CHAPTER EIGHT

THE PLAYWRIGHT

I

It is now almost a platitude to say that Eliot was a serious writer endowed with a rich complex of artistic and spiritual principles developing throughout his career. He tried to express his ideas and depict the experience of his life or the journey of his questing soul in various forms of literature like poetry, literary essays, lengthy prose compositions or treatises and plays. At the early stage of his career he was mainly concerned with poetry, and was fighting for the integrity of poetry. But, he was, all the time, intensely aware of the 'relation of poetry to the spiritual and social life of its time and of other times', (1) and of the need to reach out to a wider audience. Thus, from the very beginning drama as a public art-form was one of his compulsive preoccupations.

It is quite safe to remark that from the very beginning of his literary career Eliot was interested in drama. His early poems always tended towards

---

The Playwright

dramatic expression, and his many essays on Elizabethan and Jacobean playwrights showed his absorption and critical interest in the great age of the English theatre. He was probably feeling his way towards the possibility of poetic drama which of all art-forms, as he declared in 1920, 'is perhaps the most permanent, is capable of greater variation and of expressing more varied types of society than any other'. (2) But it was a time of realist theatre, of prose dramatists and the masters of naturalism. There was a deep prejudice against verse plays and the theatre-going public considered verse to be strained, artificial and unnatural. But Eliot started with a conception of poetic drama as an organic and artistic whole. He realised that verse was not something merely added to a play as an ornament, but that the poetic pattern and the dramatic pattern had to subsist together as integral products of the same act of imagination. In the play, poetry has to justify itself dramatically.

In 1936, in a radio broadcast Eliot made his position quite explicit:

I believe ... that poetry, is the natural and complete medium for drama; that the prose play is a kind of abstraction capable of giving you only a part of what the theatre can give; and that the verse play is capable of something much more intense and exciting.

( Published in The Listener, 25 Nov, 1936)

The Playwright

He believed in a fundamental connection between poetry and drama. The permanent part of a play is the words, and words raised to their highest power produce poetry, and poetry is 'the mode in which reality is experienced most profoundly'. (3) Eliot said quite clearly in this connection:

It is in fact the privilege of dramatic poetry to be able to show us several planes of reality at once.

(The Aims of Poetic Drama', Adam, Nov. 1949, p. 16)

Poetic drama induces heightened awareness; it not only excites the audience with the action but also reveals the significance of the action. This is because with the help of poetry the playwright creates a complex artistic structure corresponding to the totality of human experience and reproduces the various levels -- sensuous, logical, psychological and spiritual -- on which life is lived. Eliot wrote in 1934:

It is possible that what distinguishes poetic drama from prosaic drama is a kind of doubleness in the action, as if it took place on two planes at once ....... In poetic drama a certain apparent irrelevance may be the symptom of this doubleness; or the drama has an under-pattern, less manifest than the theatrical one.

(Selected Essays, p. 229)

The Playwright

This pattern may emerge above the surface of life like action and reveal itself as symbolism or allegory, or it may remain buried. It may be related to the pattern of imagery, or it may lie at the root of the action and have the quality of myth, an archetypal pattern of human experience or an ineffable vision of spiritual reality.

Regarding the prevailing cult of realism in drama Eliot wrote in 1923:

The realism of the modern stage is something to which we can no longer respond, because to us it is no longer realistic. We know now that the gesture of daily existence is inadequate for the stage.

('Dramatis Personae', The Criterion, I 1923, p. 305)

Again, in 1924 he wrote:

The great vice of English drama from Kyd to Galsworthy has been that its aim of realism was unlimited. ... There has been no form to arrest, so to speak, the flow of the spirit at any particular point before it expands and ends its course in the desert of exact likeness to the reality which is perceived by the most commonplace mind. ... . . . .

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

('Four Elizabethan Dramatists', in Selected Essay, p. 111)
The Playwright

This is a concept of art as an organic whole to be achieved by adherence to the necessary conditions of creation like abstraction from reality. Eliot wanted that poetic drama should have depth, richness, concentration and unity through a complex organisation according to the conditions of this particular form of art. Eliot himself has pointed this out in a broadcast talk:

To work out a play in verse is ... ... to see the thing as a whole musical pattern ... ... underneath the action, which should be perfectly intelligible, there should be a musical pattern which intensifies our excitement by reinforcing it with feeling from a deeper and less articulate level.

('The Need for Poetic Drama', The Listener, Nov. 1936, p. 994.)

Envisaging various possibilities for the realization of this ideal, Eliot went to the ballet with its abstract gestures symbolising emotions, and to the music hall with its, 'collaboration of the audience with the artist which is necessary in all art and most obviously in dramatic art'. (4) He also spoke of a return to 'ritual', which could have two meanings -- rhythm and ceremonies.

