CHAPTER TWO : Dynamics of Dialogue

_But how can I explain, how, can I explain to you? You will understand less after I have explained it._

_T.S. Eliot_

The two principal lines of communication in a play – between characters on stage and between stage and audience – generates a dynamics of dialogue that not only releases expository information but also speech-enacts moods and thoughts and lends expressivity to characters through cadence, tone and idiolect. The resultant effect is one of varying relationships between interlocutors – from total agreement and meeting of minds to absolute distancing and non-communication, to a complex verbal exchange of opposed intentions or clash of values, and all other complexities and counterflows.

Interlocution of varied dramatic effect analysed in terms of topic-control, lexical-control, length of turn, terms of address and turn-taking as formulated in recent drama criticism, may offer new ways of looking into a character and its dramatic motive. The characters may be estimated being pitted against the discursive frame of the play evolving out of the playwright’s personal discourses – in Eliot’s case, mostly that of Christian redemption. Discourse formulation in turn leans heavily on imagery and allusions, and registers deviations integrating the entire pattern of the play. Stylistics and speech-act study, the two branches of on-stage discourse analysis, deserve separate investigation in subsequent chapters. Before that, we may examine the repertoire of verbal modes employed by Eliot – chorus, stichomythia, love duets, runes, duologues and confession – in his mechanism of dramatic communication, the
basic challenge in his case being to amalgamate the quotidian with the suprasensational.

Eliot scavenged through the popular and literary conventions picking up modes of dramatic expression to reach his end. If the chorus formed the staple of *The Rock* (1934) and *Murder in the Cathedral* (1935), the ‘stichomythia’ had served as the bedrock for the rapid fire dialogue and rhythmic backchat in *Sweeney Agonistes* (1932). E. Martin Browne believes that it was Gilbert Murray’s translation of the Greek plays – *Trojan Women* and *Electra* in 1905 and *Iphigenia in Tauris* (1910) that lent a fresh lease of life to the Greek chorus on the modern European stage. The new aspiring poet-dramatists, dissatisfied with contemporary naturalistic theatre, he believes, ‘felt the need to go back to the springs of the drama in ritual form and communal expression’.¹ The age also saw the resurrection of the medieval Morality Play tradition and *Everyman*, we know served as a major source for several dramatic features in *Murder in the Cathedral*, specially its verse form.

In 1927 Eliot noted that in Seneca’s plays, ‘the drama is all in the word, and the word has no further reality behind it... the characters in a play of Seneca behave more like members of a minstrel troupe sitting in a semi-circle, rising in turn each to do his “number” or varying their recitations by a song or a little back-chat.’² The Sweeney experiment in a way bridges the Senecan features with features of jazz music. While the stichomythic backchat in the *Sweeney* fragments draws analogy from the syncopated rhythm, the onrush of tempo and the call and response arrangement in jazz music, the characters and dialogue pattern in it happen to be closely modelled on ingredients drawn from the music-hall or minstrel show immensely popular at that time.
Sweeney Agonistes marked Eliot’s voyage from private contemplative poetry to poetry as dramatic verse; The Rock as David E. Chinitz notes in T.S. Eliot and the Cultural Divide confirmed his emergence from a ‘coterie poet to (would-be) popular playwright’.

Chinitz points out that this play too imbibed an array of popular music-hall elements—‘a pantomime; a ballet based on the folk legend of Dick Whittington and his cat; a burlesque troupe of fascists who chant in traipsing anapaests …, devotional and satirical poetic choruses; and a rewrite of the familiar music-hall song “In Trinity Church I Met My Doom”, to reach out even to an illiterate audience. Early reviewers and late commentators, however, focussed on the chorus as the only repository of poetry and neglected the rest. Eliot himself held the view that the chorus was the only element worth preserving in this play. Indeed, the powerful use of the chorus in the communicative dynamics of these early attempts had an overwhelming effect and the subtle use of other modalities or remnants of them remained overshadowed. Murder in the Cathedral, as the title suggests, leaned on the flavour of detective fiction and as David Chinitz observes—‘Eliot even interpolated several lines from Conan Doyle’s “Musgrave Ritual” into the dialogue, where they passed unnoticed for years by audiences and critics alike,’ while the overall pattern of religious ritual, the incantatory chorus and the prose sermon dominated. In the manner of Greek tragedies the play originated with the need to celebrate a particular occasion, the Canterbury festival commemorating Thomas Becket’s martyrdom, but as Helen Gardner observed as early as 1949, ‘… the play transcends its origin and occasion’. Indeed the verbal design in this play ensuring Eliot’s entry into the area of the theatre hall communication with contemporary audiences, constitutes a complex texture of major and minor devices, weaving subtexts into the surface level dialogic pattern.
I

In the pageant play *The Rock*, Eliot claimed that his ‘only seriously dramatic aim was to show that there is a possible role for the chorus.’ In 1953, in ‘The Three Voices of Poetry’, he confessed to honing his skill in this art:

I learnt only that verse to be spoken by a choir should be different from the verse to be spoken by one person; and that the more voices you have in your choir, the simpler and more direct the vocabulary, the syntax, and the content of your lines must be.

Much earlier, before the dramatist clearly formulated his experience, Helen Gardner (1949) commenting on the art of speech had noted,

Where dialogue approximates to speech, choric verse must approximate to chant. The choruses of *The Rock* which, owe much to the rhythms of the Authorized Version, and to the Prayer-Book Psalms, have the simplicity of syntax, the emphatic repetitions, the rhythmical variety which choric verse must possess.

It is indeed this flexible speakable quality which lent immediate success to *The Rock* chorus. On 2nd June 1934, *The New Statesman* reported: ‘… it is clear that these choruses, the most prolonged effort the poet has given us since *The Waste Land*, are admirably suited for dramatic delivery, and unlike most modern poetic drama, really written to be spoken as well as read.’

The success in a way comes from Eliot’s stylistic innovation of integrating the Biblical, the liturgical and the contemporary which brings into operation a wide range of tone from the prophetic to the crispy, the hymnal to the satirical – trying to capture, as all Eliot’s works do, the moment ‘in and out of time’. As pointed out by scholars, if the chorus in *Sweeney Agonistes* casts a primitive spell, then the chorus in *The Rock* may be said to strive towards a perfect order of speech.
I have given you hands which you turn from worship,
I have given you speech, for endless palaver,
I have given you my Law, and you set up commissions,

Many are engaged in writing books and printing them,
Many desire to see their names in print,
Many read nothing but the race reports.
Much is your reading, but not the Word of God,
Much is your building, but not the House of God.  (Rock III)

What emerges through this forging of secular diction with haunting anaphoric rendition is an excellent coalition of solemnity and simplicity in natural speech rhythm. Eliot bemoans the lack of community living, misgovernance and social disparity but overshadowing them all is the concept of ‘the point of intersection’, an awareness of a moment in Eternity within the flux of time:

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

Shifting of tonality, altering of accent and mixing of diction is part of Eliot’s strategy inducing dramatic flow in these plays.

