T.S. Eliot: A Study of His Dramatic Theory

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T. S. ELIOT: A STUDY OF HIS DRAMATIC THEORY

by

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BIBLIOGRAPHY
In the past twenty-five years, T. S. Eliot has written five verse plays, the most recent in 1958. From the very beginning of his literary career, however, he has devoted much of his critical writing to the poetic drama. Seven of the thirteen pieces in his first collection of essays, The Sacred Wood, published in 1920, are concerned with drama. Since that first book, he has continued to develop his ideas on drama in essays, addresses, book reviews, and introductory prefaces, many of them collected in his later volumes of essays. It is the purpose of this study to assess the relation of this body of criticism to Eliot's plays.

The drama criticism written before 1935, which shall be considered first, centers upon two basic ideas: the importance of convention in drama and the concept of drama as a construction of deepening levels of significance. Other ideas which Eliot considered in this period, although less emphasized than these two, are also worth noting. They concern the dramatic unities, characterization, and the place of drama and the poetic dramatist in modern life. At this point it is necessary to point out that in Eliot's mind, poetry is such an integral part of drama that unless he is
specifically considering prose drama, all his theories must be applied to verse drama.

Elliot's demand for convention grows out of his deep dissatisfaction with realistic drama and his conviction that the techniques which it employs produce nothing but sterile artificiality. "Rhetoric and Poetic Drama," an essay written in 1919, is an early statement of this objection. In it, Elliot expresses his belief that an attempt to write constantly in a conversational style, as realistic drama demands, merely produces an artificial effect. "There is in fact no conversational or other form which can be applied indiscriminately; if a writer wishes to give the effect of speech he must positively give the effect of himself talking in his own person or in one of his roles; and if we are to express ourselves, our variety of thoughts and feelings on a variety of subjects with inevitable rightness, we must adapt our manner to the moment with infinite variations."¹

There are moments in a play when a rhetorical style of speech is necessary and valuable. Really fine rhetoric in drama occurs "where the character in the play sees himself in a dramatic light."² The speech on noses in Cyrano de Bergerac is an example

²Ibid.
of rhetoric properly used, for Cyrano is "contemplating himself as a romantic, a dramatic figure."^3

Only rarely in modern drama do characters possess this dramatic sense. In realistic plays characters are not allowed to be consciously dramatic because of the possibility of their appearing less real. The exclusion of the dramatic consciousness and of the rhetorical speeches which it produces is not in fact realistic at all, for "in many of those situations in actual life which we enjoy consciously and keenly, we are at times aware of ourselves in this dramatic way, and these moments are of very great usefulness to dramatic verse. A very small part of acting is that which takes place on the stage!^4

It is the presence of this dramatic sense that makes Cyrano a living character. Because of it, the speech on noses satisfies the requirements of poetic drama, for it takes genuine human emotions and gives them artistic form. Rostand's ability to endow his characters with this sense determines his stature as a dramatic poet:

Not only as a dramatist, but as a poet, he is superior to Masterlinck, whose drama, in failing to be dramatic fails also to be poetic. Masterlinck has a literary perception of the dramatic and a literary perception of the poetic, and he joins the two; the two are not, as sometimes they are in the work of Rostand, fused. His characters take no conscious

^3Ibid., p. 83.
^4Ibid.
delight in their role—they are sentimental. With Rostand the centre of gravity is in the expression of the emotion, not . . . in the emotion which cannot be expressed. Some writers appear to believe that emotions gain in intensity through being inarticulate. Perhaps the emotions are not significant enough to endure full daylight. 5

A review Eliot wrote in the Athenaeum for May 14, 1920, of John Middleton Murray's verse play, Cinnamon and Angelica, is an analysis of the plight of the poet who tries to write verse drama in an age with no dramatic conventions of any kind. For a modern poet, who is living in such an age, the most difficult task possible is to create a poetic drama: "it is infinitely more difficult for a poet today than it was for a poet of no greater talent three hundred years ago." 6

In suggesting the reason for this increased difficulty, Eliot insists that it is not lack of a receptive audience which hampers the poet; there are sufficient people willing to see and to subsidize the poetic drama:

But what is needed is not sympathy or encouragement or appreciation, . . . but a kind of unconscious co-operation. The ideal condition is that under which everything, except what only the individual genius can supply, is provided for the poet. A framework is provided. We do not mean "plot"; a poet may incorporate, adapt, or invent as he prefers or as occasion suggests. But a dramatic poet needs to have some kind of dramatic form given to him as the condition of his time, a form which in itself is neither good nor bad, but which permits an artist to fashion it into a work of art. And by a "kind of dramatic form" one means almost the temper

5Ibid., p. 84.
of the age (not the temper of a few intellectuals); a preparedness, a habit on the part of the public, to respond in a predictable way, however cruelly, to a certain stimuli.  

A modern dramatic poet living in an age which does not supply this framework faces an enormous task. "He has to supply his own framework; his own myth, he must do without the commonplaces which so stoutly supported even Aeschylus and Shakespeare. He must stand quite alone; which means he must, if he can write poetry (not merely good blank verse) at every moment."  

An idea of the type of convention Eliot had in mind for poetic drama in this period is suggested in a "London Letter" he wrote for the Dial, an American magazine, in August of 1921. In this article he writes that the Diaghileff ballet had been greeted in London two years before as the beginning of a new art of the theater. Although no further development of this new art had occurred, Eliot believes that "the ballet will probably be one of the influences forming a new drama if a new drama ever comes." Ballet is more simplified than the drama now being written, "and what is needed is a simplification of current life into something rich and strange." Moreover, ballet has what is a necessity for all art: "the counter-thrust of strict limitations of form and the

7Ibid.  
8Ibid.  
10Ibid.
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."11

A discussion of the Phoenix Society production of 'Tis Pity She's a Whore which appeared in the Criterion for April, 1923, under the title "Dramatic Personae" is a further consideration of the relationship between ballet and a new kind of drama. After noting the different styles of acting which conflicted in the production, Eliot comments on the performance of a Mr. Swinley, This actor, with his mask-like beauty, belongs to a new theater, Eliot regrets that he has not had the ballet training in movement and gesture. "For his physical type is not dissimilar to that of Leonid Massine, who seems to me the greatest actor whom we have in London. Massine, the most completely unhuman, impersonal abstract belongs to the future stage."12

In examining the difference between the ballet and the realistic stage as vehicles for art, Eliot makes his first explicit demand for some sort of ritual drama:

... the difference between the conventional gesture of the ordinary stage, which is supposed to express emotion,

11Ibid., 215

and the abstract gesture of Massine, which symbolizes emotion, is enormous. The former is usually untrue, and always monotonous. . . . The realism of the ordinary stage is something to which we can no longer respond, because to us it is no longer realistic. We know now that the gesture of daily existence is inadequate for the stage; instead of pretending that the stage gesture is a copy of reality, let us adopt a literal untruth, a thorough-going convention, a ritual. For the stage—not only in its remote origins, but always—is a ritual, and the failure of the contemporary stage to satisfy the craving for ritual is one of the reasons why it is not a living art.13

In his review of Studies of the Development of the Fool in the Elizabethan Drama, Eliot repeats his demand for ritual drama, linking the ritual to the presence of rhythm, not only in sound, but also in movement.

The essentials of drama were, as we might expect, given by Aristotle: "Poetry, music, and dancing constitute in Aristotle a group by themselves, their common element being imitation by means of rhythm which admits of being applied to words, sounds, and the movements of the body." (Butcher, p. 139). It is the rhythm so utterly absent from modern drama, either verse or prose, and which interpreters of Shakespeare do their best to suppress, which makes Massine and Charlie Chaplin the great actors that they are, and which makes the juggling of Rastelli more cathartic than a performance of "A Doll's House." As for the catharsis, we must remember that Aristotle was accustomed to dramatic performances only in rhythmic form; and that therefore he was not called upon to determine how far the catharsis could be affected by the moral or intellectual significance of the play without its verse form and proper declamation.

The drama was originally ritual; and ritual, consisting of a set of repeated movements, is essentially a dance.14

"Four Elizabethan Dramatists," written in 1924, continues the protest against realism in drama. The essay appears with the

13 Ibid.
14 T. S. Eliot, "The Beat of a Drum," Nation and Athenaeum, XXIV (October 6, 1923), 12.
subtitle, "A Preface to an Unwritten Book." This book was to be an analysis of the work of Webster, Tournier, Middleton, and Chapman in the light of Eliot's conception of the pervading fault of Elizabethan drama, its lack of dramatic convention. "The great vice of English drama from Kyd to Galsworthy has been that its aim of realism was unlimited. In one play, Everyman, and perhaps in that one play only, we have a drama within the limitations of art; since Kyd, since Arden of Feversham, since The Yorkshire Tragedy, there has been no form to arrest, so to speak, the flow of spirit at any particular point before it expands and ends its course in the desert of exact likeness to the reality which is perceived by the most commonplace mind."\(^{15}\)

Lack of such a convention removes drama from art and separates in a play the poetry and the drama. "It is essential 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 a work of art."\(^{16}\)

Eliot defines convention as "some quite new selection or structure or distortion in subject matter or technique; any form


\(^{16}\) Ibid.
or rhythm imposed upon the world of action."17 It is not "any particular convention of subject matter, of treatment of verse or dramatic form, of general philosophy of life or any other convention which has already been used."18

Drama should have "conventions of the stage and the actor as well as of the play itself."19 Lack of such conventions makes the performance even of the plays of Shakespeare unacceptable because the actor is allowed to interpret his role.

I would have a work of art such that it needs only to be completed and cannot be altered by each interpretation. Now it is obvious that in realistic drama, you become more and more dependent upon the actor, . . . The closer a play is built upon real life, the more the performance of one actor will differ from another, and the more the performance of one generation of actors will differ from those of the next. It is furthermore obvious that what we ask involves a considerable sacrifice of a certain kind of interest. A character in the conventional play can never be as real as is the character in a realistic play while the role is being enacted by a great actor who has made the part his own. I can only say that wherever you have a form you make some sacrifice against some gain.20

That Eliot intends these remarks to have an impact on modern drama is obvious from one of his opening remarks:

The statement and explication of a conviction about such an important body of dramatic literature, toward what is in fact the only distinct form of dramatic literature that England has produced should be something more than an exercise

17Ibid., p. 11.
18Ibid.
19Ibid.
20Ibid., p. 15.
in mental ingenuity or in refinement of taste; it should be something of revolutionary influence on the future of drama. Contemporary literature, like contemporary politics, is confused by the moment to moment struggle for existence; but the time arrives when an examination of principles is necessary. I believe that the theatre has reached a point at which a revolution in principles should take place.21

In April of 1925 Eliot reviewed two books on the dance in the *Criterion*. In this essay, he calls the Mass and the ballet the most exalted forms of dancing. "For is not the High Mass—as performed, for instance, at the Madeleine in Paris—one of the highest developments of dancing?"22 In a later essay, Eliot suggests that the Mass is a form of drama. These two concepts of the Mass show the close relationship Eliot sees between dancing and drama and the importance of a ritual meaning in both.

In 1928 Eliot wrote an introduction, "A Dialogue on Dramatic Poetry," to an edition of Dryden's *Of Dramatick Poesie*. This essay is the most complete development of Eliot's ideas on the relationship of drama to religious liturgy and the connection between poetic and ritual values in the drama,

Early in the discussion, the speakers agree that the function of drama transcends that of mere amusement and that dramatists must assume some moral attitude in common with their audience. Aeschylus and Sophocles, the Elizabethtans, and the Restoration


dramatists had this. But this must be already given; it is not the job of the dramatist to impose it."23

Transferring the discussion to a consideration of form, one of the speakers suggests that ballet has everything desirable in the drama, except poetry. He points out that all of them had recently enjoyed the Russian ballet. "It did not teach any 'lesson,' but it had form. It seemed to revive the more formal element in drama for which we craved. . . . If there is a future for drama, and particularly for poetic drama, will it not be in the direction indicated by the ballet? Is it not a question of form rather than ethics? And is not the question of verse drama versus prose drama a question of degree of form?"24

This question leads to a response which is a direct affirmation of the superiority of verse over the prose of realistic drama.

People have tended to think of verse as a restriction upon drama. They think that the emotional range, and the realistic truth, of drama is limited and circumscribed by verse. People were once content with verse in drama, they say because they were content with a restricted and artificial range of emotion. Only prose can give the full gamut of modern feeling, can correspond to actuality. But is not every dramatic representation artificial? And are we not merely deceiving ourselves when we aim at greater and greater realism? Are we not contenting ourselves with appearances, instead of insisting upon fundamentals? Has human feeling altered much from Aeschylus to ourselves? I maintain the contrary. I


24Ibid.
say that prose drama is merely a slight by-product of verse drama. The human soul, in intense emotion, strives to express itself in verse. . . . The tendency, at any rate, of prose drama is to emphasize the ephemeral and superficial; if we want to get at the permanent and universal we tend to express ourselves in verse.\textsuperscript{25}

The speaker who originally brought ballet into the discussion returns to it to point out that the whole group approves of the traditional and symbolic movements which provide the form of ballet, and which are really a form of liturgy. He unites the ideas of form and intense significance in his next remark:

I say that the consummation of the drama, is to be found in the ceremony of the Mass. I say with the support of scholars . . . that drama springs from religious liturgy, and that it cannot afford to depart far from religious liturgy. . . . But when drama has ranged as far as it has in our own day, is not the only solution to return to religious liturgy? . . . Have you not there everything necessary? And indeed if you consider the ritual of the Church during the cycle of the year, you have the complete drama represented. The Mass is a small drama having all the unities; but in the Church year you have represented the full drama of creation.\textsuperscript{26}

Another speaker qualifies this position by stating that the intentions of a devout person while attending Mass and while attending a drama are entirely different. It is a mistake to make a religion of drama or a drama of religion. The essential thing is to recognize that both are necessary to us. We cannot be aware solely of divine realities. We must be aware also of human realities. And we crave some liturgy less divine, something in respect of which we shall be more spectators and less participants.

\textsuperscript{25}Ibid., p. 34.
\textsuperscript{26}Ibid., p. 35.
Hence we want the human drama; related to the divine drama, but not the same, as well as the Mass. 27

One of the participants sees a more profound relationship between the quality of religion and the quality of drama which an age produces:

I have a suggestion to put forward. It is this: can we not take it that the form of the drama must vary from age to age in accordance with religious assumptions of the age? That is, that drama represents a relation of the human needs and satisfactions to the religious needs and satisfactions which the age provides. When the age has a set religious practice and belief, then the drama can and should tend towards realism. I say towards, I do not say arrive at. The more definite the ethical principles, the more freely the drama can move towards what is now called photography. The more fluid, the more chaotic the religious and ethical beliefs, the more the drama must tend in the direction of liturgy. Thus there would be some constant relation between drama and the religion of the time. . . . Perhaps our movement should be towards what we called, in touching upon the ballet, form 28

To Eliot, therefore, convention is initially attractive for artistic reasons. He objects to the lack of formal discipline in realistic drama and to the limitation of drama to "that reality which is perceived by the most commonplace mind." He sees three technical advantages for the playwright in conventionalized drama. First, such a drama would supply him with a set of commonplaces to which every audience would always respond in the same way. Secondly, such a drama would protect the author's intentions in a play from interpretation and distortion by actors. Most important,

27Ibid., p. 36.
28Ibid.
a conventionalized drama would give the author and the audience some very necessary common assumptions in an age lacking standard ethical and religious principles.

This admiration for convention on artistic grounds becomes identified with the demand for ritual. The merging of the two ideas is best seen in Eliot's attitude toward the influence of ballet upon drama. He first desires a new drama which will imitate the rigidly formal and symbolic gestures of ballet. This changes when he identifies ballet with liturgy, and then both ballet and drama with the Mass. His final position on the place of liturgy in modern drama is found in "A Dialogue on Dramatic Poetry," where the speakers agree that modern drama must fulfill a universal need for ritual related to the Mass, but not identified with it.

