

The Family Reunion:
Eliot, James, and the Buried Life *

EDWARD LOBB

T. S. Eliot's play *The Family Reunion* (1939) has not become part of the standard repertoire and is not likely to do so. Eliot himself came to consider it a failure, but it remains stubbornly alive; some of the scenes and individual speeches have indisputable power, and every decade or so there is a major production of the play in England or the United States.¹ For Eliot specialists, of course, the play is crucial in various ways. Eliot was always, from his first monologues, a dramatic poet, and his experiments in form are always of interest; the language and versification of the play also echo earlier and anticipate his later work and provide a vital link between "Burnt Norton" (1935) and the later *Quartets* and plays. As David Moody says, "*The Family Reunion* is far and away the most interesting of Eliot's plays" (172); it is also his most successful extended analysis of the human resistance to reality and of the ability of some individuals to grow and change. More importantly, for my purposes, the play illustrates Eliot's preoccupation with "the road not taken." In returning to his childhood home, Harry Monchensey is forced to confront the reality of his childhood and the genuine self he has evaded for decades. In conveying Harry's situation, Eliot makes intriguing although tangential use of Henry James's story "The Jolly Corner" in ways that have not been fully analyzed before.

*Reference: For a related article see Elena Anastasaki, "Henry James's Double-Bind: Chasing Possibilities in 'The Jolly Corner,'" *Connotations* 18.1-3 (2008/2009): 82-103.

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Even in his earliest poems, Eliot's interest in unrealized possibilities is apparent. Much of "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" is an uneasy justification of inaction haunted by the ghost of what might have been: "And would it have been worth it, after all ... ?" (*Complete Poems and Plays* 15, 16). In "Gerontion," the speaker admits

I was neither at the hot gates
Nor fought in the warm rain
Nor knee deep in the salt marsh, heaving a cutlass,
Bitten by flies, fought. (CPP 37)

The inhabitants of *The Waste Land* have also retreated from action, choice, and risk, "the awful daring of a moment's surrender/ Which an age of prudence can never retract" (CPP 74), and as a result they live a half-life between "memory and desire" (CPP 61). In "Burnt Norton" and the succeeding *Quartets*, the concern with "the door we never opened" and "what might have been and what has been" is still strong (CPP 171).

The unhappiness with one's actual life and the sense of having failed to live in a meaningful way are aspects of what Matthew Arnold famously called "the buried life."² The speakers in Eliot's poetry tell us little about the context of their lives—the matrix of family and relationships that shapes all of us—and that little is mostly hints and suggestions. In attempting a fuller portrayal of character and consciousness, Eliot was drawn not to fiction but to verse drama, a form which had never entirely died out and which he thought capable of successful renewal on the commercial stage. His earlier dramatic experiments had enjoyed some success, but none had been written for commercial performance.³

Eliot's attempt to use the form of the West End play in *The Family Reunion* was both ambitious and subversive:

The curtain was to open on the most conventional of dramatic worlds, the English drawing room, but every device at the dramatist's disposal was to be used as the play progressed to shake the audience's confidence in the

validity of that world of surface reality as a total representation of existence.
(C. Smith 116)

Beneath this surface reality, or through it, Eliot would show, without overt reference to Christianity, the universal desire for meaning, purgation, and renewal, using the Orestes myth and the primitive religious ritual that underlay it. He had, of course, used this same mixture of “unreal” surface reality, myth, and ritual with great success in *The Waste Land*, but here he was constrained by the conventional form he had chosen, and his deviations from that form, necessary to show its artificiality, created more dissonance than theatre-goers were able to accept. Early audiences in particular were baffled by the chorus, the chanting of runes, and the appearance (and silence) of the Eumenides; they were also frustrated by an excess of exposition and a dearth of action. The “deepest flaw” in the play, Eliot thought, “was a failure of adjustment between the Greek story and the modern situation,” and one symptom of this was our being “left in a divided frame of mind, not knowing whether to consider the play the tragedy of the mother or the salvation of the son.” A decade after the first production, the author’s own sympathies, against his intentions, came to be “all with the mother,” and he found Harry “an insufferable prig” (“Poetry and Drama” 84). Early reviewers considered *The Family Reunion* an interesting failure, and later critics have generally agreed with Eliot’s strictures and added others of their own.⁴

