

## MYTH AND RITUAL IN THE DRAMA OF T. S. ELIOT

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For 23 years, since 1909 — the date of the beginning of his literary career — T. S. Eliot did not pay much attention to drama; his main concern was poetry and criticism. Later on, as the number of his plays grew, it became evident that he wanted to devote his creative energies to drama. From the very beginning of his dramatic career, Eliot's fundamental demand was to write dramas in which "whatever means of communication the dramatist is going to use, the drama... must give some perception of order in life" (Eliot 1934 : 135). The pursuit of order related to his growing religious awareness of the need for an ordered universe in nature and in art led him to the search for such means of artistic communication that would allow him to present the order in his plays. Myth and ritual provided perfect vehicles for effecting this type of presentation.

Ritual, by itself, cannot account for itself, for it is pre-logical, or even pre-verbal and in a sense pre-human. Ritual links human life to the biological dependence on the natural cycle which plants and animals still have. Rituals cluster around the cyclical movements of the sun, the moon, the seasons, and human life. Every crucial periodicity of experience: dawn, sunset, seed-time, harvest, birth, initiation, marriage and death get rituals attached to them.

Everything in nature that we think of as having some analogy with works of art, like the flower or the bird's song, grows out of a synchronization between an organism and the rhythms of its natural environment, especially that of the solar year. With animals some experiences of synchronization, like the mating dances of birds, could almost be called rituals. Myth is more distinctively human, as the most intelligent partridge cannot tell even the most absurd story explaining why it drums in the mating season (Frye 1957:107).

Mythical element has a power of independent communication, it is obvious not only in the example of Oedipus, but in any folk tale. Thus ritual is the archetypal aspect of mythos, and the use of mythos in a work of art is a means of ordering experience in the chaos of the modern world. "Using the myth... is simply a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and a significance

to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history" (Eliot 1926: 483). Myth can give a simple rendering of the human soul, by virtue of its long tradition. It is moreover a part of a larger body of human experience which forms a complete interpretation of the universe. At the same time it has a long history of use and re-use by generations, so that the new user can suggest a universal meaning, and be assured that it will be understood by his audience, by simply modelling his incidents on the pattern of the actions appearing in myth. Thus the user of the myth has a greater freedom of suggesting an interpretation of the incidents.

This method was possible by concurrence of psychology, ethnology and anthropology. Christianity, as well as other religions — the fact which was extremely important for Eliot — could be seen as a modern version of old pagan celebrations; earth's yearly death and rebirth became later symbolically the death and resurrection of God. For Eliot this interpretation had the attraction of putting religion on a basis more acceptable to the intellectual and sophisticated mind.

Eliot studied the origins of Greek drama, as rooted in ancient rituals, in the primitive celebrations marking the phases in the cycles of the earth's productiveness. Especially the work of Gilbert Murray emphasizes the specific liturgical forms of the fertility ceremonies which were retained in Greek drama. Murray found in the forms of the plots of Greek tragedy the sequence of ritual procedure, which he summarizes in the following way:

- I. An *Agon* or Contest, Light against Darkness, Summer against Winter.
- II. A *Pathos* of the year-Daimon, generally a ritual of sacrificial death, in which Adonis or Attis is slain by the tabu animal, the Pharmakos stoned, Osiris, Dionysus, Orpheus, Hippolytus torn to pieces...
- III. A *Messenger*. For the *Pathos* seems seldom to be actually performed under the eyes of the audience ... It is announced by a messenger.
- IV. A *Threnos* or Lamentation...
- V. An *Anagnorisis* — discovery or recognition — of the slain, followed by his Resurrection or Apotheosis, or his Epiphany in glory (Murray 1927: 342-343).

With this impetus Greek drama took on a new significance for Eliot. The body of myth surrounding the Greek tradition provided the contemporary dramatist with an inexhaustible source of mythical material.