The importance of convention is constantly stressed, but no specific suggestion about the type of convention to be employed is given. The vagueness of the definition of convention as "some quite new selection or structure or distortion in subject matter or technique; any form or rhythm imposed upon the world of action" shows that Eliot did not intend to imitate any known conventional practices. However, it seems quite certain that those conventions that would be devised would be related to Christian ritual worship. The admiration for Everyman as the only play in English written within the limits of art, and for the impersonal, abstract, and symbolic elements in ballet, the awareness of the possibilities
of rhythmic movement as well as rhythmic speech in drama, provide
some further insights into the way these conventions might have
developed.

The second idea which dominates this early criticism is Eliot's
concept of drama as a construction of deepening layers of signifi-
cance. One of the clearest statements of this idea is to be
found in an essay on John Marston, written in 1934. In it Eliot
states that the basic difference between poetic and prose drama
is the presence in poetic drama of an under-pattern of deeper re-
ality than the surface of the play, "a pattern behind the pattern
into which the characters deliberately involve themselves; the
kind of pattern which we see in our own lives only at rare moments
of inattention and detachment, drowsing in sunlight."29 This
double pattern is demanded by poetic drama:

It is possible that what distinguishes poetic drama from
prosaic drama is a kind of doubleness in the action, as if it
took place on two planes at once. In this it is different
from allegory, in which the abstraction is something conceiv-
ed not something differently felt, and from symbolism (as
in the plays of Masterlinok) 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. . . . It is not by writing quotable
'poetic' passages, but by giving us the sense of something
behind, more real than any of his personages and their ac-
tion, that Marston established himself among the writers of
genius. We sometimes feel in following the words and behav-
ior of some of the characters of Dostoevsky, that they are
living at once on some other plane of reality from which we
are shut out; their behavior does not seem crazy, but

rather in conformity with the laws of some world we cannot perceive. 30

He applies this concept of layers to the structure of the play itself. In " Seneca in Elizabethan Translation," an introduction to the Tudor Translation Series edition of the Seneca Tragedies, he points out that Senecan declaimed drama differs from Greek drama because it is "at one remove from reality." 31

Behind the dialogue of Greek drama we are always conscious of a concrete visual actuality, and behind that of a specific emotional actuality. Behind the drama of words is the drama of action, the timbre of voice and voice, the uplifted hand or tense muscle, and the particular emotion. The spoken play, the words which we read, are symbols, a shorthand, and often, as in the best of Shakespeare, a very abbreviated shorthand indeed, for the acted and felt play, which is always the real thing. The phrase, beautiful as it may be, stands for a greater beauty still. . . . In the plays of Seneca, the drama is all in the word, and the word has no further reality behind it. His characters all seem to speak with the same voice, and at the top of it; they recite in turn. 32

An essential of good poetic drama is, therefore, the sense of a deeper reality behind the action of the play. Inferior poetic drama, on the other hand, is a hollow structure with nothing behind the words, neither character nor action.

A term closely related to this idea is "poetry of the surface." When this term was first used by Eliot in an essay on Ben Jonson written in 1919, it meant a type of writing which does not

30 Ibid., p. 189.
32 Ibid.
evoke unconscious emotional reactions, but instead arouses an intellectual response to the design of the whole play: "... the polished veneer of Jonson reflects only the lazy reader's fatuity; unconscious does not respond to unconscious; no swarms of inarticulate feelings are aroused. The immediate appeal of Jonson is to the mind; his emotional tone is not in the single verse, but in the design of the whole."33

In 1932 Eliot used the same term in an essay on John Ford to apply to the kind of verse written by Ford, Beaumont and Fletcher, Shirly, and Otway. In relation to these inferior playwrights, it means verse which is technically effective, but empty. These authors are able to write verse that is emotionally evocative, but the poetry appeals to emotions and associations which the authors do not understand.34 These authors use techniques developed by other writers, notably Shakespeare, without touching the experience which produced them. They therefore create plays which are hollow; the word falsely arouses emotion, but behind the emotion there lies nothing at all. Jonson, on the other hand, confined his plays to two levels, the second layer containing within itself its own validity and its own logic; it therefore gives us a new point of view from which to inspect the real world.35

Eliot's famous doctrine of the objective correlative, on the basis of which he condemned Hamlet as an artistic failure, is also related to this idea of levels. In "Hamlet and His Problems," written in 1919, Eliot contends that Hamlet "Far from being Shakespeare's masterpiece, is most certainly an artistic failure." The play is full of "superfluous and inconsistent scenes which even hasty revision should have noticed." The basic flaw in the play, however, is Shakespeare's inability to manipulate into art the subject of the play, the effect of a mother's guilt upon her son.

The only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding an "objective correlative"; in other words, a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that particular emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked. If you examine any of Shakespeare's more successful tragedies, you will find this exact equivalence; you will find that the state of mind of Lady Macbeth walking in her sleep has been communicated to you by a skillful accumulation of imagined sensory impressions; the words of Macbeth on hearing of his wife's death strike us as if, given the sequence of events, these words were automatically released by the last event in the series. The artistic "inevitability" lies in this complete adequacy of the external to the emotion; and this is precisely what is deficient in Hamlet. Hamlet, the man, is dominated by an emotion which is inexpressible, because it is in excess of the facts as they appear.

At the deepest level is the emotion; at another is the set of objects which stands for the emotion.

36T. S. Eliot, "Hamlet and His Problems," Selected Essays, p. 125
37Ibid.
38Ibid., p. 124.
39Ibid., p. 125.
The importance of this concept of multiple planes of reality in Eliot's mind and the impact it had upon his early experiments in dramatic form are illustrated in a remark in the concluding lecture of his term as Norton Professor of Poetry at Harvard. He says that he perceived in poetic drama, using Shakespeare's plays as examples, various levels of significance:

For the simplest auditors there is the plot, for the more thoughtful the character and conflict of character, for the more literary the words and phrasing, for the more musically sensitive, the rhythm, and for the auditors of greater sensibility and understanding a meaning which reveals itself gradually. And I do not believe that the classification of audience is so clear-cut as this; but rather that the sensibility of every auditor is acted upon by all these elements at once, though in different degrees of consciousness. At none of these levels is the auditor bothered by the presence of that which he does not understand, or by the presence of that in which he is not interested.  

His first experiment in verse drama, the few scenes of Sweeney Agonistes were written, he says, with this pattern in mind:

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


41Ibid.
It is consistent with Eliot's striving for a tight and conventionalized form that he should advocate observance of the unities in drama. In "A Dialogue on Dramatic Poetry" one of the speakers states his belief in the wisdom of Dryden's view of the unities: "But the Unities have for me, at least, a perpetual fascination. I believe they will be found highly desirable for the drama of the future. For one thing, we want more concentration. All plays are much too long. . . A continuous hour and a half of intense interest is what we need. No intervals, no chocolate-sellers or ignoble trays. The Unities do make for intensity, as does verse rhythm." 42

This remark is expanded in "An Apology for the Countess of Pembroke," the second lecture in the 1933 Norton series, to a full exploration of the unities in drama. At this point it is necessary to point out that Eliot intends these remarks to be applied to poetic drama.

Eliot begins the lecture by agreeing with Sidney's condemnation in the Defense of Poetrie of the mixture of tragedy and comedy in drama. This mixture satisfies the "permanent craving of human nature" for comic relief. 43 This craving

springs from a lack of the capacity for concentration. Farce and love romances, especially if seasoned with scabrousness, are the two forms of entertainment upon which the human mind

can most easily, lovingly, and for the longest time maintain its attention; but we like some farce as a relief from our sentiment, however salacious, and some sentiment as a relief from our farce, however broad. The audience which can keep its attention fixed upon pure tragedy or pure comedy is much more highly developed. The Athenian stage got relief through the chorus; and perhaps some of its tragedy may have held attention largely by its sensationalism. To my mind, Racine's Berenice represents the summit of civilization in tragedy; . . . The dramatic poet who can engross the reader's or the auditor's attention during the space of a Berenice is the most civilized dramatist—though not necessarily the greatest, for there are other qualities to consider.  

Sidney's demand for unity of feeling was fulfilled by the development of the comic element into independent plays. This happened "not because docile dramatists obeyed the wishes of Sidney, but because the improvements advocated by Sidney happened to be those which a maturing civilization would make for itself. The doctrine of Unity of Sentiment, in fact happens to be right."  

In considering Sidney's demand for unity of place and time, Eliot states his own view on this "stumbling-block so old that we think it long since worn away."  

But my point is simply that the unities differ radically from human legislation in that they are laws of nature, and a law of nature, even when it is a law of human nature is quite another thing from a human law. The kind of literary law in which Aristotle was interested was not law that he laid down, but law that he discovered. The laws (not rules) of unity of place and time remain valid in that every play which observes them in so far as its material allows is in that respect and degree superior to plays which observe them less. I believe that in every play in which they are not observed we only  

44Ibid.  
45Ibid.  
46Ibid.
put up with their violation because we feel that something is
gained which we could not have if the law were observed. This
is not to establish another law. There is no other law pos-
sible. It is merely to recognize that in poetry as in life
we must observe that the Unities are not three separate laws.
They are three aspects of one law; we may violate the law of
Unity of Place more flagrantly if we preserve the law of Uni-
ity of Time, or vice versa; we may violate both if we observe
more closely the law of Unity of Sentiment. 47

Eliot quotes Butcher’s edition of the Poetics to convey his
own conception of the Unity of Sentiment:

Unity, says Butcher in his edition of the Poetics is
manifested in two ways: "First, in the causal connexion that
binds together the several parts of a play— the thoughts, the
emotions, the decisions of the will, the external events being
inextricably interwoven. Secondly, in the fact that the whole
series of events, with all the moral forces that are brought
into collision, are directed to a single end. The action as
it advances, converges on a definite point. The thread of
purpose running through it becomes more marked. All minor
effects are subordinated to the sense of an ever-growing unity.
The end is linked to the beginning with inevitable certainty,
and in the end we discern the meaning of the whole."

It should be obvious that the observance of this Unity
must lead us, given certain dramatic material otherwise
highly valuable, inevitably to violation of the Unities of
Place and Time. 48

It is significant that nowhere in this early criticism does
Eliot consider characterization in general terms. It is only in
the essays on Jonson (1919), Massinger (1920), and Tourneur (1930)
that this crucial subject is considered. These essays develop only
one idea, the meaning of the word "real" when it is applied to
dramatic characters.

47Ibid., pp. 45-46.
48Ibid., p. 47.
According to Eliot, characters in a play can have two kinds of reality; they can be real in relation to actual life, as Shakespeare's are, or they can be real in relation to each other and the play in which they appear. A play of Jonson embodies this latter type of reality: "The life of the character is inseparable from the life of the drama. This is not dependence upon a background, or upon a substratum of fact. The emotional effect is single and simple. Whereas in Shakespeare the effect is due to the way in which the characters act upon one another, in Jonson it is given in the way which the characters fit in with each other."49 Eliot makes the same statement eleven years later about the characters in Cyril Tourneur's play, The Revenger's Tragedy. They "may be distortions, grotesques, almost childish caricatures of humanity, but they are all distorted to scale. Hence the whole action, from their appearance to their ending, ... has its own self-subsistent reality."50

In the essay on Massinger, Eliot adds one more facet to his idea when he insists that a character who is real in either of these ways "must be conceived from some emotional unity. A character is not to be composed of scattered observations of human nature, but of parts which are felt together. ... A 'living' character 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

49"Ben Jonson," p. 133.
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." 51 Eliot expressed the same idea in the essay on Jonson when he accounted for the difference in the type of character created by Shakespeare and Jonson. Shakespeare's complex and deeply real characters are the product of "a susceptibility to a greater range of emotion, deeper and more obscure" 52 than Jonson ever experienced.

The last point which must be noted in this early criticism is Eliot's idea of the place of verse drama and the dramatic poet in modern society. He does not want poetic drama to be limited to "the cultivated audience" or to "aesthetic society." The only form of theatrical entertainment in his own time which he admires and proposes to imitate is the English music hall. In "The Possibility of a Poetic Drama," an essay written in 1920, he expresses his belief that the place to start the new poetic drama is in the music hall:

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." . . . 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. I am aware that this is

52 "Ben Jonson," p. 137.
a dangerous suggestion to make. For every person who is likely to consider it seriously there are a dozen toymakers who would leap to tickle aesthetic society into one more quiver and giggle of art debauch. Very few treat art seriously. There are those who treat it solemnly, and will continue to write poetic pastiches of Euripides and Shakespeare; and there are others who treat it as a joke.53

In a "London Letter" written in December of 1922 and later expanded into the essay "In Memoriam Marie Lloyd," he mourns not only the death of a great music hall artist, but also the rapid decline of the medium itself. The music hall had two great powers: it was capable of expressing the values in the lives of its audience, and it drew the members of its audience into participation in the entertainment.

The lower class still exists; but perhaps it will not exist for long. In the music-hall comedians they find the expression and dignity of their own lives; and this is not found in the most elaborate and expensive revue. In England, at any rate, the revue expresses almost nothing. With the decay of the music-hall, with the encroachment of the cheap and rapid-breeding cinema, the lower classes will tend to drop into the same state of protoplasm as the bourgeoisie. 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. He will now go to the cinema where his mind is lulled by continuous senseless music and continuous action too rapid for the brain to act upon, and will receive without giving, in that same listless apathy with which the upper and middle classes regard any entertainment of the nature of art. He will also have lost some of his interest in life.54


Although Eliot abandoned this idea of using the music hall as a starting point for poetic drama, he did not abandon the motive behind it, a motive fully explained in the final lecture of the Norton series:

The poet would like to be something of a popular entertainer, and be able to think his own thoughts behind a tragic or a comic mask. He would like to convey the pleasures of poetry, not only to a larger audience, but to larger groups of people collectively; and the theatre is the best place in which to do it. There might, one fancies, be some fulfillment in exciting this communal pleasure, to give an immediate compensation for the pains of turning blood into ink. As things are, and as fundamentally they must always be, poetry is not a career, but a mug's game. No honest poet can ever feel quite sure of the permanent value of what he has written; he may have wasted his time and messed up his life for nothing. All the better, then if he could have at least the satisfaction of having a part to play in society as worthy as that of the music-hall comedian. Furthermore, the theatre, by the technical exactions which it imposes upon the author, by the obligation to keep for a definite length of time the sustained interest of a large and unprepared and not wholly perceptive group of people, by its problems which have constantly to be solved, has enough to keep the poet's conscious mind fully occupied, as the painter's by the manipulation of his tools. If, beyond keeping the interest of a crowd of people for that length of time, the author can make a play which is real poetry, so much the better.55

CHAPTER II

THE EARLY PLAYS 1926-1939

Between 1926 and 1939 Eliot published four pieces of dramatic writing. The first, Sweeney Agonistes, two unfinished fragments of a drama to be called Wanda Go Home Baby?, appeared in the Criterion in 1926 and early 1927. The second, The Rock, a pageant presented for a fund raising campaign, appeared in 1934. In 1935 Murder in the Cathedral was presented at the Canterbury Festival, and in 1939 The Family Reunion, the first play Eliot wrote for the commercial stage, was produced at the Westminster Theatre in London. In attempting to relate these plays to Eliot's drama criticism, this method will be employed: Each drama will be briefly summarized. This will be followed by an analysis of the play in the light of the four basic concepts of the early criticism and an evaluation of the effect of the critical principles upon the play. It should be noted here that the plays will be related only to Eliot's opinions before and during the time in which they were written. His later comments upon them will be considered in the next chapter.

