

THE UNIVERSITY OF MANITOBA

TIME AND PERSONALITY IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF  
T. S. ELIOT'S CHARACTERIZATION

by

Paul Lewis

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The aim of this thesis is to demonstrate that Eliot's characterization from the early verse to the last plays is based on a constant relation between time, personality, and salvation. Chapter I considers the effects of the fragmented consciousness of time on the characters of Prufrock and Other Observations. Chapter II offers an interpretation of Part IV of The Waste Land which relates the death of Phlebas the Phoenician to the lives of the other characters of the poem. Chapters III and IV discuss the interaction of time and personality in Eliot's last plays.

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## Introduction

Few questions have attracted as much critical attention as the poetry of Eliot's plays or the drama of his early verse. Everyone who writes about Eliot at one point or another takes a stand on several aspects of Eliot's work which have perhaps been too much discussed and too much explained. A favorite and long standing controversy which is still raging concerns whether or not The Waste Land either exhibits progression or holds out any hope of regeneration for all or any of its numerous characters. Another central dispute concerns the realism of the characters of Eliot's verse and drama. And a third bone of contention which ultimately subsumes the first two concerns the nature of the development of Eliot's characterization in relation to the interaction of time, personality, and salvation in his dramatic verse and plays.

As a result of the proliferation of Eliot criticism, it has become traditional to preface a study of Eliot's work with an explanation of the reasons for adding still another book to the expanding number. It is not surprising to find that critics are beginning to feel a bit defensive about formulating restatements of what more often than not are old positions. And yet, after all of the research on Tarot cards, and F. H. Bradley, and Marie Larisch, after all of the attempts to explicate the ambiguities of Eliot's verse and the arguments which suggest that the ambiguities are essential, after all this, "and so much more," there are, surprisingly enough, several aspects of Eliot's work which

remain only partially understood.

In part this is due to the unfortunate turn Eliot criticism took when it began its hectic and intense probe into the sources of Eliot's ideas. Eliot had argued that simply understanding the philosophical background or roots of a poem would not necessarily provide great insights into the poem itself:

. . . We must not confuse knowledge--factual information--about a poet's period, the conditions of the society in which he lived, the ideas current in his time implicit in his writings . . . with understanding his poetry.<sup>1</sup>

In this way, some of the critics who have gone to the greatest lengths to distinguish the influences of various philosophies on Eliot fail most strikingly in their attempts to understand the poetry itself. Kristian Smidt,<sup>2</sup> for example, who explores the influences of Bradley, Aristotle, Bergson, as well as Oriental mysticism, primitive ritual, and Christianity on Eliot's view of time, notes the multiplicity of temporal images in Prufrock and Other Observations but fails, as I shall show, to understand the significance of these images.

Although much has been written about the views of Eliot's characters on time and personality, the way in which Eliot's characterization from the early verse through The Elder Statesman is based on a consistent view of the relation between time, self, and salvation has never been fully explored. Even Hugh Kenner, who offers numerous insights into Eliot's work, only begins to approach an understanding of the development of Eliot's characterization. Kenner is, of course, correct when he argues that "The Eliot characters

do not act."<sup>3</sup> Action, in the sense of plot development, is not a significant aspect of either Eliot's dramatic monologues or his plays. But Kenner only begins to understand the complex nature of Eliot's characterization when he has one of the interlocutors in his "Supplementary Dialogue on Dramatic Poetry" argue that the characters of Eliot's plays are merely voices. He goes on to say: "So is Prufrock. So are the personages of The Waste Land. So are the Hollow Men."<sup>4</sup>

It is important to see, as Kenner clearly sees, that all of Eliot's characters are in some sense alike. It is important to see that for one reason or another each of Eliot's major characters fails to come alive as a "three dimensional person." This is, however, the result of different causes for different characters. The early characters seem shallow because their personalities are social illusions, masks meeting masks; while some of the dramatic protagonists seem unrealistic because of their transcendence of self or their longing for such a transcendence. It is, therefore, more important to see the fundamental differences between characters like Prufrock, the young man carbuncular, the hollow men, and characters like Becket, Phlebas, Celia, and Harry, Lord Monchensey.

When Kenner does attempt to account for the development of Eliot's characterization, he argues that Eliot slowly removed himself from his writings. Kenner argues that by the time Eliot wrote the Four Quartets, he did not need any "persona, Prufrock, Gerontion, Tiresias, or the

Magus."<sup>5</sup> This view suggests that Eliot was trying to express his own personality in the early poems. But it is surely the case that the sentiments of the Four Quartets, the reflections of a man,

. . . in the middle way, having had twenty  
years--  
Twenty years largely wasted, the years of l'  
entre deux guerres--  
Trying to learn to use words,<sup>6</sup>

were more auto-biographical than were the distracted indecisions of the balding Prufrock for the young Eliot. In order to understand the development of Eliot's characterization, then, it will be necessary to go beyond this "disappearing trick" which Kenner argues is its source.

Another common but mistaken view of Eliot's characterization concedes that there are differences between Eliot's characters, but attributes these differences to Eliot's conversion in 1927. Critics who adopt this view argue that the author of "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" was trying to express the despair of his generation, while the author of Murder in the Cathedral was attempting to express his new faith. This view of Eliot's development is put forward by Allan Lewis in The Contemporary Theatre in a chapter which is revealingly entitled "The Theatre as Temple." Mr. Lewis writes:

The author of Prufrock and The Waste Land, the voice from "the other side of despair," the venerated poet of postwar disillusion, was now [1927] confirmed in his convictions. A descendant of the persecuted Puritans was the champion of the Crown and the Church of Rome.<sup>7</sup>

Aside from its misconception about just which Church Eliot



was to champion, this view of Eliot's development is fallacious because it leads us from the poet to his poetry, and this is generally a dangerous direction to travel. More significantly, this view of Eliot's development suggests that in some meaningful sense Eliot's early work is philosophically incompatible with his later work. Men do change their views of life, and it would not in any way be reprehensible if Eliot's views had radically changed in 1927. Many of Eliot's ideas were in a more or less constant state of flux. But insofar as his characters are concerned, his view of the relation between time, personality, and salvation remains the same, only his focus shifts.

Fortunately other critics (and Eliot himself, who denied that it was ever any part of his intention to express the disillusion of a generation) have challenged the oversimplified view of Eliot's development held by Mr. Lewis and others:

In view of my lasting impression of Eliot's sincerity and coherence, I am increasingly puzzled by the two most prevalent false approaches to him, by critics who welcomed the poet of The Waste Land as a modern prophet for having voiced our disillusion, and now damn him because he moves towards faith; as well as by those more traditionally faithful souls, largely academic, who deplored his earlier work as dangerously radical, and now welcome him with hosannas. . . . It is certainly apparent that the same preoccupations have pervaded his work from the beginning.<sup>8</sup>

It is important to see the despair and ugliness in the lives of Eliot's early characters, but it is more important to be able to see, as Eliot says, "The boredom, and the horror, and the glory"<sup>9</sup> beneath the ugliness. Professor

Matthiessen argues convincingly for this view of Prufrock:

. . . What renders the character of Prufrock not just grotesque or absurd, but poignantly real is that as a result of a gradual accumulation of undertones and especially of the final dramatic lines, one can glimpse, beneath the banal surfaces and futile indecisions of his life, his perception of beauty, his understanding of the nature of love and sympathy, if an utter inability to gain them.<sup>10</sup>

Behind the social faces of Eliot's early characters one can sense the desperate longings of sensitive souls in torment. The self-conscious characters of The Waste Land, the characters who are aware of their own degradation--Tiresias, the man in the first section of Part Two, and the Fisher King of the closing lines-- all relate to the modern world in terms of a recollection of past values.

Eliot makes this point about The Waste Land in an essay on the modern mind in The Use of Poetry. In rejecting I. A. Richards' view that The Waste Land effects "a complete severance of poetry and all belief," Eliot explains that the aspects of the modern mind which his poem explores are all based on a sense of lost religious values. In the passage from his critical writings which is perhaps most relevant to his early verse, Eliot insists on the necessity of seeing the problems of the modern mind as results of a loss of faith. Eliot argues, for example, that the idea of Man's loneliness must be based on either the isolation of man from God or of man from his fellow men. Similarly, the problem of man's place in the perspective of time is, in Eliot's view, only a problem if one wants to see a spiritual "meaning of . . . human history in the history

of the world."<sup>11</sup>

It is clear that Eliot's early verse is primarily concerned with characters who are unsuccessful in their attempts to achieve some faith in God or vision of beauty; just as his later verse and verse drama is concerned with characters who to various extents are more successful. But it is a mistake to see Eliot's early verse as an expression only of despair over this failure. The characters who aspire to believe affirm the possibility of faith almost as strongly as the characters who do believe. As such, Eliot's early verse suggests in a far more subtle way what Tennyson was getting at when he wrote: "There lives more faith in honest doubt / . . . than in half the creeds."

It is, of course, a commonplace in Eliot criticism to see a general movement from despair toward faith in the poet's development from Prufrock and Other Observations through Ash Wednesday to The Rock. Critics have correctly suggested that the early verse describes the condition of man in hell, and that Eliot moves through the purgatorial vision of The Hollow Men and Ash Wednesday towards Becket's glimpse of heaven. It is, nevertheless, important to see the common element that runs through all of Eliot's work and is more significant than any of these differences. The central unity of Eliot's characterization becomes clear when we realize that in relation to two concepts, time and personality,<sup>12</sup> Eliot's description of the characters who are spiritually sterile in the early verse is the direct contrapositive of his description of the characters who are saved

in the plays.

Broadly speaking, sanctity for Eliot is based on the transcendence of time and personality. Contrapositively, damnation or spiritual sterility is, in Eliot's work, always a result of man's entrapment within the limits of time and self. Between these two extremes are the great number of characters in Eliot's plays who achieve some sort of peace through an increased understanding of their pasts and personalities. In the early verse, when characters like Prufrock fail to "Disturb the universe," their failure is the result of the fact that, having measured out their lives with coffee spoons, they see life as a chaotic sequence of minute temporal units. In the terms of Burnt Norton, "the enchainment of past and future" isolates the characters of Eliot's early verse from spiritual reality and allows them "but a little consciousness." But in these early poems there are intimations of an alternative to a life composed of a frantic sequence of sordid images. Behind the social faces of Prufrock and Other Observations is "The notion of some infinitely gentle / Infinitely suffering thing." In The Waste Land there are characters who escape all contact with the cycles of time and nature by going south in the winter, as well as at least one character who passed through "the stages of his age and youth / Entering the whirlpool." In Eliot's plays the possibility of achieving a meaningful faith is based on one level on an acceptance of of the realities of time and on another level on the possibility of going beyond time by perceiving its fundamental unreality. In this sense

Colby Simpkins in The Confidential Clerk and Lord Claverton in The Elder Statesman come to see the true nature of their own pasts, while Becket in Murder in the Cathedral must come to see that his death is "out of time," if he is to become a saint. Eliot summarizes both the saint's transcendence of time and the average man's ability to come to some half-guessed understanding of time in The Dry Salvages:

. . . But to apprehend  
 The point of intersection of the timeless  
 With time, is an occupation for the saint--  
 No occupation either, but something given  
 And taken, in a lifetime's death in love,  
 Ardour and selflessness and self-surrender.  
 For most of us, there is only the unattended  
 Moment, the moment in and out of time,  
 The distraction fit, lost in a shaft of sunlight,  
 The wild thyme unseen, or the winter lightning  
 Or the waterfall, or music heard so deeply  
 That it is not heard at all, but you are the music  
 While the music lasts.

