

# T. S. Eliot

Volume 2

*Edited by*  
Michael Grant

The Critical Heritage



**T. S. ELIOT: THE CRITICAL HERITAGE  
VOLUME 2**

## **THE CRITICAL HERITAGE SERIES**

General Editor: B. C. Southam

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**T. S. ELIOT**  
VOLUME 2

**THE CRITICAL HERITAGE**

Edited by

**MICHAEL GRANT**



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## General Editor's Preface

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The reception given to a writer by his contemporaries and near-contemporaries is evidence of considerable value to the student of literature. On one side we learn a great deal about the state of criticism at large and in particular about the development of critical attitudes towards a single writer; at the same time, through private comments in letters, journals or marginalia, we gain an insight upon the tastes and literary thought of individual readers of the period. Evidence of this kind helps us to understand the writer's historical situation, the nature of his immediate reading-public, and his response to these pressures.

The separate volumes in the *Critical Heritage Series* present a record of this early criticism. Clearly, for many of the highly productive and lengthily reviewed nineteenth- and twentieth-century writers, there exists an enormous body of material; and in these cases the volume editors have made a selection of the most important views, significant for their intrinsic critical worth or for their representative quality—perhaps even registering incomprehension!

For earlier writers, notably pre-eighteenth century, the materials are much scarcer and the historical period has been extended, sometimes far beyond the writer's lifetime, in order to show the inception and growth of critical views which were initially slow to appear.

In each volume the documents are headed by an Introduction, discussing the material assembled and relating the early stages of the author's reception to what we have come to identify as the critical tradition. The volumes will make available much material which would otherwise be difficult of access and it is hoped that the modern reader will be thereby helped towards an informed understanding of the ways in which literature has been read and judged.

B.C.S.

For Theresa

## Contents

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	xvii
ABBREVIATIONS	xx
INTRODUCTION	1
NOTE ON THE TEXT	66
<i>'Prufrock and Other Observations' (June 1917)</i>	
1 ARTHUR WAUGH, The New Poetry, 'Quarterly Review', October 1916	67
2 EZRA POUND, Drunken Helots and Mr. Eliot, 'Egoist', June 1917	70
3 Unsigned review, 'Times Literary Supplement', June 1917	73
4 Unsigned review, 'Literary World', July 1917	74
5 Unsigned review, 'New Statesman', August 1917	75
6 EZRA POUND, T. S. Eliot, 'Poetry', August 1917	75
7 CONRAD AIKEN, Divers Realists, 'Dial', November 1917	80
8 EZRA POUND, A Letter from Remy de Gourmont, 'Little Review', December 1917	81
9 MAY SINCLAIR, 'Prufrock and Other Observations': A Criticism, 'Little Review', December 1917	83
10 BABETTE DEUTSCH, Another Impressionist, 'New Republic', February 1918	88
11 MARIANNE MOORE, A Note on T. S. Eliot's Book, 'Poetry', April 1918	89
12 EDGAR JEPSON, Recent United States Poetry, 'English Review', May 1918	91
13 WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS, Prologue, 'Little Review', May 1919	92
<i>'Poems' (May 1919)</i>	
14 Unsigned review, Not Here, O Apollo, 'Times Literary Supplement', June 1919	96
15 Unsigned review, Is This Poetry?, 'Athenaeum', June 1919	99



<i>'Ara Vos Prec' (February 1920)</i>	
16 JOHN MIDDLETON MURRY, The Eternal Footman, 'Athenaeum', February 1920	102
17 Unsigned review, A New Byronism, 'Times Literary Supplement', March 1920	105
18 ROBERT NICHOLS, An Ironist, 'Observer', April 1920	108
19 DESMOND MACCARTHY, New Poets, T. S. Eliot, 'New Statesman', January 1921	111
20 CLIVE BELL, Plus de Jazz, 'New Republic', September 1921	117
<i>'Poems' (February 1920, American edition of 'Ara Vos Prec')</i>	
21 MARION STROBEL, Perilous Leaping, 'Poetry', June 1920	119
22 E. E. CUMMINGS, T. S. Eliot, 'Dial', June 1920	121
23 MARK VAN DOREN, Anglo-Saxon Adventures in Verse, 'Nation' (New York), June 1920	125
24 LOUIS UNTERMEYER, Irony de Luxe, 'Freeman', June 1920	126
25 RAYMOND WEAVER, What Ails Pegasus?, 'Bookman' (New York), September 1920	130
26 PADRAIC COLUM, Studies in the Sophisticated, 'New Republic', December 1920	131
<i>'The Waste Land' ('Criterion', October 1922; 'Dial', November 1922; first published New York, December 1922)</i>	
27 Unsigned notice of the 'Criterion' and review of 'The Waste Land', 'Times Literary Supplement', October 1922	134
28 Unsigned comment on the 'Dial' award of \$2,000 to 'The Waste Land', 'New York Times Book Review', November 1922	135
29 Unsigned comment on the reasons for the award, 'Dial', December 1922	136
30 EDMUND WILSON, The Poetry of Drouth, 'Dial', December 1922	138
31 GILBERT SELDES, T. S. Eliot, 'Nation' (New York), December 1922	144
32 LOUIS UNTERMEYER, Disillusion vs. Dogma, 'Freeman', January 1923	151
33 ELINOR WYLIE, Mr. Eliot's Slug-Horn, 'New York Evening Post Literary Review', January 1923	153

34	CONRAD AIKEN, <i>An Anatomy of Melancholy</i> , 'New Republic', February 1923	156
35	HAROLD MONRO, Notes for a Study of 'The Waste Land': An Imaginary Dialogue with T. S. Eliot, 'Chapbook', February 1923	162
36	HARRIET MONROE, A Contrast, 'Poetry', March 1923	166
37	J.M., review, 'Double Dealer', May 1923	170
38	JOHN CROWE RANSOM, <i>Waste Lands</i> , 'New York Evening Post Literary Review', July 1923	172
39	ALLEN TATE, a reply to Ransom, 'New York Evening Post Literary Review', August 1923	180
40	HELEN MCAFEE, <i>The Literature of Disillusion</i> , 'Atlantic', August 1923	182
41	EDGEELL RICKWORD, unsigned review, A Fragmentary Poem, 'Times Literary Supplement', September 1923	184
42	CLIVE BELL, T. S. Eliot, 'Nation and Athenaeum', September 1923	186
43	J. C. SQUIRE on Eliot's failure to communicate, 'London Mercury', October 1923	191
44	WILLIAM ROSE BENÉT, Among the New Books. Poetry Ad Lib, 'Yale Review', October 1923	192
45	CHARLES POWELL, review, 'Manchester Guardian', October 1923	194
46	F. L. LUCAS, review, 'New Statesman', November 1923	195
47	HUMBERT WOLFE, <i>Waste Land and Waste Paper</i> , 'Weekly Westminster', November 1923	200
48	GORHAM B. MUNSON, <i>The Esotericism of T. S. Eliot</i> , '1924', July 1924	203
<i>'Poems 1909-1925' (November 1925)</i>		
49	LEONARD WOOLF, 'Jug Jug' to Dirty Ears, 'Nation and Athenaeum', December 1925	213
50	EDGEELL RICKWORD, The Modern Poet, 'Calendar of Modern Letters', December 1925	215
51	LOUISE MORGAN, The Poetry of Mr. Eliot, 'Outlook' (London), February 1926	219
52	JOHN MIDDLETON MURRY on Eliot and the 'Classical' revival, 'Adelphi', February-March 1926	222
53	I. A. RICHARDS, Mr. Eliot's Poems, 'New Statesman', February 1926	234

54	EDMUND WILSON, Stravinsky and Others, 'New Republic', March 1926	239
55	J. C. SQUIRE on Eliot's meaninglessness, 'London Mercury', March 1926	240
56	ALLEN TATE, A Poetry of Ideas, 'New Republic', June 1926	242
57	CONRAD AIKEN, from The Poetic Dilemma, 'Dial', May 1927	246