At this point, it would be well to exclude The Rock from the list of plays to be studied. The circumstances in which it was written separate it not only from Eliot's criticism but from his
other plays as well. The pageant was written from a scenario by E. Martin Browne. Eliot supplied the words, but he neither planned the structure nor chose the events presented in the play. His own estimate of his responsibility for The Rock is contained in the preface to the edition of it brought out at the time of its production:

I cannot consider myself the author of the "play", but only of the words which are printed here. The scenario, incorporating some historical scenes suggested by Rev. R. Webb Odell, is by Mr. E. Martin Browne, under whose direction I wrote the choruses and dialogues, and submissive to whose expert criticism I rewrote much of them. Of only one scene am I literally the author: for this scene and of course for the sentiments expressed in the choruses I must assume the responsibility. . . . The Rev. Vincent Howson has so completely rewritten, amplified, and condensed the dialogue between himself ("Bert") and his mates, that he deserves the title of joint author.56

Eliot refers to The Rock later only as having taught him that choral verse must be written simply, and the only parts of it which he includes in his Complete Poems and Plays are the choruses.

Sweeney Agonistes. Eliot's first published experiment in drama consists of two parts, "Fragment of a Prologue" and "Fragment of an Agon." The subject of both parts is a party in the London flat of Dusty and Doris. Nothing actually happens in either fragment; all the guests at the party, with the exception of Sweeney, simply engage in crude and vapid small talk. In contrast to the stupidity and emptiness of their conversation, Sweeney speaks of

a murdered girl preserved in a bath with lysol, of the anguish of
a half-life where one does not know if he is alive or dead, of the
impossibility of communicating his personal sense of horror because
it is beyond words.

These two fragments comprise Eliot's first attempt to put into
practice the most fundamental idea of his early criticism, the es-
tablishing of a ritual convention for modern drama, in this case
employing the techniques of the English music-hall as the medium
for this ritual drama. The music hall inspires the rapidity of the
dialogue, which is comparable to the patter in a comedy routine,
the underlying jazz rhythms, and the songs sung by members of the
cast, two of them dressed as Tambo and Bones. The ritual impli-
cations are linked to these music-hall techniques. Sweeney's
first words to Doris seem to be a reference to ritual sacrifice.
He will, he tells her, carry her off to a cannibal isle and consume
her flesh. "In a nice little, white little, soft little, tender
little,/ Juicy little, right little, missionary stew." The
57 Immediately after this he remarks that he was born once, and once is
enough; this is a reference to Christ's words about the necessity
of being born twice in the ritual of baptism. Mr. Hugh Kenner
points out that telling fortunes with cards and references to a

57 T. S. Eliot, *Sweeney Acorniates*, The Complete Poems and
drowned woman, both of which appear in the play, have a ritual significance in Eliot's other poetry.58

In considering the second major point of the early criticism, the concept of poetic drama as a construction of deepening levels of significance, in relation to this play one should recall Eliot's remarks in The Use of Poetry and The Use of Criticism.59 Sweeney was to be the character of sensitivity and intelligence who would communicate with the sensitive and intelligent members of the audience to the confusion of the literal-minded and visionless members, not only of the audience, but of the cast as well. Eliot's intention to establish a second level of meaning becomes apparent also in the two epigraphs at the beginning of the first fragment: "You don't see them, you don't—but I see them: they are hunting me down, I must move on."—from the Choephoroi of Aeschylus—and "Hence the soul cannot be possessed of divine union until it has divested itself of the love of created beings."—from St. John of the Cross. The real underpattern of the play, "the pattern behind the pattern into which the characters deliberately involve themselves" is the ritual significance of the words of Sweeney and presumably of the action of the play if it had been finished. Therefore Eliot here merges the two main precepts of his early criticism.

59 See above, p. 19.
The two minor points developed in the early criticism, the importance of the dramatic unities and the reality of the characters, do not easily relate to this play since it is unfinished. Nevertheless, it appears that Eliot's stated ideas on these two points are abandoned to his preoccupation with the two major ideas of the early criticism. For example, the unity of sentiment, which Eliot regarded as the most important, is broken by the disparity between the music-hall techniques and the ritual theme of Sweeney Agonistes. The very nature of Eliot's concern with the ritual underpattern and his desire to use music hall techniques to revitalize poetic drama force him to violate the unity of sentiment. For the same reason Eliot fails to give his characters either of the two types of dramatic reality he recognizes in the early criticism. They are real neither in relation to life nor in relation to each other. Sweeney, the one character who has an identity, destroys any small credibility that the others have. One could perhaps say of the characters before Sweeney appears what Eliot said of the characters in Tourneur's Revenge's Tragedy, that they are all distorted to scale, and if the play were completed, might have created a reality of vulgarity and boredom in relation to each other. 60 Sweeney by having an identity, shatters this reality. Here Eliot's desire to create levels of significance in his play leads him to sacrifice the dramatic reality of his characters.

60See above, p. 23.
It is a mark of the failure of this play that Eliot was not able to finish it. The chief flaw in the play, the thing that made it impossible to complete, would appear to be the fact that nothing can happen, and nothing can happen because Eliot united two elements that could never harmonize: the seriousness of religious ritual and the farce of the music-hall. The action that appears to have been in his mind as a ritual is the death of Doris, but the music-hall devices would have made such a death appear either ludicrous or horrible, but certainly not a ritual action.

The attempt to employ multiple planes of reality by having Sweeney the only character concerned with the ritualistic, religious realities simply adds to this confusion. The other characters are stunned into almost total silence by Sweeney's vehemence; if the play were completed, if Doris were murdered either by Sweeney or Pereira, it is difficult to see how they could ever speak or act enough to justify their inclusion in it.

The thing that is effective about the fragments and justifies their inclusion in The Complete Poems and Plays is their creation of a powerful feeling of a sort of objectless horror and loathing, but the creation of such emotions is a function of lyric, not of dramatic poetry. From the standpoint of drama, it appears that Eliot's early critical insights as he applied them to this play make action impossible.

The next play to be considered, Murder in the Cathedral, is based upon the martyrdom of Thomas a Becket by the soldiers of
Henry II in the twelfth century. In the first part of the play, four Tempters visit Thomas. The first three offer him pleasure, power, and revenge, all temptations which he has overcome in the past. They are thus easily dismissed, but the fourth offers the one thing that can still attract him, pride in the glory of his own martyrdom. After a brief, wordless struggle, the Archbishop overcomes this temptation also. A prose Interlude containing Thomas's Christmas sermon in which he explains the true meaning of martyrdom follows. In Part II four Knights first threaten Thomas, and then kill him. Each of the Knights then addresses the audience in a prose speech, attempting to justify the murder. Throughout the play, a chorus of poor women of Canterbury comment upon the action; they close the play with a choral speech expressing the tremendous spiritual joy awakened in them by the martyrdom of the Archbishop.

For the convention of this play, Eliot relies solely on the ritual meaning, not only of the words of the characters, as in *Sweeney Agonistes*, but also of the action. Thomas a Becket is a ritual hero; his death is the human drama related to the divine drama of the Mass which Eliot envisioned in "A Dialogue on Dramatic Poetry." 61

Failure to understand the play as a ritual drama has led many critics to hold that the subject matter of the play is incapable

of dramatic treatment, that nothing can or does happen in the play. According to this view, the moment of dramatic climax occurs in the temptation scene. In that scene, Thomas, who is a potential martyr, suffers three temptations which no longer have any power over him and one that does. The struggle against the fourth temptation is, and must be, interior. Thomas makes a choice, but the choice cannot be externalized in a concrete action, for the death by martyrdom is a part of either accepting or rejecting the temptation. Even after the pivotal choice is made, he remains what he was at first, a potential martyr. His death, instead of being the direct result of the central choice, which would be dramatic, is simply connected to it by chronological sequence. Nothing that can be called dramatic has happened. 62

If the play is understood as a ritual drama, an interpretation which a study of Eliot's criticism makes imperative, many of these difficulties disappear. The climax of the play is found not in the temptation scene, but in the murder. Thomas knew that he would die at the hands of HenryII. In order to make his death a true martyrdom, he had to purify his will. This he did by rejecting the Fourth Tempter in Part I of the play. The successive stages of the perfecting of his will are revealed in retrospect to the audience in the first three temptations. The death of Thomas

following this final purification is not a sordid murder in a power struggle, but a sacrifice related to the death of Christ. The temptation scene, in which the sacrifice is prepared, and the murder scene, in which the sacrifice is made, taken together form the single ritual action of the play.

The ritual significance is further carried out in the effect of Thomas's death upon the Chorus. Because of his martyrdom they move from an attitude of craven fear of life itself to a joyful hymn of praise to God in gratitude for all that exists. Thomas's death had had a redemptive effect on the community. The sermon, which is often found in relation to Christian liturgical worship, and the addresses of the Knights to the audience, in which the audience becomes implicated in the guilt for Thomas's death, which is related to Christ's death and takes place at the altar of a Christian church, also are explained by the ritual structure of the play.

In this play, Eliot has abandoned any efforts to achieve a "pattern behind the pattern into which the characters deliberately involve themselves." The play concentrates on the ritual sacrifice; all superficial levels have been entirely stripped away. In keeping with this concentration on the most profound layer of significance is the reduction of all the characters to their spiritual powers. The abstractness of Thomas is consistent with the namelessness of the Tempters, Knights, Priests, and Poor Women who comprise the rest of the cast. Unlike Sweeney, Thomas fits in with the other characters so that the play has "its own self-subsistent
reality" within which all the characters exist. Moreover, the character of Thomas is conceived, and should be played, in an "unhuman, impersonal, abstract" manner. These are the qualities which Eliot admired in ballet in general and particularly in Leonid Massine, "the greatest actor whom we have in London," and called characteristics of the future stage.

The failure of Robert Speaight, who has made a career of playing Becket, to accept these qualities in the character is an ironic commentary on Eliot's desire to protect the play from the actor by establishing a conventionalized drama. When Speaight first read the play, he was disappointed because Becket was such a passive protagonist who "had little to do—or so it seemed—but go forward to a predetermined fate." Even after Speaight resigned himself to giving the best lines to the Chorus and appreciating the "tremendous force" of Becket's passivity, he found the Archbishop "an idea rather than a character." He felt that it was a challenge to him as an actor to clothe the idea in flesh and blood. Speaight felt that he met this challenge by elaborating the hints Eliot gives of Becket's past life, the only part of his

63 See above, p. 23.
64 See above, p. 6.
66 Ibid.
life which Speaight finds dramatically interesting. "If the
Becket of Murder were to remain human and comprehensible, one had
to withstand—without hostility—certain tendencies of the play." 67

The unities of time and place are observed in the play, but
the unity of sentiment breaks down when the Knights, speaking the
prose of clever debaters address the audience directly. The jus-
tification for this must again be found in Eliot's willingness to
sacrifice the artistic effects of the unities to the production
of a ritual drama. The Knights address the audience because Eliot
wishes to implicate the audience in the guilt for the death of
Thomas, and beyond that, of Christ.

The one aspect of Eliot's theory which this play triumphantly
vindicates is his belief in a drama based on religious ritual, for
in Murder in the Cathedral he has presented a ritual action in
dramatically satisfying terms. On the other hand, the play achieves
a full measure of effectiveness without any attempt to create
multiple levels of reality. The very simplicity and abstractness
which makes the ritual in this play so striking would be destroyed
by imposing other levels of action. Therefore, though the play
proves the validity of Eliot's first critical principle, it ap-
ppears to disallow that of the second.

The Family Reunion, the last play to be considered in this
section, at first appears to be an ordinary drawing room comedy
with the usual setting and the typical cast of characters. The

67Ibid., p. 73.
play opens at Wishwood, the estate of Amy, Dowager Lady Monchensey, on the afternoon of her birthday. Already present for the celebration are her three younger sisters, the two brothers of her dead husband, and her former ward. This group is to be completed by Amy's three sons.

Harry, the eldest son, has been away from Wishwood for eight years because of an unfortunate marriage to an unsuitable and possessive woman. His wife has drowned a year before the opening of the play, and now at last Harry is coming home. When he arrives, he is obviously nervous and upset, and he tells the assembled family that he tried to escape his constant feeling of unbearable anguish by pushing his wife overboard to her death. All the relatives are shocked and disbelieving except Agatha, the sibylline youngest aunt. Later in a conversation with Mary, the cousin-ward whom his mother had chosen years before to be his wife, Harry tries to explain his state of mind. Just when it appears that the two are going to reach mutual understanding, Harry sees the Eumenides standing in the window.

Part II of the play opens with Harry trying to get information about his father first from Dr. Warburton, who refuses to talk about him, and secondly from Agatha, who reveals to Harry that she had a love affair with his father thirty-five years before. Unhappy with Amy and in love with Agatha, Lord Monchensey had planned to kill his wife. Agatha, out of love for Amy's unborn child, who was in fact Harry, prevented the murder.
Harry suddenly understands the misery of his whole life. He is not tortured by his own guilt, but by the guilt of his father. The Eumenides appear again. Harry understands that they are supernatural agents telling him that he must leave Wishwood and begin a life of expiation. Harry departs under the spiritual guardianship of his chauffeur, Downing, and as a result of his going, Amy dies.

It should be noted here that from time to time in the play the aunts, with the exception of Agatha, and the uncles drop their individual identities and speak as a Chorus. At these moments they express the narrowness of their lives and their constant hidden fear of being made aware of reality.

This play must also be considered within the framework of ritual drama, although the sacrificial death of the victim is not the subject of the play. Harry, like Thomas, is a ritual hero, but unlike Thomas, he does not at first realize his role. The dramatic action of the play is centered not on Harry's death, but on his discovery and acceptance of the fact that the purpose of his life is to be a scapegoat for the sins of his family. He is forced to realize this truth by three things: the ceaseless anxiety which has tormented him for years, the appearances of the Eumenides, and the revelations of Agatha about his father. When Agatha has finished her story, and Harry realizes that he is tortured not by his own guilt, but by the guilt of his father, Agatha says that he has at last seen and understood that he is "the consciousness of your unhappy family;" its bird sent flying
through the purgatorial flame." At the end of the play, therefore, Harry is just beginning his purification as a sacrificial and thus redemptive victim. The process of this purification and the eventual death are implied, though perhaps too vaguely implied.

Harry's role as redemptive victim also accounts for the apparent overloading of the play with his aunts and uncles and references to his two brother who never appear. The foolishness and blindness of these complacent and selfish lives are going to be expiated by the sacrificial death of Harry. A hint of the redemptive value of Harry's act upon his still living relatives is provided by Charles, one of the uncles, who toward the end of the play twice says that he might understand the import of Harry's words and Harry's life, which is a mighty admission for someone who has based his whole life upon escaping reality behind a wall of custom and comfort. The final speech of the play, Agatha's last words in the ritual over the birthday cake, applies the merits of Harry's sacrificial death to the departed:

This way the pilgrimage
Of expiation
Round and round the circle
Completing the charm
So the knot be unknotted
The cross be uncrossed
The crooked be made straight
And the curse be ended
By intercession
By pilgrimage
By those who depart

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In several directions
For their own redemption
And that of the departed—
May they rest in peace. (Family II.iii.p.293)

These lines apply not only to Lord Monchensney, Harry's guilty father, but to the proud and blind Amy, who has died only moments before.

In the play Eliot returns to the device of multiple patterns. Upon the ritual action are imposed two other levels of reality. The first is the drawing room comedy framework, which is composed of the various crotchets and undignified quarrels of the aged aunts and uncles, and the references to John and Arthur, the absent brothers. The second is the melodrama concerning the conflict between Amy and Harry about Harry's assumption of his duties as Lord Monchensney of Wishwood, the hint that Harry has killed his wife, and the mystery about Harry's father. On this second level the family breaks into two antagonistic groups, one consisting of Harry, Agatha, and Mary and the other of Amy and the rest of the relatives. On the ritual plane this split comes to be seen as the division between the spiritually acute, who are capable of suffering and thus of performing redemptive action, and the spiritually dead, who can at best merely benefit by this action.

