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From Humiliation to Epiphany:
The Role of Onstage Spaces
in T. S. Eliot’s Middle Plays

Ria Banerjee

Criticism on T. S. Eliot’s plays can be grouped into one of two large clusters. The first tends to approach them as antecedents to the towering *Four Quartets; Murder in the Cathedral* (1935); for instance, is most often cited for the excised lines that reappear to better effect in “Burnt Norton.” Critical attention has alternately coalesced around classical references in the plays and the related question of genre; more than one recent analysis of *The Family Reunion* (1939) and *The Cocktail Party* (1949) focuses on their “translations, into contemporary settings, of Greek originals” (Matthews 185). This essay takes a different approach. Placing the abovementioned three as Eliot’s “middle plays” (between the early fragments of *The Rock* and the much later *The Elder Statesman*), it reads them as recursive attempts to inquire into the modern spiritual condition. The physicality of the stage opens up, in a way impossible for poetry, explorations of spatiality that suggest an intimate relationship between individuals and their built environments. The basic elements of each play are the same: a man, humiliated and at the end of his (in the last case, her) spiritual tether, reencounters rooms, corridors, and passages, and through this reengagement comes to a spiritual epiphany. The architectural principle presents an alternate narrative to the protagonist, one that rejects the constraints of chronological time. Onstage spaces represent an alternate value system that privileges spiritual truths and ethical responsibilities over material ones. Paying close attention to Eliot’s dramatic method shows his embrace of the unexpected and ridiculous over the expected and normal; these plays are his attempt to present a viable alternative to the givens of modernity.

*Murder in the Cathedral* was originally commissioned for the 1935 Canterbury Festival. Closely involved with the organizing committee, Eliot had more artistic control on this play than over his previous collaborative effort, *The Rock* (1934), and he took advantage of this control to play with dramatic technique on a number of levels. The compulsion towards development in this play, for instance, is almost nonexistent. Eliot himself summed up the minimal plot: “A man comes home, foreseeing that he will be killed, and he is killed” (“Poetry and Drama” 86);
the dramatic action is foreknown by almost any audience member who attends a production, then and now. Character development is similarly stalled, as Thomas adheres to decisions he has made before the play begins. Eliot’s examination of humiliation culminates in the imperative to “wait”—the twelfth word uttered onstage and repeated more than twenty-five times during the subsequent play. The cathedral space is the physical manifestation of this philosophical-religious injunction to embrace humiliation and wait. Its centrality to the play is asserted in the first lines: the Chorus takes the stage saying, “Here let us stand, close by the cathedral. Here let us wait” (CPP 175). The effect of that repeated “here” cannot possibly be replicated in productions staged elsewhere—the here of the theater in 1935 was the same as its historical referent from 1170; the fictional here coincides exactly with the real. From eyewitness accounts, Eliot’s stagecraft emphasized this closeness by having actors advance through the audience to the stage area in front; offstage actors sat on the sides of the chapter house, remaining visible. Audiences typically accustomed to distances between the fictional and real, stage and seats, were faced instead with convergences that dissolved the fourth wall and erected in its stead an altered, almost spatialized relationship between contemporary and historical time.

Crucially, the play opens with the tired, ravaged, trampled-upon women of the Chorus rather than the calm, somewhat sanctimonious Thomas à Becket. Although the play follows Thomas in his last few days, the archbishop acceding to divine will is a counterpart to the struggles of the Chorus, just as his resolution to wait echoes theirs. The wails of the women in face of their devastation also mirrors the playwright’s attempts to cope with his long-held sureties during the turbulent 1930s: “Archbishop, secure and assured of your fate, unaffrayed among the shades, do you realise what you ask, do you realise what it means / To the small folk drawn into the pattern of fate . . . the doom of the house, the doom of their lord, the doom of the world?” (181). Contemporary theatre reviews notice a change in the tone of Eliot’s interwar writing that reflects the uncertain 1930s. Delmore Schwartz writes in 1939 that there is “a new period in Eliot’s mind, a rejection of the royalism and conservatism [of 1928] . . . And this rejection might seem related to the poet’s sense of what the English ruling class has recently done . . . [his] new and as yet inadequately considered revulsion and perplexity” (qtd. in Brooker 396–97). Two years earlier, Eliot joined the advisory board of the Church of England-sponsored International Conference at Oxford on the topic of “Church, Community and the State,” where he congregated with “a wide range of Christian intellectuals committed to examining the need for radical [social] change” (Steele and Taylor 187). He read Simone Weil’s work as an ideal reconciliation of modernity with
religious feeling because of its “conjunction of Christian and Judaic moral theology, community and cosmopolitanism, spirituality and practical social action, classical and avant-garde philosophy” (Harris 54). This urgency to find practical yet moral means to social justice finds an outlet in the dolorous chants of the Chorus.