*'Ash-Wednesday' (April 1930)*

58	GERALD HEARD, T. S. Eliot, 'Week-end Review', May 1930	249
59	FRANCIS BIRRELL, Mr. T. S. Eliot, 'Nation and Athenaeum', May 1930	251
60	EDA LOU WALTON, T. S. Eliot Turns to Religious Verse, 'New York Times Book Review', July 1930	253
61	ORGILL MCKENZIE, review, 'New Adelphi', June-August 1930	255
62	EDMUND WILSON, review, 'New Republic', August 1930	259
63	MORTON D. ZABEL, T. S. Eliot in Mid-Career, 'Poetry', September 1930	261
64	THOMAS MOULT, from Contrasts in Current Poetry, 'Bookman' (London), September 1930	265
65	WILLIAM ROSE BENÉT, from Round about Parnassus, 'Saturday Review', October 1930	267
66	E. G. TWITCHETT, review, 'London Mercury', October 1930	268
67	BRIAN HOWARD, Mr. Eliot's Poetry, 'New Statesman', November 1930	269
68	ALLEN TATE, Irony and Humility, 'Hound and Horn', January-March 1931	272

*'Marina' (September 1930)*

69	MARIANNE MOORE, A Machinery of Satisfaction, 'Poetry', September 1931	280
----	---	-----

*'Triumphal March' (October 1931)*

70	MORTON D. ZABEL, The Still Point, 'Poetry', December 1932	282
----	---	-----

*'Sweeney Agonistes' (December 1932)*

- 71 D. G. BRIDSON, review, 'New English Weekly', January 1933 286
- 72 GEORGE BARKER, from a review, 'Adelphi', January 1933 288
- 73 MORTON D. ZABEL, A Modern Purgatorio, 'Commonweal', April 1933 290
- 74 MARIANNE MOORE, review, 'Poetry', May 1933 291

*'The Rock' (May 1934)*

- 75 Unsigned review, 'Listener', June 1934 294
- 76 Unsigned review, Mr. Eliot's Pageant Play, 'Times Literary Supplement', June 1934 295
- 77 MICHAEL SAYERS, Mr. T. S. Eliot's 'The Rock', 'New English Weekly', June 1934 298
- 78 Unsigned editorial on 'The Rock', 'Theology', July 1934 302
- 79 Unsigned review, 'Tablet', August 1934 303
- 80 Unsigned review, 'Everyman', August 1934 303
- 81 A.M., review, 'Blackfriars', September 1934 304
- 82 Unsigned review, 'Sunday Times', September 1934 305
- 83 D. W. HARDING, 'The Rock', 'Scrutiny', September 1934 306
- 84 CONRAD AIKEN, After 'Ash-Wednesday', 'Poetry', December 1934 310

*'Murder in the Cathedral' (June 1935)*

- 85 Unsigned review, Mr. Eliot's New Play, 'Times Literary Supplement', June 1935 313
- 86 I. M. PARSONS, from Poetry, Drama and Satire, 'Spectator', June 1935 315
- 87 JAMES LAUGHLIN, Mr. Eliot on Holy Ground, 'New English Weekly', July 1935 317
- 88 EDWIN MUIR, New Literature, 'London Mercury', July 1935 320
- 89 MARK VAN DOREN, The Holy Blissful Martir, 'Nation' (New York), October 1935 323
- 90 F. O. MATTHIESSEN, T. S. Eliot's Drama of Becket, 'Saturday Review', October 1935 324
- 91 EDWARD SHILLITO, review, 'Christian Century', October 1935 328
- 92 FREDERICK A. POTTLE, from Drama of Action, 'Yale Review', December 1935 332

*'Collected Poems 1909–1935' (April 1936)*

93	JOHN HAYWARD, London Letter, 'New York Sun', March 1936	335
94	EDWIN MUIR, Mr. Eliot's Poetry, 'Spectator', April 1936	336
95	PETER QUENNELL, Mr. T. S. Eliot, 'New Statesman', April 1936	339
96	CYRIL CONNOLLY, A Major Poet, 'Sunday Times', May 1936	344
97	MALCOLM COWLEY, Afterthoughts on T. S. Eliot, 'New Republic', May 1936	347
98	MARIANNE MOORE, It Is Not Forbidden to Think, 'Nation' (New York), May 1936	350
99	MORTON D. ZABEL, from Poets of Five Decades, 'Southern Review', Summer 1936	353
100	ROLFE HUMPHRIES, Eliot's Poetry, 'New Masses', August 1936	356
101	D. W. HARDING, T. S. Eliot, 1925–1935, 'Scrutiny', September 1936	359
102	LOUIS UNTERMEYER, from New Poetry, 'Yale Review', September 1936	364
103	R. P. BLACKMUR, The Whole Poet, 'Poetry', April 1937	366

*'The Family Reunion' (first produced and published March 1939)*

104	Unsigned review, Mr. Eliot in Search of the Present, 'Times Literary Supplement', March 1939	369
105	DESMOND MACCARTHY, Some Notes on Mr. Eliot's New Play, 'New Statesman', March 1939	371
106	IVOR BROWN, review, 'Observer', March 1939	375
107	Unsigned review, 'Listener', April 1939	377
108	MICHAEL ROBERTS, Mr. Eliot's New Play, 'London Mercury', April 1939	379
109	LOUIS MACNEICE, Original Sin, 'New Republic', May 1939	381
110	MAUD BODKIN, The Eumenides and Present-Day Consciousness, 'Adelphi', May 1939	384
111	FREDERICK A. POTTLE, A Modern Verse Play, 'Yale Review', June 1939	387
112	CLEANTH BROOKS, Sin and Expiation, 'Partisan Review', Summer 1939	390

113	PHILIP HORTON, Speculations on Sin, 'Kenyon Review', Summer 1939	393
114	JOHN CROWE RANSOM, T. S. Eliot as Dramatist, 'Poetry', August 1939	396
115	HORACE GREGORY, The Unities and Eliot, 'Life and Letters', October 1939	400
	<i>'Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats' (October 1939)</i>	
116	STEPHEN SPENDER, Cats and Dog, 'Listener', October 1939	406
	<i>'East Coker' (first Faber edition September 1940)</i>	
117	G. W. STONIER, Mr. Eliot's New Poem, 'New Statesman', September 1940	409
118	JAMES KIRKUP, Eliot, 'Poetry London', January 1941	412
119	STEPHEN SPENDER, The Year's Poetry, 1940, 'Horizon', February 1941	415
120	JAMES JOHNSON SWEENEY, 'East Coker': A Reading, 'Southern Review', Spring 1941	418
121	ETHEL M. STEPHENSON, T. S. Eliot and the Lay Reader (II), 'Poetry Review', March–April 1942	438
	<i>'Burnt Norton' (first separate edition February 1941)</i>	
122	ANDREWS WANNING, from Criticism and Principles: Poetry of the Quarter, 'Southern Review', Spring 1941	443
123	ETHEL M. STEPHENSON, T. S. Eliot and the Lay Reader (I), 'Poetry Review', October 1941	446
	<i>'The Dry Salvages' (September 1941)</i>	
124	J. P. HOGAN, Eliot's Later Verse, 'Adelphi', January–March 1942	451
125	MURIEL BRADBROOK, The Lyric and Dramatic in the Latest Verse of T. S. Eliot, 'Theology', February 1942	458
126	ROLFE HUMPHRIES, Salvation from Sand in Salt, 'Poetry', March 1942	468
127	HELEN GARDNER, a study of Eliot's more recent poetry, 'New Writing and Daylight', 1942	469
128	GEORGE ORWELL, Points of View: T. S. Eliot, 'Poetry London', October–November 1942	483
129	KATHLEEN RAINE, Points of View: Another Reading, 'Poetry London', October–November 1942	488

