CHAPTER FIVE : End of the Journey

*Not even death can dismay or amaze me*

*Fixed in the certainty of love unchanging*

*T.S. Eliot*

*The Confidential Clerk* and *The Elder Statesman*, in a way, complete Eliot’s dramatic mission. To some, it was a retreat from the avowed commitment – intellectual and dramatic – to an easy recourse to the conventional. To others it was the natural waning of a creative high tide – a return to American roots and cultural memories of youth. Contemporary reviews and scholarly assessments reflect this mixed response – a response amidst which Eliot emerges unperturbed, sure in his arrival.

Eliot’s concern with the revision and drafts of his plays and with the staging details continued unabated, but his earlier passionate involvement* with the immediate theatrical surrounding appears to have thinned. Two apparently innocuous incidents recounted by Peter Ackroyd testify to this sense of detachment. One was his curt reply to a member of the cast, during the rehearsal of *Confidential Clerk*. The

*Once, during the practice session of the chorus for *Murder in the Cathedral*, he came up to Mrs. Thurburn, the speech-trainer and murmured mildly, ‘That should be a colon, not a semi-colon’; ‘this was’, Mrs. Thurburn comments, ‘the only spontaneous remark he ever made in rehearsals’.*


Again, during the rehearsal of *Family Reunion* Eliot declared to the cast, ‘I will now read the play to you to show how I want my lines spoken’; later, at the quarrelling scene between Lavinia and Edward, he suddenly barged into the stage enforcing, ‘The wife must be fierce. Much more fierce. The audience must understand that she is impossible’.

actor wanted to know the meaning of some lines to which he replied with a firm ‘My
dear child, don’t ask me, I don’t know!’; the other happened at the premier show (24
Aug 1958) of *Elder Statesman* at the Edinburgh Festival. At the end of the show he
was called upon stage to address the audience. But, as his producer Sherek recalls, he
remained speechless for moments trying to figure out the face of his wife in the
audience. For a man meticulously devoted to social niceties, this was a significant
break; it was as if the public and the private had melted barriers for a larger union
with a higher order, shedding off all material and vocal ties. Becket, Harry, Celia,
Colby, Claverton, all stand at this juncture.

With the success of *The Cocktail Party* coming close on the heels of the Nobel
Prize (1948) and the Order of Merit (1948), Eliot had found himself catapulted to a
celebrity status overnight. *Cocktail Party* ran for several hundred performances in
New York and London catering to over a million of spectators. The crowning glory to
this newly earned stardom was the cover story in *Time* magazine published March 6,
1950. People were now more interested in Eliot the man than in his plays. The burden
of publicity was such that Eliot is said to have complained, ‘No one thinks of me as a
poet any more, but as a celebrity... . Everybody wants you to meet their friends. Huge
cocktail-parties. No time for talk.’ Even his literary lectures were now being attended
by never-before-seen colossal crowds – 2500 for ‘The Three Voices of Poetry’ in
Central Hall, November 19, 1953 and 15,000 for ‘The Frontiers of Criticism’ in the
University of Minnesota on April 30, 1956. In short, the brand Eliot had been
established and its effect was clearly visible in the production of his last two plays.

*The Confidential Clerk* (1953) and *The Elder Statesman* (1958) appeared in
the post-war phase of a general slackness in all walks of British life. Eliot was
overtaken by frequent bouts of illness during this period, recuperating several times at
London sanatoriums. The high tide of his career had been attained; his plays gained audience attention, simply as a part of the Eliot repertoire. The characteristic Eliot play with its signature verse medium had long been established and the characters – saints, sinners, martyrs, penitents, non-penitents, recognized as iconic. For the actors too, Eliot was a revered name. Browne informs us that Ina Claire, famous American comedienne, long in hibernation from acting career, enthusiastically resurfaced only to act as Lady Elizabeth in *Confidential Clerk*; in the same play Claude Rains played Sir Claude only out of ‘veneration for its author’. Even before *Confidential Clerk* could be premiered at the Edinburgh Festival, five theatres in New York, the Lyric in London and the Theatre Royal at Newcastle on Tyne offered to book their shows. Edmund Wilson observes that such was the respect for Eliot that nobody committed himself ‘by printing a sincere opinion’, ∗ as a result Eliot did not get to know what others really thought of the play.**