(C.P. p.136)

There are different views of self which correspond to the various senses of time held by Eliot's characters. Prufrock's fragmented time sense is paralleled by the acute self-consciousness which prevents him from escaping from his world of petty social conventions.<sup>13</sup> The characters of The Waste Land who are unable to relate the the natural cycles of death and rebirth are locked within the prisons of their personalities, and the only real hope of salvation in the poem seems to be based on what it is that Phlebas forgets. Finally, the characters who begin to climb the staircase out of hell in the drama do so by either coming to know and accept themselves, or, on a higher level, by seeing the necessity of transcending the limits of their own personalities.

The changes in the development of Eliot's characterization, as I shall demonstrate, then, are changes in focus, not philosophy. Just as Dante's philosophy remains constant throughout The Divine Comedy, so Eliot's views of time, personality, and salvation remain constant, while the type of character he concentrates on shifts. It is not that Eliot moves from despair to hope in his work. Rather, he moves from the consideration of characters who despair to the consideration of characters who achieve some kind of self-knowledge or self-transcendence. But, throughout, as the Chorus in Murder in the Cathedral says, "The darkness declares the glory of light."

This view of Eliot's development implies a view of his characterization. There is a view of Eliot's characterization which argues that the personae of the early verse--Prufrock, the lady in "Portrait of a Lady," Gerontion, Sweeney, and the characters in The Waste Land--are more convincing and real than the dramatic protagonists, Becket, Harry, Celia, and Colby. The early characters seem to come alive because we see the moment to moment operations of their minds; whereas the later characters seem to dissolve in the stream of abstractions in which they flow. To the extent to which this is true, it is important to develop an understanding of Eliot's reasons for creating such different types of characters. Once we have seen the essential unity of Eliot's characterization in terms of the relation of time and personality to salvation and despair, it will be

possible to present an account of the realism of any one of Eliot's characters. I shall show that the apparent vitality of the early characters' personalities is an expression of their desperate spiritual condition, leading to a sterility of thought, act, and emotion; while the lack of personality of the redeemed characters is the most vivid expression of their complete redemption. We tend to associate the real with the material, but Eliot regards the real as the spiritual. Insofar as sanctity is achieved by Eliot's characters when they emerge from the restrictions of time and self, the characters who seem to have the least convincingly real personalities are spiritually the most real. Conversely, as I have said, those characters who are physically the most convincing are spiritually the least real.

Before beginning this journey up the staircase of Eliot's writings, a final delineation of the scope of this study is appropriate. Although, as the quotations scattered throughout this chapter indicate, the Four Quartets is Eliot's most intense examination of the nature of time and personality, these poems have been excluded from consideration in this study. This was done because this study concentrates on the relation of time and personality to characterization, and the Four Quartets is not a dramatic poem.

Eliot also discusses time and personality in his critical essays. Two famous and early examples from "Tradition and the Individual Talent" come to mind:

(1) . . . What is 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 to something which is more valuable. The progress of an artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality.

(italics mine)

(2) . . . the historical sense involves a perception not only 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 literature of Europe from Homer . . . has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order.<sup>14</sup>

And yet, obviously, in his critical writings Eliot was concerned with comparing the qualities of the ideal poet with the performance of a great many poets of the past. Since this study is not concerned with Eliot's views on poetry and drama, but only with the characters of his own verse and drama, the criticism has, with the Four Quartets, been excluded from consideration. I am, however, aware of the fact that the ideas which form the basis of Eliot's verse and drama play a significant role in his critical theories as well. This study, however, is not concerned with Eliot's ideas qua ideas, but only with the way in which various concepts figure in the development of Eliot's characterization.

Moreover, no real attempt will be made to explore the philosophical sources of Eliot's views of time and personality. Eliot's view of personality can undoubtedly be traced to the compatible teachings of F. H. Bradley and the author of what Eliot called the second "greatest philosophic poem,"<sup>15</sup> The Bhagavad Gita. Eliot's summary of Bradley's views of time and self--

Immediate experience . . . is a timeless unity



which is not as such present to either anywhere  
or anyone. It is only in a world of objects that  
we have time and space and selves.<sup>16</sup>

(Eliot's italics)

is very close to the teaching of Krishna "on the field of  
battle."

For the embodied self who eats no more objects of  
sense must disappear,--save only the recollected  
flavour,--and that too must vanish at the vision  
of the highest.<sup>17</sup>

But Eliot critics have already devoted more than enough  
energy to the investigation of the sources of Eliot's ideas.  
In concentrating on the poetry and not the poet, this study  
will both follow Eliot's advice about the use of criticism  
and hopefully shed light on one of the few areas of Eliot's  
work which is widely misunderstood.

CHAPTER ONE

And Indeed There Will Be Time

Time past and time future  
 Allow but a little consciousness.  
 To be conscious is not to be in time.  
 (C.P. p.119)

In Burnt Norton (1935), using the "second voice of poetry" (the voice of the poet speaking to an audience of readers), Eliot described the condition of the characters he had previously created using the "third voice" (which is the voice of the poet speaking through dramatic characters).

Only a flicker  
 Over the time-ridden faces  
 Distracted from distraction by distraction  
 Filled with fancies and empty of meaning  
 Tumid apathy with no concentration  
 Men and bits of paper, whirled by the cold wind  
 That blows before and after time,  
 Wind in and out of unwholesome lungs  
 Time before and time after.  
 (C.P. p.120)

The consistency of Eliot's thinking about the nature of salvation is seen when we observe that the causes of spiritual failure are the same for the characters of Prufrock and Other Observations and the distracted men of Burnt Norton.

Some critics argue that the cause of Prufrock's failure to "Disturb the universe" is not fully given in the poem. Eric Thompson, for example, suggests that "Prufrock's intensities of response to the coffee-spoon circuit are in excess of the facts as they appear."<sup>1</sup> And yet, Eliot places the context of Prufrock's meditations vividly before us. The very state of mind which allows Prufrock to explore his deepest emotions is perfectly suggested by the image of the evening "spread out against the sky / Like a patient etherised upon a table." The depraved sensuality which is to become the dominant point of focus in the Sweeney poems and in The Waste

Land finds expression here in the yellow fog. Prufrock's awareness on some level of the animalistic quality of sex,

The yellow fog that rubs its back upon the window-panes,  
The yellow smoke that rubs its muzzle on the window  
panes,

(C.P. p.4)

adequately accounts for his reluctance to ask the "overwhelming question," which on one level is undoubtedly a sexual advance.

The poem is, in fact, crowded with images which describe and objectify Prufrock's state of mind. The most significant one,

Shall I say, I have gone at dusk through narrow streets  
And watched the smoke that rises from the pipes  
Of lonely men in shirt sleeves, leaning out of  
windows?...

(C.P. p.5)

although it greatly disappoints J. Alfred, does call attention to the profound sympathy and compassion which Eliot wants us to see in Prufrock.

Moreover, Eliot carefully provides a "chain of events" leading up to Prufrock's introspection. On the level of narrative, Prufrock has gone through the misty streets, ascended the stairs, and entered the rooms where a party is in progress. Torn between his intense self-consciousness,

(They will say: "How his hair is growing thin!")  
My morning coat, my collar mounting firmly to the  
chin,  
My necktie rich and modest, but asserted by a simple  
pin--

(They will say: "But how his arms and legs are thin!"),  
(C.P. p.4)

and an awareness of the triviality of his surroundings,

In the room the women come and go  
Talking of Michelangelo.--

(C.P. p.4)

Prufrock withdraws into an etherised state which allows him

to discuss with his less than conscious mind the possibility of an escape through meaningful thought or action. In this way Eliot creates a context or situation within which Prufrock is led from desire to frustration.

This in itself, however, is not sufficient. It is possible to feel the quality of Prufrock's emotions and understand the circumstances surrounding them without really comprehending the causes. What, it is fair to inquire, places Prufrock within the rigid confines of inaction and despair? Why should a man who so deeply feels the poverty of his life not be able, by asking some overwhelming question, to triumph over his condition? These questions are especially appropriate for Prufrock who sees the emptiness of his world and has intimations of another level of reality, who has "heard the mermaids singing each to each." If Eliot had failed to provide an explanation of Prufrock's failure to "Disturb the universe," he would be, as Thompson suggests he is, subject to the very criticism he brought to bear against Shakespeare: ". . . that Hamlet's bafflement at the absence of objective equivalent to his feeling is a prolongation of the bafflement of his author in the face of his artistic problem."<sup>2</sup> However, "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" (henceforth referred to as "Prufrock"), so commonly regarded as a vague and open-ended poem, is actually quite precise in its analysis of Prufrock's state of consciousness and the way in which this consciousness causes his inability to act.

What holds Prufrock suspended "Between the potency / And the existence"<sup>3</sup> is, as I shall show, his involvement in

time and with self. Ultimately, the Heraclitean flux of discontinuous thoughts and images, the visions and revisions, decisions and indecisions which preoccupy Prufrock, result from his fragmented consciousness of time and self.\* A clue to this root cause of Prufrock's failure is provided in the lines:

Do I dare  
Disturb the universe?  
In a minute there is time  
For decisions and revisions which a  
minute will reverse.  
(C.P. pp.4-5)

Just as the transcendence of time is central to Eliot's concept of sanctity in the later drama and verse, so in the early verse, where sanctity and even salvation are impossible, the characters are utterly trapped within time. The word time rings through "Prufrock" as a beacon leading the reader to an awareness of the central concern of the poem. In a twelve line passage which runs from "And indeed there will be time" to "Before the taking of toast and tea," the word appears eight times. Prufrock's vacillation and his inability to act or even think profoundly for long result from his consciousness of a time that is broken down into discontinuous fragments. The rapid shifting of his intellectual and sensory faculties from one thought or image to another is the result of a fragmentation of life into the shortest temporal units.

This cause and effect relation is often overlooked by critics who go to great lengths to avoid any real consideration of the time sense of Eliot's early characters.

