

T.S. ELIOT'S CRITICISM

"ONE SIGNIFICANT, CONSISTENT, AND DEVELOPING PERSONALITY"

A STUDY OF T.S. ELIOT'S CRITICISM

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Abstract

When we move chronologically through T.S. Eliot's critical writings from 1917 into the 1960's we realize that he has been done a disservice by a number of critics writing about his prose. Although he produced criticism prolifically for almost fifty years, many critical commentaries center on, rely upon, one essay: "Tradition and the Individual Talent". Indeed much criticism relies not even upon the entire essay, but upon a few phrases; as if this narrow selectivity were not dangerous enough, even the phrases themselves are often considered out of context. The result is a group of critical writings and observations often remote from and strangely unrepresentative of Eliot's actual creative and critical stance. These few phrases are not only used to represent the backbone of many critical discussions of Eliot, but they are sometimes used against him in critical comparisons of his early and late prose. An overview of Eliot's critical essays from 1917 through to the 1960's is necessary to ensure a more just account of his creative and critical beliefs.

Critical preoccupation with terms such as "tradition", "impersonal" or "depersonalized poetry" has also obscured Eliot's important assertions about the benefit of the creative process to its creator. These assertions, scattered throughout the body of Eliot's essays, are useful tools in the elucidation of his own creative works.

Such an overview of Eliot's critical essays from 1917 to 1962 holds three goals. First, accusations of critical inconsistency or impracticality within Eliot's essays (accusations coming from other critics) must be addressed. An accurate account of Eliot's central creative and critical assertions through the years must then be presented. Finally, these creative and critical principles must be given practical application to determine their usefulness.

I am grateful to Dr. Andrew Brink for the sense of optimism and academic enthusiasm which he exudes, and which has proven so helpful and refreshing. I am also very grateful to Dr. Michael Ross for his strict but invariably ameliorative comments; this essay is much improved because of his extensive efforts.

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Introduction: An overview of the misunderstandings which surround
T.S. Eliot's creative and critical beliefs.

It is useful to begin by reviewing particular areas of misunderstanding within Eliot's essays generally, and within "Tradition and the Individual Talent" in particular.¹ These will each be discussed in detail in subsequent chapters. The areas of clarification are a) the central misunderstanding surrounding the "Tradition" essay, b) Eliot's notion of poetic balance, his beliefs about where the poet belongs within his poetry and his ideas concerning when a critic should move beyond the text, c) the nature of the literary scene in the years immediately preceding the "Tradition" essay and its effect on Eliot's early critical style, and d) Eliot's notion of creativity as a source of personal relief for its creator.

Eliot's critical writings center on four factors--I have termed them "components"--which figure consistently in the production of a literary work. These are the poet's knowledge of literary tradition and contemporary literature, his knowledge of structural and genre detail, his own personality, emotions and circumstances and his creative ability. These components will be discussed in detail in Chapter One. In "Tradition" Eliot mentions all four components but sets out specifically to elucidate the role of two: the poet's knowledge of past literature and his creative ability. Much criticism seems to forget that this 1917 essay is entitled tradition "and" the individual talent and that, as such, the essay begins by elucidating the proper extent to which each particular poet's knowledge of past literature should and does affect the poetry he creates. However, the tone of much criticism treats the essay as if it were entitled "Tradition or the Individual Talent" or "Tradition versus the poet's personality in the poem." Samuel Hynes, for example, treats "Tradition" as Eliot's attempt to completely condemn all emotions and hints of the poet in his poem in favour of a reliance on literary tradition. Hynes says, referring to After Strange Gods, "[Eliot] is still against personality and in favour of tradition."² Such critical discussions seem to harbour the assumption that to redefine the important part played by literary tradition in the poet's creative process is somehow to suggest that it rather than "individual talent" should take prominence in poetic creation. In fact the

essay discusses the role of tradition and the individual talent (or creative ability) within each poem.³ It focusses on the compromise which takes place between how much each poet knows about past literature and depends upon it, and the extent to which his creative ability--his individual talent--uses that knowledge in novel ways.⁴ The "Tradition" essay focusses on the poet's ability to maintain a delicate balance which uses past literature without simply duplicating it, while introducing individual innovations which are apt and not made simply for the sake of "novelty."⁵ Too much or too little of any one component threatens to unbalance the inner consistency of the poem achieved through proper balance of all four components.

It is also important to note that the 1917 essay discusses the role of literary tradition and the "individual talent" and not the relationship between literary tradition and the poet's personality, personal emotions and circumstances. Eliot treats these latter elements as distinct from a poet's ability or poetic "talent." They are two different components out of the total four. While Eliot's critical writings distinguish between a poet's "personality" and his individual creative talent, many of Eliot's critics seem to treat them as one. With such misapprehensions in hand, critics speak of Eliot as a man who sought a dichotomous separation of the author's personality and the content of his poetry. Consequently, Eliot's own reliance on biographical, historical and psychological detail while discussing authors, as well as his own poignantly personal poetry, indicates to them an inconsistency of critical belief. Hough, for example, cites this passage from "The Three Voices of Poetry": "[the poet] does not know what to say until he has said it; and in the effort to say it he is not concerned with making other people understand anything" as long as it is personally relevant to him. Hough immediately interjects "So much for tradition and the community of letters."⁶ In fact, Eliot first uses phrases such as "extinction of personality" and "depersonalized poetry" with regard to the poet's reliance on literary tradition and not simply with respect to the place of the poet's personality in his poetry.⁷ Each of the four components is unique or "personal" to the poet, and Eliot merely points out that great poetry does not remain tied to its author's capabilities in each component, but rather starts with them and then moves beyond them. Eliot never maintains that a poet's personality, personal emotions or circumstances do not or should not figure in the poetry he creates. Within the 1917 "Tradition"

essay and throughout his critical writings to 1965 Eliot assumes and condones the presence of the poet's personal identity within the poetry he creates. Some critics, however, misconstrue Eliot's meaning. In his discussion of "Eliot's Tone," Roger Sharrock maintains that Eliot's "reserve of intellectual passion," "dry and reticent," points to his goal of "personal invisibility." Sharrock sees Eliot's promotion of an "impersonal" theory of art as his way of running from "personal unhappiness."⁸ Sharrock, like others, believes Eliot promoted a brand of poetry completely remote from its author's personal situation. Such misunderstandings do much to obscure Eliot's actual beliefs. An outline of his actual critical and creative beliefs, as well as an analysis of the "Tradition" essay as a whole, appears in Chapter One.

Another area in which Eliot's critical writing has been misunderstood is in its assertions about how a poem first begins to germinate within a poet's mind. The four components intermingle in particular ways unique to each poet and even to each poem. (This is only one reason why Eliot avoided using one codified "approach" to literature.) This process, this particular intermingling within the poet's mind, sets the pattern for the finished poem. If, for example, the poet has relied too heavily on the genre chosen to carry his sentiment, the finished product will show an imbalance, a skew, making the piece a less effective literary work. Similarly, if the poet's personal sentiment takes undue prominence, not allowing equal qualification by the other three components, then this poem will also lack inner balance and show a skew toward the one component. The degree to which the four components are balanced (or unbalanced) directly affects and dictates the tenor of the finished piece. The "mix" of these components--which takes place first within the poet's mind--manifests itself in the work: the path is from within the poet outward. Understandably, then, the reader or critic trying to understand and appreciate the work must take his critical cues from the work itself. If the poem lacks inner consistency, indicating a skew toward one of the four components--too reliant on a knowledge of literary precedent, too reliant on structural format, too overtly a personal reenactment or too novel simply for the sake of novelty--then the critic must attempt to retrace the path first taken in the poet's mind which produced such a skew in the poem.

Such an approach will, of necessity, take the critic into realms

which are seemingly "outside" the poem, possibly into biographical, historical or psychological details. The critic retains his credibility, however, by keeping elucidation of the text as his unwavering goal. This is why Eliot so often reminds his reader, after himself exploring a poet's biographical or historical context, that his purpose in doing so is elucidation of the text.⁹ What the critic is after is an accurate appreciation of the emotions and feelings which are energizing the poem. This is often only possible through discussion of an incident in the poet's life. Eliot's reliance on details "external" to the poem strikes some critics as critically inconsistent. M.H. Abrams, for example, includes this comment in The Mirror and the Lamp: "T.S. Eliot's dictum of 1928, that 'when we are considering poetry we must consider it primarily as poetry and not as another thing' is widely approved, however far Eliot's own criticism sometimes departs from this ideal."¹⁰

Eliot's assumption, implicit in all of his critical writings, that the poem is a manifestation of the intermingling of four components in the poet's mind, bears upon his notion of how a work of art becomes of universal significance. The great poet perfects his ability to intermingle the four components successfully and produce something new and self-sustaining which is the poem. If he does this succinctly enough he will necessarily have produced something which may then go on to have significance for other men. Although his task is to simply express his individual circumstance, the great poet often articulates the feeling of his time.¹¹ We see that even this aspect of Eliot's belief has been misconstrued in a remark by Russell Kirk: "Disdaining the Romantic lyric poet's exaltation of the ego, Eliot subordinated private emotion to the expression of general truths." Kirk then quotes Eliot's phrase "extinction of personality," out of context, as support for his claim.¹²

In light of our new understanding of phrases such as "depersonalized poetry" and "escape from personality," Chapter Two outlines where the poet is in the poetry he creates.¹³ Eliot maintains a consistent understanding of how the created work is integrally dependent upon the personality and circumstances of its creator.

While his extensive contribution to literature leads us to think of him as only a leader and instigator, it is important to remember that Eliot was just as affected by his time and his immediate predecessors as any

other artist. John Holloway points out, in his discussion of "The Literary Scene" prior to "Tradition and the Individual Talent", that writers such as Arnold, Wordsworth, Kipling, Yeats and Tennyson began in the late nineteenth century to rebel against "the whole opulent plutocratic social world of the time."¹⁴ All of these writers figure often in Eliot's writing as men whom he admired. Following in such a tradition, Eliot's writing is highly individualistic, avoiding indistinct references to "generations." That he came to be referred to as a voice of a generation greatly unnerved Eliot. He, like Henry James, was aware "of all that existed in society outside its circle of opulence" and so could not justify reducing society's multiplicity into one voice.¹⁵ Eliot was annoyed, along with many of his predecessors, with the smug solidarity of wealthy society and sought expression for individual sentiment. He referred to the Boston society of his early years as "a society quite 'uncivilized' but refined beyond the point of civilization."¹⁶

Eliot writes his "Tradition" essay in a time greatly influenced by continental writers such as Zola and Flaubert, writers "whose systematic, intellectual approach to fiction" was considered a welcome change from the "humour and melodrama" of writers like Dickens.¹⁷ Eliot also writes in a time greatly influenced by T.E. Hulme, who "had repudiated 'romantic' poetry and the primacy of emotion and had stressed how writing which is not trivial uses words precisely and concretely."¹⁸ Work by such writers obviously affects Eliot's tone and particular choice of words in his "Tradition" essay and in other of his early works. Holloway mentions that Henry James "pointed to George Eliot as a writer who had achieved the massive and integrated richness of external or material facts of writers like Flaubert or Zola, without forfeiting realism in a richer sense; the realism which sees into psychology, character and moral values."¹⁹ A careful reading of T.S. Eliot's "Tradition" essay and his subsequent prose indicates a similar ability to write in a terse, factual manner without denigrating or denying personal sentiment or the presence of the poet's personality in his work. Like George Eliot's, T.S. Eliot's prose is formulary, sprinkled with scientific references to "platinum" or "sulphur dioxide"; it is, however, similarly rich in emotion and personal sentiment.²⁰ A comment by Edmund Wilson is indicative of the way in which Eliot's "tone"

is used against him, as well as the critical tendency to cite his phrases out of context. Wilson says:

With all gratitude, therefore, for the salutary effect of Eliot's earlier criticism in curbing the carelessness and gush of the aftermath of Romanticism, it seems plain that the anti-Romantic reaction is leading finally into pedantry and into a futile aestheticism. 'Poetry,' Eliot wrote in 'The Sacred Wood,' 'is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality. But, of course, only those who have personality and emotion know what it means to want to escape from them.' This was valid, and even noble, in 1920 when 'The Sacred Wood' was published; but to-day, after ten years of depersonalized and over-intellectualized verse, so much of it written in imitation of Eliot, the same sort of thing in the mouths of Eliot's disciples sounds like an excuse for not possessing emotion and personality.²¹

Wilson accuses Eliot of stating his ideas poorly, and so of encouraging the "vices" of impersonality in subsequent poets. He does not go on to point out, however, that Eliot did not exhort a complete separation of the poet's personality and his poetry, or that the errors in interpretation made by subsequent "impersonal" writers are their fault, not Eliot's. It is clear that Wilson misunderstands Eliot's use of the term "impersonal" in the "Tradition" essay.

We might speculate that the reason Eliot couched his creative and critical assertions in such objective, formulaic terms was that he wanted them to be appealing to and considered by a public nourished by Zola, Hulme and Flaubert. In his essay on Kipling Eliot mentions Kipling's "The Fabulists," which begins as follows:

When all the world would keep a matter hid,
 Since Truth is seldom friend to any crowd,
 Men write in fable as old Aesop did,
 Jestng at that which none will name aloud.
 And this they needs must do, or it will fall²²
 Unless they please they are not heard at all.

One of the suggestions in Kipling's verse is that the writer who wants his ideas seriously considered by his public must present them in a way which pleases that public. As the literary climate changes and as Eliot becomes increasingly confident of his notions of the creative and critical process, he begins to present the same assertions put forward in "Tradition" in less

terse, formulaic terms. I feel that Eliot's terse writing style in "Tradition" furthers critical misunderstanding of him as an emotionally detached writer.

Finally, I would make a distinction which much criticism of Eliot seems to overlook. When Eliot speaks of the finished nature of poetry as something different from the four components from which it arose, he consistently uses particular words to indicate the exact nature of the relationship between a poem and its four-part "poetic material."²³ He does not say that a poem's content is completely remote from or unrelated to the elements which comprise it; indeed if the poet could not draw from his particular knowledge of past literature, his understanding of structural requirement or his own emotions and experiences, from what could he draw his material? In fact, the poetic material upon which the poet draws is intrinsically dependent upon those initial components and evolves from them. Eliot says that the emotions and situations found within a poem are the emotions and situations found in the poet's own mind in a "transform(ed)" or "transmute(d)" form.²⁴ This is an important distinction and one not usually made. Graham Hough, for example, says that Eliot proposed a "sharp cut" between the poet's emotions and the emotions found in his created work: according to Hough, "subjectivity and confession" were "divorced" from poetry by Eliot.²⁵ Eliot makes no such drastic claim. Beginning in his 1917 "Tradition" essay Eliot points out that the poet's mind takes its poetic resources, (among them his "emotions and feelings") and begins to "digest and transmute the passions which are its material."²⁶ Throughout his essays Eliot will refer to this process as one of adjustment and interdependence and not of unrelatedness.

Also beginning in "Tradition" Eliot speaks of the poet as a "man who suffers": a man cursed or blessed with a burden of "emotions and feelings," the present confines of which he seeks to alter because of their painful nature.²⁷ The poet's ability to write poetry provides him with the venue for relief of this burden. Within the creative process, the poet "starts from ... his own emotions."²⁸ These emotional situations are often troubling and insoluble in reality. However, his ability to "transmute" and "metamorphose" his own emotions in the newly created fictional world lets him "escape" the boundaries of the actual situation and explore alternatives in a fictional

world of which he maintains control. Once he has transformed his personal emotion or experience into a contained work of art, the poet has at least two options open to him. He can simply cast aside the receptacle which contains his personal trauma, thereby achieving "relief", or he can profit by the alternatives explored in the created work and return to his own emotionally trying situation better equipped to cope. Eliot's observations about the power of the creative process to change the poet's reality show interesting associations with findings like those in Paul Eakin's Fictions in Autobiography: Studies in the Art of Self-Invention.³⁰ Chapter Four looks at Eliot's comments about the power of the written word to change reality.

Chapter Four also looks at the various benefits the creative process offers to the creator. In a fictional world in which anything is possible to him as its creator, the poet can begin with an emotional incident from his life and manipulate the outcome in his favour in a way distinct from the actual outcome in his life. This process allows the poet the chance to construct or reconstruct incidents in a realm in which he maintains absolute control. This idealized created world can provide the poet with many of the things his actual circumstances deny him.

When I completed my review of Eliot's critical essays I wanted to see if their central observations were of use in elucidating a text. I was especially interested in seeing what effect the particular intermingling of tradition and individual talent can have on a text. Was Eliot being anything more than rhetorical when he said, in "Tradition and the Individual Talent," "you cannot value [an artist] alone, you must set him, for contrast and comparison, among the dead"³¹? Finally, I wanted to see if Eliot's observations about the power of the written word, the effects of storytelling through "self-dramatization", and the effect of the creative process on its creator, were of any assistance when examining a text.³² Because of its overt reliance on literary precedent (the tragedy by Aeschylus), its highly emotional, individualistic concerns, its strong affinities with its author's own life and because it shows how a verbal construct can alter reality, The Family Reunion seemed to best illustrate the central assertions of my thesis. Chapter Five analyzes this drama.

