

Theory and Practice in T. S. Eliot:
The Relationship Between His Impersonal Theory of Poetry and
The Cocktail Party

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T. S. Eliot is widely known among both literary critics and other lovers of literature as one of the premier poets and one of the most influential critics of twentieth-century English and American literature. Being both a poet and a critic, Eliot is in a unique position to advance our understanding of the nature of both poetry and literary criticism, because he is able with his critical skills to convey his insights into his own gift for poetry to those of us who may be gifted in only one or neither of these disciplines. And in his poetry Eliot is able to exemplify the kind of literature that he thinks should be written.

To take advantage of Eliot's important perspective of theory and practice in literature, then, I propose in this paper to study the relationship between his Impersonal theory of poetry and his play The Cocktail Party: A Comedy (first produced in 1949). My thesis is that, although at first sight Eliot does not seem to meet the artistic criteria of the Impersonal theory in The Cocktail Party, a closer inspection reveals that he does indeed put theory into practice in the play. This thesis needs some further definition before we begin considering my argument.

I am not arguing that Eliot wrote The Cocktail Party or, for that matter, any of his other poems and plays with the Impersonal theory or any other

theory of literary art in mind. I follow Eliot himself in affirming that, although there is much in the writing of poetry "which must be conscious and deliberate,"¹ there is also a great deal that is unconscious and intuitive. In fact, he says, "the bad poet is usually unconscious where he ought to be conscious, and conscious where he ought to be unconscious" (SE, p. 10). I am not trying, then, to establish that The Cocktail Party is merely an embodiment of certain abstract artistic principles. Nor am I trying to vindicate Eliot's Impersonal theory as an accurate and adequate view of what constitutes "good" poetry. I am neither concerned with establishing The Cocktail Party as a dramatical and artistic success. The question of whether a critical theory or a work of poetry is "true" or "right" or "good" or "successful" is always moot, because judges of theories and poetry disagree almost invariably about which standards to use in making such evaluations, and indeed whether any standards even exist. What I am concerned here with is whether or not Eliot's play is an artistic success according to the criteria which he formulates in his Impersonal theory. As I have already said, I believe that the play does meet the standards of the Impersonal theory, and I further hold that I can share this belief through arguing for it.

As in any argument, however, some basic terms have to be defined and the pertinent concepts and examples explained. This definition and explanation may seem to comprise the bulk of my paper. Keep in mind, though, that I will be advancing my argument all throughout these apparently preliminary discussions, for I am writing on the assumption that one of the best ways of explaining a concept such as the Impersonal theory, beyond merely summarizing

the author's exposition of the theory, is to show how the theory is illustrated in actual practice. This will come later. First, we need to ask how valid it is to assume that there is any significant connection between Eliot's theories about poetry in general and his own poetry. We then need to consider Eliot's explanation of the Impersonal theory, understanding what he means by such terms as "tradition," "Impersonal," "the mind of Europe," and "objective correlative." Next comes a look at how Eliot applies his Impersonal theory to Shakespeare's Hamlet. Only after all of this will we be ready to understand how the Impersonal theory is realized in The Cocktail Party.

We find the justification for comparing the Impersonal theory and the play in Eliot's own critical work. He says in "The Music of Poetry" (1942) that the critical writings of poets are interesting because when he is writing as a critic, the poet-critic, "at the back of his mind, if not as his ostensible purpose, is always trying to defend the kind of poetry he is writing, or to formulate the kind that he wants to write."² Eliot further claims that "what he [the poet-critic] writes about poetry, in short, must be assessed in relation to the poetry he writes" (OPP, p. 18). He echoes these thoughts as late as 1961, when he writes in "To Criticize the Critic" that his earlier critical writing owes its popularity to the fact that in his "general affirmations about poetry and in writing about authors who had influenced [him]," Eliot was "implicitly defending the sort of poetry that [he and his] friends wrote."³ In these statements Eliot himself sanctions the kind of comparison that I am doing here, for in effect he is saying that

in some sense a poet-critic's critical work is a justification of his poetry and his poetry a realization of his critical standards. Notice that Eliot does not assert here that his poetry is entirely a conscious realization of his critical standards. Thus he does not contradict his earlier opinion that a significant part of the creation of poetry is and must be unconscious, for he is suggesting that this unconscious element, far from being identical to his critical standards, is instead the intuitive reality that he tries to express in rational terms through the formulation of these critical standards. I reiterate this point here because grasping it is essential to grasping my argument. Equally central is the assumption that the comparison of Eliot's criticism and poetry is valid, for on this assumption I build my entire argument.

