CHAPTER ONE : Critical Evaluation of Eliot’s Plays: an Overview

....if we can never be right, it is better that we should from time to time change our way of being wrong.

T.S. Eliot

Glancing over the major critical studies of the plays of T.S. Eliot – from F.O. Matthiessen’s *The Achievement of T.S. Eliot* (1935) onwards – one discerns two major areas of discourse till the 1980s: one, on the dramatic verse of the plays unfolding in mono, duo or choral renditions, the other, on the thematic interpretation of the plays projecting Eliot’s views on guilt, sin and expiation. 1980s onwards one notices fresh lines of approach to the plays – psychological, cultural and linguistic. Publication of the facsimile edition of *The Wasteland* in 1971 with Valerie Eliot’s Introduction foregrounding several personal events in Eliot’s life and the gradual opening of access to some of the Eliot papers encouraged biographical research, relating the poet’s work to his personal experiences.

Compared to these major streams, critical explorations in Eliot’s use of language in his plays are meagre. Also nominal, insufficient and scattered is the scholarship on production and performance of the plays. The shape and structure of theatre houses, the changing perception of directors over the years, the gait and speech manner of different actors playing the same role, and the innumerable revisions before, during and after the performance – all these may provide fresh clues to the problem of communication in Eliot’s plays.

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The emerging area of drama criticism through stylistics, speech-act and semiotics in recent years also broadens the scope of our approach and we can go back to Eliot’s plays along these channels. Indeed, Eliot’s engagement with dramatic communication, his experimentation with modalities of reaching out to the audience of his own time and of all time, his newer statement in the form of drama, constitutes an area to be explored anew on our way to a fuller understanding of T.S. Eliot.

I

Critical estimate in the case of a major artist, Eliot assures us, can never claim finality. In the 1927 essay “Shakespeare and the Stoicism of Seneca” we have his celebrated comment,

About anyone so great as Shakespeare, it is probable that we can never be right; and if we can never be right, it is better that we should from time to time change our way of being wrong.²

Critical reception of a major reputation unfolds a landscape of shifting angles and altering emphases—perhaps, varied ways of being wrong.

In the field of Eliot scholarship the basic premise in Matthiessen’s estimate (1935) in a way forms the foundation of much of the later studies of Eliot’s plays. True, Matthiessen devotes only a single chapter, (No. VII) to the study of the plays—that too naturally the earlier ones—yet the essential features of Eliot’s dramatic theory and practice he focuses on, remain of seminal importance even as approaches proliferate and varied estimations are made. Matthiessen appreciates and brings to notice the complex nature of Eliot’s experimentation: his exploration of true and false realities of the interior and the veneer along with his engagement with the dramatic potential of low brow entertainment, the invention of new verse forms with rhythms
drawn from colloquial cadence and presentation of characters with different degrees of consciousness, the achievement of a variety of stylized verse patterns in *Murder in the Cathedral*, his failure to project a viable ‘objective correlative’ in *The Family Reunion*, and finally, his failure to dramatize the ambiguities of Harry’s character – the ‘utter lack of compunction’ in Harry and his lack of ‘the overmastering love of God that alone could give sanction to the mystic’s terrible renunciation.’ Matthiessen believes that Eliot fails to translate his dramatic theory into practice, much unlike what he had achieved during his long tryst with poetry:

…..his belief in the need for poetic drama, still remain more in the realm of theory even in his own experiments, as well as in their limited effect on the general course of the drama in our time.”

This is a comment, definitive in intention, which scholars of later generations like Katherine J. Worth * or Linda Wyman ** would reject in their perception of the plays of Eliot as a relevant dramatic force equally potent on stage. Recent acknowledgement of Eliot’s impact on the staccato dialogue of absurd dramatists like Harold Pinter, and on the music-hall elements in *Waiting for Godot*, stylistic features Eliot had initiated almost thirty years earlier in the dramatic fragments of *Sweeney Agonistes*, takes critical appreciation of Eliot’s plays far beyond Matthiessen.

Interestingly, apart from the major critical pronouncements of Eliot, Matthiessen also draws our attention to the principles encoded in his less circulated body of criticism: introductory articles to books, review articles, radio talk or private letters.

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He begins citing Eliot’s early statement in the ‘Introduction’ to S.L. Bethell’s

*Shakespeare and the Popular Dramatic Tradition* (1944):

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.\(^4\)

He refers to ‘The Beating of a Drum’ (1923), an uncollected review article by Eliot as
Eliot’s ‘earliest comprehensive formulation of what he demanded from drama and did
not find on the contemporary stage.’\(^5\)

The essentials of the drama were, as we might expect, given by
Aristotle: ... It is the rhythm, so utterly absent from modern drama,
either verse or prose\(^6\)

Matthiessen refers to Eliot’s 'Introduction' to his mother’s verse drama
*Savonarola* (1926) where, speaking in favour of verse dramatists moving away from
Shavian ‘discursiveness’ Eliot notes,

The next form of drama will have to be a verse drama but in new
verse forms.\(^7\)

Explaining the nature of the verse, suitable for drama Eliot explains in a radio
broadcast in 1936:

To work out a play in verse….is to see the thing as a whole musical
pattern…..The verse dramatist must operate on you on two levels at
once….underneath the action, which should be perfectly
intelligible, there should be a musical pattern which intensifies our
excitement by reinforcing it with a feeling from a deeper and less
articulate level\(^8\).

