. Pereira doesn't in fact appear. Doris and Dusty get to work with the cards, and when they draw the two of spades — which is the Coffin — we begin to understand that the principal themes of this play will be the themes of death and pleasure. Then a crowd of cosmopolitan riff-raff swarm up into the room, and what Mr Eliot, with excruciating modesty, describes as the "Fragment of a Prologue" comes abruptly to an end.

It is followed by what he describes, no less modestly, as the "fragment of an agon" and here Sweeney himself has joined the party. We have met him before in some of the earlier poems. We have seen him murder an epileptic lady in a brothel, of which Doris was also an inmate; we have spied him among the nightingales; and we have heard

> The sound of horns and motors, which shall bring
> Sweeney to Mrs. Porter in the spring.

Sweeney is the man of inevitable violence, whose love of created things so curiously leads him to destroy them. He is the twentieth-century killer, as you may watch him at work any day in the *Los Angeles Examiner*. But if you want to know more about him, you had better ask Mr Eliot himself. This is the answer Professor Coghill got, when he put the same question. "I imagine Sweeney as a pugilist of Irish-American origin, who later retired and kept a pub." Well, here he is with Doris painting a landscape of desert *ennui*, which is for Eliot the image of damnation:

SWEENEY: I'll carry you off
To a cannibal isle.
DORIS: You'll be the cannibal!
SWEENEY: You'll be the missionary!
You'll be my little seven-stone missionary!
I'll gobble you up. I'll be the cannibal.
DORIS: You'll carry me off? To a cannibal isle?
SWEENEY: I'll be the cannibal.
DORIS: I'll be the missionary.
I'll convert you!
SWEENEY: I'll convert *you*!
Into a stew.
A nice little, white little, missionary stew.
DORIS: You wouldn't eat me!
SWEENEY: Yes I'd eat you!
In a nice little, white little, soft little,
tender little,

Juicy little, right little, missionary stew.
You see this egg
You see this egg
Well that's life on a crocodile isle.
There's no telephones
There's no gramophones
There's no motor cars
No two-seaters, no six-seaters,
No Citroen, no Rolls-Royce.
Nothing to eat but the fruit as it grows.
Nothing to see but the palmtrees one way
And the sea the other way,
Nothing to hear but the sound of the surf.
Nothing at all but three things

DORIS: What things?

SWEENEY: Birth, and copulation and death.
That's all, that's all, that's all, that's all,
Birth, and copulation, and death.

DORIS: I'd be bored.

SWEENEY: You'd be bored.
Birth, and copulation, and death.
That's all the facts when you come to brass tacks:
Birth, and copulation, and death.
I've been born, and once is enough.
You don't remember, but I remember,
Once is enough.

It was never envisaged, I think, that *Sweeney Agonistes* should be performed; that would have been too flagrant a commitment for a dramatist who wasn't quite sure whether he was a dramatist at all. Nevertheless, the two fragments *were* performed with great effect in a production by Mr Rupert Doone at the Westminster Theatre before the war — and they raised the excited question; what next? But Mr Eliot was not going to be pushed into playwriting and it required the chance contact of a weekend house party to provoke him a little further. The Bishop of Chichester, Dr George Bell, had gathered a number of people together to discuss ways and means of putting the arts into the service of the Church; and among them were his own Director of Religious Drama, Mr Martin Browne and Mr Eliot. These two men, very similar in temperament, struck up a friendship which has served them well ever since, and has also considerably enriched the English theatre. They began by collaborating over *The Rock*. This was very much a play with a purpose — to raise money for the building of churches in the London diocese — and it hardly invites serious criticism. It was more of a pageant than a play, and more of a poem than a pageant. In fact it was a very fine poem

indeed. Scenes of rather naif dialogue were linked by magnificent choruses, of which this may stand as an example:

> The Eagle soars in the summit of Heaven,
> The Hunter with his dogs pursues his circuit.
> O perpetual revolution of configured stars,
> O perpetual recurrence of determined seasons,
> O world of spring and autumn, birth and dying!
> The endless cycle of idea and action,
> Endless invention, endless experiment,
> Brings knowledge of motion, but not of stillness;
> Knowledge of speech, but not of silence;
> Knowledge of words, and ignorance of the Word.
> All our knowledge brings us nearer to our ignorance,
> All our ignorance brings us nearer to death,
> But nearness to death no nearer to GOD.
> Where is the Life we have lost in living?
> Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge?
> Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?
> The cycles of Heaven in twenty centuries
> Bring us farther from GOD and nearer to the Dust.