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\* I am trying to avoid a hideous compound here. By this phrase I mean "fragmented-time-and-self-consciousness."

Kristian Smidt argues that Eliot's concern with time in the early verse was mainly emotional:

In his early poetry he had a tendency to describe time in concrete metaphors ('the smoky candle-end of time', 'devoured the afternoon', 'fragments of the afternoon', 'time's ruin', etc.). No doubt this kind of imagery constituted a poetic aim in itself, and there may have been no further significance in the metaphors than in such common phrases as a 'wet afternoon' or 'a sunny day'.<sup>4</sup>

Another approach to the time sense of Eliot's early characters which begs the question is presented by Hugh Kenner. In arguing that Eliot "deals in effects, not ideas," Kenner suggests that the passage in "Prufrock" beginning "And indeed there will be time" is "verbally effective, but rather meaningless."<sup>5</sup> I shall show, however, that there is a very strong conceptual framework running through Eliot's early verse, and that the lines and images which Smidt and Kenner regard as "rather meaningless" provide us with a key to understanding the central problem of the poems. For just as salvation in the Four Quartets and Eliot's later plays rests on the faith that all of history was a single moment without duration, so the inability to achieve salvation rests on the belief that even "In a minute there is time." It is this fragmentation of time that forms the central unifying concept of Prufrock and Other Observations.

Throughout Eliot's early verse we are told exactly what part of the day it is, what part of the year it is, and sometimes what hour of the day it is. Prufrock begins his invitation by informing his listener that it is an October evening. Prufrock is, of course, a troubled man. He feels bored and degraded by his surroundings; but he can at the

moment before a crisis when he most ardently desires to break forth reassure himself with the idea that "indeed there will be time":

And time yet for a hundred indecisions,  
And for a hundred visions and revisions,  
Before the taking of toast and tea.

(C.P. p.4)

The irony of "visions and revisions" is not as striking as the irony of "time yet for a hundred indecisions." Having measured out his life in coffee spoons, Prufrock finds that he has time for hundreds of indecisions, but no energy, no capacity for decision making or action. Indecisions occur from moment to moment, as when Prufrock wonders--

Shall I part my hair behind? Do I dare  
to eat a peach?--

(C.P. p.7)

while decision making requires that the determination to act in a certain way be maintained over a period of time.

It is possible to multiply examples of this consciousness of time in the poem, but it would be better to focus attention on a more subtle expression of the same fragmented time sense. In addition to the various direct expressions of Prufrock's awareness of days and ways, there is an unconscious awareness of sequence which suggests this same state of mind. A mind twisted by a division of the temporal field into moments that follow chaotically one after another speaks in the lines,

Streets that follow like a tedious argument  
Of insidious intent  
To lead you to an overwhelming question--

(C.P.p.3)

just as a mind beaten into passivity by the tedium of routine



cries out through the line repeated three times, "And I have known them all already, known them all." This sense of the oppression of the sequential order of time is even stronger in the following, where novels incongruously follow streets:

And would it have been worth while, after all,  
 Would it have been worth while,  
 After the sunsets and the dooryards and the  
                   sprinkled streets,  
 After the novels, after the teacups, after the  
                   skirts that trail along the floor--  
 And this, and so much more?--

(C.P. p.6)

The poem has two minor climaxes at which points Prufrock seems prepared to ask the question. In both cases his fragmented sense of time prevents the act or hinders the thought. The first, discussed above, comes at the line "Do I dare / Disturb the universe?", and is followed by the deflating "In a minute there is time." A little further on Prufrock seems ready to begin:

Shall I say, I have gone at dusk through narrow  
                   streets  
 And watched the smoke that rises from the pipes  
 Of lonely men in shirt-sleeves leaning out of  
                   windows?...

(C.P. p.5)

Prufrock's image of the lonely men in shirt sleeves is, in fact, a good beginning. It demonstrates his awareness of the suffering of other men. But Prufrock is incapable of following up on his start, incapable of forcing the moment to its crisis. To force the moment to its crisis would require prolonging it to arrive at some definitive vision or action. But for Prufrock every minute is made up of a hundred moments, and every moment passes insipidly and meaninglessly into the next. Abandoning his question at the outset, Prufrock des-

pairs and longs for complete non-consciousness:

I should have been a pair of ragged claws  
 Scuttling across the floors of silent seas.  
 (C.P. p.5)

Having begun to approach an escape only to fall more deeply into despair, Prufrock returns to his usual frame of mind and supplies himself with the following rationalization:

And the afternoon, the evening, sleeps so peacefully:  
 . . . . .  
 Should I, after tea and cakes and ices,  
 Have the strength to force the moment to its crisis?  
 (C.P. pp.5-6)

It is this fragmentation of time into parts of the day (afternoon, evening), and parts of the year, and even parts of the minute, coupled with his concentration on discrete sensory images (sprinkled streets, cakes and ices)<sup>6</sup> that prevents Prufrock from achieving any forceful action or enduring vision of life. The fragmented consciousness presents Prufrock with a multitude of perceptions and thoughts every minute. In responding to these alternative visions, Prufrock is unable to maintain a constant or consistent view of life. At one moment he is completely caught up in the trivia of his surroundings, and at the next he sees the absurdity of his life. His mind shifts back and forth between levels of reality because, as I have shown, he both literally and figuratively sees the world differently from moment to moment. His endless vacillation and his minute to minute involvement with created beings<sup>7</sup> are, then, both results of his consciousness of time.

It has been argued that it is Prufrock's acute self-consciousness and fear of social and sexual rejection that causes his failure. It is quite true that these are

factors, as the repetition of the lines,

And would it have been worth it, after all,  
 . . . . .  
 If one, settling a pillow by her head,  
 Should say: "That is not what I meant at all.  
 That is not it, at all."

(C.P. p.6)

suggests. But, ultimately, even his self consciousness is an effect of J. Alfred's complete immersion in time. Eliot makes this causal relation clear in the lines:

And indeed there will be time  
 . . . . .  
 Time to turn back and descend the stair,  
 With a bald spot in the middle of my hair--  
 They will say . . .

(C.P. p.4)

It is, then, Prufrock's fragmented sense of time and self which creates his self-consciousness. His inability to act is based on the fact that even the decisions of a minute are subject to revision. Moreover, the internal conflict of his fragmented personality (moving each minute from profound longing to banal conventionality, as in the lines, "I grow old...I grow old... / I shall wear the bottoms of my trousers rolled.") makes it impossible for him to see beyond himself for very long.

Still other views of the causes of Prufrock's failure have been advanced. Grover Smith,<sup>8</sup> who sees Prufrock as a tragic figure, suggests that the fatal flaw involved is a sense of timidity which makes action impossible. The question of tragedy is relevant to any consideration of "Prufrock," but, ultimately, Smith's idea should be rejected. It is worthwhile to bear in mind that not every failure is tragic and not every defeated man is a tragic hero. Surely, this

is what Prufrock is getting at when he says: "No! I am not Prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be." Tragedy requires not only defeat, but affirmation as well. Prufrock, whose "idealism" is undoubtedly thwarted, is not so much defeated as he is submerged within his own limitations. There is no resounding disaster here, only the quiet whimpering ending. And there is absolutely no affirmation for Prufrock as a character; although the intimations of a higher vision (which are always subject to revision by Prufrock) remain a lingering suggestion of hope. Smith's idea that Prufrock's failure results primarily from his timidity is substantially identical to the claim refuted above that it is self-consciousness that defeats J. Alfred. Timidity, as in the lines,

I have seen the eternal Footman hold my coat  
and snicker,  
And in short, I was afraid,

(C.P. p.6)

certainly plays a part in Prufrock's failure. But, here again, it is his submersion in time that is the basic cause. Prufrock fears the eternal footman because he is so desperately caught up in a temporal frame. In these lines Eliot is ironically calling attention to Prufrock's total inability to comprehend any eternal reality (be it death or a transcendent vision of life). Just as the mermaids withhold their song from Prufrock because of his ugliness, so the eternal footman snickers at one who is involved in a life lived from moment to moment.

Helen Gardner is more correct when she suggests "That in Prufrock and Other Observations, and in Poems (1920), we are mainly conscious of the boredom."<sup>9</sup> Boredom is, more or

less, another way of describing the quiet desperation of a life that is measured out in coffee spoons. But it is important to see that boredom, like despair, is for Prufrock a necessary component of the fragmented time sense. For when time moves slowly, we are most likely to feel bored. And Prufrock is bored because he has divided up his life into the shortest temporal units and watched, with only a partial ironic detachment, each wasted moment pass.

Paradoxically, Prufrock believes that it is his awareness of his existence in time that prompts him to try to escape:

There will be time to murder and create,  
 And time for all the works and days of hands  
 That lift and drop a question on your plate  
 (C.P. p.4)

Prufrock flatters himself in supposing that all the time in the world would be sufficient to allow him to either murder or create. But, more significantly, he believes that his view of time motivates his desire to change (drops a question on his plate). Unfortunately, that same view of time (and it is surely more a life style than a merely intellectual view) makes an escape from the world of time and trivia impossible. Where Hamlet triumphs because he realizes that although "the time is out of joint," he is not the only force in the universe capable of setting it right, Prufrock despairs and wallows in a consciousness of time which is both socially current (for the women turning greatness into trivia) and utterly triumphant over his deeper intimations of another way of life.

Now that the destructive effects of Prufrock's fragmented sense of time have been explored, it is possible to see how this time sense affects the realism of Eliot's first dramatic persona. A common view of Prufrock's existence as a character is summed up by Hugh Kenner in The Invisible Poet: T.S. Eliot:

. . . What "Prufrock" is, is the name of a possible zone of consciousness. . . no more than that; certainly not a person. You are not, in allowing their intermodulations to echo in your mind, deepening your apprehension of an imagined character, such as Hamlet, or discerning his boundaries; Prufrock is strangely boundless; one doesn't affirm at a given point with certainty, "Here is where his knowledge would have stopped," or "These are subtleties to which he would not have aspired." . . . he is the center of a field of consciousness . . .<sup>10</sup>

The notion that Prufrock is a fundamentally different type of character than Hamlet is both correct and misleading. Hamlet is, of course, a dramatic character who, for all his vacillation, does eventually act. Moreover, we see Hamlet against the objective and external world of Elsinore; a world of evil and folly, but a world which gives us various other views of its central figure. Ophelia's

The courtier's, soldier's, scholar's eye, tongue,  
 sword--  
 The expectancy and rose of the fair state,  
 The glass of fashion and the mold of form,  
 The observed of all observers--<sup>11</sup>

and Claudius'

Madness in great ones must not unwatched go.<sup>12</sup>  
 allow us to see Hamlet from other (admittedly subjective) points of view.