Appreciating the ‘agreeable mixture’ of Prayer Book grandeur with an extremely pedestrian idiom, Grover Smith notes here a fascinating interplay of iambic with anapaesic in the choric verse of irregular stresses. The resultant effect, he claims, are passages of 'excitement or incantation'.* For example, we note

---

Then came, | āt ā pré | dēťermination | mōmēnt, | ā mōmēnt | Īn tīme | and

ōf tīme,

Ā mōmēnt | nōt ōut | īf tīme, | būt īn tīme, | īn what | wē call | hīstōry :

trānšēctiōŋ, | bēsēctiōŋ | thē wōrd | Īf tīme, | ā mōmēnt | Īn tīme | būt

nōt like | ā mōmēnt | Īf tīme,|

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.

Then it seemed as if men must proceed from light to light, in the

light of the Word, (Rock VII).

The dramatic potential of Murder in the Cathedral too, as Gardner points out, resides in its chorus:

The real drama of the play is to be found in fact where its greatest poetry lies – in the choruses. The change which is the life of drama is there: from the terror of the supernatural expressed at the opening to the rapturous recognition of the ‘glory displayed in all the creatures of the earth’ in the last. The fluctuations of the chorus are the true measure of Thomas’s spiritual conquest.11

Commenting on the communicative agility of the chorus, Gardner adds that in course of the play, the identity of the reader / viewer merges with the Canterbury women as it were; as ‘sharers in a mystery … We pass with them through horror, out of boredom, into glory’.12

Linda Wyman* explains the same phenomenon in newer phrasing designating Murder in the Cathedral as a ‘plot of diction’. The choruses enact the women’s understanding of the essence of martyrdom and the language ‘shows it happening’.

Experiences normally left unspoken and inexpressible are given voice by the chorus. Andrew Kennedy defines the chorus as the most concentrated form of metapersonal language. The women of Canterbury progress from passive consciousness to willing participation in the Wheel of Suffering – the key metaphysical image in the play, and the language accordingly undergoes change of treatment. Expressions of fear, foreboding, horror, despair or hysteria figure on the rim of the turning wheel – the flux of commonplace life*, the bafflement at human and sub-human level. Beckett’s murder leaves them excruciatingly unsettled and devoid of understanding; the shocked bewilderment rises in a crescendo:

But this, this is out of life, this is out of time,
An instant eternity of evil and wrong.
We are soiled by a filth that we cannot clean, united to supernatural vermin,
It is not we alone, it is not the house, it is not the city that is defiled,
But the world that is wholly foul. (Part II, ll. 417-21)

Intensification by liturgy operates in two other choruses—Part I, second chorus: ‘Here is no continuing city, here is no abiding stay’, and Part II, second chorus: ‘I have smelt them, the death-bringers, senses are quickened / By subtile forebodings;’ suggesting perhaps the metaphysical ring that abides behind all apparent fluctuations of worldly deprivation and injustice. The Dies Irae or Hymn of Wrath (Part II, ll 280-309), sung off-stage while Thomas is being dragged out by the assassins, is a wail in litany. A vision of Hell is aroused threatened by the spectre of an inhuman act:

* Gareth Lloyd points out that in course of the first chorus we are taken on a visual tour across Canterbury with its seasons, peasants, kings and priests. This is ‘germane’ to our fuller understanding of the play.
Emptiness, absence, separation from God;
The horror of the effortless journey, to the empty land
Which is no land, only emptiness, absence, the Void,
Where those who were men can no longer turn the mind
To distraction, delusion, escape into dream, pretence,
Where the soul is no longer deceived, for there are no
objects, no tones,
No colours, no forms to distract, to divert the soul
From seeing itself, foully united forever, nothing with
nothing, (II, ll 293-300)

Vision of faith arrives only in the last ‘Te Deum’, directly drawn on Anglican liturgy.
Linda Wyman refutes Denis Donoghue’s statement * that Murder in the Cathedral is structurally deficient and the last Te Deum an isolated piece; she traces a path from vision of despair to vision of faith culminating in the last chorus:

We praise Thee, O God, for Thy glory displayed in all the creatures of the earth,

... ... ...

Forgive us, O Lord, we acknowledge ourselves as type of the common man,

Of the men and women who shut the door and sit by the fire;
Who fear the blessing of God, the loneliness of the night of God, the surrender required, the deprivation inflicted;
Who fear the injustice of men less than the justice of God;
Who fear the hand at the window, the fire in the thatch, the fist in the tavern, the push into the canal,
Less than we fear the love of God. (II, 620, ll 638-644)

---

* Donoghue thinks that the rest of the chorus after Part I are merely superfluous and not dramatically linked: ‘We miss the feeling that the new vision of faith has been won from the chorus of despair’—The Third Voice: Modern British and American Verse Drama (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1959), p.81.
Allusions to and transformation of the earlier chorus in the calm utterance of these lines make the Te Deum a fitting resolution in Eliot’s scheme of regeneration and rebirth; women who had once chanted the ‘death-bringer’ chorus, now realize the Glory of God and accept his manifestation in all created beings. They learn to surrender to God’s design instead of being distracted by the surface-pattern of things.

