

T. S. ELIOT AND THE
PROBLEM OF MODERN POETIC DRAMA

by

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INTRODUCTION

One of T. S. Eliot's greatest contributions to English drama was his challenge to a whole period of criticism and practice. The problem seems to stem from the lack of poetry and style; and failure or the degree of failure due to continued adherence to false ideals. From these two concepts Mr. Eliot found it necessary to search elsewhere for the foundations of the art of drama. His search started as early as 1919 with the essay "Rhetoric and Poetic Drama." This was followed with "The Possibility of Poetic Drama," published in a collection of essays entitled The Sacred Grove, in 1920. Eliot's one attempt at strict drama from this early period, Sweeney Agonistes, 1926, remained a fragment. At this stage Eliot had not found the right relationship between theme, subject, and form that was required to compose a complete drama. This stage was reached after Ash Wednesday, 1930. Soon after finishing Sweeney Agonistes, Eliot wrote one of his most important early essays on drama entitled, "A Dialogue on Dramatic Poetry" in 1928. With these early essays Eliot performed the task of restating with precision and authority some first principles which would serve as guidelines for his later development.

The interplay between Eliot's creative work and his criticism, which was valuable to the comprehension of his poetry, is a different matter in the case of his dramas. His theory of poetry has been borne out by his practice, and both have been

influential during the present generation. But his conception of drama, particularly his belief in the need for poetic drama, has not fared so well, and is still more theory than fact. It is with this aspect of Eliot that this paper will be concerned, rather than his accepted position as a leading twentieth-century English poet.

Eliot's The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism contains the remark: "The ideal medium for poetry, to my mind, and the most direct means of social 'usefulness' for poetry, is the theatre."¹ By 1933, when this was written, he had already studied the problem of the verse play in his Introduction to Charlotte Eliot's Savonarola (1926) and in his "A Dialogue on Dramatic Poetry." As he observed in his "Dialogue," which he wrote as a preface to Dryden's great discussion of the subject, "It is one thing to discuss the rules of an art when that art is alive, and quite another when it is dead."² In his Introduction, where he was pursuing an inquiry into the limits of dramatic form, he adopted the premise that such form "may occur at various points along a line the termini of which are liturgy and realism"--the former being associated with the incantation of poetry and the latter with a "prosaic"

¹T.S. Eliot, The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism (London, 1933), p. 153--hereafter cited as The Use of Poetry.

²T.S. Eliot, Selected Essays 1917-1932, (New York, 1932), p. 44--hereafter cited as Selected Essays.

mode of speech.³ Through one of his speakers in "A Dialogue on Dramatic Poetry" Eliot stated his opinion that the relative merits of liturgy and realism in drama depend on the time: "When the age has a set religious practice and belief, then the drama can and should tend towards realism. I say towards, I do not say arrive at . . . The more fluid, the more chaotic the religious and ethical beliefs, the more the drama must tend in the direction of liturgy."⁴ Eliot's intention as of the late 1920's was to justify the renaissance of poetic drama by suggesting that the theatre was most useful when it returned to its origins in liturgy, where poetry most profoundly touched the emotional life.

If at times in his treatment of verse in his plays Eliot has recreated the incantatory rhythms of liturgy, he has also duplicated by plot symbolism the conditions of myth and occasionally of ritual acts. He has never done so, however, without trying to respect the demands of the contemporary theatre audience. His verse, whatever the symbols, has a modern vocabulary and cadence, and it preserves the mean between liturgy and common speech. Also, the narrative elements of his plays involve ordinary people in such a way that what is mythic or ritualistic in the events is on a different level from the simple realism apparent on the surface. Eliot described in his essay on John Marston (1934) a

³T.S. Eliot, Introduction to Charlotte Eliot, Savonarola: A Dramatic Poem (London, 1926), p. x.

⁴Selected Essays, p. 37.

quality also discernible in his own plays.