In 1932 "Fragments of a prologue" and "Fragments of an agon" were published in a book form and the title was changed to *Sweeney agonistes: fragments of an Aristophanic melodrama*. It was Eliot's first dramatic attempt and at the same time the first attempt to stress primitive rites by underlining rhythm and man's innate fascination with it. Since the term "dramatic" meant for Eliot more than a presentation of an action — it meant the creation of an ordered whole, a total world in which everything is scaled to size, a rhythmic and proportioned totality forming an emotional and ideological

whole — even the conception of character was reduced to fit the scale. The rhythm Eliot chose for *Sweeney agonistes* was that of jazz. The stylized speeches, actions and jazz patterns of the characters are an attempt to create a simplified rhythmic world.

*Sweeney agonistes* is an allegory — Sweeney's dilemma (like Samson's dilemma in Milton's *Samson agonistes*) is that of an exile in an alien world, but at the same time his ritualistic celebration of death and rebirth is treated in such a way as to underline the comic effect, and simultaneously to find an excuse for the use of the term "Aristophanic" in the title of the play. Sweeney is the most important person of the play, for he introduces the dimension of tragic horror into the empty world of the people who surround him. He hides his wisdom in feigned stupidity; he battles with his antagonists in the agon by a debate which he wins by his wit and his use of the ironic abuse which shows the false claims of his enemies, but he masks his wit in buffoonery. Sweeney re-enacts the role of the hero, for he speaks in the play for the principle of spiritual insight won by a horrible agony — in the ritualistic sense the agony of the old and impotent god who suffers death before the regeneration of resurrection. "Fragment of a prologue" corresponds to the first part of the ritual procedure — it is the introduction of and the preparation for the ritual sacrifice. "Fragment of an agon" is the beginning of the sacrifice in its primitive dramatic form — the conflict between Light and Darkness. In the agon of *Sweeney agonistes* the opposing forces are those who live in a world without any spiritual dimension and the forces of purgation and reawakening, represented by Sweeney. Sweeney offers a regeneration to one of the girls representing the forces of the different kind than his own, but she rejects the regeneration by saying she would be bored, so he tells her a story about a girl who was murdered and dissolved in a lysol bath (as a cleansing agent). The bath was meant to bring her rebirth, like the sacramental purgatorial bath. To tell his story Sweeney returns from the dead, and as one who has been through the ordeal of the purgation he re-enacts the battle with those who are still in darkness. Thus Eliot sees in the death-rebirth process of the god, which is the type of the Passion and Resurrection of Christ, a wider meaning than the death of the body and eternal life of the soul after death. This pattern is applied to the mystic process of killing desire in order to bring to birth the spirit. The agon is thus the representation of the struggle, since humanity must be brought to awareness of another life of spiritual light. The path of penitence is never easy. Eliot's characters in *Sweeney agonistes* are isolated from God because they have refused through pride to recognize that life without God is death. Even the individual on the purgatorial path is cut off from God until he is sufficiently purified to see the divine light as other than a fearful darkness.

*Sweeney agonistes* is Eliot's first dramatic version of the theme of spiritual

pilgrimage which he has returned to again and again in his plays. The play is complete enough — although it exists in two fragments — to provide an illustration of his early dramatic attempts in presenting mythical and ritualistic sides of human life.

In *The rock* the elements of myth and ritual did not appear, for the play was intended to present the history of the English Church in the most elaborated form and in the framework of a modern pageant play.

The surface level of his second full-length play — *Murder in the cathedral*, written for the Canterbury Festival of June 1935 — is a dramatization of the historical event of the martyrdom of Thomas Becket, and it is both a psychological study of the saint and a portrayal of the contemporary struggle of church and state.

Desiring the earthly or heavenly glory of a martyr, Thomas might have committed a sin, but realizing this danger, he avoids it by total submission to God's will. He suffers martyrdom in full humility and thus achieves union with God.