Eliot’s theme in Murder in the Cathedral was profound but special; he was sceptical of the dramatic effectiveness of the chorus and it was used more as a ploy. In ‘Poetry and Drama’ (1951) he confessed:

I … became aware of my reasons for depending, in the play, so heavily upon the assistance of the chorus … I wanted to concentrate on death and martyrdom. The introduction of a chorus of excited and sometimes hysterical women, reflecting in their emotion the significance of the action, helped wonderfully. The second reason was this: that a poet writing for the first time for the stage, is much more at home in choral verse than in dramatic dialogue … next time I would try to integrate the chorus more closely into the play.13

The chorus in The Family Reunion (1939) indeed are closer sharers of feeling at a personal level in the relationships to the hero. Eliot and his perceptive readers of the late forties and fifties had clearly discerned the exclusive demands in the case of Murder in the Cathedral. As The Family Reunion moves out of church precincts into the larger commoner arena of social, familial, dynastic existence, needs of the drama-form change, and the change is in the voice of the chorus or the choric figures, and in the nature, the positioning and the collectivity of the choric role. The chorus is static, is unlike the Greek chorus in its lack of comprehension, and is also the only source of comedy since Sweeney Agonistes. But both the comedy and the lesser intellect, we must admit, are ways of attracting the common audience in its share of the dramatic experience. We recall Helen Gardner’s observation
These abortive efforts of the chorus to find out what it is all about and then to act properly are the main source of the comedy in *The Family Reunion*. There reappears here what had been missing from Mr. Eliot’s work since *Sweeney Agonistes*: the humour, irony and wit which were so delightful in his earlier poetry.\(^{14}\)

The chorus shares with Harry the sense of loathing and sorrow at the all-pervasive contamination affecting both individual existence and the social – the micro and macro dimensions. They admit of their awkwardness and incompetence, not knowing what role to play and differ from Harry in their view that, ‘There is nothing at all to be done about it’ (I, i, 30). Harry has a glimpse of the path to redemption through expiation, but they do not.

The chorus moreover shifts back and forth into their role as members of a group and as individual types – Gerald as stupid, Ivy as snobbish, Violet as malicious, Charles as warm and generous. Helen Gardner notes,

> It is a group of four quite distinct persons, who are at moments impelled to speak together to express their common bewilderment.\(^{15}\)

And the common perception is that, ‘we have lost our way in the dark’. It is both comic and pathetic to hear what uncle Charles says in utter incomprehension at the end of the play:

> I am beginning to feel, just beginning to feel,
> That there is something I *could* understand, if I were told it.

(Part II, sc. iii, ll 200-1)

Although morally inert as individual aunts and uncles, they manifest occasional unconscious insight when speaking as a chorus, as in ‘the past is about to happen…’; they use the word ‘happen’ in the sense in which Harry uses it: ‘I am afraid of all that has happened and all that is to come’ (I, iii, l 93); ‘happen’ in this case implying acts
of guilt and punishment rather than any external event. The group shares a common bond with the *Murder in the Cathedral* chorus in ‘living and only partly living’ their lives – the limitation in their case operative on a much lower, mundane level when considered by the side of the spiritual-metaphysical reach of the other chorus. The seriocomic chorus at the end of *Sweeney Agonistes* in a sense enjoys a closer connection with *The Family Reunion* in putting up a serio-farcical preview of Harry’s nightmare. The farce of the situation is that Sweeney is hopelessly hemmed in by his murderer’s soul; unlike Harry, there is no scope of redemption for him. The childish rhythm of the knocking at the door parodies his plight and also tragically reminds him that he is so cut-off from humanity, ‘that his damnation is certain and inevitable.’

16 The call of the spirit or the longing for contrition or remorse is nowhere in sight. The nightmare therefore is a nightmare, not a grave moral consternation as in Harry. Sweeney is incapable of direct confession too and his morbid pleasure in delineating the facts of crime measures the crudity of it all:

I knew a man once did a girl in
Any man might do a girl in
Any man has to, needs to, wants to
Once in a lifetime, do a girl in.
Well he kept her there in a bath
With a gallon of Lysol in a bath

(*Fragment of an Agom*)

Eliot later realized the difficulty in assigning the chorus different functions in different situations, and therefore decided to do away with it altogether. In 1951, in ‘Poetry and Drama’, he recalls the challenge faced in organizing the versification of *The Family Reunion*:
For one thing, the immediate transition from individual, characterized part to membership of a chorus is asking too much of the actors: it is a very difficult transition to accomplish. For another thing, it seemed to me another trick, one which, even if successful, could not have been applicable in another play.17

Andrew K. Kennedy in Six Dramatists in Search of A Language (1975) draws our attention to the libation scene in Act II of The Cocktail Party, as the last vestige of the chorus-form delivered in the liturgical mode; incantatory, but devoid of Christian symbolism:

Watch over her in the desert
Watch over her in the mountain
Watch over her in the labyrinth
Watch over her by the quicksand. (Act II)

He discovers ‘a histrionic ambiguity’ at its core as at one level it enacts a social ritual of ‘pouring out drinks’ while on the other it performs a sacramental ritual of conjuring up a formal requiem for Celia.

E. Martin Browne later rued the fact that

The art (the use of the chorus) has almost disappeared from our stage; dramatists, led by Eliot himself, have ceased to write for it, and the whole attitude to acting has shifted towards an ensemble of action rather than of speech.18

On hindsight, one finds that even in Greek drama speech was subordinated to character and plot and its function attenuated by the scale and weight of other accoutrements – huge amphitheatres, actors in masks, ritualistic performance, songs and dances, emergence and evacuation of deities and the like. Dramatic speech if any, had to be conveyed through prominent literary features like rhythm and rhetoric instead of subtle nuances of thought and feeling. In course of time, however, chorus,
the original purveyor of dramatic poetry, gave rise to the first, second and third actor by responding to individual voices and marked a move away from the ‘aria’ or the lyrics to the ‘recitative’ or the spoken iambic. In Aeschylus, one character at a time, in general, responds to the lyrical odes of the chorus. In *Agamemnon* the watchman, Clytemnestra and the Herald respond in turn to the choric song but never speak face to face between themselves.

In Eliot’s case the transition was almost similar – moving on to subtler dramatic expressions and dialogue proper. More in the nature of ‘interior drama’, his plays naturally have all the force of action in the language itself. Although the chorus disappears, its poetry and wisdom work through other forms of expression: stichomythia, dialogue, empty speech, or speech of illumination.

II

Stichomythia, a classical formal device, second only to the chorus in Eliot’s repertoire, was retained through the early and the middle plays in varied patterns – from the patter of *Sweeney Agonistes*, through the moral dialectic of *Murder in the Cathedral* to the chatter of *Family Reunion* or *Cocktail Party*. A form in dialogue pattern, its dynamics was avidly captured by Eliot to suit his ends.