Eliot, you see, has broadened and simplified his style to suit his own didactic intentions and the rather average audience he is addressing. It is an audience that from now onward he will rarely forget. He is learning the first lesson of the theatre — that the essential matter must be easily and immediately communicated. The man in the stalls or the circle cannot turn back the page and read the poem for the tenth or the twentieth time. The reader of *The Waste Land* or the *Four Quartets* can do this, and the poems, in proportion as we listen to them, will progressively disclose their meaning. If Eliot had been a greater poet or a greater dramatist than he is, he might have combined, as Shakespeare knew how to combine, the poetry which is equally effective in the study or on the stage. But he did not attempt to do so. Here in *The Rock*, as later in *Murder in the Cathedral*, he was also writing for several voices, speaking in unison, or speaking antiphonally, or speaking separately, and the proof of his success was the effect of these choruses in performance. The mingled male and female voices, trained by Elsie Fogerty, principal of the Central School of Speech Training and Dramatic Art, provided the best example of choral speech that I have ever heard in the theatre. No one at Sadlers Wells, where the performances were given, uttered the wish — which has more than occasionally been provoked by the choruses in another play — that "those damned women would stop wailing and let the actors get on with the job." In *The Rock* the chorus *were* the actors — or the only actors to whom anybody paid the slightest attention.

This brings us, rather irreverently, to *Murder in the Cathedral.* The play was commissioned by the Friends of Canterbury Cathedral for performance in the Chapter House at the Annual Festival of Music and Drama in 1935. The theme was the central epic of Canterbury, a theme which Tennyson had already brought on to paper and Henry Irving had already brought to life. It was calculated to appeal to a special audience of orthodox Anglicans as well as to a minority of others who agreed with everything about Mr Eliot except his beliefs. It was suited to the place of its performance — a lofty and uninteresting Gothic hall, where the voices had a fatal tendency to reverberate into a glorious inaudibility; where the only places for the audience to sit were the specifically English brand of rush-bottomed chairs calculated to try the patience of even the most stoic posterior; and where the only places for the actors to sit were the discreet sedilia where the members of a less pampered chapter had once sat in conference. I am always being told how impressive *Murder in the Cathedral* must have been at Canterbury. I am not so sure. Impressive it may have been, but it was also infernally uncomfortable. It is true that we did, at least, have a stage, some rudimentary lighting, a mixed cast of professionals and amateurs, and powerful historical associations. I certainly found it impressive to be carried out through the hall into the cloisters, and to hear the voices of the chorus chanting the Litany of the Saints fade into the summer night. Even that highly stylized assassination must have had a moving effect within a few yards of the place where Becket had fallen. But these aids were adventitious. It was not until we produced the play in the Bonython Hall at Adelaide that I realized how well suited it is to the right sort of building which is not a theatre. For all of us the transposition to the Sydney Elizabethan was an agony; and it says much for Sydney, and also a little for ourselves, that we have survived it.

There are probably few of you here tonight for whom *Murder in the Cathedral* requires much detailed comment. The comment has been given, to the best of our ability, elsewhere. But I would recall you to the epigraphs to *Sweeney Agonistes* — the one from Aeschylus and the other from St John of the Cross. This is a play about salvation and fear. It finds its prototype in classical as well as in medieval Christian drama; if, as Granville Barker suggested, it is close to liturgy it is close to it in a classical as well as in a Christian sense. The chorus who suffer, question and comment; the protagonist-victim who dies for his people — these take us back into the furthest hinterland of myth. They