Particular scenes of the play present particular stages of Thomas' inner struggle, being at the same time an illustration of the outward situation or rather of the attitude of other characters to Thomas' approach to his struggle. The Tempters come to Thomas immediately after his arrival at Canterbury after seven years' absence, at the moment when he is forced to decide what way to take in order to fulfil the aim of his life. Thomas foresees his martyrdom, preaching on it. The second part of the play presents at the beginning the reaction of the Women of Canterbury to Thomas' sermon. All the other scenes take place just as they have been foreseen by Thomas, including the arrival of the Knights and his own death. The Knights' explanation about the death of Thomas and the final address of the Third Priest affirm the triumph of the Church, which by martyrdom of Thomas reassures its supremacy.

This is the action of the surface level of the play, the presentation of Thomas' inner struggle, yet the scheme may be easily applied to the underlying level which is the analogy between Thomas and Christ. The part of the play in which Thomas is visited by the Tempters may be interpreted as Christ's temptation — Christ was tempted three times and Thomas had expected only three Tempters, but the Fourth Tempter appeared tempting Thomas with his own desires of glory. The second part in which Thomas' martyrdom is enacted is the Passion — represented by the lamentation of the Women of Canterbury after Thomas' death, it is related to Christ's death, and the Resurrection of Christ is the triumph of the Church expressed in the speech of the Third Priest. The play thus represents a myth, common and central to the whole culture. It has some of the abstractness of *Everyman*, but the

basic structure is derived from the ritual form of tragedy of the ancient times. The first part corresponds to the Agon, the second is Anagnorisis — discovery or recognition of the slain followed by his resurrection or Apotheosis. Apart from the easily communicable parallel of the martyrdom of Thomas in the play and the martyrdom of Christ, there are many elements which underline the mythical character of the play.

The Chorus of the Women of Canterbury plays the most important role as a unifying element. The scenes of the play, although logically connected with one another, must necessarily be complete in themselves, since they present abstract situations of the inner struggle of Thomas and are sometimes cut from the rest of the play. It is just the Chorus which unifies them, comments upon them, presents the following situations and reacts emotionally to the great events happening at Canterbury. The role of the Chorus is similar to that of the choruses in Greek tragedies, where the chorus not only commented on the events, but also presented those which happened off-stage or in the past and which could not be presented on the stage, since all Greek drama kept close to the Aristotelian unities.

The image of a wheel recurring throughout the play is one more element joining the two levels of the play. It is mentioned for the first time by the Chorus lamenting upon the spring. The ruinous spring which will beat at their doors and cause material and spiritual awakening makes the women, who preferred to pass unobserved, afraid. They are already waiting for October which brings decay. Beginning with the New Year which is near at hand, they long for the next December bringing quietness and inertia, and thus they narrate the circle of the whole year. Thomas in his opening speech defending the women mentions that "the wheel may turn and still/Be for ever still" (Eliot 1965 : 12). Later on Thomas replies to the First Tempter using the same image: "The fool may think/He can turn the wheel on which he turns" (Eliot 1965 : 15). In his sermon Thomas once more talks of the circle of life saying that on the day of the celebration of Christ's birth we celebrate his death at the same time. In the second part of the play Thomas is slain when standing still in the middle of the circle formed by the four Knights. The circular structure of the universe and nature, repeating cycles of man's life, the wheel of fortune — all these symbolic implications of the word "wheel" are present in the play.

The circular structure of the microcosm is adequate to the same kind of structure of the macrocosm. The circular structure of the macrocosm is adequate for the omnipotent and omniscient will of God, while Thomas Becket represents a microcosm of a saint striving for unity with God; and being a representative of God's will, he tries to be an active part of the macrocosm. As soon as Thomas is slain and simultaneously unified with God, he joins the

macrocosm of God's will becoming the centre surrounded by the Knights. The recurring image of the wheel once more stresses the magical and ritualistic level of the play.

*Murder in the cathedral* was the first play whose both subject matter and form were to such an extent dependent upon mythical and ritualistic structure.