In the Senecan stichomythia in *Sweeney Agonistes* one word of a phrase is repeated in the next phrase as one speaker takes up and twists the sentence spoken by the other. Commenting on the rhythmic pulse of the play, Arnold Kennedy recalls, 'how many of the elements in the short play are language as sound: the constant repetition of names, questions, and greetings.' The rapid backchat i.e., exchange of
short phrases between two speakers prevail over the entire play and range from the comic to the threatening:

Dusty : How about Pereira?
Doris : What about Pereira?
     I don’t care.
Dusty : You don’t care !
     Who pays the rent?
Doris : Yes he pays the rent

Eliot took up the low life idiom of uneducated characters with their repetitions and circumlocutions and integrated it to the savage beat of jazz drums. He could hear as it were the ‘antique drum’ beat beneath the debased and degenerated version of modern speech. The rhythm, as Carol H. Smith notes in *T.S. Eliot’s Dramatic Theory and Practice*, combines both the superficial and the elemental in modern man—

> The fact that jazz symbolised the superficial elements of a modern society of materialistic automatism at the same time that it suggested the primitive side of man’s nature in its throbbing rhythms provided the kind of double-edged dramatic device that Eliot liked best. … The comic and satiric could thus be portrayed on the surface while the tragic and spiritual existed simultaneously beneath.20

David Chinitz points out that *Sweeney Agonistes* not only questions the very notion of civilization but also explores the basic savagery in every man. James Waldon*, Chinitz explains, identified Europe and America with Africa in order to lighten the image of black Africa. Eliot did the same perhaps in a bid to darken the image of Europe showing thereby that sin and horrors were common to all men and that modern civilization conceals regressive pulls.

* Writer, lyricist and race-leader.
Stichomythia is used in *Murder in the Cathedral* too but on a different note.

David Chinitz notes,

> if the stichomythic rhythms of exchange carry an echo of *Sweeney Agonistes*, their riddling quality gives them a remoteness and opacity quite unlike anything in the earlier play.\(^2\)

An aura of mysticism hangs over the dialogue as it were:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Thomas</th>
<th>Tempter</th>
<th>Thomas</th>
<th>Tempter</th>
<th>Thomas</th>
<th>Tempter</th>
<th>Thomas</th>
<th>Tempter</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Who shall have it?</td>
<td>He who will come.</td>
<td>What shall be the month?</td>
<td>The last from the first.</td>
<td>What shall we give for it?</td>
<td>Pretence of priestly power.</td>
<td>Why should we give it?</td>
<td>For the power and the glory.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Eliot seems to have got over the Greek stichomythia’s lack of immediacy and also the lack of vibrant randomness of everyday speech by capturing elements of low-brow entertainment. Chinitz presents the case of Joe Walter Sweeney of the Sands Great American Circus who took the British public by storm in 1843; his ‘banjo... helped establish the minstrel show as a major genre of popular entertainment in Britain, and launched a banjo craze that lasted into the early twentieth century’.\(^2\)

This, as Chinitz believes, was probably the first invasion of American popular amusement on British culture, along with a spate of American slangs in dramatic dialogue; for example, ‘you said it’, ‘do in’, ‘swell’, ‘slick’, ‘gotta’, ‘gonna’, etc. The initial title to *Sweeney Agonistes* was also in slang – ‘Wanna go home Baby’ – an
expression with double innuendo – a call to return to the primitive origin, but in American style, a sexual proposition too.

The stiff, balanced, regular and ordered stichomythia in Greek drama could not function as a vehicle for communicating inner indecisions, doubts or conflicting drives and motivations. Yet, as scholars come to note, the potential range of classical stichomythic architectonics is amazing. In the quick one liner question-answer retort great dramatic tension may be built up, opposing sides of an argument may be rapidly developed, and even the sub-text of the ‘unsaid’ or the ‘unspoken’ implicitly conveyed. Andrew K. Kennedy in Dramatic Dialogue, Duologue of Personal Encounter (1983) notes that stichomythia may serve as a model for set symmetrical speeches on a variety of occasions; in flyting (slanging-matches of medieval Moralities), in formal lament (early plays of Shakespeare), in witty repartee (romantic comedies of Shakespeare), and ‘in the music-hall patter’, (as in Waiting for Godot).

Eliot uses it to portray rapid social chatter in the opening of The Cocktail Party:

Peter : I like that story.
Celia : I love that story.
Alex : I’m never tired of hearing that story.
Julia : Well, you all seem to know it.
Celia : Do we all know it?

… … …

I don’t believe everyone here knows it.
You don’t know it, do you?

Unidentified Guest : No, I’ve never heard it. (Act I, sc.i)
As in a party, it is a slow-paced leisurely conversation – the tone casual, the style meaninglessly repetitive. However, mystical overtones are subtly refracted through the mystery of the Unidentified Guest and by the vagueness hovering over the missing wife.

The mode of echoing words in short sharp lines runs through the texture of *Elder Statesman* too. In the opening scene for example, ‘staying’ and ‘not staying to tea’ reverberates across the first long conversation’ between Monica and her lover. Immediately after, the theme of the public and the private self is introduced and Lord Claverton is found caught between conflicting mental conditions – ‘no desire to act’ and ‘loathing for inaction’.

The pervasiveness of empty speech or speech without meaning in the social milieu of the later plays persuades us to notice a form of duality. In the world of affluent aristocracy ‘endless palaver’ or ‘speech of appearance’ jostle with sanctified or authentic speech to drown the voice of speakers attempting true communion. The intention again is to show the gradation of consciousness and the pathetic downfall of godless men. Andrew Kennedy rightly draws our attention to the fact that ‘Eliot is one of the first deliberate exploiters of the minimum content in “ordinary” talk, stylised so as to draw attention to itself.’

Stichomythia is one such speech-version.

Eliot believed in the resurrection, revival and revalidation of modalities hailing from the past – modalities of perception, of gnosis, and of expression – laden with newer potency, yet undiscovered capacity to make a point, to project a vision, to

---

* Charles : Is your father at home to-day?
  Monica : You’ll see him at tea.
  Charles : … … …
    There’s really no point in my staying to tea.
  Monica : But you *must* stay to tea.
  … … …
  Monica : But why not stop to tea?
  Charles : Very well then, I will stop to tea. (Act I)
communicate a perception in perspective, to transmit a message where such is the need. Hence, the unhesitating use of the stichomythia, the chorus et al.

But just as the chorus is not always suited to modern dramatic presentation, stichomythia also has its innate inadequacy. Intimate exchange at a personal level is almost shut out from the Greek stichomythia. Aeschylus renders the politico-religious ideology of his community through the chorus, while Sophocles is more concerned with personal vision and personal idiom; it is only with Euripides that a semblance of dialogue or personal encounter or dialectic of values is attained. For a true duologue of intimacy in everyday speech, Eliot had to wait till Ibsen.