About rhythm and drama, he wrote in 1923:

The essential of the drama were, as we might expect, given by Aristotle: 'Poetry, music, and dancing constitute in Aristotle a group by themselves, their common element being imitation by means of rhythm -- rhythm which admits of being applied to words, events, and the movements of the body. It is the rhythm, so utterly absent from modern drama, either verse or prose. (5)

The Playwright

Rhythm was the significant element common in the arts of Shakespeare, Chaplin and Massine. It was not to be found in *The Doll's House*. Rhythm should be brought back to the theatre because the audience desires to participate in a ritual, which is a set of repeated movements like the dance. The rhythms of dance and of poetry evoke latent rhythms in the human system. They evoke corresponding rhythms from the depths and allow the audience to have a glimpse of the eternal verity. (6) Communication of this kind is possible only through the rhythm of the play as a whole. Eliot himself wrote of something like this:

It seems to me that beyond the nameable, classifiable motives and emotions of our conscious life ... there is a fringe of indefinite extent, of feeling which we can only detect, so the to speak, out of the corner of the eye and can never completely focus; of feeling of which we are only aware in a kind of temporary detachment from action.

('Poetry and Drama', in *On Poetry and Poets*, p. 96)

This particular range of sensibility can be conveyed only by dramatic poetry at its moments of greatest intensity. Formulating the ideal of poetic drama Eliot wrote in 1951:

I have before my eyes a kind of mirage of the perfection of verse drama, which would be a design... (6) Herbert Howarth: *Notes on Some Figures Behind T.S.Eliot*, p. 303.
The Playwright

of human action and words, such as to present at once the two aspects of dramatic and of musical order ... ... For it is ultimately the function of art, in imposing a credible order upon ordinary reality, and thereby eliciting some perception of an order in reality, to bring us to a condition of serenity, stillness, and reconciliation; and then leave us, as Virgil left Dante, to proceed toward a region where that guide can avail us no farther.

(Ibid, p. 87)

This is an essentially religious concept of verse drama. In the open-ended and inconclusive 'A Dialogue on Dramatic Poetry', one of the speakers, E says in a simple but challenging way:

... drama springs from religious liturgy, and that it cannot afford to depart far from religious liturgy ... when drama has ranged as far it has in our own day, is not the only solution to return to religious liturgy? And the only dramatic satisfaction that I find now is in a High Mass well performed.

(Selected Essays, p.47)

Another speaker, B, more cautious and critical in temper, supplies the qualification necessary for the views of E:

We cannot be aware solely of divine realities. We must be aware also of human realities. And we crave some liturgy less divine, something in respect of which we shall be more spectators and less participants. Hence we want the human drama related to the divine drama, but not the same, as well as the Mass.

(Ibid, 49).
This is the kind of poetic drama attempted by Eliot, and this was the result of his unending pursuit of order in life, religion and art. The form of drama has to be something which satisfied the dramatic desires of the audience, because 'religion is no more a substitute for drama than drama is a substitute of religion'.

Also in the introduction to his mother's verse play Savonarola he wrote:

In genuine drama the form is determined by the point on the line at which a tension between liturgy and realism takes place.

In practice Eliot tried to react against the photographic tendencies of modern realism and contrived to cut a path clear around Shakespeare by making use of 'suggestions from remote drama, too remote for there to be any danger of imitation, such as Everyman, and the late medieval morality and mystery plays and the great Greek dramatists'. (7) Eliot did not go for prose drama because the tendency, at any rate, of prose drama is to emphasise the ephemeral and superficial; if we want to get to the permanent and universal we tend to express ourselves in verse.

('A Dialogue on Dramatic Poetry', Selected Essays, p.46.

The Playwright

And, he went for poetic drama in an age which is distinctly prosaic, and characterized by the concomitant categories of 'realism' and 'naturalism', because, according to him,

A verse play is not a play done into verse, but a different kind of play: in a way more realistic than 'naturalistic drama', because instead of clothing nature in poetry, it should remove the surface of things, expose the underneath, or the inside, of the natural surface appearance.

(Introduction to S.L. Bethell's Shakespeare and the Popular Dramatic Tradition.)

Using this kind of art-form Eliot made a heroic attempt, which was crowned with a considerable degree of success, particularly in his own age, to deal with the same problem of reality in the human condition depicted in his poems. In this context it has to be remembered that Eliot was a seriously religious writer in the sense that he was constantly concerned with the perplexing interplay of immanence and transcendence, and the excruciating conflict between the secular and spiritual orders in life. Whether he disguised his quest under secular terminologies and analogies, or used straightforward Christian symbolism and references, he was always in search of the kind of truth or reality which will relate man to his time-bound world and to an eternal order beyond it, and which will restore significance to his life. The steady religious perspective which
The Playwright

came out of his confirmation in the Anglican Church, was another decisive impetus. As a 'Christian thinker' described in his essay, 'The Pensees of Pascal', Eliot was deeply distressed by the disorder of the world and seriously concerned to 'preserve values'. In addition to the suggestion of his own plan for a Christian society envisaged in his prose-writings he began to write plays embodying in a public art-form the superiority of the religious, i.e. Christian points of view.

II

Eliot's first attempt in this form, *Sweeney Agonistes: Fragments of an Aristophanic Melodrama* (1926-27), is a fragmentary experiment in a new mode of drama, which may be regarded as an intelligent artistic response to the age itself. Conventional dramatic structures and conventional approach to dialogue are abandoned. For the model Eliot went back to something central to the dramatic traditions of the West: to Aristophanes, but Aristophanes as interpreted by the Cambridge Classical Anthropologists, particularly by
The Playwright

F.M. Cornford in *The Origin of Attic Comedy*. (8) The rhythm is the product of a clever process of permutation and combination of elements taken from sources like the music-hall and the jazz.