also explain why *Murder in the Cathedral* can be enjoyed by people who are not Christian at all, and who think that on the broad matters in dispute Henry was right and Becket was wrong. The Knights have a lot of reason on their side, and Mr Eliot has not deprived them of it, however misplaced, artistically, some audiences may feel their apologia to be. Indeed, the play is not free from ambiguity. As James Stephens once remarked to me at a literary salon which he and I and Mr Eliot used to frequent together: "Ah Tom Eliot — he's a *perhaps* chap." Poetry — great poetry — tends of its nature towards affirmation and "perhaps" is often at war with it. For example, Mr Eliot is committed to the belief that Becket was a saint; the play means nothing, if it does not mean that. It seems clear by the end of the sermon that he has overcome the Fourth Temptation; yet in his final meeting with the Knights, he behaves as if he had not overcome it at all. The old histrionic intransigence is still there, as we know it to have been there in history. However, the dramatist has done wisely in not cumbering his play with historical details which could only have alienated our sympathies from his hero, and in keeping the King — a far more interesting character than Becket — off the stage altogether. He has begun his play where Ibsen would have begun it — at the point where practically everything has already happened; and while he has kept very close to history where history was in question, he has so centred his theme in Becket's mind, he has so refined it to a drama of motive, that all that matters for the moment is that Becket should not only do what he believes to be right, but that he should do it for the right reason. A particular view of history and an orthodox attachment to the Christian Church are the context of the play, but they are not its essence. Through the integrity and courage with which a single man endured martyrdom for a single thing, the validity of other and very different martyrdoms is affirmed. This is the mark of all great theatre and all great poetry — that it takes one beyond itself. We do not have to be anarchists to admire Shelley or materialists to admire Lucretius; nor do we need to be Christians, or Mr Eliot's kind of Christian, to admire *Murder in the Cathedral.* One of the most eulogistic notices the play has ever received came from Sean O'Casey; yet it runs counter to everything in which Mr O'Casey believes.

So much for ends; but what about means? The means are still a poetry which is not ashamed of itself. Skilfully varied rhymed couplets, strong assonance and alliteration, a reminiscence of medieval rhythms, an avoidance of Shakespearian echoes, two

long passages of conversational prose, the one carrying a reminder of Lancelot Andrewes, the other of Bernard Shaw — in brief, a style excellently suited to the Byzantine stiffness of a semi-abstract convention, a poetry which, at its best, is bony and skeletal like a Norman arch. When I first read the play twenty-five years ago, it seemed to me that the best of the poetry had been given to the Choruses. I no longer feel this to be the case. I think much of the Choruses is laboured, and I think they dangerously overweight the play. Moreover, they are not consistent. Sometimes they talk like the simple women they are supposed to be; at other times they speak with a sophistication of fear and disgust, more characteristic of their author than of themselves. Their most valuable function is not a prolixity of comment, but the personal relation they establish between themselves and the Archbishop. They do much to save Becket from being a prig — the specifically Christian prig who spends the days that God has given him huddled over the balance sheet of his own salvation. They provide him with something to think about beside himself, and for that no one has better reason to be grateful to them than I.

But as a theatrical problem I have come to feel the Chorus is almost beyond solution. They must be the medieval peasantry and they must be able to speak English verse. They must be the folk without being "folksy". They must be English without being merry English. They must be as medieval as Piers Plowman and as modern as Jean-Paul Sartre. It was really an awful lot to ask of eight personable young women from a Speech Training Academy in South Kensington. They did their middle-class and melodious best. Sometimes we increased them to nine, sometimes we reduced them to seven, six or five. They spoke collectively or individually or in groups. They were more or less choreographic according to the ideas of their producer. They were dressed brightly, as in England, or drably, as in Australia. They present a fascinating and exasperating challenge. Mr Martin Browne, who was the first producer of *Murder in the Cathedral*, found that when he increased their number to sixteen for a performance in Gloucester Cathedral the effect was more satisfactory than when he had employed only half that number. Mr Eliot, I believe, was best pleased with a chorus of Irish voices in a production by the National University in Dublin; and indeed I have always been of the opinion that Celtic voices — Scots, Welsh or Irish — which are naturally musical and which naturally suggest, without any affectation of dialect, a way of life similar

to that of the medieval poor, would be the best vehicle for the choruses in *Murder in the Cathedral.* Only then you would have to face the objection that Connemara is a long way from Canterbury.

