Connotations
Vol. 21.2-3 (2011/2012)

The Family Reunion: Eliot, James, and the Buried Life: A Response to Edward Lobb[*]

MIRIAM CHIRICO

One associates T. S. Eliot with his poetry far more than one remembers him as a playwright. This general lack of approbation makes it all the more rewarding to respond to Edward Lobb's essay about Eliot's play *The Family Reunion* (1939), a play whose poetic dialogue and modernist themes play a significant role in understanding Eliot's work as a whole. Lobb focuses on the use Eliot makes of a short story by Henry James, arguing that this intertextual connection proves fundamental to understanding the action of the play, a play where seemingly very little transpires save for the main character's spiritual conversion. In James's ghost story "The Jolly Corner" (1908), Spencer Brydon returns to his childhood home in New York after being away for years in Europe and confronts his alter ego, a corrupted version of himself that represents the person he could have been had he remained in America. Lobb demonstrates how Eliot's central character, Harry Monchensey, resembles Spencer Brydon in three specific ways: firstly, the protagonists' return to a childhood home provokes an examination of their "shadow" selves; secondly, both protagonists understand the construction of their identities as inherently divided; and thirdly, both come to terms with the innate evil that exists within them. However, their experiences contrast on one final point: while Spencer Brydon's journey ends in romance, Harry Monchensy repudiates romantic love in order to follow an austere, spiritual devotion.

---

[*]Reference: Edward Lobb, "*The Family Reunion*: Eliot, James, and the Buried Life," *Connotations* 18.1-3 (2008/09): 104-22.

For the original article as well as all contributions to this debate, please check the *Connotations* website at <http://www.connotations.de/deblobb01813.htm>.

Connotations - A Journal for Critical Debate by the Connotations Society
is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International License.

Although the plot device of being reacquainted with a former self is mirrored in the works of these two writers, their respective genres of narrative fiction and drama differ; thus it is worthwhile to consider Eliot's depiction of the divided self as shaped by his preoccupation with the dramatic form as well as his philosophical conceptualization of time. Eliot's long-standing use of the theatrical metaphor to depict the self as wearing a mask appears in several dramatic monologues, not the least of which is "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock." When Eliot turned to playwriting, he wrote his plays in verse for he believed that poetry could represent the deeper recesses of the human psyche, the waking consciousness that lay beneath the layers of the mask: "The human soul, in intense emotion, strives to express itself in verse" ("Dialogue" 34). Furthermore, by situating this exploration of the hidden self within a family reunion, Eliot depicts how the individual constructs a self in relation to the response of others, much as Prufrock is sensitive to the imagined commentary of his social set. In responding to Lobb's article, I wish to expand upon Eliot's ability to dramatize the internal consciousness upon the stage through a circular model of time, as well as to question Lobb's final point about Eliot's aim to depict multiple consciousnesses upon the stage.

In *The Family Reunion*, Harry Monchensey, the eldest son of Lady Amy Monchensey, returns to the family estate of Wishwood after years abroad, to join his aunts, uncles, and cousin Mary in celebrating his mother's birthday. Harry's wife has mysteriously died during their voyage at sea and some suspect that Harry pushed her overboard, an accusation he endorses because of his private longing to be rid of her. In his guilt, he from time to time envisions a silent group of watchers who stare at him with incrimination, designated as "The Eumenides," or "The Kindly Ones" in the list of characters. By referring to this group as the goddesses who protected the domestic sphere once they had been transformed from vengeful Furies by Athena, Eliot clearly indicates that he is re-writing or adapting the third play of Aeschylus's *Oresteia*, *The Eumenides*. In Eliot's Christian overlay of the myth, Orestes's journey in exile[1] becomes Harry's penitential

wandering, as Harry discovers that the spectral accusers from whom he runs away can serve as his spiritual guides, pushing him towards salvation.

At the end of his essay, Lobb points out that what interested Eliot in James's work was the shift from the "depiction of the isolated consciousness to the interplay and conflict of multiple consciousnesses" (119), but it is quite difficult to depict the point of view of stage characters, much less their consciousnesses. Modernist poets and novelists frequently played with various means of penetrating the surface of realism and depicting life as perceived from subjective viewpoints. Rather than describing external details and factual events as the nineteenth-century realist writers had done, modernist authors described inward moments of feeling and perception, and thus their characters shared with readers the inner landscape of their minds. Virginia Woolf's novels, as one example of modernist experimentation, exhibited her technique of creating "tunnels" under each character filled with individual memories that colored his or her subjective responses to an event,[2] rendering in narrative form the model of consciousness that William James defined as an amalgamation of each human being's experience. Though novelists could portray this deeper psychological penetration through shifting points of view, free indirect discourse, or the technique of stream-of-consciousness, dramatists were limited in how they could represent a character's subjective experiences. In Expressionist plays the central character's inner psyche could be represented upon the stage through the use of foreboding settings, stilted language, as well as the practice of reducing supernumerary characters to their occupational or societal roles (e.g. "Guard" or "Husband"); these anti-realistic devices provided the central character's anguished vision of the world, but could only represent his limited perspective. In constructing a play about a family reunion, Eliot wished to depict not only Harry's spiritual turmoil, but his family's bewilderment in the face of his torment. Drawing upon the tradition of symbolist dramatists like Maeterlinck, Eliot used the suggestive qualities of poetic language to invoke the sensation of a