¹ It appears many critics base their comments on one essay of Eliot's, "Tradition and the Individual Talent." Unlike Eliot's own approach of considering the works of an author as a whole before singling out one work, many critical accounts of Eliot base all of their quoted matter or theory on one essay. See, for example, W.J. Bate, Criticism: The Major Texts Enlarged Edition (New York: Harcourt, Brace Jovanovich Inc., 1970) 519-525, David Daiches, Critical Approaches to Literature (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall Inc., 1956) 288-92, 258, 243-4, M.H. Abrams, A Glossary of Literary Terms Fourth Edition (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1981) 124, 117, Stephen Spender, "T.S. Eliot in His Poetry," T.S. Eliot: A Selected Critique, ed. Leonard Unger (New York: Rinehart and Company, 1948) 278-286), V.H. Brombert, The Criticism of T.S. Eliot: Problems of an 'Impersonal Theory' of Poetry (New Haven: Yale UP, 1949). Leaving aside the misunderstanding of Eliot's meaning in "Tradition", this singular concentration on one essay alone is dangerously partial.

² Samuel Hynes, "The Trials of a Christian Critic," The Literary Criticism of T.S. Eliot, ed. David Newton-De Molina (London: The Athlone Press, 1977) 80. In Conflicts in Consciousness David Spurr claims that tradition fights off emotion, or personality; they are on militaristic "sides" battling for supremacy in Eliot's mind. Spurr calls this an "opposition", indicative of the "divisive tension" in Eliot's confused mind. David Spurr, Conflicts in Consciousness (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1984) 112.

³ Eliot points out in "Tradition" that the reciprocal process of conforming and cohering which takes place between the "existing monuments of art" and the artist's new creation "is not one-sided" and that "the new (the really new) work of art" affects the existing order of literature no less than literary tradition has affected it. Yet Eliot is often spoken of as exclusively a traditionalist. T.S. Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent", Selected Essays (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1932) 5.

⁴ In his 1920 essay "Imperfect Critics" Eliot says, referring to poets of many interests and social affiliations like George Wyndham, "a man like Wyndham brings several virtues into literature. But there is

only one man better and more uncommon than the patrician, and that is the Individual." T.S. Eliot, "Imperfect Critics" The Sacred Wood (London: Methuen and Co., 1936) 32.

⁵ Eliot, "Tradition," SE 4.

⁶ Graham Hough, "The Poet as Critic," The Literary Criticism of T.S. Eliot, ed. David Newton-De Molina (London: The Athlone Press, 1977) 60. In his introduction to T.S. Eliot: A Selected Critique Leonard Unger promises that many of the essays which follow will discuss the "contradictions" in thought of Eliot's criticism. Unger, "Introduction," TSESC xiii. F.O. Matthiessen discusses Eliot's "change of stance." Unger, "F.O. Matthiessen," LCTSE 231 ff. In Conflicts in Consciousness David Spurr treats Eliot as a critic of "mellowing sensibility" who asserted certain things in early essays and then retracted them or changed his stance in later writings. Spurr sees a "polemic" between Eliot's early and late writings which lessens as Eliot gets older. David Spurr, Conflicts in Consciousness (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1984) 124, 125. In T.S. Eliot Burton Raffel treats Eliot's comments about "impersonal poetry" and "the man who suffers and the mind which creates" as the product of Eliot's somewhat paranoid need to put distance between himself and his work. Raffel then says that Eliot changes his critical stance from his early to late writings, claiming that by his later years "Eliot's need for the screen and the protection of personality had diminished almost to the vanishing point." Burton Raffel, T.S. Eliot (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1982) 175.

⁷ Eliot, "Tradition," SE 7.

⁸ Roger Sharrock, "Eliot's Tone," The Literary Criticism of T.S. Eliot, ed. David Newton-De Molina (London: The Athlone Press, 1977) 173.

⁹ See, for example, "Byron," On Poetry and Poets (London: Faber and Faber Ltd., 1957) 206.

¹⁰ M.H. Abrams, The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition (London: Oxford UP, 1953) 27.

¹¹ See Eliot, "Shakespeare," SE 117. Elsewhere in his 1920 essay on Philip Massinger, Eliot remarks: "even in so late and so decayed a drama

as that of Ford the framework of emotions and morals of the time is only the vehicle for statements of feeling which are unique and imperishable: Ford's and Ford's only." Eliot, "Philip Massinger," SW 133.

¹² Russell Kirk, Eliot and His Age: T.S. Eliot's Moral Imagination in the Twentieth Century (New York: Random House, 1971) 74.

¹³ Eliot, "Tradition," SE 10.

¹⁴ John Holloway, "The Literary Scene," The Modern Age. Vol. 7 of Pelican Guide to English Literature. Ed. Boris Ford (Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1961) 53.

¹⁵ Holloway 57.

¹⁶ T.S. Eliot, quoted in Lyndall Gordon, Eliot's Early Years (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1977) 86.

¹⁷ Holloway 59.

¹⁸ Holloway 89.

¹⁹ Holloway 60.

²⁰ Eliot, "Tradition," SE 7.

²¹ Edmund Wilson, "T.S. Eliot," T.S. Eliot: A Selected Critique, ed. Leonard Unger (New York: Rinehart and Company, 1949) 188-9.

²² Eliot, "Rudyard Kipling," OPAP 240.

²³ T.S. Eliot, The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism (London: Faber and Faber Ltd., 1933) 126.

²⁴ Eliot, "Tradition," SE 8.

²⁵ Graham Hough, "The Poet as Critic," The Literary Criticism of T.S. Eliot, ed. David Newton-De Molina (London: The Athlone Press, 1977) 50. Similarly, Stephen Spender calls "Tradition" an "essay [which] is in fact a vigorous attack on critics who maintain that poetry is the expression of personality." Stephen Spender, "T.S. Eliot in his Poetry," T.S. Eliot: A Selected Critique, ed. Leonard Unger (New York: Rinehart and Company, 1948) 279. David Daiches cites Eliot as the absolute opposite of Wordsworth and his spontaneous overflow of feeling. No attention is paid to Eliot's

actual description of the relationship between the poet's emotions and those found in his poetry. David Daiches, Critical Approaches to Literature (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall Inc., 1956) 144.

Eliot's actual critical and creative beliefs often suffer through analogies drawn between his work and that of other writers. In Concepts of Criticism, for example, René Wellek says that Paul Valéry felt poetry "must be impersonal to be perfect. Emotional art seems to [Valéry] always inferior. A poem should aim to be 'pure', free from factual, personal and emotional admixtures." Wellek then says "the affinity with Eliot is obvious," including no further explanation. This is not an accurate representation of Eliot's beliefs: he did not feel poetry should be free from personal and emotional admixtures. René Wellek, Concepts of Criticism (New Haven: Yale UP, 1963) 356. For further examples of similar misunderstanding of Eliot's beliefs see Edmund Wilson in T.S. Eliot: A Selected Critique, ed. Leonard Unger (New York: Rinehart and Co., 1948) 189-90.

26 Eliot, "Tradition," SE 8.

27 Eliot, "Tradition," SE 8.

28 Eliot, "Shakespeare," SE 117.

29 Eliot, "Tradition," SE 8, Eliot, "Shakespeare," SE 117.

30 Paul Eakin, Fictions in Autobiography: Studies in the Art of Self-Invention (New Jersey: Princeton UP, 1985).

31 Eliot, "Tradition," SE 4.

32 Eliot, "Shakespeare," SE 110.

Chapter One: An analysis of "Tradition and the Individual Talent":
the basis of critical misunderstanding

"[Valéry's poetry] is impersonal in the sense that personal emotion, personal experience, is extended and completed in something impersonal--not in the sense of something divorced from personal experience and passion. No good poetry is the latter."

T.S. Eliot, 1924.
A Brief Introduction to
the Method of Paul Valéry
(as cited in Mowbray Allan)

Eliot begins "Tradition and the Individual Talent" by outlining the ideal role of tradition--that much maligned force--in the creative process. He considers a knowledge of past literature generally and of his own country's language and literature in particular essential to the poet who wants to write great poetry. So Eliot points out that the creative process

involves, in the first place, the historical sense ...; and the historical sense involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence; the historical sense compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole of literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order. This historical sense, which is a sense of the timeless as well as the temporal together, is what makes a writer traditional.¹

Eliot prefaces this observation by pointing to a popular misconception, this being "our tendency to insist, when we praise a poet, upon those aspects of his work in which he least resembles any one else."² In no way should a poet strive to create "sui generis" a great creative work:

What is to be insisted upon is that the poet must develop or procure the consciousness of the past and that he should continue to develop this consciousness throughout his career.

What happens is a continual surrender of himself as he is at the moment (at which the creative process begins) to something which is more valuable. The progress of an artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality.³

If the poet does not "extinguish" or rein-in his personality and individual interests properly when working himself into the fabric of literary tradition, he will become simply a regional poet, bounded by time and territory to enjoyment by a particular audience alone.⁴ This comment is not meant to suggest that the poet's personality, personal circumstances and memories do not serve a vital function elsewhere in the creative process.

Eliot's famous "extinction of personality" comment comes at the end of Part One of "Tradition," a section devoted solely to establishing the role of literary tradition in the creative process.⁵ Impersonal poetry, in the context of Part One, simply means poetry which is not restricted to individual relevance for one poet, for one language or for one "time". Eliot goes on to say, in Part Two of "Tradition",

I have tried to point out [in Part One] the importance of the relation of the poem to other poems by other authors, and suggested the conception of poetry as a living whole of all the poetry that has ever been written. The other aspect of this Impersonal theory of poetry is the relation of the poem to its author (my emphasis).⁶

It is interesting to note that while Eliot first uses the term "impersonal" with respect to the role of literary tradition in the creative process, much criticism of Eliot uses the term exclusively to stress the gap between the poem's content and the poet's personality, a gap which many say Eliot celebrates. When he introduces the term "impersonality" in conjunction with literary tradition Eliot uses it--as the rest of the essay and his subsequent critical writings show--to describe creative work which is not limited in interest or relevance to the poet's particular context alone. In other words the great poet produces a creative work which results from his own particular literary knowledge, his own awareness of genre requirement and his own emotions and memories, but which does not require his particular background in order to be enjoyed by others. Poetry must be impersonal in the sense that it does not elicit enjoyment only from those readers with a personal history identical to the poet's own.

Eliot goes on to explain how the impersonal ideal also affects the role of the poet's personality and emotions within his created work, reiterating his analogy from Part One. He says that the blending of the four components within the creative process is like "the action which takes place when a bit of finely filiated platinum is introduced into a chamber containing oxygen and sulphur dioxide."⁷ Some critics seem to see Eliot's predilection for the use of scientific terminology as further evidence that he exclusively extolled an intellectual, factual, "scientific" approach to the creative process, the antithesis of "emotionalism".⁸ In

fact when the meaning of the scientific analogy is made the operative consideration, rather than simply its phraseology, the true nature of Eliot's conceptualization of the creative process begins to emerge. Eliot asserts that aspects of the poet's personality function in the creative process just as his knowledge of literary tradition has functioned; as one of the four components which pour into the poet's mind, awaiting "transmutation" into something distinct from each of the four ingredients.⁹ Far from denying or denigrating the presence or importance of the poet's personality in the creative process, Eliot assumes its integral role:

the mind of the mature poet differs from that of the immature one not precisely in any valuation of 'personality,' not being necessarily more interesting, or having 'more to say,' but rather by being a more finely perfected medium in which special, or very varied, feelings are at liberty to enter into new combinations (my emphasis).¹⁰

The poet's personality is not dismissed, it is simply held in balance with the other three components awaiting creative "transmutation". Eliot goes on to further outline how the poet's personal circumstances are involved in the creative process:

The [creative] experience, you will notice, the elements which enter the presence of the transforming catalyst, are of two kinds: emotions and feelings. The effect of a work of art upon the person who enjoys it is an experience different in kind from any experience not of art. It may be formed out of one emotion, or may be a combination of several; and various feelings, inhering for the writer in particular words or phrases or images, may be added to compose the final result.¹¹

An important distinction to make in this reference is that the "emotions and feelings" which Eliot says comprise the artistic material are first the poet's and subsequently (if the poetry is successfully compelling) the reader's. It is into the poet's mind or "chamber" that his "emotions and feelings" are being poured.¹² "The poet's mind is in fact a receptacle for seizing and storing up numberless feelings, phrases, images, which remain there until all the particles which can unite to form a new compound are present together."¹³ What Eliot asserts thirty-three years later in "What Dante Means to Me" shows that his concept of the creative process has remained consistent with his 1917 "Tradition"

assertions:

From [Baudelaire] as from Laforgue, I learned that the sort of material that I had, the sort of experience that an adolescent had had, in an industrial city in America, could be the material for poetry; and that the source of new poetry might be found in what had been regarded hitherto as the impossible, the sterile, the intractably unpoetic. That, in fact, the business of the poet was to make poetry out of the unexplored resources of the unpoetical; that the poet, in fact, was committed by his profession to turn the unpoetical into poetry.¹⁴

Such statements make clear the fact that Eliot did not simply detect or encourage a complete separation between "the man who suffers and the mind which creates" but that, rather, he conceived of the poet's personal experiences as one of the four ingredients in the mixing pot which is the poet's mind.¹⁵ A great poem is not simply a reenactment of the poet's personal situation, just as it is not a remake of a previously written poem. Because poetry involves a transformation process, the personal component is not the "sole" key to understanding or producing a poem. So Eliot's impersonal ideal means here, as it meant in his discussion of the role of tradition, "not restricted in interest or insight to the poet alone".

Writing in 1937 on Byron's Don Juan Eliot outlines this same correlation between the events of a poet's life and the actual tone and content of his created work:

the subject matter [of Don Juan] gave [Byron] at last an adequate object for a genuine emotion. The emotion is hatred of hypocrisy; and if it was reinforced by more personal and petty feelings, the feelings of the man who as a boy had known the humiliation of shabby lodgings with an eccentric mother, who at fifteen had been clumsy and unattractive and unable to dance with Mary Chaworth, who remained oddly alien among the society that he knew so well --this mixture of the origin of his attitude towards English society only gives it greater intensity.¹⁶

This observation not only points out the place of the poet's personality and private circumstance in the fabric of his poetry, but it attests to the way in which these two components--personal circumstance and the creative ability--work together to assist Byron's production of a great work of literature. These critical assertions are simply extensions of

the precepts outlined first in "Tradition and the Individual Talent", an essay which Eliot realized had been misunderstood by critics. In 1955 he writes:

I have, in an early essay, extolled what I call impersonality in art, and it may seem that, in giving as a reason for the superiority of Yeats' work [in this present essay] the greater expression of personality in it, I am contradicting myself. It may be that I expressed myself badly [the first time], or that I had only an adolescent grasp of the idea [then] ... but I think now, at least, that the truth of the matter is as follows. There are two kinds of impersonality: that which is natural to the mere skilled craftsman, and that which is more achieved by the maturing artist. ... The second impersonality is that of the poet who, out of intense and personal experience, is able to express general truth; retaining all the particularity of his experience, to make of it a general symbol (my emphasis).¹⁷

It is unfortunate that Eliot felt he had articulated his beliefs poorly in "Tradition and the Individual Talent" for, in fact, it is his critics who seem to have been often less than careful in taking out of context his remark on impersonal poetry.¹⁸ Eliot never contends that there are, or should be, no links between the poet's personality or personal experiences and the content of the poetry he creates. He simply sees in 1955, as he had first pointed out in 1917, that the power of great poetry is its ability to take experience and reshape or metamorphose it into a new experience for its creator and its reader. As early as 1920 Eliot is pointing out that the great poet, "in writing himself, writes his time."¹⁹

As the poet tries to incorporate the personal component, the danger is the same one inherent in his incorporation of an aspect of literary tradition. A poem which relies too heavily on a personal emotion, or circumstance of its author, necessarily lacks inner balance. In 1919 Eliot calls Hamlet an "artistic failure" because the components of the creative mix are unbalanced.²⁰ As he points out again in 1924 a work must be "self-consistent",²¹ with the four components supporting one another, otherwise the reader's attention is drawn away from the work's creative merit into a consideration of only the unbalanced component:

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

prolongation of the bafflement²² of his creator in the face of his artistic problem.

Eliot goes on to say that "both workmanship and thought are in an unstable position. We are surely justified in attributing [Hamlet] ... to a period of crisis [in Shakespeare's life.] ... Probably more people have thought Hamlet a work of art because they found it interesting, than have found it interesting because it is a work of art."²³ His references to Shakespeare's personal situation at the time he was writing Hamlet will also be of interest in Chapter Three's discussion of Eliot's own critical approach.

We have seen that private belief and circumstance play an integral role in the poet's formulation of his work, according to Eliot. In his 1929 essay on Dante, Eliot says that poets who can make a belief seem true remote from themselves (and their personal belief in it) encourage trust in the precept from their readers. Poets, on the other hand, who exude the sense "this is my personal belief" do not inspire belief in the precept. Eliot also asserts something which is the antithesis of the supposed Eliot dictum. He says that who Dante "borrowed" from is of negligible importance in analyzing his work, but

... the question of what Dante 'believed' is always relevant. It would not matter, if the world were divided between those persons who are capable of taking poetry simply for what it is and those who cannot take it at all; if so, there would be no need to talk about this question to the former and no use in talking about it to the latter. But most of us are somewhat impure and apt to confuse issues; hence the justification of writing books about books, in the hope of straightening things out.

My point is that you cannot afford to ignore Dante's philosophical and theological beliefs, or to skip the passages [in the Commedia] which express them most clearly; but that on the other hand you are not called upon to believe them yourself.²⁴

Eliot's point here is that an understanding of the poet's personal circumstances is often crucial to the reader who holds elucidation of the text as his primary goal. His assertions also tie in to his beliefs about the need for a proper balance of the four components which go into the making of a creative work. Eliot says:

we make a distinction between what Dante believes as a poet and what he believed as a man. Practically, it is hardly likely that even so great a poet as Dante could have composed the Comedy merely with understanding and without belief; but his private belief becomes a different thing in becoming poetry. It is interesting to hazard the suggestion that this is truer of Dante than of any other philosophical poet. With Goethe, for instance, I often feel too acutely 'this is what Goethe the man believed' instead²⁵ of merely entering into a world which Goethe has created.