Verse and drama, as Eliot reiterates time and again, should go hand in hand, one
complementing the other. Yet, Matthiessen demonstrates how it failed miserably in
*The Family Reunion*. The scenes between Harry and Mary and Harry and Agatha may
be great verse, but, Matthiessen observes, they remain ‘very obscure owing to Harry’s own obsessed state’*. Eliot explains his failure to portray the conflict as it goes drifting along diverse lines:

The scene with Mary is meant to bring out, as I am aware it fails to, the conflict inside him between….repulsion for Mary as a woman, and the attraction which the normal part of him that is left, feels toward her personally for the first time. This is the first time since his marriage (‘there was no ecstasy’) that he has been attracted towards any woman. The attraction glimmers for a moment in his mind, half-consciously as a possible ‘way of escape’ and the Furies….come in the nick of time to warn him away from this evasion – though at that moment he misunderstands their function.9

Helen Gardner is more appreciative of the scenes; she believes ‘the greatest poetry is to be found, in the scenes between Harry and Mary and Harry and Agatha which are both highly dramatic and highly poetic.’10 Her appreciation, however, is modified as she notes weak dramatization in Eliot’s plays of this phase. In The Art of T.S. Eliot (1949) Gardner appreciates Eliot’s experimentation in dramatic verse but considers the early plays failures in dramatic motive – lacking in action, momentum and dynamic progression:

We have to ask whether dramatic expressiveness has been achieved if, at the climax of a play, the hero cannot express himself either in action or in words, and the bystander who has the clearest insight can only tell us what has happened is inexplicable in this world, ‘the resolution is in another.’ Mr. Eliot’s plays are full of dramatic moments and of dramatic poetry; but dramatic moments and dramatic verse do not necessarily add up to a drama. One wonders whether the central subject has been conceived dramatically, and indeed whether it is susceptible of dramatic treatment at all.11

*Sweeney Agonistes* is totally dismissed as a play because dramatic change is impossible in a situation of near polarization. The gap between the levels of consciousness, between the ‘materialistic’ and ‘visionless’ Doris and Dusty on the one

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hand and Sweeney with his acute sense of essential Evil on the other, remains unbridged and no dramatic interpenetration takes place. *The Rock* is a ‘dramatic experiment’ and valued only for forging out a special kind of dramatic verse, the ‘choric’ mode.

Like Matthiessen before her, Gardner appreciates Eliot’s plays as ‘drama of the interior’ as opposed to ‘a sequence of events that has the normal dramatic logic of motive, act, result’.12 *Murder in the Cathedral* according to her does have a projected conflict, one between spiritual and secular forces, but the protagonist remains ‘static’ throughout the matrix of the play:

> the play opens so near its climax that any inner development is impossible. Except for the last, the temptations are hardly more than recapitulations of what has now ceased to tempt, an exposition of what has happened rather than a present trial; and the last temptation is so subtle and interior that no audience can judge whether it is truly overcome or not.13

*Murder in the Cathedral* nonetheless, according to Gardner ‘is a great play’ and,

> The real drama of the play is to be found…where its greatest poetry lies – in the choruses…The fluctuations of the chorus are the true measure of Thomas’s spiritual conquest.14

In *The Family Reunion*, Gardner claims, the chorus is static, the characters (apart from Amy) unreal and unconvincing, and the subject ‘incapable of dramatic treatment’. Eliot’s success is in the handling of the verse: ‘Mr. Eliot has succeeded in his wish to "convey the pleasures of poetry" to audiences of theatre-goers’15 –

> The bold flexibility of the verse in the later Quartets, its confidence and daring and ease, were made possible by the achievement of *The Family Reunion* with its control over transitions, its changes of rhythm, its power of ’expressing the greatest thoughts naturally’.16
If Gardner’s focus is more on Eliot’s versification, Grover Smith’s attention as the title of the book indicates is directed to the source and meaning of the plays. Drawing analogues between Greek originals and Eliot’s plays he explores structural deviations and modifications in the Eliot texts. The ritual pattern underlying the plays is explored and both contemporary relevance and resonance of the primeval are brought out. The study is mostly thematic with occasional though incisive glance at the verse. Grover Smith notes that ‘The Elder Statesman’ is not great poetry, but its three-stress verse has perfect timing and the dignity of restraint; and that ‘The characters in The Confidential Clerk, where Eliot sacrificed poetry even more ruthlessly than in The Cocktail Party, speak lines which are verse in typography but prose in cadence.’ Below the veneer of social comedy or farce Grover Smith discerns the serious motive of the play – their dialectic of real-false-and-buried lives and the problems of self-knowledge, knowledge of evil, guilt and contrition, ghost of past memories – issues that make Eliot’s plays, even the comedies, laden with metaphysical dilemma at different levels.