spiritual realm or a double-world on stage that only characters with a heightened consciousness could access. The term "double-world" is derived from Arnold Hauser, who, in *The Social History of Art*, describes this aesthetic development as the means of simulating a "second reality" that co-existed with the "ordinary, empirical reality"; artists such as Joyce and Kafka constructed a "double-sided existence" (235-36) in their stories, based on the overriding principle that "behind all the manifest world is hidden a latent world, behind all consciousness an unconscious" (220). In revealing his admiration for Dostoevsky's characters, Eliot acknowledges this sensation of a double world, describing characters who seem to be "living at once on the plane that we know and 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 that we cannot perceive" ("John Marston" 190)—a description that aptly characterizes Harry, who complains that his relatives "don't understand what it is to be awake, / To be living on several planes at once" (*The Family Reunion* 266). In order to depict these multiple worlds dramatically, a feat difficult to achieve in fourth-wall realism, Eliot resorts to the flexible quality of verse poetry and alters the poetic diction of the characters' dialogue.

Attesting to the limitations of prose dialogue, Eliot wrote 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" ("John Marston" 189). Eliot's language in *The Family Reunion* can be categorically divided into quotidian language and sacred language, or as Andrew K. Kennedy describes it, the naturalistic "speech of our time ('the dialect of the tribe')" and the liturgical "speech out-of-time ('the musical order')" (89). These two kinds of speech, juxtaposed throughout the play, create a double-layered structure to the world, the bourgeois surface reality and the deeper, subconscious reality of Harry's spiritual quest.[3] Lobb remarks that Mary's descriptive comments about Harry allow us to gain an external, third-person perspective on his behavior, that "his self-loathing [might be] pathological in its extremity" (118), and illustrates how revealing multiple points of view

is a trait Eliot adopts from James (119). However, I would like to argue that Eliot cannot alternate between points of view as one does in fiction, but rather that he uses contrasting metrical forms and diction to dramatize the varying degrees to which his characters can access the subconscious realm. Even the characters' varying abilities to see the Furies that pursue Harry reveal the extent of their intuition, but the point of view is still Harry's.[4]

Writing in verse enabled Eliot to establish dramatically the distinction between actual, ordinary life and what could best be referred to as a sense of "felt life," according to Henry James. For Eliot, verse plays work on an audience on two different levels simultaneously, one which gives the play meaning and one which "intensifies our excitement by reinforcing it with feeling from a deeper and less articulate level" ("Need" 944). The conventional, drawing-room setting of the play reflects the empirical reality in which the characters reside; the mystical double realm is only accessed by certain characters in moments of lyrical intensity and indicates a shift from ordinary consciousness to a spiritual plane. Using a line of blank verse with four stressed syllables[5] and colloquial diction, the aunts and uncles discuss the banalities of newspapers and telegrams, the English clubs, military widows, flower arrangements, inoculations, train schedules, life in a tropical climate, and "the strong cold stewed bad Indian tea" (*The Family Reunion* 225). Eliot then moves the same group of people into choral passages where they discard their individual identities and articulate darker fears that they dare not admit on a conscious level:

> We do not like to look out of the same window, and see quite another landscape.
> We do not like to climb a stair, and find that it takes us down.
> We do not like to walk out of a door, and find ourselves back in the same room.
> We do not like the maze in the garden, because it too closely resembles the maze in the brain. (*The Family Reunion* 218)

In other words, the chorus of aunts and uncles collectively experience the same psychic fears, but refuse to acknowledge it, preferring

to live life superficially and disregarding the religious fear Eliot deems imperative for attaining "religious hope" (*Idea* 62).[6] This alteration between naturalistic language and the choric imagistic language signifies aurally the double world and indicates moments when characters attain a sense of heightened consciousness; however, it is not the "interplay and conflict of multiple consciousnesses" that Lobb indicates (119) due to the limitations of the stage medium. The only psychological space represented in the play is Harry's. On occasion, Mary and Agatha enter his inner turmoil as indicated by their rune-like, incantatory passages; Mary confirms the emotional undercurrents Harry experiences, detailing "the ache in the moving root / [...] / The slow flow throbbing the trunk / The pain of the breaking bud," hinting at romantic interest in Harry, while Agatha cryptically intones the curse Harry must undo: "The eye is on this house / There are three together / May the three be separated" (*The Family Reunion* 257). The subconscious realm depicted upon the stage is Harry's alone and represents his isolation.