Unlike Hamlet, Prufrock is seen only through the

images of his own divided consciousness. He never acts (and never will), so we must come to see him through his thoughts and feelings. But we come to know him as both a type of man (Kenner's "zone of consciousness") and as an individual man. We know, for example, that Prufrock is a literate, sensitive man who at times can, with ironic detachment, see through the superficiality of his world. And just as Iago's description of the feelings following intercourse, "When the blood is made dull with the act of sport . . ." <sup>13</sup> tells us as much about his personality as any of his actions, so we come to know Prufrock as a person through the vivid picture Eliot draws of his mind. "Prufrock" is, in fact, a realistic portrayal of a mind inextricably caught up in matter.

The fact that Prufrock is a vividly individualized character whose personality stands before us in the poem was not an end in itself for Eliot. More than anything else, Eliot used Prufrock and the other characters of his early verse to call attention to the superficiality of personality. Prufrock's personality seems real enough; that is, he comes to life with a realism that makes us feel that we know people like him. But for all its apparent realism, Prufrock's personality is spiritually hollow. In Shakespearean tragedy the force of the action is based on the insight into the workings of individual characters. Spiritual enlightenment, for Hamlet, involves the realization that there are forces in the universe greater than any individual man. But the value of personality qua personality is never really questioned. In "Prufrock" Eliot uses the vivid and realistic presentation of a personality to reveal the limitations of personality. The real difference

between Hamlet and "Prufrock" is not in the type of characterization, as Kenner suggested, but in the views of personality developed in the works.

Prufrock as a character is, then, extremely realistic. He comes to life before us with a greater vitality than any of the characters of Eliot's drama. But the value of having a personality like Prufrock's is dubious. The implicit theme of Eliot's earliest published volume is that personality is a mask which isolates men from each other and from their own deeper selves. Eliot explores this idea in The Waste Land where his characters are locked within the prison of personality. It is clear that the characters of Prufrock and Other Observations who come alive through the vivid presentation of their briefest sensations are doomed from the start by the temporal and personal nature of their lives.

This submersion in time characterizes the remaining poems of Prufrock and Other Observations. In "Portrait of a Lady," Eliot moves from the interior monologue of "Prufrock" to a social situation. The language of the poem, however, suggests that we are dealing with a man very much like Prufrock, if younger, and a woman who could easily "come and go / Talking of Michelangelo." The moods of the two poems come together when you place the lines,

Then how should I begin  
To spit out all the butt-ends of my days and ways  
(C.P. p.5)

from "Prufrock" beside the Lady's comment:

In a life composed so much of odds and ends,  
(For indeed I do not love it . . .  
(C.P. p.8)



There is also a common boredom and triviality:

I shall sit here serving tea to friends.  
(C.P. p.10)

Ultimately, however, it is a sense of time which unites this poem with the others in Prufrock and Other Observations:

--And so the conversation slips  
Among the velleities and carefully caught regrets  
Through attenuated tones of violins  
Mingled with remote cornets  
(C.P. p.8)

In these four lines Eliot reveals the passionlessness and fragmentation of the world of "Portrait of a Lady." Velleities and regrets, after all, are hardly the stuff of intense or enduring emotion; and the fact that they pass between musical notes suggests the brevity of their duration. It is, in fact, clear that these notes which divide the world up into fleeting temporal units, like Prufrock's coffee spoons, are an image created in a mind conditioned by the fragmented consciousness of time.

The poem is divided into three parts by months. The first part takes place on a "December afternoon,"

With "I have saved this afternoon for you."  
(C.P. p.8)

In the second part, Spring has arrived and the April sun is setting. In the last part, "The October night comes down." These divisions by seasons are not simply mood setting devices. We are listening throughout to the thoughts of the young man; and it is he who finds it necessary to put a date and time on every act or feeling. Significantly, in Part I, when he feels the relationship becoming more intimate than he desires,

he seeks to escape with the following suggestion:

Let us take the air in a tobacco trance,  
 Admire the monuments,  
 Discuss the late events,  
 Correct our watches by the public clocks.  
 Then sit for half an hour and drink our bocks.  
 (C.P. p.9)

The alternative to feeling, to a human relationship with the woman, is seen in terms of being involved with the latest events and with the setting of watches. The young man, who is more cruel than Prufrock, returns to the Lady's house in Part II:

Now that lilacs are in bloom  
 She has a bowl of lilacs in her room  
 And twists one in her fingers as she talks.  
 "Ah, my friend, you do not know, you do not know  
 What life is, you who hold it in your hands";  
 (Slowly twisting the stalks)  
 (C.P. p.9)

The irony here has a double edge. The Lady's response to the Spring is hardly an expression of a soul at harmony with nature. The bowl of lilacs is a gesture toward the expression of a Whitmanian Romantic impulse; but, while the Lady does not find April the cruellest month, she cannot derive any profound joy from the rebirth of nature either. As for the man, he is embarrassed, and "at times almost ridiculous."

"And youth is cruel, and has no remorse  
 And smiles at situations which it cannot see."  
 I smile, of course,  
 And go on drinking tea.  
 (C.P. p.9)

Both the Lady and the man, living lives "composed so much of odds and ends," fail to see the waste and trivia of their existences.

The image, "The voice returns like the insistent

out-of-tune / Of a broken violin on an August afternoon," makes very little sense except when seen in terms of the point I have been making. After all, why should it be an August afternoon? The reference here to some month, any month at all, shows the man as a creature lost in a fragmented sense of time which is always exact and always dating. Even when he contemplates the possibility of the Lady dying, it is in terms of days and ways:

Well! and what if she should die some afternoon,  
 Afternoon grey and smoky, evening yellow and rose.  
 (C.P. p.11)

If what Eliot regards as a true understanding of time is expressed in the "In my beginning is my end" of East Coker, then the Lady's "But our beginnings never know our ends" reveals her complete lack of understanding. The Lady fails to see that, spiritually speaking, the beginning and the end of time are simultaneous occurrences because she is caught up in the discontinuous events of physical life. Moreover, she is unaware of the way in which she creates the very "ends" which she regards as undesirable. The Lady, who cannot understand why she and the man "have not developed into friends," was largely responsible for this "end." Her smothering attempts to approach the man--

To find a friend who has these qualities,  
 Who has, and gives  
 Those qualities upon which friendship lives.  
 How much it means that I say this to you--  
 Without these friendships--life, what cauchemar!--  
 (C.P. p.8)

only repel him. Her failure to understand her relationship with the young man is, therefore, based on her inability to see the way in which life develops from beginnings to ends. And, of course, it is not surprising that people who

cannot respond to the cycles of nature, who avoid emotional contact by escaping into a world of newspaper stories and "public clocks," whose consciousness is divided up into the smallest fragments, find it impossible to become friends.

The poems following "Portrait of a Lady" in Prufrock and Other Observations maintain this relation of characterization to time sense. The sordid images of an urban waste land are conditioned by the same fragmented consciousness which has been traced through the two major poems of Eliot's first volume of verse:

The winter evening settles down  
 With smell of steaks in passageways.  
 Six o' clock.  
 The burnt-out ends of smoky days.  
 (C.P. p.12)

Eliot created personalities around a type of consciousness in "Prufrock" and "Portrait of a Lady"; in "Preludes" which follows, that consciousness is stripped of all individuation, and revealed in its barest form. It is a consciousness utterly caught within a temporal reality which is both ugly and illusory:

The morning comes to consciousness  
 Of faint stale smells of beer.  
 (C.P. p.12)

again places the sensation in time, while

With the other masquerades  
 That time resumes,  
 (C.P. p.12)

suggests that while personality may seem real and vivid, if it is conditioned by a fragmented time sense, it must remain only a face prepared to meet other faces. The idea that the soul is constituted of a "thousand sordid images" suggests

that the apparent variety and multiplicity of sensations are an alternative to a single spiritual vision. The fragmented mind which "At four and five and six o'clock" is

The conscience of a blackened street  
Impatient to assume the world.

(C.P. p.13)

is eager to avoid thinking about the nature of life.

In discussing "Preludes" it is necessary to observe the image of a higher reality which runs through even these early poems written between 1909 and 1912. John Heath-Stubbs is undoubtedly correct when he argues that "The early verse ceased to be purely a poetry of sterility as soon as the possibility of redemption became apparent in it."<sup>14</sup> Mr. Heath-Stubbs fails, however, to correctly identify the nature of the salvation which is present but repeatedly eludes the grasp of the characters of Prufrock and Other Observations. For example, the real image of salvation in "Prufrock" is not the assertion of identity through sex, as Mr. Heath-Stubbs argues,<sup>15</sup> but rather the mermaids who represent a world of beauty and transcendence. In any case, salvation remains only a fading image in minds bound up in the sensory experiences of each moment.

In "Preludes" this higher reality emerges for only a moment:

I am moved by fancies that are curled  
Around these images, and cling:  
The notion of some infinitely gentle  
Infinitely suffering thing.

(C.P. p.13)

This is undercut instantly, however by the line:

Wipe your hand across your mouth, and laugh

(C.P. p.13)

Grover Smith is correct in suggesting that in "Preludes" the center of sensation is "itself neither soul nor 'conscience' but a kind of register upon which images have impinged."<sup>16</sup> In "Prufrock" and "Portrait of a Lady," personalities are created around this same temporal consciousness to reveal the effects of the fragmentation of time on a character's self image. The characters are impotent, self-conscious, and, ultimately, doomed to fail in thought, act, and emotion. Though characterization is vivid, the characters are cursed with sterility and lost in a world of time and trivia.

The persona of "Rhapsody on a Windy Night" (henceforth referred to as "Rhapsody") is less fully realized as a personality than either Prufrock or the characters of "Portrait of a Lady," but more of an individual character than the persona of "Preludes." In "Preludes," the "I" who is moved "by fancies" suggested by the images is little more than the momentary intrusion of the poet himself into the poem. In "Rhapsody," Eliot follows the nocturnal mental wanderings of a nameless man through sordid Prufrockian streets:

Every street lamp that I pass  
 Beats like a fatalistic drum,  
 And through the spaces of the dark  
 Midnight shakes the memory  
 As a madman shakes a dead geranium.

(C.P. p.14)

Like "Preludes" and "Prufrock," "Rhapsody" is composed of a series of sordid and more or less horrifying images:

"Remark the cat which flattens itself in  
                                   the gutter,  
 Slips out its tongue  
 And devours a morsel of rancid butter.

(C.P. p.15)



thoughts of "A patient etherised upon a table." But the sense of temporal order is not for one instant either dissolved or etherised. On the contrary, the poem is divided into stanzas by hours. Each sensation occurs at a certain time, and every hour is infinitely sub-divided into the beats of a drum. Although "Rhapsody" is one of Eliot's less successful poems-- recalling, as it does, effects more fully realized in earlier works, and anticipating images which were to be put to better use in the Sweeney poems ("female smells in shuttered rooms") and elsewhere-- here, too, the spiritual impotence of the persona is bound up in his fragmentation of time.