The title suggests an analogy with *Samson Agonistes* with regard to both Samson's spiritual dilemma and the Greek dramatic structure used by Milton. Milton's Samson is a spiritual exile in an alien world, which he pulls down around his own head under divine compulsion in order to destroy its iniquities. Eliot's Sweeney is the same natural man of the quatrains poems, gross and fleshly as the hippopotamus, but, by the absurd paradox of the human situation, a hero comparable with classical heroes and having something of the spiritual. The title means Sweeney in conflict. This is quite appropriate because he is, like Samson, another spiritual exile in an alien world to which he brings echoes of violence and

(8) According to F.M. Cornford an Aristophanic comedy consists a Prologue, the paradox or entry of the Chorus, the Agon or the conflict, the Parabasis or a static choral interlude dividing the play into almost two halves, a scene of Sacrifice, a Feast, a Festal procession and a union, which Cornford calls Marriage. The pattern may vary from play to play, but the basic structure of Agon, Sacrifice, Feast and Union remains, and this is supposed to have preserved the well-known pattern of vegetation ritual. Particularly, the Agon is a dramatized conflict between the representative of the vegetation god and his antagonist upon which depends the renewal of fertility and therefore the life of man.
death. The two epigraphs: 'Orestes: You don't see them, you don't -- but I see them; they are hunting me down, I must move on. -- Choephoroi', and 'Hence the soul cannot be possessed of the divine union, until it has divested itself of the love of created beings. -- St. John of the Cross', hint at the nature of Sweeney's conflict and the spiritual centre of the work. Orestes is haunted and pursued for his sin by the Furies who are invisible except to the victim. Sweeney is driven by a kind of knowledge which sets him apart from others and enables him to see more than others. This is the nature of the conflict suggested by the Aeschylean epigraph, and the epigraph from St. John of the Cross hints at the means of achieving resolution.

Again, according to the sub-title, Eliot's play is supposed to be Aristophanic in the sense that it presents a satirical view of contemporary life. It is also a melodrama in the sense that almost all the characters are flat and that the emotions are inflated and the situations over-dramatized. The first fragment, 'Fragment of a Prologue', sets the scene and introduces the major characters and themes. The mood is also created and the exposition initiated. Doris, Dusty and the visitors to their flat, Swarts, Snow, Krumpacker and Klipstein are 'material, literal-minded, and visionless' characters. They
The Playwright

live in a classe and demi monde world of the jazz
age with its vacuity and its insistent syncropated
rhythm protecting them from any confrontation with
reality. Dilys Powell refers to this dramatic experi-
ment of Eliot as 'the union of the ultimate economy
of diction with a conception of the ultimate spiritual
destination'. (9) The characters are not involved in
any mystery or tension. Nothing is strange to them,
nothing appals, because everything drops into familiar
categories. Then comes the ritual of cards, which do
not touch but mime facts. Like Madame Sosostris's
ritual mumbo-jumbo with the pack of tarot cards
obliquely introducing the characters and the formal
structures of The Waste Land, the cards prefigure
incidents in the play and make the audience look forward
to the Agon. There is a reference to a quarrel, a death
and a coffin. Doris is sure that the coffin belongs to
her, but the coffin is curiously associated with a
wedding:

No it's mine, I'm sure it's mine,
I dreamt of weddings all last night
Yes it's mine, I know its mine.

In the 'Fragment of an Agon' the actual conflict
is presented. Sweeney, who is supposed to be the most

(9) Dilys Powell: Descent from Parnassus (The Cresset
The Playwright

important character possessing a higher degree of spiritual awareness, (10) impinges on the locked but empty world of Doris, Dusty and others. The conflict is thus between Sweeney representing the world of the spirit and Doris representing a secular world of materialistic automatism. Sweeney's words,

I'll carry you off
To a cannibal isle.

do not mean exactly a proposal for marriage. But these words and the others following them give hints of a sacrifice, a feast and a marriage, which are some of the elements of Aristophanic comedy. Conford analyses the structure of Attic comedy as the pattern of vegetation ritual. The Agon is a dramatized conflict between the representative of the vegetation god and his antagonist upon which renewal of fertility and life depends.

Doris, has already referred to a wedding which involved her own death. Sweeney goes on teasing her with remarks on life and death and reduces the unredeemed life in their bleak reductive universe to its essentials, 'Birth, and copulation and death', and comes to a savage conviction that 'Life is death'. This sense of the ambiguity

(10) Eliot's plays show a pattern of relationship based on levels of spiritual awareness possessed by the characters. He has explained his intention in The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism, p. 153.
The Playwright

of life and death is again expressed when he tells the story of the man who 'once did a girl in'. Sweeney understands the universality of sinful impulse:

Any man has to, needs to, wants to
Once in a lifetime, do a girl in,

and the horrible predicament and moral limbo of the lost violent souls who do not know if they are dead or alive. What Sweeney sees is the condition of death-in-life, which can be solved through a process of death-wedding or life-in-death, which resembles the ritual marriage of an Aristophanic comedy.