Akin to the self-encounter experienced by James's character Spencer Brydon, Harry's reconstruction of his past self is influenced by returning to key childhood sites of his ancestral home, but his process is governed more by temporal influences than geographical ones. Agatha explains that the estate will awaken memories of his younger self, and that the current man will encounter "[…] the boy who left" (*The Family Reunion* 229), and Mary notes that here, at Wishwood, he will locate his "real self" (250). Even Harry acknowledges that his spiritual torment comes from a sense of judgmental fragmentation: "The degradation of being parted from my self, / From the self which persisted only as an eye, seeing" (272). But whereas Brydon's alternate self appears like an "evil twin left behind at some fork in the road" (Lobb 114), Harry returns to a series of different selves he associates with the estate: a childhood self who met his cousin Mary by the hollow tree at midnight, or an adolescent self who returned from school to find this hideaway demolished, or the "day of unusual heat" when he learned as a child about the death of his father (*The Family Reunion* 260). Aga-

tha explains this "loop in time" that permits Harry to confront events from his past, when "[t]he hidden is revealed and the spectres show themselves" (229), and the chorus confirms this sense of temporal layering: "whatever happens began in the past, and presses hard on the future" (270).[7] The ambiguity behind Agatha's term "spectres" suggests that Harry could encounter a former self or former *selves*; he is not limited to finding just one "Harry." Influenced by Henri Bergson's metaphysical lectures at the Collège de France, Eliot depicts the self as existing multitudinously over time, as if a person's life could be punctuated at intervals like a "loop in time" and contain a series of selves existing simultaneously.[8] Bergson drew a contrast between the scientific view of time as a linear, mathematical measurement and a fluid model of time as *durée*, or real duration. He offered an image of a snowball, rather than a stream, to explain the connection between consciousness and time: "My mental state, as it advances on the road of time, is continually swelling with the duration which it accumulates: it goes on increasing—rolling upon itself, as a snowball on the snow" (171). With this model of time as cyclical in nature and amalgamating a series of experiencing selves, we can perceive how Eliot's character does not simply encounter an *alternate self*, like James's Brydon, but returns to reintegrate past selves.

In Henry James's story, what frees Brydon from the burden of the criminal self he could have become is the presence of another person, the housekeeper Alice Staverton, who "sees" this black stranger as a ghost in a dream and acknowledges him. In her willingness to allow for this darker side of Brydon, she "performs a therapeutic, even a religious role; she accepts that the ghost is not the present Brydon [...], but tries to bring him to a recognition that it represents a real part of his present psyche" (Lobb 112). The words that Lobb uses, *therapy*, *religious*, *recognition* (also known as *anagnorisis* in Greek tragedy), and *psyche*, are reminiscent of the deep connection between religion and psychology that Eliot likewise underscores with the mythological background of his play. But more important is the social construction of identity that both authors depict, that is, how identity depends on

an interactive process with another individual; Alice demonstrates mature love, Lobb explains, by embracing Brydon despite all his faults, an action that propels him towards self-acceptance. And certainly Eliot's emphasis on a family re-*union* serves as a reminder that Harry's individual consciousness is not an atomic unit, but part of a social whole. Therefore, it is especially significant that Harry rejects Mary's romantic overtures because he feels a relationship with her would anesthetize his soul. Instead of the possibility of sexual fulfillment, he elects solitary, penitential wandering in order to absolve the ancestral home of its foundational sin: his father's adulterous liaison with Agatha and the homicidal wish to murder his wife.