From his first entrance, Harry draws attention, in near-Expressionist style, to his being on another plane of consciousness:

You are all people
To whom nothing has happened, at most a continual impact
Of external events. You have gone through life in sleep,
Never woken to the nightmare. I tell you, life would be unendurable
If you were wide awake. You do not know
The noxious smell untraceable in the drains,
Inaccessible to the plumbers, that has its hour of the night; you do not know
The unspoken voice of sorrow in the ancient bedroom
At three o’clock in the morning. (CPP 293-94)

This claim of superior consciousness certainly sounds, as Eliot would say, priggish. The cause of Harry's awakening is his murder of his wife, but we doubt almost immediately that this really occurred, and Harry himself eventually admits that he may just have dreamed it (*CPP* 333). The guilt symbolized by the imagined murder persists, however, and the Eumenides appear again shortly after Harry acknowledges that the murder may not have happened. His guilt stems, then, from something other than personal action, and the dialogue suggests various possibilities. He learns from his aunt Agatha that his father contemplated murdering Amy, his mother, and this parallel is one of several suggestions that the Monchensey family is under a curse analogous to that of the House of Atreus, in which multiple murders actually do take place. The Monchensey curse appears to be the result of Amy's failure to love and of her attachment to the house rather than the people in it. Managerial and manipulative, Amy maintained the façade of the family:

What of the humiliation,
Of the chilly pretences in the silent bedroom,
Forcing sons upon an unwilling father?
Dare you think what that does to one? Try to think of it.
I *would* have sons, if I could not have a husband:
Then I let him go. I abased myself.
Did I show any weakness, any self-pity?
I forced myself to the purposes of Wishwood. (*CPP* 340)

Growing up with an aggrieved and demanding mother, Harry and his brothers "all felt like failures, before we had begun" (*CPP* 318). The guilt-ridden child in a loveless household becomes the adult in a loveless marriage like his mother's; he is afflicted with a sense of personal inadequacy and "filthiness" (*CPP* 327) that lead, perhaps, to his self-indictment for murder. But just as the reality of Harry's "crime" evaporates as we begin to understand his upbringing, the neat psychological explanation begins to dissolve or to seem inadequate in itself—at best an explanation of the immediate mechanics of guilt rather than its origins. In the same speech in which he confesses to murder, Harry refers to "the slow stain" which "sinks deeper

through the skin/ Tainting the flesh and discolouring the bone" (CPP 294), and later he elaborates on the point in a crucial passage:

[...]. What you call the normal
 Is merely the unreal and the 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,
 Some monstrous mistake and aberration
 Of all men, of the world, which I cannot put in order. (CPP 326)

This clearly refers to the Fall; Coghill connects it plausibly with a famous passage in *Apologia pro Vita Sua* where Newman describes the human race as "implicated in some terrible aboriginal calamity" (46). The legacy of this remains with each of us as original sin, a predisposition to evil. Harry's acceptance of this general guilt, of which the family curse of lovelessness is a local example, leads to his acceptance of the Eumenides, whom he sees first as avenging Furies and finally as the benevolent guides they are. But in order to understand the meaning of this, it is necessary, I believe, to digress briefly and consider the Henry James story alluded to in the play.

Early in the first scene of the play, Agatha, one of Harry's aunts, comments on his impending return:

The man who returns will have to meet
 The boy who left. Round by the stables,
 In the coach-house, in the orchard,
 In the plantation, down the corridor
 That led to the nursery, round the corner
 Of the new wing, he will have to face him—
 And it will not be a very *jolly* corner. (CPP 288)

As early as 1947, F. O. Matthiessen (175-76) noted the allusion to Henry James's story "The Jolly Corner."⁵ The story is not about an encounter with a previous self, "the boy who left," but with the spectre of a self that never came into being—Spencer Brydon as he might have been under other circumstances.⁶ The allusion therefore

seems puzzling, at least initially, and is usually either ignored by critics or dismissed as a “dry academic joke” characteristic of Agatha, who has taught for thirty years in a women’s college (Coghill 186). I wish to suggest instead that the allusion is one of the keys to the play.