The hero of the play speaks for the principle of spiritual insight to be won through a horrible agony. In the ritualistic sense, this is the agony of the old and impotent god who will have to suffer death before regeneration. These suggestions make it quite clear that Eliot was using Conford's categories of vegetation ritual as well as the central Christian experience of the Passion and Resurrection. Sweeney's tale of murder and the awfulness of the life-in-death existence of the murderer can be read with the epigraph from St. John of the Cross. The murder of the girl and the dissolution of the body in a lysol bath may represent the violent rejection and
The Playwright
dissolution of the old life of 'birth and copulation and death' in the sacramental purgatorial bath which will lead to rebirth. Again, Sweeney may be a version of Eliot's use of the Lazarus theme. It may be that he has passed through some fire in the world of shadows, and has returned to tell the story of the ordeal of purgation, by divesting himself of the love of created things.

Sweeney Agonistes is a drama on the theme of spiritual pilgrimage leading humanity to an awareness of the life of the spirit through a mystic process. But, Sweeney says:

I gotta use words when I talk to you
But if you understand or if you don't
That is nothing to me and nothing to you.

Inspite of the gestures of his voice to exteriorise the boredom and horror of life Sweeney is uncommunicative.
The heavily syncopated rhythms of the voice takes a sickening lurch into real nightmare, swallowing up of the known by the unknown:

And perhaps you're alive
And perhaps you're dead
Hoo ha ha
Hoo ha ha

(11) In 1928, Eugene O'Neill also wrote a play of a slightly metaphysical vein on the same theme, Lazarus Laughed. Throughout his career O'Neill was driven by an awareness of the possibility of pursuing substitutes for religion. In a way quite different from the perspective of Eliot, he dramatized an experience resembling an ersatz religion consisting of a mystical denial of death.
The Playwright

This is disorientation and isolation. The play hints at an experience of almost total alienation. The unaware characters are isolated from one another and from God because they have refused to recognize that life without God is death-in-life. The spiritually aware character is cut off from the others because the spiritual path he took implied rejection of created beings, and because he cannot find words for the kind of experience he has gone through. Helen Gardner has observed quite relevantly:

Sweeney's incapacity to express the horror at the heart of life in any terms he feels to be adequate, or that his hearers are likely to understand, suggest that the subject of the fragments is not even the contrast of inanity and despair, but the gulf fixed between those capable of awareness and those who are not. (12)

_Sweeney Agonistes_ is a fragmentary experiment in drama dealing with the themes of Eliot's early poems like _The Waste Land_ and 'The Hollow Men'. This is a 'play about spiritual "lostness", expressed in the vocabulary of the jazz age, moving towards a symbolic act of violence'. (13) This is a play about a haunted world afflicted with 'fear in the way'. (14) The sense of isolation plaguing this world...

The Playwright

is an isolation in unreality like that of the schizophrenics. \(15\) Eliot could not have written it after *Ash Wednesday*. He had abandoned it as fragments probably because he had not yet arrived at the stage of solution and release through choice, attained by the protagonists of the later poems. It may also be that his conversion and reception into the Anglican Church had something to do with this.

Eliot's next experiment in dramatic writing was his part in the writing of *The Rock* (1934), a pageant play written in aid of the Forty-Five-Churches-Fund of Diocese of London. It is to be noted that in the nineteen-thirties Eliot became an active partisan for the Christian point of view. At that time his artistic and religious views started having social ramifications. In 1933, he wrote:

The most useful poetry, socially, would be one which could cut across all the present stratifications of public taste -- stratifications which are perhaps a sign of social disintegration. The ideal medium for poetry, to my mind, and the most direct means of social 'usefulness' for poetry, is the theatre.

*(The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism*, p. 96)

During that period when his membership of the Anglican Church made him aware of his Christian duty to defend his faith against its enemies who were in the

\(15\) Ibid, p.164.
The Playwright

ascendancy, Eliot was engaged in many good works for the church, of which his role in the writing of The Rock was one. He had to write under the direction of Martin Browne, who wrote the scenerio, and had to do only one scene and the choruses.

The central action of this pageant play is the building of a Church in contemporary London. The scenes depict the efforts and difficulties in the building of the church. It is not a matter of merely piling up stones, because the difficulties are the obstacles faced by the church throughout its history. With the help of a series of pageant scenes the entire process of construction is presented, and parallel situations in the history of the church are also depicted. These scenes are linked together by the chorus, which comments on the action. After the chorus diagnoses the spiritual sickness of contemporary society the Rock enters, led by a boy, and counsels the chorus:

I say to you: Make perfect your will,
I say: take no thought of the harvest,
But only of proper sowing.
The world turns and the world changes,
But one thing does not change.

The perpetual struggle of Good and Evil.

In contrast with the Chorus, which represents the Church in action the Rock represents the Church as eternal
The Playwright

witness, sufferer, and martyr. The dramatic function of the Rock is to support the chorus in its faith and duty by commenting on the difficulties of the Church as a necessary and eternal struggle. As regards his counsel, perfection of will occurs only when men act according to the will of God. Then, the changes of the world, and 'the perpetual struggle of Good and Evil', have to be looked at from the Christian perspective of humility, and of action and suffering, which are integrated in the dual conception of the Church. The church in action will continue the fight against evil, recognizing with all humility that the battle will not be won in the time-bound world, and the church as witness will recognize the eternal nature of the struggle and will insist on ceaseless building: 'The Church must be forever building, and always decaying, and always being restored'.

Then the Rock refers to the dichotomy of time and eternity:

In every moment you live at a point of intersection. Remember, living in time, you must live also now in Eternity.