Eliot is only able to dramatize Harry's spiritual sensitivity and acceptance of sin by shifting from the naturalistic plane that the relatives observe, to the psychological time of Harry's inner action, illuminating the difference between the secular and the sacred through ritualistic language and gesture.[9] In order for Harry to understand his role in alleviating the family curse, he must step back in time to the origination of the sin; that is, he must recuperate his father's illicit emotions by temporarily adopting his father's role. Harry and Agatha begin a conversation in lyrical verse that contrasts with the dominant verse pattern. Agatha reveals to Harry the adulterous relationship she shared with his father and his father's intention to kill his wife while she was pregnant with Harry. Agatha furthermore informs Harry that he is the "consciousness of [his] unhappy family" and that he must "resolve the enchantment under which we suffer" (*The Family Reunion* 275) by undertaking a journey. But this conversation moves beyond simply imparting information; as the two engage in a quasi-ritualistic dialogue, they appear to enter a hypnotic state, and they both step outside of time so that Harry can speak dialogue *as if he were* his father:

> 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
> (*The Family Reunion* 277)

The reference to the "rose garden," a symbol of desire in Eliot's poetry,[10] indicates that Agatha and Harry's father consummated their adulterous relationship years earlier and that this sin lingers upon the House of Monchensey. As the two temporal planes of the present moment and the past intersect, Harry takes on the role of his father in the scenario that Agatha recreates. William James observed that a person "*has as many social selves as there are individuals who recognize him* and carry an image of him in their mind" [294; emphasis in original],[11] postulating that a person's self may consist of the multiple images his friends and associates possess of him. Harry, who is told by several characters how much he resembles his father, discovers that both he and his father shared the same murderous intentions towards their wives. The moment when Agatha addresses Harry *as if he were his father*, he steps into his role and ultimately into his father's errant self. Describing the process of transubstantiation in the theater, that is, the actualization of mystical phenomena, Carla Dente underscores this moment as the point when Harry discovers his "identity in sin" (143) through "a process of total identification with place [...] and [with his father's] position" (142). Eliot's own criticism speaks to such anachronistic movements in time, when he notes how a writer must compose with "the whole of literature in his bones" and maintain a sense "not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence" ("Tradition" 4); or how the practice of writing literary criticism "does not so much require the power of putting ourselves into seventeenth-century London as it requires the power of setting [Ben] Jonson in our London" ("Ben Jonson" 128). Through this communal interplay with Agatha, he transfers onto himself his father's transgressions in a gesture that corresponds to Orestes's inheritance of the sins of the House of Atreus, and begins his penitential journey.

Eliot's deliberate choice of fourth-wall realism instead of a religious setting was a call to his audience to interrogate their own faith in the "world of surface reality as a total representation of existence" (Smith 116). He wished to use poetry to elevate his audiences, a goal he articulates in *Poetry and Drama*:

> What we have to do is bring poetry into the world in which the audience lives and to which it returns when it leaves the theater; [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. (31-32)

Thus the nostalgic concept of "the road not taken" that Lobb detected in Eliot's work could be expanded to include the road or avenue that poetry can provide to its listeners, that is, access into a renewed vision of their ordinary world. Rather than complete the performance with Harry's departure, Eliot envisions the audience leaving the theater with a heightened sensibility to their own surroundings, prompted by the transformative quality of poetry.

Eastern Connecticut State University
Willimantic, CT

NOTES

[1]According to Robert Graves, Orestes's exile lasted for one year, which was the designated period of time a homicide must be excommunicated from his fellow-citizens (394).

[2]See Edward A. Hungerford's article.

[3]Linda Wyman further divides the play's verse pattern into three groups: naturalistic (those speeches addressed to other characters), metaphoric (speeches that have double significance), and super-naturalistic (dialogues that are particularly heightened such as choruses, runes and "lyrical duets" (Eliot's term) (164-65).

[4]Carla Dente indicates this play is solely about Harry's personal perspective in "Enter Guilt on the Stage of Conscience." She writes about this secondary, spiritual level of the play: "the exploration of the murderous impulse, and the representation of the consequent psychic tensions experienced by a man who wants to pursue his real identity through the investigation into the origins and deepest meaning of this impulse in himself" (138).

[5]Marjorie J. Lightfoot discusses the arguments concerning how to scan the dominant verse of *The Family Reunion*. Eliot refers to the lines as having three stresses, while his director E. Martin Browne hears four. Grover Smith, Jr., scanning the lines, finds the same four-stress pattern that appears in *Everyman*. Leo Hamalian and Helen Gardner also identify the lyrics as four-stress rhythm, and Lightfoot agrees with them (260-61).

[6]The full quotation, as found in *The Idea of a Christian Society*, is "We need to recover the sense of religious fear, so that it may be overcome by religious hope" (62).

[7]The lines echo the beginning of "Burnt Norton": "Time present and time past / Are both perhaps present in time future, / And time future contained in time past" ("Burnt Norton" 1-3).

[8]Bergson's philosophy is not the only one to influence Eliot's thinking on time; writing his thesis on the philosophy of F. H. Bradley shaped his philosophical understanding of reality and time.