“The Jolly Corner” (1908) is one of those stories in which James uses a ghost or ghosts to explore the dark side of the psyche. Spencer Brydon returns to New York at the age of fifty-six, after thirty-three years in Europe. He is appalled by the vulgarity and materialism he sees in the city, but intrigued by the vitality and prosperity of the place. As he deals with the demolition of an old house he owns, which is to be replaced by an apartment building, Brydon discovers in himself an unsuspected talent for business and wonders what his life would have been like had he remained in the United States. In another house, the one he grew up in, he becomes aware of a ghostly presence, that of his “*alter ego*” (707, 711) the self he might have become had he remained in New York and pursued a career in business. Tracking the spectre over several nights in the now-empty house, he finally confronts it one evening: it is “evil, odious, blatant, vulgar” (725), and it is also maimed, lacking two fingers on one hand. The figure at first recoils from Brydon, then advances “as for aggression” (725). Brydon falls unconscious and is found and revived the next morning by his friend Alice Staverton and the housekeeper. Alice, who has known about the spectre, seen him in dreams, and accepted him, comforts Brydon, and we infer that her acceptance allows him to come to terms with the dark side of his own psyche. Readers today are likely to see the story in the context of two other *alter ego* stories of the period, Stevenson’s *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1885) and Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890). James’s story deals not only with the shadow self in each of us, but also with James’s sense of the corrosive effects of American Gilded Age capitalism and with sexual issues; as with *Dorian Gray*, critics have explored the implications of a gay writer’s depiction of the hidden and denied self.⁷ Since I am primarily interested here in Eliot’s use of James’s story, I shall focus on elements common to the two works.

The most obvious parallel between them is the two protagonists' return to their childhood home. Spencer Brydon is too intelligent to think of himself as without flaw, but he clearly considers the house of his childhood on "the jolly corner" a kind of Eden—a common enough idealization. In his youth "he had too promptly waked up to a sense of the ugly" (698) and fled to Europe; "it had been the theory of many superficially-judging persons, he knew, that he was wasting [his] life in a surrender to sensations" (711). This seems a clear reference both to Walter Pater's *Marius the Epicurean: His Sensations and Ideas* (1873) and to the famous last pages of *The Renaissance*, summarized in its last sentence: "For art comes to you, proposing frankly to give nothing but the highest quality to your moments as they pass, and simply for those moments' sake" (223). Brydon has lived a life of high-minded hedonism, of Paterian aesthetic "ecstasy" (221), but he is still anxious that Alice, in particular, should think well of him:

"Do you believe then—too dreadfully!—that I *am* as good as I might ever have been?"

"Oh no! Far from it!" With which she got up from her chair and was nearer to him. "But I don't care," she smiled.

"You mean I'm good enough?"

She considered a little. "Will you believe it if I say so? I mean will you let that settle your question for you?" And then as if making out in his face that he drew back from this, that he had some idea which, however absurd, he couldn't yet bargain away: "Oh you don't care either—but very differently: you don't care for anything but yourself." (708)

Alice's bluntness is mitigated by her great affection for Brydon: she has already asked him twice "How should I not have liked you?" As a mature person, she accepts him with all his faults, but Brydon is not yet ready to acknowledge the seriousness of these faults. He insists that his dark side was merely potential and that his move to Europe prevented its development: "'It comes over me that I had then a strange *alter ego* deep down somewhere within me, as the full-blown flower is in the small tight bud, and that I just took the course, I just transferred him to the climate, that blighted him for once and for ever'" (707). Speaking of the yet-unseen spectre, he insists that "'He

isn't myself. He's the just so totally other person. But I do want to see him,' he added. 'And I can. And I shall'" (708).