According to Eliot's theory, this deepest level of reality becomes apparent to the mind of the sensitive theater-goer as he watches the normal action of a verse play. In The Family Reunion, however, the deepest level does not wait to be sensed; it constantly intrudes upon the first two. The aunts and uncles, who are
supposed to be comical, back-biting poor relations on the surface level, suddenly drop into choral speech expressing an anxiety almost as terrible as Harry's own. Amy, whose failure to understand her son is based upon her inability to grasp the deeper reality with which he is totally involved, often speaks as if she were as well aware of its existence as her son and Agatha. In the midst of an ordinary conversation, Harry and either Agatha or Mary will suddenly enter a trance and begin speaking what Eliot called a lyric duet. In the most vigorously criticized feature of the play, the Eumenides, who should be sensed on the deepest level, physically appear on the first.

Too many things on the surface level remain distractingly unexplained because Eliot's attention is so concentrated on the ritual plane. For example, after Harry understands that his guilt feelings were produced not by his own act, but by his father's, the question of whether he did or did not murder his wife disappears from his mind and from the play. The audience has been led to believe in Part I that most of Harry's trouble was produced by guilt resulting from his wife's death, but suddenly in Part II, the whole incident is forgotten. Harry has a sudden and unexplained curiosity about his father, and when he finally learns about the married life of his parents, he realizes his role as a scapegoat for the family, and never again considers his responsibility for the death of his wife. "The play . . . curiously asks the audience to sentimentalize Harry's own crime, for which he is not
repentant, and to approve of Harry's expiating the curse in order to atone for his father's crime, for which he is not to blame."

If the end of the play is considered from the level of ritual drama, it may be understood that Harry leaves the material pleasures of Wishwood and goes off to seek suffering and death accompanied by a spiritual guardian who will leave him only when his redemptive action is completed. On the surface, however, the audience is presented with the astonishing picture of Harry, indifferent to the impending death of his mother, for which he will be responsible according to Dr. Warburton's earlier warning, going off to an unknown destination in his car, accompanied by his chauffeur, and retaining the services of his banker as his only link with his family.

This preoccupation with levels leads Eliot into difficulties in characterization. The aunts and uncles, who have at least some credibility, even if only that of type characters, suddenly lose it when they begin speaking in chorus. Even worse is the unfortunate priggishness of Harry's nature, which makes him a very repellent hero. Harry, like Thomas in Murder in the Cathedral, is solely concerned with the deepest spiritual level of reality, but unlike Thomas, he often appears with persons and in situations that belong to the superficial level. The same thing happens with Agatha, who as a sort of spiritual teacher to Harry and herself

an expiatory victim, is obviously conceived as a sympathetic character, yet at times, toward the end of the play, she appears to be viciously cruel to Amy.

Eliot observes the unities of time and place with little difficulty in the play, for all the action takes place in one room in one's evening's time. However, here again the prized unity of sentiment is destroyed by the multiple planes of action. In a play which applies the Greek Orestes myth and chorus and the devices of the comedy of manners to a theme centered on the Christian concept of vicarious expiation for sin, the unity of sentiment cannot survive.

In The Family Reunion, therefore, the attempt to achieve multiple planes of reality appears to be a major factor in the failure of the play. This multiple patterning makes the ritual action seem selfish and senseless. It twists the characters so that they cannot function as they were intended to, and it leaves the audience feeling nothing but massive confusion.

The study of all three plays reveals a close interaction between Eliot's theory and his practice. The critical preoccupation with ritual drama as the means of establishing a convention for modern drama must have been the primary influence in the ritual structure of these plays. The conscious attempt to devise plays with multiple levels of reality is the product of his critical perception of the presence of this type of patterning in effective verse drama. The two lesser points of the early
criticism, as has become obvious, have little influence upon Eliot's plays because he unfailingly abandons them to the major ideas, just as in the criticism, the major ideas absorb most of his attention.

The plays at first seem to have little influence on the two main ideas of the critical theory. In spite of the confusion produced by the multiple patterning in Sweeney Agonistes and the success of Murder in the Cathedral without it, Eliot returns to it in The Family Reunion. On the other hand, after writing these plays, Eliot turned his critical attention almost entirely toward the problem of poetic language for modern drama.

If the plays are considered a practical test of Eliot's theories, it would appear that those on ritual drama are the most sound and usable, while those on multiple levels of reality are not only impractical but actually harmful to drama. In reality, however, it may be that the second idea is just as valid as the first, the main practical difference being that Eliot had a strong and creative instinct for ritual which influenced the criticism as well as the plays, while he had merely a very accurate literary perception of the multiple patterning that led, at least in these early plays, to a conscious and labored striving after an effect without a sure grasp of the means by which it could be achieved.
CHAPTER III

ELIOT'S CRITICAL WRITING SINCE 1935

With only one exception, Religious Drama: Medieval and Modern, all the criticism of this period is concerned with what Eliot came to consider the central problem in writing his plays, producing the poetic language and metre necessary for modern verse drama. In the bulk of this later criticism, therefore, Eliot subordinates all other considerations to that of language. For example, multiple levels of action are seen here as the result of the possibilities for musical design inherent in verse drama. He shows the role of the three early plays in shaping his ideas on the qualities necessary to the language of poetic drama, and he judges the plays in relation to those qualities. All the flaws in them are related, directly or indirectly, to their language.

In an attempt to formulate the kind of verse to be used in his own plays, Eliot studied blank verse as a medium for dramatic poetry. "The Music of Poetry," originally a lecture delivered at Glasgow University in 1941, contains an exploration of this subject. In this essay, Eliot points out that all poetry is dependant upon the speech of the era in which it is written. This dependence upon contemporary speech is more direct and more necessary in
dramatic poetry than in any other kind. Part of the vigour of the dramatic idiom of Shakespeare flows from the fact that it is based on the speech of his time. As playwrights from later periods imitated Shakespeare's use of blank verse, it became more and more remote from contemporary speech. Indeed, the failure of the poets of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to produce successful verse plays arises, not from inability to understand theatrical techniques, but from the wrong kind of versification. "It is not primarily lack of plot, or lack of action and suspense, or imperfect realization of character, or lack of anything of what is called 'theatre', that makes these plays so lifeless; it is primarily that their rhythm of speech is something that we cannot associate with any human being except a poetry reciter."

In studying Shakespeare's dramatic use of blank verse, one discovers the principle which must be followed in the evolution of a new poetic medium for the theater. Eliot divides the development of Shakespeare's verse into two periods:

During the first, he was slowly adapting his form to colloquial speech; so that, by the time he wrote Antony and Cleopatra he had devised a medium in which everything that any dramatic character might have to say, whether high or low, 'poetical' or 'prosaic', could be said with naturalness and beauty. Having got this point, he began to elaborate. The

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71 Ibid.
72 Ibid., p. 27.
first period—of the poet who began with Venus and Adonis, but who had already, in Love's Labour's Lost, begun to see what he had to do—is from artificiality to simplicity, from stiffness to suppleness. The later plays move from simplicity towards elaboration. The late Shakespeare is occupied with that other task of the poet—that of experimenting to see how elaborate, how complicated, the music could be made without losing touch with colloquial speech altogether, and without his characters ceasing to be human beings.73

In an address on William Butler Yeats delivered in 1940, Eliot points out that the development of Yeats as a dramatist followed this pattern of progressive simplification. His maturing as a dramatist was marked by "the gradual purging out of poetical ornament."74 Besides this exclusion of ornament, the work of Yeats in drama is distinguished by a movement away from traditional blank verse. Modern verse drama must break away from this metre:

When he first began to write plays, poetic drama meant plays written in blank verse. Now, blank verse has been a dead metre for a long time. It would be outside of my frame to go into all the reasons for that now; but it is obvious that a form which was handled so supremely well by Shakespeare has its disadvantages. If you are writing a play of the same type as Shakespeare's, the reminiscence is oppressive; if you are writing a play of a different type, it is distracting. Furthermore, as Shakespeare is so much greater than any dramatist who has followed him, blank verse can hardly be dissociated from the life of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries; it can hardly catch the rhythms with which English is spoken nowadays.75

As Yeats progressed as a dramatist, he gradually introduced an irregularity in the blank verse metre. "Yeats did not quite

73Ibid., p. 29.
75Ibid.
invent a new metre, but the blank verse of his later plays shows
a great advance towards one; and what is most astonishing is the
virtual abandonment of blank verse metre in *Purgatory*."76 Because
of these two developments in language and because of his belief in
the importance of verse drama in a time when prose drama was every-
where dominant, modern poetic drama owes Yeats a great debt.77

The most thorough exploration of Eliot's ideas and experiments
on a modern poetic medium suitable for verse drama is to be found
in *Poetry and Drama*, originally a Theodore Spencer Memorial Leec-
ture delivered at Harvard in 1950. At the opening of the lecture,
Eliot makes clear his belief that prose in drama is just as far
from everyday speech, "with its fumbling for words, its constant
recourse to approximation, its disorder, and its unfinished sen-
tences"78 as poetry is. The modern theater audience, however,
regards prose as being close to ordinary speech, while it expects
poetry to depart from it. In the mind of the audience, therefore,
the play is separated from the language of the play. This aware-
ness of the language on the part of the audience makes it impos-
sible for the language to produce its proper effect, the uncon-
scious stimulation of emotion.79

76Ibid.
77Ibid., p. 307.
A year before the writing of *Poetry and Drama*, in the presidential address to the Poet's Theatre Guild, Eliot expressed quite clearly his concept of the emotional effect of verse in drama:

A great part, sometimes the greater part, of the kind of verse play I am imagining, could, if isolated from the rest, be said quite as well in prose. These are the parts of less intensity, those concerned with everyday affairs. I should even say that the verse, in these parts of such a play, should be unnoticeable—the audience should not be conscious of the difference from prose. But here, the purpose of the verse should be to operate upon the auditor unconsciously, so that he shall think and feel in the rhythms imposed by the poet, without being aware of what these rhythms are doing. All the time, these rhythms should be preparing the ear of the audience for the moments of intensity, when the emotion of the character in the play may be supposed to lift him from his ordinary discourse, until the audience feels, not that the actors are speaking verse, but that the characters in the play have been lifted up to poetry. For the effect of first rate verse drama should be to make us believe that there are moments in life when poetry is the natural form of expression of ordinary men and women.80

In order to take advantage of this power of verse, the modern poet-dramatist must develop a medium which will be close to modern speech and therefore capable of producing this unconscious emotional effect. He should avoid all devices, such as switching from verse to prose, which will make the audience aware of the language. But most important, he must develop a form of poetry which will enable him to handle all the moments of the play, small as well as great, in verse. "I believe . . . that we should aim at a form of verse in which everything can be said that has to be said;

and that when we find some situation which is intractable in verse, it is merely that our form of verse is inelastic. And if there prove to be scenes which we cannot put in verse, we must either develop our verse or avoid having to introduce such scenes."\(^{81}\)

As an example of the kind of poetry that can say everything that has to be said, he points to the opening scene of Hamlet. The audience listening to that scene is "consciously attending not to the poetry, but to the meaning of the poetry."\(^{82}\) The very fact that the scene is in verse means that the audience is affected differently, more profoundly than it would be if it had been written in prose. Eliot closely analyzes the poetry, pointing out the suitability of the language to the characters of the speakers and its power to evoke the scene, the situation, and the tragic atmosphere. He then quotes the closing speeches of Marcellus and Horatio, and in his commentary upon them shows that poetry, even in such a seemingly simple scene as this, can do what prose cannot. "This is great poetry, and it is dramatic; but besides being poetic and dramatic, it is something more. There emerges when we analyze it, a kind of musical design also which reinforces and is one with the dramatic movement. It has checked and accelerated the pulse of our emotion without our knowing it."\(^{83}\)

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\(^{81}\) Poetry and Drama, p. 14.

\(^{82}\) Ibid., p. 17.

\(^{83}\) Ibid., p. 18.
The second part of *Poetry and Drama* is a direct commentary on Eliot's experience as a verse dramatist. Here also, the main interest is in the poetry. The first thing he had to learn as a verse dramatist was the difference between writing for a theater audience and writing for the readers of his other poetry:

You are aiming to write lines which will have an immediate effect upon an unknown and unprepared audience, to be interpreted to that audience by unknown actors rehearsed by an unknown producer. And the unknown audience cannot be expected to show any indulgence towards the poet. The poet cannot afford to write his play merely for his admirers, those who know his nondramatic work and are prepared to receive favourably anything he puts his name to. He must write with an audience in view which knows nothing and cares nothing, about any previous success he may have had before he ventured into the theatre. Hence one finds out that many of the things one likes to do, and knows how to do, are out of place; and that every line must be judged by a new law, that of dramatic relevance.84

Turning to a consideration of the dramatic idiom of *Murder in the Cathedral*, Eliot states that the language of the play was a dead end; it solved the problem of verse for this single play, but it solved it for no later plays.85 The historical subject matter and the contemporary relevance of the situation demanded a vocabulary and style which would be neutral, "committed neither to the present nor to the past."86 In striving to avoid sounding like an imitator of Shakespeare, he patterned the versification on *Everyman*. "An avoidance of too much iambic, some

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84Ibid., p. 22.
85Ibid., p. 24.
86Ibid.
use of alliteration, and occasional unexpected rhyme, helped to
distinguish the versification from that of the nineteenth cen-
tury."87

Eliot gives two reasons for his reliance on the chorus in
Murder in the Cathedral. First, the central action of the play
was intentionally limited so that he could concentrate on what
was to him the essential idea, the death and martyrdom of Becket.
The chorus of women helped to fill out the play without adding
unwanted complexities to the action.88 Secondly, the chorus solved
a problem for a poet newly writing for the theater. Such a play-
wright "is much more at home in choral verse than in dramatic
dialogue. This I felt sure, was something I could do, and perhaps
the dramatic weaknesses would be somewhat covered up by the cries
of the women. The use of a chorus strengthened the power, and
concealed the defects of my theatrical technique. For this rea-
son I decided that next time I would try to integrate the chorus
more closely into the play."89

The Family Reunion is the product of Eliot's determination to
show an audience that poetry can be used in a play dealing with
contemporary life:

If the poetic drama is to reconquer its place, it must, in
my opinion, enter into overt competition with prose drama.