The equivalence set up between Thomas and the Chorus underlines Eliot’s ethical dramatic impulse. It also undercuts Thomas’s most obscure—and in the face of real war in the late 1930s—obtuse pronouncements. Problematically, for instance, Thomas remarks that the chorus of women “know and do not know, that acting is suffering / And suffering action . . . both are fixed / In an eternal action, an eternal patience / To which all must consent” (182). The humiliated women are integrated with the cathedral space that shelters them and are asked to wait, like the building, without “acting.” This imperative, Thomas suggests, is one that is already present in their repressed consciousness, something they know and yet, by harping on the need for temporal action that will lift them up materially, they simultaneously “do not know.” Thomas’s attitude towards the hapless women has been read by some critics as an expression of Eliot’s latent misogyny. Some passages are particularly uncomfortable—until “the wheel is forever still” in death, the human being is continually “torn away, subdued, violated . . . Mastered by the animal powers of spirit, / Dominated by the lust of self-demolition” (208). The depiction of violence is clearly gendered, and all mankind is feminized to accede to the masculinist orthodoxy of Eliot’s faith, in which the female body stands in for the universal subject. Critical exegeses have responded to the fervor of these images and the blood lust that lurks behind their mournful tones. Cassandra Laity admits that Eliot remains associated “with a monolithically elitist, masculinist, and reactionary conception of early modernist culture” (2), and for Sharon Stockton, the “aestheticized female body” of the Chorus is “a stand-in for material chaos in general and class, labor, and gender displacement and democratization in particular.” In her reading, the “violent invasion of this body by some transcendent and/or abstract force articulates the attraction that writers like Eliot, Yeats, Pound, and Forster felt towards totalitarianism” (376). The Chorus in such a view is akin to the Sabine women, savaged by the colonizing masculine gaze, their rapes turned into fodder for serene aesthetic contemplation.

Although persuasive, this critical stance does not take into account the playwright’s developing view of the modern world, Britain included, as increasingly barbaric. In The Idea of a Christian Society (1939), Eliot shows distaste for both the totalitarian regimes of Italy, Germany, Russia and also their political antithesis, western Liberalism, despite the distinctions usually made between the two. He writes that all of
these cultures create “mobs” of their populations, “a state of affairs in which we shall have regimentation and conformity, without respect for the needs of the individual soul . . . uniformity of opinion through propaganda, and art only encouraged when it flatters the official doctrines of the time” (288). These sentiments don’t echo the triumphalism of Rome; the passage shows, instead, the humiliated consciousness of a cultural arbiter whose youthful certainties demand rethinking. Eliot’s early poetry displays a fear of sexuality and distaste towards the feminine—recall The Waste Land’s “young man carbuncular” whose “vanity requires no response” from the indifferent typist whom he “assaults” (CPP 44). But unlike that listless typist, here the Chorus speaks, cries, acts onstage; it is an irrepressible feminine voice that counters or corrects the priests when they misunderstand Thomas. There is no elaborate irony in the depiction of the abject women in Murder in the Cathedral. Materially distinct from the bare-armed women who pose on pillows and strike fear into Prufrock, the Chorus is not a collective that the narrator wishes to capture and possess. Sitting among the audience, proximate to positions in which similar women have collected since the twelfth century, it seems to me clear that the Chorus was intended to discomfit, not lull, the audience of the 1935 performance.

At the end of Part I, Thomas, the Chorus, priests, and Tempters join together in a culminating recitation of the paltriness and lure of the material world: “All things are unreal / Unreal or disappointing: / The Catherine wheel, the pantomime cat, / The prizes given at the children’s party, / The prize awarded for the English Essay, / The scholar’s degree, the statesman’s decoration” (194). The list is both mundane and specific, easily recognizable in the modern world, unlike the Chorus’s list of activities (reaping and sowing, keeping the feasts, hearing the masses, gathering wood, and so on; 180–81), which are of the play’s medieval setting. The modern list invokes English household rituals celebrating small and large personal triumphs; the images are filmy and untethered to any place, unlike the rural specificity of the women of Canterbury who have “[t]alked at the corner of the fire, / Talked at the corners of streets, / Talked not always in whispers, / Living and partly living” (180). In contrast, the modern vignettes are “disappointing” because, being unmoored in space, they highlight that an audience that recognizes them in its own personal experience is conformist and mob-like, regimented and unimaginative. It is all “unreal,” not just in the diegetic world of the play but in the non-diegetic everyday of those watching. This metaleptic telescoping of time destabilizes any assumption of moral certitude in the present. Thomas and the Chorus’s doubts expand to envelop the seated audience, forcing the question:
How can anyone be certain of avoiding “the greatest treason: To do the right deed for the wrong reason” (196)?

Thomas’s sacrifice makes doctrinal sense only in this atmosphere of a world a-tilt, deceived by its patriarchs and monolithic institutions. In the second half of the play, it is Eliot’s difficult task to effect a resolution in a situation that cannot be resolved—no one but the divine can truly know Thomas’s motivations. This uncertainty, the stalled pointer about to turn, effectively undercuts any moment of dramatic culmination; the audience, like the Chorus, has to simply accept his actions for what they are. At this emotional nadir, the Chorus locates its epiphanic revival of faith through a reappraisal of built spaces. Echoing Thomas’s formulation, the Chorus emerges from not-knowing towards its opposite, which reveals itself as a message that was already present in familiar places waiting to be properly apprehended:

... Have I not known, not known / What was coming to be? / It was here, in the kitchen, in the passage, / In the mews in the barns in the byre in the market place / In our veins our bowels our skulls as well / As well as in the plotting of potentates / As well as in the consultations of powers. (208)

The passage begins in a slow chant, recognizing the common knowledge of the historical story of Thomas à Becket and his sacrilegious murder. But as the lines progress, a rising hysteria ruptures the stolidity of the narration. The organizing principles of punctuation dissolve: commas disappear and the women forget their pauses. Kitchens and passages, all their daily spaces, convey tacit knowledge directly to veins, bowels, skulls without the intercession of language (the brain, seat of language, is omitted from their list). Lowest of the low, the poor women of Canterbury nonetheless pierce through levels of social guarded doors, to perceive the “plotting of potentates” and the “consultations of powers.” At their most humiliated, the spaces that physically shelter them become the true mirror of their internal spaces where insight and faith abide.