130	A correspondent intervenes, 'Poetry London', February–March 1943	493
	<i>'Little Gidding' (December 1942)</i>	
131	Unsigned review, Midwinter Spring, 'Times Literary Supplement', December 1942	496
132	ROBERT SPEAIGHT, a review, 'Tablet', December 1942	497
133	LUKE TURNER, O.P., a review, 'Blackfriars', February 1943	500
134	EDWIN MUIR, 'Little Gidding', 'New Statesman', February 1943	502
135	JAMES KIRKUP, Eliot, 'Poetry London', February–March 1943	505
136	MURIEL BRADBROOK, review, 'Theology', March 1943	510
137	D. W. HARDING, We Have Not Reached Conclusion, 'Scrutiny', Spring 1943	515
138	R. N. HIGINBOTHAM's objections to Harding's review, 'Scrutiny', Summer 1943	519
139	F. R. LEAVIS replies to Higinbotham, 'Scrutiny', Summer 1943	521
140	JAMES JOHNSON SWEENEY, 'Little Gidding': Introductory to a Reading, 'Poetry', July 1943	529
141	JOHN SHAND, Around 'Little Gidding', 'Nineteenth Century', September 1944	536
	<i>'Four Quartets' (May 1943)</i>	
142	CHARLES WILLIAMS, A Dialogue on Mr. Eliot's Poem, 'Dublin Review', April 1943	552
143	HORACE GREGORY, Fare Forward, Voyagers, 'New York Times Book Review', May 1943	560
144	MALCOLM COWLEY, Beyond Poetry, 'New Republic', June 1943	563
145	DELMORE SCHWARTZ, Anywhere Out of the World, 'Nation' (New York), July 1943	567
146	PAUL GOODMAN, T. S. Eliot: The Poet of Purgatory, 'New Leader', August 1943	570
147	JOHN GOULD FLETCHER, Poems in Counterpoint, 'Poetry', October 1943	573
148	LOUIS UNTERMAYER, a review, 'Yale Review', December 1943	576

149	REGINALD SNELL, T. S. Eliot and the English Poetic Tradition, 'New English Weekly', December 1944	577
150	E. J. STORMAN, S.J., Time and Mr. T. S. Eliot, 'Meanjin', Winter 1944	581
	<i>'The Cocktail Party' (first produced 22-7 August 1949 and published March 1950)</i>	
151	I.H., Mr. T. S. Eliot's New Play, 'Manchester Guardian', August 1949	591
152	PETER RUSSELL, A Note on T. S. Eliot's New Play, 'Nife', Autumn 1949	592
153	DESMOND SHAW-TAYLOR, from a review of the Edinburgh Festival production, 'New Statesman', September 1949	594
154	ROBERT SPEAIGHT, a review, 'Tablet', September 1949	597
155	WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS, It's About 'Your Life and Mine, Darling', 'New York Post', March 1950	601
156	E. M. FORSTER, Mr. Eliot's 'Comedy', 'Listener', March 1950	602
157	Unsigned review, 'Times Literary Supplement', March 1950	604
158	WILLIAM BARRETT, Dry Land, Dry Martini, 'Partisan Review', April 1950	606
159	BONAMY DOBRÉE, Books and Writers, 'Spectator', April 1950	612
160	JOHN PETER, Sin and Soda, 'Scrutiny', Spring 1950	615
161	Unsigned review, Writing for the Theatre, 'Times Literary Supplement', August 1950	622
162	WILLIAM ARROWSMITH, Notes on English Verse Drama, 'Hudson Review', Autumn 1950	624
163	JOHN MIDDLETON MURRY, Mr. Eliot's Cocktail Party, 'Fortnightly', December 1950	643
	<i>'The Complete Poems and Plays 1909-1950' (November 1952)</i>	
164	V. S. PRITCHETT, An American Puritan in England, 'New York Times Book Review', November 1952	653
165	MARY COLUM, St Louis over Bloomsbury, 'Saturday Review', December 1952	656
	<i>'The Confidential Clerk' (first produced 25 August-5 September 1953 and published March 1954)</i>	
166	HENRY DONALD, Edinburgh Festival, 'Spectator', September 1953	660



167	T. C. WORSLEY, a review, 'New Statesman', September 1953	662
168	J. G. WEIGHTMAN, from a report on the Edinburgh Festival, 'Twentieth Century', October 1953	665
169	RICHARD FINDLATER, The Camouflaged Drama, 'Twentieth Century', October 1953	667
170	BONAMY DOBRÉE, a review, 'Sewanee Review', January 1954	675
171	NICHOLAS BROOKE, 'The Confidential Clerk': A Theatrical Review, 'Durham University Journal', March 1954	689
172	HELEN GARDNER, a review, 'New Statesman', March 1954	697
	<i>'The Elder Statesman' (first produced 25–30 August 1958 and published April 1959)</i>	
173	HENRY HEWES, T. S. Eliot at Seventy, and an interview with Eliot, 'Saturday Review', September 1958	702
174	J. G. WEIGHTMAN, After Edinburgh, 'Twentieth Century', October 1958	707
175	FRANK KERMODE, What Became of Sweeney?, 'Spectator', April 1959	709
176	DENIS DONOGHUE, Eliot in Fair Colonius: 'The Elder Statesman', 'Studies', Spring 1959	712
177	NONA BALAKIAN, Affirmation and Love in Eliot, 'New Leader', May 1959	722
178	HUGH KENNER, For Other Voices, 'Poetry', October 1959	725
	<i>'Collected Poems 1909–1962' (September 1963)</i>	
179	DONALD DAVIE, Mr Eliot, 'New Statesman', October 1963	731
180	JOHN FREDERICK NIMS, Greatness in Moderation, 'Saturday Review', October 1963	736
181	FRANK KERMODE, Reading Eliot Today, 'Nation' (New York), October 1963	743
	SELECT BIBLIOGRAPHY	746
	INDEX	750

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# Abbreviations

'Bibliography'	Donald Gallup, 'T.S. Eliot: A Bibliography' (London, 1969).
Browne	E. Martin Browne, 'The Making of T.S. Eliot's Plays', second impression (Cambridge, 1970).
CPP	'The Complete Poems and Plays of T.S. Eliot' (London, 1969).
Unger	'T.S. Eliot: A Selected Critique', edited with an introduction by Leonard Unger (New York, 1966).

# ‘The Family Reunion’

First produced at the Westminster Theatre, London, 21 March 1939;  
first published, London, 21 March 1939, and New York, 30 March 1939

104. UNSIGNED REVIEW, MR. ELIOT IN SEARCH OF THE PRESENT,  
'TIMES LITERARY SUPPLEMENT'

25 March 1939, no. 1938, 176

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Mr. Eliot must be admired for his persistence in making experiments for a modern verse drama. The box-office success of 'Murder in the Cathedral' may have given him an unexpected and fortunate filip. It is possible, indeed, that he, more than other poets on the scene at the moment, may establish an altered theatre. His work is ritualistic, a thing which will be increasingly appropriate, without doubt, in the coming years. Yet, strangely enough, in his new play, 'The Family Reunion' (produced at the Westminster Theatre this week), he clings in the text to naturalism of surface and the naturalistic time. For all the versification, he may be said to have hardly broken with the main tenets of Shaftesbury Avenue.

Here we have the fixed drawing-room and library of an English country house. The slight ceremonies of such a place may make a preliminary appeal to Mr. Eliot. The verse is so apologetic it might often hardly be noticed.

She's a nice girl; but it's a difficult age for her.  
I suppose she must be getting on for thirty?