Given this assurance of the validity of my thesis, we can move to the explanation of this Impersonal theory that I have been mentioning with frequency and without definition up until now. The Impersonal theory comes up in various forms and with differing emphasis throughout all of Eliot's critical work in essays as early as "Hamlet and His Problems" (1919) and as late as "The Frontiers of Criticism" (1956), but the Impersonal theory finds perhaps its most complete exposition in an essay written by Eliot in 1919 entitled "Tradition and the Individual Talent." In this essay Eliot for the first time advances his idea that "the emotion of art is impersonal" (SE, p. 11). And it is here that he suggests the phrase "Impersonal theory of poetry" as a name for his views (SE, p. 7). One of Eliot's chief critical and artistic tenets is that the subject-matter of poetry, the "raw material" that poetry refines and universalizes and then communicates, is human feeling

and emotion. (In Eliot's work the two terms are not interchangeable, but I will simply use the word "emotion" from this point onward to mean both emotion and feeling.) This belief is not at all controversial. But the particular distinction that the Impersonal theory makes is highly contested among critics. This is the distinction between personal emotion and "Impersonal" emotion. Personal emotion is the type that human beings experience, and Impersonal emotion is the type that is found in good art. In other words, Impersonal emotion or "art emotion," as Eliot sometimes calls it, does not belong to the author nor to the reader of a poem, nor, for that matter, to any human person. Rather, the emotion belongs to and exists in the poem and is thus Impersonal. We will see how one critic objects to this notion of Impersonal emotion when we briefly look at the work of Leslie Fiedler, who represents the school of thought to which Eliot is opposed and to which his Impersonal theory is partly a response. First, however, this notion of Impersonality needs further explanation.

Eliot contends that a poet ideally does not express his own personality in his poetry. Indeed, Eliot calls poetry an "escape from personality" (SE, p. 10). "The progress of an artist," he says, "is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality" (SE, p. 7). What this means will become clear once we discuss what Eliot means by "tradition" and "the mind of Europe." Until then, we can say that Eliot is asserting that the ideal poet does not express his own emotions in his poetry. Instead, he assembles different emotions, some or all of which he may never himself have even experienced personally or experienced only mildly, into new combinations. Eliot makes an analogy between the poet's mind and a chemical catalyst. A

catalyst is a substance that makes possible a chemical reaction between two or more different substances that would not combine without the presence of the catalyst. What is more, the catalyst does not contribute any substance of its own to the combination; the catalyst remains unchanged throughout the entire reaction. The mind, Eliot says, acts in the same way. The mind of the poet is a catalyst that operates upon different emotions in such a way as to form them into artistic wholes. These different emotions, Eliot goes on to say, "inhere" for the poet in words, phrases, and images, and he calls the poet's mind a "receptacle for seizing and storing up numberless feelings, phrases, images which remain there until all the particles which can unite to form a new compound are present together" (SE, p. 8). The poet, then, has not a "'personality' to express, but a particular medium, which is only a medium and not a personality, in which impressions and experiences combine in peculiar and unexpected ways" (SE, p. 9).

Where do these feelings, phrases, and images come from? They come, Eliot says, from the body of European literature of the past (for the European poet, that is), from "tradition." A poet, according to Eliot, must "develop or procure the consciousness of the past" and "continue to develop this consciousness throughout his career" (SE, p. 6). He should acquire "the mind of Europe" and regard its importance as being greater than that of his own individual mind (SE, p. 6). In other words, the poet, through a thorough understanding of the literature of Europe, acquires at the same time an understanding--which is in part conscious and intellectual and in part unconscious and intuitive--of the phrases and images which have been linked somehow with Impersonal or artistic emotion in the literature of Europe.

This same linkage presumably exists in the minds of this literature's readers. The poet stores these images in his mind until he senses that conditions are right in the literary climate for him to make a new combination of images and therefore of emotions. Then he writes, using these images and emotions to "create" new images and original emotions.

Eliot continues this line of thought by saying that because all truly new poetry is built upon and out of the whole of preceeding poetry, this new poetry can be understood and evaluated only in relation to this whole. In his words, the new work becomes a part of the "living whole of all the poetry that has ever been written" (SE, p. 6). He goes on to add that "the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of [the poet's] own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order" (SE, p. 4), and that this order shifts to include new literature.

Now all this is not as hard to understand as it may seem. Eliot is saying, I think, that the poet must communicate not his own personal emotions but more universal emotions. He must not "speak his own mind," but rather he must speak the "mind of Europe." And he does this by using the "language" of European literature, "language" here meaning the myriad traditional associations between artistic emotions and images that authors have built up over the centuries. We may go as far as to say that the poet expresses the "personality" of Europe using the conventional literary language of European literature as a whole, and that he does not express his own personality using what Eliot would say must necessarily be a private language. I don't expect this bit of paraphrasing to clear things up entirely. It is rather meant as

a buoy to guide us to the next stage of my explanation of the Impersonal theory.