Brydon's insistence that the ghost is another, unrelated to his present self, is paralleled in *The Family Reunion* when Harry first sees the Eumenides. He denies almost hysterically that he is the man they are seeking:

Why do you show yourselves now for the first time?
When I knew her, I was not the same person.
I was not any person. Nothing that I did
Has to do with me. The accident of a dreaming moment,
Of a dreaming age, when I was someone else
Thinking of something else, puts me among you.
I tell you, it is not me you are looking at,
Not me you are grinning at, not me your confidential looks
Incriminate, but that other person, if person
You thought I was: let your necrophily
Feed upon that carcase. They will not go. (CPP 311)

Spencer Brydon and Harry both divide themselves in two, and associate the denied and rejected self with the imaginary and the unreal—the ghost of a prophylactically aborted self or the self of “a dreaming moment.” Each man is dwelling in illusion, unable to face the radical flaw in himself and attempting to deny its reality because the evil of which he is capable has never been fully expressed.⁸ Both are reminiscent of the denizens of the bar in Auden's “September 1, 1939,” where illusion is facilitated with alcohol and distractions:

Faces along the bar
Cling to their average day:
The lights must never go out,
The music must always play,
All the conventions conspire
To make this fort assume
The furniture of home;
Lest we should see where we are,
Lost in a haunted wood,
Children afraid of the night
Who have never been happy or good. (246)

Eliot's Harry and James's Spencer Brydon both return to their childhood homes, and both attempt to isolate the evil self from their present self. The third major parallel between them is that each must now recognize that this division is an illusion—that his capacity for evil is innate and that he has “never been happy or good.” Brydon's two houses—one associated with commerce through its pending destruction and replacement by an apartment building, the other associated with home and childhood—are connected with his two selves, one “evil, odious,” and unrealized, the other essentially uncorrupted. The artificiality of this binary is shown by the *alter ego's* invasion of the “good” house on the jolly corner, but even after seeing him, Brydon initially insists that the spectre is not himself: “‘There's somebody—an awful beast; whom I brought, too horribly, to bay. But it's not me.’” Maintaining his belief that the “bud” of the dark side was “blighted” forever by his move to Europe, he says, “‘He's none of *me*, even as I *might* have been’” (730). In the last pages of the story, Alice Staverton performs a therapeutic, even a religious role; she accepts that the ghost is not the present Brydon (“‘No—it's not you’” [729]), but tries to bring him to a recognition that it represents a real part of his present psyche. She saw the ghost in a dream at the same time that Brydon saw him in the house, but uses a telling second-person pronoun:

“So this morning [...] you appeared to me.”

“Like *him*?”

“A black stranger!”

“Then how did you know it was I?”

“Because, as I told you weeks ago, my mind, my imagination, had worked so over what you might, what you mightn't have been—to show you, you see, how I've thought of you. In the midst of that you came to me [...].” (730)

In keeping with the affection she has already demonstrated, Alice repeats a question she earlier directed to Brydon twice: “‘So why ... shouldn't I like him?’”

“You ‘like’ that horror—?”

“I *could* have liked him. And to me,” she said, “he was no horror. I had accepted him.”

“‘Accepted’—?” Brydon oddly sounded.

“Before, for the interest of his difference—yes. And as *I* didn’t disown him, as *I* knew him—which you at last, confronted with him in his difference, so cruelly didn’t, my dear—well, he must have been, you see, less dreadful to me. And it must have pleased him that I pitied him.” (730)

Her “*could* have liked” suggests what Spencer Brydon could have been, a potentiality which—as his newfound business skills imply—is still with him. Moved by her acceptance of the ghost and therefore of his mixed nature, Brydon is himself able to accept these things, and the story ends on a note of almost conventional romance “as he [draws] her to his breast” (731).