Eternity is a timeless state and the present, the 'point of intersection', remains present to God, under the scheme of eternity. Because of the mysterious nature of time, one touches eternity constantly without apprehending it. To hold a moment and to apprehend it is to
The Playwright

recognise God in it. This apprehended moment is analogous
to the moment of Incarnation uniting two worlds:

There came, at a predetermined moment, a moment in
time and of time,

... ... ... ... ... ...
A moment in time but time was made through that
moment: for without the meaning there is no time,
and that moment of time gave the meaning.

After this treatment of the dichotomy of time and
eternity, of nature and God, comes the problem of the
necessity of uniting flesh and spirit in man:

For Man is joined spirit and body,
And therefore must serve as spirit and body,
Visible and invisible, two worlds meet in Man;
... ... ... ... ... ...
You must not deny the body.

The Rock suggests the affirmative way of service to
the Church, and to Christ through the Church, by labours
of the body and mind, which will sanctify time under the
scheme of eternity.

Again referring to the Church's struggle for survival
through the ages, with the temporal forces at war with it,
the chorus asserts:

Son of man was not crucified once for all
... ... ... ...
And if blood of Martyrs is to flow on the steps
We must first build the steps ... ...
The Playwright

But, the old creed of Capitalism and the two new 'heresies' of Communism and Fascism with their materialistic interpretation of existence, appear to frustrate the effort of the Church-builders. Then, the Rock consoles them:

There shall be always the Church and the World
And the Heart of Man

Swinging between the Hell Gate and Heaven Gate
And the Gates of Hell shall not prevail.
Darkness now, then
Light.

The Rock hardly meets Eliot's requirements for a religious play. There is no dramatic emotion in the Choruses, which simply give expression to various poetic moods. Eliot himself was well aware of these limitations of The Rock when he spoke of its voice as being his own voice 'addressing -- indeed haranguing -- an audience', and not the third, dramatic voice of poetry. However, writing the dramatic verse of the choruses having rhythms heavily indebted to the Bible and the Prayer Book, Eliot has learnt how to create a new verse form, the choric verse. After these fragmentary experiments in dramatic verse in Sweeney Agonistes and the choruses of The Rock, Eliot was ready for a fullscale play. Further The Rock started the long collaboration with Martin Browne and
The Playwright engaged him in theatrical activity for the first time. It is possible that this pledge of his interest in religion and drama encouraged the organizers of the Canterbury Festival in 1925 to commission him to write a play relevant to the occasion. Indeed, these were opportune occasions for the Christian poet, encouraging him to continue the journey of his soul, questing for the meaning and reality of life in Christian terms and categories, by using the new art-form.

III

The choruses of The Rock refer frequently to the disappointing spiritual condition of the contemporary world and raise an important question:

Waste and void, Waste and void. And darkness on the face of the deep.
Has the Church failed mankind or has mankind failed the Church?

The Church, under its spiritual aspect, as the body of Christ and the martyrs, has been offering perpetual refreshment to the parched soil of the modern waste land. So, when Eliot was asked to write a play for the Canterbury Festival of June 1935 the martyrdom of Thomas Becket of
The Playwright

Canterbury was an obvious choice as the subject. But, he was well aware of the limitations of the subject. He knew that artists employing their arts in the service of causes not so relevant to the world of their arts were doing so at their own risks, because, 'one danger is that the cause may not be big enough, or profound and permanent enough, not to become somewhat ridiculous under such treatment; and another danger is that you will not succeed in transmuting it into a personal and peculiar passion'. (16) But, Eliot was a serious Christian thinker and artist committed to values of unquestionable completeness, and his works became a complete and profound interpretation of life, which made his art possible. He had already discussed, in his prose works, the subjects of the conflict of the spiritual and secular orders and the relation of Church and State. He could easily see in the events leading to the martyrdom of Becket a dramatic situation involving a conflict between the Church and the world analogous to the modern struggle of the Church against its secular enemies. Eliot has not written a merely historical play:

Murder in the Cathedral is not just a dramatization of Thomas Becket; it is a deep-searching study of the significance of martyrdom. (17)

The Playwright

It is a play about the spiritual state of a martyr facing death, and spiritual education of the common people who are witnesses to his death -- a play about the role of the spiritually elect in society; the fructification of communal life by his example. This is a play about an archetypal figure in an archetypal situation. For the form Eliot has gone back to the fountain-head of European drama. Apart from the use of allegorical figures in the temptation scenes, he has used the Greek tragedy of Aeschylus as his model. Again, the Cambridge anthropologists discussed a theory of the origin of tragedy in the rituals of mystery religions representing the passion of a god, his death and rebirth. It is possible that Eliot saw a chance of reinforcing the Christian theological pattern with the ritual pattern of ancient religions. The result was a highly original and effective form:

The fusion of these elements of Christian drama of the Middle Ages with the pre-Christian drama of the Greeks yielded a highly original form. Although nearer to Aeschylean tragedy than to any intervening form, it has been perfectly adapted to Christian theology. (18)

As for the vocabulary and style, Eliot tried to 'bring to the audience the contemporary relevance of the situation' (19) by avoiding archaic words and going for a

(19) Eliot: 'Poetry and Drama', in On Poetry and Poets, p.82.
The Playwright

neutral style, committed neither to the present nor to the past. And for versification his model was that of *Everyman*. This departure from ordinary idioms and speech rhythms is highly suitable for the play having rich ritualistic overtones. Ronald Peacock observes:

The ritual belongs both to the inner structure of the play and to its performance. Through creating direct links at various points with his audience the poet has made his work into a continuous invitation to celebrate in religious fellowship the spiritual triumph of a saint. ... The drama becomes an instrument of community. (20)

*Murder in the Cathedral* falls into two parts, each leading to a prose speech addressed to the Chorus and the audience. Part I establishes the context of the spiritual struggle through the exchanges of Becket with the chorus, the Priests, and the tempters. It presents the conflict of Becket with temptation, which is the real dramatic action of the play. The categories of action and suffering, which constitute the internal rationale of the drama is also presented. Part II, portrays the external conflict between Becket and the murderers, and this is simply the completing of the action through the internal conflict of Becket shown in the first part.

The Playwright

The real drama of the play is to be found where its greatest poetry lies. This will be in the choruses which open up the spiritual dimension of the action in a way that looks back to the remote origins of Western drama. In a broadcast talk in 1936, the year after the first production of the play, Eliot observed that in making use of the chorus he was not aiming at copying the Greek drama, but that:

... the chorus has always fundamentally the same uses. It mediates between the action and the audience and it intensifies the action by projectng its emotional consequences, ...

('The Need of Poetic Drama', The Listener, 25 November 1936)

In contrast to the choruses of The Rock, these choruses, which are rather Aeschylean in form and function, project a real poetic amplification of the action. In addition to this Eliot has given the choruses a new significance in the light of the Christian dispensation. They are the witnesses to, and give the true measure of, Becket's spiritual progress. And by witnessing they become participants in the same spiritual process.

Like a Greek tragedy, Murder in the Cathedral opens with a chorus composed of the Women of Canterbury describing almost the same spiritual condition depicted
The Playwright

in the opening lines of The Waste Land. This is the condition of those who fear a fully conscious life and desire to maintain the quiet sterility of their humble lives, 'living and partly living'. With the return of Becket the women are filled with a premonition of what is to come and of their part in it:

Some presage of an act
Which our eyes are compelled to witness, has forced our feet
Towards the Cathedral. We are forced to bear witness.

The women fear the implications of the act, and desire only peace as they understand it. They fear that, like Peter, they will not be fit for the test:

... ... ... and who shall
Stretch out his hand to the fire, and deny his master?

Even though they are intuitively aware of the greatness of the event: 'Destiny waits in the hand of God, shaping the still unshapen', they think of it as a malady:

Some malady is coming upon us. We wait, we wait,
And the saints and martyrs wait, for those who shall be martyrs and saints.

... ... ... ... ... ... ...
Shall the son of Man be born again in the litter of scorn?
For us, the poor, there is no action,
But only to wait and to witness.
The Playwright

Even after a recognition of the eternal design, they try to efface themselves and avoid being implicated in the act. But, in the Christian sense to witness means not just to see but to be involved, to be involved means to act and to suffer.

The three priests in the cathedral react differently to the event. While the first two try to discuss the temporal effects of Thomas's return the third priest shows a better understanding of the spiritual implications of the event: 'For good or ill, let the wheel turn'. But, to the Chorus, who 'do not wish anything to happen', the return of Thomas seems only to presage 'the doom of the house, the doom of their lord, the doom of the world'. The intensity of their fear and foreboding increases, and they appeal to Thomas to return to France. When the second priest reproves them Thomas enters, reproves him in turn, and expresses the central message of the drama in his first speech:

(21) The reactions of the three priests show their awareness of the event's meaning on an ascending scale. Within the group there is a hierarchy of spiritual awareness.
Peace. And let them be in their exaltation.
They speak better than they know, and beyond your understanding.
They know and do not know, what is to act or suffer.
They know and do not know, that action is suffering
And suffering action. Neither does the agent suffer
Nor the patient act. But both are fixed
In an eternal action, and eternal patience
To which all must consent that it may be willed
And which all must suffer that they may will it,
That the pattern may subsist, for the pattern is the action
And suffering, that the wheel may turn and still
Be forever still.

This speech introduces both the action suffering theme and Eliot's imagery of the wheel and the point. (22) Here, suffering does not simply mean undergoing misery or pain. It also means permitting or consenting to action. A person who consents to an action must suffer for it and accept the responsibility. This is like the recognition of the reality of sin as a sign of a new life, described by Eliot in his essay on Baudelaire. Almost the same view was expressed in one of his notes to The Idea of a Christian Society.

The notion of communal responsibility, of the responsibility of every individual for the sins of the society to which he belongs, is one that needs to be more firmly apprehended.

(22) The wheel represents the time-bound secular world which is not only death-like, but worthless, empty and vain. This is the 'turning world' of the poems. The point, which is the 'still point' of the poems, represents the unmoving mover which is associated with value, permanence, peace and wisdom.
The Playwright

The patient is everyone, the martyr, the murderer, and the spectator. He is both suffering pain and permitting action at the same time. Eliot expresses this pattern of suffering, which is also action, and of action, which is also suffering, by the image of the wheel which always turns, but always remains still at the centre. As the play begins the Chorus do not understand their responsibility in the event and try to evade the process of their being 'drawn into the pattern of fate'. But salvation has to come through the gradual growth of consciousness and the acknowledgement of sin. Thomas himself is not well aware of the full implications of his words, and of the impending event. He hints at a process which will ultimately reveal the meaning of his words and prepare him for the event:

   Meanwhile the substance of our first act
   Will be shadows, and the strife with shadows.