This is perhaps an experiment in infiltration, of 'getting by' with verse before the Philistines suspect it. It has the flat simplicity of Frost, the studied casualness of certain Frenchmen, but it does not seem especially dramatic; nor is it compact. At times it is both clumsy and

diffuse, reminding us rather of the novel of analysis, now passing, than of a possible poetic drama. It has less natural music than that of certain dramatists who take conversation and subtilize it and make it dance to its inherent tunes. Too often he imposes rather than educes the music. What the theatre requires is the dance of the text; whether verse or prose does not matter. Crommelynck's prose, for instance, has more lively poetry than this Eliotian verse.

'The Family Reunion', to some extent, reflects the state of the modern theatre, both in its treatment and story. Old appearances are kept up, but always there is a sense of another thing, in this case horrible, ready to explode beneath. At intervals a choric frankness breaks forth, and the Eumenides are sighted for a second in a window embrasure. We realise it is inevitable that the surface will break completely, in the end, and that is all: a negative approach. The general effect is static and descriptive. We had imagined a dynamic and cursive drama, learning from the Greek, but moving away from it too. This is the contrary. Characters are erected like statues (made at Madame Tussaud's) here and there about the desiccated stage. They are the statues of an intellectual commentary, not bold complete figures in Greek sunshine, but tenebrous with nineteenth-century Gothic guilt.

A group of cohering relatives in an English mansion, paying tribute to an old property that has become more important than their life, is disturbed by a son who has twitched his wife over a ship's rail at sea, cleverly, without being found out (except by the Eumenides). What, then, is the play? A few bad thoughts in a good family. The son goes off again, as if led now by the Eumenides to redemption.

Somewhere on the other side of despair.  
To the worship in the desert, the thirst and deprivation,  
A stony sanctuary and a primitive altar,  
The heat of the sun and the icy vigil,  
A care over lives of humble people,  
The lesson of ignorance, of incurable diseases ...  
I must follow the bright angels.

Mr. Eliot is a poet with a sense of the past in search of an equivalent present. His poems contrasted slick modernism with ancient greatness, to the former's disadvantage. Here he has tried to insert guilt in the ancient style, into a drawing-room. He spoke in an essay once of Hamlet being

dominated by an emotion which is inexpressible, because it is in excess of the facts as they appear. And the supposed identity of Hamlet with his author is genuine to this point; that Hamlet's bafflement at the absence of objective equivalent to his feelings is a prolongation of the bafflement of his creator in the face of his artistic problem.

His own words describe the impression that 'The Family Reunion' makes.

Again, this is the past looking for a present, not the present reabsorbing the past (compare, on this point, Cocteau's 'Les Parents Terribles'). Mr. Eliot is perhaps an illustration of the Orpheus legend. He has visited the world of the dead and is bringing back what he needs to enrich the modern time. But it is ordained that the poet must keep his eyes well on his own brief day lest, ironically, the world of the dead should cease to help him.

105. DESMOND MacCARTHY, SOME NOTES ON MR. ELIOT'S NEW PLAY, 'NEW STATESMAN'

25 March 1939, vol. xvii, 455-6

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On Tuesday the 21st the first performance of Mr. T.S. Eliot's new verse play, 'The Family Reunion,' was given at The Westminster Theatre. It is a drama of the inner life. The character contrast which runs through it - the test applied to all the characters in the play - is whether he or she attempts to live on the surface and *pretends* (that is all that is possible) to ignore the spiritual destiny of man, or accepts a predicament which is essentially tragic. If I had grasped this while in the theatre instead of only when on my return home, I should not have been so perplexed by the play. The characters who willfully shut their eyes and seek to enjoy sham happiness by living superficially are the mother (Lady Monchensey, excellently acted by Miss Helen Haye), two of her sisters, her two brothers-in-law and Dr. Warburton; those who face the obligations and pain of living in reality in various degrees are Lady Monchensey's third sister, Agatha (amazingly well interpreted by Miss Catharine Lacey), her young cousin, Mary, and, of course, her eldest son, Harry (Michael Redgrave: surprisingly good in a most difficult



part) whose conscience is, so to speak, the seat of the drama.

The theme of this drama is retribution and expiation. It postulates a supernatural conception of sin. The dramatic method employed is (a) a blending of symbolism and realism (Ibsen's later method and the most poetic way of dealing with dramas of the inner life) and (b) a device which Eugene O'Neill used in that extraordinarily interesting experiment, 'Strange Interlude,' namely, that of making the characters on the stage speak their thoughts and feelings aloud, not as in traditional drama in the form of brief conventional asides or set soliloquies, but in order to convey to the audience a running contrast between what they are saying to each other, and those thoughts and feelings they are withholding or even stifling unconsciously in themselves.

This is obviously an extremely difficult device to handle. I cannot say that Mr. Eliot has employed it throughout with that psychological tact towards his audience which is absolutely essential if the effect is not to be more grotesque than impressive. In a sense, too, it is a 'get-out.' It is a way of circumventing what is the great difficulty in handling on the stage a drama of the inner life; namely, of writing dialogue which shall be realistically plausible and yet every line of which, however commonplace and natural, shall *suggest* to us what is going on privately at the back of the speakers' minds. Ibsen was the great master of this art. Chehov hit upon a device which was a sort of half-way compromise, realistically justified by the Russian temperament - that of the soliloquy *à deux*. Recall how often in his plays conversation between two or more characters takes the form of each pursuing aloud their own thoughts instead of answering directly what is said to them. They don't listen to each other, but continue to speak out of themselves as though they were alone or as if the other person (who is also talking in the same way) were passively listening. In fiction Virginia Woolf uses this monologistic form of dialogue at points where traditional novelists (claiming the privileges of an omniscient observer) would have simply stated what was going on inside the heads of people, while they were *talking* about something else. The O'Neill experiment, which Mr. Eliot has followed, is deliberately to make the thoughts or feelings of his characters audible to the audience, without attempting to make soliloquy, as Chehov did, consonant with the realistic surface of the dialogue. Indeed, Mr. Eliot goes a step further. At certain points in the dialogue where a group of people are presented as embodying the same reactions, they are made

to speak the same words in chorus. Thus, suddenly, in the middle of humorously realistic chit-chat, to which in turn each of them has contributed some characteristic trifle, Harry's uncles and aunts (always with the exception of Agatha, who does not cling to the make-belief surface of life) will start speaking the same words in chorus. This device is a failure, and for two reasons. It weakens still further the actuality of the scene before our eyes, and thus the intensity of what we feel about it; and secondly, words muttered in unison have the inevitable effect of ritual responses - as it might be, 'Lord, have mercy upon us and incline our hearts to obey this Law.' Realism, whether on the stage or on the written page, is primarily a means to increasing our fellow-feeling with imaginary characters and strengthening our faith in the situation presented. It is a very powerful means indeed, never to be lightly sacrificed, except in order to gain another intensity, poetic or symbolic, more valuable still. Here the destruction of plausibility is complete. The audience may have adapted their imaginations to the new convention of characters speaking their private thoughts aloud; but when a London clubman, a Bayswater boarding-house lady, a retired colonel and a well-to-do widow, who the moment before have been making typical remarks, suddenly start murmuring in chorus, then the last refuge of willing make-believe in us is destroyed. It is hard enough for actors to mark by their delivery from the stage the difference between the spoken *thoughts* and the spoken *words* which the author puts in their mouths. It can only be done by uttering the former with a peculiarly personal self-withdrawn intonation, and this is impossible when they are made to speak in unison, when to be audible they have to keep in strict time with each other. It is the difference between walking and marching. A man may express his individuality by his gait, but not in the ranks. Thus in this play at times when the words should seem to be proceeding out of the depths of an individual mind, they reach our ears like a singing-lesson or a liturgy. Mr. Eliot's 'chorus' of uncles and aunts implies a violation of auditory psychology.