That next stage involves Eliot's concept of the "objective correlative," which he develops in his essay "Hamlet and His Problems." Eliot says in this essay that

the only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding an 'objective correlative'; in other words, a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that particular emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked (SE, pp. 124-5; the italics are Eliot's).

We can see that this concept of the "objective correlative" is a refinement of the notion of the Impersonal theory that emotions and images become linked somehow in the tradition of European literature such that when the image is communicated, its corresponding emotion is experienced in a certain way. Eliot is broadening the notion to identify "external facts" as the stimuli that evoke images in the mind of the reader. Once he has done this, he makes a startling assertion: Hamlet (the play) is an "artistic failure" according to this notion of the objective correlative (SE, p. 123). His justification of this assertion is rather involved, but I am able to paraphrase the crux of it.

The essential emotion of the play is, in Eliot's words, "the feeling of a son towards a guilty mother" (SE, p. 124). Shakespeare's error is that he tries to "graft" this emotion into a plot based on the plot of an earlier

play in which the essential emotion and the main character's motive for action are merely a wish for revenge. This adaptation of old plots to new stories is a common practice among writers of all eras, and Eliot does not question Shakespeare's adaptation in Hamlet. The problem for Eliot lies in his belief that "Hamlet (the man) is dominated by an emotion which is inexpressible, because it is in excess of the facts as they appear" (SE, p. 124; the italics are Eliot's). Hamlet (the play) does not present the set of facts that is adequate to explain why Hamlet (the man) has the particular emotion that he has.

This needs some elucidation. In the play, Hamlet is dominated by an intense disgust for his mother. The artistic problem is that the facts presented to us in the play do not explain why Hamlet is disgusted and why his disgust is so intense. Hamlet himself cannot understand his emotion for this reason. And because he cannot understand his emotion, he does not know how to express it in action. The facts and the plot in the play allow for only one "explanation" and "expression": Hamlet's madness. I have put the words "explanation" and "expression" in quotation marks because Hamlet's madness is really neither an explanation nor an expression of Hamlet's disgust at all. Rather, Hamlet's madness is Shakespeare's compromise between Hamlet's disgust and the facts which do not explain this disgust and which do not allow this disgust to be expressed. By writing Hamlet's madness into the play, Shakespeare "gets out of" the problem. But this, according to Eliot, is precisely where the problem starts. By making an understanding of Hamlet's emotion and actions dependent on an understanding of his madness, Shakespeare ruins the play, because Hamlet's madness cannot be understood. Hamlet's madness is

private to him and thus inaccessible to our comprehension. The problem is that we have to look outside of the play if we are to understand Hamlet's madness and his emotion, for we cannot gain this understanding from the facts within the play. The emotion simply does not fit the facts and it therefore does not qualify as an Impersonal emotion. Shakespeare tries to get the emotion to fit the facts, but he does so at the expense of its communicability. It is as if, following Procrustes, Shakespeare has lopped off the head and feet of the emotion he is trying to express in order to fit it into Hamlet (the play).

Eliot's concept of the objective correlative should be clear at this point. If it is not, then maybe another example not as complicated as Hamlet will help. Suppose that we are walking down a city sidewalk and come upon a throng of people gathered around some object. The "object" turns out to be a man about twenty-five years old who is screaming with terror. His face is pale and he is trembling uncontrollably. He is trying to speak, but he can mumble only gibberish in his state of panic. He is holding his hand, which appears to be wounded. One of the other onlookers informs us that the young man was working on the sidewalk and has cut off half of his little finger. We all wince in empathy and we pity the poor young man, but his emotional state seems to us a bit excessive of the facts. We continue walking down the sidewalk, shaking our heads in consternation and disapproval at having witnessed an apparently unwarranted mortal fear at a little pain and the sight of a little blood. What we do not know, however, is that the young man is a hemophiliac who has nearly bled to death before from slighter wounds. The nature and intensity of his fear would be entirely understandable

to us, if we had thought at all about death and the fear that it can stimulate in those whom it threatens to overtake and, more importantly, if we had known about the simple fact of his hemophilia.