The Chorus’s unregulated flow of words collapses cultural and nationalistic distinctions that were commonplace for its audience. José Harris notes that according to popular British opinion in the late 1930s and 1940s, “Europe was a peculiarly violent, dangerous and uncivilized place” (46); on the other hand, America was deemed too conservative (53) in Eliot’s eyes to be a fit home for Western civilization and values. It is a mark of the times that the Chorus equates all potentates and powers as essentially the same while its author simultaneously clung
to an idealized image of British culture based on perceived distinctions between the country and its neighbors. It is perhaps the playwright’s own knowing/not-knowing that finds expression in the moments before the king’s knights seize Thomas. Faced with certain death at their hands, Thomas repeatedly commands his bishops, “Unbar the door! unbar the door!” (212). Before his murder, he shouts about opening the doors of the Cathedral’s inner chambers a total of seven times, furious that his priests “defer to the facts” (212) and try to lock the intruders out. Thomas, waiting in faith, is determined that he will “not have . . . / The sanctuary, turned into a fortress. / The church shall protect her own, in her own way, not / As oak and stone; [because] stone and oak decay” (211). The Cathedral, itself a humiliated sacred space defiled by a sordid political murder, emerges as beyond deferring to temporal “facts” like death or “decay.” As the play progresses, all manner of usual distinctions collapse like so much “oak and stone.” The Cathedral exceeds its physicality and, like Thomas’s sacrifice, stands like an eternal reminder of atrocity.

The Family Reunion expands upon this triangular relationship between selfhood, humiliation, and the architectural. Four years later, Eliot once again dramatizes the story of a humiliated man experiencing an epiphanic renewal of faith. The differences in this retelling are significant: Harry Monchensey bears no direct resemblance to a historical figure (and hence circumvents many audience preconceptions), although his circumstances are representative of the mid-century British upper classes. Harry’s spiritual emptiness has no historical referent but is recognizably interwar ennui, the struggles of a man whose spiritual foundations are giving way. Last, Harry’s decision to leave England is of Arabia, unlike the earlier ambiguous portrayal of Thomas’s murder. (A fourth difference exists: Eliot swaps medievalism for Greek drama with the insertion of the Eumenides in The Family Reunion, but it is for another essay to examine those repercussions.)

In this play, Eliot sharpens the emphasis on architectural space—Harry’s return to his ancestral estate echoes Thomas’s re-arrival at the Cathedral, and his path towards epiphany closely resembles that of the Chorus from Murder in the Cathedral. Through a reevaluation of familiar spaces, Harry is able to reject time-bound fears (of uselessness, of death) and embrace a radically unconventional and indeterminate course as a kind of missionary. Eliot’s first intervention is to dramatize the break from ordinary life cycles through an immense act of faith. The Chorus of women in Murder in the Cathedral calls this “the pattern of time” (176) and Thomas elaborates by saying, “The pattern is the action / And the suffering” (182); they align time with lived experience.
to suggest that ordinarily there is no difference between the tyranny of chronological time and the human subject endlessly repeating the warp and woof of modern life. To disrupt the flow of learned behavior requires a decisive and counterintuitive rupture with convention. From humiliation to rupture and epiphany: the story of Harry’s return to faith in The Family Reunion is Eliot’s second attempt at confronting spiritual agony on stage.

A strange feature of Eliot’s method is the difficulty in identifying with Harry’s spiritual struggle for much of the play’s duration. A resistant audience member isn’t alone in his or her reaction to Harry—for much of the play, Harry’s own extended family wonders what his problem is and why he can’t just settle down with his inheritance. Agatha, Mary, and even Harry’s mother, Amy, are more sympathetic and nuanced characters than the bullish Harry who reenters Wishwood Manor. To his impatient eyes when he first arrives, the manor appears to be exactly as it was when he left it years ago: “[T]his room is quite unchanged,” he remarks to his cousin Mary: “The same hangings . . . the same pictures . . . even the table, / The chairs, the sofa . . . all in the same positions. / I was looking to see if anything was changed, / But if so, I can’t find it” (CPP 246, ellipses in original). Harry notices the obvious—the repeated “same” hammers this home—but the textual ellipses extend his banal observation into a condemnation of the socio-economic circumstances that maintain those drapes and that sofa. The furnishings represent a way of life that Harry has tried to escape as a young man, and which again confronts him. He imagines himself an actor hiding his true self: “The book laid out, lines underscored, and the costume / Ready to be put on” (276). His struggle in the course of the play is to throw out this script and rend the prescribed pattern for a new path. Eliot’s corresponding work, only partially successful, is to evoke sympathy and give relevance to this dramatization for his audience. Harry’s position is far removed from the violation suffered by the Chorus of women in Murder in the Cathedral, and although he feels trapped by his elevated social circumstances and is wracked with guilt over the death of his wife, his troubles look enviable to his family. Eliot/Harry calls for a deferred judgment that recalls Thomas’s words from the previous play: “I would explain, but you would none of you believe it; / If you believed it, still you would not understand . . . You have not seen / What I have seen. Oh, why should you make it so ridiculous / Just now?” (287).