When we first encounter Harry Monchensey, he has already awakened “to the nightmare,” and is now convinced of his sinful nature and the “huge disaster” of which it forms part. In this he is a step ahead of Spencer Brydon, but he must come to terms with the reality of his childhood. Harry has come back not in search of happiness, but of simplicity; as he says to his cousin Mary,

I thought [Wishwood] was a place
 Where life was substantial and simplified—
 But the simplification took place in my memory,
 I think. (CPP 306)

Like Brydon’s idealization of “the jolly corner,” Harry’s search for simplicity—in the sense of ease, clarity, or ordinariness—is an illusion; the hollow tree which represents his “only memory of freedom” (CPP 307) was cut down when he was still a child. The root meaning of simplicity, however, is oneness, and Harry has, ironically, found this: “I thought I might escape from one life to another,/ And it may be all one life, with no escape” (CPP 306). All of his life is one thing because there never *was* a pre-lapsarian life; in a world organized by his mother, his sole memory of freedom, the hollow tree where he and his brothers and Mary played Cowboys and Indians, is short-lived and recognized as false. The immediate answer to Harry’s poignant question “Why were we not happy?” (CPP 306) is that Amy organized and

controlled everything; the deeper answer is that Harry must undergo a process of purgation and rebirth, as Mary suggests:

I believe the season of birth
 Is the season of sacrifice
 For the tree and the beast, and the fish
 Thrashing itself upstream:
 And what of the terrified spirit
 Compelled to be reborn⁹
 To rise toward the violent sun
 Wet wings into the rain cloud
 Harefoot over the moon? (CPP 310)

By this point, we can see that the apparent incongruity of Agatha's reference to "The Jolly Corner"—that Harry's impending encounter with a previous self, "the boy who left" is not the same as Spencer Brydon's meeting the spectre of a self that never came into being—is the result of the very binaries that James's story and Eliot's play seek to undermine. Because there was no world before the Fall for the individual, the boy who left is continuous with the man who returns; the *alter ego* is not an evil twin left behind at some fork in the road and "blighted [...] for ever" but a present potential that must be faced and accepted.

There remains a fourth parallel between story and play that merits attention, and it is one which involves a significant divergence between them on the subject of human love. Spencer Brydon's coming to terms with his own sinfulness is clearly facilitated, as I have suggested, by Alice Staverton, whose acceptance of the ghost represents a mature notion of love which embraces the beloved with all of his faults. In *The Family Reunion*, Harry is likewise helped by people who love him—primarily by Mary, the cousin his mother wished him to marry, and by Agatha, his youngest aunt and the only one he addresses by her first name alone. Harry is attracted to Mary:

[...]. You bring me news
 Of a door that opens at the end of a corridor,

Sunlight and singing; when I had felt sure
That every corridor only led to another,
Or to a blank wall [...]. (CPP 310)

Shortly after this, however, the Eumenides appear for the first time, and Harry renounces the possibility of ordinary human love. At the psychological level, audience or readers could accept that Harry rejects Mary's love because of Amy's attempt to engineer their marriage, and because of his own loveless marriage. At the thematic level, they could understand that Harry cannot return to the level of consciousness he had before. At the mythic level, they could perhaps recognize that Harry must undergo a process of purgation and renewal. But readers, and many critics, could not understand what this process might involve in practice.

It can be argued, of course, that this is deliberate, that Eliot's dismantling of the superficiality of the premises of realistic theatre is by this point complete and that any inquiry into what Harry intends to do simply puts the questioner on the level of the chorus of aunts and uncles who "insist that the world is what we have always taken it to be" (CPP 302). Eliot himself was bemused when Michael Redgrave, playing Harry in the first production, asked what his character actually did at the end of the play,¹⁰ and David Moody asserts that the play "mocks any curiosity about where Harry is going or what he will do" (179). In terms of Eliot's intention, this is probably true, but the issue remains one of those instances Eliot noted of "failure of adjustment between the Greek story and the modern situation," the more so because Harry's behaviour is often repellent. We see him for only a couple of hours, and in the throes of a spiritual crisis, but as Coghill argues, "if he could [suggest] some touch of contrition in the matter of his unhappy wife, or of generous feeling towards his mother, one might be ready to believe him capable of the programme he outlines for his future" (55). To know that Amy represents the "domination of the senses and of the human will" or "a corrupt spiritual principle which must die in order to renew itself" is not enough to make Harry's treatment of her sympathetic¹¹; the fact that his leaving effec-

tively kills her may be an echo of the *Oresteia*, but it still makes Harry a monster in normal human terms.