Hugh Kenner, in the The Invisible Poet, 1960, re-reads Eliot’s social comedies as a struggle between alternative selves – the contrived drawing room self and the real self facing up guilt and contrition. The characters learn to free themselves from the ritual of public appearance through encounter with ghosts of unpleasant self-knowledge. The language and versification are honed to suit the purpose. Reverberant words and phrases add an extra spiritual dimension to the usual drawing room milieu. The mystical dense language of the Family Reunion, with its plethora of images, suitably reflects what Kenner terms an ‘intractable matter’ and the ‘arbitrary’ and ‘enigmatic’ denouement of the play.
The clear course of action in the later plays likewise is credited by Kenner to the clarity of its verse. Whereas Grover Smith notes this clarity as a quality of bare prose, Kenner considers it a step towards communicative fluidity:

In Eliot’s last plays the language has developed a quite inimitable explicitness, as though people were capable of saying what they wanted to.\(^\text{19}\)

Kenner reads this language as a balanced expressive medium—neither dense nor slight, ‘seldom quotable, nearly devoid of fine lines; dry, not desiccated; not prosaic because more explicit than prose\(^\text{20}\) It is true that the characters still retain ‘their own inalienable privacy’ and ‘do not advance toward a shared illumination’, yet the phase of choking, stifling hesitancy with expression seems to be over:

no one echoes Sweeney’s complaint that he has to use words. It took Eliot twenty five years to develop a language against which that imputation would not lie. It is the thing his verse does that prose cannot do; mere English prose cannot be so explicit.\(^\text{21}\)

Hugh Kenner’s recognition of significant development in the use of the verse medium reads like a striking anticipation of the views of Harry T. Antrim in his \textit{T.S. Eliot’s Concept of Language} (1971). Antrim admits that Eliot’s early poetry contained ‘an implicit recognition that there “are indeed things that cannot be put into words.”’ \(^\text{22}\)

But later, Antrim modifies his perceptions of Eliot's linguistic philosophy and notes,

that by careful arrangement and conscious patterning, language can in fact communicate the objects of the contemplative mind, even when those objects are beyond the reach of empirical verification. In short it can describe immediate experience and it can be ordered so as to suggest that the experience is a proper analogue to the experience of “things unseen”.\(^\text{23}\)

Yet, in the final analysis, Antrim believes, Eliot could never get over his innate sense of the limitations of human speech. Indeed, Eliot adheres to the idea of the contingent nature of verbal expression and notes that language could merely 'point towards' and not capture the mystical nuances. Following Antrim, one may say that compared to
Eliot's earlier bafflement with the gap between the signifier and the signified, his later stance concerning musical patterning of speech, appears to be a positive advancement towards linguistic empowerment, if not a triumph in linguistic sufficiency.

II

Full length studies on Eliot’s dramatic art appeared during the 60s. D.E. Jones’s *The Plays of T.S. Eliot* came out in 1960, Carol H. Smith’s *Eliot’s Dramatic Theory and Practice* in 1962. With an epigraph from ‘Dialogue on Dramatic Poetry’ (1928), Jones starts from Eliot’s claim that prose drama is ‘ephemeral’ while verse plays are ‘universal’ and ‘permanent’. Jones surveys the rise, fall and revival of the verse play as a genre over the centuries. He cites Peacock’s comment:

> By means of its simultaneous creation of picture and language drama reflects a feature of life itself, which is both pre and post-linguistic. It is lived partly outside words but also partly as words. The two layers interpenetrate but do not necessarily coalesce, though the degree of coalescence might be held as index of culture. . . . It is elemental first, then spiritual, then linguistic.*

Jones agrees that, ‘The permanent part of a play is the words, and words raised to their highest power are poetry’;24 he affirms that ‘poetry expresses the significance of the action,…makes explicit what is really happening,’25 while imagery ‘enable the poet to say more than one thing at a time and endow his thought with the sensuousness and concreteness of direct experience’; 26 poetry, he notes, is ‘a mode of apprehending the experience embodied in a play, and imagery, the essence of intuitive language’27. He cites Eliot’s own musings on musical pattern, way back in 1936 in ‘The Need for Poetic Drama’, to emphasize this subtle interaction between intuition and experience, poetry and action, in his plays:

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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. Everybody knows that there are things that can be said in music that cannot be said in speech. And there are things which can be said in poetic drama and cannot be said in either music or ordinary speech.28

Jones justifies poetry as the only valid medium of deeper communication and identifies the rise and fall of emotion to the high and low coda of symphony, impossible to be realized in prose: ‘This kind of order – an organic order growing from within, not a mechanical order imposed from without – is not possible to prose.’29

Jones analyses the plays individually, relating them to the mythical and mystical planes and attempts tracing a continuous development in spiritual awakening as well as ease in communication. Jones notes the change in the later plays where, with a more expansive approach towards human love, the submission of the protagonist is no longer a silent or a cryptic one to the Divine Will, but an eloquent release in the form of confession.