Harry’s journey to “the other side of despair” (281) received lukewarm contemporary praise—one reviewer claimed that the play was “the past looking for a present, not the present reabsorbing the past” (Brooker 380), a line fascinating for its reference, undeveloped and
perhaps unintended, to the Bergsonian model of memory with which Eliot would have been familiar from his studies as a young man. The TLS calls the play “clumsy and diffuse” (qtd. in Brooker 379) and New Statesman calls the Greek parallels “hopeless symbols for Mr. Eliot’s purpose” (qtd. in Brooker 383). Another reviewer from 1939 writes, “No one should miss reading this play, if it happens, as may well be, to prove a failure on the stage” (qtd. in Brooker 384). More recent critical commentary sidesteps the question of sympathy and largely concentrates on questions of genre; contrary to those who see it as an updated Greek drama or yet another drawing room play, Leo Hamalian reads The Family Reunion as a detective story, parsing the death of Harry’s wife in an account that resembles the plot of Daphne du Maurier’s Rebecca (1938), which was immensely popular at the time. Also in Robin Grove’s study, Wishwood Manor “broods over the family reunion of destinies . . . as in classic detective-fiction” (166), a description that relegates the use of stage setting to exigencies of dramatic structure.

However, Harry’s stodgy unlikeability is, I suggest, crucial to a full evaluation of Eliot’s dramatic technique and evolving ethical stance. Harry is a precise evocation of a particular time-bound class consciousness, one of those whom Virginia Woolf scathingly calls the “men in clubs and Cabinets” (Jacob’s Room 124). Such men, in her view, were directly responsible for the disaster and horror of the first World War; such men were also Eliot’s daily acquaintances. And while Woolf became increasingly outspoken in her pacifist treatises on European war and European masculinity, Eliot’s depiction of Harry’s troubles shows a more conflicted position towards extant institutions in the face of the second World War. Harry’s development past his bumbling sense of irrelevance and powerlessness is one measure of the playwright’s attempt to grasp his own social moment. Harry’s evolution from unlikeable to sympathetic, mirroring the change from louche aristocrat to secular saint, is used as a revelatory device that triggers the dissolution of both plot and patterns. The answer, as much as the play offers one, is tentative: Harry’s development is unusual, abnormal, and unfeasible as a mode of everyday conduct.

In what follows, I concentrate on descriptions of Wishwood Manor to suggest that Harry’s epiphany is an attempt to rewrite the insights of Murder in the Cathedral using a character who would not be as immediately recognizable as Thomas. Like the latter, Harry reflects some of his author’s dilemmas on the eve of World War II. His feeling of being an actor chained to a part perhaps stems from Eliot’s own youthful desire to escape the burden of a family name; his resolution to live a more meaningful life is the hopeful counterpart to the mounting social and economic dismay in Europe during the interwar years. Triggered by
England’s capitulation to Hitler’s demands in the Munich Agreement, Eliot writes in *The Idea of a Christian Society* (1939): “Was our society . . . assembled around anything more permanent than congeries of banks, insurance companies, and industries, and had it any beliefs more essential than a belief in compound interest and the maintenance of dividends?” (64). Compound interest and dividends are what keep Wishwood Manor in the unchanging sameness that Harry notices when he first arrives. Eliot’s commentary is “not a simple criticism of a government, but a doubt about the validity of civilization” (Scott 62) that must have been profoundly unsettling for an openly Anglophilic cultural icon. It is thus crucial to the logic of the play that Harry comes from the wealthy upper classes and feels indirectly responsible for Europe’s worsening political climate, manifested as a sweeping guilt over the death of his wife. He reencounters Wishwood at his lowest, and his reevaluation of what the house represents leads to a rupture in the pattern of life thus far sustained by banks and industries.