Again, as in "Tradition and the Individual Talent", Eliot asserts the importance both of the artist's beliefs and personality in his work and the importance of their "transmutation"²⁶ to accommodate the other three components ("private belief becomes a different thing in becoming poetry"). For Eliot, Goethe's writings, like Shakespeare's Hamlet, demand examination of the poet's personal concerns and beliefs since the text is so obviously skewed in that direction.

Before moving on to look in detail at two of the four components--the actual place of the poet in his work and the nature of the creative gift--it remains to outline the place of genre and structural stipulation in the four-component "mix". In his 1920 essay "The Possibility of a Poetic Drama" Eliot points out that each literary genre carries with it a "feel" or emotional approach:

to create a form is not merely to invent a shape, a rhyme or rhythm. It is also the realization of the whole appropriate content of this rhyme or rhythm. The sonnet of Shakespeare is not merely such and such a pattern, but a precise way of thinking and feeling.²⁷

This is one reason why Eliot cautions authors and critics not to let themselves be transported solely by their own emotions, since the genre itself contains exciting emotions within its own rhyme, rhythm and structural rules. The two sets of emotions must blend and be mutually supportive for the created work to be truly great. In his 1924 essay on the Elizabethan Dramatists Eliot points out that various devices used by these dramatists may be unreal (ghosts and witches contribute to the action), and yet be acceptable and credible within the confines of the play's dramatic conventions.²⁸ Again in 1931 Eliot says of Cyril Tourneur's personages, "[they] may be distortions, grotesques, almost childish

caricatures of humanity, but they are all distorted to scale. Hence the whole action ... has its own self-subsistent reality."²⁹ Elsewhere in the 1924 essay Eliot discusses the importance for the poet and critic of establishing and operating under the "conventions" inherent for each work.³⁰ In this regard Eliot points out that

it is essential that a work of art be self-consistent, that an artist should consciously or unconsciously draw a circle beyond which he does not trespass: on the one hand actual life is always the material, and on the other hand an abstraction from actual life is³² a necessary condition to the creation of a work of art.

He cites as a second example the conventions inherent in ballet. The ballet

is a development of several centuries into a strict form. In the ballet only that is left to the actor which is properly the actor's part. The general movements are set for him. There are only limited movements that he can make, only a limited degree of emotion that he can express. He is not called upon for his personality. The differences between a great dancer and a merely competent dancer is in the vital flame, that impersonal, and, if you like, inhuman force which transpires between each of the great dancer's movements.³²

Here we have Eliot's conception of how the poet works with the stipulations of his genre, as well as a reaffirmation of his particular use of the word "impersonal" to indicate art's ability to start with and then move beyond the individual, instigating artist.

Again, as in his discussion of the role of tradition and the role of the poet's personality, Eliot cautions against an excessive reliance on this one component--structural precept--that results in the unbalanced handling of the other three. A poet who depends too heavily on genre, rhyme, rhythm or figurative language invariably unbalances the creative "mix". While the metaphysical poets were great craftsmen, well-versed in the precepts of "structure", "language" and "figure[s] of speech", they also could make their readers "feel their thought as immediately as the odour of a rose."³³ In comparison, it is for their role in disrupting the "balance" of the creative mix that Eliot castigates Milton and Dryden, since "while the language [they used] became more refined, the feeling became more crude."³⁴ Eliot is not denigrating the emotions present in Milton's or Dryden's work. He simply wants to point

out the disproportionately inferior place assigned to feeling as a result of the inflated position of structural detail. It is this same concern for unbalance which Eliot asserts in 1919 when he says, "we may conclude ... that [Philip] Massinger's feeling for language had outstripped his feeling for things."³⁵ Eliot's concern is that, in Massinger, a space exists between the words used and the emotions and feelings they are meant to represent. Again in 1920 Eliot uses an analogy to Puritanism to make this same point. He says "Puritanism itself became repulsive only when it appeared as the survival of a restraint after the feelings which it restrained had gone."³⁶ When the structural precepts have taken undue precedence, the inner balance of the poem has been disturbed. As late as 1942 Eliot writes that a poet

becomes discredited when [the stanza form is] employed solely by those writers who, having no impulse to form within them, have recourse to pouring their liquid sentiment into a ready-made mould in which they vainly hope that it will set.³⁷

It is not the presence of the personal emotions that Eliot objects to but the particular poet's inability to balance and intermingle his personal sentiments with the structural demands inherent in the genre he has chosen.

From his earliest comments in The Sacred Wood and beyond them Eliot cautions the critic "to see literature all round"³⁸ and considers ideal literature the forming of "organic wholes."³⁹ It is to guard against artistic failures resulting from unbalanced components that Eliot first begins, in "Tradition and the Individual Talent" to warn prospective artists against an unbalanced creative mix. As we shall see, Eliot's caution to the critic and the artist is of a similar nature: "we endeavour [as critics] to find something that can be isolated in order to be enjoyed. Whereas if we approach a poet without this prejudice", the artistic wholeness of the work--if it is there to begin with--can shine through.⁴⁰

¹ Eliot, "Tradition," SE 4.

² Eliot, "Tradition," SE 3-4.

³ Eliot, "Tradition," SE 6-7.

⁴ This is the same observation Eliot makes regarding Swinburne in "Imperfect Critics". Far from denigrating Swinburne's inclusion of his personal views about poetry in his criticism, Eliot merely points out that Swinburne's observations were only poetically relevant if studied with Swinburne in mind. Eliot says "there are few ideas in Swinburne's critical writings which stand forth luminous with an independent life of their own, so true that one forgets the author in the statement." In this respect Swinburne has failed to make his critical observations "impersonal": of relevance beyond his own belief. Emotionalism or authorial presence in the writing is not the contentious issue. Eliot, "Imperfect Critics," SW 39.

⁵ Eliot, "Tradition," SE 7.

⁶ Eliot, "Tradition," SE 7.

⁷ Eliot, "Tradition," SE 7.

⁸ See, for example, W.J. Bate's Introduction to Matthew Arnold in Criticism: The Major Texts Enlarged Edition (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich Inc., 1970) 438. Bate cites Eliot as following in the footsteps of Arnold and so employing Arnold's "urbane simplicity" and his "empirical concreteness" of style (520).

In Conflicts in Consciousness David Spurr says "Eliot arrays this language of scientific precision against the dark forces arising from the depths of the psyche." Spurr 110.

⁹ Eliot, "Tradition," SE 8.

¹⁰ Eliot, "Tradition," SE 7.

¹¹ Eliot, "Tradition," SE 8.

¹² Eliot, "Tradition," SE 7.

¹³ Eliot, "Tradition," SE 8.

14 T.S. Eliot, "What Dante Means to Me," To Criticize The Critic (New York: Faber and Faber, 1965) 136.

15 Eliot, "Tradition," SE 8.

16 Eliot, "Byron," OPAP 205.

17 Eliot, "Yeats," OPAP 255.

18 Further examples of how Eliot's use of the word "impersonal" has been misunderstood by critics include: Murray Krieger, Poetic Presence and Illusion: Essays in Critical History and Theory (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1970) 97 ff. Krieger assumes that Eliot's meaning in "Tradition" was that a poet's personality and emotions have nothing to do in the formation of his poem, and that criticism must consequently ignore the poet completely, focussing only on the work. Krieger not only misreads Eliot's "Tradition" essay but he goes on to mock Eliot's naivety; "how could anyone believe such a thing" is the question Krieger's tone implies regarding Eliot's essay.

The jacket precis to Peter Ackroyd's T.S. Eliot shows a similar misunderstanding of Eliot's notion of impersonal poetry. It characterizes Eliot as "a writer who described the impersonality of great poetry while his own work is diffused with his experience and personality." Peter Ackroyd, T.S. Eliot (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1984).

19 Eliot, "Shakespeare," SE 117.

20 Eliot, "Shakespeare," SE 123.

21 Eliot, "Four Elizabethan Dramatists," SE 93.

22 Eliot, "Hamlet and His Problems," SE 125.

23 Eliot, "Hamlet and His Problems," SE 124.

24 Eliot, "Dante," SE 218.

25 Eliot, "Dante," SE 219.

26 Eliot, "Tradition," SE 8.

27 Eliot, "The Possibility of a Poetic Drama," SW 63.

28 Eliot, "Four Elizabethan Dramatists," SE 93 ff.

- 29 Eliot, "Cyril Tourneur," SE 162.
- 30 Eliot, "Four Elizabethan Dramatists," SE 92.
- 31 Eliot, "Four Elizabethan Dramatists," SE 93.
- 32 Eliot, "Four Elizabethan Dramatists," SE 95.
- 33 Eliot, "The Metaphysical Poets," SE 245, 243, 242, 247.
- 34 Eliot, "The Metaphysical Poets," SE 247.
- 35 Eliot, "Philip Massinger," SE 185.
- 36 Eliot, "Philip Massinger," SE 189.
- 37 Eliot, "The Music of Poetry," OPAP 37.
- 38 Eliot, "Imperfect Critics," SW 40.
- 39 Eliot, "The Function of Criticism," SE 12.
- 40 Eliot, "Tradition," SE 4.

Chapter Two: Does the poet belong in his poetry?

"The creation of a work of art, we will say the creation of a character in a drama, consists in the process of transfusion of the personality, or, in a deeper sense, the life, of the author into the character."

"Ben Jonson", The Sacred Wood

The creation of a great work of art involves the intricate balancing of numerous factors. We have seen Eliot caution the prospective artist against producing a work so tied to his personal, emotional and literary "history" that it is unintelligible or irrelevant to anyone but himself. A discussion of where the poet actually belongs in his poem must begin, then, with an outline of Eliot's conception of how a great work is at once personally relevant to its creator and of relevance to all men.

In his 1927 essay on Shakespeare Eliot asserts that "what every poet starts from is his own emotions."¹ He goes on to say that

Dante's railings, his personal spleen--sometimes highly disguised under Old Testament prophetic denunciations--his nostalgia, his bitter regrets for past happiness--or for what seems happiness when it is past--and his brave attempts to fabricate something permanent and holy out of his personal animal feelings²

all have their counterpart in Shakespeare. Like Dante,

Shakespeare, too, was occupied with the struggle--which alone constitutes life for a poet--to transmute his personal and private agonies into something rich and strange, something universal and impersonal.³

Referring to the work of Dante and Shakespeare Eliot says "the rage of Dante against Florence, or Pistoia, or what not, the deep surge of Shakespeare's general cynicism and disillusionment, are merely gigantic attempts to metamorphose private failures and disappointments. The great poet, in writing himself, writes his time."⁴ Here, in 1927, are the exact sentiments first expressed in "Tradition and the Individual Talent". The poet is relying on present and recollected personal experiences as a source of creative "content"; the poet's mind is still "transmuting" personal emotions and experiences. Again we see the much-misunderstood word "impersonal" appear; here, as in "Tradition", the great poet's work is impersonal in the sense that a personal emotion or experience creatively transmuted and qualified by the other components of the creative process is a universal precept. What began as a personal emotion, "animal

feelings", "private agonies", becomes, with the help of the creative process, something which can also move beyond the poet to touch others.⁵ Eliot's comments in his 1924 essay on Christopher Marlowe are useful here to elucidate this important relationship between his use of the word "impersonal" and the term "universal". Eliot says:

Every writer who has written any blank verse worth saving has produced particular tones which his verse and no other's is capable of rendering; and we should keep this in mind when we talk about 'influences' and 'indebtedness'. Shakespeare is 'universal' because he has more of these tones than anyone else; but they are all out of the one man; one man cannot be more than one man; there might have₆ been six Shakespeares at once without conflicting frontiers.

Shakespeare's "emotions" are "all out of the one man" and yet, because he does not restrict his work to simply an examination of one personal emotion, but mixes it with other emotions within the creative process, his work moves beyond relevance in his own life and becomes also "universal".

From his earliest comments in "Tradition and the Individual Talent" Eliot points out that the poet uses images and emotions which may have remained stored in his mind for years, awaiting the correct moment for expression. The poet's mind is "a receptacle for seizing and storing up numberless feelings, phrases, images, which remain there until all the particles which can unite to form a new compound are present together."⁷ Anything and everything that the poet experiences and feels in the course of his lifetime may become the basis for a literary creation. As we noted earlier, Eliot was grateful for the example set him by Baudelaire and Laforgue. Baudelaire's articulation of life in the city was so in sympathy with Eliot's feeling that he used Baudelaire's "Fourmillante Cité" within his own Waste Land, saying "I knew what that meant, because I had lived it before I knew I wanted to turn it into verse on my own account."⁹ Such personal emotions and impressions flood into the poet's mind on a daily basis, and Eliot's analogy of the gas beaker posits the poet's mind as the repository in which conscious and unconscious thoughts and emotions meet, mix and reconstitute themselves into poetry.¹⁰

In The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism Eliot says "of course only a part of an author's imagery comes from his reading. It comes from

the whole of his sensitive life since early childhood."¹¹ Certain images come to have particular significance to each poet, since they "come to represent the depths of feeling into which we [otherwise] cannot peer."¹² In his 1942 essay "The Music of Poetry" Eliot attests to the reciprocal relationship a poem can have to its creator when he says of the musical fluctuations of poetry

the necessity for its reminding us of contemporary speech is reduced by the latitude allowed for personal idiosyncrasy; but [Gerard Manley Hopkins] does give the impression that his poetry has the necessary fidelity to his way of thinking and talking to himself.¹³

Eliot goes on to say that dramatic poetry demands a careful handling by its creator, since his voice is being filtered through a producer, a director and a series of actors, unlike the poem in which "the poet speaks only for himself."¹⁴

Since it is an extension of himself, Eliot believes that a poet's poetry changes as a direct result of his changing personal circumstances and personality. He writes in 1917,

any poet, if he is to survive as a writer beyond his twenty-fifth year, must alter; he must seek new literary influences; he will have different emotions to express. This is disconcerting to that public which likes a poet to spin his whole work out of the feelings of his youth.¹⁵

Again in his 1932 essay on John Ford Eliot asserts, using Shakespeare as his example, that the particular point in the poet's life at which he is writing directly affects the content of his work. That Eliot expects to "feel" a sense of the actual poet writing behind any poetry he reads is clear in his remark that "a man might, hypothetically, compose any number of fine passages or even of whole poems which would each give satisfaction, and yet not be a great poet unless we felt them to be united by one significant, consistent, and developing personality."¹⁶

He goes on to say of the evolving careers of artists like Jonson, Middleton, Webster and Tourneur,

in all these dramatists there is the essential as well as the superficialities of poetry; they give the pattern, or we may say the undertone, of the personal emotion, the personal drama and struggle, which no biography, however full and intimate, could give us; which nothing can give us but our experience of the plays themselves.¹⁷

So, in a strange and magical way, a poet's creative work is often more unconsciously illustrative of who he is and how he feels than a prose biography might be.

Precisely because he is also a practicing poet Eliot's interest in a poet's personal circumstances and feelings at the time he writes a poem attests to the distinct correlation he feels between the poet's situation and the poetry he writes. In his 1920 essay on William Blake Eliot constantly muses over the circumstances in Blake's life that allowed him to be so honest in his poetry, and considers details from Blake's childhood as the basis for his answer. He decides that Blake had nothing to distract him,

neither the ambitions of parents or wife, nor the standards of society, nor the temptations of success; nor was he exposed to imitation of himself or of anyone else. These circumstances--not his supposed inspired and untaught spontaneity --are what makes him innocent.¹⁸

Here Eliot overtly asserts that Blake's personality and personal circumstances dictated the content and atmosphere of his poetry. Eliot also feels that the artist's education or knowledge of his own craft is important, but implies that such knowledge is developed through a knowledge of literary tradition and precedent rather than conventional education:

[the poet's education in his craft] is one that is hindered rather than helped by the ordinary processes of society which constitute education for the ordinary man. For these processes consist largely in the acquisition of impersonal ideas which obscure what we [as poets] really are and feel, what we really want, and what excites our interest.¹⁹

We see again in this remark Eliot's pejorative use of the word "impersonal" to indicate the poet's acquisition of ideas and feelings which do not begin with him and then become universal, but which are externally acquired and manipulated into a poem. We remember Eliot's depiction of the process as one man first articulating his own feelings so succinctly that he invariably makes a universally intelligible statement.

It is clear from his early essay on Blake that Eliot believes a poem and its poetic approach must be representative of who the poet is and of the emotions and circumstances which initially inspired the poem within him. But because the poet creates his poetry out of his own

emotions and circumstances this does not mean that Eliot posits a one-for-one transference from life to poetry. The poet's mind is, after all, a transmuting point, and so these personal details can surface in images quite remote--to the outside observer, and even to the poet himself--from their initial models within the poet's experience. In his 1929 essay on Dante, for example, Eliot points out that the reactions found in Dante's Vita Nuova are not necessarily Dante's "conscious" feelings upon first meeting Beatrice, "but rather ... a description of what this meant [to him] on mature reflection upon it."²⁰ This suggests the poet's distillation of actual events and emotions from his own life, perhaps over a period of a lifetime, until he chooses to employ them in a particular poetic formulation. In summing up this essay on Dante, Eliot says "at any rate, the Vita Nuova ... is, I believe, a very sound psychological treatise on something related to what is now called 'sublimation'."²¹ Through its literary associations and affinities or its consistent preoccupations, the poet's work is inherently representative of who he is, even though he may not always be consciously aware of the sources guiding his poetry.