Much in tandem with Jones, Subhas Sarkar, in T.S.Eliot:The Dramatist (1972), re-reads Eliot's plays in terms of their religious and spiritual content, set against a firm structural pattern. Special focus is on Eliot's concern with the range and possibilities of effective communication in verse and with the role of drama as an instrument of social entertainment, leading to a bonding in community relationship. With Elder Statesman, Sarkar believes, the verbal articulation of the earlier plays translates into an ‘intuitive understanding’, especially in love scenes, as words, though sparse, take on emotion-laden suggestiveness.

Eliot started with trust in the verse medium, yet as the genre matures in his hand, poetry increasingly becomes imperceptible. This is a major preoccupation with scholars in the seventies. Joseph Chiari in T.S. Eliot, Poet and Dramatist (1972) says that to speculate that ‘The Confidential Clerk could have been written in prose or that
it could have carried more poetry, is to ask for something different from what the author tried to do or would have been willing to do. The kind of poetry which some poetry-lovers would wish to see on the stage cannot be associated with themes like that of *The Confidential Clerk* or *The Elder Statesman*. It could only be associated with heroic or emotion-laden themes, with highly individualized and partially symbolic characters, which require another poet-playwright and, above all, another public.30

Eliot attained a form of ‘heightened speech’ to replace the worn out blank verse while his mentors Ibsen and Chekov had opted for prose instead. Chiari draws our attention to Eliot’s comment on this option* and he focuses on Eliot’s preference:

I have before my eyes a kind of mirage of the perfection of verse drama, which would be a design of human action and of words, such as to present at once the two aspects of dramatic and of musical order.31

On the pruning of excess poetry and gearing up of a musical design, Joseph Chiari observes:

There are those who think that there was a falling off of poetry after *Murder in the Cathedral*, and that Eliot, in trying to bring poetry to the stage, in fact arrived empty-handed on it, and therefore made a fruitless journey. This is not so….In his lecture on Yeats delivered in 1940, he said: “But another, and important cause of improvement is the gradual purging out of poetical ornament. This, perhaps, is the most painful part of the labour so far as the versification goes, of the modern poet who tries to write a play in verse. The course of improvement is towards a greater and greater starkness.”32

David Ward, in *T.S. Eliot, Between two Worlds: A Reading of T.S. Eliot’s Poetry and Plays* (1973), notes that beneath the music-hall element and the Greek structural

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* ‘There are great prose dramatists—such as Ibsen and Chekhov—who have at times done things of which I would not otherwise have supposed prose to be capable, but who seem to me, in spite of their success, to have been hampered in expression by writing in prose. This peculiar range of sensibility can be expressed by dramatic poetry, at its moments of greatest intensity. At such moments, we touch the border of those feelings which only music can express’—‘Poetry and Drama’, *On Poetry and Poets* (London and Boston: Faber and Faber, 1957, Reprint 1986), pp.86-87.
frame there lurks the mystical or symbolic substructure to form the quintessence of all
Eliot’s plays. He believes that ‘This grafting and welding of modes was designed to
produce a many-layered form of dramatic communication in which there would be
something for everybody.’ 33 He quotes Eliot on this subject –

In a play of Shakespeare you get several levels of significance. For
the simplest auditors there is the plot, for the more thoughtful the
character and conflict of character, for the literary the words and
phrasing, for the more musically sensitive the rhythm, and for
auditors of great sensitiveness and understanding a meaning which
reveals itself gradually 34

Way back in the early sixties, Carol H. Smith in her attempt at tracing the
development of Eliot’s plays towards a ‘dramatic unification’ of action and verse,
placed the plays in the total perspective of Eliot’s work, creative and critical. We note
her debating, refuting or supporting the views of other scholars like Grover Smith,
Raymond Williams, D.E. Jones or Denis Donoghue. She is convinced of the need

for a more searching examination of the relationship between
Eliot’s poetic goals and his drama and between both of these and his
prose writings, for his metamorphosis into a playwright can be explained,… only by an understanding of the development and
interrelationship of his ideas concerning religion and art. The
interdependence of these elements of Eliot’s thought and his
creative activity 35

she assures, is the objective in her study. She appreciates how Eliot disturbs, ‘the gay
orderly world of comedy with spiritual probing; the audience’s expectations are, at
one level, belied; The Family Reunion is not a murder mystery, nor is The Cocktail
Party a comic treatment of life’s surface. It is a new interpretation of reality.’ 36

Capturing this reality is beyond the capacity of contemporary naturalism, Eliot
knew; as early as in 1924, Smith points out, Eliot had noted in ‘Four Elizabethan
Dramatists’:

Third print, 1967).
The great vice of English drama from Kyd to Galsworthy has been that its aim of realism is unlimited. In one play, *Everyman*, and perhaps in that one play only, we have a drama within the limitations of art;...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.\(^{37}\)

Naturalistic presentation, Eliot felt sure, leads itself to ‘the desert of exact likeness to the reality which is perceived by the commonplace mind.’\(^{38}\) Smith dissects each of the plays, exhibiting how Eliot overcomes this constriction by drawing upon mythical and Christian analogies as the underpattern, and enlivening the surface reality with implicit symbolic value attached to objects of apparent non-significance.