Now this is a somewhat contrived example, but I think that it illustrates Eliot's point. In both Hamlet and the example, the emotion seems to be in excess of the facts that are available to us. What is more, the emotion cannot be expressed to us because of this same lack of an adequate number and the right type of facts. The emotion, then, in both Hamlet and the case of the howling hemophiliac is personal and therefore incommunicable. Another way to say this is that we would need information not found in the play to understand its emotion, and we would have to have other data besides our observations and the reports of the other bystanders to understand the young man's emotion. The reason that non-Impersonal emotion in literature is undesirable is that a work of literature is deprived of its richest meanings when its emotion is not Impersonal. In Hamlet we are led to believe that Hamlet's disgust is somehow connected with his madness, and thus we are deprived of any insights into more universal, Impersonal truths. In the hemophiliac example we are led to believe that the young man's fear is the product of cowardice or weakness, and thus we are deprived of a true understanding of his fear and perhaps of insights into our own fear of death.

This, then, is Eliot's Impersonal theory of poetry. We will reexamine it shortly in relation to The Cocktail Party, and so no intermediate summaries are in order at this point. What is in order is a look at the work of another critic, Leslie Fiedler, who, as I mentioned before, represents part of the opposition to Eliot's notion of the Impersonality of art emotion. Through

this exercise, we can gain a better understanding of why Eliot proposes this notion and what is riding on its acceptance among literary critics.

Eliot's Impersonal theory is a formulation of his more general view that a work of poetry exists quite apart from its author. Throughout all of his criticism, Eliot writes on the principle that, because of the autonomy of a poem's existence, the poetry and not the poet should be the object of criticism. He says in other terms that a reader does not need to have a knowledge of an author's experiences nor a knowledge and understanding of the author's emotions to understand his poetry. The reader need only have a knowledge of the poetry and an adequate command of certain critical skills to understand and appreciate the poetry. In Fiedler's terms, Eliot is a critic who holds that, to understand a poem, the reader simply has to look "inside" the poem itself and not to the biography of the author.⁴ Fiedler would call Eliot an "antibiographist." Fiedler himself takes the opposing view, the "biographist" view. He disagrees with the idea that a poem, once written, becomes an object whose author, according to this view, is in no better a position to understand the poem than is anyone else. Fiedler argues that the poem is not an object and that the author's understanding of the poem is the fullest one because the author enjoys the most complete knowledge and, presumably, the fullest understanding of his own life and emotions. In short, Fiedler believes that there is no "'work itself,' no independent formal entity which is its own sole context; the poem is the sum total of many contexts, all of which must be known to know it and evaluate it" (Fiedler, p. 267). He goes on to say that "the connective link between the poem on the page and most of its rewarding contexts is precisely . . . biography" (Fiedler, p. 267). A

knowledge of the author's life, Fiedler is saying, is necessary to an understanding of his poetry.

It is easy to see why Fiedler rejects the notion of the objective correlative: he rejects the notion of objectivity itself. It is beyond our purposes to explore Fiedler's thinking in more depth. My summary of his views is meant to serve as a summary of the school of thought which opposes Eliot's views. This summary should reveal part of the reason why Eliot articulates his views in the ways that he does. Eliot writes as an "objectivist," that is, as one who believes that poetry is objective and therefore subject to criticism according to objective standards. Implicit in his objectivist view is an argument against "subjectivists," that is, those critics who hold that no such objective standards exist. I am simplifying matters a lot. In literary criticism, as in life, there is little black and white and a great deal of gray. There are many variations of objectivist, subjectivist (as I am using these terms), and other views. We simply need to be aware that there are views that differ with Eliot's.

This brief look at Fiedler's position provides a better idea of what Eliot is not saying, of what he is arguing against. But as I have contended all along, and as Eliot himself has said, we can learn the most about the Impersonal theory by examining how it relates to an actual work of poetry by the theory's author. Recall that I do not intend to "test" the Impersonal theory by determining whether it indeed does or does not serve as an adequate blueprint for good poetry. I am not concerned with the question of whether or not the Impersonal theory is valid or whether or not The Cocktail Party is an artistic success. My interests lie with the problem of ascertaining

whether or not Eliot's play reflects his critical beliefs and, if so, how it reflects them. As I have said, I can argue successfully, I think, that the play does indeed measure up to the criteria of the Impersonal theory. And finally we come to that argument, foundations laid and background erected. It starts with a rather involved interpretation of the play.

The Cocktail Party: A Comedy is a versified drama in three acts. It is a play about reality and self-delusion. Reality is approached in the play through an analysis of the human tendency toward self-delusion, toward misperceiving reality for various reasons and shaping it into convenient and unthreatening illusions. It is a play about salvation, salvation which consists in becoming aware of one's self-delusion, choosing to abandon this illusion, and seeking and accepting true reality. It is a play about the inability of people truly to understand and communicate with each other, an inability that grows out of a desperate need for salvation, a need for people to drop their self-delusions, their false identities, and to live according to an accurate and honest image of themselves and of each other. Finally, The Cocktail Party is the story of the inability of people in need of salvation to love and to be loved.