87Ibid.
88Ibid., p. 25.
89Ibid.
As I have said, 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 houses and apartments like ours, and using telephones and motor cars and radio sets. Audiences are prepared to accept poetry recited by a chorus, for that is a kind of poetry recital, which it does them credit to enjoy. And audiences (those who go to a verse play because it is in verse) expect poetry to be in rhythms which have lost touch with colloquial speech. What we have to do is to bring poetry into the world in which the audience lives and to which it returns when it leaves the theatre; and not to transport the audience into some imaginary world totally unlike its own, an unreal world in which poetry is tolerated. What I should hope might be achieved, by a generation of dramatists having the benefit of our experience, is that the audience should find, at the moment of awareness that it is hearing poetry, that it is saying to itself: "I could talk in poetry too!" Then we should not be transported into an artificial world; on the contrary, our own sordid, dreary daily world would be suddenly illuminated and transfigured.90

To achieve this end he chose a theme from contemporary life and tried to create "characters of our own time living in our own world."91 The basic problem, however, was versification:

Here my first concern was the problem of the versification, to find 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 phrases on the particular occasion. What I worked out is substantially what I have continued to employ: 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 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.92

90Ibid., pp. 26-27.
91Ibid., p. 27.
92Ibid.
Eliot feels that the success of this versification helped to free him from dependence on the chorus. He was not completely independent of it, however, for he used some characters at times as individuals and at other times as members of a choral group. He feels that this device creates a transition too difficult for actors to handle, and that it could not have been used in another play.93

A serious flaw in the poetic language of the play, however, is the use of the lyrical duets, isolated from the rest of the dialogue by being written in a two stress line. "These passages are in a sense 'beyond character', the speakers have to be presented as falling into a trance-like state in order to speak them. But they are so remote from the necessity of the action that they are hardly more than passages of poetry which might be spoken by anybody; they are too much like operatic arias. The member of the audience, if he enjoys this sort of thing, is putting up with a suspension of the action in order to enjoy a poetic fantasia."94

This thought leads to a consideration of Shakespeare's "poetic" lines and passages:

I observed that when Shakespeare, in one of his mature plays, introduces what might seem a purely poetic line or passage, it never interrupts the action, or is out of character, but on the contrary, in some mysterious way supports both action and character. When Macbeth speaks his so often quoted words beginning, "To-morrow and to-morrow and to-

93Ibid., p. 28.
94Ibid.
morrow," or when Othello, confronted at night with his angry father-in-law and friends, utters the beautiful line "Keep up your bright swords, for the dew will rust them," we do not feel that Shakespeare has thought of lines which are beautiful poetry and wishes to fit them in somehow, or that he has for the moment come to the end of his dramatic inspiration and has turned to poetry to fill up with. The lines are surprising, and yet they fit in with the character; or else we are compelled to adjust our conception of the character in such a way that the lines will be appropriate to it. The lines spoken by Macbeth reveal the weariness of the weak man who had been forced by his wife to realize his own halfhearted desires and her ambitions, and who, with her death, is left without the motive to continue. The line of Othello expresses irony, dignity, and fearlessness; and incidentally reminds us of the time of night in which the scene takes place. Only poetry could do this; but it is dramatic poetry: that is, it does not interrupt but intensifies the dramatic situation.95

95 Ibid., pp. 28-29.
96 Ibid., p. 29.
97 Ibid., pp. 29-30.
He feels that he failed to adjust the Greek myth to the modern situation. The symptoms of this failure are the Furies, whom he finds impossible to present on the stage effectively: "They never succeed in being either Greek goddesses or modern spooks. But their failure is merely a symptom of the failure to adjust the ancient with the modern." 98 Another difficulty which he traces to this failure in adjustment is the fact that the audience does not know "whether to consider the play the tragedy of the mother or the salvation of the son. The two situations are not reconciled. I find a confirmation of this in the fact that my sympathies now have come to be all with the mother, who seems to me, except perhaps for the chauffeur the only complete being in the play; and my hero now strikes me as an insufferable prig." 99

Eliot lists the three things he learned from writing The Family Reunion which he applied to his next play, The Cocktail Party:

... I had—the one thing of which I felt sure—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. ...

In the second place, I laid down for myself the ascetic rule to avoid poetry which could not stand the test of strict dramatic utility: with such success indeed, that it is perhaps an open question whether there is any poetry in the play at all. And finally, I tried to keep in mind that in a play from time to time, something should happen; and that, when

98 Ibid., p. 30.
99 Ibid., p. 31.
it does happen, it should be different, but not too different, from what the audience had been led to expect.

The essay closes with a discussion of the ideal toward which poetic drama should move:

It is a function of all art to give us some perception of an order in life, by imposing an order upon it. . . . It seems to me that beyond the nameable, classifiable emotions and motives of our conscious life when directed towards action—the part of life which prose drama is wholly adequate to express—there is a fringe of indefinite extent, of feeling which we can only detect, so to speak, out of the corner of the eye and can never completely focus; of feeling of which we are only aware in a kind of temporary detachment from action. There are great prose dramatists—such as Ibsen and Chekhov—who have at times done things of which I would not otherwise have supposed prose to be capable, but who seem to me, in spite of their success, to have been hampered in expression by writing in prose. This peculiar range of sensibility can be expressed by dramatic poetry, at its moments of greatest intensity. At such moments, we touch the border of those feelings which only music can express. We can never emulate music, because to arrive at the condition of music would be an annihilation of poetry, and especially of dramatic poetry. Nevertheless, I have before my eyes a kind of design of human action and of words, such as to present at once the two aspects of dramatic and of musical order. It seems to me that Shakespeare achieved this at least in certain scenes—even rather early, for there is the balcony scene of Romeo and Juliet—and that this was what he was striving towards in his late plays. To go as far in this direction as it is possible to go, without losing than contact with the ordinary everyday world with which drama must come to terms, seems to me the proper aim of dramatic poetry. For it is ultimately the function of art, in imposing a credible order upon ordinary reality, and thereby eliciting some perception of an order in reality, to bring us to a condition of serenity, stillness, and reconciliation; and then leave us, as Virgil left Dante, to proceed toward a region where that guide can avail us no farther.

100 Ibid., pp. 31-32.

101 Ibid., pp. 33-35.
The Three Voices of Poetry, a lecture delivered to the National Book League in 1953 is a development of one remark in *Poetry and Drama*: "In writing other verse, I think that one is writing, so to speak, in terms of one's own voice: the way it sounds when you read it to yourself is the test. For it is yourself speaking. . . . But in the theatre, the problem of communication presents itself immediately. You are deliberately writing verse for other voices, not for your own, and you do not know whose voices they will be."102 The later essay adds one more voice to this concept and explores the differences between the three:

I shall explain at once what I mean by the "three voices". The first is the voice of the poet talking to himself—or to nobody. The second is the voice of the poet addressing an audience, whether large or small. The third is the voice of the poet when he attempts to create a dramatic character speaking in verse; when he is saying not what he would say in his own person, but only what he can say within the limits of one imaginary character addressing another imaginary character. The distinction between the first and the second voice, between the poet speaking to himself and the poet speaking to other people, points to the problem of poetic communication; the distinction between the poet addressing other people in either his own voice or an assumed voice, and the poet inventing speech in which imaginary characters address each other points to the problem of the difference between dramatic, quasi-dramatic, and non-dramatic verse.103

He arrived at this distinction only after he had begun to write for the theater. "I have, however, gradually come to the

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102 Ibid., p. 21.

conclusion that in writing verse for the stage both the process and the outcome are very different from what they are in writing verse to be read or recited.\textsuperscript{104}

In writing \textit{The Rock} and \textit{Murder in the Cathedral} Eliot learned little about the third voice. For \textit{The Rock} he only had to write prose dialogue for a scenario written by E. Martin Browne and to devise choral verse related to the subject of the pageant. "I learnt only that verse to be spoken by a choir should be different from verse to be spoken by one person; and that, the more voices you have in your choir, the simpler and more direct the vocabulary, the syntax, and the content of your lines must be."\textsuperscript{105}

In \textit{Murder in the Cathedral} he sees some advance in his dramatic development, for he was writing not for an abstract chorus but for one with a definite identity, a group of lower class women of Canterbury. "I had to make some effort to identify myself with these women, instead of merely identifying them with myself. But as for the dialogue of the play, the plot had the drawback (from the point of view of my own dramatic education) of presenting only one dominant character; and what dramatic conflict there is takes place within the mind of that character."\textsuperscript{106}

\textsuperscript{104}\textit{Ibid.}, p. 10.
\textsuperscript{105}\textit{Ibid.}, p. 12.
\textsuperscript{106}\textit{Ibid.}, p. 13.
The third voice only became audible to him when he tried to present "two (or more) characters, in some sort of conflict, misunderstanding, or attempt to understand each other, characters with each of whom I had to try to identify myself while writing the words for him or her to speak." 107

It seems clear that Eliot conceives of characters primarily in terms of what they say when he compares the characters in a dramatic monologue to those in a play. The nature of a play demands that the author "allocate the 'poetry' as widely as the limitations of each imaginary character permit. This necessity to divide the poetry implies some variation of the style of the poetry according to the character to whom it is given. The fact that a number of characters in a play have claims upon the author, for their allotment of poetic speech, compels him to try to extract the poetry from the character, rather than impose his poetry upon it." 108 The author of a dramatic monologue has no such need to allocate the poetry and divide his sympathy; he therefore never really creates a character; he merely disguises himself: "What we normally hear, in fact, in the dramatic monologue, is the voice of the poet, who has put on the costume and make-up either of some historical character, or one out of fiction." 109

107 Ibid.
108 Ibid., p. 21.
109 Ibid.
This conviction that the thing which impels the creation of character is the necessity of providing various people to speak the poetry is again apparent in a sentence which at first glance seems to contradict the idea. The dramatic monologue cannot create a character, says Eliot, because "character is created and made real only in an action, a communication between imaginary people." 110

In concluding the essay, Eliot states that all three of the voices of poetry are present in poetic drama:

First, the voice of each character—an individual voice different from that of any other character: so that of each utterance we can say, that it could only have come from that character. There may be from time to time, and perhaps when we least notice it, the voices of the author and the character in unison, saying something appropriate to the character, but something which the author could say for himself also, though the words may not have quite the same meaning for both. That may be a very different thing from the ventriloquism which makes the character only a mouthpiece for the author's ideas or sentiments. . . . And finally there are the lines, in plays by one of the supreme poetic dramatists, in which we hear a more impersonal voice still than that of either the character or the author.

\[\text{Ripeness is all}\]

or

\[\text{Simply the thing I am,}\]
\[\text{Shall make me live.}\] 111

He tells his listeners how this concept of the three voices might be applied to their own theater-going:

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. Perhaps, if it is a great play, and

110 Ibid., p. 22.
you do not try too hard to hear them, you may discern the other voices too. For the work of a great poetic dramatist, like Shakespeare, constitutes a world. Each character speaks for himself, but no other poet could have found those words for him to speak. If you seek for Shakespeare, you will find him only in the characters he created; for the one thing in common between the characters is that no one but Shakespeare could have created any of them. The world of a great poetic dramatist is a world in which the creator is everywhere present, and everywhere hidden.\textsuperscript{112}

In an address delivered to the Friends of Rochester Cathedral in 1937 and published in 1954 as Religious Drama: Medieval and Modern, Eliot considers a topic unrelated to poetic language, but closely related to his consideration of ritual drama in the early criticism, the possibility of a modern religious drama. He insists first of all, that this drama should not be purely religious. "If it is, it is simply doing something that the liturgy does better; and the religious play is not a substitute for liturgical observance and ceremonial, but something different."\textsuperscript{113} He sees Everyman as a play in which the religious and dramatic interests are perfectly fused: "Everyman 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—with as keen interest as that with which we wait for the escape of the film hero bound and helpless in a hut to which his enemies are about to set fire."\textsuperscript{114}


\textsuperscript{113} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{114} Ibid.
Eliot holds that the development of a living religious drama should be seen in relation to the development of the secular theater: "Our problem of writing good religious plays is part of a general problem of writing good plays. Unless religious drama is going to supplant secular drama, and nobody supposes that it can or even wishes that it should, we cannot expect an improvement in this kind without an improvement in the other." 115 He believes that it may be the development of a vigorous religious drama that will lead to the improvement of secular theater: ". . . 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 realisation than if we ignore it." 116

The importance of introducing religious background to the modern theatre is even more apparent when one considers that all serious drama "has always dealt with moral problems, with problems which in the end required a religious solution—whether this necessity was present to the mind of the author or not." 117 The high points of the French theater, the plays of Corneille and Racine, are dramas of religious significance. In modern drama, the

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115 Ibid.
116 Ibid.
117 Ibid.
superiority of Tchechov to Ibsen and Shaw is due to Tchechov's interest in more profound problems. 118

There is an essentially religious craving in all lovers of serious drama:

It is not true that the craving which has possessed most people at most times, for seeing human actions represented with mime and voice is simply a craving for amusement and distraction... The theatre satisfies one form of the desire of human beings to achieve greater dignity and significance than they seem to do in their private or indeed their public lives. There is a very profound kind of boredom which is an essential moment in the religious life; the boredom with all living in so far as it has no religious meaning. The capacity for this boredom is latent in everybody, and it can never really be appeased by mere amusement. 119

It is important, however, not to lose sight of the fact that amusement is an indispensable essential in drama; "if a play does not amuse people it can do nothing for them." 120 The power to amuse is as much the test of a good religious play as it is of a good secular play. A religious play "should be able to hold the attention, to arouse the excitement of people who are not religious, as well as of those who are. If you have any consciousness of virtue in sitting through a religious drama, if what you feel at the end is physical fatigue rather than emotional exhaustion, if

118 Ibid.
119 Ibid.
120 Ibid.
you have not been as "amused" by it as by what you can get in Shaftesbury Avenue, then so far as you are concerned the play is a failure." 121

Eliot closes the lecture by insisting that although religious drama should affect secular drama, there should be a distinction of subject matter and treatment between the two types of theater. "I have not been arguing that the repertory of the West End and that of the Cathedral close should be interchangeable." 122 He advocates the writing of plays suitable for religious occasions as a type of apprenticeship for young dramatists. In this way the young writer would learn the craft of drama so that when he was ready to write for the commercial stage, he could produce a play of "moral insight and verbal beauty" 123 that is also dramatically effective.

Besides providing the secular theater with the religious background necessary for serious drama and the craftsmen able to produce this drama, the modern religious theater could be a force for the restoration of drama to the life of the community: "In closing, there is a dream that I like to indulge. I like to think that at some time in the future every cathedral will have its own permanent company of amateurs and its own cycle of modern religious

121 Ibid.
122 Ibid.
123 Ibid.
plays, and that they will rival each other in perfection of pro-
duction."124

It is worth noting here that in the introduction to the 1954
printing of this lecture, Eliot repudiates one point, his low
estimation of the drama of Ibsen. Although the essay was written
in 1937, the ideas in it, with one exception, received an endorse-
ment as late as 1954.

This last essay is interesting chiefly in view of the religious
implications of all of Eliot's plays, but the essays on poetic lan-
guage considered earlier are far more significant in showing the
change in Eliot's thought between the first and second critical
periods and accounting for the type of play which he wrote during
and after this period of criticism. The theoretical consideration
of the steps necessary to create a new kind of drama disappears
because practical experience seems to have taught Eliot that the
chief factor in writing contemporary verse drama is neither dra-
matic conventions nor multiple planes of reality, but simply verse
itself. This is not to imply that he repudiates his earliest dra-
matic principles, for he does not. Rather he follows where his
experiments with language lead him, at first employing the cri-
tical insights of the first period, as in The Cocktail Party, and
then gradually moving away from them, as in The Confidential Clerk.

124Ibid.
CHAPTER IV

THE LATER PLAYS

All three of Eliot's later plays were first presented at the Edinburgh Festival, The Cocktail Party in 1950, The Confidential Clerk in 1953, and The Elder Statesman in 1958. The first two plays ran both in London and New York, though The Elder Statesman played only in London. With these plays, especially the first, Eliot at last reached a large audience, an achievement which he once thought might be "an immediate compensation for the pains of turning blood into ink." 125

The Cocktail Party, like The Family Reunion, at first appears to be a comedy of manners. It opens with Edward Chamberlayne in the impossible position of having to give a party on the very day that his wife Lavinia has left him. The guests at the party are Julia Shuttlethwaite, Alexander Gibbs, Peter Quilpe, Celia Coplestone, and an unidentified man whom no one appears to know except the absent Lavinia. The guests are not at all deceived by Edward's lame excuse that Lavinia has gone to care for a sick aunt, and after a bit of witty conversation, the party breaks up. After it,

125See above, p. 26.
through a series of conversations, the audience learns that the unidentified guest knows where Lavinia is and will return her the next day at Edward's request, that Peter Quilpe is in love with Celia, and that Celia has been Edward's mistress. She is bitterly disillusioned and cruelly awakened to the reality of her relationship with Edward when she discovers that now when Lavinia has given him a chance to get a divorce and marry her, he wants Lavinia back.