Whatever may be said about *Murder in the Cathedral* — or against *Murder in the Cathedral* — and there is much more to be said than I have had time to say here — its place in the canon would seem to be secure. No other play in verse since Shakespeare has enjoyed a comparable success, and one of the reasons, no doubt, is that it is so utterly unShakespearian. It is a very didactic play, and unless one is careful its didacticism can become a freezing bore. But it is secured by the integrity of its thought and craftsmanship, its fastidious use of language and by a certain moving humility in the means by which it approaches its didactic ends. In any event, it committed Mr Eliot to the theatre; and the question remained — what kind of theatre was it going to be? Mr Eliot was not a man to rest upon his laurels; though he might say the same thing over and over again, he would say it differently. The first answer was given by *The Family Reunion* in 1939.

This play has never had the success of *Murder in the Cathedral,* although many people prefer it to anything else that he has written for the stage, and although it is a play to which opinion has gradually grown up. The vocation of Harry Monchensey is not essentially different from the vocation of Thomas Becket — to find out what he has to do and to do it "for the right reason". Where is he to go, when he has recognized the Eumenides for what they are — ministers of grace rather than furies of divine vengeance? The answer recalls the line of the Chorus in *Murder in the Cathedral,* inspired by the example of Charles de Foucauld:

> To the death in the desert, to the prayer in
> forgotten places by the broken imperial column.
> Where does one go, from a world of insanity?
> Somewhere on the other side of despair,
> To the worship in the desert, the thirst and deprivation,
> A stony sanctuary and a primitive altar,
> The heat of the sun and the icy vigil,
> A care over lives of humble people,
> The lesson of ignorance, of incurable diseases.
> Such things are possible. It is love and terror
> Of what waits and wants me, and will not let me fall.

Possible, yes, but difficult, as we shall see when we come to *The Cocktail Party.* Here the words to note are "love and terror". For Eliot they have always been inseparable and their conjunc-

tion, while it confers a special tension upon his poetry and his plays, sets him apart from the modern mind, which knows a lot about terror and less about love. For many Christians, even, the alliance is disconcerting. In *Murder in the Cathedral* the Te Deum which begins as a hymn of praise ends in a confession of fear — and the fear is a fear of love. Indeed fear has been the principal emotion of the Chorus throughout. Behind the sober, stately rhythms and the dessicated patrician décor of *The Family Reunion* the devils dance in a *Walpurgisnacht* which no romanticism can relieve. If this play had ever been turned into an opera, Stravinsky — not Berlioz — would have been the man to do it.

The play has faults and Eliot is himself obsessed by them. He finds Harry an "insufferable prig", presumably because he is for ever talking about himself. It was lucky for Becket — and for the actor playing Becket — that he had the Tempters to talk to him instead. The trouble with Harry is not that he has too much to say, but that he has too little to do. Hamlet has a great deal to say but Hamlet is for ever up and doing. The crucial scenes between Harry and Mary — who brings him halfway to self-knowledge, and between Harry and Agatha — who brings him the whole way there, is that they are too contemplative and retrospective for a scène-à-faire; and that the moment of Harry's conversion is too intangible to be theatrically evident. It is only when he faces the Eumenides without flinching — only when he can "follow the bright angels" — that we know that he has really come home. And the Eumenides themselves are an obstinate problem in the theatre, for it is of their nature to be static. Conceive them as mysterious shapes or as malevolent eyes, there is still nothing whatever for them to do — and the stage is very impatient of people who do nothing.

Since in *The Family Reunion* Eliot was drawing closer to a modern and therefore post-Christian audience, he decided to borrow a classical myth for the communication of a Christian truth, and to discover at the same time a style which he could modulate to varying degrees of incandescence; a style, moreover, which would not sound implausible on the lips of people attired in dinner jackets and sipping glasses of dry sherry. This is the real conquest of the play. Let us take three examples; the first is where one of the uncles is asking Harry's chauffeur and servant Downing — the Pylades to this modern-dress Orestes — exactly what happened on the night when Harry's wife was supposed to have fallen overboard the liner in mid-Atlantic. Here you may

well imagine that you are listening to prose, but then the basic rhythm will assert itself and you will recognize the verse structure underneath the conversational idiom:

CHARLES: Good evening, Downing.
It's good to see you again, after all these years.
You're well, I hope?