In The Use of Poetry Eliot points out that "it is not the business of the poet to talk like any class of society, but like himself."²² It seems clear that Eliot was not comfortable being considered the exemplar of any one particular "concept" or "generation"; in "Thoughts After Lambeth" he says that he dislikes the word "generation", since it is misleading. Eliot says "[when I] wrote a poem called The Waste Land some of the more approving critics said that I had expressed the 'disillusionment of a generation', which is nonsense. I may have expressed for them their own illusion of being disillusioned, but that did not form part of my [personal] intention."²³ In The Use of Poetry Eliot suggests that "any radical change in poetic form [for example the development of 'Romanticism'] is likely to be the symptom of some very much deeper change in society and in the individual."²⁴ So the idea remains consistent within Eliot's writing that any movement or belief of a generation begins simply with individuals--artists among them--asserting their particular emotions and beliefs in isolation, and only secondarily forming a "movement". It would seem that Eliot was concerned

about some criticism's tendency to obscure the fact that the actual path an idea takes is from within the individual artist's mind outward. We shall see that Eliot's own tendency as a critic is to focus on how a poet's message first formed and took on personal relevance within that poet's life and how this personal situation elucidates his poem.

Elsewhere in The Use of Poetry Eliot says of Matthew Arnold:

I feel rather than observe an inner uncertainty and lack of confidence and vocation in Matthew Arnold. ... Perhaps, looking inward and finding how little he had to support him, looking outward on the state of society and its tendencies, he was somewhat disturbed. He had no real serenity, only an impeccable demeanor. ... He is a representative figure. A man's theory of the place of poetry is not independent of his view of life in general.²⁵

Here again Eliot suggests that who the poet is and what he believes as a man is made manifest in his poetry. If it is well written, his poetry may also come to be considered a universally relevant observation about life. But it begins in the mind and heart of the one poet. Since Eliot believes that a great literary work begins as a personally relevant statement and then moves outward, we understand his perturbation in the face of I.A. Richards' comments assigning him the "job" of spokesperson for his age.²⁶ Perhaps Eliot has comments such as Richards' in mind when he asserts that "the man who is 'representative' of his time may be in opposition to the most widely-accepted beliefs of his time."²⁷ Being hailed as a poet representative of his age quite unnerved Eliot; he frequently states his amazement over the success or universal application of a number of his comments.²⁸ Perhaps this is why Eliot felt so frequently compelled to assert: "my criticism has this in common with that of Ezra Pound, that its merits and its limitations can be fully appreciated only when it is considered in relation to the poetry I have written myself."²⁹ Just as he has said that every poet sets out only to express himself and sometimes expresses his time, so here Eliot points out that his universally applicable rules for literature have their roots in his own poetry. In "The Music of Poetry" Eliot says, "I believe that the critical writings of poets ... owe a great deal of their interest to the fact that the poet, at the back of his mind, if

not as his ostensible purpose, is always trying to defend the kind of poetry he is writing or to formulate the kind that he wants to write."³⁰ This notion that any manipulator of words defines and defends himself through words surfaces elsewhere in Eliot, and will be considered in more detail in Chapter Four.

With the writing of great poetry as an ideal goal, and with a knowledge of literary tradition, a storehouse of personal emotions and memories, and a knowledge of formal conventions to assist him, the poet sets out to create a poem and often does much more. That the great artist ultimately creates a literary moment which has universal relevance must not obscure the fact that the creation of the poem also defines the poet's individuality. Phrases such as "escape from personality", considered out of context, might suggest that Eliot's notion of the creative process is one which does not see the individual creating artist as a central concern.³¹ In fact, Eliot's comments throughout his essays stress how personally relevant and self-defining the creative act is for every poet. In his 1924 essay on the Elizabethan Dramatists Eliot points out that "no artist produces art by a deliberate attempt to express his personality. He expresses his personality indirectly through concentrating upon a task (my emphasis)."³² The task, as mentioned above, is the successful mixing and balancing of the four creative components which work together to form every great poem.

Eliot observes that Montgomery Belgion castigates a particular passage in Dante because he says it fails to reveal the "Vision" to him that Dante is speaking of in the particular passage. Eliot objects to this criticism, saying

what we experience as readers is never exactly what the poet experienced, nor would there be any point in its being, though certainly it has some relation to the poet's experience. What the poet experienced is not poetry but poetic material; the writing of the poetry is a fresh 'experience' for him, and the reading of it, by the author or anyone else, is another thing still.³³

Here, in The Use of Poetry, we have Eliot asserting the "transforming" power of the creative process; a notion first articulated in "Tradition". Eliot realizes that Belgion expects an exact reenactment, within himself,

of Dante's personal experience. Such a one-for-one reenactment of an incident in the poet's life is not, however, something which we have seen Eliot assert as the mark of a great poet. In discussing the relationship between the poet and his poem Eliot says that the poet is in a unique position with respect to his poetry, since he "knows better what his poems 'mean' than ... anyone else; he may know the history of their composition, the material which has gone in and come out in an unrecognizable form."³⁴ Eliot sees the relationship between the poet and his poem as an interdependent, mutually supportive one. "What every poet starts from is his own emotions" and so each poem depends heavily upon the experiences and personality of its author.³⁵ But, as we will see in Chapter Four, the poet depends on the power of the creative process to "transform" and structure aspects of his life for him.³⁶ Of the many assertions that could be made about what events induced the writing of a poem, Eliot says "I should say that the poet is tormented primarily by the need to write a poem."³⁷

- 1 Eliot, "Shakespeare," SE 117.
- 2 Eliot, "Shakespeare," SE 117.
- 3 Eliot, "Shakespeare," SE 117.
- 4 Eliot, "Shakespeare," SE 117.
- 5 Eliot, "Shakespeare," SE 117.
- 6 Eliot, "Notes on the Blank Verse of Christopher Marlowe," SW 87.
- 7 Eliot, "Tradition," SE 8.
- 8 Eliot, "What Dante Means to Me," TCTC 126.
- 9 Eliot, "What Dante Means to Me," TCTC 127.

10 In his 1919 essay on Ben Jonson Eliot castigates Beaumont and Fletcher for including arbitrary emotions and feelings in their poetry which they had not personally experienced and made their own. He says "the evocative quality of the verse of Beaumont and Fletcher depends upon a clever appeal to emotions and associations which they have not themselves grasped." Eliot, "Ben Jonson," SW 116.

By contrast Eliot remarks in his 1920 essay on Philip Massinger: "Marlowe's and Jonson's comedies were a view of life; they were, as great literature is, the transformation of a personality into a personal work of art, their lifetime's work, long or short." Eliot, "Philip Massinger," SW 139.

- 11 Eliot, The Use of Poetry 148.
- 12 Eliot, The Use of Poetry 148.
- 13 Eliot, "The Music of Poetry," OPAP 33.
- 14 Eliot, "The Music of Poetry," OPAP 33.
- 15 Eliot, "Ezra Pound: His Metric and Poetry," TCTC 177.
- 16 Eliot, "John Ford," SE 179.
- 17 Eliot, "John Ford," SE 180.
- 18 Eliot, "William Blake," SE 275-6.
- 19 Eliot, "William Blake," SE 277.

- 20 Eliot, "Dante," SE 234.
- 21 Eliot, "Dante," SE 235.
- 22 Eliot, The Use of Poetry 72.
- 23 Eliot, "Thoughts After Lambeth," SE 314.
- 24 Eliot, The Use of Poetry 75.
- 25 Eliot, The Use of Poetry 119.
- 26 Eliot, "Dante," SE 230 (note).
- 27 Eliot, "Goethe as the Sage," OPAP 219.
- 28 Eliot, "The Frontiers of Criticism," OPAP 106.
- 29 Eliot, "The Frontiers of Criticism," OPAP 106.
- 30 Eliot, "The Music of Poetry," OPAP 26.
- 31 Eliot, "Tradition," SE 10.
- 32 Eliot, "Four Elizabethan Dramatists," SE 96.
- 33 Eliot, The Use of Poetry 126.
- 34 Eliot, The Use of Poetry 130.
- 35 Eliot, "Shakespeare," SE 117.
- 36 Eliot, "Tradition," SE 8.
- 37 Eliot, The Use of Poetry 130.

Chapter Three: Eliot on criticism. Eliot as critic.

One aspect of Eliot's criticism which seems to have caused great confusion and misunderstanding is its frequent reliance on, and interest in, biographical and contextual detail in analysis of an author's work. Some critics see Eliot's reliance on personal detail in his discussion of a poet's work as a departure from what they perceive as his early critical position of objectivity and depersonalized poetry.¹ If one assumes that an author had disdained all presence of the poet's personality in his poetry, how does one reconcile that person's own avid interest in biographical detail?

In light of our new understanding of Eliot's phrase "depersonalized poetry", how does Eliot operate as a critic?² If, in fact, the poet is intimately linked to his poem, and if the great poet is striving to create a balanced mix, how does Eliot justify his credo "honest criticism and sensitive appreciation are directed not upon the poet but upon the poetry"?³ Can the same critic devote so much time to biographical detail yet utter this statement and still be considered critically consistent? How can Eliot believe this statement and also believe that "what every poet starts from is his own emotions"?⁴ Actually, when Eliot's essays are reviewed as a whole, and when each of these phrases is considered in context, there are no critical inconsistencies.

Eliot's critical approach contains at least one central assumption: if the internal mix of a work is balanced to produce internal self-consistency, the critic can and should stay within the confines of the text during his critical commentary. However, if the critic detects an imbalance of factors, then, as a thorough critic, he must research the biographical, historical or social context of the poet to try to determine why and how the balance was tipped. When the critic begins, under these circumstances, to delve into realms other than those bounded by the poetic work, he must do so with elucidation of the text as his unwavering goal. In those creative works in which there is inner self-consistency, with no one element overly stressed or omitted, Eliot restricts his comment to the content of the work itself. If he detects an overly

disproportionate personal element (Hamlet) or an inordinate reliance on structure (in Milton and Dryden) his essay sets out to research why that particular component took prominence as a governing factor in that author's work, at that particular time.⁵ Not all works strike Eliot as unbalanced and within his discussions of them his comments remain within the confines of the work itself. His essay on "The Metaphysical Poets", in whom he finds not only a mastering of "structure" but also a "fidelity to thought and feeling" and an awareness of literary precedent, remains focussed on their actual poetry.⁶ Similarly, his essay on Lancelot Andrewes admires the inner consistency of the Bishop's sermons, leaving biographical and historical detail aside as a factor in his critical analysis. We begin to see that Eliot takes his critical approach from the particular demands of the work in question, moving beyond it into areas of biographical or historical detail if he senses that this is necessary to provide "sensitive appreciation", and staying within its bounds if the work has its own inner consistency.⁷

How does this individualistic critical approach work in Eliot's essays? In his 1926 essay on Lancelot Andrewes Eliot praises Andrewes, saying "intellect and sensibility were in harmony" in his work.⁸ He goes on to say that the emotion present in Andrewes' sermons "is purely contemplative; it is not personal, it is wholly evoked by the object of contemplation, to which it is adequate; his emotions wholly contained in and explained by its object."⁹ We see that two familiar aspects of Eliot's critical approach are touched on here: the mix of components has been correctly established in Andrewes' sermons, creating inner consistency, resulting in "harmony" of form and sentiment. The remark also implies Eliot's concern to establish internal balance in a work through the proper choice of objects, images and logically cumulative events. Since the emotions present in Andrewes' sermons are the logical extension of the images and situations included in them, the sermons are not only internally consistent, but because of their inner consistency they are successful in producing in their reader the emotions which Andrewes intended. Eliot says of Andrewes:

when we have saturated ourselves in his prose, followed the movement of his thought, ... we find his examination of words terminating in the ecstasy of assent. Andrewes takes a word

and derives the world from it; squeezing and squeezing the word until it yields a full juice of meaning which we should never have supposed any word to possess.¹⁰

Eliot admires Andrewes' ability to take his mastery of structural precept, his knowledge of religious doctrine and the emotions which inspired him to produce a work and transform them into something beyond his purely "personal" ability and faith, into something different from each of the four components.

In contrast to Andrewes' sermons in this regard Eliot cites the sermons of Donne. Eliot greatly admires Donne for his achievement as a poet, and does not cite him here to lower his position as a writer of sermons, so much as to raise Andrewes'. "Donne [Eliot points out] is a 'personality' [in his sermons] in a sense in which Andrewes is not; his sermons one feels, are a 'means of self-expression'. He is constantly finding an object which shall be adequate to his feelings; Andrewes is wholly absorbed in the object and therefore responds with the adequate emotions."¹¹ Donne, in Eliot's opinion, has let his own "un-transmuted" personality and needs tip the balance of inner consistency which should make up (and does make up for Andrewes) the internally consistent sermon. The result, Eliot points out, is that Donne's sermons may be successful for the wrong reasons. To Eliot Donne "is dangerous only for those who find in his sermons an indulgence of their sensibility"; the danger is that people will be drawn to God because of their sense of personal affinity to Donne and his torment, not because of their particular love of God. The hazards for Donne's audience, to Eliot, are an extension of Donne's own problems within religious belief. Eliot points out that

Donne ... belonged to that class of persons, of which there are always one or two examples in the modern world, who seek refuge in religion from the tumults of a strong emotional temperament which can find no complete satisfaction elsewhere.¹³

Eliot maintains that the sermons of Donne must be assigned a "lower place" in the history of English prose than those of Andrewes because "about Donne there hangs the shadow of the impure motive; and impure motives lend their aid to a facile success."¹⁴ Donne's sermons have this quality because the "experience" they contain is "not perfectly controlled" and moulded into something beyond it.¹⁵ For his ability to keep his sermons

internally self-consistent Eliot ranks Andrewes' prose among "the finest English prose of [its] time, of any time."¹⁶ Donne, on the other hand, betrays to Eliot an interest beyond the pure one of leading his listeners to God. Compared to Andrewes, "Donne is much less the mystic; he is primarily interested in man."¹⁷

Eliot greatly admires Donne's persuasive gift with words; but, as we will see, Eliot's only objection to Donne's religious writings is that they are successful through methods outside the formal demands of their genre. Donne leads people to God through his knowledge of the human psyche more than through his reliance on the innate virtues of a belief in God. Eliot says:

Donne ... in his cunning knowledge of the weaknesses of the human heart, his understanding of human sin, his skill in coaxing and persuading the attention of the variable human mind to Divine objects, and in a kind of smiling tolerance among his menaces of damnation [leads people to God].¹⁸

It is here that Eliot calls such an approach "dangerous" for those who respond to Donne's personality and "forget that in the spiritual hierarchy there are places higher than that of Donne."¹⁹

We should not let the strong religious sentiment of the essay obscure the critical approach which Eliot is taking; an approach he adopts in his other critical essays. Donne's sermons, like Shakespeare's Hamlet and Goethe's philosophies, have not, in Eliot's opinion, been subject to equal mixing and transmutation from their initial components into a free-standing creation with merits of their own. Eliot concedes that Donne was obviously successful in bringing people to God; he merely questions what it was in Donne's sermons that actually brought the people to God; God's inherent properties or a sense of personal affinity with Donne's own religious torment. Because he feels the latter is a more likely answer, Eliot's comments on Donne's sermons center on Donne's personal torment. Eliot's comments denigrating the presence of Donne's "personality" in his sermons, taken out of context, could unwittingly support the myth of the emotionally detached (or critically inconsistent) critic.

In The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism Eliot observes that Matthew Arnold "discovered a new formula" which made his work similar in process to Donne's sermons. Eliot says:

Arnold was too temperate and reasonable a man to maintain exactly that religious instruction is best conveyed by poetry, and he himself had very little to convey; but he discovered a new formula: poetry ^{is} not religion, but it is a capital substitute for religion.²⁰

So Arnold's poetry fails in Eliot's eyes because it too does not establish and maintain self-consistency within one genre. It is neither poetic achievement enjoyable within its own confines and for its own sake, nor is it pure religious doctrine. Eliot castigates Arnold for making his created work neither one thing nor another; his work is "not invalid port, which may lend itself to hypocrisy, but coffee without caffeine, and tea without tannin."²¹ Such a failure to commit oneself either to a self-contained creative work or to a piece of religious doctrine is, for Eliot, "a hopeless admission of irresponsibility."²²

There are two important observations which Eliot makes in this regard: creative people--Donne, Shakespeare, Arnold--may produce within their created work something which moves beyond the bounds originally set for it, whether it is a sermon, a play or a poem. They may produce something which is much more a personal statement, a personal crutch on which they can lean. So Arnold discovers that he can make poetry fulfill something in his life--a pseudo religion--and the creation of a self-contained creative piece is no longer his only or primary end. Because Arnold's goal in creating a poem is not, in Eliot's eyes, simply to create a self-contained literary work, he, as the critic elucidating Arnold's poetry, cannot simply stay within the poem's boundaries and expect to paint a complete critical picture. Taking into account the author's goal is a necessary task of the critic and if, as Eliot detects is often the case with Shakespeare, Arnold, Donne and others, the author's preoccupation is the exploration or establishment of a concept not contained within that work, then he must also move into those realms to present a full critical analysis. Many writers try, through their creative writing, to conquer or understand certain principles which affect their own life. These endeavours are obviously of great personal import to each artist; Donne seeks to understand himself, Arnold seeks a personally satisfying religion, Arthur Symonds seeks, through his critical writing, personal release of pent-up creative urges.²³ Because these motives rebound on and

govern their creative work, critics of such authors can and should examine the details external to the work which are governing its content. While the more ideal works of art are self-complete and energized by factors within their own boundaries, many literary works are not. The critic, with elucidation of the text always his goal, must follow the pattern set him by the work itself.