The Second Act begins in the consulting room of the psychiatrist, Sir Henry Harcourt-Heilly, the unidentified guest of the First Act. Edward, who has left Lavinia, has come to him because he is sure he is having a nervous breakdown. To the dismay of both of them, Harcourt-Heilly calls in Lavinia. He shows the Chamberlaynes that they are uniquely suited to each other because Edward is incapable of loving anyone, and Lavinia is unable to accept love. Resigned to continuing their marriage, they leave the office together. The psychiatrist next sees Celia, learns of her intense spiritual hunger, and arranges to send her to his sanitarium, where she will learn the meaning of reality. Julia and Alex, who it turns out are partners in Harcourt-Heilly's spiritual enterprise, enter, and the three perform two ritual toasts, one for the marriage of Edward and Lavinia, and one for the sanctification of Celia.

The last act takes place two years later, just before the Chamberlaynes, who are obviously much happier together, are giving another cocktail party. With one exception, all the guests at
the original party reappear. Alex reveals that Celia, who had
joined an austere nursing order, had been crucified in a persecu-
tion of Christians in monkey-worshipping Kinkanji. All of them are
shocked, yet somehow exalted by her death. The entire group departs
just as the Chamberlaynes' party is about to begin, and the play
ends.

The elements of the comedy of manners are consistently used
in the play. They can be found in the opening plight of Edward
obviously and publicly abandoned by his wife, in the conspicuously
witty dialogue, in the unfaithful husband's surprise that he has
an unfaithful wife, and in the ironic situation in which the
husband is requested by his wife's lover for help in the romantic
conquest of the husband's mistress. It is obvious however that
this is much more than a drawing room comedy. It is in fact that
ritual drama, that human drama related to the divine drama of the
Mass, but not identical with it, which Eliot has been writing
since he began writing plays.

In this ritual, Harcourt-Reilly is the priest; he engages in
two duties of the priest, hearing confessions, and preparing sac-
rifices. The consulting room of the psychiatrist is a confession-
al, and his sessions with his patients are in the tradition, not of
Freud, but of the Christian sacrament of penance. The patients
who go to him cannot lie; if they try to do so, as Edward and La-
vinia do, he reveals the lie, and he hints that if the patient-
penitent persists in the falsehood, the treatment will not work.
After all the subterfuges are stripped away, and the patient faces the reality of his own life, Harcourt-Reilly either advises the course of action he must take, as he does with Edward and Lavinia, or presents him with the choice between an ordinary Christian life and the life of heroic sanctity, as he does with Celia.

At the end of both of the consultation-confessions which appear in the play, he uses the same words: "Go in peace," which are the priest's last words in the sacrament of penance. To this he adds a second sentence: "Work out your salvation with diligence." Another indication of his priestly character is that he realizes that he is an instrument of grace, even though the grace itself and the process by which it transforms the patient-penitent are mysterious to him. To Julia, after Celia has made the choice of the life of sanctity, he says:

> And when I say to one like her,
> 'Work out your salvation with diligence,' I do not understand what I myself am saying. (Cocktail II, p. 366.)

The sacrificial death of Celia begins in the consulting room-confessional of Harcourt-Reilly. Under this aspect, he assumes another function of the priest, the preparation of sacrifice. This does not become fully apparent until the last act, after Celia's death, in a speech Harcourt-Reilly makes to Lavinia:

> When I first met Miss Coplestone, in this room, I saw the image, standing behind her chair, Of a Celia Coplestone whose face showed the astonishment

---

Of the first five minutes after a violent death.

So it was obvious
That there was a woman under sentence of death.
That was her destiny. The only question
Then was, what sort of death? I could not know;
Because it was for her to choose the way of life
To lead to death, and without knowing the end
Yet choose the form of death. We know the death she chose.
I did not know that she would die in this way,
She did not know. So all that I could do
Was to direct her in the way of preparation.
That way, which she accepted, led to this death
And if that is not a happy death, what death is happy?
(Cocktail III. p. 384)

When Celia came to him, therefore, Harcourt-Reilly, knowing
by intuition of the suddenness and violence of her death, offers
her the two alternatives of a Christian life. She may either marry
and lead a family life, with its joys and its limitations, or she
may choose the way of heroic sanctity. He describes this second
way to her under the metaphor of a journey:

The destination cannot be described;
You will know very little till you get there;
You will journey blind, but the way leads towards possession
Of what you have sought for in the wrong place.
(Cocktail II. pp. 364-365)

Celia chooses this second way, and because she does, her
death is strikingly similar to that of Christ. However, according
to Harcourt-Reilly's speech to Lavinia, even if she had chosen
Christian family life, she still would have died the sudden, vio-

tent death, and he still would have prepared her so that this death
would have been united to Christ's death. Nevertheless, the choice
of sanctity led to the peculiar horror of her death and its simil-
arity to Christ's. Harcourt-Reilly points out that this similarity
is part of the pattern of the choice which Celia made:

I'd say she suffered all that we should suffer
In fear and pain and loathing—all these together—
And reluctance of the body to become a thing.
I'd say she suffered more, because more conscious
Than the rest of us. She paid the highest price
In suffering. That is part of the design. **(Cocktail III. p.384)**

The guilt for her death, like the guilt for Christ's is not
limited to those who murdered her. Edward and Lavinia both say
that they are more responsible than the band of savages who killed
her. Harcourt-Reilly, however, extends the guilt for her death to
everyone:

If we all were judged according to the consequences
Of all our words and deeds, beyond the intention
And beyond our limited understanding
Of ourselves and others, we should all be condemned.

***(Cocktail III. p. 385)***

The redemptive effect of Celia's death is not explored as
fully as the guilt for it. Edward and Lavinia at first think of
her death as a terrible waste. A hint of its redemptive implica-
tions is contained in Harcourt-Reilly's reply to Lavinia's remark
that Celia died "because she would not leave/A few dying natives."

**(Cocktail III. p. 383)**. To this he answers:

Who knows, Mrs. Chamberlayne,
The difference that made to the natives who were dying
Or the state of mind in which they died? **(Cocktail III. p. 383)**

In the play, Eliot is quite successful in creating his multi-
ple planes of reality. All of the characters can move easily be-
tween the drawing room comedy and the ritual drama. Perhaps this
is a major factor in the satisfying achievement of the various lev-
els of action in the play. In other plays where he attempts this
creation of levels, Sweeney Agonistes and The Family Reunion, he always had a small spiritual elite, Sweeney himself in the first, Harry, Agatha, and Mary in the second, who were alone capable of participating in the ritual action, or even of understanding the meaning of reality. In this play, however, the members of the spiritual elite, Harcourt-Reilly, Julia, and Alex, are organized into some kind of religious brotherhood to bring those who are outside into the Christian life. Moreover, those at first incapable of ritual action and outside of reality are lost, miserable, and desperately searching for some meaning behind the drawing room superficialities. All of them feel that they are mentally ill, in need of the services of a psychiatrist, and therefore they seek out Harcourt-Reilly, who in his priestly function leads them to accept the Christian life. The vast confusion of Sweeney Agonistes and The Family Reunion, it will be recalled, stemmed from the fact that the other characters were totally incapable of ever coming to understand the viewpoint of the spiritual elite, and the members of the elite often seemed unconscionably priggish because they had such contempt for those outside their circle.

This ability of the characters to move from one level to the other, and to communicate with each other on both, allows the action of the play to deepen naturally so that both levels are satisfying, and discrepancies and clashes between the two levels disappear. However, this is only a partial explanation of the successful achievement of the multiple pattern in this play for the
first time. As the criticism of the second period shows, Eliot accounts for this sense of ever-deepening reality in poetic drama by the power of the verse alone. It is notable that for the first time, Eliot completely dispenses with choral speech in this play, and there is nothing anywhere in it that could be called a lyric duet. The poetic devices which Eliot used in The Family Reunion as a means of giving this sense of deepening reality have entirely disappeared. The only thing in the play that even comes close to such devices is the sixteen line ritual toast at the end of the Second Act. However that toast serves a dramatic purpose, for through it the audience is convinced that Julia, the society gossip, and Alex, the man about town, are with Harcourt-Reilly members of a religious brotherhood dedicated to Christianizing those with whom they come in contact.

In the verse of this play, Eliot does achieve the objective he set for himself in the criticism. The characters are contemporary, "people dressed like ourselves, living in houses and apartments like ours, and using telephones and motor cars and radio sets."127 The verse that they speak is based on modern idiom and gives the sense of personal human conversation. A contrast between a conversation in The Family Reunion and one in The Cocktail Party shows the immense advance Eliot made in versification between these two plays:

127See above, p. 54.
Harry: What I see
May be one dream or another; if there is nothing else
The most real is what I fear. The bright colour fades
Together with the unrecapturable emotion,
The glow upon the world, that never found its object;
And the eye adjusts itself to a twilight
Where the dead stone is seen to be batrachian,
The aphyllous branch ophidian.

Mary: You bring your own landscape
No more real than the other. And in a way you contradict yourself:
That sudden comprehension of the death of hope
Of which you speak, I know you have experienced it,
And I can well imagine how awful it must be.
But in this world another hope keeps springing
In an unexpected place, while we are unconscious of it.
You hoped for something, in coming back to Wishwood,
Or you would not have come. (Family I.ii. p. 249)

Edward: One of the most infuriating things about you
Has always been your perfect assurance
That you understood me better than I understood myself.
Lavinia: And the most infuriating thing about you
Has always been your placid assumption
That I wasn't worth the trouble of understanding.

Edward: So here we are again. Back in the trap.
With only one difference, perhaps—we can fight each other,
Instead of each taking his corner of the cage.
Well, it's a better way of passing the evening
Than listening to the gramaphone. (Cocktail I.iii. pp. 340-341)

Harry and Mary are not conversing in a lyric duet in the section quoted; this is their normal mode of speech. Their words are vague, stiff, and impersonal compared to the immediacy and credibility of the mutual nagging of Edward and Lavinia.

Eliot's verse in the play is admirably elastic. It conveys the banalities of Julia's party chitchat:

Edward without Lavinia! He's quite impossible!
Leaving it up to me to keep things going.
What a host! And nothing fit to eat!
The only reason for a cocktail party
For a gluttonous old woman like me
Is a really nice tit-bit. I can drink at home.
Edward, give me another of those delicious olives. What's that? Potato crisps? No, I can't endure them. Well I started to tell you about Lady Kloots. (Cocktail I.i.pp.299-300)

It is equally effective in expressing Celia's despair and confusion in her consultation with Harcourt-Reilly:

Reilly: And this man. What does he now seem like to you?

Celia: Like a child who has wandered into a forest
Playing with an imaginary playmate
And suddenly discovers he is only a child
Lost in a forest, wanting to go home.

Reilly: Compassion may already be a clue
Towards finding your own way out of the forest.

Celia: But even if I find my way out of the forest
I shall be left with the inconsolable memory
Of the treasure I went into the forest to find
And never found, and which was not there
And perhaps is not anywhere? But if not anywhere,
Why do I feel guilty at not having found it?

(Cocktail II.pp.362-363)

The dramatic utility of the verse in this play is undeniable. Nowhere does the poetry draw attention to itself for no dramatic purpose. Mr. Denis Donoghue cites only one passage in which Eliot allowed the poetry to "break loose from the restraints of the dramatic context."128

O God, O God, if I could return to yesterday
Before I thought that I had made a decision.
What devil left the door on the latch
For these doubts to enter? And then you came back, you
The angel of destruction—just as I felt sure.
In a moment, at your touch, there is nothing but ruin,
O God, what have I done? The python. The octopus.
Must I become after all what you would make me?

(Cocktail I.iii.p.343)

Even this speech, in spite of its self-conscious imitation of

Master Frankford's famous lines in *The Woman Killed With Kindness*, is not dramatically irrelevant, though it appears to be when it is quoted by itself. Immediately before it, Lavinia has intimated to Edward her knowledge of his relationship with Celia. In the speech Edward is actually attempting to draw Lavinia off the subject, to reinforce his own illusion about his nervous breakdown, and to blame Lavinia for all his personal and marital difficulties. He chooses this elaborate mode of expression because at the moment he sees himself in a dramatic light as a great man destroyed by the wiles of an evil woman. One of the first advantages Eliot saw in verse drama was that it would permit such expressions of a character's consciousness of himself as a dramatic figure.\(^{129}\) The failure of Edward's gambit in the speech can be measured by Lavinia's crisp reply:

> Well, Edward, as I am unable to make you laugh,  
> And as I can't persuade you to see a doctor,  
> There's nothing else at present that I can do about it.  
> I ought to go and have a look in the kitchen,  
> I know there are some eggs. But we must go out for dinner.  
> Meanwhile, my luggage is in the hall downstairs:  
> Will you get the porter to fetch it up for me?  
>
> *(Cocktail I.iii, p.343)*

The verse of the play, which fulfills Eliot's requirements for dramatic poetry, enables him to achieve in practice for the first time both of the dramatic principles he envisioned in his first period of criticism. His very real success with the verse in this play is due to more than his development of the three

\(^{129}\) See above, p. 2.
stress line, which he had already used in The Family Reunion, and his omission of distractingly poetic effects such as choruses and lyric duets. From the evidence of this play, it would appear that his concentration on language in his second period of criticism not only integrated his early critical ideas and made them fully effective, but made his whole conception of poetic drama more truly dramatic than it had ever been before.

Three years later, Eliot followed The Cocktail Party with The Confidential Clerk, a comedy based upon the ancient device of discovering the parentage of the illegitimate child. In this case the child is Colby Simpkins, a young man who is replacing Eggerson as the confidential clerk of the London financier, Sir Claude Mulhammer. Colby, who is supposedly the son of Sir Claude, has recently abandoned his desire to be a great organist, an ambition which he feels is beyond his talents, and has accepted the necessity of finding another career in which he can achieve success. Sir Claude, years before, had made the same decision for the same reason. Since he would not be a second rate potter, he became a successful financier.

Sir Claude intends to introduce Colby into his household as his secretary so that his eccentric wife, Lady Elizabeth, will become so attached to him that she will propose that they adopt him. Lady Elizabeth, however, decides that Colby is not Sir Claude's child at all, but her own. Years before she had borne a son whom her lover had placed in a foster home. When the baby's
father was killed in an accident shortly afterwards, she was unable to trace the child because she forgot the name of the foster mother. When Colby mentions that he was raised by his aunt, Mrs. Guzzard of Teddington, Lady Elizabeth remembers that this was the name of the woman who had cared for her child. When his wife tells him this, Sir Claude is unconvinced, feeling certain that Colby, whom he has secretly supported all these years, is his own son by Mrs. Guzzard's sister, who died soon after his birth.

Colby's desire to learn the truth leads to the confrontation of Mrs. Guzzard and the Mulhammers. At this meeting Mrs. Guzzard reveals that B. Kaghger, a rising young financier who is engaged to Sir Claude's illegitimate daughter, Lucasta Angel, is the son of Lady Elizabeth. Colby is the child of neither of the Mulhammers; he is the son of Mrs. Guzzard herself. Twenty-five years before Sir Claude had assumed that the infant Colby was his child. Mrs. Guzzard, who had been recently widowed and was very poor, allowed him to continue in his mistake for the benefit of her child. After hearing the truth, Colby decides that he will not do as Sir Claude had done, rather he will follow his real father and be content to be a second rate organist. Eggerson offers Colby a position as organist in the church of Joshua Park, the country village where he lives. He also hints that perhaps in the future Colby will become an Anglican priest. Sir Claude and Lady Elizabeth are left with their two real children, Lucasta and B., to make a relationship founded not on illusion, but on reality.
In this play, Eliot departs for the first time from the ritual drama. In all the previous plays the implications have been religious in the ritual and liturgical sense; in this play they are religious but in a more philosophical sense. The play insists that one must discover the truth about himself and the meaning of reality before he can make any kind of spiritual progress. All of the characters, with the exception of Eggerson, have been living in illusion and deception, the parents knowingly, the children unknowingly. When they are confronted by the truth, in the form of Mrs. Guzzard's story, they are forced to, or are able to, begin acting in accordance with reality. Sir Claude must realize that the half-despised Lucasta is the only child he will ever have. Lady Elizabeth must accept B. as her son. Mrs. Guzzard, who has at least known what reality was though she has lived a lie, must realize that she can be neither aunt nor mother to Colby. Lucasta, who as a protection for herself has always pretended to be cheap and common, can at last be the conventional and secure woman she has wanted to be. B. can stop being vulgar and flashy. Most important, Colby is freed by knowing the identity of his real father, from having to imitate the futilities and escapes that abound in the life of Sir Claude. He is free to be what he is, and what he wants to be, an organist, even an unsuccessful organist. It is Eggerson who says that after he has achieved this ambition, he will probably take the steps that lead to the priesthood. Thus after Colby learns who he is, he can make greater spiritual progress.
All of these changes come about not through an action of religious ritual, but simply by a confrontation of the truth, as Mrs. Guzzard brings it. Eggerson, the one man in the play who does not live on illusion, does not have to suffer and die to bring the other characters to reality; he is simply present when the truth is revealed, and he helps them to accept it.