In the shorter poems following "Rhapsody" in Prufrock and Other Observations, this fragmentation of time is either hinted at or taken for granted as a fundamental fact of life. Two of the titles, "Morning at the Window" and "The Boston Evening Transcript," call attention to the theme which I have been tracing through the volume. "Morning at the Window" is little more than an extension of the second stanza of "Preludes" in which "Morning comes to consciousness." The persona of "Morning at the Window," the "I" who is

. . . aware of the damp souls of housemaids  
 Sprouting despondently at area gates,  
 (C.P. p.16)

like Prufrock and the other sensitive characters in Eliot's verse, is aware of the inhumanity of modern urban life. The Kafkaesque

. . . aimless smile that hovers in the air  
 And vanishes along the level of the roofs  
 (C.P. p.16)

is torn from the twisted face of a passing girl, and reminds



the speaker of the futility of life.

In "The Boston Evening Transcript," the central irony compares the lifeless readers of the paper to other more animated men:

When evening quickens faintly in the street,  
Wakening the appetites of life in some  
And to others bringing the Boston Evening  
Transcript

(C.P. p.16)

The "appetites of life" seem rather appealing in this context. They stand in the poem as an alternative to the sterile routine of Cousin Harriet and the other readers of the paper who are ironically compared with a "field of ripe corn."

The final poems of Prufrock and Other Observations need not be fully considered in this context. It is, however, significant that although some things change after the death of Aunt Helen,

. . . the footman sat upon the dining-table  
Holding the second housemaid on his knee--  
Who had always been so careful while her mistress  
lived.--

"The Dresden clock continued ticking on the mantelpiece." (p.17)  
Although there is "silence in heaven" following Helen Slingsby's death, the clock goes on ticking off the seconds in the world she left behind. This one line unites "Aunt Helen" with the poems discussed above.

Finally, it is interesting to note that Eliot's vignette "Hysteria" presents us with a couple very much like the man and woman in "Portrait of a Lady." Apprehensive of becoming involved with the woman, the speaker of "Hysteria" strives for a momentary recovery, and, in the end, concen-

trates his attention on saving "some of the fragments of the afternoon."

The dominant mood of Eliot's earliest published verse is one of despair and frustration. Above the despair is a sense of irony which more often than not allows Eliot's characters the luxury of seeing the splinter in the eyes of their fellow men, but failing to see the timber in their own. Below the irony lies the deep suffering of tormented, twisted souls. Concealing the torment are the social faces and masks. These souls, because of their fragmented sense of time, perceive the world as an unending series of discrete images. Their minute to minute perception of these images evokes a personal response, and these responses, the hundred indecisions and visions of a moment, impose a self-consciousness which leads to inaction and despair.

These early characters, when seen as characters (as in "Prufrock" and "Portrait of a Lady"), come to life before our eyes. It is this vitality that makes "Prufrock" such a convincing poem. But the appeal of the poem is not based on any appeal its speaker might be supposed to have. Just the reverse is, of course, the case. In "Preludes," Eliot gives us the time sense stripped of the personality, to artificially isolate the cause from its effect. When he puts the cause beside its effect, as in "Prufrock" or "Portrait of a Lady," we can see that from the start Eliot believed that any hope of salvation or even meaningful life could only be based on a different consciousness of time and view of self.

CHAPTER TWO

Life By Water

Gentile or Jew  
 O you who turn the wheel and look to windward.  
 Consider Phlebas, who was once handsome and tall as you.  
 (C.P. pp.46-47)

Ever since Eliot wrote The Waste Land critics have been considering just what sort of death Phlebas experiences. "Death By Water" is only one image in the complex structure of echoing water symbolism which runs from

Summer surprised us, coming over the Starnbergersee  
 With a shower of rain; we stopped in the colonnade,  
 (C.P. p.37)

through

The river sweats  
 Oil and tar

(C.P. p.45)

to the "damp gust/ Bringing rain" and the Fisher King of Part V. Moreover, Phlebas is only one sailor in a poem of boats and fishermen. Some critics have argued that Phlebas is completely annihilated. For, although the dead land cries out for water--

If there were water  
 And no rock  
 If there were rock  
 And also water  
 And water  
 A spring--

(C.P. p.47)

and seamen seem to be the only people who can even begin to "set their lands in order"--

O City, city, I can sometimes hear  
 Beside a public bar in Lower Thames Street,  
 The pleasant whining of a mandoline  
 And a clatter and a chatter from within  
 Where fishmen lounge at noon--

many critics have followed the advice of Madame Sosostris and argued that more than anything else death by water is to be feared. This interpretation is especially misguided; for, as I shall show, Phlebas is the first of Eliot's characters who

achieves spiritual renewal through an extinction of personality and an escape from time.

"Death By Water" is first mentioned by Madame Sosostris:

Here, said she,  
Is your card, the drowned Phoenician Sailor,  
.....  
Fear death by water.

(C.P. pp.38-39)

This "famous clairvoyante," however, is not to be trusted. Her Delphic remarks do serve as a structural index to the rest of the poem, but her powers are limited both because she lives in a sterile world,

I do not find  
The Hanged Man.

(C.P. pp.38-39)

and because of the debasement of her own trade.

One must be so careful these days.

(C.P. p.39)

Eliot makes it quite clear that there are many things which Madame Sosostris cannot see:

And here is the one-eyed merchant, and this card,  
Which is blank, is something he carries on his back,  
Which I am forbidden to see.

(C.P. p.38)

We are, therefore, justified in doubting Madame Sosostris' evaluation of the appropriate response to death by water, even though she correctly predicts its occurrence.

The brevity and beauty of the lines describing Phlebas' death often lure readers and critics away from any intense examination of what Eliot is suggesting.

Phlebas the Phoenician, a fortnight dead,  
Forgot the cry of gulls, and the deep sea swell  
And the profit and loss.

A current under the sea  
Picked his bones in whispers. As he rose and fell  
He passed the stages of his age and youth  
Entering the whirlpool.

(C.P. p.46)

In the first three lines we are told that Phlebas forgets both the sensations he had become accustomed to in life and the driving concerns which preoccupied him as a business man (the "profit and loss"). Critics who argue that Phlebas is completely annihilated fail to see that it makes very little sense to speak of a mind that has ceased thinking altogether as forgetting or remembering. Forgetting is just as much an organic mental process as remembering. And we must suppose that in order to forget these things, Phlebas lives on in some way after his death.

Moreover, the things which Phlebas forgets are the very things which Eliot's earlier and unsaved characters were unable to forget. In forgetting the cries of gulls and the sea's swell, Phlebas forgets the sensory realities which divided his world up into discrete units, the hundred visions of a minute. In forgetting the profit and loss, Phlebas goes beyond both the financial considerations which must have distracted him from profounder meditation, and the self-conscious Prufrockian tendency to consider endlessly the implications of each thought or act.

In the next three lines we learn that Phlebas' body is destroyed. Yet unlike the characters Gerontion remembers, Phlebas is not simply "whirled / Beyond the circuit of the shuddering Bear / In fractured atoms."<sup>1</sup> In Poems 1920 Eliot expressed the Platonic view that the body and soul are somehow separate and at odds. In this way Sweeney, the pure animal, became repeatedly the object of the poet's scorn:

Apeneck Sweeney spreads his knees  
 Letting his arms hang down to laugh;  
 The zebra stripes along his jaw  
 Swelling to maculate giraffe.

(C.P. p.35)

Nor is Sweeney the only character who embodies this debased and purely physical existence:

The sleek Brazilian jaguar  
Does not in its arboreal gloom  
Distill so rank a female smell  
As Grishkin in a drawing room.

(C.P. p.33)

Repeatedly in the Sweeney poems and in The Waste Land the sterility of the modern world is seen as a result of the prevalence of purely physical lust devoid of feeling or passion. This inhuman emotionless sexuality becomes the point of focus in the section directly preceding "Death By Water."

Flushed and decided, he assaults at once;  
Exploring hands encounter no defence;  
His vanity requires no response,  
And makes a welcome of indifference.

(C.P. p.44)

In this context, the destruction of the body should not be seen to imply the destruction of the total man. On the contrary, we are forced to infer that Phlebas is, under the circumstances, well rid of his body; and that freed from the temptations of the flesh, he can enter into a new sort of life.

Looking ahead it is interesting to note that Eliot returned to the image of "picked bones" in Ash Wednesday. Just as the sea currents picked Phlebas' bones in whispers, so the leopards of Part II of Ash Wednesday feed to satiety on the flesh of the persona:

And God said  
Shall these bones live? shall these  
Bones live? And that which had been contained  
In the bones (which were already dry) said chirping:  
Because of the goodness of this Lady  
. . . . .  
We shine with brightness.

(C.P. p.61)

And that which had been contained within Phlebas' body also

continued to shine as it entered the whirlpool.

Critics, on the whole, have tended to see some suggestion of rebirth in "Death By Water." Philip Heading's comment is typical of one approach to this part of The Waste Land. He argues that Phlebas experiences "the dissolution of death which, if good intellect is used, can result not in simple dissolution . . . , but in the rebirth suggested by the many strands of allusion in the poem."<sup>2</sup> Elizabeth Drew, who approaches Eliot's verse from a Jungian viewpoint, also sees in Phlebas' death a "metamorphosis . . . which seems to suggest both the disintegration of the old life, and the mystery and half-heard message of the new."<sup>3</sup> Unfortunately, the critics who have seen a suggestion of regeneration in Part IV have tended to accept Cleanth Brooks' view that it is not safe to go beyond the point of suggesting that the section is an ambiguous "symbol of surrender and relief through surrender."<sup>4</sup>

While critics who see Phlebas' death as a positive occurrence have been moderate in the advocacy of their views, the critics who see Phlebas's death as an example of the destructive power of water which parallels the destructive fires of lust in Part III<sup>5</sup> have been more extreme. Hugh Kenner, for example, argues that Phlebas does not experience the "baptismal renunciation of the Old Adam."<sup>6</sup> Kenner continues: "Were there some simple negative formula for dealing with the senses, suicide would be the sure way to regeneration." Kenner's argument is rather weak at this point. For one thing, Phlebas does not simply "deal with his senses," although his ability to escape from the sensory world which contains the characters of Prufrock And Other Observations is his first step toward



salvation and rebirth. Nor is the self-surrender (entering the whirlpool) a purely negative formula. There is a significant difference between inaction and the transcendence of action; just as there is a significant difference between insensitivity and the escape from sensation.