There is much in Harry’s admission of guilt that is interesting and problematic, particularly in the humiliated position he forcibly occupies. In Part I, Scene I, Harry seems to wish that he had killed his wife, unwilling to accept his driver’s explanation of a drunken accident, as if to claim authenticity for his consequent mental agony: “All that I could hope to make you understand,” he tells his aunts and uncles, “is only events: not what has happened” (234). Admitting his crime, or just the intense desire to kill his wife, he continues: “One thinks to escape / By violence [but] . . . It was only reversing the senseless direction / For a momentary rest on the burning wheel / That cloudless night in the mid-Atlantic / When I pushed her over.” Then his tortured mind returns to the present: “[Y]ou must believe / That I suffer from delusions. It is not my conscience, / Not my mind, that is diseased, but the world I have to live in” (236). This reads like an attempt to avoid the bigger sin (of a corrupt civilization) by replacing it with a smaller one (an individual death) that he can reasonably blame himself for. Weighed down by guilt, Harry inhabits a humiliated space akin to that of the women of the Chorus or of Thomas in *Murder in the Cathedral*—but where does he confront hunger, destitution, rape, and death, and what is his ability (spiritual or physical) to set things aright? Wishwood Manor shows him how to bear his conscience, but the play is ultimately dissatisfying for allowing him to leave for an unspecified beyond, to carry out unknown tasks, with his driver Downing for company and his only fixed address “care of the bank in London until you hear from me” (287). *The Family Reunion* is critical of this upper-class family and its broad socio-political influence, but at end it remains immured in the landscape that Harry attempts to leave behind.
Instead of social change per se, the play calls for a reinvestigation of the workings of memory, and its associated imperative, chronological time. Harry realizes that Wishwood Manor dismantles the forward motion of time so that nothing is relegated to the remembered past; everything remains immediate and sensorial:

In an old house there is always listening, and more is heard than is spoken. / And what is spoken remains in the room, waiting for the future to hear it. / And whatever happens began in the past, and presses hard on the future . . . / All twined and tangled together, all are recorded. (270–71)

Here, Eliot replaces evanescent speech with recorded impressions, as if words are made text by the old house itself. Before, now, and after are rearranged as if on a page, their chronological distinctions flattened. Wishwood emerges to Harry’s consciousness as an archive of remembrance that contains all the tangles of human life. Like the Chorus of women’s breathless list that upends distinctions between powers and potentates, low and high, that are normally taken for granted, Wishwood collapses neat divisions of time. At Wishwood, “the past is about to happen, and the future was long since settled” (256). The past, present, and future are no longer neatly linear in its spatial memory; even as the past and present press hard on the future, they are twined into a Gordian knot that belies attempts to impose causality.

This passage in Part 2, Scene I shows Wishwood recording mundane images of daily life over the seasons: the “agony in the curtained bedroom, whether of birth or of dying”; “treble voices on the lawn”; the “mowing of hay”; “dogs and the old pony”; the “stumble and the wail of little pain”; the “chopping of wood”; “singing in the kitchen”; and “steps at night in the corridor.” It also incorporates the adult drama that Harry’s child consciousness missed: the “moment of sudden loathing”; the “season of stifled sorrow”; whispers among adults, “the transparent deception” of grown-up lies; the “keeping up of appearances”; and the “making the best of a bad job.” In contrast to the “unreal or disappointing” list of prizes and pantomimes in Murder in the Cathedral, the manor contains and contextualizes these disjointed fragments. Eluding human attempts to weave events into the patterned fabric of time, Wishwood Manor-as-archive presents the audience with a twined and tangled skein of happenstance. In Wishwood, whose strange name invokes both an echo of aching human desire and the Dantesque selva oscura, these imagistic fragments are incorporated into a new form of narrative that refuses linearity.
Eliot’s dramatic achievement, albeit limited, is to present this mute archive onstage. The scene ends in a strange kind of failure, one that reads to me as a failure of the popular imaginary. Harry’s aunts and uncles, speaking in tandem, end the scene as if with a shrug: “There is nothing to do about anything, / And now it is nearly time for the news / We must listen to the weather report / And the international catastrophes” (271). These lines sound alternately despondent or loaded with macabre laughter, but in either case, the effect is the same. The imagistic, achronological narrative of Wishwood is supplanted by the radio broadcast. The news is the ubiquitous twentieth-century narrative project, representing the era more than any other form of storytelling. In its emphasis on the latest event, presented with scant attention to context, the news has hardly any room to gather the voices of the past to bear on the future—it is purely “events: not what has happened” (234). Buoyed by the congeries of capital interest that fund it, it enacts international catastrophes are slotted in next to the weather.

Eliot’s depiction of the emerging story of Harry’s past demands that the audience grapples with a similar reappraisal of its own. In Part I, Scene II, Harry muses to his cousin, “I thought [the Manor] was a place / Where life was substantial and simplified— / But the simplification took place in my memory, / I think” (247). Later, when his aunt Agatha reveals the torrid love triangle between Harry’s parents and herself, his suspicion turns out to be accurate. An encounter with the house seen anew, without the habitual blinkers of memory, will change him. Agatha marks this change, saying that “at Wishwood . . . The man who returns will have to meet / The boy who left. Round by the stables . . . coach-house . . . orchard . . . plantation . . . down the corridor / That led to the nursery . . . he [the older] will have to face him [the younger self]— / And it will not be a very jolly corner” (229). Her words wind around the built spaces of Harry’s youth from the outside to indoors, collapsing the strict divisions that sustained the Victorian manor house—insides and outsides, nurseries and coach houses, masters and servants. Eliot’s phrasing recalls Henry James’s “The Jolly Corner” (1908), another story of an adult reencounter with an ancestral house, and reinforces the ghostly touch of the Eumenides upon Harry’s dawning epiphany in the spaces of Wishwood.