DOWNING: Thank you, very well indeed, Sir.

CHARLES: I'm sorry to send for you so abruptly,
But I've a question I'd like to put to you,
I'm sure you won't mind, it's about his Lordship.
You've looked after his Lordship for over ten years . . .

DOWNING: Eleven years, Sir, next Lady Day.

CHARLES: Eleven years, and you know him pretty well.
And I'm sure that you've been a good friend to him, too.
We haven't seen him for nearly eight years;
And to tell the truth, now that we've seen him,
We're a little worried about his health.
He doesn't seem to be . . . quite himself.

DOWNING: Quite natural, if I may say so, Sir,
After what happened.

CHARLES: Quite so, quite.
Downing, you were with them on the voyage from New York —
We didn't learn very much about the circumstances;
We only knew what we read in the papers —
Of course, there was a great deal too much in the papers.
Downing, do you think that it might have been suicide,
And that his Lordship knew it?

DOWNING: Unlikely, Sir, if I may say so.
Much more likely to have been an accident.
I mean, knowing her Ladyship,
I don't think she had the courage.

CHARLES: Did she ever talk of suicide?

DOWNING: Oh yes, she did, every now and then.
But in my opinion, it is those that talk
That are the least likely. To my way of thinking
She only did it to frighten people.
If you take my meaning — just for the effect.

CHARLES: I understand, Downing. Was she in good spirits?

DOWNING: Well, always about the same, Sir.
What I mean is, always up and down.
Down in the morning, and up in the evening,
And *then* she used to get rather excited,
And, in a way, irresponsible, Sir.
If I may make so bold, Sir,

I always thought that a very few cocktails
Went a long way with her Ladyship.
She wasn't one of those that are *designed* for drinking:
It's natural for some and unnatural for others.

CHARLES: And how was his Lordship, during the voyage?

DOWNING: Well, you might say depressed, Sir.
But you know his Lordship was always very quiet:
Very uncommon that I saw him in high spirits.
For what my judgment's worth, I always said his Lordship
Suffered from what they call a kind of repression.
But what struck me . . . more nervous than usual;
I mean to say, you could see that he was nervous.
He behaved as if he thought something might happen.

CHARLES: What sort of thing?

DOWNING: Well, I don't know, Sir.
But he seemed very anxious about my Lady.
Tried to keep her in when the weather was rough,
Didn't like to see her lean over the rail.
He was in a rare fright, once or twice.
But you know, it is just my opinion, Sir,
That his Lordship is rather psychic, as they say.

CHARLES: Were they always together?

DOWNING: Always, Sir.
That was just my complaint against my Lady.
It's my opinion that man and wife
Shouldn't see too much of each other, Sir.
Quite the contrary of the usual opinion,
I dare say. She wouldn't leave him alone.
And there's my complaint against these ocean liners
With all their swimming baths and gymnasiums
There's not even a place where a man can go
For a quiet smoke, where the women can't follow him
She wouldn't leave him out of her sight.

CHARLES: During that evening, did you see him?

DOWNING: Oh yes, Sir, I'm sure I saw him.
I don't mean to say that he had any orders —
His Lordship is always most considerate
About keeping me up. But when I say I saw him,
I mean that I saw him accidental.
You see, Sir, I was down in the Tourist,
And I took a bit of air before I went to bed,
And you could see the corner of the upper deck.
And I remember, there I saw his Lordship
Leaning over the rail, looking at the water —
There wasn't a moon, but I was sure it was him.
While I took my turn about, for near half an hour
He stayed there alone, looking over the rail.
Her Ladyship must have been all right then,
Mustn't she, Sir? or else he'd have known it.

CHARLES: Oh yes . . . quite so. Thank you, Downing,
I don't think we need you any more.