However, both the ‘popular’ press and the ‘quality’ press responded with equal gusto to the new play on varying grounds. Brooks Atkins in *The Times*, labeled it as an ordinary commonplace play while E. Martin Browne lamented its extreme naturalism leading to a ‘thinness in the tone’ that resisted several levels at once. Walter Kerr of the *Herald Tribune* (12 February 1954) disapproved ‘the impudent face of farce, the deliberate overplay of nonsense’ ∗∗ that stood in the way to our understanding of ‘the more serious overtones’. Farce and feeling, he regretted in the next Sunday paper, had failed to match. Many others hailed its technical felicity and immaculate structural construction.

∗ Peter Ackroyd, Ibid., p. 313.

** Eliot himself considered it as his ‘most profound play’ and ‘The best to date’. Ibid., p. 311, p. 312.
Mass readership papers were all praise for the easy comprehensibility of its texture. Robert Coleman in the *Mirror* defined it as ‘superlative theatre’ and ‘the brightest and easiest to understand of all T.S. Eliot’s plays’. John Chapman in *Daily News* refused to be bothered by its ‘underlying meaning’ and regaled in its bevy of characters—‘one has been led to know a number of interesting people most intimately’.

Other papers of the popular category differed, considering the play as ‘hard work’ for the audience, and the dramatist’s observation, ‘an infinitely melancholy’ variety ‘revealed in the most flippant surroundings’.

With their penchant for symbol hunting (as Browne observes) American critics discerned extended Christian symbolism in the play. *Harvard Crimson* published one such review by a student; one of the Harvard intellectuals discovered Mary Magdalene in Lucasta; another associated Mrs. Guzzard with Virgin Mary owing to her blue dress. It is interesting to note that all this was happening at a time when Eliot was consciously navigating his course from divinity to humanity. At a massive cocktail party thrown by the Signet Society of Harvard, the Brownes explained to the intellectuals that the author had no such symbolism in mind and that Mrs. Guzzard’s blue dress was bought under compulsion owing to the non-availability of the grey stock. But as the play moved to Washington, the papers still refused to relent and *The Saturday Review*, 13 February, 1954 came up with reference to scholars who extracted ‘an obvious Trinitarian significance’.

In all the three cities – New York, Boston and Harvard – where Browne toured, the play was received with a sense of great pleasure and entertainment. Earlier in the Lyric, London, the play was hailed with ‘warm reception’. At the Theatre Royal too, one comes to know from the *Newcastle Journal*, (8 Sept.), it was received with ‘a packed Monday night house…and bookings almost the heaviest for straight (and
poetic !) plays that the theatre has had in ten years’. At the Lyceum, 25 August 1953 both critics and audience were entertained as well as moved to question the underlying meaning.

The box office success of Elder Statesman however was not very remarkable. It ran only for two months in London while the New York production did not materialize at all. Harold Hobson in the Christian Science Monitor however praised it as ‘both aesthetically and financially the most successful new play offered at any Edinburgh Festival in recent years’. Amidst this whirlpool of production trends, Eliot remained unscathed with his newfound marital bliss. On the author’s part, the phase of radical experimentation was over; what remained was the projection of a gentler, mellowed vision of life.

The verse in Confidential Clerk had been generally considered to be unpoetic except for the conscious poetic scene between Colby and Lucasta. Even Browne observed that the poetry was not in the language but in its concept and characterization. Grover Smith and D. E. Jones noted the closeness of its verse to prose cadence while Ivor Browns, reviewer of Edinburgh performance, assured the audience that ‘no poetic diction or poetic melody is discernible in the lines as spoken by the cast’. In other words, poetry, the discriminating, distancing factor, was almost wiped out. Yet Eliot had not failed to communicate the ‘other’. Both in Confidential Clerk and Elder Statesman, under cover of farce and melodrama, transcendence takes place at the substratum, in an unobtrusive way.