Yet, if Eliot wanted to prove the importance of myth and ritual in modern life, he could not base all his plays upon some historical events. Then,

What kind of play was to follow *Murder in the cathedral*? Naturally, its success produced a number of invitations to write further religious or historical plays, but Eliot was quite determined to refuse them all. He had always been wary of repeating himself, but in this matter he was motivated by a positive conviction. If the poets of twentieth century were to find once more a place in the theatre, it could only be by writing of contemporary life (Brown 1969:90).

And thus in 1939 Eliot abandoned the historical setting in favour of the drawing-room world of polite society in *The family reunion*. In this play Eliot used for the second time a number of themes that had already been presented in his earlier dramatic forms. The theme of a girl killed in a lysol bath — which Sweeney expected would make her spiritually pure — is repeated in Harry's drowned wife, and there is the same sense of mystery that surrounds the event. Dr Warburton, the old friend of Amy, follows in the footsteps of Dr Pereira from *Sweeney agonistes* as a symbolic representative of spiritual treatment. These similarities have been widely recognized by criticism, yet in this play Eliot attempted to solve other problems than those of *Sweeney agonistes*.

Once more, just as in *Murder in the cathedral*, the existence of the surface and underlying levels (the underlying level being in fact the mythical one) is seen almost immediately. Harry arrives home after his eight years' absence in a state of unnatural excitement. Even Aunts and Uncles, who are not aware of the events surrounding them simply because they are interested only in their remembrances and sentiments, notice it, breaking into a choral chant. For a long time, since the death of his wife, Harry has been haunted by invisible creatures, but he saw them for the first time when entering his home, as he concludes that the appearance of the Eumenides was more real to him than anything surrounding him. Trying to communicate his state, he confides to Agatha that it was he who pushed his wife overboard on the ship. His family does not want to admit the truth, since they do not want to participate in his guilt. Harry has believed that his coming home would cure him and let him get rid of the Furies, but meanwhile he learns from Agatha that she and his father were in love with each other and his father planned to murder Amy, Harry's mother, yet Agatha persuaded him not to do so, because Harry was due in some months. Just at that moment Harry realizes that his own rela-

tionship with his wife was a repetition of his father's desire to kill Amy. He realizes that, although his supposed killing of his wife was not true but only a projection of his wishes, he himself lives under the same curse of hatred as his father. This curse can be overcome by following the Furies but not by escaping them. The acceptance of the Furies is the end of one kind of suffering and the beginning of another. Harry decides to leave Wishwood, although he realizes that this will lead to Amy's death. Agatha's summary expresses the symbolic meaning of the events that have passed and at the same time joins the two levels together:

What we have written is not a story of detection,  
Of crime and punishment, but of sin and expiation.  
It is possible that you have not known what sin  
You shall expiate, or whose, or why. It is certain  
That the knowledge of it must precede the expiation,  
In its dark instinctive birth to come to consciousness  
And so find expurgation. It is possible  
You are the consciousness of your family,  
Its bird sent flying through the purgatorial flame.  
Indeed it is possible. You may learn hereafter,  
Moving alone through flames of ice, chosen  
To resolve the enchantment under which we suffer (Eliot 1969:75).

Harry involved in the process of expiation becomes, according to Agatha, the scapegoat for the entire family and his personal identity is connected with all saviours who suffer and are purged for the sins of others. The family for which Harry suffers is symbolically the family of man on earth. The first level of the play, which in the eyes of the audience is a kind of pot-boiler or thriller, is shattered by Agatha. It becomes evident that the underlying level and thus the pattern of the play is concerned with the possibility of connecting the story of Harry and his family with Orestes and thus with myth and ritual. The curse on the house of Atreus, which caused Orestes' matricide and his looking for a possibility of expiation, in Eliot's play becomes a curse on Harry's family. And thus Agatha becomes an Athena who frees Harry-Orestes from the Eumenides or rather from the fear of them.

But it is possible to treat Harry still in a different way, and not only draw analogies between him and Orestes. Eliot's view on murder and its meaning is a complex one. He connects the very fact of murder with a mystical process of purgation in primitive rituals. Gilbert Murray describes the importance of such ceremonies in the life of a tribe in the following way:

This death and vengeance was really enacted among our ancestors in terms of human bloodshed. The sacred king really had slain the slayer and was doomed himself to be slain. The queen must either be taken on by her husband's slayer, or else slain with him. It is no pale myth or allegory that has so deeply dyed the first pages of human history (Murray 1927:229).