Incidentally, there is a certain doubt as to whether Harry pushed his wife overboard; whether the murder was mental or material. "Perhaps I only dreamt I pushed her" — Harry will remark later on to his aunt Agatha. This has always seemed to me a matter on which a dramatist might be expected to have made up his mind, and I once observed to Eliot that I was quite sure Harry *had* pushed her. His reply was characteristic. He smiled sadly and then said: "I have always wanted to let him off." The second passage has a much more formal rhythm. Agatha and Harry are looking back into the past to which the collective guilt of the family has bound them and from which Harry is only now learning to escape.

HARRY: . . . Now I see
I have been wounded in a war of phantoms,
Not by human beings — they have no more power
than I.
The things I thought were real are shadows, and the real
Are what I thought were private shadows. O that awful
privacy
Of the insane mind! Now I can live in public.
Liberty is a different kind of pain from prison.

AGATHA: I only looked through the little door
When the sun was shining on the rose-garden:
And heard in the distance tiny voices
And then a black raven flew over.
And then I was only my own feet walking
Away, down a concrete corridor
In a dead air. Only feet walking
And sharp heel scraping. Over and under
Echo and noise of feet.
I was only the feet, and the eye
Seeing the feet: the unwinking eye
Fixing the movement. Over and under.

HARRY: In and out, in an endless drift
Of shrieking forms in a circular desert
Weaving with contagion of putrescent embraces
On dissolving bone. In and out, the movement
Until the chain broke, and I was left
Under the single eye above the desert.

AGATHA: Up and down, through the stone passages
Of an immense and empty hospital
Pervaded by a smell of disinfectant,
Looking straight ahead, passing barred windows.
Up and down. Until the chain breaks.

HARRY: To and fro, dragging my feet
Among inner shadows in the smoky wilderness,

Trying to avoid the clasping branches
And the giant lizard. To and fro.
Until the chain breaks.
The chain breaks,
The wheel stops, and the noise of machinery,
And the desert is cleared, under the judicial sun
Of the final eye, and the awful evacuation
Cleanses.

The third passage is more formal still. Amy has died; Harry has left in pursuit of his undefined vocation; Agatha and Mary are ritually walking round the Birthday cake which was to celebrate this Family Reunion.

AGATHA: A curse is slow in coming
To complete fruition
It cannot be hurried
And it cannot be delayed

MARY: It cannot be diverted
An attempt to divert it
Only implicates others
At the day of consummation

AGATHA: A curse is a power
Not subject to reason
Each curse has its course
Its own way of expiation
Follow follow

MARY: Not in the day time
And in the hither world
Where we know what we are doing
There is not its operation
Follow follow

AGATHA: But in the night time
And in the nether world
Where the meshes we have woven
Bind us to each other
Follow follow

MARY: A curse is written
On the under side of things
Behind the smiling mirror
And behind the smiling moon
Follow follow

Of these passages it is the first which points the way that Eliot was moving — to a verse that shall be progressively more difficult to distinguish from prose, and from which any recognizable poetry shall have been expurgated. It was a curious destination for a great poet. But there is this to remember; while Eliot was writing *The Family Reunion*, he had already written the first of the *Quartets* and was no doubt meditating the others. Certain

images — notably the rose garden — are common to both. Ten years separate *The Family Reunion* from *The Cocktail Party*, and in the meantime the vein of poetry which had given us the *Quartets* had been worked through. It may have been by necessity as well as by choice that in his next play such poetry as it contained should have been in the whole rather than in the parts, and that in his next play but one poetry should have disappeared altogether. Eliot has explained his purposes in an interesting essay — his desire to compose a verse drama which a modern audience would not immediately recognize as such — but I still think that he may have been rationalizing an incapacity.

In spite of its faults — too slow and stiff a movement, too conventional a characterization, too much talk and too little action — *The Family Reunion* only just misses, as it seems to me, taking its place as the great representative play of modern times. But although modern in its setting, it is remote from the modern situation. The grim patrician house is a social backwater, and there is no evidence that any of the characters, except Agatha, has ever done an honest day's work in their lives. This is nothing against them of course, as *dramatis personae*, but in the century of the common wage-earner it does rob them of a representative value. They don't pretend to "show the age and body of the time his form and pressure", however faithfully they may hold the mirror up to nature. And the reason why *The Cocktail Party* won an immediate and sensational popularity, both in London and New York, may well have been that the audience recognized in it people very like themselves. And it may well have been Eliot's intention that they should do so.