How did he come to make it? That is an interesting question connected with my fundamental criticism of his play. Evidently his theme - retribution and expiation - occurred to him first in the form of Greek drama. Eugene O'Neill had adapted in 'Mourning Becomes Electra' with extraordinary, tragic effect the Greek conception of Destiny and the whole of the Clytemnestra-Agamemnon story. It was a masterpiece, thanks fundamentally to the

inspiration which made him perceive in the modern theory of the Unconscious - a power which pushes us into behaving against our will - a close parallel to the Greek conception of Destiny. Mr. Eliot has perceived a relation between the Greek Furies and remorse or a maddened conscience. But note this. O'Neill got his effect without using Greek mythology. Had he introduced the Eumenides in the last Act as symbols of Orry's remorse, they would not only have left us cold but made nonsense of an intensely tragic situation. The Eumenides are not for us recognised symbols of remorse and retribution. They are not part of the furniture of our minds as, in a shadowy way, guardian angels and devils still are. They carry no guns, so to speak; the mention of their name, let alone a glimpse of them through a modern drawing-room window, awakes no sensation of dim disgust and terror in our hearts. They are hopeless symbols for Mr. Eliot's purpose. If he had put his story of remorse and expiation into a Greek setting, Furies would have been in place, but he could not expect us to shiver at the idea of a young lord being pursued on his travels by those monsters (visible also to his chauffeur and a young lady cousin) and of his finding them waiting in his old home.

It is the greatest pity that Mr. Eliot in writing this play about the place of the conscience in life ever took off on a Greek foot. The temper of his mind, too, is entirely Christian, not Greek. I know the Greeks to propitiate evil powers called them by flattering names, and the Eumenides were superstitiously referred to as 'the good ones' for fear of being dogged by them. But the whole point of Mr. Eliot's play is that they (these embodiments of remorse and thwarted spiritual aspirations) are really guiding angels which must be welcomed and followed, if man is to find peace. Why in that case introduce Greek mythology at all? It is maddening. This play shows that Mr. Eliot has it in him to write a masterpiece on a theme nearer his thoughts than any other: on the problem of wickedness and the salvation of the soul. But the Greeks are the last people in the world to help him in that. He might have presented this young man, who perhaps - it is even left in doubt whether he ever did more than contemplate doing it - pushed his silly wife overboard, as *haunted* on his return to take up his life as a country squire. We can still suspend disbelief in regard to revengeful ghosts, and be interested in them too, if they stand at the same time for spiritual torture. But (*vide Macbeth*) certainly no one else ought to see the spectre of his conscience.

There was another less fundamental flaw in 'The Family

Reunion' which threw me for a long time off the track. In the opening scenes the family are presented as living in dread. The mother says, 'We must not mention to Harry anything that has happened during the last eight years,' and one of the others says, 'That will be difficult.' Of course, the audience thinks that there is a ghastly family secret. But the only skeleton in the cupboard let loose is Harry's own confession on his arrival that, while away, he had drowned his detested wife. Why, then, should the family be under a curse? The mother turns out to be more sinned against than sinning - except in so far as she is one of those who deny the importance of the spiritual life. It was Harry's dead father who, before Harry was born, had thought of murdering *her*, and had been restrained by Agatha who loved him. Surely this is confusing. But - and that 'but' is an enormous one - there are passages of intense significance concerned with the difference between ignoring spiritual realities and facing them. The play is also an example of how to write a modern play in verse. Mr. Eliot has used a kind of subtle verse, based on iambic blank verse, which can be delivered as prose, or at moments of high emotion, stressed rhythmically so as to carry us into the region of poetry: a great achievement and one of pioneer importance. The diction, too, is fine, clear and impeccable.

106. IVOR BROWN, REVIEW, 'OBSERVER'

26 March 1939, 15

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Brown (1891-1974), an English novelist and critic, was drama critic for the 'Observer' from 1929 to 1954, and editor from 1942 to 1948.

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Amy, Lady Monchensey.....	Helen Haye
Agatha.....	Catharine Lacey
Ivy.....	Henzie Raeburn
Violet.....	Marjorie Gabain
Charles Piper.....	Stephen Murray
Gerald Piper.....	Colin Keith-Johnston
Mary.....	Ruth Lodge
Harry, Lord Monchensey.....	Michael Redgrave

Denman.....Pamela Kelly  
 Downing.....Robert Harris  
 Dr. Warburton.....E. Martin Browne  
 Sergeant Winchell.....Charles Victor  
 Directed by E. Martin Browne.

Life, chez Lady Monchensey, is not gay: her tribe have the gloomiest of family seats, and the starkest of family curses. They are people of property - and doom. They are Forsytes who will suddenly speak in chorus, like the elders of Argos. It is as though a play of John Galsworthy's had collided with something of Sophocles. That confusion is accompanied by the blending of a pagan idea (the family curse) with Christian ideas of expiation, 'by intercession, by pilgrimage,' and by accepting as 'bright angels' the seeming Furies who haunt young Harry Monchensey. The curse concerns a family proclivity to willing or achieving the murder of a wife - a serious matter for a decent lot of landed gentry and their estimable women-folk. Into the Monchensey country Mr. Eliot makes a curious Anglo-Hellenic tour and comes back with as strange a piece of poetical drama as ever set a Forsyte quartette confessing themselves in choric form.

Here then is abundance of fine, confused feeling. The best of it, to my mind, comes on the fringes. Mr. Eliot has written some really exquisite passages, one about old age, spoken by Miss Helen Haye as the Dowager with all Miss Haye's firm mastery of pathos, and others about the childhood of the family ('The rule of conduct was simply pleasing mother') and their games and pleasures. These things and more can be easily revealed because Mr. Eliot employs a convention whereby the characters are living on two levels, one of normal, self-suppressing, polite, Forsytish behaviour, the other of self-revelation to the audience. That convention makes things easy for a dramatist. Many technical problems are abolished at a stroke. But that convention also has its price, at least with a British public accustomed to realism. The urgency and intimacy of naturalistic stagecraft bring the characters straight to us. Destroy that intimacy and the characters are apt to seem remote, fragments of an experimental technique, something to argue over later, not something to feel and feel poignantly now.

Mr. Eliot's play, when it comes to doctrines of expiation and methods of curse-lifting, fades into a misty, muddled enigmatic exaltation; inevitably, for Christian and pagan do not mix. How can a Christian accept the idea of a family curse at all? But it does go wandering off with musical honours and leaves the memory of some most moving passages. The dramatist has raised an enormous number of issues, doctrinal, and technical. He uses, with

very good effect, a series of metres in which the trochaic and anapaestic feet do more of the marching than the familiar iambic. (By the way, it is amusing to find that the scholarly Mr. Eliot does not know that the word 'fruition' means enjoyment and has nothing to do with ripeness.) Whether or no you are bored by the story of the curse and its expiation, there is so much innovation of style and such skilled use of words and rhythms that the play is arresting and important. Furthermore, it suggests that Mr. Eliot might write an excellent light comedy. (I preferred his fun to his Furies.) Naturally, it sets the actors some problems, and these are extremely well surmounted by a strong company, of whom Mr. Michael Redgrave, Miss Helen Haye, and Miss Catharine Lacey are the chief ornaments, all blending strength with sensibility, and firmly, quietly assisting Mr. Eliot's play on its strange, uneven passage to the mind and heart.

## 107. UNSIGNED REVIEW, 'LISTENER'

6 April 1939, vol. xxi, 750

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No one should miss reading this play, if it happens, as may well be, to prove a failure on the stage. As an imaginative work of art, a book to read, it compares with the most sensitive of the short novels by Henry James. It is fashionable to say boldly that there is no place in the library for the dramatic poem; poetic drama is written for the stage, we are told, and if it fails there, it is useless. But just conceivably the poetic drama is developing in two directions; one, in the plays of Auden and Isherwood, certainly towards the theatre; the other, of which this play is a striking example, towards narrative poetry.