The connection between the primitive rite and its re-enactment in Christ's Passion, Crucifixion and Resurrection makes possible the connection of murder with Christian symbolism. The slayer in the primitive rite was to be slain, and thus purged of his sin. Christ was killed, for he took upon himself the sins of mankind, and then he had to be purified by his resurrection.

In *The family reunion* it is Harry who takes upon himself the sins of his family, yet he realizes he cannot find any help at Wishwood. He is to follow his persecutors and not to escape from them. Wishwood, which Harry considers to be an asylum from the Eumenides, becomes the place where he finds other ghosts, yet he experiences a moment of happiness and knowledge because of understanding the past of the family. Roy Battenhouse in his article "Eliot's *The family reunion* as Christian prophecy" comments that "the very name of Wishwood is intended by Eliot to stand for universal man's Dream House, located in a wood of wish and memory, turned to by man for refuge, but discovered to be only an asylum for ghosts" (Battenhouse 1945 : 317). This is just the Wishwood to which Harry comes back.

The ritual of expiation and rejuvenation is stressed throughout the play by the use of imagery. The action of the play takes place on an evening in March, and spring is the season of coming back to life and of rebirth. March is the beginning of the spring, and in Christian tradition is immediately associated with the coming of Easter — the feast of Christ's Crucifixion and Resurrection. Amy, being an old woman, does not feel the spring coming, and there will be no spring for her, for she will not be able to live through rejuvenation. A new life is to come to Harry but not to Amy. The ritual battle is thus re-enacted between Harry and Amy as representatives of the human will or self and of spiritual fight. The battle between life and death is to bring death to Amy but a painful moment of happiness to Harry, together with his spiritual rebirth. The ritual character of Amy's death is underlined by a magical dance of Aunts and Uncles around her birthday cake, as if Amy were a sacrifice put on the altar of Harry's expiation.

Thus in *The family reunion* Eliot once more looked for myth and ritual to provide him with patterns for his play. The myth-and-ritual analogies are evident from the very beginning of the play, and Eliot managed to render the two worlds on the stage, yet he wanted to write a modern poetic drama dealing with contemporary people; he did so, but the effect was rather artificial. Nevertheless Eliot proved that myths and rituals must be considered integral parts of human knowledge.

In his two comedies: *The cocktail party* and *The confidential clerk* Eliot did not make use of myth and ritual to such an extent as he had done in his earlier plays, but in his last play, *The elder statesman*, Eliot once more turned to the patterns used previously.

Both the levels of the play present the stages of Lord Claverton's, the

elder statesman's, spiritual reconciliation. Claverton comes to the conclusion that he has spent his life in selfish exploitation of others, because of his inability to love and be loved. Only at the end of the play does he discover that his ghosts can be exorcised by his recognition of what loving costs and its curative effects on the soul.

Monica, his daughter, and Charles, her fiancé, discover the possibility of love and of finding a private world in the middle of public life. There exists the necessity of a private world of personal love before a reconciliation can be achieved. Neither public personality, like that of Claverton, nor the isolation of a private life with unconfessed secrets can give a sense of identity. Lord Claverton sacrificed his private world of personal relationships for his public roles. His spiritual cure begins with his recognition of the meaninglessness of his public triumphs. He has nothing to look forward to, except a portrait taken twenty years ago, representing the outworn mask of his public personality. He is visited by the ghosts of his past, by people who think him responsible for corrupting their natures when they were young. Even Michael, Claverton's son, is about to leave England and change his name because up to then he was forced to live in the world of his father's public roles. Lord Claverton confesses to Monica and Charles the failures of his past when he is finally brought to the awareness of his own responsibility for his son's nature and his need to face the past himself. Monica persuades him to leave the place of his retirement to free himself from the two persons haunting him, but Claverton determines that he will no longer flee from these ghosts. He must endure the humiliation and suffer sins inherent in his past as a sign of his recognition of personal guilt and responsibility.