Eliot was probably amused by the variety of critical responses evoked by "Death By Water." In the original manuscript which he sent to Ezra Pound, Eliot had prefaced the short lyric with a long sea narrative in quatrains. Kenner, who had not seen the manuscript which was lost until quite recently, correctly inferred from one of Eliot's letters that the deleted voyage paralleled the voyage of Ulysses in The Inferno, Canto XXVI. Actually, while Ulysses sailed first west and then south, the boat Phlebas was on sailed to the west and then to the north. But there is a more important difference between Dante's Ulysses and Phlebas. Whereas Ulysses' eternal torment consists of having to remember all of his evil deeds in Troy--

there they lament the ambush of the Horse  
which was the door through which the noble seed  
of Romans issued from its holy source;

there they mourn for Achilles slain  
sweet Deidamia weeps even in death;  
there they recall the Palladium in their pain.<sup>7</sup>--

Phlebas simply forgets his past life. Phlebas, unlike the tormented Ulysses, but like Prince Ferdinand (from whom he is not "wholly distinct") is transformed into something strange and new. In any case, Eliot closed this rather long and tiresome narrative (Pound was wise to remove it) with two exceptionally poor lines (which I am not allowed to quote) which made Phlebas' continued existence after death explicit. These

lines are spoken in the first person (by Phlebas), and they explain that the speaker can no longer hear any noise. Just below in the Ur-Wasteland are the lines which tell of the forgotten cries of gulls.

It is not my intention to argue about the poem Eliot published with evidence selected from the poem he wisely decided not to publish. On the contrary, it seems clear that the brief and suggestive lines Eliot did publish do more than simply suggest some hope of rebirth. Rather, they give us a character freed from the distractions of sensation and the concern with the possible consequences of action who surrenders his will to the greater forces of nature. Pound must have seen that all of this was suggested by the published version of Part IV, and that the long narrative was unnecessary. It is unfortunate that so many critics have failed to see the sense in which Part IV of The Waste Land is a moment of life by water in a world of sterility and despair.

Much of the confusion surrounding critical appraisals of "Death By Water" is a result of the fact that Phlebas is Eliot's first character who transcends personality. Although we are told that Phlebas was as handsome and tall as other men, we learn nothing of his personality. And though Phlebas passes beyond the stages of his age and youth (and thereby transcends his previous life in time), we learn nothing of his life. Many of the characters of The Waste Land seem more real than Phlebas. But, as with the characters of Prufrock And Other Observations, their reality is an expression of their desperate condition.

We learn a good deal about the poem's first speaker. We learn of her youth--

And when we were children, staying at the archduke's,  
 My cousin's, he took me on a sled,  
 And I was frightened. He said, Marie,  
 Marie, hold on tight. And down we went--  
 (C.P. p.37)

and of her present life style:

In the mountains, there you feel free.  
 I read much of the night, and go south in the winter.  
 (C.P. p.37)

Without doing any research, we know that this woman is of aristocratic birth. We know also that she is unable to respond to the cycles of nature, and that she is deeply troubled by both memory and desire.

In "The Fire Sermon" Eliot creates a vivid characterization in four lines:

He, the young man carbuncular, arrives,  
 A small house agent's clerk, with one bold stare,  
 One of the low on whom assurance sits  
 As a silk hat on a Bradford millionaire.  
 (C.P. p.44)

From these lines<sup>8</sup> we have not only the visual image which the word carbuncular evokes, but also a knowledge of the man's class and personality. We know that his range of emotions is limited (to "one bold stare") and that his assurance is both new-found and awkward. In short, like Prufrock, he comes to life before us.

It is not a coincidence that the "realistic" characters of The Waste Land are incapable of following the ancient counsel of the thunder to give, sympathize, and practice self-control. It is of interest to note that their failure to achieve the salvation which these disciplines would bring is based on an acceptance of personality and a wrong approach to time.

While these characters (and these are the great majority

of the characters in the poem, including Marie, Stetson, the two women in the pub scene in Part II, the typist and the clerk, as well as the three Thames daughters) are trapped within the restrictions of self,

We think of the key, each in his prison  
Thinking of the key, each confirms a prison,  
(C.P. p.49)

their view of time is seen as the cause of their acceptance of personality and their inability to achieve salvation. Where Prufrock's fragmented personality and time sense forces him to live from moment to moment (not within the cycles of nature, but within his own chaotic sub-divisions of these cycles), the doomed characters of The Waste Land find it impossible to relate to the changes of time in the world. Finding April the cruellest month, they withdraw from all contact with nature (by going south in the winter) and with each other (by fixing their eyes before their feet).

The poem turns on the inability of its characters to respond to the cycles of death and rebirth which had formed the basis of religion and literature since time immemorial. Where Jessie L. Weston<sup>9</sup> had shown the continuity of the myths of death and regeneration (based originally on the seasonal death and regeneration of nature), Eliot ironically used Weston's work to call attention to the collapse of these myths in the modern world. In the modern waste land, the Tarot cards (once used to predict the flooding of the Nile) are used for crass fortune telling, the sacrificed vegetative god has become a macabre corpse planted in a backyard garden, and sexuality, once a drive associated with great passion,

The change of Philomel, by the barbarous king  
So rudely forced,

(C.P.p.40)

has become a matter of indifference and genital gratification. All sense of value has been lost by those who cannot accept the cycles of time and nature in the world.

Many of the characters of The Waste Land appear only as names in passing. Years after the publication of The Waste Land, when old Possum got around to writing his Book Of Practical Cats, Eliot playfully returned to this question of names in "The Naming of Cats."

There are fancier names if you think they sound  
sweeter,

Some for the gentlemen, some for the dames;  
Such as Plato, Admetus, Electra, Demeter--  
But all of them sensible everyday names.

(C.P. p.149)

But Eliot's cats are his only characters whose personalities are both delightful and charming. In The Waste Land, the names we hear in passing--Stetson, Bill, Lou, May-- are simply the labels of vacuities. In the original fifty-four line opening section which followed the nocturnal wanderings of a debauched man from a London apartment to a theater to a brothel, the names of more than fourteen characters including Old Tom, Old Jane, Joe, Mr. Donovan, Myrtle, Trixie, Steve, Silk Hat Harry, and Ben Levin are mentioned. The impression that this catalogue of names creates is of a multitude of faces with no substance or reality. Eliot had used this technique of name dropping in "Gerontion," where he mentioned in passing Mr. Silvero, Hawakawa, Madame de Tornquist, Fraulein von Kulp, Fresca, Mrs. Cammel, and de Bailhache. In both "Gerontion" and The Waste Land these named characters are unreal and hollow. Just as the detailed exploration of Prufrock's personality is used to reveal the artificiality of

personality, so the catalogues of names call attention to the desperate emptiness of the characters of the early verse.

There are, then, sets of characters existing on different levels of consciousness in The Waste Land. On the lowest level are the characters discussed above who, because of their inability to respond to the cycles of time, are enslaved by their own personalities. Whether we are given a vivid impression of their personalities or only hear their names, we can sense the desperation and sterility of their lives. On a higher level of consciousness are the characters who, although unable to achieve salvation, are nevertheless aware of their own degradation. In this group is the man in the first part of "A Game of Chess" who thinks to himself:

. . . we are in rats' alley  
Where the dead men lost their bones.  
(C.P. p.40)

In the original manuscript Eliot suggested that this man was a contemporary counterpart of the questing knight who falls in the hyacinth garden of Part I. Tiresias also belongs in this group of characters who see the sterility of the modern world:

(And I Tiresias have foresuffered all  
Enacted on this same divan or bed;  
I who have sat by Thebes below the wall  
And walked among the lowest of the dead.)  
(C.P. p.44)

Finally, this group includes the Fisher King who in Part III hears

The sound of horns and motors, which shall bring  
Sweeney to Mrs. Porter in the spring,  
(C.P. p.43)

and who wonders in Part V if he can at least set his own lands in order. But the highest level of consciousness in the poem

is that of the drowned Phoenician sailor who escapes from the confining bounds of personality by surrendering to the currents of time.

In the closing lines of "Death By Water" the reader who turns the wheel of life is asked to consider Phlebas' death. It is impossible to read these lines today without thinking of the elaborate wheel symbolism of Murder In The Cathedral where Becket tells the first tempter:

Only  
The fool, fixed in his folly, may think  
He can turn the wheel on which he turns.<sup>10</sup>

But even if we confine our attention to The Waste Land, it is clear that we are being asked to compare our own willfulness (and the willfulness of the other characters of the poem) with the self-surrender of Phlebas. The peaceful verse of "Death By Water" haunts us as does the strange salvation of Phlebas the Phoenician.

CHAPTER THREE

The Center and the Circumference in

Murder in the Cathedral



From the start Eliot's characters existed on different levels of consciousness. In Prufrock and Other Observations, there is the frustrated desire to break out of a life of triviality and time,

To say: "I am Lazarus, come from the dead,  
Come back to tell you all, I shall tell you all.  
(C.P. p.6)

Prufrock is painfully aware of the existence of characters who achieve a different consciousness: he looks up to Hamlet and, at times, down to the fool. In The Waste Land, as I have shown, the levels of consciousness are even more extremely divergent; moving from the apparently omniscient Tiresias to the unthinking typist and clerk. In Sweeney Agonistes (1927), Eliot's first attempt at playwriting, this division of characters by consciousness becomes what Kenner calls Eliot's "unvarying dramatic method, which is to set loose in a drawing room full of masks, some Lazarus."<sup>1</sup> There is a vast gulf between Sweeney who sees the sterility of modern life and the other characters-- Doris, Dusty, Swarts, Snow, Wauchope, Horsfall, Klipstein, and Krumpacker--who only begin to understand what Sweeney is talking about. This gulf is maintained by Sweeney's unwillingness to explain what he means:

But if you understand or if you don't  
That's nothing to me and nothing to you.  
(C.P. p.84)

In The Rock (1934), an awkward experiment which is only of interest in terms of Eliot's development as a dramatist, the gulf between levels of awareness is bridged first by the Chorus (which represents the Church) which explains the ways of God to men, and later by the Rock (who is Saint

Peter). Among the workers who are building the church is Bert who, in the course of explaining the subtleties of various religious and political ideas to his fellow workers, serves as one mouthpiece for the author in a play of rhetorical harangue. What is significant about The Rock, however, is that only here do Eliot's characters begin to communicate between levels of awareness. As such, The Rock served as a training ground for Murder in the Cathedral, a play in which the spiritually enlightened can communicate with "common men."

Murder in the Cathedral (1935) is also built around sets of characters who function on different levels of awareness. The poor women who make up the chorus, like many of the wastelanders, are, at the play's opening, only "living and partly living." Like so many of the characters of Eliot's early verse, the tempters are convinced that "Man's life is a cheat and a disappointment." And, like Phlebas, Thomas à Becket passes the stages of his age and youth as he approaches the unmoving center of the turning wheel of human destiny and action. Ultimately, however, what unites the characters of Eliot's early poetry with the characters of Murder in the Cathedral is the relation between characterization and the consciousness of time and self.