III

Dialogue involving the personae is the staple verbal medium on stage. Dialogue originates from the Greek expression ‘dias logos’—‘through words’ and implies interpersonal exchange through verbal activity among any number of characters. From the Greek stichomythia, through the Elizabethan blank verse to modern naturalistic prose, ‘dialogue’ remains engaged in a core function in the speech dynamics of a play. Aristotle affirmed the actional role of dialogue in drama; it was the dramatists of the time of Renaissance who granted dialogue its due place and privileged it over other forms of verbal mode like the chorus, the aside, the ‘monologue’ or narration. Dialogue as a serious verbal act or a significant human activity often involves in modern drama a conflict of values and registers transformation of characters through confessional or self-revelatory utterance.
In Eliot, the end pursued is communion at a deeper level. Dialogue in his case, is not so much a matter of conflict, contention or dialectic of values as a psychological stimulus to connect with people and the world around. It is also an exercise in introspection and salvaging of the soul.

In *The Elder Statesman* Act III, Lord Claverton, the unflinching public figure, wakes up to the value of surrender, humility and release. This is a one-sided confession, a heroic feat so to say, to gather courage and stand up to the fear of rejection or wrath. By accepting the ghosts of the past and the limitations of the present, he redeems himself from ending up as ‘hollow’. The isolated life burdened with nonconfessional secrets, and the glamorous public life built on the debris of personal relationship – either is capable of annihilating one’s identity. To be reborn in the true sense is to connect and communicate. Signs of verbal communication are sensory and visible but it is the unseen ethereal connection between souls which confers to the verbal mode its real worth:

If a man has one person, just one in his life,
To whom he is willing to confess everything—
And that includes, mind you, not only things criminal,
Not only turpitude, meanness and cowardice,
But also situations which are simply ridiculous,
When he has played the fool (as who has not?)—
Then he loves that person, and his love will save him.  (Act III)

Later on in the play, after confessing to Monica the hidden guilt behind his hardened exterior, Claverton arrives at a contentment never experienced before:

… I feel at peace now,
It is the peace that ensues upon contrition
When contrition ensues upon the knowledge of truth.
Why did I always want to dominate my children?
Why did I mark out a narrow path for Michael?
Because I wanted to perpetuate myself in him.
Why did I want to keep you to myself, Monica?
Because I wanted you to give your life to adoring
The man that I pretended to myself that I was,
So that I could believe in my own pretences.
I’ve only just now had the illumination
Of knowing what love is. (Act III)

The close parallel is with Oedipus in Sophocles’s *Oedipus at Colonus*, drawing succour from daughter Antigone in the last moments of his life.

Celia’s confession or rather self-awareness in *The Cocktail Party* is on a different plane altogether. She is the ‘miseria hominis’ of the Calvinist dogma and as Rudolf Germer points out in ‘T.S. Eliot’s Religious Development’ (1994)*, embodies Eliot’s conviction of man’s degradation through Original Sin. She is the chosen one like Harry and Becket and is predestined to atone for Mankind through selfless love and self-annihilation. This is her ‘salvation’ as dictated by Reilly ‘through the path of diligence’. She had placed her love in the wrong object, but haunting signals from the outer world informed her intuition:

It’s not the feeling of anything I’ve ever done,
Which I might get away from, or of anything in me
I could get rid of – but of emptiness, of failure
Towards someone, or something, outside of myself;
And I feel I must … atone—is that the word? (Act II)

Celia’s sense of sin is not at all of the personal nature; its magnitude is much larger, and as yet beyond her comprehension.

In the central dialogue in *The Cocktail Party*, Celia is seen to be groping for words and meaning till Reilly comes to her help. She limps through hesitations, questions, pauses, and indefinite pronouns till a final crescendo of realization is reached. Stephen Spender points out that the dialogue between Celia and Reilly lacks ‘the ecstatic communication of those who share with one another the knowledge of Buried Life – Harry and Agatha.’

Hers is a path to be traversed alone. Reilly can only provide the road-map but will not assume the role of a confidante, consort or companion. Indeed, Celia is unfortunate in not having to share an empathetic understanding of pure human love! In *After Strange Gods* (1933) Eliot insists that

> with the disappearance of the idea of Original Sin, with the disappearance of the idea of intense moral struggle, the human beings presented to us both in poetry and in prose fiction to-day, … tend to become less and less real … more and more vaporous.

The moral struggle in its acutest is impersonated in Harry. Celia is subjected to the contamination of the world around, but Harry experiences its pain within. The very desire to get rid of his wife by homicide, makes him culpable. He is one of the twice-born* destined to suffer to cleanse the world of moral evil; the sense of sin is so intense that any effort to struggle with it and seek release renders his utterances frustratingly difficult—

> …the slow stain sinks deeper through the skin
> Tainting the flesh and discolouring the bone—
> This is what matters, but it is unspeakable,
> Untranslatable: I talk in general terms
> Because the particular has no language.  

(I, i, 328-32)

---

* defined by William James in his *The Varieties of Religious Experience*.  

78
Sweeney’s frustration with language stems from the fact that there are no words actually to describe his state of utter damnation, the total incapacity to experience sense of guilt or sin; communication snaps miserably as both speaker and listener fail to strike a minimum chord.

Non-communication apparently and perhaps ironically similar, ails Harry who speaks in terms of a vision of sin to express the expanse of hereditary evil corrupting human society. Of all the members of Wishwood House he alone is the sufferer, an alien in his own land—

You are all people
To whom nothing has happened …
… You have gone through life in sleep,
Never woken to the nightmare.
… You do not know
The noxious smell untraceable in the drains,
Inaccessible to the plumbers, that has its hour of the night; you do not know
The unspoken voice of sorrow in the ancient bedroom  (Part I, sc.i, ll 302-8)

It’s a pity that even love cannot guarantee him the relief desired. He is supposed to follow, not flee from the Eumenides, as they transform themselves from the Avenging Furies of Blood Guilt to the Avenging Angels of Conscience. Until he understands his role as a vicarious sufferer, communication fails:

Oh, there must be another way of talking
That would get us somewhere. You don’t understand me.
You can’t understand me. It’s not being alone
That is the horror—to be alone with the horror.
What matters is the filthiness. I can clean my skin,
Purify my life, void my mind,
But always the filthiness, that lies a little deeper … (Part II, sc.i, 365-71)

Confessional or self-revelatory utterance of a different kind – of a therapeutic nature so to say – takes place in the psychiatrist’s chamber in The Cocktail Party, Act II:

Edward : I doubt if you ever had a case like mine:
I have ceased to believe in my own personality.
Reilly : Oh, dear yes; this is serious. A very common malady.
Very prevalent indeed.
… … …
Edward : But I am obsessed by the thought of my own insignificance.
… … …
Reilly : Half of the harm that is done in this world
Is due to people who want to feel important.