[9]Several critics refer to this combination of the sacred and profane in this play; see William V. Spanos's article where he illuminates Eliot's own connection between poetic drama and the Incarnation, "whereby the human is taken up into the divine" (6); and Anne Ward's description of the Furies signaling a "religious apprehension of time"; as well as Theresa M. Towner, who notes how certain ritualistic devices allow Eliot to show "the soul in the process of liberating itself from the flesh that holds it" (65).

[10]Scholars have interpreted the rose-garden in Eliot's poetry in varied ways: Helen Gardner refers to it as an inexplicable moment of joy or release; Morris Weitz considers it the junction between the eternal and temporal; and F. O. Matthiessen describes it as "the birth of desire".

[11]The full quotation, from ch. 10 of *The Principles of Psychology* (1890), reads: "Properly speaking, a man has as many social selves as there are individuals who recognize him and carry an image of him in their mind. To wound any one of these his images is to wound him. But as the individuals who carry the images fall naturally into classes, we may practically say that he has as many different social selves as there are distinct groups of persons about whose opinion he cares" (294).

WORKS CITED

Bergson, Henri. "The Endurance of Life." *Henri Bergson: Key Writings*. Ed. Keith Answell Pearson and John Mullarkey. New York: Continuum, 2002. 171-86.

Dente, Carla. "RSC 1999: Enter Guilt on the Stage of Conscience: *The Family Reunion* by T. S. Eliot." *The Poetics of Transubstantiation: From Theology to Metaphor*. Ed. Douglas Burnham and Enrico Giaccherini. Hampshire: Ashgate, 2005.

Eliot, Thomas Stearns. "Ben Jonson." *Selected Essays*. New ed. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1950. 127-39.

——. "Burnt Norton. " *The Complete Poems and Plays 1909-1950*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1952. 117-22.

——. "A Dialogue on Dramatic Poetry." *Selected Essays*. New ed. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1950. 31-45.

——. *The Family Reunion. The Complete Poems and Plays, 1909–1950*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1952. 223-93.

——."John Marston." *Elizabethan Essays*. London: Faber and Faber, 1934. 177-95.

——. "The Need for Poetic Drama." *The Listener* 25 Nov. 1936: 994-95.

——. *The Idea of a Christian Society*. London: Faber and Faber, 1939.

——. *Poetry and Drama*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1951.

——. "Shakespeare and the Stoicism of Seneca." *Selected Essays*. New ed. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1950. 107-20.

——. "Thomas Middleton Murray." *Selected Essays*. New ed. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1950. 140-48.

——. "Tradition and the Individual Talent." *Selected Essays*. New ed. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1950. 3-11.

Gardner, Helen. *The Art of T.S. Eliot*. London: The Cresset P, 1949.

Gordon, Lyndall. *T.S. Eliot: An Imperfect Life*. New York: Norton, 1998.

Graves, Robert. *The Greek Myths*. 1955. 2. vols. London: Folio Society, 1996.

Hauser, Arnold. *The Social History of Art*. 4 vols. Vol. 4. New York: Vintage Books, 1958.

Hungerford, Edward A. "'My Tunneling Process': The Method of Mrs. Dalloway." *Modern Fiction Studies* 3 (1957): 164-67.

James, William. *The Principles of Psychology*. New York: Holt and Company, 1890.

Kennedy, Andrew K. *Six Dramatists in Search of a Language: Studies in Dramatic Language*. London: CUP, 1975.

Lightfoot, Marjorie J. "*Purgatory* and *The Family Reunion*: In Pursuit of Prosodic Description." *Modern Drama* 7.3 (1964): 256-66.

Matthiessen, F. O. *The Achievement of T.S. Eliot*. New York: OUP, 1952.

Smith, Carol H. *T. S. Eliot's Dramatic Theory and Practice: From* Sweeney Agonistes *to* The Elder Statesman. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1963.

Spanos, William V. "T. S. Eliot's *The Family Reunion*: The Strategy of Sacramental Transfiguration." *Drama Survey* 4.1 (1965): 3-27.

Towner, Theresa M. "From Romance to Ritual: The Evidence of *The Family Reunion*." *South Central Review* 6.1 (1989): 62-74.

Ward, Anne. "Speculations on Eliot's Time-World: An Analysis of *The Family Reunion* in Relation to Hulme and Bergson." *American Literature* 21 (Mar 1949): 18-34.

Weitz, Morris. "T.S. Eliot: Time as a Mode of Salvation." *Sewanee Review* 60 (1952): 48-64.

Wyman, Linda. "Language as Plot in *The Family Reunion*." *The Placing of T. S. Eliot*. Ed. Jewel Spears Brooker. Columbia: U of Missouri P, 1991: 163-68.