III

Carol H. Smith perceived Eliot’s intellectual progress as a struggle through contradictions towards unity and order: ‘Eliot appears to have had a compelling need to make some personal order out of the chaos which he found around him as a young man.’\(^{39}\) This idea of the ‘personal’ underpinning the ‘intellectual’, or as Lyndall Gordon puts it in Eliot’s own terms, ‘the struggle “to transmute the personal and private agonies” into something universal and holy,’\(^{40}\) acquires central importance in Eliot scholarship as biographical details come to provide significant clues.

The three biographical studies by Lyndall Gordon composed over nearly three decades—*Eliot’s Early Life* (1977), *Eliot’s New Life* (1988), and *T.S. Eliot: An Imperfect Life* (2000), aim at reversing the older and established notions. The external façade of an impeccable public figure is dissolved as it were, and a palpable design is evolved to reflect the real man. With access to Eliot’s unpublished letters and poems Gordon remakes the image of the detached critic, the unbiased intellectual, into a
fragile human being shifting between the sense of innate moral failing and a deep spiritual sensibility lending itself to nouminal experiences. In Gordon’s words, Eliot devised his own biography, enlarging in poem after poem on the character of a man who conceives of his life as a spiritual quest despite the anti religious mood of his age and the distracting claims of women, friends and alternative careers’.  

In the Foreword to *Eliot’s New Life* Gordon provides a commentary on her own work:

> From 1970 to 1975 I wrote an account of T.S. Eliot’s earlier life based on unpublished papers...At the time, it went against the grain of Eliot studies, which had always stressed his impersonality. The idea that Eliot’s poetry was rooted in private aspects of his life has now been accepted and this has encouraged me to attempt a sequel on the years of Eliot’s maturity and great fame. *Eliot’s New Life* follows his last thirty-eight years tracing the conflict between his capacity for love and a more compelling sense of sin which was not resolved until the final eight years of his life.  

*Eliot’s New Life* also detects the persistence of American traditions in Eliot ‘especially his renewal of the dominant genre of sermon and spiritual autobiography’ and the haunting assemblage of Massachusetts imagery gleaned from childhood memory. Gordon’s research effectively demolishes the line between early Eliot and the poet of *Four Quartets* and the plays of later years. Continuity is traced from the early experience on the streets of Boston recorded in ‘Silence’ to the mystic vision in the *Four Quartets*; and the polarity and the basic tension in Eliot’s work is related to, almost located in, the personal context:

> It is as though two antithetical views fought for dominance: on the one hand the higher dream associated with Emily Hale; on the other, the sense of sin associated with Vivienne. Out of this conflict came the great works of Eliot’s maturity, as he converts life into meaning in *Ash Wednesday*, *The Family Reunion*, *Four Quartets* and the later plays.

Peter Ackroyd in *T.S. Eliot* (1984) traces a similar pattern. In the Prelude to his work he declares
the connection between the life and the work is here explicitly made and it will be the purpose of this book to attempt to elucidate the mystery of the connection.45

Ackroyd maps out the major events of Eliot’s life with precision of date, time, place and acquaintance, and constructs their influence on the subsequent work. Eliot’s plays are viewed in terms of theme, poetry, production and reception but, again, the aim is to provide more clues to the understanding of Eliot’s personality than to the plays themselves.

Peter Ackroyd proclaims that the tender love scenes in *The Elder Statesman* arose out of felicity in Eliot’s second marriage; they contained the real poetry of the play and went through several revisions: ‘If it were not for the scenes written after his marriage, *The Elder statesman* would have been by far the grimmest play he had ever written.’46

In the area of biographical inquisitiveness, stimulated more by guesswork than factual corroboration, we have John Peter who as early as 1949 noted intrusion of personal preoccupations in *Family Reunion*. In the *Scrutiny* essay he considers this a point of imbalance:

> The requirement of the total theme, on one side, demands that the ‘murder’ should be as nebulous as possible; and, on the other, the ferment of the personal experience required the murder to be a very real and substantial ‘objective correlative’. It cannot, however, be both.47

In his ‘A New Interpretation of *The Wasteland*’ offered in the July 1952 issue of *Essays in Criticism* he focuses on a love-relation of the poet with a young French, Jean Verdenal, to whom *Prufrock and Other Observations* was dedicated. Similar hints are also in Robert Sencourt’s memoir and James Miller’s *T.S. Eliot’s Personal Wasteland* (Philadelphia, 1977).

underlines the association of sex and murder as an obsession with Eliot ever since his earliest unpublished poems down to *The Family Reunion*.

Lyndall Gordon’s *T.S. Eliot: An Imperfect Life* came out in the year 2000; her attempt at revealing the man behind the mask in the bio-trilogy extensively documented and supported by biographical details long buried in unpublished material, presents a sensitive human profile with frailties and fortitude. Exploring ‘the divide between saint and the sinner in the greatest poet of the twentieth century’, she proposes viewing Eliot.

from the vantage point of the next century….with a keener sense of his strangeness, his prejudice, and extremism. The aim, though, is not to reduce Eliot to the level of others in an extremist century, but to follow the trials of a searcher whose flaws and doubts speak to all of us whose lives are imperfect.