While the priests worry about the physical security of the Church, and the women of the Chorus suffer their premonitions of a catastrophe, which is almost a metaphysical fear, the Tempers appear. The first Tempter offers sensual pleasures, and the second one offers secular power. The third Tempter offers both revenge upon the King and
The Playwright

power for the Pope, Thomas rejects these offers quite easily because they echo motivations from his past, but, his reply to the third Tempter:

To make, then break, this thought has come before, The desperate exercise of failing power Samson in Gaza did no more. But if I break, I must break myself alone.

shows some contradictions in his thinking. This gesture to will his own destruction is incompatible with a martyr's will, which is compliant with that of God. At this point the fourth Tempter enters and tempts Thomas with his own desires by offering the power and the glory of martyrdom. This is the worst temptation, 'To do the right deed for the wrong reason'. With a shock Thomas realizes the impurity of his motives and the spiritual pride within him:

Is there no way, in my soul's sickness, Does not lead to damnation in pride? ... ... can I neither act or suffer Without perdition?

Then the Tempter repeats to Thomas his own words concerning action and suffering addressed to the women of the chorus:

You know and do not know what is to act or suffer ... ... ... the wheel may turn and still Be forever still.
The Playwright

This action suffering paradox reveals to Thomas the peril of spiritual pride. To will martyrdom and to act accordingly amounts to turning the wheel himself rather than allowing the will of the unmoved mover to rule. As the painful struggle in his soul continues, the Tempters chant their triumphant despair: 'Man's life is a cheat and a disappointment', and the priests express their secular fright: 'Should we not wait for the sea to subside'? Then, the Chorus, the Priests and the Tempters in alternation present a vision of terror: 'Death has a hundred hands and walks by a thousand ways'. In the midst of this tangle of motives, Thomas resolves the struggle in his own soul and comes to a decision:

Now is my way clear, now is the meaning plain.
*** *** *** ***
I shall no longer act or suffer, to the sword's end.

Thus the first part of the play ends with a note of acceptance and resignation with which Thomas finally and irrevocably dedicates himself to what he has recognized as his necessary purpose.

The prose Interlude separating the two parts of the play is the sermon of Thomas on Christmas morning. The sermon's text, 'Glory to God in the highest, and on
The Playwright

the earth peace to men of good will' (Luke 2:14) is full of implications. Part I has shown that Thomas has rejected worldly glory offered by the Tempters and has opted for the glory of martyrdom, which is the glory of God in the highest. The word, 'peace', which is also the first word uttered by Thomas in the play, means much more than the peace understood by the Chorus: 'He gave to His disciples peace, but not peace as the world gives'. This is peace of 'the still point of the turning world'. The circumference of the wheel is the realm of phenomena, of external appearances, and of action and suffering, but at the centre there is peace because it is beyond action and suffering. The rare moments of peace and reality which happen at the point of intersection of time and eternity can be apprehended only by the saint because, 'human kind cannot bear very much reality'. This peace, which comes out of the reconciliation of all irreconcilables, through the losing of individual wills in the will of God, is like the peace of Dante: 'And in His will is our peace.' (23)

The sermon, then, explains the Christian conceptions of joy and sorrow, and draws an analogy between Christ and the martyrs. Thomas closes the sermon with his newly won concept of martyrdom:

---

The playwright

A Christian martyrdom is never an accident, ... ... Still less is a Christian martyrdom the effect of a man's will to become a Saint, ... ... A martyrdom is always the design of God, for His love of men, to warn them and to lead them, to bring them back to His ways.

After this definition of the pattern of martyrdom, 'the eternal design', in theological and emotional terms, in terms of the fulfilment of God's will and the testimony of mankind, the play proceeds to Part II, which will externalise the internal conflict of Part I.

The opening chorus is a fitting response to the Christmas sermon of Thomas. Their earlier fear of the spring and of a spiritual awakening is replaced by an attitude which is near acceptance:

The peace of this world is always uncertain, unless men keep the peace of God.
And war among men defiles this world, but death in the Lord renews it.

However, the old note of mistrust, anxiety and anticipation still persists:

Between Christmas and Easter what work shall be done? ... ... ... We wait, and the time is short But waiting is long.

Then the three priests enter carrying the banners of St. Stephen, St. John the Apostle, and the Holy Innocents,
The Playwright

and accompanied by the Introits of St. Stephen and St. John. This is a device, based on the liturgy, used for the unification of the time sequence, for showing the significance of saints and martyrs in the Church year, and for foreshadowing the martyrdom of Thomas. Then, with the interest fixed on the fourth day after Christmas, as yet unsanctified, the Knights enter displaying violent bestiality in contrast with the mildness and hospitality of the priests. They accuse Thomas of ambition and pride, and of disloyalty and treason. Thomas stands for the order, the law of Christ's Church, and the judgement of Rome. The reaction of the Chorus to the impending murder is impassioned and hysterical: 'I have smelt them, the death-bringers...'