Hugh Kenner made a perceptive comment when he noted that the verse in the post-war plays was not prosaic because prose entailed ‘shared meaning’ and ‘agreed areas of understanding’. The verse of the plays enjoyed an adequacy of expression not possible in prose proper. In the longer speeches, expressivity was attained by the
poetic device of parallelism whereas in shorter ones it was the chiseled diction that performed the magic. The ingrained inadequacy of spoken prose on the other hand led to broken sentences to be supplemented by gestures and eye contact. Hugh Kenner, in ‘For Other Voices’ (T.S. Eliot), cites a few passages* from Elder Statesman to show how extreme accuracy of expression can lead to a bland and bloodless exchange of thoughts.

Most of the critics however hailed Elder Statesman as Eliot’s most ‘human’ play, less ‘austere’ than his earlier plays, and Kenneth Tynan in The Observer admitted to hearing a new voice of Eliot ‘unexpectedly endorsing the merits of human love’10 Antony S. Abbott in The Vital Lie: Reality and Illusion in Modern Drama, upheld a new paradigm in Eliot’s play with its shift of emphasis from a saint to a common man: ‘Eliot continues, in this his last play, the movement away from an elitist view of life . . . The Elder Statesman is a world without saints. There are no Beckets, Harrys or Célia, not even any Colbys or Eggersons. There is only everyman, Dick Ferry.’11

II

Abbott’s comment is significant. The slide he indicates from one zone of engagement to another is in consonance with Eliot’s transitions through the Bradleyan levels of experience: immediate, relational and transcendental. The ‘immediate’ is an awareness of the experience itself, ‘relational’, an awareness of the experience and the experienced, ‘transcendental’, an awareness of a unified whole accommodating opposites not as polarities but as complementarities. The third experience is the true

reality, fragments of which are manifested in time as ‘appearance’, but are part of a larger design in which one perspective is understood in relation to the other. The concept of ‘binary’ or ‘duality’ is of restricted significance because it minimizes the vision. Being part of a larger order on the other hand provides a frame of reference – a set of ideas or a system of belief – that makes sense of the universe and enables one to live and act. Love in the life of an ordinary man is one such elixir – a microcosmic revelation of the transcendental. Harry groped for it, Celia despaired of false love and rose above it, Colby waited at the entry point looking for a soul-mate while Dick Ferry, the commonest of the lot succumbed to human love and moved ahead with it.

The reference-frame or pattern or scheme is necessary as long as one needs to organize the chaotic experiences of life. Once a conviction is reached the pattern may fall off. Poetic conventions – verse, accent, rhythm, rhyme – were necessary as long as Eliot strove to convince the audience of a literary form capable of transmitting the super real. But with each play and with more and more clarity in the realization of this search, poetry receded by degrees, and by the time Eliot reached Elder Statesman, it had almost vanished. What remained now was the ‘concept’, the conviction; the cadence did not matter any more.

The near-prose of The Elder Statesman with its sharp clarity of statement may have lost the mist and mystery of poetry but the sub-surface of an assured way of life, of a definite inner pattern, had been established. The Christian virtues of ‘wisdom’ and ‘humility’, it seems, have been finally attained.
III

Eliot's change of stance both in matters of poetry and spiritual quest, we know, moved through phases and levels of doubts and questioning. In the process he explored and embraced new experience but did not reject the old. With *Elder Statesman* his dramatic career came to a halt but the flow of critical writing continued for sometime more. ‘To Criticize the Critic’ (1961) was perhaps the last major work that rounded off Eliot’s aesthetic speculation. In poetry, drama and critical essays he traversed the same graph examining and exploring experiences and churning out the abstract to colour later experiences. He gave up the radicalism of his early youth, matured into an inclusive mellowed vision: ‘less fired by enthusiasm but informed by wider interest, and, one hopes, by greater wisdom and humility,’\(^\text{12}\) as he puts it in ‘To Criticize the Critic’.