The play is centered around the dominant emotion of one such person who is not able to love. This emotion is not hate, nor disgust, nor envy, nor fear. It is not precisely anxiety or guilt, either. The emotion is that of a man who has glimpsed salvation and has been offered it, but who finds himself unable to choose salvation. In fact, he finds himself incapable of choosing anything at all, not because of a real lack of free will, but instead because of an apparent lack of free will. Edward Chamberlayne is dominated

by a false image of himself, an image that he himself has constructed out of improper responses to hate and disgust and envy and fear and anxiety and guilt and all the rest. And when he is faced with reality untainted by illusion, Edward discovers that this false self, which has functioned so well for him in his tidy world of self-delusion, does not function at all in reality because this false self possesses no free will. The actions of this false self are determined by its inherent tendency to falsify reality and not by any act of the will. The only decision that is freely made is the decision to let the false self exist. This false self is not human, and therefore salvation is not available to it. Out of a lack of any better term, then, I will call the dominant emotion in the play "existential confusion," for it is the utter bewilderment of a man who, when faced with a reality which he has tried to escape, finds that he does not know what reality is at all.

Edward's confusion begins when he finds one afternoon that his wife has left him. Thinking of this abandonment, he is deeply preoccupied during that evening's cocktail party, for which he is forced in his wife's absence to act as the sole host, all but five of the guests having been told not to come. Edward hates cocktail parties. Lavinia, his missing wife, is fond of giving them chiefly for their social value. At this party, however, Edward is alone and he feels Lavinia's absence more acutely than ever. The five guests whom he is not able to head off are no help to him. Julia Shuttlethwaite, a doddering middle-aged woman, probes Edward with pointed questions about Lavinia, and she, as well as Alexander MacColgie Gibbs, Peter Quilpe, Celia Coplestone, and a guest whom no one seems to know--and who later turns

out to be Sir Henry Harcourt-Reilly--all seem to realize that something is wrong between Lavinia and Edward. But they can induce Edward to admit nothing. Edward makes up a story about Lavinia's being away to nurse a fictional sick aunt. The party swiftly breaks up, and all the guests leave; all, that is, except for Reilly.

Reilly understands Edward's problem to the minutest detail, and we understand why this is so later in the play, when he begins to seem like some sort of extension of the Divine. Although his ostensible role in the play is that of a London psychiatrist or counselor, he can perhaps more accurately be called an agent of God who, through his limited but adequate share in divine omniscience, omnipotence, and omnipresence (which he possesses with the help of Julia and Alex, who turn out to be his confederates), is able to lead Edward to the realization that his whole world is an illusion that he himself has dreamed up. Lavinia, his marriage, and even his own self-image are all projections of his illusion, projections that have no real existence. Edward is so caught up in "the endless struggle" that almost all persons wage to "think well of themselves" that he has lost contact with reality. He is not insane--unless all of us are insane. Eliot seems to be saying that all of us, like Edward, tend to look at only those features of the real world that jibe with our view of how we want the world to be. The rest of the world we ignore. But to keep living, we cannot live in an incomplete world, and so we dream up a world of our own, a world of illusion that incorporates just enough features of the real world to convince us that our world is complete enough to be the real world. In The Cocktail Party, Edward, as well as Lavinia, Celia, and Peter, have all done this to some extent, and we find

that this refusal to face and to accept the real world is what sin and hell are all about. All four characters, along with us, the readers, can say with Edward:

What is hell? Hell is oneself,
Hell is alone, the other figures in it
Merely projections. There is nothing to escape from
And nothing to escape to. One is always alone (CPP, p. 342).

Why should we want to deny reality? It is simply because there is something in reality, something about our real selves, that we do not want to accept. And this aloneness about which Edward speaks, this isolation from one's real self, from the real selves of others, and from the world as it really is, is the result of sin. In The Cocktail Party, sin is nothing more than the refusal to accept reality in all its forms.

We are given a choice, however, just as Edward and the other three characters are given a choice by Reilly in the play. We can choose salvation. Salvation is facing reality, facing our true selves, the selves that are sinful, limited, and weak, and salvation is accepting this reality. Salvation is refusing to make the real world over into an illusionary world that does not remind us of who we really are. But before we can have this choice, we, like Edward, must come to an awareness of the illusionary nature of our world view. Edward says:

I see that my life was determined long ago
And that the struggle to escape from it

Is only a make-believe, a pretence

That what is, is not, or could be changed (CPP, p. 326).