Though a weakling, Edward makes a frantic attempt at analysing his own predicament:

I see now why I wanted my wife to come back.
… … …
Without her, it was vacancy.
When I thought she had left me, I began to dissolve,
To cease to exist. That was what she had done to me!
I cannot live with her – that is now intolerable;
I cannot live without her, for she has made me incapable
Of having any existence of my own. (Act II)

This is revelation without illumination; an ordinary man’s commonplace awareness of his situation. Reilly prescribes for Edward and Lavinia, the cure of the familiar path, life lived at a physical level:
… They do not repine;
Are contented with the morning that separates
And with the evening that brings together
For casual talk before the fire
Two people who know they do not understand each other,
Breeding children whom they do not understand
And who will never understand them. (Act II)

This is the well-trodden path setting out on which the mass keep moving along –
‘partly living’, if living at all, in that familiar ambience of acquaintances meeting at
socializing parties, engaging in inanities, occasionally talking of Michael Angelo.

But the moment of illumination, of solace, of awakening is not far off, at least
for the God’s chosen few.

Celia : You see, I think I really had a vision of something
       Though I don’t know what it is. I don’t want to forget it.
       I want to live with it. I could do without everything,
       Put up with anything, if I might cherish it.
       In fact, I think it would really be dishonest
       For me, now, to try to make a life with anybody!
       I couldn’t give anyone the kind of love –
       I wish I could – which belongs to that life. (Act II)

Celia’s awakening is of a divine calling just as Colby’s in the other play is an
integration of the aesthetic with the spiritual. One may recall the long duologue
between Harry and Mary, resonating with memories of garden, flowers and sunshine,
just as a breakthrough is indicated in Harry’s soul and enlightenment seems imminent
along reminiscences of the ‘real past’ :

Harry : … You bring me news

       Of a door that opens at the end of a corridor,

       Sunlight and singing; when I had felt sure
That every corridor only led to another,
Or to a blank wall; that I kept moving
Only so as not to stay still. Singing and light.

(Act I, sc ii, ll 283-288)

Confessional exchange between Colby and Lucasta in Act II, Confidential Clerk, bears close analogy to this; lovers in both cases try to reveal their moment of illumination. Colby and Lucasta, are lonely souls awaiting entry into the secret garden, each willing to understand the other and attain a new identity in being understood:

Colby: … there’s no end to understanding a person.

All one can do is to understand them better,
To keep up with them; so that as the other changes
You can understand the change as soon as it happens,
Though you couldn’t have predicted it.

(Act II)

A sense of near-communion is established as the duo takes up the onus of supplementing words to each other's speech, even repeating parts of it verbatim:

Lucasta: I think I'm changing.
I've changed quite a lot in the last two hours.

Colby: And I think I'm changing too. But perhaps what we call change...

Lucasta: Is understanding better what one really is
And the reason why that comes about, perhaps...

Colby: Is, beginning to understand another person.

(Act II)
For yet another moment of a mutually liberating deep communion between souls one has to look back at the duologue between Harry and Agatha, dramatically significant as it confirms the new direction in Harry’s life. Agatha is relieved of her burden as well. In the duet that follows, they share the same kind of word, imagery, metaphor and phrases and also replicate each other’s syntax. The union of consciousness could not have been better portrayed than in this exchange between spiritually compatible souls:

    Agatha : … over and under  
              Echo and noise of feet
    Harry : In and out in an endless drift—
            . . .
    Agatha : Up and down, through the stone passages
            . . .
    Harry : To and fro, dragging my feet        (Part II, sc. ii, ll 190-206)

The transforming power of love, however, is perhaps nowhere more deliciously conveyed than in the opening duologue between Monica and Charles in *The Elder Statesman*. The lightness of the drawing room scene with its ‘playful courtship argument’ delves to a serious emotional depth as Monica suddenly wakes up to her new found bliss,

    How did this come, Charles? It crept so softly  
    On silent feet, and stood behind my back  
    Quietly, a long time, a long long time  
    Before I felt its presence.               (Act I)

The emotional upsurge reaches its climax in Act III when, overwhelmed by the immensity of love, Charles strives for an exactitude of expression to express his feeling:

    … now we are conscious of a new person  
    Who is you and me together.
Oh my dear,
I love you to the limits of speech, and beyond.
It's strange that words are so inadequate.
Yet, like the asthmatic struggling for breath,
So the lover must struggle for words.

Monica’s concluding speech marks a step ahead as faith and comfort in relationship ring in the certitude of love; the mind in control of the self finds words in clear analytical forms, underscoring the invincible bonding of souls; a great love poem is born:

Age and decrepitude can have no terrors for me,
Loss and vicissitude cannot appal me,
Not even death can dismay or amaze me
Fixed in the certainty of love unchanging.
        I feel utterly secure
In you; I am a part of you.*  .  .  .  (Act III)

From Harry’s ‘real past’ to Charles’ ‘real present’ is indeed a dream journey that not everyone is fortunate to complete. In our modern faithless age, the duologue of mutuality, as Andrew K. Kennedy points out, may be taken ‘as a symptom of his (Eliot’s) belief that language in the theatre can be used to show at least two persons trying to communicate, against all the odds.’26 In this age of dwindling confidants and diminishing trust this indeed is a progress in authentic communication.

The relation between Lavinia and Edward, on a contrary note, is a vacuum where love forever remains elusive. All they learn is to adjust and adhere. They end up as characters in High Comedy in which, as Helen Gardner notes (1965),

* When Raymond Williams in ‘Spectres of a Dying Theatre’ (1968) finds the Charles-Monica conversation ‘a dry, tightlipped idiom, in a world of social formalities, which makes the talk of love like the faint rattle of spoons, and dry sticks, saying the words to each other, as the old man dies in the garden’, the comment reads more like an ideology-bound response than a penetrating grasp.
‘characters are relieved of the ordinary anxieties of life in order that they may give
their whole attention to those anxieties . . . of earning a living, succeeding in a
business or profession, preserving one’s health and fulfilling the duties of one’s
station.’