He began with ‘Arnoldian disbelief’ championing a poetry that refused contextual relevance. The poems of this period – 'Portrait of a Lady', 'Preludes', 'Prufrock' and 'Rhapsody' – Jewel Spears Brooker in *Mastery and Escape, T.S. Eliot and the Dialectic of Modernism* notes, reflected a consciousness of ‘broken connection’ i.e. of failed communication, ‘cut off from friends, from lovers, from any community, from God’.\(^\text{13}\) This was the 'art for art’s sake’ phase (1910s) of self-referential poetry and fragmentary awareness on the part of the poet. *The Sacred Wood* (1920) theorized this concept, but in the preface to the second edition of this volume (1928), right after his conversion, he mended his earlier assumptions, linking poetry ‘with morals, and with religion, and even with politics’.\(^\text{14}\) *The Wasteland* in 1922 was a cry of distress – ‘I can connect / Nothing with nothing…’; but in ‘East Coker’ he was able to say, ‘The poetry does not matter’. By 1948, in ‘Poe to Valéry’, he even managed to pitch meaning against style, content against form.
All poetry may be said to start from the emotions experienced by human beings in their relations to themselves, to each other, to divine beings, and to the world about them; it is therefore concerned also with thought and action, which emotion brings about, and out of which emotion arises.\textsuperscript{15}

Eliot warned his fellow poets that too much insistence on style leads to annihilation of poetry: ‘a complete unconsciousness of anything but style would mean that poetry had vanished’.\textsuperscript{16} He repeatedly asserted the importance of subject matter and the vacuity of works where ‘The subject is little, the treatment is everything’.\textsuperscript{17} He predicted a temporary life span of the modernist agenda in style, and proclaimed that the readers would soon tire of the poets’ extreme self-conscious manipulation of language and revert to the poetry of themes:

> it is a tenable hypothesis that this advance of self-consciousness, the extreme awareness of and concern for language which we find in Valéry, is something which must ultimately break down, owing to an increasing strain against which the human mind and nerves will rebel;\textsuperscript{18}

In 1951 in ‘Poetry and Drama’ (\textit{On Poetry and Poets}), he identified the function of poetry with the ‘ideal order’ he had been looking for in spiritual avenues, in the mythic method, in the musical pattern:

> For it is ultimately the function of art, in imposing a credible order upon ordinary reality, and thereby eliciting some perception of an order \textit{in} reality, to bring us to a condition of serenity, stillness and reconciliation; and then leave us, as Virgil left Dante, to proceed toward a region where that guide can avail us no further.\textsuperscript{19}

In 1961 in ‘To Criticize the Critic’ he takes a detached stand in relation to formulation of phrases like ‘dissociation of sensibility’ and ‘objective correlative’. But again, this is not to dismiss or disregard their worth, at crucial junctures of his experience. It is simply that he has crossed the crossroads of doubt and under the anchorage of Christianity and the epistemological wisdom of a unified whole, he now has the range of vision to express emotional preferences.
Eliot's poetry (1910-1948) and critical essays (1919-1961) occupy much larger space; drama, emerging in the fervour of the poetic drama movement of the 1930s, covers little more than half the span of the earlier phase (1935 to 1958). Yet, the six plays among themselves replicate in full, the course of the journey from frustration to fulfillment, from aggression to a mellowed vision.

The new reading of the plays undertaken in the present thesis – a stylistic study through a close analysis of the communicative strategies employed by Eliot – attempts to map out the development from *Sweeney Agonistes* to *The Elder Statesman* and demonstrate that in the plays too the arduous journey of quest reaches a point of arrival. I have examined the dialogue pattern, the stylistics of the dialogue, their speech-act potential, as well as the non-verbal communicative dimension exploited on stage, and come to the conclusion that Eliot's journey as a dramatist has been towards a fullness and completion. It has been a journey of exploration, the playwright trying to find a path not just as a craftsman with words, but also as a quester facing doubt, anxiety, distress. Communication in the plays, in one way, is Eliot's communication with himself. The communicative tautness of the earlier plays is gradually relaxed as serenity in private life merges with public recognition and fame and perhaps with a sense of benediction on the spiritual front.