This dramatization demands the question, is life ever “substantial and simplified,” or is our perception of such a state always an act of compromised memory? In the context of Europe in 1939, this question remains highly politically charged. Chronological memory is deemed unreliable in tone as well as content and its effect is to lead the unwary individual astray. Harry’s decision to abandon all the stories he’s been
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told, to “go from a world of insanity” towards “worship in the desert . . .
a primitive altar . . . [and] care over lives of humble people” (281) takes
on a wistful valence in this context. It occurs to me that the heroic T. E.
Lawrence, a matinee idol in Britain in the 'teens and 'twenties whose
early career is a model for Harry’s, died in 1935, deeply scarred by the
role he had tried to play in the Middle East during the first World War.
Harry’s resolution to “follow the bright angels” (281) on a spiritual pil-
grimage strikes a peculiar note when taken in tandem with this other
ghostly presence—Private T. E. Shaw (Lawrence changed his name in
1923) hovers on the edges of the contemporary imagination, another
Fury glimpsed through a half-open window. Europe’s political and
social turmoil and the precarious British interwar conscience is ac-
knowledged in moments like these, in which mundane situations and
neat endings transmute into shifting philosophical minefields.

After the lukewarm response to The Family Reunion, it is a decade
delay until Eliot returns to the stage with The Cocktail Party; meanwhile, in
the late 1930s, he continued his systematic involvement with issues of
great public import. Through a friendship with the educational psy-
chologist Karl Mannheim, who was a proponent of the British wartime
planning movement to bolster communal life, Eliot engaged with pro-
tecting “Englishness” as a socio-moral ideal. He joined the Christian
social reformist J. P. Oldham in a discussion society named Oldham’s
Moot, which first met in 1938 and continued to circulate written papers
and hold discussions about social and religious problems during the
war years. The second World War sharpened his fears about the dete-
riorating condition of the modern world and the need to reintroduce
religious belief into everyday life, which finds expression in both The
Cocktail Party and his public lectures. In 1951, he speaks of the need to
engage with culture as a moral imperative: “Surely it is the great task
of the religious artist, musician, and even the creative writer, to real-
ize religious feeling in the terms of his own time” (Value and Use of
Cathedrals 9); The Cocktail Party is Eliot writing in the cadences and
using the “terms of his own time” to return once more to the dramatic
situation preoccupying him since the 1930s. This time, he puts onstage
a woman, Celia, who is drifting along with the smart set in London
when she suddenly finds her religious calling; he adds a couple,
Edward and Lavinia, who are a foil to Celia and lack her sudden convic-
tion. Celia demands the audience’s empathy for her courage and grue-
some death, while Edward and Lavinia, continuing their limited lives
together, are an acknowledgement that not everyone finds the strength
to break with convention and depart into an unknown. Mediating the
stern, even rigid, stance of the previous two plays, The Cocktail Party
appears the year after Eliot wins the Nobel Prize to give him his first
major theatrical success with sold-out runs on both Shaftsbury Avenue and Broadway. The irony of this situation is that the clearest measures of Eliot’s success in arguing for the inclusion of faith in secular modernity are the same profits and dividends that earlier so distressed him.

Once again the play crucially engages with built spaces, but the emphasis is not as explicit as before; the cathedral and manor house that resonated with metaphysical import are replaced by ostensibly ordinary rooms: the stage space is halved between Edward and Lavinia’s drawing room and Dr. Harcourt-Reilly’s visiting chamber. Whereas the former is a spiritual and physical dead end, the latter is maze-like, with multiple entries and exits through which visitors’ movements are closely orchestrated. Lavinia and Celia, for instance, come through the same entrance, but their different epiphanies dictate that they are escorted to leave in different directions. Rather than focus on specific spaces, which remain essentially static throughout the play, Eliot directs audience attention to characters’ movements through and past them. The opening of Act II contains a set of instructions from Harcourt-Reilly to his Nurse-Secretary about when and where to show in his patients as they come in later that day. The two characters go over their routine with some thoroughness on stage, repeating the arrangements three times (CPP 344); the effect is that of “a trap” (346), as Edward immediately suspects when he enters. The doctor’s reassurance is a close echo of that in Murder in the Cathedral when Thomas is faced with a spiritual Hobson’s choice: “Let’s not call it a trap. / But if it is a trap, then you cannot escape from it: / And so . . . you might as well sit down” (346). The religious language is excised from the dialogue, but Edward faces the same temptations shown to Thomas by his first three tempters. Like Thomas, if Edward breaks the bonds of convention, he will lose being-in-time. His social position, cocktail parties, dalliances, and family will be replaced by a solitary spiritual wait. Unlike Thomas or Harry, Edward is loathe to leave his circumstances; no amount of guidance brings him to discard the trappings of convention that he has been brought up to value.

Harcourt-Reilly reveals himself to be a strange psychoanalyst, part-doctor and part-priest. He condescends to repair Edward’s marriage by calling in Lavinia (who was waiting in the antechamber), but not before making two diagnoses: that neither of them have “an honest mind” and that they are either “the common cheat” or “insuperably, innocently dull” (352). These qualities, he suggests, are “the bond that holds you together” (356). Harcourt-Reilly’s “cures” reflect the playwright’s conviction that “analytic psychology” was fundamentally flawed, a theory that he delves further into in his essay, “Religion without Humanism” (1930). Eliot’s vision of salvation rests on a rejection of
the talking cure (the doctor wants to hear nothing of Edward’s “early history”; 350, italics in original) instead of a reconciliation between science and spirituality. “Are you a devil,” Lavinia asks the doctor midway through her treatment, “Or merely a lunatic practical joker?” (351–52). Her question is perhaps the playwright’s as well, since Harcourt-Reilly fulfills expectations of both those roles.