Having overtly observed that creative work can fulfill various personal functions for the person who creates it as well as for the person who reads it, Eliot, as critic, expects an author, if he intends to use his creative work to fulfill some personal requirement in his life, to commit himself completely to this goal. This need not interfere with the work's maintaining internal consistency. Writing of Tennyson in Essays Ancient and Modern Eliot criticizes his poetry on the grounds that Tennyson seemed unable to infuse his poetry with emotions commensurate with what he was feeling as he wrote the poem. Eliot writes:

There is no evidence (in Tennyson's poetry) that he knew the experience of violent passion for a woman; but there is plenty of evidence of emotional intensity and violence--but of emotion so deeply suppressed, even from himself, as to tend towards the blackest melancholia than towards dramatic action. And it is emotion which, so far as my reading of the poems can discover, attained no ultimate clear purgation. I should reproach Tennyson not₂₄ for mildness, or tepidity, but rather for lack of serenity.

Eliot faults Tennyson for committing himself to a form of self-expression and then refusing to completely surrender his personal experiences to the creative process. By avoiding complete self-expression Tennyson denies himself the chance for personal catharsis. He could have chosen to write about less personally evocative incidents than those his poetry contains. Tennyson chose not to do this, however, and his reticence to expose himself produces a work neither personally detached nor a vehicle for personal serenity. As was his objection to Hamlet, Eliot's objection here is that there is no logical correlation between the emotions Tennyson includes in his poetry and the actual circumstances of the poems. None of the actual incidents in the poem "Maud", for example, sufficiently explain its violent emotion.

When he discusses Tennyson's poem "Maud" Eliot takes his critical

cues from the poem itself. Because he detects as the energy source of "Maud" Tennyson's desire to break free of oppressive, deeply suppressed emotion, Eliot criticizes Tennyson for not following through on his desire.

He says:

the fury of "Maud" is shrill rather than deep. ... A poet can express his feelings as fully through a dramatic, as through a lyrical form, but Maud is neither one thing nor the other. ... In "Maud", Tennyson neither identified himself with the lover, nor identified the lover with himself: consequently, the real feelings of Tennyson, profound and tumultuous as they are, never arrive at expression.²⁵

Here again Eliot castigates a poet for not being consistent. If Tennyson intended to keep himself overtly remote from the content of "Maud" he should have done so consistently throughout the entire work. Since he disproportionately infused the poem with personal sentiment and torment, to the detriment of the other three components, Tennyson has made it necessary for Eliot to explore the personal circumstances which lie behind the poem.

Eliot's comments about "In Memoriam", by contrast, indicate his admiration for Tennyson, who has, in this poem, created a work which can and must "be comprehended as a whole" rather than simply a collection of disconnected parts, only some of which demand attention.²⁶ Because "In Memoriam" has achieved perfect internal consistency Eliot calls it "great poetry, economical of words, [illustrative of] a universal emotion in what could only be an English town."²⁷ As in the poem "Maud", Eliot detects in "In Memoriam" the emotions and memories of Tennyson's life in England. But "In Memoriam" succeeds where "Maud" fails because of its "unity and continuity"; "In Memoriam" is also personal, but the other three components have risen up to surround and incorporate the personal sentiment.²⁸

Eliot writes with respect and enthusiasm for those writers whose creative works reflect their personal dilemmas, religious philosophies or philosophical beliefs, but he does distinguish between these works and the ones which remain strictly within the realm of the self-contained literary creation. If a work exceeds the boundaries set by its creative genre to overtly express the personal emotions or philosophies of its

author, then it can no longer be judged solely on literary merit. Eliot's willingness to consider what functions a created work may serve for its creator beyond its contribution to literary history further attests to his belief that the poet and his poetry are inextricably interrelated.

In The Use of Poetry Eliot is touched by Coleridge's "Dejection: An Ode" and includes it in the text, calling it an example of verse which "in its passionate self-revelation rises almost to the height of great poetry" (my emphasis).²⁹ He goes on to say "the lines strike my ear as one of the saddest of confessions that I have ever read."³⁰ Coleridge's poem serves as a recital of his personal anguish. Eliot detects in the poem Coleridge's need to tell his own story, explain his own feelings. So we detect in Eliot's criticism an assumption that each writer is driven to produce a creative work from quite different motives, not all of which are purely literary. He speaks of the drive to write poetry as a compulsion which can be tormenting to the poet. Of Coleridge Eliot says "for a few years he had been visited by the Muse ... and thenceforth was a haunted man; for anyone who has ever been visited by the Muse is thenceforth haunted. ... [Coleridge] was condemned to know that the little poetry he had written was worth more (for the sense of personal satisfaction it gave) than all he could do with the rest of his life."³¹ Eliot concerns himself with the personal details of Coleridge's life because he feels that the content and tenor of his poetry stem directly from his feelings of personal unhappiness over "lost youth", "when the disastrous effects of long dissipation and stupefaction of his powers in transcendental metaphysics were bringing him to a state of lethargy."³² Eliot feels that whatever drove Coleridge to write was not purely poetic in nature; poetry simply became, as it had for Arnold, Dante and Shakespeare (in certain of their works), the way through which an otherwise "inexpressible" burden could be cast aside.³³

Eliot concedes that extra-literary factors often drive a poet to write and that these factors often energize their work. Referring to Johnson's "London" Eliot says "what keeps the poem alive is the undercurrent of personal feeling, the bitterness of the hardships, slights, injuries and privations, really experienced by Johnson in his youth."³⁴ Because

he finds the energy source of "London" in Johnson's childhood experiences, Eliot proceeds to talk of Johnson's personal life, again with elucidation of the poem as his goal.

Eliot points out that the fourth component in the production of a literary work--the creative ability--is one which is difficult to define and understand not only for the critic analyzing a work but for the creator himself. In "Virgil and the Christian World" Eliot says:

If a prophet were by definition a man who understood the full meaning of what he was saying, this would be for me the end of the matter. But if the word 'inspiration' is to have any meaning, it must mean just this, that the speaker or writer is uttering something which he does not wholly understand--or which he may even misinterpret when the inspiration has departed from him. This is certainly true of poetic inspiration: and there is more obvious reason for admiring Isaiah as a poet than for claiming Virgil as a prophet. A poet may believe that he is expressing only his private experience; his lines may be for him only a means of talking about himself without giving himself away; yet for his readers what he has written may come to be the expression both of their own secret feelings and of the exultation or despair of a generation. ³⁵

These lines are strongly reminiscent of Eliot's own amazement at I.A. Richards' comment, quoted above, that Eliot had expressed the disillusionment of a generation in The Waste Land, when Eliot considered The Waste Land his "personal grouse against life."³⁶ Clearly Eliot feels that certain works are integrally bound up with the personal psyches of their creator, and failure to face these facts by a critic is a failure to keep "honest criticism and sensitive appreciation" of the text as his goal.³⁷

So where critics such as David Spurr detect a "conflict in consciousness" in Eliot's critical approach, we see that Eliot takes his critical cues from the works he writes about.³⁸ The critic must research and present Arnold's religious beliefs if these are needed by readers to better understand his poetry. If Shakespeare makes Hamlet an overtly personal manifestation of his personal confusion, then this personal circumstance should form part of an alert critic's discussion. If, on the other hand, a creative work has an inner self-consistency--like the sermons of Andrewes or the poems of the metaphysicals--

the critical commentary can and should stay within the text's boundaries.

After a sensitive discussion of Byron's poetry in On Poetry and Poets, which has included a consideration of Byron's personality and social concerns, Eliot cautions the careless reader against misconstruing his reasons for researching these "external" details. Eliot points out that when he refers to details outside of a particular work of Byron's he "is speaking of the qualities and defects visible in [Byron's] work and important in estimating his work; not [simply because they form part] of the private life, with which [he, as literary critic, is not principally] concerned."³⁹ By observing Eliot's critical approach from his early through to his late essays, we see that his critical interest in biographical detail and his credo "honest criticism and sensitive appreciation are directed not upon the poet but upon the poetry" are critically consistent.⁴⁰

¹ Along with those critics cited in the Introduction, see Paul Elmer More's comments in T.S. Eliot: A Selected Critique. More sees "an inconsequence between the older poet and the newer critic." T.S. Eliot: A Selected Critique, ed. Leonard Unger (New York: Rinehart and Co., 1948) 27. See also Ernest Boyd's comment, cited in Unger: Boyd says Eliot's "aesthetic theory bears no relation whatsoever to his practice." Quoted in Unger, Introduction, xii.

² Eliot, "Tradition," SE 7.

³ Eliot, "Tradition," SE 7.

⁴ Eliot, "Shakespeare," SE 117.

⁵ See, for example, Eliot's discussion of the internal inconsistencies in Hamlet and their roots in Shakespeare's personal situation at the time the play was written. Eliot, "Shakespeare," SE 124 ff. Eliot also discusses Milton's blindness in so far as he sees it affecting the style of Milton's poetry. See "Milton I," OPAP 139 ff.

⁶ Eliot, "The Metaphysical Poets," SE 245.

⁷ Eliot, "Tradition," SE 7. In 1920 Eliot again links the notion of self-subsistent, balanced works of art with the word impersonal. He says of Swinburne's poetic worlds: "the world of Swinburne does not depend upon some other world which it simulates; it has the necessary completeness and self-sufficiency for justification and permanence. It is impersonal, and no one else could have made it." Eliot, "Swinburne as Poet," SW 149. Once again, great poetry is impersonal in that it is a self-contained, self-subsistent reality which can exist on its own without the author's specific literary, historical or emotional history needed to clarify it.

⁸ Eliot, "Lancelot Andrewes," SE 293. Eliot admires Andrewes for his ability to create self-subsistent sermons, viable within their genre apart from Andrewes' personal belief in their content.

⁹ Eliot, "Lancelot Andrewes," SE 298-9.

¹⁰ Eliot, "Lancelot Andrewes," SE 295.

- 11 Eliot, "Lancelot Andrewes," SE 298-9.
- 12 Eliot, "Lancelot Andrewes," SE 299-300.
- 13 Eliot, "Lancelot Andrewes," SE 299.
- 14 Eliot, "Lancelot Andrewes," SE 292.
- 15 Eliot, "Lancelot Andrewes," SE 292.
- 16 Eliot, "Lancelot Andrewes," SE 289.
- 17 Eliot, "Lancelot Andrewes," SE 299.
- 18 Eliot, "Lancelot Andrewes," SE 299.
- 19 Eliot, "Lancelot Andrewes," SE 299.
- 20 Eliot, The Use of Poetry 26.
- 21 Eliot, The Use of Poetry 26.
- 22 Eliot, The Use of Poetry 26.
- 23 Eliot, "The Perfect Critic," SW 1-16.
- 24 T.S. Eliot, "In Memoriam," Essays Ancient and Modern (London: Faber and Faber Ltd., 1936) 181.
- 25 Eliot, "In Memoriam," EAAM 182.
- 26 Eliot, "In Memoriam," EAAM 182.
- 27 Eliot, "In Memoriam," EAAM 183.
- 28 Eliot, "In Memoriam," EAAM 183.
- 29 Eliot, The Use of Poetry 68.
- 30 Eliot, The Use of Poetry 68.
- 31 Eliot, The Use of Poetry 69.
- 32 Eliot, The Use of Poetry 67.
- 33 Eliot, "Hamlet and his Problems," SE 125.
- 34 Eliot, "Johnson as Critic and Poet," OPAP 179.
- 35 Eliot, "Virgil and the Christian World," OPAP 122.

- 36 T.S. Eliot, epigraph to facsimile The Waste Land, quoted in Lyndall Gordon, Eliot's Early Years (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1977) 86.
- 37 Eliot, "Tradition," SE 7.
- 38 David Spurr, Conflicts in Consciousness (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1984).
- 39 Eliot, "Byron," OPAP 206.
- 40 Eliot, "Tradition," SE 7.

Chapter Four: The Power of the Creative Process: how the creator benefits.

"Poetry is not a substitute for philosophy, or theology or religion, ... it has its own function. But as this function is not intellectual but emotional, it cannot be defined adequately in intellectual terms. We can say that it provides 'consolation': strange consolation"

"Shakespeare and the Stoicism of Seneca", Selected Essays.

Because they are concerned largely with issues such as tradition, classicism, impersonality or religion, most discussions of Eliot's essays miss his insightful and innovative ideas about the power of the creative process as personal therapy for the creator. Scattered throughout his essays from 1917 into the 1960's are references to the power of words and the power of the creative process to form new realities; references which place Eliot into an interesting relation to post-modernist writers like Borges and Atwood who are intrigued by the power of the written word and each man's need to tell his story.¹

Eliot does not isolate in one place the various functions of the creative process. This makes a step-by-step analysis of his views difficult. This problem is compounded by the fact that all of the functions of the creative process are tightly interwoven throughout Eliot's criticism. It is necessary, therefore, to consider Eliot's comments on the various powers of the creative process collectively, although five general areas can be observed. Eliot maintains that the literary world of each work can provide momentary escape for the poet from a treacherous actual reality into a literary safe one. At other times the poetic world which he creates can contain the poet's personal anguish, forming a receptacle which can then be dismissed by him. Eliot points out that through the creative process the poet can gain access to areas of his unconscious which are otherwise inaccessible to him. Once these barriers are broken down the poet is free to reconstruct a new situation from composite experiences, some of them fictive. Eliot believes that the poet, as instigator of the process of reconstruction, can manipulate experiences into situations which are more serene than those his actual experiences offer him. Eliot never implies that the poet calls upon the creative process to perform these various services simultaneously. As each work forms in the poet's mind, each of these services is more or less appropriate in light of his personal circumstances at the time. Finally, I suggest that the way in which dramatic personae sometimes manipulate words to console themselves and form personally comforting realities is in some ways analogous to the way in which the artist, in turn, manipulates

words to achieve relief, serenity or an extended understanding of his life's events.

With growth beyond himself as his goal, the great artist submits each of the components into the poetic "chamber."² In "Tradition and the Individual Talent" Eliot says:

The mind of the poet is the shred of platinum. It may partly or exclusively operate upon the experience of the man himself; but, the more perfect the artist, the more completely separate in him [at the moment of poetic creation] will be the man who suffers and the mind which creates; the more perfectly will the mind digest and transmute the passions which are its material.³

So each poet not only governs the chance his poem will have to become great poetry by his willingness to submit each of the components to the creative process, but he also governs the degree to which his own emotional spectrum or his understanding of himself will be broadened by the creative experience.

How, then, does this creative component work on the poet's behalf, according to Eliot? In his 1921 essay "The Metaphysical Poets" Eliot points out that "all experiences" which the poet brings to the creative moment enter and "form new wholes."⁴ Again, as in his "Tradition" essay, Eliot asserts the ability of the creative component to begin with the poet's actual experiences and through them form "new" situations as yet unexperienced by the poet.⁵ In his 1927 essay on Shakespeare, Eliot sees Dante's and Shakespeare's work as "gigantic attempts to metamorphose private failures and disappointments" into positive formulations.⁶ Eliot's belief is that the poet's poetry becomes, for the poet, his attempt to bring otherwise inaccessible information to light. Eliot says "under compulsion of what experience [Shakespeare] attempted to express the inexpressibly horrible [through the writing of Hamlet] we cannot ever know. We need a great many facts in his biography. ... We should have to understand things which Shakespeare did not understand himself."⁷ Eliot is dismayed, on Shakespeare's behalf, for two reasons. As we noted earlier, Eliot considers Hamlet an "artistic failure" because it fails to achieve an internal consistency.⁸ His other source of dismay, however, is relevant here. Eliot believes that the writing of Hamlet was, for Shakespeare, an attempt to objectify and cope with a personal trauma; an

attempt which failed. Eliot maintains that Shakespeare, like Kyd and other writers working with Hamlet before him, added something to the play to make it distinctly his own. Eliot feels Shakespeare's contribution was the attribute of madness in Hamlet, and that, for Shakespeare, "the essential emotion of the play is the feeling of a son towards a guilty mother."⁹ These were the issues which Shakespeare sought to effectively objectify and delineate through Hamlet. He is unsuccessful, however, because he fails to personally understand and objectify the emotions he has chosen to incorporate in his play. Shakespeare's own inability to delineate the ramifications of madness and familial guilt bears itself out in his play, which includes "superfluous and inconsistent scenes."¹⁰ Eliot feels that Hamlet is overwhelmed by the various emotions he is asked to experience and understand in the play, and that his confusion is an extension of his creator's confusion. So Hamlet remains, "like the sonnets, ... full of some stuff that the writer could not drag to light, contemplate, or manipulate into art."¹¹ To Eliot, the creative process shows evidence of a symbiotic relationship between the creator and the work he creates. The inner consistency of a work, its sense of understanding and acceptance of the emotions inherent in its action are extensions of the artist's own understanding of those emotions. Hamlet's confusion and lack of ultimate serenity within his own circumstance indicates to Eliot Shakespeare's own inability to clarify the emotional concerns and themes which the play was meant to exemplify. If Hamlet had been a successful enactment of madness and of the theme of familial guilt, this would have convinced Eliot that Shakespeare fully understood these issues and that he had profited by the ability to explore them through his play. The internally inconsistent work betrays its creator's inability to increase his understanding of himself and of life generally through the creative process.