Edward is not revealing here any belief that there is no free will. Instead, he is realizing that who he really is is fixed and cannot be denied, for to deny his true self, he sees, would be to live a pretence, an illusion. We find in the play that Edward does not choose salvation. In a sense, he is unable to choose anything at all, as I have said before, because he cannot loosen his hold on his make-believe world. Until he can do this and face reality in all its brutal clarity, he is not free to choose anything. He is only doomed to stay within his world of illusion.

I have said before that Edward's illusion starts crashing down around him when Lavinia leaves him. This act of abandonment smashes more illusions than Edward's alone; Lavinia, Celia, and Peter are all affected in ways that we will examine shortly. First, let us examine the effect of this central event on Edward.

Edward is confused. He does not know for certain whether he wants Lavinia back or not (CPP, p. 309). His confusion arises, as does almost every element of his consciousness, from his world of illusion. Edward does not love Lavinia, and so he does not want her back. But because he cannot imagine a world without Lavinia, he cannot imagine any world. And because he cannot imagine any world and will not accept the real world, Edward is left without any world at all. If he is to have any world at all to live in, he needs Lavinia back. He laments:

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 (CPP, p. 349).

It comes as no mystery why Edward is confused. His entire world has left with Lavinia.

We find out in the play that Lavinia does come back to Edward, although she is also confused, not knowing exactly why she comes back (CPP, p. 339). Edward's world is restored. But this restoration may be only temporary, for there remains a hope at the end of the play that Edward will come to a "choosing point" at which, once again, he will see that his world is an illusion and that salvation consists of accepting the real world, the world that does not have him as its center and its creator and its god. And we know that there is the hope that Edward may choose the way of salvation through another very important character, Celia.

Celia, as I have said, like Edward, has her world of illusion exposed for what it is. She calls this world "a dream" and of it she says:

I was happy in it until today,
And then, when Julia asked about Lavinia
And it came to me that Lavinia has left you
And that you would be free--then I suddenly discovered
That the dream was not enough; that I wanted something more
And I waited, and wanted to run to tell you.
Perhaps the dream was better. It seemed the real reality (CPP, p. 324).

Celia, we discover, is Edward's lover, and her dream calls for her to remain only as Edward's lover. Lavinia's departure changes all this. Celia's role must change and, because it cannot support this change, her world of illusion is exposed to the light of reality. Incidentally, we know that Edward is incapable of loving not only because he cannot love Lavinia. He cannot love Celia, either. And we know that Lavinia is incapable of being loved because she cannot accept the love of Peter, who is her lover. Thus, Edward, the man who cannot love, and Lavinia, the woman who cannot be loved, are a perfect match. We know that Celia and Peter are both capable both of loving and being loved because, although they do not realize it until it is too late, they love each other (CPP, p. 355). The reason that Edward cannot love is that his entire world, as I have said, is a projection of his mind. He cannot love Lavinia because he does not know Lavinia. All he knows is his projection of whom he wants Lavinia to be. We see this in these words of Lavinia:

I thought that there might be some way out for you,
If I went away. I thought that if I died
To you, I who had been only a ghost to you,
You might be able to find the road back
To a time when you were real--for you must have been real
At some time or other, before you ever knew me.
Perhaps only when you were a child (CPP, p. 341).

What Eliot seems to be saying here is that we cannot love what does not exist. Edward does not understand this, and so he is confused.

Celia, however, is becoming less and less confused all the time. As Edward grows more and more confounded, we find Celia saying:

I am not sure, Edward, that I understand you;
And yet I understand you as I never did before.
I think--I believe--you are being yourself
As you never were before, with me (CPP, p. 326).

Later in the development of her understanding of her predicament, Celia tells Edward, "I can see you at last as a human being" (CPP, p. 331). Celia is beginning to understand not only Edward; she is beginning to understand herself and her world. She is beginning to see that, in her dream world, there can be no union between people, because only in the real world are there real people, and only real people can be really united. As she asks Reilly later, the question is:

Can we only love
Something created by our own imagination?
Are we all in fact unloving and unlovable?
Then one is alone, and if one is alone
Then lover and beloved are equally unreal
And the dreamer is no more real than his dreams (CPP, p. 362).

This is the central question in the play, and Celia is able to answer "no" because she is able to face the central reality of the human condition: that sin makes real union between people impossible without salvation, because sin is precisely the tendency of people to make each other and themselves and the entire world unreal. Celia faces this. She no longer perpetuates the illusion that in her sinful state she can love or be united with anyone. She has come, as she says, to an "awareness of solitude" (CPP, p. 359).