Edward and Lavinia are reconciled in the second part of the play to the compromised life they continue, both already armed by the doctor for future recriminations. Harcourt-Reilly coaches them in this too, saying, “You could always say: ‘He could not love any woman’; / You could always say: ‘No man could love her.’ / You could accuse each other of your own faults, / And so could avoid understanding each other” (356). Robin Grove writes that “one use Eliot made of the opportunities the action of theater allowed was to devise and perform rituals of extinction” (162)—Edward and Lavinia’s retreat into placid domesticity is its own kind of extinction, as they are left with no further illusions about themselves. The outer shell of their lives remains the same, but Edward knows that “[t]here was a door / And I could not open it. I could not touch the handle” (342). Edward, divorced from the ancestral past in his modern city flat, has no access to his own Wishwood. The doctor’s chambers cannot help him in the way that Wishwood helps Harry reject the bonds of linear time. Fearing for himself and what he will lose in society, he lives “a good life” with his wife, but “they do not understand each other, / Breeding children whom they do not understand / And who will never understand them” (364). Harry’s epiphany allows him to leave but Edward is forced to continually confront the nature of his humiliation.

Celia encounters the doctor’s chambers very differently, and her character is revealed to be quite unlike that of her friends. In a stage space entirely occupied by either Lavinia’s drawing room or Harcourt-Reilly’s chambers, Celia is a utopic soul misplaced in both. Almost casually towards the end of the play, it is revealed that she left to work as a missionary nurse in a place called Kinkanja, an Eastern island “that you won’t have heard of / Yet” (373). The Chamberlaynes’ friend Alex Gibbs has returned from these (imaginary) islands with the news that Celia was taken by insurgents and “she must have been crucified / Very near an ant–hill” (381). Her death has none of the proleptic foreknowledge of Thomas’s murder, and the audience might well have assumed that she had disappeared midway through the play for an unknown beyond. But Eliot doesn’t repeat the hopeful ending of The Family Reunion; Celia’s death in a colonial no-place is a chilling reminder of a world aflame. Alex’s description of her end brings to mind once again of the macabre laughter-and-tears of The Family Reunion when it commingles the
horrible with the mundane: despite her death, “We must listen to the weather report / And the international catastrophes” (271).

The depiction of her death has been harshly disparaged by critics who find it a ridiculous “mid-nineteenth century churchman’s notion of Darwinism” (Asher 114). Critical distaste even envelops Eliot’s audience for “accept[ing] uncritically his notion of the savage ‘other’ or treat[ing] the natives as inconsequential figures” (Brewer 51). There is no doubt that this is a difficult section of an otherwise lighthearted play, a morally-fraught set piece that uses a number of unpleasant tropes about the colonies within the frame of the London drawing room, to show that Alex’s explanation about his colonial work and Celia’s death are callous and racist. But this, I suspect, was Eliot’s final use of the architectural motif: in a stage space/world without Wishwood Manor or Canterbury Cathedral, in which the past bears increasingly lightly upon the present and future, moral frames of reference have also lost weight. No Eumenides peek through Lavinia’s windows to guide these characters, and the freshly-built walls have no spiritual succor to offer those who shelter there. In such an unmoored space, Celia’s death is ridiculous and ineffective. Her spiritual sacrifice, crucially important to her author, is made into an irrelevant afterthought in the context of secular modernity.

Applying the principle of honesty that is the hallmark of Harcourt-Reilly (the lack of which marks Edward, Lavinia, and the spaces they inhabit) reveals the extent of the play’s rejection of colonial brutality. It is obvious that the colonial project is both ineffective and idiotic: after an account of all the killed monkeys, natives, and Europeans, Edward asks Alex, “And what has your commission accomplished?” (375), to which he replies, “We have just drawn up an interim report . . . [But] There are too many international complications . . . Meanwhile the monkeys multiply” (375-76). As an outcome, nothing has been achieved and Alex relates a shaggy dog story of horrifying proportions. The British-run law enforcement saved neither native nor English lives, and Alex has written a report which will be ignored amidst bureaucratic red tape and political maneuvering. The outcome of this does not reconstruct “the values informing the White imperial subject in a comforting manner, leaving the belief in the divine right of the British to racial ascendancy unchallenged” (Brewer 52). Rather, Kinkanja is a symbol of the supreme waste of effort in the material world: Celia’s, in giving away her life; Alex’s, in writing his report; and Edward’s, in listening to the story. It is even a waste of the audience’s time to follow the story hoping to find a clue about the logic behind Celia’s death. I’m reminded of Thomas telling the audience that it is pointless to try understanding his actions: “What yet remains to show you of my his-
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tory / Will seem to most of you at best futility . . . I know that history at all times draws / The strangest consequence from remotest cause” (CPP 197). In Lavinia’s living room and on Broadway, watching Sir Alec Guinness read Harcourt-Reilly’s lines, the audience remains mired in a linear history of cause-and-effect in which the past, present, and future are thought to be clearly distinguished. There are no places, on-stage or off, in which time knots upon itself and emerges entangled to the human eye. There is cultural space for ordered and explainable causality, but none for Wishwood’s archive of eventhood or lists of happenstance.