Eliot's 1930 essay on Baudelaire points out that

it is not merely in the use of imagery of common life, not merely in the use of imagery of the sordid life of a great metropolis but in the elevation of such imagery to the first intensity--presenting it as it is, and yet making it represent something much more than itself--that Baudelaire has created a mode of release and expression for other men (my emphasis).¹²

The creative process is often of most use to its creator, according to Eliot, when it does not simply set out to mimetically represent life, but when, instead, it dissolves boundaries between the possible and the impossible to increase the understanding of its creator. As late as 1961 Eliot remembers that one of the reasons he so admired Shakespeare and Dante was for their ability to creatively produce "that intense excitement and sense of enlargement and liberation" from the confines of things as they are.¹³ This is, no doubt, what Eliot had in mind as early as 1924 when he pointed out that "on the one hand actual life is always the material [for literary creations], and on the other hand an abstraction from actual life is a necessary condition to the creation of art."¹⁴ Such comments indicate Eliot's belief that the creative experience, for the artist, allows a rising above or moving beyond actual life experiences and possibilities into a realm of unbounded possibility. Increasingly we detect in Eliot the notion that poetic endeavour does not strive to mimetically represent; it begins with actual experiences, the poet's "poetic material", and then proceeds to create a realm devoted to exploring "what if".¹⁵ This is a special ability unique to the creative artist. Within everyday reality,

the intense feeling, ecstatic or terrible, without an object or exceeding its object, is something which every person of sensibility has known; it is doubtless a study for pathologists. It often occurs in adolescence: the ordinary person [denied the power of the creative process] puts these feelings to sleep or trims down his feelings to fit the business world: the artist keeps them alive by his ability to intensify the world [artistically] to [meet] his emotions.¹⁶

This comment is reminiscent of Eliot's observations elsewhere that the poet has the unique ability to take an otherwise grotesque or out-of-place emotion and build up a world around it so that the emotion is proportionate to the world it now inhabits. Here, then, is one of the great powers of the creative process, according to Eliot. It lets the creator control and contemplate intense emotions which might otherwise be pushed aside into the unconscious.

In his 1929 Dante essay Eliot points out that one of the marks of a great artist is his ability to intermingle fictive elements with his actual experiences in the work he creates. He cites this as one of the

capabilities which make Dante's poetry more "alive" for him than the poetry of Tennyson.

It is worth pointing out again how very right was Dante to introduce among his historical characters at least one character who even to him could hardly have been more than a fiction. For the Inferno is relieved from any question of pettiness or arbitrariness in Dante's selection of damned. It reminds us that Hell is not a place but a state; that man is damned or blessed in the creatures of his imagination as well as in men who have actually lived; and that Hell, though a state, is a state which can only be thought of, and perhaps only experienced, by the projection of sensory images.¹⁷

Dante's Inferno is that "projection of sensory images" and constitutes the poet's personal delineation of Hell. As a manifestation of his personal sense of Hell, the written work becomes Dante's way of defining and experiencing Hell. Dante's sense of Hell "can only be thought of, and perhaps only experienced" by him through words.

Eliot's "Tradition" essay pointed out that the creative process lets the creator transform his own emotions and situations. The artist can also manipulate and experiment with emotions and human reactions generally through his words. In The Use of Poetry Eliot remarks approvingly on Wordsworth's comment that the poet possesses an added "disposition to be affected more than other men by absent things as if they were present; an ability of conjuring up in himself passions, which are indeed far from being the same as those produced by real events."¹⁸ In this way the creative process can sometimes become the way in which the poet initiates situations which reality denies him, while maintaining absolute control of his created world. Eliot concedes the poet's ability to actually change his own reality and that of other men in "What Dante Means to Me". He says that Dante "is making possible [through his poetic work] a much greater range of emotion and perception for other men, because he gives them the speech in which more can be expressed."¹⁸ Having the right words affects man's emotional spectrum and sense of life, according to Eliot.

Just as the "sensory images" in the Inferno constitute Dante's image of Hell, all poetry, according to Eliot, involves an exploration of personal concerns and confusions. That Eliot conceives of the creative

process as a way in which each poet tries to understand certain things for himself is clear in his observation in "Baudelaire":

Indeed, in much romantic poetry the sadness is due to the exploitation of the fact that no human relations are adequate to human desires, but also to the disbelief in any further object for human desires than that which, being human, fails to satisfy them. One of the unhappy necessities of human existence is that we have to 'find out things for ourselves.' If it were not so, the statement of Dante [in his Divine Comedy] would, at least for poets, have done once for all.

Eliot implies in the essay that Dante sought to understand life from its beginning through to its end by means of his literary masterpiece. Each poet studies life through his poetry, with this same understanding as a goal. What the poet is able to ascertain for himself will later be of benefit to his reader. In "What Dante Means to Me" Eliot points out that the Divine Comedy is "therefore a constant reminder to the poet, of the obligation to explore, to find words for the inarticulate, to capture those feelings which people can hardly feel, because they have no words for them."²¹ As a manipulator of words, the poet's "role" is crucial: full comprehension of complex feelings is sometimes impossible if the right words cannot be found to express those feelings. When the poet manages to find those words, he brings otherwise lost feelings into existence. Eliot believes that one of the tasks of the poet is "making people comprehend the incomprehensible."²² He does this by exploring the realm "beyond the frontiers of ordinary consciousness" and returning to "report to his fellow-citizens" on what he finds there.²³

Because the poet has the power, through his creative ability, to manipulate and extend the realm of human emotion and experience, he can use this power to particular, personal ends. In The Use of Poetry Eliot speaks approvingly of Coleridge's account of the function of the creative imagination. In Biographia Literaria Coleridge says:

The Imagination then I consider either as primary, or secondary. The Primary Imagination I hold to be the living power and prime agent of all human perception, and as a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM. The Secondary Imagination I consider as an echo of the former, co-existing with the conscious will, yet still as identical with the primary in the kind of its agency, and differing only in degree, and

in the mode of its operation. It dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to recreate; or where this process is rendered impossible, yet still at all events it struggles to idealize and unify (my emphasis).²⁴

Two of Coleridge's observations here fit in particularly well with Eliot's beliefs. Coleridge's understanding of the Secondary Imagination as something which mixes and intermingles its material before forming it into something distinct which is the poem is analagous to Eliot's process of transmutation, first mentioned in "Tradition". Coleridge's Secondary Imagination "dissolves, diffuses [and] dissipates, in order to recreate." Eliot's depiction of the poet's mind as a chamber which mixes and transforms the "gases" which are its poetic material posits the same type of process. The Imagination takes all of its poetic material and mixes it together "in order to recreate". For Eliot one of the most powerful and appealing aspects of the creative process is that it lets the poet take his poetic material (among it his personal memories, emotions, experiences or traumas), and reconstruct those situations to his own benefit. This power to "recreate" lets the poet turn personal failures (we think of Eliot's references to Dante, Shakespeare and others) into successes by his ability to "idealize and ... unify" those experiences within his newly created world. Because the poet controls the order in which events may occur in this creative realm, he can produce explanations and outcomes which everyday reality does not afford. Events may surface in his poetry and form themselves into explanations which had not occurred to him before. This power can be used in two ways by the creating artist: it may help him understand his actual reality more fully and so cope with it more easily or, as we will see in Eliot's critique of Othello's last great speech, it may afford him the only reality which he is emotionally capable of accepting.

This power of the creative process makes it an ideally-suited instrument of the poet's unconscious. Eliot believes that poetry "may make us from time to time a little more aware of the deeper, unnamed feelings which form the substratum of our being, to which we rarely penetrate; for our lives are mostly a constant evasion of ourselves, and evasion of the visible and sensible world."²⁵ In his 1924 essay

"The Music of Poetry" Eliot says

it is a commonplace to observe that the meaning of a poem may wholly escape paraphrase. It is not quite so commonplace to observe that the meaning of a poem may be something larger than its author's conscious purpose, and something remote from its origins. ... If, as we are aware, only a part of the meaning can be conveyed by paraphrase, that is because the poet is occupied with frontiers of consciousness beyond which words fail, though meanings still exist.²⁶

Again in his 1951 essay "Poetry and Drama" Eliot says:

it seems to me that beyond the nameable, classifiable emotions and motives of our conscious life when directed towards action--the part of life which prose drama is wholly adequate to express--there is a fringe of indefinite content, of feeling which we can only detect, so to speak, out of the corner of the eye and can never completely focus; of feeling of which we are²⁷ only aware in a kind of temporary detachment from action.

These otherwise unavailable emotions and feelings, this "peculiar range of sensibility" is accessible to the poet and his audience through the nature of dramatic poetry.²⁸ Eliot's observation here supports his comment elsewhere in the same essay that dramatic verse, through its use of the soliloquy, lets even the dramatic persona review his own life in a kind of detachment from action. Because of the drama's great power Eliot is able to conjure up "a kind of mirage" of what "prose drama" brought to "perfection" would make possible.²⁹ He ends the 1951 essay by outlining how such an idealized form of drama could serve its greatest function:

To go as far in this direction as it is possible to go, without losing that contact with the ordinary everyday world with which drama must come to terms, seems to me the proper aim of dramatic poetry. For it is ultimately the function of art, in imposing a credible order upon ordinary reality, and thereby eliciting some perception of an order in reality, to bring us to a condition of serenity, stillness, and reconciliation; and then leave us, as Virgil left Dante, to proceed³⁰ toward a region where that guide can avail us no farther.

The creating artist tries to come to terms "with the ordinary everyday world" to hopefully establish an order in his "reality". This ensures a condition of "stillness" and "serenity" in the creator. This new-found condition of stillness and serenity is much more amenable to the creator than the "private agonies" and personal anguish which often began

the process.³¹ Because he believed that the creative process could transform its personal poetic material Eliot makes a curt (yet ardent) observation in "Tradition":

Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality. But, of course, only those who have personality and emotions know what it means to want to escape from these things.³²

We see that Eliot believes in the power of words to alter, expand, order and, in every sense of the word, "change" the reality of the person who uses them. At times the creating artist taps areas of his unconscious and so expands his actual knowledge of himself through his words. At other times, however, this same ability to manipulate his sense of reality can become the creating artist's way of completely escaping reality and fashioning a personally supportive, fictive reality for himself. The same abilities which let him extend the realm of his actual reality serve the creator here as well. As a manipulator of words he can still diffuse and dissolve in order to recreate. The creating artist's goal in these instances is still to idealize and unify the details of his life to achieve personal serenity, perhaps to an even greater degree than if he sought increased understanding. Mankind's need, in certain perilous situations, to tell his own "customized" version of himself is something which Eliot feels Shakespeare captured brilliantly through his use of the dramatic soliloquy.

In his 1927 essay on Shakespeare Eliot isolates a feature of dramatic verse which he calls "the attitude of self-dramatization."³³ He uses Shakespeare's Othello as his example, and begins his comments by saying

I have always felt that I have never read a more terrible exposure of human weakness--of universal weakness--than the last great speech of Othello. ... It is usually taken (by readers) on its face value, as expressing the greatness in defeat of a noble but erring nature.³³

Eliot, however, sees something less obvious but more important at work in the speech. He goes on to quote Othello's last great speech in which he refers to himself as "one that loved not wisely but too well". Eliot's observations about the speech are as follows:

it may appear subjective and fantastic in the extreme (to my reader but ...) what Othello seems to me to be doing in making this speech is cheering himself up. He is endeavouring to escape reality, he has ceased to think about Desdemona, and is thinking about himself. ... Othello succeeds in turning himself into a pathetic figure, by adopting an aesthetic rather than a moral attitude, dramatising himself against his environment. He takes in the spectator, but the human motive is primarily to take in himself. I do not believe that any writer has ever exposed this bovarysme, the human will to see things as they are not, more clearly than Shakespeare.³⁵

To explain his meaning, Eliot makes an association between what he sees at work in Othello's speech and the Greek slaves during the time of Imperial Rome. Eliot maintains that, like Othello, the Greek slaves found themselves in a reality which offered no alternatives: they were in a situation which they could not physically alter, one which was personally degrading. Their only recourse was to use their words to affirm control and supremacy through the verbal constructs of Stoicism.³⁶ The Stoics escaped the reality of their physical situation and lived in a reality formulated by words; a reality which stressed their abilities and which they, as creators, could completely control. By highlighting the emotional, "romantic" and heroic reasons for his actions Othello is showing the same human need to tell out in words an idealized version of his actions.

Eliot points out that many of Shakespeare's dramatic heroes, "notably Othello, Coriolanus and Antony" find themselves in perilous situations which they are powerless to change and which are often of their own making.³⁷ Their only option is to use their words to fashion for themselves a bearable, idealized sense of how their life really progressed. Pushed to the limits of their actual reality Shakespeare's heroes, like the Greek Stoics, fashion a more amenable, safer reality with words. In outlining man's dependence on words to provide a haven in such trying situations Eliot says Shakespeare is "merely illustrating ... human nature."³⁸ Eliot says "Stoicism is the refuge for the individual in an indifferent or hostile world too big for him; it is the permanent substratum of a number of versions of cheering oneself up."³⁹ He continues:

In Elizabethan England we have conditions apparently utterly different from those of imperial Rome. But it was a period of dissolution and chaos; and in such a period any emotional attitude which seems to give a man something firm, even if it be the attitude of 'I am myself alone,' is eagerly taken up.

Eliot maintains that Shakespeare captures an attitude which is "modern, and [which] ... culminates in the attitude of Nietzsche."⁴¹ Eliot's point is that anyone who fashions a version of themselves with words does so to see themselves against their environment, but also to retell themselves and their situation in a more personally acceptable, positive light. In the dramatic soliloquy Shakespeare captures man's need, in the face of unalterable dilemmas, "to take in himself", "to see things as they are not." In the final moments of his tragedy, when the facts of the drama point out his errors and short-sightedness, Othello's only recourse is to create a personally supportive version of himself through his words. Through his manipulation of words, and because of the version of himself he gives, Othello "succeeds in turning himself" into a figure who elicits pity from his peers rather than contempt.⁴² Sometimes, in the face of otherwise insurmountable circumstances, the dramatic persona resorts to living in a completely or semi-fictionalized version of reality so that he might at least assert "I am myself alone".

Because they are--to varying degrees--extensions of his own psyche, an artist's literary personae can often carry on, in their fictive world, battles toward understanding which the poet is fighting in his own mind. As extensions of his own psyche, the poet's personae let him vicariously experience things which reality may never allow. In 1932 Eliot points out that "a dramatic poet cannot create characters of the greatest intensity of life unless his personages, in their reciprocal actions and behaviour in their story, are somehow dramatizing, but in no obvious form, an action or struggle for harmony in the soul of the poet."⁴³ Again in 1953 Eliot writes:

It seems to me that what happens, when an author creates a vital character, is a sort of give-and-take. The author may put into that character, besides its other attributes, some trait of his own, some strength or weakness, some tendency to violence or to indecision, some eccentricity even, that he has found in himself. Something perhaps never

realized in his own life, something of which those who know him best may be unaware, something not restricted in transmission to characters of the same temperament, the same age, and least of all, of the same sex. ... On the other hand, a character which succeeds in interesting its author may elicit from the author latent potentialities of his own being.⁴⁴

Eliot also places great trust in the power of words and in their ability to extend man's realm of feeling. In his 1945 essay "The Social Function of Poetry" Eliot maintains that in poetry "there is always the communication of some new experience, or some fresh understanding of the familiar, or the expression of something we have experienced but have no words for, which enlarges our consciousness or refines our sensibility."⁴⁵ In 1945 Eliot writes:

the impulse towards the literary use of the languages of the peoples began with poetry. And this appears perfectly natural when we realize that poetry has primarily to do with the expression of feeling and emotion; and that feeling and emotion are particular, whereas thought is general. ... One of the reasons for learning at least one foreign language well⁴⁶ is that we acquire a kind of supplementary personality.

In direct opposition to what some critics mistakenly conceive of as his impersonal notion of poetry, Eliot's assertion here is that words, language, poetry can be the way in which supplemental personalities, diverse aspects of self, are realized by the poet. His poetic creations not only allow the poet to explore the otherwise inaccessible areas of himself, but they can show the way for his audience to expand their awareness also. Eliot writes:

in expressing what other people feel [the poet] is also changing the feeling by making it more conscious; he is making people more aware of what they feel already, and therefore teaching them something about themselves. But he is not merely a more conscious person than the others; he is also individually different from other people, and from other poets too, and can make his readers share consciously in new feelings which they had not experienced before. ... [The poet] discovers new variations of sensibility which can be appropriated by others.⁴⁷

This particular function of the creative process, the tapping of feelings otherwise unnoticed, can often be painful, regardless of its ultimately beneficial effect. In his 1920 essay on William Blake Eliot

points out that "the peculiarity of all great poetry" is its "peculiar honesty, which, in a world too frightened to be honest, is peculiarly terrifying. It is an honesty against which the whole world conspires because it is unpleasant."⁴⁸ Although this process toward increased self-understanding is painful, we remember that the creative process begins in private suffering and then seeks to transmute and transform that suffering into a contained, personally understandable literary statement. Although confrontation of the unconscious, in the creative realm, can be painful to the poet, we remember that Eliot believes barriers to understanding are also whisked away in such confrontations. If the poet can leave the creative process with increased self-understanding, then the process, although painful, has been worthwhile.