Broadly speaking, Murder in the Cathedral is concerned with the positive effects of martyrdom on the Christian community.<sup>2</sup> More specifically, it is concerned with the effects of one man's transcendence of time and personality on the general understanding of time and self within a given society.

In Murder in the Cathedral, the man is Thomas à Becket, and society is represented by a Chorus of the poor women of Canterbury in the year 1170. In the story of Becket's temptation and triumph, Eliot saw one of the "timeless moments" which comprise history. In Becket's development (and, as I shall show, in the development of all of Eliot's spiritually enlightened characters), Eliot creates a dramatic presentation of the abstraction of Burnt Norton that "only through time time is conquered." For Eliot's characters, the only hope of transcending the limits of personal desire in time is based on coming to understand both one's own past life and the nature of time in general. For this reason Becket reviews and rejects his former life with the first two tempters.

The first tempter, who tempts Becket with the lure of past pleasures, with

Fluting in the meadows, viols in the hall,  
 Laughter and apple-blossom floating on the water,  
 Singing at nightfall, whispering in chambers,  
 Fires devouring the winter season,  
 Eating up the darkness with wit and wine and  
 wisdom!-- (C.P. p.183)

urges him to renew his friendship with Henry II. It is Becket's understanding of time that makes it possible for him to resist the lure of "the good time past." Rejecting the first tempter's view that it is possible to return to a former life, Becket says:

We do not know very much about the future  
 Except that from generation to generation  
 The same things happen again and again.  
 Men learn little from others' experience.  
 But in the life of one man, never  
 The same time returns. Sever  
 The cord, shed the scale. Only

The fool, fixed in his folly, may think  
 He can turn the wheel on which he turns.  
 (C.P. p.184)

Becket already understands intellectually that man does not completely control his own destiny, and that salvation rests on the escape from the patterns of action in time.

The second and third tempters attempt to interest Becket in temporal power. The second tempter argues that Becket should seek to become Chancellor again because:

Power obtained grows to glory,  
 Life lasting, a permanent possession.  
 (C.P. p.185)

Becket rejects this suggestion on the grounds that political power ("Not controlled by the power of God") is necessarily corrupt.

Unlike the first two tempters who urge Thomas to return to the past, the third tempter urges Thomas to see that "Time past is time forgotten." Suggesting that the King would never again trust Thomas, the third tempter urges Becket to form an alliance with the barons against the King. Becket easily resists this temptation, saying:

If the Archbishop cannot trust the throne,  
 He has good cause to trust none but God alone.  
 (C.P. p.189)

The important thing to notice about these temptations is that, while they are different in specific content, they are each attempts to seduce Becket into accepting a false approach to time. For, as the play develops, it becomes increasingly clear that if he is to become a saint, Thomas must neither return to nor forget the past; he must, on the contrary, escape from the limits of time.





This transcendence of time is also seen as the basis of Christianity in Becket's Christmas sermon between parts I and II. In discussing the "mystery of our masses of Christmas Day," Becket explains how it is possible for Christians to simultaneously rejoice over Christ's birth and mourn over his death and passion on the cross. He says: "Beloved, as the World sees, this is to behave in a strange fashion. For who in the world will both mourn and rejoice at once for the same reason." (C.P., p.198) In celebrating a mass on Christmas, Becket suggests that the Christian community is being shown the reconciliation of opposites through the transcendence of time. It is possible to mourn and rejoice at one time, ultimately, because there is only one moment which comprises all of time. From God's perspective, and from Becket's perspective as a saint, the birth and death of Christ, the very creation and annihilation of the world are simultaneous occurrences.

Becket's transcendence of time is seen in Part II in his conversation with the priests who want to lock Becket's murderers out of the cathedral. In rejecting the narrow frame of reference from which the priests argue, Becket says:

You think me reckless, desperate and mad.  
 You argue by results, as this world does,  
 To settle if an act be good or bad.  
 You defer to the fact. For every life and every  
                   act  
 Consequence of good and evil can be shown.  
 And in time results of many deeds are blended  
 So good and evil in the end become confounded.  
It is not in time that my death shall be known;  
It is out of time that my decision is taken  
 If you call that decision  
 To which my whole being gives entire consent.  
 I give my life

To the Law of God above the Law of Man.  
 (C.P. pp.211-212, italics mine)

There are, of course, two primary senses in which Becket means that good and evil are confounded. He is suggesting that in the development of history the moral consequences of his own actions may seem complicated. But, more significantly, he is alluding to still another set of opposites which are reconciled through the transcendence of time. Becket is making the standard theological point that ultimately there is no such thing as evil; and that from God's point of view everything in existence is good. In any case, it is Becket's transcendence of time that allows him to see the second point and ignore the first.

Just as Becket becomes a saint by transcending time, so the poor women of the Chorus express their lack of spiritual insight with their constant references to time and the seasons:

What shall we do in the heat of summer  
 But wait in barren orchards for another October?  
 (C.P. p.176)

These women fear the spiritual rebirth of nature which would result from Becket's martyrdom. They open the play with an expression of their anxiety over Becket's return:

Winter shall come bringing death from the sea,  
 Ruinous spring shall beat at our doors,  
 Root and shoot shall eat out our eyes and our ears,  
 Disastrous summer burn up the beds of our streams  
 And the poor shall wait for another decaying  
 October.

(C.P. p.176)

What the Chorus fails to see is that Becket's martyrdom is not going to "disturb the quiet seasons." They fail to see



that on the most important level Becket has not come "bringing death into Canterbury." Rather, like the vegetative gods Jessie L. Weston discussed, Becket returns to England to be sacrificed to bring about a renewal of nature. The Chorus' failure to understand the significance of Becket's impending martyrdom parallels Madame Sosostri's inability to find the Hanged Man; and Eliot makes it clear that, like the wastelanders, these women fail to see in the cycles of nature an annual reenactment of the physical death and spiritual rebirth that is the basis of Christianity.

Moreover, these "scrubbers and sweepers of Canterbury" are victims of their own fragmented view of time. Their opening speech revolves around their entrapment in days (New Year's, Christmas), months (December, November, October), seasons (autumn, summer), and years ("Seven years and the summer is over"). It is this consciousness of time, a consciousness which drops a question even on Prufrock's plate, which the Chorus must, if only for an instant, transcend if they are to be saved.

In their speech directly following Becket's Christmas sermon, the Chorus is still unable to relate properly to the cycles of nature:

What sign of the spring of the year?  
 . . . . .  
 Do the days begin to lengthen?  
 Longer and darker the day, shorter and  
 colder the night.

(C.P. p.201)

To a mind at tune with the harmonious changes of the seasons, the days between the winter solstice and the vernal equinox

would seem lighter. And yet, these women have begun to appreciate the mysteries of Christian faith. For they say:

The peace of this world is always uncertain  
Unless men keep the peace of God.  
(C.P. p.201)

The final enlightenment of these members of the Christian community follows Becket's death. Eliot substituted a symbolic "rain of blood" for the storm which actually followed Becket's murder. The Chorus chants:

How can I ever return, to the soft quiet seasons?  
Night stay with us, stop sun, hold season, let  
the day not come, let the spring not come.  
Can I look again at the day and its common things,  
and see them all smeared with blood,  
through a curtain of falling blood.  
(C.P. p.214)

Although they contemplate it with horror, this is exactly what they must do: this is the very essence of a Christian view of life. Blood, the symbol of Christ's sacrifice, a sacrifice which Becket reenacts, falls to renew the "soft quiet seasons." In seeing the day with its common things through a curtain of blood, the Chorus will come to view the world in Christian terms.

In addition to this new way of seeing daily life, the Chorus, so bound up in time in its early speeches, has come, if only for a moment, to see the way in which a martyrdom transcends the pattern of time:

Every horror had its definition,  
Every sorrow had a kind of end:  
In life there is not time to grieve long.  
But this, this is out of time, this is out of time,  
An instant eternity of evil and wrong.  
(C.P. p.214, italics mine)

At this point in the play the Chorus sees only the horror of

Becket's murder. They feel the damnation of Becket's murderers ("The death bringers"), and the burden which all men must share ("the blight man was born for."). But this is only one side of the mystery of life and death. As Becket says, this is "solely to mourn." For these women the awareness of sin leads to renewed faith. Becket's death leads the Chorus to an appreciation of the meaning of nature's cycles; for, in their final speech, they say:

Even in us the voices of seasons, the snuffle  
of winter, the song of spring, the drone of  
summer . . . Praise Thee.

. . . . .  
For wherever a saint has dwelt, wherever a martyr  
has given his blood for the blood of Christ,  
There is holy ground, . . .

. . . . .  
. . . From such ground springs that  
which forever renews the earth.

(C.P. p.221)

By failing to take the relation of Becket's transcendence of time to the salvation of the Chorus fully into account, many critics have failed to understand the different levels of characterization in the play. In an otherwise intelligent essay, Patricia Adair argues that Becket is a cold, almost inhuman character.<sup>4</sup> In The Art of T.S. Eliot, Helen Gardner supports this view of Becket when she suggests that he is something of a "prig."<sup>5</sup> In the same chapter Gardner goes on to argue that the true strength of Murder in the Cathedral is in the Chorus' development. She argues that while Becket is little more than an "embodied attitude," the choric speeches give us women who are caught up in an action which leads to a significant change.

It is clear that these critics have seen what Eliot

was doing without fully appreciating his reasons for doing it. The women of Canterbury seem more real than Thomas because they are average and not saintly people. More significantly, like the characters of Prufrock and Other Observations, the Chorus sees the world through a fragmented time sense which brings sharply into focus their moment to moment sensory experience of the world:

. . . I have heard  
 Fluting in the nighttime, fluting and owls, have  
 seen at noon  
 scaly wings slanting over, huge and ridiculous,  
 I have tasted  
 The savour of putrid flesh in the spoon. I have  
 felt. . . I have heard . . .  
 . . . . .  
 I have seen . . . I have eaten . . . I have tasted  
 . . . . .  
 I have smelt . . . I have seen.

(C.P. p.207)

Their various responses of horror or boredom give life to these women.

Becket's "unreality" is, conversely, a reflection of his transcendence of personality and time. To accuse Becket of being either priggish or cold is both unfair and imprecise. For one thing, Becket expresses a deep concern with the fate of mankind in all of his relations with the Chorus. The frank openness and concern of his Christmas sermon, addressed to the "Dear children of God," shows us a man who is passionately involved in the affairs of men. Later in Part II before the murder, Becket attempts to comfort the women when he counsels them to "be at peace with" their thoughts and visions.