In *The Cocktail Party*, as in its much less satisfactory successor *The Confidential Clerk*, Eliot once again claims the ancestry of Greek myth — in the one case the *Alcestis*, and in the other the *Ion*. This was rather like a man claiming to be the fourth cousin six times removed of the Duke of Wellington; the fact is more likely to be of interest to himself than to other people. Lavinia is restored to Edward Chamberlayne by a Harley Street Herakles who, before the play is over, comes to bear an uncomfortable resemblance to Almighty God. "I do not know very much about gods" says the poet of *The Dry Salvages* and we are grateful for the modest admission. It is the least that even the greatest of poets can say. But in this God the classical and Christian components are mixed with extraordinary cunning. Harcourt-Reilly is never less than himself, but his dimensions grow larger with the development of the theme he expounds. He

is quite literally a *deus ex machina*, except that he is on the stage, albeit anonymously, when the play opens — and this machine is the most intricate and the most efficient that Mr Eliot has ever constructed for the theatre. In the building of it he was helped by Mr Martin Browne, who pointed out that if the social gadflies were to turn into guardian angels the audience must be subtly conditioned for the surprise. That is why Julia leaves everything behind and why Alex is so keen to cook an omelette. Neither must be out of sight or mind for too long. They play is as modern and glossy as the chassis of a Jaguar and it runs as smoothly. Only at the very end does a note of excessive and unnecessary didacticism intervene.

The Cocktail Party at once fascinates and appals a contemporary audience. The existentialist agony is diagnosed with so clinical an accuracy, and cured with so light a touch, that we are almost prepared to accept a "comedy" which includes a crucifixion. But people who have long ceased to turn a hair at other Crucifixions were shocked by this one. Really, they complained — as some will still complain when Becket's assassins come forward to make their apologia — Mr Eliot should not hit below the belt. Larwood, they say, is simply not in it with Mr Eliot for bodyline bowling; and Mr Eliot, who will talk to you about cricket by the hour, would hugely enjoy the comparison. I confess that I have a great desire to play Harcourt-Reilly on an Australian oval, and perhaps one day I shall. For *The Cocktail Party* represents the complete success of a great poet in coming to terms with the modern theatre, even if its price is the abdication of what we normally understand by poetry. But Mr Eliot has never allowed us to rest content with any such normal understanding, and so he will enlarge the dimensions of poetry in one way even when he seems to be restricting them in another. Listen to the great scene between Harcourt-Reilly and Celia Coplestone; first there is the bleak, but also curiously moving, definition of the affirmative way — the way to which Edward and Lavinia will return, and which Celia may find if she wishes:

> REILLY: . . . If that is what you wish,
> I can reconcile you to the human condition,
> The condition to which some who have gone as far as you
> Have succeeded in returning. They may remember
> The vision they have had, but they cease to regret it,
> Maintain themselves by the common routine,
> Learn to avoid excessive expectation,
> Become tolerant of themselves and others,
> Giving and taking, in the usual actions

What there is to give and take. They do not repine;
Are contented with the morning that separates
And with the evening that brings together
For casual talk before the fire
Two people who know they do not understand each other,
Breeding children whom they do not understand
And who will never understand them.

CELIA: Is that the best life?

REILLY: It is a good life. Though you will not know how good
Till you come to the end. But you will want nothing else,
And the other life will be only like a book
You have read once, and lost. In a world of lunacy,
Violence, stupidity, greed . . . it is a good life.

Is this the only alternative to crucifixion on an ant-hill in darkest Africa? The question is a fair one, and we can only reply that for this poet, at that time of writing, it was the only alternative that his imagination could encompass. Here, no less than in *Murder in the Cathedral* and *The Family Reunion*, his imagination is fired by the martyrdom of the natural man. Celia is offered her choice and the contemporary English drama knows nothing finer than the passage in which she makes it:

REILLY: There *is* another way, if you have the courage.
The first I could describe in familiar terms
Because you have seen it, as we all have seen it,
Illustrated, more or less, in lives of those about us.
The second is unknown, and so requires faith —
The kind of faith that issues from despair.
The destination cannot be described;
You will know very little until you get there;
You will journey blind. But the way leads towards
possession
Of what you have sought for in the wrong place.