Their lives begin and end as Robert Crawford (1987) observes ‘in the tinkling
surfacy cocktail world of sophisticated chiming dialogue’:

Edward : And now for the party.
Lavinia : Now for the party.
Edward : It will soon be over.
Lavinia : I wish it would begin.
Edward : There’s the doorbell.
Lavinia : Oh, I’m glad. It’s begun  (Act III)

They belong to the hordes of the Hollow Men; the desensitised fragmented
citizens in ‘Preludes’. Redemption is remote, almost impossible in their lives; sin is a
mystical concept beyond the reach of these decadent minds; but Eliot pursues a
relentless effort at bringing such ‘other’ forms of awareness right into the heart of
drawing-rooms, in the musings of a transformed and contemplative Lord Claverton
for instance :

It’s harder to confess the sin that no one believes in
Than the crime that everyone can appreciate.
For the crime is in relation to the law
And the sin is in relation to the sinner.  (Act III)

Realistic West End façade coupled with non-realistic device – the voice of a
chorus, the presence of Eumenides, or the love-duets – could not meet the end that
Eliot had envisaged. They were therefore discarded never to be used again, except in

diminutive or altered forms; the chorus as libation chant or runic recitals, the Eumenides in human shape as Julia, Alex and Reilly in Cocktail Party, Mrs. Guzzard in Confidential Clerk, Frederico Gomez and Mrs. Carghill in Elder Statesman; love-duets in Family Reunion as ‘beyond character’ lyrics;

Denis Donoghue examines the superfluity of the duets following Eliot’s own approach towards them—

These are lyrical duets isolated from the rest of the dialogue by being written in short lines with only two stresses per line. They are in a sense, as Eliot observes, ‘beyond character’, and the speakers have to be presented as falling into a trancelike state in order to speak them. But they are far more remote from the necessity of the action than operatic arias.

However, the question remains: Is it possible to capture the other reality without falling into a trance? Mary seems to foresee Harry’s change of heart – ‘the joyful pain of rebirth’ and speaks in imagery more befitting a lyric than a normal conversation; Harry needs to be born twice as he is elected to expiate and atone:

I believe the moment of birth
Is when we have knowledge of death
I believe the season of birth
Is the season of sacrifice
For the tree and the beast, and the fish
Thrashing itself upstream: (Part I, sc ii, ll 269-74)

Lynda Wyman in ‘Language as Plot in The Family Reunion’ comments – ‘The scene between Mary and Harry is intensely dramatic; … Harry takes hope from the discovery that there is someone at Wishwood with whom he has something in

common, experiences a moment of deep communion with Mary ... for one brief shining moment Harry and Mary speak the same language.²⁹

It is through the trance speeches that the characters reveal their secret thoughts in the most concentrated form. The speeches also lead Harry towards the discovery of spiritual vocation:

And what of the terrified spirit
Compelled to be reborn
To rise toward the violent sun
Wet wings into the rain cloud
Harefoot over the moon? (Act I, sc.ii, ll 274-278)

On an apparently more pedestrian level, Eliot’s basic principle of fusing the abstract and the musical, with the visible and the daily, continued. In The Confidential Clerk the integrity is symbolized at one level by Eggerson’s garden and in The Elder Statesman, by unconditional human love – ‘an earthly image of the divine love of God’. By the time of Elder Statesman in fact, Eliot seems to have reached his dramatic goal. Carol H. Smith writes,

The love-duet between Charles and Monica gives ample evidence that Eliot has learned to integrate his poetic and his dramatic goals ... In The Elder Statesman he has reintroduced the poetic interlude, but it now serves to forward the main love theme of the play. The lovers’ discovery of a private world in the midst of the public world is conveyed...³⁰

IV

Much as in the Comedy of Manners Eliot’s characters often live by false impressions in public life; scholars designate the language of their conversation ‘speech of appearance’. The assumed profile is consciously subjected to ruthless
criticism and ultimately abandoned by the personae. After the stormy scene with Michael in Act II, Lord Claverton, rid of all his fictional glory, undertakes a scathing analysis of the self with full-knowledge of a life lived in role-playing. In Act III, he even opens up to an outsider and commoner like Charles:

I've spent my life in trying to forget myself
In trying to identify myself with the part
I had chosen to play. And the longer we pretend
The harder it becomes to drop the pretence,
Walk off the stage, change into our own clothes
And speak as ourselves.

The anguish arises from an awareness of having grabbed a niche, by falsifying one's real worth:

So I'd become an idol
To Monica. She worshipped the part I played:
How could I be sure that she would love the actor
If she saw him, off the stage, without his costume and makeup
And without his stage words.

Lord Claverton, long, has lived life in terms of ‘stage words’ and ‘stage roles’ but finally strips off his actor’s mask to reveal the vulnerable self that rises to a litany of love through genuine filial connection:

I love him, even for rejecting me,
For the me he rejected, I reject also.
I’ve been freed from the self that pretends to be someone;
And in becoming no one, I begin to live,
It is worth while dying, to find out what life is. (Act III)
Lucasta in *The Confidential Clerk*, sheds off her ‘borrowed speech’ in favour of an authentic one as her mocking, flippant self reveals an unexpected intuitive edge—

. . . I don’t like myself
I don’t like the person I’ve forced myself to be;
And I liked you because you didn’t like that person either,
And I thought you’d come to see me as the real kind of person
That I want to be. That I know I am.
That was new to me. I suppose I was flattered. (Act II)

Lucasta's intuitive articulation, however, is that of a lesser intellect, spared of deeper conscious thought. It may be termed a 'babel' in a positive sense.

Lucasta: But you've something else, that I have'nt got:

Something of which the music is a ... symbol.
I really would like to understand music,
Not in order to be able to talk about it,
But ... partly, to enjoy it ... and because of what it stands for.
You know, I am a little jealous of your music! (Act II)

She makes statements – end-stopped and stunted – yet, in a sense, this is the common, universal tongue, engulfing entire humanity; a language of understanding, capable of moving beyond barriers, beyond designed expression.

In *The Cocktail Party* Edward Chamberlayne speaks in ‘the language of the hypocrite’ as he tinkers with words that try to hide his lapses and exculpate him:

I see now why I wanted my wife to come back.
It was because of what she had made me into.
We had not been alone again for fifteen minutes
Before I felt, and still more acutely –
Indeed, acutely, perhaps, for the first time,
The whole oppression, the unreality
Of the role she had always imposed upon me
With the obstinate, unconscious, sub-human strength
That some women have.
Without her, it was vacancy. (Act II)

Reilly effectively resists the socialites’ habitual tendency to impose certain constructs:

… You have both of you pretended
To be consulting me; both, tried to impose upon me
Your own diagnosis, and prescribe your own cure.
But when you put yourselves into hands like mine
You surrender a great deal more than you meant to.
This is the consequence of trying to lie to me.