Becket's transcendence of personality, moreover,

should not be seen as a lack of humanity. As Eliot wrote elsewhere,<sup>6</sup> only those who have a personality can want to go beyond it. We see Becket as a proud and powerful man in his rejection of the second and third tempters; and we see his struggle to go beyond personality in his response to the fourth tempter. His pride is revealed in his last reply to the second tempter:

. . . shall I who keep the keys  
Of Heaven and Hell, supreme alone in England  
Who bind and loose, with power from the Pope,  
Descend to desire a punier power?--  
(C.P. p.187)

and in his parting thrust at the third tempter:

I ruled once as Chancellor  
And men like you were glad to wait at my door.  
· · · · ·  
Shall I who ruled like an eagle over doves  
Now take the shape of a wolf among wolves ?  
(C.P. p.189)

At this point in the play, Becket is a proud and feeling man who, for example, still remembers his love for Henry II-- "O Henry, O my King!"-- and who desires to use martyrdom to achieve still greater power. The fourth tempter gives voice to Becket's deepest desires when he asks: "What earthly pride, that is not poverty / Compared with the richness of heavenly grandeur?". Torn between earthly pride and the desire for heavenly grandeur, Becket cries out "Can I neither act nor suffer / Without perdition?".

When Becket resolves to neither act nor suffer in his triumphant final speech in Part I, it is because he has gone beyond his own personal desires and become the instrument of God. In explaining the meaning of martyrdom to the

Christian community in his Christmas sermon, Becket explains that the transcendence of personality is absolutely essential:

. . . A martyr, a saint, is always made by the design of God, for his love of men, . . . A martyrdom is never the design of man; for the true martyr is he who has become the instrument of God, who has lost his will in the will of God, not lost it but found it, for he has found freedom in submission to God.

(C.P. p.199)

The realism of Becket's personality has, nevertheless, been a topic of interest for critics. "The dramatic problem, of course, is that the more perfect the saint's self-surrender the more difficult it is to keep him a real man, since it is by our weakness that we are most human."<sup>7</sup> In his discussion of this view of Murder in the Cathedral, D. E. S. Maxwell<sup>8</sup> argues that while Adair "sees the dramatic problem" Eliot faced, she fails to take sufficient notice of the "brief glimpses of other, normal facets of Thomas' character" which Eliot builds into the unfolding action. Adair had argued that by forcing Thomas "to play a purely passive role, Mr. Eliot increases the difficulty of making Thomas entirely credible as a man." Maxwell responds by questioning the view that Thomas is purely passive. Both of these critical responses to the play center around the most fundamental questions raised by the types of characters which Eliot created, but a correct understanding of the question can only emerge from a synthesis of the view that Becket is throughout de-personalized and the view that he is throughout seen as having other, normal character traits.

More than anything else Murder in the Cathedral is a vivid dramatic presentation of the nature of the saint's

view of life. It is an attempt to do what Dante, in Eliot's view, had done, that is to make the spiritual visible. Both Adair, who argued that much of Becket's realism is sacrificed to his selflessness, and Maxwell, who saw glimpses of personality behind the saintly abstractions, fail to see the dynamic nature of Eliot's protagonist. The action of the play is the subtle internal development of Becket's mind in achieving sainthood. Maxwell is correct to call attention to the "normal" aspects of Becket's personality, but it is significant that all of his examples come from Part I. Adair is correct to see a sacrifice of "realism" in Becket's self-surrender, but she fails to see that in Murder in the Cathedral Eliot is presenting a view of both the "reality" that finds expression through the illusory masks of personality, and the reality of a higher spiritual order.

When Adair argues that Becket's humanity is sacrificed by Eliot in the interest of exploring the nature of martyrdom, she is only partially correct. Humanity, as Adair uses the word, is little more than a warm personality. And, of course, Becket transcends his personal desires to become God's instrument. Eliot was not so much sacrificing Becket's humanity as he was exposing the superficiality of mere personality. It is worthwhile to note in this regard that the warmest, most congenial character in the play is the first tempter who, like his three colleagues, is only a disguise concealing the hollowness of spiritual vacuity.

There is also some critical confusion concerning Eliot's use of the historical facts concerning Becket. It is not that Eliot's version of history is at odds with histor-

ical fact, but rather that Eliot was not interested in the historical political situation surrounding Becket's death. Both Tennyson and Jean Anouilh tampered more with historical facts in their reconstructions of the story.<sup>9</sup> But both of these authors were also more concerned than Eliot with the psychological and historical motives of Becket and Henry II. Eliot takes Becket out of his historical context and concentrates on the exploration of the nature of martyrdom in an effort to develop a more universal and spiritual theme. Eliot removes Becket from his historical situation so that we can clearly see the way in which Becket, in the course of the play, is removed from time, from the circumference of the spinning wheel to the still point at the center.

In Murder in the Cathedral, then, Eliot for the first time explicitly presents a solution to the problems of spiritual death which had overwhelmed his earlier characters. Through the Chorus' development, Eliot makes it clear that the fragmented time sense can be unified through the realization that there are some sorrows (and some joys) which do not exist within a temporal frame. Moreover, the inability to relate to the cycles of nature and time can be overcome through the sacrifice of one who has "made perfect his will." In short, the transcendence of time and personality which forms the basis of Part IV of The Waste Land finds a more complete and less ambiguous expression in the fate of Eliot's Becket.



I

In The Family Reunion (1939), Eliot attempted to transpose the themes and characters of Sweeney Agonistes and Murder in the Cathedral into a full length exploration of the quest for spiritual understanding in a modern setting. Like Sweeney, Harry, Lord Monchensey, the play's hero, has awakened to the horror of life, the nightmare which makes life unendurable. Like Sweeney, Harry is brought into contact with spiritual forces through an awareness of his own guilt and sin. And, like Becket, Harry begins the play surrounded by a chorus of hollow men who are caught in the fragmented time consciousness, and only slowly works his way toward an understanding of the nature of time and personality.

The characters of The Family Reunion function on various levels of spiritual awareness which can be associated with their views of time. At the bottom of the play's rather schematic divisions is the Chorus of insensitive aging Prufrocks, Harry's aunts and uncles: Ivy, Violet, Gerald, and Charles. Harry correctly, if obnoxiously, points out that these are people "To whom nothing has ever happened," except, "at most a continual impact of external events."<sup>1</sup> Drawn into the pattern of Harry's spiritual enlightenment, the Chorus repeatedly resists seeing what is going on around them. At the end of the first scene in Part I, they chant:

Hold tight, hold tight, we must insist that the  
world is what we have always taken it to be.  
(Col. Pl. p.74)

Refusing to become involved in the unfolding action later in the play, they decide that:

CHAPTER FOUR

The Inner Self in Eliot's Last Plays

There is nothing at all to be done about it,  
 There is nothing to do about anything,  
 And now it is nearly time for the news,  
 We must listen to the weather report  
 And the international catastrophes.

(Col. Pl. p.101)

In these lines we see Harry's aunts and uncles as people who, like the characters of Prufrock and Other Observations, withdraw from meaningful thought or action into a world of time and trivia.

On the next level of consciousness is Harry's mother Amy, the dowager Lady Monchensey, whom Eliot has since called "the only complete human being in the play."<sup>2</sup> As she grows older, Amy's driving concern is to stay alive. In a rather awkward speech, Amy explains her reasons for living:

. . . I keep Wishwood alive  
 To keep the family alive, to keep them together,  
 To keep me alive, and I live to keep them.

(Col. Pl. p.59)

By all means the most self-willed character in The Family Reunion, Amy has foolishly attempted to halt the progress and development of time. In keeping Wishwood exactly as it was when Harry left it, she is trying to stop the wheel of human life not by arriving at the unmoving center, but by grabbing onto the inevitably turning circumference. The folly of her approach to time is seen by Harry, for he says:

. . . It's very unnatural,  
 This arresting of the natural changes of things:  
 But it's very like her.

(Col. Pl. p.77)

The play ends with the final defeat of Amy's will. When Harry departs, Amy, in despair, resolves to give up her perpetual fight against the cycles of nature:

. . . Why should I worry---  
 To keep the tiles on the roof, combat the endless  
 weather,  
 Resist the wind.

(Col. Pl. p.117)

And, inevitably, time catches up to Lady Monchensey; for when "the clock stops in the dark," her life ends. Amy realizes too late that there was something that she might have understood:

At my age, I only begin to apprehend the truth  
About things too late to mend.

(Col. Pl. p.117)

On a still higher level of awareness are Mary and Agatha, who represent Harry's alternatives of worldly and spiritual love. Mary attempts to lure Harry from one false approach to time to another. Harry has spent the year prior to the beginning of the play trying to escape the guilt associated with his wife's death. But this attempt to escape only increased his suffering. He returns to Wishwood to resume a former life, to evade the memory of his marriage by returning to a time in the even more remote past.<sup>3</sup> In bringing Harry "news / Of a door that opens at the end of a corridor, / Sunlight and singing" (Col. Pl. p.82), Mary tempts Harry to abandon his guilt (which is associated with the Furies which can lead him to salvation) and settle down at Wishwood as her husband. Although he, too, had thought of this, he comes to see that this would be unwise; for he says:

The instinct to return to the point of departure  
And start again as if nothing had happened,  
Isn't that all folly?

(Col. Pl. p.80)

Like Becket, Harry must neither escape from nor return to his former life; he must, rather, come to understand the way in which "all time is eternally present."

Agatha, whom Grover Smith correctly calls Harry's spiritual guardian, sees that Harry must come to understand

more completely the torment he has endured. Agatha clearly sees that if Harry is to be free, he must do what Sweeney in Sweeney Agonistes was unable to do; that is, he must see a glory behind the horror and boredom of life. Only Agatha knows that Harry, who sees himself as

. . . the old house  
With the noxious smell and the sorrow before morning,  
In which all past is present, all degradation  
Is unredeemable.

(Col. Pl. p.66)

is actually the conscience of his "unhappy family, / Its bird sent flying through the purgatorial flame." Where Harry had thought himself hopelessly ensnared in the past sins of his family, Agatha sees that his growing spiritual consciousness will make it possible for him to release himself and his family from their curse:

It is possible that you have not know what sin  
You shall expiate, or whose, or why. It is certain  
That knowledge of it must precede the expiation.  
It is possible that sin may stain and struggle  
In its dark instinctive birth, to come to conscious-  
ness  
And so find expiation.

(Col. Pl. p.105)

Agatha also sees that if Harry is to defeat his familial curse, he must do so through a knowledge of the past. When she says:

. . . the future can only be  
built  
Upon the real past.

(Col. Pl. p.60)

she is succinctly stating the most important theme of the play.

Harry, who functions on the highest level of consciousness, is the most difficult character to understand.