The plot of 'A Family Reunion' is extremely simple. The scene is a family party to celebrate the birthday of its senior member, Lady Monchensey, the mother of the hero, Harry. A shadow is cast over the proceedings by the fact that Harry's wife, whom the family always disliked, has been drowned by falling overboard during a voyage at sea. Everyone assumes that this is either suicide or an accident. However, when Harry returns, he disconcertingly reveals that he either has, or believes he has, pushed her overboard. The family assures him that this is the

working of his fevered imagination. However, he is a modern Orestes, pursued by the Eumenides. Moreover, the crime is not just his, for it has been repeated in the family; his father has also wished to murder his mother. This leads us to think that in all probability neither of these murders exists outside the hearts of the protagonists. But Harry has to suffer:

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

The upshot is that Harry leaves his family to follow the 'bright angels' of the Eumenides and to atone for his crime in isolation.

Various features of this plot must surely mar it on the stage. In the first place, the main piece of action, the murder, is an unexplained mystery, which may even not have happened. It has only a symbolic significance. The actual action on the stage is of a quiet, domestic drama, in which one of the characters has a load of guilt on his mind: and yet one feels that there is more than that to it, that something violent ought to *happen*. The Eumenides idea, and the idea of the repeated crime, are surely purely academic: it would be much simpler if one member of the family was faced with the problem of his own sin, and the rest of the family were spectators, entering into his consciousness at various levels. These things do not bother one so much when one reads the play; although the obscurity of the action sometimes makes it a little tiresome to follow. But what is wonderful is the marvellous opening out of consciousness, the flowering of meaning, which makes this play an account of a spiritual experience. There are passages of great poetic beauty, and statements which are the fruits of a lifetime devoted to poetry. To find any parallel to Mr. Eliot's moral sensitivity, to his capacity for feeling life and opening out layer after layer of consciousness, we are brought back again to his great compatriot the New Englander, Henry James.

108. MICHAEL ROBERTS, MR. ELIOT'S NEW PLAY, 'LONDON  
MERCURY'

April 1939, vol. xxxix, 641-2

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Roberts (1902-48) was a poet, critic and anthologist. His 'Collected Poems' was published by Faber & Faber in 1958. In his introduction to 'The Faber Book of Modern Verse' (1936), which he edited, he gave sympathetic attention to Eliot's work up to that date.

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It is a relief to be able to read a new verse drama with interest, to be fairly confident that no revolutionary flood is going to get the dramatist out of a tight corner and that nobody is going to die in the last ditch. In Mr. Eliot's new play the characters are *there*, in Lord Monchensey's country house, and their problems have to be solved on the given data. The main problem is Lord Monchensey himself, returning to an unhappy family after seven years' absence; but when he returns we see that the problem is not any of those his mother or his uncles and aunts have foreseen - what he will do with the house, will he marry again, and so on - but a problem he carries inside himself.

The versification is an advance on anything Mr. Eliot has so far written. The epic poet or the novelist can afford to be longwinded once in a while - the reader can always skip a dozen pages - but the dramatist has to hold his audience all the time, or the whole reality of the play vanishes. If he chooses to write in verse, the verse must be flexible enough to carry trivialities as well as meditations and flashes of insight, and the passages of poetry must carry the action forward quite as much as the passages of backchat: if the audience becomes conscious of being jolted up to the poetic level, or jerked down, the play becomes an anthology. Mr. Eliot has worked out a kind of verse that allows him to be trivial without becoming silly:

I hear that Harry has arrived already  
And he was the only one that was uncertain.  
Arthur or John may be late, of course.  
We may have to keep the dinner back ...

The same verse, without any strain, is capable of carrying



statements that are pitched higher than prose would stand:

We do not pass twice through the same door  
Or return to the door through which we did not pass.  
I have seen the first stage: relief from what happened  
Is also relief from the unfulfilled craving  
Flattered in sleep, and deceived in waking.

It is not only that the verse will carry off short, sententious thoughts like a thought from Pascal:

Everything is true, only in a different sense

without ever raising in the reader's mind the awkward thought that people do not talk like that, but also that it allows Mr. Eliot to move into poetry as serious as anything he has written:

A curse is like a child, formed  
In a moment of unconsciousness  
In an accidental bed  
Or under an elder tree  
. . . . .  
O my child, my curse,  
You shall be fulfilled:  
The knot shall be unknotted  
And the crooked made straight.

Readers familiar with Mr. Eliot's will have a smile of recognition for the imagery: the sun shining on the rose garden, 'I would go south in the winter, if I could afford it,' death by water, 'You don't see them, but I see them,' the noises in the cellar, 'a door opens at the end of a corridor.' But this repetition is not a sign of poverty. Mr. Eliot is a poet rather than a novelist or dramatist: the material of his thought is imagery rather than characters and situations, and in this play the imagery is not merely repeated but developed. Each of the themes mentioned above occurs in a context that throws new light on the similar phrases in Mr. Eliot's poems.

The characters are none the less real and distinct, and when they are used as a chorus they are convincing because we already know them as individuals. As chorus, they are free to speak the thoughts of which they are barely conscious as individuals. The propriety of this may not be *understood* in a stage production, but it is likely to be *felt*: and it gives the chorus real work to do in the development of the play.

At a first reading, one wonders whether the denouement is strong enough, whether it throws enough new light on the past, alters Lord Monchensey's relations to all the other characters, and paves the way for a dissolution of all the 'situations' as we have seen them. Perhaps it does: it has not the brutal directness of a revelation in Greek tragedy, but there is no doubt that it solves the problems by breaking them up, so that each character is left with the responsibility of fending for himself. This may not be easy to put across the footlights, but it comes out clearly on re-reading the play, and it reveals the comparative triviality of the motor accidents that pointed the climax of Part One.

There is much more that might be said about what happens at Wishwood - 'Seek only there... The hermit's chapel, the pilgrim's prayer' - and it is a pity that this important book has to be reviewed briefly and in haste.

109. LOUIS MacNEICE, ORIGINAL SIN, 'NEW REPUBLIC'

3 May 1939, vol. xcvi, 384-5

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MacNeice (1907-63) was a poet associated with Auden and Spender during the 1930s. From 1941 to 1949 he was a producer for the BBC. His 'Collected Poems, 1925-1948' was published by Faber & Faber in 1949. Poems and reviews by him appeared in the 'Criterion'.

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'The Family Reunion' seems to be a better play than 'Murder in the Cathedral,' better integrated, less of a charade. This time the subordinate characters are real persons, fuller, more differentiated, more sympathetic; and the ideas behind the play are fused into the action and the characters; it is difficult (and this is as it should be) to divorce the theme or the moral from the play itself. It would be an easy play to ridicule - a haggard hero who appears in a vague mess and disappears toward a vague solution - but such ridicule would be misplaced. Aristotle thought that the soul of a play is action. If we interpret action in the narrow or external sense, then according to Aristotle this play is not dramatic. But Mr. Eliot has always been more interested in

action, and in the correlative suffering, on the spiritual plane. His religious beliefs, as can be seen from such books as his notorious 'After Strange Gods,' have opposed him to 'liberalism,' to any basically utilitarian doctrine of progress. From one point of view, then, Mr. Eliot is a reactionary, but he is at the same time a corrective to the facile optimism of many Leftist writers. We may regret that he seems to put all his money on the religious conscience as distinct from practical morality, but at the same time we must recognize that he asserts certain truths (even if these are the truths of the Unknown God) which are now commonly neglected and whose neglect may in the long run sap the life from our utilitarian ethics:

...the circle of our understanding  
Is a very restricted area  
Except for a limited number  
Of strictly practical purposes  
We do not know what we are doing.