I've made my confession to you, Monica:  
That is the first step taken towards my freedom,  
And perhaps the most important (Eliot 1956:82).

Lord Claverton at last feels at peace in a new understanding of his past and a new unity of existence.

Why did I want to keep you to myself, Monica?  
Because I wanted you to give your life to adoring  
The man I pretended to myself I was,  
So that I could believe in my own pretences.  
I've only just now had the illumination  
Of knowing what love is (Eliot 1956:85).

The love of Monica and Charles is to express the positive and beneficent power of love, while the life of Claverton exemplifies the destructive and malignant power of perverted and betrayed love. It is only at the end of his life that he recognizes the relation of his own errors and crimes to pure love.

*The elder statesman* is Eliot's version of the Oedipus theme. It suggests

that Eliot wished to express the final resolution of his constant theme of spiritual quest. When *The family reunion* was performed for the first time, Eliot wrote to his director, E. Martin Browne, that "Harry's career needs to be completed by an *Orestes* or an *Oedipus at Colonus*" (Eliot 1969 : 326). *The elder statesman* is the fulfilment of that promise. Eliot's choice of the old king Oedipus as his prototype for Lord Claverton stresses expiation by suffering and devotion to the will of gods. In Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus* the exiled king has grown old expiating his youthful crimes of patricide and incest. Having arrived at a state of reconciliation and acceptance, he comes near the sacred grove of Eumenides, where it is ordained that he is to die. Because of his blindness he is led by his daughter Antigone and later on joined by his other daughter Ismene, who assists him in conducting his prayers to the gods. Oedipus begs Theseus, the king of Athens, for asylum and protection, and Theseus grants his request, since Oedipus' death-place has been ordained by Apollo and his burial at Colonus will bring a blessing to the city. In spite of the protest of Creon, Oedipus resists all efforts to take him away from the sacred grove of Eumenides.

In Eliot's Oedipus, Lord Claverton re-enacts the final purgation of Oedipus, laden with sins but purified and blessed by gods. Claverton, like Oedipus, blinded by his guilt lived in a state of spiritual darkness. His sins are parallel to those of Oedipus. He ran over an old man (who later on appeared to be dead before), just like Oedipus killed his father without recognizing him as his father; he lived with his wife without recognizing her personality, considering her to be a stranger, as Oedipus lived with his mother Jocasta not realizing she was his mother. He is, like Oedipus, supported in his purgation by his faithful Antigone.

The structure of the play is again based on the pattern of the ritual cure. In the first act Claverton, as a representative of the old king, is consumed with the corruption of earth and his self. In the second act, through his struggle with the ghosts of his past and the images of his former selves which they project, he is brought to recognition of the source of his illness. In the third act, through his daughter's love and his admission of sins, he is purged of his mortality through death and made ready for his rebirth. The ritual plot is literally translated into the surface action. The ritualistic and naturalistic meanings of the play are thus closely integrated and the dramatic mood of the play is consistent on both levels. This is one of the reasons for the success of the play.

In his plays Eliot was constantly referring either to the history of Church or to Greek mythology. Even in his later plays he could not omit any possibility of drawing analogies to ancient mythology, although the plays themselves were set in the fashionable drawing-rooms of modern England. He came to the conclusion that, if he wanted to present "some perception of order in the

universe", he had to make possible the analogies to the history of mankind. He presented new versions of the archetypal patterns of man's consciousness, trying thus to generalize some statements on man and the nature of universe. John Peter in his article "The family reunion" stated:

Eliot ... has established a fundamental relation between two cultures, and thus has shown a single abiding constant in both. Not only is the process engrossing and valuable per se: it has the added merit that reinforces his choice of the Greek type of drama as a milieu through which to attempt the reinforcement of verse drama in English (Peter 1949 : 223).

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