Carol H. Smith in ‘The Elder Statesman: Its Place in Eliot’s Theatre’ notices how Eliot develops ease of communication in terms of his happy unwinding in the later phase of life. She evaluates the last play as Eliot’s ‘personal testimony to his discovery of a transforming love late in his life that seemed to change the meaning of all that had gone before’. His trust in possible restoration of the soul ‘by personal confession to a truly accepted beloved’, Carol Smith believes, is the basic idea behind the play. Eliot seems to do away with the dramatic third voice and make a public expression of love in frank submission to Valerie in the dedicatory poem to the play, the verse entitled ‘To My Wife’:

    To you I dedicate this book, to return as best as I can
    With words a little part of what you have given me.

* Although both second and third volumes of the bio-trilogy are mainly based on unpublished papers, the major impetus behind the third book is (a) publication of the first volume of Eliot’s correspondence in 1988, (b) the lifting of ban in 1997 from quotations in Eliot’s manuscript poems with publication of *Inventions of the March Hare*.

The words mean what they say, but some have a further meaning
For you and me only.∗

IV

Biographical scholarship perhaps serves as an indirect catalyst in sparking off psychological, cultural or linguistic investigations during the later decades of the twentieth century. Stephen Spender in Eliot (1975) graphically analyses the shift in attitude (nihilism to faith), technique (music hall devices to drawing room comedy genre) and social environment (bed sitter to middle class life) from the Sweeney fragments to the later plays. Russell Kirk in T.S. Eliot’s Moral Imagination in the Twentieth Century (1984) projects Eliot’s inner commitment to the restoration of a higher order (the right and ethical order) both in the individual soul and in the community. Michael Goldman in ‘Fear in the Way: The Design of Eliot’s Drama’∗∗ does not consider Eliot’s plays as mere exercises in dramatic verse or studies in Christian values; he engages in a probing analysis of their psychological depth. The ghost, a symbol of unconscious memories, conscious memories, hereditary and ancestral pasts, economic and social forces, arouse feelings of fear, hatred and desire and trigger off action. ‘The structure of each of Eliot’s play is built on a double manifestation’,52 he notes, as the transition takes place from false to true ghosts. In Robert Crawford’s The Savage and the City (1987) too, a psychological probing is initiated to underscore the savagery latent in every urban individual. It offers an

∗ Leonard Unger in Moments and Patterns (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1956,1966), appreciated the unveiling of an inner sense of fulfilment. The revised version of dedicatory verse printed on the last page of Collected Poems (1909-62) has an added line: ‘Of lovers whose bodies smell of each other’. The unrestrained gesture of celebrating private intimacy in a public statement, in a way marks the end of a long journey:

But this dedication is for others to read
These are private words addressed to you in public.


*T.S. Eliot and Mysticism, The Secret History of Four Quartets* by Paul Murray (1991), is not directly a discourse on drama yet it marks a step ahead in investigating a language that moves beyond the quotidian to encompass the transcendental. To capture the subtlety of mystical experience, Murray notes, was a new challenge for Eliot and the prime motive of all his plays. Major works specifically on the language of Eliot’s plays include *Six Dramatists in Search of a Language* by Andrew K. Kennedy (1975) and *The Language of Modern Drama* by Evans Gareth Lloyd (1977).

Andrew Kennedy dissects the various forms of speech-mode in the plays – chorus, confession, the unsayable, (along with a note on lower-class speech) – and chalks out Eliot’s move from ‘speech of appearance’ to ‘authentic communication’. He points out that other dramatists too have dealt with appearance and reality, but ‘no one before Eliot has come to drama with such a dualistic approach to language’. On this duality, Gareth Lloyd comments:

> Throughout that part of his working life in which the writing of drama occupied a large section, and certainly in the earlier period, Eliot was searching for a language. But he became obsessed, it would seem, with the need to find a language which would not only speak to its own time with the words and tones and rhythms and associations of its time, but also be capable of expressing deeper and, therefore, less immediately articulate feelings and ideas.

Lloyd examines in detail the stylistics and metrics of Eliot’s dramatic speech and conducts a survey of the linguistic character of the individual plays—music hall and jazz in *Sweeney Agonistes*, coalescing of the familiar and the spiritual in *The Rock* and
*Murder in the Cathedral*, ‘philosophy, wit and epigram’ from *The Family Reunion* to *The Elder Statesman*.