I mention this problem not to point out flaws in the play that are generally acknowledged, but to suggest how “The Jolly Corner” functions in the play’s treatment of love. Spencer Brydon is offered redemption in the form of acceptance and love by Alive Staverton, and embraces it; Harry rejects a similar redemption by Mary and goes off, as himself, Orestes, Buddha, or Christ, in search of purgation.¹² The contrast between earthly and other-worldly salvation, whether intended by Eliot as a contrast to the James story or not, draws attention to the severity of Eliot’s vision. The idea of divesting oneself of the love of created beings has honourable antecedents in Christian and non-Christian traditions,¹³ but to the ordinary reader Harry’s brutality is distasteful, and it is hard to disagree with the critics Evans mentions who conclude that “Eliot denigrates human life in favour of a divine calling” (23). Eliot’s later comments on the play and his sympathy for Amy suggest that the author himself perceived a problem in Harry’s apparent brutality as well as his priggishness. It is easier for most of us to sympathize with Spencer Brydon, who is able to come to terms with his own faults and continue to live, with heightened consciousness, in the world we all share.

If we look more closely at the play, however, we can see that Eliot’s portrayal of human love is more complex than it first appears. Although Agatha apparently approves of Harry’s rejection of Mary and his mother (“Love compels cruelty/ To those who do not understand love” [*CPP* 337]), she represents, as Harry’s favourite aunt and spiritual guide, a “merging of human and divine love” (C. Smith 119). Mary, too, has helped Harry to understand his childhood, and both women take their places in the line of intercessory female figures in Eliot’s poetry. These figures, who function on various levels depending on the poem, are part Beatrice, part Madonna, and part muse, and have been analyzed by many critics.¹⁴ Although Harry eventually leaves his family and the house behind, Mary and Agatha function

very much as Alice Staverton does in the James story, lovingly but firmly leading the protagonist to recognize the truth.

It is when we look at the characters' interaction, however, that James's influence on Eliot is most apparent. Critics who see *The Family Reunion* as Harry's story routinely consider most of the other characters (except for Agatha and, to a lesser extent, Mary) as dullards—foils to Harry and his higher consciousness—and assume that the author's sympathies are entirely with his protagonist; Grover Smith, for example, speaks of "the uncritical tolerance the play accords this character in whom there is much to criticize" (197). In the only book-length analysis of the play, however, Giles Evans makes a compelling case for seeing *The Family Reunion* as another kind of "poetic" drama in the tradition of Ibsen and Chekhov, both of whom Eliot acknowledged as influences.¹⁵ This approach takes account of Eliot's desire to move beyond the theatre of superficial realism while demonstrating that he was concerned not only with spiritual issues but with ordinary human life: "The experience at the centre of the play ceases to be Harry's inner illumination (so difficult in fact to dramatise) and is rather the human consequences on those who are not Harry. There is a tragedy for those who go on living" (23). Evans shows that each of the characters has a more complex inner life than is usually recognized; he also draws attention to the ways in which the dramatic situation undermines our acceptance of any one character's point of view as correct. This orchestration of conflicting centres of consciousness, like the overlapping circles of a Venn diagram, is one of the staples of good drama; it is also, as Eliot realized, a technique which Henry James had perfected in fiction.