The concept of levels of reality is the dominant one in this play. The audience first perceives the lies which Sir Claude, Lady Elizabeth, and Mrs. Guzzard have elevated to a way of life and then the truth which Mrs. Guzzard reveals. Beneath this truth about parentage is the spiritual truth of the necessity of knowing one's own identity and reaching toward God in full possession of reality.

Eggerson is always on the deepest level. Colby is stranded on the first and unable to escape it. He at first accepts the compromise upon which Sir Claude has built his own life. Sir Claude has been able to endure his life as a financier only by escaping from time to time to his pottery collection. He explains the role of the collection in his life to Colby:

It's all I have
I suppose it takes the place of religion:
Just as my wife's investigations
Into what she calls the life of the spirit
Are a kind of substitute for religion:
I dare say truly religious people--
I've never known any—can find some unity.
Then there are also the men of genius,
There are others, it seems to me, who have at best to live
In two worlds—each a kind of make believe.
That's you and me. 130

Colby says that something in him rebels against such conditions, but he nevertheless tries for a time to incorporate this double pretense into his own life. He explains to Lucasta that when he plays to himself he escapes into a secret garden where he is alone, but where his existence seems to be slightly more real at least than the one he leads as Sir Claude's clerk. However, he tells Lucasta that he is not satisfied with this compromise, and that he envies Eggerson who does not have to make it:

What I mean is, my garden's no less unreal to me
Than the world outside it. 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. (Clark II. p. 64)

Colby goes on to point out that what has made Eggerson capable of leading an integrated life, and what would make him capable of it is religion:

If I were religious, God would walk in my garden
And would make the world outside it real
And acceptable, I think. (Clark II. p. 65.)

When by learning his identity, he is freed from the necessity of adopting Sir Claude's compromises, he is prepared, as Eggerson points out, to find God in the garden, and thus to accept reality.

To give up her illusion about being Colby's mother and to accept B. Kahan as her son is very hard for Lady Elizabeth. It is

even more difficult for Sir Claude to relinquish his fatherhood.
Even after he hears Mrs. Guzzard's story and is forced to accept its plausibility, he begs Colby to keep his former position in his life:

Believe, if you like, that I am not your father:
I'll accept that. I put no claim upon you—
Except the claim of our likeness to each other.
We have undergone the same disillusionment:
I want us to make the best of it, together. (Clerk III. p. 153)

Colby points out that if he remains, it is one more subterfuge; Sir Claude will still think of him as a son. He can love Sir Claude, but not under those conditions. In order to love him as he really is, Colby must leave him and his way of life:

Not that I've abandoned my illusions and ambitions
All that's left is love. But not on false pretences:
That's why I must leave you. (Clerk III. p. 154)

It is only when Colby, the pseudo-son, has gone that Sir Claude at last turns to the real daughter, Lucasta. B. Kagan's words in response to Lady Elizabeth's remark that she and Sir Claude must understand their two children expresses his own and Lucasta's desire to build on the truth of their relationship to the Mulhammers:

And we should like to understand you . . .
I mean, I'm including both of you,
Claude . . . and Aunt Elizabeth.
You know Claude, both Lucasta and I
Would like to mean something to you . . . if you'd let us;
And we'd take the responsibility of meaning it.
(Clerk III. p. 158-159)

In this play, as in The Cocktail Party, the characters can move from one level to another and communicate with the others
from whatever one they happen to occupy. For example, Eggerson, who exists on the deepest level can always speak to those who are on the superficial plane. Like Harcourt-Reilly, Alex, and Julia, he does not feel contempt for those not on his level, though he is eager to help them when they wish to reach it.

In The Confidential Clerk, Eliot introduces a further variation to the original concept, for those on the third level do not lead a hidden, mysterious, mystical existence, as they do in the previous plays. They are not tormented by a radical split between their life and that of those who lack their illumination. Rather, as Colby points out, the other levels of reality are integrated for them by the insight which they gain from living at the deepest possible level. This new attitude makes the deepest level less mysterious, and therefore less interesting from a theatrical point of view. Eggerson quietly leading the full Christian life in Joshua Park and London does not have the dramatic impact of Celia Coplestone crucified in Kinkanja.

This new harmony between levels is much more the product of Eliot's personal thought than of his dramatic technique. To a certain extent, it robs The Confidential Clerk of a characteristic dramatic tension produced in the other plays by the conflict between levels. Even with the loss of this particular effect, the concept of ever deepening layers of reality is still essential to the structure of the play.
Eliot employed the same verse techniques that he had used in *The Cocktail Party* in this play. The verse in *The Confidential Clerk* seems less effective than that of the previous play mainly because its emotional content never rises to the intensity of *The Cocktail Party*. The harmony between levels of action is one reason for this, and a second is that nothing of real dramatic importance depends on the revelation of the identity of Colby. The truth about Colby leads to a crucial difference in attitude for everyone in the play, but the only real change which springs from it is Colby's change of profession. *The Ion* of Euripides, from which Eliot derived the plot, forms an interesting contrast here, for in that play, the life of the child depends on the revelation of his true parentage.

The following lines from the climactic scene of the play illustrate the kind of poetry which these relaxed emotional conditions produce. Mrs. Guzzard has just revealed that she is Colby's mother and explained why she has deceived Sir Claude. Colby's first words are:

I believe you. I must believe you;
This gives me freedom.

    Sir Claude: But Colby—-
If this should be true—of course it can't be true!—
But I see you believe it. You want to believe it.
Well believe it, then. But don't let it make a difference
To our relations. Or, perhaps, for the better?
Perhaps we'll be happier together if you think
I am not your father. I'll accept that.
If you will stay with me. It shall make no difference
To my plans for your future.

    Colby: Thank you, Sir Claude
You're a very generous man. But now I know who was my father.

I must follow my father—so that I may come to know him.

Sir Claude: What do you mean?

Colby: I want to be an organist.

It doesn't matter about success—
I aimed too high before—beyond my capacity.
I thought I didn't want to be an organist
When I found I had no chance of getting to the top—
That is, to become the organist of a cathedral.
But my father was an unsuccessful organist.

(Clark III. p. 151-152)

The words are as personal and immediate as any found in The Cocktail Party. They capture the kind of conversation which would occur at such a moment between persons like Colby and Sir Claude, who have shared a half-intimate, half-formal relationship for years. Perhaps it would be accurate to say that though they are dramatic, they are not theatrical.

The language nicely adapts itself to the eccentricities of Lady Elizabeth, the flippancy and the tenderness of Lucasta, and the seriousness of Colby and Sir Claude. It always fulfills its dramatic function, and because it does, it appears less successful than the verse of The Cocktail Party. Actually, its simplicity and fidelity to its dramatic purposes are as much the result of Eliot's sure grasp of his poetic medium as the more exciting verse in the previous play, which had more exciting action.

Five years after The Confidential Clerk, Eliot presented his latest play, The Elder Statesman. The title character is Lord Claverton, who began life as Richard Perry, the son of a rich but undistinguished family. With the help of his father's money, his
wife's family connections, and his own ambition, he had achieved a brilliant career in politics. Just when it seemed his political power was at its peak, he accepted the title that took him out of politics and into another brilliant career in business, from which at the opening of the play he is retiring. He is in poor health and is going to Badgley Court, a hospital masquerading as a convalescent hotel. During his stay there, he will be attended by his devoted daughter Monica, who at the opening of the play has just become engaged to Charles Hemington, whom she will not marry until her father no longer needs her.

On the eve of his departure for Badgley Court, Lord Claverton is visited by a Senor Gomez, who was born Freddy Culverwell. Years before, Lord Claverton, who was then Dick Ferry, had known Culverwell at Oxford. According to Gomez, Ferry corrupted Culverwell by leading him to acquire expensive tastes, which he gratified soon after being sent down from Oxford by forgery. Culverwell, who left England with Ferry's help after he got out of prison, has become wealthy by some shady means in the Central American Republic of San Marco. He has returned to revenge himself on Lord Claverton by means of a sort of moral blackmail. Gomez knows of an incident from the Oxford days when Ferry had run over the body of a man lying in the road, and had not stopped for fear of the difficulties he would encounter if his female companions were called to give evidence. At Badgley Court, another person out of his past awaits him. She is Mrs. John Carghill, who once as Maisie Mountjoy, a
showgirl, was engaged to Richard Perry. She too plans to engage in moral blackmail, for she has a collection of old love letters with which she plans to torment Lord Claverton.

Shortly after his encounter with her, Lord Claverton is visited by his spoiled son, Michael, who has gambled himself into debt and out of a job. He has come to ask for help to establish himself in business anywhere in the world away from England. Mrs. Carghills and Gomez tell Michael all that they know about his father, and Gomez offers him a job in his own questionable business in San Marco. Michael turns against his father and leaves with Gomez. Before his departure, however, Lord Claverton has merited release from his past by confessing to Monica and Charles all that Gomez and Mrs. Carghills know about him. As a result of this confession, he has at last learned the truth about himself, and knowing this, he is able to release his daughter to her new life with Hemington and to really love Michael for the first time, in spite of his betrayal.

This play, like The Confidential Clerk, is built on the sense of multiple planes of reality, in this instance centering on the various layers in the life of Lord Claverton. At the beginning of the play, he looks back on his busy years in public life and recognizes that his ceaseless activity was quite meaningless, that his honored position was largely hypocrisy, but he fears the emptiness of the future without these two supports.
Gomez vigorously attacks the surface of this life. He intimates that Lord Claverton must have made a serious mistake which caused him to retire from politics; he wonders if his retiring from business is not a move to cover up another mistake, and, of course, he sees always underneath the respectable Lord Claverton, Richard Ferry, corrupter of his youth and coward. When she looks at Lord Claverton, Mrs. Carghill also sees Richard Ferry, this time as the faithless lover, who allowed both himself and her to be bribed out of marriage. Michael does not have the information of Gomez and Mrs. Carghill, but he senses the secrets hidden behind the honored respectability of his father's reputation.

Lord Claverton has spent all of his adult life covering up his past and rationalizing his effect upon Gomez and Mrs. Carghill, but he is freed from the past and absolved of his guilt when he confesses his sins to Monica in the presence of Charles Hemington:

I've made my confession to you Monica: That is the first step taken towards my freedom. And perhaps the most important. I know what you think You think that I suffer from a morbid conscience. From brooding over faults I might well have forgotten. You think that I'm sickening, when I'm just recovering! It's hard to make other people realize The magnitude of things that appear to them petty; It's harder to confess the sin that no one believes in Than the crime that everyone can appreciate. For the crime is in relation to the sinner. What has made the difference in the last five minutes Is not the heinousness of my misdeeds But the fact of my confession. And to you, Monica, To you, of all people.  

In his confession, Lord Claverton passes into the second layer of reality, recognizing the truth about himself. As a result of it, he is able to pass into the deepest level, a state of spiritual awareness where he at last becomes capable of love. He tells Monica and Charles that he feels, for the first time, the peace that follows contrition. He is at last able to give up Monica and to love Michael:

I've been freed from the self that pretends to be someone; And in becoming no one, I begin to live. It is worth while dying, to find out what life is. And I love you, my daughter, the more truly for knowing That there is someone you love more than your father— That you love and are loved. And now that I love Michael, I think, for the first time—remember, my dear, I am only a beginner in the practice of loving— Well, that is something. (Elder III.p.129)

Eliot also develops this theme of levels of reality in the name changing of many of the characters. Richard Ferry becomes first Richard Claverton-Ferry when he makes his advantageous marriage, and then Lord Claverton when he becomes an elder statesman. Freddy Culverwell becomes Senor Gomez in order to make his evil way in San Marco. Maisie Batterson had the stage name of Maisie Mountjoy when Richard Ferry first knew her, and since then she has assumed a succession of names in marriage, ending as Mrs. John Carghill. Michael Claverton-Ferry will most certainly change his name under the sinister influence of Senor Gomez.

The one who explores most fully the significance of these name changes is Gomez. He tells Lord Claverton that he, Gomez, who has changed his name not by slow social progressions, but with
one painful wrench, who has fathered children who regard his native
tongue as an alien language, knows the real meaning of the most
terrible forms of loss and loneliness. "It's only when you come
to see that you have lost yourself / That you are quite alone"
(Elder I.p.36).

Gomez, Mrs. Carghill, and Lord Claverton have thus lost
themselves, and Michael intends to lose himself. But Lord
Claverton is able to turn his loss of self into a spiritual prep­
paration for love by admitting and confessing his guilt for the cor­
ruption of Culverwell and Maisie. Though they know they have lost
their identities, Gomez and Mrs. Carghill will never take this
step. They choose to remain on the surface of reality by placing
the entire blame for their corruption on Lord Claverton. They will
never realize their own guilt and confess it; rather they prefer
to remain ghosts by punishing Lord Claverton through the moral
ruin of Michael. Claverton's loss of self becomes the capacity to
love. Gomez's loss of self is simply the nothingness of damnation.

Monica and Charles also lose their separate identities, but
they do so not through a cowardly or selfish denial of moral
responsibility for their actions, but rather through the trans­
figuring power of their total giving of self in love. Because
they love each other, they move together to the deepest level of
reality, not as two different people, but as one new person. By
their love, they are protected from the lies, the evasions, the
hypocrisies which have degraded Lord Claverton, Senor Gomez, Mrs.
Garthill, and Michael. The love makes the confession of sins and stupidities possible; the confession puts them in contact with reality, where subterfuges are no longer necessary. Lord Claverston, who has learned this after a life full of pretenses explains it to Charles Hemington, who has just said that though there are things in his life which he wishes had never happened, there is nothing he would ever wish to conceal from Monica.

If a man has one person, just one in his life, To whom he is willing to confess everything— And that includes, mind you, not only things criminal, Not only turpitude, meanness and cowardice, But also situations which are simply ridiculous When he has played the fool (as who has not?)— Then he loves that person, and his love will save him. (Elder III, p.102)

The only element in this play that could be related to religious ritual is its insistence on the necessity of the confession of sins, and the references to absolution, contrition, and peace which follows it. The confessions of Edward Chamberlayne and Celia Coplestone in The Cocktail Party are sacramental, and therefore ritual actions. Harcourt-Reilly is a priest figure who sees himself as an instrument in the service of God. Charles and Monica do not look upon themselves in this way. Yet in both plays, the telling of the sins is the cause of the following peace. In The Elder Statesman it would seem that Eliot intends this use of confession to be more than a metaphor for the full revelation of oneself to a loved one, for the confession brings peace and a new ability to see life as it is into the penitent's life. Here, for the first time, it appears that Eliot is giving to human love,
either that between man and woman or that between parent and child, the power which in previous plays has been reserved for sacramental and ritual actions.