Though the subject of his play is Original Sin, Mr. Eliot has embodied it in characters who on the surface plane also are involved in dramatically interesting relationships to each other (this set of characters in the same situation could in fact have been treated by Chekhov). There is a compromise here between naturalism and mysticism. The definite surface facts - the mother's birthday, the family house, the brothers' accidents, the hero's home-coming, the previous death of his wife, the death in the last scene of his mother - may be from Mr. Eliot's point of view merely incidental, but they act as girders to the play. Thus the hero, like Orestes, has apparently committed (or thinks he has committed) a murder; this murder is merely incidental to, or at most symptomatic of, a far more basic and less particularized sin which he has to expiate. The Eumenides who haunt him appear at first sight to be subjective phantoms but are discovered, to the hero's own belief, to be forces outside him. His expiation on the face of it seems to consist in leaving his home forever; this is in fact the outward and visible sign of a profound spiritual change. This change being still obscure, Mr. Eliot was of course right to stress the outward and visible signs. For this reason the play seems to me more suited to the stage than 'Murder in the Cathedral.'

The trouble with 'Murder in the Cathedral' was that the essential conflict was between Becket and himself as represented by the Tempters; the murderers merely arrived out of a machine. In 'The Family Reunion,' the hero is

again struggling with himself, but the conflict is made more palpable by the antipathies between various members of his own family - between the hero and his family in general or his mother in particular, between his mother and the aunts and uncles, between the dead father and the mother, between the inhibited young cousin Mary and the mother and aunts. These characters are not treated satirically; even the stupidest uncle is allowed a certain human feeling and an inkling of truth outside himself. The old mother, who in a sense has been a vampire to her son, yet compares favorably with the mother in Messrs. Auden and Isherwood's 'Ascent of F-6,' who is almost a Freudian dummy.

Technically the verse of this play is most successful, though some people have accused it of not being verse at all. Mr. Eliot has quite rightly avoided inserting any hunks of obvious prose; no prose-plus-verse play in recent times has as yet managed to be homogeneous. He has therefore had to contrive a versification elastic enough to be incantatory at one moment and to represent the banalities of conversation at another. This is a very considerable achievement. He uses his favorite devices - hypnotic repetition, antithesis, paradox, the overrunning of sentences from line to line, the simple and sharp but yet mysterious use of imagery:

...the sobbing in the chimney  
The evil in the dark closet?

And there are echoes from his previous poetry - 'south in the winter,' 'You don't see them, but I see them' (the key line from the 'Choephoroe' of Aeschylus). It is foolish to cavil at these echoes when they are so well integrated into the present piece. Thus the scene between Harry and his Aunt Agatha is a reminiscence of 'Burnt Norton,' but is a magnificent presentation of the world of unfulfilled choices:

I was not there, you were not there, only our phantasms  
And what did not happen is as true as what did happen,  
O my dear and you walked through the little door  
And I ran to meet you in the rose garden.

Most of the characters speak at one time or another as if they were a chorus; this is one of the advantages of a poetic play. Further, Mr. Eliot here has not introduced any external chorus (a disrupting influence on the modern stage) but on occasions (with a certain irony?) he makes the four stupidest characters step out of their proper

parts and speak a commentary in unison. I am not sure if this will succeed on the stage, but it is at least a hopeful experiment. It is probable, however, that this could have been dispensed with and that characters like Agatha could have been left to speak the commentary singly and still more or less in character.

Lastly, this is a very moving play both as a whole and in its passing pictures, its ironic comments, its pregnant understatements, its bursts into liturgy. Witness Mary's criticism of Henry:

...you attach yourself to loathing  
As others do to loving; an infatuation  
That's wrong, a good that's misdirected.

Or Henry's comment on himself as a person that his family has conspired to invent. Or one of his first remarks on re-meeting them after eight years: 'You all look so withered and young.' Or his mother's dying words: 'The clock has stopped in the dark.' Or the brilliant reminiscences of a neurotic childhood. Or Henry's indication of his apparently eccentric conduct:

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

Mr. Eliot's own poetry may appear to be taking the opposite direction, but the reader of this play cannot, I think, object to it, as he could to 'The Waste Land,' that it is essentially defeatist; it embodies a sincere belief and a genuine courage.

110. MAUD BODKIN, THE EUMENIDES AND PRESENT-DAY CONSCIOUSNESS, 'ADELPHI'

May 1939, vol. xv, 411-13

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Bodkin (1875-1967) was an English critic best known for her Jungian analyses of poetry, as exemplified by 'Archetypal Patterns in Poetry' (1934) and by her study of 'The Family Reunion' in relation to the 'Eumenides' of Aeschylus, 'The Quest for Salvation in an Ancient and a Modern Play' (1941).

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Of T.S. Eliot's play, 'The Family Reunion,' at the Westminster Theatre, one critic - in the 'Observer' - wrote 'Christian and Pagan do not mix. How can a Christian accept the idea of a family curse at all?' Another - Desmond MacCarthy in the 'New Statesman' - similarly questions: Why introduce the Furies - 'hopeless symbols for Mr. Eliot's purpose' - in a play of Christian temper 'about the place of the conscience in life'? A vengeful ghost, visible, as in 'Macbeth,' to the haunted sinner alone, would, Mr. MacCarthy suggests, win from us a readier response.

A play by Mr. Eliot is more than an event of the theatre. A critic reviewing the play - in the 'Listener' - as 'an imaginative work of art,' that 'no one should miss reading,' praising Eliot's 'moral sensitivity,' his 'capacity for feeling life and opening out layer after layer of consciousness,' yet repeats the complaint concerning the use of the myth of the Eumenides. He pronounces it 'purely academic; it would be much simpler if one member of the family was faced with the problem of his own sin and the rest of the family were spectators.'

Does it not seem a little odd that critics, recognising the poet's moral sensitivity and power to bring new issues to consciousness, should yet so lightly propose change in the play's central imagery, as if they knew better than the author what experience this imagery should illumine?

Is this a play about an individual conscience haunted by an individual sin? Eliot - I think - tries to guard against just such an apprehension of his theme. The play's chief character, Harry, the returning heir, speaking to his assembled family, dismayed to find him, as it seems, conscience-haunted, believing himself guilty of the murder of his wife - insists that they do not understand:

It goes a good deal deeper  
Than what people call their conscience; it is just the  
cancer  
That eats away the self. I knew how you would take it.  
First of all, you isolate the single event.

It is not my conscience,  
Not my mind, that is diseased, but the world I have to  
live in.

And again:

You go on trying to think of each thing separately,  
Making small things important, so that everything  
May be unimportant....

I was like that in a way, so long as I could think  
 Even of my own life as an isolated ruin,  
 A casual bit of waste in an orderly universe.  
 But it begins to seem just part of some huge disaster.

Of the haunting to which these words refer we can best gain understanding, it seems to me, if we search our own spirits, and putting aside demands of theatrical convention, use the poet's fable and imaginative speech to objectify our own deeper experience at this moment of our individual and collective destiny. For us, too, horror grows of overshadowing disaster. Our world is diseased, constrained to self-destroying violence; and when we question: 'Can devastation of our own homes be averted? Can we, if war comes, refuse part in it?' do we not feel that our questions falsely 'isolate the single event,' 'making small things important'?

It is indeed one necessity of life to isolate, concentrating upon our small individual range; yet there is another need: to be aware of a reality more comprehensive. There is a vision of the real pressing on our spirits that only myth and imagery can convey. At a time like the present, in a world where - as I think some journalist put it - the air around us is dark with the wings of curses coming home to roost, surely the myth of the Eumenides - dread pursuers that avenge not private but communal crime - far from being academic, has dreadful relevance.

Of the pursuing forces in Eliot's play the fugitive says:

Were they simply outside,  
 I might escape somewhere, perhaps. Were they simply  
     inside  
 I could cheat them perhaps with the aid of Dr.  
     Warburton -

But this is too real for your words to alter.