After suffering a horrible vision of a universe without order the women come to something like an acceptance of their share of the guilt:

I have consented, Lord Archbishop, have consented.
Am torn away, subdued, violated,
United to the spiritual flesh of nature,
Mastered by the animal power of spirit,
Dominated by the lust of self-demolition,
By the final uttermost death of spirit,
By the final ecstasy of waste and shame.

The horrifying imagery from the animal world cramming the Chorus, along with this sexual imagery shows the
The Playwright

agony of the Women, who have come to recognize the
shameful degradation of humanity into the animal. (24)
But through this agony they have arrived at the stage
of Christian responsibility. Thomas consoles them:

Peace, and be at peace with your thoughts and visions,

This is your share of the eternal burden,
The perpetual glory.

After this recognition of a deep sense of guilt
and of a great need for a mediator, 'O Lord Archbishop ...
for we, pray for us that we may pray for you, out
of our shame', the chorus has a vision of horror beyond
all horrors, which is equivalent to the 'Dark Night of
the Soul' of St. John of the Cross:

... ... the Void, more horrid than active shapes
of hell;
Emptiness, absence, separation from God.

Then the knights come back maddened with drink
and taunt Thomas, who is ready for the final moment:

........... I am a priest,
A Christian, saved by the blood of Christ,
Ready to suffer with my blood,
This is the sign of the Church always,
The sign of blood, blood for blood,
His blood given to buy my life,
My blood given to pay for His death,
My death for His death.

The Playwright

Every martyr is a witness to the efficacy of Christ's sacrifice, and martyrdom is a gesture of love in response to the Love of God revealed in Christ. While the knights kill Thomas there is a Maenad-like outburst from the Chorus:

Clear the air! Clean the sky! Wash the wind! ... ... ... defiled with blood.

The women do not understand that the blood of Thomas, or a martyr, is not defilement, but purification for those who are contrite and ask for the cleansing. This rain of blood is like the redemptive rain searched in The Waste Land.

After the killing the knights address the audience in modern prose and try to defend their actions on several grounds and according to modern logic. Their conclusions hint at the kind of judgement on martyrdom which is likely to be given by the modern secular world. Eliot himself said that the knights' apologia was meant to shock the audience, to jerk them out of sanctimonious complacency into a fiercely uncomfortable realization that this man died for them. (25) There is another more important purpose for this:

The Playwright

It is, in effect, the temptation of the audience, corresponding to the temptation of Thomas. (26)

Through this an attempt is made to create an attitude of acceptance of the pattern of martyrdom in the great mass, the common people. Martyrdom requires the martyr's right attitude to God. It also requires the right attitude of the great mass of men. It is not efficacious unless it is accepted by them as the design of God. They are there to witness, may be passively, but they will have to bear their part in the pattern of action and suffering. In accepting Thomas's martyrdom, they are accepting a new Christ's sacrifice and the pattern of Atonement. This is very well expressed by the Third Priest:

For the Church is stronger for this action,
Triumphant in adversity. It is fortified
By persecution: Supreme, as long as men will
die for it.

Under the impact of martyrdom they leave apathy and evasion behind and come to a humble, triumphant acceptance of a lively faith. The chorus becomes resonantly affirmative, singing their praises of God in terms of a creation that has lost all its frightfulness. In strong, resonant liturgical rhythms they build up a firm statement of

(26) D.E. Jones, p. 61.
The Playwright

t heir renewed faith and recaptured peace, and their voices fall silent upon words for intercession:

Blessed Thomas, pray for us.

Murder in the Cathedral is a Christian play.

Helen Gardner has rightly observed:

Murder in the Cathedral is like Ash Wednesday in its choice of a Christian theme, its employment of liturgical material: the introits and versicles for the three days after Christmas, the dies Irae, the Te Deum; and most of all in the contrast between the ideal of sanctity, which is at the centre, and the reality of the experience of common unsanctified humanity out of which both poem and play arise. (27)

But, the play is more than a stylized dramatization of Becket's martyrdom and of the twelfth-century power struggle between the Church and the state, which may be relevant to the modern world. There is another level of meaning beneath the surface. In the context of Eliot's use of Cornford's ritual scheme, Christ is cast in the role of the murdered god, and the ritual sequence of events is made to conform to the pattern of Biblical events surrounding the Crucifixion and Resurrection of Christ. Then, the playwright constructs an elaborate dramatic analogy between the martyr, i.e., Thomas and Christ.

The Playwright

Symbolic events in the life of Christ like the Temptation, the Passion, Death and Resurrection, are all enacted in the life of Thomas. In the concluding lines of the play the Women of the Chorus pray to both Christ and Thomas for mercy and intercession:

Lord, have mercy upon us.
Christ, have mercy upon us.
Lord, have mercy upon us.
Blessed Thomas, pray for us.

thereby showing the final correspondence between the Saviour and the martyr. Further, the Chorus of the play is more than the Chorus of Greek drama. Through their progress from a fear of spiritual realities and evasion of responsibilities to acceptance of and participation in martyrdom, Eliot has shown that he has enlarged the original function of the Chorus in the light of Christian liturgy. In addition to its function of mediating between the audience and the action the chorus becomes choir, 'the articulate voice of the body of worshippers'. (28) They are the worshippers at the shrine, the pilgrims to Canterbury, and the Christian counterpart of the ritual mourners weeping for the dead god. They also represent humanity confronted by the mystery of iniquity and the mystery of holiness.