It is possible that what distinguishes poetic drama from prosaic drama is a kind of doubleness in the action, as if it took place on two planes at once. In this it is different from allegory, in which the abstraction is something conceived, not something differently felt, and from symbolism (as in the plays of Maeterlinck) in which the tangible world is deliberately diminished--both symbolism and allegory being operations of the conscious planning mind. In poetic drama a certain apparent irrelevance may be the symptom of this doubleness; or the drama has an under-pattern, less manifest than the theatrical one. We sometimes feel, in following the words and behavior of some of the characters of Dostoevsky, that they are living at once on the plane that we know and on some other plane of reality from which we are shut out: their behaviour does not seem crazy, but rather in conformity with the laws of some world that we cannot perceive...In the work of genius of a lower order, such as that of the author of The Revenger's Tragedy, the characters themselves hardly attain this double reality; we are aware rather of the author, operating perhaps not quite consciously through them, and making use of them to express something of which he himself may not be quite conscious.⁵

How consciously Eliot has set out to appeal to different levels of sensibility or education in his audience is evident from the account of Sweeney Agonistes given in The Use of Poetry. Despite his efforts, however, Eliot has not always succeeded in developing his characters on a double plane. On the other hand, he usually produced a doubleness of action, whether by symbolic allusion or by an accidental and unconscious sub-structure.

Keeping in mind these concepts for which Eliot was striving, this paper will concern itself with the following plays and essays: Sweeney Agonistes, 1926; "A Dialogue on Dramatic Poetry," 1928;

⁵T.S. Eliot, Elizabethan Essays (London, 1934), pp. 189-90.

The Rock, 1934; Murder in the Cathedral, 1935; The Family Reunion, 1939; The Cocktail Party, 1949; "Poetry and Drama," 1951; The Confidential Clerk, 1953; and The Elder Statesman, 1958.

SECTION I

Sweeney Agonistes

The most obvious failure among Eliot's attempts to develop a character who could function on more than one level occurred in his skit Sweeney Agonistes. The following is the example he cited.

My intention was to have one character whose sensibility and intelligence would be on the plane of the most sensitive and intelligent members of the audience; his speeches should be addressed to them as much as to the other personages in the play--or rather, should be addressed to the latter, who were to be material, literal-minded and visionless, with the consciousness of being overheard by the former. There was to be an understanding between this protagonist and a small number of the audience, while the rest of the audience would share the responses of the other characters in the play.⁶

Eliot was probably influenced by Aristophanes in writing Sweeney Agonistes, and in fact it was subtitled "Fragments of an Aristophanic Melodrama." As I have stated earlier, this first attempt at a drama remained a fragment containing only a few brief scenes. Even though Eliot subtitled these first brief scenes after Aristophanes, the source of the verse spoken by Sweeney and his friends was much nearer at hand. The poet was trying to utilize vaudeville rhythms, because he believed that any hope for a popular drama would spring from the robust entertainment of the lower class. The songs in Eliot's play, "Under

⁶The Use of Poetry, p. 153.

the Bamboo Tree" and "My Little Girl," found their stimulus in American jazz, as did the rhythm of the dialogue.⁷ Therefore, in this play, Eliot's verse sounded more familiar to the American audiences.

The unfinished Sweeney Agonistes, which Eliot seems at one time to have called "Wanna Go Home, Baby?"⁸ (perhaps an idea he conceived from his feeling about vaudeville) consists of two verse episodes, "Fragment of a Prologue" and "Fragment of an Agon."

"Fragment of a Prologue," in which Sweeney does not appear, has just enough plot to convey a sense of the superficiality of life on the everyday level. The characters, vulgar and rather boisterous, subsist in the sensual or surface world. What drama is apparent is simply the drama of contrast, or interruption. The opening conversation between the two girls, Dusty and Doris, is interrupted by the ringing of the telephone, then Dusty deals with the menace of Pereira with what she plainly feels is feminine expertise. The fortunetelling breaks off with the appearance of the deuce of spades, the "coffin"; but the thought of the coffin is pushed into the background by the arrival of the party and the fragment breaks off with dull social conversation and male boasting.

In the second fragment the dramatic contrast is provided by the gloom of Sweeney, and his anecdote of the man who 'did a

⁷Essays in the Modern Drama, ed. Morris Freedman (Boston, 1964), p. 267--hereafter cited as Essays.

⁸Grover Smith, T. S. Eliot's Poetry and Plays (Chicago, 1956), p. 113--hereafter cited as Poetry and Plays.