So with us; when the horror of reported events becomes unendurable, we escape to private interests; when the pain of our own spirits overwhelms us, we practise devices of mental hygiene. But our trouble is both within us and without. For such modes of escape it is too real. Is any escape possible?

The play suggests an answer. For such a problem any solution a poet may suggest can be no more than a hint, partial and tentative, to which an individual spirit may respond.

Harry learns that his sin against the wife he hated was foreshadowed in his father's sin of intention against his

mother; that his suffering has its counterpart in that of the woman, his aunt, who loved his father, and had known and loved himself as though he had been her son. She tells him:

[Quotes 'The Family Reunion', II, ii, CPP, p. 333, 'It is possible that you have not known' to 'which we suffer'.]

The revelation of the nature of the haunting sin, with fellowship in suffering, is found to liberate. The spectres seen again by their victim, released from the 'awful privacy of the insane mind,' are seen without fear or wonder.

This time, you are real, this time, you are outside me,  
and just endurable....

Now I see at last that I am following you,  
And I know that there can be only one itinerary and one  
destination.

So of this horror laid on us; though we do not know, individually or collectively, the path we must tread, we perhaps know this at least: that what horrifies us is real. We cannot escape it; we must not, like the unseeing aunts and uncles of Eliot's chorus refuse to know what lies beyond our narrow circle, blindly insisting 'that the world is what we have always taken it to be.' We have to seek knowledge of the sin - in ourselves and in our world - that now is fulfilling itself in such monstrous shape. In conscious fellowship with others, enduring sin's consequences that cannot be averted, we also may sustain hope hereafter to achieve expiation of the curse, resolution of the enchantment under which we suffer.

111. FREDERICK A. POTTLE, A MODERN VERSE PLAY, 'YALE  
REVIEW'

June 1939, vol. xxviii, 836-9

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Mr. Eliot's experiment in domestic drama is an even more decisive technical triumph than 'Murder in the Cathedral,' not because it contains actually better verse but because the problem to be solved was more difficult and he does



well with it. The martyrdom of Thomas, the subject of his first play, seems naturally 'poetic,' but it is another thing to make credible an apparition of the Eumenides at Wishwood. We have known the specifications of this kind of play for a long time: it must give us a prevailing surface of dialogue so close to prose in its rhythms and sentiments as to create the illusion of common reality, but it must also manage to invest its matter with the urgency which we associate with verse. To be prosaic: to be literary: - these are the poet's Scylla and Charybdis. It seems pretty certain that Mr. Eliot has come through more prosperously than any of his predecessors. His conversational lines have a surface which we recognize as the familiar level of prose, but when we venture on it, we feel it to be precarious; maintained, as it were, not by gravitation but by an unnatural tension. Beneath, and momentarily breaking through, is the real world, a world of poetry in which people see strange sights and say things never heard in any drawing-room.

The device for the chorus is masterly. It was perhaps suggested by 'Strange Interlude,' but in its effect is quite original. The four characters who compose it express, in their normal rôles, no sentiment not strictly in prose character. The 'choruses' consist not of what they would ever actually say, but of what they are thinking - or would be thinking if they had the poet's power of expression. I find no verse here so memorable as parts of 'The Rock' and 'Murder in the Cathedral,' but that was, no doubt, Mr. Eliot's intention. He had to be extremely careful in this piece not to pitch any passages so high as to make them seem verse interludes in a prose context.

A brilliant feat; but if my own feelings can be trusted, the least satisfactory of Mr. Eliot's long poems. I do not feel in it that strong current of excitement which has previously swept me on through dense and rare. One should have seen the piece presented before attempting to diagnose its faults, and I have not had that opportunity. But I venture the following criticisms.

The exposition should be clearer. This is emphatically not closet drama. It deals, as Mr. Eliot's chief character is at pains to point out, with states of mind, not with events; but without knowledge of certain crucial events, a good deal of the language is radically ambiguous. The explanation of the mystery comes very late: the play is more than two-thirds over before Agatha reveals the crucial bit of information that makes sense of what has gone before. Anyone reading and pondering the text will probably convince himself that the central character, Lord Monchensey (Harry), really did push his wife over the steamer-rail,

though we are to think of the crime as not his but the sin of his father, mother, and aunt coming to completion through him. No person merely seeing the play presented will be sure that Harry did not imagine the whole thing. It makes a difference. And we do not know what Harry is going to do at the end of the play. His mother, not unnaturally, infers that he plans to be a missionary; he says that is not it. He has 'not yet had the precise directions.' It is very hard, if not impossible, to feel that any act is expiatory until we know what it is. In neither case does the ambiguity result from clumsiness; ambiguity is Mr. Eliot's deliberate intention. To object to this is not to raise the old cry against his 'obscurity,' it is merely to insist that a play to be acted is a different thing from a poem to be read. There seems no escape from the conclusion that the people who are to witness a play must be quite clear as to the gross actions which constitute the plot. If these are not part of history or notorious legend, they must be unequivocally set forth by the author. And 'unequivocal' is not the word for Mr. Eliot.

In the second place, I do not think Mr. Eliot so successful as usual in his religious framework. Current criticism charges him with having dwindled into a Christian poet, and some will feel that he is showing his versatility by writing a play from which Christian dogma is entirely excluded and in which Christian phraseology is allowed to appear only in the last scene. It is more probable that he has yielded to a dramatic exigency: having chosen to write a play of modern life, he had to reconcile himself to the religious paucity of the skeptical mind. At Wishwood the stark Greek conception of the ripening curse may barely seem in character, but to add the rest - the massive pagan faith of Aeschylus or Sophocles - would be too much. This makes for dramatic difficulties.

'What we have written,' says Agatha in lines that are clearly to be taken as an epigraph,

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

Crime and detection have meaning without expressed religious values, but sin and expiation have none. It is too late to bring in the Christian reference at the very end by ritual (a parody of the service of *tenebrae*) and by such words as 'intercession,' 'pilgrimage,' and 'redemption.' The result is to make 'The Family Reunion' more than superficially like the works of a dramatist whom

I cannot think Mr. Eliot wished to resemble: Ibsen. There is the same plot of inexorable destiny, the same visiting of the sins of the fathers on the children, the same bad manners (I do not remember reading any play in which the chief characters were so consistently rude), the same flaying of bourgeois virtues, the same obsessions - almost, one would say, the same ghosts. The intent, no doubt, was to effect a resolution: to show the solemn forms of Christian faith emerging through disbelief, petulance, and horror to invest the curse with meaning; but the end seems rather a surprise than a resolution.

112. CLEANTH BROOKS, SIN AND EXPIATION, 'PARTISAN REVIEW'

Summer 1939, vol. vi, 114-16

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Brooks (b. 1906), a well-known American critic, was Professor of English at Louisiana State University from 1932 to 1947. His publications include 'Modern Poetry and the Tradition' (1939) and 'The Well Wrought Urn' (1947). He has written extensively on Eliot and his aesthetic pre-suppositions have been profoundly influenced by his understanding of both Eliot's poetry and criticism.

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The work of few poets shows the intense continuity which we have learned to expect in the work of T.S. Eliot. It was to be predicted that 'The Family Reunion' would contain a recapitulation of the symbols which dominate Eliot's earlier poetry. They are here: the purposeless people moving in a ring ('in an overcrowded desert, jostled by ghosts') of 'The Waste Land'; the 'hellish, sweet smell' that accompanies the apprehension of the supernatural from 'Murder in the Cathedral'; the purgatorial flame of 'Ash-Wednesday.' But most of all, perhaps, the play is illuminated by that rather dry and not sufficiently appreciated poem, 'Burnt Norton'; and in one sense, at least, the play may be said to be a restatement of 'Burnt Norton' in terms of drama.

The world of the play is the world of 'The Waste Land': a world inhabited by thoroughly respectable upper-class English ladies and gentlemen, 'people to whom nothing has ever happened,' and who consequently 'cannot understand