Because of the very uncharacteristic dedication of the play to his young second wife, it is tempting to say that in The Elder Statesman Eliot has ignored all his own principles on the qualities of dramatic verse to produce a very personal, and therefore undramatic tribute to human love. There are certain speeches in the play which at first glance seem to substantiate the judgment that Eliot has ignored the third voice of poetry in favor of the second. Such a speech is Monica's attempt to make peace between Michael and her father. Just at the height of the argument between them, Monica breaks in with this outburst:

Father! You know that I would give my life for you. Oh, how silly that phrase sounds! But there's no vocabulary for love within a family, love that's lived in, but not looked at, love within the light of which, all else is seen, the love within which, all other love finds speech. This love is silent. What can I say to you?

However Michael has behaved, Father, whatever Father has said, Michael, you must forgive each other, you must love each other. (Elder II, p.88)

Because of the dedication, one is likely to hear not the third voice, Monica speaking to her family, but the second, Eliot speaking to an audience, in this case, his wife. A closer analysis of this speech reveals that it is the third voice speaking after all. Monica has just become engaged, which explains her keen
appreciation of the meaning of love. Moreover, she is trying quite desperately at this moment to reconcile her father, whom she knows to be dying, and her brother, who is just now threatening to go abroad. Such a girl would speak this way at such a moment.

All of the love speeches, which are quite new to Eliot's drama, at first seem distractingly poetic just because they are new. Actually, they always serve their dramatic purpose, and two of them, while filling their function in the play, seem to capture effortlessly, by the movement of the words themselves, that sense of levels of reality which Eliot has seen for so long in poetic drama. One of these passages occurs immediately after the engagement of Charles and Monica:

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

Monica: Already

How much of me is you? 

Charles: And how much of me is you? 

I'm not the same person as a moment ago. 

What do the words mean now—I and you? 

Monica: In our private world—now we have our private world—

The meanings are different. Look! We're back in the room That we entered only a few minutes ago. 

Here's an armchair, there's the table; 

There's the door, . . , and I hear someone coming: 

It's Lambert with the tea. . . 

(Enter Lambert with trolley)

and I shall say, "Lambert, 

Please let his lordship know the tea is waiting."

Lambert: Yes, Miss Monica.

Monica: I'm very glad, Charles, 

That you can stay to tea. 

(Exit Lambert)

--Now we're in the public world. 

(Elder I.pp.16-17)
These lines not only express the feelings of Monica and Charles at this moment, but they also give the sensation of floating, freely and mysteriously away from the surface of life toward all the depths beneath it, and then somehow returning again.

At the close of the play there is a similar passage which ends with an extremely poetic speech from Monica:

Age and decrepitude can have no terrors for me,  
Loss and vicissitude cannot appal me,  
Not even death can dismay or amaze me  
Fixed in the certainty of love unchanging.

I feel utterly secure  
In you; I am a part of you. Now take me to my father.  
(Elder III. p. 132)

One must not make the mistake of thinking that this is Eliot speaking and not the character, for Monica has learned from her father's experience that love is the only defense against the corroding evasions and hypocrisies of the world, and she quite simply joys in her love. Perhaps this is a speech in which the author and the character are speaking in unison, "saying something appropriate to the character, but something which the author could say for himself also, though the words may not have quite the same meaning for both." 132 In judging all such passages in this play, one must admit that what the character says is always appropriate and dramatically relevant.

It seems clear that Eliot's conception of dramatic verse developed in the second period of his criticism integrated all of

132See above, p. 62.
his early theories and gave him a usable dramatic medium. His perception of the qualities of dramatic verse modified his early insights by causing him to abandon his conviction of the necessity of ritual in modern verse drama, and by turning his theory of multiple planes of reality into a usable, even a valuable device rather than the positive obstruction it was in Sweanev Acionistes and The Family Reunion.

In all three of the later plays Eliot was able to achieve in practice the type of verse which he envisioned in theory, but the ultimate value of this feat is a matter of critical disagreement. The objections to the verse are of two different sorts. Some critics hold that it is simply prose typographically disguised as poetry and lacking the excitement and vigour usually associated with dramatic verse. Typical of this type of disapproval is an observation made by a critic of the first performance of The Cock-tail Party at the Edinburgh Festival: "The piece, clouded by symbols and abstractions, is written in verse that might equally be prose; it is fluent and colloquial, but it does not fire the spirit. One expects a verse play to hang out the banners. Mr. Eliot, I am afraid, flutters a handkerchief, though as The Cock-tail Party proceeds, its lines begin to haunt the ear with a queer dying fall."133 Right months later the same critic reviewed the London opening of the play, forgetting the grudging praise of

the last sentence and repeating his displeasure: "The verse is really no more than a metronomic beat; it is a relief, for a moment, to hear in the last scene a short passage from Shelley."\textsuperscript{133}

The second type of objection comes from admirers of Eliot's non-dramatic poetry who feel that in abandoning the methods of that earlier verse in order to write for the theater he deliberately condemned himself to poetic mediocrity. Mr. Grover Smith expresses this view in his comment on the verse of \textit{The Family Reunion}:

The poetry is not abstract; that is the whole trouble. It is too symbolically concrete, too imagistic. Phrases like "The unexpected crash of the iron cataract," "The bright colour fades," "The bird sits on the broken chimney" are good in themselves, but are not closely relevant; they are "objective correlatives" for emotion that an audience wants to see justified in the plot. The connotative language should integrate with the action. Eliot's old methods of symbolism are not public enough for drama.

The defects of \textit{The Family Reunion} should have warned Eliot away from further writing for the stage. What is permanently most valuable in his poetic technique is precisely what shuts the public out—the symbolism of his imagery. Throughout the next play, in relying less on scrupulous attention to communicating a sense of realism, he was to preserve a symbolism of action which did not aggressively interfere with surface intelligibility. But in concentrating his style upon "verse," he had to throw away the poetic gains of forty years.\textsuperscript{134}

Both of these views ignore the whole course of Eliot's critical thinking. The first objection seems to spring from a desire


\textsuperscript{134}Smith, p. 213
to hear constant imitations of Shakespearean blank verse, a course which Eliot has convincingly shown has been closed to English drama for three-hundred years. The second, in considering the change in Eliot’s verse, does not inquire into the reason for it nor assess it in relation to the objectives Eliot was trying to achieve.

There are, however, very real poetic merits in the verse of the later plays, as Mr. Hugh Kenner points out:

In Eliot’s last plays the language has developed a quite inimitable explicitness, as though people were capable of saying what they wanted to. . . . This verse is neither a dense medium lying in wait for effects of full intensity and damping out anything slighter, nor is it apt to be set twittering by random trivialities. It is seldom quotable, nearly devoid of fine lines; dry, not desiccated; not prosaic because more explicit than prose. The characters make themselves understood to each other and to us with preternatural efficiency and wit, and as they enlighten one another they grow more and more separated before our eyes. . . . The characters discover and affirm their own inalienable privacy, indistinguishable from identity. They do not advance toward a shared illumination; they do not all, once freed from the illusions with which the play concerns itself, do similar things or elect similar lives. And yet no one echoes Swee­ney’s complaint that he has to use words. It took Eliot twenty-five years to develop a language against which that imputation would not lie. It is the thing his verse does that prose cannot do; mere English prose cannot be so explicit.

Colloquial prose does not define its meaning, but refers to its meaning; and no prose defines emotional meanings. Prose sketches in what it can and then says, “You know what I mean.” Hence prose, a system of reference to meanings already shared, draws interlocutors together, when the drama­tist is representing them as understanding one another. And when they are represented as not understanding each other, that is because the language is defective. But a speech in verse can be as clear as a scientific law, its intelligibility residing in the structure of what is said, not in another’s guess at its purport. So it is possible for the verse drama­tist, if he understands this use of verse, to build up gradu­ually a structure of meaning which clarifies to everyone on
stage everything that can be formulated. What is then left unstated is simply each speaker's wordless experience of himself, the essential life in possession of which he exper-
inces both the freedom and the isolation of the finite centers. . . .

Clarity of discourse, then, is the function of the verse. It is secured by using only those components of poetry which can enhance the defining powers of colloquial speech: rhythm and syntax, brought to the assistance of images not mere sal-
ient, though more tidily developed, than those that occur in enlightened speech. And clarity, once secured, determines the moral climate of the plays. Establishing as it does the separateness of the characters—each actor's part, speech by speech a marvel of explicitness—it lends definition to Eliot's familiar theme, the difficulty of understanding that another person exists not simply as a figure in your inner drama, but in his own way, and the necessity of arriving at that understanding in order that both you and he may be free.135

CHAPTER V

ELIOT’S CONTRIBUTION TO MODERN DRAMA

An accurate assessment of the value of the plays Eliot has written is, of course, not possible at this time. Current critical reservations about the quality of the plays may, however, give some indication of what the judgment of the future may be. Mr. David Jones, after considering all of the plays, holds that the importance of the whole of Eliot’s drama resides in only one play: “Of the greatness of Murder in the Cathedral, there can be no doubt—it may even be the greatest religious play ever written—and the other plays will survive if only as parts of the unity of which it is the finest element. It is difficult, however, to be sure of their individual stature. One cannot yet distinguish between their intrinsic merit and their importance as steps towards the re-establishment of poetic drama.”

Sean Lucy is more severe in his judgment of the merits of the plays:

It is almost impossible to avoid the idea that Eliot the poet is much more important than Eliot the dramatist. So

far he has written no great play, and no play except *Murder in the Cathedral* which approaches greatness. He has helped to give the theatre a workable dramatic verse; and has probably done more than any other English playwright of this century to get audiences to accept the verse without prejudice. This is a major achievement, but whether time produces more than a few successors to the new verse tradition remains to be seen. As for dramatic intensity or originality of any other sort, whether in the sphere of plot, action, theme, character, or staging: so far there has been nothing outstanding in his naturalist plays—but here we must remind ourselves that this is not the end of the story.137

Denis Donoghue relates the plays to modern drama as a whole. According to him, the current lack of universally accepted moral values produces the conditions of the contemporary theater: "a profusion of talent and good will issuing in plays composed on the margin of a blank page; almost total confusion as to the nature of tragedy; almost total inability to find order or meaning in an individual life; the misunderstanding of entelechy; a failure of nerve issuing in the mood play, the gimmickry of 'theatre,' cut off from genuine theatrical invention."138 Against this background, Eliot's plays appear to him as:

not so much a number of good or bad plays as a body of interim drama, essays in drama rather than drama itself. And as essays they are probably in their own way, as fine as can be managed until conditions of society change. Indeed it may well be that their value is to keep the lines of severe intelligence open in the commercial theater, waiting for such a change. If society changes, it will also provide

138Donoghue, p. 254.
'central' motives for the dramatist; relevance will gather into new patterns involving the whole of man. At present each dramatist does the best he can with his own little corner. We recall with Francis Fergusson that drama can flourish only in a human sized scene, generally acknowledged as the focus of the life or awareness of its time.139

Turning from the plays themselves to Eliot's criticism, one can estimate the probable importance of his basic principles by their effect on his own drama. Eliot's earliest critical insight was that realism was a dead end for modern drama. The theater's attempt to imitate exactly "that reality perceived by the most commonplace mind"140 led to nothing but a desert. Moreover, the formlessness of ordinary realistic social drama made verse plays impossible because the poet had to devise his own dramatic framework. Eliot found the solution to this problem in ritual drama. This would function as an anti-realistic device which would supply a common background for the audience and the playwright as well as its own form.

The first four plays which Eliot wrote were, in accordance with this critical perception, ritual dramas. Sweeney Agonistes, for the reasons which have been examined previously, was never finished. Murder in the Cathedral was the most purely ritual play that Eliot wrote. It is undeniably effective, but it seems clear that it would have been difficult to write another such play.

139 Ibid., p. 257.
140 See above, p. 8.
that was not simply an imitation of Murder in the Cathedral. Purely ritual drama could turn into its own dramatic dead end. In The Family Reunion and The Cocktail Party, the ritual action is progressively less conspicuous, and in the last two plays, it disappears.

Ritual was thus gradually relinquished, but Eliot learned to achieve some of the objectives he sought from its convention by another means. This device, the concept of multiple planes of reality, was also first perceived in the period of his early criticism. It functioned initially in connection with ritual drama, but it is still operating in the later plays when ritual has been left behind. After Sweeney Agonistes and The Family Reunion, when Eliot has fashioned this concept into a usable dramatic tool, it becomes the anti-realistic device which allows him to deal with that deepest reality which he thought realistic drama, as it is written today, does not touch. In the last two plays, one is always conscious, as the characters are, of actualities operating behind the surface action. Though he first thought ritual drama was the only way in which this particular sense could be supplied, he seems to have learned through practical experience that the use of multiple planes of reality was just as capable of creating that sense and was ultimately more capable of dramatic development. It would appear, therefore, that the principle of multiple patterning which Eliot applied to the structure of his plays is a useful
tool for the achievement of a consciousness which removes drama from what Eliot regarded as the desert of realism.

The other two concepts of Eliot's first period of criticism, on characterization and the dramatic unities, are of little importance. The theory on characterization is so undeveloped that it ignores more than it states on that important subject. To the unities Eliot has contributed nothing but a modern theoretical appreciation; in practice, he has frequently violated them.

Probably the most valuable contribution of Eliot's criticism is his perception of the qualities necessary to the development of modern verse drama. He has insisted that dramatic verse must dissociate itself from blank verse, that it must be based upon current colloquial speech, that it must always be dramatically relevant. He has re-affirmed the value of verse drama and defined its possibilities, which by the nature of language, exceed those of prose.

He has developed in his own plays a poetic medium using a loose rhythm and modern colloquial idiom. As this study has shown, this form enables him to accomplish what he sets out to do in his later plays. It probably will not come to be what blank verse was to the Elizabethans, but it is at least a point of departure from which such a poetic form might develop.

"Insofar as the problems of verse drama are linguistic problems," writes Denis Donoghue, "Eliot has done more than any other
dramatist to lay down genuine lines of development."141 But he goes on to point out that there are more problems than linguistic ones in verse drama: "At its deepest level it [drama] is a sequence of acts whose nature is indicated partly by words, partly by gestures, partly by the 'context of situation,' by the 'scene' itself."142 The contention of Donoghue and many other critics is that Eliot has paid little attention to these other components of verse drama, that the main interest in his dramatic theory and his plays themselves is in the word spoken rather than the action performed.

There is no defense against this charge. The only sort of action that Eliot notices in the criticism is ritual, and it is notable that he arrives at it not under the aspect of action, but as an anti-realistic device. It is quite significant that the only time in the criticism that he defines dramatic action, he calls it a "communication between imaginary people."143 The dominance in the second period of criticism of considerations of the language of verse drama and the continued absence of any exploration of action and character as such, are evidence that practical experience did nothing to make action a more essential part of Eliot's conception of drama.

141 Donoghue, p. 248.
142 Ibid.
143 See above, p. 62.
In spite of this objection, which is valid and serious, one must admit the very real achievement of Eliot's drama and of his criticism. Understood in the light of what he was trying to do, every play he wrote was an advance in his dramatic technique. In both his plays and his theory, he has shown one way, at least, in which a modern living verse drama can be developed. Even from his mistakes and deficiencies, later writers will be able to learn. One might apply to him, in his role as dramatic theorist and playwright, the words he spoke of William Butler Yeats in 1940: "I do not know where our debt to him as a dramatist ends—and in time, it will not end until that drama itself ends. In his . . . writings on dramatic topics he has asserted certain principles to which we must hold fast. . ." [144]

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Approval Sheet

The thesis submitted by Jeanne A. Flood has been read and approved by three members of the Department of English.

The final copies have been examined by the director of the thesis and the signature which appears below verifies the fact that any necessary changes have been incorporated, and that the thesis is now given final approval with reference to content, form, and mechanical accuracy.

The thesis is therefore accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts.

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