What is more important, Celia has come to an awareness of, as she says to Reilly, a "sense of sin" (CPP, p. 360). She sees that isolation between people is not natural, that it is the result of sin. This is Celia's big breakthrough in understanding, for this understanding makes it possible for Reilly to offer her the choice between a return to her illusion and the way to salvation. In other words, Reilly is the mediator of forgiveness and Celia is at last ready to accept forgiveness because she can admit her need for it. Her choice is between denying that she needs forgiveness and never receiving it on the one hand, and admitting her need for forgiveness and receiving it on the other hand. "I can reconcile you to the human condition," Reilly tells her, if she chooses to return to her illusion (CPP, p. 363), and he also offers her the second way, which is "unknown, and so requires faith--/ The kind of faith that comes from despair" (CPP, p. 364). To shorten the story, I will say that Celia chooses the second way. By the end of the play we find that she has gone as a sort of missionary-nurse to a mysterious island in "the East" (CPP, p. 373) and has been crucified there near an ant-hill by a band of savages. This image of crucifixion serves only to confirm what we already know: that Celia, through exposing her illusion and admitting that its origins are in sin, chooses reality and thus is saved.

Although Celia is an important character in her own right, her vital part in the play is to serve as an example and an inspiration for Edward. Celia is a sort of Christ-figure, while Edward's plight, Eliot seems to be suggesting, is our plight. We, like Edward, are at times aware that our sinful nature is always tending to falsify the world into illusions. And we, like Edward, have our Reilly's and our Celia's, who represent, it seems, the

Church and the Savior, and who make us aware of the offer of salvation and the possibility of gaining salvation if we will only drop our illusions. But like Edward, we cling to our illusions. Eliot certainly presents a gloomy picture of the human condition here. Implicit in this gloom, however, is a challenge. Just as Celia has attained to salvation, so can Edward, and so can we. And there are slight indications that Edward may someday be able to choose salvation. For instance, at the end of the play, Reilly says that Celia's death is "triumphant" (CPP, p. 385) and that it was the right way for her to die. Celia, Reilly says, has chosen "the way to life" and that this way has "led to this death" (CPP, p. 384). Reilly continues, "And if that is not a happy death, what death is happy?" (CPP, p. 384). In response to this, Edward says:

But if this was right--if this was right for Celia--

There must be something else that is terribly wrong,

And the rest of us are somehow involved in the wrong.

I should only speak for myself. I'm sure that I am (CPP, p. 385).

Edward seems to be coming to the same sense of sin that made it possible for Celia to choose the "way of life." And because Edward's situation seems to be ours, I think that Eliot is offering us a hopeful view of life.

I believe that I have said enough about the resemblance of Edward's condition to the human condition in terms of the play itself. Now it remains for us to examine the play in terms of Eliot's Impersonal theory. This examination has been our purpose all along. Actually, this examination does not begin here, for it actually began at the beginning of the paper. We need only to tie up a few loose ends here.

I have said that the central character of the play is Edward and that his emotion, his "existential confusion," is the dominant emotion. And I have discussed in great detail the facts in the play which are offered in support and explanation of this emotion, the central and precipitating fact being Lavinia's desertion of Edward at the beginning of the play. We need now simply to ask the same question of The Cocktail Party that Eliot has asked of Hamlet: do the facts explain the emotion? Does the emotion "fit" the facts? In other words, is the emotion truly Impersonal? I will treat these three questions as being practically similar.

I said at the beginning of this paper that at first glance Eliot does not seem to meet the artistic criteria of the Impersonal theory in The Cocktail Party. This seems true because of the character of Sir Henry Harcourt-Reilly. Reilly simply does not seem to "fit" into the play. He is mysterious, so mysterious that we do not even learn his name until well into Act II. And he seems to know everything about Edward, Lavinia, Celia, and Peter, and he seems to be everywhere. Reilly seems supernatural, because he does not seem bound by the same human and natural limitations as the other characters in the play. Everything in the play that cannot be explained is put into Reilly's mouth and he, in his relative omniscience, keeps the play going by his constant prophetic utterances. Thus, even though Edward and Lavinia and Celia and Peter are confused profoundly about the shattering of their illusions and are confounded about what to do next, we understand them and they come to understand themselves through Reilly's many and telling speeches. In my interpretation, I may have given the impression by not quoting Reilly extensively that he does not figure prominently in the play.

Such an impression would be mistaken, for Reilly plays a vital part in the structure and meaning and intelligibility of the play. My point in all this is that, in fact, Reilly is the catalyst in the play, but also that Reilly seems to be a supernatural figure who is therefore unintelligible. But doesn't this mean that Eliot is making the same artistic error in the personage of Reilly that he criticizes Shakespeare of making with Hamlet's madness?