In The Use of Poetry Eliot includes this passage from Coleridge, "from which we can learn a great deal":

That synthetic and magical power, for which we have exclusively appropriated the name of imagination ... reveals itself in the balance or reconciliation of opposite or discordant qualities ... the sense of novelty and freshness, with old and familiar objects; a more than usual state of emotion, with more than usual order; judgement ever awake and steady self-possession with enthusiasm and feeling profound or vehement.⁴⁹

In his 1920 essay on Tennyson Eliot ends by looking for, in Tennyson's late poetry, an indication that Tennyson had resolved some of his personal uncertainties which his poetry showed him to be combating, but finds "no reconciliation, no resolution."⁵⁰ Elsewhere in The Use of Poetry Eliot accuses Arnold of being unaware of the benefits open to the creator through the creative process. He says "one feels that the writing of poetry brought [Arnold] little of that excitement, that joyful loss of self in the workmanship of art, that intense and transitory relief which comes at the moment of completion and is the chief reward of a creative work."⁵¹ Eliot goes on to concede that some poets turn to creative endeavour in times of "ill-health, debility or anemia" and produce "an efflux of poetry" from this period of personal illness. He says:

it seems that at these moments, which are characterized by the sudden lifting of the burden of anxiety and fear which

presses upon our daily life so steadily that we are unaware of it, what happens is something negative: that is to say not 'inspiration' as we commonly think of it, but the breaking down of strong habitual barriers--which tend to re-form very quickly. Some obstruction is momentarily whisked away. The accompanying feeling is less like what we know as positive pleasure, than a sudden relief from an intolerable burden.⁵²

His daily anxieties and fears circulate like a pool of undefined chaos in the poet's mind, refusing to be pinned down. He feels haunted by certain personal incidents which often constitute part of his poetic material. They are, at this point, "a burden." Through his use of words and formation of poetry, however, the poet can put an end (even if it is sometimes but a temporary end) to the chaos. The anxiety and fear can be somehow contained within the poem he creates. The poet's ability to impose an order on what was once chaotic provides him with "relief." Once this relief and understanding has been achieved through formulation of the poem, the poet has freed himself from the demons of disillusionment and anxiety which tormented him. At various times and through various works this sense of relief ranges from temporary to a more lasting sense of understanding and serenity. We remember, for instance, Eliot's belief that Baudelaire and Dante achieved a greater understanding of life and of religion as a result of their lifetime's work.

As soon as the poet commits himself to producing a literary work, he becomes inextricably tied to that work. Musing on what the ideal place in society would be for the poet--in light of the personally painful process through which he must often go--Eliot says "[the poet] would like to be something of a popular entertainer, and be able to think his own thoughts behind a tragic or comic mask. ... There might, one fancies, be some fulfillment in exciting this communal pleasure, to give an immediate compensation for turning blood into ink."⁵³ Twenty years later, in his 1953 essay "The Three Voices of Poetry", Eliot envisages the creative act as a "burden" not only for the artist who writes from personal illness, but for all artists. In the early stages, before an actual poem has formed itself, the poet

is not concerned ... with other people at all; only with finding the right words. ... He is not concerned with whether

anybody else will ever listen to them or not, or whether anybody else will ever understand them if he does. He is oppressed by a burden which he must bring to birth to obtain relief. Or, to change the figure of speech, he is haunted by a demon, a demon against which he feels powerless, because in its first manifestation it has no face, no name, nothing: and the words, the poem he makes, are a kind of form of exorcism of this demon. In other words again he is going to all that trouble, not in order to communicate with anyone, but to gain relief from acute discomfort; and when the words are finally arranged in the right way--or in what he comes to accept as the best arrangement he can find--he may experience a moment of exhaustion, of appeasement, of absolution, and of something very near annihilation, which is in itself indescribable. And then he can say to the poem 'Go away! Find a place for yourself in a book--and don't expect me to take any further interest in you.'⁵⁴

Later in the same essay Eliot explains "what I am maintaining is, that the first effort of the poet should be to achieve clarity for himself" through the writing of his poem.⁵⁵ His assertion in his 1953 essay is a logical extension of his assertion in 1927 that "what every poet starts from is his own emotions."⁵⁶

¹ See, for example, Borges' The Garden of Forking Paths and Atwood's Lady Oracle.

² Eliot, "Tradition," SE 7.

³ Eliot, "Tradition," SE 7-8.

⁴ Eliot, "The Metaphysical Poets," SE 247.

⁵ Eliot, "Tradition," SE 10.

⁶ Eliot, "Tradition," SE 117.

⁷ Eliot, "Hamlet and His Problems," SE 126. It is important to remember in connection with such observations that whether or not Eliot admires Dante or Shakespeare for their attempt is (here) beside the point. The relevance of Eliot's observation is its elucidation of how the artist uses the creative process for his own emotional benefit.

⁸ Eliot, "Hamlet and His Problems," SE 123.

⁹ Eliot, "Hamlet and His Problems," SE 125, 124.

¹⁰ Eliot, "Hamlet and His Problems," SE 123.

¹¹ Eliot, "Hamlet and His Problems," SE 124.

¹² Eliot, "Baudelaire," SE 341.

¹³ Eliot, "To Criticize the Critic," TCTC 22.

¹⁴ Eliot, "Four Elizabethan Dramatists," SE 93.

¹⁵ Eliot, The Use of Poetry 126.

¹⁶ Eliot, "Hamlet and His Problems," SE 126.

¹⁷ Eliot, "Dante," SE 211. Eliot's observation about Dante in this passage exemplifies his way of making points generally. As in this passage, Eliot will often begin a comment about a particular work by a particular author and then move beyond that work to generalize about the nature of the creative process and how it reflects human needs.

¹⁸ Eliot, The Use of Poetry 74.

¹⁹ Eliot, "What Dante Means to Me," TCTC 134.

²⁰ Eliot, "Baudelaire," SE 343.

- 21 Eliot, "What Dante Means to Me," TCTC 134.
- 22 Eliot, "What Dante Means to Me," TCTC 134.
- 23 Eliot, "What Dante Means to Me," TCTC 134.
- 24 S.T. Coleridge, as quoted in Eliot, The Use of Poetry 76.
- 25 Eliot, The Use of Poetry, 155.
- 26 Eliot, "The Music of Poetry," OPAP 30.
- 27 Eliot, "Poetry and Drama," OPAP 86.
- 28 Eliot, "Shakespeare," SE 110-11 ff.
- 29 Eliot, "Shakespeare," SE 117.
- 30 Eliot, "Poetry and Drama," OPAP 87.
- 31 Eliot, "Shakespeare," SE 117.
- 32 Eliot, "Tradition," SE 10-11.
- 33 Eliot, "Shakespeare," SE 110.
- 34 Eliot, "Shakespeare," SE 110.
- 35 Eliot, "Shakespeare," SE 110-11.
- 36 Eliot, "Shakespeare," SE 110-113.
- 37 Eliot, "Shakespeare," SE 111.
- 38 Eliot, "Shakespeare," SE 111.
- 39 Eliot, "Shakespeare," SE 112.
- 40 Eliot, "Shakespeare," SE 112.
- 41 Eliot, "Shakespeare," SE 110.
- 42 Eliot, "Shakespeare," SE 111.
- 43 Eliot, "John Ford," SE 172-3.
- 44 Eliot, "The Three Voices of Poetry," OPAP 94.
- 45 Eliot, "The Social Function of Poetry," OPAP 18.
- 46 Eliot, "The Social Function of Poetry," OPAP 19.

- 47 Eliot, "The Social Function of Poetry," OPAP 20.
- 48 Eliot, "William Blake," SE 275.
- 49 S.T. Coleridge, as quoted in Eliot, The Use of Poetry 79.
- 50 Eliot, "In Memoriam," EAAM 189.
- 51 Eliot, The Use of Poetry 108.
- 52 Eliot, The Use of Poetry 144.
- 53 Eliot, The Use of Poetry 154.
- 54 Eliot, "The Three Voices of Poetry," OPAP 98.
- 55 Eliot, "The Three Voices of Poetry," OPAP 98.
- 56 Eliot, "Shakespeare," SE 117.

Chapter Five: "The mind of the past ..." - An Analysis of T.S. Eliot's
The Family Reunion.

As Eliot mentions in his 1951 essay "Poetry and Drama", his play The Family Reunion is linked to Aeschylus' tragedy The Eumenides.¹ It is interesting, in light of this admission, to consider Eliot's notion of tradition and the individual talent in connection with The Family Reunion. There are certain obvious links between the two dramas, indicating Eliot's awareness of Aeschylus' precedent. There is the same sense of a tenacious, known-yet-not-completely known force hounding a son. Both plays center upon a son overwhelmed by guilt. The death of a parent is also involved in each. A strange group of furies pursue the son in each play, and each play is amicably resolved in supernatural fashion. We see, then, that certain structural details constitute Eliot's reliance on the literary tradition set forth by Aeschylus.

If he is to honor the principles set forth in Eliot's 1917 essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent", the author of The Family Reunion (like the author of any literary work) is compelled to appreciate and benefit by the tradition of the Greek Tragedy, while applying his individual talent to make of it a new thing which is his own work. In his translation of Aeschylus' The Eumenides Richmond Lattimore points out that the Oresteia trilogy (of which The Eumenides is a part) centers upon "issues [which] are public, not individual."² This statement provides a standard by which Eliot's manipulation of the plot details of Aeschylus' tragedy within his own drama can be judged. In Aeschylus' tragedy Orestes, the son, has the least lines of any character; the Chorus--the Eumenides--have the most lines. Eliot reverses this allotment in The Family Reunion. It is clearly Harry's drama; its action and energy center on him. The pain inflicted on Orestes by the Furies terminates early in the drama, allowing the balance of the play to concentrate on the details of the new social set-up. Eliot reverses the importance of these two issues, making most of his drama a review of the painful details of the son's life, pursued by the Furies. While the climax and resolution of the Greek tragedy center on the Chorus with provisos for care of "the city" and the "land", Harry alone reaps the benefits of his drama.³ Finally, it is Apollo and Athene who magically

find solutions and bestow them on Orestes. While Orestes relies heavily on his mediators, Harry initiates the improvements in his life himself. Because of this Harry benefits most by the outcome of his drama, while in Aeschylus' more public production it is the Chorus who seem to benefit most at the hands of the gods.

The central concerns and ordering themes which Eliot has retained from Aeschylus, while leaving behind the details of the Greek city-state, are a good example of Eliot's point in "Tradition" that the great writer must acquire the "sense of the timeless as well as of the temporal."⁴ Eliot takes some of the central concerns of The Eumenides and examines them in the context of one family, one man. The issues are similar; Eliot merely changes the context in which they are considered.

It is precisely because we have and know Aeschylus' play that The Family Reunion gives us a sense of what Eliot was trying to present. Only when we see how Aeschylus' play informed and did not inform The Family Reunion can we begin to appreciate what Eliot was attempting to present in his drama. Aeschylus effectively explores the themes of guilt, pursuit, matricide, expiation and resolution in an unbounded, urban context. Eliot's drama takes these ingredients and explores their impact within the context of the son's mind. Our knowledge of the Greek tragedy informs and heightens our appreciation of Eliot's very personal psycho-drama. Eliot's own phrase from "Tradition" highlights this fact most succinctly:

if we approach a poet without this prejudice (in favour of novelty) we shall often find that not only the best, but the most individual parts of his work may be those in which the dead poets, his ancestors, assert their immortality most vigorously.

Among the many instances of Eliot's "individual talent" at work in The Family Reunion is this dramatic movement inward, away from Aeschylus' city-state toward one family, one man in that family, and finally toward the workings of the man's unconscious mind.⁶

The first step in understanding The Family Reunion lies in isolating the source of its dramatic energy, a step Eliot points to in "The Frontiers of Criticism."⁷ All aspects of the play point to Harry Monchensey as its driving force. We must examine the structure of the drama to see

how and why Harry is so central. Harry is the guest that the family particularly awaits; he is the eldest son, missed for eight years, especially by Amy. While Ivy, Gerald, Violet, Mary, Agatha and Charles have lived essentially safe, unquestioning lives within Wishwood's protective walls, only Harry has ventured out into the frightening real world. Before Harry arrives Amy reigns as the controlling force of Wishwood and of the lives of its inhabitants. For years she has controlled the Wishwood universe, suspending time, preventing change, arranging marriages and lives. Amy thrives on predictability and control. She says

I do not want the clock to stop in the dark,
 If you want to know why I never leave Wishwood
 That is the reason. I keep Wishwood alive
 To keep the family alive, to keep them together,
 To keep me alive, and I live to keep them.

Amy and the other Wishwood personae depend on the predictable stasis, the clock safely ticking, to surmount the dark areas of life. When Harry returns to Wishwood, however, the dynamics of the situation change completely.

As soon as Harry steps back into Wishwood it becomes quickly apparent that his personality now sets the tone and the style of conversation, and that he now controls Wishwood's personalities and the resolution of the drama. Amy has been supplanted as Wishwood's controlling force. We come to realize that The Family Reunion is, in fact, Harry's psychic diary, an exposé of his thoughts since childhood. As Harry moves through the details of his life this time, however, he understands what went wrong and who was to blame. Harry's account of his life in The Family Reunion shows interesting affinities to Eliot's notion of "self-dramatization": the drama is Harry Monchensey's chance to reconstruct his reality by confronting, reviewing, retelling the incidents in his life in a realm in which he exerts absolute control.⁹ I postulate that the events of The Family Reunion are a kind of inter-psychic dramatization of Harry Monchensey's unconscious.

It becomes clear that Harry has returned to Wishwood to regain contact with an aspect of his own personality, his "Wishwood" self. He and the other characters refer to two different Harrys: a "Wishwood"

Harry who lived by the conforming standards set by Amy for many years, and a second Harry who developed a life elsewhere through his escape into a more vital world and his marriage to the unapproved wife. His sense that his psyche was split into individually incomplete fragments first drove Harry out of Wishwood in search of his missing self; the same sense of incompleteness has initiated his return. Although it was his sense of incompleteness that first drove him from Wishwood, Harry only understands this when he is back at Wishwood. He tells Mary that he "wanted to escape" and says: "I thought I might escape from one life to another, / And it may be all one life, with no escape. Tell me, / Were you ever happy here, as a child at Wishwood?"¹⁰ Agatha predicts, even before Harry returns, that a return to Wishwood will make clear to Harry his sense of self-fragmentation. She says:

I mean that at Wishwood he will find another
Harry.
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.¹¹

As Mary and Harry first try to understand his motives for return, Harry says

Whatever I hoped for
Now that I am here [at Wishwood] I know I shall not find it.
The instinct to return to the point of departure
And start again as if nothing had happened,
Isn't that all folly? It's like the hollow tree,
Not there.¹²

His sense of fragmentation has made Harry feel incomplete, unreal. Mary intuits this, and replies:

But surely, what you say
Only proves that you expected Wishwood
To be your real self, to do something for you
That you can only do for yourself.
What you need to alter is something inside you.
Which you can change anywhere--here, as well as else-
where.¹³

Mary points out that Harry's flight from Wishwood in search of his actual

self was destined for failure, since it involved running from or denying the presence of the "Wishwood" Harry. She says:

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 deceive your-
self.

Like the man convinced that he is paralysed
Or like the man who believes that he is blind
While he still sees the sunlight.¹⁴

Harry has yet to learn that he must confront both selves and not simply choose one or the other.

Having returned to Wishwood to find the rest of himself, the Eumenides--aspects of his own psyche--tangibly appear before Harry. His first reaction is to direct them toward the other Harry, away from the person he now perceives himself to be. Referring to Mary, Harry asks the Eumenides:

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.¹⁵

As his sense of self-understanding increases Harry becomes better able to articulate his sense of self-fragmentation upon leaving behind his Wishwood "self" to search for a more vital life. He tells Agatha:

At the beginning, eight years ago,
I felt, at first, that sense of separation,
Of isolation unredeemable, irrevocable--
... That is one hell.
Then the numbness came to cover it--that is another--
That was the second hell of not being there,
The degradation of being parted from myself,
From the self which persisted only as an eye, seeing.
All this last year, I could not fit myself together;
... I felt ...
Diffused, I not a person, in a world, not of persons
But only of contaminating presences.¹⁶

As yet Harry does not perceive that the Eumenides--the contaminating presences which have been haunting him--are in fact aspects of his own

psyche from which he has been running. Aeschylus may have had similar ideas in mind when he arranged to have the Eumenides call themselves "the mind of the past."¹⁷

As soon as he left Wishwood eight years ago Harry began to feel cut off from a part of himself, that part of his personality which was the safe and predictable Wishwood Monchensey. He says:

When I was outside (Wishwood)
I could associate nothing of it with myself,
Though nothing else was real. I thought foolishly
That when I got back to Wishwood, as I had left it,
Everything would fall into place.¹⁸

Agatha, who best understands Harry's search for wholeness over the last eight years, calls it "Wandering in the neutral territory/Between two worlds."¹⁹

So Harry returns to Wishwood to find and understand his Wishwood self. However, it is not the percipient Wishwood Harry that he comes to understand, but the unconscious Harry, the child who had its inception at Wishwood. Consequently, the realm in which The Family Reunion operates is a particularly murky, hard-to-define one. Harry's search into his childhood is comprised of pockets of memory, smells, snatches of conversation. He says "I remember/A summer day of unusual heat,/... the silence ... the conversations not overheard,/Not intended to be heard with the sidewise looks,/That bring death into the heart of a child."²⁰ As Harry reconstructs his life at Wishwood his remarks indicate that The Family Reunion is his path through his own unconscious. He realizes, through his recounting of his life, that his life elsewhere was simply "automatism", and feels oppressed by a guilty burden which has driven him back to Wishwood to find relief. Merely conscious life involved

many creatures moving
Without direction, for no direction
Leads anywhere but round and round in that vapour--
Without purpose, and without principle of conduct
In flickering intervals of light and darkness;
The partial anaesthesia of suffering without feeling
And partial observation of one's own automatism
While the slow stain sinks deeper through the²¹ skin
Tainting the flesh and discolouring the bone.

Although Harry went through the necessary motions of everyday life while

absent from Wishwood, he always felt that more important issues, less overt actions, remained unresolved beneath the surface.