This becomes clearer if we look at one of the crucial speeches in the play—Mary's analysis of Harry's state of mind:

Even if, as you say, Wishwood is a cheat,
Your family a delusion—then it's *all* a delusion,
Everything you feel—I don't mean what you think,
But what you feel. You attach yourself to loathing
As others do to loving: an infatuation

That's wrong, a good that's misdirected. You deceive yourself
 Like the man convinced that he is paralysed
 Or like the man who believes that he is blind
 While he still sees the sunlight. I know that this is true. (CPP 309)

Looking at the play as a whole, we understand Mary's own experience of cheat and delusion, her sense of having been used by Amy, her awareness of the "ordinary hopelessness" of her life (CPP 307). We do not take her characterization of Harry entirely at face value, but neither do we dismiss it: there remains the real possibility—and not only from an obtusely secular point of view—that his self-loathing is pathological in its extremity.¹⁶ Unless we believe that he actually murdered his wife (and this possibility is effectively dismissed), Harry has not, after all, done anything very terrible; his reaction to discovering his sinful nature seems excessive, a form of self-importance or pride based on the idea that he is unique. He imagines, for example, that only he can see the Eumenides, but we learn that Mary, Agatha, and Downing have all seen them; guilt and the desire for expiation are not Harry's alone.¹⁷

Eliot had analyzed a focus on self similar to Harry's in "Shakespeare and the Stoicism of Seneca" (1927). Discussing Othello's famous last speech ("Soft you: a word or two before you go"), Eliot writes:

He is endeavouring to escape reality, he has ceased to think about Desdemona, and is thinking about himself. Humility is the most difficult of all virtues to achieve; nothing dies harder than the desire to think well of oneself. Othello turns himself into a pathetic figure by adopting an *aesthetic* rather than a moral attitude, dramatizing himself against his environment. He takes in the spectator, but the human motive is primarily to take in himself. (130)

Othello's narcissism deflects attention from his murder of Desdemona to himself; Harry, who claims to have murdered his wife, dramatizes himself in a similar way.¹⁸ His response to Mary's account of him suggests that he has learned something about himself: "Perhaps you are right, though I do not know / How you should know it" (CPP 309).

When Eliot began to write West End plays, his interest in perception had expanded from the depiction of the isolated consciousness to the interplay and conflict of multiple consciousnesses, and in this growth the example of James was crucial. In addition to being obsessed with what was and what might have been, Eliot's early personae (Prufrock, Gerontion, the inhabitants of *The Waste Land*) are all more or less self-absorbed, and their failure to acknowledge other people's points of view amounts in many cases to a form of solipsism. James, too, created a whole gallery of characters whose consciousness is limited by naïveté, egoism, or circumstance, and who may or may not develop a more comprehensive vision as the story progresses.¹⁹ As *The Family Reunion* shows, Eliot had learned not only from the great dramatists but also from Henry James how to present various perspectives on a single issue. When, early in his career, Eliot praised James for a "mind so fine that no idea could violate it" ("In Memory" 2), he meant what he said: everything in James comes to us mediated by a dramatized character's consciousness and qualified by our awareness of other characters' points of view, and a real encounter with another point of view or centre of consciousness is crucial in both *The Family Reunion* and "The Jolly Corner." If Spencer Brydon is able to accept human love fully and Harry Monchensey is not, the point is not to decide which of them is right, but to understand the full complexities of their situations. The story and James's work as a whole allow us to look at Eliot's play not only in terms of his often unrealized intentions but of his actual accomplishment. The "buried life" is not only the life that was not lived, the road not taken²⁰; it is also the self-knowledge we avoid by clinging to our own limited points of view. As Eliot's later comments on *The Family Reunion* demonstrate, he understood that part of his achievement in the play was the portrayal of Harry's self-absorption and its effects on his family.

Queen's University
Kingston, Ontario

NOTES

¹For Eliot's later view of the play, see "Poetry and Drama" 82-84. Since the play's premiere, there have been four major productions in London (1946, 1956, 1979, and 2008) and two in New York (1947 and 1958); a 1999 production moved from Stratford-upon-Avon to London and then to New York.

²Craig Raine was not the first to invoke Arnold's poem "The Buried Life" in relation to Eliot, but he makes it the persuasive focal point of his reading of Eliot as poet, dramatist, and critic.

³"Sweeney Agonistes" is a pair of fragments; both *The Rock* and *Murder in the Cathedral* were written originally for non-commercial production.

⁴See, e.g., Donoghue 94-103; Matthiessen 170-71; Williams 232-37; G. Smith 212. Goldman's essay is an interesting defence of Eliot's practice, but even Goldman does not argue that the plays are effective on stage.