CELIA: That sounds like what I want. But what is my duty?

REILLY: Whichever way you choose will prescribe its own duty.

CELIA: Which way is better?

REILLY: Neither way is better.
Both ways are necessary. It is also necessary
To make a choice between them.

CELIA: Then I choose the second.

REILLY: It is a terrifying journey.

CELIA: I am not frightened
But glad. I suppose it is a lonely way?

REILLY: No lonelier than the other. But those who take the other
Can forget their loneliness. You will not forget yours.
Each way means loneliness — and communion.
Both ways avoid the final desolation

Of solitude in the phantasmal world
Of imagination, shuffling memories and desires.

CELIA: That is the hell I have been in.

REILLY: It isn't hell
Till you become incapable of anything else.
Now — do you feel quite sure?

CELIA: I want your second way.
So what am I to do?

REILLY: You will go to the sanatorium.

CELIA: Oh, what an anti-climax! I have known people
Who have been to your sanatorium, and come back again —
I don't mean to say they weren't much better for it —
That's why I came to you. But they returned . . .
Well . . . I mean . . . to everyday life.

REILLY: True. But the friends you have in mind
Cannot have been to this sanatorium.
I am very careful whom I send there:
Those who go do not come back as these did.

CELIA: It sounds like a prison. But they can't *all* stay there!
I mean, it would make the place so over-crowded.

REILLY: Not very many go. But I said they did not come back
In the sense in which your friends came back.
I did not say they stayed there.

CELIA: What becomes of them?

REILLY: They choose, Miss Coplestone. Nothing is forced on them.
Some of them return, in a physical sense;
No one disappears. They lead very active lives
Very often, in the world.

CELIA: How soon will you send me there?

REILLY: How soon will you be ready?

CELIA: Tonight, by nine o'clock.

REILLY: Go home then, and make your preparations.
Here is the address for you to give your friends:
[*Writes on a slip of paper*]
You had better let your family know at once.
I will send a car for you at nine o'clock.

CELIA: What do I need to take with me?

REILLY: Nothing.
Everything you need will be provided for you,
And you will have no expenses at the sanatorium.

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

REILLY: It is the best reason.

CELIA: But I know it is I who have made the decision:
I must tell you that. Oh, I almost forgot —
May I ask what your fee is?

REILLY: I have told my secretary
That there is no fee.

CELIA: But . . .

REILLY: For a case like yours
There is no fee.
[*Presses button*]

CELIA: You have been very kind.

REILLY: Go in peace, my daughter.
Work out your salvation with diligence.

This, as it seems to me, is the climax of Mr Eliot's achievement as a dramatist. I have not the time and, to tell the truth, I have not the inclination, to discuss the later plays. *The Confidential Clerk*, admirably constructed as it is, with a single very moving scene in the second act, is in its ensemble little more than a theatrical exercise for five fingers. The old theme of vocation is still present, but it is now stated in language of a disconcerting aridity. I played the part of Sir Claude Mulhammer when the play was given in Paris at the International Drama Festival in 1954, and I did not greatly enjoy it. No sooner had I started to master the dry staccato rhythms than I realized the distance that Eliot had travelled since *Murder in the Cathedral.* Was it a step forward or a step back? It was, in any case, a step aside. If Eliot's drama had developed on the lines of *The Waste Land* — the speculation is vain but, for me, continuously haunting. In *Sweeney Agonistes* there were signs that it might have done so. The sophisticated dialogue of the one and the syncopated rhythms of the other, announced the possibility of a new poetic drama which should be at once timeless and contemporary. So indeed it has turned out; but meanwhile the Liturgy and the Greeks and the well-made play have interposed their several conventions. T. S. Eliot has arrived in Shaftesbury Avenue and the English theatre owes him much. But although in that theatre, he is not of it; and if he had decided to build a theatre of his own, for which he had laid the foundations and outlined the plan, I think that our gratitude might have been even greater.