(Act II)

Discordances between truth and lying, fabrication and revelation, finally
dissolve as Speech of Appearance retreats, replaced by Speech of Reality. Monica
emerges as a genuine figure of love and compassion, at peace with herself, not
dependent on pretended speech

Monica : I’ve loved you from the beginning of the world.
Before you and I were born, the love was always there
That brought us together. (Act III)

It is Monica’s presence presumably which, according to some scholars,
generates more ‘lyric interludes’ and intense dramatic moments in *The Elder Statesman* – much more than in any other play of Eliot.
If lyric is heightened speech then sermon is a piece of solemn poetic prose. Eliot believed that prose and poetry should not be mixed in a play; apparently, Becket’s sermon and the knights’ address to the audience intrude in the verse play. Eliot allows this as he needs utilizing a special potential of such juxtaposition in the context. The sermon in prose enjoys poetic facility, not in terms of imagery and metre but through incantatory resonance of repeatedly accessed words of loaded significance: ‘Peace’, ‘martyrdom’ and ‘God’ (along with its variants, He, His, Our, Lord).

The sermon is dramatic also in the sense that it both anticipates and follows dramatic action. Linda Wyman, referring to her classroom teaching and students’ response points this out:

In understanding the Christmas sermon as a dramatic speech, … they come to understand both the structure and the meaning of the play … Contemplating the Christmas sermon as a dramatic speech leads students to anticipate what will happen in part 2 – leads them to understand that without the ‘bringing back’, the murder is simply a killing, not a martyrdom.31

Thomas’ triumph over the last temptation forms the pivot of the sermon. The Christian essence of martyrdom is dexterously construed in a language specially scripted for the occasion. The language here effectively uses the conventional idiom; H.T. Antrim believes it derives its accent from Bishop Andrews’ sermons – exploring, the meanings of a single word, working it through a number of contexts until it could be revealed in ‘lucid profundity’.32

The exposition on the concept of martyrdom, Antrim notes,

is there considered in a variety of contexts and is made to yield meanings which go beyond those affixed to it by either the people of Canterbury or the knights who come to kill the Archbishop. The
process of the prose is marked by what Eliot calls, elsewhere, “ordonance and precision”, and it is just those qualities which the justifying speeches of the knights, near the close of the play, lack.33

The knights address the audience in pure denotative prose – the language of the material world without tinge of an other reality. Direct address, like soliloquy, is a non-naturalistic device and considered unreal by the naturalistic playwrights. Eliot, as we know, moves beyond the common distinction of naturalism and non-naturalism to gain higher dramatic ends. He uses twentieth century prose against a twelfth century context to shake the audience out of complacency. Theatrically, the scene provides relief from the preceding high tension drama and connects to the modern sensibility through shift in mood, tone and content, projecting ‘the political expediency of our time’. In the Aldwych production of the play in 1972, the knights appear seated in ‘black collarless dress’ speaking over microphones, drawing thereby a direct analogy with contemporary politicians.

Plays coming next to Murder in the Cathedral, we know, turned another way; Christian references, Greek sources, metaphysical perplexity or ritual formulations in these remain under cover of a profane, secular drawing room world. Comedy of Manners, farce and Victorian melodrama on which Eliot had grown up, supply formal modalities. The language generates and sustains the tension not formally between prose and verse, but between the surface portraying the conventional matter-of-fact pattern and the sub-text hinting at, suggesting, other levels of signification; the verse glides from one level of communication to the other. Ordinary conversation beginning at a simple pedestrian level begins to give way to a crescendo of heightened emotion while innocuous words in normal utterances assume connotative dimensions at a deeper level.
The interplay of multiple levels of reference and Eliot’s growing mastery over it is widely appreciated by scholars. Linda Wyman notes the various levels of communication in *The Family Reunion*, categorising speeches into ‘naturalistic’ or ‘discourse of ordinary talk’, ‘overlaid’ or ‘metaphysical’ and ‘supra-naturalistic’ or choric commentary.

Amy, at the beginning of *Family Reunion* for instance, dismisses the parlour maid, considers the present state of her life, and comments on the shortness of spring, in one single speech – just varying the modulations in tone and rhythm:

Not yet! I will ring for you. It is still quite light  
(*Tone: authoritative; short clipped syntax*)

I have nothing to do but watch the days draw out  
(*Tone: introspective in a long drawl*)

... ... ...

When I was young and strong, and sun and light unsought for
And the night unf feared and the day expected
And the clocks could be trusted, tomorrow assured
And time would not stop in the dark!

(*Tone: philosophical with a periodic syntactic pattern that holds the information till the end*)

Put on the lights. But leave the curtains undrawn.

(*Tone: commanding, in a sharp brisk way*)

(Act I, sc. i, ll 1-11)

Raymond Williams considers the intertwining not merely as a dramatic device but a thematic necessity, ‘because this interpenetration is the condition of experience of the play as a whole’.

M.C. Bradbrook observes that ‘Characters engaged in ordinary conversation suddenly enter a trancelike state, in which they utter prophecies, while the Chorus of uncles and aunts occasionally emerge from their satisfied triviality to utter a general confession of fear or discomfort.’
1927 onwards Eliot was drawn towards the negative way of St. John of the Cross. But communicating the urge for a divine calling was too visceral to be embodied in words – beyond all worldly signifiers, as it were. Becket was silenced by the gap between the knowledge or understanding of action and its expression; Harry went verbose but failed the Word. In the last three plays he shows the effort among the characters to move beyond the insularity caused by a communicative gap. Moments of illumination are conveyed with greater transparency of expression. Yet both Celia and Colby are found to lapse into silence after reaching intense tumultuous heights.*

Lyndall Gordon, placing Eliot’s own life of private agony beside the action of his plays, comments—

> Ordinary words ‘slip, slide, perish,/Decay with imprecision, will not stay in place’, but against the perpetual decay of language in the course of time Eliot has as his model ‘The Word in the desert’, language that has the permanence of scripture, as though graven on tablets of law. In Christian terms the Word is the deity whose holiness was proven in the face of temptation. Eliot sets up here the highest challenge that language can present: to make shoddy words approach the perfect word.36