Some force which has its roots in Wishwood has been working on Harry like a "cancer/That eats away the self."²² He realizes that he has been chased all these years by voices which originate within his Wishwood unconscious. Mary assures him that the voices which pursue him originate in his own mind. Harry replies:

Something inside me, you think, that can be altered!
 And here, indeed! Where I have felt them near me,
 Here and here and here--wherever I am not looking,
 Always flickering at the corner of my eye,
 Almost whispering just out of earshot--
 And inside too, in the nightly panic
 Of dreaming dissolution.²³

Harry's references to the Eumenides here suggest Eliot's own observations about the creative process. Harry's dramatic review of his life makes otherwise inaccessible memories, emotions and understanding accessible to him. These memories and incidents, which lurk just beyond everyday consciousness because of their emotional nature, can appear safely in his dramatic construct of his life. The otherwise unbearable or inaccessible memories surface within the verbal construct "in a kind of temporary detachment from action."²⁴

As the drama unfolds it becomes clearly an enactment of Harry's mental torment. Downing tells the family that Harry is suffering from depression; specifically he feels Harry has "suffered from what they call a kind of repression."²⁵ In the course of the drama Harry learns that repressing or running from his inner voices aggravates them, while confronting them dispels them. As he detects their presence once more, he feels

That apprehension deeper than all sense,
 Deeper than the sense of smell, but like a smell
 In that it is indescribable, a sweet and bitter smell
 From another world.

... Oh why, now? Come out!
 Since I know you are there, I know you are spying on me.
 Why do you play with me, why do you let me go,
 Only to surround me? When I remember them
 They leave me alone: when I forget them
 Only for an instant of inattention
 They are roused again, the sleepless hunters
 That will not let me sleep.²⁶

As we have seen, Eliot believes that the creative process offers the creator many benefits. Once he is physically surrounded by his childhood world, the actual nature of that world begins to come clear to Harry. Now he remembers, as do Mary and Agatha, the actual details of childhood at Wishwood, the reason why these details were repressed and why he fled them for so many years. Amy had designed a strange marriage-like bond between herself and her infant son. This strange Oedipal arrangement involved the death of Harry's father and Amy's complete preoccupation with and dependence upon her eldest son for emotional contact. Within the drama Mary realizes what her place was in Amy's plan. She says:

What cousin Amy wants, she usually gets.
 ... I know very well
 Why she wanted to keep me [at Wishwood]. She didn't need me:
 She would have done just as well with a hired servant
 Or with none. She only wanted me for Harry--
 Not such a compliment: she only wanted
 To have a tame daughter-in-law with very little money,
 A housekeeper-companion for her and Harry.
 Even when he married, she still held on to me
 Because she couldn't bear to let any project go:
 And even when she died: I believed that ²⁷Cousin Amy--
 ... had killed her by willing.

Amy initially pretends "she" (Harry's wife) never existed. Amy says "I am glad that none of you ever met her./It will make the situation very much easier. .../I would have prevented [the marriage] if I could. .../Please behave only/As if nothing had happened in the last eight years."²⁸ Amy groomed Harry as a replacement for her husband and kept this Wishwood Harry alive while the real Harry "escape [d]";²⁹ she says, "Seven years I kept him,/For the sake of the future, a discontented ghost,/In his own house. ... I would have sons, if I could not have a husband."³⁰ Agatha insinuates that because of his part in this strange marriage bond to Amy, Harry's father tried to murder both him and Amy before Harry was even born. Agatha says of Harry's father: "I found him thinking/How to get rid of your mother. What simple plots!/He was not suited to the role of murderer./ ... You were due in three months' time;/You would not have been born in that event."³² That Agatha is even aware of the father's unspoken motives suggests that she may be a pawn in Harry's transcript of his own unconscious.

Harry senses that his mother has lived her life vicariously through others, particularly through him. Any self-indulgent moments enjoyed by Harry annoyed Amy and added to the burden of guilt which Harry already carried because of his suspicious birth. When Warburton innocently cautions Harry against upsetting his mother, Harry lashes back:

What about my mother?
 Everything has always been referred back to mother.
 When we were children, before we went to school,
 The rule of conduct was simply pleasing mother;
 What was wrong was whatever made her suffer,
 And whatever made her happy was what was virtuous--
 Though never very happy, I remember. That was why
 We all felt like failures, before we had begun.
 When we came back, for the school holidays,
 They were not holidays, but simply a time
 In which we were supposed to make up to mother
 For all the weeks during which she had not seen us
 Except at half-term, and seeing us then
 Only seemed to make her more unhappy, and made us
 Feel more guilty, and so we misbehaved
 Next day at school, in order to be punished,
 For punishment made us feel less guilty. Mother
 Never punished us, but made us feel guilty.³²

At home it becomes clear to Harry that it is his mother's incestuous and pervasive control of him that makes him feel that at Wishwood he has "been finding/A misery long forgotten, .../The shadow of something behind [his] meagre childhood,/Some origin of wretchedness."³³ Harry intuits his role in the father's displacement and this helps him understand his feelings of guilt. The spectres, aspects of his long-repressed memory, evoke these feelings in him. He says "were [the spectres] simply outside,/I might escape somewhere, perhaps./ ... But ... /What matters is the filthiness. I can clean my skin,/Purify my life, void my mind,/But always the filthiness, that lies a little deeper."³⁴ As his unwitting role in the family's tragedy becomes clearer to him, Harry is obsessed by the need for information about his father. He constantly says "I want you to tell me about my father", and asks "what did he look like then? Did he look at all like me?"³⁵

If The Family Reunion is Harry's psycho-drama, it is important to

consider what role the individual family members play in it. Eliot points out in his essay on Shakespeare that the benefit of "self-dramatization" to the dramatic persona is its ability to let him objectively contemplate himself.³⁶ The creative process as a whole lets the creator achieve "serenity" and "reconciliation" with his past.³⁷ Again, the creative process helps Harry achieve these things. Agatha and Mary, figures in his recreation of his life, provide unwavering support and understanding to Harry on his painful psychic journey. When he talks of his fear in facing the spectres, Mary says: "Look at me. You can depend on me./Harry. Harry! It's all right, I tell you./If you will depend on me, it will be all right."³⁸ When the family learns that Harry may have murdered his wife, Charles kindly interjects: "in any case, I shouldn't blame Harry./I might have done the same thing once, myself/Nobody knows what he's likely to do/Until there's somebody he wants to get rid of."³⁹ Agatha consistently encourages Harry to pursue his path toward self-understanding; she says:

I am ... convinced
That you only hold a fragment of the explanation.
It is only because of what you do not understand
That you feel the need to declare what you do.
There is more to understand: hold fast to that
As the way to freedom.⁴⁰

Agatha and Mary also serve as Harry's clear voice of reason, pointing out his errors during the years away from Wishwood, and encouraging him to keep searching. Agatha says:

Whatever you have learned, Harry, you must remember
That there is always more: we cannot rest in being
The impatient spectators of malice or stupidity.
We must try to penetrate the other private worlds
Of make-believe and fear,⁴¹ To rest in our own suffering
Is evasion of suffering.

Agatha also curtails Amy's control over Harry; Amy says "I wanted to obliterate/[Harry's] past life, and have nothing except to remind him/Of the years when he had been a happy boy at Wishwood;/For his future success."⁴² Agatha points out that "success is relative:/It is what we can make of the mess we have made of things,/It is what [Harry] can make, not what you would make for him."⁴³ Agatha's remark further suggests that The Family Reunion is Harry's attempt to reconstruct a more

comprehensible and amenable reality out of the chaotic fragments his real life afforded him.

One of the Chorus' many roles (they are, it must be remembered, the members of the family) is the expression of the fearful nature of this voyage through the unconscious. They point out how much safer it is to remain in the realm of the merely conscious; the realm where nothing is unclear:

We do not like to look out of the same window, and see
quite a different landscape.
We do not like to climb a stair, and find that it takes us
down.
We do not like to walk out of a door, and find ourselves back
in the same room.
We do not like the maze in the garden, because it too closely
resembles the maze in the brain.
We do not like what happens when we are awake, because
it too closely resembles what happens when we are
asleep.⁴⁴

The Chorus are unnerved by the fact that the drama is forcing them to face the dark realms of the unconscious formerly threatening to them only during sleep.

The Chorus highlight the fact that submissions, like Harry's, to the forces of the unconscious dissolve the safe, everyday boundaries of reality:

We understand the ordinary business of living,
We know how to work the machine,
We can usually avoid accidents,
We are insured against fire, ...
We do not know much about thinking,
What is happening outside the circle?
And what is the meaning of happening? ...
 what are we, and what are we doing?
To each and all of these questions
There is no conceivable answer.
We have suffered far more than a personal loss--
We have lost our way in the dark.⁴⁵

Harry's return to Wishwood is his facing of the unconscious and, as such, it takes him into the "dark": he no longer respects Amy's realm of control, causing her clock to stop ticking reassuringly in the dark. Although necessary, Harry's voyage is not easy. The Chorus express Harry's own fear that once he renounces the safe, conscious, controlled

world epitomized by Wishwood and addresses the world of the unconscious he will have "lost [his] way."⁴⁶

The Chorus also articulate the alternatives to Harry's voyage into self-awareness. They are not convinced that they should allow themselves to be exposed to such aspects of the unknown; they wonder why they should make the effort.

Why should we stand here like guilty conspirators, waiting
for some revelation?
When the hidden shall be exposed, and the newsboy shall
shout in the street?
When the private shall be made public, the common photo-
grapher
Flashlight for the picture papers: why do we huddle to-
gether
In a horrid amity of misfortune? why should we be impli-
cated, brought in and brought together?⁴⁷

As an alternative to searching one's inner thoughts, they suggest stasis:

We only ask to be reassured
About the noises in the cellar
And the window that should not have been open.
Why do we all behave as if the door might suddenly open,
the curtains be drawn,
The cellar make some dreadful disclosure, the roof disappear,
And we should cease to be sure of what is real or unreal?
Hold tight, hold tight, we must insist⁴⁸ that the world is what
we have always taken it to be.

Charles sums up how unnerving self-discovery can be, saying: "It's very odd,/But I am beginning to feel, just beginning to feel/That there is something I could understand, if I were told it./But I'm not sure that I want to know."⁴⁹ Harry's dramatic journey is not an easy one and Charles and the rest of the Chorus tempt him with an alternative: continued flight from the unknown.

Finally the Chorus provide an over-view of the events of the drama, reiterating as a group what individual characters' conversations have touched on. The Chorus sum up Part Two, Scene Two with the observation that

whatever happens began in the past, and presses hard
on the future.
The agony in the curtained bedroom, whether of birth or of
dying,

Wishwood to find and make peace with the rest of himself, the Wishwood self from which he ran years ago. In the course of the drama, he learns several important things about his life. He says:

I only now begin to have some understanding
Of you [Agatha,] of all of us. Family affection
Was a kind of formal obligation, a duty
Only noticed by its neglect. One had that part to play.
After such training, I could endure, these ten years,
Playing a part that had been imposed upon me;
And I returned to find another one made ready--
The book laid out, lines underscored, and the costume
Ready to be put on.⁵⁵

Harry considers his life a script, a narrative that he has had to learn; one he has returned to Wishwood to review and re-write. The Family Reunion becomes his enactment of life's drama; this time, however, he writes and controls the script. Agatha also uses this analogy when she says: "what we have written [the text of the play] is not a story of detection, / Of crime and punishment, but of sin and expiation."⁵⁶ Eliot observed that Shakespeare's heroes often used the dramatic soliloquy as a means of self-dramatization; they used it as an opportunity to re-tell aspects of their life story, adding explanations and perhaps altering certain details in order to place themselves in a more self-flattering light. Eliot admires Shakespeare for capturing, through this dramatic technique, "the human will to see things as they are not."⁵⁷ Eliot sees as a fundamental part of human nature man's need to tell his own version of situations. Within the creative process the creator, in this case Harry, begins with factual detail: actual names and incidents. But the teller of the tale can provide dramatic explanations for events which his actual life denies him, whether through timidity or repression. We have seen Eliot maintain that there are various ways and various creative situations in which the creator benefits by production of his work. Harry, as the teller of his dramatic tale, bears out Eliot's belief.

By retelling his story in a realm in which he, as the central "force" in the play, exerts absolute control, Harry comes to understand many things about himself and the actions of his family. The actual "telling out" of his story gives Harry the detachment he needs to let him break free from the voices of the past. After conceding that his is

a fragmented psyche, Harry is able to push on and achieve personal insight. He says:

All this year,
This last year, I have been in flight
But always in ignorance of invisible pursuers.
Now I know that all my life has been a flight
And phantoms fed upon me while I fled. Now I know
That the last apparent refuge, the safe shelter,
That is where one meets them. That is the way of
spectres⁵⁸

Once he has faced these aspects of his own memory, he no longer feels the need to escape his reality, he can confront the voices. Harry says: "I know there is only one way out of defilement--/And I know that I must go."⁵⁹ He says:

Now I know
That my business is not to run away, but to pursue,
Not to avoid being found, but to seek.
I would not have chosen this way, had there been any other!
Now [the Furies] will lead me. I shall be safe with them.
I am not safe [at Wishwood].⁶⁰

Eliot's assertions about the creative process are given practical application in his drama The Family Reunion. First, we understand what Eliot meant in "Tradition and the Individual Talent" when he said "you cannot value [an artist] alone; you must set him, for contrast and comparison, among the dead."⁶¹ Eliot's overt reliance on the Aeschylus drama for themes and plot detail, along with his manipulation of those themes into a poignantly individual account elucidate the meaning of this 1917 observation. In light of the changes he makes to Aeschylus' premise, we see that Eliot is concerned primarily with the individual. Aeschylus asks us to consider how the themes of his play affect the people of a city, while Eliot asks us to consider how one man suffers through guilt and repression.

Along with providing a good example of how tradition and individual talent work together within one work, The Family Reunion also gives evidence as to just how a "creator" can benefit from the powers of the creative process. Harry's ultimate understanding comes as a result of his ability to dramatize himself against his environment, filling in conversations and speaking his mind much as Shakespeare's heroes do in

moments of comparable intensity. One of the observations inherent in much of Eliot's criticism is that words can be used by people to alter, understand, control, escape, idealize or fabricate their reality. Harry specifically benefits by his rendition of his life because he can control all the elements, exert unnatural control over the otherwise insurmountable Amy, and because he gains access to information which begins to free him from his sense of guilt.

The Family Reunion is also an interesting example of how an author includes details from his own situation in his work, while adding fictive elements: a process Eliot discusses in his delineation of the creative process.⁶² Certain obvious details from Eliot's own life can be seen to inform the events of his drama. The plot delineating a son's escape from a manipulative mother, his marriage to an excitable wife and return home after an eight year period is strongly analogous to the path Eliot's own life took in his early years with Vivienne Haigh-Wood. Certainly fiction and fact both play a part in Eliot's delineation of the Monchensey household. It might be argued, however, that Harry's speeches about his childhood and his particularized accounts of his mother's manipulative ways are particularly poignant because of their basis in Eliot's own experience. Just as Byron's Don Juan is especially moving to Eliot because of the affinities he sees between Byron's own life and the events of his long poem, we realize that Eliot's drama The Family Reunion sets out to capture, in part, Eliot's own sense of fatigue and self-fragmentation. In this area Lyndall Gordon's and Peter Ackroyd's accounts of Vivienne Haigh-Wood and Charlotte Eliot are interesting and helpful in understanding the emotions which are meant to infuse Eliot's drama.⁶³

Although the associations between Eliot's personal situation or a knowledge of Aeschylus' play enhance our enjoyment of his drama, The Family Reunion is impersonal in that it can stand on its own as a coherent work. Because Eliot's drama begins with conventional dialogue and plot detail and then moves gradually into stream-of-consciousness and the establishment of a Chorus the reader can follow the drama without access to "external" details. The biographical and literary background does, however, add dimension and scope to a reader's understanding of the text.

A clarified understanding of Eliot's actual use of the word "impersonal" was useful when analyzing The Family Reunion, since it let me use the biographical information to understand the drama, without fear of transgressing Eliot's own critical codes.

Finally, Eliot's own predilection to acquaint himself with an author's entire works as well as that author's biography before commenting on one work proved a useful standard in approaching his own criticism. As I moved chronologically through Eliot's essays from 1917 into the 1960's, a sense of continuity and consistency with respect to words like "impersonal", "personality" or "tradition" became clear. I would suggest that too many analyses of Eliot's criticism rely solely or largely on "Tradition and the Individual Talent". Eliot's subsequent essays support and further elucidate the ideas which "Tradition" introduced. An over-view of Eliot's criticism brings out this continuity. Because Eliot's critical observations are cumulative and interdependent, remarks taken out of context can be particularly misleading. As it became clear that select phrases from one essay formed the basis of many critical commentaries about Eliot, I tried to emulate his own, more catholic approach to an author.

Notes

- 1 Eliot, "Poetry and Drama," OPAP 84.
- 2 Richmond Lattimore, Greek Tragedies Volume 3 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960) 2.
- 3 Aeschylus, "The Eumenides," Greek Tragedies Volume 3 Ed. D. Greene and R. Lattimore (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960) 39-40.
- 4 Eliot, "Tradition," SE 4.
- 5 Eliot, "Tradition," SE 4.
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- 8 T.S. Eliot, The Family Reunion (London: Faber and Faber, 1939) 15.
- 9 Eliot, "Shakespeare," SE 110.
- 10 Eliot TFR 49.
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- 41 Eliot TFR 86-7.
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- 43 Eliot TFR 110.
- 44 Eliot TFR 122.
- 45 Eliot TFR 122-3.
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- 53 Eliot TFR 82, 85.
- 54 Eliot, "Shakespeare," SE 110.
- 55 Eliot TFR 99.
- 56 Eliot TFR 97.
- 57 Eliot, "Shakespeare," SE 111.
- 58 Eliot TFR 105.
- 59 Eliot TFR 104.
- 60 Eliot TFR 106.
- 61 Eliot, "Tradition," SE 9.
- 62 Eliot, "Dante," SE 211.
- 63 See, for example, Gordon, p. 8, 11, 33, 44-5 or Ackroyd p. 15, 20, 38-41.

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