Of course, my answer is an unqualified "no," because it is my contention that Reilly's supernaturality lies at the essence of what Eliot seems to be saying in The Cocktail Party. Eliot seems to be saying that we all drift along in life, each of us creating for himself an illusionary world. To sustain these illusionary worlds, we have to make ourselves believe that there is true union between ourselves and those specters whom we allow to inhabit our worlds. We have to maintain at all times, and at the cost of truth and even salvation itself, this pretense that we are not isolated from one another, that our false worlds are the true one. The cocktail party is the image of this pretense. A cocktail party is an event to which people come in order to be seen among people whom they fancy to be important. They come not to enjoy each other's company, but rather to nurture each other's individual spheres of unreality and thus to push each other even more deeply into their isolation from one another. And because we cling so tenaciously to the pretense that there is no isolation between us, only one force can expose our pretense: God. This is the same force that can save us from our pretense.

Reilly is God's representative in The Cocktail Party. Reilly uses the separation between Lavinia and Edward to break up the party and force everyone to give up his illusion long enough to take a glance at reality. He also

uses this separation, which is a fact that no one can deny, a fact that will fit into no one's illusionary world, to offer everyone salvation. In these actions, Reilly is acting as the messenger of God. It is somewhat ironic, therefore, that Celia thinks that Reilly is the Devil (CPP, p. 321) before she understands who Reilly really is. She does not realize how far she is from and yet how close she is to having the right name for Reilly. Indeed, Reilly is an angel, but he is not the Fallen Angel. The point here is that Eliot is saying that God must intervene in human affairs if our "cocktail parties" are ever to end. And God must do so in ways that are unintelligible to us. Reilly, therefore, far from not fitting into the play, fits masterfully well.

Does all this mean that the dominant emotion in the play is Impersonal and can thus be understood only on the basis of facts given in the play and of our own understanding of human nature, or do we have to check into certain facts about Eliot's life to understand this emotion? The answer should be clear by now. Notice that I went through my entire interpretation of The Cocktail Party almost without even mentioning Eliot, and when I did mention him it was not to refer to his life or his emotions. The reason for the nature and intensity of Edward's confusion seems clearly based only on the facts presented in the play. I moreover comprehend Reilly's role in the play, as well as the roles of the other characters. And all this understanding has led us not to personal emotions that can belong only to Eliot. It has led us to an understanding of Edward's confusion and thus of our own confusion in the face of the human condition, a confusion that is universal among all human beings. The play has not conducted us to any understanding of Eliot's

own emotions about his own divorce (he was divorced from his first wife), but rather to an insight into our own emotions in the face of our individual divorces from reality.

To gain the full appreciation of my argument, you will have to recall the essentials of my presentation of The Cocktail Party. You may in fact have to read the play yourself. But you have gained an adequate appreciation of my thesis if you have come to a satisfying understanding of Eliot's Impersonal theory. Everything that I have undertaken to do in this paper has been meant to give you this understanding and to argue that the theory can bear fruit in the interpretation of literature. And I am satisfied if the next time you read any work of literature you recall Eliot's opinion that art should express universal emotion and not the author's personal emotion alone. For to understand universal or art emotion, you need an understanding of human nature. Such an understanding is available to you if you will simply try to ⁿunderstand yourself and those around you. To understand personal emotion, however, you must understand the person to whom it belongs. What kind of art would demand of you that you understand its author before you could understand it? Only impure art, or false art, demands such an understanding. This art is impure or false because it is not communication but rather a vain, one-sided expression ~~(of)~~ what the author thinks is his personality. And I think that we could all get by a lot better with a lot fewer of these expressions which serve not to unite us, but to push us farther apart.

Notes

¹ "Tradition and the Individual Talent," in Selected Essays (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1932), p. 10. Further references to this source will appear as internal citations in my text and will employ the abbreviation SE.

² On Poetry and Poets (New York: Farrar, Straus, & Giroux - The Noonday Press, 1947), p. 17. Further references to this source will appear as internal citations in my text and will employ the abbreviation OPP.

³ To Criticize the Critic and Other Writings (New York: Farrar, Straus, & Giroux, 1965), p. 16.

⁴ Leslie Fiedler, "Archetype and Signature: A Study of the Relationship Between Biography and Poetry," in An Introduction to Literary Criticism, ed. Marlies K. Danziger and W. Stacy Johnson (Boston: D. C. Heath and Company, 1961), p. 263.

⁵ T. S. Eliot, The Cocktail Party: A Comedy, in The Complete Poems and Plays: 1909-1950 (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1952), p. 348. Further references to this source will appear as internal citations in my text and will employ the abbreviation CPP.

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