In a different vein is the study *Harmony of Dissonances: T.S. Eliot, Romanticism and Imagination* (1990) by John Paul Riquelme. *The Reason in a Storm, A Study of the Use of Ambiguity in the Writings of T.S. Eliot* by Geoffrey B. Williams is also a major work in this field. The Introduction notes,

T.S. Eliot’s poetic career was born in the midst of the crisis of language and meaning which defines the Romantic tradition…

…there are strong parallels between post modernist concerns and techniques and those encountered in the writings of T.S. Eliot.…

To read Eliot and his use of language in the light of post-modernist concerns is possible because both have their roots in a Romanticism based on idealist epistemology.55


V

Papers and essays in compilations offer newer insights. *T.S. Eliot* edited by Linda W. Wagner is a collection of critical essays published in 1974, reflecting, as the
editor notes in the Preface, the new approaches and fresh enthusiasm generated after the publication of *The Wasteland* MSS and the celebration of fifty years of the poem. Wagner claims that,

> Criticism of Eliot’s work has finally reached that higher plateau where the critic can assume that his reader shares a basic understanding of the poem in question;\(^{56}\)

the time, she believes, is for opening out to new readings.

Katharine Worth’s essay in this compilation, in its assessment of ‘the actual dramatic value’ of Eliot’s plays offers new reading signaling a deviation from the conventional study of the moral pattern in Eliot’s plays –

> Eliot’s plays must be seen in the context of the living theatre, not as an extension of the poetry and the dramatic theory, nor as a special kind of activity called “religious drama”.\(^{57}\)

She asserts,

> What in my view emerges as theatrically interesting, and what gives Eliot a place, however tentative, in the main stream, is his feeling for alienation and violence, his gift for suggesting metaphysical possibilities in the trivial or absurd and his exploration of new dramatic means for working upon the nerves and pulses of an audience.\(^{58}\)


> Many playwrights, in my experience, feel their work is Holy Writ, are jealous of every comma, and the last person they would want a comment from is an actor. Not so T.S. Eliot. Like Graham Greene,
another writer who accommodates his performers, Eliot’s professionalism was appreciative of the minor skills of others, and he was quick to spot where criticism was justified.59

Austin Warren’s ‘A Survivor’s Tribute to T.S. Eliot’ treats the much discussed idea of a personal facet lurking behind the third voice; for example the pangs of guilt in *The Family Reunion* resulting from the author’s ambivalent relationship to his first wife or ‘a heavily veiled autobiographical confession’ in *The Elder Statesman*. Alan Weinblatt’s essay ‘T.S. Eliot : Poet of Adequation’, originally published in *The Southern Review*, Vol. 21, No.4 (Autumn 1985), studies Eliot’s struggle with language and explains the term ‘adequation’ as equivalence or equalizing between form and meaning. Alan seems to echo Antrim in his comment that if ‘quest for meaning’ or adequation was an impossibility in early Eliot then for the maturer poet it was ‘if never probable…at least possible.’ The universe is in a constant process of change hence, language i.e. form, Eliot believed,

must struggle perpetually to remain adequate to experience…To remain adequate to experience, form itself must be ‘always changing’.60

Alan observes that Eliot in his mature phase had come to realize that every moment of experience ‘tends to struggle towards intellectual formulation’ and ‘every act of creation is’

a rediscovery and reaffirmation of a momentary equality between signifier (‘general words’) and signified (‘particular feelings’), an adequation of form of experience. …

Sunder the possibility of adequation between signifier and signified, words and feelings, and there remains only… a world of silence, emptiness, waste and void. A world of dead fact. Eliot’s lifelong quest was a search of form adequate to redeem a world of dead fact.61

Pedagogic handling of the plays, again, forms an interesting area of reviewing and re-reading the texts. Lynda Wyman in ‘On Teaching *Murder in the Cathedral*’
(Approaches to Teaching Eliot’s Poetry and Plays, ed. Jewel Spears Brooker, 1988) locates the action of the play in its language. She calls it the ‘plot of diction’ which students can understand noting the nuances of language that the Chorus, the tempters, the priests and Beckett enforce dramatically. Wyman believes that the right way to initiate the study of dramatic action is by paying ‘close attention to the play’s opening chorus’62. This is to be followed by a close examination of certain key terms: ‘martyr’, ‘wait’, ‘witness’, ‘saint’, ‘action’, ‘pattern’ and ‘suffering’. Planning a fruitful learning process Wyman continues,

as they consider the speeches of the Three Priests, students might profitably look for similarities in the language of the Priests and the Women. Such exercises as those I have mentioned equip students to see that the second chorus builds on, intensifies, particularizes, and extends the meaning of the first (and so on throughout the play).63

Katherine E. Kelly proposes drawing the attention of students to the basic tension in Eliot’s plays between ‘verisimilitude’ and ‘stylization’ (‘An Unnatural Eloquence: Eliot’s Plays in the Course on Modern Drama’ in the same volume). Relating Eliot’s practice to that of contemporary modern dramatists she studies The Cocktail party side by side with plays of marital disappointment like Ibsen’s Doll’s House, Strindberg’s Ghost Sonata, Chekov’s Uncle Vanya, Williams’ Streetcar Named Desire. A major point of difference, she notes, is in motivation: ‘Eliot’s intense interest in his characters’ spiritual salvation finally distinguishes his marriage play sharply from those preceding it.’64 Emphasis on the spiritual explains the format of ritual in Sweeney Agonistes or of liturgy in Murder in the Cathedral.