Celia’s death has a complete lack of resolution in a play that otherwise neatly reflects “the terms of [its] own time”; it is the crux upon which Eliot attempts to “realize religious feeling” by provoking the audience into an affective response to her death. It is arguably unfair for critical outrage to fault the playwright for his depiction of colonialism; as a symptom, this anger highlights that The Cocktail Party stirs up emotions over Celia’s death without offering the palliative release of an explanation. Death does not valorize she who is in a place beyond human praise or condemnation; it is egotism for Edward or Peter to call it a “waste” because in Eliot’s religious framework, the value of a life can only be evaluated by the divine. Harcourt-Reilly pointed to the hollow cyclical nature of their reasoning: “[B]ecause you think her death was waste / You blame yourselves, and because you blame yourselves / You think her life was wasted” (385). For the men to label her death either way undercuts Celia’s own definition of her life’s purpose. Eliot uses the off-stage loss of Celia to insist upon the circularity of human egotism, and the pompousness of masculinity that claims itself an active agent on the temporal plane. The colonial project is time-bound, rigidly defined, and strictly hierarchical; as a trope, it has been roundly critiqued by authors otherwise as different as Conrad and Forster or Orwell and Greene for enforcing a kind of mob mentality among Englishmen living abroad. Under imperialism, there can be no rupture from the ordinary or any alternate understanding of historical “patterns.” In its emphasis on violence and force, it goes against the volitional end of volition (“waiting”) that Eliot dramatizes in the spiritual journeys of Harry, Thomas, and Celia. To read The Cocktail Party as a bigoted pro-colonial diatribe is to miss the essence of this message.

In “Poetry and Drama” (1951), Eliot writes a critical exegesis of his artistic intent that emphasizes his reliance on the use of the onstage gesture, one that points in difficult spiritual directions but remains inarticulate. Like Harcourt-Reilly to Celia, he imagines the work of art chaperoning its audience through the darkest thickets of philosophy towards a leap into faith:
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It seems to me that beyond the nameable, classifiable emotions and motives of our conscious life . . . there is a fringe of indefinite extent, of feeling which we can only detect, so to speak, out of the corner of the eye and can never completely focus . . . it is ultimately the function of art . . . to bring us to a condition of serenity, stillness, and reconciliation; and then leave us, as Virgil left Dante, to proceed toward a region where the guide can avail us no farther. (SP 145–5)

The “fringe” of feeling is religious, but Eliot’s articulation is classical and secular, in line with his evolving politics in the 1930s and ’40s. The selva oscura is on the playwright’s mind in all three plays, each one refining his gesture towards the unnamable and unclassifiable terrain that lies beyond the temporal plane. Buildings that have endured the passage of time interrupt the forward motion of the modern clock to provide space for the humiliated spirit to shelter and recuperate before it, once again, proceeds.

Notes
1. Unless otherwise noted, all Eliot’s writing appears in the Complete Poems and Plays (CPP).

2. Martha Carpentier’s “Orestes in the Drawing Room: Aeschylean Parallels in T. S. Eliot’s ‘The Family Reunion’” is an able overview of previous criticism on the Greek parallels as well as an energetic reevaluation of the importance of the Eumenides to this play. Carpentier shows that through precise plotting, the Eumenides are central in leading Harry past the harmful feminine influence of his mother and her lackeys, and towards Agatha and spiritual enlightenment; the Greek framework is central for Harry’s Christian epiphany. Despite her evocative title, however, Carpentier pays scant attention to the drawing room per se, whose importance is asserted here.

3. Harry categorically says, “I never said that I was going to be a missionary” (287), turning the nature of his epiphany secular. I use the word here as a shorthand: what else to call someone on such a vague mission?

4. Benjamin Kohlmann provides a recent overview of critical responses to the debates between Eliot and I. A. Richards in the 1920s on the relationship between belief and poetry, and their argument over the need for context. It would be interesting to follow the impact of this debate on Eliot’s later theatrical work.

5. The coldness of this vision of ordinary life leads William Barrett to write that “at bottom the world of The Cocktail Party is the same empty world of Prufrock . . . So I feel at the heart of this play some immense tricherie, or at least self-deception, for I can’t believe that Eliot takes the Chamberlaynes as seriously
as he pretends to” (qtd. in Brooker 534). Brooks Atkinson’s New York Times review from January 1950 asks, in a similar vein: “By what right does [Sir Henry] recommend the low road to the Chamberlaynes but the high road to Celia, who up to this point, appears to be made of the same stuff as the Chamberlaynes. If the frame of reference is still a London drawing room, why is Celia’s crucifixion at the hands of the savages a triumphant destiny rather than a harrowing disaster?” (qtd. in Brooker 525). More recently, a thread of Eliot’s youthful interest in Bergson and vitalism shows in his tendency towards what Erik Tonning calls “a certain incipient anti-humanism, in that life itself is given primacy over human life” (7).

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