In the last phase of his journey, Eliot manifests a keen catholic bent of mind expressing a wider tolerance and a deeper acceptance of the frailties of the mortal condition. The shift naturally is easier to notice in the plays as drama develops through the pragmatics of social-familial-personal life on the plane of mundane action. The earlier harsh repudiation of the life of physical senses and lower levels of awareness is supplanted by a broader vision and a more humane approach. Luminous moments 'out of time' are also realized as moments 'in time'; the line between the
'awakened' and the 'unawakened' ceases to segregate and concern extends to the less spiritually gifted – Edward, Lavinia, Lucasta, Sir Claude, Michael, Lord Claverton. The spiritually elect are shifted to the periphery and the prospect of redemption opens up to the average, the frail and the vulnerable. The thinning barriers smooth out contours of contrast, lessening the intensity of conflicting approaches and values. In a way the evenness has a flattening effect in terms of the 'dramatic' twists and turns. The jazz-beat rhythms of Sweeney expressing crudity and savagery in man, the biblical chant of the chorus in The Rock exhorting mankind to restore faith in the church, the dramatic wails of despair and wisdom of the chorus and the mystical paradoxical speech of Becket in Murder in the Cathedral, had been at a level of heightened 'poetry', not called for in the last phase.

The middle plays – Family Reunion and Cocktail Party – initiating moral and spiritual enigma in a modern setting, combined the esoteric and the exoteric in its bid to communicate the soul's depravity and its struggle towards redemption. The seriousness associated with formal structure of Greek tragedies and the Christian theme of Original Sin is projected through the fumbling mode of communication – Harry's desperation at saying much and explaining nothing; Celia-Edward-Lavinia's perplexed confessions allowing lengthy self-introspection but resisting self-knowledge. The mode now alters as the last plays enter the terrain of pedestrian life of lesser mortals, more vulnerable and for the same reason true participants in the shared life of the larger human community.

Remnants of formal components in the middle plays, in the form of runes, chants, chorus-like socialites, pursuing Furies and controlling guardians, die out. Earlier efforts at anchoring chaotic experiences onto an ordered pattern in the form of
myth, music or cultural and religious archetypes gradually slow down as the 'sense of order' is internalized and relationships established through meaningful duologues.

The last two plays, almost devoid of all poetic accoutrements, stand bare in the face of vivid communication rendered in straight prose – still harboured within the fold of verse in regular meaningful emphasis or accent. On the level of situational comedy Confidential Clerk is a search for identity by three foundlings and a drama of complications through misconception and misunderstanding; Colby and Lucasta's sharing of loneliness and Colby and Eggerson's choice of real goal as against the illusory goals of others, are poetic in essence. Confessional speech in Elder Statesman is a true penitential process – emotional and moral obstacles overcome through an unabashed release of remorse and long suppressed burdens of agony. Human speech at a level of true sharing reaches an almost unnatural exactitude in this play, albeit at the cost of formal 'poetic' subtlety.

Communication works at many levels. Does Eliot's turning away from overt poetry in the last plays mark a retreat from the almost forbidding frontiers where language grapples with the task of grasping and projecting the spiritual-mystical experience? Translating the spiritual in clear vocal terms is perhaps beyond verbal potency and beyond human ability. Mystical experience remains enigmatic, never to be captured in prose-like or speech-like structure. The extreme compression, distillation and paradoxical juxtaposition of the mystical message – be it Haiku, Tao, Biblical or Vedic – bear testimony to this fact and circumscribe this area as an exclusively intuitive poetic domain. The Confidential Clerk and The Elder Statesman look into the innermost recesses of human responses to life and bring out the utmost redemptive power of human nature, man's innate power of self-redemption.
Transcendence at the mortal level attains a validation in *The Elder Statesman* and the trustful acceptance blends into a poetry perhaps too deep for prosodic measures.

'Speech', in Eliot's plays, etches out the problematics of communication and, in the plays of the last phase, carves out communication at the deepest level of ethical-emotional release. Poetry works within a wide range; at different levels and in various guises, we note, poetry co-extends with existence, catches the crude and the flippant as much as it permits penetration into the transcendental, the subterranean, and all that rests beyond.