Carol H. Smith in ‘Teaching Eliot’s Christian Comedy’ reads Eliot’s plays as translations of his spiritual experience. Students, she believes, should not only understand the development of Eliot’s art in its specific historical context but also acquire knowledge of his basic convictions and dramatic ideals, namely the evolution
of his personal philosophy’, his search for ‘a special verse form, one that would be rhythmic, colloquial yet hint at spiritual meanings beneath’65 his mythical method of enforcing underlying meaning beneath a surface of contemporary life or his reliance on Cornford’s theory of ritual as the source of ‘one essential ingredient of all drama – rhythm.’66 Another paper of the author, ‘The Elder Statesman : Its Place in Eliot’s Theatre’ is compiled in The Placing of T.S. Eliot (ed.) J.S. Brooker (1991). The editor introducing the collection of papers originally presented at T.S. Eliot Society, notes that several of these ‘focus on language’, and these papers do open up fields of reinterpretation. Lynda Wyman rejects the opinion that The Family Reunion is dramatically deficient, poetically overt, and uneven in characterization, the idea that ‘there is a “gulf” (more than one critic has used the word) between Harry the central character and the members of his family.’67 Such impressions, she affirms, are formed when we fail to appreciate the distinct design in a play and look for wrong set of values. Language, as J.S. Brooker puts it in her Introduction, is the plot in this play. Wyman notes,

*The Family Reunion* is a play in which the element of language – rather than the element of character, say, or of thought – is the chief imitator of the action. The reader who attends carefully to the very words of this play and discovers how Eliot has used them to make his meaning may very well find that *The Family Reunion*, far from being a disappointment is a luminous success.68

The Third volume of *T.S. Eliot’s Critical Assessments*, Graham Clarke (ed.), 1990, presents a collection of reviews published in journals in the thirties, forties and fifties; these present the chequered career of critical response to Eliot’s plays.*

Glancing through the articles one discerns two recurring areas of critical probing: (a) multiple levels of experience with shifting planes of reality, (b) an elastic and flexible scheme of verse varying in tempo, mood and cadence.

The evolving spectacle is of a dramatic mode both popular and profound, secular and Christian, mundane and metaphysical, naturalistic and symbolic. This simultaneity, coherence, and the equivocation in treatment, we may say, generates a scope of wide experimentation in imaginative production. A spectrum of non-verbal signs is unleashed and new channels of communication – between stage and audience and between author and stage, is established.

VI

Production history of Eliot’s plays takes off with E. Martin Browne – *The Making of T.S. Eliot’s Plays* (1969). He not only provides drafts and summary of the plays but also offers valuable comments on the verse-rhythm. He, in fact, charts out the development of each play from its first draft to the final version produced on stage. Adding to the definitive status of the text are the letters exchanged between the playwright and the director, informing even minute proposals of revision or production details.

William Tydeman’s *Murder in the Cathedral and The Cocktail Party : Text and Performance*, 1988, divides into two parts: ‘Part one: Text’ analyses critical issues like 'Drama and Doctrine', 'Drama and Ritual', 'Drama and Realism', 'Drama and Personality', 'Drama and Poetry'; Part Two introduces us to some of the selected productions of the plays in the title along with short discussions on ‘The Author’s Role’, ‘The Director’s Role’, ‘The Players’ Roles’, ‘The Critics’ Verdicts’. The illustrations provided in Part Two are also an added asset to this book.
‘Murder in the Cathedral at Stratford’, *T.S. Eliot at the Turn of the Century* (ed. Marianne Thormahlen) 1994, is more concentrated on a probing analysis of the production of the play in 1990 with all its subtleties in theatrical presentation. On a much larger scale, *T.S. Eliot’s Drama, A Research and Production Sourcebook* (1992) by Randy Malamud is a comprehensive research guide on the production history, performance review, scholarly response and publishing history of all the plays of Eliot. The Bibliography section includes along with primary and secondary sources, a short analysis of Eliot’s Essays on Drama; the occasions for ‘Interviews’ are also noted, sources of ‘Manuscripts and Archival Holdings’ are given and a full catalogue of scholarly criticism on each play is appended. The section on ‘Additional Adaptations’ in the Appendix offers interesting information on the stage production of some of his poems—in the form of musicals, ballet, opera, and on the film and television adaption of his plays. Sources for photographs of various productions are mentioned for the benefit of researchers. The editor Malamud endorses the collection with the perceptive comment:

The distinction between reviews and scholarship (which is reflected in my discussion of each play…) seems generally sensible…By review I mean to denote immediate popular reaction, focusing on audience response to performances and the effectiveness of a production. Scholarly essays provide a more intricate response to the work.

...I mean to indicate no prejudice against either of these – merely to recognize that there are different genres of response to a work, and the user of this book might benefit from having some indication of the two different types.69
A definitive influence, a shaping presence in twentieth-century literature and literary speculation, T.S. Eliot remains under critical focus as an illustration and as a point of reference. Eliot scholarship naturally grows larger and more nuanced.

The modest effort in the present work is to analyse the strategies of communication in Eliot’s plays – strategies changing, developing and perhaps reaching a point of ‘speaking’ beyond formal borders.