⁵Matthiessen's is in fact the first mention in a *book* of the James allusion. At least one journal review noted the reference: see Horace Gregory, "The Unities and Eliot," *Life and Letters* 23 (Oct. 1939): 53-60, reprinted in Brooker 403-06. More recent critics have tended to dismiss the allusion in a few lines or ignore it altogether.

⁶Grover Smith points out in addition that *The Family Reunion* is really the reverse of "The Jolly Corner," with the present self acknowledging guilt (cf. 205). For reasons which will become clear, I think the two narratives work most often in parallel rather than by contrast.

⁷On gay issues in the story, see Savoy.

⁸Eliot intended the question of Harry's murder of his wife to remain unresolved, but most readers and viewers of the play conclude that he did not in fact kill her; the fact that he *thought* of doing so is enough to represent the evil inherent in him and all of us.

⁹The distinction between the Once-Born and the Twice-Born, as Coghill points out, is borrowed from William James, Henry's brother, who followed earlier writers on the subject. The Once-Born (or Healthy-Minded) are joyful, optimistic, and confident; the Twice-Born (or Sick Souls), "conscious of their own sinfulness and the sinfulness of the world around them," "tend to prefer punishment to forgiveness, the Day of Judgment to the Beatific Vision, justice to Mercy, righteousness to happiness, asceticism to pleasure, Protestantism to Catholicism, Puritanism to either" (Coghill 52).

¹⁰See Jones 101. According to the biography of Redgrave cited by Jones, Eliot replied that "[Harry] and the chauffeur go off and get jobs in the East End." When Redgrave mentioned that it would be useful to have some lines suggesting this, Eliot was surprised, but produced an additional twenty-five lines for rehearsal the next day. The play had already been published, however, and the lines have never appeared in any subsequent edition.

¹¹Carol Smith 134. Most commentators on the play (Jones, Matthiessen, Moody, and Grover Smith, among others) also mention Harry's unpleasant qualities.

¹²As one "awakened" and seeking escape from the fire of the senses and earthly attachment, Harry is analogous to the Buddha; as a sacrificial or expiatory victim for the sins of the family, he is analogous to Christ and the various slain gods of mythology.

¹³Several critics draw attention to one of Eliot's epigraphs to "Sweeney Agonistes," a line from St. John of the Cross: "Hence the soul cannot be possessed of the divine union until it has divested itself of the love of created beings" (CPP 115).

¹⁴E.g.—in different ways—by Moody, Childs, and myself.

¹⁵See Evans 17-22 for the evidence and acknowledgment of earlier work by Kristian Smidt and Andrew Kennedy.

¹⁶My view of the play owes much to Giles Evans's analysis of it as a drama of "the tension between various sympathies" (23); my view of Harry is perhaps harsher than his.

¹⁷In Eliot's play and James's story, the fact that other characters see the apparitions suggests that they are, in literary terms, real—or, as Eliot might say, real enough.

¹⁸In discussing Harry's sometimes absurd phrasing ("a twilight/ Where the dead stone is seen to be batrachian,/ The aphyllous branch ophidian" [CPP 308]), Evans acutely cites Eliot's essay on "'Rhetoric' and Poetic Drama" (1919), which also draws attention to characters who see themselves "in a dramatic light" (Evans 50). The more extended discussion in "Shakespeare and the Stoicism of Seneca" seems to me a better gloss on Harry's character and a stronger suggestion of Eliot's awareness of Harry's self-absorption.

¹⁹Many of James's tragic heroines—Catherine Sloper, Isabel Archer, Verena Tarrant, and Kate Croy, for example—learn and grow; the anonymous narrator of *The Aspern Papers* does not.

²⁰While it is beyond the scope of this article, the speaker's encounter with the "compound ghost" in "Little Gidding" is clearly, on one level, another allusion to "The Jolly Corner." As Lyndall Gordon demonstrates in her biography, James's works are useful glosses on both Eliot's writings and his life.

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